



The Iris System

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Introduction

Iris the Dragon series has established itself as a credible brand and effective tool in North America since starting its book series in 2000. While many have attempted to simulate Iris' success in reaching young audiences and educating them about their mental health and wellness, none have stood the test of time and been a trusted resource to use to reach children aged 8 – 12 in helping them understand theirs and others mental health.

Iris' success and longevity is a combination of factors from having the right team in place to produce books of this nature to following a specific formulaic approach in producing each book and delivering it. Recently, the series has been evaluated empirically for its value that it brings to children and this approach has been found to be effective at reducing stigma towards mental health and providing children with basic mental health literacy to better navigate their futures. This research begs the question as to what is driving the success of the series. The following document breaks down Iris' approach to understand the components of this successful series.

Team's Influencing Background

Gayle Grass – Author, President of Iris the Dragon Charity

Education

- Honours at York University, Kinesiology – thesis on History of Community Health/Recreation Centres after World War 1 in Canada.
- Master's Degree on Victorian Literature, Art and Culture (MA) University of London England, Royal Holloway. See [course description - http://www.rhul.ac.uk/english/coursefinder/mavictorianliterature,artandculture.aspx](http://www.rhul.ac.uk/english/coursefinder/mavictorianliterature,artandculture.aspx)
 - Thesis on "History of Victorian Children's Book Printing" - Gayle studied the techniques of many of the famous children's authors and illustrators. The fairy tale format was especially prominent in these early print books. Her thesis received a Distinguished Mark and was marked by an exterior panel of Judges – Head Curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Head Curator for the Royal Art Gallery and Head Curator for the Tate Gallery.

Professional

- Served on many mental health boards – Ottawa/Carleton Schizophrenia Society, Lanark Country Mental Health Agency, Open Doors of Lanark County Children's Mental Health Agency, etc.

Personal

- Family history of mental illness dating back two generations creating real life experiences learning about treatment, doctors, facilities and the mental health system in Canada. Also experienced society's general stigma and discriminations against mental illness.
- Avid researcher into mental health challenges and keeps up to date with latest programs, treatment and educational programs using Twitter and a blog to communicate her findings.



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Graham Ross - Illustrator

Education

- Sheridan College, Ontario – Illustration Program

Professional

- McClelland & Stewart Publishing House – Designer
- Kid with a Crayon – Head Illustrator & Graphic Designer. Clients include Orca Book Publishers, Carus Publishing, McClelland & Stewart, the Government of Canada, Domtar & Iris the Dragon Charity.

Personal

- Graham's work embraces the demographic information of the target population of each of his clients and considers appropriate design principles to allow his work to appeal to his client's target audiences. As such with the Iris the Dragon series, he has created characters that reflect Canada's youth population and also created a playful character, Iris that visually exudes a trusting and comforting stance for children.

Jessica Grass – Project Manager

Education

- Masters of Education in Educational Counselling, Ottawa University
- Masters of Science in Teaching (Distinction), Potsdam University
- Event Marketing Diploma, Algonquin College
- BA in Sociology of Communications, Queen's University

Professional

- Marketing & Communications Specialist working with various organizations such as The Royal Canadian Mint, Vector Media and Iris the Dragon Charity.
- Educator – specialization in technology, business and social sciences. Worked with primary, junior and intermediate grade levels in Ottawa's public and independent school boards.
- Counselling – specialization in adolescents facilitating group and individual work. Creating mental health programming to appeal to this age group.

Personal

- Family history of mental illness going back three generations creating real life experiences learning about treatment, doctors, facilities and the mental health system in Canada. Also experienced society's general stigma and discriminations against mental illness.

Due to the team, Iris the Dragon books have:

- Credibility
- Professionalism
- Passion & personal interest driving their success



Vetting Doctors

Each of Iris' books is vetted, endorsed and supplemented with professional and current knowledge in the form of an epilogue at the end of each book. Vetting professionals include:

- **Dr. Simon Davidson** – M.B., B.Ch., F.R.C.P.(C), Chair, Child and Youth Advisory Committee Mental Health Commission of Canada, Chairman of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics, University of Ottawa, Chief of Psychiatry, Medical Director of the Mental Health Patient Unit, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario
- **Dr. H. Beitchman** – M.D., FRCP (C) Professor and Head, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Toronto, Clinical Director, Child Youth and Family Program, Centre of Addiction and Mental Health
- **Dr. Catherine Robertson** – Head of ADHD Unit at CHEO
- **Dr. Michael Cheng** – Dual Diagnostic TEAM at CHEO, Consultant to Iris the Dragon
- **Dr. Ian Manion** – Director of Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health
- **Dr. Anand Prabhu** – Registered Psychologist, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Head, Mood and Anxiety Team
- **Dr. Mark Kaluziński** – M.D., FRCP (C), Psychiatrist, specialist on Asperger's Syndrome, Dual Diagnostic TEAM at CHEO
- **Dr. Peter Szatmari** – has worked in the field of autism and pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) for more than 25 years. Dr. Szatmari is Professor and Head, Division of Child Psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University. He is also the Director of the Offord Centre of Child Studies.
- **Dual Diagnosis TEAM at CHEO**
- **Dr. Darcy Santor** – PhD, C, Psych. Senior Scientist, Professor, Psychology, University of Ottawa, The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO



The Iris Book Formula

The Importance of Narrative

Iris has understood that stories are a meaning-making vehicle, and it is using this knowledge to reconstruct the story about the importance of one's mental health.

We know that stories are effective educational tool as listeners become engaged with the content to learn new knowledge and imagine new possibilities to resolve potential conflicts in their lives. We also know that learning is most effective in social environments thus; Iris uses stories with children to create a change in attitudes towards mental health and to help them navigate their mental health and wellness.

Studies in Narrative therapy demonstrate how structured thoughts and perceptions influence life circumstances. As Morgan (2000) points out, "as humans, we are interpreting beings. We all have daily experiences of events that we seek to make meaningful. The stories we have about our lives are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them. This meaning forms the plot of the story. We give meanings to our experiences constantly as we live our lives" (*What is Narrative Therapy*). Thus, Iris uses storytelling as a means to re-author people's perceptions about mental health – their own and others.

The Genre

Aside from understanding that storytelling is a powerful mechanism to create change in people's lives, the Iris the Dragon series also follows the genre of the fairy-tale to create positive change in children's lives. As Dr. Bruno Bettelheim (1976) points out in "The Uses of Enchantment – The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales," "fairy tales educate, support, and liberate the emotions of children". Dr. Bettelheim's research reveals that when following the guidelines of this genre, fairy tales provide "children with images of heroes, who have to go out into the world all by themselves and who, although originally ignorant of the ultimate things, find secure places in the world by following their right way with deep inner confidence." Also quick to point out, Bettelheim (1976) comments how in modern times the need to provide children with hope is paramount – "today, even more than in past times, the child needs the reassurance offered by the image of the isolated man (child) who nevertheless is capable of achieving meaningful and rewarding relations with the world around him" ("The Uses of Enchantment – The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales") despite the example being portrayed in an exaggerated form.

Thus, the Iris the Dragon series uses this genre to inspire confidence and hope in children's own abilities to overcome challenges that might exist due to the stigma of mental health as witnessed in a reader of the series, Sarah Cannon, "as well as conveying the child's perspective on his/her situation, each story also lays bare the understandable but sometimes faulty belief system underlying it. In the throes of youth and frustration, the child believes he/she will never "do anything right." In response to this common lament, Iris slowly and subtly sets the stage for change – of attitude and of heart - by ingeniously mirroring for the child his/her unique range of abilities and strengths."



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Structure

Following in the tradition of the fairy-tale genre, each of the Iris the Dragon books has a predictable format to offer children reassurance when they become familiar with the book series. Each book is divided into 4 chapters representing 4 seasons. Each season represents different elements of a good story starting with familiarization with characters and the problem, the problem climaxing requiring a solution, the problem solution, and ending with successful application of the problem solution to rectify the problem. Furthermore, each book is 48 pages long – 36 pages for the plot, 2 pages for the intro, 4 pages listing resources for parents or educators and 8 pages for an epilogue, which is written by a specialist explaining the mental health concern in the story.

Elements of a Good Story

While there is debate as to what exactly makes a good story, there is some consensus on having strong characters that can identify with audiences, the use of literary devices to engage audiences, and having a strong resolution/message. The Iris the Dragon series relies heavily on these elements to create an engaging series for children.

Iris' Characters—Iris the Dragon has developed a unique brand whereby their main character is a green friendly female marsh dragon. Understanding that dragons are timeless mythical creatures across most cultures, the dragon was a good fit to represent the series. In the Iris the Dragon series, Iris the Dragon is the consistent force that offers her wisdom and guidance to children challenged by mental health concerns and supports them in their journey. In addition, to have a strong consistent character who is reliable across the series, other animal characters exist to support the main character along with Iris on their journey such as Oattie the Otter and Rosie Raccoon.

“Also characteristically, the hero of a fairy tale, during a traumatic struggle, is helped by primitive things – a tree, an animal, nature. This connection with the Earth and its creatures appeals to a child as the child feels more in touch, and more “in synch” with these organic elements, than do most adults. The fate of these heroes gives the child the hope that, like them, he will be guided and given help when it is needed. It is noteworthy then to mention, that the Iris the Dragon tales also depict life as it exists in the “Riverbank Community” of animals who live in harmony with nature, and in care and consideration of one another.”(Does Anybody Get Me? –article by Diane Sutherland)

Literary Devices – To enhance the important text elements that reveal important information about the mental health challenge spotlighted in the book, the Iris the Dragon series uses graphic text. Graphic text makes the text stand out to the reader and is showcased in a variety of colours and larger fonts. In addition, the Iris the Dragon series author, Gayle Grass, uses rich descriptions in her writing to make the events more real to the reader and to form an identity with various circumstances that the reader might also be experiencing as expressed in the book. These descriptions often include the descriptions of what one is feeling both emotionally and physiologically. As Bettelheim points out, “for a story truly to hold the child’s attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination help him develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality – and this without ever belittling but on the contrary giving full credence to the seriousness of the child’s predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and his future” (“The Uses of Enchantment – The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales”).



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The message— Stories need to have messages that resonate with its audience and given the current climate and culture in which children live, Iris the Dragon believes that children need social emotional support which is what they receive from the Iris the Dragon series. The Iris the Dragon series deals with the social emotional wellness of our children helping them understand feelings and cognitive functions as early as possible so they can navigate other aspects of their life. Some of the series messages reinforced in each book are:

- Make healthy choices for yourself
- Look inside yourself & know yourself
- Self-advocate
- Feeling Ok about expressing oneself
- Surround yourself with supporters
- Stand up for yourself
- Don't ever feel trapped

"I quickly purchased the book, and was brought immediately to tears, not because of the story, or the information provided, but because of the relief, for the first time having access to something concrete that would provide me a foundation to help my daughter, that provided me with hope at a positive outcome, and provided me with a relief that I was not the only one experiencing these difficulties, that others before me had experienced the same types of struggles, and that others were able to provide guidance, acceptance, and support."

— Testimonial from a reader

Elements of Effective Book Making

Author was influenced by the courses she took for her Master's Degree, one such course being the Arts and Crafts Movement in England 19th and 20th century.

"We have come to label the products of Morris's firm, as well as the handicraft work of a number of other artists and designers from the 1860s onward, as "Arts and Crafts" in style, but the term itself did not become official stylistic nomenclature until the establishment of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1887, in part through the efforts of artist and illustrator Walter Crane.

Although Morris was initially lukewarm about the efforts of the organization, he eventually participated wholeheartedly in its wide-ranging program of lectures and exhibitions. Two Society-sponsored lectures in November of 1888 were specific catalysts in the establishment of the Kelmscott Press: Emery Walker's illustrated lecture on "Letterpress Printing and Illustration" (using lantern slides) and T. J. Cobden-Sanderson on "Bookbinding." (Both men would later assist Morris at the Kelmscott Press, and together established the highly-respected Doves Press in 1900 after the Kelmscott Press closed when Morris died.) Morris established the Kelmscott Press in 1891 with the help, in particular, of Emery Walker, a friend and neighbor in Hammersmith. It is ironic that the press, something he had long pondered, should have been founded so late in his life (Morris died six years after its incorporation), but during the brief period of its existence, Morris designed 66 books issued by the press, with a total of 23,000 books printed, all sold by subscription. They were to have enormous influence on the private press movement in the late 19th and 20th centuries and on the design of books produced by the commercial



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book establishment. Even those who criticized and reacted against Morris's often elaborately-decorative approach to page design (Cobden-Sanderson and the Doves Press is a good example) had to acknowledge his enormous influence.

Of his venture in book publishing, Morris wrote: "I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite aim of beauty.... They should be easy to read and not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters."

Testing & Informed Practice

The Iris the Dragon series has been a recognized source to go to for educating children about various mental health concerns. In part, its recognition is due to the fact that it aligns itself with credible sponsors whom support children's mental health such as RBC Foundation and also vets each book with a specialist.

The specialist reviews the book for accuracy of the mental health topic being discussed. In addition, draft copies are also reviewed by the target age group of the book series in addition to educators that may use it. These testing processes allow Iris the Dragon Charity to create a credible and reputable book series.

Lastly, Gayle Grass, the author, is an avid researcher ensuring that she is well versed and up to date with the topic she is writing about.

Delivery

The Iris the Dragon book series can be delivered by a parent, teacher, social worker, anyone working with children. To receive the best results for understanding the message of the books, the book series was intended to be read in its four parts on separate occasions allowing the reader time to digest the information and think of questions that might arise in the course of the reading.

Iris the Dragon Charity recognizes that the books are longer than typical children's books but this is not a typical children's book and is intended as a piece to consider over a long term.

Please visit www.iristhedragon.com for more information about the charity's objectives.

— Dated March 24, 2013 and written by Gayle Grass, the author of the Iris the Dragon Book Series.