Children's Book Insider

HOW TO KEEP YOUR READERS RIVETED

May 2019

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE CODE: Nelson Literary Agency

Table of contents

This issue's contributors

Laura Backes has published *Children's Book Insider* since May 1990, is the co-creator of Writing-Blueprints.com, and WriteForKids.org, and a founder of Picture Book Summit (www.picture-booksummit.com).

Jean Daigneau has been published in newspapers and magazines, including *Highlights* and *Fun for Kidz,* and has sold educational testing material, craft ideas, and greeting card text. Her work has appeared in *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writers' and Illustrators' Market.* She is a former regional and assistant regional advisor for SCBWI Ohio North and currently serves on the executive board. Jean is represented by Vicki Selvaggio, Associate Agent at the Jennifer Di Chiara Literary Agency.

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

Lynne Marie is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), *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.

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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

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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:

New Children's Imprint Seeks Books that Focus on Mental Health Issues

Trigger Press, a publisher that focuses on adult books on mental health and wellbeing, will debut their children's imprint *Upside Down Books* in the fall of 2019. Alli Brydon, formerly of the Bright Agency, will be the acquiring editor. The inaugural list will initially include fiction and nonfiction picture books, activity, and middle grade nonfiction that focus on mental health issues while also promoting positivity, emotional intelligence, and wellness for children. Future lists will also include young adult nonfiction. The focus of *Upside Down Books* will be "comforting, nurturing, playful, and humorous books, while sparking thought, conversation, and action for children and the adults in their lives."

For picture books, submit full manuscripts. For the other categories, submit a proposal with an outline and 2 sample chapters. Also include a cover letter with the following: information about your proposal or manuscript, including where you see your project fitting in with the Trigger list and where you see it placed in bookshops; biographical information, especially about your previous publications, any awards you have received for your work, and special qualifications; your contact details, including the best way to reach you. Paste all submission materials into the body of an email and send to **submissions@triggerpublishing.com**. Replies in about 3-4 months. For more information, go to **http://www.triggerpublishing.com/**

Independent Publisher Seeks #OwnVoices Authors/Illustrators for Ages 5-12

Reycraft Books is an independent publisher of fiction for ages 5-12 for children from underrepresented communities that mirror their lives and experiences. Actively seeking #OwnVoices authors and illustrators who represent and honor these communities. Currently accepting submissions for picture books and easy readers (send a cover letter and the full text without illustrations unless you are a professional artist), and chapter books/middle grade (send cover letter and full text). Also accepting submissions from illustrators who do not have a manuscript (send a cover letter and three sample illustration and/or links to online portfolios). Your cover letter should include your name, contact information, manuscript genre and target age group, the underrepresented group to which you most closely identify, and a link to your website, if you have one. All submissions will be done via an online form on the Reycraft website (manuscripts must be either Word documents or PDFs). For more information and the submission links, go to **http://www.reycraftbooks.com/** Responds within four months if interested. Does not require exclusive submissions.

International Competition for Unpublished Illustrators Outside of the U.S.

If you're an unpublished children's book illustrator from the Netherlands, Belgium, France, South Africa, Germany or the United Kingdom you are eligible to enter Picture This!, a competition sponsored by several international publishers. The works of the 15 winning artists will be part of a travelling exhibition, which will be shown in the participating countries. The final selection will be published in an international catalogue and presented to several leading picture book publishing houses at the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2020. Entries must consist of text and illustration for a picture book (the story can be original, or you can illustrate a public domain story). Three illustrations and a story synopsis must be uploaded to a form on the Picture This! website **by May 15.** Entrants who pass the first round will be asked to send hard copies of their work to the judges. Go to **https://www.wwpbic.com/** for more information.

Highlights **Magazine Current Needs**

Highlights, a general-interest magazine for children ages 6-12, has released its current submission needs. **These guidelines are in effect for the month of May 2019 only.** Submissions to the magazine will be closed from June 1-August 31, 2019. All submissions must be done electronically through Submittable at **https://highlights.submittable.com/submit/29961/highlights-magazine**

Crafts and Activities: All crafts, including recipes, science experiments, and engineering projects, should have concise, numbered directions, around 4 to 6 steps. Submit step-by-step photos of a well-made sample of the project. Materials should be inexpensive and easy to obtain.Crafts and recipes that celebrate holidays and religious traditions are welcome. Current needs: Crafts from various cultures that include a few contextual sentences that have been reviewed by an expert; games kids can make; STEM activities; interesting, easy- to intermediate-level recipes. Payment: $40 and up

Puzzles: Instructions should be concise. Playful themes and language are welcome. Current needs: All kinds of puzzles–word puzzles, visual puzzles, code puzzles, logic puzzles, and so on. Especially need math puzzles that are fun and don't feel like schoolwork. For example, they might include a payoff or some enticing tidbit that makes kids want to solve the puzzle. No puzzles that require kids to write in the magazine (crosswords, word searches, etc.) Payment: $40 and up.

My Sci submissions: Photo-based features of 100-175 words. Queries should include the topic, the angle you plan to take, and the credentials of an expert you plan to ask for a review. Subject should lend itself well to a great photo–science "eye-candy"–to intrigue young readers. Photos do not need to be provided by the author, but the author should consider how the text might drive the choice of photo. Especially need non-animal subjects at this time. Payment: $75 and up.

Nonfiction Articles: Accepting only detailed queries at this time. Queries should include the proposed topic and focus as well as a list of sources and potential interview subjects. Articles for beginning readers should have fewer than 400 words. Articles for independent readers should have fewer than 700 words. Prefers research based on firsthand experience, consultation with experts, and primary sources. Articles about cultural traditions and ways of life should reflect a deep understanding of the subject. Prefers biographies that are rich in quotes and anecdotes and that place the subject in a historical or cultural context. Payment: $175 and up

Fiction: Stories should have an engaging plot, strong characterization, a specific setting, and lively language. Stories for beginning readers should have fewer than 475 words and should not seem babyish to older readers. Stories for independent readers should have fewer than 750 words and should be appealing to younger readers if read aloud. Graphic (comic-book format) stories should have fewer than 400 words. In addition, they might include ideas for panel breaks and basic art notes. Current needs: historical fiction set during periods other than World War II; graphic (comic-book format) stories; humorous stories; fantasy stories; mystery stories; stories set in countries outside the United States; holiday stories, especially Thanksgiving, Easter, Passover, and Hanukkah. Does not need Christmas or Halloween stories, or stories on food traditions. Payment: $175 and up.

Verse: Current needs are short verse (up to 10 lines), especially non-rhyming and/or humorous poetry. Not accepting poems with nature or seasonal themes or poems about dogs at this time. Payment: $40 and up

Cartoons: Can be single-panel or multiple-panel, black-and-white or full-color, with or without a caption, and with either human or animal characters. Current needs: cartoons that are fresh, original, and geared to kids. No cartoons with adult characters at this time. Payment: $40 and up for black-and-white; $50 and up for full-color.

Applications for the **Vermont Writers Roundtable**, a small-group creative nonfiction retreat led by Laura Backes and authors Stephen Swinburne and Peter Lourie, are due by May 28. Limited to 15 participants, there are **only two spots left for the July 12-14 session** in South Londonderry, VT. For more information, go to **www.VermontWritersRoundtable.com**.

Counting Down to 30: Part 1
Skill Transcends Talent

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader:

This issue marks the beginning of *Children's Book Insider*'s 29th year. That's right, we've been publishing this newsletter longer than some of you have been alive. Rather than ruminate how I could have possibly gotten old enough to have done anything this long, I decided to spend the 12 months leading up to our 30th anniversary by sharing some truths about this business I've learned along the way. These are my personal insights—some you may find inspiring, others will be wrapped in tough love. And whether you agree with them or not, I hope they spark some interesting discussions the next time you get together with your writer friends.

So let's kick off with a truth I've seen play out over and over in my decades in publishing: A writer's success hinges far more on skill than on talent.

Let me explain. If you strip away everything else from a writer's abilities, and give her *only* skill or *only* talent, I believe skill wins. The perfect package, of course, is a combination of skill and talent. But what if you truly want to be a published author, but you didn't come out of the womb with a natural, effortless ability communicate through the written word? Do you even stand a chance?

You bet. And in my experience, your lack of natural talent could even work to your advantage.

I have read manuscripts by writers who clearly have an innate ability to string words together. I've seen characters appear fully-formed in two or three sentences, and descriptions that have immediately transported me to another place. But often these same authors can't structure a plot that pulls me through the story, or craft a satisfying arc to their character's journey. They can't cut the unnecessary scenes from their chapters or add page-turning moments to their picture book texts. Their talent carried them through school, earning them attention and praise for their work. Well-deserved praise, but the step from writing a compelling essay to writing a publishable book is a big one. One that is built on skill.

While you can't control your DNA, you can control how hard you work on your skills as a writer. And trust me, there are a lot of factors in publishing that are completely beyond your control, so why not put all your energies into the one thing that can tip the scales in your favor?

So what are the components of skill, those factors that must be developed, regardless of natural talent? Here's a partial list, some of which may surprise you:

- Practice
- A curiosity about what makes a great children's book, to the point where you read hundreds of published books in your area of interest (and dozens more outside your area, because...why not?).
- The willingness to analyze your favorite books to understand exactly how they're put together. This may include typing out the texts, highlighting and studying all the dialogue, reading blog posts by the author on his inspiration for the story, and asking yourself if the author made the best decision at each critical plot point (and if not, how would you do it better?).
- A desire to raise your own writing to the level of your favorite authors by taking writing classes, attending webinars, and generally investing in your education.

- Practice.
- Developing a firm understanding of what a children's book actually *is*. This includes everything from knowing accepted word counts, to how to structure a plot, to how to give your characters believable yet necessary flaws, to finding a focus for your nonfiction book that's meaningful to readers.
- Developing a firm understanding of who your readers actually *are*, how they think and what's important to them.
- Joining a critique group and getting feedback on your work. Welcoming constructive criticism because you know that's the only way you'll find out whether the book in your head has actually become the book on the page.
- Practice.
- Writing one, or three, or five manuscripts that just don't work before you finally write the one that does, and then being grateful for those other manuscripts for teaching you how to write.
- Falling in love with an idea, then setting your feelings aside so you can hold the idea up and really examine it. Is it book-worthy? Is it original and amazing? Or is it simply easy? Having the courage to cast the easy ideas aside (let the unskilled writers pick them up), and embrace the idea that's a little scary, or challenging, or uncomfortable. And falling in love with that one.
- Taking that gem of an idea (the one you've deemed worthy of your love) and giving it *yet another twist,* making it so completely your own that it will outlast any current publishing trends. This twist should also give your premise a hook, allowing the agent to pitch it to a publisher—and the publisher to sell it to book buyers—with a one- or two-sentence summary.
- Accepting that if your manuscript is regularly rejected, it's not because of your age, or your background, or your lack of an MFA. It's probably because you either haven't yet found the editor or agent who is as passionate about your book as you are, or you haven't yet developed your skill to the level necessary to get published. And a skillfully-written manuscript is far more likely to inspire passion than a serviceable one.
- Practice.
- The conviction that, even if your book never hits the best-seller lists, you'll gladly join the ranks of thousands of midlist authors who may not be household names, but whose books have touched the lives of readers for years, and who are awarded rock star status by teachers and children when they visit schools.
- An absolute passion for writing, for your readers, and for children's books in general. This must be the world in which you want to live. If it is, passion will sustain you through rewrites and rejections, through developing skills that aren't in your wheelhouse and working those skills until you master them. Passion will remind you that you're doing this because you love it, even when you hate it. If joy doesn't permeate the work, then it's just work.
- Oh, and practice.

If you've been a *Children's Book Insider* subscriber for a while, this list shouldn't surprise you. If you're new to our family and you're still reading, then congratulations, you may just have what it takes to write a book and see it published. And by the way, this list applies to self-published authors as well as those seeking traditional publication, so don't be trying any shortcuts.

Before I let you go, I'd like to circle back to my earlier point about how lack of natural talent could actually work to your advantage. Here's what I mean: If communicating effectively through the written word has always come easily to you, you may not accept that it can also be hard. And at some point, every talented author is going to reach the limit of her talents, and she'll have to decide if she's going to push past that and develop skill, or give up. But if you start with the mindset that you absolutely need to grow your skills, then the work is just part of the process. You'll build your writing muscles early, and continue to make them stronger. If you begin by acknowledging that you have much to learn, then each bit of knowledge gained is a huge leap forward. And if you can check your ego at the start, you'll progress even faster. (By the way, I know some naturally talented artists who love their own work, but are indifferent to the works of others. These people rarely grow because they refuse to be influenced or challenged by their peers. Too bad.)

And finally, this: Every successful author I've talked to over the years (and this includes several award-winning, beloved icons), has emphasized how hard they worked to grow their writerly skills at the beginning of their careers, and how they continued to do so with each new book. And yet, when you read their work, it seems effortless. And you think, "Now *that's* a talented writer!"

Which begs the question: Does skill create talent, or just reveal it?

Maybe, if you're worried that you lack the DNA to become a published author, the talent is already there, waiting to be skillfully uncovered. If you're game to try, we've got your back. We've been teaching skill-building for nearly 30 years, and we're not going anywhere. So if you've been hard at work with us for a while, good for you. You've already outlasted thousands of wannabe authors who gave up when they realized what it takes to be successful. Keep it up.

And if you're new to CBI, welcome. Let's get started.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

What Would Heidi, Laura, and Jane Do? Finding Your Writing Mentors

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Heidi

It was 2002. I was a young wife, mom of three small children, and clueless aspiring children's book author. I thought that a good place for me to start would be in magazines. My children had subscriptions to *Babybug* and *Ladybug* magazines. I most especially loved the fun poetry sprinkled throughout the pages. I started writing and submitting, and the rejections started piling up. This poetry business was harder than it looked. As I read through different back issues with my kiddos, I noticed that several of the poems published in *Babybug* and *Ladybug* were written by Heidi Bee Roemer. I recognized Heidi's name right away because she was also our SCBWI Illinois Assistant Regional Advisor. Her name would pop up frequently in SCBWI emails. It wasn't long before one of those emails in particular caught my attention. Heidi was offering an ABC's of Poetry class. This was my chance to learn from a poet that I really admired. I couldn't attend the class in person as it was over four hours away, but Heidi offered to make audio cassette recordings of each class and mail them to me. Yes, you heard that right. It was 17 years ago, and audio cassette tapes were still a thing :)

I soaked in every ounce of poetry goodness from each one of the those cassettes. I read all of the materials. I wrote and wrote and wrote some more. Heidi critiqued my poems, and I tackled revisions. I read Heidi's published material, and I read other books that she recommended. I learned everything I could from Heidi. She unknowingly became my poetry mentor, and it wasn't long after finishing this class that I sold my first poem to Babybug magazine. I still follow Heidi's career, and when it comes to poetry, I still ask myself, "What would Heidi do?"

Laura

Heidi was my first writing mentor, but she wasn't my last. Besides poetry, I also developed an interest in writing nonfiction for children. I was homeschooling my children at the time, and I loved introducing them to science and nature topics through well-crafted nonfiction picture books. Also, my son was dyslexic, and I found that it was much easier to get him to practice reading when I provided him with nonfiction texts that really fed into his interests. One day, while researching how to get started writing for the educational market, I stumbled across an author by the name of Laura Purdie Salas. Laura had written hundreds of series nonfiction books, and she had just sold her first

nonfiction picture book. Unbeknownst to Laura, she became my second writing mentor.

I started following Laura's blog and sifting through the archives. I followed her on social media. If she posted about a nonfiction book she was reading, I tracked down the book and read it, too. About a year after finding Laura, I sold my first nonfiction picture book to Arbordale Publishing. It wasn't long after that I sold my first nonfiction series to Capstone Press. About 30 nonfiction published books later, I still ask myself, "What would Laura do?"

Jane

Poetry and nonfiction are my two biggest loves, but I have one more writing mentor—Jane Yolen. Unless you've been hiding under a rock, you know that Jane Yolen writes just about everything. She posts regularly on social media about daily writing accomplishments. She might write three new poems, revise two chapters of a middle grade novel, play with a new picture book idea, and write a speech for an upcoming speaking engagement—all in the same day! Her ability to jump back and forth seamlessly between very different projects inspires me. I remember reading in Jane's book, *Take Joy: A Book for Writers*, that writing was a muscle. In order to get stronger, the writing muscle had to be exercised. I learned that that I had to write all the time to become and to stay a strong writer. That was the best, most honest writing advice I ever received.

Jane also shares via social media about the roller coaster of submissions, rejections, and acceptances. Again, in one week she might report on receiving three poem rejections, two poem acceptances, a short story anthology acceptance, a pass on a middle grade novel from one editor, and interest from another editor on a YA novel. We see her persistence in her posts. Rejected materials get sent out to new editors. She does this over and over again until her work finds the right home. When it comes to motivating and inspiring myself, I always ask, "What would Jane do?"

If you're interested in finding your own writing mentor, I recommend the following:

1. Start at the library. Read as much as you can in the genre you're most interested in writing. As you read through the stacks, are there a few writers that stick out for you that you really enjoy reading?

2. Once you've discovered a few favorites, try to get your hands on as much of their published material as you can. Read it. Type it. Study it. You're basically giving yourself a master class on this particular author.

3. Find this author and follow them on social media. Writers love to share what they are reading and researching. They discuss experiences that spark new ideas. They might mention upcoming conferences and workshops that they will be speaking at. If you get the chance to connect at a local conference or workshop, go for it!

Find your "What would _____do?" person. Once you do, it will be one of the best writing educations you will ever receive.

KEEPING READERS RIVETED

by Jane McBride

How do we write stories that don't become yawn-fests halfway through? You've probably had the same experiences that I've had. I'm reading along in a book, only to find that I lose interest. It may happen during the beginning chapters, or perhaps in the middle. Maybe you're nearly to the end with the book and realize that you don't remember a thing about it. Worse, you don't care.

So, how do we keep readers riveted to the story?

Several factors come into play:

- Show, don't tell.
- Raise the stakes.
- Make sure every scene moves the story forward.
- Push characters to their emotional limit.
- Make them work to achieve their goals and then see those goals change.

Let's break these down into a Mini Blueprint lesson.

STEP 1: Show, don't tell.

ACTION: You will do this in two ways: first, by choosing specific nouns and verbs that don't require adjectives and adverbs for elaboration and also have a visual and/or emotional subtext. Use words that evoke the senses: touch, sight, sound, taste, smell. For example, The leaves skipped across the grass not only allows the reader to imagine how the leaves moved, but also lends a playful tone to the image. The leaves blew across the grass is too general and lacks emotion.

The second element of "show, don't tell" is making certain there is a reaction to every action. This is especially true when conveying a character's emotions. Suppose you are writing a story about a young boy's reactions to his parents bringing a new baby home from the hospital for the three-to-five-year-old set. Though young children look forward to the birth of a new brother or sister, they may also be a little jealous. I have witnessed this recently when my son and his wife brought a baby girl home. Three-year-old Wyatt had a hard time with the new arrival. All of a sudden, he was wetting his bed again and trying to do everything he saw his mother do with the baby. He got one of his stuffed bears and tried to wrap the bear to his chest as his mother had wrapped his little sister to her chest. How could I describe that without telling the reader what Wyatt was feeling?

Consider this:

Wyatt laid Bear on Mommy's scarf. The scarf smelled like flowers and Mommy. He tried to tie it around him as he'd seen Mommy do with Baby Christy. But the scarf wouldn't work. Wyatt twisted it every way he could, but it still wouldn't work.

"Why can't I do it?" he asked Bear.

Bear didn't answer.

Wyatt pushed Bear to the floor. "Oh no! I'm sorry, Baby Bear," he said immediately. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Wyatt threw himself to the floor, pulled Bear close, and started to cry.

Notice that I never used the words *angry* or *jealous*. I showed Wyatt's feelings of hurt and jealousy with his actions, and his confusion over these feelings by how he reacted to his own outburst.

STEP 2: Raise the stakes.

ACTION: Raising the stakes intensifies the action and feelings. How can we raise the stakes of Wyatt trying to cope with a new baby in the house? What if his father has decided to work at home and must use the room originally earmarked for Baby Christy for an office? His parents tell him that he must share his room with his little sister.

"No!" Wyatt shouted. "No. It's my room."

He already had to share Mommy and Daddy with Baby Christy. She couldn't have his room, too.

STEP 3: Make sure every scene moves the story forward.

ACTION: Be willing to cut scenes. Have you ever fallen in love with one of your scenes? You labored to get the language just right, the flow of the sentences, the precision of the dialogue. But what if it didn't serve a purpose to your story as a whole, such as moving the plot forward or revealing character? You have two choices: cut the scene, or rewrite it to give it purpose. Let's switch gears and go to a book for young adults. Sixteen-year-old Kelsey desperately wants her own car. Her parents tell her that she can have one if she earns enough money to pay for her insurance. Kelsey finds a job that will cover the insurance. She will be entering information into a computer at a medical office, five days a week after school. The only

hitch is that the job is at the same time as her cheer squad practice which is held three times a week.

One way to follow up this revelation is to create an introspective, angst-ridden scene of Kelsey walking home from her job interview, ruminating on the unfairness of life. She might liken her dark mood with the gathering thunderclouds on the horizon. She may complain to the universe that everyone expects her to be perfect, to always show up and do her job, but who is showing up for her? She could even stop to watch young children playing in the park and reminisce about how simple life used to be. And at the end of the scene, Kelsey would not have moved forward one bit from where she was when the scene began.

Here's a sample of how Kelsey could handle her problem in a way that moves the story forward:

What was she going to do? Take the job and give up cheer squad? Or keep cheer squad and give up her dream of having a car of her own?

"I can't do both," Kelsey said to her mother.

"Why not?"

Why wasn't her mother listening?

"You're a smart girl, Kelsey. Think it through."

Kelsey barely refrained from shouting at her mother. That wouldn't get her anywhere.

She approached the problem as she would a math equation. What were the fixed components? And what were the variables?

The beginnings of an idea worked their way into her brain. What if she could work at home for the days when she had cheer practice? She could do the work after practice and send it to the office electronically.

Excited by the possibility, she ran to find her mother and explained her idea.

Her mother smiled. "I knew you'd come up with something."

It's important to note here that moving the story forward with a scene does not necessarily mean your character takes positive steps toward solving her problem. Sometimes, moving the story forward means your character makes a bad decision, or loses ground. What we're really saying is that at the end of each scene, your character should have changed in some way. She may have learned something (positive or negative), or done something, or lost something. Each scene is a plot point in the overall arc of the story, and some of those points will be setbacks that eventually contribute to how your character grows and changes by the end of the book.

STEP 4: Push characters to their emotional limit.

ACTION: We all have emotional limits. Of course, what a three-year-old's emotional limit is different from that of an eight-year-old which is different from that of a sixteen-year-old. In the picture book about three-year-old Wyatt, we see him desperate to understand and to cope with all the changes in his life. Having his baby sister share a room with him challenges him to find a way to both love her and to maintain his place in the family. What if Wyatt's parents discover that Baby Christy is allergic to dogs and that the family must find another home for their beloved Goldendoodle Ginger? Though Wyatt can't verbalize all his feelings, he feels that his world is falling apart.

Wyatt went to his closet, found the space behind the hamper of dirty clothes, and closed his eyes.

He wrinkled his nose. Something didn't smell good. Probably his dirty socks.

Wyatt tried really hard not to cry. Crying was for babies, like Christy. He pulled a sock out of the hamper and wiped his eyes.

STEP 5: Make them work to achieve their goals, even when those goals change.

ACTION: In order for a character to grow, she must do some self-inventory. In our book about Kelsey, we learn that she is willing to work hard to make money for her car insurance. She is also willing to work hard to stay on the cheer squad.

In her room, Kelsey slumped over her desk. She couldn't believe she'd actually just quit the cheer squad.

Making the squad had been her goal since she'd been four years old and taken her first tumbling class. But now being on the squad didn't seem so important. In fact, ever since she'd started working in the doctor's office, the squad had seemed like a silly waste of time.

There are many other ways to keep readers riveted to your book. These are only a few. As always, use what works for you and scrap the others.

writing blueprints

Each month, we will be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, editing, submitting, marketing, or self-publishing your book, go to **www.writingblueprints.com**

Danielle Burby

Nelson Literary Agency, LLC

interview by Lynne Marie

Based in New York City, Danielle became an agent at Nelson Literary Agency (NLA) in January 2017. Previously, she was an agent at a NYC-based firm where she managed foreign rights in addition to building her client roster. She also interned at several top agencies and publishers before graduating from Hamilton College with a dual degree in creative writing and women's studies.

Danielle represents all genres of YA and MG along with picture books and select passion projects in women's fiction. She particularly enjoys complex female characters, quirky adventures, narratives that ask readers to think deeply, girls with swords, and seaside novels. Danielle also looks for a strong narrative voice and characters she wants to spend time with. For more information about her wishlist, check out NLA's Submission Guidelines page. You can find details about her recent sales on Publishers Marketplace.

LYNNE MARIE: After interning at several publishing houses and agencies, what made you decide to become an agent, rather than an editor? What drew you to Nelson Literary?

DANIELLE BURBY: When I applied to jobs, I was looking at both editorial and agency jobs, but was very specifically only looking at jobs that would allow me to work on the children's side in some capacity. I did have a preference for ending up at an agency because I like the flexibility in terms of being able to work in any genre or age group I want and to take on whatever clients most excite me. I also love working with authors over the course of their careers whereas on the editorial side you are working on a project by project basis.

LM: How does your degree in women's studies inform your approach to women's literature in today's market?

DB: My degree in women's studies gives me an academic understanding of structural inequality and intersectionality, which, as an agent who cares about supporting marginalized creators, is incredibly helpful. Using my position of privilege as a gatekeeper to magnify underrepresented voices within the industry—and to allow opportunities for children with marginalized identities to see themselves represented in fiction—has always been a priority for me.

My women's studies background also informs the way I approach editing manuscripts. I keep an eye out for sensitivity issues and am sure to flag them for my authors when I see them even though that may lead to uncomfortable conversations. I also understand that I have blind spots and, knowing that, I support my authors in finding and working with sensitivity readers whenever it is appropriate.

LM: Accordingly, you are seeking stories with complex female characters. Can you share examples of two popular characters that stand out as such, and why?

DB: A complex female character is really just a character developed well and treated with nuance and depth. Some characters that immediately come to mind include Marin from Nina LaCour's *We Are Okay*, Suzie from Ali Benjamin's *The Thing About Jellyfish*, and Starr from *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas. All three of these characters are layered, handled with care, and feel fully real-

ized. They all have major emotional obstacles to overcome and very believable and gutting growth journeys.

LM: What other elements are you looking for in a novel?

DB: A strong voice, nuanced writing, plots with unexpected twists, high concept. I like quirky adventures, queer narratives, complicated family dynamics, romantic plotlines that are an element of the narrative but don't dominate it, seaside novels, girls with swords, stories that take place in the aftermath of disaster (whether personal such as the death of a loved one or bigger picture such as a revolution), magical realism, YA, psychological thrillers, sister stories. I am also interested in social justice themes, own voices authors, and have a special interest in LGBTQ+ stories.

LM: It's not often that a children's book agent looks for "seaside novels." What are the aspects of "seaside novels" that draw you to them, in particular? Is *My Kind of People* by Lisa Duffy (Atria, Summer 2020) one of these such books? Why or why not?

DB: I love the ocean and when I can't be near the ocean I love a book that takes me there! There is a lot of beauty in the sea, but it can also be very dangerous and unpredictable. I love stories that use the ocean as a setting, whether it is treated as benign and beautiful or threatening and tempestuous. I'm endlessly drawn to books that take place by the water! *My Kind of People* isn't a seaside novel because it takes place in a town just outside of Boston, but Lisa Duffy's first novel, *The Salt House,* takes place in Maine and follows a lobsterman and his family as they heal in the wake of a tragedy. It is a great example of the kind of seaside novel I love! I also have an upcoming book in the YA space that I can't talk about just yet that has a different kind of seaside setting!

LM: Magical realism is an interesting genre. How would you define it, and what would you name as your favorite magical realism books in the children's literature genre?

DB: The magical realism I most enjoy has a literary and lyrical feel. Ideally, it has depth and gets to some core emotional truth. It should be a realistic novel with some speculative or magical element. In YA, I absolutely loved e. lockhart's *We Were Liars* and I think *The Hazel Wood* by Melissa Albert is also wonderful magical realism, though it tips more into a contemporary fantasy direction when you get deeper in. I was first introduced to magical realism by reading *Kindred* by Octavia Butler and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and those books have stuck with me on a very deep and fundamental level. Really good magical realism gets under your skin and stays there.

LM: Would you consider *The Twister, the Elephant and Me* (Crown, 2020) to be magical realism? Please share a little about this book and tell us why or why not.

DB: Yes, *The Twister, the Elephant & Me* by my client Celesta Rimington is absolutely magical realism! It is a beautiful story gorgeously told about a girl who is blown into a zoo on a tornado and sheltered by an elephant through the storm. This girl has a special connection with the elephant and she can also talk to the wind. Both of those pieces of magic are just part of her world and they aren't picked apart or questioned, but they both serve the deeper emotional journey of self-discovery in vital and moving ways.

LM: Another recent sale of yours was *The Paper Girl of Paris* by Jordyn Taylor (Harper Teen, 2020). Please share a little about the premise and explain what drew you to this book.

DB: This story is so fun because it throws the reader right into the 'what if' headspace. What if I inherit a secret apartment? What if I find potentially explosive information about my family's history there? How would I handle that? What would I do? Plus, it takes place in Paris and it alternates between a WWII and a present day narration. It really has everything you could want in a book!

LM: What type of MG and YA books did you read as a child? Please share some examples.

DB: The first book I ever read on my own was *Mandy* by Julie Andrews Edwards so that novel has a very special place in my heart. I was obsessed with *Ella Enchanted* by Gale Carson Levine and read it every year for a long time. (To the point that, when my local newspaper gave me a choice between interviewing Gale Carson Levine or Anne Hathaway when the Ella Enchanted movie came out I chose to interview Gale Carson Levine.) I was/am a massive Tamora Pierce fan. *Because of Winn Dixie*, *The Bridge to Terabithia*, anything Sarah Dessen, anything Robin McKinley. And, of course, I grew up right alongside Harry Potter and loving that series was basically a lifestyle for my throughout my entire childhood and all my teen years.

LM: What type of MG/YA books to you enjoy reading now? How have your preferences evolved over time?

DB: The books I love now are books I think I would have loved if I had read them at earlier stages in my life. I love

and have always loved writers who have something real to say and aren't afraid to take a risk and let the work be vulnerable. I love books that tell me something true. I also love fun books and daring adventures. I love being swept up in a story!

LM: You only represent authors who you feel incredibly passionate about. What are some qualities that have inspired this passion in you? What are you looking for in the relationship?

DB: I just sold a novel that I can't name yet because we haven't announced the deal, but it is a YA that is just amazing. It is literary and raw and real and beautiful and edgy in some very interesting ways. I took it on because I loved it and, when I offered the author representation, I told her flat out that it was going to be a hard sell. And boy was it a hard sell. I've read and edited that novel around six times so far, if not more. We were on submission for a year. I would talk about it in my staff meetings and my colleagues would ask me if I thought it was time to throw in the towel. I never did because I knew in my core that this novel was unquestionably worthy of finding a home and that I was willing to fight that fight. Publishing is hard and there are no guarantees, which is why agenting can be very challenging. You can work on a book for a year or more and never sell it and therefore never make any money on the hours you invested. It is also never a simple matter of sending a book to an editor and selling it and then moving on to the next thing. You have to fight for your clients every step of the way. You need to find them the right editor, negotiate the contract well, guide them through the publishing process, strategize about their long-term career, etc. I find that when I have passion for a project, I am able to keep up the energy and enthusiasm levels I need to be the best advocate for my clients. Plus, it is so cool to work with authors I admire every day!

LM: Pretend you have just opened up a submission: What do you want to see in the query?

DB: There is plenty of great query advice out there and I would say all authors should research that in depth before querying in terms of format, etc. But, fundamentally, I always look for the inciting incident, the protagonist's goal, what is at stake, and a sense of character.

LM: What does it take for you to get to reading the manuscript? Do you always peek at the manuscript? What will keep you reading the manuscript to the very end?

DB: I always take a peek at the writing because, at the end of the day, the manuscript itself is more important than the pitch. If someone is a masterful writer, their skill immediately leaps off the page. That, more than anything, is what hooks me. I like to feel like I'm in good hands.

LM: How willing are you to work with an author to get the manuscript publication ready?

DB: I have never submitted a project without doing edits. I edit with the goal of selling, which is similar to, but different than, editing with the goal of making a manuscript publication ready. I try to strengthen the manuscript so editors love the book and say yes to it, but the editor will then take it the rest of the way once they've acquired the project. I would say I typically do between two and three rounds of edits with my clients before we submit a project. It really depends on how close a manuscript is when I take it on!

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Danielle Burby has offered an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity to CBI Subscribers. All submissions must go through Query Manager at this address:

https://querymanager.com/query/1352

Put **CBI SUB/QUERY** in the "If this query is a referral, who referred you?" field. Your submission will include a one-page query letter and the first 10 pages of your manuscript. Danielle responds to queries within about three weeks, and tries to respond to requested materials within eight weeks. There is no deadline for when queries need to be submitted.

Note: ***Above the Slushpile*** *codes are special benefits for CBI subscribers generously offered by our Spotlight agents and editors. Please don't share these codes with non-subscribers. Also, please submit only one manuscript with the* ***Above the Slushpile*** *code, and make sure it's your best work.*

What is a Sensitivity Reader and Why Would I Need One?

by Jean Daigneau

Even though everybody loves a winner, what sometimes garners the most press is the bad news. In the world of children's book publishing, one of the hot button issues currently making headlines is a book that is panned or vilified for an inaccurate portrayal of characters from marginalized or minority groups. One such book, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, was called out for its portrayal of slaves. J. K. Rowling's book, "*History of Magic in North America*," was criticized because of how it portrayed Navajo traditions.

What then is an author, or in some cases an illustrator, to do? Hiring a sensitivity reader can go a long way to avoiding issues that might garner bad publicity. But as an author, bad publicity is only half the equation. Consider how you labor over every word of your novel. Knowing that someone has called you out on those very same words and accused you of giving a totally inaccurate portrayal of a marginalized community would be hard to live with. The book would most likely be pulled from shelves and go out of print, but like spoken words that can't be taken back, it can't be unpublished.

So, What Do They Do?

Just like copy editors and fact checkers, the goal of sensitivity readers is to prevent a writer from moving forward on a project replete with errors. Sensitivity readers have a different role than catching typos when looking at your characters. The major difference is that a missed comma won't impact anyone other than an anal reader like myself who catches it immediately upon reading. A missed representation of a culture or ethnic group not only does a disservice to that group, it impacts those reading the story. It can reverberate by perpetrating lies, false information, or inaccurate stereotypes. Which in turn can sway readers about how they think about certain individuals.

Best-selling author Patrice Williams Marks (**https://www.patricewilliamsmarks.com/**), a registered sensitivity reader and founder of a non-profit that works to diversify media, offers classes on being a sensitivity reader. She notes that "there are all kinds of sensitivity readers; all of whom address instances of misrepresentations, bias, stereotypes, misinformation and even unintentional racism…."

Why Do I Need One?

Marks gives two explanations of why sensitivity readers are needed today more than ever. In her words, "One reason is that more and more authors are choosing to write stories that include diverse characters, which is a very good thing. However, the author may create a character without having knowledge about them as people and may draw upon stereotypes instead." Secondly, she goes on to explain that "social media can be very unforgiving." It only takes one Twitter frenzy to tank a book.

Debut author Risa Nyman's middle grade novel *Swallowed by a Secret* will be published in October by Immortal Works Press. Although Nyman has personal experience with how mental health issues impact a family, she says that "mental health problems are complex and often devastating, and I wanted to make sure what I wrote was accurate and sensitive, especially for vulnerable, young readers. A book has the potential to make a profound impression…." Nyman turned to children's author and psychologist Jessica Bayliss because she was "uniquely qualified to do this type of sensitivity reading."

But what if you steer clear of multicultural characters? Or you avoid including characters from the LGBTQ community? Issues a sensitivity reader addresses also have to do with people living with any number of other challenges. Consider children today with a parent who is incarcerated. In 2016, authors of a study called *The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the United States* noted that incarceration often impacts a family's financial security and economic stability. It can impact a family's living situation if the family moves closer to where a member is incarcerated. Then, too, 10 percent of these children are unable to finish high school or attend college, most likely because they are required or feel compelled to work. When writing about a character dealing with incarceration, it would be easy to overlook the secondary issues that impact this population.

Sensitivity Readers continued

Bring on the Experts

Any author is remiss in not doing due diligence when it comes to writing outside your own experiences. As Marks explains, "Let's say you want to write a television pilot that takes place in a hospital and focuses on a hotshot cardio surgeon. Great. But you have no experience working in a hospital and no medical background. Wouldn't it be prudent to hire a consultant who is a cardiac surgeon? Or would you just write it and guess at how doctors and hospitals work? You could, but it would not be authentic. That is what a sensitivity reader provides— intimate knowledge and experiences within certain niches."

So how does it all work? If you Google "sensitivity readers," you'll find any number of people offering these services. As always, doing your homework will pay off handsomely. Some questions to ask yourself are: What topics does this person review? What is his or her own experience within this community? What other projects has he or she edited?

Do keep in mind that this person is not here to tidy up mistakes or tell you what a wonderful writer you are. If you want a stamp of approval, show your manuscript to your mom.

As always, read, read, and read books that deal with the issues you're writing about. Remember there are any number of subsets in any community. A sensitivity reader who herself is adopted may not have foster home experience. Or may not have dealt with abuse within that setting. Consider the layers of issues your characters are dealing with. Then consider whether or not one sensitivity reader can cover all the bases. Some can, but not all.

Show Me the Money

What exactly can you expect when hiring a sensitivity reader? As with any editing service, numbers differ significantly. The average I've researched is around $250 and up for a middle grade novel. You should sign a contract so the terms of the service are clearly defined. Usually the process involves a thorough read of the novel and a report on dialogue and word choices, plot lines relative to stereotypes and other issues, and any area that appears problematic. If you think about having your published novel trashed on social media because of a major glitch, that money might seem insignificant.

From her sensitivity reader experience, Nyman was shown places "where I needed to add more description of the mental illness to make it more authentic, without being heavy-handed or actually indicating what the diagnosis might be."

There Are Always Two Sides to Every Story

This article would not be accurate without mentioning some of the controversy of sensitivity readers. Not about not hiring them, but about hiring them. Some people have responded to authors withdrawing their work before or after publication and issuing apologies as nothing less than giving in to censorship and bias. I've read articles that tell these authors to grow a spine and, in essence, not to cave in to a small group of hypersensitive readers who have their own axes to grind.

And there are stories circulating where sensitivity readers reviewed manuscripts that were still trounced after publication. This is where finding an experienced reader should pay off.

The Final Word

Lee & Low editor Jason Low wrote in *The Horn Book* that they use the term targeted expert readers. This is intended because it "shifts the attention away from cultures and sensitivities and focuses on the true function of what these readers do for us: they are experts in a particular subject area. These readers are tasked with the job of verifying the accuracy of information that appears in books." Considering that many nonfiction authors are encouraged to have their project vetted by an expert in the field, why should other projects be any different?

Hiring a sensitivity reader is a personal choice. But, as Marks says, "Sensitivity readers are simply another tool in the tool belt of the author or content creator. They are there if someone wants to tap into their knowledge. Their job is not to stifle creativity or demand changes, but to simply give their opinion as someone coming from the same background that their character(s) are based on." And for an author who is writing outside his or her own culture, that kind of input can be invaluable.

It's important that you find sensitivity readers who fit your project. You may need to hire more than one reader if you are writing about several areas outside of your personal experience (race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, etc.) If you are fortunate enough to know people who belong to communities portrayed in your book, you can ask them to read your manuscript for accuracy. You can also Google "sensitivity readers" for names, but the best way to find a good sensitivity reader is by recommendation from other authors. Pose the question on writing message boards or Facebook groups you belong to. Ask around at conferences. When you do contact a reader, ask for references and clarify their rates (extra charges may apply if the reader is reviewing several versions of your manuscript). Always get everything spelled out in a written agreement.

One source for sensitivity readers is Quiethouse Editing (called "diversity readers") at

http://www.quiethouseediting.com/

AUTHOR DRAWS FROM REAL LIFE TO CREATE ANTI-HERO IN DEBUT MIDDLE GRADE NOVEL

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Inspiration comes from the most unlikely places. Even though Niki Lenz loved to write, she hadn't considered it as a real life career path. Then, as a kindergarten teacher, she met a little girl who would later become the inspiration and anti-hero of her debut middle grade novel, *Bernice Buttman, Model Citizen* (Random House, March 2019), with her second book, *Team Gravy,* scheduled from the same publisher in Summer 2020. Now a mom and proud Potterphile, Lenz lives with her family in Kansas City, MO, and claims, among her many skills, to know the words to every song ever written. You can learn more about Lenz and her affinity for polka dots and red lipstick at **https://www.nikilenz.com**

PJ McILVAINE: Did you always aspire to be a writer or was that a natural progression of your love of reading? Do you remember the first thing you ever wrote?

NIKI LENZ: I always loved writing and have been an avid journal/diary writer for as long as I could hold a pencil. However, I thought of being an author sort of like being a professional athlete or a rock star—nice to dream about but not very practical. When my kids were babies I loved to blog about all the cute things they would say and do. I always got comments like, "I just love the way you tell stories!" And then I started writing dramas for my church, and people commented with, "You write such great dialog!" So, I thought, what the heck, maybe I should try writing a novel!

PM: You were a Kindergarten teacher for several years (you deserve a medal). How did that experience help in terms of seeing firsthand what books resonated with your students? What, if anything, from your teaching days has made its way into your material?

NL: Kindergarteners are firmly in the picture book stage, and they will let you know which books they like and which ones they don't. I remember reading aloud a Dr. Seuss book one time and the entire class burst into applause at the end! I loved hearing them laugh, and I love it when my own children laugh at a great book. So funny stories have always been my favorite. I think the biggest advantage I take with me from being a teacher (I still substitute teach several days a week) is that I have an ear for what kids really sound like. Nothing pulls me out of a story faster than a kid who is talking like an adult.

PM: Where did the inspiration for your published debut book come from? How did you come up that great title? How many drafts did it take until you were satisfied that it was ready to go out into the world?

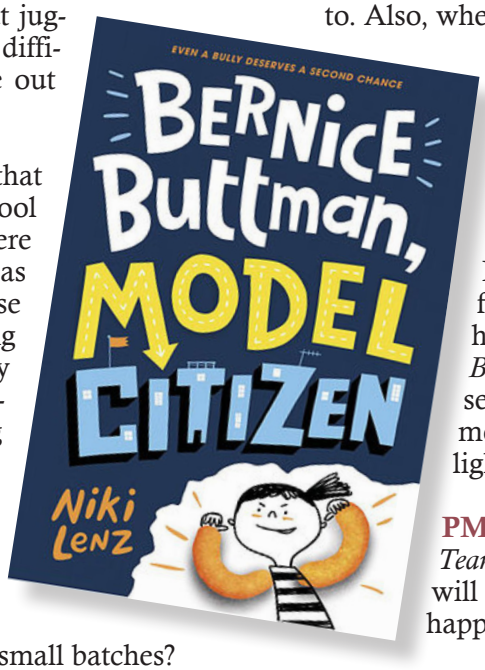
NL: Bernice was inspired by one of those kindergartners I taught. I knew I wanted to write a book with an anti-hero: a kid who does bad things, but you kind of want to cheer for her anyways. When I tried to remember a "problem child" from my teaching days, one particular girl came to mind. She was a bully in the truest sense of the word, and she came from a family of bullies. I often wondered if that poor girl could get away from her family if she would have a shot at being nice and having friends. And so Bernice was born. The original title was *Bernice Buttman's Guide to Halfway*, which I liked because Bernice was learning about the town, Halfway, MO, and she was learning to be "halfway nice." But my brilliant editor thought kids would get a better picture of what the story

was about by changing the title to *Bernice Buttman, Model Citizen*, which was one of the chapter headings. It went through many rounds of revisions, as all books do, but as soon as I typed THE END on the first draft I knew I'd written something special.

PM: Do you belong to a critique group? Do you have a specific writing routine? Do you outline or do you write the story as you go along?

NL: I have several amazing critique partners that always bring my work to the next level. I trust these authors with my life and my ugliest first drafts! I always start with an outline, because staring at a completely blank page is terrifying. And really, all I need for a writing routine is coffee, my laptop, and silence.

PM: I know from experience that juggling writing and family can be difficult at times. How do you carve out "me time" without feeling guilty?



NL: This is so much easier now that my children are older and in school during the day! When they were babies, I just claimed nap time as writing time. I didn't let myself use those precious hours for anything else. Sure the dishes and laundry piled up at times, but writing seriously kept my brain from melting out my ears during those thankless years!

PM: You have an agent now, but when you were unagented, what was your query process like? Did you send queries out in small batches? How long did it take until you got an offer of representation? Specifically, what were you looking for in an agent?

NL: I queried three other novels before I signed with my agent. I made a personal goal of collecting at least one hundred rejections before I would shelve a project. So, if you are doing the math… that is a lot of rejections. With my fourth book, a Mary Poppins retelling, I signed with an agent from my top ten, Kate Testerman of K.T. Literary. I wanted an agent that excelled at the business end of publishing, that rocked at contracts and negotiations, and had a reputation and connections that could get my foot in the door. Kate is all that and more! She is the best agent a girl could ask for! That book was out on sub for a year, and we got some very nice feedback, but ultimately when Kate read Bernice, she suggested we shelve the other book and take Bernice out. *Bernice Buttman, Model Citizen* sold in the first round of submissions to a big five publishers, which still sounds like a dream to me.

PM: What was it like, besides nerve-racking, to have your book out on submission? How did you maintain a positive frame of mind when dealing with rejection? How long did it take to get an offer from a publisher? Once it was purchased, what was the editorial process like?

NL: I actually find being out on submission a lot more stressful than sending queries out to agents. First of all, you don't have much control about it. When I was sending queries and I got a rejection I would just send out three more. When you are on submission it is sort of up to your agent as to who and when you send your project to. Also, when you are querying you can easily find a lot of other authors who are in the same boat and you can commiserate together. But being on submission is a lot more hush hush. You aren't really supposed to talk about it, so it feels lonelier at times.

When I got the call from Caroline Abbey at Random House I knew she was the editor for me. She totally got my wacky sense of humor and she loved the heart of my story. *Bernice Buttman, Model Citizen* went through several rounds of edits and she really helped me clarify what I wanted to say. She is a delight to work with!

PM: Your second book with Random House, *Team Gravy*, a high-concept reverse *Parent Trap*, will be published in 2020. How did that sale happen?

NL: *Team Gravy* was my option book, and when I heard that it was also going to be published I felt like lightning had struck twice! I mean, seriously, whose life is this? In case you don't know, an option book is where they say in your book one contract that the publishing house gets a 30-day sneak peek at the next book you want to put on submission. So it's a little different than a two-book deal; there isn't a guarantee that they will like whatever your option book is. Luckily, in my case, they did.

PM: How do you decide which ideas are viable? Do you work on multiple projects at once? Do you have a pet project?

NL: I think the best ideas are the ones you can't stop

thinking about. They visit you in your dreams and they take up your brain space while driving. Sometimes they make you run red lights but let's not talk about that. I usually write 2-3 middle grade novels per year. I can knock out a first draft in 30 days, but the real work is in the editing, which can take up to a year. I basically have lot of projects in lots of different stages at all times. This is helpful because there is a lot of "dead time" in publishing, when you are waiting for your next critique partner notes or agent changes or copy edits, or whatever the next thing is. If you just sat around twiddling your thumbs you would be very bored, and you wouldn't have much inventory to present when they do come knocking on your door. I love all my projects (until that special point in revisions when I hate them) but I wouldn't say I have a pet project. All these weird kids in my head are special to me.

PM: What do you think is the most important thing in writing middle grade: voice, story, or character? Do you write for yourself, subjects that you find interesting, or for the market, or a combination of both?

NL: This is trick question, isn't it? You gotta have all those elements. Sorry, there are no shortcuts. This market is so very competitive that you pretty much have to nail it on all those areas. Now, some things you will get some help from your editor. Mine helped me really round out my characters and make her motivations more clear. But you have to have all the pieces in place before anyone can tweak it. I write about subjects that I find interesting because I'm the one who is going to be spending the most time with these people in that world. The market is too hard to predict, so it is useless to chase it. I will say I think that stories with humor and heart will always appeal to kids, so that is the sweet spot I try and stay in.

PM: What are you working on currently? Do you plan to write in other genres?

NL: Contemporary middle grade seems to be my bread and butter, so I have a few more of those on the back burner. Hopefully they will make their way into the world at some point. If I were to write another genre it would be fantasy middle grade. I think it would be fun to add a dash of magic to my stories!

PM: You're a Harry Potter fan, and you also worked as an event party planner. If you could plan a party for Harry, what would it be like?

NL: Oh my gosh! Best question ever! Harry deserves a great party because it seems like every time he got to celebrate in the books it was directly after being nearly killed by the Dark Lord, and I feel like he was probably still in shock. Anyways, I think Harry would prefer a more intimate gathering, with just his closest friends. Maybe on a rooftop, with signature cocktails that have heatless flames and trays of delicious Muggle food that he can share with his wizard friends! He wouldn't want dancing, but maybe some games. Dress would be casual so that Ron wouldn't have to wear his horrible dress robes. They would definitely invite me to join the party because Hermione and I would be new best friends.

CLUTTER, SEXISM, CLICHÉS, AND OTHER WRITERLY SINS

by Jane McBride

We recognize the Goliath enemies of good writing immediately: poor characterization, weak plots, contrived situations. But what of the minor, though no less egregious, enemies of good writing—clutter, sexism, and cliches? They detract from otherwise quality writing with trite and superfluous words.

Let's attack these sins one at a time:

CLUTTER

Open any home and women's magazine, especially around the first of the year, and you're bound to run into an article—or a dozen—about clutter. You know what I mean, the useless things that a home collects. There are the outdated magazines that you can't bring yourself to get rid of, the broken pieces of a teapot that you've been meaning to glue back together for five years, the craft project collecting dust in your closet. Your manuscript has probably accumulated similar debris.

STEP 1: Recognize clutter for what it is: unneeded words.

ACTION: Be ruthless. Cut useless words wherever you find them. If you aren't sure if a word is unnecessary, try reading the sentence where it appears aloud, first with the word, then without it. Consider reading the passage in question into a recorder, then play it back. (Many phones will do this.) Listen, not just as a writer but as an editor and as a reader.

Note: Clutter doesn't always occur as single words. Sometimes it can appear in the form of sentences, paragraphs, pages, even scenes. Go through your manuscript not just with an eye to useless words but with unflinching honesty regarding sentences, paragraphs, and scenes. Ask yourself if they serve a real purpose. Do reveal characterization and/or advance the action? If not, get rid of them. Your job as a writer is to craft a story that will be un-put-downable, not to show off your writing prowess.

SEXISM

We recognize sexism in the workplace. We recognize it in social situations. We recognize it in the home (like when a teenage boy thinks he's too good to do housework!). But do we recognize it in books and in our own writing?

STEP 1: Watch qualifiers. Consider this sentence:

Nineteenth century settlers, along with their wives and children, carved out homes on the unforgiving Wyoming prairie through courage and perseverance.

Nothing wrong there, you say. So did I, that is until I looked more closely. The word "settlers," accompanied by the phrase "along with their wives and children," means men. And only men. The fact is that settlers were both men and women. By qualifying it, we have eliminated the brave women who "settled" the land along with their men, denying their contribution. Is this sexism? You bet.

ACTION: Take out the qualifier. Let's rewrite the sentence:

Nineteenth century men and women carved out homes on the unforgiving Wyoming prairie through courage and perseverance.

STEP 2: Watch such things as professions, athletics, etc.—anything where we might routinely write the character as male. Girls play sports. Women run businesses. The rough-and-tough hockey player can be a girl. The ruthless CEO of a multi-million dollar business can be a woman.

Take a look at the following:

The goalie on the hockey team played hard, blocking all moves with her quick responses.

Writerly Sins continued

The CEO rose through the ranks through a combination of knowing when to kick butt and when to kiss it. She never apologized for either.

In neither example did I say "the girl goalie" or "the female CEO." I let that information evolve naturally.

CLICHÉS

I'm fond of saying that there's never been a cliché I didn't like. I figure I must like them because I have used a bunch of them over the years, despite my resolve to eradicate them from my writing. Never do clichés show up more than in our use of similes and metaphors

STEP 1: Look for fresh comparisons and analogies.

ACTION: Take an old saying and make it your own.

Old saying: Her face was white as a sheet. (How many times have you read that?)

New twist: Her face looked like someone had washed it with bleach and then hung it out to dry.

STEP 2: Don't compare things that are too similar. This becomes redundant and turns into the clutter we just discussed.

ACTION: Find an analogy that enhances the reader's understanding of what you are trying to convey. For example, saying that "He used his fists as he would a weapon" is hardly helpful. Fists are weapons. What about "He pummeled the man with fists of hate." Likening fists to hate takes the comparison to a new level.

STEP 3: On the other hand, don't compare things that are too disparate.

ACTION: Find the sweet spot in crafting an analogy, neither too similar nor too different. Consider this:

The lilting melody floated through her mind like the swift punch of a heavyweight champion.

How can a "lilting melody float" like the "swift punch of a heavyweight champion?" It can't. How about: The lilting melody floated through her mind like the graceful dance of a butterfly? Now the analogy has a consistent tone.

STEP 4: Don't overcrowd your prose with too many metaphors and similes. A few well-crafted figures of speech can strengthen your writing; too many dilute the effect and become commonplace, even trite. How does the following passage strike you?

The victim's eyes shone like fiery embers in the black as pitch night. The tortured sounds she made grated against his nerves like chalk on a blackboard. Her sobs scratched his heart like the tears a cat made on brand new upholstery.

Enough already. Not only is the passage full of metaphors and similes, several are, pardon the expression, old as Methuselah (another cliché): eyes shone like fiery embers, black as pitch, chalk on a blackboard. Only in the last sentence do we have anything approaching a fresh simile. That's plenty.

ACTION: Use figures of speech as you would a potent spice. Remember: a little goes a long way.

STEP 5: Use descriptors that fit the tone and theme of your story. If you use a grim metaphor in a comedy, it pulls the reader away from the light-hearted story.

ACTION: Be consistent. Suppose you are writing a comedy about a boy going to clown school. Does this fit the tone of the story?

The clown's face contorted like the machinations of a serial killer's mind.

Hardly. Instead, what if you wrote:

The clown's face contorted like the gyrations of a giggling four-year-old boy as he tried not to wet his pants.

Those of us who are parents or have younger siblings know exactly what that looks like.

IN SUMMARY

Are clutter, sexism, and clichés the worst mistakes we can make as writers? Of course not. But they are preventable. Go through your work-in-progress and be unsparing as you search-and-destroy these pesky conditions.