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To: hazel@hazeledwards.com

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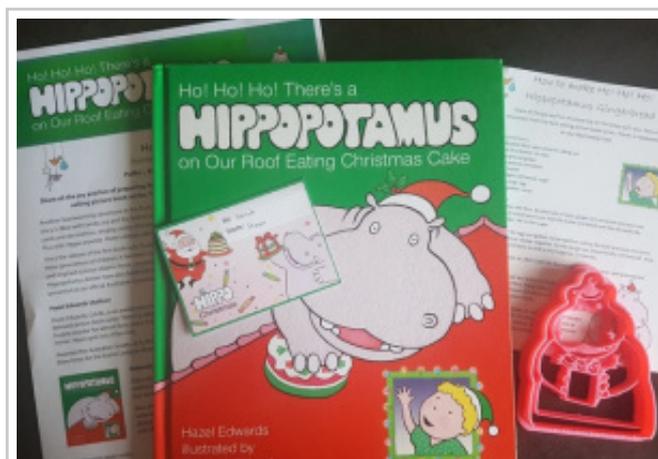
## Ho, ho, Hippo—an interview with Hazel Edwards

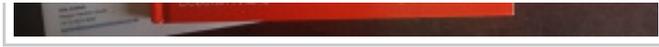
by [Sophie Masson](#)



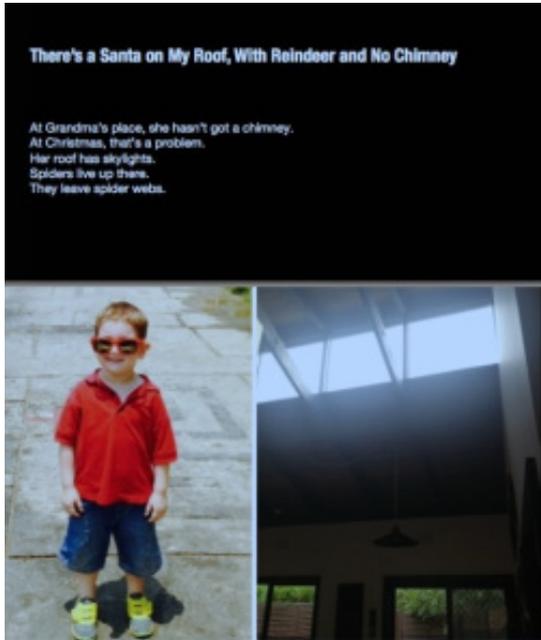
Today, I have the great pleasure of presenting an interview I did recently with [Hazel Edwards](#), to celebrate the publication of a very special picture book: [Ho! Ho! Ho! There's A Hippopotamus On Our Roof Eating Christmas Cake](#). It's the seventh and final title in the [well-loved Hippo series](#), written by Hazel and illustrated by Deborah Niland, which since the publication of the [very first Hippo book in 1980](#) has been a firm favourite with families all over Australia--and well beyond (even royal families, as you'll find out!)

This book's as warmly and engagingly written as ever, with the familiar charm of the bold, colourful illustrations and a sparkly Christmassy feel as well. You can also get an activity pack which includes all sorts of fun Christmas activities--and cookie cutters, including one in the shape of Hippo of course, to make gingerbread biscuits just like the little boy does with his grandmother in the book. Indeed, Hazel's dedication in the book is to her grandson Henry, the third generation to make friends with Hippo, as she explains in the interview. Read on!





**First of all, Hazel, congratulations to you and Deborah Niland on the publication of *Ho ho ho, there's a hippopotamus on our roof eating Christmas Cake! It's the seventh and final book in the much-loved Hippo series which have enchanted generations of children and their parents. Can you tell us a bit about how this new book came about?***



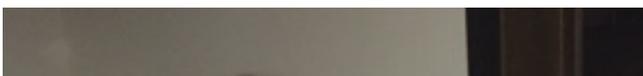
Extract from Santa Skylight gift book page

Grandson Henry Garnet ( to whom “Ho! Ho! Ho !...is dedicated) inspired this hippo story. Henry had just moved with his parents and big brother to an older house which has two chimneys. He was concerned that his grandparents’ house had only skylights, and the lack of chimneys would mean Santa might miss us on Christmas Eve. Since I write a story gift of the imagination for him each Christmas, that became his photographic story, with his older brother suggesting a webcam and GPS to redirect Santa.

As with many picture books, the story was later ‘tweaked’ but is still about the logic of fantasy, especially when you have a ‘fantastic’ hippo and a Santa who might co-exist on a roof. And I especially wanted Hippo to strut a cake-walk on the roof , which later became a dance and carols by cake-light. So all ideas are moderated in the creation of a picture book like ‘Ho! Ho! Ho!...’

The hippo biscuit cutters have attracted the attention of reviewers , who are avidly baking gingerbread hippo biscuits. I feel a bit of a fraud as I’m not a great cook, but the grandkids and I will make hippo biscuits this weekend.

I wanted the emphasis to be upon the ‘giving’ of creativity at Christmas, not a ‘gimme presents’ attitude. So within the text and illustrations are many ideas which readers and families can create for themselves.





Hazel's grandson Henry reading Ho Ho

Instead of a 'launch', readers are making the other ideas Deborah Niland has hinted at in the visuals. And hopefully next year will be the touring musical again with Garry Ginivan productions. Last year's national 'Hippo Hippo the Musical' inspired from the books, was one of the most satisfying aspects for me of this history of the imagination. To sit in the audience with enthralled children who were the third generation of the original readers of the 1980 edition was special.

And they were all reacting to the hippo character on stage as if he were part of their own imaginative world.

***Lovely as it is to see a new Hippo book out, it must also feel rather poignant for you and Deborah, as this is to be the last. Tell us a bit about the journey of Hippo, from the start to now. Where did the idea for Hippo originally come from? Did you imagine 38 years ago that Hippo would capture the hearts and imaginations of so many people? And why do you think young readers take so warmly to Hippo?***

Originally our new roof leaked and our then 4 year old thought the workmen fixing it were the cake-eating hippo thumping around. Now the nephew of the original 4 year old has been concerned about the same roof: only this time, the skylights being a Santa -barrier is the worry.



The original 'Hippo' trio in 1978 when Hazel first wrote the story: Kim (Henry's mother) Leni (neighbour) & Trish (Hazel's uncle)

Because the big friend has all the answers, especially when you are doing something for the first time and are apprehensive, the hippo books are reassuring. Situations like starting school, going to hospital or acquiring a new baby in the family are easily identifiable. Christmas is also shown as a time of family sharing of traditions and is Australian, rather than snow laden.

***I remember you saying in an interview that for the anniversary edition of the first Hippo book (There's A Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake) you chose to tweak a couple of things in the text. Can you talk a little about that? And how has the reception of the Hippo books changed over time?***

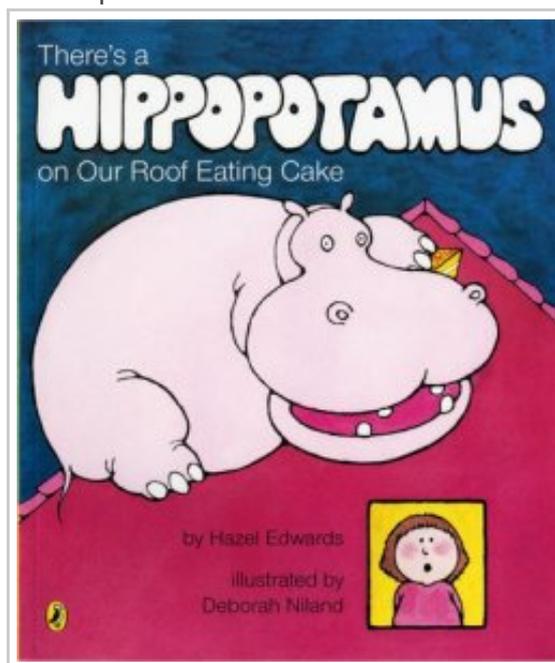
Food is the sex of children's books, so the sensual delight of adding a themed food to a book for literary events is on-going.

Most readers enjoy the absurdity of juxtaposing cake with hippos who are actually bad tempered in real life, not cute and cuddly. But across the years I've had requests to make the cake gluten-free or a healthier alternative like celery sticks. Real hippos do eat carrots, so I've suggested carrot cake as a compromise, but generally the cake is a chocolate mud one which is apt for muddy hippos. Or even just roof tiles, which are easier to design than the challenging hippo cake shape.

The original 'smack' was edited out at the publisher's suggestion but many readers, especially young dads had firm views on retaining the original wording as a point for discussion with their families. I tend to agree that stories should remain in the cultural context in which they were written and that readers are intelligent enough to discuss interpretations. I do NOT favour child abuse, but 'smacking is a highly emotive issue for some parents. The publishers changed the wording to 'Daddy growled'...so earlier editions are now collector items.

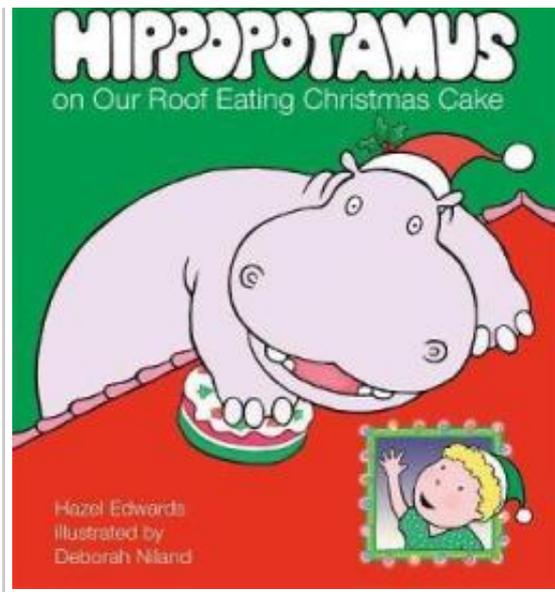
***Picture books are of course always a collaboration between words and pictures, author and illustrator. Can you tell us a bit about your own collaboration with Deborah Niland over the years?***

We live in different states. Deborah adds her visual interpretations to the text and I'm always willing to change the wording if the picture already conveys the concept. But I keep the rhythm of the reading. I love the 'joyous' aspect of the 'Ho! Ho! Ho!...' illustrations due to Deborah Niland's ability to draw so appropriately for this age group. But it's also a book which can be shared within families and many nostalgic readers love collecting copies, even if they are no longer children.



Ho! Ho! Ho! There's a

***Hippo has become a classic figure in***



**Australian children's literature. What are your favourite anecdotes about how readers from 1980 to 2018 have responded to him?**

Literary Speed Dating in my memoir '[Not Just a Piece of Cake: Being an Author](#)' is where the hippo (via Hazel) answers fan questions in character. There's also 100 things which have happened in the history of the cake-eating hippo friend. Readers' responses are often poignant. And some children with health issues have responded to the books, using them as a kind of therapy, that if the hippo can cope, so can they. A book can offer reassurance that

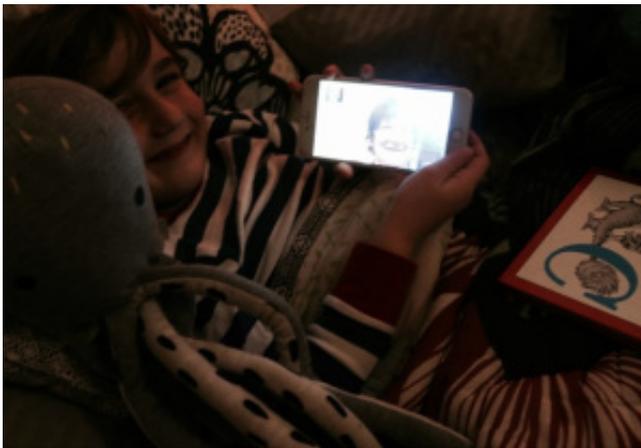
others survive, just like the young person in the original book (whose family has grown across the decades) but who is sort of in charge, with the help of hippo.

Here are a dozen memories:

1. Knock at my front door. Small child. 'Excuse me. Is this the house where the hippo lives on the roof?' Answer. 'Have a look.'
2. Danish Palace note of thanks (with gold crown) from Princess Mary for autographed Hippo book Australia Government sent as official gift of the imagination for the birth of her daughter.
3. Fan letter addressed to: The Hippo, Blackburn South, and delivered in person to author by the smiling mailman.
4. Principal, an ex rugby player, accepted challenge to eat cake on school roof, in hippo costume, and read the book aloud if his students surpassed their reading quotas. They did. And despite being scared of heights, he kept his promise.
5. Hippopotamuseum created by gifted educator to demonstrate physics principles e.g. falling, related to Hippo character.
6. Rural prep mother who could not read, but wanted 'Another easy book like Hippo which I'm learning to read with my 5 year old.' Brave woman to ask in front of other parents.
7. Parent's letter from children's hospital, thanking for the reassurance of 'Hippo on the Hospital Roof' read in casualty waiting room and in ambulance en route.
8. In Nepali Montessori School, in Kathmandu reading through interpreter, with hippo music and dancing, and Himalayan mountains as a backdrop.
9. Felix suitcase of book and stimulus for blind pre-schoolers. Also had hippo cake tins, an audio and Braille copy. Helped name Felix project. Felix means happy and 'feel' related to the textures felt by blind children.
10. Collage of memorable fan letters touring as 'Corridors of Characters' with Hippo responses by ghost-writer Hazel exhibited at the former Fremantle Maximum Security Jail.
11. 'Us mob like your stories. We laugh at the funny bits.' from an online webchat with a remote outback school.
12. After a literary festival, the over-loved hippo needed cleaning. Dry cleaners wouldn't

touch it because the head had paper inside. Too big to fit in washing machines, hippo had to be 'emptied' of the filling of polystyrene balls and the 'skin' washed by hand in baby soap flakes. Experts advised removing the filling either in the carpark or in the bath. ...I found out why. The polystyrene balls went everywhere, even clung to our underwear. I handwashed 'skinny' hippo in our bath and a visitor freaked on opening the bathroom door to discover hippo hanging from the shower, to dry.

One of the most heart warming aspects of being a long term children's author is having a three generational readership. 'Ho!Ho!Ho! There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Christmas Cake' is being shared by the grandparent generation too. And I also have grandchildren who are reading books inspired by their parents when children. And even learning to read from Hippo books.



Henry Facetime-reading with Hazel

Another special moment with grandson Henry was when I gave him the advance copy and he read it through with expression. Earlier we used to read on Facetime each night, (he taught me Facetime and I helped with his reading) but he always chose the books we shared.

***The first Hippo book was adapted for a [musical recently](#)--what was it like, experiencing your characters on the stage? And will Hippo pop up in other adaptations, whether for stage or screen?***

While children's theatre is my greatest love, I'd like the cake-eating hippo to have his own television program. In that way he could reach more children and also encourage them to pick up the books too. Although there have been translations into Mandarin, Japanese and other languages, the one I value most is the Braille translation in Vision Australia's 'Felix project' for children who are sight impaired.





Hazel at a performance of 'Hippo! Hippo!' the Musical

Note from Sophie: As Hazel's publisher Penguin Random House kindly sent me the Hippo cookie cutters with a review copy of the book, I had a go at making some biscuits myself, as a trial run for the visit of certain special little people who are coming to see us in a couple of weeks' time! I didn't make gingerbread biscuits as I'm not keen on gingerbread., instead making a vanilla butter biscuit mixture which has a similar consistency and is easy to shape and cut out. Here, below, is the result--the biscuits just made, before they went into the oven, and the final, brightly decorated product with some bonus stars! Fun to make and taste pretty nice too--and I know some little people who will love making them too 😊





### More about Hazel Edwards:

Hazel Edwards writes quirky, thought-provoking fiction and fact for adults and children. Coping successfully with being different is a common theme. Co-written 'junior novel 'Hijabi Girl' and YA novel 'f2m;the boy within' explore cultural diversity.

Best known for 'There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake' series, recently touring as a musical, Hazel has grandkids for whom she writes a story each birthday. 'Outback

Ferals' her YA novel set in Darwin, is a sequel to 'Antarctica's Frozen Chosen', researched during her 2001 Antarctic expedition.

Hazel runs book-linked workshops on 'Authorpreneurship' and 'Writing a Non Boring Family History'.

'Trail Magic; Going Walkabout for 2184 Miles on the Appalachian Trail ' with her son Trevelyan is an adventure memoir. He did ALL the walking.

A National Reading Ambassador, in 2013 Hazel was awarded an OAM for Literature. Her memoir 'Not Just a Piece of Cake-Being an Author' explores long-term creativity.

'Celebrant Sleuth;I do or die' an adult mystery with an asexual sleuth is her latest fiction and 'Almost a Crime' , short crimelettes are available on Kindle.

Hazel's website is [here](#).

You can find her on Facebook [here](#).

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**Sophie Masson** | October 30, 2018 at 7:00 am | Categories: [Authors](#), [Book talk](#), [Creative life](#), [creative process](#), [Interviews](#), [New books](#), [Picture books](#) | URL: <https://wp.me/p5eB7A-SH>

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