

Children's Book Insider

October 2019

Find the Right Pace For Your Story



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**

Storm Literary Agency

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Jane McBride is the author of 38 novels (writing as Jane McBride Choate), numerous short stories and articles including pieces in 16 *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthologies, and the CBI Managing Editor. See her Amazon Author Page at <http://bit.ly/JaneMcBrideChoate>

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) recently teaches in Hollins University's graduate program in children's literature. www.candiceransom.com

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At Presstime:

We Need Diverse Books Offering Mentorships for Unpublished Authors and Illustrators

We Need Diverse books is offering 10 mentorships in 2020—eight to aspiring authors and two to aspiring illustrators or author/illustrators. Each winner will be matched with an experienced children’s book creator and receive individual support and feedback on a completed draft of a work-in-progress. **Applications for the 2020 cycle will be open from October 1 to 31, 2019.**

The writing mentorships are available to diverse writers or any writers or illustrators who have completed a full draft of a manuscript for children or teens featuring a diverse main character or diverse central subject matter. The illustration mentorship is available to any diverse illustrator who has a portfolio and several sample illustrations completed. Applicants may only apply for one of the four mentorship categories, so it is up to the applicants to research the available mentors and decide which category will be most suitable for their work. For a list of the 2020 mentors, go to <https://diversebooks.org/our-programs/mentorships/mentor-mentee-bios/>

Applications will consist of an autobiographical statement with how you identify as diverse (if you identify within an underrepresented group) and your career summary; a statement on how you or your work will bring forward an underrepresented voice or viewpoint; the title, genre, intended age, and very brief pitch of your attached manuscript (or, if an illustrator, a link to your online portfolio that showcases your children’s illustration samples); the full manuscript if writing a picture book, or 10 pages of a completed longer work. For more information on applying, go to <https://diversebooks.org/our-programs/mentorships/>

Independent Publisher Accepting Fiction, Nonfiction for All Ages

West Margin Press is an independent print and ebook publishing company based in Berkeley, CA, that is dedicated to creating beautiful books and sharing unique voices and stories that create a better understanding of our world through purposeful content, engaging design, and authentic experiences. Genres span many fiction and nonfiction categories for children and adults, including nature and travel, history and memoir, literary fiction, social issues, adventure, concepts, and fairy tales and legends.

Accepting fiction and nonfiction submissions for picture books through young adult. Of particular interest right now in children's books are under-represented voices, including people of color, native populations, and LGBTQ topics; kindness and empathy, mental health, nature and the environment, personal empowerment and growth, STEM, and STEAM; graphic novels and memoirs with a strong point of view and unique voice; and regionally-focused children’s books (California and Pacific Northwest), both nonfiction and fiction, including activity and craft books with a visual focus.

Submissions must be emailed to hello@westmarginpress.com Submissions must include a complete Author Proposal form, found at <https://www.westmarginpress.com/submissions/> Also looking for illustrators. See the previous link for info on submitting illustrations. Allow up to six months for a response. For current West Margin Press titles, go to <https://www.westmarginpress.com>

Independent Press Seeks Middle Grade, YA Fiction

Jolly Fish Press is an imprint of North Star Editions, Inc., an independent publisher based in Minnesota, that is dedicated to promoting exceptional, unique new voices in fiction and jumpstarting writing careers. Currently seeking high-quality middle grade and YA fiction, especially books showcasing strong voices, unique stories, and diverse characters. To see recent titles, go to <https://www.jollyfishpress.com/new-releases/>

Authors can email a query letter with a brief (1-3 paragraphs) plot synopsis, a short bio and 3-5 comparative titles published within the last 5 years with an explanation of how your book both ties into a trend in the genre and offers something unique. Attach the first three chapters of your manuscript as a Word document. Put your book's title in the Subject line, and email submit@jollyfishpress.com

North Star Editions also welcomes applications from authors, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, interested in producing manuscripts on a work-for-hire basis. Under this arrangement, NSE offers a flat fee for a writing project that adheres to specifications provided. Topics will be assigned by the staff and may include writing under a pen name assigned by NSE. Experienced authors should submit a résumé, including a list of publishing credits, to jobs@northstareditions.com.

Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Tanglewood Books is an independent publisher distributed by Simon & Schuster, headed by publisher Peggy Tierney. Publishing high-quality books for toddlers through teens, Tanglewood is most interested in expanding its middle grade and young adult fiction and narrative nonfiction (history or biography). Open to most fiction genres, as long as the manuscript has authentic, 3D characters and a strong plot. Not looking for high fantasy, though elements of fantasy or the fantastical are always welcome if incorporated into contemporary stories or mysteries. Also interested in diversity of content and authorship. Finally, emotional depth in characters is also a plus (but don't just teach a lesson at the expense of telling a good story). For recent titles, go to <http://www.tanglewoodbooks.com/books/>

Send a query with the full manuscript for picture books, or two sample chapters for longer works, pasted into the body of an email, and address to Acquisitions Editor at submissions@tanglewoodbooks.com. Please include your name and email address on your manuscript and not just the query letter. Illustrators may send a link to their work posted online, whether website, blog, or social media channel.

Current Calls for Submission for Babybug

Babybug, a magazine for children up to 3 years old, presents simple poems, stories, nonfiction, and activities that reflect the natural playfulness and curiosity of babies and toddlers. When reviewing submissions, the editors look for manuscripts that please the ear and beg to be read again, as well as those that capture a baby's ongoing discoveries in a few simple, concrete sentences. Particularly interested in manuscripts that explore simple concepts, encourage very young children's imaginative play, and provide opportunities for adult readers and babies to interact, and welcomes work that reflects diverse family cultures and traditions.

Current calls for submissions:

I Made It Myself (submission deadline November 1, 2019): short stories, poetry, nonfiction, and songs about young children's creations, real and imagined. When reading submissions, the editors look for playfulness, humor, beautiful language, and a childlike point of view. Six sentences maximum on stories; 8 lines on poetry.

Let's Move (submission deadline November 1, 2019): fingerplays and action rhymes (energetic poems for children to act out, connecting language with simple, playful movements). Your rhyme might invite children to act out parts of a daily routine (cooking, dressing, riding a bus, etc.), to imagine the life of a community helper, to embody an animal, a construction vehicle, the wind, the ocean—or something else entirely. 8 lines maximum.

All submissions must go through Submittable at <https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/17819/babybug-magazine-for-ages-6-months-3-years> Allow 3-6 months for a response.

Counting Down to 30: Part 6 The Important Thing About Picture Books

by Laura Backes

The important thing about the sky is that it is always there. It is true that it is blue, and high, and full of clouds, and made of air. But the important thing about the sky is that it is always there.

---from *The Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown (published 1949)

Dear Reader,

One of the things I've learned in my three decades in publishing is how astonishing a picture book can be. A well-crafted picture book can bond families together, take an entire class of kindergarteners on an adventure, comfort a child going through a difficult time, open up the reader's mind to new ideas, and crack a joke that makes children and parents laugh (but for completely different reasons). So this month, as we count down to the 30th anniversary of CBI, I'm going to explore just a few of the important things about picture books.

They reaffirm how the young reader sees the world.

In Margaret Wise Brown's *The Important Book*, the author looks at the everyday world with the same big-picture view as a child. "The important thing about rain is that it is wet. It falls out of the sky, and it sounds like rain, and makes things shiny, and it does not taste like anything, and is the color of air. But the important thing about rain is that it is wet."

Here, Brown acknowledges the hierarchy of information that is unique to childhood. Rain may have many qualities, but being wet is the best one. Why? Because it is! Every kid knows that, so no explanation is needed. But then Brown invites the reader to look closer, and find nuances to that truth. *Look! Rain and air are the same color. Listen! Rain has a sound that is so unique, we can only call it "rain."* Once the child's-eye view of the world is validated, the reader is confident enough to continue exploring and discovering new truths. But this only happens if the author walks *with* the child through the book. Margaret Wise Brown, and all the exemplary authors who came after her, understood that the best picture books are windows into the child's mind and heart. The adult author's worldview is irrelevant and just gets in the way of a good story.

They provide a safe space for a child's emotions.

Before they learn to analyze or swallow their feelings, children experience intense, unfiltered emotions. They often process new situations by reacting first, then thinking. The best picture books allow a character's emotions to unfold the same way, without judgment. One of my favorite picture books is *Some Dogs Do* by Jez Alborough. In this rhyming story, Sid (a dog) is walking to school one day when he's filled with a happy

Counting Down to 30 continued

feeling. “It filled him up so much he found/his paws just lifted off the ground./Without a how, without a why,/Sid fell up toward the sky.” I love the simple logic of the story's premise—Sid felt happy (we don't need to know why) and that happy feeling made him float (makes sense). Soon he's floating over town “like a doggy-shaped balloon.” But the next spread is the kicker:

At school Sid asked his best friend, Ben,
 “Did you see me fly just then?”
 “Don't be daft,” came Ben's reply.
 “You're a dog, and *dogs don't fly.*”
 “But I *did*,” said Sid.
 “*I did...I did.*”

And there it is. The first time someone (your best friend, no less!) accuses you of lying when you're telling the truth. It's beyond frustrating, and so unfair (it's not Sid's fault Ben didn't look up!). But the worst part is the feeling of powerlessness. All you can do is say, “*I did.*”

Some Dogs Do gives the reader the opportunity to fully sink into Sid's despair as he's called a liar by Ben, then his classmates, and finally his teacher. When Sid loses that happy feeling, we're right there with him. The author doesn't try to console the reader too soon; that would trivialize Sid's experience. And it makes the story's resolution all the sweeter.

They are constantly reinventing themselves while remaining true to their roots.

The picture book form has evolved over the last century, with texts getting shorter, characters becoming more nuanced, the humor more sophisticated, and the messaging taking a back seat to story. But modern writers still use the best practices of authors like Beatrix Potter, Maurice Sendak, Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle, Tomie dePaola, Ezra Jack Keats, Jane Yolen, and countless others as the foundation for original, unique works. Mac Barnett exemplifies this in his recent picture book biography, *The Important Thing About Margaret Wise Brown*, by paying homage to Brown's writing style from her most popular books, while still somehow making the text all his own. But it's his voice as a writer, crafted through 40 published works in 10 years, that reveals how much he understands and respects his audience.

Which leads me to the most important thing about picture books:

They make the child feel seen, and heard, and understood.

That's really what it's all about, isn't it? The author and illustrator are taking the journey with the child, on the child's terms. And when that magic happens, the book becomes part of your being forever. If you revisit your childhood favorites as an adult, you feel as if you're reconnecting with an old friend. Someone who knows your secrets, who's got your back, because you grew up together and nothing replaces that shared history. A beloved picture book, like the sky, is always there.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

How to Create a TEACHER'S GUIDE for Your Book

by Pat Miller

A reliable market for children's books is the school market. Librarians and teachers continue to purchase books. A way to add teacher appeal to your book is to create a teacher's guide.

As a career elementary teacher and librarian, I've created a number of them. You don't need to be a teacher to follow these steps and make a helpful guide for your own book.

Why a teacher's guide? By providing the instructional component for your book, you save the teacher time and effort. Because you are adding school market appeal to your title, it could extend the shelf life of your book. And best of all, you will increase the learning for students.

What should you include in your guide? There are three main parts: book information, pre- and post-reading questions, and extension activities. Let's examine each of these requisites.

BOOK INFORMATION

This section provides key information for the person deciding on appropriateness for their students.

Grade Level: Begin with a picture of your book's cover. Add the title, author, illustrator, publisher, and copyright date. Next add the suitable grade levels. Choose K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12. Don't suggest that your book is good for all grades. Think of where a teacher is most likely to use the book. You can also supply the readability level.

Readability Level: Find the readability level by going to the Accelerated Reader Bookfinder site (<https://www.arbookfind.com>). Type in your title and you

are likely to see a lot of information about your book. Your title will be in blue. Click it to get the ATOS Book Level, Interest Level, and word count.

For my book *Substitute Groundhog*, the book level is 2.6. That means that the book could be read independently by a student with reading skills typical of a second grader in the sixth month of school. My nonfiction book, *The Hole Story of the Doughnut*, has an ATOS score of 4.9. Seeing the readability can help you choose the grade range.

Book Finder does not contain every trade book and contains no self-published books. To find the grade level of a book not listed, go to the ATOS Analyzer (www.readabilityformulas.com). Type in a sample of 200-600 words and the program will analyze it and return an ATOS readability score.

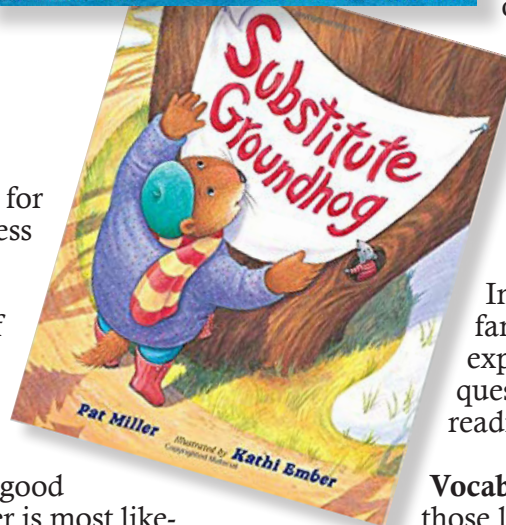
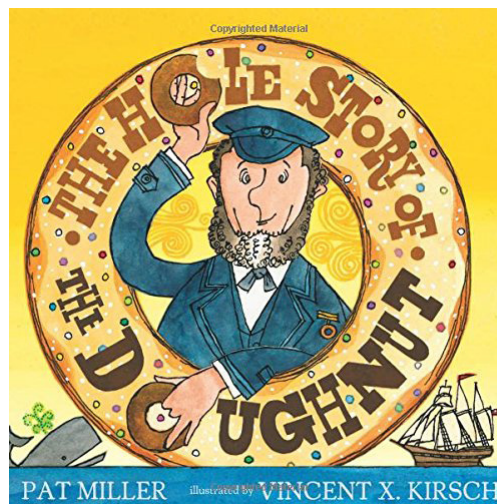
Summary: Next, add a summary of your book. These few sentences can come from the publisher (look your book up in Amazon to see what's there), or you can write it.

PRE- AND POST-READING

In the second section, provide unfamiliar words with definitions, explanations of new concepts, and questions to be used before and after reading.

Vocabulary: Vocabulary words will be those likely to be unfamiliar to the child. For *Substitute Groundhog*, that included 10 words like squinted, ledge, gear, and flannel.

The young inventor in *The Hole Story of the Doughnut* worked on ships most of his life. Vocabulary which would need prior introduction included 14 words,



How to Create a Teacher's Guide continued

most of them nautical terms like schooner, ratlines, furl, and belaying pin. Include a simple definition for each word, and for words like schooner, a pronunciation key.

Concepts: Are there any abstract ideas in your book with which children may be unfamiliar? Explain those here. In *Substitute Groundhog*, I listed five concepts students would need to understand, including substitute, want ads, and the Texas Lone Star. For *The Hole Story of the Doughnut*, I explained concepts like Master Mariner and cargo ships.

If you're unsure, read your book to children and ask them to stop you when they hear a word they don't understand.

Questions: You can provide questions for pre- and post-reading. Before reading fiction, have readers discuss the cover and make predictions about the story. For nonfiction, ask students to list some things they think they know about the topic, a list of what they wonder about the topic, and finally, a list you will create after the reading of what they learned.

When writing questions, keep several things in mind. Avoid yes/no questions. Low-level questions include those asking for simple details, like "Which animal tried out to be a substitute first?" These usually begin with who, what, when, or where.

Balance those with higher level questions that use why or how. Or ask them to make comparisons or predictions based on information in the story. A higher level question for *The Hole Story of the Doughnut* would be "Why did Hanson want to share his doughnut recipe with his mother?" That information is not explicit in the book. Provide answers for all your questions.

Activities: Suggest activities that can be done based on the content of your book. Try to cross curriculum areas, so activities aren't all related to writing or speaking. Here are some examples:

Substitute Groundhog activities

- Science – Research to find which of the characters are carnivores, herbivores, or omnivores.
- Math – Use seed packets to figure how many carrots you can plant in a garden that is two square feet? How many green beans?
- Social Studies – Discover the origin of Groundhog day.
- Music – Create an original song about Groundhog Day.

- Art – Create a pop-up groundhog puppet from a cup, a stir stick, and a drawing of a groundhog

The Hole Story of the Doughnut (NF) activities

- Science – Stars were used to navigate the seas. Talk about major constellations that guided ships
- Math – Given the measurements of its sails, compute the amount of canvas needed on a schooner's sails.
- Social Studies – Trace Captain Gregory's sea voyage from New England to California during the gold rush.
- Music – Learn a sea shanty (chanty).
- Art – Create a clay figurehead for a sailing ship

Writing Prompt: Supply several prompts based on characters and events in your story.

Substitute Groundhog: Write a paragraph telling Groundhog why you are the best one to substitute on Groundhog's Day for him. List at least three qualifications.

The Hole Story of the Doughnut: Sailors liked their stories bold. Create your own myth about how the doughnut was invented.

Quiz Questions: Teachers will appreciate having a quiz available. Make them easy to score — five or ten questions for picture books, multiples of five for longer books. Distractors should be reasonable for multiple choice. You can use true/false and short answer as well. Avoid essays because they are difficult to score. Make some of the questions higher level.

Substitute Groundhog

Low level: Which of these animals was Armadillo's cousin?

- Badger
- Mole
- Bear

High level: Why did Groundhog need a substitute?

The Hole Story of the Doughnut

Low level: Which ingredient made "sinkers" so heavy?

- sugar
- lard
- flour

How to Create a Teacher's Guide continued

High level: Why did Hanson Gregory climb the ratlines?

- a. to escape the rats
- b. to search for land
- c. to furl the sails

Low level questions are based on simple recall. Higher level questions require thinking about the story.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Resources

If possible, provide links to activities and other extensions for your book. They can be based on a detail in the story or something related to the characters. Here are two examples:

Substitute Groundhog: For a Readers' Theater script, take a look at <https://www.patmillerbooks.com/activities-substitute-groundhog.html>. (Write one yourself for your book.)

The Hole Story of the Doughnut: Make your own doughnuts out of socks with Crafty Girls at <https://youtu.be/julziqhTgVE>.

Bibliography

Add a short list of books that could extend the learning or satisfy curiosity. Two examples:

Learn more about groundhogs with *Groundhog's Burrow* by Dee Phillips (Bearport, 2012).

Captain Hanson worked on a variety of sailing ships. Visit these amazing vessels in *Tall Ships* by Thaddeus Koza (Tide-mark Press, 1996).

Biography

Add facts about you and your illustrator that aren't found on the jacket flap. Find them on their websites. Something like this:

Substitute Groundhog: Pat Miller lives in Texas where there are no groundhogs, but thousands of armadillos. Illustrator Kathi Ember lives in Pennsylvania, home of the most famous groundhog, but not one armadillo. Learn more at patmillerbooks.com

The Hole Story of the Doughnut: Illustrator Vincent X. Kirsch used hundreds of sharp blades to cut out the center of each illustration and place it on the opposite page, kind of like Hanson Gregory did to sinkers. Can you see the edges of all the cut-paper pieces he add-

ed to each collage? See more of his work at <http://www.vincentxkirsch.com>

HOW CAN YOU USE YOUR TEACHER'S GUIDE?

Now that you've put so many hours into your teacher's guide, put it to work for you!

- Add it to your website. Be sure you point to it on your home page so people arriving at your site can't miss it. Sometimes having a teacher's guide makes the book more appealing for purchase. By perusing the guide, teachers and homeschoolers can see that the book is a good fit for their curriculum and may buy it.
- Include it as a bonus when you autograph for educators. Add a stand-up sign, with illustration, to your signing table letting people know about the freebie. It may bring you more customers.
- Use as promotional materials. Print copies and give them out as promotional materials wherever teachers and librarians are present—conferences, book events, and with your author visits to schools.
- Make it a freebie to give away when people sign up for your blog.
- Put a link to your guide in your email signature block along with a photo of your book cover.

Teachers and homeschoolers are busy and usually on tight budgets. Extend the learning with your book by providing a teacher's guide. Educators will be grateful, students' experience will be enriched, and hopefully your service will increase your book sales.

THE NUANCES OF PACING

by Jane McBride

What can be fast or slow, tense or relaxed, and urgent or gentle? If you guessed pacing, you're right.

Pacing can be all of those, though not at the same time. Last night, I complained to my husband that the book I was reading got off to a slow start. "I want something to *happen*," I complained.

What I was really complaining about was the pacing.

When we talk of pacing, we're really talking about the speed at which a scene, chapter, or entire story moves along or changes. And physical action – whether fast or slow – is a big component of that. But tension also works to keep the reader turning the pages. It speeds up the *emotional pace* of a scene or chapter. If a character answers the phone and the voice on the other end says, "I'm watching you," does that speed up the emotional pacing or slow it down, even if the character remains frozen in her chair? Obviously it speeds up the pacing because the tension is increased. In my current work in progress, one of the most tense scenes is when one of the main characters reveals part of her past to the other MC. The tension raises considerably because the dynamic between the characters quickly shifts, but the only "action" consists of the characters talking.

What about a slowly-paced scene? Does slow mean only lack of movement, or does slow mean calm, quiet, reflective? It could be either, as long as the movement and the tension has dropped. Slowly-paced scenes can still have plenty of plot and character development, but it's happening in a less heart-pounding way.

How do you, the writer, know how to choose what works best at any given part of your story?

That comes from experience and experimentation. You may try writing the scene from different points of view until you find the one that suits what you're trying to say. You may also experiment with strong, active verbs versus softer, gentler verbs.

Now that we've discussed action scenes and slow scenes, let's move on to a more subtle distinction. Words that tap into visceral responses in the body nearly always increase tension. Think of a teenage boy on his first deer hunting trip with his father, an avid hunter. Our young protagonist desperately wants to make his father proud of him, but he doesn't know if he can kill an animal. To make matters worse, his father's best friends, also hunters, have come on the trip. The main character doesn't want to embarrass his father in front of his friends. While lying in wait for a buck to appear, the boy feels like his heart is jumping in his chest. Every bit of saliva dries up in his mouth, but he is sweating profusely. His breath is quick and shallow. He wonders if he is having a heart attack. He is not "doing" anything but waiting for his prey to appear, but the scene is definitely not slow.

Those of you who have read my articles in the past know that I'm a fan of the Mini Blueprint format, so let's look at the subject through that lens.

STEP 1: Understand pacing and its effect upon the reading experience.

ACTION: Read with an eye to pacing in books by authors whom you admire. Is it fast or slow? Or, ideally, a mixture of both? Can you determine where the author steps up the pacing and then slows it down again? Can you figure out why she varied the pacing when she did?

STEP 2: Understand the different feelings you have as the pacing of a story escalates and as it de-escalates.

ACTION: Figure out what you want your readers to feel during the story's development. Do you want them to be constantly on the edge of their seats? Or do you want them to take a breath and relax for a few minutes while they absorb what has happened?

Mini Blueprint continued

STEP 3: Look at your book as a whole.

ACTION: Ask yourself what story you are telling and if the pacing suits that story. Is it a fast-moving action/adventure book? You'll probably want to have more stepped-up pacing than if the book is a romance with emphasis on feelings (though romances also need balanced pacing). Nowhere is pacing more important in a book than in the opening and the ending scenes. The first captures your readers' interest; the second gives satisfaction and a resolve to read your next book. What about the conflict/resolution of the story? Have you kept the pacing consistent to what is happening and used it to enhance the overall story?

STEP 4: Look at your chapters.

ACTION: Now that you've looked at your book, pay attention to your chapters and the pacing in them. Have you varied the pacing? Use brisk pacing to ramp up the excitement in action scenes and a more leisurely pacing to give readers time to absorb what is happening. Have you ended scenes on a cliff-hanging note? This does not mean your characters need to be in physical danger, but there should be some sense of intrigue, anticipation, or surprise that makes the reader want to start the next chapter immediately.

STEP 5: Look at the individual segments of your chapters: the paragraphs, sentences, and words (yes, even words can have pacing).

ACTION: Can paragraphs have pacing? Of course they can. The same is true for sentences. Short paragraphs can speed up the pacing, while longer paragraphs can slow it down. You need both to keep your readers involved in the story. What about sentences? Brief, snappy sentences move the story along at a rapid rate. Some sentences may be only a word or two long. Such abbreviated sentences draw the eye, creating greater impact. Longer, more lyrical sentences give a reader a chance to reflect upon what has happened. Once again, you need both. Regarding words, consider two that I used in this paragraph: snappy and lyrical. Snappy implies action, while lyrical evokes feeling, both important elements of pacing.

STEP 6: Polish the pacing to fit your reading audience. Picture books are written in a series of short scenes (creating a reason to turn the page every few lines to see what happens next), or some other liter-

ary device to pull the reader through the book (such as posing a question on one page, with the answer revealed after the page-turn). Creating a book dummy with your text will help you understand if your pacing works (see *How to Make a Picture Book Dummy*, <https://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/how-to-make-a-picture-book-dummy/>). Easy readers and early chapter books generally have short scenes and chapters with lots of action and dialogue to make the reading experience fun. As readers move through older chapter books, middle grade and young adult novels, the stories can include slower scenes with more internal dialogue and character development, interspersed with fast-paced scenes that may incorporate tension through action as well as emotional and psychological drama.

ACTION: Examine several of your favorite published books that are targeted to the same audience as your work in progress. Take a look at page turns (picture books and easy readers), chapter beginnings and endings, how long the slower scenes last, how much external action vs. internal tension moves the plot along. Now compare this to your manuscript. If your pacing varies dramatically from your mentor texts, have you done this deliberately (and does it serve the story), or do you need to make more revisions?

WRAPPING UP

Your job as a writer is to create a story that will touch readers' hearts and minds. In other words, you want to make them feel and to make them think. Finding the balance in pacing and using it to help bring your story to life will do just that.

Weaving effective pacing throughout your book comes with experience. Experience comes with practice. And practice comes with writing.

For more on pacing, check out **Manuscript Magic** at <http://ms-magic.com> which gives you the ability to diagnose and fix pacing issues on the story, scene and sentence levels.

To get the free trial edition of **Manuscript Magic**, go to <https://writingblueprints.com/p/manumagic-trial>

A Journey Inside the Slushpile

What REALLY Happens When You Submit Your Manuscript to an Agent or Publisher

by Mary Kole

I wish every writer had access to a slush pile. It'd be incredibly informative to everyone querying a literary agent or publisher. Unfortunately, this incredible treasure trove of ideas, dos, and don'ts isn't available to just anyone. But as a literary agent for five years, I had my very own. And I'm here to tell you some surprising things about what really happens behind the closed door.

In my case, I represented exclusively children's books with the Andrea Brown Literary Agency, so I was only seeing a slice of the market. Even so, that translated to a mind-boggling 10,000 or more submissions per year. (And to be honest, that number is probably bigger now because of the ease of sending e-queries.)

The good news for querying writers—even though it doesn't sound encouraging at all—is that about half of those submissions were an instant rejection. They were wrong for me, form letters, unprofessional, or simply not “ready for prime time,” meaning that the writer had no business trying to get an agent or publisher because of copious grammatical errors, or similar issues.

With so many submissions flooding in, it was easy to reject the “Dear Agent” queries, or those with typos, right away. They hadn't taken the time to research me or polish up their work? Well, there were always other fish in the sea.

For the writers making a more strategic effort, it's pretty easy to stand out. But then the competition does heat up. This means you really have to give your submission package a cold, hard, objective look. Have you done your agent and publisher research? Is your query compelling? Is your writing sample the strongest it can possibly be? The latter usually means getting outside critique from a beta reader or freelance editor on at least the first few chapters.

The first powerful tool of your slush pile strategy is query personalization, as long as you make it specific and professional. Any information you find on an agent or editor (as long as it's not too personal) will show them that you've done your research. A lot of queries are still not personalized. This is an easy way to stand apart, but it takes time

and planning to pull off. Invest yourself here.

Another way to catch an agent or publisher's eye is to include some sales hooks in your query, even if you're writing a novel. Is it about a timely topic? Does it have cross-over appeal between categories? Are you an expert in a field connected to your subject matter? Does your picture book have a curriculum hook for the school market or a strong universal theme? Even a nod in this direction will suggest to an agent or editor that you are a savvy writer who understands that publishing is, at the end of the day, a business. It's never too early to start marketing.

Finally, you can further communicate that you're not just a good writer, but a great person to work with, by conveying realistic expectations. Keep your comp titles (if you're using them) down-to-Earth. Don't talk about 12-book series or movie deals starring Tom Cruise. Avoid analyzing your own work in glowing terms. The agent or publisher's first question will be whether you've written a strong manuscript with a compelling idea. Their second (unspoken) question will be: Is this person going to be easy and fun to work with?

A friendly, realistic, approachable query is always going to find a warm reception over one that's boastful or forcefully quirky. If you feel like you're trying too hard, you probably are. Pull back.

At the end of the day, all agents and publishers are looking for the same thing: Good stuff, done well, by a reasonable person who's willing to work hard. You have spent months or years on your manuscript. Put the same care and attention into how you present it—and how you present yourself—and you will float to the top of that mysterious and intimidating slush pile.

Personalizing a query to each agent or editor can be as simple as one or two sentences in your opening paragraph, such as:

“I enjoyed your talk on quirky picture book characters at the XXX Conference, and feel my picture book [TITLE] fits your tastes.”

OR “I recently read on your blog that you're looking for nonfiction early chapter books that incorporate science topics into the storyline. My chapter book [TITLE], features [brief description of plot with science tie-in].”

Mary Kole is the instructor for Manuscript Submission Blueprint on WritingBlueprints.com, a step-by-step guide that takes you through the entire submission process. For a free trial edition, go to: <https://writingblueprints.com/p/submissions-blueprint-trial/>

VICTORIA A. SELVAGGIO



Literary Agent/Partner

interview by Lynne Marie

Victoria combines her knowledge and experience as a businesswoman, author, former Regional Advisor for SCBWI Northern Ohio, and former agent at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency into her newest position as a literary agent and co-owner at Storm Literary Agency. She is always looking for unique projects and gets excited about helping writers and illustrators achieve their publication goals.

LYNNE MARIE: With over 25 years of business experience under your belt, how would you say that informs your approach to agenting?

VICTORIA SELVAGGIO: Starting/owning a business at a young age, I've learned from my successes and then, also, my failures. With my partner, Essie White, clients of the agency, agents of the agency, other agents/agencies, editors/publishers, and querying writers and illustrators, I find that remaining professional and positive in all interactions is the key to success.

In addition to my organizational and bookkeeping skills, I've been handling and negotiating contracts (although, not all publishing contracts) for half of my life (OMG!). I've always hired and trained the employees for my business, which helps tremendously now at the agency. Instead of being the boss (co), though, Essie and I like the agents of our agency to think of this as our mentoring, supporting, and guiding them. We are truly a team. We all receive the benefits of every success.

Every business has good days and bad, but we try hard to make sure that the majority are good days. Being pas-

sionate about one's job is also the key to success.

I love what I do!

LM: How would you qualify the aspects of your job with one-word explanations, i.e., cheerleader / boss, etc.

VS: As an agent and partner, I find that I am required to prioritize constantly. The volume of work, clients, and all of the unknowns—things that I can't predict—do create a many-hats-type job. I am a cheerleader, co-author, editor, counselor/therapist, bookkeeper, contract specialists/negotiator, publicist/marketer, website designer, partner, boss, and much more. What I push for most, though, is to be a team player with my partner, agents of the agency, and clients.

We are all working toward the same goals. We all receive the benefits of every success.

Lastly, I do try hard to be everyone's friend. Publishing is such a long and hard process and I do understand the rollercoaster of emotions—I care deeply for everyone I'm associated with.

LM: At what point in the submission process do you consider marketability?

VS: All points. More about querying (to come), but I consider marketability throughout my review. The title, pitch, word count, genre/audience, writer's platform, comps—what similarities this submission has to other books in the marketplace, but more importantly, what makes this submission stand out. Then, I consider voice/



Victoria Selvaggio continued

writing style, emotional resonance and how well I relate and connect to the main character(s). I also consider cinematic appeal. And sometimes, I begin to think of editors and where I see this manuscript fitting at particular publishing houses, if I were to submit it as an agent.

Marketability is important. I have to feel confident that this project has something special.

Have I fallen in love with a submission that I knew was going to be a challenge based on its marketability?

Yes.

Sometimes, I pass. And sometimes, I take a chance (especially, if I feel I can't live without it and/or I have the desire to try—I'm always transparent with tentative clients, though, on the challenges of today's market).

LM: While reading proposed submissions, do you respond first to heart or to hooks? How many hooks would a project need to have and what criteria would you use to determine them?

VS: For me, I feel it's a little bit of both. I have to fall in love with the main character(s). To be engaged completely in that world. To understand the conflict, and what's at stake. I need to feel the give and take, the emotions of the ups and downs. To feel that despair. To feel that relief.

As with creating that flawed and wonderful main character, I need that hook at the beginning. That promise that this will be an amazing journey. Sometimes, the hook comes as immediately as the opening line.

Hooks are great tools. Hooking your reader from the first sentence is a great way to get that attention needed. But then, you must keep it. From one word to the next, the story must continue moving forward. And you want that reader to continue reading until the last page.

Chapter endings are great ways to "hook" readers—encouraging them to turn that page. In a picture book, using page turns for the "reveal" can hook readers.

Overall, I don't have a set hook count or criteria on how many a writer should use. As with all tools, make sure the journey is pushing the reader forward at every moment. And that the main character(s) has those emotional elements that will make the reader care.

LM: I've read that you read the entire query every time. Do you read the query first, or peek at the manuscript and then go back to the query? Approximately how

many queries do you receive in a week?

VS: I'm actually a "different" agent. I dislike queries. And I don't read them (in full). I'm not selling a query; I'm selling a manuscript. Writing a query letter is a much different skill than writing a novel or a picture book. Writing a synopsis is the same—it requires a different skill set.

Do clients need to know how to write query letters?

Yes. Of course. I do submit projects with a complete package (query, manuscript, etc.), but for me, I don't base my rejection on the query letter.

The parts that I focus on (for a few seconds to a minute—really, I don't spend that much time) are title, genre/word count/comps, pitch, and biography.

My main focus is the manuscript. When I first became an agent, I read all of it. Now, I read until I experience a disconnect. If I'm completely engaged, I reach out and request the full.

Currently, I'm closed to submissions except for conferences/events, contests and interviews. (Note, see the special Above the Slushpile opportunity at the end of this interview.)

On average, I still receive about 300 emails, inquiries, queries a week (these are unsolicited submissions, questions, conference/events, contests and interviews). These do not include the emails that I receive from editors, clients, agency-related inquiries, etc.

When I'm open to submissions, I receive in queries alone on the average of 600-800 a week.

It's a lot of reading! So, that's why every submission needs to be as submission-ready as possible.

LM: Being such a dedicated query reader, please share what components you feel are most important to a query? What are some of the things that you feel should be left out?

VS: While I dislike queries and I'm not very dedicated to reading them, I do present query workshops all the time!

These are my preferences for a query (for a nonfiction proposal, this will vary slightly as there is more to the proposal package that I include in my submissions):

Element #1 – Greeting & Introduction. Some consider this filler/a warm up/wasted space and prefer you lead

Victoria Selvaggio continued

with the pitch or a logline. If you've met this agent, mention it briefly.

Element #2 – The Pitch. This should be concise and compelling (100-200 words). Consider: Who is the main character? What does the main character want/need/desire? What stands in the way from the main character getting what s/he wants/needs/desires? What is the main character willing to sacrifice to get what s/he wants/needs/desires? Consider how the main character changes from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. Do not include the ending. Additionally, your pitch should not be a rundown of your story. Throughout, your voice should emerge.

Element #3 – The Basics. Title, Genre, Audience, Word Count, Comps

Element #4 – Biography. This information should be relevant to your writing history.

Element #5 – The Closing, Signature, Contact information.

I would also like to know if you've had previous representation (not the details of it), if this submission is published/self-published, if this submission is a revision of something I've already seen/rejected, anything relevant (such as an offer of publication/representation)

Some quick “do” tips: Always proof before sending—grammar, punctuation, spelling. Some agents/editors will reject immediately. Make sure agent/editor's name/title is correctly listed/spelled. Only query relevant genres/age categories. If you've revised and have NOT received a response yet, follow up with an email first, asking if you may resubmit. In the result of a request or offer, advise everyone you've submitted to—include dates and be prepared to give details (Agent/Editor/Agency/Publishing House/Contract specifics if an offer of publication).

Some quick “don't” tips: Including personal information not relevant to your manuscript (I have three cats.). Mentioning that your manuscript has been professionally edited (this is a don't for me; other agents may feel differently). Mentioning previous rejections. Being rude, angry, weird—avoid any of these adjectives in your follow-up letter. Sending flowers, candy, baked goods, countless emails (especially before a noted “response time”). Following up with a phone call. Querying more than one project at a time. Ignoring submission guidelines or doing ANYTHING that will make your FIRST IMPRESSION a bad one!

LM: Speaking of queries, what types of “wish list” projects would you like to see queries for? Have you ever filled your wish list for a book about mold? Have you had your fill of dog books after dog week?

VS: I'm quite easy on what I'm looking for—a well-written story. I never know how I'm going to respond, so I look at all genres and all age categories. Currently, I represent mostly children's literature (picture books to YA), but I'm looking for that adult project that I can't live without.

I'm still looking for a book about mold—or anything creepy, yet fascinating. And I don't think I can ever have enough dog books (I love dogs!).

I absolutely love projects that have educational elements—both fiction and nonfiction. I love lyrical picture books, while I love edgier YA.

If I fall in love with the main character or the topic (non-fiction) or the concept—that's all it takes.

LM: I love your philosophy that “a pass is not a failure,” and that it just means “not a match.” Can explain this in a bit more detail so readers really understand that they don't want someone representing their book who doesn't connect with it?

VS: This is such a subjective process. We all respond differently to stories. We all like different movies and T.V. shows, and that's all right. We want our libraries and bookstores to reflect that, too. Otherwise, reading the same type of book would be very boring!

When I pass on a submission, if I didn't connect to the main character (and ultimately, the story), that's all right, too. As this is a subjective process, I encourage writers to continue submitting to other agents. It is possible that another agent might feel differently. If I provided feedback that does resonate, I encourage the writer to consider it. Of course, though, my opinion is only one of many and I do feel that the process of submitting should be considered before delving into extensive revisions.

The author-agent relationship is a team effort. And a writer really needs an agent to be passionate about that manuscript. For me, I have to be—being passionate is what drives me to work endlessly in edits, submissions, and so forth (which I do for free until I sell that manuscript or something else for that client).

LM: Please share what types of projects, in general, are you accepting submission for. Do you represent illustrators?

Victoria Selvaggio continued

VS: Currently, I'm looking for board books, picture books, chapter books, middle grade, young adult, and specifically for this interview: adult. I am interested in nonfiction and fiction in all genres. I especially love thrillers and all elements of weird, creepy stuff. If it's out-of-the-box and it will make me think and think, long after I'm done reading, send it to me. On the flip side, I yearn for books that make me laugh, cry, and wonder about the world.

I am interested in representing illustrators—I'm happy to review tear sheets and online portfolios and/or a book dummy (if from an author/illustrator).

LM: In nonfiction, you say you love it best if it “reads like fiction.” Can you clarify a bit more for those who may be submitting nonfiction?

VS: I disliked nonfiction as a child—it felt so stiff and boring to me. Now, nonfiction has that voice, at least to me, that pulls me in. Where I find I'm excited to learn about mold :)

I feel there is a balance—where the educational elements emerge naturally in a fun and kid-friendly way.

LM: Please share with us what you love about lyrical picture books. How would you define a lyrical picture book?

VS: Although I love rhyming picture books, a lyrical picture book is one that doesn't rhyme (necessarily) and is still pleasing to the ear. It has a rhythm all of its own, created by the descriptive words/wordplay, sometimes incorporating poetic devices that evoke emotion. Repetition, similes, metaphors, alliteration, etc. The result is soothing, entertaining and there's a desire to read it out loud.

LM: Regarding lyrical picture books—what are some personal favorites? Have you acquired on recently that really spoke to you? If there was one that almost made it, but did not, what was lacking?

VS: Some of my favorites: *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson (Nancy Paulsen Books); *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen (Scholastic).

I haven't acquired anything recently, but several of my clients write amazing and lyrical picture books.

LM: Please share your passion for creepy thrillers like *Pet Sematary*. Did you read these types of stories as a child? Have you recently acquired a title that you can tell us about?

VS: We had limited funds growing up, so the library was my go-to place. I was able to entertain myself (for free). I did read Stephen King at an early age. *Christine*, *Pet Sematary*, *The Talisman*, *Dolores Claiborne*—I've read most of his work.

As an author too, I write creepy stuff. I find that's my voice and where my passion comes alive (when writing myself).

I have a few clients who write edgier material. I am, though, looking for that perfect adult submission that will win me over like Stephen King did (when I was a child).

LM: You are drawn to unique stories and concepts. Please highlight a few unique stories that you have recently acquired and share what drew you to them.

VS: While I don't want to give away ideas, I'm always looking for picture books that incorporate math, counting, fractions. Or ones introducing concepts (shapes, colors, etc.) in a new way. For middle grade—I'm looking for more graphic novels and material that might be a little edgier. I'm also looking for stories that reflect today's youth and the world they're experiencing. For YA—I'd love to see stories about different cultures, traditions, and from all writers.

I've never received anything based on horoscopes and find that fascinating. I'm intrigued by legends and myths. I'm a sucker for vampire and werewolf stories (I know—I'm different!).

Though she's currently closed to unsolicited submissions, Victoria has agreed to open up a special **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for CBI subscribers for **October 2019**. Please email Victoria Selvaggio at vicki.stormliteraryagency@gmail.com and put “**CBI VS Fall Fun Pass [Title of Manuscript]**” in the subject line of your email. Paste a query letter and the first 20 pages of the fiction manuscript in the body of your email (for picture books, send the full manuscript for fiction or nonfiction). Longer nonfiction submissions may consist of an emailed cover letter and an attachment of the entire proposal as a Word document (the proposal should include a sample chapter and other proposal components, and the cover letter should also be included in the attachment). Vicky is only able to respond to submissions she's interested in seeing more of. If you haven't heard back after 9 weeks, you can consider it a pass (but do let her know if you receive another offer of representation during that time).

Exercise Your

POINT-OF-VIEW

by Jane McBride

You may have learned the following about point-of-view (POV):

- Keep to one POV per scene, maybe two for older readers
- Write from the POV of the character who has the most to lose in the scene
- Try a different POV if our default choice isn't working (i.e. If you normally write in third person, try writing in first person).
- Avoid the omniscient POV
- Go deep in POV

If you do know all these things, what's the point (pardon the pun) of this article? What I am going to ask you to do is to exercise those elements when writing POV. Yes, POV can get flabby, like the mid-section of a woman in menopause. (That could be a whole other article, one I am so qualified to write!)

Let's take the points one-by-one.

Keep to one POV per scene. Have you ever read a book where the POV jumped from character to character until you didn't know whose story it was? It's frustrating, to say the least, and can get downright annoying. I read one book where the POV was in that of a cow. This is fine if you're writing a "talking animal" book; if not, stick to the POV of the human characters.

Exercise: Ask yourself whose story you are writing. Suppose you are writing a story about a seven-year-old girl who wants to take ballet lessons but her parents can't afford to pay for them. Our young protagon-

ist understands that, but she still very much wants the lessons. What would happen to portraying her deep desire if the POV shifts from her to her mother to her father to her kitty, Jasper? Would the story lose some of its impact?

Of course. Your exercise, beyond deciding whose story you are writing, is to pull out any competing POVs as you would a noxious weed.

Write from the POV of the character who has the most to lose.

Exercise: Take a scene from your own work-in-progress (WIP) or make up a scene with two major characters in it. These should be fairly equal characters (both have a big impact on the story). Write the scene from each character's POV and see which has the most impact. Tension comes from a character losing something, or thinking they will lose something. Often we can't see what a character has to lose until we see the situation from inside his or her head. If you're writing a novel and you find the scene works better from a secondary character's viewpoint, this may mean that this character deserves a subplot of his or her own, or perhaps your book requires you alternate chapters between two different narrators. If you're writing a picture book and it feels flat, maybe you've got the wrong narrator. Experiment with telling the story from a different character's POV and see what happens.

Go beyond your default POV stance. I have always written in third person and never thought I could write in first person. My words felt awkward and then there was the problem of all those "I's" and "me's." But in a short story for a children's magazine, I realize that my traditional third person POV didn't engage me in the story. If it failed to involve me, the writer, how was it going to engage a young reader? I took a chance,

Exercise Your Point-of-View continued

scrapped the original version of the story, and rewrote it in first person. Guess what? It worked. And it was accepted by the editor.

Exercise: If you normally write in third person POV, try writing a scene or chapter in first person POV. Turn it on its head: if you typically write in first person POV, switch to third person. While you're at it, try a different verb tense as well. Try the first-person present-tense. You might like it.

Avoid the omniscient POV. Have you read passages in a book that seem like they were written from some all-knowing POV? This was far more common in books from earlier centuries; still, some authors succumb to it. We sometimes call this the omniscient POV or bird's eye POV. The omniscient POV distances readers from the characters. Some authors start a book or chapter or scene by writing from the omniscient POV and then telescope it to first or third person. This can be done, but it takes a skilled writer to pull off that shift. Stay true to your character(s)'s POV. Giving in to the temptation of writing from this lofty POV robs you of the opportunity to connect your readers with the character.

Exercise: Go through your manuscript and look for instances where you have written from an all-knowing POV. (If you haven't done this, you're ahead of the game, so skip this exercise.) When you find these instances, yank them out and rewrite the scene from the POV of your protagonist. How do you know if you're in an omniscient POV? One way is to ask yourself if you are describing things that your character couldn't possibly see or know. Suppose your MC is in a mountain setting and all of the sudden you are talking about what the mountains think, what the river meandering through a valley says. These are extreme examples, but you get the picture.

Go deep. It's fine to tell what a character sees, hears, feels, tastes, and smells, but that is only the first layer. Thoughts and feelings get us much deeper to the heart of the character.

Exercise: Interview your character and ask him why is he acting the way he's acting. Is the 12-year-old girl of your 'tween book throwing a fit because her mother wouldn't buy her the expensive jeans she wanted? Ask her why having the expensive jeans is so important. Is it because she feels ostracized at school because she doesn't dress like the other girls do?

WHY POV IS SO IMPORTANT

Why is getting the right POV so important? It establishes who the main character (or characters) is immediately. I have read more than a few books where I had to get to the second or third chapter before I could identify the main character. It was frustrating enough to tempt me to put down the book, and, in some instances, I did. Secondly, it reminds the reader who they are to "root for." Most readers, young and old, want someone to cheer for when things go right and to sympathize with when things go wrong. And finally, it engages the reader on an emotional level, because the reader can intimately experience the story along with the protagonist. So take some time to exercise your POV muscles, and perfect this part of your craft.

THE STRANGE AND DEADLY WORLD OF E. LATIMER

interview by PJ McIlvaine

The weird, offbeat, and eccentric have always appealed to Erin Latimer, even as a child. Thus it should come as no surprise that Erin's writing is all about the weird, offbeat, and eccentric. Her critically acclaimed debut MG fantasy novel, *The Strange and Deadly Portraits of Bryony Gray* (Tundra Books/Penguin Random House, 2018), a female centered re-invention of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was nominated for the prestigious Red Maple Fiction Award. Her second novel, *Witches of Ash and Ruin* (Disney Freeform, March 2020), is a gritty YA fantasy about queer witches and dark Celtic mythology set in Ireland. Erin makes her home in Vancouver, BC, reads and writes prodigiously, and is a savvy social media beast. (<http://www.elatimer.com/>, Twitter [@ELatimerWrites](https://twitter.com/ELatimerWrites))

PJ McIlvaine: Your website has a very cool, quirky eccentric vibe, like your books. Have you always gravitated to the weird, unusual, and offbeat?

Erin Latimer: Absolutely. I loved weird, magical books growing up. *The Phantom Toll Booth*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Alice in Wonderland*, I started out with these types of bedtime stories as a kid and just never stopped. If it had magic in it, I'd read it.

PM: Who were your writing influences growing up? Did you always want to be a writer? Did your family support you?

EL: I devoured Enid Blyton's books growing up, and often tried to write my own stories based around her characters, before I even knew what fanfiction was.

Honestly, as soon as I realized people had writing as a job (the thought seemed too wonderful to be true, and sometimes still does) I knew that was what I wanted to do. My mother was very supportive. She took my siblings and I to the library constantly. I was also lucky enough to be homeschooled up until grade 11 & 12, and there were a few years (grade 10 especially) where I really just read books back-to-back and skipped the rest of my schoolwork. I'm sure my grade 11 math teacher would read that and everything would suddenly make so much sense, but it's one of my fondest memories.



PM: Your debut novel was a middle grade gothic fantasy retelling of *Dorian Gray*. Your next book is a queer, witchy book. How did those ideas come to you and how did you know those ideas were worth pursuing? What is your writing process like? Do you multitask or prefer to work on one project at a time?

EL: *The Strange and Deadly Portraits of Bryony Gray* came to be in a much less organic way than most of my ideas. I sat down one morning and

thought, "I really do love Oscar Wilde, I'd like to write something involving him" and sort of brainstormed my way to the idea from there.

Witches of Ash and Ruin, on the other hand, was very much inspired by my love of witchy women. I'd dream of dancing in the kitchen with Sally and Gillian from *Practical Magic*, or sitting around the table with Persephone, Maura and Calla from *The Raven Cycle*. There's something intrinsically magical about these characters, and the environments they create, but in a way that feels very possible. A kind of subtle magic you could accidentally fall into without realizing. There's

E. Latimer continued

something about that I'm very drawn to.

As for my writing process. I don't start on a project until it's absolutely driving me mad, banging around in my brain. When it won't leave me alone, that's when I know it's seized my interest enough to be a lasting project. I do prefer to work on one project at a time, as I like investing 100% of myself into them, though sadly sometimes my schedule doesn't allow that.

PM: Do you belong to a writer's group? How many revises do you burn through before you judge the material is ready to be seen? What is the hardest part for you, the initial first draft or subsequent revises?

EL: Revisions are the hardest part for me. I usually put myself through at least two, sometimes three drafts, before my agent or editor sees anything. Thankfully I do belong to a writer's group. We meet online over google chat every week, so they help me with this process. They're all wonderful beta readers.

PM: Do you have an agent? If you do, what was the querying process like? I understand at one point that you were an intern for a literary agency. How did that impact on your writing? In terms of your internship, were there any common plots or tropes you'd see?

EL: I do. I have a wonderful agent, Siliva Molteni of Peters Fraser and Dunlop. The querying process was...long. I'd been repped before, and parted ways with my first agent, so it was the second time I'd been back in the query trenches, and found myself very beaten down when I first started that second round. The second time though, turned out to be vastly different, as I ended up getting multiple offers on Bryony, and then Silvia sold the MS very fast after I accepted her offer.

I'm actually retired from interning at this point, due to being very busy. It did impact the time I had to write.



I used to see waves of trends, it would be everyone writing mermaids, and then vampires and then everyone was secretly some kind of royalty. There were also consistent themes, like bullying in MG, that I would see all the time. Obviously, I don't know what's going on with the slush pile anymore, but I still do keep an eye on MSWL over on twitter, just out of curiosity.

PM: You've also been a past mentor/mentee in Pitch Wars. What was that experience like? Were there any lessons you learned from that which helped you in your own writing?

EL: The Pitch Wars experience was wonderful, both as a mentee and a mentor. It has taught me that community is so important as a writer. I've also found wonderful beta readers from the PW community too, and everyone is so supportive of one another.

PM: You write in both middle grade and young adult. Do you find it difficult to navigate between the two genres? What is your personal criterion for deciding on whether an idea is either middle grade or young adult? Do you write your passion or to the marketplace?

EL: Usually it's the voice that decides if something is MG or YA for me. Occasionally I'll start out something thinking it's YA, and will fall into a rhythm and voice that's just so clearly middle grade that I'll have to reassess everything.

And I always write what I'm passionate about, as I tend to lose interest if I try to write for any other reason. You have with that MS for so long, it really needs to be something you love.

PM: Do you have any tips, advice, or nuggets of wisdom for aspiring kid lit authors? What has surprised you about the writing or publishing process?



E. Latimer continued

EL: Patience. Oh my gosh, brush up on practicing your waiting. And not just that, but practice actively waiting, ie, learn how to turn your attention to another project while you're waiting on feedback from betas or agents. Work on perfecting your craft, as that's what will get you there.

I had no idea just how impatient I was, until I realized it was actually hurting my writing journey. I was too busy being impatient to "get there" and hadn't been working on my craft, all it did was slow down the process.

PM: How important is social media to aspiring authors? Should they have their own personal website or should that wait until they're farther along in their writing (querying, multiple manuscripts, etc.).

EL: I think you can stick with something simple at first, maybe a Wordpress site, or a Twitter account, something you know you'll use regularly. The idea is that you should have some kind of online presence so that agents (and eventually editors) can look you up. Showing them that you are actively involved in the writing/reading communities and working on building a fan base is valuable as well.

PM: You blog and vlog with Word Nerds about writing. Can you explain the difference between the two and how they fit in the social media landscape for an author?"

EL: I find vlogging so much more fun than blogging ever was. I don't actually write out articles anymore. If I have something I want to touch on that will take longer than a few paragraphs, I make a Word Nerd video. I find it's a better way to make what feels like a direct connection with viewers and readers, who get to know you and your personality. If you look at many popular book tube and author tube channels, they end up creating a large, loyal following who are invested in them as a person, instead of just a single book or series.

PM: Once your books are out in the world, how involved are you in the marketing/PR. Do you enjoy that side of it or do you have to push yourself outside of your comfort zone?

EL: For me, it's more a matter of figuring out exactly what to do. I'm always willing to make appearances, or shout about my books (my comfort zone is a fairly large place, it turns out) but generally my problem is

being a bit clueless and not really knowing what to invest my time and funds into, or what will work, verses fall flat. I actually ended up putting aside a portion of the advance for *Witches of Ash and Ruin*, in order to hire an independent publicist. Already the publicist is telling me exactly what I'm doing wrong (thank god) and how to change things so my marketing efforts are actually effective. I look at it as an investment in both the book, and my career in the future.

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

EL: I'm currently working on another MG for Tundra. It's not a sequel to *Bryony Gray*, but it's also set in London in the 19th century. This time it's full of witches!

So far my great love is fantasy, though I occasionally find myself venturing into dark fantasy and horror, so I may play with that more someday.

PM: If there's one thing you'd like your readers to get from your books, what would it be?

EL: I'd like them to feel seen. Whether it's finding a family outside the one they were born in, or grappling with mental illness, or struggling with self-acceptance, I'd like people to be able to open my books and recognize themselves and feel less alone.

I'd also like them to be able to escape real life, at least temporarily. To be totally and completely swept away by a story.

PM: Given your love of all things Gothic and eccentric, what do you imagine you were in a past life?

EL: Oh, this is a brilliant question. Strangely enough, I actually have a cat paw tattoo because for a very long time I was absolutely convinced I was a cat in some other life. I mean, they're standoffish until they demand attention, they like to curl up by the fire and sleep, and they're terribly picky when it comes to food. It really is me, basically. Plus, I'm fairly certain they can see ghosts.