

UKAAF webinar, 5 July 2022

Judith Furse in conversation Transcript

Roger Firman

Hello and welcome. My name is Roger Furman from the UK Association for Accessible Formats and we are very pleased to welcome Judith Furse to our July webinar.

for nearly thirty years, Judith has been running her own braille producing business. Her introduction to braille began at an early age after losing her sight and she remains extremely passionate about braille to this day, as will become clear. Judith is a valued member of UKAAF's Editorial Working Group, and we're delighted this is the case.

Judith, welcome. A very warm welcome to you.

Judith Furse

Thank you.

Roger

Your introduction to braille began, I believe, in 1967. I wonder if you could tell us about that.

Judith

Yes. Well, I was desperate to learn braille. I stopped being able to read print and I was at the age of six coming up for seven, the age where I had discovered the joy of reading, and then I had it snatched away from me and I was devastated, and was off school along time because the local authority took a long time to get me into a special school, and eventually they got me into Linden Lodge.

My recollection is I just fell upon braille. This was going to give me the ability to read again, so I had a huge incentive to learn it, and of course, I was at an age where you are very receptive. I was just so desperate to read again and had a very good teacher, Miss Garling, who was just brilliant. I can remember that summer the first lesson I did, "abkl". I don't know if they are still teaching braille in the same way, but they taught like that in those days. In a way, taught by shape almost so, "abkl" are similar, and then I think we went to "df" and "ei" and so on.

I learned the basics quite quickly, and do remember the first day I was given contractions to learn. I had a little thermoform book and the first one was "and", and remember the page had, I think it was "hand" and "sandal", it has just stuck in my mind. I was just so thrilled to be able to read. The first series you did was something called the Gay Way Reading Scheme, which they wouldn't call it that today. I know it started with The Little Red hen and I think we had Joe the Cat and I just took to it like a duck to Water. I sat in class next to somebody called Peter Boshier, whom many of you will know. He was a very competent braille reader. Sometimes when it was raining, we couldn't go out to play at break time, he was asked to read to us, he read us Jennings books, I seem to remember. And I thought I want to read like that. yes, that was my beginning with braille.

Roger

Fascinating, it's really interesting. So from what you've said, you clearly enjoyed the learning process and did you encounter at that stage material that you really wanted to read for yourself?

Judith

Yes, I did. I was into Enid Blyton, and as soon as I mastered enough Grade Two to be able to read that, I read those and some Jennings books myself, and what I don't remember now is whether we had an actual library at Linden Lodge. I think probably Miss Garling just got out books she thought we would manage and enjoy.

Quite early on, I did join the National Library and I always had National Library books around. There was quite a reasonable amount of material for that age-range, E. M. Nesbit and those sort of authors that were read by children.

Roger

Yes, I myself remember getting material from the National Library and that was a good way of obtaining reading.

Judith

It certainly was. I'm sure there was a limit to what Linden Lodge actually had themselves to give out to children. It was wonderful. It was a whole treasure trove of books that you could have, so I really appreciated that.

Roger

I'm guessing that as you continued along this journey that at some time you began to come across and use a variety of different braille codes and systems during your education?

Judith

Yes, indeed we did. We had maths and French. Those were the main ones at Linden Lodge, and of course, then when I went on to Chorleywood I did German, Latin, and science although we didn't do it to a very high standard, but we did it first and second year.

So yes, there were different codes we had to master and I did a little bit of braille music up to Grade One.

Roger

How did you get on with the different codes and systems of the languages you were learning, did you find that they sat alongside your learning of the language and the code that went with it?

Judith

Yes, I think so. I don't remember it ever being an issue. I think that it was just part of what you did. And I think when you are at school and you are at that age where you are still quite receptive, it isn't a big deal. If I had to start from scratch now, That might be a different thing, but I think you just took it on board. You know this was a French lesson and certain symbols were part of reading French and you just took it as it came.

Roger

As you say, that's what you did at this time.

Did you find that you were being drawn to particular types of material, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or anything else?

Judith

Fiction and poetry, which I just lapped up. I've always loved poetry and I still do belong to a poetry group, and braille is hugely important for that. I couldn't participate if I didn't have braille poetry books I could take along and read from, and fiction. We had quite a reasonable library at Chorleywood so you could usually find something to read, But I was still a member of the National Library, so I was still reading those as well.

And I think it's fair to say that for most of that time, initially I read fiction. I now read all sorts of different things, but fiction was the thing I was most drawn to particularly historical fiction. I loved Rosemary Sutcliff and Geoffrey Trease and those sorts of authors, and there was a reasonable amount of that in braille, so that was my favourite go-to reading material.

Roger

As you continued your education at Chorleywood, did you have any strong feelings about what you might develop as a career?

Judith

I wanted to be a solicitor and I did take a law degree, but I failed the solicitors exams twice so I gave up on that. Then I decided I would like to work in the health service in a Community Health Council as they were then, and they were the patient voice in the health service and I felt very passionate about that. I did get shortlisted for some jobs, went to lots of interviews, didn't get any of them. You always suspect it's because you can't see, but you can't prove it.

I did do some voluntary work in the local Community Health Council and got on with it fine. In the 80s when so many people were unemployed what was then called the Manpower Services Commission, which I think would now be DWP, they used to run these schemes which were supposed to be an introduction to work, and were really just to get you off the statistics, but I actually did one which was educating people about the problems of deafness, and it was actually really enjoyable. We would work in a team and we'd go into schools, shops and places and talk about the problems of deafness. I loved it. Some of the children were slightly confused, that blind lady had come to talk about deafness, but it was great fun.

My first proper job was working at what was then Pembridge Place, (now the RNIB college at Loughborough) teaching braille on the telephony course and working with some adults who had just lost their sight on a one-to-one basis. Somebody told me this job was going so I applied and got it, and it was a fixed term. They just needed somebody to fill in for one term because somebody was away and I loved it. I loved teaching and they said to me, if we could find you a permanent post, would you stay? I said yes, but they couldn't. But somebody on my team knew that they were looking for proofreaders at RNIB so I applied for a job as a proofreader and I got a job on their magazine team. When they were

moving to Peterborough, I didn't actually particularly want to go to Peterborough, so I took my redundancy. I hadn't been off work for more than a couple of weeks and they rang me up and said would you do some proofreading because they had assumed that the visually impaired staff would all go to Peterborough rather than be unemployed and they did not, so they didn't have enough proofreaders. So I would proofread and I did that for ages. So what would happen was the weeks that I had work I didn't sign on and when I didn't have any work I signed on, so that eked out my unemployment benefit for quite a long time, actually. But eventually I ran out and I was only signing on to get my National Insurance paid. that is quite complicated because you can only work so many hours and somebody said, why don't you go self-employed and be a transcriber as well. I said I could give it a go but hadn't really thought about doing that. I know about braille so would not have to re-train but did have to train to use the equipment but that's how it started, I fell into it, really. I didn't set out to be a transcriber.

Roger

Interesting journeys and amazing different routes and never quite sure where they are all going to lead, as often things are in life. That was quite a while ago and ever since you've been running your own transcription business. Have you found that an enjoyable experience doing different things?

Judith

Yes, it's not always enjoyable. You sometimes feel very harassed. People often want things yesterday.

Roger

Yes, I know the feeling.

Judith

If you don't, they don't understand what's involved. But I do feel very strongly about braille, I do think people are entitled to have information in

a format they can read And so I have always looked at it from that point of view. There is somebody if they need something, they should have it. Some things are a bit tedious. If you're brailleing hundreds of bank statements, it is not terribly intellectually very satisfying, but you do have the satisfaction of knowing somebody's going to be able to read their bank statements. You do get some really interesting things. I remember somebody was doing a postgrad about the Apollo 13 mission and brailleing Some of the communications between the ground control and Apollo 13, that was really interesting. So you do sometimes get something that is really, really interesting and gives you lots of satisfaction.

Over the last few years I've been proofreading SATS papers and that's been a real eye-opener. You know what children have to know these days, particularly in maths. I don't think I could have done these papers! But it's the satisfaction I think of.

You get a document and you run it through the software and then you are going through it and some documents just come out as a mess. There is satisfaction I find in sorting it out, making something into a shape that somebody can actually read.

Roger

Yes, that is certainly very true. I know sometimes you can be doing a lot of things that might be considered routine, then you are asked to do something that you personally find really interesting.

Judith

I like proofreading for Clear Vision, I love proofreading the children's books.

Roger

Yes, and it's so good to know that people are learning braille needing this type of material because as we all know, it's so important in people's lives to have literacy skills for whatever they may be going to do.

Judith

Yes.

Roger

Particularly employment.

Obviously during your lifetime with braille, there have been changes to the code, changes to the system. I wonder if you have a professional perspective and a personal one about this?

Judith

Yes, I think some changes have, perhaps, been better than others. So from a personal point of view, you can get used to reading almost anything if you are a fairly proficient reader.

I don't like some of the changes and don't like Unified English Braille, however, it is here with us, so you just have to get on with it.

I do feel a bit concerned we've had cross-over during the years, we've had quite a few changes now, some haven't been huge. To take changing the "ea"-sign so you do "e" and then an "ar"-sign, it's not been a huge change. and although a lot of people personally whom I know still do the "ea"-sign, because that's what they were taught at school, and for personal reasons, they've never had to change it. Why should they really if just writing to friends?

I Don't feel that's a difficult one and I actually quite like the shape under your fingers of the "e-ar" and think it looks quite nice.



That wasn't a big deal, and I can see the sense behind some of the changes. For instance, the sequencing we don't run "and for the" together anymore and I get that. If you're learning braille, it's much easier to read them spaced out. That's how we would write them in a sighted world. So although when I'm writing for myself, I still run them together.

I feel much more concerned about introductions, for instance, the typeform indicators. I really feel that, particularly when I'm dealing with children's material, there are just too many dots. You could have something in print that's bold and underlined and in block capitals before you ever get to the first word. You've got a two-cell sign for bold, two-cell sign for underline and three dots for the capitals, and I just feel that is too much. Fortunately, Clear Vision takes a fairly pragmatic view so we look at it, is this important for the reading of the story. If something needs to be emphasised it should be, but do we need every single indicator?

I use Duxbury for my transcription and Duxbury just throws everything into it, everything and the kitchen sink. If it's emphasised in print, you often get bold and italic, and I spend a lot of my time just stripping lots of this stuff out. I say to myself, OK, what do they need? What do they need to be emphasised? How do we make this sensible? They don't need all these signs. you don't need the bold and the underline in this context. And so I take it out. I do find that frustrating and I know people say that's what you should do. You should use your common sense. Why write the software so that it throws it all in in the first place? If you don't need it, I just feel really frustrated about that. I do worry a bit. Maybe I'm being really unfair about this, but I feel that there was a little bit of let's make it easy for the computer programmers and not enough of let's make it easier for the people reading it. And I just worry that it is putting people off. I know people who have stopped reading magazines for instance because they just can't stand all these extra dots, and it feels clumsy, I just think that is so sad, and I understand why people are saying, I needed a unified code et cetera. And I just say we're not going

to go back now. But I do wonder whether there's still room for improvement or change.

It has been a big change and I know people say that print changes.

I think it's different, I really do. I think a sighted person can see a page at a glance, you are not going to be thrown so much as if you are reading along with your finger and particularly if you're not a very fast reader, you're going over each line fairly slowly and you just think, yes, you know that's going to make it more difficult for some people.

Roger

Yes, I think in some ways this is a story still to be told, because I know people who say that. Like it or not, one has to accept That they are entitled to have a view about UEB and that the view is not always "This is absolutely wonderful." It's the enjoyment of reading that they find particularly difficult with UEB and as you say, it is really sad that people have stopped reading magazines because of it.

I think the untold bit is what will people in future generations feel about all of this, whether everything has worked out as well as it could have done. I just wonder whether the software might get a touch more sophisticated so you can have the option for choosing/selecting whether certain things are Automatically translated or not, depending upon a particular transcription.

Judith

Yes, that might be a solution. I would be interested to know as well whether some research would be done as to whether it has made a difference to how many people are learning braille and how they found it, I would be very interested to know that information and if it is encouraging people to learn braille and they are, you know, flying, then great. Whatever gets people into braille is good and I would be happy with that.

Roger

Agree.

Now, Clair, I'm wondering, do we have any questions?

Clair Woolrich

We do.

Do you find people unfamiliar with braille find it interesting to learn about it?

Judith

Yes, I do. I find people are very interested when I'm using it. I use it in church and people come up to me and they want to run their fingers over it and ask me how it works. I did do a session for a group at church, they wanted me to talk about braille production and I took some braille along, I'm going to tell you what the dots are, and you are going to shut your eyes and see how you get on, they found that really interesting. I've done talks with Brownies and Scouts and so on. And I think children particularly love it, they just find this is really fascinating. So you could do something with your fingers. So yes, when people see you reading braille, I often get asked about it.

Roger

That's good people are curious to learn about how somebody else encounters the world, encounters information.

Clair. Any others?

Clair

Yes. Do you have storage problems with large quantities of hard copy braille?

Judith

Yes. I'm very fortunate that I do have quite a lot of space, but the trouble with having a lot of space is you fill it up. My sighted assistant every now and again says will you stop buying books!

And so yes, it is an issue and I feel very lucky that I have got quite a bit of space but you do come to a limit and I don't know what the answer is really because braille is just big it just takes up space and there's not a lot you can do about that.

Roger

No, I think we all encounter that kind of issue, don't we? Do you find that for pleasure that reading digitally is a way forward for you or is the hardcopy part of the experience?

Judith

I like the hard copy. I do sometimes read things digitally. Obviously a lot of stuff comes by e-mail, I'm a hospital governor, I get lots of reports to read. I don't print all those off. I would be disappearing under mounds of paper. But things that I want to keep reading like my poetry books, absolutely hardcopy. It would not be the same. And I can't even describe exactly why that is. But I think it's something to do with your relationship with the book. You know you are actually reading the book and you know it's all there on the page. And also you can refer back and forwards more easily. I said I belong to a group and we take the books along to read. We have a theme and choose poems. And then we go and read the poems and discuss them. I don't have a portable digital device, so I take the books. This is something about having the book to look through flicking the pages back and forwards, reading bits of poems. I chair meetings at church, for instance.

Roger

Indeed.

Judith

I need to have a hard copy agenda under my fingers, and that's better, easier if you just have a bit of paper rather than taking a device. So I'm a hard copy girl.

Roger

Yes, there is something about reading the braille in the context of the page where it is, how the lines fit, it's a different experience, isn't it?

Judith

Yes, definitely. I think particularly with poetry, you know how it's set out is important.

Roger

It's part of telling a story and a very important part. It just shows that there is still a need for hardcopy braille and it's not all going to go digital, and that'll be that. And as you say, from the reference point of view, there is something that you can just flick a few pages back and forward if you're wanting to refer to different parts of a poem or whatever it is you're reading.

Judith

Yes.

Roger

Judith, I want to thank you very much for being our guest and for sharing your insights about braille. Thank you to Clair for the administrative side of this webinar.

In August, we will be joined by Sophie Randall from the Patient Information Forum. So do join us then. Until next time goodbye from us all, goodbye.