

'Muesli dressed as coco pops' — the black ops strategy to engage kids in reading



By Susannah McFarlane

Biography

*Susannah McFarlane is a successful children's book author who, after many years working as a publisher, now spends her time writing and creating stories that kids love to read. She is the creator and writer of the award-winning **EJ12 Girl Hero** and **EJ Spy School** series (Scholastic Australia), the co-creator and co-author of the hugely popular series for boys, **Boy vs Beast** (Scholastic Australia), the author of the **Little Mates** series of alphabet books for under-fives (Scholastic Australia), and the series editor for **Stuff Happens** (Penguin Books), a great new series for boys about the everyday challenges they face.*

www.susannahmcfarlane.com

www.ej12girlhero.com

<https://www.penguin.com.au/stuff-happens-series>

<http://www.readingbattleover.com/>

<http://www.boyvsbeast.com/>

Introduction

For the last 25 years I have worked in the publishing industry as a marketer, publisher and writer, creating books that kids will want to read. As a trade publisher rather than an educational one, I've made books that aim to be chosen by the kids themselves, not imposed on them, and offer stories that are entertaining and compelling reading, not just the required reading of the classroom.

But you really can't take the mother out of the publisher, which is why there has always been a slight agenda with the series I create or curate: to hook reluctant readers with

Zac Power (Hardie Grant Egmont) and *Boy vs Beast* (Pop & Fizz/Scholastic); to provide positive role models for young girls with *EJ12 Girl Hero* and *EJ Spy School* (Lemonfizz Media/Scholastic); or to facilitate the development of their emotional literacy with the *Stuff Happens* (Penguin) series.

Enter the 'muesli dressed as coco pops strategy': creating stories and worlds that kids want to explore, packaged with the look and feel that they want them to have, while never letting on that what's in the books might be good for them!

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Series publishing provides an excellent platform to apply this strategy, and the opportunity to re-engage, and reinforce your message over a large number of books. Series deliver comfort and the elimination of risk — for the child, their parents and their teachers — because once a child is hooked in, they will read the series through. This is of particular relief to desperate parents — and I speak from experience here — who buy books, only to discover them unread under their child's bed.

However, that all assumes that the series does hook them at the start, so it is perhaps interesting to look at the way, as publishers, we can do that. Here are examples of two different series for boys with different 'black ops' agendas — one aimed at improving their reading literacy, the other their emotional literacy — without, of course, them suspecting a thing!

Hooking reluctant readers

One of publishing's biggest but most rewarding challenges is creating books for the reluctant reader, the child who wouldn't for a moment consider reading as a valid entertainment option when that's what screens and sport are for. Books are school work, and what you are made to do. Books are boring.

Grown-ups know differently: that books are windows to other worlds, and mirrors for our

own experiences in our own world. Books and stories make us laugh, cry, and wonder, and they enrich our understanding of our world and ourselves. And we also know that a reader is made not born, but that some are made more easily than others. Getting the kids who are reading adverse — or even reading hostile — into reading for enjoyment has become something of a career passion and challenge for me. And while there are, of course, reluctant girl readers, it is a much larger problem for our boys, so this is where I have focussed much of my writing and publishing efforts, to find ways to be inventive — sneaky even — to entice them into reading.

The first challenge, I believe, is to unhook the book from its association with school, with work, with boring. A good book for a boy to read is any book a boy wants to read. Or anything they want to read actually! I am an advocate of a format-agnostic approach to encourage kids to read: get them reading anything — comics, the backs of cereal boxes, footy cards — they're all putting one word next to another. And just as a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step, so too might the road to *War and Peace* start with a less 'booky' title, or what I call a 'black ops book'. Stats and facts and joke books are perfect examples of 'black ops books' and great reading starters.

Yet, ultimately, they need to be able to read sustained narratives and develop their

*Kai Masters's battle-buddy, the robotic canine, BC and his self-created Jet Drill plane from Book 8 **Lava Beast***

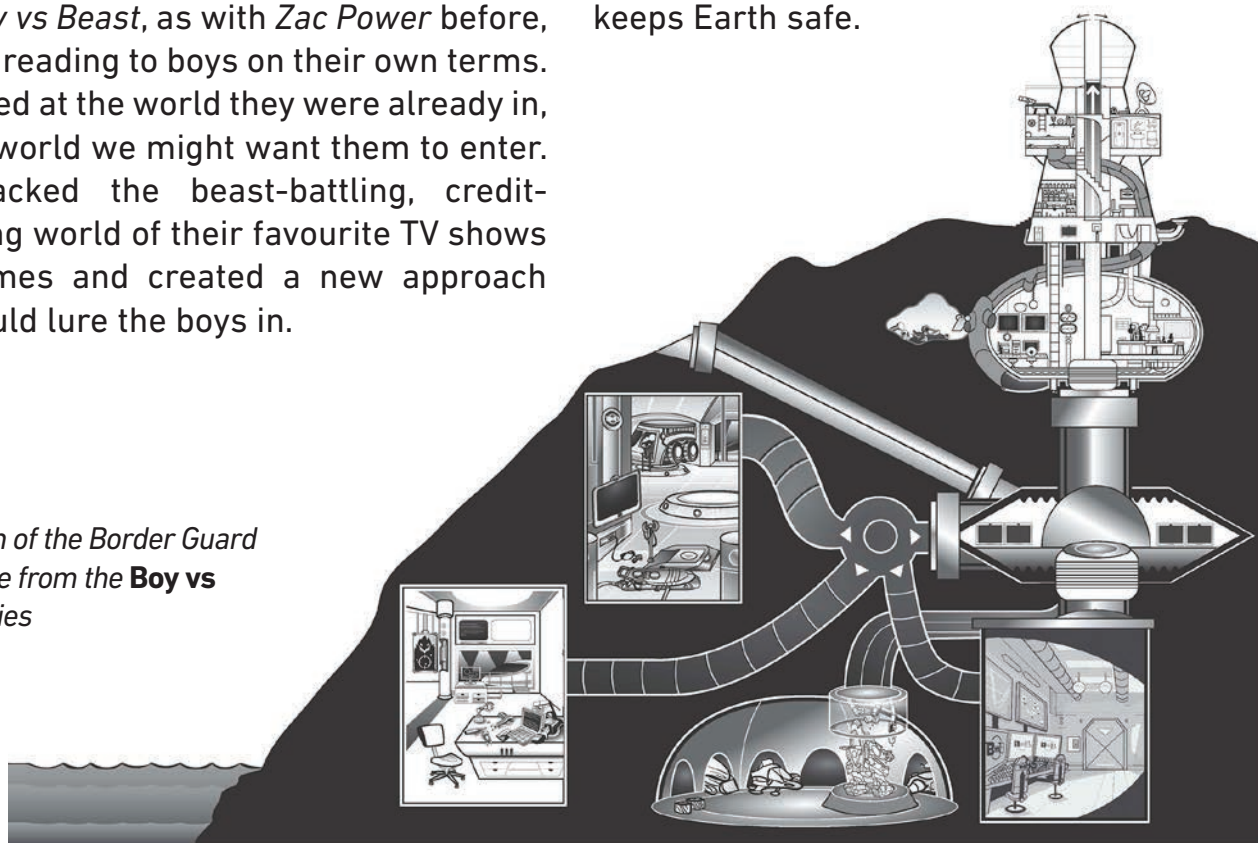


reading capacity and stamina to increase their reading engagement, and this is perhaps the publisher's — and parent's and educator's — greatest challenge. Even more so in our sound-byte age of screen-based quick grabs.

So, in creating fiction series for reluctant readers, publishers deploy stealth tactics. With *Boy vs Beast*, as with *Zac Power* before, we took reading to boys on their own terms. We looked at the world they were already in, not the world we might want them to enter. We hijacked the beast-battling, credit-collecting world of their favourite TV shows and games and created a new approach that would lure the boys in.

We created Kai Masters, aged 12, a 21st century Border Guard who defends Earth from ancient beasts. Kai is trained to stop the beasts crashing through the border wall that separates Earth from Beastium and, with the help of his robotic dog, BC, and an ever-growing arsenal of gear and vehicles he creates himself, Kai battles beasts of ever-increasing strength and mutation, and keeps Earth safe.

*Illustration of the Border Guard Lighthouse from the **Boy vs Beast** series*



In Kai, boys are given a hero that reflects a positive and aspirational image of themselves. Kai is a boy who learns and gains through mastery: he is a problem-solving hero — with very cool stuff. He lives in a lighthouse filled with the stuff of a young boy's dreams: laboratories, vehicle and hover-board testing stations; hot dog vending machines; popcorn-makers; a home cinema, games room and launch-pad — all under his control.

So once we, Louise Park and I, had conceived the world, we needed to create the stories and the design that would deliver the 'high energy — low word count' stories we were promising.

This meant deploying the same highly researched techniques of the educational

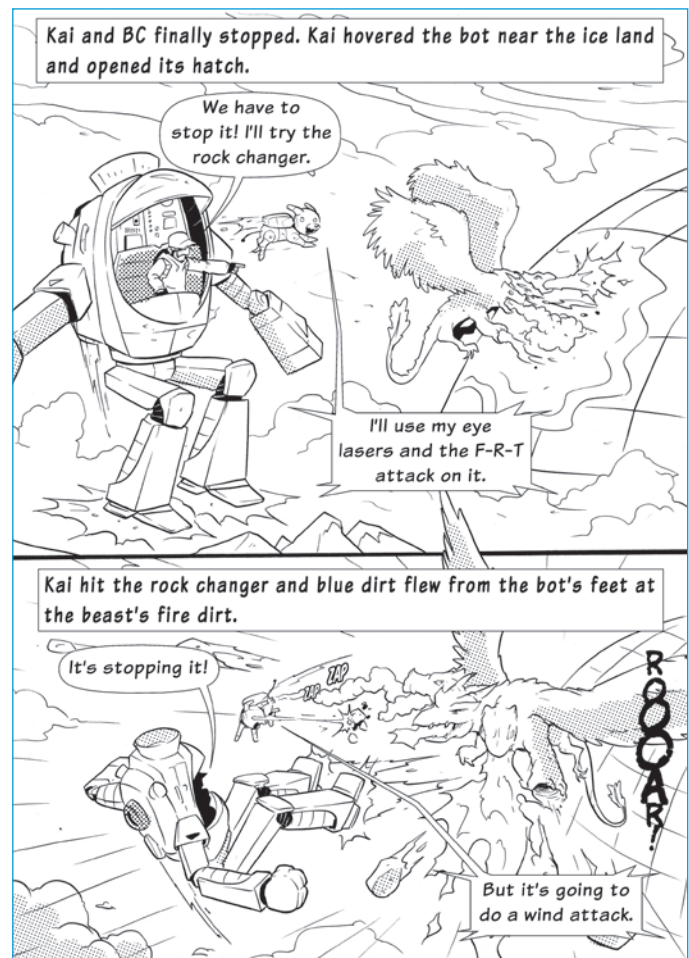
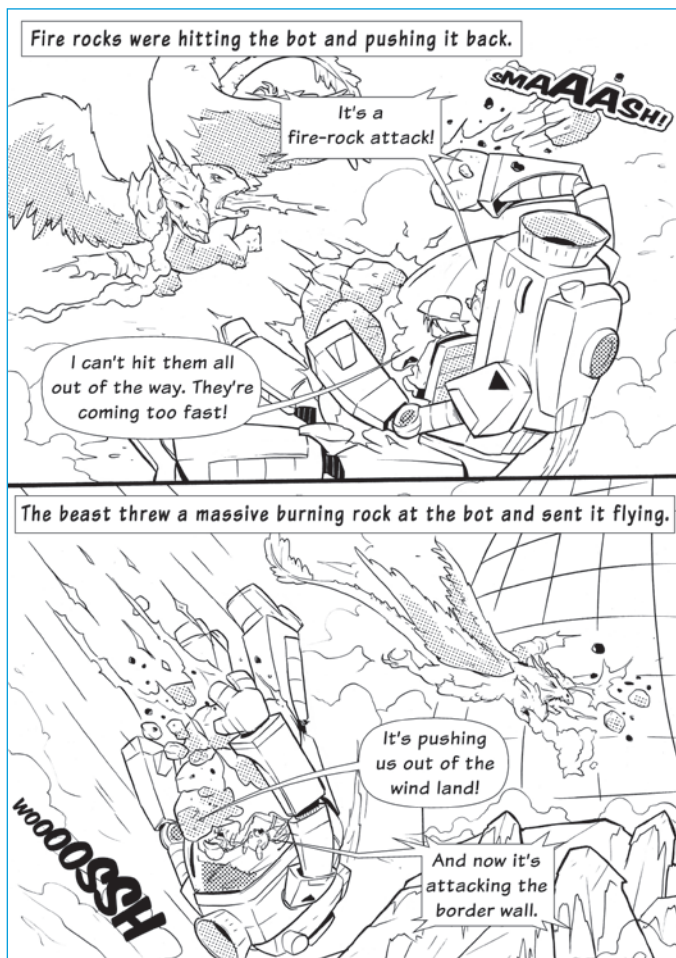
publisher (carefully controlled sentence length and vocabulary, and the correct balance of new and familiar words delivered in short, manageable chunks), with the instincts of a trade publisher (strong visuals and graphic devices that not only lessened the reading load and provided timely reading breaks, but also delighted the young beast-obsessed reader).

The illustrations were critical and had to appeal to and respect the young boy's highly developed visual literacy and aesthetic. While they may still be struggling with words, young boys have a very sophisticated visual appreciation, fuelled in no small part by the games they play and the movies they watch. If illustrations are too 'babyish' they will turn off and we've lost them.

*Illustration of the games room and Lab from the **Boy vs Beast** series*



Graphic novel spreads



Kids, like all of us, choose books by their covers ... Whoever said you shouldn't judge a book by its cover had no idea about how much time publishers put into their design!

Using trading cards and graphic novel spreads allowed us to deliver complex concepts and action while still using frequently used words. Kids easily understand the elemental symbols and know that as the beasts mutate from small to large their attack power increases, as shown by the number of stars each attack power is given. We delivered all this information graphically, simultaneously satisfying the boy and respecting the reader.

Finally, all these elements needed to work together on pages that invite rather

than alienate the emerging or struggling reader. The pages needed to be visually attractive and look achievable to the new reader — too many words and too little white space can intimidate. So we used open page designs with generous spacing, allowing not only for ease of reading but also — with fewer words on each page — for the child to read more pages more quickly — nothing builds confidence like achievement! Illustrations and word art also punctuate the story, to give reading breaks and enhance the experience.

Trading cards



And, finally, the most important weapon of all in the fight for a reader's interest and heart is the book cover. Kids, like all of us, choose books by their covers; they are the little billboards publishers make to tell you what sort of read awaits you. Whoever said you shouldn't judge a book by its cover had no idea about how much time publishers put into their design!

Over the years the semiotics of covers has evolved to a tacit understanding between

publisher and reader. A cover featuring shadowy figures seen through sight hairs and with the author's name in foiled letters will undoubtedly be a spy-thriller, while a woman looking out to a Tuscan-esque landscape most likely points to a woman's search for self in Europe. Covers convey not just the content but the mood of the book and if the publisher doesn't grab the reader's attention and interest with the front cover they won't even turn the book over to read the blurb, let alone the story inside.

Banana peels landed right under the beast's foot just as it lowered its leg to stomp. And down it went.

Booom!

Li and BF moved quickly. BF put the beast to sleep with her hypnotic eyes and Li pinned it down with the net.

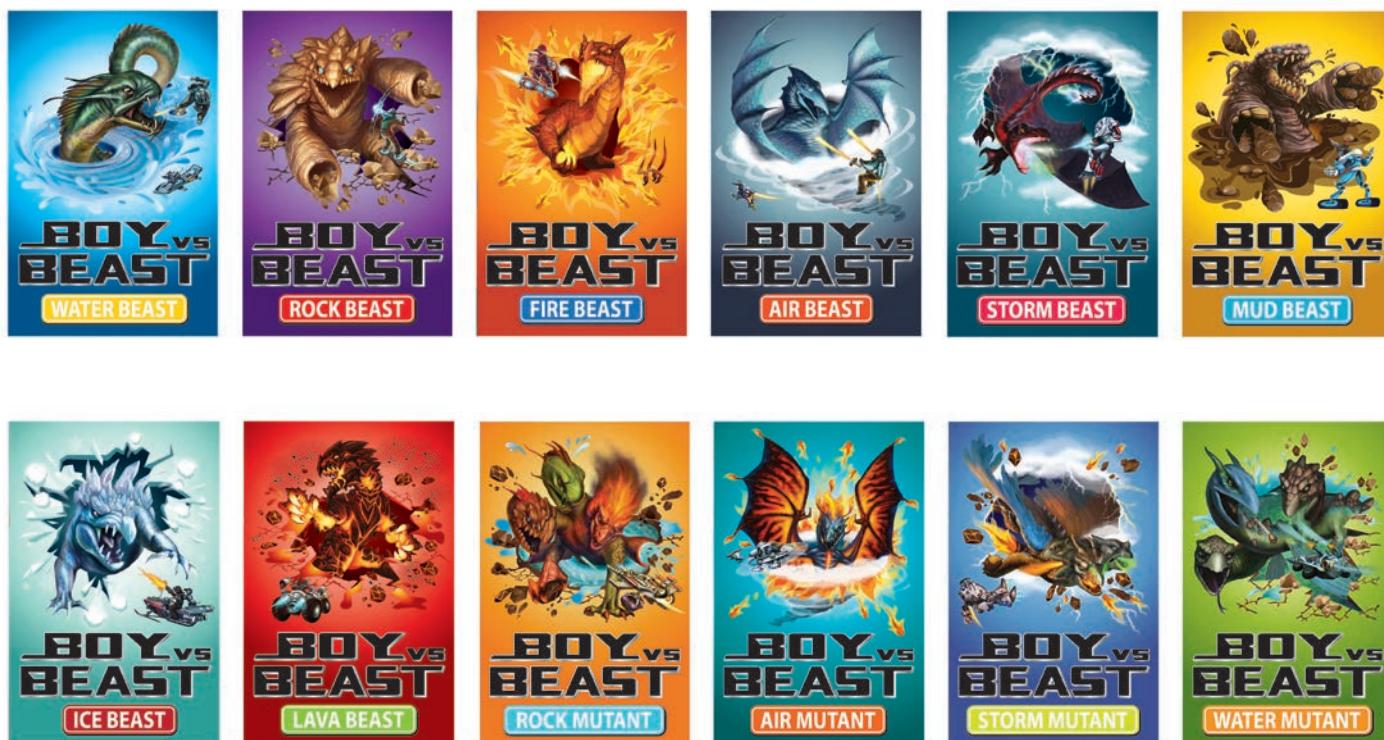
'Excellent beast-battling work team!' said Kai.

'I'll activate the ray cage, BC.'

'And then we take it to the Outlands,' said BC.



Sample page spread

Boy vs Beast series covers

And so it is with kids' books — the covers must lure the potential reader in. They must also, I believe, satisfy the backpack test: will a child be embarrassed if it falls out of his backpack in the playground, or might it garner him a few peer points? Books don't enjoy the coolest of reputations in the school yard, so we need to fight back by respecting the visual sophistication of the boy and his desire to, or be seen to, 'read up'. The *Boy vs Beast* covers, with their strong graphics and high-impact beasts, could just as easily be on a book with double the word length. And so we protect the vulnerable boy — who is perhaps already slipping behind his classmates — from being exposed as a 'baby reader'.

Helping reluctant talkers

A quite different challenge presented when I realised there are scores of books and series that talk to the emotional life of girls — that allow girls to explore how they feel

about friends, family, school, boys, life — but there were very few available for boys. Boys — who also worry about friends, school and family — would actually find it easier to find a book on defending themselves against marauding mutants than the sting of a friend's rejection or the fear of not fitting in.

Books are so useful in helping kids — and adults — develop their emotional thinking, so the lack of these books for young boys seemed to me both a problem and an opportunity. It led to me joining forces with Penguin Books to create the contemporary reality series, *Stuff Happens*.

In Kindlon and Thompson's *Raising Cain: Protecting the emotional life of boys* (Ballantyne Books, 1999) they write, '[a] boy must see and believe that emotions belong in the life of a man. If we teach our sons to honour and value their emotional lives, if we can give boys an emotional vocabulary

Stuff Happens
series logo



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and the encouragement to use it, they will unclench their hearts'. So with *Stuff Happens* we wanted to make a contribution to that unclenching of boys' hearts with a series they would love to read in a package that

sat comfortably alongside their much-loved *Wimpy Kid* and *Andy Griffiths*.

So how to package it so it looked that way? The last thing we wanted to do was present

Stuff Happens: page layout

shouldn't have and turned the car around to take Misty her stuff. 'But, Muuuuuum,' I started. It's already half past nine. I'm late. It's her fault. Can't you take me to school, thChapen take Misty her stuff? It's the first day and I'm really, really late.' I tried putting on the croaky voice, like I was a robot about to cry. That didn't help.

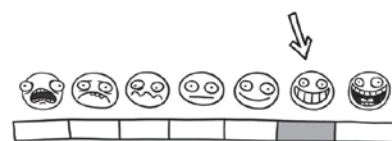
'We're all late, Derek. You're late, I'm late, your sister's late. Your brother's probably late as well. What do you want me to do about it? What can I do about it? It's the first day of school, It really doesn't matter. Trust me, no one cares.'

We didn't talk much after that.

When she dropped me she said sorry and gave me a kiss. She said she wanted to come

in and make sure I was okay but knew I'd be fine because I always was. Then she dropped me at the school crossing and yelled, 'make good choices' as I walked in front of her car.

It wasn't the start to Grade five I'd been hoping for.





Stuff Happens covers

... as always, we wanted to wrap these stories in packaging that would appeal to boys, like sweets or 'coco pops' that they would want to unwrap.

it as stories about boys and their feelings! So again, we started with the world the boys were already experiencing and their highly developed visual literacy, which led us to explore the 'on-trend' world of emojis and tags to create a series logo that would reflect the promise of the series.

Next we gathered some of Australia's best male writers and asked them to tell an everyday, 'every boy' story from the perspective of a Year 5 class at our made-up Monvale Primary School. We asked them to write about the stuff that happens to boys and their mates — and how they feel about it.

The story themes all fall around a 10-year-old's emotional triangle of friends, family and school, and the everyday challenges and worries — such as fitting in, not fitting in, dealing with parents, teachers, friends — you know, stuff that happens. Because we had lots of different writers, we ended up with lots of different boys in our imaginary class: the sporty ones, the joker ones, the arty ones, the shy ones. And the sensitive ones that lie behind all those boys.

The stories are linked by the common narrative world of Monvale Primary and the characters at times wander through each other's stories: just as we are all stars in our

own dramas and extras in other people's, so too are the boys of *Stuff Happens*. When Tony Wilson's sporty character Jack appears in the background of Will Kostakis's story *Sean*, we already know there is more to him than meets the eye and it subtly makes the point that everyone has stuff happening. And, because we have a whole series to play with, we can embed things in one book that then turns up again in other books, rewarding the repeat reader with a richer experience.

to commit to at least 12 books rather than just dip a toe in the water with two or four, and it is the series bulk that often allows a series to be seen in a crowded market. With *Stuff Happens*, we think we've got it right, but it's still always an anxious wait to see how a series is embraced, or otherwise, by its target readers.

So it's always a great relief when you are sent something like this after a series is launched:

If you are hunting the engagement of young readers — whether as a publisher, writer, teacher, librarian, parent or mum — the 'eating up' of their muesli dressed as coco pops is truly the biggest prize of all.

We then laid these stories out using an open, clean type and page layout that invited the reader in. And, at the end of each chapter, we placed our very own 'emotimeter' to take a snapshot of how each boy was feeling. Drawn in the same slightly anarchic, tagging-like style of our logo, it allowed us to lightly, amusingly, flag the emotion that was being focussed on in that chapter.

And, as always, we wanted to wrap these stories in packaging that would appeal to boys, like sweets or 'coco pops' that they would want to unwrap. Each cover is set against a school wall and 'tagged' with the emotional story of the featured boy, inviting the reader to guess at and be drawn in to the drama. Rolled out across a series, this also allowed us to create a visual language to help the reader understand and express their own emotions.

Creating a series is always a big commitment for a publisher: it takes heart and ambition

As a mum to two boys aged 8 and 10, I was thrilled to find a book series that provided very real 'boy dilemmas' and connected feelings and behaviours, which can be really confusing for boys. What was even more exciting was how much the boys ate it up. My eldest read the first book in one sitting and I was back at the bookshop the next day to buy the entire series! My youngest loved being read to and was so engaged and interested in all the characters and their issues. Can't wait for the next installment.
— Marita Evans, mum to Rupert, 10, and Henry, 8.

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