

THE NON-CELEBRITY'S GUIDE TO GETTING A CHILDREN'S BOOK PUBLISHED



By Jon Bard,
Managing Editor, *Children's Book Insider*,
the Newsletter for Children's Writers

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What do Jerry Seinfeld, Madonna, L.L. Cool J, Jay Leno and Charles, Prince of Wales have that you (probably) don't?

A published children's book.

And they're not alone. The market is brimming with celebrity-authored kids' books. And, being celebrities, it's a good bet that the majority of these authors enjoyed a clear path to a publishing contract with a minimum of fuss.

For the rest of us, getting a children's book published isn't nearly as easy as "let's have lunch and sign the paperwork." There are writing skills to hone, publishers to be researched, query letters to be written and tears to be shed over growing piles of rejection letters.

But fear not, anyone – no matter how spectacularly unfamous – can become a children's book author.

Here's how.....

Don't Get All Bitter About It.

Why would a publisher pay a celebrity to write a children's book? Hmmmm, lets see.... Massive guaranteed worldwide publicity? Built in sales to a large and adoring fan base? "Synergistic" tie-ins to world tours, movie premieres and major press events?

Yeah, pretty much.

But before you get too down on publishers, remember that it was always thus. Celebrity autobiographies have been around since the beginning of publishing. And famous folks have been writing adult fiction – and getting it published on account of their famousness – for years.

And that's OK, because the revenues piled up by the sales of celebrity books can often help fund the kinds of less glamorous projects that editors love to do. Like, well, yours, perhaps.

Learn the Rules.

If you're not famous, your manuscript or query letter takes the same path as the rest of the non-celebrities. It gets dropped, as part of a huge pile, on the desk of an underpaid, overworked editorial assistant (or a freelance reader). Her job is to sift through the pile of dross and find a few nuggets of gold, and then pass them on to an equally underpaid and overworked editor. The editor then reads through the smaller pile, pulls out the submissions that catch her eye, and brings them to an editorial meeting. If the general consensus is "yes, this is a book we want to publish", you're on your way to partying it up with L.L. Cool J in the special "Children's Writers' VIP Lounge" at the Viper Room.

Buried in that timeline is some bad news, and some good news. First the bad news:

The editorial assistant sifts out up to 95% of the submissions that arrive. In other words, *the vast majority of submissions to a publishing house never even make it in front of a person in a position to publish it.* Why not? They may, of course, simply be awful submissions, loaded with poor grammar, misspellings and hackneyed writing. They may be the obvious work of amateurs, handwritten on lined paper with childish drawings. Or, and this is where there's some hope, they may simply get rejected because they're the less obvious work of amateurs.

More subtle things, like using single spacing rather than double spacing, or a manuscript whose word count is out of whack with the "norm" is sometimes all it takes for an EA to say "Beginner.... Rejection."

So here's the good news: simply by learning the specific, but not wildly arcane, rules of children's publishing, you can leapfrog over the madding crowd. When an EA or reader sees a manuscript that comes from someone who clearly knows how it's done, they're far more likely to give it a fair reading, and far less squeamish about passing it on to the boss.

So how do you learn the rules? Try the free article library at <http://write4kids.com/info.html>. For more detailed instructions, check out the Career Starter Beginners Guide (<http://write4kids.com/starter.html>) or go to <http://write4kids.com/dvd.html> to learn about a DVD that tells all.

Write to the Publisher's Needs.

The problem with most aspiring children's book writers is that they have a specific idea from which they won't budge. To be frank, it's usually a pretty dumb idea and, even if it's halfway decent, chances are it's been done many times already. Look, I know your dream is to write that book about the talking dish sponge and his sinkside pals, but put the dream on hold for a bit. The absolute best way to get published is to figure out what publishers want – and give it to them.

Here's an example: Schools desperately need fiction and nonfiction books that integrate into curricula. Publishers, thus, are desperate to provide said books, as schools are big and dependable customers who are likely to buy directly from the publisher, giving even a better profit margin.

And your response to this is.....? Hopefully, it's "Hey, I'm gonna write some books that tie in with school curricula!"

This is just one example – publishers have all sorts of often unglamorous niches they need filled. How to find out? Send for their guidelines and catalog. Often, they're quite explicit about their needs, other times you need to read between the lines of the catalog to figure it out. But the answer is usually there.

And, seriously, let's see Denzel Washington try to write an exciting thriller about the passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act.

Learn to Write a Killer Query Letter.

Your query letter (used if you're sending a few sample chapters of a longer manuscript) or cover letter (used to accompany and introduce a complete manuscript) is your chance to really make the sale. Almost always, it's a wasted opportunity filled with irrelevance (*I'm the mother of four and I've always dreamed of writing a children's book!*), pleading (*It would mean so much to me to have this book published!*) and ludicrous assertions (*Everyone tells me I'm the next Dr. Seuss!*).

A good query letter is simply this: a powerful sales letter meant to convince a publisher that it is in its best interests to publish your book. Essentially, you need to tell them that your book fits their needs and will sell to their current market and will expand into new markets. Tell them, specifically, why you will be able to deliver readers (e.g. *I have a weekly blog read by more than 20,000 parents and my website attracts 60,000 visitors a month*) and how there is a defined need for your book and how you will reach the target customers (e.g. *There are more than a half million foster children in America. These children, their foster parents and foster siblings need books like mine to help make sense of their situations. I will promote my book directly to them through organizations, conferences, newsletters and websites.*)

To succeed in publishing, you must strip away the romantic nonsense you've been brought up with and see things as they are. Kids books aren't published by magical elves. They're published by business people (albeit, business people who, thankfully, often genuinely love the books they publish). Show an editor that your book will be an artistic and financial success and you're taking a big step in the right direction.

For much more on writing a great query letter, go to <http://www.write4kids.com/query.html> To learn about a collection of actual query letters from children's authors that you can use for models, go to <http://www.write4kids.com/a2e.html>.

Write to an Existing, Underserved Market.

Sometimes the concept of writing to a publisher's needs can be turned on its head. Perhaps there's a sizeable, wonderful market that no one is serving and you can convince a publisher that its just the one to serve it. It could be anything – children of interracial marriage, girls who like jazz, boys who play bass guitar, American kids who dig the game of cricket – if there are enough of them out there and are too few books for them to read, you may very well be introducing a publisher to a potentially lucrative market.

Do your research. Talk to trade associations, government experts, owners of websites that serve specific markets or anyone else who can give you some supporting backup on the size of your target group. Search Books in Print for already existing titles that target the group. Speak with librarians and booksellers to get their viewpoint on needs. And include it all in a great query letter.

Ignore Your Kids.

Well, not always. But, at least when it comes to getting an objective opinion about your writing, you may not want to pay too much attention to them. Your children, your nieces, your nephews, the cute kid next door, that group of kindergarteners at the school – they'll all love whatever you've written. Why? For one, they already probably like you. And two, they love the attention of being read to.

Seriously, you could read a *Chilton's Auto Repair Manual* to a bunch of 5 year olds and they'll squeal in glee.

To get a real gauge on your writing, join a writer's organization like the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators (www.scbwi.org), join a critique group, or seek out a grownup that reads lots of published children's writing. Your local children's librarian is the right place to start. Or perhaps the children's book department manager at a major bookstore. If you ask them nicely, they're likely to have a look at your manuscript. Ask them for honest feedback, and not to spare your feelings. And, when they give their constructive criticism, accept it with humility and take a cold, hard look at your work.

One trait that successful writers have in common: they've learned how to step away from their work and appraise it objectively. It's not an easy thing to cultivate, but the ability to remove your ego from the process will pay dividends. Here are two ways to get on that path:

- Put your writing aside for a week, then come back to it. Read it in the guise of a third party book reviewer. What works? What doesn't? Where do you get tripped up? What can be cut?
- Take your absolute favorite passage in your manuscript and cut it. This one will hurt – that spectacular turn of phrase on page three is something you're really proud of, I know. But those pangs of pain are a sign that you're too in love with

your work. That's a bad place to be. Hey, as the Buddha said, attachment is the prime cause of suffering and nonattachment is the path to enlightenment. The guy was a pretty good celebrity author back in the day, so you should listen up.

Leave the Illustrations to the Illustrators.

One of the surest signs of an amateur: a writer with little or no artistic ability who tries to illustrate a manuscript. If you, your spouse, your sibling or your friend wishes to provide the artwork for your manuscript, pay your local bookstore a visit for a reality check.

Children's book illustrators are often world-class artists, spinning magic with their brushes and pencils. Pick up a few best-selling picture books and ask "Is the art I want to provide anywhere near as good as this?" Chances are, it's not.

Focus on writing a great story and let the publisher worry about finding an illustrator.

Work Your Way Up to Writing That Book.

There are lots of outlets to get your work published apart from books. Magazines, e-zines, web sites, community parenting publications, local theatres, greeting card companies and plenty of other places will publish your writing – and even pay you for it. Use these places as a launching pad to hone your skills and build a list of impressive credits that will speak to your professionalism. Very few writers score a contract with the first thing they've written. Get used to writing to deadline and conforming to guidelines in lower pressure, lower profile environments before submitting to the big presses.

Listen to the Pros.

There's no need to go it alone. Take the time (and spend a few bucks) to listen to others who have made the journey. Writing conferences, workshops, books and newsletters (such as *Children's Book Insider*) can dramatically increase your chances of getting published by helping you avoid typical mistakes and pitfalls.

An eBook such as *I Wish Someone Had Told Me That: 64 Successful Children's Authors Give You the Advice They Wish Someone Had Given Them* (<http://write4kids.com/wishbook.html>) is a great example of this sort of instruction. Pay heed to the voices of experience!

Don't Whine.

Yeah, celebrities get published because they're celebrities. Hey, it's business. Move on. And don't complain about being too old, too young, too male, too female, too ethnic, too whitebread or any other excuse.

Publishers don't care who you are, they just want good, salable books. Deliver them and you'll get published, no matter who you are.

This is 18 years of experience talking: The folks who complain are the ones who will never get published.

Persevere.

Every great children's author has a wall full of rejection letters. They tack 'em up, shake it off and move on. Starting from scratch as a "nobody" to ultimately get your first book published is a journey, and overcoming rejection to score that contract is an adventure that will make you stronger, better and more confident.

And hey, that's one journey that Madonna will never get to take.

Useful Links

Write4Kids, The Children's Writing SuperSite

<http://write4kids.com/aboutcbi.html> All about *Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers*

<http://write4kids.com/collectbegin.html> Useful tools for beginners.

<http://write4kids.com/collect.html> The complete collection of our writing tools

<http://write4kids.com/info.html> Our huge library of free how-to articles for children's writers

<http://write4kids.com/update.html> The Children's Writing Update free e-zine.

Sites to Help You Sell Your Work

http://www.cbcbooks.org/about/cbc_members_list.html Membership list of Children's Book council. Some listings have links to publishers' web sites.

<http://www.ukchildrensbooks.co.uk/pubs.html> List of UK-based children's publishers.

<http://www.signaleader.com> Large list of children's book publishers.

<http://www.bookmarket.com/childrens.htm> List of children's book publishers and resources.

<http://www.write4kids.com/wmarket> Children's Writers Marketplace online e-zine, with many magazine markets.

<http://freelanceswitch.com/general/101-essential-freelancing-resources>
Great list of online resources for freelance writers.

<http://www.writers.net/agents.html> List of literary agents.

Writing Contests

<http://www.fundsforwriters.com/contests.htm> Lists of writing contests.

<http://www.freelancewriting.com/writingcontests.php> Searchable database of writing contests.

Writing Help

<http://cliche.theinfo.org/> Analyzes prose for common cliches and hackneyed phrases.

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/> Online writing lab with help on grammar, style and more.

Useful Blogs

<http://www.asuen.com/blog.central.html> Author Anastasia Suen's Blog Central for children's writers.

<http://blog.lizaburby.com> Liza Burby, author of 41 books and editor of *Newsday's Parents & Children* monthly magazine, talks about being a fulltime writer. Also see her articles for writers at www.lizaburby.com.

<http://editorialanonymous.blogspot.com> An anonymous children's book editor dishes on the industry, the slush pile, and all aspects of writing.