

Children's Book Insider

April 2019



Spring Craft Special

Perfect First Chapters Find Your Story's "Why"
Building a Nonfiction Book Character Deep Dives

ABOVE THE SLUSHILE SUBMISSION CODE: ALBERT WHITMAN & CO

Table of contents

At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests.....2

Picture Books: The Importance of Finding Your Why
by Kimberly M. Hutmacher.....4

Editor Spotlight: Andrea Hall, Associate Editor at Albert Whitman
interview by Lynne Marie.....6

Finding Your Way into Your Nonfiction Book
by Candice Ransom.....9

Mini Blueprint: The First Chapter—Make it Count
by Jane McBride.....11

Featured Interview: Musical Background Helps Author Create Rhyming Picture Books that Sing
interview by PJ McIlvaine.....13

Character Interviews: Going for the Gold
by Jane McBride.....15

This issue's contributors

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

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>

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 #PBPitch, the premiere Twitter pitch party for picture book writers and illustrators.

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

Published 12 times/year by Children's Book Insider, LLC,
901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838.
970/495-0056.
ISSN 1073-7596
mail@CBIClubhouse.com
<http://www.writeforkids.org>

Publisher: Laura Backes
Layout: Shellie Dougherty
Editor/Agent Spotlight Editor: Lynne Marie
Genre Spotlight: Jean Diagneau
Featured Interviews: PJ McIlvaine
Chief Operations Officer: Jon Bard

Children's Book Insider, *The Children's Writing Monthly* is an electronic monthly newsletter that is included in the paid membership to the Children's Writing Knowledge Base (<http://www.CBIClubhouse.com>). The cost of membership is \$49.95 per year, or \$5.49 per month if billed monthly. For more information, go to <http://writeforkids.org/come-join-the-insiders/>

Text copyright © 2019 Children's Book Insider, LLC. Subscribers may reprint up to 300 words with credit to Children's Book Insider, www.writeforkids.org. For longer reprints, email Laura Backes at Laura@CBIClubhouse.com.

Children's Book Insider makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses and literary agents before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers or agents with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. All "At Presstime" listings are current at the time of initial publication. Members are urged to verify listings past the month of publication.

At Presstime:

Nineteenth Annual New Voices Award Open to Submissions

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

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

Send to: Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, Suite 1205, New York, NY 10016. ATTN: New Voices Award. **Submissions must be postmarked by August 31, 2019.** The winners will be announced by December 31, 2019. For more information go to <https://www.leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award> Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this Award.

Agent Seeks Middle Grade Fiction, Nonfiction and Graphic Novels

Alyssa Eisner Henkin is Senior Vice President of Trident Media Group (<https://www.tridentmediagroup.com/>). Actively seeking new clients, Alyssa represents all forms of literature and illustration for children and young adults. Alyssa's primary focus for new projects is middle grade. She is fond of both fiction and nonfiction: from illustrated and graphic novels and memoirs to innovative series. Alyssa loves underdog stories and unique perspectives. She's also looking for younger middle grade projects that appeal to second and third graders, along the lines of *A Boy Called Bat*. Illustrated and graphic projects akin to *The Wild Robot*, *El Deafo*, and Nathan Hale's *Hazardous Tales* are in high demand. She's interested in historical fiction and stories with characters living outside of the U.S., as well as middle grade nonfiction such as *Some Writer: The Story of E.B. White*, or based on a true story, as in *A Long Walk to Water*. She'll also consider select young adult projects, especially when they champion social justice or have an intriguing family or romantic dynamic.

Query letters should be submitted via email to ahenkin@tridentmediagroup.com. The first five pages of text should be pasted below the query letter in the text body of the email, not as an attachment. Links to online art samples or book dummies should be inserted in the body of the query letter. Responds within 30 days if interested.

Agent Accepting Middle Grade and Young Adult Submissions

Andrea Somberg is an agent with Harvey Klinger Literary Agency (<https://www.harveyklinger.com/>), representing a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, including projects for adult, young adult and middle grade audiences. Her clients' books have been NYTimes and USABestsellers, as well as nominated for The Governor General's Award, the Lambda Award, the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award and the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award, and have been chosen for ABA's Indies Introduce Program. She is currently seeking young adult narrative nonfiction that deals with the opioid epidemic; YA novels that are based on a true story from the 20th century; epic fantasy, especially one set in a non-Western culture; magical realism for the YA or MG market; young adult and middle grade novels that feature diverse protagonists; nonfiction for middle grade or young adult audiences; and YA or MG novels with great characters and compelling storylines. Send a query letter with a brief synopsis and author bio, and the opening 5 pages of your manuscript pasted to the end of the letter to andrea@harveyklinger.com. Responds if interested within two months. Does not require exclusive submissions. For more information about Andrea and her clients, see her website at <http://andreasomberg.com/aslitagent/> and follow her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Andrea-Somberg-NYC-Literary-Agent-at-Harvey-Klinger-199888223384030/>

Small Press Seeks Children's Fiction with Christian Themes

Established in 2018, WhiteSpark Publishing is the children's/YA imprint of WhiteFire Publishing, a small independent publisher of Christian-themed books. WhiteFire Publishing was created to embrace those books that the authors write from the heart but which can't always find a home in Christian publishing because of risk factors like subject matter, setting, or length. Their books embody the motto of "Where Spirit Meets the Page", and this continues with the WhiteSpark imprint. Recent titles include *Land of Lies* by Melody Carlson, illustrated by Bethany Harris and *From This Window* by Emma Broch Stuart, illustrated by Natalie Maza (picture books); *Meet the Misfits* series by Melody Carlson (MG contemporary) and *Cosmic Chaos* by CM Sheldon (MG time travel/sci fi); *Gone Too Soon* by Melody Carlson (YA contemporary). See <https://whitespark.whitefire-publishing.com/> for more titles.

Looking for picture book, middle grade and young adult fiction with a strong hook, engaging characters, and a Christian theme. Faith themes don't necessarily have to be overt, but should inform the plot or characters in some way. Submit a cover letter that includes your contact info, book title, genre, and word count. Also include a proposal (Word doc attachment) that includes a 1-sentence hook; a 1-3 paragraph blurb (as might appear on the book jacket); the status of the manuscript (estimated completion date if not finished); series info, if applicable; full bio, including sales history of other books, if any; marketing/promotional overview (to whom the book is targeted and how you'll appeal to them); comparable titles; a 2-3 page synopsis for novels; and the first three chapters for novels, or the full manuscript for a picture book. Email to Roseanna White, Senior Editor at r.white@whitefire-publishing.com

Illustrators who would like to send work to be considered for future illustration projects can email jpeg samples with a cover letter with contact info and your rates, flexibility, and whether or not you'd consider working for royalties or only on a paid-upfront basis to Roseanna White at r.white@whitefire-publishing.com

Follow WhiteSpark Publishing on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/WhiteSparkPublishing/>

Creative Nonfiction Retreat Led by Laura Backes and Two Award-Winning Authors

Vermont Writers Roundtable: How to Write Creative Nonfiction for Children and Teens, is an intensive retreat held in South Londonderry, VT on July 12-14, 2019. Limited to 15 attendees with nonfiction works-in-progress, the weekend will feature several small-group critique sessions as well as informational workshops lead by **Laura Backes**, publisher of *Children's Book Insider*, and award-winning nonfiction authors Stephen Swinburne and Peter Lourie. Yolanda Scott, Editorial Director of Charlesbridge, will present a session on the editor's perspective. After a collaborative, empowering weekend, participants will leave with an action plan on how to write, revise and submit their work. Go to www.vermontwritersroundtable.com for an information packet and application form. **All applications must be received by May 28, 2019.** Spots will be given to the first 15 qualified applicants, so early applications are encouraged.

Picture Books: The Importance of Finding Your Why

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

I have read and studied hundreds of picture books, and one universal truth has stood out for me. A picture book needs to answer a question. Let's dive in and look at some examples.

Be Kind by Pat Zietlow Miller

Question: What does it mean to be kind?

In each spread, Miller's main character, Tanisha, beautifully seeks to answer that question. When a classmate spills her juice and becomes embarrassed, Tanisha wonders what kind thing she could do to help her friend feel better. From there, she explores many different ways that kindness can be shown to others.

Wordy Birdy
by Tammi Kippes Sauer

Question: How can refusing to listen lead to trouble?

Wordy Birdy loves to talk, but she's not a very good listener. Her inability to listen, leads to trouble for this chatterbox, but her patient and loyal friends, come to the rescue. With their help, Wordy Birdy also learns to be a good listener—at least some of the time.



The Rabbit Listened
by Cori Doerrfeld

Question: When someone suffers a loss, what is the best way to help them feel better?

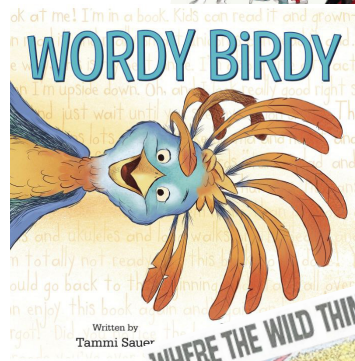
When the main character, Taylor, suffers a loss, each of her animal friends thinks they know just the thing to make Taylor feel better. They feel they have just the right answer. Eventually, Rabbit comes along and just listens. For Taylor, this was exactly what she needed. We learn that loss and dealing with loss is different for everyone.



Dress Like A Girl by Patti Toht

Question: What does it mean to dress like a girl?

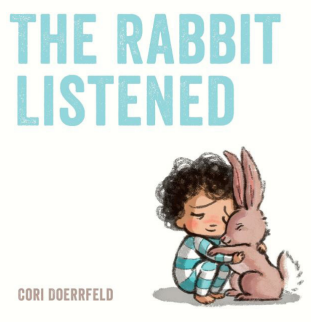
Should girls where white in the summer-time? Should you wear your team's colors to a sporting event? Would it be okay to where a spacesuit if you felt like it? Patti's answer empowers girls to dress in ways that make them feel most like themselves.



Where The Wild Things Are
by Maurice Sendak

Question: How does a young child learn to control his or her temper?

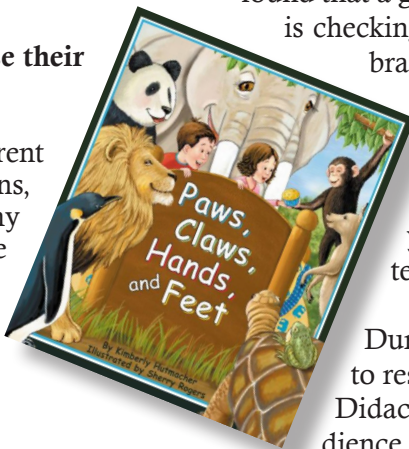
In this story, Sendak answers that question by having his main character daydream that he has sailed off to a safe place where he can be in charge and release all of his emotions. Then, when he's calm and ready, return home for dinner.



Paws, Claws, Hands, and Feet
by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Question: How do different animals use their appendages?

Each scene in the wild captures a different animal using their hands, feet, claws, talons, etc. for different things. Among the many animals featured, we see a chimpanzee with opposable thumbs that allows him to swing from branches and a lion using his claws to mark his territory.



Multi-Level Picture Books

You might be wondering if you need to have a question when you begin writing your story. It is not necessary at the beginning, but once you have that first draft down, it is important to go back over it and try to determine what main question the story seeks to answer. Sometimes I have difficulty figuring out my question. If this happens, I bring my critique partners on board for help. After this exercise, you might find yourself with several questions. At this point, it is time to try and narrow it down and find your focus. It is important to note that a picture book can answer more than one question. For instance, in my book, *Paws, Claws, Hands, and Feet*, readers not only discover how different animals use their appendages, they also discover where these animals live by visiting different habitats along the way. The book's illustrator, Sherry Rogers, made this magic happen. A picture book can be multi-level. We see this quite a bit in concept books. For example, in *City Dog, Country Frog*, Mo Willems tells a story of friendship and loss, but he also structured the story around the four seasons of the year. In most picture books, we do not see more than a couple of questions being addressed. Most picture books are 500 words or less these days. With so few words available to flesh out and tell a story well, the story needs to be as narrow and focused as possible.

Revision and Avoiding a Didactic Tone

Once you know your question, you have a great tool to help you begin the revision process. At this point, I go back through the story and underline any words, phrases, and/or sentences that do not serve to help to answer the question. Everything that is underlined gets cut, and

I begin reworking my story to answer my question. I have found that a good exercise to help me get better with this is checking out a stack of picture books from the library. I read each one carefully and try to determine the question it answers. This is a great exercise to do with your writing group as well. Knowing your why can guide you to the answers that will help you to create the story that only you can tell.

During the revision process, it's important not to resort to didactic text to answer the question. Didactic text preaches and talks down to its audience. With a heavy hand, it attempts to teach a lesson. No one likes to be spoken to like this, so we don't want to do that in our stories. E.B. White said, "Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth." It would have been easy for Miller to resort to didactic text in her book, *Be Kind*. She could have had an adult explain to Tanisha how to show kindness. That would have been a very different book, and it probably would not have been published. Instead, Miller has Tanisha struggle with this question. She has her ask and answer this big question on her own. Over the course of brainstorming ways to be kind, Tanisha also discovers how lots of small kindnesses can make a huge impact.

Andrea Hall, Associate Editor

ALBERT WHITMAN & COMPANY

Publishing award-winning children's books since 1919

interview by Lynne Marie

Albert Whitman is celebrating 100 years in the book business, and we are happy to share that joy with you by featuring Andrea, a self-proclaimed bookworm, in the Editor Spotlight this month.

Andrea's passion for publishing began in middle school. Prior to joining Albert Whitman, Andrea worked at Pearson Education. She works primarily on picture books and is particularly drawn to stories that have layers of meaning and diversity. She's on the lookout for the next book that pulls her in and won't let go!

LYNNE MARIE: It's interesting to note how you had got the "children's publishing" bug early on! How did it lead you to work for Pearson Education? What on-the-job experience from Pearson did you bring with you over to Albert Whitman?

ANDREA HALL: I did! I've always loved to read, and I decided in middle school I wanted to work in publishing. I'm lucky that it's worked out! After college, I was applying for positions in publishing companies when an opportunity came up to work at Pearson Education. I learned a lot about contracts, permissions, and the whole book making process, and I've brought that knowledge and experience with me to AW.

LM: What are some of the books that you relied upon as a child that you still feel are relevant today? Why?

AH: One book that stands out is *Dealing with Dragons* by Patricia C. Wrede. It was so refreshing to find a non-traditional princess who would rather run away and live with dragons than be forced to marry a dull prince who

couldn't think for himself. Cimorene was practical, headstrong, and determined, and she found her own path. All relevant themes today! (Though I don't recommend the running away part.)

LM: Who are some of your favorite authors from your childhood? Today? What draws you to these authors?

AH: Madeleine L'Engle is an author whose books I still reread today! Her writing blows me away. Maurice Sendak and Mercer Mayer are also favorites from childhood. Outside of all the amazing authors I work with at AW, some authors I'm drawn to are Grace Lin, Josh Funk, Mindy McGinnis, and Laura Ruby. These authors push boundaries, craft masterful plots, and create engaging characters.

LM: It's clear you look for picture books that teach the reader something (although not in a didactic way). What would you consider another common thread of these type of picture books that you've published? What are some recent

titles that exemplify this?

AH: Another common thread that these books encompass is family. Each family is unique in its makeup and traditions, and I love exploring that. In *Applesauce Day*, the reader learns about the process of apples becoming applesauce, but also about a family tradition being passed down through generations, which is lovely.

The Gift of Ramadan explores the holiday of Ramadan and how it's observed and celebrated by one family. It's also about the special connection the main character has with her grandmother.



LM: What are some themes you are looking for in picture books?

AH: I'm currently seeking picture books with themes of nature, STEM/STEAM, multiculturalism, diverse or special needs, folktales, lighthearted stories with layers of meaning and underlying message, and stories with historically relevant people or events that aren't overdone. I'm drawn to quirky and offbeat or silly humor and clever wordplay.

LM: Can you share some examples that represent these categories and give a quick comment as to why those books in particular stood out to you?

AH: *Chester Nez and the Unbreakable Code* is one story that's historical, cultural, and underrepresented. It's about the Navajo Code Talkers recruited during WWII and their significance in helping the US win the war. But it's also about the power of language and staying true to your heritage—despite what others say. It's a story that isn't well known, but in my opinion needs to be.

Delivery Bear is a humorous story about Zogby, a bear who wants to work as a cookie delivery animal. Only all the other delivery animals are cute bunnies. Zogby has to find a way to stand out, rather than fit in, to achieve his dream. There's an important message about accepting yourself as you are, not trying to be someone else, and thinking creatively about how to reach a goal. And, of course, cookies!

The Earth Gives More is a lyrical, rhyming story about the many things the Earth gives to us, and how we can each give back to the Earth. It's a wonderful call to action for young readers, showing them how to be good stewards to our planet.

LM: How important is a well-developed narrative arc in a picture book? Why?

AH: Very! There still needs to be a distinct beginning, middle, and end in a picture book. Even though picture books are short, the story needs to be complete. So make every word (and scene) count!

LM: How often do you receive manuscripts riddled with information dumps in the narrative? What advice do you have for dealing with this problem?

AH: I see this quite a bit in our slush submissions. While this information may be important to the story, find a

way to pepper it throughout the beginning chapters. This keeps the reader hooked and allows for a slow reveal.

LM: What are your thoughts about holiday books and their marketability?

AH: Holiday books are great, but there is limited marketability for them. The goal is to have a holiday title be a perennial seller—but keep in mind that this pertains to all the holiday books out there (and there are a lot!). There needs to be something that sets the story apart from the crowd.

LM: Do you have any advice for writers submitting books dealing with topics of diversity or special needs (and/or issue-driven books)? Can you give an example of a few successful one you've published? What did you feel made these work?

AH: Handle these topics with care! Think about if you are the right person to write the book, and why.

Far Apart, Close in Heart is one book that has been successful. It's about children coping with parental incarceration. The book explores the different emotions a child might be feeling and how parents and children in this situation can stay connected. What I love about this book is that it isn't one child in one situation—it's many children, each with different situations, but this one thread connecting them together. And that's reality.

Another book that has been successful is *Still a Family*. This story looks at homelessness from the eyes of the child. The family is split up in two different shelters, but there's an element of hope that the future will bring them back under one roof. Until then, they play together and eat together—because they're still a family.

LM: What revision tip would you recommend for picture book writers before submitting?

AH: For picture books, every word needs to count. Eliminate the words that are unnecessary. And read the story out loud! This is helpful to hear any problematic spots that may need to be tweaked.

LM: For chapter books/novels, would you put non-fiction or fiction books higher on your editorial wishlist? Please share any wishlist specifics you may have.

AH: Fiction books are higher on my wishlist right now. In novels, I'm looking for authentic stories with an emo-

Andrea Hall continued

tional core, memorable characters, and strong voice. I'm always looking for diverse stories and stories with tougher subject matter that's tackled with heart, hope, and touches of humor (i.e. in the vein of *Blossom*). I'd love to find a novel that makes me laugh out loud. I'm open to historical fiction, mystery, contemporary, contemporary fantasy, and magical realism. Please do not send me gore or horror, but creepy is okay!

LM: What revision tip would you recommend for chapter book / novelists before submitting?

AH: For novels, look at words or phrases that are over-used and try to avoid repetition. Most writers have them, and it's good practice to discover what they are and find ways to eliminate them.

LM: You have appeared at SCBWI conferences and conducted a workshop on "The First Steps in Creating Award-Worthy Books." Would you be willing to share a little tidbit from that presentation?

AH: SCBWI is a wonderful organization! Yes, I'm happy to share a tidbit from that presentation. It's important to be aware of what other books are on the market. Where do you see your book placed? What books does yours compare to, and how is your book different? Albert Whitman does ask for three comparative books published in the last five years as part of our submission guidelines. Do the research! And talk to a local librarian or pop into your favorite bookstore.

LM: What are some submission pet peeves you have?

AH: When the writer doesn't follow the submission instructions! These are there for a reason, and it just makes a good impression to follow them. Additionally, when the author gives their entire life story and it does not pertain to the story. Also, calling the submission the next "best seller."

LM: If you see potential in a submission, but it's not quite there yet, how willing are you to work with the author?

AH: Very willing! If I like the story that much, I'll reach out and see if the author is willing to revise.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Andrea Hall is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to CBI subscribers. You may submit a fiction or nonfiction picture book or first ten pages of a chapter book, middle grade or young adult novel to submissions@albertwhitman.com with the code **AH/CBI Submission 4/19** in the subject line. Be sure to study the Albert Whitman submission guidelines before submitting: <http://bit.ly/AlbertWhitmanGuidelines>

Please note this opportunity expires 7/1/19. Be assured that Andrea will give each submission special attention, but due to the volume of submissions, she will only be able to respond to those manuscripts she is interested in.

You may connect with Andrea Hall on Twitter at: [@andreadonall](https://twitter.com/andreadonall)

Finding Your Way into Your Nonfiction Book

by Candice Ransom

You've done all the research, interviews, and readings for your nonfiction children's book. The story is in your head, mostly. You sit down at the computer or turn to a clean page in your notebook, and . . . you're stuck. Or you've already begun working on the manuscript, but that opening isn't working. You try another. Nope, not that one, either. It seems the project you've invested so much time in has left town. Here are some ways to find your way into your book.

Nonfiction Vs. Fiction:

Being lost at the beginning sounds like a problem that fiction writers have (and is). Nonfiction, you may argue, is based on facts. You don't have to make up anything. You should be able to follow those facts and go from Point A to Point B. However, it's not that simple. Writing a nonfiction book isn't like using the directions to put together a piece of furniture. You are part of the equation of getting from Point A to Point B.

You stumbled on the nugget that snagged your attention. You pursued that lead until you realized you had the makings of a nonfiction kids' book. Or you chose to write about someone or something that has always fascinated you. And even though you're true to the facts, you bring an autobiographical slant to your story. The tricky part is separating yourself from the facts yet allowing your personal style to shine through.

The Right Point of View:

For my forthcoming picture book biography about Margaret Wise Brown, I could not settle on a point of view. The subject was mercurial, eccentric, and, in some ways, an unreliable narrator of her own life. I tried on different points of view like pairs of shoes: a diary format using Margaret's voice in first person, snippets from Margaret's books to portray different parts of her life, even telling the story from her dog's point of view.

Fourteen years passed during which I rewrote and revised and revisited the research. Why couldn't I make this story work? The answer came unexpectedly on a trip to Vinalhaven Island, Maine, where Margaret had a summer house. An elderly man who was a child when he knew Margaret told an amusing anecdote. I said to myself, "Only Margaret!" And bam! There was the way in. I revised the manuscript once more from the point of view of a child who knew Margaret, not that man, but myself. After spending so many years with her, I knew Margaret as well as anyone could.

If it suits your subject, try a first-person point of view. Or third-person close. Omniscient is always safe, but not always exciting. Keep in mind your writing style. Does it go with your subject? You wouldn't want a rambunctious style for a biography of Mother Teresa.

Ready for Your Close-up:

In her picture book biography, *Star Stuff: Carl Sagan and the Mysteries of the Cosmos*, author-illustrator Stephanie Roth Sisson used both wide shots and tight shots to pull the reader into the story of the astronomer who gave regular people the universe. Her book begins, "In the Milky Way galaxy. . . In a neighborhood of stars . . . On the third planet from the sun . . . In a big city, in a small apartment . . . Lived a boy named Carl."



The opening contracts from very large to very small, reminiscent of the way we wrote our addresses as kids: The Universe, Milky Way, Earth, North

America, U.S.A., Virginia, etc. This successful way in offers a hint of the story—the subject becoming an as-

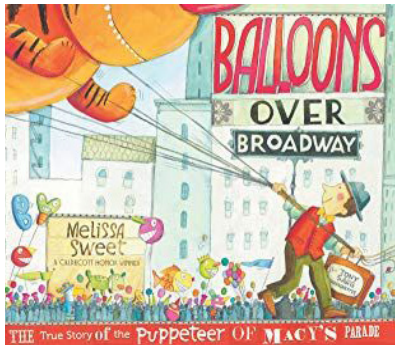
Finding Your Way continued

tronomer—to the boy himself, a character that readers can identify with. As Carl’s story progresses, Sisson expands her text accordingly, from small glimpses to the big picture.

As both author and illustrator, Sisson created her book by moving back and forth between sketches and writing drafts. Even then, she admits she piled up many “very wordy drafts.” Even if you aren’t an illustrator, sketch how you think your book might look. Vignettes or full-page art? A comic-book style? No one will see your doodles and it might help you focus your story.

Rebuild Your Foundation:

You’ve spent months, maybe years, researching your book and feel you know everything there is to know about your subject. It’s possible that knowing too much could block the way in. The solution: go back to not knowing everything. In other words, rebuild your foundation.



When Melissa Sweet was researching her book, *Balloons Over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy’s Parade*, she jotted a brainstorming list, “Ten Things about Tony Sarg.” At the end of that list,

she concluded: “It all started with the toys.” Tony Sarg was a playful man. On another brainstorming page, she decided what kind of sandwich Tony Sarg would be, what kind of car. She “interviewed” him with 100 questions. She drew a timeline of his life that included other important events.

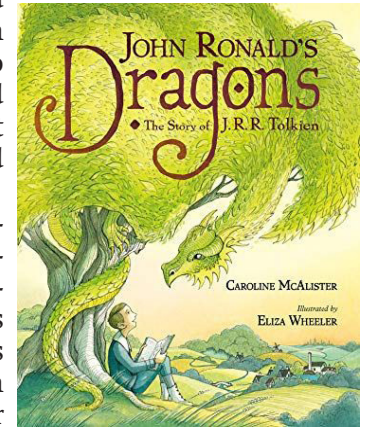
Creative brainstorming can be done at any stage of your project. Do it again (or for the first time) before you begin writing. You’ll have a better idea of what kind of sandwich your subject might be. The way in may appear in one of your lists, as Sweet did when she realized that her subject had been playful all his life.

Read Widely, Travel if You Can:

Author Caroline McAlister found the hook for her picture book biography, *John Ronald’s Dragons: The Story of J.R.R. Tolkien*, early in her research. She read Tolkien’s

essay, “On Fairy Stories,” and came across the line, “I desired dragons with a profound desire.” That window into young Tolkien triggered her book’s opening: “John Ronald was a boy who loved horses. And trees. And strange sounding words. But most of all, John Ronald loved dragons.”

On a trip to Oxford, McAlister saw C.S. Lewis’s typewriter and knew she wanted to write about him. This time the way in wasn’t as easy. She began the book in rhyme, losing sight of her story trying to make the rhymes work. Her description of the shipyard in Belfast where Lewis grew up also fizzled as an opening. She returned to her original visual, the typewriter. Lewis didn’t like to type; his brother Warnie became his typist. Her way in—a book about two brothers.



We can’t all travel to England to do our research. I’ve traveled for most of my picture books, but the destinations have been on this side of the pond. Travel gives us visuals we won’t find online or even in books, and a different perspective.

Even if travel isn’t an option, read widely, well beyond the particulars of your subject. If you’re like most writers, you love research more than the actual writing. At some point, your book will start calling to you and you’ll have to begin. Don’t fret about the way in.

For a detailed discussion of writing nonfiction in the picture book format, see Laura Backes’ **Writing Blueprints Masterclass: Writing Creative Nonfiction Picture Books** at <http://bit.ly/CreativeNonfictionPBks>

THE FIRST CHAPTER: MAKE IT COUNT

by Jane McBride

Serious writers understand the importance of the first line, the first paragraph, the first page of a manuscript. We have attended workshops, read articles, and perhaps even entered contests about the urgency to make those “firsts” sing.

In this article, we’re going to expand upon that and talk about the importance of the first chapter. Why just the first chapter?

The first chapter of a book gives an editor and/or agent a glimpse into your style and voice. If the opening pages contain only backstory and scenic descriptions, the rest of the story may well be lost.

Let’s look at some of the elements that make the difference between a riveting first chapter and a ho-hum one in a Mini Blueprint lesson.

The first chapter should:

- Introduce your protagonist.
- Pose a question for the protagonist to answer.
- Present a clear conflict.
- Contain plenty of action.
- Reveal characters through their dialogue.

STEP 1: Introduce your protagonist. Readers want to identify with characters. Put your protagonist(s) center stage from the get-go and keep him there.

ACTION: Make certain that readers know who your main character (MC) is from the start. The action in Chapter 1 should be centered around your protagonist, and the reader should be seeing this action through the MC’s eyes, whether you’re writing in first or third person. It’s fine to also have other significant secondary characters in this first chapter, but it should clearly be the MC’s story.

It is beyond frustrating to read the opening scenes of a book and not to be able to identify who the MC is. Yet, sometimes this happens. Readers want to know whom they are going to root for. One of the best ways of doing this is to establish point-of-view immediately. Recently,

at a writers’ workshop, an author handed out the first three pages of her manuscript for critique. Though I liked her writing style, there was no indication or even a small hint as to who the protagonist was. The point-of-view jumped from one character to the next, finally ending in the omniscient POV. As I listened to comments from other members of the group, I realized that I was not alone in my confusion. Don’t leave the reader guessing who your MC is. Let them see into his mind and heart, starting with your opening scene.

STEP 2: Pose a question for the protagonist to answer. A first chapter that captures and then holds a reader’s interest poses an important question that the protagonist will be working to answer for the entire story. Whether the book is for very young readers or for young adult readers, raising this question early in the plot will entice readers to invest in the rest of the book.

ACTION: Make the question an important one. It goes without saying that you will make it appropriate for your targeted age group. In a chapter book, it might be, “Can Sam convince his parents he’s responsible enough to keep the stray dog he found?” For young adult readers, the question may be “In a family of athletes, how can Ashley convince her parents to send her to science camp where she gets to participate in research on global warming when all their resources are focused on her sister’s training to skate in the Olympics?” Both characters are forging their identities within their families, but the arena gets bigger as the characters and readers get older.

STEP 3: Present a clear conflict that makes it difficult to answer that question easily. Without conflict, a story becomes a character sketch. Show that conflict early in the story. NOTE: The conflict presented in the first chapter won’t be the only obstacle your character faces, but it should be indicative of the main roadblock your character will have to overcome.

ACTION: Identify the primary obstacle standing in your character’s way of getting what he or she wants. Have your MC acknowledge this obstacle, or really see it

Mini Blueprint continued

for the first time, in your first chapter. Then brainstorm how this big obstacle can be broken into smaller obstacles to be sprinkled throughout the book. As your MC deals with the smaller obstacles, he will be building the skills to finally overcome the big obstacle and reach his goal.

In the chapter book example above, Sam has found a stray dog and wants to keep him. But on the way home he recalls how his parents have told him in the past that he can't have a pet until he learns to be responsible. At first Sam thinks his parents are being unreasonable, but when he walks in the door he realizes he left his homework at school, so he'll be turning in the assignment late again. He reaches into his piggy bank to get his allowance to buy dog food, and remembers that he didn't do his chores that week, and so didn't get paid. And when he brings the dog into his bedroom, Sam sees all the dirty dishes on the floor filled with food that might not be good for a dog to eat. Sam thinks, "Maybe my parents are right. I'm not very responsible." His primary obstacle is himself. Sam's going to have to change, and fast.

(In later chapters, as Sam begins to learn exactly what "responsible" means, he must face a related obstacle: does he put signs up around the neighborhood about the lost dog and contact the local Humane Society in an effort to locate the owner?)

STEP 4: Contain plenty of action. Gone are the days where flowery descriptions of scenery, landscape, and drawing rooms will snag readers' interest. In our world of instant gratification and sound bytes, readers, especially children and young adults, want action and they want it now. That does not mean your entire book must consist solely of action scenes, only that things need to be happening in between periods of introspection.

ACTION: Have your character DO something. Don't simply focus on your character thinking about what she wants to do, or should do. On the other hand, don't write an action scene just for the sake of having more action in your story. Make the action meaningful; make it move the story along. Your first chapter pulls the reader from the opening lines through the presentation of the problem to the acknowledgment of the main obstacle. End it on a mini cliffhanger that makes the reader wonder "What happens next?"

STEP 5: Reveal characters through their dialogue. Do you ever find yourself skimming long passages of narrative in a book and jumping to the dialogue? I do. Narrative is necessary, but it usually does not give great

insights into character. Good dialogue reveals character. The opening chapter is the first time your readers will hear your characters speak. They'll be forming an impression of your characters from these first words. Your characters' personalities and how they interact with each other all starts here.

ACTION: Listen to real-life conversations. Shamelessly eavesdrop whenever you have the opportunity. Pay attention to what is said and what isn't said. I learn a great deal when I listen to what is going on around me. Tune in to that annoying kid at the mall who is begging his father to buy him a new football. What words is he using? How do his speech patterns and syntax differ from that of his father? Does this mean you should copy this exchange verbatim into your book? No. Real conversations contain a lot of information that would bore a reader silly. Find those hidden gems in snippets of conversation and then use them to bring your characters to life. This applies not only to your protagonists but to secondary and minor characters as well. Read your dialogue aloud. If you are brave enough to listen to your own voice, record passages of dialogue and then listen to them. Or have a friend or family member act out the scene with you as though you are doing dialogue for a play.

WRAPPING UP

Is this all there is to crafting an attention-grabbing first chapter? Of course not. You will need to use active voice, rather than passive; consider backstory and how to weave it into the present story; eliminate adverbs and adjectives whenever possible, and a host of other things. All of this comes with practice and a lot of revision. But if you focus on these five important aspects of your first chapter as you're writing your early drafts, you'll infuse that chapter with all the necessary elements to give your story a strong start. And it will point you to where you need to go in Chapter 2, and all the chapters that follow.


 The logo for "writing blueprints" features a stylized blue and white globe icon to the left of the text "writing blueprints" in a lowercase, sans-serif font.

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, editing, submitting, marketing, or self-publishing your book, go to www.writingblueprints.com

MUSICAL BACKGROUND HELPS AUTHOR CREATE RHYMING PICTURE BOOKS THAT SING

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Natural born ham Tim McCanna combined his love of writing and performing to morph into a successful children's picture book author, with four books published in 2018 alone and more on the way. But as he readily concedes, it took years of honing his craft, a fair amount of rejection, and a healthy dose of perseverance, before he found his niche. Now a father, Tim makes his home in San Jose, California with his family. You can find out more at (www.timmccanna.com).

PJ McILVAINE: To say you have an eclectic background would be an understatement: you grew up in Missouri, you got your thesis in *Dramatic Writing for Musical Theatre*, you've acted, you wrote and produced an off-off Broadway musical, a stint as an accordion player in a folk rock group, and then eventually becoming a dad. How did all this prepare you to become a children's picture book author?

TIM McCANNA: Well, it did and it didn't! For certain, having written songs and musicals for years provided some experience in the craft department. Grad school toughened my skin and taught me how to take feedback and make revisions. And all the rhyming for songs definitely paved the way for me to be a rhyming picture book writer. But once I jumped into kid lit, I still had a lot of learning to do about picture book structure, leaving room for the illustrator, and making every word on the page count. On top of that, I had to immerse myself in the industry, which doesn't happen overnight.

PM: Your first book was published in 2013. In your opinion, how has the market changed since then? For example, shorter vs. longer picture books, topics, etc.

TM: When I sold *Teeny Tiny Trucks*, it came out in hardcover and as an interactive iPad story app. There was a whole hubbub about ebooks and the death of the printed page at that time. Clearly, everyone needed to just take a breath. Nonfiction has always been popular with kids,

but it seems even more chic these days. Writers are finding innovative ways to tell unique stories about science and historical figures. I definitely jumped on the shorter-text-is-better bandwagon, and it worked for me. But it seems like authors are selling longer manuscripts again. (I still say keep them under 500 words.)

PM: What part of the writing process do you enjoy the most? The first draft or revising? Are you a plotter or a pantsier? Do you write every day? If there is one thing you hate about writing, what would it be?



TM: Every book is different and goes through its own evolution. I actually like getting line edits and suggestions from my critique group and then trying to solve them. It's exciting to iron out the wrinkles. I'm a bit of a "plantier." I plot a bit, but I always follow my first instincts (especially in that first draft phase) and I listen to my characters. I don't write everyday, and I don't beat myself up about it. I write when I'm excited to write. When I'm not, I brainstorm, I work on marketing and school visits, or I just take a break. I hate that feeling when I'm in the middle of a first draft and I start to doubt what I'm doing. But I always try to push through and finish that draft, and I'm usually glad I did.

PM: Where do you get your ideas/inspiration? Have you ever suffered from writer's block? When do you know when a manuscript is "ready" to go out into the world?

TM: Sometimes a story idea will just pop in my head while I'm driving around town. Other times it comes from actively sitting and brainstorming. I don't believe in writer's block. You either put your nose to the grindstone and figure out a solution, or you table that project and write something else. As far as knowing if a story is ready or not, it's about practicing your craft over and over so you can start to develop a sense for when a story is really clicking. And, I rely on the critique group process. It really helps to have extra perspectives. If my trust-

Tim McCanna continued

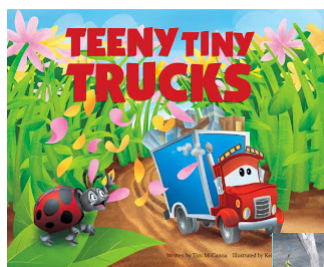
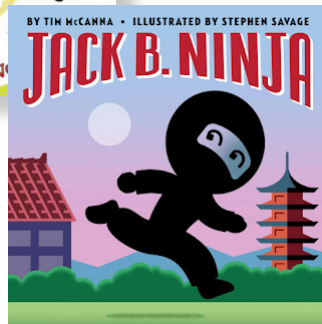
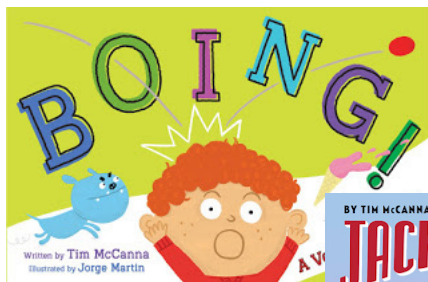
ed peers give me the thumbs up, I feel good about sharing a new story with my agent. Then it has to pass her eagle eyes!

PM: Four books published in 2018 is amazing. Were the books written at different times? How involved are you in the illustrations? Do you have any deals pending (or any books that you can discuss)?

TM: Thanks! 2018 was a fun year of book launches. All four books were written between 2015 and early 2016. Other than my spare art notes in the manuscript that sometimes get used and sometimes don't, I'm really not involved in the illustrations at all. I usually see a round of early sketches, and near final art, but I don't direct or contribute to the illustrator's process at all. A couple times an editor has requested I make a text change to help an illustrator out with a certain detail or page turn. I'm excited for my next two books coming in 2020. One is called *In a Garden* with illustrations by Aimee Sicuro. It's all about bugs and plants. And Richard Smythe and I are teaming up again for a sequel to *Watersong*. Spoiler alert: there will be dinosaurs.

PM: School visits seem intimidating to many writers, but it seems that you really embrace it and form a great rapport with kids. Was that easy for you? Do you have any tips for authors re school visits and social media?

TM: I do my best to be fun and confident, but I get a little nervous every time. I think because I'm so hardwired as a theatre performer, I treat my visits like a performance. I never go in and wing it. I write a kind of set list for myself, plan out which books I'm going to read in what order, and which songs I'll sing. The level of talk I give depends on whether I'm visiting preschoolers, kinders, or 1st through 3rd graders. That's how I roll. I envy authors with teaching backgrounds because they can really command a room. I tend to act like a goof and sing silly songs to keep the kids' attention. In terms of social media, it's all about finding a balance and doing what you enjoy. Don't



worry if someone else has an email list with thousands of subscribers. Be yourself and identify your target audience—if you're into that kind of thing. For me, social media always takes a back seat to craft work.

PM: How long were you in the query trenches before you signed with an agent? Are you with the same agent now?

TM: Like many people starting out, I was anxious to submit to agents and editors. I collected loads of form rejection letters from publishing houses in those first few years. Then I saw Caryn Wiseman from Andrea Brown Literary Agency speak at a conference back in 2010. I subbed to her right afterwards and she kindly passed. Four years later, our paths crossed again. I was a stronger, more experienced writer with much better manuscripts in my back pocket this time. I shared Bitty Bot with her, and a few weeks later she became my agent. I recently sent Caryn some new manuscripts to consider for submitting!

PM: What are you currently working on? Do you have a passion or pet project? Do you aspire to write in other genres?

TM: While I continue to write picture books, I'm currently working on a couple of middle grades novels. One I started in 2013 and have been tinkering with it off and on. The other one I wrote late last year. I love

both, but these projects take more time for me just by nature of their length and complexity. Middle grade novels are such a different beast! I admire anyone who's been successful at it.

PM: What book has influenced you the most? And what book do you wish you had written?

TM: Julia Donaldson's *What the Ladybug Heard* is a book I go back and read when I'm feeling slumpy. It's truly genius—the rhyming, the structure, the characters, the repetition, and the read-aloud-ability all wrapped in a delightfully illustrated story. But I wish I'd written Jon Klassen's *I Want My Hat Back*. So clean, so simple, but so memorable and funny.

CHARACTER INTERVIEWS

—GOING FOR THE GOLD

by Jane McBride

Interviewing your characters, especially your protagonist, antagonist and significant secondary characters, is a tried-and-true method for digging deeper than age, appearance and grade when creating the cast for your story. But, in the rush to get past the preliminaries and start writing their book, many authors ask only surface questions of their characters. This is not a job interview; it's a life interview. Get personal, get deep. That's where you'll find gold.

If you start with two or three deep, open-ended questions, you pave the way for learning unexpected nuggets about your characters. If their first answers are short and easy, see if you can add a complication or two to their life that makes the answer less straightforward, and that leads to even deeper questions. Here's an example:

Where do you see yourself as fitting into both your private world and the world at large? Depending upon the character's age, he may feel that he doesn't fit into one or both of these places. Let's ask these questions of 16-year-old Jared. Short answer: Jared sees himself as an artist, and wants to devote all his spare time to honing his skills, but the world sees him as a potential basketball star. So he can't fit into both worlds without compromising one of them.

That's a broad basis for a plot, but can we throw some details into this combination to create more specific conflict? Let's brainstorm some wrinkles: Jared is tall, lean, and athletic and is expected by his parents, his friends, and the school at large to play basketball. To add to the pressure, the school's basketball team has an abysmal record and he is expected to step up and lead the school team to a championship season. But what if Jared doesn't like basketball and wants to focus his energies on art, aiming toward an art scholarship when he graduates? He may very well feel that he doesn't fit in with his family's image of him and with his friends' and school's image of him. Teens often desperately want to fit in with others' perceptions. When they don't, a guilt-producing

conflict can overwhelm them.

This complication leads us to the second question: **What is other people's perception of you?** Jared knows precisely what other's perception is of him. It is diametrically opposed to his self-perception. Let's lay on another layer of conflict for him and have his father be an all-state basketball champion when he was in high school. Upping the conflict and guilt for our character is the fact that his father attended the same high school. Jared is a "legacy," and, therefore, carries that responsibility and duty to uphold the family name and honor. And it's assumed by his family that this "legacy" status is important to Jared.

Then, naturally, we have to ask: **What is your perception of yourself?** Jared sees himself as someone who expresses himself through his art. Throwing a ball around a court seems like a giant waste of time. But Jared feels he'll be letting his family down—not living up to the family name—if he doesn't play basketball and excel at it.

Interesting. Now we've got a story taking shape. But we still need to know more about Jared and how he got here.

How have you changed on the outside since last week? Last month? Last year? Last year, at 15 years old, Jared was scrawny, uncoordinated, all elbows and knees. He was passed over in sports and was content with the way things were. No one cared that he was an artist. Now, having grown six inches and being more physically developed, he must bear up under the expectations of others.

Have you changed on the inside since last week/month/year? Obviously, Jared has changed physically from last year. More importantly, though, he has changed emotionally. As he begins to understand himself better, he knows that he can never be happy making sports the center of his life. His artistic talents

Character Interviews continued

have grown and he's received some positive feedback from his art teacher and judges in contests where he has entered his work.

How are you like your friends? How are you different? Jared was comfortable hanging around with the school nerds. He liked talking about art and music and journalism. Now he's expected to hang with the jocks. As far as he's concerned, the jocks are jerks.

Do you fit in with your family? Jared's family is sports-obsessed. From his six-year-old sister to his booster-member father, the family eats, breathes, and lives for sports. With his artistic, sensitive nature, Jared doesn't fit in at all.

Do your parents and/or other significant caregivers support who you are? Jared is a good student and doesn't have give his parents a hard time, but that doesn't keep them from being on his case to go out for basketball. When he doesn't, he feels that he's let his parents down. They, in turn, feel betrayed by a son who doesn't hold their values. Jared wonders why they can't love him as he is.

Do your parents/significant caregivers seem to favor your siblings or peers over you, or do you feel they appreciate you all as individuals? Jared's father is a good guy, but he doesn't understand Jared. When Jared disappoints him about basketball, he spends more and more time with Jared's younger brother, Trent, who loves all things sports.

If you could change anything about you, what would that be? Jared wishes he had the courage to stand up to his parents, his friends, and the school. He is afraid he is going to cave and give in to the expectations of others. If he does, he knows he will hate himself.

Are we done yet? Nope. Notice how all the answers are in third person. This first pass served to establish the broad strokes of Jared's character and some of his backstory, but we still haven't gotten inside Jared's head. Now we'll go back and ask the same questions but write the answers in first person, in Jared's voice.

When you do the second step of this exercise, don't refer to the original, third-person answers as you're writing the first-person responses. You want your character to be free to take the story in a new direction, or add details not contained in the first round of questions. How your character feels about the questions you're asking is important. Does he answer reluctantly? Is he angry? Is he resolved? Each nuance can affect the trajectory of your plot.

NOTE: Our example uses a character for a young adult novel, but you can interview characters for younger books the same way. You'll only use information about your character that applies directly to the scope of your book (and with a picture book, that scope will be much narrower), but knowing all these details will give you plenty to draw from to create unique, unexpected characters and plots.

After you've fully interviewed your character, look at the totality of information you've uncovered. Only then can you begin plotting out your story by determining what your character wants more than anything, and what's standing in his way of getting it. You'll also know what he's capable of doing, or not doing, in his efforts to achieve his goal.

For tips on how to use dialogue to develop your character, see our **Writing Blueprints Masterclass: Dialogue Made Easy**

<http://bit.ly/DialogueMadeEasy>