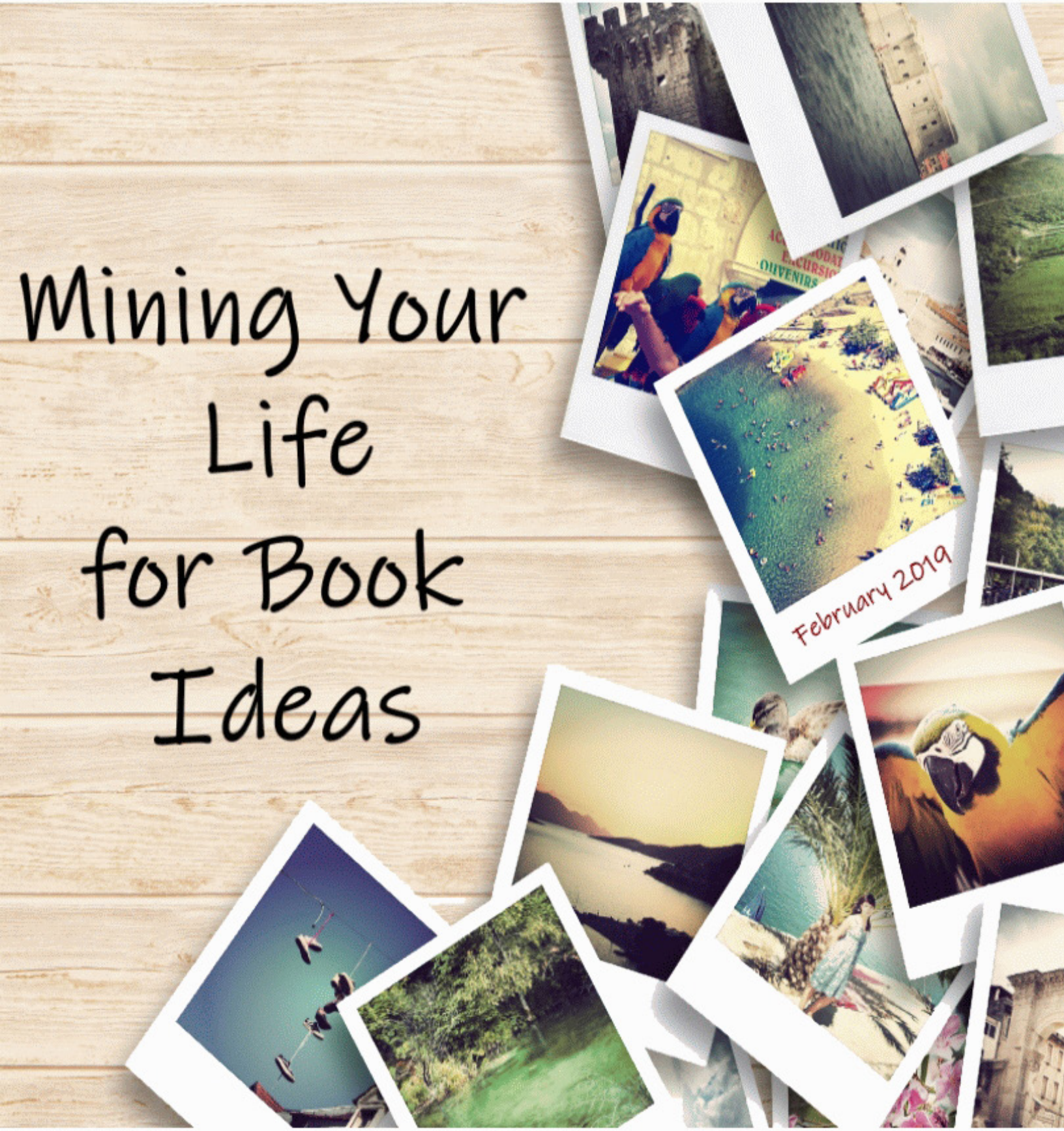
Children's Book Insider



ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE SUBMISSION CODE: STERLING PUBLISHING

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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.

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

PJ McIlvaine is a published writer/produced screenwriter/kid lit author/blogger/journalist. In a former life she was a great baker of Europe. PJ is a co-host #PB-Pitch, the premiere Twitter pitch party for picture book writers and illustrators.

Lynne Marie is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), *The Star in the Christmas Play* and *Let's Eat Around the World* (Beaming Books), Moldilocks and the 3 Scares (Sterling) and more forthcoming, as well as 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

Candice Ransom is the author of 150 books for children, including *10 Step into Reading* titles. She has an MFA in writing for children from VCFA and an MA in children's literature from Hollins University. She currently teaches in Hollins University's graduate program in children's literature. www.candiceransom.com

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At Presstime:

Agent Accepting Queries for All Ages

Mary Cummings is an agent with Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises (https://amsterlit.com/about/), a full-service literary agency located in Los Angeles that works with both first-time and established authors. Mary Cummings represents fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry for children and teens, from picture books to middle grade and young adult novels, including contemporary and historical, humor, mystery, fantasy, and multicultural. She is particularly seeking middle grade novels as well as picture books with strong story arcs, a spunky central character, and warmth, humor, or quirky charm. In literary nonfiction, her areas of interest include picture book biographies as well as lyrically written science, nature, mindfulness, and social awareness issues. She is currently looking for stories about times, people and places underrepresented in children's and teen lit; friendship stories; magic realism and fantasy grounded in or related to the real world; great read-aloud picture books; stories about important, complex relationships; historical fiction and narrative nonfiction; work tied to school standards (such as STEAM) or geared to a specific audience; biographies, especially in the arts and sciences (as picture books or longer works); lyrically written science, nature, mindfulness and social awareness topics; stories about holidays, including those important to a minority community; picture books written and illustrated by the same person (author-illustrators); picture book poetry collections; and middle grade or YA written in multiple formats (poetry and prose; diary and text etc.). **She is not looking for** rhyming picture books, YA stories with characters out of their teens, zombies or vampires, or mean girl stories and school dramas.

Query by email to **b.amster.kidsbooks@gmail.com**. Include a bit about your project (pitch language), plus some bio information as well as related writing or other experience. For picture books, embed the entire text in the body of your email. For longer works, embed the first three pages. Do not include attachments. Responds only if interested (assume it's a pass if you haven't heard back in about 6 weeks.)

Agent Seeking Unique, Boundary-Pushing Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction

John Cusick is an agent with Folio Jr. (https://www.foliojr.com/) and is currently accepting submissions for middle grade and young adult fiction, as well as graphic novels for those readers. He's seeking unique voices in fiction for young people, stories that move readers, and personal, dangerous, life-saving stories that kids will read late into the night. Open to boundary pushers and query pitches that make (certain) people say, "You can't write a YA / MG about THAT!!" He's drawn to beautiful, character-driven YA and MG that connects on a strong emotional level, as well as the strange, iconoclastic, and unusual. Also interested in diverse and underrepresented voices.

In middle grade, he's especially looking for adventure, suspense, quirky stories, and books with heart. In young adult, he seeks contemporary realistic stories with strong hooks, as well as fresh fantasy set in our world and others. He's open to genre series pitches, as well as high-concept standalone titles. Stories told in alternate formats (such as letters, texts or sticky notes) are an interest, as well as graphic novels for MG and YA.

Email a query letter with the first 2500 words of your manuscript pasted into the body of email, and the word QUERY in the subject line, to **John@foliolit.com**. He tries to respond to all queries, however if you do not hear from him within thirty days, please consider it a pass.

There's still time to enter the **10th Annual Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition**, sponsored by British publisher Chicken House Books. Open to unpublished and unagented writers of middle grade and YA fiction (stories for ages 7-18, 30,000-80,000 words). Two prizes will be awarded: First Place wins a worldwide publishing contract with Chicken House Books with a £10,000 advance. A bonus prize (The Chairman's Choice Prize) will receive a publishing contract with a £7,500 advance. The deadline for entries is midnight GMT on February 28, 2019. All entries can be submitted online. See https://www.chickenhousebooks.com/submissions/#about for details.

Magazine for Ages 2-6 Accepting Submissions

High Five is a magazine published by *Highlights for Children* that features stories, nonfiction, crafts, recipes, and science activities that support the curiosity and social and emotional development of children ages 2-6. At this time, the editors are especially interested in nonfiction articles appropriate for this age, up to about 170 words.

Also seeing stories up to 170 words. The topics should be age-appropriate, with settings, characters, and plots that will be familiar to young children. Rhyme, repetition, and patterned texts are particularly welcome. Remember that illustrations can provide many descriptive details, giving you room in the text for dialogue and four scenes.

Not currently seeking poems for the magazine's verse page or action rhymes, but the magazine is accepting short poems for the poem puzzle page. Crafts, recipes, and nonfiction activities should be designed so that most children can do all the steps with limited help from an adult. Materials or ingredients should be easy to find. It's advised that authors read several back issues before submitting, which you can find at most libraries and larger book stores.

All submissions should be sent electronically through Submittable at https://highlights.submittable.com/submit/43099/high-five-magazine. On the first page of the manuscript, include your name as you would like it to appear in your byline. Buys all rights; pays on acceptance. Responds to submissions in about 2 months.

Award-winning Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Albert Whitman & Company publishes award-winning picture books through young adult fiction. For current titles, go to https://www.albertwhitman.com/catalog/. Here is what two of their editors are currently seeking:

Jonathan Westmark, Editor: Picture books (realistic stories that explore tough, often overlooked issues in sensitive ways without being didactic; quirky, over-the-top, or subtle humor that works for kids and adults; and nonfiction picture books that dig into little-known stories or underrepresented cultural or religious traditions). Chapter books and early middle grade (high-concept series—something with an imaginative premise, a quirky and diverse cast of characters, and a fast-paced plot). Middle grade (contemporary and historical MG with a literary bent). Young adult (upmarket suspense, mystery, magical realism, and accessible sci-fi and fantasy).

Annie Nybo, Editor: Picture books (witty and well-crafted stories; subtle books with a layered message). Middle grade (contemporary, fantasy, adventure, magical realism, and historical fiction. Especially likes humorous stories that also reveal something new about human nature, and voice-driven literary fiction.) Nonfiction (lyrical nonfiction picture books on any topic; narrative nonfiction for middle grade; feminist nonfiction for all ages).

FOR ALL SUBMISSIONS, send an email query letter with a brief description of story or story pitch (summarizing the book's hook and audience), short bio mentioning previous publications or other background information relevant to your story, and titles of up to three comparative books published in the past five years. These should be books that have a similar audience to your book and that you feel will compare with your book in the marketplace. Explain how your manuscript is different from these books. Attach manuscripts or samples (as per instructions below) as Word documents (preferred) or PDFs. File sizes cannot be larger than 4MB. Subject line must be formatted according to individual category guidelines below. Emails that do not use the subject line formatting may not be read.

For PICTURE BOOKS (fiction and nonfiction, ages 1-8, up to 1000 words), it is not necessary to provide illustrations with the story text, but if you are sending illustrations they should be in PDF or JPEG attachments not to exceed 4MB. Attach entire manuscript as Word or PDF document. Subject line should read: “PICTURE BOOK: (story title) by (author name).”

For MIDDLE GRADE FICTION and NONFICTION (ages 8-12, up to 35,000 words) and YOUNG ADULT FICTION (ages 12-18, up to 70,000 words), send story synopsis and/or chapter summary, and first three chapters as Word or PDF attachments. Subject line should read: “MIDDLE GRADE: (story title) by (author name)” or “YOUNG ADULT: (story title) by (author name).”

All submissions should be emailed to submissions@albertwhitman.com. Responds within six months if interested.

Craft Writing Books for Kids—Anything But Kid's Stuff

by Candice Ransom

In 2014, I attended Jack Gantos' morning keynote at the SCBWI Mid-winter conference. From his first PowerPoint slide, I was riveted. His talk—and nearly his entire career—was based on illustrated journals he kept beginning in fifth grade, and how those journals provided fodder for the Norvelt, Joey Pigza, and Jack Black books. I took pages of notes, but his humorous neighborhood map, annotated with ridiculous incidents that triggered stories, was too detailed for me to copy.

Three years later, Jack Gantos published a new book. *Writing Radar: Using Your Journal to Snoop Out and Craft Great Stories* is not a book for adults on how to write for kids, but a writing book for kids. Packed with anecdotes and scribbly drawings, Gantos urges kids to keep a journal, then use their own lives to create stories. "Write what you know" has never been more approachable, or funny. The neighborhood map that had flashed onscreen at the conference earns a double-spread in the book. Whenever I teach writing, *Writing Radar* is always on my craft book handout.

The Peanut Gallery

Do you ever turn to children's nonfiction books to understand a new subject or one you've forgotten, like the water cycle? Children's nonfiction breaks complex topics into simpler terms. Books intended for young writers also break down the writing process into bite-size chunks. Don't overlook these gems.

Craft books for kid writers aren't new. When I was ten, I read *Someday You'll Write* (1962), by children's author Elizabeth Yates. Desperate to finish my mess of a mystery novel, it was hard to follow advice such as, "Your fingers will clasp a pencil as they do a friend's hand, and your thoughts will flow onto a piece of paper as they do in conversation." *Writing Radar's* chapter titled, "'I'll Kill You,' Said My Sister" would have steered me to use personal experiences, something I didn't figure out until many years later.

Visit the children's section of your local library. Check out the books under 808, where writing books are classified.

Refresher Course

Kids' writing books are refreshing, especially if you're stuck on your current project. Lessen some of that heavy lifting. Don't fret over snowflake plotting methods or if your antagonist has agency. Go back to basics.

Gail Carson Levine, author of the best-selling *Ella Enchanted* and other fairy-tale based novels, has written not one, but two craft books for kids. *Writing Magic: Creating Stories that Fly* was inspired by her six years of teaching creative writing to middle school students. Her manner is both accessible and practical. For example, she describes how to use specific details by telling the reader to ask questions. If our character is getting a glass of water, do we think about all that entails? Levine says, "Where are the glasses kept? The answer is a detail . . . Are they glass, paper, or plastic? Are they heavy? The answers are details." We all know we're supposed to use details, but sometimes we forget to put them in. Ask questions!

Levine's second craft book, *Writer to Writer: From Think to Ink*, grew from her blog for writers of all ages. The best part of Levine's craft books are her exercises. I have never been a big fan of free-writing (it always turns into a gripe-fest), but I love writing prompts. Levine suggests writing a story as a poem, something I've never tried. Or writing a story about a pet who thinks in language and is separated from its owners. My fingers are itching to write what an escaped corn snake would think as he wiggles through the plumbing pipes.

Craft Writing Books for Kids continued

Think Way Outside the Box

The Creativity Project: An Awesometastic Story Collection almost defies description. It's aimed at elementary teachers and students, but I found it helpful in changing rote thinking. Teacher Colby Sharp pulled together 44 writers and illustrators of children's books to collaborate on stories. But not in the usual way. Each person submitted two prompts: "poems, photographs, drawings, anything." Then Sharp sent each contributor another person's prompts. When the collaborator received the package, he or she chose one prompt and went to town. The results became *The Creativity Project.*

This book made me see and think a new way. Debbie Ridpath Ohi turned the prompt she received—Margarita Engle's poem, "road trip with puppies/ just one whiff of forest air/delivers wildness"—into a mind-bending graphic story. Linda Urban prompted her collaborator to tell what happens when a fairy tale character almost misses curfew. Deborah Freedman's illustrated response shows the near-tragedy of the mouse in "Hickory Dickory Dock." A drawing inspires a story. A photograph is answered by a mysterious poem. All "unused" prompts are listed at the end for kids to create their own stories, once they realized a story could be anything.

I sent a copy of *The Creativity Project* to a writer friend, along with a packet of oddments like paint chips (for colors and names), photos, phrases snipped from magazines. The idea was for her to pick one and create something, not necessarily written. Making collages or taking photos also spins our creative wheels. She sent me a packet, including a facsimile book of the nomenclature of nature colors, first published in 1821. I'm still toting this lovely book as I mull over my creative response.

Consider adding a children's writing book to your craft bookshelf. Forget knobby-fingered writerly rebukes about cutting Latinate words until revisions. Instead create a story about a kid who finds a diamond necklace on the bus. And make it into a paper fortune-teller!

Writing Radar: Using Your Journal to Snoop Out and Craft Great Stories
Jack Gantos
FSG, 2017

Writing Magic: Creating Stories That Fly
Gail Carson Levine
HarperCollins, 2006

Writer to Writer: From Think to Ink
Gail Carson Levine
HarperCollins, 2015

The Creativity Project: An Awesometastic Story Collection
Colby Sharp, ed.
Little Brown, 2018

WRITING WITH EMOTION

by Jane McBride

Writing with emotion does not mean telling the reader what the character is feeling. Writing with emotion is showing what the character is feeling. How can we do this? How can we get away from the easy fix of saying, "Susie was crying. Susie was sad because her best friend was moving across the country?"

While there are any number of ways to elicit emotion in readers, I've found the following to be among my favorites.

- Detailing small things that lead to big emotions
- Finding the emotional midpoint of a story
- Having character say the opposite of what he is feeling
- Using symbols to show emotion
- Identifying the emotional black moment

Let's take a look at these points through a Mini Blueprint format:

STEP 1: Detail the small things that lead to big emotions.

ACTION: Pick out some tiny incident in any particular scene, one that does not seem related to the story. Then show your character's reaction to it. What if an eleven-year-old girl hears her parents fighting in the other room? At the same time, she sees a spider painstakingly weaving a web in a corner of a ceiling one intricate motion at a time. Her parents fight and the spider's persistence in building a web have nothing in common. Or do they? What if our MC (main character) compares her parents' constant fighting (this is not the first fight she's ever overheard) to the seemingly small steps the spider must take to weave a web? She thinks back to the small cruelties and slights her parents have shown each other over the last months. Detailing the spider's actions provides her with a way to think about her parents, without the author coming out and saying "She was sad and had felt this way for a long time."

STEP 2: Find the emotional midpoint of a story and have your character change his or her worldview from then on.

ACTION: Follow your story's emotional arc and identify its midpoint. This may not be the same as the plot midpoint. The emotional midpoint occurs when the protagonist reverses his view on something vitally important. He realizes that everything he'd believed up until then was wrong and now he must find a new way of thinking. Let's make up a story with a ten-year-old boy, Matt. Matt has always worshipped his father The father is a "man's man," with hobbies and skills that reflect that image. He hunts and fishes and brags about his physical prowess in every area. Matt's mother left his father after years of physical abuse. She begged Matt to go with her, but he refused. To safe her life, she took off. Matt blamed his mother for the dissolution of their family and believed what his father always said, that "she had it coming" whenever he hit her. One day, Matt's father comes home roaring drunk. He is in a rage and comes after Matt with a broken whiskey bottle, threatening to cut Matt's face into pieces until he is unrecognizable. When Matt sees his father's anger directed toward himself, he realizes that his mother had been telling the truth all along. This shatters his world view and his sense of self. Matt had always imagined himself being like his father—tough, brave, able to handle anything that came his way. Now he understands that he doesn't want to be anything like his father. Matt hides in the woods, escaping unscathed, but his world has been shattered. He must find a new belief system and a new view with which to cope with his life. He resolves to find his mother and start a new life with her.

STEP 3: Have character say the opposite of what he or she is feeling by adding body language or other context to the dialogue.

ACTION: Look at a passage of dialogue in your story. Is the character saying exactly what he is thinking?

Mini Blueprint continued

Try to find a way for him to say the opposite. What if a sixteen-year-old boy has a rough relationship with his younger brother who has behavioral problems due to mental health issues? Our protagonist is blindingly angry at his brother for going through his room and messing up his stuff. The protagonist doesn't want to show that anger, knowing that his brother can't help his actions sometimes. Instead, the MC might say something like, "I hope you found what you're looking for. Can I help?" He says this through tight lips. The brother does not pick up on the character's true feelings and sees this as permission to do the same thing again and again.

STEP 4: Use symbols to show emotion.

ACTION: In an earlier example, the ten-year-old girl compares her parents' fighting to a spider weaving a web, every small stroke and action building to a climax. In the case of her parents, the climax could well be divorce. What is another symbol that this young girl might use to represent her feelings? What if she finds a picture of her and her parents on vacation? They all look smiling and happy. Though the picture was taken only seven months earlier, it seems that many years have passed in terms of her parents' relationship. She focuses on this picture, even sneaking it from the family album to tuck in her dresser drawer. Every day, she pulls it out, hoping if she says a wish with the picture in hand, her parents will be happy again and her family intact. In many ways, the picture represents her past, while her parents' constant fighting is her present, and, she fears, her future.

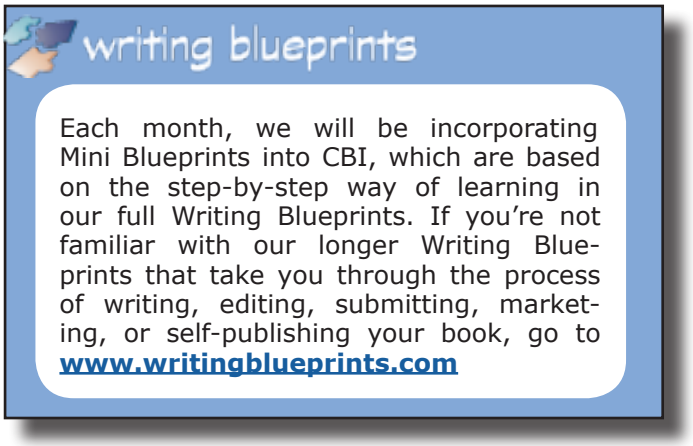
STEP 5: Identify the emotional black moment.

ACTION: As in identifying the emotional midpoint of a story, identifying the emotional black moment may differ from that of the plot's black moment. The black moment will occur near the end of the story, often preceding the plot's climax. Just as in the black moment of the storyline, the emotional black moment causes the character to feel that all is lost on the personal front. I wrote romantic suspense. For the hero and heroine, the emotional black moment comes when they both feel that the relationship is doomed and that nothing will or can save it. What could an emotional black moment be in a 'tween age book? Suppose your eleven-year-old character, Sarah, learns that her much loved brother is gay. She doesn't understand fully what that means, but she knows that it makes her brother different. Her family is very conservative, her parents very rigid in their standards. Can she live with the knowledge that her brother is gay and keep it to herself? Or does a deep sense of loyalty to her parents and her upbringing prompt her to tell them her brother's secret? In the end, Sarah decides to keep the knowledge to herself. As much as she loves her parents, she loves her brother even more.

WRAPPING UP

Today's readers are sophisticated and savvy. They don't want to be beat over the head with the author telling them what the reader is feeling and how they should react to it. Readers want to come to the conclusion themselves of "Hey, he's really bummed out about that. Wonder what he's going to do?"

If some of the above points work for you, fine. Use them. If they don't resonate in you, find your own methods of showing emotion. That takes practice and work. You can do it. You're a writer!



RACHAEL STEIN, EDITOR, STERLING PUBLISHING

interview by Lynne Marie

Since founding *The Book Muncher* (a YA and MG book review blog) in 2007, Rachael has worked as an Editorial Assistant at Scholastic Reading Clubs and an Editorial Associate at Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt before taking on her current position at Sterling Children's Books, giving her experience on both sides of the books—reading and editing!

Lynne Marie: Because I'm a fan of your opinions as a former book reviewer, I am going to ask a fun question up front. If you were stranded on a desert island and could bring only one book with you, what genre would you want it to be and what elements would you want it to have?

Rachael Stein: Oh no, the toughest question for any book person! If I were forced to pick just one book, I would probably choose a very long YA fantasy novel with vivid characters, intrigue, and a bit of romance—so lots on the page to keep me entertained and a lot of pages, period. (Thank you for not actually making me pick out a book!)

LM: While you are no longer reviewing, if you could recommend a YA novel from from 2018 which one would it be, and why?

RS: One YA book from last year that I really enjoyed was *Stay Sweet* by Siobhan Vivian. It has some of my favorite things: complicated female friendships, unexpected romance, and ice cream!

LM: Coming from a fiction background, how does that inform what you are looking for in nonfiction? Which age category are you seeking? Do you lean toward a more narrative nonfiction? Please describe.

RS: I'm looking for nonfiction for all levels of kids' books. Since I've worked so much with fiction, I do tend to gravitate more toward narrative nonfiction. That said, I have enjoyed working on a fantastic nonfiction picture book that doesn't fit that mold: What Do You Celebrate? by Whitney Stewart, which profiles holidays around the world. So, for the right nonfiction project, I may want to try something different!

LM: What do you look for in chapter books? What aspects of published chapter books do you find appealing, as an example?

RS: The chapter book market can be tough to break into because there are so many strong and ongoing series already out there. That said, a distinctive voice, characters that feel unlike other chapter book characters I've seen, and fun and age-appropriate plot shenanigans would definitely capture my attention. A great example of this is *Sam Wu Is Not Afraid of Ghosts*, the first in a chapter book series by Katie and Kevin Tsang that I'm lucky to now work on. Sam has such a fun voice, and I love how his stories are a mix of everyday kid problems (like overcoming a fear of ghosts) and what it is to be a Chinese kid growing up in a Chinese household. The way the text, art, and overall design all work together in this book is also fabulous.

LM: What makes a submission especially compelling to you? Please define in terms of plot, voice, whatever this means to you.

RS: I am very drawn to character-driven stories, so

Rachael Stein continued

a strong voice and an intriguing character are great to get me started. From there, a satisfying character arc to complement the plot arc—so I can see the character changing and growing—will keep me reading. While this mainly applies for novels, I look for similar things in picture books, too; a strong character experiencing and/or affecting change will usually draw me in.

LM: At one point, you cited on your #MSWL (Manuscript Wish List) that you wanted to see more books about Drag Queens—MG, YA, even PB. Are there any books out now that you feel are great examples?

RS: Sadly, I don't actually know that many kids' books featuring drag queens! But there are a few YA books including drag that I'm excited to read that have come out recently or are coming out soon: *Kings, Queens, and In-Betweens* by Tanya Boteju; *Death Prefers Blondes* by Caleb Roehrig; and *Love & Other Curses* by Michael Thomas Ford.

LM: Is there any topic currently on your wishlist that you would like to see submissions on? Why do you feel there is a need for this topic?

RS: I would love to see more submissions with biracial and mixed characters. I feel that perspective is underrepresented at every level of children's books, and since the world will only continue to get more diverse and mixed, it's important to me that we publish great books that reflect that experience.

LM: What are you looking for in a prospective author? How important is social media platform? Own voices? Are you open to first-time authors?

RS: Above all, I am looking to work with authors who are strong writers with a unique perspective, have an interesting story to tell, and are committed to getting that story out in the world. I am particularly interested in working with authors from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds (aka own voices), and I love working with first-time authors. Having a platform or active social media presence certainly helps, but I wouldn't say it's a prerequisite; platform, presence, and writing careers are built over time.

LM: How would you describe your editing style?

RS: I usually start with an editorial letter focusing on bigger picture edits (character development, plot arc, etc.), and narrow in from there. When the author and I are satisfied with overarching changes, I'll do a line edit to take a closer look on the scene and sentence level.

LM: If you could give authors submitting to Sterling one piece of advice, what would it be?

RS: I would recommend researching the Sterling Children's Books list, particularly books we've done recently or are publishing soon, to see where your submission might fit in.

LM: Where else can readers connect with you?

RS: I'm on Twitter *@rachaeljstein*, where I tweet (sporadically) about kids' books, diversity, and miscellaneous.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Rachel Stein is offering an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for CBI subscribers through **June 30, 2019**. Please send via email to **rachael.stein.submissions@gmail.com** and include in the subject line the code word "PUZZLE, CBI submission", the title of your manuscript, and your name. (For example: PUZZLE CBI submission: THIS IS A BOOK by Rachael Stein)

For all submissions, please send your query letter in the body of the email and your manuscript/materials as a single Word doc attachment (full manuscript for picture books, first 25 pages plus a 1-page synopsis for CB/MG/YA, proposal and a sample chapter for longer nonfiction). Note that Rachel will be responding to submissions only if she's interested in seeing more of the manuscript, or interested in publishing the picture book. If you hear nothing within six months, you can assume it's a pass.

Be sure to study the books published by Sterling at https://www.sterlingpublishing.com/books/ before submitting. Note that the publisher guidelines on the website say that Sterling is not accepting submissions by email, but Rachel Stein is taking email submissions directly from CBI subscribers with the **Above the Slushpile** code.

MINING YOUR LIFE FOR IDEAS

by Jane McBride

Occasionally, the well for new ideas runs dry and we must mine for fresh ones. We all know to look in such places as the newspaper, television news, and even advertisements for ideas. But have you thought of researching yourself? You are a mine of experiences, feelings, and knowledge.

I don't have an interesting life, you may protest. Or nothing ever happens to me. Or I'm so boring. Nobody would want to read about my life. Really? Think again.

Look to the past. Why look at your ancestors for story ideas, especially if you are writing contemporary set books? Though experiences can be vastly different, feelings are universal. My ancestors came by handcart and wagon train to the Salt Lake Valley in the Mormon migration in the 1840s through the 1860s. Their perseverance, courage, and sacrifice provide countless ideas for me as well as inspiration when I start feeling sorry for myself.

How to use this in your writing: Pull from your family's past, both recent and long ago. Your ancestors no doubt led rich and varied lives. Though the circumstances were far different, I pulled from my ancestors' experiences of leaving their comfortable homes and journeying into an unknown land to write a short story for very young children about having to leave their home and move across the state for their father's new job. The feeling of being yanked from all that is familiar is a common and relatable one. What about your family? Were they immigrants who fled another country to come to the United States for a better life? Did your grandparents or great-grandparents weather the Great Depression and survived upon rice and beans and little else? What about more recent family? Every family has its stories. If you don't know many stories about yours, interview your parents, your aunts and uncles, your grandparents.

Interview yourself. Why should you do this? Though you know yourself intimately, you may not recognize everything that is unique about you. What crises have you weathered? Have you suffered a severe loss? Whether it be the death of a parent, a child, a divorce, a job loss, you've undoubtedly experienced grief. Channel that grief into a story for a child.

How to use this in your writing: Using your own experiences and the resulting feelings, put yourself in the character's place and ask yourself what he/she is feeling. Ask yourself what does grief feel like? Describe the white-hot pain, the anger, the denial, and, finally, the acceptance that things will never again be the same. Draw deep from within you and write about the certainty that your life is over. Write from a child's point-of-view (of course you'll make the story appropriate for your targeted age readership).

Check in with your passions. Why is this important? When you are passionate about something, you bring that enthusiasm and intensity to your writing. Are you passionate about singing? Playing the violin? Painting? Now try to imagine if you weren't able to pursue your passions. How would that feel?

How to use this in your writing: As a writing exercise, use your feelings of passion to write a few scenes about a boy who is passionate about making the middle school basketball team. He wants to play first string and is deeply disappointed when he doesn't make it. Write realistically and sensitively about his feelings. If you're writing for younger children, as an exercise imagine what a preschooler might be passionate about. Could he want to go to school with his older brother and be told "no," that he is too little? Use what you learn from exercises like this to infuse the characters in your work-in-progress with passions of their own.

Give yourself credit for volunteer activities. Why? Where you give your time, your energy, and your means shows what matters to you. Do you volunteer at your church, perhaps playing the piano or organ? Do you help at your children or grandchildren's schools? Do you serve in the community?

How to use this in your writing: Use those feelings of service to help you describe a small child's feelings when he is given the opportunity to share his toys with a family who has lost everything, perhaps in a fire, or perhaps a displaced refugee family. Several years ago, our area was hit by terrific rains and floods. Many people lost their homes or had their belongings destroyed by mud. A center was set up in Loveland where people could go and pick up basic necessities for life, from food to household goods to clothes. People of all ages donated things to help those who had lost so much. My husband and I

Mining Your Life for Ideas continued

volunteered at the center and witnessed remarkable examples of service and generosity. I found inspiration for several short stories there.

Go back in time and recall your "firsts." Why should you do this? "Firsts" are frequently the most memorable. You may not remember the third car you had, but chances are you remember the first. The same goes with first boyfriend, first kiss, first babysitting job, and the first job that wasn't babysitting.

How to use this in your writing: Remember the heady excitement of your first boyfriend/girlfriend? Bring that to your story about a fifteen-year-old girl who has been asked out on her first date. What if you're writing a book for younger children? You can still explore those feelings. What "first" might a three-year-old boy be excited over and yet frightened about at the same time? His first pet, whether turtle, dog, or gerbil? His first sleepover at his grandparents' home? His first plane ride?

Look at your job. The "why" of this is self-evident. You probably spend much of your day at your job, a job you've trained for and believe is important. Do you teach at an elementary school? You have a plethora of ideas right there. Are you an engineer at a big company? Did you, as my husband did one time, lose important papers on a business trip? My poor husband beat himself up over that for weeks, but events like that can often find their way into fiction.

How to use this in your writing: Extrapolate from your on-the-job experiences in to set-ups for your fiction. If you've experienced a "mess-up" in your work (and who of us hasn't?), use it to describe a seven-year-old boy's feelings when he runs the wrong way with the ball in a football game and is certain that everyone will laugh at him forever.

Remember, you are not trying to recount actual experiences. You are looking for feelings that we have all experienced, whatever our age. You are looking for genuine emotions to make your stories relevant to children of today. You are looking for ideas that transcend a particular time and place. You are looking for universal truths.

WHEN YOU GET STUMPED

Sometimes writers get stumped. Despite our best efforts to fill our creative wells and to write every day, we occasionally can't find the inspiration we need. We discover we can't write a word. If you are like me and other writers I know who are sometimes stymied about what to write and how to go about it, consider one or more of the following strategies. (A warning here: these are all low-tech ideas. If you like something more high tech, you can find many writing prompts online.)

Clustering. Clustering is exactly what it sounds like. Choose a topic. Write it in the middle of your page. (This is best done manually rather than on a computer.) From there, group (cluster) words or phrases around it. Write whatever comes into your mind, however outlandish or foolish or downright weird it may sound. Throw out your inner censor/editor and give your imagination free rein. Draw arrows between your central topic and the words you've written around it. You may also want to draw arrows connecting different words. You may see relationships you hadn't thought of before. Or you might get a whole new direction for a story or article that was giving you problems. This is brain-storming at its most basic.

Listing: It doesn't get simpler than this. Put your subject at the top of your page. This is your title. Write as fast as you can. As in the clustering example, don't censor yourself. Include anything that comes to mind (even the kitchen sink): colors, people's names, feelings, historical events, current events, headlines you've seen, animal names. After you've finished, or as you write if that feels more comfortable, consider the list and then start organizing it. Put a star next to the more promising items. Then number those items by order of importance. Group related items together. Cross out things that do not feel promising upon second thought. Add new things. Continue this process until you have a cohesive and inspiring list.

Dramatizing: Draw a five pointed star on a sheet of paper. Label each point with one of the following: actor (character), action (plot), setting, motive (why the action occurs), method (how the action occurs). From these five points, write brief descriptions. Then expand upon what you've written. Perhaps you will build an outline or write a brief synopsis (for a fictional book) or summary (for a non-fiction piece). The point is that you'll have a jumping-off place. If you've ever taken a journalism class, you may remember the questions that journalists are supposed to ask: who (actor), what (action), when and where (setting), why (motive), and how (method). The star method is simply another way of asking those questions.

Looping: Looping involves writing very quickly to look at one aspect of a topic. Once you've done that, you loop back to the starting point and explore another aspect. After you have done this several times, you will probably see the focus of your subject. Give yourself a set amount of time, whether five, ten, or twenty minutes. (It helps to set a buzzer). Write as fast as you can. When the time is up, stop writing and loop back to the beginning. Repeat.

As you can see, these are all very basic techniques. You can expand upon them or devise your own. The important thing is that you start writing and keep writing. And don't forget to have fun.

D IS FOR DAUGHTER: CARRYING ON A MOTHER'S LEGACY

by PJ McIlvaine

When Sydell Rosenberg, a prolific Haiku poet and charter member of the Haiku Society of America, passed away unexpectedly, her unrealized goal had been to have a picture book published. With no shortage of her mother's writing to choose from, her daughter Amy Losak was determined to carry out her mother's cherished dream, culminating in the publication of the critically acclaimed *H is for Haiku*, (Penny Candy Books, 2018), an alphabet compendium. Thanks to her mother, Losak has developed a new appreciation for this mysterious Japanese style of poetry as well as inspiration in her own writing.

PJ McIlvaine: What is your earliest childhood memory of your mother writing? Why was she drawn to Japanese poetry like Haiku and Senryu? What is the difference between the two forms? How can today's reader relate to it?

Amy Losak: I have vague memories of my mother, Sydell Rosenberg, being drawn to and writing haiku in the early-to-mid 1960's. I don't know how mom found haiku—or, as I like to say, how haiku "found" her. Mom was creative and I think somewhat restless in her thinking—her way of perceiving things. She viewed the world around her differently, with curiosity and joy. I think she woke up most days with the expectation of adventure and new possibilities. Unfortunately, I didn't appreciate this mindset at the time. All these years later, I think I understand it better.

Haiku is the briefest form of poetry, yet arguably the most expansive. It "forces" one to slow down and pay attention to little things. It's "unfussy" but "demanding," as Syd described her love for the form in her bio-sketch in the classic 1974 anthology, *The Haiku Anthology* (edited by Cor van den Heuvel; Anchor Doubleday).

There's quite a lot of disagreement and even debate about the differences between haiku and senryu. I think early on, mom was pegged as being more of a senryu poet—apparently because, as a product of New York City, she focused more on human nature rather than the seasons and the natural world. I'm not sure she liked this label. In "*The Haiku Anthology*," she referred to her short poems as "city haiku"— perhaps she meant this as a mild act of defiance (I can only surmise). But mom certainly was a haiku poet —a "haijin."

The Haiku Society of America (http://hsa-haiku.org/) has definitions of these forms. But I've learned that there is little consensus among haijin (not everyone agrees with the definitions) and some say not to get "hung up" on them. This is actually something of a relief to me!

PM: Did your mother have a lot of support and encouragement in her ambitions? I know firsthand how challenging juggling writing, a full time job, and family obligations can be.

AL: No one stopped Syd from doing what she wanted to do. But if I recall correctly, she didn't get a lot of support and encouragement. Times were different—we are going back several decades. Mom was loved, of course, and her family knew she was talented, but I don't think her literary or creative ambitions and dreams were taken that seriously. Still, I don't think

Amy Losak continued

anyone really stood in her way—or not for long.

PM: What inspired you to query your mother's work after her sudden passing? It really sounds like a labor of love and passion.

AL: My family had long known that Syd had wanted to publish a poetry picture book (in fact, if my memory is correct, she wanted kids to illustrate it). She was a New York teacher. I guess pretty early, she determined that some of her short poems would appeal to kids.

Her sudden death in October of 1996 of an aortic aneurysm shocked everyone. At the cemetery in Queens, as we were leaving, my sister-in-law Debbie Rosenberg said that somehow, we would publish the kids' book she had long wanted.

Finally around 2011, after years of inaction based on my own procrastination and other "life-gets-in-the way" reasons (some legitimate, to be fair to myself), I started to mobilize. It had begun to dawn on me that time was not on my side, and the weight of that realization grew and became burdensome. But even then, I moved forward one slow—but positive—step at a time. I still wasn't ready to review and prepare one of her old manuscripts for submission, so in the interim, I found a number of creative ways to "resurrect" and leverage some of her best work for young audiences today.

For example, among other initiatives, after doing considerable homework on various organizations serving children, and a number of false starts and dead ends in trying to connect with them and interest them in my ideas, I forged a partnership with an amazing nonprofit arts education organization in New York, Arts For All (arts-for-all.org, celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2018). AFA brings diverse arts programs into city schools. Together we developed programs that use mom's haiku to teach art, music, and theater, primarily to second-graders (but also other grades). I have funded several teaching residencies in two schools, one each in the Bronx and Queens. This rewarding partnership continues today.

PM: How did you find the publisher for *H is for Haiku*? Was it a long process? Once you found a publisher, how involved were you in the illustrations? Do you think your mother would be happy with the end result?

AL: Once I got serious about moving forward, I took some time to evaluate the merits and drawbacks of various avenues to publication: finding an agent, submitting to publishers over-the-transom (the ones that are open to unsolicited submissions), and self-publishing. I did a considerable amount of research, and the Kid Lit and poetry communities were encouraging and helpful along the way. My husband Cliff and family, friends, and coworkers also supported me. It made such a vital difference, because I was tempted to abandon my project on several occasions.

I first began sending out mom's manuscript (which I had edited) in April 0f 2015 (National Poetry Month, coincidentally!). In 2016, thanks to a poet/editor/teacher, Aubrie Cox Warner, I learned about Penny Candy Books (https://www.pennycandybooks.com/), a new independent publisher. I checked them out online and I was impressed by what I saw. They were committed and creative, and they took chances. And importantly, they were open to unsolicited manuscripts.

I submitted a partial manuscript, per their requirements. The principals, Chad and Alexis, loved what they read. I sent the rest as they requested, and we signed the contact on October 31, 2016. The book was released in April of 2018.

Chad and Alexis kindly asked me for feedback about the style of illustrations I liked. When they selected Sawsan Chalabi, I was delighted. Sawsan's work is so clever and ebullient—she is wonderful (http://www.schalabi.com/).

I do think my mother would be thrilled with the result! And as an English teacher, she would so happy that the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) has chosen *H Is For Haiku* as a "Notable Poetry Book" for 2019. It also has been nominated for a Poetry Cybils Award. Syd would be overjoyed.

PM: Are there more writings of your mother that you'd like to see published?

AL: Yes. Mom wrote other poetry, short stories, literary and word puzzles, and more——even a novel. Some of her various writings were published decades ago, and some were not. I would love to publish a poetry chapbook for adult readers, at least. I have a feeling this was another goal of hers, which she didn't have an opportunity to attain, unfortunately. And I want to do at least one more poetry picture book, if possible. I have some ideas percolating!

PM: What are your writing goals, if any? Do you see yourself branching out into fiction or other genres? Has your mother's work filtered down and/or inspired your own writing?

AL: Syd was a charter member of the Haiku Society of America in 1968. She also served as HSA secretary in the 1970s, and on a couple of its Merit Book committees. I am now a member of the HSA. I'm trying to improve as a haiku poet, and as a writer overall. I'm a late—and eternal—beginner. And that's fine. But some of my short poems have been published! It's really quite remarkable, because I showed little interest in this form years ago, when my mother tried to engage me in her poetic and other literary efforts. So yes, Syd has inspired me—and she would be surprised, even shocked, I think. But she would be happy. And others in the Kid Lit and poetry communities have helped and inspired me, as well. Everyone has a story, a journey—and hardships to surmount. I've learned some terrific lessons along the way.

As for branching out, yes, it's possible. I have an idea for a picture book story, but it's still inchoate. We will see what happens!

I wish to express my gratitude again to many people who have been supportive over the years. They lifted me up when I faltered and wanted to quit. They helped me get here, and I will always be thankful.

I hope *H Is For Haiku* brings joy to young readers and the adults in their lives.

High Concept: What That Means, and Why It Matters

by Hilari Bell

If you hang around writers conferences, eventually you'll hear the term "high concept." A high concept story is pretty much the holy grail of commercial fiction—a story that sells itself. (Sometimes at auction, for a lot of money.) But when you ask people to define what "high concept" means, they start running into problems.

"It's a story you can sell, easily, with a two sentence pitch."

"It's a story that grabs you the moment you hear about it."

"No story that uses the word 'struggle' in the pitch is high concept."

But when these same people describe a few high concept pitches, you begin to get a sense of what they're talking about.

"A terrorist wires a city bus with a bomb that will go off if the bus slows to less than 60 miles an hour."

"A girl who attends a high school that trains kids to be spies falls for a normal boy."

"A doctor framed for murdering his wife must find the real killer while being hunted by the police."

You instantly know the central conflict of these stories, and that conflict is strong enough to grab your interest—that's the essence of what high concept means. The premise, the basic set-up of your story, is immediate, clear and compelling. And please note that this basic set-up is something that will emerge in the beginning of the story. Events that happen in the middle, or even the climax, are no part if what makes a story high concept.

So how important is it to have a high concept story? Well, it certainly helps when you're trying to sell it. A high concept pitch will be instantly noticed by agents, editors and readers. On the other hand, no matter how compelling your premise, if the novel isn't well written, if it fails to live up to the potential your pitch promises, it still won't sell. Having a high concept story opens the door—but the novel has to be strong enough to walk through on its own.

It's also worth noting that neither the *Harry Potter* books, nor the *Twilight* series, are high concept. Boy goes to school for wizards and fights powerful bad guy, and Girl falls for sexy vampire, aren't high concept premises. But these two series are among the best sellers of the last decade. Their success is due to good storytelling, and good writing. And as for the movie *Up*, it's premise is: Old man whose wife has died sails off to have adventures in South America. *Up* is about as far from high concept as you can get—but it's simply one of the best, and most moving stories I've seen in a long time.

In fact, strong plots full of complex twists and great character arcs, and with all the heart in the world, (which is pretty much the essence of *Up*) are the reverse of high concept—because it's the things that happen in the middle and at the end of the story that matter most. High concept doesn't mean "good." But it does mean "easier to sell," and anyone who has tried to sell a novel knows that's not a trivial matter.

I'd love to end this tip by telling you how to take a strong plot novel and make it sound high concept. (I write strong plot novels that aren't high concept, so I really wish I could do that.) But the truth is that if your novel doesn't have a high concept premise, there's no way to make it high concept. You needn't despair—look at *Harry Potter* and the *Twilight* books—but you're going to have to put extra effort into making your cover letter and synopsis compelling, because you're at a disadvantage when it comes to pitching. And if you're one of those people who naturally come up with high concept story ideas, rejoice. You have a profound advantage when it comes to selling—but you still have to write a novel that delivers on the your pitch's promise. No matter how high concept the premise is, a bad book won't sell. And sooner or later, a good book—whether high concept or strong plot—will.