HOW TO SURPRISE YOUR READERS

A CBI Special Report

by Laura Backes
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It's essential that you give your readers something they haven't seen before. If you surprise them in a satisfying way, they'll want to read your book over and over, and they'll want to read your next book. So here are some tips for building surprise into your stories.

First, ask “Who are my readers?”

If you're writing a picture book, your readers are kids up to about age 8, but they are also parents, grandparents and teachers. These adults have seen a lot of stories in their lifetimes, and will have to read your book over and over to the child. They also have to shell out the money to buy your book, which in the case of a hardcover picture book could run $18 for one story that takes 10 minutes to read. If you write a story that the adult buyers could easily think up on their own, they won't feel as if they're getting their money's worth.

The biggest reason a picture book story doesn't surprise all these readers is that the idea hasn't been well-developed. Many writers think that, because they're writing for the youngest kids, they don't have to put a lot of planning into the story. We'll talk more about how to make your idea unique in a minute.

If you're writing an easy reader or chapter book, your audience is kids from about first through third grade. They have less life experience with literature than adults, so have fewer previous books as reference points when reading your story. That makes your job easier when developing your plot. However, you still have to give the editor, parents, and teachers (the book buyers) something they can't already get. I'll give you some ways to check if the idea's been done at the end of this talk.
But for now, let's take a look at how these early elementary school kids like to be surprised:

They like stories that have their origin in the child's everyday life, such as stories about friends, school, family, holidays, and childhood milestones like losing your first tooth, attending your first slumber party, moving to a new neighborhood (or having your childhood best friend move away), playing an organized sport for the first time, or experiencing some other event that moves them from little kid to big kid. So the stories themselves might be comfortably familiar, but the way you tell them should be surprising. Maybe the characters are animals instead of kids. Perhaps your protagonist has some unique traits—she has a photographic memory, or he prefers tap dancing lessons to playing soccer—that complicates the everyday experience. So while the plots can be grounded in the familiar, the details should take your reader beyond their own lives and give them glimpses into characters and situations they have not yet encountered.

Another very important element of surprise in picture books, easy readers and chapter books, is humor. If kids don't expect to laugh, and then they do, they are always pleasantly surprised. Picture book humor tends to be visual (because picture books are a visual medium with their illustrations) and broad and silly. As children get older, you can incorporate humor through dialogue (the character might say something we don't expect, or say it in a way we we don't expect), as well as physical (such as a dog chasing a squirrel through a fancy garden party and causing chaos).

In middle grade fiction, your readers can be anywhere from eight to about 12 years old, depending on the story and their reading level. As kids become older and more sophisticated, we writers have to work harder to surprise them. Two elements are the basis for surprise in middle grade fiction: character development, and plot devices. First, your characters. As with chapter books, it's important that you give your characters some unexpected traits, but in middle grade fiction you
need enough layers to your character that you can reveal these traits bit by bit throughout the story. You need to know who your character is before you begin writing, and need to know that all the elements of her personality work together to create a believable person. But the reader won't necessarily know everything up front. In fact, your character might not know everything up front. Middle grade characters, who tend to be the age of the reader or a year or two older, will be discovering who they are as the plot unfolds. If your character's never had to choose between being loyal to a lifelong friend who starts shoplifting, and staying true to her belief that stealing is wrong, how will she know which choice she'll make? She won't until she lives through it.

Another important thing to remember is that as the adult author, we know how we want our stories to turn out. We know how we want our characters to act. But what if they don't act the way we predict? What if that girl, in my previous example, decided to shoplift with her friend? And what if she found it exciting? Middle graders know an adult is writing this book, and in the back of their mind they're waiting for you to tell them, via your characters, what's right and what's wrong. But if you allow your characters to make mistakes and take some time to find their way, then you're telling the reader, “I trust you to make up your own mind.” That, in itself, is very surprising.

Now let's look at plots. With more books on the market than ever, and more kids devouring these books, it's getting more challenging for authors to construct unique plots. But you must. One way to do this is to think beyond your own personal experience. Remember, as readers, we want to be taken from our ordinary lives and transported to a more interesting, exciting, funny, dangerous or mysterious place. Look at the popularity of Harry Potter, the Hunger Games, Twilight, Percy Jackson, and even classics like The Chronicles of Narnia. All these stories took ordinary kids, gave them some unique qualities that were still believable according to their characters, and then set them loose in a fantastic world full of surprises. But even if you want to stay grounded in reality with your
book, you need to think outside of everyday life and toss some extraordinary experiences at your protagonist.

With young adult fiction, for ages 12 and up, you're building on the concepts of middle grade surprises. But you're also adding elements of the broader, more adult world into your story. So what surprises your characters, and your readers, is when adult situations enter their lives for the first time. They might encounter racism or homophobia, they may befriend a runaway who has been sexually abused, they could become the main breadwinner for the family after a parent dies and be forced to drop out of school and get a job. Or, as in John Green's The Fault in Our Stars, your protagonist could have a terminal illness and be forced to think about her own mortality, and how her eventual death will affect her family. In other words, characters are looking beyond themselves and defining their place in the world. What they see, when they look outside their own little bubble of existence, will be surprising if you as the author are completely honest with your readers. How they deal with it will also be surprising if you do your work building your characters.

So, in short, with middle grade and young adult fiction, surprises happen when what's inside the character is just as complex and unique as what's happening to the character from the outside.

So how do you build those surprises into your characters and plots, for any age? Here are some questions you should be asking yourself at this point:

Is this plot, and/or this character, based on the first idea you had?

Our first inspiration for a plot or character appeals to us, because it makes us feel a certain way. And we assume the reader will feel the same way, and so we want to immediately sit down and start writing. But it's helpful to explore why you feel this way about this idea. Does it remind you of something from your childhood? If so, it might be based on a book you read over and over as a child.
Does it make you feel good? That's fine, but “good” should be the end result of your story. So that's where your characters need to end up. Surprise comes from the reader not expecting the characters to end in that place. So take that good feeling, and start as far from it as you can with your plot. By doing this, you're more likely to have your characters arrive at the good ending in unexpected ways.

Does your idea trigger more negative or complex emotions? That's great. Think about why those emotions have come up, and then explore how your characters can ultimately change their fates.

My point is that you want your readers to be invested in your story, but also be caught off guard. If everything that happens is safe, ordinary and predictable, the reading experience won't be nearly as fulfilling. And if your picture book is ordinary and predictable, it won't get read more than once.

So don't run with your first idea. Sit with it until you really understand what about the idea excites you, then turn that aspect in various directions until you've come up with something even you couldn't have predicted.

Here are two good ways to play with an idea:

Ask What If? In my example of the middle grade character whose best friend started shoplifting, I asked “What if my protagonist went along, and found the experience exciting?” That raises a whole list of plot possibilities that are very different from, “What if she told her favorite teacher that her best friend had turned to a life of crime?” And “What if she reluctantly stood as lookout, and got caught by the security guard as her friend got away?” takes us down yet another path. So spend time with “What If” questions, and follow those with more “What Ifs” until you have a story thread that works.
Secondly, add conflict. Conflict is essential to plots for any age. Get your characters in trouble, then let them pull themselves out. Throw obstacles at them they have to overcome. “What if” questions work for plot development as well. You may have noticed all the questions I asked about my shoplifting girl had to do with plot as well as character development. That's because the two are so intricately connected. Some of these obstacles can come from the outside – such as other characters, or situations, or random events – and others can come from within the character himself. But don't let things to too smoothly for too long. Again, your readers want to be transported, and nothing is more boring than a plot where everything is fine.

Finally, it's a good idea to see if your story is too similar to something that's been done before. This is especially important when writing a picture book, because many plots are based on similar concepts or themes. So once you have a solid plot concept, write it out in a couple of sentences. Then come up with a list of key words that describe your book. Next, go to Amazon.com

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You'll be brought by to the Children's Books Home Page. You can then click on categories in the left column. You can search by age group, or farther down by format, such as Picture Books or Chapter Books. I had the best luck when I searched by format.

Then you can type in key words in the search engine that describe your idea. I also suggest you sort by publication date, so that you'll see what the most recent books are with these key words. These are the books that will be on the market in the near future, and are possible competitors to your idea.

Refine your search as much as possible. Try several key words, and search the age
group above and below what you think your book will fall into. Once you have a
manageable number of titles, look at the synopsis for each and see if something
sounds too similar to what you want to write. If you find a book that seems to be
similar, read it to be sure.

Another way to see new and upcoming titles is to look at the announcement issues
of Publishers Weekly, an industry trade journal, which are now online at this
You can also simply Google Publishers Weekly Announcements. Scroll down on
the home page until you see Juvenile Fiction. Then you can click on broad subject
categories. You can further refine your search in each subject category. Then look
up the synopses of the books you find, either at Amazon or in the publisher's
online catalog.

The biggest complaint I hear from editors, and the biggest reason self-published
books don't sell, is that they are not original enough. Lack of surprise is a big
component of that. If you have any doubts as to whether your plot and characters
contain surprises, try describing your book to someone else, but leave off the
ending. Ask them how they think the story ends. If they're right, you have more
work to do.