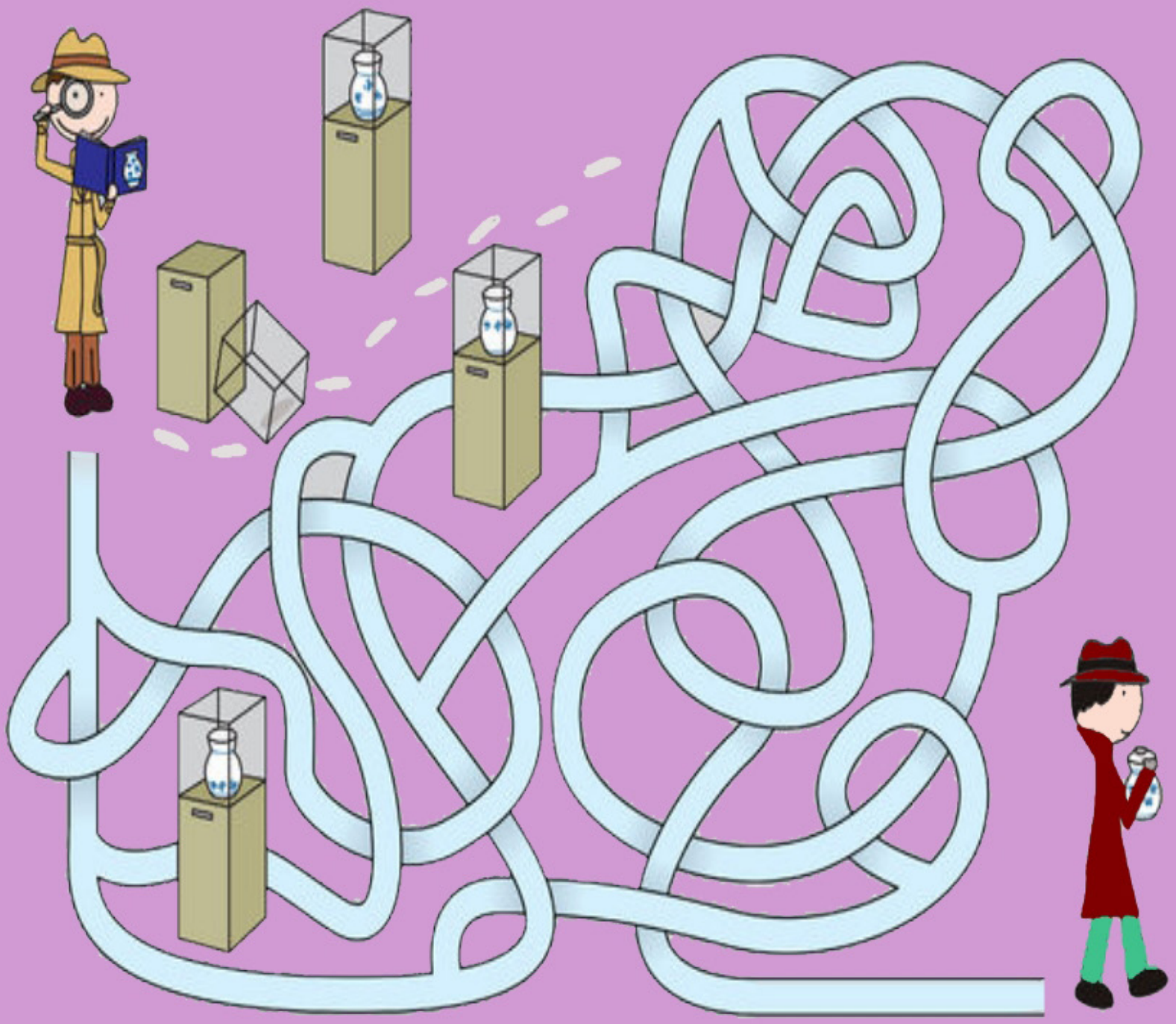
Children's Book Insider

June 2017



Writing Mysteries That Work

Table of contents

This issue's contributors

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Children's Book Insider, The Children's Writing Monthly is an electronic monthly newsletter that is included in the paid membership to the Children's Writing Knowledge Base (http://www.CBIClubhouse.com). The cost of membership is $49.95 per year, or $5.49 per month if billed monthly. For more information, go to http://writeforkids.org/come-join-the-insiders/

Children's Book Insider makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses and literary agents before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers or agents with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. All "At Presstime" listings are current at the time of initial publication. Members are urged to verify listings past the month of publication.

At Presstime:

Publisher Accepting Writing Samples, Portfolio Links for Work-for-Hire Projects

Insight Kids, an imprint of Insight Editions, publishes illustrated books in the categories of self help, humor, activities, animals, and multicultural topics, as well as books with licensed characters, for children up to age 8. Most are nonfiction, but will consider fiction with an educational purpose. Many of their books have lift-the-flap or other novelty elements. All books are commissioned on a work-for-hire basis. Interested authors may submit a resume and writing samples; illustrators may submit links to online portfolios. No attachments. Study the Insight Kids current catalog before submitting at **https://insighteditions.com/product-category/insight-kids/**. Send information to Susan B. Katz, Senior Editor, at **s.katz@insighteditions.com**.

Agent Seeks MG/YA Fiction and Nonfiction Picture Books

Carrie Pestritto is an agent with the Prospect Agency (**http://www.prospectagency.com/**). As a history and mythology buff, she is intrigued by books that introduce her to another culture or time period. She is looking for description and detail that will make her feel like she is inside the story and interest her in a subject she never thought she would want to read about—or, conversely, introduce her to startling facts about something or someone she believed she already knew everything about. In the children's/teen area, Carrie is looking for high-concept YA fantasy, diverse YA and upper middle grade, middle grade with a quirky voice, and biographical, educational, or cultural picture books.

For nonfiction projects, she looks for authors that have a strong platform, such as a popular blog, published articles, or related professional experience. In the fiction arena, she is drawn in by relatable characters, fantastic voices, strong heroines, unusual premises, or re-imaginings of classical books. She is not currently interested in picture books that do not fit the parameters listed above. To submit, send the entire manuscript for a picture book, or a query with a synopsis and three chapters for longer works. All submissions should be done online at **https://www.prospectagency.com/submit.html**

Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award for Books Published in 2017

This award will be given to a new writer for a picture book written in the tradition of Ezra Jack Keats that highlights the universal qualities of childhood and the strength of the family; reflects the multicultural nature of our world; has an original text and original story (no folk tales or retelling of folk tales); unifies illustrations and text; avoids stereotypes; is respectful of the child's intelligence, sensitivity, curiosity, and love of learning; and displays freshness and originality of language and literary expression.

To be eligible, the author will have no more than three children's books previously published. The book submitted for the award must have a 2017 copyright date. Entries may be sent at any time during the year prior to the deadline of December 15, 2017. A cash award of $1,000, coupled with the esteemed Ezra Jack Keats medallion (inscribed with the recipient's name), will be presented to the winning author at the award ceremony, which is held every year in April during the Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival at the University of Southern Mississippi. A gold seal with the iconic image of "Peter" in a red snow suit (from *The Snowy Day*) is made available to the publisher to affix to copies of the book.

A copy of each entry must be sent to each member of the Awards Committee. Please email Claire Thompson (**claire.thompson@usm.edu**) or Ellen Ruffin (**ellen.ruffin@usm.edu**) for a complete list of the committee members and their addresses. Deadline for entries is December 15, 2017. Selection will take place in January 2017 in time for the award presentation in April.

Publisher Accepting Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry

Boyds Mills Press, the trade book division of Highlights for Children, has three imprints that are all accepting submissions for picture book through middle grade fiction and nonfiction. The **Boyds Mills Press** imprint publishes a wide range of high-quality fiction and nonfiction titles for young readers, including picture books, chapter books, middle grade novels, and nonfiction that focus on excellent storytelling, imaginative illustration, and strong characters.

Calkins Creek publishes both nonfiction and historical fiction that introduces children to the many people, places, and events that have shaped U.S. History. Calkins Creek titles present multiple points of view through original and extensive research, using primary sources, such as timelines, bibliographies, historical notes, and glossaries.

WordSong is the only children's imprint in the United States specifically dedicated to poetry. WordSong titles capture the vibrant, unexpected, and emotional connections between text and young readers.

All submissions go to the same address, and every submission will be evaluated for each imprint. Responds in 3-4 months.

Picture Books: Submit the entire manuscript. If you are a professional illustrator submitting a picture book or if you are an illustrator working with a professional illustrator, include the manuscript, a dummy, and a sample reproduction of the final artwork that reflects the style and technique you intend to use.

Chapter Book and Middle Grade Fiction: Submit the first three chapters and a plot summary.

Poetry: Send a book-length collection of your own poems. Do not send an initial query. Keep in mind that the strongest collections demonstrate a facility with multiple poetic forms.

Nonfiction: Include a detailed bibliography with your submission. It's highly recommended you include an expert's review of your manuscript with a detailed explanation of the books in the marketplace that are similar to the one you propose. If you intend for the book to be illustrated with photos or other graphic elements (charts, graphs, etc.), it is your responsibility to find or create those elements and to include with your submission a permissions budget, if applicable. Keep in mind that good children's nonfiction has a narrative quality—a story line—that encyclopedias do not; please consider whether both the subject and the language will appeal to children.

Send all submissions with a cover letter of relevant information, including your own experience with writing and publishing. Label the package "MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION" and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you would like the manuscript returned. For art samples (without a manuscript), label the package "ART SAMPLE SUBMISSION." All submissions should be sent to: Submissions Editor, Boyds Mills Press, 815 Church Street, Honesdale, PA 18431

NOTE: It's important that you study current Boyds Mills Press titles before submitting: **https://www.boydsmillspress.com/bmp**

Upcoming Workshops

Robert Quackenbush's Children's Book Writing & Illustrating Workshop will be held in New York City on July 10-13, 2017. This four-day workshop is held at legendary author/illustrator Robert Quackenbush's Manhattan studio. The focus is on picture books and middle grade readers from concept to finish. The goal of the workshop is to have a project ready in manuscript or dummy book form by the end of the four days to submit to a publisher or agent. The fee for this workshop is $750. A $100 non-refundable deposit is required to hold a place. The $650 balance is due two weeks prior to attendance. Applicants are responsible for their accommodations and meals. Limited to 8 people. For more information, contact Robert Quackenbush by phone at (212) 744-3822, by email at **Rqstudios@aol.com**, or visit: http://**www.rquackenbush.com**.

Pacific Coast Children's Writers Workshop: 15th annual novelcrafting seminar, September 22-24 near Santa Cruz, CA, for 16 intermediate to published writers. Receive critique(s) on your partial or full novel by senior editor Stacey Barney (G.P. Putnam's) and/or senior agent Brianne Johnson (Writers House). Choose manuscripts to read in advance, then see how faculty critiques them. Savvy teens in concurrent workshop also provide feedback on adults' manuscripts. In-depth focus sessions, serene beachfront setting. Fee $819 (CBI rate through June 10: $799) includes lodging and meals; critiques additional. Most manuscripts due June 10; some accepted through August. (Alternate teens' fees, due dates.) Inquiries for Nancy Sondel, Founding Director: **http://www.ChildrensWritersWorkshop.com**. Open until filled!

WRITING mysteries FOR CHILDREN

by Jean Diagneau

Turning the final page on a great mystery is like putting the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle into place. For puzzle enthusiasts like me, there's a satisfaction in that final act. Unless, of course, the puzzle has a piece or two missing. Then there's nothing more disappointing or frustrating. So it is with mysteries. If all the pieces are there, there's nothing more exciting than that final scene when all the clues fall into place. Let's explore this genre and see what pieces you need for a complete picture.

Choosing the Design

Depending on your reader's age, there are lots of mysteries or crimes a child protagonist can sort out–kidnapping, theft, forgery, shoplifting, arson, and even murder. Where you choose to put your characters plays a role in getting your readers to stick with you to the end. While schools, sporting events, and extracurricular activities are familiar to kids, they don't always make the most interesting location. Setting can ramp up the excitement and conflict in a mystery, whether it's a wilderness camp, a truck rally, or an historic monument, so use it to your advantage. Wherever it is, the location of your mystery must be accessible to your protagonist. If a kid only attends asthma camp one week a year, your mystery has to be solved–and in a satisfying way–within that one week.

That All-Important Border

Putting a puzzle border together equates with plotting a mystery. Without a solid framework, the story won't hold up. Lerner Publishing Group editor Amy Fitzgerald suggests you outline first. "You may think that you know where your story is going and don't need to map it out, but doing an outline never hurts and usually helps." Linda Joy Singleton, author of the Curious Cat Spy Club series, agrees. "I usually think of a plot first." Even if you're a "pantser" and don't tend to outline, a framework can help you visualize where your story is going. Fitzgerald adds, "You can depart from the outline as you work, of course, but having a path to follow will help keep you from getting tangled in questionable character motivations and twists that lead to nowhere."

Filling in the Characters

After the border, I group pieces by color or design. That's where characters come in. Author Penny Warner, edited by Fitzgerald, likes to "put my characters in interesting situations where they're sort of 'fish out of water' and see what happens." This technique has worked well in her Girls to the Rescue series. What she loves best is "seeing what happens to my characters as the plot develops, getting them into more and more trouble, and figuring out how to get them out–which isn't always easy."

In mysteries, your main character usually doesn't go through major change or growth by the end. The protagonist must have the intelligence and ability to recognize clues from the beginning. Additionally, he can't pull some mysterious talent or magic trick out of thin air to solve the mystery. That doesn't mean he can't have some interesting ability, like a photographic memory. But your readers have to be in on it from the start. They want to solve the mystery right along with your protagonist; withholding information will be a disappointment that might cause readers to put your book down. That's never a good thing.

Even more important is that your protagonist–all of your characters for that matter–need some motivation for solving the mystery or causing it. Your main character needs a reason to rush into the face of danger or take on a ghastly villain. It can't just conveniently happen. This is where a subplot–sometimes presented as a smaller second mystery–helps. Often, a devastating secret involving a friend or family member, a difficult moral decision, or an action that contradicts your protagonist's personality can add another layer to keep readers' interest. But each subplot must be tied to the mystery in some way in order to make sense.

Subplots can help place obstacles in your protagonist's way. Then, too, a protagonist may create some of his own problems. Maybe it's important for your sleuth to interview people at local cafes and shops. If he's gotten himself grounded or has a huge homework assignment to finish, he's the reason he can't follow through.

Those Crucial but Oddly Shaped Pieces

Finding where the unusual pieces of a puzzle belong can be challenging. But often those challenges keep your reader guessing…and reading. Having several suspects keeps the protagonist and your reader on their toes and adds that fast pace and action that propels your story along and in different directions. Suspects often lie or come across as ingratiatingly helpful or friendly. But they must have their own motivations for their actions–something they will go to no end to keep hidden. As Warner explains, "All of the suspects have secrets. It's up to the reader to figure out which of those leads to murder."

Then, too, all your characters must be believable. Warner explains, "I like the story to ring true in terms of the characters' behaviors, so I try to think about what I'd do in the same situation–other than call the police." As an editor, Fitzgerald sees this too often in submissions, when the "dramatic option" is chosen over realism. "This is especially true of villains," she says. "They can easily start rubbing their hands together in evil glee, twirling their mustaches, and talking to children with pseudo-Victorian flair." She prefers "a villain who acts more like your math teacher or your next-door neighbor." She adds, "A story can be gripping without being over the top."

Those Open Spots in the Puzzle

I love filling in those empty places with stray puzzle pieces I've set aside. For your mystery, this means you should scrutinize every clue you've created since they're what move the story forward. Some clues are red herrings–misleading or "fake" clues that send the protagonist and the reader in the wrong direction. Others are important, but should be purposely set up to be overlooked or to appear trivial at the beginning. They're downplayed when presented, but are integral to the solution. A note scribbled on a scrap of paper may seem trivial, until your protagonist discovers it's something that never should have been overlooked. Singleton often discovers this as she's writing. "Usually small details will turn out to be important later in the story." One of the biggest "aha" moments is when your reader realizes he missed a significant clue that was right in front of him all along.

Most importantly, clues must be believable and attainable by your protagonist. Scaling a skyscraper to find a clue isn't likely. But taking an elevator in the building where he lives and discovering clues by talking to different tenants can certainly be doable by a child sleuth. Additionally, while your clues should not be obvious, your reader must be able to go back and sort them out so they make sense at the end. Otherwise, you've sold her short.

That Final Piece

This is the moment mystery readers and puzzle solvers are waiting for–when everything comes into focus. However, if that final clue doesn't fit and things don't come to a logical conclusion, you're going to have one very dissatisfied reader. Sometimes you have to go back and add or eliminate clues. One of the easiest ways to finalize this is when your protagonist sums up the clues that brought her to the solution; having those details outlined ahead of time helps immensely. Remember, too, that reiterating the clues and finding the solution should happen for the protagonist about the same time it happens for your reader. It's that moment when you fit that final piece into the puzzle that will bring satisfied mystery readers asking for more.

Many mysteries are written as a series, from *Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys*, to the *Box Car Children*. If you've got an idea for a series, Linda Joy Singleton suggests you "make sure the first book can stand alone, but let your agent/editor know you have additional titles planned." Editor Amy Fitzgerald suggests that this is her preferred way of receiving these submissions. "I'm currently mostly looking for stand-alone books, so I love when an author has a really strong first book that I want to turn into a series but that can also work as a single story."

Since writing is all about reading, here are some mysteries to add to your must-read list.

A to Z Mysteries (Ron Roy)
The Book Scavenger series (Jennifer Chambliss Bertman)
Cam Jansen (David A. Adler)
Chet Gecko (Bruce Hale)
Dead Girl series (Linda Joy Singleton)
The Code Busters Club (Penny Warner)
Encyclopedia Brown (Donald J. Sobol)
Girls to the Rescue series (Penny Warner)
A Jigsaw Jones Mystery (James Preller)
Nate the Great (Marjorie Weinman Sharmat)
The Seer series (Linda Joy Singleton)
The 39 Clues (various authors)

TACKLING THE "REVISE AND RESUBMIT" LETTER

by Jane McBride

Rejections hurt. And, after 35 years of writing, I still get them. And they still hurt. But, and this is an important but, I'm getting a higher quality of rejections these days. My last one was a "revise and resubmit" rejection. This came from an editor I've worked with in the past, and so she sent a detailed letter about what she'd like me to change. If you're lucky enough to get such a letter, take those suggestions seriously.

Now I am viewing the project with new eyes, working to erase the stumbling blocks and strengthen the writing. I won't fool you: it's a daunting task and I have to summon all my skill, persistence, and drive to see it through to the end.

Approaching a "revise and resubmit" project is much the same as any revision. Seek, identify, destroy any problem areas and replace them with thoughtful revisions.

STEP 1: Start with the easy fixes. What do I mean by an "easy fix?" My publisher is a Christian-based one. As such, it disapproves of certain words, even words which the rest of the world might find innocuous. One such word is "lucky." The editor had noted it, and I promptly removed it. Why is starting with the easy stuff important? It gives you confidence to tackle the tough stuff later. Of course if you are one who likes to get the hard things done first, by all means do that.

ACTION: Identify what you can correct in a few minutes, whether it be spelling or grammar errors, a missing word, a wrongly used word, etc. Take care of them one by one. Even though these matters are fairly simple to correct, don't skimp on them.

STEP 2. Move on to the slightly harder revisions. These can include POV switches, stilted dialogue, or overly long narrative. I tend to be free and easy with POV. Though I've been writing for decades, I still have lapses in maintaining a single POV within a scene. For some publishing houses, this is not an issue. My publisher likes a single POV per scene. (When will I learn?)

ACTION: You've gotten the easy fixes under your belt. Now it's time to work on more problematic ones. If you've indulged in some head-hopping, go back and get your head (or that of your characters) straight. If a dialogue exchange is stilted or you've tended to wax poetic in a passage of narrative, address these matters with the same diligence you paid to the simple ones.

STEP 3: Tackle the hard stuff. My editor had a problem with the basic premise of the story. Ouch. That's a big one. It involves a lot of re-writing, a lot of re-thinking, a lot of gritting my teeth and throwing out perfectly good words. At least, I thought they were good words when I wrote them. What other story problems could we include in the category "hard stuff?"

Character arcs. In novels, characters are expected to grow and change over the course of the story. Ideally, this growth and change help the protagonist to conquer his problems and reach his goals. Some books may not require much, if any, change in the character, such as a mystery series where the plot revolves around the main character solving a crime, frequently a murder. In the case of my manuscript, the heroine didn't show enough growth in order for her to realistically reach her happy ending.

Conflict. Conflict, or more precisely, lack of conflict, has always been my downfall. I needed more conflict, both between the hero and heroine and in making the two main characters struggle to reach their goals and subsequent happy ending.

Motivation. Closely related to conflict, motivation is key in crafting a believable story. My characters' motivation was lacking. They didn't have sufficient reason for doing what they were doing. Fixing this means delving into

"Revise and Resubmit" letter continued

their backstories and giving the reader a believable reason for why they are acting the way they are. Much of this backstory won't show up in the story, but I need to know it so that I can write convincingly.

ACTION: When you have big content-related revisions, you need to take a step back and see your story as a whole, so you'll know where the revisions need to begin. It helps to make an outline of the book you've written (not the one you intended to write, but an outline of your actual manuscript). Try creating a chapter-by-chapter outline and write a sentence or two for each chapter that describes the elements of character arc, conflict, motivation, and action. Or, create an outline that describes the scenes in each chapter with one sentence each. Now look at the "big picture" version of your book. Identify exactly where you went off track and start your revisions there.

Now that we've talked about what may be involved in a "revise and resubmit" project, let's talk about the differences between different kinds of rejection letters and how to interpret them.

In the past, I've received other kinds of rejections. The first type of rejection is the form letter. Here you receive a mass-produced letter with only an editor's (or more likely an assistant editor's) name at the bottom.

Another kind of rejection is the flat-out rejection with the damning phrase, "good luck in placing your manuscript elsewhere." This is code for "Don't bother us with this piece of garbage again." These letters contain no encouragement, no offer to look at the manuscript again, and may contain some scathing phrases such as "I suggest you pursue another career." (I received this kind of rejection over 30 years ago. You know what? It still stings. But that editor did me a favor. She doubted my talent, and I was determined to prove her wrong.)

A third type of rejection letter is the "good but not good enough" letter. In this, the editor may give some personal encouragement on your writing but is not really impressed with this particular project. Take the encouragement to heart as editors do not give this kind of personal attention out without reason. He or she may offer some pieces of constructive criticism, such as "Character lacks sufficient motivation" or "Pacing is sluggish." Pay attention to these in order that you can use them in future manuscripts.

Yet another kind of letter is the "we'd like to look at this if you can fix some problems." (Usually these are pretty big problems.) Here, you are being offered the opportunity to rework your manuscript and resubmit it to an editor with whom you have not worked in the past. This is different than the "revise and resubmit" project I described above. This type of letter is a real stepping stone in your quest to be published. Act on it.

STEP 1: Don't rush the revision process. Take your time and give the revision your very best. Why is this so important? You're being given another chance. Don't blow it.

ACTION: Enlist a fresh set of eyes. I asked a trusted friend to look at my manuscript and got new perspective.

STEP 2: Don't allow too much time to go by before you resubmit. You want to get the revised work before the editor while it is still fresh on her mind.

ACTION: Follow through. Many editors complain that they asked to look at authors' work once the manuscripts were revised, but the writers failed to follow up. Editors have long memories.

My story has a happy ending. I revised (and revised and revised) and resubmitted. My editor called last week and wants to buy the project. Hooray!

Wherever you are in your writing career, whatever kind of rejection letters you are currently receiving, resolve that you will succeed. The only way you can do this is to keep writing. And then do it all over again.

writing blueprints

Starting this month, we'll be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, marketing, or self-publishing your book, go to **http:www.writingblueprints.com**

GIRL POWER: THE STORY OF LAURIE WALLMARK

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Sometimes writers aren't born. They're created out of passion and persistence. Laurie Wallmark was a self-admitted "late bloomer" when it came to writing, but she melded her love of science and words to find her own unique niche in the kid lit world. Following her inspiration, she's determined to spotlight accomplished female pioneers. In addition to being an award-winning author, Laurie has an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. When not writing, Laurie teaches computer science at Raritan Valley Community College. Her debut picture book, *Ada Byron Lovelace and the Thinking Machine* (Creston Books, 2015), received four starred trade reviews (Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, Booklist, and School Library Journal) and several national awards, including Outstanding Science Trade Book, the Eureka Award and a Cook Prize Honor Book. Her new book, *Grace Hopper: Queen of Computer Code* (Sterling Books, May 2017) is a biography of the first person to use English words to program computers, has already received a starred review from Kirkus.

PJ McIlvaine: From teacher to acclaimed debut picture book author. Did you always aspire to be an author?

Laurie Wallmark: Actually, no. As a child, the only creative writing I did was pen song lyrics. I never took any writing courses in college. I guess I'm just a late bloomer.

PJ: *Ada Lovelace and the Thinking Machine* was critically well received and won several prestigious awards. What was that experience like from your initial submission to when you got an offer? How long did it take to write it? How much research do you do and how long does that take?

LW: I wrote and revised, on and off, for over five years before I got the offer from Creston Books. I then did over ten revisions with my editor, Marissa Moss. Although I did a lot of research before I even set fingers to keyboard, the process continued during the writing phase. With a picture book biography, you're always looking for that special nugget of information that will resonate with a child. I was lucky in that I had access to many of Ada's letters, which helped bring her personality to life.

PJ: In terms of the publishing process, was it what you expected? Any roadblocks or potholes? Do you have any tips for authors on a similar path to publication?

LW: In publishing, you need to always expect the unexpected. Before Ada, I had sold a middle grade novel, but the publisher went out of business before it could come out. I had an agent for a single day before we parted ways. I even got so discouraged at one point that I stopped writing. So my biggest tip for writers is to hang in there. I have a whole group of kid lit friends who were not published when we first met. Many of us now have published books out there being enjoyed by children.

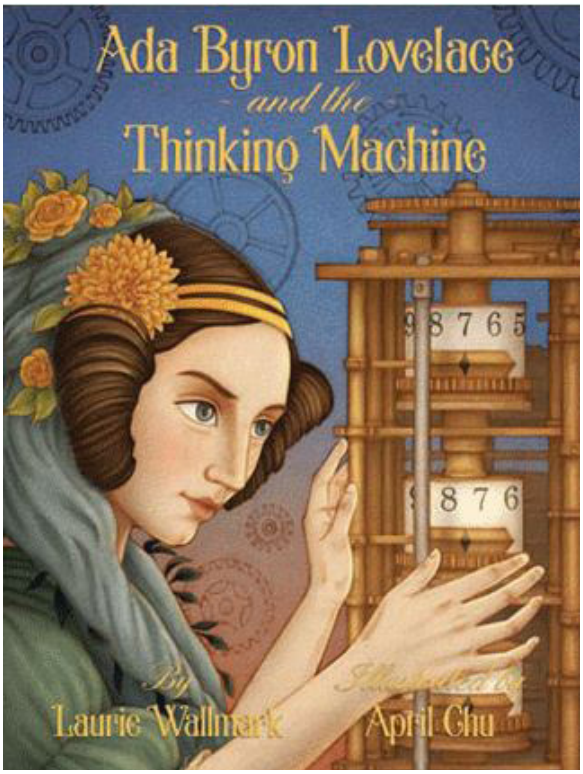
Laurie Wallmark continued

PJ: How much input did you have re the illustrations for the project?

LW: Because Ada is nonfiction, I think I had more input than most writers have with the illustrations. I saw the preliminary sketches and the final art before the book went to press. My illustrator, April Chu clearly did a lot of her own research, and I didn't find any problems in her illustrations. I did make a few suggestions, some of which were taken.

PJ: What was your agent search like? How long did it take you to find representation?

LW: It takes a long time to find not just an agent, but the right agent for you. I looked for seven years before finding my agents, Liza Fleissig and Ginger Harris-Dontzin of the Liza Royce Agency. To be honest, those submissions from the first few years were really not of publishable quality. They deserved to be rejected.



I found my agents after having a critique at a conference. Liza and Ginger both loved Ada and thought Creston would be the perfect publisher for this story.

PJ: You connected with your agents at a conference, so how did that work? Did you still have to go through the query process?

LW: No, I didn't have to go through the query process, either for an agent or for the book. In effect, the conference critique took the place of the agent query. After that, my agent submitted the book to Creston for my first book. Now, my agent handles all my submissions.

PJ: In hindsight, you say the material you queried then were not publishable, but of course, you didn't realize that at the time. What makes you say now that they weren't ready for prime time? Any tips you wish you would have known then?

LW: I think it's natural when we first start out not to realize how long it takes to really hone our craft--the proverbial 10,000 hours. I don't look on those early manuscripts as wasted time. Rather, they were my writing exercises, analogous to the many hours a pianist spends playing scales and the same pieces over and over again.

As far as why do I think they're not publishable, I should have said not publishable as written. I think several of them have possibilities after revision. Others I'll file under my "juvenilia" time period.

The biggest problem I see in 20/20 hindsight is that the stories, especially picture books, don't easily flow. The language and syntax are a little bit clunky. This makes them books that kids would not want to read again and again.

PJ: Since your new book, *Grace Hopper, Queen of the Computer Code,* is about another female computer pioneer, do you believe that this is your niche or brand? As it happens, Hopper has been in the news recently. Sounds like great timing for you. Why do you think there is such interest in female pioneers at the moment? Is it an effort by publishers and editors to include more diverse subject matter?

LW: In nonfiction, my niche is definitely women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math). I consider them to be the unsung heroes of the scientific world. Often a husband or brother got the recognition, but a woman did as much or even more of the work. I want to bring these women's accomplishments to light.

Publishers respond to the market, and more people are looking for books that show the amazing diversity of people working in STEM. Girl power, especially in regards to technology, is definitely popular now, but when I started writing Ada, no one was looking for books like mine. You can't write to the market. You have to write your own passion.

And yes, the timing is certainly good for me as far as my Grace Hopper book. In just the past six months, Grace received the National Medal of Freedom, the Naval Academy announced they were naming their new cyber security building in her honor, and Yale University decided to rename a college after her.

PJ: What is your writing routine like? How many drafts before you decide it's ready? Do you have a critique group?

LW: Because I have a day job and am very involved in volunteering with SCBWI (Society of Children Book Writers and Illustrators), I have to work my writing in the interstitial times of my life. There are no set numbers of drafts before I think my work is ready to show to my agents. I stop when my changes aren't making the manuscript any better, just different. I've been in the same critique group for many years. I think it is essential for any writer to have either a critique group or a few trusted critique partners.

PJ: Where do you get your inspiration? How do you decide that the idea merits further development?

LW: I always have my eyes and ears open for accomplishments of women in STEM. If I think a woman's story might make a good picture book biography, I do some preliminary research. It's at this point that I reject many subjects. Sometimes, even though she is an important person in STEM, there's not a good angle to use for a younger child. The math may be too abstract or her accomplishments not really of interest to an elementary-age child.

PJ: Are there other genres you'd like to write?

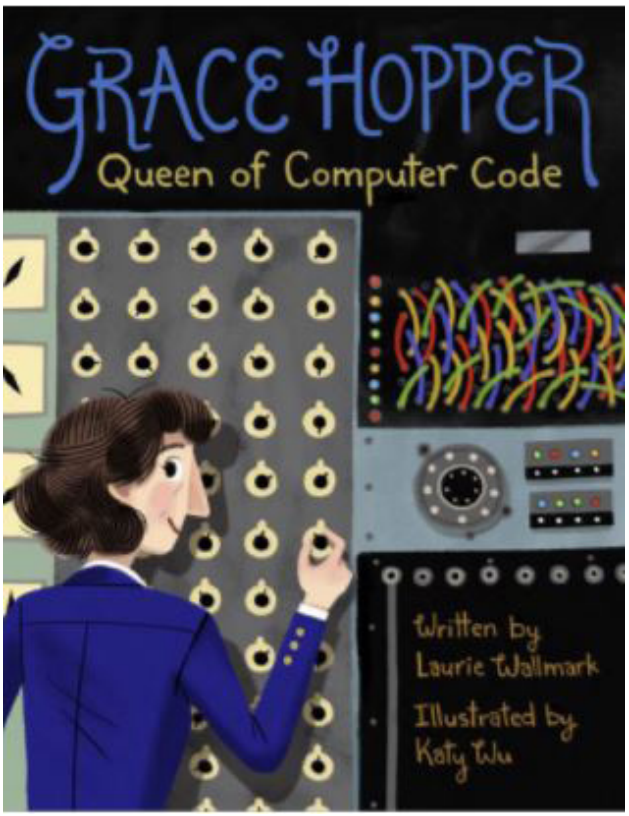
LW: I already write in several genres, but haven't been published in them yet. My graduate thesis was a YA novel in verse about Ada Byron Lovelace. I've written two middle grade novels. I've together a poetry collection about bugs. I have many fiction picture books in various stages of completion, both rhyming and not. I even have a wordless picture book.

PJ: What excites you most about writing? Is it the research or the actual writing?

LW: Neither. The part I like most is revision. I enjoy doing the research. I'm less fond of getting that first draft on paper. Ah, but the revision. That's where I can really put my wordsmith tools to work.

PJ: What are you currently working on?

LW: I can't yet give you the specifics, but it's another woman in STEM. This is a person who is well known for her accomplishments in another field, so I think it will surprise people to find out she was also an inventor.



Is Writing in Present Tense for You?

by Jane McBride

More and more authors are turning to writing in present tense, especially those writing for children and the young adult audience.

My 16-year-old granddaughter loves, and I mean totally loves, *The Hunger Games* and its sequels. "You aren't a real reader unless you've read her (Suzanne Collins') books," Reynna tells me. So why am I relating this bit of family trivia?

The Hunger Games is written in present tense. Let's take a look at the first two paragraphs of the first chapter.

> When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping.
>
> I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named.

We learn a great deal in these two paragraphs. We learn that the narrator, Katniss Everdeen, shares a bed with her sister. We also learn that the conditions in which they live appear to be sparse: the rough canvas cover of the mattress, the fact that the girls must share a bed, not only with each other but with their mother as well. We feel Katniss' distress immediately and her matter-of-fact acceptance of those conditions. Moreover, we are pulled, even yanked, into her point-of-view as she tells the story is it is unfolding. We feel what she is feeling in the here-and-now.

Collins takes the reader from present tense to past seamlessly. ("Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named.")

There is no barrier between the first person narrator and the readers as we experience everything she does as it is happening to her.

So why don't all writers pen our books in the present tense? A couple of answers come to mind.

First, Collins possesses a rare mastery of the language and storytelling skill that many of us, most especially me, do not have. Her ability to move from present to the past, when necessary, is beyond reproach.

Second, habit and tradition may keep us from experimenting with present tense.

An "old school" writer and reader, I grew up reading books written in the past tense. When I started writing, I always wrote in past tense. What happens when you want to go to the past when you're writing in the simple past tense. You go to past perfect, of course.

This is still my preferred method of writing, but I'm coming around, a little anyway, to writing in present tense occasionally.

This is true whether you are writing picture books, first chapter books, middle gradel books, or YA novels.

Can you write a picture book in the present tense? You bet. I recently bought my almost-one-year-old grandson the book *When the Sun Shines* (Brimax Books).

Here are the first few lines:

> When the sun shines …
> We all want to be outdoors.
> When the sun shines …
> We put on hats and sunscreen.
> When the sun shines …
> It's beautiful at the beach.

The simple words and rhythmic meter lend themselves to the present tense; in fact, if it were written in the simple past, much of the appeal of the book is lost.

Is Writing in Present Tense for You? continued

Now that we've looked at a couple of examples of books written in the present tense, let's examine some of the pros and cons of it.

Pros:

- As mentioned above, writing in the present tense gives an immediacy to the story that traditional past tense can not.

- Present tense can enhance characterization. Being in the character's "now" lets readers feel as the character feels as he is feeling it.

- Present tense can make the writing process a whole lot less tense. (Forgive me. I couldn't resist.) In using present tense, you don't have to worry about figuring out the intricacies of past perfect, a tense which confuses even experienced writers. *(*Examples of past perfect tense: *By the time he texted her, Kaylee had already left.* And: *After I finished my homework, I went outside to check on the puppy. I didn't see him anywhere in the yard, but I did find a new hole in the dirt by the fence.)*

Cons:

- Present tense can reduce tension and suspense in a story. The main character is reporting things as they occur. There is no way to include trepidation or reflection before an event occurs or after it has already happened. Because the character (and therefore the reader) are always in the present, it is impossible to slow down or speed up the action.

- Present tense can encourage the writer to "list" events in the protagonist's day: Jeremy gets up. Jeremy pulls off his pajamas. Jeremy takes a bath. Jeremy puts on clean clothes. Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but writing in the present tense makes it easy to include all sorts of trivia in a character's life.

- Present tense makes it difficult to manipulate time. Some readers and editors have a problem with present tense manuscripts in that they don't often show the passage of time in a way that doesn't pull the reader out of the story. It defeats the purpose of using the present tense to go to a flashback, which can give depth and layers of complexity to a story. Sometimes, we want to alter chronological order, an impossibility when using present tense. Any prologues or epilogues are also out of place in present tense.

Just as present tense can simplify the use of other tenses, it can also detract from the intricacies of time relationships. This can be both good and bad; it depends upon what kind of book you are penning.

Is using present tense right for you? The answer is "It depends." In writing a short story for a children's magazine, I did not set out to write in the present tense; however, after writing the first few paragraphs, I realized I was doing just that. Why? Because it felt right. That's not a very scientific or professional reason, but all I can say is, it worked for that particular story.

Am I making a total switch to writing in the present tense? No. When I write my romantic suspense novels, I stick to the traditional simple past. A couple of factors come into play here: Present tense does not always work when using several viewpoints. Another element is that I need to show some past events and how they affected the characters. Lastly, and not insignificantly, my publisher expects its books to be written in the past tense. (So do the readers.)

Experiment with tense. Experiment with point-of-view. Present tense is frequently combined with first person point-of-view. Play with them. Understand that what works for one writer will not necessarily work for you. Similarly, what works for one story will not necessarily work for another. If present tense feels awkward and cumbersome, you may well choose to stick to writing in the simple past. And that's fine. Either way, do what allows you to tell the story of your heart and do it the very best you can.

Often, the story dictates whether it should be told in past or present tense. A book about a past event is generally told in past tense, especially if it's a picture book (it might be confusing to the young child to hear a narrative nonfiction or historical fiction picture book read out loud in present tense). If a story takes place over a long time period, and the plot involves moving from one time frame to the next, this can be difficult to accomplish smoothly in present tense.

When writing in present tense, be sure to include clues when the story jumps forward in time to anchor the reader. These generally happen at the beginning of a new chapter in chapter books and early middle grade, but can also start a new scene in older middle grade and young adult fiction *(I hate Monday mornings. I especially hate that my week starts off with gym class. But here I am in the boys' locker room, trying to change clothes without actually undressing. I could just wear my gym clothes to school on Mondays, eliminating one humiliating wardrobe change, but then I'd have to ride the bus in shorts. I don't think I could survive that.)*

JENNIE DUNHAM
DUNHAM LITERARY, INC.

interview by Lynne Marie

In May of 1992, Jennie Dunham began her career at John Brockman Associates. She soon moved to Russell & Volkening where she spent the majority of her early career. In 2000 she went out on her own and opened Dunham Literary. Today, her successful agency represents authors of quality fiction and nonfiction, books for adults and children, and some children's book illustrators, including Nick Bruel, Barbara McClintock, Robert Sabuda, Margaret McMullan, Reeve Lindbergh and more. Fun fact: She has a climate-controlled library in her house with her collection of first edition children's books.

Lynne Marie: With many years in the business under your belt, you must have "seen it all" when it comes to submissions. Please share what something "fresh" and/or "stand out" might look or feel like to you.

Jennie Dunham: I'm looking for unique voices, quirky but endearing characters, and unusual stories. That's a generic answer, but it's a situation where you know it when you see it. Usually, it's the voice that makes me feel a book will stand out. Many people have great ideas for books, but it's the execution that makes a good idea become great.

LM: Do you have any items on your "wish list"? Any topic that you are passionate about? Does your Agency post wish lists? If so, where? Are you active on Twitter?

JD: I haven't posted any topics on wish lists. Agenting feels vital and new to me continually because I get to learn something new with each new project. I love that! I have a new Twitter account: **@JennieDunhamLit** and am liking it. What I like best is speaking at conferences and meeting with writers.

LM: Are there specifics you look for in a manuscript to take on? What might they be? What things might turn you off to potential projects?

JD: I don't look for anything specific. I try to stay open to the pages in front of me. Voice and humor are always noteworthy to me.

I represent writers who need minimal help with the basics of style, so writers who need heavy copy editing are not a good fit for my list.

LM: Nonfiction is growing in popularity. What are you looking for in nonfiction?

JD: I like narrative and creative nonfiction that show new subjects in an engaging way or popular subjects from an interesting angle. Who are people that we should know about? What projects or events changed our world that would inspire readers? What struggles and sacrifices have changed our world?

LM: Is there a recent fiction deal you are excited about placing? Why?

JD: Yesterday I sold a *Bad Kitty* book, and it's a gratifying feeling to watch an author and his series grow. Nick Bruel has come a long way from when I sold his first pic-

ture book years ago before he created the first *Bad Kitty* book.

It's always exciting to sell any book, but it's a special thrill to sell a writer's first book because it's the moment they become an author. This is why I'm on the hunt for the next exciting voice to bring to the world.

LM: Would you consider yourself an editorial agent? A business person? A cheerleader? A combination?

JD: I give editorial feedback to clients before I start submitting, even long established clients, because it's important for a manuscript to be as strong as possible when it goes out on submission. I have strong business skills. I'm passionate about my clients and their projects. I guess I'm a triple threat.

LM: Please describe the type of relationship you wish to cultivate with a potential client. Are you willing to represent on a book-to-book, partial or complete career?

JD: I like to establish long relationships with my clients. I have several that are longer than two decades! While of course it's business, it's not just business. I represent clients exclusively for their careers because it promotes continuity and clarity in career guidance. I do not represent clients on a book-to-book basis or for a partial career.

LM: How would your representation of a client differ from Bridget Smith's? Is there a line of delineation between what each of you might represent?

JD: Our agenting styles are similar which is one of the reasons we've worked well together for over six years. I prefer an office with a team spirit to an every-agent-for-herself competition. We are all championing books and advocating for authors.

When each of us chooses projects, of course we are drawn to what interests us personally. I prefer Medieval epics over Austen. Mythology, especially Egyptian and Norse, interest me. I'm puzzler and prankster. I'm obsessed with gender issues. I like family secrets, often revealed painfully. Hardly a week goes by that I don't find something fascinating in *New Scientist* magazine.

LM: Does your agency report on Publisher's Marketplace (**https://www.publishersmarketplace.com**)? Why, or why not? How would you describe the publishing houses you prefer to deal with, and why? What factors do you consider in deciding who to approach with which project?

JD: I sometimes report to Publisher's Marketplace, but not consistently because I prioritize responding to clients. When I submit, I'm trying to match the author and editor because they'll have to work together closely. Of course I also want a publisher that will sell the book well which means they have experience with that type of book, the means and enthusiasm to promote it, and strong distribution channels.

LM: Your agency requests that a marketing statement be submitted with requested submissions. Can you elaborate a bit more on what this entails and how it proves helpful to you?

JD: I like to know that a writer has thought about the book's audience before submitting it to me. These days an author's job is not just to write the book but also to help sell it once it's published. Nobody is more invested in a book than the author, and it's helpful to be able to tell publishers that the author will be an asset in selling it. An author with an established platform is enticing to editors.

Each author has a reason why he or she chose the story to tell that is on the pages sent to me. The market statement explains this. Maybe personal or business experience inspired the author.

A market statement should also include comparable titles. While each book should be different so that there's a need for it, an author should also know how his or her book fits in the spectrum of books already available.

LM: Your terms and services are upfront and are shared on your website at: **http://www.dunhamlit.com/terms--services.html**. I like that it knocks out many questions a potential client might ask of a prospective agent. How has this approach benefited the client and/or your agency?

JD: I get fewer calls about the agency before people submit queries. I like to be up front about my agency's services. It also gives new writers information that is proba-

Jennie Dunham continued

bly similar to many other agents.

LM: Are you currently in the market for diverse books? What are your thoughts on this topic?

JD: Absolutely, these voices are imperative in our changing world. In college I majored in cultural anthropology, and I loved reading ethnographies and learning about people from all different parts of the world. I also have a master's degree in social work which only deepened my interest in the strengths and challenges that people face. One of the reasons that people need stories is to understand the wide breadth of human experience.

LM: You are willing to look at picture books up to 800 words, although the trend has been to publish picture books 200-500 word average. What is the mindset behind this opportunity?

JD: Sometimes the spark is there, but the writer needs help to get the manuscript to the place where an editor will buy it. Mostly I give a word count as an indicator that if the book is longer than that, maybe the author should consider that the story he or she is writing would be best told in a different format.

LM: Your agency notes a 4-8 week response time. If no response is received by that time, should it be considered a "no thanks," or do you appreciate nudges?

JD: I respond to everyone although the response is a form if I'm not interested. If I request a manuscript and don't respond within that time frame it means I haven't finished reading and thinking about the manuscript. I admit that occasionally I hold them a long time (I have one now – yikes, hate to admit that but it's true). I have gone on to represent some of these patient writers for whom I've then sold multiple books.

LM: Please share your submission guidelines.

JD: The basics are that I like the query letter and sample five pages by regular mail or email. I don't like calls or faxes with queries. The query should not be longer than one page and should include a brief description of the project and the author's bio. More information can be found on my agency website: **http://www.dunhamlit.com/how-to-submit.html**

Jennie Dunham is offering an "Above the Slush" opportunity to CBI readers.

Please put the title of your book and Code only for CBI Insiders in the subject line of your query.

ADVICE ON WRITING PICTURE BOOKS FROM AUTHOR Rob Sanders

interview by Laura Backes, Publisher,
Children's Book Insider

I first met Rob Sanders back in 2008, when he attended one of my Children's Authors' Bootcamp workshops that I used to teach with author Linda Arms White. Though he had worked as a consultant for an educational publishing company and was currently a teacher, he had never explored his true passion—writing picture books. After the Bootcamp weekend, Rob joined SCBWI and in 2010 signed up for a paid critique at their conference in Los Angeles. He was assigned to Diane Muldrow from Golden Books/Random House, who liked his manuscript and offered revision suggestions. After revising, Rob mailed off his manuscript and in two weeks Diane emailed to say she was taking the manuscript to acquisitions. Two months after that, Rob signed a contract, and two years later his first picture book, *Cowboy Christmas*, illustrated by Jon Manders, was released.

Since then Rob's acquired a literary agent and published four more picture books (*Outer Space Bedtime Race*, illustrated by Brian Won; *Ruby Rose: Off to School She Goes* and *Ruby Rose: Big Bravos*, illustrated by Debbie Ridpath Ohi; and most recently *Rodzilla*, illustrated by Dan Santat), and has two nonfiction picture books in the works. Not bad for a guy who first dipped his toe into the picture book pool nine years ago.

So now, I turn to a former student to teach you (and me!) a thing or two about writing picture books that will catch an editor's eye.

Laura Backes: Many of your books take time-honored themes (Christmas time, first day of school, bedtime) and come at them from an original, funny angle. How do your ideas originate? Do you start with the familiar, and then try to move out of the box, or does the silly idea come first?

Rob Sanders: Maria Modugno from Random House told me years ago that every book needs a reason or a season. That means booksellers need a reason to put a book on the shelves (the beginning of school, friendship, new sibling, loose tooth, etc.) or they look for a seasonal hook (Valentine's Day, fall, Christmas, Halloween, etc.). Reason and season help me evaluate my ideas before I begin writing, and help me focus my pitches when I'm ready to take my manuscripts out into the world.

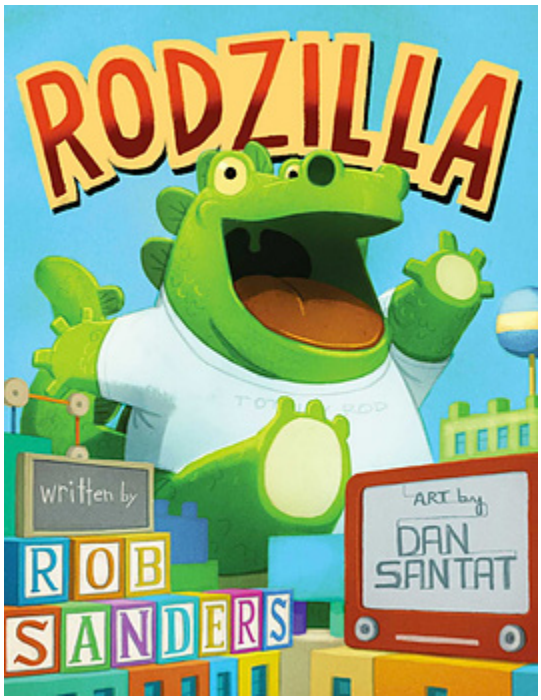
It's difficult to say how my ideas and humor originate. For me, the process is organic. Most ideas seem to come when I'm not really thinking about writing or looking for an idea. Hearing a song called "Hanukkah Hoedown" gave me the idea for *Cowboy Christmas*. Watching my great niece try to dance her way out of every situation in which she found herself inspired the *Ruby Rose* books.

Rob Sanders continued

The notes and doodles I made during a conference session seemed to suddenly point to an idea for a boy bedtime book in outer space, and O*uter Space Bedtime Race* was born. Sometimes the funny is inherent in the idea, other times I find the funny as I'm writing. No matter how the humor happens, it always has to be amped up.

LB: Your newest book, *Rodzilla*, features a toddler (of sorts!). Picture book wisdom says create characters the age of your readers or perhaps a year older. But this book looks like it will appeal to the entire picture book crowd. How do you find that sweet spot that reaches the biggest audience?

RS: *Rodzilla* breaks lots of rules—or, let's say it explores new territory. The story is told entirely from the perspective of a news reporter, Rodzilla is a monster who is destroying the city, the story being told and shown is not the actual story (that's the reveal at the end), there are tons of visual clues the reader has to find to figure out what's going on, and more.



I'm a good guy from the Midwest, so I believe in following the rules. We all need to listen to what editors are telling us, we need to read all the gurus have written, and we need to humble ourselves and learn (and the process never ends). All that information must become part of our writing DNA.

If you're well versed in "the rules", then you'll know how to use them, how to bend them, and how to break them when there's a need to. Bottom line—know where the lines are before you try to color outside them.

LB: Caldecott-winner Dan Santat illustrated *Rodzilla*. How awesome was that, and did you have any contact with him during the book creation process?

RS: I first heard that Dan was going to illustrate *Rodzilla* a month or two after he won the Caldecott. For several months my editor, agent, and I only used Dan's initials in our communications—I don't know if it was top-secret news, or if we were afraid we'd jinx ourselves. As is usually the case, Dan and I did not communicate during the book creation process. I had already told my half of the story. It was time for Dan to tell his half. Our editor, Justin Chanda, sent me sketches at various stages. Both Justin and Dan took my story to an entirely different level that I never imagined, and I'm grateful. That's why a writer must step back and trust the process, and the editor, art director, and illustrator. The end result is more than most of us could ever envision. (P.S. Dan and I are faboo Facebook friends.)

LB: Can you speak a little about writing humorous texts for the picture book audience?

RS: I sometimes have an idea for the silly, funny, engaging aspects of my books before beginning to write. Other times, it comes later in the process. There are lots of kinds of humor. There's the kind that makes you smile, the kind that causes an occasional giggle while reading, and the kind that leaves your sides aching from laughter. I don't write exploding-chicken humor. My humor is more subtle. I use word-play, situational humor, surprises, and twists and turns. Don't think humor means you have to write like anyone else. Just be your own funny self.

LB: How do you write in a way that leaves room for the illustrations, without telling the illustrator what to draw?

RS: Actually, I don't leave room for the illustrations when I write. I do that when I revise. I begin by writing the story I need to tell, getting it down on paper. It's usually too long, has too many details, and needs tons of revision. I write art notes in my early drafts (they're as much for me as for anyone else). Then I revise, cut, tighten, and focus the manuscript.

Here are some of the things I recommend writers do to make sure they're leaving room for the illustrator as they revise:

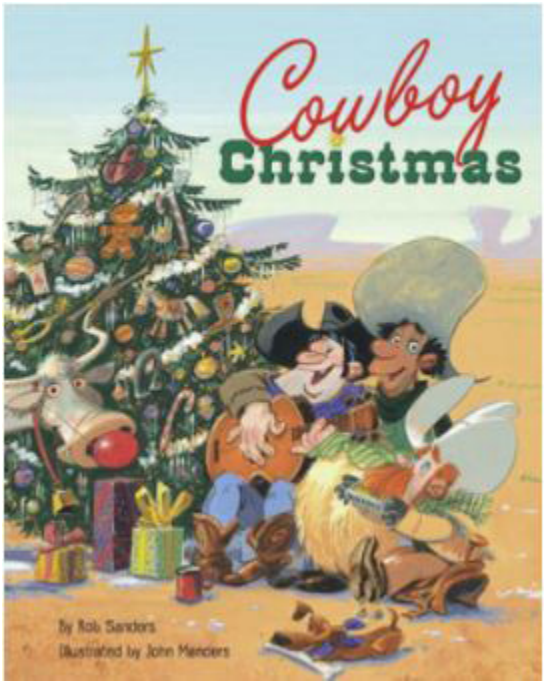
Rob Sanders continued

- Ask yourself lots of questions about your story. Such as: Does it matter what color the boy's hair is? Do I need to describe the classroom? Will the illustrator get enough info from what I've written? How can the story be told more succinctly, and yet get the message across?

- Show, don't tell—but don't over show. I know we're told to show, not tell—but picture book authors have illustrators who help do the showing. Take out those extraneous details that someone else can show.

- Look at strengthening word choices. The clearer and more precise your word choices are, the clearer the message will be. Go for strong nouns and vivid verbs. Lose as many adjectives and adverbs as possible.

- Delete every art note possible. Only use an art note if it is imperative for the illustrator to know something not in the text.



LB: Can you speak a bit about the pacing of picture book texts, and how to work in those page turns?

RS: I have one word to tell you about pacing—DUMMY. Make a dummy. Take eight sheets of blank paper, fold them in half, and staple the folded side to secure the pages together. Voila! A 32-page dummy. Cut apart your text and tape it on these mock pages (don't use pages 1-3—those are for the half-title page, copyright, dedication, etc.). Make sure the text at the end of each two-page spread causes you to want to turn the page, to learn more, to reveal what happens next, to answer a question, and so on. Re-position the text as needed to get the flow perfect.

LB: *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* is coming out from Random House in 2018. This is your first nonfiction picture book. Was making the switch to nonfiction difficult?

RS: Laura, thanks for asking about *Pride*. The book, illustrated by Steven Salerno, will release in time for the 40th anniversary of the first rainbow flag stitched by Gilbert Baker for his friend, Harvey Milk. Let me put a plug in for my second nonfiction picture book which will come out from Random House, also. Illustrated by Jamey Christoph, *Stonewall: The Uprising for Gay Rights* will be released in 2019 which will be the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots.

Now on to the question!

The first draft of *Pride* was written the evening of June 26, 2015. For those who might not remember, that was the date the SCOTUS declared that marriage equality was the law of the land. For a 50ish gay man like me, that was an inspirational, tear-jerking day that I never thought I would see. I researched, revised, and rewrote, and the manuscript was ready to be shopped by my agent within a week. So, no, the transition wasn't difficult, because I was inspired. This was a story I could tell and needed to tell. Honestly, *Stonewall* was the same way. Once I found the way to tell the story, the writing flowed. *Pride* is unique because it's the story of an inanimate object—a flag. *Stonewall* is unique because it is told from the perspective of the buildings themselves.

My other nonfiction writing hasn't come so easily. I think inspiration and a topic that a writer can relate to make all the difference.

LB: How much has being a teacher influenced your writing?

RS: I've worked with children in various settings since I was in high school. Kids are the reason I write. I want to see boys and girls checking out my books and holding them in their hands, and, of course, I want to hear them reading the stories I've written. It warms my heart when a student says, "Mr. Sanders I just read one of your books," and then launches into a conversation.

Rob Sanders continued

I often jot down things I hear students say and engage them in conversations to see how their minds are working. I'm especially interested in what words, jokes, and puns kids find funny. I guess you could say they're my focus group. However, I seldom share my manuscripts with students.

However, the largest influence my students have had was before I started on my picture book journey. When teaching writers workshop lessons, I use mentor texts—great pieces of literature that show the craft or writing strategy we're learning about. One year, I had a group of students who kept asking during writers workshop, "Why don't you use one of your books? and "Why haven't you written a book?" and "Where are your books, Mr. Sanders?" I realized they were right. I needed to do what I was asking them to do—put myself on the page.

LB: Do you have any advice/words of wisdom for aspiring picture book writers?

RS: I have four words of advice for aspiring picture book writers: Read. Type. Learn. Write.

Read—Read all the award-winning picture books you can put your hands-on. Read the books on the best-sellers list. Go to your local bookstore and read every picture book with the cover facing out (often, these books are displayed for a special season or reason, because of positive reviews, and/or because they have proven to be popular with readers and buyers). Take notes on what you see. Is the book fiction or nonfiction? Which books rhyme? Which don't? What are the topics of the books? How long are they? How many are concept books versus stories with plots? Who is the character—an animal, a child, someone else? What books do you like better, and why? And so on.

Type—Type up the text of picture books so they become mentor texts for you. Type the text exactly the way it appears—use the same line breaks, punctuation, capitals, and so on. Double space at page turns so you can remember where they were. Study these typed mentor texts and you will have a crash course in picture book writing.

Learn—If you have not already joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), do so ASAP. Attend reputable conferences. Follow the blogs of writers you admire and would like to emulate. Stay tuned into what's going on with Children's Book Insider. Learn all you can, and put into practice what you learn.

Write—The most obvious advice of all, I know. But many new writers spend more time reading and talking about writing than they spend writing. Don't fall into that category. Write. Try out different genres, tell a variety of stories, find your voice, always be looking for the next idea. The more you write, the better your writing will become.

Find out more about Rob Sanders on his website:

https://www.robsanderswrites.com/

and blog:

http://robsanderswrites.blogspot.com/