

Children's Book Insider

March 2020



**WRITING
YOUNG
ADULT
ROMANCE**

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**



**beaming
books**

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Published 12 times/year by Children's Book Insider, LLC,
901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838.
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<http://www.writeforkids.org>

ISSN 1073-7596

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Children's Book Insider, *The Children's Writing Monthly* is an electronic monthly newsletter that is included in the paid membership to the Children's Writing Knowledge Base (<http://www.CBIclubhouse.com>). The cost of membership is \$49.95 per year, or \$5.49 per month if billed monthly. For more information, go to <http://writeforkids.org/come-join-the-insiders/>

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At Presstime:

Publisher Seeks Progressive, Inspiring Books for All Ages

Triangle Square Books for Young Readers is the children's imprint of Seven Stories Press, an independent publisher that focuses on “works of the imagination and political titles by voices of conscience.” Publisher Dan Simon formed TSBFYR in 2012 to breathe progressive new life into the world of children's and YA books and inspire children to think for themselves and change the world. Titles include the the award-winning *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert and Rex Ray (picture book about gender identity), Innosanto Nagara's *A is for Activist* (board book), Cory Silverberg's *Sex Is A Funny Word: A Book About Bodies, Feelings and You* (ages 8-11), *Out of Salem* by Hal Schriever (paranormal urban YA fantasy); *Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience*, edited by Alyssa Raymond and Patrice Vecchione (YA poetry). Triangle Square books are published in hardcover, paperback, and ebook formats, in English and Spanish, throughout North America and around the world. The publisher supports social justice, multicultural literacy, restoration of the environment, kids’ rights, and freedom of the imagination, and is looking for fiction and nonfiction manuscripts for all from ages picture books through young adult that tie in with these ideas.

Submit a cover letter with a brief description of the project, a short author bio and any relevant publishing experience, along with two sample chapters (picture books may be sent in their entirety). Send by mail only (no email submissions will be read) to Acquisitions, Triangle Square Books for Young Readers, Seven Stories Press, 140 Watts Street, New York, NY 10013. Include a business-size self-addressed, stamped envelope or a stamped postcard for a reply. If you'd like your submission materials returned to you, include a larger envelope with sufficient postage. For more TSBFYR titles, go to <https://www.sevenstories.com/imprints/triangle-square>

Publisher Accepting Fiction and Nonfiction Picture Books, YA Fiction

Page Street Publishing is an independent publisher that publishes about 120 books per year in adult nonfiction, picture book, middle grade and young adult categories. Currently looking for young adult fiction (for ages 12 and up) in all genres, picture books in all genres for ages 4-8 that rely heavily on the illustrations to tell the story, picture book biographies for ages 8-12, select board books for ages 0-3, and visually driven concept books. Study recent Page Street Publishing titles to see if your work fits the publisher's list at <https://www.pagestreetpublishing.com/>

For picture books and picture book biographies, include a query letter and attach either a manuscript as a Word document (if text only), or a 32- to 40-page PDF sketch dummy in spread layouts (if text and art). Your query must contain: 1) synopsis, pitch, age range; and 2) a bio that describes your occupation, publishing history, social media presence, whether or not you are represented by an agent, and any other information relevant to your submission. If you are an illustrator, include a link to your portfolio website. Do not send more than one submission per person within a three-month period, unless you receive a request to submit other stories. Email submissions to childrensubmissions@pagestreetpublishing.com with the title of your book in the subject line.

For young adult fiction, include a query (1 page) with the first three chapters of your manuscript in the body of your email. Your query must contain: 1) a book synopsis that includes your novel's pitch, word count, and classification (literary, historical, fantasy, mystery, etc); and 2) an author bio that describes your occupation, publishing history, social media presence, and any other relevant information that pertains to your manuscript (including any endorsements, if applicable). If you are represented by an agent or plan to be, note this in your author bio. Ideally, your manuscript's length is 60-90K words and your protagonist is 15-18 years old. Email submissions to yasubmissions@pagestreetpublishing.com with the title of your book in the subject line.

Responds within three months to authors whose work is under consideration for publication. If you haven't heard back after three months, you should consider it a pass.

New Agent Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Raven Quill Literary Agency (<https://ravenliterary.com/>) is a new agency founded by Jacqui Lipton, to represent creators of books for children and young adults. Jacqui holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is also an attorney and law professor specializing in legal and business issues related to publishing. **Kortney Price** recently joined Raven Quill Literary as an agent. She is representing all ages of fiction from picture books through young adult novels. While she's accepting work in all genres, she is particularly looking for the following:

Picture books: humorous and/or emotionally poignant stories; unique retellings of classic tales; anything leaning a bit toward the absurd. Early readers and chapter books: books that weave history into the story (as in the Magic Tree House chapter books), as well as anything geared toward boys. Middle grade: wilderness survival stories; creepy horror, poignant contemporary, historical adventures and “troublemakers on the space station” sci-fi-type stories. Young adult: also seeking wilderness survival stories, as well as contemporary lighthearted romance with a good dose of comedy, or a much more serious contemporary tackling heavier topics. Also wants YA horror, magical realism, psychological thriller and genre-blending historical fiction, especially with gothic elements, hauntings, psychological cat and mouse games, or other dark elements. She's also passionate about diverse representation in the books she works with (though author diversity is not mandatory). Query with a synopsis and the first five pages via Query Manager here: <https://querymanager.com/query/kortneyprice> You can follow Kortney on Twitter [@kortney_price](https://twitter.com/kortney_price)

Independent Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Sky Pony Press is the children's book imprint of Skyhorse Publishing, an independent publisher. Their goal is to provide books for readers with a wide variety of interests, and their list includes fiction and nonfiction picture books, educational books, novelty books, and middle grade and YA fiction and nonfiction. Open to any genre and style, the editors are always looking for something new and different. Recent titles include *Evolution for Smart Kids: A Little Scientist's Guide to the Origins of Life* by Carlos Pazos (picture book); *It's Fun to Draw Fairies, Mermaids, Princesses, and Ballerinas* by Mark Bergin (activity book ages 5-10); *When Boys and Girls Become Men and Women: Everything You Need to Know about Growing Up* by Jörg Müller, illustrated by Dagmar Geisler (nonfiction, ages 8-12); *Christmas Carol & the Shimmering Elf* by Robert L. Fouch (middle grade action/adventure/time travel/Christmas story); *The Benefits of Being an Octopus* by Ann Braden (contemporary upper middle grade); *People of the Lake* by Nick Scorza (young adult paranormal mystery). More titles are available at <https://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/sky-pony-press/new-releases/>

To submit a manuscript or proposal to Sky Pony, please send an email to skyponysubmissions@skyhorsepublishing.com. Put a query letter describing your project and the target market in the body of your email and attach all materials to be considered as a Word document, or in the case of art, as a jpeg. For picture books, you can attach the entire manuscript. For longer works, attach up to three chapters. Nonfiction should include a proposal with a table of contents, brief description of each chapter, and 1-2 sample chapters. To make sure your email is received, please be mindful of the size of attachments included in your message.

Literary Magazine for Children Sponsors Poetry Contest

The Caterpillar is a magazine of literary poems, stories and art for readers ages 7-11, published in Ireland and distributed throughout the world. Quarterly issues are published in March, June, September and December each year. While the magazine itself is not a paying market, they have an annual children's poetry prize for a single unpublished poem for children ages 7-11 with an award of €1,000 (approx. \$1086) plus publication in the summer issue of *The Caterpillar*. Authors from anywhere in the world can enter. Poems can be on any subject and of any length as long as they're appropriate for readers ages 7-11. There is an entry fee of €14 per poem, and you can enter as many poems as you like. Go to <http://www.thecaterpillarmagazine.com/a1-page.asp?ID=7253&page=10> to see the online entry form (where you'll be given the option to pay by PayPal or send a postal money order), and the contest rules. Deadline for submission is March 31, 2020. This year's judge is Roger McGough, the author of over 50 books of adult's and children's poetry. For more information, or to purchase a sample issue, go to <http://www.thecaterpillarmagazine.com/> For a list of bookstores that carry *The Caterpillar*, click on “About Us.” You can also find *The Caterpillar* in many larger libraries.

Counting Down to 30: Part Nine The Kidlit Family Tree

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader,

I've been in this business for over 30 years, and the single best piece of advice I've heard from editors, agents and seasoned authors is this: "If you want to be a writer of children's books, you need to be a reader of children's books." When I first started in publishing, that's as far as the advice went. Just read. A lot. It was, indeed, good advice.

Then, about 20 years ago, a rider was added: "Be sure you include a lot of books that have been published in the last 20 years." Sure, I thought, writing styles have changed, and authors need to be aware of how modern books are paced. Still good advice.

About 10 years ago, that rider was amended. "Spend the majority of your time reading books that have been published in the last 10 years." Since new authors have a finite amount of reading time at their disposal, they were now forced to eliminate most children's books published in the 20th as well as the first decade of the 21st centuries. What?? No Natalie Babbitt? No Dianne Wynne Jones? No E.B. White or Roald Dahl? No *Where the Wild Things Are*?

And now, dear Reader, we're down to five years. You should—the prevailing wisdom says—be focusing your energies on works published since 2015. Just let that sink in for a moment.

When you write for children, you become part of the Kidlit Family Tree, whose roots reach back over 150 years through Judy Blume, Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, Ezra Jack Keats, Margaret Wise Brown, Beatrix Potter and Louisa May Alcott. These authors, and hundreds of others, helped craft the DNA of the books you see on the shelves today. When you only read books published in the last five years, what you're doing is plucking the blossoms from the tree. The fragrant, lovely blooms that have just opened. But the blossoms can't sprout if the tree's branches, trunk and roots aren't strong.

If you want to be a writer of children's books, you need to be a reader of THE BEST children's books, no matter when they were published.

Think of it this way: Your 13-year-old wants to start a rock band and write her own songs. She asks you who she should listen to for inspiration. Your advice: "Anything that's come out in the last five years is good. And whatever you do, don't listen to the Beatles."

That would be madness.

Now, there is a reason industry professionals tell you to study books published in the last five years. Writing styles do change with each new decade. Picture book texts get shorter (and then longer again), age cat-

egories get divided into more precise segments to serve every reader at every stage of development, genres combine to create unique storytelling opportunities, pacing changes to match how children are receiving information from other mediums, information is delivered in creative, visually appealing ways. These are all exciting developments, and keep the industry fresh. As an aspiring author or illustrator, it's important that you truly understand how children's books are defined today.

But a great children's book is also timeless. And if a book is still in print after 40 or 50 or 80 years, there's a reason. Your job as an author is to figure out why, and then infuse your own work with that same timeless quality. And you can't do that without reading the book.

When you read as an author, not just as a reader, you're looking at two qualities in your mentor texts: style and substance. Style evolves over time. It's influenced by technology (how books are printed), how we communicate as a society, what's going on in the world at the time the book is written, and what we know about how children think and process their life experiences. If you want to get published today, you must understand current children's book writing styles. This will influence how you deliver the story or information to your readers.

Substance is what your book's about. It's creating characters with whom the reader can identify and building a plot that expands the reader's worldview and takes their imagination to new places. It's challenging the reader to think about new ideas because you're not writing down to them. It's connecting with the reader on a deeply emotional level. Substance transcends time.

Some classic children's books have both substance and timeless style. *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak is just as perfect a picture book now as it was in 1963. Others are extraordinary books, but need to be read a bit more carefully if you're using them as a model for your own writing. The themes of friendship, loyalty, selflessness, and the cycle of life in *Charlotte's Web* touch every generation that reads it, and the book continues to be the standard for creating complex, interesting animal characters. But upon closer study, you'll see that E.B. White does more head-hopping with point-of-view than is typical today, and lingers on long passages of description. It's still a lovely book with tremendous substance, but stylistically, if it were published today, some elements would change.

So your job, as an author-reader, is to identify the DNA of great children's books and then incorporate that DNA into your own work. Some DNA (substance) comes from the trunk and main branches of the Kidlit Family Tree. It was formed by visionaries from past generations who turned children's books in a new direction, and influenced the writers who followed. Look at iconic books that are stocked in every library and bookstore, and whose stories have become part of our culture. Note which authors have major awards named after them. Read the visionary's work, and then read more current books in the same genre/age group/topic to see how the original influenced the modern. You'll discover that Ramona Quimby's irrepressible spunk, fearlessness and individuality flows through chapter book heroines like Junie B. Jones, Amber Brown, Ivy & Bean, Clementine, Yasmin and Jasmine Toguchi. You'll find the heart of *Charlotte's Web* in animal protagonists like Sara Pennypacker's Pax and Katherine Applegate's Ivan. You'll see how Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* could not have existed without Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. And you'll appreciate how Walter Dean Myers paved the way for Jason Reynolds.

Then dissect modern books for style. Note which books are getting starred reviews in *Kirkus*, *School Library Journal* or *Publishers Weekly*, look at annual Best Book lists from the American Library Association, and talk to you local bookstore owners or librarians for recommendations. Focus on the last five to seven years for

middle grade and YA, 10 years for easy readers and chapter books. Picture books are trickier—you definitely want to deconstruct books from the last five years for structure, but once you get an understanding of how picture books are being written today, you'll be able to find many older books that fit the current style simply because their creators were brilliant. Dissect those as well.

Your education on modern writing style includes noting where the author began and ended the story, how long it took for the main character to appear, how the author incorporated description and setting into the action, where the page breaks (for a picture book) or chapter breaks occurred, how the tension increased/decreased/increased again, how many characters populated the story, the role of each character, how dialogue was crafted, how the theme wove through the plot, the tone and voice of the writing, the lengths of sentences/paragraphs/chapters, and so on. You'll learn many of these elements from reading classic books, but you need to verify which ones are still relevant with modern works. Because, trust me, if you submit a 150-page manuscript featuring a protagonist entering kindergarten, you're going to have trouble getting it published today as a middle grade novel, even if it's titled *Ramona the Pest*.

Finally, put it all together. The qualities that have lasted for generations and are still alive and well in modern books are the DNA of the Kidlit Family Tree. The newly-created styles incorporate that DNA, but they're the leaves and blossoms. Exciting, colorful, beautiful, but they could not exist without what's underneath. Infuse your books with timeless substance, and add enough modern style so your work is fresh.

So read it all. Read the wonderful books being published right now and marvel at the creativity and imagination of the authors and illustrators. Read the classics and honor the visionaries who wrote them. Reread your favorite childhood books and remember how they made you feel, how they changed your life. And then write your story.

Welcome to the family.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

Writing Young Adult ROMANCE

by Jean Daigneau

While love may make the world go around, a quick google search on the stages of love gives you choices from three to twelve. Really, twelve stages of love? Sounds like a lot of work, to me. But what about writing about love? Are you there any stages, as in formulas, to follow when writing YA romance? Let's find out.

THAT FIRST LITTLE SPARK

Many great love stories start with infatuation, which can be said for writing romance novels. Like many genres, an author gets an idea that either hits them in the heart like a cherub's arrow or that starts small and takes time to grow. For Kristy Boyce, whose debut YA romance novel *Hot British Boyfriend* has been acquired by HarperCollins, that spark starts with plot not character. Boyce says, "A scenario will come to mind and then afterward I'll have to figure out what type of character makes sense for that plot. I don't love this approach and I'm envious of writers who have fully-formed characters roaming around in their heads!" But, once she gets that issue nailed down, like all character-driven novels, it's about knowing her characters and what they want. "Understanding the backstory and mindset of the characters will inform their decisions and help you to make all of their choices believable."

Interestingly, Lisa Brown Roberts, who has written six teen romances, says, "For me, character always comes first. I know the emotional journey of my protagonist(s), their transformation, before I figure out plot details."

ISN'T IT JUST ABOUT LOVE?

As with other novels, conflict is what keeps your readers turning pages. So, while infatuation and sexual tension draw readers in, an obstacle is needed that pulls your characters apart or points them in a totally different direction. This could be of their own making, perhaps if they initially dislike each other or have conflicting or strongly held opinions or moral standards, or it can involve other characters or baggage that make pursuing the love game a challenge.

Then, too, researching those small, but important details, can make your story ring true. For *The Bookworm Crush*, Roberts did a ton of research on surfing. She visited L.A. to check out the surf scene, interviewed a professional surfer, watched documentaries and surf competitions on YouTube, and talked to a high school member of a surf team.

THE PLOT THICKENS

While the chemistry between your characters can cause your readers' hearts to palpitate, it's the struggles that make them care about where that chemistry might lead...or not. This is where subplots play a major role. Boyce describes it this way, "I think one of the most important things to consider is that the romantic plotline needs to be balanced with other subplots. Writers may want to only write about the romance, but the main character needs to have other struggles and needs to grow and change as a person over the course of the novel. In fact, I would say that the overall growth of the main character is more important than the romance."

Roberts agrees. "With all romance novels, there are multiple character arcs and plot threads because the romance is an entirely separate story arc than the main plot. Also, in addition to growing as individuals, the characters also grow and change as a couple along their path to a happy ending."

Like with many writing genres, there are a number of subgenres in the romance field. Romance novels can skirt the historical, paranormal, contemporary, or sci-fi categories. But with a YA audience, usually the story includes some coming-of-age or real-world relevance issues. For romance readers, "getting the guy—or girl" is not the only goal. But using that romance to foil or complicate a protagonist's reaching her goal adds depth and can keep your readers panting for more.

Then, too, your story doesn't only need to focus on the romantic interests of your protagonist and her love. Most teens in relationships are surrounded by plenty of others who are in and out of relationships all the time at the same time. Surrounding your

Writing Young Adult Romance continued

character's story with those of others can complicate or complement her own.

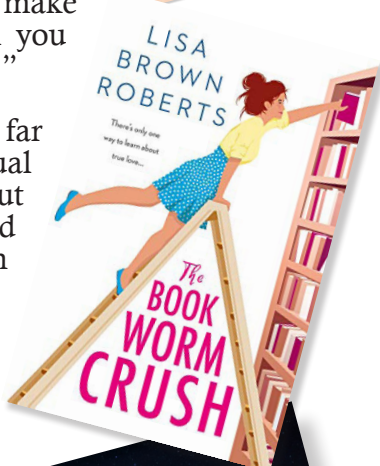
As Boyce sees it, “There are always important arcs dealing with other facets of life for the main character, including relationship struggles with parents or friends, finding one's place in society, making big decisions about life after high school, coming to understand and accept yourself, etc. The romance is only one piece, but it should tie into the other arcs and allow the main character to grow as a person.”

THAT THREE-LETTER WORD

When it comes to sex, just about anything goes with teens these days. And that includes relationships with members of any community—gay, transgender, straight. But, for most teen readers, it's usually less about the sex and more about the character. Staying true to your character, whether it's how they speak or what they do, is key. Boyce says, “There is a lot of variety in YA so I don't think you can necessarily go ‘too far’ with a character unless you're trying to get them to say or do things that don't make sense based on their personality. Then you run the risk of losing your reader's trust.”

Another thing when considering how far to go with your protagonist in a sexual relationship is your own feelings about the subject. “I don't think writers should write a romance that doesn't fit their own comfort level just because they think it will ‘sell,’ ” says Roberts. “The story won't flow well if the author isn't one hundred percent committed to the direction. Also, why write something you don't want to write?”

But sex *is* a big deal for teens whether they are actively engaged or just thinking about it. Reading romance novels helps them explore their own feelings about the subject, even if it's just that first kiss. It's more than just the physical side that can help them sort things out. Using emotions, senses, and even non-verbal cues can deepen your characters and keep your readers turning the page, which is what all authors want.

**THE FINAL WORD ON LOVE**

As with most writing advice, that geared toward YA romance is no different. Read. Write. Repeat.

Boyce sums it up well. “The cliché advice we've all heard is to write the book you want to read, but I think it's especially true for romance. Don't write this if it's not your jam, if you don't love writing about the thrill of first crushes, first kisses, not to mention the drama of first heartbreak!” And, lastly, she says it best this way, “Many romance authors describe romance as the genre of hope. I love that. We need all the hope we can get these days!” Here's hoping your romance novel tugs at teens' heartstrings.

Books on writing romance recommended by Lisa Brown Roberts:

ROMANCING THE BEAT
by Gwen Hays

THE EMOTIONAL THESAURUS series
by Becca Puglisi and Angela Ackerman

SAVE THE CAT! WRITES A NOVEL
by Jessica Brody

WRITE YOUR NOVEL FROM THE MIDDLE
by James Scott Bell

FOR FURTHER READING (a few great teen romance novels to get you started):

SPIES, LIES, AND ALLIES: A LOVE STORY
by Lisa Brown Roberts

THAT BOY, A SMALL TOWN FRIENDS-to-LOVERS ROMANCE by Jillian Dodd

IF I FIX YOU by Abigail Johnson

NEVER ALWAYS SOMETIMES: A COMING-OF-AGE NOVEL by Adi Alsaid

TO ALL THE BOYS I'VE LOVED BEFORE
by Jenny Han

FAME, FATE AND FIRST KISS by Kasie West

ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES by Jennifer Niven

MAKE DESCRIPTION WORK FOR YOU

by Jane McBride

Experienced authors work description into their writing seemingly effortlessly. However, some of us struggle to find the right way to do it and occasionally become hopelessly bogged down in detailing our scenes to the detriment of writing riveting and suspense-building scenes.

Never is this more apparent than in the first chapters.

Chances are you've attended a writers' workshop or conference and heard an editor speak of the importance of first chapters. "If I'm not hooked by the first chapter, or even by the first three pages," she states, "I won't be making an offer on the book."

So what does this have to do with writing descriptions?

Everything. Description is flat if it adds nothing to character and plot. Readers want to be immersed in characters, not in a description of scenery, however captivating it is, however beautiful your prose. Gone are the days when an author could spend pages or even chapters describing the setting. Today's readers expect to be involved in the characters' struggles, their will to survive, their determination to reach their goals. If the description you are writing doesn't reveal character and advance the plot, take it out.

Let's break this down into a Mini Blueprint.

STEP 1: Involve your character(s).

ACTION: Make certain that your descriptions show how your character is affected. Consider the following:

Rushing water from the swollen river drowned out all other sounds. Majestic mountains loomed in the distance while ominous clouds scudded across the sky. Forest animals scurried for protection from the downpour of rain. Everything seemed to hold its breath in anticipation of the lightning and thunder that was sure to follow.

Aside from the fact that I abhor the phrase "majestic mountains" (talk about a cliché), what is wrong with this paragraph? Simple. It adds nothing to a scene. But why not? We've involved a couple of senses, giv-

en details of the setting. So why doesn't it work?

Because no character is involved. We're reading this scene from an omniscient point-of-view that provides no context of who the rushing water, mountains, clouds, animals, and rain is affecting.

Let's rewrite this paragraph from the viewpoint of the character, 17-year-old Hannah:

Hannah skidded to a halt in her run through the forest, listening for footsteps. But rushing water from the swollen river drowned out all other sounds. Forest animals scurried for cover from the downpour of rain. Just like her. Only she was running from the two men who had hijacked her car and her along with it. Everything seemed to hold its breath in anticipation of the lightning and thunder that was sure to come.

Hannah held her breath as well.

They were coming. She could feel it.

As you can see in this rewrite, we've included Hannah's reactions to the setting. Though many of the words remain the same, we've eliminated the "majestic mountains" because they don't affect Hannah's escape through the forest and detail the things that deepen her conflict of reaching her goal of freedom.

STEP 2: Don't let your character exist in a vacuum.

ACTION: Use the five senses to make your descriptions come alive. In the above example, Hannah is listening for the telltale sound of men's footsteps. What other senses could we employ? Perhaps the rain is stinging her face, the wind lashing at her from all directions. Could she smell the distinctive odors of a deep forest and instinctively slip deeper into the stands of thick trees?

STEP 3: Use description to beef up the conflict your character faces in reaching her goal.

ACTION: Be mean to your character by having elements of the description keep her from reaching her goal. Here, our character's goal is to escape. That is the only thing on her mind. She doesn't have time to

Make Description Work For You continued

describe the scenery even to herself; she thinks only of what she can use to reach her goal. Her whole being is centered on survival.

Example 1:

Ropes of vines hung from towering trees. The wind blew. Thick roots covered the forest floor, along with a bed of pine needles.

Example 2:

Vines hanging from towering trees obscured her vision. The wind slashed at her cheeks, stinging them with viscous stripes. Roots as thick as her arm protruded from the earth. Her toe caught on one, sending her face down to the unforgiving ground. She lay there, winded.

Get up. Move.

They're coming.

In the second example, we've used the same descriptive elements: vines, wind, and roots, but we've used them to impede our character's frantic rush through the ever darkening forest to escape her would-be captors.

STEP 4: Use description to establish the era, mood, and genre of your book.

ACTION: Employ details that portray the setting without telling.

In our story, we know the time is contemporary since her pursuers first carjacked her. What else could we use to establish the era, mood, and genre? The details we've singled out "wind slashing her cheeks," "roots thick as her arms protruded from the earth," etc. tell us that this is a suspense.

STEP 5: Use description to raise suspense.

ACTION: Find descriptors that will intrigue readers and raise more questions. In Hannah's story, we know that she is running from two men. The first question is, Will she escape them? The second question is, Will the setting (our description) help her or hinder her? It can do both.

Hannah stumbled her way through the forest, fighting the vines, the roots, everything that stood in the way of escape. Silently, she cursed the biting sting of the rain, the brutal wind, the thick trees. Think. Could she use them? Just as the raging river obscured the sound of the men's footsteps, it also covered her own.

She turned, ran toward the river. The closer to the water she was, the more difficult it would be for her pursuers to hear her. She wasn't a victim. She'd find a way out, and she would defeat the men intent on taking her.

Be smart.

The words chanted through her mind, a mantra of hope.

Here, we've raised questions. Will Hannah be smart enough to use the elements of the setting to aid in her escape? Or will she allow them to defeat her?

IN CONCLUSION

You aren't writing about Hannah and her struggle to elude the men chasing her, but perhaps you can use these five steps to beef up your own work-in-progress.

Ask yourself these questions when you come across passages of description in your story:

- Have I involved the character or have I only given a grocery list of adjectives?
- Have I employed the five senses to bring the setting alive and to show how it impacts the character?
- Have I used description to make things harder on the character and his quest to achieve his goal?
- Have I established the era, mood, and genre of my story?
- Have I used details that will intrigue the reader and raise questions in her mind?

If you are doing these things already, congratulations. You don't need this article. Keep up the good work. But if you find that your descriptions are only that, that they don't work in tandem with character and plot, you may need to rethink and rewrite them.



Each month, we will be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, editing, submitting, marketing, or self-publishing your book, check out free trial editions here: <https://writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints>

A Closer Look at



Poetry Friday

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Poetry Friday began in 2006 as the brainchild of Kelly Herold. It is a weekly blogging celebration of poetry for young people. Poetry lovers from around the globe share any and/or all of the following: their own poetry, bits and reviews of other people's poetry, lessons on how to write different forms of poetry and use poetic tools, and ideas about how to share poetry in classrooms.

How Does it Work?

Each week, a different Poetry Friday participant volunteers to host on their blog. Usually, late Thursday or early Friday morning, participants can start leaving links to their posts on the host's blog. Mary Lee Hahn issues a call-out for host volunteers every year and keeps the schedule posted here <http://kidlitosphere.org/poetry-friday/>. Everyone who is a reader, writer, and lover of poetry is welcome to participate. There are no other prerequisites or requirements. Just write a poetry-themed post on your own blog, share the link on the host's blog, and then begin clicking over to read, enjoy, and comment on everyone's poetry goodness.

I began participating in early 2018. It had been a few years since I had sold anything poetry related, and I had made a New Year's resolution to read and write more poetry that year. I had previously learned technical aspects of poetry in classrooms, but Poetry Friday is where I truly fell in love with words, images provoked, and meanings. This is where my passion for the art of poetry was sparked and developed. It's also where I found community and friendships founded and grounded in that same passion. Several of my poetry pals eagerly agreed to be interviewed for the rest of this article. I think their input will show you how extraordinary the community really is.

Since you began participating in Poetry Friday, how have you grown as a poet?

"I have taken risks, shared more, too. Rather than waiting for a poem to be publishable and published, shared only with readers of whichever publication, I now often share poems which are

more drafts, or which perhaps aren't right for any publication opportunities, but which need to be shared." *Sally Murphy*

It's been "learning new poetry forms and practicing them, learning new poems by "greats" that others share, learning to read and critique peers who write poetry, and learning about prompts, new books/collections, and events to attend." *Linda Mitchell*

"Not only has Poetry Friday helped me do the vital task of reading 'the best words in the best order' week after week, but it has also given me deadlines and pushed me to write." *Tabatha Yates*

"I write almost every day. I am a more observant person in the world. I look at things with an eye on how it can be a poem." *Jone Rush MacCulloch*

"It's a fantastic source of inspiration, support, and know-how, and is constantly challenging me to think about poetry—the reading, writing, and teaching of poetry—in fresh new ways. Also, the fact that the community embraces writers of any background and ability means that you will never feel out of place. You will always find friends to accompany you on your personal writing journey, even if you happen to live across the world from one another." *Michelle Heidenrich Barnes*

"Many ways! Being exposed to poems far out of my comfort zone is always a learning experience, whether I love the poems or not. And participating in poetry exercises and challenges has probably been the biggest spur to poetry growth." *Laura Purdie Salas*

"Immeasurably! It's proof that you get better at what you practice, and when you surround yourself by others doing the same work, you have fabulous teachers all around you." *Mary Lee Hahn*

Has your participation led to any professional opportunities?

"Yes, I was lucky enough to be part of the *Imperfect* anthology, a call from which came from the

Poetry Friday continued

editor, Tabatha Yates, because of our Poetry Friday connection.” *Sally Murphy*

“Participating in Poetry Friday has led to having poems published in the three volumes of *The Best of Today’s Little Ditty*, edited by Michelle H. Barnes. I also have a poem in *The Poetry Friday Anthology For Celebrations*, edited by Janet Wong and Sylvia Vardell.” *Jone Rush MaCulloch*

“Definitely! More than I can count! I’ve met people, conducted presentations together, even published together. It’s been incredible! But most of all, it’s such a lovely community of caring friends.” *Sylvia Vardell*

Was there ever a time that the community went above and beyond in support of you, whether for a personal or professional matter?

“I am always amazed how the PF community jumps in to cheer me on or, if I post about woes (as recently I shared my feelings about the terrible fires happening here in Australia) send lovely messages of empathy and support. During the fires, PF members checked up on me and also participated in a [fire relief] Twitter Auction I blogged about.” *Sally Murphy*

“I would say that the community is regularly very supportive on a personal level. I also love that I can turn to them when I am doing projects, such as my Poetry in the Halls printable and Fictional Favorites, and receive wonderful contributions.” *Tabatha Yates*

“Yes. When I had breast cancer, I received so many lovely messages, cards, and notes of support. It was absolutely beautiful and meant so much to me.” *Sylvia Vardell*

“I would not be where I am today as a children’s poet and blogger if it weren’t for the support of the Poetry Friday community. If you look at any one of *The Best of Today’s Little Ditty* anthologies, you’ll find about 50% of the contributing poets were active in Poetry Friday at one time or another. Those TLD books would not exist without Poetry Friday—not only because of the poetry contributions, but also because of the committee who helped select the poems, and because of the bloggers who brought attention to the books after publication. On a personal note, the Poetry Friday community has also been the source of many close friends, critique partners, and role models.” *Michelle Heidenrich Barnes*

“The outpouring of support and encouragement at tough times, like when my mom passed away in 2016, has been such a comfort. It’s an extremely empathetic community. When I travel for events, someone always goes out of their way to support

me. For example, I participated in the 2019 Denver Children’s Festival of Stories, and Linda Baie came to see me! In stressful and intimidating circumstances, it’s amazing how much a friendly and familiar (from online, anyway) face means. Jessica Bigi and Janet Clare have ordered signed copies of some of my books from my own indie bookseller. Joy Acey sent me a fabulous poetry t-shirt! Irene Latham pops postcards in the mail. Jone MacCulloch shares my work online. There are so many people reaching out in so many wonderful ways...and I’ve left out so much.” *Laura Purdie Salas*

Generosity and kindness is nothing new in kidlit, but if you love poetry for young people, and you’re looking for a like-minded community, look no further. You’ve found it. I’ll end with two more quotes, because I can’t say it better myself.

“It’s a hub bubbling over with poetry related material and inspiration! *Michelle Kogan*

“Every bit of it is lovely. Every bit.” *Laura Purdie Salas*

Go to <http://kidlitosphere.org/poetry-friday/> to see the list of bloggers who will be hosting Poetry Friday Roundups each week in 2020, as well as archived Roundups from 2019. If you have a poetry-related post on your blog that week, post the link on the host’s blog Thursday night or Friday morning to be included in that week’s Roundup. If you simply want to read a variety of poems, inspirations for poetry, or other prompts, visit the Roundup Friday afternoon and follow the links.

Here’s one great example from a recent Poetry Friday Roundup by author Sally Murphy:

<http://sallymurphy.com.au/2020/01/poetry-friday-the-roundup-is-here/>

LINKS TO CONTRIBUTOR’S BLOGS

Jone Rush MaCulloch <https://deowriter.wordpress.com/>

Sally Murphy <http://sallymurphy.com.au/>

Laura Purdie Salas <https://laurasalas.com/blog/>

Michelle Kogan <https://moreart4all.wordpress.com/posts/>

Tabatha Yates <https://tabathayeatts.blogspot.com/>

Michelle Heidenrich Barnes <https://michellehbarnes.blogspot.com/>

Linda Mitchell <http://awordedgewiselindamitchell.blogspot.com/>

Sylvia Vardell <http://poetryforchildren.blogspot.com/>

Mary Lee Hahn <http://readingyear.blogspot.com/>

Janice Scully <https://janicescully.com/>

Kimberly Hutmacher <https://kimberlyhutmacherwrites.blogspot.com/>

Super Kid Lit Writer



interview by PJ McIlvaine

Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith to end up exactly where you belong. Karla Valenti delayed pursuing her dreams of being a children's author until destiny took her overseas. She took another leap when she answered a writer call from a science association and came up with a proposal for a novel take on historic scientific figures. The proposal was accepted and subsequently a global fundraising campaign was launched which resulted in a publishing deal, thanks to—you'll never guess—a tweet! (*Marie Curie and the Power of Persistence*, illustrations by Annalisa Beghelli, Sourcebooks, April 2020, available for pre-order at Amazon and the first in a planned *My Super Science Heroes* book series). And because she persisted and persevered despite despair and rejection, Valenti now has a fantastic agent, three picture book deals (announcements pending) plus her passion project sold in a two-book deal at auction.



Now making her home in Chicago, Valenti keeps herself busy with lots of words, big ideas, and even bigger dreams. Active on social media, you can learn more about Valenti at www.karlavalenti.com, on Twitter (@KV_Writes), and Facebook (www.facebook.com/KarlaValentiAuthor).

PJ McILVAINE: Did you always aspire to be a

writer?

KARLA VALENTI: I have always been a writer, which is to say I have always dabbled in words. This has taken many shapes and forms, leading me to pursue a degree in philosophy, learn five languages, and work in a variety of careers (from English teacher to media assistant to debt finance attorney and, of course, kidlit writer!).

That said, I wasn't able to commit to being a children's book writer until after the birth of my third child when we embarked on a family adventure and moved to Germany. The terms of my visa didn't allow me to work in Germany, so I focused my energies on the dream I had not had the time or opportunity to pursue. What initially started as a six-month opportunity turned into a six-year journey that personally transformed us and helped me launch my career as an author.

PM: Where did the inspiration for your picture book series about scientific historical figures and their amazing stories come from?

KV: I was invited to submit a book proposal in response to an RFP launched by a wonderful science association in Europe. The Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) was looking for authors with whom to partner on a book project. The theme was

Marie Curie. At first, I was hesitant to submit anything since my writing is firmly planted in fiction and I had never written a nonfiction piece. However, it was an opportunity I didn't want to pass up. So I submitted a somewhat unconventional proposal: a series of books featuring scientists, but instead of focusing on their accomplishments, we would focus on the traits that helped them reach those accomplishments. These traits were, in a sense, their superpowers. Which made the scientists superheroes! The rest unfolded naturally from there.

By the way, the reason I wanted to focus on the traits (as opposed to the accomplishments) was two-fold: (1) there are already plenty of excellent books that highlight these scientists and their accomplishments and (2) many children are intimidated by science (and STEM more broadly). They think that one needs to be born a genius or brilliant at math/science/technology/engineering in order to succeed. By re-framing these success stories in terms of traits that all children embody I hoped to make STEM more accessible to young readers.

Back to the story about the story... I was delighted to know that my proposal was accepted, and began working with the MCAA folks to identify the right illustrator and launch the campaign. Initially, the book was going to be published as part of a global fundraising initiative. By the end of the month, not only had we exceeded our goal by 20%, but Sourcebooks had made us an offer for world rights.

Sourcebooks got wind of the project through a tweet about the fundraising campaign that was forwarded to one of their editors. I wish I knew who sent that tweet so I could thank them for connecting us! This has been an incredibly rewarding experience, and a true collaboration between the scientists, the writer, the illustrator, and a great publisher. I couldn't be more proud of the results of our work!

PM: Did you always envision it as a series?

KV: Yes. It was clear from the beginning that this had tremendous potential as a series. Not only did we have a vast line up of phenomenal scientists to cover, but dozens of superpowers/traits to showcase!

PM: Was your approach tackling a series different, then, let's say, a standalone book?

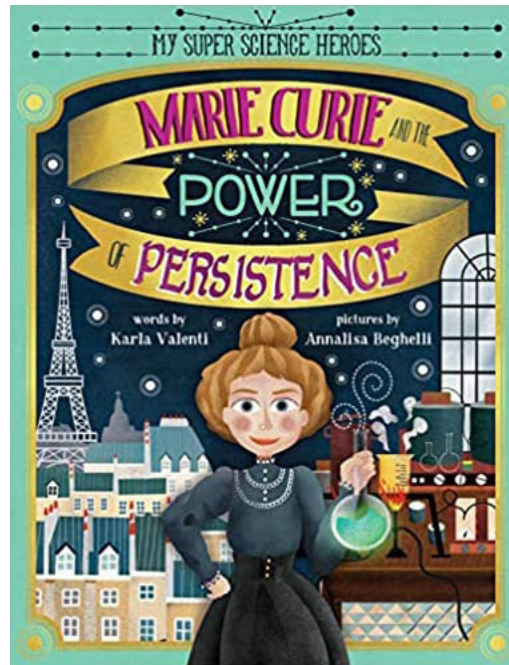
KV: My goal was for every story to stand on its own, but for all of them to share a cohesive thematic element—the superhero narrative. I started by doing a lot of research on superhero tropes and storytelling techniques. Then, I created a larger framework that would encompass the full series.

For example, Super Evil Nemesis is the big baddie that features in every story. However, each scientist battles their own minion based on their particular superpower and storyline. Also, Super Evil Nemesis has a single and one-dimensional goal (to take over the world). Each minion, however, has their own agenda providing a more robust antagonist for each scientist to battle.

Finally, I am incorporating “Easter eggs” and references to other *My Super Science Hero* stories in the books (for the astute readers to pick up).

PM: How did you market the book? Did you have one written out entirely and then just outline the others?

KV: The first scientist was selected by MCAA who wanted to launch the series with a book about Marie Curie. For the second book, we discussed a number of potential scientists, and I chose a handful that seemed interesting (again, not so much because of their accomplishments, but their defining traits). I spent some time researching their lives and trying to identify a common theme that hinted at what their superpower might be. Once I identified a trait that seemed particularly interesting, I began writing that story. The next book will be about Alan Turing, and



it promises to be a very enigmatic adventure.

PM: How is your series different than other books featuring noted figures?

KV: There are a lot of books that feature scientists and share the wonderful achievements of these great women and men. This goes to the what (what did they do?). However, my series sets out to define the how (how did those scientists accomplished what they did?). The how is equally relevant as the what. More importantly, it is something to which we can all relate (i.e., we may not all be Nobel-prize recipients, but we can all be persistent!)

PM: What do you like best, research or the actual nuts and bolts of writing?

KV: Definitely the writing and world building!

PM: How long does a first draft take you?

KV: The first draft is usually pretty quick. The revisions are what take a long time! For example, I recently sold a picture book that I had been revising for five years. And I have a novel I wrote in 6 weeks which I have been revising for almost ten years.

PM: Do you edit as you go along?

KV: I do, but not massively. Just small tweaks here and there. The big revisions happen after the first draft is down.

PM: Do you have beta readers or belong to a writer's group?

KV: YES! And if I had to give one piece of advice it would be to join a good critique group. Which is to say—a group of committed writers who are willing to give you candid and thorough feedback. I have learned a tremendous amount from my critique partners! They are a group of brilliant, creative, inspiring writers to whom I owe a great deal. Moreover, they have become a huge support network for me as I have struggled and evolved in my career as an author.

PM: Do you have an agent?

KV: I am represented by my dream agent Ammi-Joan Paquette at EMLA.

PM: Any tips or tricks for those in the querying stage? How do you deal with rejection?

KV: This is a very subjective business. Rejections are the norm. We need to build a tough skin and get used to staying in the game. Many times after many heartbreaks, I thought of throwing in the towel and just walking away. Fortunately, my amazing critique group kept me in the game each time (which is why it really helps to have a solid critique group to bolster you!).

Here's the thing, as writers, we put our heart on the line every time we send out our work. To be rejected can feel like a personal rebuke. It really isn't (though it still hurts). It's hard to talk about being rejected, but I think it's important to know that we're all in the same situation, feeling the same dismay. I have received more than 500 rejections, but at some point I stopped counting because it stopped mattering. Ironically, that's exactly when things started to pick up in my career.

I currently have five books in the pipeline: three picture books (April 2020, Jan 2021, and 2022); and two novels (my debut MG novel was recently acquired at auction resulting in a two-book deal). I never saw this coming, and I still can't believe that it's happened.

I had written a novel about ten years ago that I was completely in love with. The character in this story felt like my own child, and I had been trying for years to find a way to bring his story to life. But it's a tricky story to tell, fragile and subtle. And I was too close to the story to be able to do it justice. I knew I needed to let him go, to free him so I could see him better. But to do that, I needed to fall in love with another character.

Around this time, I went back home (to Mexico) for my brother's wedding. We had been living in Europe for many years and I hadn't been able to make it back to Mexico for ages. Being home was very emotional, and I was so completely swept away by the magic of this wonderful country. When we returned to Germany, I brought back a new cast of characters eager to tell a story based in Mexico.

I have a background in philosophy and all of my stories tend to explore philosophical concepts. This novel was to become a discourse on free will vs. de-

terminism packaged in a MG story format. I wrote the novel in about 4 months and then spent the rest of the year revising it. I had succeeded in releasing my first character, giving that story the room it needs to flourish, and I was now smitten with a new story.

Unfortunately, I was also in the dreaded "pit of despair" writers experience when we feel our career is going nowhere. I had been working for so long, writing, writing, writing, trying to sell my work. I had amassed hundreds of rejections, and I began to think that perhaps it was time to focus all that energy elsewhere. I ended up parting ways with my agent (which was a very difficult decision) and confessed to my critique partners that I was thinking of moving on to other endeavors.

"Not so fast!" one of my critique partners said (Becky Shillington, to be precise). "What about that new novel? It's incredible. You can't leave without giving it a shot." I can honestly say that if it weren't for Becky, I probably wouldn't have taken the next steps. However, Becky refused to let me walk away without trying to find a home for this new story. [PSA for all writers—get yourself a good critique partner. It can save your career!].

So, I used this novel to query, and I reached out to all of my dream agents. To my immense surprise, I received interest from eight agents and offers from five. It was such a privilege to be in this position, and such an incredibly difficult decision to make. I ended up signing with Ammi-Joan Paquette at EMLA.

Within months, Joan had sent the novel on submission. We received interest from four publishers and the novel went to auction. It was an unbelievable experience. Less than six months prior I had been ready to walk away from being a writer, and now my MG debut was being sought out by the top players in the kid lit space. Not only that, they wanted two books (a gesture of confidence for which I am immensely grateful). I think what surprised me the most was the depth of enthusiasm and genuine love the editors felt for this novel. After receiving so many rejections over the course of my career, I simply didn't believe it was possible.

The first novel is now scheduled for publication in 2021. The second book is due out in 2022.

There are a few takeaways or "morals of the story" that I would love to share:

- (1) Critique Partners are amazing and so important. Don't write anything without them.
- (2) This industry is incredibly subjective. Unlike other fields of work where we have clear metrics and parameters that help us define our progress, success in this industry is dependent on a number of entirely subjective factors, many of which are out of the control of the writer, the agent, or even the editor.
- (3) It's so easy to get discouraged and lose hope in this line of work. Know that you're not alone in feeling that way. And see (1) above.
- (4) I didn't get here on my own. The success of this book and where we hope it will end up, is the labor of many who edited, reviewed, revised, and advocated for the manuscript. My editor is brilliant and pushing me to take this story even further. I am deeply proud to be one part of this group.
- (5) Give your stories to breathe and learn to fall in love with new characters!

PM: What's the most surprising thing you've learned on your writing and publication journey?

KV: To expect the unexpected (both good and bad).

Andrew DeYoung

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



beaming books

interview by Lynne Marie

Andrew DeYoung is an award-winning author, former Editorial Director of Sparkhouse Media and currently, the Director of Product Development and Editorial Director of Beaming Books. His goal at Beaming Books is to publish high-quality children's books that help kids thrive in every part of who they are—emotionally, socially and spiritually.

LYNNE MARIE: Atop your [#MSWL](#) [Manuscript Wish List] you've listed picture books about the grand adventure of creativity—the risk, the reward and the importance of allowing oneself to fail and experiment. I love that you support failing as a component of success and would love more people to embrace failure as such so that little ones do not feel anger or resentment in doing so and learn that it's all part of the process. Can you give some examples of books that you feel successfully do this, including some Beaming Books titles?

ANDREW DeYOUNG: Absolutely! The classic in this category is probably Peter Reynolds' Creatrilogy trilogy, particularly my favorite book, *The Dot*. (Though I really love them all!) As for Beaming Books, we've got a couple forthcoming books that reflect my interest in this area: Roman Yaszko's *Where the Best Stories Hide*, and Sara Zarr's *Courageous Creativity*. Those books are pretty different from each other; one's a picture book, the other's a book of creativity advice for teens! But both share the perspective that creativity is a beautiful and life-giving part of life that should be for everybody, not just a select few "creative kids."

LM: As an editor, you seem inclined to purchase mostly picture books. Would you say that is your focus as an editor? Why, or why not?

AD: I love picture books, in part because my two

kids are both of the age where they love picture books.

LM: Please tell us a little bit about your debut, sci-fi young adult novel, *The Exo Project* and what inspired you to write it. And BTW, congratulations on this book winning the 2018 Minnesota Book Award!

AD: *The Exo Project* is about two teen characters—a boy who's launched across the galaxy in search of a planet to replace a dying Earth, and an alien girl who leads a matriarchal society in the planet he lands on. What puts these two characters in collision with each other, and what happens when they and their two civilizations meet, provides the plot of the novel. I enjoyed thought-provoking, otherworldly sci-fi when I was growing up, and I wanted to write a book like the ones I loved when I was a young reader!

LM: What do you like to see in a query letter? Do you read the manuscript first, or the query?

AD: In a query letter, I'm simply looking for the bare bones of the story or concept being pitched, and whether it might be a fit for me and for Beaming Books. I'm not necessarily judging the pitch on the level of "oh, that's a clever pitch" or "this pitch could be sharper"; I just need to understand what the project is, and understand whether it might be a fit for us or not. From there, if it checks my boxes, I'm moving on to the manuscript and getting a sense for the writing and how it's working for me.

LM: I am always impressed by Beaming Books' presence and participation in online Twitter events and their willingness to request manuscripts from these parties. What are the types of things do you look for in a Twitter Pitch? Is there anything you don't want to see in a Twitter Pitch?



Andrew DeYoung continued

AD: As with regular submissions, I'm just trying to look for stuff that I'm going to like and that will be a fit for Beaming Books. I probably value clarity in a pitch more than anything else; first things first, I have to understand what's being pitched. Of course, that's a lot harder with just 280 characters!

LM: How successful have these events proved to be for Beaming Books? Have you signed authors as a result of them?

AD: We have! LaRhonda Gardner Middlemiss's *I Love Me*, out in April, originally came to us through a pitch contest, as did a few others that we hope to announce soon!

LM: To further this discussion, please share a direct link to your current wishlist.

AD: Here it is:
<http://andrewdeyoung.com/manuscript-wish-list/>

LM: What does it take for a book to go to an acquisitions meeting at Beaming Books?

AD: The first thing is that someone on our team needs to love the book, whether that's me or one of my colleagues. There are a lot of steps to acquiring a book—getting colleagues in sales and marketing on board, gathering comp titles and thinking about sales potential. It's very difficult for a book to go through that process successfully without a champion. If we don't love something, often we have to let it go.

LM: When a project goes to acquisitions at Beaming Books that is loved or championed by one of the editors, what would be some of the reasons why it may still be turned down? What are some of the criteria by which the book is examined at this point?

AD: Most often, if a book doesn't make it through the acquisitions process, it's because we realize that even though we may love it, it's just not a fit for us or we don't think we can position it in the marketplace for success. When that happens, it's best to let a project go in the hope that it will make a better fit at another house.

LM: I recently saw that Beaming Books is looking for an editor. Are there plans for expansion?

AD: We recently hired a new Assistant Editor, so our editorial team has grown. We've grown our titles as well. Right now we're doing about 40-50 titles/year, and we need our dedicated editorial team—

plus a lot of great submissions—to keep up that pace!

LM: Please describe what you feel makes a Beaming Books book different from other books and how one might try and ascertain whether their book is right for Beaming Books (apart from buying Beaming Books titles and reading them).

AD: Yes, definitely read our books! Beyond that, I'd say that our tagline "Helping kids thrive" is really a great description of what we want our books to do. If you have a book that tackles some aspect of what helps kids thrive, and you approach it in an artful, not overly preachy way—that's a book that could be a fit for us.

LM: Recently Beaming Book has adopted an Agented Only policy, what has informed the choice to switch over to this policy?

AD: It's all about time! We were starting to get so many submissions that we were overwhelmed and couldn't reply to them all in an effective way. Taking submissions from agents only really helps manage our time and allows us to acquire new books while also having time to actually make the books. But, if you're not agented, never fear—we do participate in pitch contests, as said earlier, and we'll sometimes open our submissions to unagented authors for a limited time. Follow Beaming Books on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) to hear any announcements for when that happens.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

As mentioned, Beaming Books only reviews agented submissions. However, Andrew DeYoung has offered CBI subscribers an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity to send a query for Board Book, Picture Book, Chapter Book or Middle Grade fiction, and nonfiction concepts for readers ages 0-12, until **March 31, 2020**. Each manuscript query should include the title, target age range, pitch (1-5 sentences that describe the book's hook and give a sense of the plot or nonfiction focus), author's name and email contact information and be sent with the subject line "**CBI ANDREW DEYOUNG MARCH SPOTLIGHT: Title/Your Name**" to submissions@beamingbooks.com. Do not include sample pages or chapters with your query.

Only one query per person, please. Note that he will only respond to queries that he is interested in pursuing. If you don't hear back by June 15, you can assume it is a pass this time around.

Exercises for BUILDING CHARACTER

by Jane McBride

I have been writing professionally for almost 40 years. That's four decades, 38 books, and hundreds of short stories and articles, and I'm still trying to get it right.

During those decades, I've attended numerous conferences, workshops, and classes where characterization is addressed. Exercises are frequently given to learn how to create memorable characters. (For me, characters come first and plot grows out of them.)

I'd like to share some of those exercises with you here.

Treat your characters like an onion. What happens when you peel back the layers of an onion? The first few layers come off easily, but the more layers you peel, the harder it becomes to get to the inner core. Some writers compare this to taking off veils. Imagine an exotic dancer wearing many veils. Each time she removes one, you see a bit more of her. For our purposes here, we'll stick with the onion analogy. Your characters have layers just like onions do. Those outer layers are only the surface and peel back easily; you must continue to peel each layer to reveal what is truly important. You might compare the first layer to the most superficial part of character: appearance. This includes hair and eye color, height, any distinguishing characteristics like a boy whose face seems to be one big freckle. What might come next? What about the character's place in his family? Is he the first child, the middle, or the baby? Or perhaps he is an only child. Peel back another layer and discover what the status of his family is. Are his parents together or are they divorced? Does he live with his mom or his dad? What's his relationship with a step-parent if that's the case? Now we're getting somewhere. Another layer might reveal his goals. Does he hope to play junior varsity football if he's a freshman in high school? Does he want

to make the National Honor Society? Yet another layer can expose his biggest fears. You get the idea. With each layer, you delve deeper into your character. You may not use all the information you discover about him, but it will help you flesh the character out, to know what his reaction will be to certain situations and how he is likely to react when confronted with a new challenge.

EXERCISE: Give your character 10 layers and write down what you discover about him in each layer. Be specific.

Interview your characters. Over the years, I've conducted several interviews for articles for various publications. People like to talk about themselves. Your characters are no different. Ask easy questions at first, then move on to the thornier questions like "How did you feel when your father abandoned your family?" Mimic a hard-hitting television journalist and ask difficult questions.

EXERCISE: Write down the character's responses to your questions. Don't rely on your memory. Remember: this is an interview and you need to get the details right.

Hold conversations with your characters. Do you talk to your characters? You should. Do your characters talk back to you? I hope so. My husband tells friends that I talk with my characters and then write down what they say. He's exactly right. Because my books are character-driven, I allow the characters to direct what's going to happen next. (Sometimes I do have to rein them in if they go off on a tangent.) I can only do that if I talk with them and listen to them. Talking with your characters is one of the best ways to understand them. Talk with the MC of your work-in-progress about why she's acting as she is if she's throwing a tantrum because her cousin is coming to visit. You may learn that she and her cousin had a big fight

Building Character continued

the last time they saw each other. Does your seven-year-old MC of an easy-reader book resent having her room taken over by her grandmother when she comes to live with the family? Sympathize with her in being displaced to the family room sofa and having no privacy. Asking questions is fine, but be prepared to just listen.

EXERCISE: As much as possible, record your conversation with the character by writing down what she “tells” you. It can help to write down your responses to her revelations as well. You are on a journey of discovery and need to understand your feelings about your character as well as her feelings about himself.

Have your characters write letters to each other or to you. What would your character tell you in a letter? Would she complain about her parents? What about her siblings? Would she also complain about them? Maybe she will share her greatest dream or her most embarrassing moment. What would she tell her parents if she were to write to them? Would she express her gratitude to them for all that they do for her? Or would she give them a list of things they’re doing wrong. (When they were young, my children would definitely choose the latter!)

EXERCISE: Have your character write you a letter. You can do this on a computer, but I suggest hand-writing it. Different feelings can arise when you are actually writing something out.

Throw your MC into the deep end of the pool and see how she reacts. To do this, you must know what and whom your character fears. Is he afraid of the class mean girl, who gets pleasure from tormenting your MC? Put him in a situation where he has to spend time with that girl. Maybe they are assigned to work on a science project together. Does your character find the courage to stand up to the girl or does he ask to be reassigned? What if your seventeen-year-old character is deathly afraid of water but must find the courage to save his little brother on a family camping trip when his brother is swept into the river? Is your character willing to overcome his darkest fears and risk his own life to save his brother?

EXERCISE: Determine your MC’s greatest fear and then devise a situation where he must confront it. Chances are you won’t use this in your actual sto-

ry, but it will help you understand your character more, what he can and cannot do, how he reacts under pressure, how he finds the courage (or doesn’t find it) to conquer his fears.

Spend thirty minutes describing someone you know. This can be a family member, a friend, a co-worker, a church member, etc.

EXERCISE: Write how they treat others and how others treat them. Write how they respond to certain situations. Write how they act around “important” people and how they act around people who aren’t important. Do they act differently? Write how they present themselves in public.

Spend another thirty minutes describing yourself.

EXERCISE: Use the same things as above and then go deeper. Be honest, even brutally so. After all, no one else will see this but you. Write about your greatest fears, your most deeply held beliefs. Write how you would act if you weren’t afraid of certain things. I sometimes ask myself what I would be like if I were more outgoing and less reserved. Describe yourself so that someone who doesn’t know you would recognize you in an instant.

Ask “why?” You’ve now done several exercises on your protagonist, and discovered what pushes her buttons, what makes her uncomfortable or afraid or embarrassed. Now ask her why. Discovering your character’s motivations for her actions, as well as the reasons for her reactions, will give you plenty of ways to raise the tension in your story.

EXERCISE: List any of your character’s dreams, fears, phobias, desires, annoyances, aspirations and challenges you’ve uncovered in the previous exercises. One by one, ask your character why she feels this way. Record her answers in first person, in her voice.