

**Laura Backes:** Hi, this is Laura. And today, I am speaking with Laura Rennert who is senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency in California. And if you read Laura's interview in this month's *Children's Book Insider*, you know that she represents some news-making authors, as well as a lot of brand-new talents.

And this month, she becomes a published author herself with the release of her first picture book, *Buying, Training and Caring for Your Dinosaur*, published by Knopf and illustrated by the wonderfully talented Marc Brown.

So Laura, your book has been receiving some really terrific reviews already and I wondered what's it like to be on the receiving end of this praise, rather than sort of working from behind-the-scenes as an agent?

**Laura Rennert:** It's really a lot of fun, of course. And it's also instructive. It certainly makes me more sympathetic as an agent. I've been waiting to see what kind of reception the book would get. And I understand now what my authors go through in that regard. I'm thrilled that the reviews have been good. And I also would've had a practice where I tell my authors, which is "Don't take it personally" if it had been otherwise. "Move on. Don't focus on it!" But it's been a lot of fun.

**Laura Backes:** And yeah, it's interesting that you could say you know -- you see what they're going through. I imagine it would be very hard *not* to take it personally if the reviews hadn't been great. How do authors deal with that sort of thing, do you think?

**Laura Rennert:** I think in a number of different ways. One of the things is, a lot of times, when the reviews aren't good, you can see sometimes that the reviewer had an agenda and didn't read carefully. And other times, we just have to accept the fact that in the end, this is ultimately somewhat of a subjective process and not all work is going to people to all people. So, you have to believe in yourself and have faith in what you've put out there and find a way to just move on if you didn't get the reception you wanted.

And of course, we always say, "Take a look. Think about anything that might be helpful for next time around. If there's criticism that makes sense to you or makes you rethink something, then you want to use that to your advantage."

But yeah, by and large, the quote about, "Great art isn't great art unless it offends somebody", sometimes that's also true. So, if you get a strong reaction or you evoke a strong reaction, sometimes, there's a way of looking at that as a positive, too.

**Laura Backes:** Now, your book blends dinosaur facts with fantasy and humor. It's kind of a how-to-guide for picking a pet dinosaur. And I love that tongue-and-cheek humorous tone that you've got to the text. And whenever I see a picture book myself that I may be critiquing for someone, I always think about how the pre-school teacher might use this in a classroom, reading it to a group of four year olds. And I wondered, is that sort of blend of fact and fantasy like you've had with your book, do you think that's a selling point when it's being used in schools like that?

**Laura Rennert:** I do! I think it's a selling point because dinosaurs are important part of kindergarten and first grade curriculum so kids are definitely learning information that's relevant. And then, the fun part of my story, I hope, is that there are facts in there and Marc's illustrations are in some ways also

anatomically correct and I know that he did a lot of research. And what we hope is the underpinning of some fact leads it to be instructive in the classroom and then, the fantasy part, the fun part, makes it to a kid appealing. So, we're hoping it's a good combination. And it is something that I look for on my own work for kids, for younger kids especially. Something where there's a hook that's going to be relevant in terms of curriculum.

**Laura Backes:** I imagine that's very important because schools and libraries are such a huge part of the children's book market that having that little hook is certainly going to help your book sell.

**Laura Rennert:** That's right! Hopefully yes. We definitely think that the more, the broader readership you can appeal to, the stronger sales are likely to be for a book. So, if you can get the trade market and also the school and library market, then that's the best.

**Laura Backes:** Now, from your vantage point being an agent, I wondered, is there anything new on the horizon in children's book that we haven't, as consumers, seen yet? For example, picture books for older readers like I'm thinking middle-grade, young adult, but in the picture book format as far as fiction goes or books for kids who are reading *above* their grade level -- we have high-low books for kids reading below their grade level -- but I sometimes get parents asking me, "My kid is in third grade and she's reading on a fifth or sixth grade level, I need books for her, too", I wondered if there were anything like that *that* you see coming?

**Laura Rennert:** I do! what I'm looking for right now -- and I know that editors from my past in New York are also looking for -- is we feel like there's a gap between early readers, young chapter books and middle-grade and there are kids who are developing readers who would respond -- and *are* responding really well to, I can call it a new category of *highly illustrated book for young readers* that incorporates more illustration and text, so the reader has the benefit of pictures that also helps connect the dots, as well as a slightly more involved story than some of those earlier reader books.

So, I think that's a new category that's exciting and definitely, we're also playing with illustrated formats and more sophisticated narratives. So, I'm actually just going out right now so this can be the guinea pig, in a way, with a project that's for young adults, but incorporates more visual elements. And the thought is because of the strength of graphic novels and because the data is in this some of this hybrid formats like *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* are doing well and getting critical acclaim and needing with reader approval, that this is a scenario that's going to be worth developing and keeping an eye on.

**Laura Backes:** Well, and I think that's really exciting because I've always felt that young adults and middle-graders get the short end when it comes to their illustrations. Older kids still like to have illustrations in their books. It certainly *adds* to the book. And I think that's great that some of those are becoming more and more available.

And also with the, you know, kids are being raised so much now online and with so much visual information that they get that I think it's a natural transition to carry that over to their books for the older kids, as well.

**Laura Rennert:** Yeah! I think you're right. And I think also with -- there are graph booking elements and there are multimedia elements that can be incorporated in new and intriguing ways. And especially as

publishing is becoming more digital and that's changing the landscape, I think there's a lot of opportunities there.

**Laura Backes:** This leads into the next area I wanted to talk about, which is sort of the electronic rights issues and contracts these days. And this is probably a really good selling point for getting an agent because these contracts change daily, I'm sure, with all the inventions of the new technology in the multimedia. Can you give a sense of what the typical split is for an author? Or is there a typical split for these rights?

**Laura Rennert:** Right! For electronic, for royalties right now, what we're getting is probably 25% of net or 15% of retail and that seems to be pretty typical. We are wondering if there needs to be a correction because the cost associated with eBooks are certainly less in terms of production, of course. And we want to make sure that the author has a share in that tie. And also, I think that will help praises in line and actually help the hard copy book business, as well. Those places should reflect realistic share.

**Laura Backes:** Are print book sales still strong in the children's book area even though we are getting a lot of these electronic formats?

**Laura Rennert:** They are still strong in the children's book area. And in fact, for the moment, this seems to be one of -- if not the *most* -- dynamic areas in the market, so we still feel somewhat buffered, but still, these changes are inevitable. So, publishers are going to have to rethink what is a fair share there and also, maybe figure out a way to streamline their cost so that they can compete more effectively.

**Laura Backes:** Authors, do they need to be really web-savvy and electronically proficient these days in order to properly promote their books or is a lot of that still taken care of by the publishers?

**Laura Rennert:** No, I think that's a *huge* help. And I *do* think it's a requirement. I'm afraid that a lot of the difficulties, not only in the economy, but specifically and lay-off and transitions, re-orgs at houses, more and more, there are fewer resources that go to marketing books and it's very much an expectation on our part that the author needs to work hard to promote their books. And I think some of the biggest opportunities at the lowest cost are with online promotions, social networking. I think these are great low-cost ways to get the word out. So, I think it's increasingly important for authors to be web and media-savvy this way.

And especially, I think it's helpful certain for all authors, for picture book authors and authors of some of the categories directed at a younger readership, but especially for middle-grade and young adult because that's actually also where their audience is. Their audience is online on Facebook and MySpace. And it's a great way of reaching that audience.

Some of my most successful author like New York Times best selling Ellen Hopkins, I think one of her books speak so honestly to readers and one of the strings she has on the marketing front is that she has an incredibly close contact with her readers. And there's a real dialogue there.

**Laura Backes:** I think that's very true. And I know a lot of authors I've interviewed recently including *your* Maggie Stiefvater for her book *Shiver* are doing blog tours when their books first come out. And that's a real new thing. But it's essentially free to the author to do these blog tours.

**Laura Rennert:** That's right! It's an expenditure of time, but there are no additional cost. You can cover an *enormous* amount of ground and I think Maggie's *Shiver*, another of New York Times' best seller is a great success story in that regard. Maggie has really gotten the word out for her readership by blog tours and she's one of my authors where -- I have Google hits for a lot of my authors and I see hers popping up everywhere. And I know she's doing a fantastic job. And I think that is part of the reason that book came out of the gate so successful right upfront.

**Laura Backes:** I do, too. And I think for authors who are afraid of venturing into the Internet and this area, I think blogs are probably the quickest way to get your name around. And once you get into the blog world, you realize how incredibly viral these things are. They connect to each other. They *link* to each other. And if you hook into the right network of blogs, the word spreads very quickly. So, I think that *that's* a really easy way for authors to get the word out quickly.

**Laura Rennert:** Yeah, I think you're right. I mean, I think another benefit is that a lot of authors -- I know sometimes authors are more solitary or not so extroverted, certainly not *all* authors and another nice benefit of blog tours and online promotion is you don't have to be out there face to face. You can be really connected, but still have your privacy. So, I think it's also more comfortable for some authors.

**Laura Backes:** Yeah, and connected through your writing. So, you could edit what you're writing before you post it in your blog and do all those things that you're very comfortable with.

**Laura Rennert:** Exactly!

**Laura Backes:** And still get the word out, yeah. Great! Well, my final question for you is -- and you probably get this a lot if you go to writing conferences, but I was wondering, as an agent, can you sum up some of the most common mistakes that you see in submissions that you get?

**Laura Rennert:** I would say one of the most common is a clear case of somebody not doing their home work and this can take the form of somebody who hasn't research the agent they're submitting to and they're sending that agent something that here she doesn't really handle or something who hasn't familiarized themselves with the different categories on the market, doesn't have a clear sense of where they fit in or even, maybe, what an agent does sometimes. So, that's a really simple one.

It seems like there are so many great resources out there now for writers: publisher's market places and outstanding ones were for \$20.00 a month, you can join and have access to their deal database and see what agents are selling in your category.

So, not doing your homework is a definite problem. Sometimes, we get submissions that come in that are just -- it seems they're not strong enough and that the author hasn't spent the necessary time to go through revisions, to really make something as polished as it needs to be. So, careless errors, writing sort of -- I don't know -- empty calories or not very tighter-polished writing especially in the very beginning, that's another *easy* disqualifier.

**Laura Backes:** Would you recommend that authors certainly join a writer's group, get feedbacks, get critics on their work before sending it to you?

**Laura Rennert:** I think it's a great idea. And again, with fabulous organizations like FSDWI, it's pretty easy to connect to a group in your region and to find other authors who are working in similar categories or in

children's books and I definitely think that the more -- well, not the more eyes necessarily -- but if you had a few great eyes on your work, it's going to make for a much stronger manuscript ultimately and something that's much more likely to get agent and editor attention when you submit it.

And I know most of my authors are in critic groups -- I'm going to use the term loosely, but *critic groups* of some form or another. I have some authors who just work with some or two other also frequently-published authors when they're published, writers of the same calibers. And some authors who are in more traditional critic groups.

So, I think the thing to be aware of, I guess, in terms of critic groups is you want to make sure you're in a group that's giving constructive criticism and where you're working with other writers who are enough at the same level that everybody's got a benefit. And it's going to be a real share -- a sharing profit that is an investment for everybody. And I think it's great to have other eyes on your manuscript before you submit.

**Laura Backes:** How polished does a manuscript have to be before submitting it to an agent? Does agents do some editing or help the authors with revisions before sending it out to publishers?

**Laura Rennert:** That's going to vary from agent to agent. I know there are some agents who really are looking for something that comes in clean and they can just turn it around. And there are other agents who work much more in an editorial capacity. My MO from the very beginning of my career as an agent has been that I feel like -- especially with my background, which includes a PhD on literature and freelance editing -- that my editorial eye is one of the benefits I bring to the table. And I would rather work with a client on a number of iterations -- and sometimes, it is a number -- and make sure a work is absolutely a strong and enticing as we can make it before we go out with it and then, get a bigger deal.

So, a great show-and-tell kind of example would be my wonderful client, Jess Stone who I met at our *Big Sur Writing Workshop*. And I saw three or four chapters of his work there. And then, he and I corresponded afterwards and I took him on as a client. He had a fabulous, serious proposal and also, a partial of that first manuscript. It was unusual that I would take someone on on a basis of a partial. The writing was terrific. And the conception of the project was terrific, and of the series. So that was an inducement.

And then, he and I worked on that first manuscript for almost a year. We went to writing two or three rounds of revision before we went out to it, before I went out with it to publishers. And then, it was so strong and so polished and so well-conceived that in the end, it went out and I got an auction going and it sold as a seven book series to Random House for over half a million dollars. So, that's a fabulous Cinderella success story, of course. But also, it illustrates the point of the benefit, if you can find an agent who will work that way and who has the background that makes him or her qualified to work that way of doing that kind of revision upfront especially in this market where editors are doing more work than they did formerly because of lay-offs and sort of job consolidations. I think things have to be incredibly strong to get attention and to make it across the finish line, through the acquisitions process of a house.

So, I think a great question to ask an agent when you are doing the dance of "Is this the right person for me? Are we going to be a good fit?" is, "Do you work editorially with your clients?" One of the

first questions I ask authors when I'm offering representation is, "Are you open to revision?" So, I think that could be a great benefit if you find somebody that can work that way with you.

**Laura Backes:** Definitely! And it also shows the benefit of going to conferences and networking because that's how you met Jess Stone or conferences or workshops. And I think that getting out and actually, if nothing else, hearing agents talk and hearing about the kinds of books that they like will help you also zero in on the agent who might be right for your book. So, I think it's important that authors leave their computer once in a while and get out.

**Laura Rennert:** Exactly! That kind of networking is invaluable, I think. It gives you information about the marketing and it gives you information about the person at the other end of the process, whether that's an agent or an editor. And the more you know and the more you can potentially make some kind of personal connection, the better your chances are going to be.

**Laura Backes:** Well, thank you so much. You've given us a lot of great information, a lot to think about. And I'm sure my listeners are going to benefit a lot from your advice. So, I appreciate your time. And good luck with your book.

And also, your next book, *The Extraordinary Princess*, which is due -- it's one of those highly-illustrated chapter books that you talked about.

**Laura Rennert:** Exactly!

**Laura Backes:** And it's coming out Spring of 2011, right?

**Laura Rennert:** That's right!

**Laura Backes:** So, it's a ways off, but...

**Laura Rennert:** It's a ways off. I'll be working on that second manuscript in that series actually in the next few weeks. Thank you, Laura. It's been a pleasure talking to you. And I hope the information is helpful to those of you out there who are in the midst of the process. Good luck, everybody.