Children's Book Insider

November 2018

PLUS:

Above the Slushpile Code: Beaming Books

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This issue's contributors

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At Presstime:

Small Press Seeks Stories for All Ages Featuring South Asian Cultures

Yali Books is an independent publisher of books and graphic novels for children with a focus on South Asian culture – the people, places, and cultures of India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Looking for stories that authentically represent the diversity of the region and its people. For recent titles, go to **https://yalibooks.com/** Looking to build partnerships with authors and illustrators who are willing to actively participate.

Seeking fiction picture book, early readers, middle grade, young adult, and graphic novel manuscripts. For picture books, send the entire manuscript. For longer works, send a query letter and three sample chapters to **editors@yalibooks.com**.

For illustrators, send your bio, a link to your portfolio and two sample images to **editors@yalibooks.com**. Submissions sent through social media will not be considered.

Magazine Seeks Nonfiction for Ages 6-13

Fun for Kidz magazine is published six times a year for readers from 6 to 13 years, with ages 8, 9, and 10 the specific target age. The editorial point of view is that child deserves the right to be a child for a number of years before becoming a young adult. As a result, *Fun for Kidz* publishes articles, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that deal with timeless topics, such as pets, nature, hobbies, science, games, sports, careers, simple cooking, and anything else likely to interest middle elementary school children. Each issue revolves around a theme (see below).

Looking for lively writing, most of it from a young girl or boy's point of view, with the girls or boys directly involved in an activity that is both wholesome and unusual. *Fun for Kidz* is primarily interested in nonfiction pieces of either 350-375 words, or 600-650 words, accompanied by high-definition color photographs (at least 950 pixels wide, at least 260 dpi). Pays a minimum of 5 cents a word for both fiction and nonfiction, with additional payment given if the piece is accompanied by appropriate photos. *Fun for Kidz* buys first American serial rights and pays upon publication. It's advised that authors study back issues before submitting. You can also preview an issue here: **http://funforkidzmagazines.com/catalog/product/view/id/21**

Fun for Kidz is currently accepting nonfiction submissions for the following 2019 issues with these themes: Dogs (March 2019), Numbers (May 2019), Sports (July 2019), Fall Fun (September 2019), Animal Training (November 2019). Mail full manuscripts and sample photos to *Fun For Kidz* Magazine, ATTN: Submissions, PO Box 227, Bluffton, OH 45817-0227. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) for acceptance/rejection letter; contact info., including e-mail address, phone number, and mailing address, on each page of the manuscript; and notation of which upcoming theme your content should be considered for.

Agent Accepting Middle Grade and Young Adult Submissions

Kristy Hunter is an Associate Agent with The Knight Agency (**https://knightagency.net**). She's seeking middle grade and young adult manuscripts in most genres, including fantasy, paranormal, contemporary, historical, and magical realism. A unique voice, strong hook, and diverse cast of characters are a must. She would also love to see more OwnVoices manuscripts. Submit a query letter and the first 20 pages of your manuscript through Query Manager at: **https://querymanager.com/query/Kristy_Hunter_TKA**

UPCOMING CONTESTS

Upcoming Deadline for HarperCollins' Diverse Voices Middle Grade Contest

HarperCollins is holding it's inaugural **Diverse Voices Open Inbox** contest, for unpublished middle grade manuscripts written by #ownvoices authors. Manuscripts should be for ages 8-12 in any genre or format, including graphic novels. A typical middle grade novel is 30,000 – 75,000 words in length, and a typical middle grade graphic novel does not exceed 250 pages.

The content of the manuscript should be reflective of a diverse background, with an emphasis on #ownvoices (in which the author is a member of the same marginalized group depicted in the story). HarperCollins recognizes all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.

Detailed submission guidelines and online entry form are found at **https://www.harpercollins.com/childrens/diverse-voices-open-inbox/** **Deadline for submissions is November 16, 2018.** One Grand Prize winner will receive editorial feedback from a panel of HarperCollins editors in writing, including an edit letter and a thirty-minute phone consultation, and consideration for publication by the HarperCollins Children's Books' acquisitions group.

Katherine Paterson Prize for Children's and Young Adult Manuscripts Now Open

The annual **Katherine Paterson Prize for YA and Children's Writing** is sponsored by *Hunger Mountain*, a print and online journal of the arts that publishes fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction for adults and children. The Prize has three categories: Young Adult (for ages 12 and up — a short story or novel excerpt up to 10,000 words); Middle Grade (ages 8-12, short story or novel excerpt of up to 10,000 words); and Picture Book or Writing for Young Children (picture books and short stories for up to age 8). Novel excerpts should stand on their own. Picture book submissions may include pdfs or photocopies of illustrations, but it's not necessary (will be judged by the same standards as text-only picture book entries).

One Grand Prize winner will receive $1000 and publication in *Hunger Mountain*; three category winners will each receive $100 and publication. Contest is open to all authors, published or unpublished. Entries must be unpublished but may be submitted to publishers while being considered for the Prize (inform *Hunger Mountain* if entry becomes published). Go to **https://hungermtn.org/contests/katherine-paterson-prize/** for full rules and a link to enter electronically at the bottom of the page. Once in the submission manager, you'll need to choose "Katherine Paterson Prize" (scroll all the way to the bottom to find it). Pay the $20.00 entry fee and upload your entry. Include a cover letter in the comments section that identifies the age group your piece is intended for.

All entries must be submitted by March 1, 2019. Each entry must be accompanied by a $20 entry fee.

Upcoming Deadline for YA Novel Discovery Contest

Serendipity Literary Agency is hosting its ninth annual **Young Adult Novel Discovery Competition**. Entrants submit the title and first 250 words of their YA novel (for ages 12 and up) via the contest website at **https://www.serendipitylit.com/contest** One entry per person; anyone age 14+ can apply. Open to authors in the U.S. and Canada. **Entries for the YA Novel Discovery Contest will be accepted 11:59 pm November 30th, 2018 (ET).** There is a $15 entry fee.

YA literary agent Regina Brooks (Serendipity Literary Agency) and her team will read all of the entries and determine the top 20 submissions. These submissions will then be read by editors from many of the major publishing houses. Past judges include editors from Scholastic, Random House/Penguin, Little, Brown, Candlewick, Bloomsbury, Simon & Schuster, and Abram Books. Judges will whittle the top 20 down to five winners, including a Grand Prize Winner. The Grand Prize Winner will have the opportunity to receive a full manuscript critique from YA literary agent Regina Brooks. The Top Five Entrants (including the Grand Prize Winner) will receive a 15-minute, one-on-one pitch session with Regina Brooks. They will also receive commentary on their submissions from editors at several top publishing houses.

For full rules and a submission link, go to **https://www.serendipitylit.com/contest**

Choosing the Right Topic for Your Nonfiction Book

by Candice Ransom

Publishers' lists tout picture book biographies and longer nonfiction books. Ideas for nonfiction are ripe for the picking. A quick internet search of *Atlas Obscura, HistoryNet,* or *Today in Science History* will yield bushels of interesting facts that can spark a book project.

Yet writing a nonfiction book requires more than uncovering a little-known fact. How do you decide if a topic will keep you hooked through months and even years of work? In the course of writing more than 40 nonfiction books, I've developed a litmus test.

Although editors and packagers have asked me to write nonfiction projects, the books I generate myself are triggered by one of two things: curiosity about something I don't know, or deep passion for a subject I long to spend more time with.

Driven by Passion

Passion led me to write my forthcoming picture book biography, *Only Margaret: A Story About Margaret Wise Brown*. In 1992, I bought *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* by Leonard Marcus. I knew little about Brown, aside from her book *Goodnight Moon*. For the next ten years, Marcus's biography stayed on my nightstand. I read it every single night. My keen interest in this eccentric, fascinating person bordered on obsession.

One night a voice whispered in my ear, Write about me. It was Margaret. I pretended not to hear. But the idea, like Margaret herself, was persistent. If I wrote about Margaret, I could spend more time with her. I ordered many of her out of print books, the original *Life* magazine she'd been profiled in, traveled to the Eric Carle Picture Book Museum twice for an exhibition of her illustrators, visited Hollins University to sift through Margaret's archives. When I attended Hollins for an MA in children's literature, I completed a five-month independent study, writing papers and compiling bibliographies on Margaret. I loved every second.

Yet writing the manuscript was difficult because I still didn't get what made Margaret tick. I wrote draft after draft, trying to find the right POV, and the way into the story. I revised, submitted, was rejected, researched more, revised more, submitted more. Five years passed. Ten. Margaret was wearing me out, but she wouldn't let me give up. In 2016, I went to Vinylhaven Island, Maine, where Margaret once lived. It was there the missing piece dropped into place and I revised one final time. A year later, Eerdmans bought my book and Margaret finally fell silent.

Ten years of reading about a subject. Fourteen years of researching and writing. Clearly, passion kept me going.

Driven by Curiosity

My next nonfiction project was spurred by something I read in a book about Big Bone Lick, Kentucky. "Thomas Jefferson did what?" I said. A single sentence started a three-year journey. I worked backwards, spooling through Jefferson's entire life, then branching out into eighteenth century natural history. There was a book, but I wasn't about to skip into this project. It was Jefferson. Did I have the nerve to do this book? Yes, because I needed to answer the question raised by that one sentence. I had to know. I traveled to Jefferson's home, to research libraries, to Philadelphia to interview a Jefferson scholar, and to museums and exhibitions from New York City to Saltville, Virginia.

Choosing the Right Topic continued

Then I began writing, again wrestling with structure and point of view. My agent suggested I revise. I did two major overhauls. Then an editor asked me what I was working on. When I told her, she said, "Thomas Jefferson did what?" Doubleday Books for Young Readers acquired my book. Only three years this time!

The One That Fizzled

On a trip to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, I was entranced by the 34-ton meteorite Robert Peary brought back from Greenland. I dove into the research. The size and weight of this monstrous iron rock! The methods used in the late nineteenth century to haul it out and install it! I could almost see the illustrations for my story.

Then I learned that Peary also brought back six Inuit, including a seven-year-old boy, to be studied as specimens. The boy's father died, along with most of the others. The boy led an unhappy life in New York, and home again in Greenland.

I could have focused only on the meteorite, but my conscious wouldn't let me ignore the rest of the story. In earlier children's nonfiction (the ones I read when I was growing up), writers sometimes presented a selective view, not exactly biased, but not entirely truthful, either. As writers for children, we have a responsibility to our audience. Kids today can easily Google almost anything. I wouldn't want a child, eager to learn more about the gigantic meteorite I'd written about, to stumble on the less savory aspect I'd left out.

Even the shiniest apple can conceal a worm.

Narrowing Your Topic

You've found a tantalizing subject and you're eager to jump in. First, ask yourself these questions:

- How much time are you willing to invest in a book that is maybe 800-1200 words? Not all books will take fourteen years, or even three years. But count on many months of hard work.
- Most nonfiction books are done on spec. Are you able to travel on your own nickel to reach primary sources? To purchase reference materials you can't find elsewhere? While original sources aren't necessary, they add authenticity to your story, and credibility to you as a writer.
- Is your topic suitable for young readers? This seems like a no-brainer since we write for children. But that amazing story merits intense preliminary research. Run down the road with your idea, all the way to the end, if possible. You may find a worm hidden in the core.
- Keep magazine and newspaper articles and go through your file periodically. When you find an idea that refuses to go away, a fact that makes you say "What?" it's time to get moving. Readers out there want to know that story, too.

LINKS

Atlas Obscura
www.atlasobscura.com

HistoryNet
http://www.historynet.com/

Today in Science History
https://todayinsci.com/

BACKGROUND: HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

by Jane McBride

How much background do we give a character? And how much of that background should come out in story and how much should remain in your mind as you build that character? When and how should this background information be revealed? These and other questions can cause a writer to doubt her ability to weave in background information in subtle but meaningful ways.

If we break these questions down into steps, we can better decode the art and science of revealing background information. (Note: Background is not the same as backstory. Background involves the details of your character's history that add up to who this person is as your story begins. Backstory is the events that happened in your character's past that directly affect the present plot of your book. So your character's background may include having a pet goldfish at age five. However, unless having had that pet influences the book's plot, it won't be mentioned in the book as part of your character's backstory.)

STEP 1: *Determine how much background to give a character.* Obviously the three-year-old main character of a picture book is going to have less background than the 16-year-old character of a YA novel. As you grow in your writing, you will develop an understanding for how much background to give your characters. Background serves three main purposes: 1) You want to make the character stand out from others in the story. 2) You want to provide the character motivations or reasons for behaving as he does. 3) You want to make him believable. If you are thinking of adding a piece of information to your story, ask yourself if it serves one or more of the above purposes. If not, you may want to reconsider including it.

ACTION: Look at your character. Really look at her. Start with her physical appearance. Move on to the important people in her life, then to her environment. What are her experiences? Finally, what are her ideas? What are the values and mores which guide her life? Would she be the same character if she grew up in the exclusive community of Beverly Hills as she would if she grew up in the barrio of Los Angeles? Of course not. Write down the important details of her life. This goes beyond character charts. It goes to the essence of a character's being.

STEP 2: *Identify when it is necessary in your story to reveal a piece of background information.* This needn't be a big piece of information. It can be a small one, but still necessary. If your 12-year-old character Steven spends every summer in England visiting his maternal grandparents who live on an estate complete with horses, you will probably want to share that with your readers. However you may not want to share it in the first page. Or even in the first chapter. It may not come out until Steven is invited to the home of a wealthy classmate from Connecticut whose family has their own stables.

ACTION: Brainstorm on how the "reveal" will affect the action that comes immediately after this scene and the direction it will take the plot.

STEP 3: *Determine how the "reveal" should be accomplished.* Does Steven brag about his lifetime experience with horses on the train ride to Connecticut, or does he slip into the stable one evening to help the stablehands groom his friend's horses, only to be discovered by his friend's mother?

ACTION: Experiment with several ways to make the reveal. Once again, brainstorming comes into play. The way information is revealed by the protagonist to other characters can signal how he feels about this part of his background, or how comfortable he is with disclosing personal details. Not only does this round out your character's history for readers, it also shows more subtle layers of his personality.

STEP 4: *Think about why you want to give your character a background in the first place.* Knowing your character's background helps you see your character inside and out, and you'll be communicating this in subtle ways to the reader every time your character acts or reacts in your book. Is your protagonist the oldest of seven siblings? Chances are, she's used to taking care of younger kids, and so has no trouble adjusting to her first day of work as a camp counselor. Did your five-year-old character's mother, a high school Spanish teacher, speak both English and Spanish to him since he was born? If so, it might give your shy protagonist the courage to approach the new student in his kindergarten class who just arrived from Mexico.

However, just because you've created a rich background for your character doesn't mean you're obligated to use all those nuggets in your story. In picture books, you'll reveal key parts of your protagonist's background in a sentence or two, and only if these details are necessary for the reader to understand the book's plot. In longer works, a detailed background allows you to pick and choose how you'll show the reader the options your character has as your plot unfolds.

ACTION: Make a list of possible backgrounds for your character and see how each one influences the trajectory of the plot. As an example, let's create a character for a young adult novel, a 16-year-old girl named Aspen who is a championship swimmer and hopes to compete for the Summer Olympics in two years. As your story opens, Aspen gets accepted into a special swim program for her training. All of a sudden, that program is cancelled. Aspen must find another way to get the training she needs. Depending on her background, Aspen could be the daughter of affluent parents who can afford the best coaches, or the daughter of working class parents. Do you see how changing this one piece of background dramatically alters Aspen's expectations and her circumstances?

When Does Background Become Backstory?

If you're brainstorming your character's background and come up with some significant past events that in turn inspire plot points in your book, those events could become backstory. Like background, backstory is revealed only as necessary. If your character had a traumatic experience that caused her to be afraid of crowded places, and resolving the conflict in the plot depends on her overcoming this fear, then the trauma is part of your character's backstory. It must be resolved for her to reach her goal. However, if her fear of crowds has absolutely no impact on the book's plot, leave it in the background and perhaps show her skipping the packed bus to walk home as an interesting character trait.

In Conclusion

There is no one way to reveal background information.Remember, though, that background is generally best sprinkled throughout a story, much as you would sprinkle a seasoning over a perfectly cooked dish.Too little makes it bland; too much renders it over-spicy. Choose your background details with care and then add them to your story with a deft hand.

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**

Naomi Krueger

Art Director

beaming books

interview by Lynne Marie

In this season of counting blessings, I'm thankful to interview Naomi Krueger, the art director (and editor) who brought my own *The Star in the Christmas Play* to life.

LYNNE MARIE: I would love your help in officially clearing up any misconceptions for newer writers regarding the art in picture books. Is it necessary to find an illustrator and send in art with a manuscript submission?

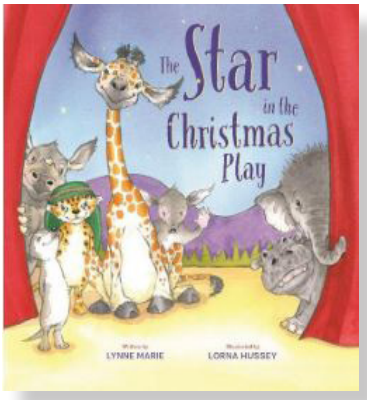
NAOMI KRUEGER: No! In fact, we prefer to choose our own illustrators. If the author is also an experienced, professional illustrator then we are very excited to see samples of their artwork. But if not, we just want to see the manuscript. And unless an art note is absolutely critical to understanding the manuscript, we prefer not to receive art notes too. This can be distracting for us when we review manuscripts. Usually a strong manuscript can stand alone and does not need art or art notes for us to imagine how it could be illustrated.

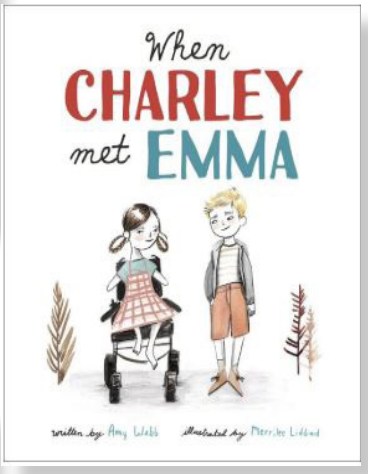
LM: Please share a little bit about your experience/background in art and design. Did you study this, or acquire the talent through experience?

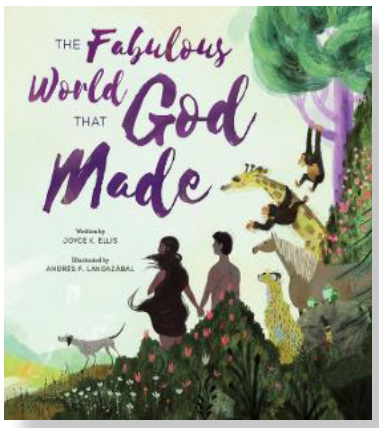
NK: This has definitely been an "on the job" learning experience. Publishing in general tends to be an apprenticeship style career, where you learn from others in the industry. Beaming Books is a small, start-up imprint so our team is very lean and we wear many hats. I am primarily an editor, but I get to direct the art and production process as well. My formal training is in journalism.

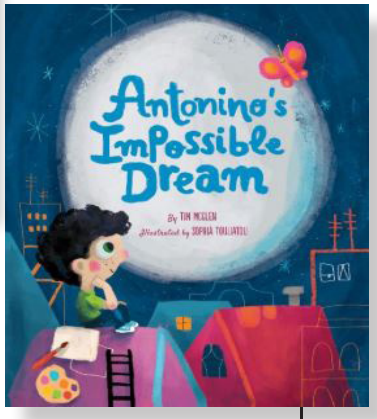
LM: What is process for overseeing the illustrations for a book?

NK: I select the illustrator, brief him or her on the art direction, and then brief a separate designer for the production of the book. So I rely heavily on the designer's expertise for font selection, layout design, etc. Some of our covers are designed by in-house designers, but many are designed by an external design firm that we work with regularly. Here are a few covers that we're especially proud of from recent or upcoming seasons:









Naomi Krueger continued

LM: If you could choose five words to generally describe the type/style of art you seek for Beaming Books, what would they be?

NK: This is a really difficult question, because each book requires different styles of art. We don't have one specific style. But if I had I had to choose words to describe our books broadly, I'd say: playful, fresh, vibrant, unique, and fun.

LM: For my book *The Star in the Christmas Play*, you asked for a list of preferred illustrators. You ultimately agreed to my top choice. What drew you to the final illustrator for our project?

NK: I looked at quite a few different illustrators in addition to Lorna Hussey, but I was ultimately captivated by her realistic, yet child-friendly watercolor painting. Most of her samples were of animals, which gave me confidence that she could illustrate this book well.

LM: For my second book project which was conceived in-house, you shared which illustrator you had in mind. What drew you to this artist? As a general rule, do you consult the author regarding the choice of illustrator? Why, or why not?

NK: I was looking for someone with some global experience who could illustrate children from diverse backgrounds for *Let's Eat! Mealtime Around the World*. I found Parwinder Singh, who is from India, and thought his portfolio really contained the style I was looking for. He did a really good job illustrating active, diverse children. I often ask authors if they have preferences for illustrator style, but I don't always run the illustrator by the author before contracting with them. We as the publisher get the final say on the illustrator, since we're paying them and usually have more access to a wide range of illustrators than authors do.

LM: What are the usual methods and steps that you go about to select the illustrator? Do you canvas websites, review postcards or consider recommendations?

NK: We work with several different illustration agencies, so I usually start there. Often I'll ask agents to send me suggestions, based on various criteria I send them. Other times I'll just scroll through portfolios on the agency's website until something catches my eye. There isn't an exact science to it and sometimes it can take a long time to find the right fit. I don't usually go directly to illustrator websites or find illustrators through postcards or other mailings. I have found illustrators through the SCBWI illustrator gallery at times though, and they aren't always agented.

LM: What exactly is it that you look for in art that will represent Beaming Books?

NK: I'm looking for art with child appeal and artists who can tell stories through their artwork. So the illustrator needs to be able to illustrate children and sometimes adults really well or animal characters. Again, each book is unique so there isn't one particular style that we're looking for as a publisher. It just has to help tell the story visually in a way that will grab kids' attention and the adult buyers' attention.

LM: What tips do you have for an illustrator to make their own particular style of art stand out among all the rest?

NK: Read lots of picture books to get a feel for what styles exist and how artists tell stories with their work. I highly recommend signing with an illustration agency which is the best way to be discovered by publishers. And make sure to have a well-rounded portfolio that shows off the different styles you can do and the different kinds of character, scenery, and detail work you can do.

LM: If an illustrator is under consideration, do you ask for any sketches from him/her? If not, at what point do character sketches, scenes and story thumbnails come into play? Do you give any direction in this, or just see what he/she brings to the table in a first draft?

NK: It depends. If I'm having trouble finding someone with the style I want, but the agent says that a particular artist could do what I'm asking for, then I ask for sketches or samples. For example, we published a book this fall that included kids doing American Sign Language signs. I needed to find an illustrator who could draw hands doing these signs really clearly. So I asked for samples from a few different illustrators before I decided who to hire. Once we've hired an illustrator, we usually just go straight to first round sketches or thumbnails and then give feedback from there. It really depends on the particular artist's style. People who do all their work digitally might not need as many rounds of sketches or

Naomi Krueger continued

thumbnails because they can make changes at any point in the process, but someone who does mostly painting or mixed-media art that is more permanent might have more rounds of sketches up front before moving onto final art.

LM: How hands-on is your approach to re-visioning art. Do you give general, or specific, directions? Do you pass the art by the author and consider their feedback?

NK: Again, it all depends on the illustrator. At the initial briefing, I'm usually more open-ended because I want to see what the illustrator will bring to the table. They are the artist—not me! So I don't want to limit their creativity. But then after seeing first round of sketches, I will give very detailed feedback, asking for changes in composition, or in character features, or other details. I don't always send sketches to the author for review. Sometimes they don't get to see it until first round of color art or final art. It depends on the subject matter and how involved I need them to be. Unless it's worked out differently in the contract, typically the publisher gets the final say on art direction. So sometimes I don't pass along all of the author's feedback to the illustrator. I almost always revise it in my own words, but sometimes I tell the illustrator that the request came from the author and that I would really like to make the change because of their request.

LM: On another topic, the Beaming Books 2018 Picture Book Writing Contest was highlighted in *Children's Book Insider* in October. (For readers who may have missed it, the contest is open until November 14. Here is a link to the guidelines: **https://beamingbooks.submittable.com/submit/124333/beaming-books-picture-book-writing-contest-2018**). Please share a few thoughts about why the winners of the past two years were selected and perhaps what you hope the Beaming Books Contest will bring you this year.

NK: In 2016 the winner was *Porcupine's Pie* by Laura Renauld. It's a really sweet fall story about a generous Porcupine and her woodland friends, who help each other out to create their festive fall feast desserts. This book just released this fall and is available now in bookstores and online. In 2017 the winner was *Antonino's Impossible Dream* by Tim McGlen. This is a story about a young artist who dreams of painting a masterpiece, and impossible dream he calls friend. Then he meets someone who provides unexpected inspiration. This one comes out in Spring 2019. Both of these books fit our mission to help kids thrive emotionally, socially, and spiritually. *Porcupine's Pie* is about generosity, and *Antonino's Impossible Dream* is about creativity and friendship. Neither of these came with art, but they were stories we could imagine being told visually. We chose the winners like we choose any of our books for publication, but these two rose to the top of the contest submissions.

This year we're looking for another stand-out book that will compliment other books we're publishing in 2020. We're looking for a fantastic story that meets a need for kids and communicates some kind of deeper meaning or value. I can't give specific topic ideas, since we're open to a variety of things and I don't want to limit people's creativity. I'd like to point out that while we do publish religious children's books, we also publish general market children's books too. The last two books that won did not have spiritual content, so that is not a requirement for submission.

A NOTE FROM LYNNE MARIE: *I submitted my picture book manuscript,* The Star in the Christmas Play*, to the Second Annual Beaming Books Contest. Although it was not the actual winner (*Porcupine's Pie *by Laura Renard won that year), I received a note from Andrew DeYoung that the judges so enjoyed my submission that they would be presenting it in January at an acquisitions meeting. I encourage you to review the Beaming Books catalog to get a sense of titles they have published, as well as the values connection. It has been my pleasure to work with a company as wonderful as Beaming Books and I wish the same for you all! Good luck submitting!*

Above the Slushpile

Naomi Krueger is offering an **Above the Slush** opportunity for illustrators and author/illustrators who submit their work here: **https://beamingbooks.submittable.com/submit**. Put "CBI" along with your manuscript title in the Title field (for author/illustrators), or put "CBI — Illustration samples" in the Title field for illustrations only. Up to 5 sample illustrations can be uploaded as jpeg or pdf images. For those who are illustrators only, add your bio information and link to an online portfolio in the "Author Bio" field.

Be sure to study the Beaming Books list at **https://www.beamingbooks.com/** before submitting.

Grab Your Readers with a Question

by Laura Backes

If you're an avid reader, you've probably got a list of favorite opening lines from books. As a writer, you may be wondering how to craft memorable opening lines of your own. You may have heard that a good technique is to open your story with action or dialogue. But you can't just toss the reader into the middle of a conversation and expect her to stick around to see what happens next. The best beginnings engage the reader emotionally from the first sentence. They also raise questions that are so intriguing, the reader can't possibly close the book until they're answered.

Some openings accomplish this with a literal question.

> **"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.**

What? my eight-year-old self exclaimed when I first read this line. I didn't yet know the Arables lived on a farm, where ax-carrying might be a fairly common occurrence.

> **"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."**

Now I knew they were on a farm, but *why is Papa bringing an ax along when he visits the new piglets?*

> **"I won't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight.**

Thank you Fern.

> **"Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."**

Whoa! What does she mean by DO AWAY WITH IT?

Which, as you know, was Fern's reaction as well. And for the first four pages of *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, the question of whether Wilbur would live hung in the air. Thankfully, it was answered peacefully when Mr. Arable agreed to let Fern adopt Wilbur.

If another question hadn't been raised for the reader soon after, the story would have ended right there. As it turns out, the question of "Will Wilbur live?" is not only the opening, hook-the-reader question of *Charlotte's Web*, but also the central dramatic question that runs through the entire plot. It's raised over and over, with Wilbur's life on the line every time.

Unanswered questions are what keep readers turning the pages. They create the book's tension. Some books open with a question so big it takes an entire story to answer. This works with picture books as well as novels.

Here's the opening of *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* by Mac Barnett, illustrated by Jon Klassen (picture book)

> **On Monday, Sam and Dave dug a hole.**

Interesting. Why are they digging a hole?

> **"When should we stop digging?" asked Sam.**
>
> **"We are on a mission," said Dave. "We won't stop digging until we find something spectacular."**

OK, the "why" has been answered, but what spectacular thing will they find? How long will it take them to find it? What happens if they never find it? What, exactly, is a "spectacular thing"?

When three lines of text raise so many intriguing questions, you've got a page-turner.

Here's another classic opening with a question up front that takes the entire book to answer:

Grab Your Readers continued

Claudia knew that she could never pull off the old-fashioned kind of running away. That is, running away in the heat of anger with a knapsack on her back. She didn't like discomfort; even picnics were untidy and inconvenient: all those insects and the sun melting the icing on the cupcakes. Therefore, she decided that her leaving home would not be just running from somewhere but would be running to somewhere. To a large place, a comfortable place, an indoor place, and preferably a beautiful place. And that's why she decided upon the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler by E.L. Konigsburg deftly plants a provocative question in the first sentence *(Will Claudia run away?)* and then doubles down with specific character details that make us ask related questions *(Where will Claudia sleep if she doesn't like being outside? What's been going on at home for so long that Claudia has had a chance to plan her escape? Will she really live in the Met?)* We can't stop reading until we find out if Claudia does indeed pull off her version of running away.

It's common wisdom in children's publishing that if you're going to study books and use them as mentor texts to inform your own writing, those books should be less than 10 years old. That's because the way children's and young adult stories are written keeps changing, and you want to incorporate the newest techniques into your work. But I feel a strong beginning is timeless, and that's why I've quoted *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and *From the Mixed-Up Files* (1970). The way these authors open their stories, the amount of information we get about the characters in just a few lines, and the big, important questions engage readers emotionally from the start. More importantly, readers are *willingly* engaged, because the questions matter to them. That's what has kept these books in print for generations.

Not every question raised in a book's opening lines has to be the story's central dramatic question (when the reader asks if the protagonist is going to resolve the plot's main conflict). Sometimes, it's simply a way to pull readers into the story. Here are a few examples:

We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck.

(*Feed* by M.T. Anderson, young adult, 2002)

Is the moon somewhere they go all the time? For fun?

The bullfrog was only half dead, which was perfect.

(*Gertie's Leap to Greatness* by Kate Beasley, middle grade, 2018)

Wait...what?

Before Bean met Ivy, she didn't like her. Bean's mother was always saying that Bean should try playing with the new girl across the street. But Bean didn't want to.

(*Ivy and Bean* by Annie Barrows, chapter book, 2006)

So...what's wrong with the new girl? Or is Bean just anti-social?

Welcome to the beautiful Sinclair family.
No one is a criminal.
No one is an addict.
No one is a failure.

(*We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart, young adult, 2014)

Sounds too perfect. What's the catch? I bet the narrator knows.

Raising a question or two in the reader's mind can work for openings of nonfiction books as well:

So, you want to learn how to swallow a pig. You've come to the right place. Follow these step-by-step instructions, and soon you'll acquire the dining skills of a large snake. But maybe you're not quite ready to gulp down a hairy four-legged animal. Don't worry – there are lots of other useful techniques you can master. After all, you never know when you might need to spin a web, disguise yourself as a jellyfish, battle a sheep, or catch a wildebeest. Just take it slow, and remember: practice makes perfect.

(*How to Swallow a Pig* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page, 2015)

Do I want to learn how to swallow a pig? Guess I'd better read this book and find out. But I really want to know under what circumstances I'd need to battle a sheep. That sounds important.

Regardless of whether you begin your story by raising the question that will underpin the entire plot, or smaller questions that compel the reader to investigate these characters, you've set up certain expectations in the reader's mind:

The question(s) raised in the opening scene will be answered in interesting, unexpected ways. If the reader can predict the answer, you've failed. If you've planted the question only to teach the reader a lesson with the answer, you've failed. If you manipulate your characters or plot events to steer the reader toward only one answer to the question…you guessed it. Give room for readers to interpret those answers in ways that are meaningful to them.

If you raise the story's central dramatic question with the opening scene, that question must be compelling enough for the reader to want to ask it several more times during the story. Life and death is compelling. Finding your place in the world is compelling. Being seen and appreciated for who you are is compelling. So if you're putting all your cards on the table up front, you'd better be holding a straight flush.

That doesn't mean your character's life has to be on the line for the central dramatic question to grip readers. Consider the first sentence of *Imogene's Antlers* by David Small (picture book, 1988):

> **On Thursday, when she woke up, Imogene found she had grown antlers.**

Deadly? Probably not. Irresistible? You bet.

If you begin your book by raising smaller questions about the plot or characters, they need to quickly lead to the story's central dramatic question. Planting quirky, weird or funny information at the beginning of your book simply to intrigue readers only works if that information builds to the catalyst, or the moment the protagonist's life changes from ordinary to extraordinary. This is when the plot actually begins, and the reader asks that central dramatic question *(What's this character going to do about this problem?)* for the first time. If you wait too long to get to the catalyst, readers will put down the book. If you tease them with unrelated information before the plot takes off, they'll feel manipulated. Make every word count, even in novels.

The bottom line is that, while grabbing readers with your book's opening lines is important, those lines are meaningless if you can't follow through with the rest of the book. But if your opening inspires readers to ask gripping questions about your characters and/or plot, then you're automatically setting yourself up to provide gripping answers. Hooking the readers will be accomplished. And you'll be well on your way to creating a satisfying story.

So compile your own list of favorite opening lines. Note which questions they raise for you. Then study each story in its entirety to learn how your favorite authors answered those questions and carried the opening's momentum through to the last pages.

Dragons, Geeks, and the Perseverance of YA Author Mari Mancusi

interview by PJ McIlvaine

If you looked up "perseverance" in the dictionary, chances are you would find Mari Mancusi's picture. A prolific writer in several genres, her tween novel *The Camelot Code: The Once and Future Geek* (the first book in a series about a contemporary time-traveling tween King Arthur) sold at auction, she had a two-book deal, and not once, but twice, the book got waylaid before it returned to its true champion. A story of serendipity, fortuitous timing, and good old-fashioned faith, Mari never gave up on the book of her heart, coming out in this month by Disney Books. An accomplished freelance TV producer, Mari has also won two Emmys. Mari lives in Austin, Texas with her husband Jacob, daughter Avalon, two dogs, and still yearns to own a pet dragon (maybe Geico can help on those hefty insurance premiums). You can learn more about Mari at **www.marimancusi.com**.

PJ McIlvaine: According to your bio, you wanted to own a pet dragon as a kid, but did the next best thing: became an author and wrote about them. How did that come about? What were your inspirations, reading wise, growing up?

Mari Mancusi: I was a huge fantasy nerd growing up and devoured any and all sci-fi/fantasy novels I could get my hands on. I loved *The Chronicles of Prydain* by Lloyd Alexander (which I'm currently re-reading to my daughter!), *Lord of the Rings*, *Hero and the Crown* by Robin McKinley (about a girl dragon slayer!), and, my favorite book of all time, *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. I was also an avid gamer and *Dungeons and Dragons* player. But as much as I loved reading other peoples' stories, I always dreamed of telling my own.

PM: You've had books published in the young adult market, and now the tween market. Did you set out to write in a particular genre or category or do you let your muse and passion be your guide?

MM: I actually got my start writing adult books. My very first novel, *A Connecticut Fashionista* in King Arthur's Court, was a tongue-in-cheek time travel story and a celebration of my love for all things Arthurian. My editor, at that time, took me aside and said I had a "young voice" and suggested I try my hand at young adult. I did and I was instantly hooked on writing stories for younger readers.

I've written in a variety of genres over the years—both contemporary/realistic and the more fantastical. I honestly enjoy writing both and find it can be a great palette cleanser between books—to go from realistic to fantastical and back again. But I do believe my true passion lies with fantasy and adventure stories. And, no matter what, I always seem to go back to those.

PM: I understand your latest book, *The Camelot Code: The Once and Future Geek,* has quite a backstory: 13 years to publication. Can you elaborate on what happened and how you managed to keep the faith in the face of so much adversity/bad timing? Did you have the same agent throughout the process?

MM: *The Camelot Code* story is one of those crazy publishing stories that really emphasizes the importance of luck and timing and perseverance in our business! It originally sold in 2005 to Dorchester Publishing, an independent romance publisher who had started a YA line. They bought a two-book contract and asked me to write the first book, *Sk8er Boy*, first and then move onto *Camelot Code*. (Which was originally called *Camelot.com.*)

I did and by the time I had finished *Sk8er Boy*, their YA line had shuttered and they dumped the second book on the contract in favor of another adult romance novel instead.

By that time, I was looking for a new agent and I used *Camelot Code #1* as my query book to find new representation. My new agent took on the book and managed to sell it at auction for quite a bit more money than the original acquisition. I was, of course, thrilled! The winner of the auction was a Penguin imprint and they bought it in a two-book deal. And, guess what? They asked me to write the second book on the contract, *Gamer Girl*, first! And yes, by the time I'd finished that? Once again, things changed. My editor, along with the president of the imprint, left the company and the new president decided this story was not for her. And my book was dumped a second time.

By that time, unfortunately, the YA market had changed greatly. No longer was there any space for tween books like mine. Editors who read the manuscript complained it was "not quite YA" and "not quite middle grade" and I couldn't seem to find a home.

I started to despair. I realized this book—which had really become the book of my heart—might never see the light of day. One publisher even asked me to rewrite it as a middle grade novel, which I did, only to have them change their mind in the end.

The lowest point came at the birth of my daughter. I had just gotten home from the hospital and was in the throes of postpartum when my agent sent me five rejections in the same evening. I was devastated and defeated.

But my husband took me aside and reminded me that this book had brought a lot of good into our world—even if it would never end up on bookstore shelves. Because of the original advance, I was able to move to New York where I met my husband. When the contract was canceled, I moved in with him to save on money—since the check wasn't going to come after all. And now we had a beautiful daughter! An entire human being existing on this planet because of a book deal gone south! Of course we had to name her Avalon, an Arthurian name.

Fast-forward five years. I had a brand new agent and Disney sent out an announcement saying they were looking for new books about different mythologies around the world. I told my agent about *Camelot Code* and she sent it out to Stephanie Lurie, the publisher. I didn't have much hope, but why not, right? It was just sitting there, collecting dust under the metaphorical bed.

But low and behold, Stephanie wrote back. And, to my surprise, she told us she loved the book as much as she loved it the first time around. At first I was puzzled; how had she read it before? And if she loved it, why hadn't she bought it? It was then that I realized, with a little Internet digging, that she had been the president of the Penguin imprint that had acquired the book nine years before! When she had left, the book got dumped. But she never forgot it! And now, nine years later, she had the chance to acquire it again!

I told her that basically makes her my fairy godmother.

So now, thirteen years after the original acquisition, *Camelot Code: The Once and Future Geek* will now finally get its Disney happily ever after! And let me tell you, all the struggle, all the pain and frustration and rewriting and tears will be worth it when I first see the book on the shelves—and more importantly, in readers' hands. It just goes to show the old Galaxy Quest adage is true: Never Give Up! Never Surrender!

PM: If you could go back in time and give your younger writing self some advice or tips, what would you say?

MM: Stop being in such a hurry to get published! Enjoy the process of writing that first book. I think sometimes as writers we want that validation of being a published author so badly, we don't take the time to appreciate the craft behind creating a novel.

PM: Are you a panster or a plotter? What is your daily writing routine like? Which do you enjoy more, writing the first draft or revising? Do you work on several projects at once?

MM: I am half-and-half. I usually write out a summary of my plot before writing and have a basic idea of where the story needs to go. But as I start to write it often changes quite dramatically. I enjoy the process of taking the journey with my characters and seeing where we end up.

I wake up and write every morning at five AM. It sounds like torture, but it's really quite blissful. I'm my most creative in the morning and I'm not yet tired and drained from the day. Plus there are few social media distractions so I tend to stay more focused.

I try not to work on several projects at once. I like to dive deep into the headspace of my current project. Some-

Mari Mancusi continued

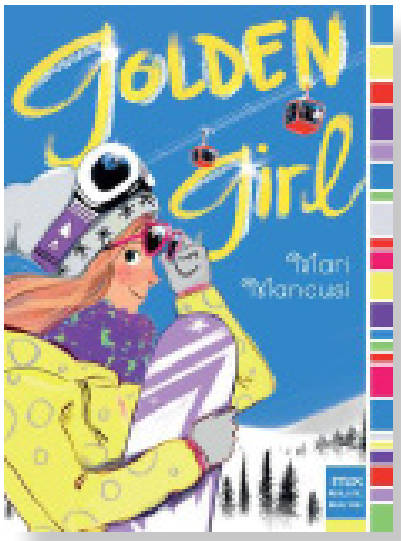
times that isn't possible, however. For example, this week I have edits for *Dragon Ops*, my new series with Disney, as well as page proofs to read over for Book 2, *The Camelot Code: Geeks and the Holy Grail.* So I'll have to split my time between those.

PM: How important a role does social media play in promoting your books? And which part of that do you like the most? Blog tours, interviews, getting feedback from readers, etc.

MM: I use social media like any author, but I don't know how much it actually moves the dial. It's fun to interact with other authors and people in the book business, but I don't know if it actually gets enough books into readers' hands to make a real difference. I'd much rather do real life stuff—like school visits and librarian conferences, etc. For example, this past weekend I "speed dated" with indie bookstore owners from the southwest and mountain states. That kind of face-to-face, real life interactions I think builds bridges and community more than just a cute post on Instagram. Still, I do like posting pics of my doggies and daughter online and will continue to do so!

PM: Who are your influences now? What are you currently working on?

MM: I am currently working on a new series with Disney that will come out in spring of 2020. It's called *Dragon Ops* and is the story of three kids who visit an augmented reality, video game theme park months before it's open to the public. When a rogue dragon AI takes over the game, they're forced into a fight for their (real) lives. One wrong move and it could be game over…forever. It's super fun and action packed and contains all my favorite things—video games, theme parks, and dragons!



Planning a Series

by Jane McBride

You've written a book, submitted it, and sold it. Congratulations. Your editor and publisher are so pleased with it that they want you to turn it in to a series. Congratulations again.

The trouble is, you never intended for the book to become a series. You aren't sure you can do a series. You aren't even sure you want to do a series. We call that the unintended series.

Let's look at another scenario. This time you planned a series from the start and submitted a proposal with sample chapters from the first book. Your editor and publisher are enthusiastic.

In both situations, you will need to decide what kind of series you want to do (subject, of course to your editor's agreement), block out the series, and possibly create a series bible. A series bible is a list of facts regarding the characters, ranging from everything to hair color to birth order to quirks and fears to medical history and family background. It can also include details about settings, environment, the time frame of the series, etc. A bible is a good idea regardless of the kind of series you are writing.

Let's start with the different kinds of series

The one-character series. In this type of series, you have a main character who is the focus of every book. Think *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books by Jeff Kinney, or the *Olivia* picture books by Ian Falconer. All the plots are stand-alone, meaning you could pick up a book from the middle of the series and not be lost. A core supporting cast may appear in each book, but new characters also move in and out of individual stories. The strength of these series depends on the protagonist, and often they are unintended series because the first book catches on and readers want more stories with the same character.

The series of rotating protagonists. In other words, the first book introduces a main character with several supporting characters. The next book will feature one of those supporting characters as the main character. And so on. Frequently, the main characters of early books continue to show up in the series, this time taking on the roles of supporting characters. This could be an unintended series (the first book has such strong supporting characters that the editor asks for each to star in their own story), or it could be planned from the beginning. This type of series isn't as common as it was 20-25 years ago, when multi-book series like *The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids* (chapter books) and *The Baby-Sitters Club* (middle grade, now having a rebirth with new covers on the original books and as a graphic novel series), were first published. The books tend to be stand-alone plots (though the relationships between characters may change slightly as the series progresses, adding a few carry-over details from one book to the next).

The series based on a concept. While these series may have a recurring cast of characters, the series revolves around a unique plot concept that drives each book. *The Magic School Bus* picture book series is one example. These books existed to teach science through adventures with Ms. Frizzle and her class as they go on field trips in a bus that can transform into a plane, spaceship, submarine, or even shrink down and enter the human body. The connecting factor of the series is the magic bus and the science lessons. The books can be read out of order, and the series keeps growing as long as the demand for new books continues.

The series based on a plot arc. This series absolutely must be planned out ahead of time, proposed as a series to the editor, and needs a series bible. Plot arc series are generally 3-5 books long, and have one story that begins in Book 1 and is concluded in the last book. The books must be read in order. *Harry Potter* and the *Hunger Games* series are popular examples.

The combination series. This type of series takes elements from two or more categories above, but one element stands out as the driving structure of the series. For example, you may create a plot arc series that features a different protagonist in each book pulled from 3-5 main recurring characters. But the plot arc is really what holds

the series together (and the rotating protagonists is simply a vehicle for advancing the plot). Or, as in *The Magic Tree House* series of early chapter books, the concept of two siblings being transported to different times and places through a tree house creates the series concept, but gradually they discover a secondary character who is sending them on these missions. So there is a plot thread running through the series, but it's summed up at the beginning of each book so readers can pick up a title mid-series and not be lost.

Considerations for any type of series

If you're planning this series from the start, decide what type of series you want to write. To make an informed decision, ask yourself some questions:

- What is the age group of my readers? Picture book, easy reader and chapter book series tend to be built on a concept that links all the book (such as *The Magic School Bus*), or strong main characters who are interesting enough to star in several books (like the *Captain Underpants* and *Bad Kitty* series). Series based on a plot that spans the entire series (with cliffhanger endings in each book), are best for middle grade and young adult readers.

- How many books do you want to be in the series? Series based on plot arcs have a fixed beginning and end. Other types of series can grow into 10 or more books if the sales are strong and the publisher keeps asking for more. That doesn't mean you have to write that many books in the series, but your characters and concept should lend themselves to at least 10 different stories, just in case.

- How long do you want to live with this series? Again, you do have control over this, but if you're planning a plot arc series you must commit to writing all of the books in the proposed arc, one after another. The publisher will want to bring out a new title each year until the series is complete.

Then decide upon your characters.

- Whether you're doing a one-character series, a series with rotating protagonists, or a plot arc series, you'll need to carefully craft your protagonist(s) and recurring supporting cast. Create a character bible with physical traits, likes and dislikes, character history, family details, where this character lives and goes to school, character strengths and weaknesses.

- For one-character series, your character can grow and learn a bit from the plot in each individual book, but will essentially remain the same core character throughout the series. After all, the character is the draw for the series as a whole, and should have enough layers to his/her personality to get in and out of trouble over and over.

- For series based on a concept, you still want to craft your main character(s) and recurring supporting cast with detail. Make sure they will support the concept of the series and are interesting enough to draw readers in over and over (Ms. Frizzle of The Magic School Bus is a good example). The characters themselves should fit the tone of the concept (a humorous, quirky concept needs a quirky main character).

Things to keep in mind when plotting your series

- Series based on a character or a concept will probably have stand-alone stories in each book. But you want to make sure your characters and concept lend themselves to many different stories, and there's a consistent "hook" that runs throughout the series; something that quickly defines the series as a whole. This hook should be evident in each plot. For example, in the *Hank Zipster* middle grade series (now spun off into an early chapter book series), Hank is described as "the world's greatest underachiever." He's a bright boy with learning challenges, which often get him into trouble. And the plots are funny. So the humorous yet empathetic look at a character navigating school with learning challenges is the hook for this series.

  If you're proposing one of these series to an editor as a whole, provide a paragraph plot synopsis for 3-5 books. You'll also need to have the first book completely written, and send a brief synopsis and the first three chapters.

- For series with a continuous plot arc, you'll need to carefully outline the entire series. Your series as a whole should have a beginning, middle and end, with one continuous problem or goal for your character that isn't resolved until the final pages of the last book. But each book in the series has its own arc as well, with a beginning, middle and end that lead to the resolution of smaller conflicts on the path to the larger goal. Endings should be satisfying, even if they're open-ended enough to make readers want to grab the next installment and see what happens next.

(If you're proposing this type of series, give a brief synopsis of the series as a whole, then a synopsis of each book in the series. Attach the first three chapters of the first book.)

- In any type of series proposal, it's a good idea to also include one page with a summary of the recurring characters, and an overview of the series concept and/or world in which the series takes place (for fantasy, science fiction, dystopian, or other genres that require extensive world-building).

If you're writing an unintended series, go through the steps above and map out your characters, concept and plot for future books, based on the groundwork you've laid with the first book. Run it all by your editor before starting on Book 2.

If you feel series writing is for you, know that it has many rewards, including having readers tell you "I love your characters. They have become my friends." There are also pitfalls, such as when you realize that you must continue the series to the number of books you agreed upon with your editor even if you have grown tired of it. But planning out your series ahead of time, and understanding the commitment involved, will help you smooth over potential rough spots and create books that readers will be talking about.

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