

Children's Book Insider

February 2020

How to Negotiate a Book Contract



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**

Apokedak Literary Agency

Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests..... | 2 |
| Marketing Tips: Book Marketing Tips for Wallflowers by Kimberly M. Hutmacher..... | 4 |
| Idea Workshop: Make Your Story Fit by Jane McBride..... | 6 |
| Agent Spotlight: Melissa Richeson, Apokedak Literary Agency interview by Lynne Marie..... | 8 |
| Business Tools: How to Negotiate Contracts Wisely interview by Lydia Lukidis..... | 12 |
| Featured Interview: James Patterson Co-Author Chris Tebbetts Took Roundabout Path to Success interview by PJ McIlvaine..... | 16 |
| Writing Workshop: Outlining - Choose Your Style by Jane McBride..... | 20 |
| Writing Workshop: Your Writing Voice - Own It, Hone It by Jane McBride..... | 22 |

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At Presstime:

Upcoming Twitter Pitch Parties for Unagented Writers

#PBPitch, for picture book authors and author/illustrators, will be **February 20th, from 8am to 8pm EST**. Pitch your picture books on with 280 characters or less on Twitter using the #PBPitch hashtag. Pitch manuscripts only once in the morning and once in the afternoon or evening. If you are an author/illustrator, you can attach an image to your PB manuscript pitch.

Include sub-genre # if it applies: #NF = Nonfiction, #C= Concept, #L= Lyrical, #I= Interactive. Only agents and editors should FAVORITE a pitch. If they do, check their submission guidelines (and do your research) before submitting to them.

For more information, go to <http://www.pbpitch.com/>

#PitMad will take place on **March 5, 2020 (8am – 8pm EDT)** and is open to all unagented authors writing in any genre or category. Writers tweet a 280-character pitch for their completed manuscripts, and agents and editors make requests by liking/favoriting the tweeted pitch.

Your manuscript should be polished, unpublished, and ready to query. If you're not ready to send the full manuscript immediately, please wait until the next event. For nonfiction, you should have a polished proposal. Memoirs should be completed. Your pitch must fit inside one tweet. Do not thread tweets. You don't have to include the title of your book in the pitch. Include the #PitMad hashtag and an age category sub-hashtag (<https://pitchwars.org/pitmad/#hashtags>). You may include multiple genre or additional hashtags as they apply.

You can pitch more than one manuscript throughout the day. You may only tweet three pitches for each manuscript (they can be the same pitch or different pitches-- space out every four hours). Do not attach pictures unless it's an illustration for a picture book or graphic novel. If an industry professional favorites/likes your tweet, check their recent tweets for submission preferences. If they haven't tweeted #PitMad submission guidelines, follow their usual query submission guidelines on their website, but put "PitMad Request: TITLE" in the subject line of your email.

For more information, go to <https://pitchwars.org/pitmad/>

New Middle Grade Imprint Accepting Submissions

Clear Fork Publishing is an independent, family-owned publisher based in Stamford, TX, which has recently launched a new imprint, &MG, which will focus on middle grade fiction. Specifically looking for stories that revolve around tough issues readers ages 9-14 are facing. Submit a query with total manuscript word count, a synopsis and author bio. Include a list of three books that are similar in the current marketplace, along with author, publisher and publication date, and identify three marketing hooks for your book. Their children's imprint, *Spork*, publishes picture books and chapter books. Spork's current picture book needs are character-driven fiction with a narrative arc, non-fiction and concept books. Chapter books are also welcome, as well as young adult manuscripts for the Clear Fork Publishing imprint. For more details on submitting, as well as a link to the online submission form, go to <https://www.clearforkpublishing.com/submission-116692.html>

Agent Accepting PB, MG and YA Submissions

Shari Maurer is an agent with Stringer Literary Agency (<https://www.stringerlit.com/>) is actively seeking picture book, middle grade and young adult submissions. Especially interested in humorous, offbeat and quirky stories, she's also open to historical, literary, mysteries, and paranormal romance (YA). Also interested in biographies, narrative nonfiction and parenting titles. Query with a synopsis and the first five pages to Shari Maurer through Query Manager at <https://querymanager.com/query/1434>

Leapfrog Press Fiction Contest for Middle Grade and Young Adult Books

Leapfrog Press, a small, independent publisher focused on discovering new talent and books that are overlooked by the big houses, is accepting submissions for its 2020 Leapfrog Fiction Contest. Adult, young adult (YA) and middle grade (MG) novels, novellas, and short story collections are accepted. Minimum word count: 22,000. Individual stories in a collection may have been previously published in journals. Books that have been self-published will be considered "unpublished" if fewer than about 200 copies were printed. Looking for literary fiction and mainstream fiction. Genre fiction is accepted (especially science fiction), but the story is more important than the genre.

All manuscripts will be reviewed by at least two Leapfrog editors, and those that go to the second round of judging may be read by editors at other small presses as well.

The Award consists of a **First Prize** publication contract offer from Leapfrog Press, with an advance payment, and one or two critiques of the manuscript from contest judges, permanent listing on the Leapfrog Press contest page as a contest finalist, along with short author bio and description of the book. A **Finalist Prize** consists of \$150 and one or two critiques of the manuscript from contest judges, permanent listing on the Leapfrog Press contest page as a contest finalist, along with short author bio and description of the book. One **Semi-Finalist** receives their choice of a free Leapfrog book and permanent listing on the website. An **Honorable Mention** gets listing on the Leapfrog Press website.

Entrants can submit as many manuscripts as they'd like. Each is submitted separately through Submittable at <https://leapfrogpress.submittable.com/submit> and requires a \$33 entry fee. Entrants may submit their manuscripts to other contests as well as agents and editors while under consideration for the Award. Manuscripts must be received by May 3, 2020. For more information, go to http://leapfrogpress.com/contest.htm#How_to_Enter

Middle Grade Magazine Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction

Jack and Jill is a magazine for ages 6-12 published by U.S. Kids Magazines. Looking for high-quality stories and articles with a broad health and fitness focus. The editors would rather show kids living a healthy lifestyle than dictate a healthy lifestyle to readers, so health topics should be incorporated into the story or article, not be the focus of it.

FICTION: (600-800 words) The tone of the stories should be fun and engaging, hook readers in the first paragraph, and convey a positive message that comes organically from the story and is not just tacked on. Humor is very important; dialogue should be witty instead of just furthering the plot. Possible themes could include self-reliance, being kind to others, appreciating other cultures. The message—if there is one—should be clear. Payment: \$25 and up.

NONFICTION: Accepting nonfiction manuscripts of 700 words or less. Especially interested in features or Q&As with regular kids (or groups of kids) in the *Jack and Jill* age group who are engaged in unusual, challenging, or interesting activities. No celebrity pieces. Payment: \$25 and up.

All material should appeal to a broad audience across the United States. Seasonal material should be sent at least 8 months in advance. Study back issues at libraries. A table of contents of the current issue can be found at <http://www.uskidsmags.com/magazines/jack-and-jill/>

Submit the entire manuscript for fiction, and a query OR the entire manuscript for nonfiction. If sending the entire manuscript, include a brief cover letter with contact information, any relevant publishing credits, and a 1-2 sentence synopsis of the story or article. Note if this is a simultaneous submission. Buys all rights and pays on publication. Responds to submissions within about 3 months. Submissions can be mailed to U.S. Kids, *Jack and Jill*, P.O. Box 88928, Indianapolis, IN 46208 (indicate in cover letter if you want the submission returned. If so, also include a self-addressed, stamped envelope). Submissions can also be emailed (paste the entire submission into the body of the email) to jackandjill@uskidsmags.com. Address submissions to Jennifer Burnham, Senior Editor.

Book Marketing Tips for

WALLFLOWERS

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

As a naturally shy person who relishes solitude and quiet, it was quite a wake-up call when I realized how much I was going to have to interact with the world in order to market my first picture book. Pushing my offerings on social media felt artificial and uncomfortable. Just the idea of speaking in front of groups was enough to send me into full blown panic attack mode. I'm not kidding when I tell you that my heart raced, my face flushed red, and I shook at just the thought. What was I going to do? I wrote this book that I knew an audience would love, and I was fortunate enough to find a publisher who felt the same way. Now the book was on the verge of entering the world, and I needed to push it out there and introduce it to the very best of my ability- in spite of the paralyzing fear that threatened to overtake me. This wallflower-for-life had to figure out how to do this in the most comfortable ways possible.

Changing Perspective

The first thing I did was to change my perspective. I told myself that I wasn't talking about and promoting myself. I was actually talking about and promoting my book. This was something that I had always been more than happy to do for other author's books, and now I needed to do it for my own. Whether interacting with an in-person group or sharing on social media, I try to stay focused on the book and what it can offer and not on myself. Changing my perspective took a little bit of the pressure off.

Non-Verbal Marketing

If you aren't ready to talk about your book, think about writing promotions. You do not have to be

on every social media platform, but pick a few to focus on. If Twitter is your thing, engage in a Twitter chat on your book release day. Maybe you could share a 30 second prerecorded video of you reading an excerpt from the book. If you do not want to be in the video, I'm sure you could find a child who would love to star in the show. Tweet a brief synopsis. Ask and answer questions with followers. You could host a book giveaway in conjunction with the chat. Offer followers an entry for tweeting about the chat and joining in the conversation.

Have you ever been uncomfortable with another author's social media marketing? Did you feel their tactics were too aggressive? Maybe they added you to a group without first asking for your permission. Maybe their posts were numerous and appeared to be totally self-serving. Learn from their mistakes. Don't add anyone to a group without their permission. Don't post endlessly day and night. Curate a few well-crafted posts to share each day. Keep them kind, informative, and helpful. And remember to share the love. Make sure you're posting to help promote other authors and their work as well.

I didn't blog back when my first book was published, but I do now. If you blog, consider asking your blogging community to host a virtual book tour to help promote your book. The tour could offer a mix of reviews, interviews, fun facts, and lesson plan ideas and activities for teachers and parents. Whenever your book is featured on the tour, don't forget to share the links on social media. Remember that your friends and family are proud of you and what you've accomplished, and they want to support and celebrate your book!

Sometimes, you will get interview requests from media outlets. If you're shuddering at the thought, don't panic. You can also request media interviews

via email. Many outlets, especially print publications, are happy to agree to this. For radio, podcast, and TV requests, you can ask for a copy of the interview questions ahead of time. This will give you the chance to study and prepare.

Use The Buddy System

All of this non-verbal marketing will get you going, but eventually, you are going to have to face an audience. I recommend starting small and enlisting the help of fellow authors. Maybe you could suggest a book reading/signing event at a local bookstore featuring several local authors. You wouldn't be alone, and you wouldn't have to create a program to take up all of the time. You could each spend a few minutes sharing some backstory, reading from your books, and answering audience questions. Your group could offer a craft or two to coincide with the books. Coloring and decorating bookmarks is one of my easy go-to craft ideas.

You could also team up for school, library, and conference presentations. In my early days I remember teaming up with a fellow author to present a talk on children's publishing to our local art association. We also teamed up to teach a week long children's writing camp hosted by a local community college. Two of my author friends who have published lots of preschool age poetry, team up to present poetry workshops to early childhood professionals.

It Gets Easier

I know it might be hard to believe right now, but the more you do these things, the easier it gets. Heck, you might even begin to enjoy it, and I don't think it will be too long before you're venturing out solo and loving every minute. Okay! Okay! But I do think you will be getting through it without an imminent panic attack.

Remember why you wrote your book. Remember how hard you worked to craft it and bring it to fruition. That book deserves a chance and so do you. Be proud of what you've created. To all of my wallflower friends, I hope you and your books bloom everywhere!

A Few Of My Favorite Marketing Resources

[Terrific Connections with Authors, Illustrators, and Storytellers: Real Space and Virtual Links](#) by Toni Buzzeo and Jane Kurtz

Susan Raab operates a children's book marketing company (<http://www.raabassociates.com/>) and offers marketing tips on her blog Arts to Market: <http://artstomarket.com/>

If you want to learn how to market your book but you're not crazy about social media, check out Book Marketing Without Social Media from Writing Blueprints:

<https://writingblueprints.com/p/marketing-without-social-media/>

MAKE YOUR STORY FIT

by Jane McBride

How do we find the right story "fit?" I've started stories, only to find that they weren't going anywhere or that they weren't the right stories for me to tell. Because they didn't fit me, they ended up being trashed.

One way to know if a story idea is the right fit for the writer is to put it through a four-step process: discover, clarify, simplify, and harmonize.

- *Discovery* is finding the idea that sparks the author's imagination.
- *Clarity* is refining the idea so that it makes sense.
- *Simplicity* is keeping the idea to its purest state (not allowing it to wander into something else).
- *Harmony* is making the story fit with the author's value system.

DISCOVERY

Where do you find your story ideas? If you're like me and many other writers, the answer is, "Everywhere." From a blurb on the internet to a snippet of overheard conversation, story ideas abound. I found one idea in an article in our local newspaper about the reintroduction of gray wolves to Colorado. The idea took hold and blossomed into a book, which I sold.

Take a look at the idea behind your WIP (work-in-progress). Where did you find it? Did you overhear a conversation between a parent and a child? Or did a TV commercial grab your interest? One of your best tools can be to pay attention to what is going on around you.

CLARITY

Did you know that clarity is one of the hallmarks in judging a gem's value? Just like a gem, story ideas require clarity to make them valuable.

I once started a children's story about a flamingo named Flo. In my mind, I could see the pictures that would accompany the story. They were so charming that they made me forget that I didn't have a real story to go with them. I grew so excited by the idea that I started writing without any idea of where the story was going, without any idea of the theme, even without an idea of Flo's character. In short, all I had was a name for the character and a bunch of pictures floating around in my mind.

Poor Flo never got her story told because I didn't think the idea through. After a few pages, I gave up on telling Flo's story. When my imagination takes over, I sometimes believe I can hear her scolding me for not refining the idea first and then telling her story.

On the flip side, I once wrote a book in six weeks because I knew the character and the plot inside out. While six weeks may not be a record for extremely prolific authors, it was for me.

SIMPLICITY

Have you ever started a story only to have it morph into something you didn't intend? Somehow the story took over and became something else entirely. While it can be a good thing to have a story take over, it should be the story you started off telling. If it's not, stop and step back to see if you were telling the right story after all. Keep your story going forward by returning to the original theme.

HARMONY

Beginning writers sometimes think that their value system doesn't affect their writing. They can write about anything, they tell themselves, because it is only words on paper or screen. The truth is, one's value system affects everything he does and is.

Once upon a time I started a thriller, filled with spies, murder, and a host of other things foreign to what I usually wrote. Just like Flo's story, it never got off the ground, this time because I didn't like the hero. He was harsh, unforgiving, and ready to do anything to accomplish his goals. Granted, his goals were noble—protecting the United States of America—but he was not. Looking back, I don't know why I ever started the book in the first place. I got as far as writing several chapters, certain that my un-hero was going to turn around and become a real hero. But he didn't. I couldn't keep writing because he went against everything I believed in. Couldn't I have put my core beliefs aside to write what promised to be an exciting story? It turned out that I couldn't.

Let's play one of my favorite games, that of let's pretend, and make up four story ideas and then put them to the test.

Idea #1

A lesson in church includes a personal example of the teacher and her child. As I listen, I realize that the example she is showing could make a good short story for a children's magazine. My discovery process worked because I was listening and observing.

Idea #2

On his fifth birthday, Wyatt's father takes him out of preschool early to go to Wyatt's' favorite fast-food place. There, he is given a birthday crown and a free treat. Wyatt is excited to wear the crown and asks his father if that means he is special. His father doesn't reply right away and then says that wearing a crown doesn't make someone special, but being kind does. Wyatt goes to play on the playground. When he sees a little girl who is afraid to go down the slide, he encourages her and tells her that he will be right behind her. He realizes he is being kind and that that feels even better than wearing a crown. Does this pass the clarity test? I think it does. The story shows

Wyatt moving from a superficial definition of special to a deeper meaning.

Idea #3

Twelve-year-old Samuel's brother needs a new kidney. Samuel is the only one in the family who is a match. Though he is scared, Samuel agrees to undergo the operation. Samuel and his brother both recover. But Samuel's journey toward courage is interrupted by his parents' divorce. The story turns from being about Samuel finding courage to help his brother to dealing with the bitterness of his parents and the upheaval the divorce causes in the family. This idea does not meet the simplicity test as it goes off in an entirely different direction. Perhaps if Samuel meets the divorce with a new kind of courage, the story could stay on track, but it doesn't.

Idea #4

Seventeen-year-old Julie wants to go to college, but her parents can barely make ends meet and have no way of paying college tuition. But Julie excels in taking standardized pre-college tests. Two girls offer her money to take their tests and provide her with picture IDs. Other kids learn about this, and Julie begins taking tests for a number of students. She earns great money which she puts away for college. She excuses her dishonesty by telling herself that it's for a good cause. Julie earns enough money to pay for her first year of college, earning a scholarship for the remaining years. The story ends with Julie earning a medical degree. Though the story has a happy ending, it does not meet the harmony test because it doesn't fit with my values. Julie suffers no consequences for her actions and goes through life believing that the end justifies the means. Could the story be made to harmonize with my beliefs? Maybe. But not as it stands. As a result, I don't like my protagonist, and therefore will have a difficult time making her sympathetic to the reader.

IN CONCLUSION

The process of discovery, clarity, simplicity, and harmony works for me as I test ideas for both short stories and books. I hope it will for you as well.

Melissa Richeson



interview by Lynne Marie

Melissa Richeson came to Apokedak Literary Agency with a degree in Marketing and years of experience as a writer. She interned for over a year before becoming an Associate Agent, and she is currently building her client list. You can connect with her on Twitter [@MelissaRicheson](https://twitter.com/MelissaRicheson).

LYNNE MARIE: As a fellow lover of Disney and Disney stories, I am excited to chat and curious to know what draws you to these tales. Have you read the originals? What are your thoughts about the Disney versions of these classic stories?

MELISSA RICHESON:

I'm a huge Disney fan! I remember reading many of the classics as a child, and for the most part, I like the Disney versions better. I'm also loving all of the live action remakes that Disney has been putting out lately. I think they've generally been an improvement, especially in drawing out important themes for today's audiences which may have been hidden in previous versions.

LM: What are your thoughts about princesses? Princesses? How do you feel their roles have changed in today's society?

MR: Belle will probably always be my favorite princess because of her bookish tendencies and her ability to see the good inside people. I love that today's princesses are not always damsels in distress. And if they find themselves in distress, they have the ability to make change for themselves. Take Moana, for instance. She's fierce and capable and driven. True princess qualities, for sure! I also like the intentional movement toward portraying princes as allies rather than authorities or saviors. Kristoff's line in *Frozen 2* is exquisite: "I'm here. What do you need?" As a boy mom, I think stories like these are important to help enhance the conversations I'm already having with my sons.

LM: What do you feel about the role of the fairytale in the present day kidlit world? Is it something that you are interested in seeing more of? Why or why not?

MR: I'd love to see more fairytales, especially modern ones that reinforce themes of truth, courage, acceptance, strength, and loyalty. I love retellings that look at a classic story from a different point of view. Jennifer Donnelly's *Stepsister* was one of my favorites last year. I also love stories that flip a traditional fairytale on its head for a deeper purpose.



Melissa Richeson continued

For example, one of my clients has an awesome picture book that I'm subbing right now. The main character is usually anything BUT a hero, but throughout the tale, the reader watches as he literally rewrites his own story. That's what a great present day fairytale is made of, in my opinion.

LM: What takeaway value might a study of Disney renditions of fairytales and original material have to a writer in today's age?

MR: I think the genius of the Disney entertainment empire comes in part from their ability to distinguish which elements of story are timeless and which parts of a tale could stand to be changed. I think that could be a talking point or takeaway for all writers.

LM: If asked to answer the question which comes first, the plot or the character (much like the chicken or the egg), what would you answer, and why?

MR: Ha! Is this a trick question? Just kidding. But seriously, both are important. Speaking from a marketing standpoint, I think the plot is most important. In a crowded market, it takes a fresh concept and a layered plot with a strong hook to stand out. That said, being intrigued by a plot will only take me so far as a reader. There has to be a compelling character to keep me turning the pages. As a writer myself, I definitely have to create a plot outline before my characters really come alive to me ... and then, of course, I have to revise the plot once that happens.

LM: How does your experience in marketing inform your approach to publishing as an agent?

MR: I think it gives me a fairly decent concept of salability. A story could be flawlessly written, but the bottom line question is, "Will this sell?" In a subjective marketplace that's driven by changing tastes, that can be like tossing darts blindfolded at a moving target. I think my background in marketing lets me take the blindfold off—or maybe just peek one eye out?

I also think having marketing experience helps in terms of writing pitches and proposals for my clients. Marketing best practices always dictate that you write for your specific audience—what do they need to hear about your product, service, etc. to move them into action? When crafting pitches and pro-

posals about my authors' work, I'm always thinking from the editor's point of view. There are thousands of great books out there—what will move them to make an offer on this particular story?

LM: Do you have any tips for published authors with regard to successfully marketing their books?

MR: There are so many things that are book-specific, so it's hard to generalize, but I will say this: don't discount personal connections. Social media, blog tours, podcasts—all are great, but they are not (usually) a personal call to action. You may have heard the old phrase, "Every man's challenge is no man's challenge." To illustrate, think about the difference in these sentences: "We need everyone to help out with the bake sale." And "Karen, could you please bring chocolate chip cookies to the bake sale and help collect money from 1:00-2:00?" Which one are you more apt to respond to (assuming your name is Karen, haha)? The difference is in the specific, personal address. The first sentence likely makes you think you should help, whereas the second sentence moves you to respond that you will help.

Now translate that to books. If I read an ad/post/blurb about a book, I might think "Oh, that sounds good. I should buy that." But it hasn't given me a personal call to action; it's a broad call to "every man" at that point, so it hasn't moved me to the point of purchase, only to the point of "should" or even "might" purchase. Finding ways to engage your audience on a personal level helps to eliminate the "every man challenge" and increases the likelihood for action (purchase). School visits, conferences, book signings, launch parties, library presentations—these are all points for personal connection, places for you to be able to say, "Bob, would you be interested in buying a copy of my book? What about one for your kids' school?" Yes, it's more work. (Think how much extra time it takes to personally email every Karen, Jen, Sandy, and Diane in the scenario above.) But it's work that has a good potential to produce results.

LM: It seems from agency submissions that some authors are not clear on the difference between a pitch and a synopsis. Could you explain this?

MR: A pitch should be contained in your cover letter (email body). It should use tight language to describe

the main character and his/her main problem. A pitch's purpose is to get the reader (agent) intrigued in the story, and it should end on a question or hook that entices him/her to read on.

On the other hand, a synopsis should reveal the whole story. All the major plot points, all the major players, all the twists, all the spoilers. It should answer the question posed in the pitch and then some. This usually doesn't go in the body of the query email (unless specifically requested in the agent's directions) but could be requested as an attachment. (So have one ready before you start querying!) In my opinion, a good synopsis is no less than one page single-spaced. Anything shorter, and I don't feel like I have a good sense of the story.

LM: I just loved your Twitter tip for starting a query! Please share here so that we can all benefit from it.

MR: I caution against starting a query with a line like "Thanks for taking a look at my novel..." simply because many agents read queries on their phone or tablet, and a line like that could indicate that the query has already been seen and responded to. Authors will sometimes respond with a "thanks for your time" kind of email after I send a rejection (which isn't necessary, by the way). If I'm sorting through emails on my phone (happens a lot while my kids are at sports practices) that first line is all that's visible on the main page. So what I'm saying is, a new query that begins with "Thanks for..." may accidentally get deleted because I might mistake it for a rejection response. It's happened before, and I've caught myself and retrieved the query. But I'd hate for an accidental deleting to happen if it can be avoided. Instead, I appreciate when authors jump right in with the pitch for the book. Or if there's a personal connection that you've researched, that's fine as a lead too: "I thought you might like this because ..."

LM: Voice is often elusive. Some say it's what they struggle with most. Do you have tips for finding one's voice? And if the voice is off, is it fixable? What is your advice for keeping different character's voices distinct?

MR: I LOVE talking about voice. Simple answer: I

see voice as a distinct combination of the narrator, the audience, and the author. When you examine all three of those elements, the voice you come up with should be different for every book and every character. You can find more of my thoughts on voice here: <https://sally-apokedak.com/2019/11/27/the-problem-of-voice/>

Yes, voice is fixable, but it's easier if you develop it up front for each project, otherwise it'll mean a big rewrite later. Because voice can be seen as the "how" of the storytelling, some authors write a scene—possibly the opening scene—multiple ways until one seems to speak naturally. They're "listening" for the voice to come through. Experiment with POVs, with language, with formatting. Take multiple versions of the same scene to your critique group. Which one sounds most authentic for this narrator, audience, and author? Voice is a subjective thing, but thinking strategically about its components can help infuse a touch of objectivity.

LM: In novels, what are your thoughts about prologues? Do you have any guidelines to share on writing one?

MR: Prologues are controversial, so unless it's 100% necessary, I'd say don't do it. Listen, mathematical odds are stacked against writers. I get 200-300 queries a month, and I'm still a new agent. Imagine what that means for more established agents! When it comes to prologues, this is just a guess, but I'd say you're looking at a 50/50 chance as to whether or not the agent/editor has strong feelings against it. Do you want to take that chance, knowing how many other manuscripts are in the inbox queues? I'd say don't risk it, if you can help it.

LM: How might a writer increase tension in their novel? In their picture book?

MR: Define the problem early—what does the character really want and what stands in their way? Make it relatable. Up the stakes at regular intervals—what do they stand to lose if they fail to solve the problem? Make it believable.

I've written more extensively about tension here: <https://sally-apokedak.com/2019/07/16/the-problem-of-tension/>

Melissa Richeson continued

LM: You have been known to participate in #DVPit (<https://www.dvpit.com/about>). Is there anything in particular you are looking for when you browse these twitter events? What types of things will grab or stand out for you?

MR: Strong hook. This goes back to stakes, in my opinion. Your setting and characters are probably super interesting, but when you've got limited space for a twitter pitch, you can't focus on that. You've got to tell me what's on the line.

LM: Please share what you would most like to see in your inbox? Novels? Picture books? A particular concept?

MR: Picture books through young adult, with more of a focus lately on middle grade and young adult. I'd love more brother stories, more upper MG stories (for 12-14 year olds), and more destination stories. I'm not a good fit for horror or paranormal. And finally, call it the Disney bubble, but I'm not a big fan of excessive foul language in YA. (I'm not naive; I know teens talk that way. But with all the gorgeous words in the English language, I don't think we need to encourage teen readers to limit their vocabulary to f*** and sh** when there are other options. Personal preference.)

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Melissa Richeson is offering an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for CBI subscribers. First, review her current needs here:

<https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/melissa-richeson/>

Then review the Apokedak Literary Agency submission instructions here:

<https://sally-apokedak.com/submission-guidelines-2/>

CBI subscribers can email their submissions directly to Melissa at

melissa.richeson@apokedakliterary.com

Use the subject line **CBI - MRA [Genre and Title of Manuscript]**.

This opportunity runs through April 30, 2020. Please query only one manuscript per submission.

How to Negotiate Contracts Wisely

interview by Lydia Lukidis

After endless rounds of edits and slews of rejection letters, it's particularly gratifying when an author is offered a publishing contract. But do these contracts always look out for the author's best interest?

Not always. Trust me, I learned the hard way. When I signed with my first agent years ago, I had little experience. In my excitement, I read through the contract without truly understanding it and signed it without getting legal advice. After parting ways with that agent, I discovered what I had agreed to. There were several pitfalls in my contract, including not being able to query other agents for a significant period of time after our partnership dissolved.

Other writers step into even worse legal traps, and end up signing away their rights and creations. That's why it's crucial to seek legal help before signing anything. Author Karen Rostoker-Gruber has published a plethora of books and knows first-hand the importance of being vigilant when it comes to contracts. She offers some great advice in this Q & A that will be useful to all authors, both emerging and established.

LYDIA LUKIDIS: Please walk us through your recent experience with a publisher (that shall remain nameless) where you felt compelled to walk away during the contract negotiations.

KAREN ROSTOKER-GRUBER: I've signed 16 contracts over the years with different publishing houses: Dial, PSS, Marshall Cavendish, Whitman,

Apples and Honey Press, Behrman House, KarBen, and Two Lions. In the end, I've only walked away from two. This time was one of those times; it just didn't feel right. As my character Bandit (the cat) would say, "I could feel it in my bones."

And, as luck would have it, the same week that I walked away from that contract, I got another book deal for a totally different book, so it took the sting out of the one that I had walked away from.



Every contract is different and authors may not always understand how to protect themselves, which is why my Rule 1 for authors is this: ALWAYS have a lawyer/agent/or a lawyer at the Authors Guild look over your contract!

Before I had my agent, Karen Grecik (Red Fox Literary), I used Mary Flower as my lawyer for ALL of my book contracts. Mary is an experienced Publishing Contract Consultant who will not only look over your contract, but she'll negotiate with the editor on your behalf. (See Mary Flower's contact info at the end of this article.)

LL: What are some "dangerous" clauses or pitfalls authors need to be wary of? What can be at stake for the author?

KRB: There are sooooo many things that authors need to be wary of, that is why you must adhere to RULE 1. Every contract is different, but I'll try to highlight a few of the contractual things that can make the negotiations tough.

How to Negotiate Contracts Wisely continued

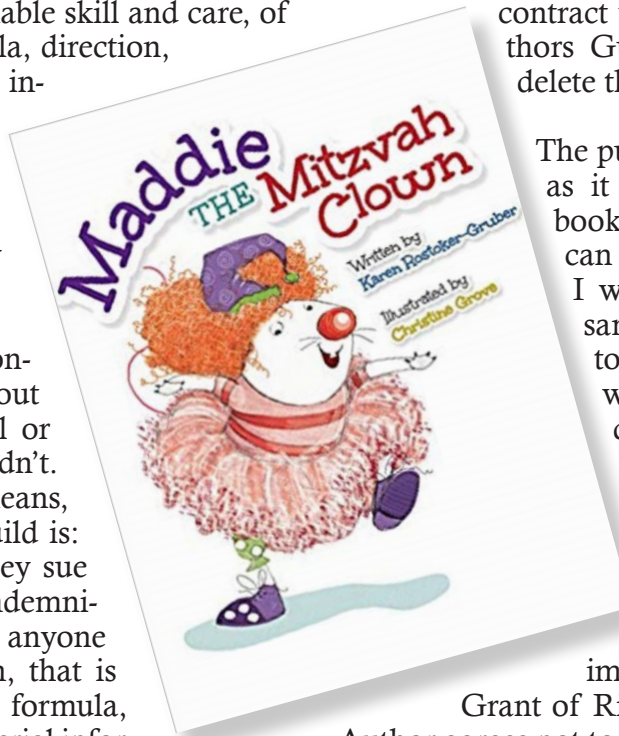
It's always the Warranties and Indemnity clause that gets me, and this is the one sentence that made me walk: "The Author further represents and warrants that the use, with reasonable skill and care, of any recipe, instruction, formula, direction, advice, or other material or information contained in the Work will not result in injury to anyone and the Author shall include in the Work appropriate warnings and safety precautions."

I would have signed the contract, if the publisher took out the words, "or other material or information," but they wouldn't. Essentially, what this clause means, according to The Authors Guild is: "If someone gets hurt and they sue the publisher, you'd have to indemnify the publisher." (Meaning, if anyone is injured and makes a claim, that is due to the recipe, instruction, formula, direction, advice, or other material information, that you put into the book, which is essentially everything, then you [the Author] would be liable under the indemnity.)

The Authors Guild told me that I could add the phrase "to the best of Author's knowledge," after the word "warrants," but the publisher wouldn't do it. That is why I walked.

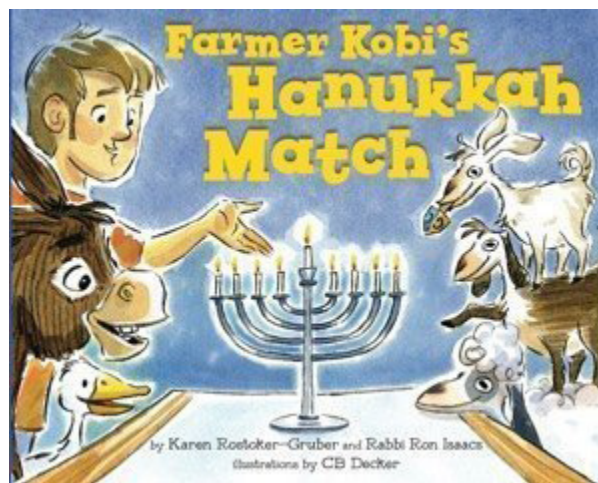
The other thing that got to me, but the publisher DID change it, was this clause under Grant of Rights: "With the exception of any work already under contract, the Work will be Author's next published work...., and Author will not, prior to delivery of the complete manuscript of the Work, write or contract with any other publisher to write any other work for publication in book form without the written permission of Publisher."

The Authors Guild told me that this means "that you can't write or contract to write another book until you DELIVER the current book under contract with your publisher." The Authors Guild says that authors should delete this.



The publisher did change this clause, as it loosely means that no other book, not currently under contract, can come out before this book. I work on multiple books at the same time, so I wouldn't be able to sign any other contract, or work on any other book, until I delivered this book—and that is freakin' crazy!

Some other things to watch out for that I had changed in other contracts have to do with my characters. One important change was under the Grant of Rights clause, which read: "The Author agrees not to create for anyone or any entity other than the Publisher a work that is substantially similar to the Work of covering essentially the same subject matter, or likely to compete for sales with the Work, during the term of this Agreement."



This essentially means that you can't write a Work similar to the one that you just wrote for that company. I usually have the contract changed to be more specific. I write a lot of picture books, so I would and could change the contract to read something like this: "The Author agrees not to create for anyone or any entity other than the Publisher a work with the

hamster characters Lily and Gil during the term of this Agreement."

The Authors Guild said, "We generally tell authors to try to delete competing works clauses. See the Authors Guild Model Trade Book Contract

How to Negotiate Contracts Wisely continued

and Commentary for a good discussion of why a non-competition clause is objectionable. Many publishers will remove or alter this clause if the author asks. If your publisher is stubborn, you can alleviate the effects of this clause by: 1) defining a competing work more specifically, 2) limiting the time during which this clause is effective, and 3) limiting the media in which this clause is effective.”

The Options clause is also a sticky one. I usually strike out this paragraph in all of my contracts: “The publisher shall have the first option of publishing the Author’s next book.....”

Some authors think that this is a great clause as they will take your next book. But, what if you don’t like working with that publisher, or what if that publisher didn’t have a great relationship with you, you now have to wait for them to reject your next manuscript before you can legally send it elsewhere. If you don’t have a good working relationship with them, then they can or may take forever to get back to you on it, and YOU CAN’T SEND IT ANYWHERE ELSE according to the contract!

LL: Do contracts vary significantly from house to house? And in general, is there a difference between small and large publishers?

KRB: All contracts are different—small vs. large publishers—it doesn’t matter. Some contractual negotiations are easy, some aren’t. Some contracts are longer than others, some are short. It all depends.

LL: In general, what kinds of advances or royalties can an author expect?

KRB: It differs with every publisher.

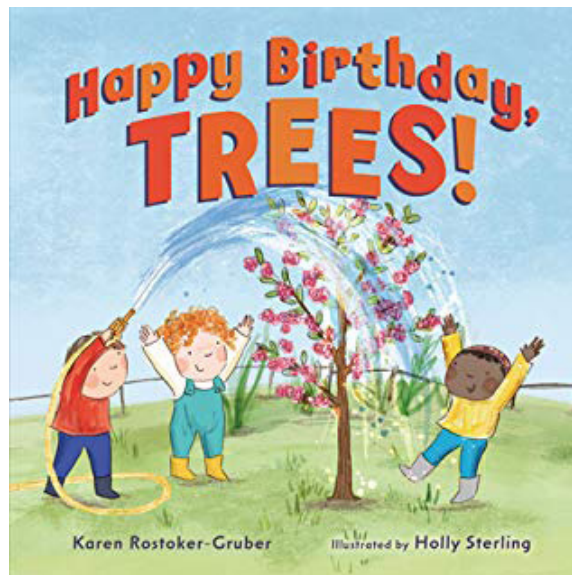
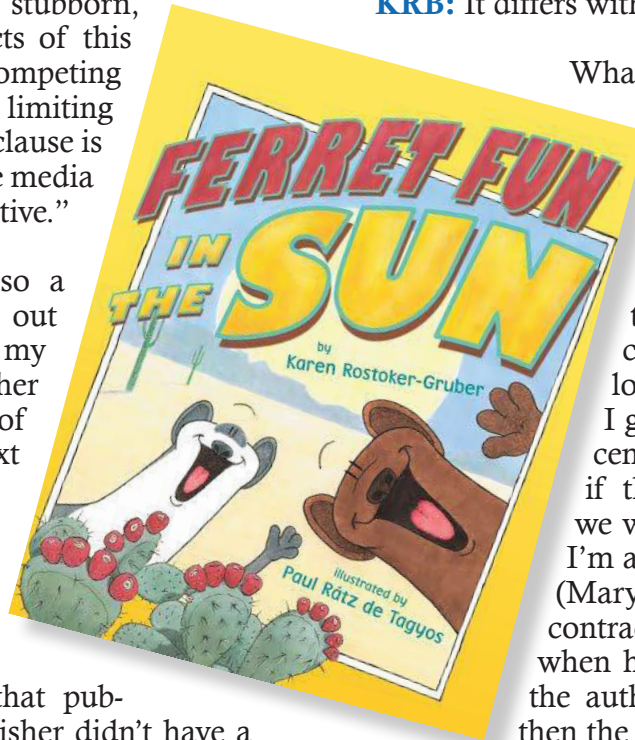
What you want, however, is to get royalties on the *retail* price of your book and try to avoid getting royalties on *net wholesale*.

Royalties on retail work like this: According to one of my contracts, of a book that is no longer in print, without an agent, I got 5% royalty on retail, was .80 cents per \$16.00 book. I don’t know if the illustrator received more as we weren’t allowed to discuss it, but I’m assuming that they got the same. (Mary Flower negotiated the above contract for me, but it was a while back when hardcover books were 16.00.) If the author or illustrator has an agent, then the agent typically takes 15% off of the .80 cents.

Also, try to get escalation clauses in your contract. A lawyer or agent can help with that. “5% on the first 20,000 copies sold and 6 ¼ % on all copies thereafter,” is what I have in the above contract.

Royalties on Net Wholesale work like this: Your royalties are based on whatever discounted price the publisher charges bookstores and other sales outlets for your book (often as much as 40-50% off retail). If you have that clause, make sure your agent or lawyer negotiates a higher royalty percentage for you to make up for net wholesale vs. retail.

LL: Do you think agents are absolutely necessary to help advocate for your best rights?



KRB: Having an agent is great, but if you don't have an agent, it's not the end of the world, you can just have Mary Flower—or another publishing lawyer—look over your contract and negotiate for you. And, you can always go to the Authors Guild, which will go over your contracts for FREE! That's right, for free! There is an annual fee though, but it's worth it. They always get back to me in about 2 days via email.

I didn't have an agent for my first 14 traditionally-published books. But I ALWAYS went through a lawyer. [Editor's note: Lawyers will charge a one-time fee to look over and negotiate your contract. Agents get a 15% commission from any money your book earns as long as it's in print, but don't charge any extra fees to negotiate the contract. Agents will also submit your manuscript to publishers on your behalf and help manage your career through the publishing and marketing process. Lawyers are only involved in the contract stage of the process.]

LL: What is the standard amount of time an author can take to deliberate over a contract before giving an answer?

KRB: There is no standard time for this. Just go over it with a lawyer, or the Authors Guild and, take your time. You will be living with this contract for the life of the book, so know what you are getting into and what you have to do.

In the contract that I walked away from, they were requiring me to get three blurbs for the back of my book and 20 reviews on Amazon, once it was published. If you sign a contract with that clause, be sure that you can do it. You are signing away that you can and will do certain things by certain times, so you need to make sure that you can fulfill those promises or any other promises (getting the manuscript there by the date stated in the contract, getting all of the required permissions for photos to the editor by a certain date, etc.)

LL: Thank you Karen! So the two main takeaways are:

It is in your best interest to seek legal advice BEFORE signing any contract.

You're entitled to negotiate the terms. Don't sign anything you feel is unfair, and don't forget, there's always the option of walking away from a contract that does not serve your best interest.

For those of you negotiating a contract now or in the future, good luck!

MARY FLOWER, Publishing Contract Consultant, can be reached at flower.mary28@gmail.com

Learn more about joining the **AUTHORS GUILD** here: <https://www.authorsguild.org/>

KAREN ROSTEKER-GRUBER is a multi-award-winning author of many picture books with hundreds of thousands of copies sold. Her books have been: National Jewish Book Award Finalists; International Reading Association Children's Book Council Children's Choices Award recipients; chosen for the 100 Best Children's Books in the Bureau of Education and Research's Best of the Year Handbook; nominated for the Missouri Show Me Award, and the South Carolina Book Award. Her book *Rooster Can't Cock-a-Doodle-Do* (Dial) was a Dollywood Foundation selection two years in a row (it went out to 73,579 children in 2007 and 88,996 children in 2008). Karen's book, *Maddie the Mitzvah Clown* (Apples and Honey Press) went out to 21,000 children as part of the PJ Library program in 2017.

For more information:

<http://www.karenrostoker-gruber.com>

chris tebbetts author

James Patterson Co-Author Took Roundabout Path to Success

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Growing up in a small town in Ohio, Chris Tebbetts loved to read, spending hours in the local library, but his aspirations lay elsewhere. It was only after stints in film and theater in New York City that this country boy at heart opted for a quieter pace of life in the foothills of Vermont. There, he followed his writing muse, networking and attending writer's conferences while honing his craft. Serendipity came calling when in a six degrees of separation thingy he learned of an editor who was on the hunt for a writer for a middle grade fantasy-adventure book series about Vikings. Now a best-selling kidlit author, Tebbetts has partnered with super author/publisher James Patterson on the hilarious *Middle School* book series and celebrity TV host Jeff Probst on the thrill-a-minute kid adventure *Stranded* book series. In addition, Tebbetts co-wrote a middle grade contemporary *Cyrano de Bergerac* inspired romantic comedy *M or F?* with Lisa Papademetriou. 2019 saw the publication of his young adult fantasy *Me, Myself and Him*, described by the *School Library Journal* as "an engaging story that examines love, relationships, and the different paths one's life can take." A popular lecturer/teacher/guest at writing workshops, you can learn more about Tebbetts and his schedule for 2020 at <http://christebbetts.com/home>.

PJ McILVAINE: Looking over your impressive

biography and credits outside of writing, you tried other careers like film and realized it wasn't for you. How did that help you on your way to becoming an acclaimed kid lit author? Was being an author something you aspired to or was it more of being at the right place the right time with your first book series?

CHRIS TEBBETTS: I think it's relevant that I didn't first publish until I was forty years old, because I only came to my own writing aspirations after a series of other aspirations along the way: to act...to direct movies...to direct plays...to write creative nonfiction...to write picture books.... and eventually(!), to write books for middle grade and young adult readers.

All of those things have storytelling in common, so even though I had my moments of feeling like I'd failed along the way, it was also true that at every turn, I was collecting storytelling experience and honing my creative sensibilities. So while I knew, on some level, that I wanted to be a storyteller, it took me a relatively long time to find the right form.

The thing that made the difference for me in publishing, as compared to theater or film work, was that, for whatever reasons, I was much more willing to apply myself to the business and networking end of things. By that, I mean taking classes, going to



Chris Tebbetts continued

conferences and workshops, researching the markets, getting involved in online writer communities and in-person writers' groups, and (of course) submitting my work all over the place.

For introverts like me, the necessity for that part of the work can be a tough pill to swallow. But there's no use pretending that it doesn't come with the territory. The only question in my mind is about how to best navigate it.

PM: How is writing a book series with a huge name like Jimmy Patterson and celebrity host Jeff Probst different than writing your own books?

CT: On the one hand, collaborating on a written story is very different than writing solo, in terms of autonomy, creative compromise, and what I call creative synthesis, which is the opposite of compromise. On the other hand, the demands of story remain the same. No matter how you go at it, you still need a good hook, taut middle, satisfying ending, believable characters, etc., etc. So the process for me is always grounded in very familiar territory.

PM: Who comes up with the ideas for those kinds of books or is it more of a package kind of deal?

CT: James Patterson generates all of his own story ideas, and for those books, I work from a detailed outline to create a draft of the story, which I submit in pieces that we discuss once a month.

Similarly, when I came on board to work with Jeff Probst on *Stranded*, it was already a "Survivor for kids" project, with certain elements predetermined.

PM: Do you outline? Do you trade pages back and forth and edit as you write the drafts?

CT: Outlining has always been a necessary part of the collaborations I've done. Otherwise, writing the story would be like setting out on a road trip in two separate cars with no maps.

I've had one collaboration (*M or F?* with Lisa Papademetriou) where we traded pages back and forth, generating the story cumulatively over time, but most of what I've done has involved me first-drafting the story from an outline.

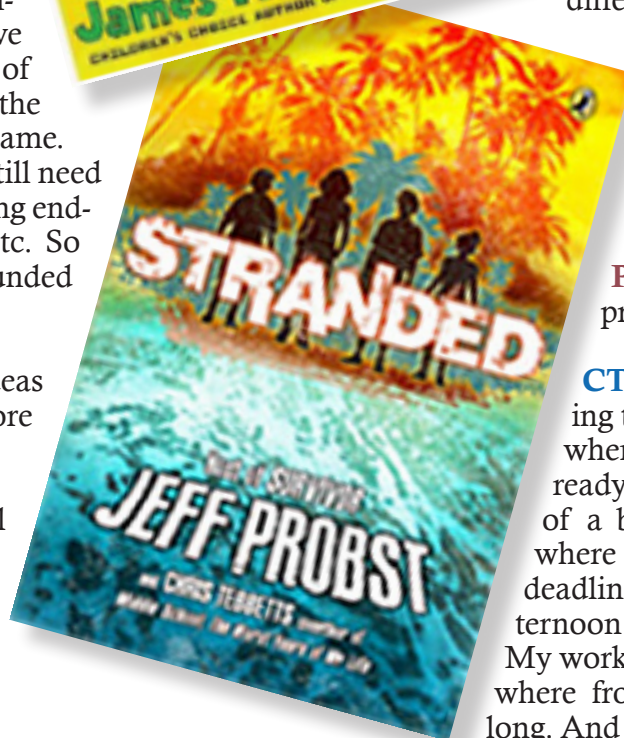
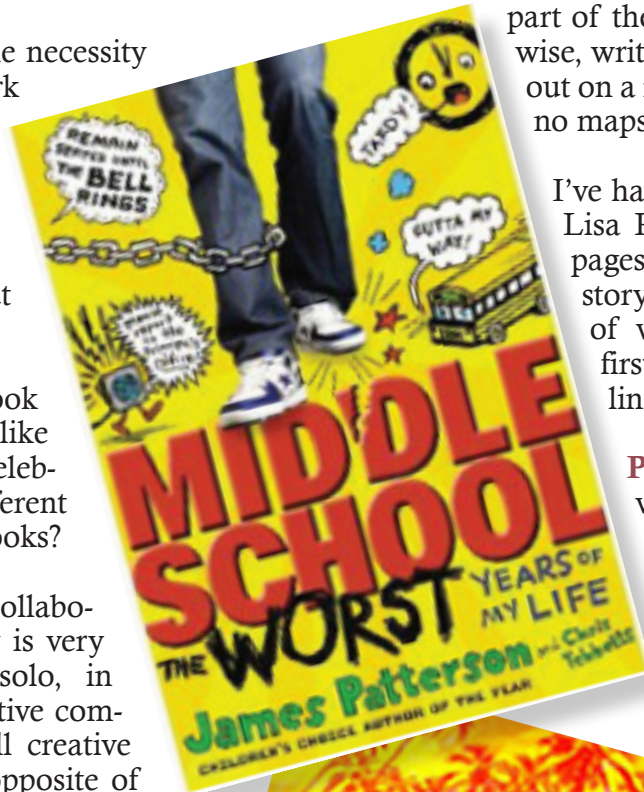
PM: How much research is involved?

CT: Every book has brought me one kind of passive education or another, based on the research I have to do. And each book is different that way. Generally, though, I'll spend about six weeks on research for a project before I'm actually writing it, and then do additional research along the way, as needed.

PM: What is your writing process?

CT: I like to focus my drafting time on the morning hours, when I'm most awake and ready for the newness/pressure of a blank page. Depending on where I am relative to a given deadline, I'll also write in the afternoon and/or into the evening. My work days fluctuate hugely, anywhere from four to fourteen hours long. And I like to write at least something every single day, to help keep up

my momentum on a given project.



Chris Tebbetts continued

PM: How hard is it to write a book a series that can also be a standalone title?

CT: It feels like a muscle I've developed over time—learning to give enough information for new readers to catch up without alienating readers who have read previous books in the series. The other factor I think about a lot is the way you need a story arc for each separate book in the series, along with a kind of ecto-story arc that spans the whole series itself.

PM: How did you get your agent? Do you run ideas by him or just send him material when you think it's ready to be seen?

CT: I got my first agent through a mentor of mine, Barbara Seuling. It was just kismet. At a workshop of hers, we were discussing agents, and she said, "I think George Nicholson would be a good match for you." She wrote an email the following week, I met with George soon after that, and he took me on. It was crazy-easy, compared to how it can be.

My second (and current) agent was one that I found in the more usual way, sending out query letters and writing samples. He leaves it up to me, in terms of how much I share work in progress vs. waiting until a manuscript is finished. I really like his feedback, though, so I tend to show him work ahead of time.

PM: In addition to writing, you do a lot of school visits, book festivals, writing workshops, tours, conferences, etc. When do you find the time to write?

CT: These days, I'm away for an event maybe once a month, which feels just about right to me, in terms of the work-travel balance. And when I am away from home, I try to grab writing time when I can, by getting up early or skipping lunch. Usually, though, I just absorb the productivity loss with more desk time at home.

PM: How do you think being published later in life helped you in terms of determining what you wanted to write as well as how to deal with the stresses and pressures of meeting deadlines, handling publicity, etc. Do you think you would have handled it as well if you had found success earlier?

CT: Honestly, I'm not sure I have good answers for these questions. My feelings about taking so long to "find" children's books and publishing are really somewhat neutral. On the one hand, I had a lot of stress in my twenties and thirties, feeling as though I just wasn't accomplishing what I wanted to accomplish in life...and on the other hand, I'm so glad to be able to bring my experience in other areas of the arts to the writing I do today. As for whether or not I'd have handled the success I have found in a different way at a younger age, I'm going to guess that the answer to that one is no. I've always been a hard worker, and while I don't specifically wish that I'd gotten published earlier, I also don't feel as though I would have been worse off getting an early start at it.

PM: What advice do you have for more mature writers who perhaps haven't quite found their feet or have encountered speed bumps on the journey to publication?

CT: I often talk about how it takes at least two of three things to succeed in this business: talent, luck, and persistence. All three are great, of course, but a lot of people get by on just two.

And in any case (more to the point here), there's only one thing on that list I can really control: persistence. I can't make myself be more talented, or more lucky, but I can make sure that I get my butt in that chair every day, and keep on working at it, no matter what. That doesn't mean that my hard work guarantees success, but I will say that this quote has proven true for me: "I find that the harder I work,



Chris Tebbetts continued

the luckier I tend to get.”

Another piece of this, for me, is in distinguishing between want and need. It’s great to know what I want, in terms of professional success or anything else, but if I over-identify with that thing—if I let myself think (consciously or unconsciously) that I’m incomplete without it—then it creates a tension around the pursuit itself, one that works against me instead of in my favor.

So my advice would be to fervently want that publishing contract, or that piece of success, whatever it might be... but don’t feel like less of a person, or incomplete, if you don’t ever get there. Ironically, letting go of that need can be a necessary step toward getting the thing you’re going for.

PM: For writers who are introverts (like me) do you have any tips or tricks for getting us out of our comfort zone regarding networking? Were there any aspects of networking or social media that you found challenging or more difficult to master?

CT: Oh man...this is a big topic for me, and timely, as well. I’m just now developing a workshop with the title, “Introverts’ Roundtable: Self-Promotion in the Face of Shyness, Social Anxiety, and Impostor Syndrome.” It’s a personal issue for me; I’m a generally outgoing person, but I also have a very timid side, and struggle with public speaking and self-promotion.

Last summer, as I was working to promote my solo novel, I wrote about exactly these issues for the SCBWI blog, here: <http://scbwi.blogspot.com/2019/07/introverts-unite-quietly-and-in-your.html>

In terms of tips: There’s a saying I’ve heard before: “Gratitude is the antidote to anxiety.” And as “soft” or “new-agey” as that can sound, I have found it to also be profoundly true.

So when I’m in a fraught situation—nervous about the speech I have to give, or feeling shy at a professional function—it helps to also think about something(s) I’m grateful for, whether that’s my family and friends; or having a book to promote in the first

place; or the opportunity to speak at a given venue.

Whatever it is, that gratitude almost always puts my anxiety into a larger context, where it (the anxiety) is no longer the only thing I’m feeling. Anxiety can be overwhelming, and in my experience, general reassurances like “I’ve got this,” or “You’ll be great” don’t have the same efficacy as the bird-in-the-hand quality of expressions of gratitude. You’ll be great is an opinion. I love my story is a fact. And when my anxiety seems like a fact of its own, I need facts to fight it back.

PM: What do you like best about the writing life? What are your future goals? What are you currently working on?

CT: I like the creative autonomy that writing gives me, including on the collaborative work I do. Even when the story is a shared creation, much less when I’m working on my solo stuff, I’m still there at the computer, devising, and creating, and putting together puzzle pieces.

Future-wise, I’d love to continue to work on a diverse body of work in different genres and for different ages, while still keeping the core of what I do based in middle grade fiction. That’s my very favorite age to write for. Not coincidentally, I’m sure, those were also the years in my own life when I was a more voracious reader than I’ve ever been. I’ve heard the same is true for a lot of writers.

PM: What book do you wish you had written?

This question makes me think about books that had some kind of lasting, creative impact on me. Here’s what comes to mind: *A Fly Went By*. *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. *Harriet the Spy*. *Catcher in the Rye*. *Dune*.

OUTLINING CHOOSE YOUR STYLE

by Jane McBride

Are you old enough to remember outlining in school when students were taught to use Roman numerals, then capital letters, then numbers, then small letters, etc in outlining a report or paper? I am. It was a tedious process, but do you know what? It worked.

I remember one English teacher who insisted we write each element of the outline in a complete sentence. In that way, she instructed, we already had much of the work already done. I no longer outline in this fashion, preferring a more informal method, but I can't deny the benefits of working from an outline.

Why outline at all? Doesn't this curtail the creative process? Outlines themselves are creative—you're essentially brainstorming your book in whatever format works for you, then choosing which elements you're going to keep, and rearranging them so they flow in the best pattern for your story. Outlines are a tool, not a straightjacket. You can revisit the outline at any point during the writing of your book to see if you're on track, or to add or tweak plot points if you have a burst of inspiration halfway through your first draft. An outline allows you to see your entire book at a glance, which helps you avoid plot missteps and can keep you from creating a bloated first draft that needs excessive trimming before it makes sense.

Writers approach outlines differently. Below is a partial list of outlining methods. Perhaps one of them will fit your style.

Beat-sheet. Here, you list the main points of the book in bullet fashion. Don't worry if you don't have them in order yet. You are just trying to get down what happens. Once you do that, you can arrange them in the right sequence. These may change as you start writing, so it helps to remain fluid in this kind of outline.

- *Fourteen-year-old Gemma wants to win a state-sponsored essay contest about patriotism. The winners of each city will get an all-expenses paid trip to visit Washington, DC.*
- *She writes her essay and feels good about it.*
- *She shows it to a friend for a critique.*
- *That friend plagiarizes Gemma's words in her own essay; she tells Gemma that the essay isn't very good and that she should completely re-write it.*
- *Crestfallen, Gemma re-writes her essay.*
- *She isn't nearly as pleased with it as she was the first essay, but she submits it anyway.*
- *Her friend wins the contest; her essay is posted in the local paper.*
- *Gemma reads it and finds it to be a nearly verbatim copy of her original essay.*
- *She confronts her friend.*
- *At first, the friend denies any wrong-doing; then she laughs at Gemma and tells her that she shouldn't be so trusting.*
- *Gemma is heartsick; not only has she lost the essay contest, she has also lost a friend.*
- *Gemma considers going to the contest judges and telling them what happened.*
- *She rejects the idea, knowing she can't prove it.*
- *She returns to her daily life.*
- *Another essay contest comes up. This time the prize is \$10,000, payment due when the winner is accepted to college. The subject is "What value do you prize more than anything else?"*
- *Gemma enters this contest, writing about loyalty. Her recent experience allows her to write with passion.*
- *She wins the contest.*
- *She realizes that if she hadn't had the experience with her friend, she wouldn't have been able to write with such feeling.*

As you can see, the story isn't yet finished. What would you give as the final beats to wrap it up? Would you have the friend come to Gemma and beg her forgiveness? Would Gemma forgive her

Outlining continued

friend? Or would the two girls become enemies throughout the next four years of high school? (There are a lot more possibilities in the last for future books.)

Character-driven: Here, the characters tell you, the writer, what to do. Think in terms of character arcs and growth. Study the example below. If you read carefully, you will see that every plot-point originates from the character's decisions.

Seventeen-year-old Thom wants to come out to his parents. Thus far, only his nineteen-year-old sister Kayla knows that he is gay. The story opens with Thom rehearsing what he will say to his ultra-conservative parents. In the end, he can't do it. He enters his senior year of high school living a lie. The quarterback of the football team and debate team captain, he is crowned Homecoming king and takes his place with the Homecoming queen and the attendants. He's miserable on stage, pretending to be something he isn't and excuses himself for a few minutes. When he sees a boy whom he knows is gay being slammed against the lockers in the school hallway by two members of the football team, Thom steps in. He tells the bullies to back off. They ask why he's sticking up for the boy and Thom tells them that that boy could be him. A burden is lifted from his shoulders. He returns to the dance and makes an announcement, then goes home. His parents greet his news with relief that he is being honest with them. For the first time in years, Thom feels good about himself. His character grows when he accepts who he is.

Scene and sequel. This method posits that for every scene there is a corresponding sequence. Your job is to list the scenes, then fill in the sequels.

Here's an example of scene and sequel:

The set-up: fourteen-year-old Samuel wants to make the junior varsity basketball team, but he also wants to be in the school play and try out for the debate team and do a host of other things. When he fails to make the junior varsity team on his first try, his older brother Eric rags on him.

Scene:

"You've got all the discipline of a squirrel on steroids," Eric said, giving Samuel a push.. "If you want to make the team, you've got to practice."

Samuel bit down his lip. Eric knew what he was talking about. He'd made every team he'd ever tried out for. And he was usually captain of each of those teams. That didn't mean that Samuel had to like it.

It steamed his shorts having Eric tell him what to do.

"Stuff it," he said and pushed his brother out of the way.

"Have it your way. But don't expect to make the team the way you're going."

And the sequel:

Samuel balled a hand into a fist and slammed into his palm. He was mad at Eric for always being the best at everything. He was mad at his parents for always holding Eric up as an example in everything. Why couldn't they see that Samuel was doing his best? Just because he wasn't as good as St. Eric didn't mean he couldn't be a little good, did it?

Narrative arc. In this method, you list the inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and the resolution. If you want to draw it, think of this as a large bell curve with the exposition at the left and ending in the denouement on the right. Or you can list each action and go from there.

Synopsis. Some writers consider a synopsis as a kind of outline. I tend to think of a synopsis as a brief narrative of the story, complete with sentences, paragraphs, in chronological order separate from an outline. Several writers whom I know even include a few passages of dialogue in a synopsis. Whether you treat it as an outline or as an encapsulated version of your story, know that many editors and agents will require a synopsis, either with sample chapters or accompanying the entire manuscript. If you are a well-established author, you may sell on the synopsis alone.

IN CONCLUSION

Outlining isn't for everyone. Don't beat yourself up because your way of writing doesn't match that of an author friend or conform to what you learned in a workshop. As always, do what works for you.

SOME OUTLINING TOOLS

- **Microsoft OneNote:**
<https://www.onenote.com>
- **OmniOutliner for Mac:**
<https://www.omnigroup.com/omnioutliner>
- **FreeMind mind mapping tool:**
<https://freemind.en.softonic.com/>
- **Scrivener:**
<https://www.literatureandlatte.com/>

Your Writing Voice

OWN IT, HONE IT

by Jane McBride

We talk a lot about character's voices, how they sound, what they (the characters) say. We take classes and workshops in how to write effective dialogue. We learn about tag lines and body language. Less frequently do we talk about our (authors') voices.

Yes, you have a voice. It comes through whether or not you are aware of it. It's taken years, decades even, for me to be able to identify my voice. My husband says that he can recognize it; perhaps, because I am too close, I have a more difficult time identifying it.

What are the factors that make up your voice? Education. Geographical background. Position in the family. Religion. Gender. You are a product of all of that. And more. (For the purposes of this article, we're going to focus on your childhood and teenage years.) It makes sense, then, that your writer's voice would reflect that. Let's examine these factors and see how they have affected your writing as well as how you can use them to deepen and strengthen your voice.

Education: Whatever your education, it will reflect in your writing, in your word choice, in your sentence construction, in your expectations. Your age plays a part here, as when you grew up defines a large part of your education. I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. There were no computers, no electronic devices. There was no spell-check or grammar-check, so spelling and grammar were a part of our daily study. When we were old enough to learn cursive, we hand-wrote everything until we entered junior high or high school and learned to type.

Exercise: Take ten minutes to describe your elementary school years. If you can remember the name of your favorite teacher, write a few sentences about him or her. What did your classroom look like? What did it smell like? Were you a class leader? Or were you the class clown? Did you have spelling tests? Did you enjoy recess or did you dread it because you were always the last chosen when it came to choosing up teams? (That was me.) What was your favorite subject? What was your least favorite?

Geographical background: Where did you grow up? Where did you spend the majority of your childhood, teen, and young adult years? Did your family move around a lot or did you stay in the same place? Did you live in a small town or a big city? Or did you live in a rural setting? I grew up in Washington, DC, but our family spent a great deal of time in Tennessee where my mother's people lived. Did you notice my use of the word "people?" In that region, family was referred to as people. When I write books set in the South, I use that word, yet another example of how our geographical background affects our voice.

Exercise: Write a description of your childhood home and determine how where you grew up has affected your outlook on life and your writing voice. Include in it not just the physical structure, but the neighborhood and community and region. Write this as you would describe a setting for a book. What features of your home and its surroundings stand out to you? What were the speech patterns? Did people speak in short, sharp sentences or did they take their time, their voice and words meandering in different directions?

Family place: What is your place in the family of your childhood? Were you an only child? A middle child? Or were you the youngest.

Exercise: Write a sketch of yourself as the child you were, paying particular attention to your place in your family constellation. If you were the oldest child in your family, were you proud to occupy that position? Or were you weary of being the one on whom a great deal of responsibility was placed? Did you envy your younger siblings who seemed to be able to get away with everything? Were you the youngest child and resented not being able to do all the things your older brothers and sisters did?

Belief system: What was the religion or belief system of your childhood? This need not be formal religion. Perhaps you grew up believing in a higher power but did not give Him or Her a name. Perhaps you grew up believing in God and His goodness. Perhaps you grew up not believing in any kind of Supreme Being. The important thing is that you were affected by it and that, in turn, affects your voice.

Exercise: Write a paragraph or two about why you believed as you did as a child. Write this as the child you were would write it. Don't try to dress it up with fancy words. Don't filter it. Our beliefs and values evoke strong feelings. Look at the words you chose.

Gender: A large part of our identity comes from our gender. We see the world through the eyes of that gender.

Exercise: Write a page describing how you saw yourself as a child. Then examine your work-in-progress and determine how your description of yourself affects how you have drawn your main character. Now choose a character (he or she need not be from your manuscript) and describe him. If you've chosen a teenage boy, what does he sound like? What does he wear? What music does he listen to? What are his interests? What would someone see if they entered his bedroom? Would they wrinkle up their nose at the smell of five-day-old gym

socks? Would they notice the clothes stuffed under the bed? Would they notice the dent in the wall where the boy and his brother were wrestling and he ended up pushing his brother against the wall? (I speak from experience here, having raised three sons.) Contrast this with what someone might see upon entering a teenage girl's room.

Your writing voice shows in every word you choose, in every sentence you construct, in every character you create. It shows in your style, whether that be short, snappy sentences or long, lyrical sentences. It shows in your subject matter. It shows in how you describe a setting and whether you work from a plot-driven mindset or a character-driven mindset.

One final exercise: Intentionally write in a different style from your own. If you normally write dark, dystopian novels for young adults, try writing a lighthearted romance. If you usually write quiet, thoughtful essays, try writing a hard-hitting piece. Can you change up your style? Don't be disappointed if you can't pull this off. Some years back, I decided to write a gritty thriller. Guess what? I could plot it, even create the characters, but I couldn't make my voice that of a thriller writer. I kept reverting to my own voice. Still, it was a good exercise. It showed me what my true voice was and what it wasn't. Even deliberately trying to write something foreign to me, I couldn't find the right words, the right tone. Needless to say, the project didn't go anywhere.

Your writing voice is yours alone. No one else can duplicate it. Nor should you want to duplicate anyone else's voice. Be proud of your voice. Own it. Hone it. And then polish it so that it is as distinctive as your speaking voice.