

# Children's Book Insider

September 2019



How to Write a  
Graphic Novel

Above the Slushpile  
Submission Code:

**BETSY AMSTER**  
**LITERARY AGENCY**

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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 Company Accepting Submissions

Last spring, *Highlights for Children* sold its trade book publishing arm, comprised of Boyds Mills Press and its imprints Calkins Creek and WordSong, to Kane Press. The new company, called Boyds Mills & Kane, will be headquartered in the Kane Press offices in New York City. The new company's imprints are **Boyds Mills Press** (fiction and nonfiction picture books through young adult), **Wordsong** (poetry collections for all ages), **StarBerry Books** (diverse picture books), **Calkins Creek** (middle grade and YA nonfiction and historical fiction), and **Kane Press** (series-based titles with an educational underpinning written for children ages 3–11. For example, each title in the “Math Matters” series features a fictional narrative in which kids find fun ways to use math in everyday life. Books in the popular “Milo & Jazz Mysteries” chapter books feature kids using problem-solving skills.) **At this time, only Boyds Mills Press is actively seeking submissions, though Kane Press is open to proposals for new series ideas.** You can follow Boyds Mills & Kane on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/BMKbooks/>, and see current and upcoming titles at <https://boydsmillsandkane.com/>

Below are the current needs of editors for the Boyds Mills Press imprint. Submit to each editor at the emails provided, following the submission guidelines at the end of this listing:

**Senior Editor Joy Bean:** Humorous books, lively nonfiction of all types, character-driven stories with a strong voice, new approaches to telling a story. Seeking picture book, early chapter book, middle grade, and young adult manuscripts, as well as graphic novels for all ages (fiction and nonfiction). Submit to [jbean@bmkbooks.com](mailto:jbean@bmkbooks.com)

**Editor Jes Negrón:** For picture books: humor, an element of the absurd, magic, space, robots, mystery, fairy tales that focus on non-Western European canons. Also characters and narratives that help children explore concepts too often discussed in whispers. For middle grade and young adult: contemporary, fantasy, science fiction, and mystery/thriller. Would love to see more stories that focus on the bonds of friendship, kinship, and mentorship. For all age groups, particularly interested in stories featuring characters, authors, and illustrators from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, including People of Color and of the LGBTQ+ community. Submit to [submissions@bmkbooks.com](mailto:submissions@bmkbooks.com)

**Assistant Editor Suzy Krogulski:** Middle grade and young adult novels with intricate, thoughtful plots and astute, sincere voices from diverse backgrounds. For picture books, stories that use silliness and fun to explore important themes. Also realistic fiction, mysteries, thrillers, horror, and nonfiction puzzles or investigations for all ages. Submit to [skrogulski@bmkbooks.com](mailto:skrogulski@bmkbooks.com)

**General Submission Guidelines:** When submitting, designate in the subject line the editor to whom the submission is addressed, your book title, genre, and word count. Will respond only if interested. If you have not heard back after three months, you can assume it's not right for the BMK list.

For Fiction: Picture books—submit a query letter and paste the entire manuscript in the body of your email. Middle grade and Young Adult—submit a query letter and first 10 pages of your novel pasted in the body of your email.

For Nonfiction: Follow the same guidelines as above but also include your qualifications for writing on this topic in your query letter, and paste your bibliography of resources along with your manuscript or sample pages into the body of the email.

## Last Chance to Sign Up for Picture Book Summit!

The Fifth Annual Picture Book Summit online picture book conference takes place on Saturday, October 5, 2019. The entire Summit takes place online and can be attended from the comfort of your home anywhere in the world. Keynote speakers include Caldecott-winning author/illustrator Matthew Cordell, and award-winning authors Samantha Berger and Rukhsana Kahn. Workshop presenters include author Ruth Spiro, agent Jennie Dunham, Summit co-founders Emma Walton Hamilton and Laura Backes, as well as editor and agent panel discussions. Six submission opportunities will be available to Summit attendees after the live event. Registration for the live event includes access to all the session recordings until January 31, 2020, as well as the pre-Summit online Pajama Party. For more information, go to <https://picturebooksummit.com/registration-2019/> Registration ends September 24, 2019.

**Magazine Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction for Early Elementary Grades**

*Spider*, a literary magazine for ages 6-9, features stories, poems, articles, and activities for newly independent readers. Editors seek energetic, beautifully crafted submissions with strong “kid appeal” (often tied to high-interest elements such as humor, adventure, and suspense). Particularly interested in stories that explore themes of identity (gender expression, ability, race and ethnicity, family structure including LGBTQAI+ and single parent homes, neighborhoods, beliefs, and traditions); global cultures and languages (current needs include South American, African, and Middle Eastern countries, island nations, and Native American nations); scientific and technological exploration and innovation; magical or interplanetary landscapes; cities and metropolitan areas; real kids doing real things; weird and sometimes gross stuff; and the creative spirit. Fiction runs 300-1000 words; poetry is up to 20 lines, nonfiction is 300-800 words (articles should be written in a kid-friendly narrative, not just be a listing of facts); crafts, recipes, games and puzzles should be 1-2 pages (all activities should require a minimum of parental supervision).

**Specific topics needed at this time (query deadlines: November 1, 2019):**

**Journeys:** Stories, poems, and short plays about going on a journey – whether a quest through an enchanted land, a move to a new home, or simply an afternoon spent traversing one’s own backyard. Looking for pieces with humorous or fantastical takes on the concept of journeys, as well as those that take a quieter, more thoughtful look at children’s feelings during times of movement and transition.

**Ancient Civilizations:** Wants writing that goes beyond crumbling ruins and shows readers what it was like to visit a Maya temple, construct an Egyptian pyramid, or live at the height of artistic excellence in Greece. Also welcomes myths and legends, stories about archaeologists, and fun and quirky things you won’t find in history class. Please provide a list of sources with your submission.

Send all submissions via Submittable: <https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/17817/spider-magazine-for-ages-6-9>  
Allow 3-6 months for a response.

**Independent Publisher Seeks Timeless Books for All Ages**

Peachtree Publishing Company is an independent trade book publisher based in Atlanta, Georgia, specializing in timeless, enduring children’s books, including board books, picture books, and middle grade and young adult fiction and nonfiction. Peachtree is currently accepting unsolicited manuscripts and art submissions for fiction and nonfiction picture books, chapter books, middle grade and young adult. Many books feature diverse characters and/or themes of diversity. Recent titles include *One Fox: A Counting Book Thriller* by Kate Read (picture book), *Aalfred and Aalbert* by Morag Hood (picture book), *Under the Snow* by Melissa Stewart, illustrated by Constance R. Bergum (nonfiction picture book), *Nina Soni, Former Best Friend* by Kashmira Sheth, illustrated by Jenn Kocsmiersky (chapter book, ages 7-10), *Mr. Penguin and the Fortress of Secrets* by Alex T. Smith (ages 8-12), and *Fault Lines in the Constitution: The Framers, Their Fights, and the Flaws that Affect Us Today* by Cynthia Levinson & Sanford Levinson (nonfiction, ages 10 and up). For more titles, go to <https://peachtree-online.com/>. It’s essential that you study the Peachtree online catalog and read some recent titles before submitting, to make sure your work fits with Peachtree’s list.

Submit the entire manuscript with a query letter that includes a brief synopsis, target audience, your pertinent biographical information (social media handles, website, contact information, past publishing credentials, education, etc.). Also include a self-addressed stamped #10 (letter-sized) envelope for a response. If no self-addressed stamped envelope is included, you will not hear back. If you would like your materials returned, send an appropriately sized envelope with adequate postage and note in your cover letter that you would like your manuscript to be returned. If there is not sufficient postage, the manuscript will be recycled. All manuscripts should be mailed to Helen Harriss, Acquisitions Editor, Peachtree Publishing Company Inc., 1700 Chattahoochee Ave., Atlanta, GA 30318.

Because Peachtree is a smaller publisher and responds to all submissions, allow 6-9 months for a response. Please note in your query if you are also submitting the manuscript elsewhere.

**Agent Accepting Submissions for All Ages**

Melissa Richeson is an Associate Agent at Apokedak Literary Agency (<https://sally-apokedak.com/>). She’s looking for heartfelt and/or humorous picture books, as well as picture book nonfiction. Chapter books with quick pacing, a great hook, and a well-researched world. In middle grade, she loves magic, humor, and a sense of imagination. For young adult, she’s drawn to contemporary and historical work, as well as well-crafted fantasy. A plus for anything that uses subtle wit and intelligent wordplay. She is not a good fit for sci-fi, horror, or graphic violence.

Email submissions to [melissa.richeson@apokedakliterary.com](mailto:melissa.richeson@apokedakliterary.com). For picture books, paste the full text into the email and attach links to any dummies if you’re an author/illustrator. For novels, paste the first 10 pages and include the full manuscript and synopsis as a .doc attachment. Follow Melissa on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MelissaRicheson>

## Counting Down to 30: We Need to Talk About the M Word

by Jon Bard

Dear Reader:

*(Laura here. This month, I'm turning the Countdown to 30 editorial over to Jon. [In case you're a new subscriber, I've been counting down the 12 months to the 30th anniversary of CBI with editorials revealing insights we've learned over the years.] This one's a biggie, because when we started in this business back in 1990, the internet was three years away from entering most people's homes and "social media" meant sending out party invitations by snail mail. Publishers sent authors on book tours and scheduled appearances for them on local TV and radio shows. Even if you weren't a best-selling author, you still had a shot at drawing a decent crowd at book signings and getting reviewed in dedicated book sections of newspapers because that's how people found out about new books.*

*For better or worse, the industry's changed. Very few publishers put big money behind promoting authors these days, and if they do, it's because those authors already have a large audience. Authors (and illustrators) are now expected to do the lion's share of their own publicity. You may yearn for those genteel days of yore when authors didn't have to schedule their own blog tours, you may moan and groan and swear you'll never have a Facebook page, but you can't get around it. This is simply the way publishing now operates. If you want to be a part of it, you gotta play by the new rules.*

*So read on, because Jon's going to take the sting out of the dreaded M word.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

Hi everyone, it's Jon. Deep down you know that, to succeed as a writer in today's environment, you have to market yourself and your work. And you're probably not too thrilled about that. Look, I get it. You want to write, not promote. If you're like a lot of writers, you view marketing as being pushy...inauthentic...kind of "icky".

And when you add to it all the stuff that's been thrown at you about social media and blogging and author platforms and all kinds of other things, I expect you end up looking something like this:



So, I'd like to help you out a bit, and see if I can change your mind about marketing.

But first, a bit of background about me that you may not know: Before partnering with Laura on Children's Book Insider, I was the creative supervisor at a major NY public relations firm. I then co-founded my own PR agency (we helped promote clients like Pictionary, Ertl and Little Golden Books). For the past 30 years, I've been consulting with and mentoring entrepreneurs on marketing and promotion. And because I spend my days helping writers, I understand your unique issues with marketing, and why it can be so difficult for you. In other words, I get you. And I think I can help bridge the gap between where you are and where you need to be.

OK then, let's begin by sharing three truths about marketing that I've learned....

**Truth 1: Author marketing is not about pushing things at people, it's about drawing people to you.**

This is a major hangup for lots of folks. They say "I don't want to be pushy" or "I don't want to hawk my wares." Well, that's good. Because that's not what you should be doing.

The point of author marketing shouldn't be to sell a particular book. It should be to develop a fan base. A community. A Tribe. You can only do that by giving folks the opportunity to get closer to you – not force yourself upon them. And how do you draw people to you? By giving them things they enjoy. By giving them points of connection. By demonstrating shared values.

To put it another way, it's about honoring them as human beings and inviting them to be part of something bigger, and wonderful.

That's connecting. And yes, it is marketing.

**Truth 2: Forget about book marketing, forget about promotion, forget about selling. Instead, focus on advocating.**

You've written (or you're planning to write) a book, app or eBook that will bring something meaningful to the life of readers. Perhaps you have a message to share, important information to teach, an inspirational tale to tell or you just want to give your new friends a few giggles to brighten a day.

That's a pretty important contribution, and it deserves to flourish.

So let me ask you this: How, exactly, will that reader ever be impacted by your work if no one tells her about it? How will her life be changed by your words if you keep everything to yourself?

It's up to you to reach her. In fact, you're doing her a great disservice by not reaching her! But how do you do that? By marketing. No, scratch that – by advocating for your work. By bringing people together with a goal not only to sell your book, but to improve their life experience. By going to where your prospective readers are hanging out (or, perhaps where their parents are hanging out) and becoming part of their world. (And then having them become part of your world.) By moving forward with a certainty that you have something important to share and you're bound and determined to share it.

Let me be clear: if you have created something that will enhance another person's life, you owe it to them to tell them about it!

If you're truly a writer, the opportunity to advocate for yourself and your work should thrill you. Heck – it's right in your wheelhouse. You're a communicator, and this is about communication. You're a word-smith, and this is about putting words together on a blog, on Facebook and on Twitter. You love young people, and this is a further opportunity to connect with them and learn from them.

What's so scary about that? In fact, if you're like most writers, you'll find that advocating for your work is rewarding, fun and full of surprises.

### **Truth 3: The time to start marketing yourself is before you're published.**

This is one of the greatest secrets I can share. Most writers think “I don't have to worry about marketing – I don't even have anything published yet!” What a huge mistake they're making.

Here's why: When the day comes that your first book, app or eBook is released, would you rather the situation be:

a. You have no fan base, no way to reach potential readers (or their parents, if you write for young children) and no one to help spread the word about your wonderful new release.

or

b. You announce the release to your devoted Tribe, who eagerly buy copies and then start spreading the word.

Pretty obvious, isn't it? Start building your Tribe now. You'll thank me later.

### **Truth 4: Marketing should be simple, and it shouldn't take much of your time. Oh, and it should cost very little.**

There's so much nonsense surrounding marketing. Flashy new techniques, the “hot social network of the week”, massive websites with all the bells and whistles that need to be built....

You don't have time for all that, and you don't need to worry about it. If author marketing is really just about building a Tribe, than that's what you should focus on. And it's not brain surgery. Your success in any marketing endeavor is directly related to the amount of value you give your customers. Now, by “value” I don't mean money. I mean things like:

- \* memorable experiences
- \* positive feelings
- \* connection
- \* usefulness
- \* reinforcement, and so on.

Here's a classic example: the musician Jimmy Buffet hasn't had a hit record in more than 30 years. And yet, his concerts sell out large venues. He's built an empire of restaurants, music venues and merchandise



(including his own tequila brand) under the Margaritaville umbrella and he's an icon to millions of fans.

How'd he do it? By giving massive value, and by building a Tribe to keep the connection growing. When his Tribe (Parrotheads) gather, folks who may have had a rough week in the office get to put on Hawaiian shirts and silly hats and feel like they're on a beach in the Caribbean. They feel a connection with each other (for which they are eternally grateful to the man who set the Tribe up) and they feel connection to the artist. Between shows, the value continues. Videos, Tweets, blog posts, books, emails – all reinforcing the common bond that draws his fans together.

Now consider how most authors market their books:

They start by releasing their book and then just flail around trying to get some attention. If you ask them “What value are you giving prospective readers?” they might say “The value is in how good my book is!”

Well, that's nice. But no one has read your book yet. And so, you've given absolutely zero value. No wonder you aren't selling books!

Now, let's look at a different scenario:

The same author develops a Tribe and showers them with value. Fun tips, great quotes, freebies, a comments section after blog posts that allows readers to share their ideas, downloadable activities related to their book (even if the book's not published yet), a bibliography of further reading, interviews with other authors writing in the same genre, writing exercises the author has used to jump-start her own creativity (here's an Insider tip: some of your most enthusiastic Tribe members will be other writers, so be sure to give them value too)...and so on.

This author also follows the blogs, Facebook pages and websites of other authors or people who cater to the same audience the author wants to reach, commenting on posts and participating in online discussions. In other words, the author becomes part of a connected, online community.

Then the author releases her book. And what happens?

Her Tribe repays the value she's provided them many times over. They are rooting for her. They are excited for her. They buy her book and go on a quest so that others will buy the book (and join the Tribe).

So right now, you need to ask yourself this very important question about your current marketing efforts:

***Are you giving prospective readers any value, or are you just pushing your book in their direction in hopes they'll buy it?*** If you're doing the latter (and almost every writer is), you need to stop right now and work on building your Tribe. (Those of you who write for young children may be asking “How do I grow a Tribe of 6-year-olds?” The answer: you don't. You grow a Tribe of parents, teachers and librarians – the folks who are the purchasing decision makers when it comes to books for children and pre-teens.)

## **Building Your Tribe**

There are lots of ways to build your Tribe, but you need to find what works for you. Some authors post



*Counting Down to 30 continued*

on Facebook about three to five times a week. Their posts are brief but entertaining and thoughtful, and they've amassed hundreds (or thousands!) of followers because their posts are interesting to read. And they're not always about their books. But, as a pub date for a new book approaches, they may post the cover (along with how excited they are for the release and a few interesting tidbits about the writing/researching/editing process), then pictures of them happily holding up their author copies when they arrive in the mail, then images from their book launch party. Their Tribe is delighted because they've gotten to know this person, think of him or her as a friend, and are happy to share the good news on their own Facebook feeds (and, even more importantly, buy the new book). THEN the Tribe posts comments about how much they love the book, or photos of their own kids delightedly reading the new work. You can't buy that kind of publicity – it has to come from the heart.

Other authors pour their efforts into their blog, creating weekly posts that resonate with their targeted audience. If they're writing picture books, their blog posts may be aimed at teachers or parents and talk about how to get young children interested in the natural world (if they're writing nature-based nonfiction), or how to help kids deal with a school bully (if that's the focus of their upcoming fiction work). Middle grade and young adult authors may speak directly to pre-teens and teens in their posts, as well as share their writing process (many MG/YA readers also love to write). The point is, these authors are giving readers a reason to return to their blog again and again, because they're receiving value. And then, when a blog post announces the release of a new book, they're first in line to buy it.

Author websites that go beyond simply showcasing a new book's BUY button also encourage repeated visits. Providing teacher-ready classroom lesson plans based on the book, activities for kids, interesting supplemental information on the topic, and videos from the author talking directly to the reader are a few ways to add value to your visitors.

Some of your Tribe-building efforts will take just a few minutes a day; others may take a couple of hours a week. You can mix it up to fit your schedule. Your first step in building your Tribe is to gather ideas. Start by studying the websites of well-known authors you admire and note any interesting content that goes beyond showcasing their books. Also Google authors' names with the word “blog” to see what pops up. Plug authors' names into Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Make a list of practices, posts and videos that work for you (those that make you want to click “follow” because you want more of the same). Then use the best ideas as a blueprint for advocating for your own work. And don't forget – if another author, or teacher, or librarian in your Tribe comments on your posts and follows you, return the favor. They will always be your biggest cheerleaders when your book comes out.

So, there it is – if you're not cut out to be a marketer, then don't become one. Instead, become a Tribe builder and advocate for your work. And then go change some readers' lives.

Sincerely,

*Jon Bard*

PS: If you want more tips for how to take the pain out of promoting your work, check out our **Easy Author Marketing**. As a CBI subscriber, use this link to get 20% off: <http://bit.ly/ezauthormarketing>

# THE BASICS OF CREATING GRAPHIC NOVELS

by Jean Daignau

**A**ccording to a recent article in Publishers' Weekly (April 2019), sales of graphic novels increased by 11.7 percent as measured by unit sales for 2018. But what is even more impressive is that the juvenile market accounted for 56.2 percent of this sales growth. That's a lot of kids' graphic novels. What is even more astounding is that Dav Pilkey's *Dog Man* holds the top six slots and Raina Telgemeir's graphic novels, *Drama*; *Smile*; *Sisters*, hold spots seven through nine. While graphic novels are more a format than a genre, that increase in sales warrants a further look, especially for book writers who can think visually and are looking into breaking into this unique area of children's publishing.

## AREN'T GRAPHIC NOVELS JUST GROWN-UP COMIC BOOKS?

Comic books first appeared in the 1930s, although a Swiss artist, Rodolphe Topffer, is credited with the first comic *strip*—a multi-panel illustrated publication dating back to 1827. Although the first graphic novel predates that publication with an adaptation of Gottfried August Burger's *Lenardo und Blandine* in 1783, it wasn't until 1978 that the term “graphic novel” found its place in American literature with Will Eisner's *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories*. This format saw a major uptick in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly with the success of graphic novels by British authors such as Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore.

Besides the obvious difference in the length of graphic novels versus comic books, there are other differences. Comics tend to be written in serial format, often with one continuous story spanning several—usually monthly—publications. While graphic novels don't read like novels because the storyline takes place in panel format, usually the plotline itself is much more complex and there tends to be more character development than in comic books. Just like other books, a story arc spans the length of the book and there is a resolution by the end.

While much distinguishes comic books and graphic novels, much more connects the two. For graphinovelist Steve Kissing, who's 2003 memoir *Running from the Devil* was adapted to graphic novel form in 2018, graphic novels require “interesting scenes and engaging action that make for captivating visuals.” Sounds a lot like a comic book, doesn't it?

Additionally, for a graphic novel to stand out, Kissing says it needs what every good comic book needs: “arresting cover art, illustrations throughout and, of course, a wonderful story.” One way to determine if your story might be suitable to graphic novel format is whether or not it's “filled with visually interesting scenes and characters.”

And, like comic books, the format for graphic novels includes images, sound effects or onomatopoeia, and text—either in the form of dialogue or captions—all told in panels on the page. Additionally, cliffhangers, or page turns as they're often called, are important.

## ARTWORK IS THE STAR

For writers, it's important to remember that in graphic novels, the artwork tells much of the story. That beautiful lyrical prose will often be replaced by words like “POW” and “SPLAT!”

Unlike standard novels and most picture books, graphic novels can involve a more back and forth process between the author and the illustrator. Kissing advises to “expect a fair amount of back and forth as being typical” depending on the publisher and illustrator, and, if so, he suggests that authors remember that for graphic novels, “it's also the art and the way the art and the script ‘talk’ to each other” that's important. As with any illustrated book, it can be hard for authors to put aside their egos and let someone else take control, but particularly with this format, the artwork often is the star. It's helpful for authors to try to think visually when creating a graphic novel, even if that's not how they normally approach writing. Because usually, if a graphic novel text is read on its own, the

*The Basics of Creating Graphic Novels continued*

reader would have trouble understanding everything that's happening on the page. As Kissing says, "The illustrations do a lot of the heavy lifting."

**THOSE PESKY FORMATTING ISSUES**

A number of graphic novel authors I've read about suggest that you start by writing your story in regular manuscript form. This helps you think through issues that typically fall short with a first draft: not enough storyline, weak character development, and lack of growth in your main character. You can avoid spending a lot of time on lengthy descriptions, since the artwork carries that ball, but knowing that you have a complete story with all the right pieces will save you a lot of trouble prior to formatting.

While there are no standards in the industry for formatting graphic novels, getting a clear vision of comic book or movie script layout will help. An article that appeared in *Writer's Digest* in November 1947 and written by Stan Lee is still relevant. Lee says that the important part of the formatting process is that the editor and illustrator can clearly understand what the author is communicating. You can find this article at: <https://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/stan-lee-1947-guide-to-writing-and-selling-comics>.

For Kissing's project, he approached it as "creating a story board for a movie for which I was writing captions. This helped me to 'see' the story in images rather than just words."

Here is an example of Kissing's layout for *Running from the Devil*:

**PAGE 11:**

**PANEL ONE:** Iconic image from THE EXORCIST poster (see visual reference material, separate document)

**CAPTION:** BUT THE MOST CONVINCING EVIDENCE OF SATAN'S EXISTENCE WAS THE WILDLY POPULAR MOVIE, THE EXORCIST, WHICH HAD MADE ITS DEBUT THE YEAR BEFORE.

**CAPTION:** IT WAS BASED ON A TRUE STORY, WE WERE TOLD. ALTHOUGH I HADN'T SEEN THE R-RATED FLICK, I HEARD ALL ABOUT THE DETAILS.

**PANEL TWO:** Iconic "levitating" shot from THE

EXORCIST (see visual reference material, separate document)

**CAPTION:** LEVITATION, SPINNING HEADS, GREEN PUKE

A slightly different format style might look like this:

**PAGE 4:**

INT – INSIDE BLOOMINGTON DETECTIVE BUREAU OFFICE

PANEL 1:

LAURIE STEVENS, the office administrative assistant, sits at her desk. JOHN BLOOMINGTON is walking through the door.

STEVENS

You look like hell. And you're an hour late for your meeting with the Gardners.

PANEL 2:

Close up of Bloomington's face, slightly annoyed.

BLOOMINGTON

Great to see you too. And I'm not late. I avoided the Gardners intentionally.

PANEL 3:

BLOOMINGTON enters his office. GARDNERS are sitting in front of his desk.

JANE GARDNER

If you meant you hope we left, we didn't.

No matter what formatting style you use for submission, remember clarity and consistency are key. And, it's always wise to check a publisher's website for specific guidelines.

**WHAT ELSE IS THERE?**

If you're interested in trying this unique format for your manuscript, the tried and true advice for any writer is still the same: read, read, and repeat. Typing out an existing graphic novel in a screenwriting or comic book format can be especially helpful. It allows

*The Basics of Creating Graphic Novels continued*

you to see how the sparse text looks on the page without the artwork.

There are a number of reference books out there that can help you get started. Kissing recommends *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* by Hilary Chute. Another title often seen in my research and geared toward authors is *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* by Scott McCloud.

## **GRAPHIC NOVEL TIPS FOR THE AUTHOR-ILLUSTRATOR**

THIS INFORMATION IS ADAPTED, WITH PERMISSION, FROM AN ARTICLE TITLED "10 THINGS BEFORE YOU START A COMIC OR GRAPHIC NOVEL" BY JASON BRUBAKER (<https://www.makingcomics.com/2014/09/24/10-things-start-comic-graphic-novel>).

IN A NUTSHELL, HERE ARE BRUBAKER'S TIPS BEFORE STARTING A GRAPHIC NOVEL.

1. READ BOOKS ON THE SUBJECT. BRUBAKER RECOMMENDS MAKING COMICS AND UNDERSTANDING COMICS BY SCOTT MCCLLOUD.
2. MAKE A MODEL SHEET OR TURNAROUND OR SCULPT YOUR CHARACTERS IN CLAY.
3. START WITH AN IDEA YOU REALLY BELIEVE IN AND WANT TO SHARE WITH OTHERS. BRUBAKER EMPHASIZES THAT CREATING A GRAPHIC NOVEL IS HARD WORK, SO YOU REALLY NEED TO LOVE AND BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO DO.
4. WRITE YOUR STORY BEFORE DRAWING IT.
5. DEVELOP A STYLE THAT IS DOABLE AND WON'T TAKE A GAZILLION YEARS.
6. FOCUS ON YOUR STRENGTHS. IN OTHER WORDS, DRAW WHAT YOU LOVE.'
7. IF YOU PLAN TO DRAW REALISTIC HUMAN CHARACTERS, MAKE SURE YOU KNOW ANATOMY.
8. MAKE RULES FOR YOURSELF [FOR STYLE, CHARACTER DETAILS, SETTING, ETC.] TO FOLLOW SO IT LOOKS LIKE THE SAME BOOK FROM BEGINNING TO END.
9. CREATE THE ILLUSTRATIONS IN RGB MODE BUT PRINT THEM CMYK MODE. BRUBAKER ADDS THAT THIS IS THE WAY I FINALLY CHOSE TO DO IT AND THE COLORS IN MY PRINTED BOOK LOOKED PERFECT ON PAPER.
10. WORK IN AT LEAST 300 DPI.

## **FOR FURTHER READING:**

BESIDES DAV PILKEY AND RAINA TELGEMEIR'S POPULAR TITLES, HERE ARE A FEW OTHERS WORTH READING.

*REAL FRIENDS* BY SHANNON HALE

*SWING IT, SUNNY* BY JENNIFER L. HOLM

*GRAVEYARD SHAKES* BY LAURA TERRY

*OLGA: WE'RE OUT OF HERE* BY ELISE GRAVEL

*HEY, KIDDO* BY JARRETT J. KROSOCZKA

*KISS NUMBER 8* BY COLLEEN A. FVENABLE

*THE ADVENTURE ZONE: HERE THERE BE GERBLINS* BY CLINT MCELROY

*BE PREPARED* BY VERA BROSGOL



# BE BRAVE, BAD KITTY: KID LIT AUTHOR-ILLUSTRATOR NICK BRUEL

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**N**ick Bruel always wanted to be a cartoonist, so to fund his “radical lifestyle” he worked in bookstores. And that’s probably where he might still be laboring away if not for a fortuitous turn of events: a stint at a children’s bookstore which taught him the basics of creating engaging, humorous books that kids would love to read, and finding his dream agent who asked him for a meeting as a courtesy and offered representation on the spot. Now a best selling author of the popular *Bad Kitty* series, with more books on the way, Bruel shares his writing tips and offers the most valuable piece of advice for aspiring authors and artists.

**PJ McIlvaine:** Did you always want to be a children’s author/illustrator?

**Nick Bruel:** I always wanted to be a cartoonist, which, I suppose, is similar. They are both formats wherein you tell a story with both words and pictures. When I was in college I actually wrote and illustrated the comic strip for the campus newspaper. After college, my goal was to syndicate the comic strip, but to no avail. Meanwhile I created cartoons for alternative newsweeklies and magazines and for trade journals – pretty much for anyone who was willing to pay anywhere between \$10 and \$250 for a comic. In order to support this radical lifestyle I’d developed, I worked bookstores. I worked in book retail for over 15 years, the last 7 of them for a children’s bookstore in New York City called Books of Wonder. It was there that I first began contemplating to combine these two interests: comics and children’s books. I’d tried submitting children’s book manuscripts in the past, but it wasn’t

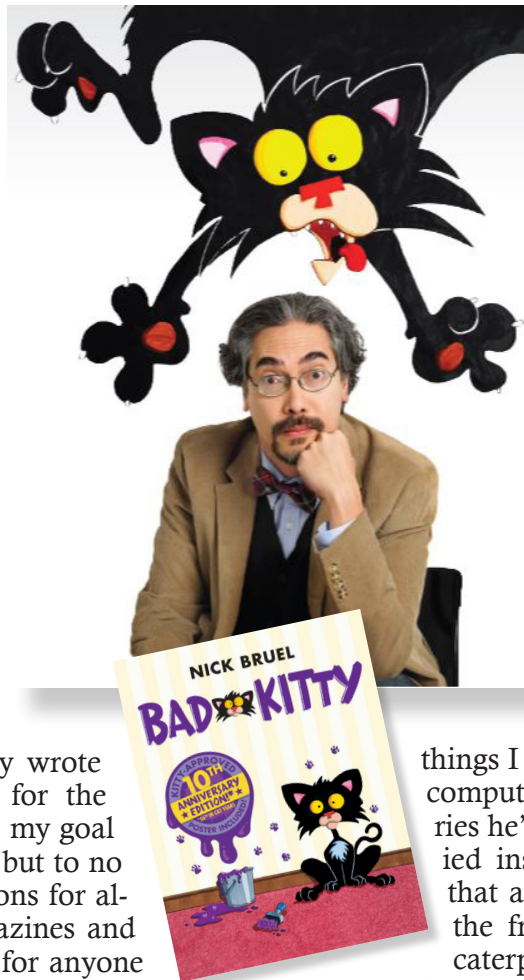
until I’d worked in that store and really understood how a children’s book worked that I managed to create manuscripts that actually worked.

**PM:** Some years ago, you illustrated a picture book written by your father, the late Robert O. Bruel, which you maybe not so jokingly said sells better than your current books, at least in Canada. Was he a source of inspiration and support?

**NB:** The reverse is true. While I was cartooning, I also began writing short stories to submit to journals and the like, also to no avail. My father found this fascinating, and maybe even inspirational. He was a psychologist by training who also taught classes at the university level. Shortly after he retired, he bought himself a computer and began writing his own short stories to submit out to journals and the like, although to no avail just like me.

My father died suddenly on June 12, 2002. One of the first things I did after he passed was go into his computer and collect all of the short stories he’d written in his last few years. Buried inside one story was another story that a character is telling another about the friendship between a worm and a caterpillar. I found this little sub-story

so charming that I set aside the time to develop it and adapt it into a picture book. It got great reviews when it came out and still receives a little attention every spring. Why it’s managed to touch upon Canadian sensibilities so successfully is anybody’s guess. But the real takeaway is that my father did finally manage to become a published author, albeit posthumously.



*Nick Bruel continued*

**PM:** How did you come up with the enormously popular, best-selling series *BAD KITTY*?

**NB:** I thought of the title first. I use a creative device every now and then in which rather than challenge myself with coming up with a story idea, I go easy on myself and simply think of simple one or two word titles that might themselves form an idea. This has been true with most of my books, whether it be *Boing!* or *Who Is Melvin Bubble?* or *Bad Kitty*.

So about 17 years ago now, I was sitting at home jotting down and contemplating titles I'd never seen before. Eventually I thought of *Bad Kitty*. I'd never seen a picture book with that title before, although I've since come to understand that there was one once. This was when I began implementing the only story developing device that I know of that actually works: I asked myself questions. What does this cat do that's so bad? I came up with so many ideas that I thought it would be interesting if I put them into alphabetical order. Why would this cat do so many terrible things? A cat's behavior is often dictated by the food it receives, so I thought it would be even more interesting if I created an alphabet of foods that she doesn't like. And so on.

**PM:** Do you have your own bad kitty?

**NB:** We do now. We didn't have a cat at the time I wrote the first *Bad Kitty* book. Since then we had a wonderful cat named Esme who only recently died. We still have our cat Rose, who we named Rose because she looks and smells nothing like a rose.

**PM:** How long does it take you to write/draw the books?

**NB:** It takes me on average 7 months to write and il-

lustrate a book. This is true, by the way for the chapter books and picture books. Chapter books – illustrations are

black and white and gray, but there can be as many as 160 of them in a single book. Picture books – a lot less pages, but the illustrations are color. The only exceptions are the 8x8 picture books/early readers I recently created. For those, all I illustrate are the line drawings and a very talented artist named Rob Steen drops in the colors digitally. Because the stories are so short and I'm not painting them, those take a LOT less time.

**PM:** Is it difficult to keep the *BAD KITTY* series fresh and engaging?

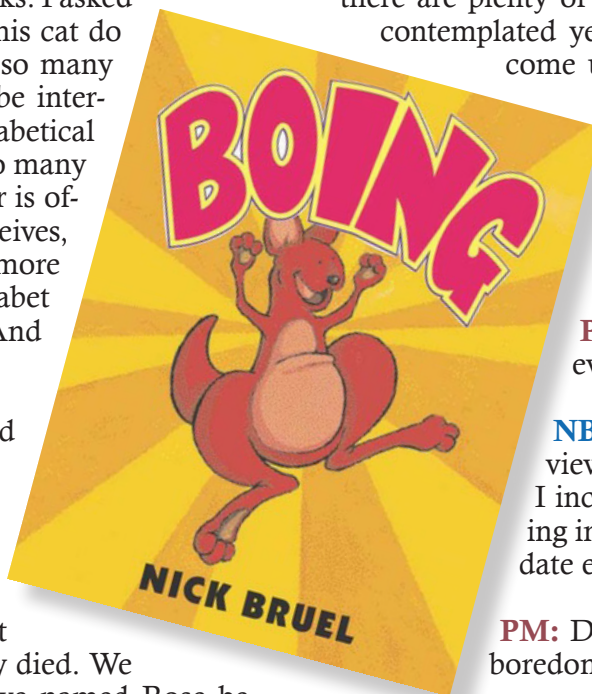
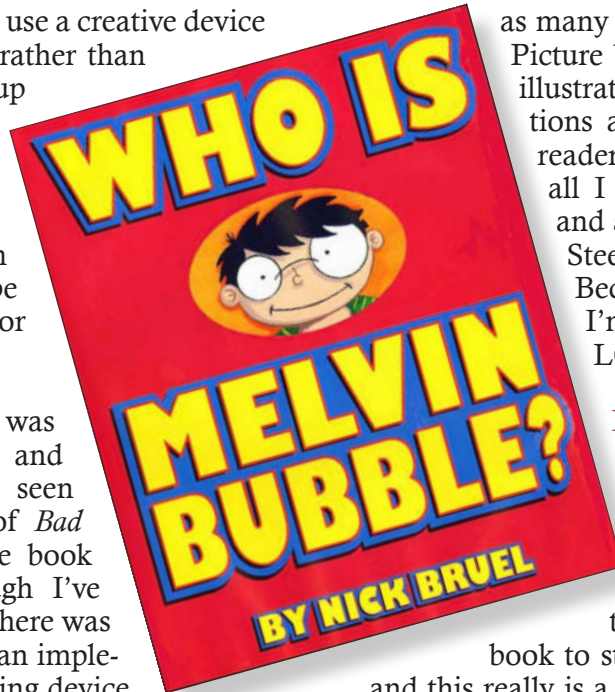
**NB:** Yes and no. It's true that I'm always trying to do something new with Kitty. I want each book to stand out as unique in the series, and this really is a huge challenge. But I also know there are plenty of topics and themes I haven't even contemplated yet. My editor Emily Feinberg has come up with some very good ones recently including the forthcoming *Bad Kitty Joins the Team* and *Bad Kitty On Vacation*. Much like my own process, she simply suggested the titles, and I went from there.

**PM:** Do you go back and tweak it even when you think it's done?

**NB:** Absolutely. In fact, I have to review *Bad Kitty for President* really soon. I included details on campaign financing in it that I knew I would have to update every four-year election cycle.

**PM:** Do you have any tricks for keeping boredom at bay?

**NB:** I WISH I got bored. My family is small but complicated. As such, there is always a lot here that needs my attention. I rarely have more than a few hours uninterrupted to do my work, which is fine. It just means that when I am able to sit and contemplate all things Kitty, I do it knowing that my opportunity is





*Nick Bruel continued*

fleeting.

**PM:** How did you acquire your agent? Was it a long process?

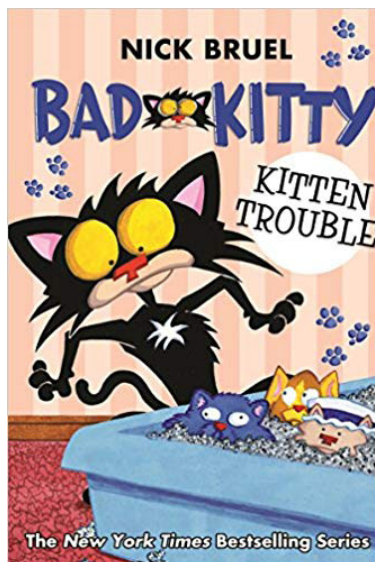
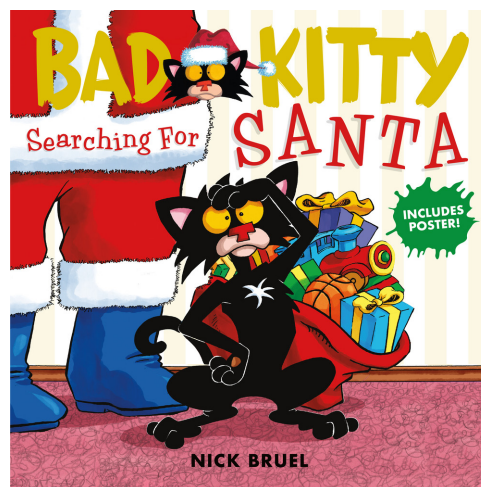
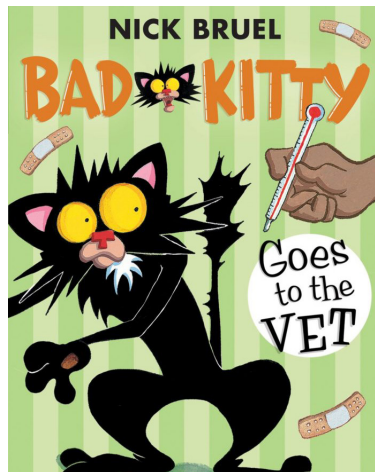
**NB:** This is where luck plays its part in my career. Jennie Dunham, the woman who became my agent, was a regular customer in the store where I worked. She had heard through someone else at the store that I was working on manuscripts and book dummies that might interest her. Out of kindness, she approached me and asked if I would like to meet with her in her office to show me what I had. I agreed, of course. I think she was as shocked as I was at the end of the meeting when she sat back and offered to take me on as one of her clients.

**PM:** Earlier this year, you went on a road tour for your books. Do you find these tours enjoyable or a grind?

**NB:** Macmillan has been sending me on tour pretty much every year since *Bad Kitty for President*. A tremendous investment of time, energy, planning, and money on my publisher's part goes into sending me around the country, and I don't take that for granted. It's glorious on one hand to visit states I might not see otherwise, but the experience is grueling. A common day might be waking up early, visiting two schools, visiting a store, and catching an evening flight to my next city only to repeat the same pattern the next day. It's a lot, but it's so necessary for the success of a new book.

**PM:** Do you have a particular writing routine?

**NB:** Not really. I try to write my stories when opportunity allows. I will say that when I'm writing a story, I need to turn my office into a sensory deprivation



tank. I can have no distractions other than maybe some classical music. But when I'm drawing or painting, I like to have Netflix or YouTube or NPR playing on my computer. I kind of rely on the distractions then to keep myself from growing too tired of the process.

**PM:** Do you use a special computer/illustration program? Are you Mac or Windows?

**NB:** I still create all of my artwork by hand. Pencil, pen, brush, and watercolors on paper. The only time computers come into play in my process is when I scan all of my penciled pages into my ancient Macintosh desktop in order to put the pages together to form the manuscript that I'll show my editor. I use InDesign for that. And I'll use Adobe Illustrator sometimes to create some unique type or graphic, but that's pretty much it. I sort of know how to create art on the computer, but I still get a visceral thrill from the feeling of pencil on paper that I simply don't get from a tablet, convenient though they may be.

**PM:** What comes first, the text or the art?

**NB:** So, say I have an idea for a story. First, I start writing down my ideas on whatever sheets of paper are handy. Then I outline the story, and I do that on the computer. Then comes the tricky part. Because my stories are told with both words and pictures, I simply take a pile of paper and begin writing and sketching the pages by hand. Kitty doesn't speak, so I need to visually show how she will react to the words that are being spoken to her. Completing this step will give me a page count for the book as a whole. Then I pencil all of the art on the final paper: Arches Watercolor Hot Press. Then I scan

*Nick Bruel continued*

those penciled pages into the computer so I can lay out the pages and type in the words. Once all of this is approved, I ink and paint all of those penciled pages. 7 months.

**PM:** Do you multitask or do you prefer to focus on one project at a time?

**NB:** I can't work on more than one book at a time. My brain likes to dedicate itself to one project at a time. There are loads of other book creators out there who do that routinely, and I have no idea how they do it.

**PM:** Looking over your career, what was the hardest thing about the publishing process?

**NB:** Rejection and criticism isn't easy for anyone, regardless of the circumstances. Kitty may be a success, but I'm certainly not above having a project turned down or passed until substantial revisions are made. It's a tough pill to swallow, but necessary to a career.

**PM:** Do you have any tips for aspiring authors/artists?

**NB:** Be brave. I know that sounds clichéd, but I mean it in two different senses. First, be brave with the work you create. Don't edit yourself because you're convinced something won't work. Maybe it won't. But being creative means taking chances.

Second, be brave in sharing your work. I know too many creative and clever people who will dedicate themselves to creating a work but then become shy about sharing it with anyone. I don't think this is as unusual as it sounds. We all become self-conscious when it comes to laying ourselves and our sensibilities out in the open. Again, rejection and criticism are not easy, and nobody likes it. And while there's nothing wrong with creating a work purely for the pleasure of creating it, if you want to be published, you have to be ready to share.

**PM:** Would you like to write/draw in other genres? What are you currently working on? Do you have a pet project (pun intended)?

**NB:** I would like to get into writing middle grade fiction. I've already created two manuscripts which may or may never be published, but oddly enough one of them is, in fact, based on the life of my cat Esme who died at the beginning of the year. So your pun is better

placed than you might have intended.

**PM:** Are there any authors and/or artists that have influenced your writing and/or art style?

**NB:** Not enough attention is given to the work of Jack Kent. Most of what he's done is long out of print, but he had a marvelous sensibility for picture books that I appreciate. He was an interesting man in that he had a syndicated comic strip called *King Aroo* in the newspapers for much of the time he was creating books for kids. He did a book once called *Fat Cat: A Danish Folktale* that always stayed with me, and frankly might have influenced me even as a young child to eventually dedicate my own books to a feline character.

There's also my dear friend Jules Feiffer. I would love to have a career like his. He illustrated *The Phantom Tollbooth*. He had his own genre bending comic strip in the *Village Voice* for literally decades. He written both brilliant picture books and middle grade novels. He's won an Academy Award, a Pulitzer, and an Obie, just to name a few. The only reason he hasn't won America's Top Model is because he hasn't tried yet.

**PM:** If you hadn't become a cartoonist/illustrator, what do you think you'd be doing now?

**NB:** My wife Carina once noted that I would probably be an actor if I wasn't doing what I'm doing now, because I can be a bit of a ham. I think I might be a teacher, if only because I worked as a teacher's aid one summer in college and enjoyed it tremendously. But in the long run, this is an impossible question for me to really answer. I absolutely love what I do and can't imagine a better career for myself.



# TENSION

## Bad in Life, Great in Fiction

by Laura Backes

**W**e all know that finding ways to minimize tension and stress in our lives is a good thing. But minimizing the tension in your plot can suck the life out of a story. Tension works with conflict to raise the emotional level of the text to a boiling point. It forces the reader to become invested in the story. Plots without tension simply flow from one event to another on an even keel, like a lazy, meandering river. And while this may be perfect for a toddler's bedtime story, if you want to write a book that begs to be read over and over or entices readers away from their phones, you'll need to add some rapids along the way.

"Tension" is a loaded word, and can be misleading. A better way of thinking about tension might be to constantly raise the stakes for your character, so she has to work harder to get what she wants. In her book *Dynamic Characters: How to Create Personalities That Keep Readers Captivated*, Nancy Kress says,

"Fiction...demands a pattern of mounting tension. Thus, if you are shaping real life events into fiction, you must rearrange them into the kind of pattern...that puts ever increasing pressure on your protagonist."

Tension, as it's used to raise the stakes or put pressure on a character, is different from identifying the main plot problem your character will be facing for the duration of the story. Tension serves to throw obstacles in the character's path as he's working to solve the big problem. It also can change the pacing of a scene, pulling the reader from one page to the next. And finally, it gives the reader an opportunity to identify and even empathize with the character.

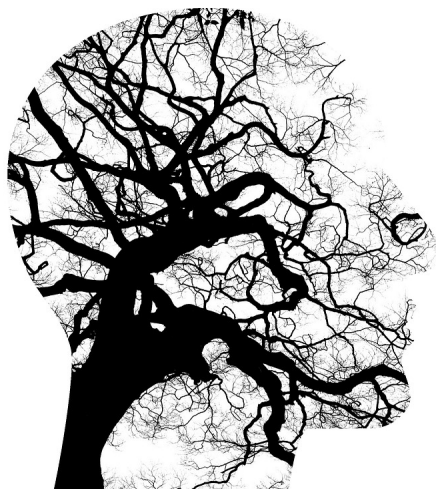
Tension, or pressure, can come in many forms. One is external, from events happening to or around the protagonist. This type of tension (insert "pressure" or "raising the stakes" here if those terms are easier for you to work with), most often creates plot twists. Your protagonist's phone dies, along with her alarm, so she is late for school on the day of her big presentation. A young boy tries to hide a stray dog he finds from his parents, but the dog gets into the kitchen and devours most of Thanksgiving dinner.

A high school senior interviews for a waitress position and the restaurant manager puts his arm around her in a decidedly creepy and intimidating way while offering her the job she so desperately needs.

External pressure can also appear in dialogue, when a conversation doesn't go the way the protagonist had hoped. Or, it can add humor to a scene. If a character is racing to catch the city bus to school (after her phone alarm died) and gets sprayed with muddy puddle water as the bus comes to a stop, she'll

have to give her school presentation on the Clean Water Act covered in mud.

The second type of tension is internal. This comes from a character throwing emotional obstacles in their own path (intentionally or otherwise), being limited by their fears or beliefs and acting on those limitations, or making a bad decision. Very often, the reader sees that the character is making things more difficult than necessary, but the character is initially oblivious to the added pressure he or she has created. The tension arises from the reader waiting to see what happens next, and whether or not the character will learn to approach the situation differently next time.



*Tension continued*

Authors employ many methods of increasing the pressure on their characters. Here are a few you can try:

**The ticking clock.** A time limit presents automatic pressure. If your character has to reach her goal by a certain time or suffer dire consequences, the stakes are raised from the beginning of the story. If you then place unforeseen obstacles in your character's way, all the better. The clock can provide mental tension (it's a personal goal for your character to accomplish something within a designated time period), emotional tension (the character will suffer embarrassment or shame if the task is not completed on time), or impending danger (harm will come to the character or someone he cares about when the time is up).

**The threat of social disgrace.** Never underestimate the power of embarrassment, especially in middle grade and young adult novels. The possibility of embarrassment raises the tension, and how your character handles it – with humor and self-deprecation, by running away from the situation, or by doing whatever it takes to turn the situation to her advantage – moves the plot forward and either continues to raise the tension, or diffuses it.

**Dialogue.** The way you craft conversations between characters can effectively elevate the tension in subtle or overt ways. If your protagonist wants something from the other character but doesn't want that character to know, tension underlies the seemingly innocent conversation. Another character may want information from your protagonist, who sidesteps the issue. Or, the dialogue can be openly confrontational. In any case, the exchange pushes the story to the next plot point.

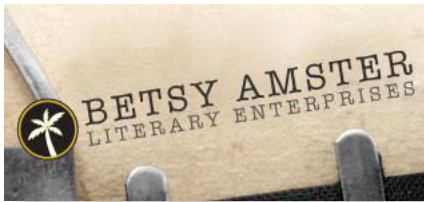
**Pacing.** Well written fiction has ebbs and flows to the pacing of the story. Each time your character hits a crisis point, the pacing speeds up. Once that crisis is solved, the story can take on a more leisurely pace, giving your protagonist (and the reader) a brief break. But soon another crisis presents itself, this one greater than that last. The "ebbs" get shorter as the plot speeds up, finally culminating in the climax. Your reader anticipates these peaks in the tension, and is pulled through the story.

**Sentence structure.** Short, choppy sentences with active verbs signal tension. Think of the text mirroring your protagonist's racing heart. Long, meandering sentences filled with adjectives and adverbs imply a relaxed pace. Varying the format of the text will inject tension into key moments of each scene.

Each story requires a different kind of tension. Gentle picture books for young readers might simply put an obstacle in the character's path that needs to be overcome by the end of the book. The tension could come from the protagonist's humorous missteps as she reaches her goal. The stakes are much higher in young adult novels, in which the tension may come from life-changing situations. But tension, in whatever form, must be present for a book to sell in today's competitive market. And besides, tension makes the story more fun to read...and to write.

If you're unsure how tension may affect a story, try this exercise. Take a fairy tale, legend, or other short public domain work and note where the author raised the tension for the characters and how it affected what happened in the following scenes. Then rewrite the story, keeping the same characters and overarching plot problem the characters are trying to solve, but alter the places where the tension is raised. Make some little changes to the original, and a few big ones. How does the story change? Did the small changes in tension allow you to maintain the same basic plot, but perhaps highlight different aspects of the characters? How did the characters or story line change when you threw in bigger moments of tension or larger obstacles for the characters to overcome? Did you prefer the original version, or did moving the tension around make the story more compelling?

# MARY CUMMINGS, Agent



interview by Lynne Marie

**F**ormerly an education director at the Loft Literary Center, Mary Cummings now nurtures new and upcoming writers at Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises. She is very passionate about books and loves to share her thoughts with writers.

**Lynne Marie:** Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to be a literary agent.

**Mary Cummings:** Although the agency is located in California, I work from my home in Minnesota. For 14 years I was Education Director at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. At the Loft I curated an annual Festival of Children's Literature, and hired judges for the McKnight Award in Children's Literature from among the nation's top editors of children's books. On many occasions, I hired Betsy Amster to teach workshops at the Loft and, in 2008, joined the agency to bring contacts and expertise in children's lit. Many star-reviewed, inspiring books later, and more in the pipeline – I'm still having lots of fun!



**LM:** What type of projects do you represent? Do you represent nonfiction projects?

**MC:** I represent picture books, chapter books, novels, and other book projects for kids and teens. Most of what I rep is fiction, but I do like lyrical, narrative nonfiction and some poetry.

**LM:** What are your thoughts about poetry? Rhyming picture books? Do you accept submissions written in rhyme? Why or why not?

**MC:** That's a very big question! Some poetry is wonderful, and much is not. As for rhyming picture books,

quite a few on my list are written in rhyme, and I definitely accept rhyming submissions. That said, the rhyme is typically confined to certain parts of the manuscript, rather than running throughout. Or, the rhyme is in a pattern with prose elements. In Elizabeth Verdick's *Small Walt* books for example, Walt – a little snowplow – thinks in rhyme. When there is an increase in emotional intensity in the story, it's expressed in rhyme. But otherwise, Elizabeth uses other language devices (including wonderfully expressive machine noises) to give energy and interest to the story. So many people send me end-rhyme couplets with a beat that's never varied. It just isn't a good way to tell a story that suits the marketplace and readership.

**LM:** You had shared that one of the best ways to see what you like is to read the books of your clients. Who are some of your current clients?

**MC:** My client list includes – among others – George Shannon, Ariel Bernstein, Elizabeth Verdick, Karen Briner, Hannah Voskuil, David Cundy, Joy Keller, Ariel Horn, Lois Barr, Dawn Young, Nick Dyer, Melissa Martin, Maggie Rudd, Rachel Tawil Kenyon and John Elkins.

**LM:** What are some of the publishers you have worked with in the past?

**MC:** Little, Brown; Abrams; Knopf; Henry Holt; Imprint; Holiday House; Farrar, Straus Children's; Running Press Kids; Peter Pauper Press; Random House Children's; Viking; Philomel; David Godine; Walker; and Paula Wiseman Books/Simon & Schuster, among others.



*Mary Cummings continued*

**LM:** What do you feel are some of the benefits of working with a large house or small houses?

**MC:** Large houses usually pay more than small, and usually have better distribution systems. They typically have a publicity department which aids with outreach and sales. They often, but not always, produce books that are visually more attractive than a small publisher is able to do. Small houses may be more dedicated to keeping a book in print. Small houses are more likely than large to have no restrictions (or option clause) on the author's next book. Small houses that have a regional focus may be the best fit for an author with a title that has a regional subject matter or tie-in.

**LM:** You mentioned that you like to nurture new and upcoming authors. Do you take clients on a per book or career basis? If career, and an author submits their one manuscript, should they have others in the works? Or are you willing to take on someone with just one manuscript that you love?

**MC:** Yes, I do. Very much. I primarily work on a single-project basis, but not always. What typically happens is a writer has one manuscript close to ready for submission – and sometimes isn't working on anything else. Or, I'll look at several but only resonate with one. This works well for a single-project. The rep agreement is structured as a six-month renewable agreement. Typically, though, we either have a sale in that time, or we know why it isn't selling. And, once I sign on to rep, I'm excited and raring to go and start pitching! When someone has a publication track record, or sometimes even when not, but there are multiple manuscripts I really like and feel are in good shape, that is a situation that might be appropriate for a career basis representation. But I may also feel we should do multiple single-project agreements to run at the same time. I have that situation now with a client who has both a middle-grade novel and a picture book manuscript.

**LM:** What type of agent are you? Do you have more of a hands-on or hands-off approach to working together on a project for submission? Are you editorial?

**MC:** Definitely hands on, editorial.

**LM:** Openings of books are very important as they hook the reader. What are some tips that you could share about crafting an opening that will draw in an editor or agent, and ultimately, readers?

**MC:** The opening of a novel should at least hint at what kind of story journey is ahead: what the obstacles or issues may be, what the tone is, a little about characters, setting, etc. The opening of a picture book should, in its own and different way, do much the same.

**LM:** How would you describe your personal tastes when it comes to children's literature?

**MC:** My tastes are pretty broad. I like warmth, humor, adventure, and quirky charm, but warmth is at the top of the list. Kindness is important to me. I like adorable and cute. I like sad and satisfying. I like gorgeous and lyrical. I like wondrous. I like love. Let me say that one again. I like love themes. I like energetic and unconventional. I like serious and poignant. (I know. As I said, my tastes are pretty broad.) I want to feel a change in my breathing when I read a manuscript: a change because I'm seeing something really good that makes me go "wow!" I want a strong story arc and strong protagonist. I want characters to experience some kind of change or transformation. I want something that kids will relate to, stirring or awakening new emotions and providing them with a look at possible ways to live in the world.

My personal "golden time" with books growing up was when I was 9-11, and I have a special connection with middle grade work perhaps as a result of this.

I began collecting picture books when I was in high school and truly love the form.

**LM:** Here comes my favorite question of all – what is on, or not on, your wish list?

**MC:** **#1 for picture books:** love themes, from new baby, to love between a child and an other (parent, pet, friend, etc.), to love of the broader world and nature.

**#1 for middle grade:** contemporary, or recent historical (like Vietnam war era, or McCarthy era Red Scare)

**#1 for YA:** contemporary with non-romantic strong relationship between two lead characters.

*Always welcome:* Stories about times, people and places underrepresented in children's and teen lit; friendship stories; magic realism, and fantasy grounded in or related to the real world; great read-aloud picture books; stories about important, complex relationships; historical fiction and narrative nonfiction (with relevance to



*Mary Cummings continued*

today's kids and issues); work tied to school standards (tell me which) or geared to a specific audience; lyrically written science, nature, mindfulness and social awareness topics; stories about holidays, including those important to a minority community; author-illustrator picture books; poetry collections (picture books); middle grade or YA written in multiple formats (poetry and prose; diary and text etc.).

*Probably not a fit for me:* Picture books with rhyming words at the end of every line; YA stories with characters out of their teens; zombies, vampires, etc.; mean girl stories and school dramas; abuse, murder, gore (which is not to say I totally shy away from darkness and danger!)

**LM:** What are some of your pet peeves about submissions?

**MC:** Top pet peeve is people sending attachments. Unless we've requested to see a particular project, emails sent with attachments are DELETED without being read. So, a writer may have something marvelous, but I'm not going to see it! I also dislike a writing sample sent with no query (and vice-versa). If people read and followed the submission guidelines posted on <https://www.cummingskidlit.com/> or on <https://amsterlit.com/>, these problems would be avoided. I hate teensy font. I'm not keen on submissions that are clearly sent to many agents (i.e., "Hello" or "Dear Agent"). Perhaps the worst is "I've got an idea for a book, but really don't know how to go about getting it published. Could you call me to chat?"

**LM:** What is the advice that you have given to prospective writers the most?

**MC:** Be ready. Wait to submit until you are sure your work is refined, revised, polished to be your very best effort. I know this isn't easy! Writers are passionate and often impatient. But patience pays off. Get the perspectives of peers from writing groups, classes, conferences, etc. Be professional. Take yourself and your work seriously. For example, NEVER say: "I have a little picture book project to tell you about," or "Now that I'm retired, I'm turning my hand to writing."

**LM:** You have given the advice to writers who write their stories in rhyme to try and write it without the rhyme. This is of course, something that most writers, don't want to hear, but good solid advice. Can you share the reasoning behind this valuable tip?

**MC:** I'm glad you feel it's valuable. As for writers not wanting to hear it: this is about experimenting, about playing. It's entirely possible the writer will conclude that rhyme is the best way to tell the story. But I've had people in my picture book workshop tell me that it was a "revelation" that the exercise of writing the story in straight prose opened up new avenues of creativity and possibility for them. Quite often a writer will "plug in" some words because they are needed for the rhyme scheme – but they are often odd choices and make for a fuzzy storyline. The exercise can reveal weaknesses in the story and character development, and perhaps some new possibilities.

**LM:** You have given workshops where you share tips to developing a picture book manuscript. Would you share one of those tips here?

**MC:** Ask someone (an adult, or someone of the age who would be a reader of such a story) to read the first page of your novel, or your full picture book text aloud. Listen to how they read. See if there are areas where they stumble or mispronounce or misread and think about if there are problems in those spots of your text. Notice where they smile or laugh or otherwise react emotionally, too.

**LM:** What do you feel is your special superpower regarding revision?

**MC:** I don't think I have a special superpower. I look at a great many things both in close detail and holistically to see where I might be able to suggest changes to the author.

## ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Mary Cummings is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. For picture books, please embed the entire text in the body of your email. For longer works, please embed the first three pages. Include a bit about your project (pitch language), plus some bio information as well as related writing or other experience. Submit to: [b.amster.kidsbooks@gmail.com](mailto:b.amster.kidsbooks@gmail.com) with the code "CBI Submission for Mary Cummings" in the Subject line. **This offer is good through September 2019.** Some form of response (brief comments) will be sent to all CBI submissions within two months.

# Reviving a Stalled Project

by Candice Ransom

It happens to us all—we begin a novel or nonfiction book fired with excitement. Then a higher-priority project pushes in front, or a life event intervenes, and the project must be put on a back burner. When it's time to take the project out of mothballs, we may find our book idea has pulled up stakes and left with no forwarding address. Can the book be saved?

In 2016, I began planning and writing a middle grade novel. A series of contracts, revisions, teaching, and illness crammed a three-year wedge between me and the novel. At last, I was ready to return to the novel, but the novel was not ready to come back to me. The chatty main character had clammed up. The setting had faded like an old Polaroid. The plot had deflated like a flat tire. I still believed in my idea, but how could get the story moving again?

## Character Reunion

Initially, the main character slammed into my head. She told me all about herself, who she was, who she wanted to be, and why she couldn't achieve that goal. Unfortunately, I was driving at the time and couldn't take notes until I got home. Revisiting those notes three years later only brought radio silence.

We're often advised to interview our characters. Suspecting my character would take the fifth, I wrote letters to her. After she'd been given time to "think," she "wrote" back. Her replies were stiff at first, but after a bit she loosened up. Write letters to your character. Beg him or her to answer. Characters can't resist a pleading writer.

Still, I needed a second opinion. So I wrote letters to her cat. The cat was—well, catty. Quizzing your character's pet will reveal stuff from a different point of view.

Next, I decided to follow my character around for a day. I walked around the house with a basket, choosing objects I felt had meaning to her: (1) Her phone, obviously. (2) The book she'd checked out of the library, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, a story she'd already read and was too easy for her. (3) A half-finished friendship bracelet. (4) A lip gloss that looks amazing on her friend, but terrible on her. (5) A much-loved pink stuffed bunny.

Specific objects added up to a portrait of a girl between stages in her life, uncertain whether to move forward or stay parked in her comfort zone. Bingo. She was back. Meaningful things provide a shortcut to your character's personality.

## Put Setting on the Map

My initial setting was too vague. With paper and colored pencils, I sketched a setting to bring my story to life. You don't have to be an artist to draw squares for houses, lollipops for trees, stick figures, etc. Mark areas important to your character and the story: the "haunted" woods, the creek pocked with muskrat tunnels, best friend's house, former best-friend-turned-enemy's house, vacant lot good for bike riding, etc.

Draw your main character's bedroom. Does she share it with a younger sister? Are his walls plastered with *Star Wars* posters? Is the quilt on her bed handmade? Does he have a corner where he tosses his dirty clothes? Add specific details.

Draw the floorplan of the character's house. Is his room in the basement? Does he love the privacy or hate the isolation? Does she have to share a bathroom with her mirror-hogging big sister? What's the yard like? Prize-winning roses or scruffy weeds?

## Stir the Plot

Before my project screeched to a halt, I hadn't gotten far with the plot. Resuscitating the character and freshening the setting revved the stalled project into first gear. Plot, the engine of the story, is often the last element to fall into place. Plot requires maintenance, just as a car requires water, oil, and fuel.

Tips to keep your story on the road:

- **Tangible objects ground your book in reality.** If your story is set at the beach, keep a jar of shells on your desk, an old postcard or photograph, a fossilized shark's tooth. Consider these as souvenirs from a place you are creating.
- **Carry a notebook dedicated to your novel or non-fiction project.** Most of us have a notebook to jot down ideas, possible titles, observations, etc. Use a different colored notebook for your book. Take it everywhere. Thoughts often skitter in while we're driving or standing in line at the grocery store.
- **Print out daily pages or chapters.** It's tempting to write first drafts and leave them in closed computer files at the end of the day. Give your project a physical presence by printing out your daily work. You'll have pages to review the next day, making it easier to slide into your story.
- **Put your book to bed each night.** Even if you finished writing (and printing) hours before, visit your desk at bedtime. Square your stack of pages. Notice your progress. Glance at the last sentence, maybe jot a few quick notes. You may wake in the morning with the next sentence in your head, ready to write.



# Go Old-School at the Public Library: A Writer's Strongest Ally

by Pat Miller

**W**hen we moved to a small Texas town eight years ago, I was delighted to discover a public library less than a mile away.

This isn't just any public library. It is the county's main branch, the one named as a memorial for the donor couple who had funded several other libraries. The



George Memorial Library has two stories filled with materials and access that make it ideal for me as a reader, but even more, as a writer.

If our library is open, its parking lot is full. And no wonder. This is a building full of treasures, and the librarians happily provide them for free. They will even help me dig them up. And everything is accessible with a small, free library card. This card is as essential to me as my keyboard.

Check out your own local library and see how many of these writer tools it provides.

## The Children's Section

The first area in the library marked with the treasure X is the children's and/or YA section. Anne Carrol Moore opened the first children's room at the New York Public Library in 1911. Can you imagine your library without its children section?

Here is a carefully curated collection, purchased



by knowledgeable experts who know kids and books. It is kept updated and accessible. Thankfully, my library has no limit to the number of

books I can check out. I invested in a small wheeled bag because I often go home with tall piles of books for writing challenge months, to use as mentors for my work, for research or simply to enjoy the best in children's literature.

## The New Books Shelving

In the children's section, colorful shelves create forts of facts and islands of fiction surrounded by puzzle tables, computers, and games. My favorite section contains these shelves. These are the glittery new books.

Find this treasure cache in your library and read as many as possible. Immerse yourself in these – the genres you write and those you don't. Learn what's being published, what you like, and what you'd improve on.



*Public Library continued*

Enjoy the language and the plot, and then dissect it and figure how the author wrote it. I call the new book section “My Free MFA.” These titles have been chosen and vetted not only by publishers, but by certified librarians with limited budgets, so I know these books are the cream of the crop.

**System-wide Access**

I can remember the days when I had to physically visit branch libraries to borrow their books. If one branch didn't have the book, I had to drive to the next. That's not the case now. The collections of all 12 county

libraries are in a single catalog. If my branch doesn't have it, I simply locate the book I want in the catalog, click “place hold” and specify my home library. Voila—the book will show up with my name on it. My library even emails me a notice when the books is in. And I can search my library's catalog from home.

A service I find astonishing is called interlibrary loan. This is a generous sharing of collections between public and academic libraries nation-wide. No library can stock every title, but most are part of the interlibrary loan system. That means I have access to millions of books currently residing in other cities and states.

When I was researching my book, *The Hole Story of the Doughnut*, I used interlibrary loan to borrow books from several New England libraries and many Texas libraries and universities. I received some books in fragile condition, trusted that I would take good care of them. I was not even charged for shipping but would gladly have paid for such generous sharing.

I used interlibrary loan so often when writing my nonfiction books and articles that I asked to meet Shirley Yen, the librarian in charge of this service. Without her, I would have missed out on valuable resources or had to invest a lot of money buying the books. Treasure indeed!

**Librarians**

Along with the interlibrary loan librarian, I'm indebted to the reference librarians. They take my questions as personal challenges, and find the answer while I wait, or call me after they've tracked down the answer. I owe much to the librarians who man the genealogy room at our library. My first foray into genealogy records was to search for the doughnut inventor, Captain Hanson Gregory. With help, I found that he was an inmate at the time of the 1920 census! Yikes! Had I inadvertently chosen a criminal to write about? Fortunately, the genealogy librarian was able to find that he was an inmate in a sailors' home. In those days, anyone in a public institution like an orphanage, hospital, home, or prison, was an inmate.

**Additional resources**

My library card is good for more than books. As I write, I sometimes listen to albums borrowed digitally through Hoopla. You can also borrow ebooks through Hoopla, which is a great way to review a mentor text or resource if you can't make it to the library (<https://www.hoopladigital.com/>). I have also borrowed documentaries and audio books. There was a time that magazines were accessed through a thick bound index. One wrote down the issue needed, handed that to a librarian, and waited while she disappeared for a bit and then returned with the needed magazine. Now it's all on databases provided by the library at no charge to me. I can search scholarly journals, newspapers, magazines, and more from the library's computer or mine at home.

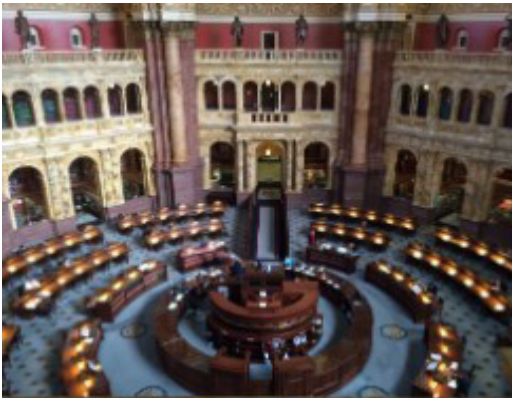
**Online libraries**

Whether your library is small and limited, or huge and well-supplied, we all have access to two vast libraries that are as close as your keyboard. If you are a writer looking for primary resources, especially visuals, you'll want to use these libraries.

First, access the largest library in the world with-

## Public Library continued

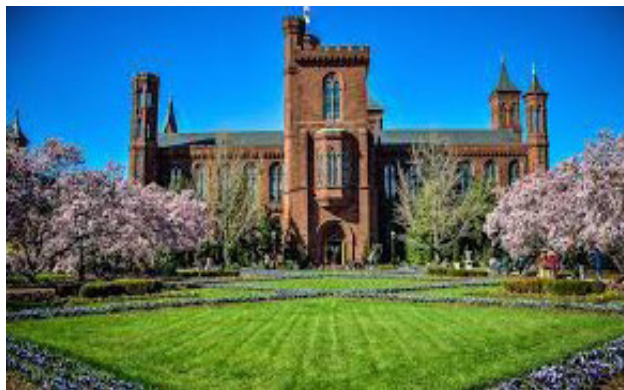
out leaving home. The Library of Congress was founded in 1800 for the use of Congress. When the British burned the Capitol in 1814, the 3000 volume library was destroyed. A year later, Congress purchased Thomas Jefferson's personal library of 6,487 books to begin again.



Today, the Library of Congress has more than 168 million items, including 39 million volumes in 470 languages, and millions of recordings, photographs, newspapers, maps, and manuscripts. To use it in person, you must apply for and receive a photo library card. Materials are in closed stacks and must be brought to you for use only in the library.

However, you can more conveniently access many of the materials without a card or a trip to Washington. You can spend hours searching their digital print and image collections from the comfort of home and after library hours. Simply go to <https://www.loc.gov/collections>.

Second, you can research the network of 21 specialized libraries of the Smithsonian. Because it is smaller than the Library of Congress with 1.5 million books and manuscripts and 400,000 visuals, I find it easier to navigate. The libraries support the exhibits and museums. Much of their materials are digitized and some can even be borrowed through interlibrary loan. Begin your visit at the user-friendly home page, <https://library.si.edu>.



I love the thrill and exclusivity of using my library after hours. I like to go late at night in my PJs. I have the entire library to myself. Like a phantom, I put books on hold, renew that stack of nearly overdue books, get in line for best sellers, and checkout E-books, digital movies, and audiobooks. I do hope you have these same services in your area library. Talk with your local librarian. You might be surprised at all the ways she can help you as a writer.