Children's Book Insider

August 2019

THE RIGHT WAY TO BEGIN YOUR NEXT FICTION PROJECT

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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 Jill of all trades when it comes to writing: kid lit, screenwriter, journalist, blogger. She is the author of *Little Lena and the Big Table* (Big Belly Book Co., May 2019) and *Dragon Roar* (MacLaren-Cochrane, TBD). PJ is also a co-host of #PBPitch, the premiere Twitter pitch party for picture book writers and illustrators. Follow PJ's magical adventures at her website **https://pjmacwriter.com**

Pat Miller (www.patmillerbooks.com), a former teacher and school librarian, has nine young grandchildren and nine books for children. Her latest is an award-winning nonfiction picture book, *The Hole Story of the Doughnut*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). She is also one of the eleven Nonfiction Ninjas **(www.nonfiction-ninjas.com)**

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At Presstime:

Upcoming Contests

Second Children's Book Prize for Buddhist-themed Picture Books Taking Submissions

The Khyentse Foundation and Bala Kids (an imprint of Shambhala Publications) are teaming up to offer the Khyentse Foundation Children's Book Prize for best Buddhist children's manuscript. This year, the prize will be offered to the best children's book about one or more of the five following foundational Buddhist topics: The Four Noble Truths: Dependent Arising, Karma, Rebirth, Impermanence. The winning submission will receive a $5,000 publication offer from Bala Kids.

Submissions must consist of a complete English-language picture book manuscript for children ages 0–8 (fiction or nonfiction), from any Buddhist tradition on one or more of the five major Buddhist teachings mentioned above. The book should be conceived as a standard children's picture book (not a board book) of 20–40 pages, not exceeding 2,000 words. Illustrations for the winning story will be provided by the publisher in consultation with the author. Submissions will be reviewed by both Khyentse Foundation and Bala Kids and will be assessed based on their creativity, message, and adherence to the theme. It is possible that Bala Kids will make publication offers to multiple submissions; however, the Children's Book Prize will be awarded to only one recipient. If there are no submissions that meet the standards of Khyentse Foundation and Bala Kids, the prize will be withheld until there is a new round of open submissions. Email submissions to **balakids@shambhala.com** with the subject line: **KF Book Prize 2019**. All manuscripts should be submitted as PDF files, along with a short summary and short author biography in the body of the email. **Deadline for submissions: December 1, 2019.** The winning author will be notified by March 1, 2020. For more information, go to **https://www.shambhala.com/second-khyentse-foundation-childrens-book-prize/**

Annual Award for Self-Published and Indie Books Open to Submissions

The annual Best Indie Book Award™ (or BIBA™) is an international literary award contest recognizing self-published authors in thirteen major genres. Entries are limited to independently (indie) published books, including those from small presses, ebook publishers, and self-published authors. Submissions must be written in English and available to the public at the time of submission to the award.

Entries must be independently published (self-published) and your own work (the authors retains full rights to the book). Books published by small, independent presses are accepted, but no works under a publishing contract with a major publisher such as HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster or Penguin Random House. Entries will be judged based on multiple writing skills, which include storytelling ability, author's ability to engage the reader, transitions, pacing, movement of the story, author's skill with voice, character, dialogue, and narrative. Grammar skills will also be taken into consideration. The award is open to books in 13 categories (including children's, young adult, and nonfiction). There is a $50 entry fee per category (you can enter a book in more than one category, but there will be a $50 fee for each entry).

Winners in each category will receive the Best Indie Book Award™ Emblem to display on their website and book cover; a physical Best Indie Book Award™ trophy to display at book signings; their winning book featured in advertising, email, social networks and other means; their book displayed on the front page of the Best Indie Book Award website, and listed on the permanent, archived "Winners" page of the site; winners will also be announced across multiple social networks. **Deadline for entries is October 1, 2019.** For more information and an entry form, go to **https://bestindiebookaward.com/submit/product/best-indie-book-award-entry/** Winners will be announced by December 15, 2019.

New Independent Press Open to Submissions from Underrepresented Voices

Levine Querido (**https://www.levinequerido.com/**) is an independent publisher recently founded by Arthur A. Levine (former President and Publisher of the Arthur A. Levine imprint at Scholastic). Levine Querido will publish two lists: The Arthur A. Levine list, seeking out the writing and artwork of exceptionally talented creators, and the Em Querido list, a partnership with the renowned Dutch publisher to find the most outstanding authors and artists from around the world. Levine Querido seeks to give voice to a diverse group of authors and artists whose books will inspire a true love of reading in young people while offering them a sense of their (and others') rightful place in the world. The company will focus on publishing the writing and artwork of authors and creators from underrepresented backgrounds, including people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, Latinx creators, indigenous artists and writers, creators with disabilities, members of minority religions, and more.

Looking for authentic emotion and ideas or perspectives that haven't been seen before, especially from debut authors and illustrators. All work should be sent via Submittable at **https://levinequerido.submittable.com/submit**. For picture books, submit a query letter and the full manuscript. For middle grade and young adult novels, submit a query letter, synopsis and the first two chapters. Illustrators may submit three sample illustrations and/or links to online portfolios. Aims to respond to all queries within six months. **NOTE: If you are met with the message "There are presently no open calls for submissions," after you email your submission, that means the publisher has reached its monthly limit on queries. Please wait until the first day of the next month to resubmit your query.**

Agent Seeks Submissions for All Ages

Bibi Lewis is an Associate Agent with the Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency (**https://ethanellenberg.com/**) and also acts as the agency's subsidiary rights manager, selling foreign and audio rights for agency clients. She is seeking picture books, chapter books, middle grade and young adult fiction and nonfiction. She enjoys fiction with well-developed characters and a strong hook, and prefers towards realistic stories or books with magical realism but not necessarily high fantasy or science fiction. In nonfiction, she likes projects that center on women and historical figures that were also people of color. In all ages, she welcomes projects from marginalized voices.

For email submissions, paste all materials into the body of the email in this order: **For longer fiction,** send a brief query letter, a synopsis (1-2 pages long), the first 50 pages (approximately) of your manuscript. **For longer nonfiction,** send a query letter, a book proposal (outline of the material, sample chapters, author bio, etc.). **For picture books** (fiction and nonfiction), send a query letter and complete manuscript (author/illustrators may also paste 4-5 images of sample illustrations into the body of the email). Responds within 4 weeks if interested. If you have not heard back after 4 weeks, you can submit a new project if appropriate. Email all submissions to **agent@ethanellenberg.com**, **attn: Bibi Lewis**.

Boutique Publisher Seeks Middle Grade, Young Adult Genre Fiction

Pants on Fire Press (**http://pantsonfirepress.com/**) is an award-winning boutique publisher of middle grade, young adult and fictional books for adults. Though they are open to any genre of fiction, the publisher tends to focus on fantasy, science fiction, paranormal, dystopia and romance. Looking for strong writers who are excited about marketing their stories and building a following of readers. For novels, the body of the email should include your query with a synopsis, the genre of the book, approximate word count, a short pitch, marketing plan, writing credentials (if any), your contact info, agent info (if work is agented), brief author bio and list of any previous titles with sales history. Also paste the first three chapters into the email.

In middle grade, looking for an exciting plot, strong voice and well-revised manuscript, fully-developed characters and strong storytelling. Young adult books should be written in a voice that sounds real and believable, have a premise that can be conveyed in 2-3 sentences, protagonists who are 15-19 years old, and age-appropriate romantic element (even if it's not the focus of the story), and memorable characters readers will care about and relate to. Email to Becca Goldman, Senior Editor at **submission@pantsonfirepress.com**. Please allow 8-12 weeks for a response. Will respond only if interested in seeing more of the work.

Counting Down to 30: Part 4
The Path to Visionary

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader:

This past June, in Part 2 of my series of editorials counting down to the 30th anniversary of CBI, I challenged you to become a visionary and think outside the box with your book ideas. One thing I've learned in my 33 years in this business is that writers get excited by a challenge. Another thing I've learned is that if writers don't have a clear path to success, they often give up. Since Jon and I pride ourselves in showing you the way, I present to you….

Your Path to Visionary

Step 1: Ask "What if?" You've heard this one before, but have you done it? Have you started with your basic idea for a plot, character or nonfiction book and really given your imagination free reign? If you have, and still feel your idea is ordinary, you may have done it wrong. I know, this is brainstorming, so there shouldn't be any rules. But maybe your technique needs some tweaking. Did you brainstorm on your computer? That's a mistake, especially if you write on a computer. You don't want your brainstorming to look anything like the eventual work that you'll be editing and polishing. You also want to access a different part of your brain, and you do that by going old school. Spread out a large piece of butcher block paper on the table (or tape it to the wall) and write your basic idea in a circle in the center or across the top (whatever visually works for you). You can also write the name of your character, or even a plot point that's stumping you. Get a marker or pen (anything that's non-erasable) and ask yourself questions out loud starting with "What if?"

- *What if my protagonist is a girl instead of a boy?*
- *What if I change the setting to Chicago?*
- *What if I write this in free verse instead of prose? How might that change the voice?*
- *What if I approach the theme in a humorous way?*
- *What if the canary in my story is the bully, and the bear is the victim?*
- *What if I start my research at this person's childhood home and focus my book on her early life instead of her adult accomplishments?*

Now, here's the important part: Write down whatever comes into your head on that big piece of paper. It doesn't matter if it makes no sense. It doesn't matter if it has nothing to do with the question you just asked. Dump it all out. Keep asking What If? until you run out of questions.

Step 2: Stand back and examine your mind dump. It will probably look messy, chaotic and perhaps a bit crazy. That's good. Read through the answers to your questions and pull out any that especially resonate with you. Now ask yourself why these answers stand out. Is it because they've opened up some interesting possibilities for your book, or is it because they reinforced what your idea was before you started brainstorming? In other words, are you playing it safe, or really opening yourself up to the process?

Here's my point: If you do it right, stuffed between the logical, reasonable answers to your What If? questions will be seemingly random, off-the-wall ideas that clearly have been beamed into your head from another planet. These ideas give you pause because they make you laugh, or think, or marvel at your own madness. You appreciate them for a moment, and then you move on to the more sensible answers. And you can still go on to write a good book that gets published. But if you want your work to rise above all the good books published each year and live among the handful of authors whose books are talked about for

Counting Down to 30 continued

generations, then you've got to keep asking questions.

Step 3: Ask "Why Not?" Visionaries give these weird ideas just as much time and attention as the more conventional ones. Their first response is always "Why not?"

- *Why not write a picture book entirely in dialogue about a bear who gets revenge on a lying, thieving rabbit by eating him?*
- *Why not tell a middle grade story set during wartime that explores themes of loyalty, trust and loss via alternating viewpoints between a boy and a fox?*
- *Why not examine the chain reaction of gang violence through verse during a seven-floor elevator ride?*
- *Why not write a picture book biography that begins toward the end of the subject's life and moves backwards to her youth?*

**I Want My Hat Back* by Jon Klassen; *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker; *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds; *Before She Was Harriet* by Lesa Cline-Ransome, illustrated by James E. Ransome

Visionaries treat all brainstorming ideas, all What if? answers, equally. That doesn't mean they'll end up developing every out-of-the-box idea, but they won't immediately discard them either. They don't reflexively think, "I can't do that because it's too different," or "This isn't *exactly* what editors have said they're looking for." If a new twist on their idea excites them, they'll figure out how to make it compelling and relatable enough to work.

Step 4: Be fearless. Visionaries get incredibly excited by these revolutionary ideas. They get inspired. But most importantly, they feel challenged. They know, at the moment the idea takes shape, that it's something new and therefore will be much harder to write than something safe. Maybe it won't sell. Maybe no one will understand it. Maybe it will be a big, fat failure. Or maybe it will work.

If you truly want to raise your book to something extraordinary, understand this: At the idea stage, *nothing is at stake*. No one but you sees what's happening on your brainstorming papers. You are free to run with every possibility as far as you'd like. If it leads you to a dead end, start over. No one will judge you.

And when you actually begin the writing process, hold on to that same freedom. If you write five chapters of your novel and then realize the story really starts in Chapter Three, toss out the first two chapters. If you yearn to create a picture book that's subversive and fun and doesn't impart any great life lesson to young readers, try it and see what happens. And if you truly believe in the route you're taking, be true to your vision. It may take a while, but if you skillfully pull it off, you'll eventually find an editor who gets it.

Remember, until your book is published, it's not yet a book. Your work is a collection of words on paper. You have an infinite number of words available to you. Only the absolute right words are irreplaceable. Anything else can be changed, rearranged or moved to the "this chapter's not working" file. So be bold. Take chances. Ask "Why not?" You're striving for magic with your books. And that's the only thing that editors—and readers—really want.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

MENTORED BY A PICTURE BOOK

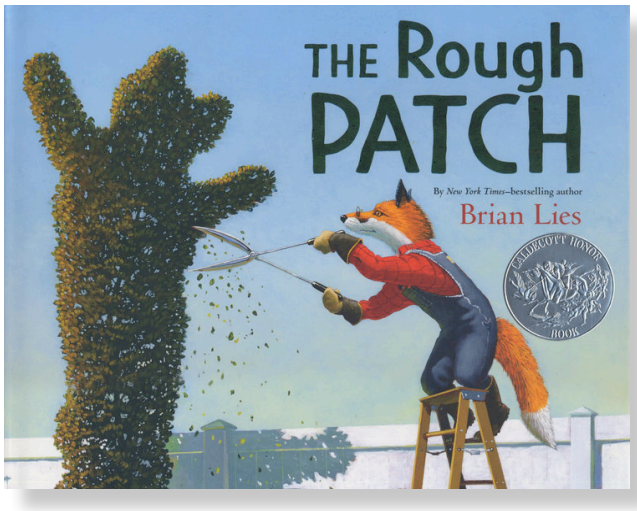
by Pat Miller

Writers often say theirs is a lonely job.

It's true that when it comes to putting words on the screen or paper, it's just you. But before that, accomplished authors will visit your home, stay for weeks, and show you exactly how it is done.

No need to feed them or put fresh sheets on the guest beds. You will invite in them through their published works. Their books have successfully survived the journey you want to send yours on.

You can take theirs apart and figure out how they did it. Then you have a recipe for your own work. This process is called using mentor texts. The work of another is going to be your teacher.



Mentor texts have long been used in elementary classrooms to teach writing. Familiar books are used as exemplars of everything from using capitals in kindergarten to using humor in fifth grade.

Adult authors quickly caught on to how deconstructing a successful children's book could be a private course in writing. Mentor texts can reveal how to build suspense, how to rhyme deftly, ways to pull on the readers' heartstrings, and much more. Likely, this isn't the first time you've heard the term. You may even have lists of mentor texts. But if you're like me, you could use a demo on how to take one apart.

So, let's do that now. I'd like to show you how I would take apart a 2019 Caldecott Honor book, *The Rough Patch*, written and illustrated by Brian Lies (Greenwillow Books, 2018).

THE POWER OF THREE + A KEYBOARD

For picture book mentor texts, I read them three times. The first time is before I even know it will be a mentor. Not every book will meet your writing needs. This is another reason why writers read hundreds of children's books. But you'll know it when something about the story resonates.

The first reading is simply to enjoy the story. In *The Rough Patch*, Brian Lies tells the story of a fox whose beloved dog dies. It portrays his anger and grief in dealing with the loss of his best friend. It ends with hope.

The second reading is to savor the illustration. It's a good lesson on how an illustrator can add to the richness of our text if we give them room. If you're an illustrator, studying Brian's book will show you how he brings the deceptively simple text to life.

Third, I read to dissect it. (Spoiler alert: You might want to read the book before continuing.) Before the third reading, I type the book in a Word document exactly as it is on the page, double spacing between spreads. The beginning of *The Rough Patch* would look like this:

Evan and his dog did everything together.

They played games
and enjoyed sweet treats.

They shared music
and adventure.

Doing so allows me to see the rhythm of the story, where the author wants the reader to pause. In this short excerpt, I could see that Brian uses just one adjective and no literary devices. Short and sweet. The illustrations show the characters' personalities.

ANALYZING THE STRUCTURE

The Rough Patch only has 365 words, but it delivers a powerful story. I wanted to see how Brian structures his story to do that.

The traditional three-act structure has a beginning, a middle divided into two halves, and an end. Each act ends with a change.

The job of Act One is to introduce the characters and let us know the problem or what the main character wants.

Mentored by a Picture Book continued

Brian creates an idyllic world in which the friends exist happily, and we settle in. What they want is unspoken—they want to keep enjoying one another's companionship and their garden.

Then comes the inciting incident. It changes everything. On page 8-9, a double spread has just six words, *But one day, the unthinkable happened.* The dog is curled in his bed facing away from the reader. Fox kneels beside him with his paw on his friend's shoulder. His ears and tail droop, his eyes are closed in sorrow, and the background on both pages is the empty white of shock.

Act Two, Part One, begins with the first plot point after the big change. Evan lays his dog to rest in the garden they both loved and — the text informs us — *nothing was the same*. Those who've lost a loved one will understand the illustration's background of various shades of scratchy blacks and browns. Evan grieves. Then comes the pinch point, the change that amps it up. Without forethought, Evan takes a hoe and slashes his garden to the ground. We see that grief can wreck you. Weeds take over the garden.

Act Two, Part Two, begins when a pumpkin vine crawls under the fence from his neighbor's garden. *He let it be.*

Evan begrudgingly begins to care for the vine. A new normal begins as tentatively as a seedling. Evan eventually discovers a pumpkin beneath the vine's leaves, and nurtures it for Fair Week.

The final act begins with another change that makes the resolution possible. Evan takes the pumpkin into town and ends up hanging out with other fox friends and enjoying the fair. *It felt good to be out again, even if it wasn't quite the same.* Hope shines through for Fox and for the reader.

Evan's pumpkin wins third place and Evan can choose between $10 or a puppy in a box. He chooses the cash but can't resist taking just a little peek into the box.

The last page turn is hugely satisfying and filled with hope and promise for the future. The reader lingers on this illustration, bringing their own emotions to the ending.

OTHER TEACHING POINTS

Story structure isn't the only thing I can imitate from Brian Lies.

EMOTION: I also noticed how he pares down the story to its essentials without removing the emotion—a true gift. He does not use manipulation to make you feel sad. Nowhere in the story will you read sentences that tell about his feelings. None of these appear:

- *Evan was lonely without his dog.* (telling)
- *Never again would he see his dog's wide-faced grin or his liquid brown eyes.* (manipulating the audience's feelings)

I use a highlighter to go through the story and color the lines that elicit emotion from me. Like this one: *If Evan's garden couldn't be a happy place, then it was going to be the saddest and most desolate spot he could make it.*

Then I go through my own story looking for emotional resonance. Using a highlighter makes it evident where I need more heart.

ADJECTIVES: Using another color, I highlight all the adjectives in Brian's story. There are few of them. Like this sparse but powerful sentence: *Evan laid his dog to rest in a corner of the garden…"* Brian doesn't get out the thesaurus and try to fancy up the nouns or verbs. He chooses his simple words deliberately. Then I go back to my own MS and highlight the adjectives. Is each one necessary?

ILLUSTRATOR NOTES: Granted, Brian doesn't have to write art notes for his illustrator. Much of the richness of the story is in the illustrations. What can writers learn from this?

Note the simplicity of the text and the complexity of the illustrations. Brian Lies' sentences are crafted so artfully that they give lots of possibilities and freedom to the illustrator, even if it's not himself. The beginning, shared above, contains just 19 words. Yet they give the illustrator much to illustrate in a double spread and four art spots. Does my text do the same? Rarely does the writer need to give art direction, but the text has got to be alive with visual possibilities.

I always make a book dummy for my story. CBI has a detailed article on how to do this: https://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/how-to-make-a-picture-book-dummy/

Next, I find it helpful, using stick figures and rough sketches, to "illustrate" my story after I have laid it out in the dummy. If I find a page that I have trouble sketching, I know I need better words.

The next time you feel stuck as you write your picture book, or wonder how to improve your manuscript, head for the library. A habit of reading books similar to what you write will provide you with lots of mentors to inspire, exemplify, and instruct.

Thanks to willing mentors like Brian Lies, writing no longer has to be a lonely business.

WHERE DO I START?

by Jane McBride

Most authors know that nonfiction projects start with research. But what about fiction? When a writer faces the start of a new project, she can be overwhelmed. How does she go from a blank page (or screen) to a completed book? It helps to break up the creation process into smaller chunks. Think of it as the literary equivalent of eating an elephant, one bite at a time.

Prewriting

At this stage, you are exploring storylines and characters, researching, and gathering together any details that inspire you. You may want to set up a vision board where you attach pictures of people who look like your characters and landscapes or scenes that resemble settings in your book. You can do a board in real materials or you can do one on Pinterest, whatever your preference. There is something about a visual representation of your book, even before you're written the first word, that has power. This is also the stage where you delve into research, searching for just the right details and references to bring your writing to life. Read personal materials if you can find them. This is especially important in doing historical research. A caveat here for historical fiction: some writers become so immersed in the research end of things that they go overboard and spend too much time researching while neglecting the writing. Also remember that all of that research will not and should not go into your book. A phrase here, a word there are often all that is required. Don't bore the reader—and you will—by dumping pages of your hard-won research into the book. We call this an information dump. It won't move along the story; nor will it illuminate your characters. It will only convince the reader to close the book and probably not to open it again.

Drafting

Here you will be outlining chapters and then quickly filling in the bones of the story. At this point, you want to write as fast as you can, getting the story down. You won't be worrying about choosing the right words or crafting a beautiful turn of phrase, or even using perfect grammar. Your sole goal should be telling your story as quickly as you can. Let it pour out of you. More than one writer had described this as opening a vein and letting it bleed.

Revision

We sometimes call this stage story development. Here, you will flesh out your characters, bring them to life with those small details and quirks that set them apart from other characters. Does a particular character feel flat to you? Ask yourself what you can do to pump life into him. Do you have characters who have the same "voices,"— in other words, they sound too much alike in their word choices, sentence structures, or other speech patterns? What can you do to make your main character(s) stand out from among the cast of characters? Does your dialogue tend to ramble and fail to add anything to advance the plot or enhance the characters? You'll want to fix that here, hone it until it sparkles and shines. You will also want to address any plot inconsistencies you may find. Pay attention to your timing. Make certain that everything fits together in terms of time and movement. It may help to create a timeline for yourself that lists all major events in chronological order. Finally, look at your transitions.

Where Do I Start? continued

Second drafting

Now you're going to incorporate all your revisions from the first draft to create a second draft of your story. Once the full second draft is on paper (or on your screen), go back and do the revision step again. You may need to repeat this process several times until you feel your plot, characters, dialogue and overall story arc are built on a firm foundation. It's helpful to take second drafts and beyond to critique groups to get feedback on these big-picture issues.

Editing and proofreading

Now we get to the nitty-gritty such as correcting grammar and spelling mistakes, checking for word usage, etc. This is where you'll get out your nit-picking glasses and subject your manuscript to intense scrutiny. Do you think you can rely on spell-and-grammar-check alone? Think again. They are both great tools, but they do not take the place of an experienced writer going through her sentences looking for such typos as "to" vs. "too." They pick up on grammar clunkers, but they don't know when you've deliberately used poor grammar in a dialogue to reveal a character's lack of education. Check your sentence structure. Do you have a long string of subject/verb statements with little variation? Or are you enamored with the clause/subject/verb construction. Check, as well, sentence length. Too many short sentences or too many long ones in succession can turn boring. Look for instances when you've resorted to passive voice rather than using the active voice. Look for tired clichés and find fresh ones. Look for specific nouns and verbs rather than generics. Is the wrist corsage a boy brought his prom date a rose or an orchid or a fat daisy surrounded by baby's breath? Say that rather than simply describing it as a corsage. Is your character walking down a country road or is he stumbling, rambling, strutting, limping, hopping, or skipping? Have you paid attention to punctuation? A manuscript with haphazard punctuation is not only difficult to read, it may not even make sense in some instances. Though social media posts may be lax with punctuation, your editor will not tolerate such lapses.

It is a humbling thing to write a book. But don't let that stop you. If you break the process down and focus only on one step at a time, it's far less daunting than trying to create perfection from the get-go. Understand that every writer goes through this same process, often several times, before producing a work that seems effortless. All you need to do is begin. The rest will follow.

CHAD REYNOLDS, CO-OWNER

Penny Candy Books

interview by Lynne Marie

Penny Candy Books is an independent children's book press founded in 2015 by poets Alexis Orgera and Chad Reynolds. They publish kids' books that reflect a wide range of authors and illustrators from around the globe. They are not interested in perpetuating a publishing culture that ALL authors, illustrators, and readers do not have access to. While they will not exclude anyone from their catalog, they focus on underrepresented, unheard, or forgotten voices as part of their mission. They support We Need Diverse Books.

LYNNE MARIE: Tell us a little bit about yourself. I say *a little bit* because I hear you are a fan of brief bios.

CHAD REYNOLDS: I am the author of five poetry chapbooks and a co-founder of **Short Order Poems**, a poetry collaborative whose mission is to bring poetry to people in unexpected ways and places.

LM: Since both you and Alexis are poets and have "a poet's aesthetic" how would you say that translates into your catalog of books?

CR: As poets Alexis and I pay close attention to language—in our writing and also in the manuscripts for consideration from other writers. We want our books to feature lively, interesting language that demonstrates to kids and adults the possibilities for expression, clarity, and fun that words present.

LM: What percentage of your books relate to poetry and what percentage relate to fiction? Any nonfiction? In the future?

CR: Five of our first 16 books contain poems, so just under a third relate to poetry. We have published only one nonfiction picture book (about Hedy Lamarr), but we'll be doing another one in the fall (about Antonia Brico, the first woman to conduct the New York and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras), and we are looking at other books that could become part of what we're calling our "Amazing Women" series.

LM: How would you say your line has evolved, if at all, since your first book, *A Gift from Greensboro*, was published in 2016?

CR: A lot! We have started doing all first runs in hardcover. We have come to feature a broader array of voices and experiences. We have published a bilingual book. We have published books from foreign countries. We have also committed to publishing young adult and middle grade novels under our Penelope Editions imprint starting in fall 2020.

LM: What would you say is different about Penny Candy's books than other small presses?

CR: Well, all small publishers are working to put out the best titles they can on limited budgets. We're trying to publish books that are beautiful aesthetically and linguistically but that also spark big conversations about timely topics, as well as showcasing a variety of voices and experiences and characters.

LM: What genres are you currently looking for? Are there any topics or themes you would like to see? Any topics or themes that should be avoided?

Chad Reynolds continued

CR: We want to hear authentic voices telling their authentic stories. What's the book you wished you could have read when you were a kid? What's the book that could have changed your life? That's the book we want to see from you.

LM: Using *The Yellow Suitcase* as a "case study," because it is a 2019 release and was well-circulated, how did this book in particular come to be? What spoke to you about this book?

CR: We received this manuscript during an open submission period via Submittable. So it was a cold submission! We immediately knew, based on the beauty of the first couple of sentences, that it was a book we'd seriously consider. Linguistically it just made sense to us. But the content of the story also appealed to us in that it connected with our mission of sparking big conversations and featuring diverse voices. Since the book is about a girl grieving her deceased grandmother, and since it touches on the Indian diasporic and immigrant experiences, we knew it would be perfect for us. We also knew that we wanted to have an artist of Indian heritage illustrate the book, and we were very fortunate to find Meera Sethi, a Canadian-Indian illustrator whose own personal story is similar to Asha's, the protagonist in the book. You can hear the author Meera Sriram talk more about the book on her recent interview with Matthew Winner on his Children's Book Podcast.

LM: Because there is an aspect of the poetic in every book that Penny Candy does, what advice would you give to someone wanting to submit their manuscript? Any tips?

CR: Pay attention to the language you use. Does it sing to you? If so, it might sing to us. If you're submitting a book in verse, it doesn't have to rhyme. If it does rhyme, what does the rhyme scheme contribute to the story? Why is it necessary?

LM: A look at your catalogs shows that Penny Candy is growing! How many titles do you plan to add to 2020 catalogs? What are your future plans? Do you currently pay advances? Royalties?

CR: We have published 16 books as of July 2019. We have 4 more titles coming this year (in July, September, October, and December), and so far we have 6 more titles lined up for 2020, with another 4 or so that could make it. We do pay advances on royalties, yes.

LM: What distributor do you work with? Where is the best place to find your books?

CR: We work with Publishers Group West. If you are a bookstore or librarian looking for our titles, you can start there. You can learn how to contact PGW on the "Contact Us" page on our website. If you're a reader or fan, you can get our books directly through us here, at your favorite independent or national bookstore, or really about anywhere online that sells books. At our website we offer subscriptions and book bundles, too.

LM: What percentage of your authors have been first-time authors? What percentage have been established authors? What are the percentages for illustrators?

CR: Of the 16 books we've done, 9 have been from first-time authors. We've worked with 12 first-time illustrators.

Chad Reynolds continued

LM: How closely do you work with your authors and illustrators in creating the final project? What would the process be like? Does the author have any say in the illustrator?

CR: In terms of the editorial process, it depends on the manuscript, but we're always aiming for a feeling of collaboration and teamwork with the process. We seek some input from the author on matters regarding illustrator choice, book design, font, format, etc. We want the author to be happy. But we have the final say in these matters.

LM: You launched an imprint, Penelope Editions, in 2017. Please tell us a little bit about that arm of your company.

CR: Our first Penelope title was an adult coloring book called Nuveau: The Future of Patterns that came out in Jan 2017. Initially we just thought of this as a vehicle to catch those titles we loved but that didn't necessarily fit our Penny Candy mission. But now we've transitioned it to feature young adult and middle grade novels, starting next year.

LM: I see that Penny Candy Books has presence at important industry events, like BookExpo. In what other ways does Penny Candy Books support its authors and illustrators?

CR: We don't have the marketing and PR budgets of the big publishing houses, but we try to bring as much attention to the book and its creative team as we can by setting up readings, sending out review copies, submitting titles to awards and festivals, taking out ads, posting constantly on social media, reaching out to organizations who might benefit from our titles, going to conferences and fairs, etc.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

While Penny Candy Books is normally only open to submissions until March 31, 2019, Chad has agreed to offer an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to Children's Book Insider subscribers from August 1-31, 2019. Submissions should be emailed to Chad Reynolds at **chad@pennycandybooks.com** with the code **CBI Penny Candy 8/2019** in the subject line. For picture books, send a brief cover letter with a short synopsis, comparable titles, a short biographical note, and the entire manuscript pasted into the body of the email. For MG/YA submissions, include a short synopsis of your book, comparable titles, what sets your book apart, and a short biographical note along with a sample chapter pasted into the body of the email. Illustrators can include a link to online samples or a portfolio.

Note that Penny Candy Books is looking for manuscripts that reflect a wide range of authors and illustrators from around the globe. While they will consider work from all authors, they focus on underrepresented, unheard, or forgotten voices as part of their mission. For picture books, the language (whether rhyming or not) is very important. For middle grade and young adult fiction, the publisher is looking for books with guts and vision, books that celebrate language and story, and books that speak to young people in a way that's relevant to their lives. Please study current Penny Candy Press titles at **https://www.pennycandybooks.com/** to get a sense of their catalog before submitting.

YES, U CAN SAVE THE DAY Kid Lit Author Shannon Stocker

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Shannon Stocker always wanted to be a writer, but actually taking the leap to follow her creative side was another story. Stocker was in the 9-5 world until a medical crisis forced her to leave the States for experimental treatment that ultimately saved her life. Still, it wasn't until 2015 that she came to the belated realization that life was too short and it was time to chase her writing dreams once and for all. Now a Mom, she became enchanted with picture books, culminating with the publication of her debut *Can U Save the Day?* (Sleeping Bear Press, August 2019, illustrations by Tom Disbury), a story about the alphabet in disarray thanks to a bullying consonant B. A proud "word nerd", survivor and fighter, Stocker lives in Louisville, KY, with her family and pet menagerie.

PJ McILVAINE: Your writing journey took a lot of roads not followed and unexpected challenges. Did you always aspire to be a writer or was it something that called to you later in life?

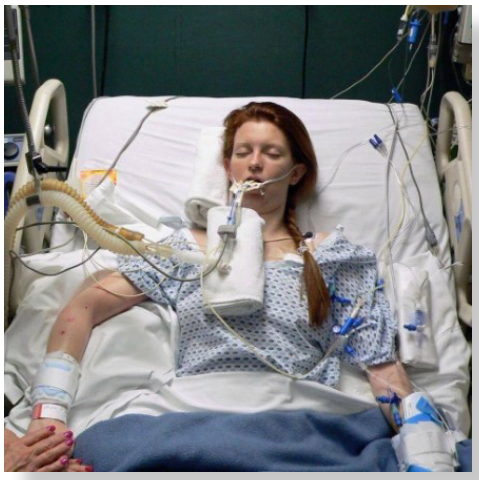
SHANNON STOCKER: "Unexpected challenges" is right! Honestly, I just think that's life. Does anyone really land where they expected? Without a doubt, a piece of me always aspired to be a writer. Poetry, speeches, songs, journals…writing has always been my primary creative outlet. I went to medical school, but my heart was never committed. I wanted to be a singer/songwriter. Life had other plans for me, though, and by the time I became a mother, picture books enchanted me. I really didn't believe in myself enough to pursue my passions until I was in my 40's.

PM: How has your chronic medical issues, which you detail on your blog (**http://www.shannonstocker.com**) along with your miraculous recovery, impacted on your writing and also, what you write about?

SS: Facing death changed everything for me. I knew there was a chance I wouldn't wake up when doctors induced a coma in 2007. I made a promise that if I woke up, and if I got better, I would change my way of living. I now live with an abundance of gratitude and few expectations. I try to give back as much as I can. I never let a day pass without telling my husband and my children how much I love them. I don't take good health for granted. When I believe in something, I fight hard for it. When I fall, I get back up. Every single time. It doesn't mean I don't have disappointments, or that I don't have down moments. I do—we all do. That's life. But I'm constantly trying to see the bigger picture, while taking baby steps. That's why I'm writing picture books and a memoir now. This is my passion, and I'm honoring my pre-coma promise. Although I will always love rhyming and humorous or lyrical prose, I'm also finding that I connect strongly with #OwnVoices topics. I want to reach children who feel "less than" because of a disability or illness. Those kids deserve to see them-

selves in books, too. I want to be their advocate.

PM: Where did the inspiration for your debut picture book *Can U Save the Day?* come from? Were you bullied as a child? How long did it take you to do a first draft? Did you have an agent when you sold it? What was the publication process like? Did you have a lot of input with the illustrations?



SS: Sure, I faced my share of bullies as a child…but *Can U Save the Day?* came to me in the moments before falling asleep. My head snapped off the pillow with, "The dog couldn't bark, he could only brk, and the duck couldn't quack, she could only quck" screaming in my brain. I typed that refrain into my phone and tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn't. So I padded to my office, wrote three or four stanzas, and went back to bed. The next day, the first draft rolled out of me. About 30 versions later, I sold it to an editor who'd fallen in love with it during a paid critique. I did secure an agent during the process (after my editor, Sarah, was already interested), but unfortunately, she was dishonest with me and hadn't done the work she said she'd done. We parted ways and Sarah and I continued to work together directly. I couldn't have asked for a better champion during the process. She respected my vision but held firm when she felt something wouldn't work—and she always communicated promptly and respectfully. Sketches were sent for my approval, as were several stages of completed illustrations. The whole process was a joy! *Can U Save the Day?* just went to print, so I'm incredibly excited to actually hold a copy for the first time!

PM: What is your writing routine like? When you begin do you have a general idea of how the story goes or do you prefer to let the story unfold as your write? Do you edit as you write? Do you have beta readers or belong to a critique group? How has being a mom impacted your writing?

SS: My writing routine changes daily, depending on my family. They are always my first priority. I try to get in some social media time, catch up on emails, work on my blog (inHERview), write my memoir, do critiques, write new manuscripts, and revise a bit every week. What I don't do one week, I'll try to focus on the next. I'm a rare breed, in that I'm a pantser with new drafts. I've tried to outline, but I find I rarely follow my own bullets. I do like to have a solid idea of how I want to start and end a story before I write, but I think I'm probably undiagnosed ADHD; my brain hops around too much. That usually means I'm going to do a billion revisions, but I actually love revising…so I don't mind. I definitely do edit as I write! It's funny—as time goes by, I find it's much harder to get that first draft on paper. I'm very critical of my writing, and I want it to be perfect (though I know that's not a realistic way of looking at a first draft).

Yes, I have critique groups—I'd be lost without them. I belong to three PB groups, one specific to nonfiction picture books, and a local partner who writes YA and MG. My critique partners are not only amazing writers, but they're also my closest friends. It's like group therapy and writing advice all at once.

Being a mom…how has that NOT impacted my writing? I don't know that I ever would've had the courage to write PBs had it not been for my children. I'd probably still be working in a job that didn't fulfill my soul. My kids crack me up all the time—they're constantly throwing wacky ideas my way. They don't realize that I get my best ideas by just watching them watch the world. I see things touch their hearts, and then I want to write about those things. I see them laugh, and then I want to write about those things. I see them cry, or fear, or hide, and then I want to write about those things. The world opens up to me when I look through their eyes.

PM: You recently signed with Allison Remcheck of The Stimola Literary Studio. How did that come

about? Were you actively seeking an agent at the time? Do you have any tips for those in the querying game? What were you looking for in an agent, regarding editorial and marketing strategies? Do you bounce ideas off your agent? What is the submission process like?

SS: Two manuscripts went to acquisitions at two different houses on the same day in March, so I queried 13 of my top agents/agencies that afternoon/evening. I had been dabbling in queries to agents for about a year before that. I actually queried Rosemary Stimola in March, because my writing didn't seem to fit Allison's online profile/wish list and Erica Rand Silverman was closed to queries. Rosemary passed my manuscript to Allison, who wrote shortly after I queried asking if I'd like to talk. My critique partners and I freaked out for a bit, since a call is typically reserved for offers of representation and she hadn't asked to see additional work yet. We arranged to speak the next morning and Allison started the call by telling me she loved my writing, she'd been to my website, she believed in me, and she wanted to offer me representation. We chatted for two hours during that first call. It was surreal. A few other agents expressed interest, but I knew Allison was right for me in a very short period of time. She's genuine, bright, communicative, and her clients adore her (I asked to speak with two).

As to tips for those in the querying game, follow your gut. If you get an offer and you feel any red flags, pass. My first agenting experience really shut me down for two years. When the right agent comes along, you will know. You should both be equally excited about the relationship. I'd also suggest that writers consider focusing their energy on smaller publishing houses before querying too many agents. I found securing a book contract to be slightly easier than securing a good agent. But no agent is better than a bad agent! And yes—I bounce some ideas off Allison. Our relationship is young and I don't want to bombard her with too much at once; she hasn't even seen most of my polished manuscripts yet! But I respect her expertise and her opinions tremendously, so I want to balance my time between writing things that feel important and marketable, and those things that just feel fun.

As to the submission process, I can't comment on that too much yet—it's a learning curve for me. There are certain rules with the Big 5 that don't apply to other houses, and things like options need to be considered following a sale (if you have an option, then that house has first right of refusal on your next similar manuscript, typically). Options can vary, but that's the gist. I trust that she's looking to build my career in the healthiest way possible, so for now, I'm just kicking back, writing more, watching, and waiting!

PM: How do you decide which ideas to work on? Do you work on multiple ideas at a time or focus on just one? Do you plan to expand into other genres? Is there a genre you would love to write but shy away from? Do you have a pet passion project?

SS: Ugh—this is where my focus could improve. I do work on multiple ideas at once, but it's hard. If I love love love a draft, then I'll polish it before moving to anything else. I do plan to expand into other genres, but not until my memoir is done. I'm about 50,000 words in now. I'd love to write a MG and/or YA that deals with the topic of abuse.

PM: Who are your favorite authors? What book or writer has influenced you?

SS: So many! Judy Blume, Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, Sandra Boynton, JK Rowling, Andrea Beatty, Deborah Underwood, Tara Lazar…and honestly, some of my favorite writing comes from my critique partners. They influence me more than anyone.

PM: In addition to writing, you're also a musician. How are you incorporating that talent into your writing?

SS: I just composed a song to accompany my debut, which I'll play at school visits. My friend and Nashville-based co-composer, Scott Sanford, laid down the guitar tracks for me, and now it's my turn to get the vocals down. My brother-in-law is a pretty great videographer/producer, so he will be helping me create a music video this summer. I also want to use the music in my trailer, which I'm hoping to work on with a friend who's an animator. She's amazing, so I'd be lucky if she could work me into her schedule!

PM: Where do you see yourself five years from now, writing wise?

SS: I'm hopeful that my memoir will be in print by then, which would open up more time for me to work on MG/YA (as well as picture books). I think it would be amazing to do more inspirational speaking, both to adults and in the form of school visits. I've been through a lot in my life, but I've also been the recipient of so much love and support. I really want to pay it forward.

Rising to the Occasion:

The climax of your novel

by Hilari Bell

Someone once said, "Your beginning sells this novel—but it's your climax that sells the next." Yet it's more difficult to identify the ingredients of a good novel climax than it is to pinpoint what makes great opening, or a well-structured middle. In commercial fiction, any good beginning and middle will have certain common characteristics, which apply to almost any genre. A novel's climax is so dependant on what's happened previously in the story that any number of events can create a great climax—it doesn't have to be a big fight scene, or a death-defying chase that ends with the villain's capture. In fact, in one of my favorite climaxes, a bunch of the protagonist's employees sit down and have a quiet chat about him…and the reader realizes that everything she has witnessed in the proceeding 500 or so pages, fights, riots, fire and avalanche, were not at all what they appeared. (*Niccolo Rising*, by Dorothy Dunnett.)

No matter what form it takes—a battle to the death or a quiet decision to do the right thing—the climax must be the culmination of the main story problem your character should have been pursuing from Chapter One. It's where the boy overcomes the final obstacle that stands between him and the girl. Where the weak protagonist finds the courage to stand up to the evil boss/gang leader/popular girl, or best friend. Where the hero summons that last ounce of strength, cleverness, or whatever virtue he possesses and the villain doesn't, to beat those overwhelming odds. And because the climax is so completely dependant on the shape of the story it springs from, it's hard to pin down what it should contain—but I can identify some of the things that make climaxes fail.

The climax doesn't match the story. You see this most commonly in a quiet novel about tangled relationships that ends with a car crash (or a kidnapping, or a natural disaster) and the protagonist suddenly finds herself struggling for survival. Even if the struggle for survival clarifies what's been wrong with her relationships, and lets her find the self-confidence to resolve them, the sudden switch to action adventure usually fails for the reader, because it's not what this novel is about. I know why writers do this; it's because they don't think that the protagonist simply figuring out the right thing to do and then doing it is sufficiently exciting—and they're probably right. But the answer isn't to suddenly tack on an action adventure finish, the answer is to put more and more pressure on the protagonist to make the wrong choice, so that making the right choice involves real sacrifice and strength on her part. A climax doesn't have to be "exciting." Dramatic can work just fine—in some cases, better than "exciting" ever could.

The climax consists of a simple battle of strength, which the hero wins. Adventure stories of all genres encounter a different problem. The big, action-packed final struggle is perfect for those genres, but if the protagonist wins that last battle simply because he's stronger than the villain the climax will fail. It doesn't matter if the battle is fought with spells, fists, or fleets of spaceships, if it's just a matter of who has the most force at his disposal, then the novel loses. The way an action climax works is when the protagonist is facing overwhelming odds—the villain is stronger than he could ever be—but he has some other quality of character, something he can summon out of the depths of his own nature, that will allow him to win. One of the best examples of this is in *The Lord of the Rings*, where two small hobbits, through sheer determination that good will prevail, defeat the greatest army of evil their world has ever known. After Sam and Frodo have dragged themselves across Mordor, expending every last ounce of strength, courage and love they possess to reach that volcano, they've earned their victory and the reader is delighted to see them achieve it.

Rising to the Occasion continued

If I was asked which is more important in a climax, drama or excitement, I'd have to say drama. The climaxes that readers remember longest are the ones that test the main character's inner resources to the utmost—his super-fast draw, endless strength, or the fact that he has tons of cool magic at his disposal make him less interesting than if he's slower and weaker than the villain, but still somehow summons up the courage, determination or cleverness to prevail. The harder the victory is, the higher the cost the hero pays for it, the more we admire him.

Someone else turns up to save the hero. This is the ultimate example of winning by superior force—and it's not even the hero's own force! By now everyone should know that the cavalry can't come to the rescue at the last moment, that the hero has to rescue himself—but I see an amazing number of children's and YA novels where adults step in at the end to solve the young protagonist's problem. And being saved by grownups is even worse than being rescued by the cavalry.

The protagonist—or the villain—suddenly starts acting in a way that is irrational or out of character to allow the hero to win. I recently saw the movie *3:10 from Yuma*, and despite a few glitches (if they're trying to hide in the middle of hostile Indian territory, why are they building huge campfires?) the compelling villain had me completely roped into the story…right up to the climax *(spoilers ahead)*, where several people did things that were completely out of character and/or just didn't make sense. I know the answer to all my caveats; the director thought that having the villain shoot all his own men was exciting—even though there was no reason for him to shoot more than one of them. He thought having the boy point a pistol at villain was dramatic—even though the kid then simply changed his mind and turned away, which was profoundly anti-climactic. He thought having the bad guy board the train was proving something to someone—even though this was a man who understood himself so well he had nothing to prove. (And the director liked the lighting effects of all those big campfires. And of course the reason they didn't shoot the horses to stop the coach in the first place was because then we wouldn't have a story.) But after a very short time these things add up to a big rational howl of, "He wouldn't do that!" And you've blown the reader's suspension of disbelief right when you need it most. Never have your hero (or villain) do something stupid or out of character just because it will make for an exciting climax—this is where they have to finally get it right.

(And don't have them light big campfires when they're supposed to be trying to hide, either!)

And finally, the climax should closely involve the culmination of the protagonist's growth arc. It doesn't always take place right in the middle of the climax—sometimes the protagonist learns whatever-he-needed-to-learn in order to go into that final battle armed for victory. Sometimes he figures it out right in the middle of the action, and can then go on to win. And sometimes it's only in the battle's quiet aftermath that he realizes he's now grown into the person he needs to be.

There are probably many other ways to screw up a novel's climax, but I can leave you with some final, positive tips. The climax is the resolution of what has happened in *this* story—it shouldn't involve extraneous types of action, or people who show up to help the hero out. The protagonist should use qualities he has acquired in the story to solve his problems; he can't just suddenly find the strength, he needs to be motivated by previous story events. The protagonist must be primarily involved in solving the problem—the more pain, effort, sacrifice, grit and drama it takes, the better your climax will work.

And a hard-working climax will help sell not only this book, but many books after that—which for a writer, is the ultimate happy ending.

Author Finds the Extraordinary in Ordinary Lives with Picture Book Biographies

interview by Laura Backes

This issue opened with Pat Miller's terrific article on how picture book writers can use mentor texts to improve their craft. Mentor texts are such an important tool for writers of any genre or age group that I thought the topic deserved a second look. One way to find mentor texts is to simply read loads of books in your chosen age group and/or genre, and then dissect those that speak to you. Another way is to peruse websites of published authors. Many will offer curated lists of their favorite mentor texts that they've used to inform their own books. This is just as relevant for nonfiction writers as it is for fiction.

One such writer is Annette Bay Pimentel (**http://www.annettebaypimentel.com/**). Annette is the author of two picture book biographies (*Girl Running: Bobbi Gibb and the Boston Marathon*, illustrated by Mica Archer and published by Nancy Paulsen Press, which won the 2019 Golden Kite Award for Nonfiction for Younger Readers; and *Mountain Chef: How One Man Lost His Groceries, Changed His Plans and Helped Cook Up the National Park Service*, illustrated by Rich Lo, published by Charlesbridge) and 12 titles in the from the Do You Really Want to Meet…a Dinosaur? series published by Amicus Press. Her newest picture book biography, *All the Way to the Top: How One Girl's Fight for Americans with Disabilities Changed Everything,* illustrated by Nabigal-Nayagam Haider Ali, will be published by Sourcebooks in Spring 2020.

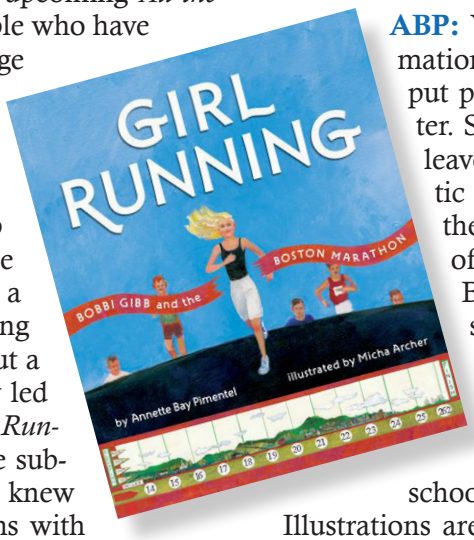
Annette's website is a terrific resource for nonfiction writers. The home page is devoted to reviews and studies of nonfiction books broken into categories such as How-To Nonfiction, Rich Back Matter, and Juxtapositions and Arguments. This is not only useful for writers, but it's helpful for teachers who may want to use creative nonfiction books in their classrooms. Which brings up another point: when you're ready to build your author website, take a look at what other authors have done to make their sites not only useful for book buyers, but for teachers and writers as well. If you can attract lots of different people to your site, you'll have a chance to sell your books to all of them. Check out Annette's Teacher's Guides helpfully linking her books to Common Core standards so teachers can easily use them in classrooms.

In terms of writing picture book biographies, Annette's two books make excellent mentor texts. Cradle-to-grave biographies are out of style, especially when writing for kids in preschool and early elementary grades. But since the interesting accomplishments of a subject may not happen until that person is an adult, the key to a strong picture book biography is finding a thread in the subject's childhood that leads to that future success. Another key: framing that thread in a way that's relatable to readers' lives today.

I had the opportunity to chat recently with Annette Bay Pimentel about her best tips for writing biographies and other narrative nonfiction.

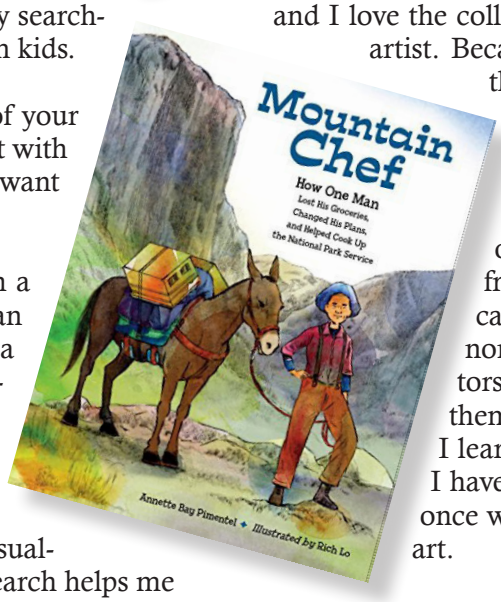
Annette Bay Pimentel continued

LAURA BACKES: Your picture book biographies, *Girl Running* and *Mountain Chef,* and your upcoming *All the Way to the Top* all feature ordinary people who have done extraordinary things to help change history. How do you find these subjects? Do you search them out, or do you stumble across them?



ANNETTE BAY PIMENTEL: I keep my antennae up! I stumbled upon Tie Sing, the hero of *Mountain Chef,* in a photograph as I researched something else. My husband sent me an idea about a different female runner that eventually led me to Bobbi Gibb, the subject of *Girl Running*. And I found Jennifer Keelan, the subject of *All the Way to the Top*, because I knew I wanted to write about the Americans with Disabilities Act and was systematically searching for a story that would connect with kids.

LB: How do you plan out the writing of your picture book biographies? Do you start with research and then find the angle you want to take, or the other way around?

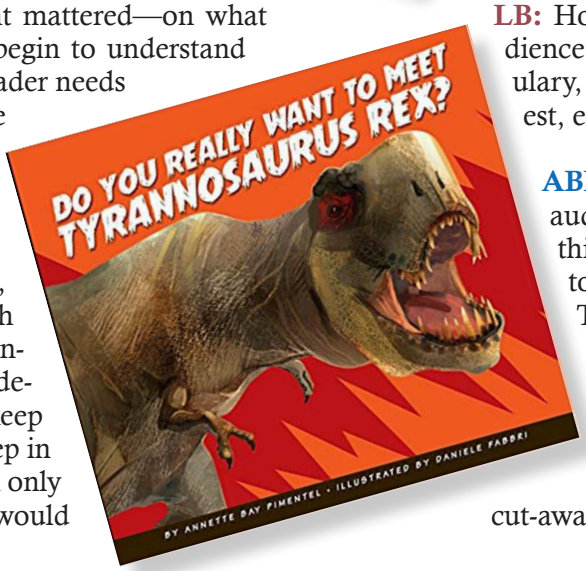


ABP: I love biographies that focus on a key event in someone's life, rather than birth to death stories. So I don't start a project until it's clear to me what moment or event I want to write about. But once I have that very vague sense of direction, I dive into research. I try to get as close to the moment as I can, sometimes through interviews, usually through archival research. That research helps me zero in on why a specific moment mattered—on what my story is really about. Once I begin to understand that, I can think about what my reader needs to understand before they get to the moment I want to write about, and I also start to figure out how to end the book.

LB: Because of their limited text, you must have a lot more research than you can fit into a narrative nonfiction picture book. How do you decide what to leave in, and what to keep out? And when writing, do you keep in mind the details that will be shown only through the illustrations, as you would when writing a fiction picture book?

ABP: You're right! I have oodles more information than fits in my books! I often get to put part of that information into back matter. Still, it can be painful to decide what to leave out. I tell schoolchildren three fantastic stories I left out of *Girl Running*, and they almost always argue that at least one of those should have been in the book! But I'm confident that the book is much stronger because I was ruthless in winnowing out anything that wasn't absolutely central to the heart of my story (and I sneakily got to share the stories anyway by putting them into my school visit!).

Illustrations are a vital part of how I tell my stories, and I love the collaborative process of working with an artist. Because art is such an essential piece of the nonfiction package we are making for young readers, I regularly include illustration notes in my manuscripts. I don't dictate what should be in the art but I explain the context of the scene, often with quotations from sources, so that the illustration can take up some of the burden of the nonfiction storytelling. And my illustrators so far have been crack researchers themselves—I'm astounded at the things I learn from their art! Still, my editors and I have always found words we can take out once we're looking at the writing next to the art.



LB: How conscious are you of your audience when writing in terms of vocabulary, pacing, holding the reader's interest, etc.?

ABP: I am most conscious of my audience of young readers when I think about what they need to know to understand the story I'm telling. The kids who are reading my stories were born in 2009 or later—some of the socks in my drawer are older than that! These kids have probably never imagined, for example, a cityscape without cut-away curbs or a school without kids

Annette Bay Pimentel continued

with disabilities. I need to figure out what they need to know to understand the story I'm telling; I have to build a historical scaffolding that they can stand on.

LB: Do you pay attention to school curriculum or think about how your books would be used in schools, or do you simply write what interests you?

ABP: I care most about writing something that fascinates or intrigues or moves me—I'm going to spend a long time with a topic, so I better love it! But when it's time to market a book, I think about where it might fit in the school curriculum. I've learned the most about how my books can be used in the classroom by developing workshops and programs with friends who are teachers. For me, the bigger challenge than finding a way into the school/library market is figuring out how to make my book connect with a bookstore browser.

LB: With your *Do You Really Want to Meet a .... Dinosaur?* series, you're writing about a topic that's been covered a lot for picture book readers, but you found a new, humorous angle. Was this series a tough sell?

ABP: Amicus Publishing hired me to extend their existing series about living animals to books about extinct animals. So the challenge for me was to reverse-engineer their established form. It felt almost like walking backwards. With my own work, I research to figure out the form of the book. With work-for-hire I use the form of the book to figure out what to research.

LB: Do you have any tips for finding/querying a literary agent?

ABP: I advise friends not to spend too much time on the query but to focus on the quality of the manuscript. Lackluster queries with gleaming manuscripts can lead to representation, never the opposite.

LB: Any final words of advice for new writers wanting to write narrative nonfiction?

ABP: Read. Read. Read. Be an expert on the books published in the last two years in the genre you want to write. What could be better than getting to spend your work hours reading kids' books?