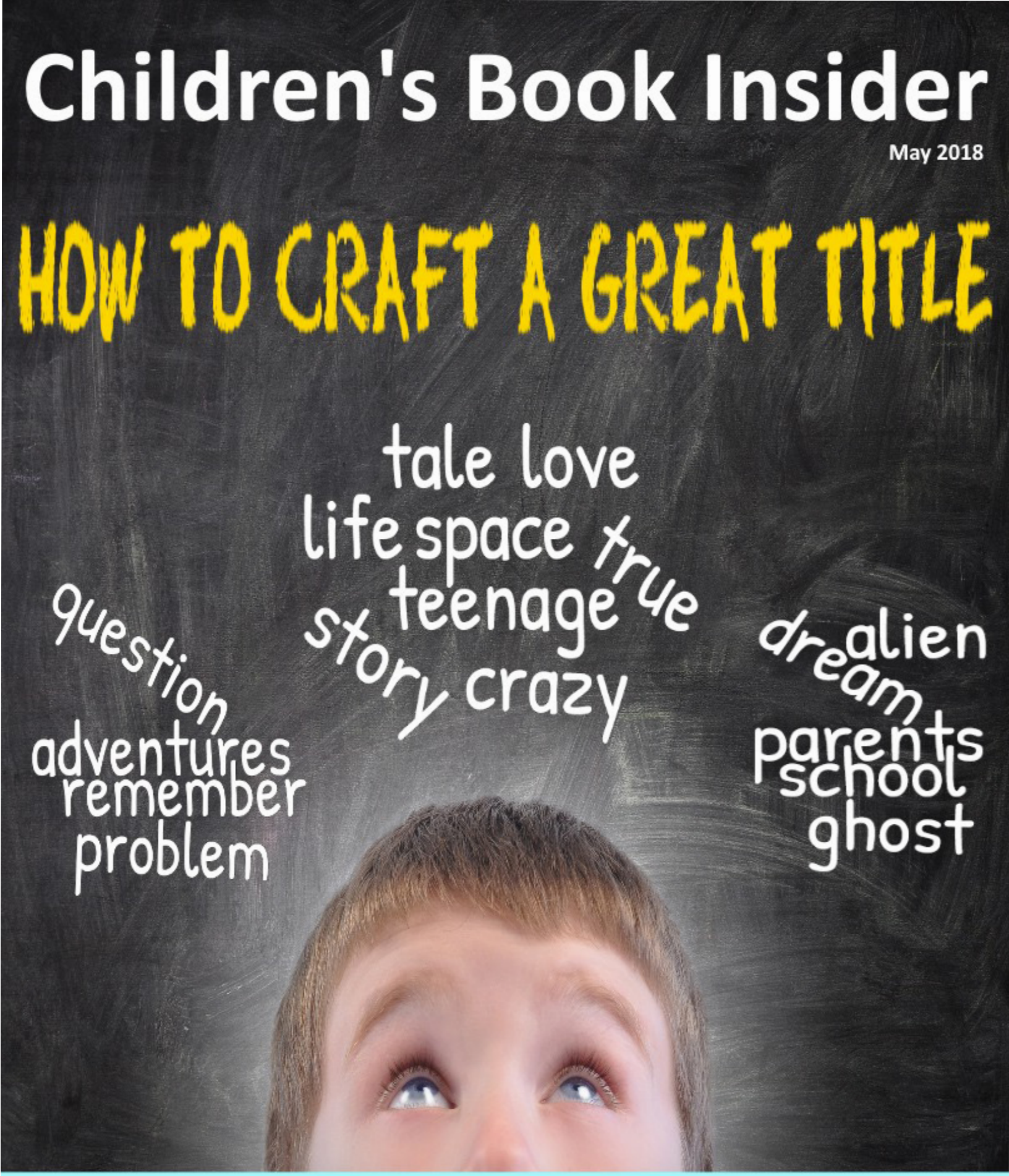
Children's Book Insider

May 2018

HOW TO CRAFT A GREAT TITLE



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Above The Slushpile Code: Laura Dail Lit Agency

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This issue's contributors

Hilari Bell has written five fantasy series for middle grade and young adult readers, and five stand-alone novels (three of which as science fiction). She's currently working on a novel that mixes steam punk with fantasy. Visit her website at **http://hilaribell.com**.

Kimberly M. Hutmacher has published over 150 articles, stories, and poems in magazines. She is the author of 25 books for children and teachers. Kimberly enjoys sharing her love for writing almost as much as she loves writing itself. To learn more about Kimberly, her books, and her workshop offerings, please visit **https://kimberlyhutmacherwrites.blogspot.com/**

Lynne Marie is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), and numerous stories and articles in magazines, including *Highlights for Children, High Five, Baby Bug, Family Fun, Hopscotch, Turtle, Spider* and *Writer's Digest*. Her website is **http://www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com**

Jane McBride is the author of 36 novels, numerous short stories and articles including pieces in 16 Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies, and the CBI Managing Editor. Follow her writing blog at **http://www.janemchoate.blogspot.com**

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An Open Letter to Agents and Editors

Dear Children's Book Agents and Editors,

First of all, I want to let you know how much I respect what you do. Your dedication to discovering talent and bringing the best books for children to the market is inspiring. The passion you have for your work is clear when you speak at conferences, post on your blogs, and champion your clients' books. But most of all, it's shown through the long hours (often outside of the office) that you put into combing through the slush pile submissions from new writers and illustrators.

So let's talk about that slush pile.

I *know* it's out of control. Blame technology and the ability to send multiple submissions with the click of a button. Blame authors and illustrators who simple Google "children's book publishers" and then mail off a copy of their manuscript to every company that pops up. Whatever the cause, I sympathize with the problem, and I want to assure you that we're doing everything we can to educate authors and illustrators how to appropriately target their submissions in *Children's Book Insider*, our Writing Blueprints products, and in every webinar and writing conference we put on.

Many of you list very specific submission guidelines on your websites, stating exactly what you're looking for, the tone, content and length of preferred submissions, and what you're not accepting. You also provide updates on your blogs and Twitter feeds. Thank you for that. But if you're not being specific, if you're simply listing broad categories (picture books, middle grade fiction, young adult nonfiction) without details, you're going to be inundated with inappropriate submissions. If you speak at a conference and say, "I can't tell you exactly what I'm looking for, but I'll know it when I see it," then every attendee with a manuscript is clicking the "Send" button as soon as they get home. Can you blame them? Who knows, maybe they've got "it". I realize that it's hard for many writers to be objective about their work, and all hope their manuscripts are infused with "itness", but if you provide more concrete details, maybe some qualities of books you've published that had "it", you'd go a long way toward cutting down those unwanted submissions. Show, don't tell. 😉

Now, can we please talk about rejection letters? Because I firmly believe that the way you reject a manuscript can lead to bigger slush piles.

I know, lots of inappropriate submissions means you're rejecting lots of manuscripts. The most time-effective way to do this is the have one generic rejection letter you send to everyone. But that may be hurting you in the long run.

First, how about we move the rejection process completely into the 21st century and require that every submission include an email address for a response? Many of you are already accepting submissions electronically, so that step's done. For those who aren't, it's just one detail to be added to your submission guidelines, if it's not there already.

Then, you create a few boilerplate rejection letters that you simply click and send. One for "this manuscript does not fall within our publishing guidelines" to alert the submitter that she needs to research better before making another submission. One for "I found the plot too predictable." One for "I don't feel the protagonist is believable." One for "This is a great start, but I feel you need to work on developing and strengthening the voice of your writing to make it more unique." You know, the stuff you see *all the time*.

Many of you have interns. Let them send these letters. Simply indicate Rejection 1, Rejection 2, etc. on the manuscript and you're done. If you don't have an intern or an assistant, simply type the recipient's email into the To field and send. It's OK if the letter isn't personalized. What's more important is that it gives the author a

clue as to why the work was rejected. I appreciate that you want to spare authors' feelings with generic rejection letters that say things like, "Your work isn't right for us at this time, but we wish you luck in placing it elsewhere," but this does *nothing* to help the author. What does this mean? Will the work be right in six months? Will it ever be right? The author's going to take a chance and send it to 20 more editors and agents, just in case. Then your colleagues get your rejections, and you get theirs. And the slush pile continues to grow.

Finally, let's chat about the non-answer to submissions (hang in there, I'm almost done).

Again, I *completely* understand how sending rejection letters (even with the click of an email) takes time away from the work you're doing with authors and illustrators already under contract. This precious time is spent on manuscripts you don't want to publish or represent, so there is no financial benefit to you. But the bottom line is that you depend on submissions to keep your jobs. If all the submissions dry up, eventually your current clients won't be able to create enough books for you to continue to make a living. You'll need new talent. At their core, the author/agent and author/editor relationships are business relationships. They require both parties to act with professionalism and respect toward each other.

If you were to apply for a job, one you'd trained for and dreamed of holding for years, and the interviewer said, "If you don't hear from me in six months, assume you don't have the job," would you wait around, or would you immediately go interview somewhere else? If you applied for another position and were told, "Wait six months before applying elsewhere. Then, if you don't hear from me, you're free to move on," would you even *want* to work for that company? If you continued to advance your training and hone your interview skills, but spent years waiting for a response in six-month increments, only to be met with silence, how long would it take you to throw up your hands and say, "Screw it, I'm going to work for myself?"

I'm not implying that you don't respect authors. I know you do. But it *feels* disrespectful from the author's perspective to be told they won't hear back unless you want to represent or publish them. And it's especially frustrating when a click of a button can send a brief rejection that at least gives the author some closure and the ability to either revise their work or move on.

You've been the publishing gatekeepers for decades. And you've done a great job. But the business has changed, and the rules for entry need to be updated. Authors and illustrators need to understand exactly what's expected of the work they submit, and they need to take those directions seriously. You, in turn, must let them know if they're not ready, and give them a minimal amount of feedback so they don't just storm another gate.

If we can't work this out together, as a mutually-beneficial business relationship, the talented authors and illustrators buried in the slush pile may just give up. And that would be a shame.

I'm sure you have thoughts about all this. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

Insiders: You can continue to do your part in reducing the slush pile by reading the guidelines in At Presstime carefully each month, visiting the websites of the publishers and agents listed to verify that your work fits with what they do, and making sure your work is submission-ready before sending it off. This also applies to our **Above the Slush** codes in each issue. This month's **Above the Slush** oppurtunity is with agent Carrie Pestritto of the Laura Dail Agency. See the Agent Spotlight for more details.

At Presstime:

Nineteenth Annual New Voices Award Accepting Submissions from Picture Book Writers of Color

Lee & Low Books announces its eighteenth annual New Voices Award for a picture book by a writer of color. The Award winner receives a cash grant of $2000 and a standard Lee & Low publication contract, including the basic advance and royalties for a first time author. An Honor Award winner will receive a cash grant of $1000. The contest is open to writers of color and Native nations who are residents of the United States and who have not previously had a children's picture book published. Writers who have published work in venues such as children's magazines, young adult, or adult fiction or nonfiction, are eligible. Only unagented submissions will be accepted. Work that has been previously published in any format, including online and self-publishing, is not eligible for this award. Manuscripts previously submitted for this award or to Lee & Low books will not be considered.

Manuscripts should address the needs of children of color and Native nations by providing stories with which they can identify and relate, and which promote a greater understanding of one another. Themes relating to non-traditional family structures, gender identity, or disabilities may also be included. Submissions may be fiction, nonfiction or poetry for children ages 5 to 12. Folklore and animal stories will not be considered. Manuscripts should be no more than 1500 words in length and accompanied by a cover letter that includes the author's name, address, phone number, email address, brief biographical note, relevant cultural and ethnic information, how the author heard about the award, and publication history, if any. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced on 8-1/2" x 11" paper. A self-addressed, stamped envelope with sufficient postage must be included if you wish to have the manuscript returned. Up to two submissions per entrant. Each submission should be submitted separately.

Send to: Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, Suite 1205, New York, NY 10016. ATTN: New Voices Award. **Submissions must be postmarked by August 31, 2018.** The winners will be announced by December 31, 2018. For more information go to **https://www.leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award** Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this Award.

Publisher Seeks Picture Books that Incorporate Math Concepts into Storylines

Charlesbridge and TERC, a non-profit STEM education center in Cambridge, MA, are collaborating on an initiative to develop better math storybooks for children of all backgrounds. Their efforts are centered around expanding the mathematical content in trade picture books to include often overlooked yet critically important topics, such as: Patterns (in actions or images), Sorting and classifying (How are these things alike? How are they different?), Comparing amounts (more, less, the same), Sizes/measuring (larger than I am, smaller than my hand), Spatial relationships (near, far, above, between), Comparing and describing shapes (How is the book like the piece of paper? How is it different?). Also seek to expand images and contexts of characters in such books, to reflect families from traditionally underrepresented groups and to give all readers an inclusive vision of mathematical thinkers.

Seeking manuscripts for fiction picture books that weave together engaging story lines, mathematical themes, and diversity. Looking for compelling and emotionally resonant stories that readers will revisit again and again for new insights and joy on each reading. Manuscripts should integrate math so that readers experience it as an organic component of the story and naturally engage in mathematical thinking as they discuss the characters and progression of events. For sample titles, go to **https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0750/0101/files/Story-telling-Math-Call-for-Submissions.pdf?14909534260749705531**

Submit complete manuscript to Alyssa Mito Pusey at alyssa@charlesbridge.com by September 1, 2018. Include “Storytelling Math Submission” in the subject line. Will respond to all submissions within two to three months of receipt.

Publisher Seeks Nonfiction and Learning Materials to Help Children Overcome Challenges

Free Spirit publishes high-quality nonfiction books, learning materials, and select fiction that provides children and teens with the tools they need to overcome challenges and make a difference in the world. You can study Free Spirit's complete list of titles at **http://www.freespirit.com/** Free Spirit does not publish general fiction, books with animal or mythical characters, poetry, material with religious content, biographies or memoirs, or self-help for adults.

Currently looking for strong nonfiction proposals in the following categories (note where fiction is also considered below). Many of these categories include the series Self Help for Kids® and Self Help for Teens® :

Early Childhood: Board books for ages 0-4 and picture books for ages 4-8 that focus on social skills, getting along, early learning, character education, and self-esteem. Will also consider fiction that relates directly to these areas of focus.

Gifted & Special Education: Books on academic, social, and emotional development for young people with diverse learning needs, including gifted students and students with learning differences, ADHD, behavioral difficulties, or autism spectrum disorders.

Bullying Prevention & Conflict Resolution for All Ages: Fiction, nonfiction and resources for teachers to help young people prevent and respond to bullying incidents.

Character Education, Leadership & Service Learning for All Ages: Fiction, nonfiction and resources for teachers in these areas.

Educational Games, Posters, & Jars: Games and In a Jar® products for kids and teens that promote character development, bullying prevention, positive behavior, social-emotional learning, and other related topics.

Counseling & Social-Emotional Learning for All Ages: Fiction, nonfiction and educator resources to help children and teens deal with grief and loss, health and wellness, depression and other mental illnesses, stress, social skills and friendship, anger management, GLBTQ issues, manners, family, self-confidence, and more.

All material must be sent by regular mail and must contain a proposal that includes: A cover letter briefly outlining your project, the intended audience (including age ranges), and your relevant expertise; a current résumé; a market analysis with a comprehensive list of similar titles and a detailed explanation of how your project differs; a chapter-by-chapter outline; at least two sample chapters (if a full manuscript is available, you may send it). Note: For early childhood submissions, send entire text. Bracketed art suggestions are appreciated, though illustration samples should not be sent unless professionally competent. Also include a description of your personal promotion plan for the proposed book (including both in-person and social media outreach).

Send proposals to Free Spirit Publishing, Attn: Acquisitions, 6325 Sandburg Road, Suite 100, Minneapolis, MN 55427-3674. Allow up to 6 months for a response.

Walter Grant for Unpublished Diverse Authors and Illustrators Open to Submissions

We Need Diverse Books will award up to six Walter Grants (named after the late Walter Dean Myers) of $2000 each to unpublished diverse authors and/or illustrators. Applicants must be working toward a career as a children's book author and/or illustrator in one of the following categories: Picture Books, Early Reader Books, Chapter Books, Middle Grade Books, Young Adult, Graphic Novels, Nonfiction, Poetry. Applicants must be US residents and identify as one of more of the following: person of color, Native American, LGBTQIA+, person with a disability, marginalized religious or cultural minority. Note: The applicant themselves must be diverse. Being married to, a parent of, or a sibling of a diverse person, or being someone who has grown up with diverse people, will not qualify an otherwise ineligible applicant. Work considered for the Walter Grant must not currently be on submission.

Application details can be found at **https://diversebooks.org/our-programs/walter-grant/submission-guidelines/ All applications must be emailed by May 31st, 2018 at 11:59PM EST.**

Chatting with Author/Illustrator Mark Teague

interview by Lynne Marie

We are especially pleased to feature Mark Teague an accomplished author/ illustrator, who, rumor has it, has no formal training in writing or illustrating, knows just the barber to recommend to extra-terrestrials (or humans for that matter), happens to know a letter-writing dog AND knows how dinosaurs say goodnight!

Mark has more than 20 picture books to his credit, many of which he has authored himself, including the popular *Pigsty*, *Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters from Obedience School*, and *One Halloween Night*. He is also the illustrator of Cynthia Rylant's beloved *Poppleton* series for beginning readers and the best-selling *How Do Dinosaurs…* series of picture books by Jane Yolen. His newest picture book, *Jack and the Beanstalk and the French Fries*, is a fractured fairy tale that teams up Jack and the Giant to battle the true villain of the classic tale: the beans!

Lynne Marie: Let's flash back to college graduation. What did you see yourself doing with your life after that? What did you NOT want to see yourself doing with your life?

Mark Teague: I was fairly directionless coming out of college. The things that interested me--travel, art, books, the outdoors—seemed unrelated to basic survival. I got a job waiting tables in San Diego and hated it. That's when I began plotting my escape.

LM: Did your college studies in U.S. history ever make their way in some way shape or form into any of your books. If so, which ones?

MT: Reading history helps me understand the world, which is its real value to me. That said, I have no idea how to write history for children. If there's anything historical in any of my books it's an accident or an oversight!

LM: Thought I find it hard to believe, sources report that you're not trained in art either writing or storytelling. Is this true? Is it also true your only experience was "pretending" to be an author author/illustrator as a child? Please tell us about this.

MT: I loved to draw as a kid and I considered myself very good at it (though there isn't much evidence to back me up). I also loved books. Before I learned to write I would sometimes dictate stories to my mother, who would type them up for me. She was wonderfully patient. I can't imagine that either of us thought of this as professional training, but in a way I suppose it was. Writing and drawing were play for me—kid's stuff, literally. Maybe that's why I never sought out formal training.

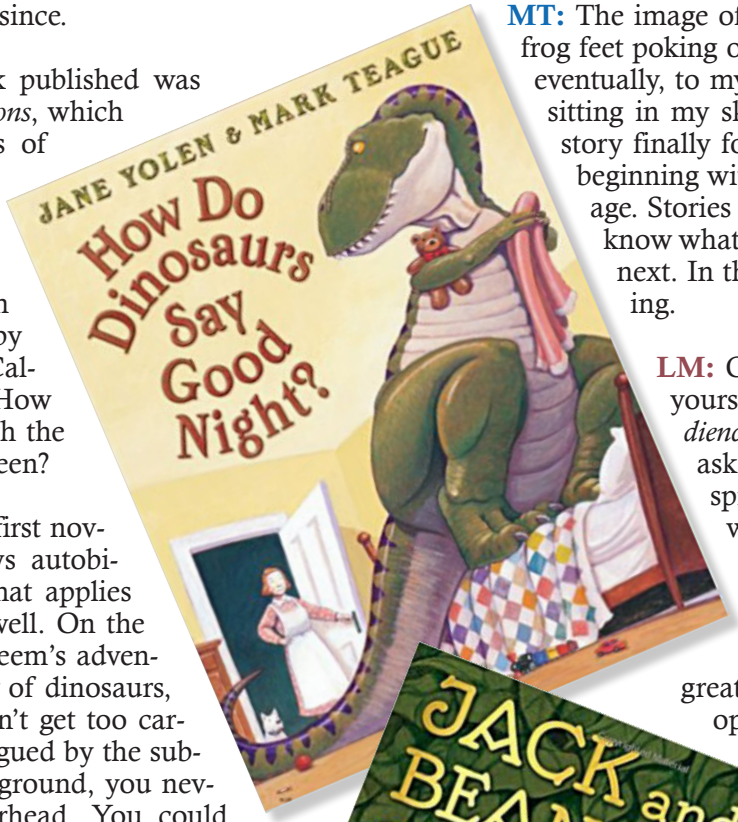
LM: When you set off for New York City and live with your brother after college, did you have it in your mind to become an author or illustrator? How did your job working in the display department at Barnes and Noble in Rockefeller Center fuel your desire to become the author/illustrator you are today?

MT: I was still aimless when I got to New York. Just living in the city was my goal. The Barnes and Noble job was a revelation—probably the luckiest break in a whole series of lucky breaks. The display department was full of good artists, mostly students at Parsons and the School of Visual Arts. I learned a lot from them and from the work itself, which largely consisted of making posters copying book covers. Beyond that, the books themselves were inspiring, especially children's books. Maybe it went back to my experience as a kid, but I immediately believed that I could write and illustrate my own book and I set about doing just that. Later, my contacts within Barnes and Noble, particularly the children's buyer, Mike Cavanaugh, were hugely help-

Mark Teague continued

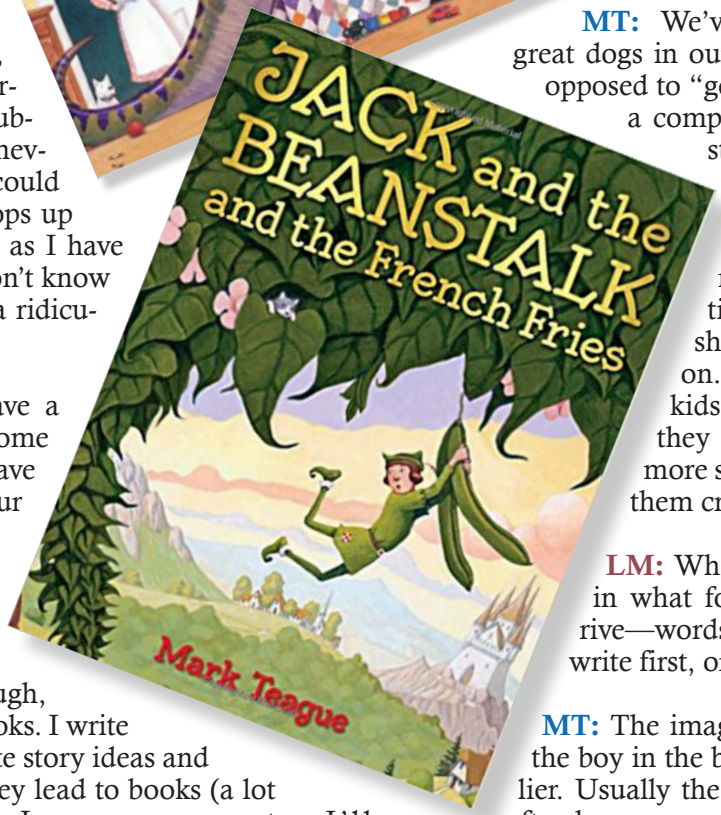
ful in introducing me to editors and publishers. Mike sent me to meet Jean Feiwel at Scholastic and I have been publishing there ever since.

LM: Your first book published was *Trouble with the Johnsons*, which explores the troubles of Elmo Freen, who longs to return to the country after his family has moved to the city. Was this in any way inspired by your move from California to NYC? How did you come up with the character of Elmo Freen?



MT: I've heard that first novels are almost always autobiographical. Maybe that applies to picture books as well. On the other hand, Elmo Freem's adventure involves a family of dinosaurs, so I probably shouldn't get too carried away. I was intrigued by the subway. Traveling underground, you never know what's overhead. You could pop up almost anywhere. Elmo pops up back home in the country, though as I have said, there are dinosaurs there. I don't know where I got Elmo Freem, but it's a ridiculous name, which suits the story.

LM: Speaking of names, you have a flair for unusual names. Share some some examples of ways that you have come up with names of some of your fun characters.



MT: This is a hard question. Who knows where ideas come from? Names are like that, too. A good name can unlock a character, though, and good characters make good books. I write down names in the same way I write story ideas and good first sentences. Sometimes they lead to books (a lot of times they don't). Occasionally I come across great names in real life. I had a neighbor once named Melvina Finckle. There has to be a book in that.

LM: Please share some of the ways you get your ideas and directions for your stories, like, for example, sprouting frog feet.

MT: The image of a little boy sitting in a bathtub with frog feet poking out of the water was the idea that led, eventually, to my book Frog Medicine. I remember it sitting in my sketchbook for a long time before the story finally formed. The process is often like that, beginning with some small, mysterious idea or image. Stories build off of that curiosity, wanting to know what's going on, or what's going to happen next. In that sense, writing is the same as reading.

LM: One of my personal favorite books of yours is *Dear Mrs. LaRue—Letters from Obedience School* and the sequels. So, I must ask on behalf of all dog lovers: What inspired Ike, and do you have a dog? Also, what gave you the idea to contrast what was really going on with what Ike was writing in his letters?

MT: We've had a succession of great dogs in our family. I say "great" as opposed to "good." Ike is something of a composite. I loved writing the story in his voice, from his point of view. Unfortunately, he's thoroughly untrustworthy, so I needed to use the illustrations as a counterpoint, to show what is really going on. I had some concern that kids wouldn't get the joke, but they did. Children are often more sophisticated than we give them credit for.

LM: When an idea comes to you, in what form does it generally arrive—words or pictures? Do you write first, or sketch first?

MT: The image I mentioned earlier of the boy in the bathtub is actually an outlier. Usually the written part comes first. I'll often have a completed manuscript before I even think about the drawings.

LM: While I understand it will vary from book to book, please share an example of your writing process.

Mark Teague continued

MT: As a writer I'm quite undisciplined. Sometimes I'll write a note to myself or scribble an idea in a sketchbook. I never know when a small idea will grow into something bigger. Often there's a sort of incubation process. After I wrote the book Pigsty, I noticed the word "pigsty" written in sketchbooks going back several years. Until that moment I had believed that the story came to me quickly, in a matter of days!

LM: As a formerly untrained illustrator, please share some of the avenues you explored that helped you develop, define and refine your technique to the point of becoming publishable and successful.

MT: I've read quite a few books on painting. Beyond that, I love lots of artists—and not just children's illustrators. I'm often trying to imitate effects I like. Sometimes being unschooled is actually helpful. I have learned a great deal through trial and error. More than anything, I've learned through practice. And imperfect technique helps make my pictures distinctive!

LM: As a formerly untrained writer, please share some tips you have for honing your craft and learning the art of storytelling.

MT: I was a big reader from an early age, and always opinionated. Knowing what I liked as a kid, and why, helps me write for that audience now. Honestly, I think all writers are self taught. Mostly it's about reading. Every good book is a sort of manual for how to write a good book—which doesn't make it easy, but still, there are lots of manuals out there!

LM: As an author of over twenty books, please share some of your favorites and tell us why those stand out among the rest.

MT: I live with each of my books very intensely while I'm working on them. I have to like them, or I couldn't sustain the effort, but once I'm done, I'm really done. Occasionally I read to a class and if it's an old book that I haven't looked at for a while it might seem strange or different than I remembered, like looking at old photos. Sometimes I'm fond of books for reasons separate from the books themselves. I wrote *Dear Mrs LaRue* when my kids were very young and I can remember reading it to them at bedtime. That stands out.

LM: Please share how you got the idea to write your latest book, *Jack and the Beanstalk and the French Fries*. How did the process of writing this book differ from any of the others?

MT: I loved *Jack and the Beanstalk* as a kid, but it's a very odd story. Jack isn't much of a hero—he's basically a thief—and unless you play up the gruesomeness (which I didn't want to) the giant isn't much of a villain. What really intrigued me as a kid was the beanstalk—the idea that you could climb right out of this world. Still, if Jack isn't greedy and the giant isn't evil, I needed some other problem to build the story around, so I settled on the beans. Think about all the beans a stalk like that would produce! It's appalling, especially from a kid's point of view. The story takes off from there. Reworking fairy tales is fun because the template is has already been made. Its like icing a cake that some kind person already baked for you.

LM: Please tell us anything you care to share about your next project.

MT: It's about an unlikely friendship between two animals waiting to be adopted at the pound. That's about all I can say at this point.

LM: What is your best piece of advice you have to offer for writers and/or illustrators?

MT: I may have covered it already. Write the sort of story you'd like to read. Work really hard; put in the hours; read lots of books. When you're ready to think about publishing, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) is a wonderful resource.

The Uses and Abuses of Coincidence

by Hilari Bell

Coincidences happen in real life all the time…so why do editors swear under their breath when they come across a simple coincidence in a manuscript? Aren't we supposed to be true to reality when we write? The answer to that second question is a flat out, "No." Fiction has to be better than reality, cleaner, clearer, and above all else, more causal than random, messy reality. How unsatisfying would it be, for instance, to have your manly hero come down with shingles right before the climax and itch horribly all through his great moment—maybe even in too much pain to enjoy his victory? It can happen to anyone who had chickenpox as a child, and in mundane reality, it just might.

The Coincidence You Can't Use

But of all the random things that happen in the real world, the *convenient* coincidence is a particular problem in manuscripts, because beginning writers tend to use coincidence to get their protagonists out of trouble, or to give them information they need, or to get them into the right place at the right time. In fact, coincidence is even worse than magic as an "easy button" for getting protagonists out of trouble.

For example: *The protagonist is wandering through the evil king's castle, and he "happens" to hear voices coming from the king's private office. He impulsively decides that it would be fun to eavesdrop on the king. And when he does, it just "happens" that the king is talking about an evil plot to wipe out the hero's family. Our hero then flees from the guard who caught him eavesdropping (the guard "happened" to need to use the privy just before the hero walked by) the hero's about to be trapped when he "happens" to fall though some conveniently rotted floorboards. And the tunnel he falls into just "happens" to lead to the hidden room that just "happens" to hold the one weapon that can pierce the evil king's magical armor, and there "happens" to be a secret passage that takes him too…*

The reason this is such a problem isn't only that this hero is the luckiest guy alive. It's because all these convenient coincidences make it possible for the protagonist to win without having to fight for it. And that makes him a weak character, and his story unsatisfying. It's the hero's struggle, and the grit, the brains, the courage he displays in that struggle, that makes him a hero. And this is true whether his struggle is to overthrow the evil king, or to find a home for a stray kitten.

The Coincidence You Can Use

So when can you use coincidence in a story? It's simple—any coincidence that gets the protagonist *into* trouble is probably fine. When the guard caught our hero eavesdropping on the king's plot, that's a coincidence too—but it's one no editor will have a problem with. (Unless they're objecting to the fact that it's also a cliché.) You can still go overboard, even with trouble-causing coincidences. If everything your protagonist touches goes wrong—particularly because of something that comes out of the blue—your story will start feeling fake. But you can rack up a reasonable number of coincidences—in a full novel, maybe as many as three or four major ones—as long as they all make things harder for your hero.

For example, one of my favorite scenes in a TV shoot-em-up was one in which the hero was driving a rental car across the desert, with the bad guys in hot pursuit. He was a reporter, and didn't carry a gun. You're watching this chase from a far off perspective so you can see both cars, and also how deserted this part of the desert is. The hero's car starts moving slower, then slower, and then it stops. The hero gets out of his car, and goes to lean on the fender with his arms folded. The bad guys park behind him and approach cautiously, guns drawn. The hero finally looks up at them and says, "You're not going to believe this, but I'm out of gas."

That's the kind of coincidence you can almost always use, because it increases suspense and escalates the difficulty of the story problem.

The Uses and Abuses of Coincidence

Another allowed coincidence is the inciting incident that kicks off the story. The tornado "just happens" to pick up your protagonist and whisk her off to Oz. The gun-slinger "just happens" to ride into your hero's town, picks a bar fight with the hero's best friend and shoots him. When getting home from Oz or avenging the friend is the central story problem, it's OK for that problem to have come out of nowhere. The inciting incident, which begins the story problem that your protagonist will struggle throughout the novel to solve, is the ultimate example of a coincidence that gets your protagonist into trouble.

"Then how to I get my hero into the hidden tunnel?" the writers wails. "He has to find that sword—it's the only way to kill the king!" In fact, with just a little thought you can almost always get your hero into the exact same place your coincidences took him—and it will add to the strength of his character instead of weakening him. The secret is in the set-up.

Avoiding Coincidences is almost always done with proper set-up. I watched an episode of *Castle* some time ago, where the team needs to solve a mystery in Atlantic City, and they were also planning a bachelor party for one of the detectives. But 1) the bride's teenage brother was going to be part of the bachelor party, which meant it had to be PG. So Castle decided to throw an unofficial bachelor party in Atlantic City during the investigation. 2) As part of the party prep, Castle asks the hotel clerk what's showing on main stage, and learns that there's an Elvis impersonator convention at the hotel. 3) As part of the investigation they inspect casino security, and learn that the casino cameras work with facial recognition software. All these steps happen quite early in the episode. But at the end of the second act… 4) The casino owner shuts down the investigation and has them thrown out—they're out of their jurisdiction, so he can. And they have to get back into hotel. 5) Castle sees rack of sparkly costumes being pushed into hotel. And 6) he realizes they can walk right through the front door, disguised as Elvis impersonators.

If the writers had skipped steps 1 through 3, and just come up with that solution at step 5 (*Hey, look at those Elvis costumes. I bet there's an Elvis impersonator convention going on. Hey, we could sneak in as Elvis impersonators.*) it would have seemed "too convenient." As it was, it came across as quick thinking. And the reason it came across that way was because all elements needed to make it work had been established early on, as a natural part the story.

Set-up is also necessary to establish a sufficient the motive for your character's actions. Remember when our hero "impulsively" decided that it would be fun to eavesdrop on the king's conversation? That kind of thing is an even worse method than coincidence for getting your hero where you want him to go. Worse, because instead of simply making your story-world feel fake, it makes your hero look like an impulsive idiot. And it shouldn't be too hard to create a good motive for the protagonist to eavesdrop on the king. Suppose it's time for court appointments to be made, and he wants to see if his father will get the cabinet appointment he's been lobbying for? Or better, if his father is about to be kicked off the cabinet, as the king's been threatening. And as he strolled past the room, where the door had been propped open because it's an unusually hot day, the words that caught his attention were, "…may have to make some difficult choices." If you set it up right, seizing a chance to eavesdrop on the king's conversation would be perfectly natural thing to do. Even if the hero knows it's risky.

Can't a protagonist ever do risky, stupid things? In fact, they can. You just have to set the situation up properly. The easiest way is to conceal information, so what turns out to have been a bad idea was a perfectly sensible choice, given the information the protagonist had.

A little more difficult, but sometimes more rewarding, is to have your protagonist so heavily personally motivated that they'll do something everyone knows is a bad idea… but they're so driven they do it anyway. In my novel, *Navohar*, the heroine is a biologist who helped create a virus to repel an alien invasion, which later mutated and started affecting humans…including her beloved nephew. She's spent her entire, obsessed life trying to find a cure for that virus, and she's on the verge of finding it—but it's in a place where primitive aliens will attack humans who linger in their territory for too long. When the warning drums sound, she tells herself that the aliens always hold off for a few hours before they attack, sometimes for several days. And she keeps saying, "Just a few more hours. Just a few more hours…" until, of course, the aliens attack. The reader knew they were going to attack, even Irene knew they were going to attack. But she's such a driven character that it's believable she'd push the safety limits too far.

One final thing worth noting is that doing detailed set-up, and forcing your protagonist to work for his victory instead of lucking into it, not only makes your hero stronger, it makes your story richer and more complex.

Let's take our lucky eavesdropper and the evil king. There are actually better ways to resolve this situation, but let's say you really want your hero to find that magic sword in the secret tunnel. How could you set this up?

The Uses and Abuses of Coincidence

Suppose that that instead of conveniently overhearing that the king is plotting to destroy his family, the hero learns about it when a band of mercenaries come to arrest his parents. (The hero's father is in the cabinet, and too popular for the king to send the army to do the evil deed.) Using his quick wits, our hero hides from the king's goons and escapes being arrested. He wants to know where his parents were taken, so he goes to the tavern where mercenaries are known to drink, and gets a job there waiting tables—hoping to overhear where they took their prisoners. He works in the tavern for many dreary days. The room where he sleeps shares a chimney with the taproom, and the noise when the maids start to clean comes up that chimney and wakes him every day at dawn, and he hates it. And worse than all the rest, he doesn't manage to overhear anything more significant than a few grumbles about how long it's taking the mercenaries' "employer" to pay them off.

Finally the mercenaries hold a meeting in the tavern with a guy who wears elegant clothes under his cloak—maybe the guy who hired them! But they go into a back room, and the innkeeper is waiting on them himself. Because you've already established that sound rises up the chimneys, it's not much of a stretch that our hero thinks of getting into the room above that private room and listening in…but there's a fellow servant in that room, and the hero uses most of the money he has left to bribe him to leave for a few hours. Then he can overhear, not only that his family is being held in the dungeons under the castle, but also that the king is planning to seal off those old escape tunnels—so much more sensible to destroy your enemies than to keep a back door open in case you need to flee. And mercenaries will destroy your enemies with far fewer questions than the army would! Their next job is to…

Bribing his fellow servant will make working at the tavern problematical anyway—the guy he bribed is bound to tell the boss eventually. So the hero goes out and burgles the office of the construction company the king hired to seal off the tunnel. It makes sense that a builder would have less security than the palace, and after he uses his quick wits to get past the guard dogs, the hero can make his own copy of the secret-tunnel-map. To his great disappointment (but rather logically) there are no escape tunnels that connect with the dungeon. But if he gets into the palace, maybe he can find a way to free his family.

He enters the tunnels before the construction crew arrives, and hides inside as they seal the entrance. Then he can lurk in the tunnels under the palace, stealing food from the kitchens and sleeping behind piles of books in the dusty library where no one ever goes. It takes him some time to steal the keys, so he can get into the king's office to try to find evidence of his family's kidnapping. When he finally breaks in, he can't find the evidence he needs…but he does find a whole pile of information in a secret compartment in the king's desk. Part of that information is that the king's magical armor can be pierced with a particular sword, but the sword has been hidden/lost for centuries. Maybe some of those old diaries he's seen in the library would hold a clue…

OK, most of this is pretty farcical. And there are several things here that might be seen as "coincidences" that help the hero; the fact that sound travels up the chimney into the hero's room, the paymaster meeting the mercenaries in the tavern where the hero is lurking, the fact that the king keeps information about the missing magical sword in the secret compartment in his desk. But because I made the hero work to get this information, laboring as a servant, outwitting guard dogs, lurking like a rat in the palace walls, it won't feel too "lucky" when he finally gets some success from his efforts—because he's *earned* those victories.

And also observe how much you can build his character, as this previously-somewhat-spoiled rich kid waits tables in a low tavern. How many action scenes you've added as he eludes goons, outwits guard dogs, and lives by his wits in the tunnels. How much more complex, how much richer the whole story becomes when you make your hero overcome obstacles to get what he need, instead of "lucking" into it. Abandoning fortunate "happenings" will make your whole story stronger…and that's no coincidence.

WRITING TEAM HAS LEGENDARY MIDDLE GRADE DEBUT

interview by PJ McIlvaine

As a kid, the works of iconic authors like Stephen King and Louis L'Amour captivated Brad McLelland (http://www.bradmcbooks.com), so making the leap from crime journalist to debut kid lit author was an organic and natural evolution. McLelland and his co-author Louis Sylvester mashed the genres they loved most (western-horror-zombie) and came up an action packed, rip-roaring adventure that Woody from Toy Story would heartily endorse with their middle-grade Legends of the Lost Causes (Holt Books for Young Readers, February 2018) the first in a planned four book series. But how the novel came about is a tale in and of itself, so all you cowpokes, grab your blanket and mosey on up to the campfire…

PJ McIlvaine: From Southern crime journalist to debut kid lit published co-author, that's quite a career trajectory. How did that quantum leap happen?

Brad McLelland: Basically, my writing career exists because I wrote for newspapers first. As many might be aware, English degrees don't always pan out the best jobs when you're first Author Brad McLelland, one half of the McLelland-Sylvester writing team starting out, so I did what many hungry English majors do: I turned to journalism. I honed my writing skills through articles and features, and when I started covering the crime beat, I learned what the darker side of humanity looked like. But I also saw hope and kindness and beautiful things. I think going through that experience really fine-tuned my perceptions as a fiction writer. I whittled away on stories at the same time I wrote articles for papers—and eventually the transition happened in a very natural way. The leap to writing for kids was only a matter of time. I wanted my words to give young people hope, and with any luck, show them that broken homes and situations don't have to mold them into who they're supposed to be. I wanted to show them that they can be heroes of their own lives, and rise from whatever rubble gets thrown in their path.

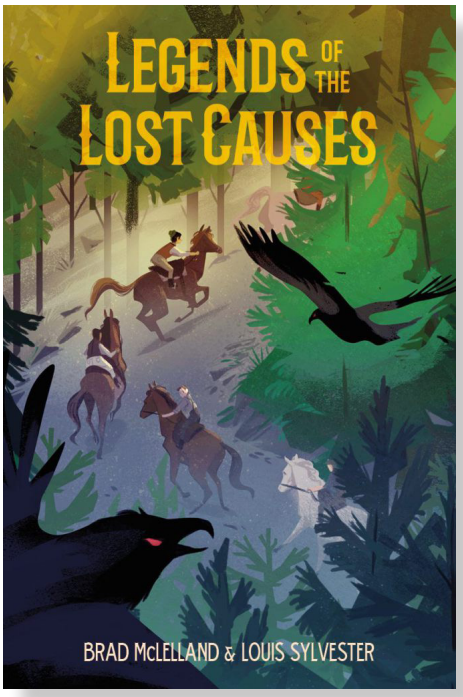
Author Brad McLelland, one half of the McLelland-Sylvester writing team

PJ: Your MG book is a western fantasy. Were westerns your favorite genre as a kid? How did the idea of meshing the two genres come about?

BM: I adored the western genre as a kid—there was just something gritty and powerful and simple about the sweeping landscapes and chiseled characters that spoke to my imagination. I remember going through entire boxes of Louis L'Amour novels in my grandmother's bedroom, and watching old spaghetti westerns with my dad on quiet Saturday afternoons. But I never really thought of the genre as my favorite—not like horror and fantasy at the time. Among those same boxes in Grandma's house, I stumbled across Stephen King, and so I found myself submerged in the world of *The Dark Tower*, which also blends the western and the fantasy. I found I could enjoy both worlds at the same time, and years later, I started hunting for more of that blend and didn't find much. I discovered Joss Whedon's *Firefly* on TV, which mixes the western with sci-fi, and I thoroughly loved every second. It wasn't until grad school that I started conjuring my own plans to mesh the genres and do something of my own.

PJ: *Legends of The Lost Causes* is co-authored by Louis Sylvester. Have you been co-writing long? What is your writing routine? How many books are planned in the series? Could you see it on the big screen?

BM: Louis and I officially started working together in summer 2010, after a long discussion at a friend's birthday party about our mutual reading interests. We discovered we both loved adventure stories—particularly westerns and dark fantasy—and so we started the planning process for what would become *Legends of the Lost Causes*. When Louis took a job as a professor in Idaho and moved across the country, we knew we couldn't quit, so we kept the fire burning online and continued our partnership.



I must say, our writing routine is wild. We start by getting on the phone and sharing plot and character ideas over long talks. Then we head to Google Docs. We draft a loose outline of the story, and then begin swapping chapters to draft. For *Legends*, Louis wrote Chapter 1, and then he passed it over to me for review. I read through the chapter, incorporated a few changes to get my own voice and style in, then I wrote Chapter 2 and passed it back to Louis. This is how we've written two books now—with the back-and-forth exchange and layering of styles. So, our novels really become a perpetual motion machine of drafting, revising, and editing, all at the same time. It's a true seat-of-our-pants system, but the end result is a book we both love, down to the syllable.

As for the number of books in the series, there are four books planned—but you never know where things like this will take you. There's plenty of fodder for spin-off material, so who knows? Perhaps movies? When we draft our books, we both tend to see the action and the settings in a very cinematic way, so for us it's easy to dream about seeing the series on the big screen. (Mr. Spielberg, we're lookin' at you.)

PJ: Your agent is Brooks Sherman of Janklow & Nesbit. How hands-on is he? Do you run ideas by him before going further?

BM: Back in early 2013, one of my grad school friends grew interested in *Lost Causes* and basically took it upon himself to do some agent research for us. One day over lunch, my friend handed me a note with Brooks name written on it. At this point, Louis and I had already queried several agencies, but no one had "taken the bite" yet. So my friend hands me this note and says, "I seriously think this is your guy. He sounds perfect for your story." I thanked my friend and quickly sent a query off to Brooks (who at the time was a rising-star agent at another agency).

A few weeks passed and no reply came from Brooks. Then one day while I was musing that I should try for a few face-to-face meetings with agents, my then-fiance-now wife Alisha found a literary conference in Austin; the fantastic annual Writers' League of Texas Agents & Editors Conference. "We should go! It's this coming weekend, but it's a bit expensive," she said. At first I was a bit skeptical, but then she listed off the agents who would be attending. One of them was Brooks Sherman. This was my chance, my one shot to interface with an agent (and one I had actually queried to boot). So Alisha and I drove to Austin and put the conference fee on a credit card. But the fee only got me through the door; it didn't guarantee a slot with Brooks. I knew I would just have to catch him "cold" and try to have a conversation.

As it turns out, my tactic worked like a charm. I waited in the lobby of the hotel where the conference was being held, and in walked Brooks, a small fellow with a kind-looking face. I seized my small window and just pitched the book to him right then and there. I expected to receive a sound "Not interested," but instead, Brooks invited me to breakfast the following morning, and promised he would look over my query and sample chapter that night (he'd been swamped beforehand with a backlog of query letters, so he hadn't gotten to ours yet). We met that next morning, as promised. Over breakfast burritos, we talked extensively about the story, about the possibility of making it middle grade (as opposed to YA, which Louis and I had attempted in the first draft), and other ideas. He agreed to look over a revision of the manuscript as discussed—and so began the long process of revising the book using Brooks' notes.

We spent a full year on the revision. We turned it back over to Brooks in February 2014 (during this time he had transitioned to another agency), and in early April we had a conference call with him. During that call, he said he loved the revision, but that the book needed a bit more tweaking before it could be publisher-worthy. So Louis and I agreed to make further changes, but on one condition: that Brooks agree to represent us. He agreed right there on the phone, and the next day we had a contract.

For the next year or so, we worked closely with Brooks in a creative process I can only describe as thoroughly insightful. Brooks drew up careful notes, and we would whittle away on the next draft, learning more and more with every new sentence and paragraph. Then, in March 2016, Brooks gave us exciting news: the book was ready to take to publishers. He made a "Round 1" list of publishing houses, sent off the book, and two weeks later he called to tell us that Macmillan wanted to pick up all four books in our planned series.

After Brooks sold our series to Henry Holt, he stepped back from the creative process to let us cultivate our relationship with Macmillan's editorial team. But he remains a crucial member of Team Lost Causes, particularly when it comes to our discussions of diversity and culture in the series. His wisdom is indispensable.

PJ: What do you enjoy most in writing, the actual writing or the research? How many drafts do you do before you feel that it's ready to be seen?

BM: Writing a series set in the Old West, I've discovered that the research is just a blast. Right now I have a scatter of reference books about the Santa Fe Trail piled on my desk. Many times I discover that my drafting goes much more quickly, and feels much tighter, when I've done a healthy dose of research beforehand.

In terms of draft numbers, Louis and I are on pretty tight deadlines with Macmillan, so technically speaking, we might enjoy time for two good drafts before delivering the manuscript to our editor. Of course, after the edit letter comes, we have much more time to lay back and get things right.

PJ: What are you working on now? Do you plan on expanding to other genres?

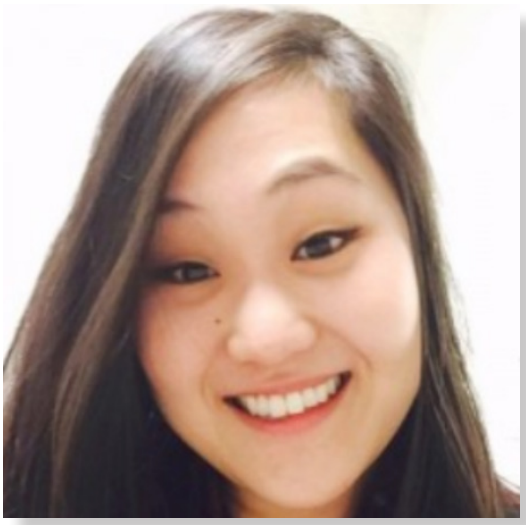
BM: Our contract calls for three more books in the *Lost Causes* series, so currently we're hard at work on the final draft of Book 2, and also the first draft of Book 3. After the fourth book—the sky's the limit! I do have solo ideas that would expand into more of a Southern gothic world, and also an idea that might take me into the realistic sci-fi arena. But for now, Louis and I are enjoying our ride through the Old West. And as I said before, who knows? There's always potential for a spinoff series set in the same *Lost Causes* world.

Carrie Pestritto of the Laura Dail Agency

interview by Lynne Marie

Carrie Pestritto (formerly of Writers House as an intern, then an assistant, and the Prospect Agency as an agent) is now the newest agent at the Laura Dail Agency. She earned her BA in English, cum laude, from Amherst College in 2009, also spending a year studying abroad at St. Catherine's College, Oxford University. She has graciously granted us this interview and opportunity even though we're sure she's been followed and flooded. Thank you, Carrie!

Lynne Marie: As an agent with a resume listing some wonderful agencies, what makes you most excited about your new venture at the Laura Dail Agency? Is there anything that you will be taking on or doing different than you have in in the past?



Carrie Pestritto: I am probably most excited about the fantastic colleagues I am working with! Laura, Tamar, and Elana are all superstars and I've really enjoyed being part of the intelligent, collaborative atmosphere at LDLA so far.

LM: One of the questions that is on everyone's minds — if someone queried you at Prospect and did not hear a response, should he/she re-query you, or did you bring those queries with you to Laura Dail? Or is no response a "pass"?

CP: If you queried me after December 27th, then I most likely did not get a chance to look at your submission and you should re-query me at LDLA. If you queried me before that and did not hear back, you should consider it a pass. If you queried me and I reached out to request pages, I did bring those pages with me to my new job and will respond to you as soon as I can!

LM: For those who are not familiar with you and your enthusiasm — how would you describe your working relationship with clients? Are you an editorial agent? To what extent are you willing to work on a manuscript that you see potential in, but is not quite there?

CP: I tend to have very collaborative relationships with my clients and most enjoy working with authors who are willing to try different things to see what works and who look at their work from a commercial standpoint. I always give my clients detailed editorial feedback and notes on their manuscripts (I also love brainstorming convos!) but tend to leave the nitty-gritty of how to achieve something up to them.

If I see something with potential, I always let the author know what works and doesn't work and the changes I would like to see. I'm a big R&Rer [revise and resubmit] and like giving that opportunity to writers who query me so that I can see if they're able to bring their writing to the next level. I've signed many clients after working with them on R&Rs, even after just a couple rounds of back and forth.

LM: How many polished manuscripts do you recommend that they have in their arsenal before querying an agent? Which do you think should come first, an editor or an agent? If a writer gets an offer, are you willing to quickly consider that author and perhaps negotiate the contract?

CP: I don't think you have to have a certain number of manuscripts ready to approach an agent with--I personally can find it a little overwhelming if a writer shoots off several manuscripts/queries in a row to me, especially if they are all different genres or age categories. I think the more important thing is to have a manuscript that has been through several drafts, has had several pairs of critical eyes on it, and is at its best self when you send it to an agent.

In that vein, I know many writers have critique partners or freelance editors read their work before querying, and I think that is a great idea! The more polished your manuscript is the better! On the flip side, though, there is such a thing as over-editing and you want to be sure you don't cross that line so that an agent can see the raw potential of your manuscript and not something that has been overworked.

LM: You have spoken in the past about First Chapter Faux Pas. What are are some of the things you find lure you to keep reading? What might stop you from reading?

CP: Lots of tension, a compelling premise and characters, and tight pacing always encourage me to keep turning the page. I'm turned off by overly wordy prose that tells instead of shows, the wrong amount of backstory (whether too much or too little), flat characters/voice, and plots that feel overdone.

LM: How would you describe the "kind" of books you wish to represent?

CP: Aside from the specific genres I prefer, the general "kind" of books I want to represent are ones with fantastic voices, unique premises, and compelling, tense plots. I enjoy projects that are more commercial and I'm always looking to feel drawn in by any of the elements I just mentioned. Reading, for me, has always been about escapism and I want to escape somewhere fantastic!

LM: Of course, your manuscripts wish list can be found here: **http://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/carrie-pestritto/**, but aside from that, is there something special you would like to find / achieve or some special genre you would like to break into here in your new agency? Speaking to the children's submissions — what would you like to see more of in your inbox? What would you like to see less of?

CP: I'm on the lookout for more diverse stories in all genres, Millennial romance, unusual biographies, and breakout commercial fiction in particular right now! For children's submissions, I'm on the hunt for great ethnic YA fantasties, diverse YA and MG, heartfelt MG, quirky MG, and educational picture books. I'm less interested in YA stories with high school settings or diverse stories that revolve around identity — I'm more interested in reading about diverse characters living their lives — unraveling a mystery, falling in love, discovering their magic, etc., rather than issue books.

LM: You are a participating agent in Pitch Wars. Have you ever picked up a client through this event? What do you feel is the take-away value of participating in such an event?

CP: I have definitely signed clients from Pitch Wars before and think it can be a fantastic opportunity for writers to both hone their manuscripts with their mentors and get on a very visible stage to present them to agents. However, it is definitely not the only way to catch an agent's eye! There are other amazing pitch events like **#DVPit** but also you can't underestimate the value of good, old-fashioned querying. While I have signed some authors from contests and pitch events, the majority of my clients are from the slush!

LM: Notably you love books that introduce readers to new worlds and have meticulous world-building. Where would you point writers to who need to reinforce their worldbuilding skills? What tip could you offer for those who need a checks and balances system to see if their worldbuilding works?

CP: There is a delicate balance to worldbuilding that teeters between using enough lush, sensory description to give readers a snapshot of what you're creating and micromanaging their imagination by telling them every single detail of the world. Worldbuilding, like backstory, needs to be carefully and strategically scattered throughout the manuscript rather than dumped in big clumps at the start.

You should definitely read a lot of comp titles to see how other authors have successfully enacted their worldbuilding skills, what they've done, and how it may or may not work for you and your manuscript. Doing that research and having plenty of critique partners to offer advice and first impressions is also very helpful!

LM: Please share the titles of some previously published books where you feel the world building acts as a stellar example of how to build a world.

CP: Ohhh, definitely Stephanie Garber's *Caraval* and Margaret Rogerson's *An Enchantment of Ravens*. But worldbuilding obviously doesn't only apply to fantasy...I've been super impressed with the worldbuilding done in RJ Palacio's *Wonder* and NH Senzai's *Shooting Kabul*, too!

LM: You've mentioned that are drawn to unusual, compelling, premises. Please share the titles and blurbs of some books that you have acquired recently or in the past that illustrate this point.

CP: Sure! One of my recent acquisitions is Laura

Carrie Pestritto continued

Lashley's *MG Surf Monks of New Hawaii*. It is set in a post-apocalyptic world with no electricity and is about girl named Pallie, who lives on a sinking cruise ship near Hawaii and who has to infiltrate the Locals on land by pretending to be a Surf Monk acolyte, in order to steal a shortwave radio after she accidentally fries the ship's only remaining one.

Another is EM Castellan's I*n the Shadow of the Sun*, which is like a YA version of the BBC show *Versailles*, but with magicians! It is about Princess Henriette who is secretly a magical conduit and who ends up working with Louis XIV (who is a magician) to try to figure out who is murdering conduits in the court and stealing their power!!

LM: You have a strong interest in nonfiction and cultural diversity. Are there topics in particular that you would be eager to see treatments of?

CP: I love reading biographies about marginalized people who influenced or took part in history but are not well known. I also love books where culture is a big part of the story, but not the main reason for the story's existence (I would love to see MG/YA books set in Mexico City, Seoul, or India!)

LM: How would you describe a strong nonfiction submission? How do you like the sources presented?

CP: A strong nonfiction submission usually comes from an author with a strong platform already in place that relates to what they're writing about. You should have a comprehensive proposal with a vibrant overview that gets me excited about the topic, comp titles, your qualifications, and sample chapters. I usually like sources to be in a bibliography at the end.

LM: What do you look for in a fiction query? A nonfiction query? Do you read the query first? Or the manuscript?

CP: What I look for in a query is pretty much the same, regardless of whether or not it is fiction or nonfiction: concise, well-written prose that immediately draws me in and leaves me wanting more! I tend to be turned off by really long, rambly writing and prefer to read something that is like back jacket copy. And I always read the query first before looking at pages!

LM: Please share a link to your submission guidelines:

CP: Our submissions guidelines can be seen at: **http://www.ldlainc.com/submissions**.

LM: Will you respond to these submissions? If so, generally what is your response time? If not, at what point should the writer consider it a pass?

CP: Yes, I will definitely respond to these submissions... mostly likely within a month or two. If I pass on something, I do send out form rejections, so if you haven't received one in a couple months, it probably means I somehow missed your submission and you should check in!

LM: Please share a book that has inspired you the most in your career and please tell us why.

CP: That is a tough one! Hmmm...okay, this isn't a book, but about an author. Back when I was in college, I stumbled upon Jackson Pearce's blog and started reading it obsessively. She was sending out queries for her manuscript (which would become her debut *As you Wish*), and I remember thinking that if I were an agent I would totally offer her representation, which lead to the chain-reaction realization that I should BE an agent! And here we are...although Jackson was loooong signed by the time I hung my shingle.

Above the Slushpile

CBI subscribers can query Carrie Pestritto with "CB Insider" in the subject line to move to the top of the slush pile. Please review her guidelines before submitting at:

http://www.ldlainc.com/submissions

FINDING THE PERFECT TITLE

by Jane McBride

Coming up with a great title for a book takes more than luck. It requires work, thought, and a listening ear and a discerning eye.

Think of the book titles that stick in the mind: *A Wrinkle in Time, Charlotte's Web, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and other classics. Each conveys a distinct picture in readers' minds.

How can a writer create a memorable title?

Know the market. What's current in children's books? What is passé? What has been done over and over? What fairly new writing trends are going strong, such as first-person/present tense? Are dinosaurs in or out? What about fairy tales? Use what you have learned about market to not only write your book but to coming up with an attention-grabbing title as well.

Know the audience. Obviously, a title designed to appeal to the picture book age (*Make Way for Ducklings*) won't work for an older audience (*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*).

Identify your book's genre and tone and targeted age group. Pay attention to word choice and style in the titles of similar books. Word choice and sentence structure for a gentle book like *Goodnight Moon* varies drastically from that of a suspenseful tale such as *Jumanji*.

Read extensively. This goes back to knowing the market. Read what is currently being published as well as the classics. Know what editors are looking for now. Remember that what is being published now was likely purchased 18 or more months ago. The same goes for titles.

Pay attention to titles. What titles capture the attention? Are they short or long, lyrical or intriguing, humorous or serious? Are they evocative of the books themselves? Or do they same randomly-chosen? *Chains* (about slavery) gives a very different feeling than does *Big Red Lollipop*, but both are closely tied to the books themselves.

Come up with 10-15 titles for your book, then pare the list down to three or four titles. If that fails to yield the perfect title, repeat the process until you hit upon one that grabs you. Though titles cannot be copyrighted, know that an author probably won't get away with using a famous title such as *Gone with the Wind* or *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Play with the titles. Take a cliché or well-known phrase and turn it on its head. Can you reverse the order of the words? Sometimes changing only one word will make a huge difference. Experiment with rhyme, think *Amelia Bedelia*, or repetition, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* Though short titles (*Holes*) can carry a punch, sometimes a long title such as *Alexander, and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* and *Don't Let the Pigeons Drive the Bus* can appeal by painting humorous images. Let the title hint at the book's tone, as *Bridge to Terabithia* hints at mystery and adventure.

Use words that evoke the senses. *Green Eggs and Ham* captures several senses, including those of sight, taste, and smell. *Locomotion* ensnares the sense of hearing as does *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. Say a potential title aloud. Does it jar your sense of hearing? This can be a good thing, depending upon the subject matter and tone of the book. Or does it flow quietly off your tongue?

Respect the marketing department of the publishing house. Marketing people know what works and what doesn't. They want your book to succeed just as you do. They understand what makes for an eye-and-ear catching title.

Accept that you may not get to keep the title you've worked so hard on. Finding the best title is a joint effort between author, editor, and marketing. Keep ego out of the process. Understand that what may be a great title might not work because the publishing house has just accepted another book with a very similar sounding title.

Now that we've taken an overview look at how to come up with a great title, let's break up the process in a Mini-Blueprint fashion:

Mini Blueprint continued

STEP 1: If you haven't done so already, identify the market you are targeting. Know the differences between YA (young adult) and NA (new adult). Understand the differences between a board book and a picture book.

ACTION: Look at different aspects of titles. Start with the length of the titles for various genres. Do the titles grow longer as the readership age grows older? Not necessarily. Holes is intended for an older age group, where *Don't Let The Pigeons Drive the Bus* is written for a much younger age group. Do the titles hold symbolism such as Chains, once again a book for an older reading audience?

STEP 2: It goes without saying that you must read. Read everything but especially those books in your targeted market and pay special attention to the titles.

ACTION: Compare classics and current books in your market. What are the differences and what are the similarities? Are you writing a YA mystery? It isn't often that we have the opportunity to read a series of books that was published decades ago and read the same series today, complete with the same characters. Because *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys* were and are written by a stable of authors, the books that were popular 80 and more years ago are still popular today? How have the titles changed? Or have they? How have they remained the same?

STEP 3: Become a student of famous quotations, scriptures, and nursery rhymes.

ACTION: Take a phrase from a familiar passage and turn it upside down. What about using the line "One, two, buckle my shoe" and turning it into "One, Two, Jump, Kangaroo," a nonfiction counting book (totally made up just now). The surprise ending plays well the familiar first two words. Another example: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe." Spin it into "There Was a Young Pig Who Lived on a Farm." Most of us, children as well as adults, respond well to familiarity and, at the same time, appreciate an unexpected twist.

STEP 4: Do everything you can to come up with a fabulous title, but understand it may be changed.

ACTION: If your editor or the marketing department wants to change your title, let them. I have published 36 books and hundreds of short stories. Approximately half of these titles have had their titles changed. At first, I was annoyed, even offended, by the changes to what I thought were wonderful titles. Then I got smart and realized that the marketing department of publishers have their noses to the ground when it comes to thinking up the most marketable titles. Their goal is the same as mine: to title the book or short story so that it captures a potential reader's attention and convinces him that this is worth spending his time and money on.

Coming up with a great title is all part of the craft of writing. You will get better at it with practice … but don't fall in love with any given title. Your first and most important job is to write the best book of which you are capable.

writing blueprints

Each month, we will 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 **www.writingblueprints.com**

Poetry Anthologies: Bringing Big Ideas and Big Conversations to Young Audiences

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

I'm a big fan of Jim Trelease and his *Read-Aloud Handbook*. Like Jim, I believe in reading to children for as long as they will allow it. Even though my teenagers are very capable of reading just about anything I put in front of them, they still enjoy listening to me read to them sometimes. Even when younger children aren't ready to tackle the advanced language or content of something written for middle grade readers on their own, they can understand much of what is presented to them. Read-aloud or guided reading with poetry anthologies provides a unique opportunity for younger readers to listen to big ideas, ask questions, and dig into deeper conversation. I recently asked a few anthologists to share examples of this from their own work. As writers, I think we can learn a few things about how they present their work that can help us to present ours in more interesting and accessible ways.

Goodbye Picture

The day Granny leaves,
we stand by the cactus
for a goodbye picture.
Dad says, "Be careful
you don't get stuck."

But nothing scares Granny.

"Those needles hurt!"
she laughs in her letter
from back home.

"Glad we got loose!!!"
I laugh in mine.

But not really glad.
I'm still here.
Granny's gone.

Copyright David L. Harrison, from *Connecting Dots*, with permission of the author

David Harrison shares that this is a poem with a universal theme: the sadness of separation from someone we love. "In this case, the sadness is defined by distance but classroom discussions can lead to other kinds of separation: loss of a pet, death of a dear one, divorce that divides a family, disagreement that spoils a friendship." He says that kids of any age can relate to these human experiences and sometimes they can express their own feelings best through poetry. "Children love to laugh, but they're also learning about life."

Janet Wong and Sylvia Vardell compile the *Poetry Friday* anthologies. Within these anthologies are mini-lessons called "Take 5." These are activities that guide parents, teachers, and librarians in sharing a poem in lively ways that get kids listening, reading, talking, and thinking.

Fake News

How do we know
if something is a lie?
Start wondering
why someone might try
to pass off a lie as a piece of truth-
and keep your eyes open
for plenty of proof.

People play games,
fracturing facts.
They'll borrow bits
of this and that
to create convincing/confusing news.
Look for the clues that a story's not true.

How can you know
if the news is real?
Read, read, read.
Search, ask questions, think out loud
and don't be afraid to
stand out from the crowd.

Stand up with your crowd.
Ask yourself why
someone might want to pass off a lie.

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Sylvia Vardell says that for "Fake News," their mini-lesson would begin with an adult reading the poem aloud

Poetry Anthologies continued

to students. To add a bit of interest before sharing the poem, let students know that the word "fake" is over 200 years old and may have started as slang used by criminals to describe robbing someone. After the first reading, read it again and invite students to join in on a key word or line. In this instance, they might choose the word "read." Next, Vardell says their books offer conversation starters- guided questions or prompts. For "Fake News" they might invite students to talk about how news is presented and perceived today. Step 4 invites students to examine a poetic skill demonstrated in the poem. In this case, they challenge students to consider the key words-- "lie," "truth," "proof," "games," "facts," "real," "think," and "crowd" and to use these words and others to create their own original "found" poem built from the words of this poem. In the final step, they share another poem that is connected to the focus poem in some way. For "Fake News," they shared Wong's "Declaration of Independence" found in *Declaration of Independence: Poems for an Election Year*. Vardell says, "In five simple, interactive steps, and in approximately five minutes, you can present a complete literary work and engage young people in active listening, read aloud, thinking deeply, and making connections. What could be a more authentic language experience?"

Not only can poems act as a conversation starter for hot topics and universal themes, they can introduce new, more difficult academic concepts in a fun and interesting way. Analogies are part and parcel of just about every college entrance exam and standardized test. Heidi Bee Roemer uses analogy poems to introduce this sometimes difficult concept to younger audiences.

Food Fest

Chef is to restaurant as teacher is to school.
Stove is to hot as fridge is to cool.

Milk is to drink as egg is to eat.
Lemon is to sour as sugar is to sweet.

Ears are to corn as eyes are to potatoes.
Green is to zucchini as red is to tomato.

Fuel is to car as food is to tummy.
Liver is to yucky as pizza is to yummy!

Roemer explains that analogies make connections and find similarities and differences between like and unlike things. "It's an important learning concept and helps enhance a student's vocabulary and observational skills…. plus they're just plain fun!"

For "Food Fest," Roemer encourages teachers to figure out the level of background knowledge of their students first. They may need to preteach some of the words. Maybe some of the students aren't familiar with zucchini. Perhaps it could be taught ahead of time on a spelling list. Preteaching could also include a discussion about things that are similar and different. For this poem, she recommends a visual show-and-tell of the different foods discussed in the poem. Ask students what they have in common and how they are different from one another. Roemer says, "Now read the poem aloud and present it several times. Invite students to read along in unison. Help students identify the analogies in the poem by using additional visual prompts."

The above examples are not just for parents, teachers, and librarians. As writers, if we're sharing poetry at a school or library visit, we can use this information to help help us think about our programs and how to present our poems in ways in which they can reach the broadest of audiences.

ABOUT THE POETS

David L. Harrison's 95 books for young people and teachers have received dozens of honors including the literary award for best children's nonfiction book of 2016 from The Society of Midland Authors. His work has been translated into numerous languages and anthologized more than 185 times. To learn more about David and his body of work, stop by his blog **https://davidlharrison.wordpress.com/**.

Sylvia M. Vardell is Professor at Texas Woman's University and teaches children's and young adult literature. She has published five books on literature, plus more than 25 chapters and 100 journal articles. Her current work focuses on poetry for young people, including a blog, *Poetry for Children* **http://poetryforchildren.blogspot.com/**.

Janet S. Wong is a graduate of Yale Law School and a former lawyer who became a children's poet. Her work has been featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show among others. She is the author of 30 books for children on identity, chess, creative recycling, yoga, and more.

Together, Vardell and Wong are the creative forces behind *The Poetry Friday Anthology* and *Poetry Friday Power Book* series.

Heidi Bee Roemer has sold over 400 poems to various children's magazines and anthologies. Her books are *Come to My Party* and *Other Shape Poems*, (Henry Holt, 2004), *What Kinds of Seeds are These?* and *Whose Nest is This?* (NorthWord Press, 2006 and 2009). Her new books are *Peekity Boo! What You Can Do!* (Henry Holt, 2019), and three with Highlights Press: *Hide-and-Seek on the Farm: A Lift-the-Flap Book*, (2018), *Who Says Peek-a-Boo?* and *Who Says Oops* (both 2019). Visit Heidi at **http://heidibroemer.com/**.