

Children's Book Insider

December 2019

Get Started Writing Middle Grade Nonfiction



Above the Slushpile Submission Code: **THEBENTAGENCY**

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Catherine DePino has sold 17 books for parents, teachers, and children. Her books address bullying, grammar/writing, spirituality, and women's issues. She holds a doctorate in curriculum theory and development and educational administration. Catherine was a teacher, department head, and disciplinarian in the Philadelphia School District, and subsequently worked at Temple University as an adjunct assistant professor and student teaching supervisor. She is currently writing a self-help book for Rowman and Littlefield and a series of meditation books.

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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>

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At Presstime:

Aspiring Script Writers from Underrepresented Backgrounds Sought for Sesame Street Fellowship

Sesame Workshop Writers' Room is a writing fellowship from the creators of Sesame Street. Now seeking fresh writing talent from underrepresented racial backgrounds. Aspiring storytellers who are selected to join the Writers' Room will receive hands-on writing experience guided by Sesame Street veterans and other media industry leaders. Each participant will develop and write a pilot script for their own original kids concept. Weekly sessions will take place at the Sesame Workshop NYC offices in Summer 2020 (early May through mid-July).

Applicants must be a US citizen or permanent resident at least 21 years old, and identify as Asian, Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Middle Eastern, or multiracial. Applications consist of an Application Form (go to <https://sesamewritersroom.org/> and click Apply Here at the top right corner); Resumé of writing and overall work experience; Personal Statement of up to 250 words; Original Script Sample (11-page maximum, it should NOT contain Sesame Street elements, it can be an excerpt from a larger piece you've written, it must be kid-friendly content for viewers up to age 12); More Info on Your Script (Up to 100 words on the bigger picture/idea of your script sample). For more information on the application process, go to <https://sesamewritersroom.org/frequently-asked-questions/>

Application must be submitted by January 10, 2020 5PM EST. Select applicants will be invited to take part in an interview with the selection committee in Spring 2020.

Times/Chicken House Children's Writing Competition Open to Entries

The Times/Chicken House Children's Writing Competition is open to unpublished, unagented authors of middle grade and young adult books for readers ages 7-18 years old (30,000-80,000 words). Sponsored by independent British children's publisher Chicken House Publications (<https://www.chickenhousebooks.com/about-us/>), the competition consists of two prizes: First prize is a worldwide publishing contract with Chicken House with a royalty advance of £10,000, plus an offer of representation from Kate Shaw of the Shaw Agency (<https://www.theshawagency.co.uk/about>). This year's competition coincides with Chicken House's 20th anniversary, so another entry will be awarded the Chairman's Prize—a publishing contract with a royalty advance of £7,500 plus an offer of representation from Kate Shaw of the Shaw Agency. The prize will be awarded to a manuscript hand-picked by Barry Cunningham, Publisher and the Chairman of the Judging Panel, for work that promises outstanding potential but requires more editorial input than the overall winner.

All longlisted entrants will receive a reader's report of their work.

The deadline for entries will be at midnight on May 4, 2020. Open to writers all over the world, entries can be submitted online at <https://www.chickenhousebooks.com/submissions/#faqs>. An £18 entry fee is required for each entry, and must be paid at the time of submission. Entries consist of a single Word document containing the following submission materials:

- A page-long covering letter explaining why you believe your novel would appeal to children and a bit about yourself.
- A page-long synopsis of your story. Please include all the main points of your plot in your synopsis, including 'spoilers.'
- The full manuscript.

Please note that all materials submitted online will be read digitally on e-readers so exact formatting will not be retained. If you have any questions regarding entry to the competition, please see [Competition FAQs](#) or, if you can't find your answer, email hello@chickenhousebooks.com. Chicken House aims to announce the longlist on their website in July, the shortlist in August, and the winner in October. You can follow them on Twitter (@chickenhousebooks) to keep up with all the latest news.

Publisher Seeks Picture Books, Middle Grade and YA Fiction and Nonfiction

Pelican Publishing Company, an imprint of Arcada Publishing, is an independent company with a backlist of over 2,500 titles and 40-50 new titles produced yearly. Children's and young adult fiction often have a regional or historical focus. Nonfiction topics are listed below. Currently seeking **YA fiction and nonfiction** (history, biography, African American, regional) for ages 12 and up with a minimum of 25,000 words; **middle grade fiction and nonfiction** (History, biography, cooking, African American, regional, STEM) for ages 8-12 with a maximum of 25,000 words; and **picture book fiction and nonfiction** (holiday, history, biography, African American, regional, STEM) for ages 5-8 with a maximum word count of 1100 plus an Author's Note to children.

For middle grade and young adult submissions, send an email to editorial@pelicanpub.com with the subject line "TITLE—Submission for Publication", containing a query letter (for details, see below); author publication credits (ISBN/link to Amazon) if applicable; sales history (life to date and first 12 months), and translation/subsidiary rights sales if any; author platform, including social media links; research references if nonfiction; synopsis (max 250 words); table of contents, if applicable; first chapter. Pelican requires exclusive submissions for up to one month. After that period, Pelican will continue their evaluation on a nonexclusive basis.

For picture book submissions, send an email to editorial@pelicanpub.com with the subject line "TITLE—Submission for Publication", containing a query letter (for details, see below); author publication credits (ISBN/link to Amazon) and sales history (life to date and first 12 months) if applicable; author platform, including social media links; full manuscript. Accompanying artwork may be attached to email. Pelican requires exclusive picture book submissions for up to three months. If that period expires, they will continue the evaluation on a nonexclusive basis. Please note that these books are 32 illustrated pages when published, with a maximum Flesch-Kincaid reading level of second grade (2.0).

Query letter tips: The query letter should discuss the book's content (general description as well as subjects covered); anticipated length (in double-spaced pages or in words) and number of black and white and/or color images if any; intended audience; ideal publication date or season (spring or fall); three competing titles, with links to Amazon, and how your title differs from the competition; any promotional ideas and contacts you may have. To review current Pelican titles, go to <https://pelicanpub.com/>

Two Agents Seeking Submissions

Ali Herring, Assistant Literary Agent with Spencerhill Associates (<https://www.spencerhillassociates.com/>) is seeking middle grade and young adult fiction in all genres. **In middle grade** she is looking for joyful stories featuring POC characters, written by diverse creators; bold, unexplored settings; fantasy with a commercial hook but literary writing; hooky, really high-concept middle grade, great for Jimmy Patterson or Rick Riordan Presents imprints; dark fantasy or horror (but not gross-out); magical realism or paranormal; issue books; coming-of-age; first love; STEM-positive; stories for upper middle grade girls that aren't all about romance, yet aren't childish either; anything adventurous and thrilling for boys like *Hatchet*. **In young adult**, she's seeking contemporary, fantasy, sci-fi, speculative, horror, romance, issue books, contemporary with a speculative element, suspense/thrillers, anything with an edge, vibrant teen rom-coms, dystopian, and anything edgy. If you'd like a better idea of her interests, you can find her on Twitter, @HerringAli. Submit a query letter, synopsis and the first three chapters at <https://querymanager.com/query/1032>. Address your query letter to Ali Herring. Responds within 12 weeks if interested.

Samantha Wekstein, Agent with Thompson Literary Agency (<https://thompsonliterary.com/>) is accepting submissions for picture books, middle grade and young adult fiction. In YA, she loves creative and epic fantasies in the vein of Sarah J. Maas or Leigh Bardugo. But she is also drawn to realistic stories with multi-dimensional female characters like those of Rainbow Rowell, Julie Murphy, and Melina Marchetta. She is always interested in elevating diverse voices, particularly through feminist narratives. She is seeking **middle grade** of all stripes, but especially stories that deal with themes of friendship, adventure, or encountering tragedy for the first time. Her favorites are Sharon Creech, Shannon Hale, and Gail Carson Levine. She is also on the lookout for whimsical, meaningful, and funny **picture books by author/illustrators**. Submit a query letter in the body of your email with the first 25 pages as an attachment to submissions@thompsonliterary.com. Include the word "Query" in the subject line and address your query directly to Samantha Wekstein. Responds in 4-6 weeks if interested.

Getting Started Writing Middle Grade Nonfiction

by Jean Daigneau

While I would be the last person to suggest you follow trends in writing, you should be aware that nonfiction has been, and still is, riding a wave of popularity. But nonfiction is not just for younger kids. Today's middle grade readers are finding a vast selection of great nonfiction to draw them in. And my debut nonfiction book, *Code Cracking for Kids: Secret Communications throughout History with 21 Codes and Ciphers* (Chicago Review Press), probably tops the list. Okay, it's not really at the top, but CBI publisher Laura Backes opened the door on this subject knowing my book had recently launched, so blame her for this shameless self-promotion! Seriously, let's look at the nuts and bolts of this genre.

First Things First

Once you've narrowed down some topics to write about, ask yourself these questions *before* you start researching: Why I am the person to write this book? What sets my book apart from others on this subject? Am I passionate about the subject? You will be spending hours immersing yourself in research and writing. You better like your topic.

Another approach is to ask what kids will like about your idea. What spin can you put on a familiar topic, or what new topic will get kids' attention? Award-winning nonfiction author Mary Kay Carson has this to say, "What does your book about women's suffrage or endangered gorillas do that a Google search, Wikipedia article, or YouTube video doesn't? It needs some kind of hook, unique angle, fresh perspective, or innovative format to justify its publication these days." And she would know. Carson has had more than 50 books published on subjects ranging from *What Makes a Tornado Twist? And Other Questions about Weather to Weird Animals*.

Carson, known for her science and history writing, finds some ideas while researching other topics. She says, "I subscribe to a number of science news aggregates that deliver headlines and links to the latest research findings." She also uses Twitter and Facebook to follow NASA and other science-related sources, Ted

Talks, or PBS shows. When Carson finds an idea that "might make a good book," she says, "I create a folder for it and add files to it as I come across information related to it."

For me, I try to copy and paste interesting articles into a Word document. This can be cumbersome and doesn't always work, but helps me avoid losing interesting information, since sometimes articles disappear over time. I use the article title for the document name, and *always* note the URL in the document. The date I create the file is the "access" date, if I later use the website as a source. By copying, pasting, and saving, I can access the information if I decide to pursue an idea and can easily print a hard copy.

And one note about sources: Wikipedia and encyclopedias are *not* considered valid sources for your bibliography. I started with over six pages of sources, which certainly can't all be included in the back matter for a kid's book. My editor suggested I title that section *Selected Bibliography* and only include books plus online or other sources where I found quoted or footnoted material. This reduced my bib to about two pages.

You've Nailed Your Topic, Now What?

Research can be extremely time-consuming and having reputable sources is a must. Because of her subject matter, Carson says, "Interviews with scientists is a big source of information for me. Government websites (NASA, NOAA, etc.) are also terrific places for information geared toward educators as well as scientists." And we both Google everything we can on the subject. Information is literally at your fingertips these days if you're willing to put in the time.

For me, I immerse myself in online and library research and look for one or two books as "go-to" resources. For *Code Cracking*, I kept seeing the names of two experts in the field. I ordered their books from the library, so I could review them before purchasing. I like to highlight passages and write notes in the margins or circle key words that make my research easier.

I'm Ready to Write, Where Do I Go from Here?

I won't spend time explaining the importance of writing in a kid-friendly or engaging voice. But be aware that middle grade nonfiction book lengths can compete with middle grade novels for word counts upwards of 35,000 words.

Unlike nonfiction for younger readers, nonfiction books for middle grade readers are usually pitched with a proposal. Most publishers make proposal information available online. A typical proposal includes the following:

- Cover letter
- Complete table of contents
- Synopsis or book description
- Target market
- Competitive analysis
- Marketing plan
- Writing sample, which usually includes the first chapter
- Sample sidebar, if applicable
- Footnotes, if applicable, pertaining to sample chapter
- Glossary, if applicable, pertaining to sample chapter
- Websites and/or places to visit
- Sources, to date
- Author resume

As with any submission, always check publisher guidelines and be sure to follow instructions and provide information as requested. If you include something not required, you're likely to run less risk of jeopardizing your chances of grabbing an editor's interest, than if you omit important information. For example, Chicago Review Press books are big on activities, so laying out a dozen or more activity ideas in the proposal is crucial.

Some Important Details to Consider

One perk of nonfiction writing outside of the educational market is that publishers pay advances *and* royalties. Advances might range from about \$3,000 to over \$7,000. Carson's advance has increased over the years when she's written for the same publisher. Additionally, instead of a complete proposal, she now submits an annotated outline. The beauty of royalties is that unlike some picture books or other fiction, nonfiction books often stay in print for years. Some of Carson's books have been out for more than 10 years but still pay royalties and sell well at book events.

Another issue is that the author is often responsible for acquiring photos and ensuring images are copyright free. If payment is required for photo use, that usually

comes out of the author's pocket. Few publishers offer a photo budget. I negotiated the price of four photos for *Code Cracking* because they were images I really wanted from overseas news agencies. The costs ranged from \$45 to \$75 per photo. Photo research can take hours of time, so be sure your contract spells out how many photos are required. It's not unusual to need 50 or more photos for a middle grade book.

Carson notes that for her six *Scientists in the Field* titles, her contract requires *original photography*. Fortunately for her, her husband Tom Uhlman is a photographer/videographer and they collaborated on those books. We can't all be in her position, but knowing what's required can save issues down the road.

Some publishers require your book be reviewed by an expert. Carson has never had to pay an expert. But my code expert asked for \$200, which he more than earned with the help and input he gave me. *But*, those kinds of costs can add up.

The Final Word

If you're considering nonfiction, don't let jumping through the hoops stop you. But, don't approach the topic blindly. I agree when Carson says that "being a writer of middle grade nonfiction means you spend most of your time doing research. Often months, if not years, of research takes place before sitting down to actually write. Writing is icing on the cake; the hard work of baking the cake is the research." My advice after tackling *Code Cracking for Kids* is this: If you're interested in writing middle grade nonfiction, just get cracking!

FOR FURTHER READING

Writing nonfiction means, of course, reading nonfiction. Here are some exciting books to choose from:

Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon, by Steve Sheinkin

Alexander Graham Bell for Kids: His Life and Inventions, with 21 Activities, by Mary Kay Carson

Rocket to the Moon! Big Ideas that Changed the World, by Don Brown

Warrior Queens: True Stories of Six Ancient Rebels Who Slayed History, by Vicky Alvear Shecter and Bill Mayer

The Poison Eaters: Fighting Danger and Fraud in our Food and Drugs, by Gail Jarrow

Hey There, Earth Dweller! Dive into This World We Call Earth, by Marc ter Horst

Fantastic Failures: True Stories of People Who Changed the World by Falling Down First, by Luke Reynolds

GOAL-SETTING FOR THE NEW YEAR

DEBUNKING

WHAT YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW

by Jane McBride

“If you want to be happy, set a goal that commands your thoughts, liberates your energy, and inspires your hopes.” -- Andrew Carnegie

It's the new year. It is the time of taking stock of ourselves, of making resolutions, and maybe even giving in to a few self-recriminations for what we didn't get done last year. Magazines and e-zines are filled with articles on decluttering, losing weight, and goal-setting. The first two are certainly important, but I have more or less accepted that neither is going to happen for me. I still cling to the idea of goal-setting, though.

Unfortunately, we as writers sometimes get caught up in other people's opinions about what goal-setting really means. I admit it: I have given in to several popularly held goal-setting strategies for writers. After nearly forty years of writing, I've finally come to understand what true goal-setting involves.

This is not going to be the typical article on goal-setting. We're not going to talk about SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals, wonderful though they are. We're not going to talk about word counts or page counts or chapters completed. We're not even going to talk about developing the integrity in keeping to your goals. Don't get me wrong: these are not bad things. In fact, they're good. But they are not the subject of this article.

So what are we going to talk about?

We're going to debunk some commonly accepted goal-setting counsel for writers. I came up with these goals by combing writers' magazines and publica-

tions and culling out some of the ones mentioned over and over.

Write every day. This is good advice. Except that it doesn't work for everyone. I don't write every day. I don't write on Sundays (for religious reasons). I also don't write when my children and grandchildren visit. Family comes first. What about the full-time mother who also works eight hours a day five days a week and still has children to care for when she returns home? She may not be able to write every day, but she may be able to get in quality writing time on the weekends. The man who works two jobs to support his family may also not be able to write every day, but he finds time on holidays and the occasional Saturday.

Choose a time to write and stick to it. This is not just good advice; it is great advice. Once again, though, it doesn't always work. Life happens. Children need you. A friend needs you. Some years back, I received a call from a woman in our church asking me to take a mutual friend to the hospital. Our eighty-something-year-old friend was in severe pain and didn't know what was going on. My schedule went out the window as I drove to her place and helped her into the car. The rest of the day was spent in the hospital with her. Not once did I regret chucking my schedule and going to my friend's aid. Remember: you don't write in a vacuum. Nor should you want to. It is through living, through helping others and letting them help you, that you find grist for your writing mill.

Write what you know. Writers are constantly told to write what they know. Also good advice. But what if you want to write about special ops teams as I

Debunking continued

am for my current series of books? I don't have any experience with the military (except that my father served in WWII), but I can learn. What's more, I care about this subject and am eager to know more about the brave men and women who serve in Delta, Navy SEALs, Rangers, Marine Force Recon, etc. One of my very few fan letters asked if I had ever served in the special ops arena of the military. I was flattered beyond belief that I had written convincingly about the men and women who so fascinate me.

Write what the market says is hot. Understanding the market is key. We want to sell our work; that is a kind of validation for what we do. Nothing beats the thrill of holding your book in your hands and seeing your words in print. Those who work hard at their writing need that, even crave it. A decade or so ago, vampires were all the rage. I actually tried to write a vampire romance, only to find that I didn't have a single vampire in me. No matter how hard I tried to create one, he wouldn't appear in my mind or on the screen. Why couldn't I find a vampire inside of me? The answer's simple: I wasn't being true to myself. The counsel of understanding the market is good advice. But don't write to the market. Write what is true and be true to yourself. Only in that way will you find the success you want.

DEBUNKING THESE GOALS

Write to your daily schedule, not one imposed upon you. Instead of trying to fit yourself in a slot that isn't the right size and beating yourself up because you don't fit that slot, choose the writing schedule that works for you and your family. Writing is not a "one size fits all" thing. (Neither are panty hose.)

Establish your working hours but keep them fluid enough to allow life in. Writing is a priority, but so are people. Let people inside your life. Your writing will flourish along with your relationships.

Write what you care deeply about and then find out what you need to know. If you have chosen a subject for a book but have little knowledge about it, research it. Find out what you need to know. Don't just go on-line, though that can be a great resource. Go to the library and make a friend of the librarian. See what's been written about the subject already. Try to find first-hand sources. When you are passionate about a subject, it will show through and

your writing will shine.

Write what you, not the market, think is hot. I use "hot" here to refer to what is burning inside of you. Do you have a story that begs to be told? Do the characters speak to you? I know I'm on the right track in a book when my characters talk to me. Occasionally, my husband will ask, "Are the characters talking today?" If I say yes, he'll smile because he knows it will be a good writing day for me. If I shake my head, he gives a slight frown, knowing that every word will be pulled out of me with pliers. If you write with integrity to both the truth and to yourself, you will find your characters talking to you, urging you to give voice to their thoughts and feelings.

TAKEAWAYS

- Write on a schedule that fits your life.
- Write in the hours you've set aside for it but give yourself a break when life happens.
- Write what you are passionate about.
- Write with integrity.
- Lastly, determine why you write. Knowing this will help you in finding not only time for writing but also in finding yourself.

LAUREL SYMONDS

THE BENT AGENCY

interview by Lynne Marie

Laurel Symonds' career began as a creative writing major at Hamilton College. During college, she interned at Bloomsbury Children's Books. After college, she landed an editorial position with HarperCollins/Katherine Tegen Books. Thereafter, she worked in marketing at Albert Whitman & Company. Now, she brings all the knowledge and experience together in her job as an agent at The Bent Agency.

LYNNE MARIE: Your path to becoming an agent is paved with strong stepping stones, including work at a library and bookstore. Going back, what informed your decision to study creative writing, and what was your genre of interest at the time?

LAUREL SYMONDS: I went to college, and majored in creative writing, with the intention of being an author. What I discovered in my classes were all the skills that set me up as an editor, namely the ability to give and receive constructive feedback and the importance of revision.

LM: Is there an author or person who most inspired you to begin your career path in children's writing? How were you inspired?

LS: There were so many books in my childhood that inspired moments: *The Abominable Snowman*, a Choose Your Own Adventure, helped transform me from a reluctant reader to a voracious reader and writer; Harry Potter and Tamora Pierce's Tortall books inspired my love of fantasy; and I'd like to think *Anne of Green Gables* and Jo March influenced some of my optimism, imagination, and determination.

LM: Like many others in recent years, you have shifted from editing to agenting. If you don't mind sharing, what caused you to make this shift and how is your life different now?

LS: The shift, which I have found immense satisfaction in, was a combination of personal and professional. Personally, it was the best decision for my fam-

ily. Professionally, I realized what I loved most about all my roles was working closely with authors and as an agent being an author's cheerleader is my number one role, while using my combined editorial/marketing/sales experience and knowledge.

LM: You are an editorial agent, which is a big plus for those who strive to write/sell marketable books. Can you describe your editorial process as an agent?

LS: This is always different for every client, but I will generally do at least two rounds of edits, first focusing on larger developmental areas (plot, characters, world building) and then moving into smaller issues. This can take weeks or months, but I believe it's worth it.

LM: Is your editorial process much different than when you were an editor?



LS: Absolutely! I have to be especially careful not to have a client edit too much to my vision, because the editor we ultimately sell the book to will bring their own vision and we want to leave room for that.

LM: So many new writers come to the table with an idea put down in manuscript form with aspirations for quick success. You advise that writers should learn/know about the publishing industry and, especially at the early stages of a manuscript, and should read, read, read. You also have stressed importance in finding out what's popular, what's similar (and dissimilar) to their project, and being able to explain why the book has a place in the market. Can you explain where this advice informs success?

LS: The more you know the more educated your decisions can be, whether that's the word count of a manuscript, or breaking genre conventions, or finding the right agent.

LM: It's wonderful that you participate in #MSWL

Laurel Symonds continued

— and hopefully makes for more targeted submissions (<http://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/laurel-symonds/>). I noticed you didn't mention anything about poetry. What are your thoughts about poetry? Rhyming picture books? Do you accept submissions written in rhyme? Why or why not?

LS: In general, poetry and rhyme are not the right fit for me, although there are always exceptions to every rule. Rhyming is difficult to do well and I see a lot of rhyming manuscripts where the rhyme feels forced and the story would be better served without it.

LM: As reading these books would be helpful to those who query, what are some deals you have made since you started agenting?

LS: The first books I represent come out in 2020: the picture books *Little Monster Trucks Go!* by Doug Cenko and *Fussy Flamingo* by Shelly Vaughan James and illustrated by Matthew Rivera, as well as the middle grade mystery *Midnight at the Barclay Hotel* by Fleur Bradley.

LM: Word count sometimes presents as a hot topic in the picture book forums, as do art notes and pagination. What are your thoughts about these?

LS: One of the reasons why it's so important to read widely is so you can assess how your manuscript compares to elements of published projects. Writers can get a great feel for word count through reading picture books and they'll likely note that shorter and snappier texts are working well right now. As far as art notes, my preference is only to include them if they're essential to the understanding of the text. Pagination is unnecessary at the querying phase, but it's always a helpful tool to consider during revision.

LM: Which do you read first: the first few paragraphs of a manuscript, or the query? Do you feel one is more important than the other?

LS: The sample pages are far more important! Although a strong query might catch my attention, if it's followed by weak sample pages I likely won't request to read more. The focus should always be on the pages.

LM: What are your thoughts on meta-fiction and subversive stories? Dark or edgy? Politics or social consciousness? Issue books?

LS: I'm open to all of the above with the obvious caveat that, like all subcategories, it depends on successful execution.

LM: Please tell us a bit about your illustrious and adorable office assistant. Does this mean that you are open to picture books and novels that deal with dogs? I ask this as a person who won't read dog novels or see dog movies for obvious reasons. Please share your thoughts.

LS: My office assistant is a two-year-old Airedale Terrier named Sherlock. I work from home and really appreciate his company. I'm open to books about dogs, even without happy endings. Stay by Kate Klise and illustrated by M. Sarah Klise deals beautifully with the aging and death of a pet – but don't expect me to read it with dry eyes!

LM: What is something specific you would like to see more of?

LS: More representation, on my list and in the industry as a whole, of voices that have previously been underrepresented and stories that have been overlooked.

LM: I too am fascinated by witches, both real and imagined, and the history of witchcraft. Where does your interest stem from? Are you open to other supernatural beings and/or mythologies?

LS: I grew up in New England and was always fascinated by my regional history; *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* was a childhood favorite as well. I am very open to other supernatural or paranormal creatures, as well as mythologies from around the world.

LM: Lastly, please share what you are looking for in a prospective client?

LS: One of the most important characteristics of a client is one who is good at communicating. As an agent, it's my role to help clients but I can't do that if I don't know what they need. Everyone communicates differently, but it's important for there to be open channels of communication in both directions.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Laurel Symonds is offering an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. She is open to fiction and nonfiction for all ages, as well as picture book author/illustrators, and graphic novels. Please refer to guidelines at <http://www.thebentagency.com/submission-guidelines> and <http://www.thebentagency.com/laurel-symonds>, and then query Laurel at with the code **CBI** in the subject line at symondsqueries@thebentagency.com. There is no deadline for queries. Responds in 2-3 weeks.

Old and New Ways to Use Inclusive Language

by Catherine DePino, Ed.D.

As children's writers we spend a lot of time thinking about how to use inclusive language in our books and articles. We want our work to read smoothly and not sound awkward or confusing, which often happens when we use the older methods of expressing inclusivity. At the same time, we want to include both genders and those who do not identify with a certain gender. Some writers have embraced the use of the singular *they*, which is one way of solving the dilemma of how to use inclusive language.

Many of us still follow the old rules to ensure that our writing passes the test of ensuring inclusive language. Let's review some history about the singular *they*: The singular *they* surfaced centuries ago. Shakespeare, Austen, and Byron used it. You can also find it in the King James Bible. Fast-forward to the late 19th century when many language experts condemned it as being bad grammar. Then, in the early part of this century, those who do not think of themselves as *he* or *she* or who are transitioning popularized the use of the singular *they*.

In 2019, the Merriam Webster dictionary certified the use of the singular *they* as acceptable for all populations and included it in the dictionary. Most style manuals recognize this gender-neutral pronoun. Some grammatical purists avoid use of the singular *they*, although many writers gladly embrace it because it's commonly used in speech and it's easier for writers to use than the old ways of solving the problem.

The old ways of ensuring gender equality in writing involve a few different approaches. For example, you could use *he* or *she*, or *he/she*, which often sounds cumbersome. You could alternate the use

of *he* and *she*, but sometimes it's hard to remember which paragraph or page you last used a certain pronoun so that you distribute its use equally. Here are a few examples of the way many of us are used to writing inclusively.

Use *He* or *she*: *He* or *she* is not afraid of the wildest amusement park rides. (Many writers avoid this and *he/she* because it sounds awkward and intrudes upon the rhythm of the sentence.)

Pluralize the subject: Most kids aren't afraid of wild amusement park rides. (In some cases you may want to pluralize your subjects, but it's not always possible to do that throughout your entire manuscript without alluding to a single person.)

Alternate *he* and *she* in a paragraph, or page:

Chase ran up to his room when he heard his mom talking on the phone with his math teacher. He always got nervous when Ms. Carter called because she never said anything positive about him when he did something right like ace his science test or score a home run in baseball. She cared only about whether he spelled everything right in his journal.

His sister Tara was another story. Mom thought she was perfect. Ms. Carter praised her and wrote glowing notes on her report card. Didn't his teacher know that it hurt when she always compared him to his sister? Now it would give Mom one more reason to ground him. He had to find a way to wiggle out of this.

(Alternating *he* and *she* can pose a problem because you may find it difficult to recall when

Inclusive Language continued

you last used a masculine or feminine pronoun. It can also confuse your reader when you constantly switch back and forth.)

Let's look at examples of the singular *they* using the new way of approaching inclusion in your writing.

- Each student should bring *their* books to class every day. (In addition to being gender-neutral to consider those who don't identify with a specific gender, this sentence avoids the *he/she* and *he* or *she* problem by using *their*, a form of the singular *they*.)
- He took care of the dogs and cats as every pet owner should if *they're* considerate of *their* pets. (In this case, we used *he* as the subject and referred back to it by using *they're* and *their* instead of repeating the masculine pronouns *he's* and *his*.)
- She kept her temper and didn't talk back to her dad as everybody ought to do when *they're* involved in a face-off with an adult authority figure. (This sentence brings everybody into the picture instead of only the girl referred to here. It sounds more inclusive and universal to the reader.)

All of us want to use inclusive language. We have to consider whether we're most comfortable with the old or new way of doing it. It's also important to discuss with our editor how they'd like to approach using inclusive language in their publication. (Doesn't that sentence run more smoothly than "It's also important to discuss with our editor how *he* or *she* would like to handle using inclusive language in his or her publication?" You be the judge.

In our modern era, we need to think about those who do not identify with a particular gender. In addition to being a grammatical issue, it's a social one. In light of the fact that the most-respected style manuals currently accept the singular *they*, ask yourself which method you will use and which one your editor will approve. Most editors will give you a choice. In the end, it's your decision.

Simple Ways to Promote Your Book on



by Suzanna Henshon, Ph.D.

Your first book is coming out! Until now, you've avoided using Facebook for anything but posting family vacation pictures, but now you're ready to venture into some online book promotion. You just posted about your upcoming pub date on Facebook, and there are 31 likes so far. Is that the end of your Facebook promotion, or just the beginning? Many writers struggle to come up with ways to promote their books beyond the notification post, but there are other simple things you can do that generate ongoing sales and attention.

Post a notification when the book is published. On the day your book hits the stores, notify your Facebook friends. Make this announcement loud and clear, so that friends can click their way to a purchase if they are interested. Include the link to your book on Amazon. What should you say? Here's a post that I used, "My new book, *Teaching Empathy*, came out today with Prufrock Press! Thanks for your support during this project."

Announce developments in your writing career. If your book is being released as an ebook after the initial hardcover publication, announce it on Facebook. This will remind people that you have a book out there, and that it's just a click away from reading. Keep your posts short and to the point, to make sure people see them. Here's an example: "The ebook version of my new chapter book *Jamie's Pumpkin Pie Disaster* is coming out just in time for the holiday travel season. Perfect for taking on the plane!"

Create an Author Page on Facebook. You are

trying to create an audience for your book, and that means reaching out to readers. Once you create an Author Page, you can invite your Facebook friends to follow you there like I did: <https://www.facebook.com/Sue-Henshon>. After you create your Author Page, think about exciting and dynamic content that you can post on a weekly basis. For instance, you could post excerpts from your book or updates about events connected to your writing. Posting related videos, whenever possible, makes the page more interesting and gives followers good content to share. See an example on Natasha Wing's Author Page:

Announce real-life promotions on Facebook. If you are signing your witch-themed book at a store a few days before Halloween, you can easily spread the word on Facebook. Be sure to include the location, time, and date, and ask local friends to share. Also announce any promotions or short-term discounts available for your book along with a buy link. This is especially important if you're doing a limited sale on platforms like Kindle or BookBub. Post an announcement early in the day of the sale, and again later that day so it stays at the top of your followers' news feed.

Support your Facebook friends in their endeavors as well – whether they are writers or in business. If friends have books coming out, why not post on your Facebook site? When friends are involved in charity and other endeavors, support their efforts by sharing their links on your page. This helps build your online community, strengthens your connections with people who are talking about your book.

are talking about your book.

Create a Facebook ad. Facebook allows you to advertise to the exact demographic you want to reach. After setting up an account, you will define your audience (gender, location, etc.) and select where your ad will appear (geographically). Ads cost a minimum of \$5 a day, so you can advertise your book for a week for as little as \$35. Have a starting point and an ending point for when your ad will run, so that you won't go over your budget. Here are some tips: <https://buffer.com/library/facebook-ads>

Join writing and promotion groups online. Some groups are specifically set up to help authors promote new books. Request to join these groups ahead of your publication date, and read their rules carefully. If you decide to promote your book, make sure the tone of your presentation matches what other people are doing on that site. Here are some to check out:

<https://www.facebook.com/AuthorsHelpingAuthors/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/BookPromotion/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/selfpublishingandbookmarketing/>

You can also join Facebook groups dedicated to writing and publishing books in certain genres (do a keyword search to find groups relevant to you). While you probably can't promote your book on those sites, you'll see who the active authors are and can start following their Facebook pages to learn how they promote their work.

Don't be shy about promoting your book, but remember that if your posts include more than "please buy my book", they're more likely to be shared. Mention your book in a broader post about a related topic, or upload pictures from a recent book signing and thank everyone who attended. Engage your Facebook friends in the content of your posts, and you're on your way to developing an enthusiastic fan base.



GROWING YOUR BOOK

by Jane McBride

Occasionally, writers find themselves short in the final word count for a book. While word counts are flexible, there are general industry standards for each age group. If your young adult novel weighs in at 25,000 words, you may get feedback saying the story is “too thin”, meaning it’s not as fully developed as it could be. How can we add length to a book without padding our writing? Several ways come to mind, including: beefing up the conflict at each plot point, adding depth and dimension to characters, intensifying the black moment, making certain each scene and chapter ends on a note of tension or with a question, and clarifying character motivation. (Note: Standard word counts apply to traditionally-written books, not creative formats such as novels in verse; books written as text messages, emails or diary entries; or graphic novels. However, the following tips can apply to any format if you’ve been told the story is too thin.)

Let’s take a look at these one at a time.

Beefing up conflict. This is a biggie. Without conflict, there is no story; there is only a loosely connected string of events. What if you already have conflict in your story (and you should)? Ask yourself if it is sufficient. A recent synopsis of mine came back from my editor with lots of notes, most of them having to do with the conflict. “Not strong enough conflict” was a frequent remark. She was right. My conflict was weak, and so was the resolution. I redid the synopsis, paying careful attention to the conflict, shoring up the weak pilings until the obstacles facing the characters were real and couldn’t

be solved with just a conversation. How can you do that with your story? Let’s make up a story about a teenage girl Jessi who desperately wants to win an essay scholarship. It’s a big deal because without a scholarship, our heroine won’t be able to go to college — her dream for as long as she can remember. She works on the essay for a month and turns it in. Guess what? She doesn’t win that scholarship but she wins another one. Yawn. Let’s try again. She doesn’t win that scholarship or any of the others she’s applied for. Her applications are weak because she doesn’t have sufficient volunteer and civic activities because she comes home every day to tend her younger brother and sister while her single mother works. Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. Jessi resigns herself that she’s not going to college and will work in some dead-end job just as her mother is doing. She was determined to break that cycle, but it’s not going to happen. She decides to earn some extra money by tutoring math in the afternoons. A mother who brings her 12-year-old girl to Jessie’s home twice a week is impressed by Jessie’s math skills and asks if she plans to study math at college. Reluctantly, Jessie says that she probably won’t be going to college. The mother, who runs a CPA firm, gives Jessie her card and says to call her when she graduates from high school, that she (Jessie) can intern at the woman’s office, earning money and college credit at the same time. Our story has a happy ending, but not before Jessi experiences setback after setback.

Adding dimension to the characters. Your characters, even in a picture or board book, should not be

static. Have you fully explored the characters peopling your book? Could they use some extra layers? A one-layered character is not only unrealistic; she is also boring. Go through your manuscript with a careful eye to detail about where you can add extra depth to the main characters. Then do the same with any secondary characters. This does not mean simply adding to the physical description of the characters. Once you've established that your main character's hair is blonde, there is no reason to keep describing it, no matter what lovely words you use such as strawberry blonde, titian, or honey-colored.

Intensifying the black moment. Notice that the phrase is “black moment,” not murky or gray or discolored moment. Have you made your story's black moment as horrible as you can, so that there is no coming back from it? Or so your main character thinks. Is there a way you can emphasize the bleakness of that moment. Maybe your teenage boy hero, Matt, has decided that he can't keep playing basketball (his way out of the Boston projects where he lives) because he fears that someone on the team will discover that he's gay. He quits basketball and, in doing so, alienates his father who depended upon Matt to help the family. Matt now faces two crushing defeats: he has left a sport he loves and has disappointed his father. Could it get any blacker?

Making certain each scene and chapter ends on a note of suspense or with a question. This requires going through every scene and chapter ending of your novel and asking yourself if you've filled them with suspense or cliffhanger. This doesn't mean that each scene and/or chapter ending has to end in physical danger. What it does mean, however, is that each scene and chapter ending should leave the reader with a question to be answered. Whether form your scene and chapter endings take—with a question, tension, or suspense—it will provide greater tension in your book as well as adding words.

Clarifying character motivation. Determine if your main character has sufficient motivation to act the way she is. If she doesn't have a motive that will hold up, her actions won't make sense. Don't take for granted that readers will be able to guess your character's motivation. Let them come through in the character's reflections and actions. Suppose your twelve-year-old main character Crystal chooses to join a group of girls at her middle school who have

the reputation of being “mean girls.” Why would Crystal, who is independent and popular in her own right, do this? If she is doing this just to be even more popular and expand her circle of influence, she is going to come off as being an unsympathetic and unlikeable character. What if she is doing this because she wants to get her best friend, Jenny, out of the group and has to get close to her to do this? When Jenny joined the group, she dropped Crystal, at the mean girls' behest. Now Crystal has a worthy reason for joining such a group—to save her friend from ending up shallow and cruel like the other girls in the group. Crystal's motivation now makes sense, allowing readers to root for her in her quest to save her friend.

Doubtless you will find other ways to expand and grow your book. Here are some more tips:

- **Do** add passages that enhance and strengthen your characters. Characters are all-important.
- **Do** add scenes that make things harder on your characters. You want them to face unimaginable obstacles in order to achieve their goals.
- **Do** show, don't tell. (This is good counsel for any aspect of your writing.) Showing action generally requires more words than simply telling what is happening. Your goal is to show with specific words and active voice.
- **Don't** add a prologue and/or epilogue just because you can. Do so only if it strengthens your story. Besides, many editors don't care of prologues or epilogues and prefer that the action be woven into the story.
- **Don't** pad scenery descriptions. The mountains are majestic; we get it. Don't go on and on about them. Scenery is boring, unless the setting impacts the action.
- **Don't** find ten words to say what one word will do. Your goal is to add depth to your book, not simply to add words.
- **Don't** load up on adjectives and adverbs. Use a few well-chosen modifiers sparsely.

Kim Long

Author

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Authors get ideas in the strangest of places. Some writers keep a notebook on hand to easily jot ideas down, while others get brainstorming in the shower (uh, me). Kim Long was inspired when she was stuck in traffic and wondered if there was an easier way to get out of gridlock. The happy result was *Lexi Magill and the Teleportation Tournament* (Running Press Kids, 2019), a STEM adventure that Kevin Sands, author of the Blackthorn Key collection, hailed as a “delightful romp throughout the globe, jam-packed with puzzles, friendship and fun.” You can learn more about Kim (and a certain octopus pal) at <https://kimlongauthor.com>

PJ McILVAINE: What inspired your love of science, adventure, magic, and mystery? Did you always want to be a writer? Who was your favorite author as a child? Was there a particular book that lit your creative fire?

KIM LONG: When I was a kid, I absolutely loved scientific mysteries, my favorite being the Bermuda Triangle. There was a non-fiction book on the Bermuda Triangle at the library I checked out constantly and kept reading because I found it so fascinating. Even *Choose Your Adventure* books involving mysterious places like Atlantis or the Mayans were my favorite. Something about combining real places with a fantastical element was enthralling, and that type of mystery has always stayed with me.

The first book I absolutely fell in love with was *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Granted, that’s not fantasy or mystery, but I loved those characters. From there, I read a lot of Stephen King—particularly his short stories, which were short enough I could handle them in high school. Again, the mix of fantastical and mysterious with a touch of science pulled me in.



PM: Where did you get the idea for your debut middle grade book *Lexi Magill and the Teleportation Tournament*? What came first, the story or the title? Is there a bit of you in Lexi?

KL: I first got the idea of a teleportation book while stuck in traffic! I was thinking how cool it would be to skip traffic jams and teleport wherever I needed to be. But it took several months before I arrived at the idea for a teleportation tournament. In the

beginning, it was *Lexi Appleton’s Teleport Misadventure*. I tried a few different plots, but nothing hit. Then, I was playing a board game—*Castles of Mad King Ludwig*—and loved it. It’s based on an actual castle and an actual king who filled it with all sorts of weird rooms—a hall of mirrors, a dining room where the table would rise from the basement with food, etc. I started playing around with that concept and a game/competition. What if the kids teleported around the world to different castles, museums, mazes, etc. as part of a tournament?

Then, because I wanted to add some substance to the teleportation aspect, I added a science ele-

Kim Long continued

ment throughout. The concept of teleportation is discussed, as are real scientific advances (computer science, coding) that would lead to teleportation (if it did exist).

Once I settled on the idea of a teleportation tournament, it took me about six months to draft. I prefer revising over drafting so much it's silly. I LOVE revising! Drafting is easily the hardest part for me.

PM: Do you have a set writing routine? Do you outline? How do you know when an idea is a “keeper”?

KL: I've played around with novel writing applications and have always gone back to Word. It works for me! My process for *Lexi Magill* by way of outlining was different than in other books because of the fact that, since it is a competition, one clue leads to the next, and I had to pay particular attention to time zones and how much puzzle-solving, traveling, could be done during the day.

While I do outline in general, I find what works for me is knowing where the big beats fall—the 25%, 50%, 75% mark as to where the characters must be. Then, as I draft, I have that target in mind. One thing that works for me creatively is writing longhand in composition books! I do my best brainstorming that way. Then, when it's time to type at my laptop, I already have an idea of what's next. A big part of keeping my enthusiasm going on a project is that I don't know entirely how the characters are going to get from point A to point B. It's like a riddle or puzzle I have to work out for myself and figuring that out keeps me motivated to get to the end. The bad part of this is that when I do have it figured out, it can be hard for me to get my butt in the chair and do the actual typing!

PM: Is there anything that surprised you or challenged you during the publishing process? How

proactive is your publisher in doing publicity for the book? I know that for some writers (me included) doing publicity like author events and school visits can be difficult and/or intimidating.

KL: This was the third book I wrote and the second book that went on submission to editors. Actually, *Lexi Magill* went on sub initially in 2016 with a different agent. It didn't sell, and I wrote something else, which I queried to my current agent. She felt the new thing needed more work so elected to send *Lexi Magill* out again (it'd been a full year and had only been subbed lightly). By the time we got the offer, I had written it off, so it was a surprise.



Although I'm technically with a Big 5 publisher, Running Press Kids is a smaller imprint, so I have done a lot of publicity on my own. RP Kids did reach out early on to various independent bookstores to see if there was any interest in an event, and three said yes to school visits, so I am doing some school visits through bookstores my publisher contacted. I pitched myself to the Wisconsin Book Festival and was invited for a school visit through them. I'm also doing a couple panels at bookstores that I set up with fellow debut middle grade authors.

Overall, I'm finding that I love school visits. I include a mini-teleportation tournament with props that has been a big hit. I'm a lawyer in my day job and am used to rambling in front of people, so although I'm an introvert, I can muster the strength to present as need be!

PM: You have an agent now, was that easy or difficult? What were you looking for in an agent? What was the submission process like for you? How long did it take for *Lexi Magill* to find a home?

KL: My agent is Natascha Morris at Bookends Literary, and she is my second agent. I got my first

Kim Long continued

agent back in 2014 with a different MG. After a couple years, we parted ways. Natascha is very editorial, which is something that was important to me this time around. With my first agent, *Lexi Magill* was on sub for a year and went to about eight editors. With Natascha, we started in October 2017 and received the offer in early June 2018. So, overall, *Lexi Magill* was on sub for 21 months before it sold.

PM: I know that for the past couple of years that you've become very involved in Pitch Wars as a mentor, a popular mentoring contest/workshop where writers can (hopefully) make an agent match. How did that come about? Do you think being a mentor as helped you in your own writing?

KL: The very first thing I did after getting my first agent in late 2014 was email Brenda Drake and ask about being a mentor! I applied to PW twice as a mentee before getting my agent. I didn't get any mentor requests on my MG (which did land me my agent around the same time mentees were announced that year!) and I got only a partial request on my YA in 2013. In 2014 I was just starting to get involved in the on-line writing community via query contests and Pitch Wars. I met so many other writers and learned so much from those contests that I really wanted to give back and help others. What I didn't know was how much I'd improve as a writer through mentoring others. I think I've met all my critique partners via Pitch Wars (applicants and other mentors) or query contests (fellow applicants or judges). It also helps so much seeing what works and what doesn't in other material in order to apply it to my own work. I think my pacing in particular is something I've gotten a lot better at as a result of reading others' works-in-progress.

PM: What are you currently working on now? Any new deals in the works? Do you envision *LEXI MAGILL* as a series? Do you have a pet project?

KL: I'm currently working on a Brand New Thing that is contemporary, but with a sci-fi twist, much like *Lexi Magill*. It is in its very early stages—just a lot of handwritten notes, some research, but no actual drafting done yet! I also recently went on sub with a contemporary fantasy (the one I had queried Natascha with back in 2017). *Lexi Magill* certainly lends itself to a series or another book, and I'd love to write another, but it really depends on how this

one sells!

PM: Since you have a big ole octopus lurking on your fun website, I have to ask: if you could be one animal in the world, what would it be and why?

KL: Oooh. Great question! As much as I love sea creatures, I think I'd be a bird of some kind so I can fly over everything and see what's going on. Then I can dive down and get a closer look if something interests me. As soon as I get bored, I can dart back into the sky!