This is Heinemann’s fortieth anniversary. As part of the celebration, we are introducing a new feature series, “Turn & Talk: Two Heinemann authors meet up to talk it out.” In this series, we will convene two writers, one from the earlier generation of Heinemann authors and the other representing our newest cohort of authors, for conversations on a variety of topics. An excerpt of our first exchange, between Harvey “Smokey” Daniels and Kristi Mraz, is presented here, and the complete transcript is featured on our landing page. Join author and editor Ellin Oliver Keene as she moderates this timely discussion that explores the source of writer identity, the challenges of teaching during unsettled times, equity issues in schools, and more.

Additional “Turn & Talk” conversations, facilitated by Ellin, will be published on the Heinemann blog throughout Heinemann’s fortieth year, enabling our readers to immerse themselves in the most critical topics in education around the world from the perspectives of two deeply respected authors with very different backgrounds.
Ellin:
In all of the identities that you have as parents and partners and spouses and professional developers and teachers, how did you develop a writing identity? How did you come to be writers, to feel like writers? What influenced your development as writers?

Kristi:
I grew up in Western New York outside Rochester, and the schools were early adopters of writer's workshop. My first memory of writing is third grade. In a writer's workshop, I wrote a story called “Look What I Found,” which was about a chicken bone I found in an archaeological experiment. I remember our teacher bound it in wallpaper and put a hard cover on it, and I was like “Nailed it, nailed it.”

I really thought of myself as a writer in elementary school, and then in middle school and high school—nothing. College—nothing. I lost it a little. I always wanted to revisit that part of me, but it was only in the past five years that I've reacquainted myself with that feeling.

Ellin:
No matter what your political views, it feels like we are in an unsettled time in education as well. When adults are unsettled, distracted, fearful, or angry, those emotions can filter out to the children. I worry that those feelings are manifesting in our teaching, affecting our kids. What can teachers do to keep our focus on the kids while assuming roles of advocates and active citizens?

Smokey:
When you teach, when you're with kids for 180 days a year, something always is happening: a class pet dies, a fire in the neighborhood, someone's grandma passes away. These things happen and come through the door with the kids, so we've always had to figure out how to deal with unsettledness as maybe just part of the human condition.

Our job as teachers isn't to make it seem like the world is completely safe and happy all the time, but to have the skills to confront trouble when it comes and to learn about it and to have agency and power.

Kristi:
It's my responsibility along with everything else. I didn't get hired to have no filter. My job is to make kids feel like they can make a better world and so that's what I'm trying to do.
Ellin:
I worked in many districts serving primarily children of color and teachers were mostly white. I'd love your thoughts about how, as a nation—not at the school level or individual classroom level, but as a nation—we should approach this issue. What needs to change to not only attract people of color into teaching, but help them feel comfortable enough to stay? What can educators do to address this dilemma?

Smokey:
When I was a young teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, so many of my colleagues were people of color. Now, young black and Hispanic folks can choose from a wider variety of careers than were open to them in the past. We have to address this “minority teacher flight” through our professional organizations like NEA, AFT, NCTE, and ILA.

Kristi:
I think one thing to name straight off the bat is that we’re three white people having this conversation, which is the problem. So if I am the one at the table, I need to amplify other voices, other people who are doing really smart work around this like Val Brown, Christopher Emdin, Cornelius Minor, and organizations like Border Crossers. Read them! We talk about picture books being windows, mirrors, and sliding doors, but professional books have to be that, too.

Ellin:
Back to the questions: Why do teachers of color leave in such huge numbers? What can we do to help stem that tide? And where does it start?

Kristi:
Teachers are in a position where it can feel like we’re powerless. We can feel powerless about curriculum, powerless over school decisions. Power is a huge issue in the teaching profession.

Smokey:
I think teachers of color rightly worry about whether they will be seriously respected and listened to in school systems. To make teaching more attractive, faculties need to do the deep identity and empathy work that creates real trust and community. There is a blueprint for this in Sara Ahmed’s book, Being the Change. And teachers need to do this same work with kids.

Kristi:
One of the trickiest things about teaching is that there’s a caregiving aspect to it. The only parenting advice that I follow is that the best predictor of who your kid will be is who you are. I’ve taken that as a mission statement to be a better person.

Ellin:
We are fortunate to work in a professional community. We meet at conferences, we attend and provide professional development, and we engage in extraordinary conversation with other educators. We are lucky, but I wonder if our professional lives sometimes become an echo chamber. What’s the balance between collaborating with like-minded colleagues and engaging in conversations with those who have a different point of view?

Kristi:
I’ve been trying to follow people in my social media who are saying very different things than I often see in my feed. I just try to sit and learn. I’m working hard to make sure I’m hearing a variety of points of view about things.

Smokey:
Yeah, for $35,000 a year or less.
Kristi: There's a saying, something like, "The world is good and worth fighting for. I believe in the second half." That's a good summary of me at this moment. I don't feel the world is all good, but it's worth fighting for, and that's what we're doing in our classrooms.

Ellin: So, it's been great to meet up and talk with you both today. This is my last question. It's Heinemann's fortieth anniversary this year. I'm curious what Heinemann has meant to you as writers, readers, and professionals—what's the influence been over the years?

Kristi: Well, I'm a product of Heinemann to a certain extent since I had writer's workshop in my classroom as a kid. My mom was a teacher, and when I joined the teaching profession, she gave me her first edition of Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing*.

Smokey: I wrote my first Heinemann book in the mid '80s, and so I've been publishing there for more than thirty years. It's been my professional home base in so many ways. Just the other day, I got out the Heinemann "mother text"—Donald Graves' *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*. I started reading the first page, and it's just, oh man, this is so amazing. He was writing breakthrough stuff back then, but it feels so fresh and valuable to us even today.