

Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  May 2020

30th Anniversary Edition



ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:



SIMON & SCHUSTER
Books for Young Readers

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Children's Book Insider makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses and literary agents before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers or agents with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. All "At Presstime" listings are current at the time of initial publication. Members are urged to verify listings past the month of publication.

At Presstime:

Publisher Seeks Teen Romance with Paranormal Twist

Entangled Teen Crave is an imprint of Entangled Publishing that features engaging first-love stories with teen characters that also have a paranormal element (as in the Twilight series). Looking for sci-fi, paranormal, fantasy, dystopian, steampunk, biopunk, and cyberpunk romances featuring characters that are 16-18 years old, and told from a uniquely teen point of view. Manuscripts should be 45,000-65,000 words in length, with at least one strong primary trope and two more secondary tropes (examples of tropes: falling for the boy/girl next door, ugly duckling, opposites attract, wrong side of the tracks, best friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, mistaken identity, etc.) Stories must follow the traditional romance category story arc and be focused on the romance. High conflict and high tension are a must. Manuscripts should be written with dual points of view (hero/heroine), in either first or third person. Diverse characters are welcomed and encouraged. Romances can be male/female, male/male, female/female, or any other romance between two people. Sex is allowed in the stories, but nothing graphic. The tone can be anything from light and funny to heavy and dark, or a combination of both. Please refer to these pop culture teen romances as guides: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Teen Wolf*, *Smallville*, *Roswell*.

Submit the entire manuscript with synopsis on Entangled's Submittable site at this link:

<https://entangledpublishing.submittable.com/submit/31406/teen-crave>

Entangled Publisher Liz Pelleiter is also looking for #ownvoices authors of color writing young adult, new adult or adult romance or mainstream thrillers that would fit into one of Entangled's imprints. Study the company's imprints at <https://entangledpublishing.com/>, and then submit your #ownvoices manuscript for any imprint through this Submittable link: <https://entangledpublishing.submittable.com/submit/135265/call-for-ownvoices-by-liz-pelleiter>

Current Calls for Magazine Submissions from Cricket Media

Cricket Media publishes a variety of children's magazines for different ages. Here are current calls for submissions from several publications. **All magazines have a submission deadline of June 15, 2020.**

Babybug (for babies and toddlers) seeks poetry (up to 8 lines), action rhymes, finger plays, and simple stories (up to six sentences) on two themes: **Beep-Beep! Vroom-Vroom!** (all kinds of vehicles, whether they travel by land, sea or air); and **Breezy Summer** (a celebration of summertime). All content should be rhythmic (though not necessarily rhyming), playful, and the type of writing that toddlers want to have read over and over.

Ladybug (for ages 3-6) seeks short stories (up to 800 words), poetry (up to 20 lines), rebus stories, and songs with lively writing that begs to be read aloud, as well as playfulness, humor, and lyricism. Two upcoming themes: **Making Make Believe** (work with an imaginative or magical twist); and **Family Life** (stories about the personal or cultural traditions that make each family special: celebrating holidays, passing down jokes and stories, annual scavenger hunts, favorite trips, etc.)

Spider (for ages 6-9) seeks word games, language activities, riddles, puzzles, poems (up to 20 lines), riddles, short stories and plays (300-1000 words, plays should have 2-6 characters) and nonfiction (up to 800 words). Games and activities should be 1-2 pages long and appropriate for newly independent readers. Two upcoming themes: **Word-play** (new twists on crosswords, riddles, hidden words, and secret codes—foreign languages welcome— as well as poems and stories that incorporate wordplay, puns, and riddles, or otherwise play with the endless possibilities of language and meaning); and **Get a Move On!** (movement and activity, from sports, dancing, walking in the woods, or riding a bike around the block. Wants to see diverse, modern kids engaged in group play, solo activities, family trips, and games with friends.)

All submissions must be made through Submittable. Click this link for more details and to submit to all magazines: bit.ly/CricketMediaCalls

New Visions Award Open to Middle Grade and YA Submissions

Tu Books, the middle grade and young adult imprint of Lee & Low Books, is sponsoring the eighth annual New Visions Award for a middle grade or young adult novel by a writer of color or a Native/Indigenous writer. The Award winner receives a cash prize of \$2,000 and a standard publication contract, including basic advance and royalties for a first time author. An Honor Award winner receives a \$1000 cash prize.

The contest is open to writers of color and Native nations who are residents of the United States and who have not previously had a middle grade or young adult novel published. Only unagented manuscripts will be accepted. Work that has been published in its entirety in any format (including online and self-publishing as well as other countries) is not eligible.

Manuscripts should address the needs of children and teens of color and Native nations by providing stories with which they can identify and relate, and which promote a greater understanding of one another. Themes relating to LGBTQ+ topics or disabilities may also be included. Submissions may be any fictional genre novels, narrative nonfiction or graphic novels for children ages 8 to 12 (up to 75,000 words) or young adults ages 12 to 18 (up to 95,000 words). Novels in verse are also welcome. Particularly interested in literary fantasy and science fiction, but also welcome contemporary, historical, mystery, suspense and genre fusions. Graphic novel scripts in those categories are also welcome (up to 150 scripted pages with 6-10 pages of final art samples). Submissions should include a synopsis of the story plus the first five chapters, accompanied by a cover letter that includes the author's name, address, phone number, email address, brief biographical note, relevant cultural and ethnic information, how the author heard about the award, and publication history, if any. Do not send the entire manuscript. For graphic novels, include the equivalent of 24-30 scripted pages and 6-10 pages of final art samples and optional character sketches in PDF format only if you are an author/illustrator.

All submissions go through Submittable at <https://tubooks.submittable.com/submit> in the New Visions Award category. You will receive a confirmation email stating your submission was received. Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this award. Submissions will be accepted through August 31, 2020. The winners will be notified by April 1, 2021. For more information, go to <https://www.leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-visions-award>

Publisher Seeks Submissions for All Ages in a Variety of Areas

Sterling Children's Books publishes fiction and nonfiction, including classics, joke books, novelty formats, as well as books for babies and toddlers. Their Flash Kids imprint publishes workbooks and flash cards for pre-school, elementary, and middle school students in essential curriculum areas such as reading, math, writing, test preparation, and much more. Categories of interest include beginning readers, history & biography, crafts & hobbies, humor, holidays, science & nature, puzzles, games & activities, as well as general fiction for picture book, middle grade and young adult readers. Study recent titles at <https://www.sterlingpublishing.com/> to see recent titles. Submission packets should include a cover letter with a synopsis of the plot (or overview of the topic for nonfiction), an outline (for nonfiction) and sample chapter for anything longer than a picture book. For picture books, send a cover letter and the entire manuscript. Include copies of sample illustrations if you are also an illustrator. Submissions should be mailed and sent to the attention of the appropriate editor (i.e. "Puzzle Editor" or "Middle Grade Fiction Editor"), Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. 1166 Avenue of the Americas, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10036. If you'd like submission materials returned, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Responds to all submissions, but it may take several months to get a response. Does not require exclusive submissions, but please contact Sterling if you receive an offer of publication elsewhere while your manuscript is still under consideration by calling (212) 532-7160. Please do NOT call this number to check on the status of your submission.

Counting Down to 30: It's Here!

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader,

Thirty years ago this month, the first issue of *Children's Book Insider* rolled off the presses. Though that inaugural issue—eight pages of black type on cream-colored paper—looked very different from the electronic, full-color, 23-page ezine you're reading now, the framework was the same: At Presstime market listings, articles on writing techniques, analysis of mentor texts, an explanation of how (and how much) authors get paid, a rundown of how to find and work with a literary agent. We were gambling on the hunch that aspiring children's book writers wanted a concise, affordable source of information on crafting quality books for kids and navigating the often confusing publishing industry. We had no idea if it would fly.

But Walter Summers did. Shortly before publishing our May 1990 issue, I'd taken out a small ad in *Writer's Digest* magazine. In the second week of May, a check arrived for \$30 for a year's subscription. We had our first customer! Jon said I should frame the check; I needed to pay the printer, so I cashed it. But now we were all in—Walter had paid for 12 issues, and he was going to get them.

For the first five years of CBI, Jon and I had other jobs (he owned a public relations company; I was a literary agent and then a freelance editor), so the newsletter was created on weekends and evenings late into the night. Back then, I wrote every word of each issue (I am *so* grateful for the talented contributors we have today). Until I could afford to invest in a desktop publishing program I drafted the articles on my computer using Word Perfect, then printed and glued them to layout boards before dropping the issue at the copy shop. Jon and I printed out mailing labels organized by zip code, folded and stapled the newsletters in our living room, then sorted them into rubber-banded bulk mail categories and hauled them to the post office. Any addresses that didn't fall within the bulk mail bundles had to be individually stamped. You know those books of self-adhesive postage stamps we take for granted today? They didn't exist in 1990. If you were an early subscriber who received a newsletter with a stamp, it just may have been licked by our dog.

1990 was a year before the World Wide Web was publically available; Facebook was still 14 years away. But Jon was a social media visionary, and in those early years he delved into the new online communities of AOL and CompuServe, posting articles on each platform's children's writing forums. Our first website appeared in 1995 with the URL <http://www.mindspring.com/~cbi>. Jon taught himself HTML code to pull that off—which means I never have to learn how to program anything—and also created The Big Yellow Board, the first online children's writing message board named after its lined yellow notepaper background. We passed on management of that message board years ago to other people; it's morphed and been renamed, but still exists today.

Anyone who has started a business will tell you that the early years are tough. There's often a point where you ask, Is this worth it? I'm not going to lie—we had a few of those moments. But every time we hit a bump in the road, we'd take a breath, reassess, and remind ourselves why we were doing this. It always boiled down to two reasons:

Reason 1: Kids absolutely deserve the best books possible. They deserve to laugh, to be challenged, to find a connection, to feel seen. They deserve books that are thoughtful, well-crafted and beautiful. And they deserve creators of those books who take their calling seriously.

Reason 2: The dream of creating excellent books for children should be within reach of anyone who wants it. If you're willing to put in the time, and do the work, you should have the opportunity to change a child's life with your books.

If we were truly committed to Reason 1, then we had to stand behind Reason 2, and help make your journey from aspiring to published author as easy as possible.

That philosophy has fueled our belief in what we do, but what's really kept our passion for our work alive is you, our subscribers. We've come to know you over the years. You've allowed us to celebrate your successes and commiserate over your setbacks. You've loyally attended our online and in-person events. You've put your faith in our products, whether it's subscribing to CBI or purchasing one of our Writing Blueprints. You've talked about us to your writing friends. We know your names, and we're invested in your writing journey. I would have never predicted back in May 1990 that our family would grow into thousands of people all over the world. But that's exactly what you are—an extraordinary writing family.

And you know what? You've done it! You've published books, written articles, visited classrooms. You've donated publishing profits to charitable causes, presented at conferences, read your books online for free. You've created incredible work and put it out into the world. We're so proud of you, and honored to have been a part of your journey.

If you're new to the CBI family, welcome. If you've been with us for years, thank you. I hope you're all fired up to keep writing, because we believe in you and we're not going anywhere.

And Walter...thanks for that vote of confidence 30 years ago. You made us believe this idea had wings.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

PS: So much has changed in publishing, and the world, in these 30 years. But as I look back over those early issues of CBI, I am reminded that what's truly important remains constant. What was good writing then is good writing now. Expert advice from editors, agents and published authors, even decades old, still rings true. A well-crafted children's book is, and has always been, a true artistic achievement. In honor of these constant truths, we'll be reprinting select timeless articles from CBI's early years in the newsletter over the next 12 months. Enjoy!

WRITING WORKSHOP: PICTURE BOOKS

Creating Stories for Children Age 4-7

It's a common misconception that picture books are easy to create. The audience is young (and presumably easier to please) and the stories are short. The truth, in fact, is that writing a strong picture book offers many problems and challenges for burgeoning authors.

Children do not believe everything they are told in books. However, young children are willing to suspend their disbelief if the story is good enough. As long as the characters are convincing, they can be anything from elves to personified toys. And as long as the characters are occupied with the same concerns as the reader, the child will remain involved in the story.

Because picture books have short text (average length is 32 pages) any flaw in plot is glaring. One badly written picture book paragraph can be the equivalent of 10 poorly written pages in an adult novel. To avoid problems that commonly trip up new authors, keep these key points in mind when developing your story:

- *There must be a thread of logic running through the plot, regardless of content.* If your main character is a girl who has shrunk to the size of a mouse, don't have her pick up an apple and put it in her pocket.
- *Once you develop a character, keep that character consistent.* If Max the Bat is afraid of the dark on page 1, don't have him enter a cave on page 4 without him feeling some trepidation.
- *Children will lose interest in one-dimensional characters.* Give your characters humanistic traits a child will care about; humor, emotions, physical description, even if they're animals.
- *Don't sacrifice the story for plot.* If a picture book plot is too complex, the characters will simply exist to move from point A to B, without any story development in between. The plot should unfold as a result of the characters' personalities and the setting of the story, rather than manipulating the characters to fit the plot.
- *Plots should rely mainly on action and emotion, rather than intellectualization.* Large blocks of dialogue between characters (unless it's very funny) will slow the story down. *Keep in mind:* The illustrator must be able to create a new picture for each page, so the characters have to move around.
- *Minimal wording has best effect.* Use concrete imagery and eliminate unnecessary words. It is the job of the illustrator to read between the lines and expand upon your text.

Best way to test your story: Before sending it to an editor have someone else read the story to a child. Watch the child's reactions; if he or she fidgets or appears distracted, you haven't held the child's attention. Also, have an adult read your book, but don't explain the story beforehand. Flaws are more evident to a reader if he or she doesn't know what to expect.

NEXT MONTH: For Illustrators—Submitting Your Portfolio



Children's Book
INSIDER

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SPECIAL REPORT: *An Interview With Author Judith Viorst*

Best selling author Judith Viorst planned her future when she was nine years old. "I was going to be a fabulous writer," she has said, "with my name on the front of the book and my picture on the back." She started by writing poems such as: "I wonder how the angels look/ And what they do and say?/ They took my Mom and Daddy/ And carried them away." Her parents, both still alive, were annoyed.

This dream persevered year after year, and got more specific. She'd go to New York and get a job in a publishing house, and "in a minute they'd turn around and say, 'My God, there's this incredibly talented person, right in this room.'"

Reality was quick to bring her down to earth. Looking for her first job after graduating from Rutgers University, Judith felt intimidated. "I didn't know shorthand or typing, and everybody was brilliant and gorgeous and had a Phi Beta Kappa key. I worked as a model in the garment district. I modeled waterproof shantung dresses, and buyers would throw water at me to show it didn't stain. I used to go to my assignments on Seventh Avenue with my little hat box and inside the hat box was *The Brothers Karamazov*, and I would sit in the dressing room reading and making the silent statement—"I'm not an ordinary model, I'm an intellectual."

Judith did land a job as a children's editor at William Morrow Junior Books, though no one discovered her incredible hidden talent. She eventually married journalist Milton Viorst and moved to Washington DC. Amid her relentless pursuit of a publishing career, Judith worked as an editor of science newsletters and a freelance writer for several major magazines. Finally her adult poetry was published in a slim volume called *The Village Square*, and though the first edition sold out, the publisher decided not to print a second. Her next adult book, *It's Hard to Be Hip Over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life*, was a big success. Judith's career was off and running.

Judith's most popular children's book is *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, which has had 32 hardcover printings in this country alone, outnumbering her best selling adult book *Necessary Losses*, which spent 7 weeks on The New York Times Best Seller List. Her other children's books include: *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, which deals with the death of a pet; *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins or Things*, about a child's fear of the dark; *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday*, about a child's inability to save money; and *I'll Fix Anthony*, which gives sibling rivalry a new

meaning. Judith has a new children's book, *Earrings*, coming out this September from Atheneum.

Recently, CBI spoke with Judith Viorst about writing for children.

CBI: *How did your first book come about?*

JV: The first actual books I wrote were science books for children. I was working at Science Services in Washington as an editor and they needed a book written about outer space and wanted me to do it. I knew nothing about space. I was heartbroken because I had been trying to get published for so long, and here I finally had an opportunity and they asked me to write about space! I came home crying to my husband "I don't know anything about space, I don't even know where that it." He said take the job and we'll find out where space is. I discovered if you're a good researcher you can write about anything.

CBI: *Your adult books seem to be made up of events in your own life. Are your children's books the same?*

JV: I don't write autobiographies; my adult books are observations about my life and other people's lives. I give talks around the country about writing for adults and children, and I argue that we're dealing with exactly the same topics in each kind of book. Dreams, love, friendship, fears. Children's books are just understanding those issues with a younger voice.

CBI: *Do you think having children of your own is necessary to be able to write children's books?*

JV: I think it's helpful but not necessary. I think what you're really tapping into is the child within yourself. It's that which provides the voice in my stories. The material comes from the details of life, and remembering what it's like to be a child.

CBI: *Are the characters in your children's books based on your three sons?*

JV: In a broad sense. I often use their names, and some of the books were inspired by specific things that were going on in my household. Alexander had a propensity for more than his share of bad days. And Nicholas' fear of monsters got me writing *My Mama Says*.

CBI: *Do children's books have an obligation to teach children or help them cope with an issue in their lives?*

JV: I wouldn't put it that way. I'd like to think that books help children see things in a different way—to look at nature differently, to understand how the world works, to understand a friend in a new way. They also validate a child's feelings and let the child know other people

can feel the same way. Books help children realize if they have naughty thoughts or feelings that they're part of a community that encompasses good stuff and bad stuff.

When one of my children was a teenager I recommended *Catcher in the Rye* for him to read. After he read it he said, "You can't possibly understand what this means." He thought it had been written just for him, and I never would have felt the same way. He thought I never could appreciate those feelings.

CBI: *You've worked with some impressive illustrators: Kay Chorao, Arnold Lobel, Erik Bleguad, Ray Cruz. What's it like to have someone else illustrate your work?*

JV: I've been thrilled with the illustrators and I pick them very carefully. I look at their work and if that particular artist's style goes along with the story I've written. Once I get the artist I want I keep my hands off the project. I have a vision of what I'd like to see but very often the artist will expand upon the text in ways I didn't think of. Kay Chorao added the last picture in *My Mama Says*, where the ghost turns into the mother. It was a great idea that hadn't occurred to me.

I always see sketches of the book and check for accuracy—like making sure the bedspread matches from one page to the next. Once in a while I'll say "These two pictures seem awfully close to each other," but I just make suggestions. Nothing's written in stone.

CBI: *Your first two books were published by Harper & Row, and since then you've been published by Atheneum. Do you have an allegiance to an editor there?*

JV: I was on the Today Show, pregnant with Alexander, promoting my first book of poems, and an editor from Harper & Row called me and asked if I would be interested in writing a children's book. I said "Would I ever!" So I worked with Charlotte Zolotow on *Sunday Morning and I'll Fix Anthony*. The third book I proposed was *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. I knew I was onto something but I was a little early. Death had not become a hot topic yet in children's books. Three other publishers turned it down and then Jean Karl at Atheneum took it immediately. Then I was a little confused about my loyalties because Harper & Row had started me and I felt I owed them one more shot. I offered them *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* and they turned it down. Atheneum published that and I've never had a book that has sold so many copies. They reprint it as fast as they can sell it. Jonathan Lanman has been my editor at Atheneum since Jean retired.

I've lived in the same house since 1971, have been married to the same man for 30 years, and I sort of like things to stay the same. I would be very happy to have settled in with one publishing house, one editor, and

lived happily ever after, but that's just not the way it is. My agent is Robert Lescher and he watches over me. He's really taken care of me, and is a real stable element in my life, along with my husband.

CBI: *You credit your husband with helping you to achieve success. Do you think it's important for a writer to have a close support system to be productive?*

JV: My husband was an established journalist when I started writing, and he became my Columbia School of Journalism. He's a terrific editor, and he helped me with the very simple mechanics of life; he helped with the children, did the dishes, called the repairman when something broke. I think it's important for a writer to have help with those things because writing itself is such a consuming job—especially if you're also working at another job to pay your bills.

CBI: *Could you comment on getting rejection letters?*

JV: You'll get a lot of them. If this is what you want to do, keep doing it. If you have to eat, find some way to eat. There are mornings, evenings, and weekends to write. Find some way to keep at it—I've been there.

CBI: *Do you have any advice for other people who want to write children's books?*

JV: The main thing is to steep yourself in children's books. People who think "Oh, it's children's books, I can operate with 1/5 of my mental capacity" are suddenly writing ooy, gooy prose which is patronizing and saccharine, and using language a child wouldn't be caught dead using. I think a writer should be familiar with children's books and with children, whether they have children or not, and plug into the child within themselves. Which, if they're being honest, is not some little thing with a halo.

Judith Viorst's success is a testimony to following her own advice. As one of her children once explained, "My father is a typewriter, and I think my mother is too."

NEXT MONTH: Knopf Associate Children's Editor Jonathan Schmidt explains how to write a cover letter.

~~SPECIAL OFFER FOR CBI READERS~~

~~A **Writer's Guide To A Children's Book Contract**, written by publishing attorney Mary Flower. This book contains vital information for children's book authors and illustrators on the publishing contract and negotiation techniques. **To order:** send \$15 plus \$1.50 postage and handling (NY State residents add appropriate sales tax) to **Children's Book Insider, Special Offer**, 80 Eighth Avenue, Suite 303, New York, NY 10011.~~

On **NOT** Being an Author

by Candice Ransom

Sometimes we inadvertently kill an idea before it's barely formed in our heads. We start to think format (picture book? chapter book? nonfiction?), where the market is at that moment, would our agent encourage the project. Even if we don't have those thoughts, we sit down to a blank screen, hands poised over keyboard . . . and, nothing. Have we started too soon? Should we outline, do research, ask writing buddies what they think, check comp titles on Amazon or at the library?

We're unconsciously setting an intention for the end product: a book we will be the author of. As children's writers, particularly within the last fifteen years, we're expected to be professional marketers (even with an agent), promoters, publicists, school visit presenters, and social media experts. Those "author" notions can sometimes drive a wedge between our fragile ideas and beginning the work.

Recently, I watched an online interview with Lynda Barry, a well-known cartoonist and creativity coach. Her Q&A focused on adults who claimed they couldn't draw. They believed they'd outgrown their inner artist. Adults are afraid of failing, Barry pointed out, of being judged. Didn't we all have a class "artist" in second or third grade and the rest of our elementary school years, the one student who was better in art than anyone else? We tell ourselves we'll never be as good as the class artist and that's the age most of us quit drawing.

Barry brought up how four-year-olds enter the creative process of storytelling. Young children sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil or crayons and just start drawing (at this age they can't write fast, or not at all). They make noises or talk to themselves as they create, a willing participant in their story.

Children don't fret over the end product; they're in it for the experience. They may not finish. They may walk away to go on to the next experience. An older child or an adult would wonder if their picture was

any good and what would they do with it after expending so much time and effort.

When I heard this, I remembered my child writer self. I never finished a single story, not because I was bored or lazy, but because I wanted to move on to another story (that I wouldn't finish either). In sixth grade, after I'd been writing stories for years, my best friend and I wrote a mystery novel. We passed the manuscript back and forth—she wrote a chapter, then I wrote the next chapter, and so on. We never discussed what would happen next. We never even commented on what the other wrote. When she handed me her new chapter, I read it and then plowed on, sometimes in an entirely different direction.

I still have that novel (it was my turn last when the school year ended). We never finished it. We didn't care about finishing or meaning or doing it "right." What mattered was the experience of writing a story together, that moment of immersion into this other world we'd created. I still recall how it felt. Joyful. Fun!

When was the last time we felt joyful in our work, or wrote something just for fun? If we begin our new project as an experience, not as a product, it will come to us with an open heart. Start your story the way a four-year-old starts drawing, by following your hands. Let yourself write nonsense at first. Don't call it free-writing or journaling, don't give it a label. Just write.

Soon you'll feel you are part of your idea and will become immersed in it. You'll fly along with it like Cinderella's coach racing to the ball. Experience your idea as something new and wonderful, not as something you're the author of. Before those "shoulds" and "musts" creep in, hiding behind your new idea, banish them by throwing the notion of process out the window.

Try not being an author with your next idea. Your inner four-year-old will cheer.



The Power of STRONG VERBS to Actively Promote and Sell Your Book

by Jane McBride

We all know the importance of using strong verbs in penning our books. We know to use specific verbs, such as *trudge* rather than *walk* to convey how a depressed or reluctant character might move from one place to another. What are other examples of specific verbs? *Pummeled* rather than *hit*. *Escape* rather than *run* away.

Strong verbs play another part in our writing as well. Using them in our blurbs, social media posts and blogs attract readers to our books and, if those verbs are used correctly, will give prospective readers a taste of what our books are about. I write romantic inspirational suspense and use verbs in my selling tools that evoke images of the flavor of my books. Someone who writes about the comedic trials of being in the fourth grade would use different verbs in his promotional efforts.

Where do we start using these verbs in our promotional efforts?

The Synopsis

The synopsis is the first selling tool, this time selling to an editor or catching the eye of an agent. With a sharply-defined number of words in a synopsis, every word counts. That means that verbs need to carry the action and show, rather than tell, what the characters are doing. Consider the difference between the following pairs of sentences.

When the bully hits Henry hard, he falls to the ground.
Yawn.

When the bully rams into Henry, he slams onto the ground. Better.

Carrie talks about her friend Sissy with malicious intent.

Carrie gossips about her friend Sissy.

The zombie walks quickly behind Willie.

The zombie stalks Willie.

Knowing she is going to fail the test, Sally constantly rubs her forehead in worry.

Knowing she is going to fail the test, Sally kneads her forehead.

Can you feel the difference in the choice of verbs? Did you also notice that we were able to take out adverbs (*hard, quickly, constantly*) and prepositional phrases (*with malicious intent* and *in worry*)?

Okay, you've sold your book (the synopsis has done its job and you've done yours by doing a bang-up job in writing it) and now you want to promote it. More and more publishers are requesting, even requiring, that their authors participate in promoting their books. For introverts, like me, the very idea of "hawking" your book in any way, shape, or form is off-putting, even terrifying. But you can take some of the sting and a lot of the fear out of it by doing what you do best: write.

Back Cover Copy

With more and more writers participating in their own promotional and marketing efforts, it pays to know how to write effective back cover copy. I've heard authors say, "Anybody can write back cover copy. It's only a few lines." Nothing could be further from the truth. Back cover copy may be the best method of catching a reader's interest as she picks up a book from an author she may not know and immediately turns it over to read that all-important back cover. Imagine you are writing a historical novel for the 'tween set about a 12-year-old

The Power of Strong Verbs... continued

girl and her little brother tagging along with a wagon train. Their parents have died of cholera, and the wagon master kindly agrees to allow them to stay with the wagon train provided they can keep up. What verbs would convey the time period and struggle the sister and brother are going through? Certainly they would not skip or saunter as they try to keep up with the wagons. What about saying “Kit and her brother scabble over rough terrain to keep pace with the oxen-pulled wagons. They scrap with the other kids for meager bites of food and for the right to sleep inside the protection of the wagon circle at night.” Did you notice the hard-hitting verbs in these sentences? Each evokes pictures of an unrelentingly hard life.

Blurbs

A blurb about your book—a one-to-three-sentence description of your book’s hook—is another chance to catch readers’ interest. Where do you use blurbs? Your editor might want one for the marketing team. If you’re self-published or traditionally published, you need a blurb for your website or just talking up your book when chatting with others. Blurbs are not just for written material; they also make great “elevator minutes” when you find yourself in a position to tell someone about your book. Does your blurb contain strong verbs that evoke the tone of the book? Or is it wishy-washy?

Author Newsletters

A writer friend sends out a charming newsletter every month about book releases, the “birth” of a book—how she came upon the idea for it, and why the book is special to her. Since she writes American west historical fiction, she uses verbs to evoke the era of the Old West. Horses don’t *run*; they *canter* or *gallop*. Characters, likewise, use verbs of the era. If you aren’t certain of when a word or phrase came into existence, look it up on. The last thing you want to use is a word that takes your reader out of the era.

Tweets

With word count in tweets so restricted, words need to do double and triple duty. Don’t let your eight-year-

old character just *fight* with the school bully. Have him *skirmish*, *tussle*, *brawl* or *scrap*. Make the verb suit the character.

Social Media Posts

Use these posts to keep your name and book title in the minds of potential readers. Suppose you’ve written a story about a child growing up in Chicago’s projects. He is fighting to stay out of gangs, to find enough to eat, to keep his little sister safe. His father has deserted, and his mother has all but abandoned her role as parent. Notice those two specific verbs: *deserted* and *abandoned*. Describe your young character’s actions and use equally specific verbs such as *scavenge*, *scrimp*, *forage*, *rummage*, *sift*, and *hunt*. These verbs convey the battle for survival he faces every hour of every day.

Art fact sheets

For the publisher for whom I’m currently writing, authors must fill out an extensive art fact sheet. In these packets, we not only describe the characters and plot, we must write an abbreviated version of the synopsis, one that the marketing department will use in the publishing house’s promotions. I spend a great deal of time coming up with the right words to describe my story, not an easy feat when I’m limited to a 100 words. Since I write suspense, I work to use words that portray the sense of danger and mystery in the story. I use words such as *escape*, *resist*, *tempt*, *evade*, *threaten*, *risk*, etc. I try to keep “to be” verbs to a minimum to suggest the sense of non-stop action and constant menace. The better I do my job in depicting the story through hard-hitting words, the better the art department can do its job in providing a great cover, memes, and other promotional material.

Verbs are among the most effective tools we have in our writers’ toolboxes. Use them to your advantage and make your writing shine with each choice. Know their power. Employ them to give panache, excitement, tenderness, and excitement to your work. You won’t be sorry.

AMANDA ISABEL RAMIREZ

Assistant Editor  Simon & Schuster

interview by Lynne Marie

AMANDA RAMIREZ is an Assistant Editor at Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers. She received an MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University in Creative Writing and gathered literary experience as a children's bookseller, a writer for news and pop culture outlets and as an editor at *The Literary Review*. Follow her on Twitter [@AmandaIsARam](https://twitter.com/AmandaIsARam)

LYNNE MARIE: As Simon & Schuster only accepts submissions from agented authors, we truly appreciate you accepting submissions from our readers and want to thank you for opening that window. In addition, with the world having “shut down” at the present time, I love that you are opening the door to the world by seeking more books set outside the US (as well as stories by Latinx and LGBTQ+ voices). What criteria would you want authors to fill when writing about these topics?

AMANDA RAMIREZ: When I'm looking for stories featuring marginalized characters, what I'm looking for is a story that authentically and thoughtfully captures an experience that is often overlooked or forgotten. I'm not too keen on stories that center solely on the marginalization of a character; I don't want the thing that makes them different to be the conflict of the narrative. What I'm hoping to find are stories about identity and choice and growth that are simply told through the lens of a marginalized voice. How are queer love stories different from heteronormative love stories? Or POC love stories? How is a coming of age experience different for a Latinx teenager, as opposed to a LGBTQ teen, or a disabled teen, or a teen who's all of the above? Even though these experiences are universal, the way these stories are told will differ from one young person to another, which is true across all stories because everyone is individual in that way—but there are perspectives that aren't being heard, and I'd love to be a champion of those voices, and I'd love to

provide fun, accessible escapes for readers who deserve to see themselves in these stories.

There isn't a specific criterion to writing diversely or championing diverse voices—there are no boxes to check. If you do it with heart and with passion and with care, then I'll know you've done your job as a writer.

LM: As my first interview during the pandemic, how do you feel your job and/or responsibilities have changed during the current situation? Has there been any decrease or increase of sales reported as a result? Please share any thoughts you are able to give.



AR: If we, as a society, are doing our job correctly (staying indoors, only going out if it's absolutely necessary, etc.), then we expect there to be a decline in book sales, of course. That's just what's going to happen because—and I can't overstate this enough—the handselling of a novel from a passionate and knowledgeable bookseller is paramount to the shelf life of a book. And a lot of titles aren't getting that kind of treatment right now because of the pandemic and the lack of in-store browsing. However,

that's not to say book sales are dramatically down. The amount of backlist titles that are being sold, for example, has only gone up because parents and teens are searching for ways to keep themselves busy and, in that search, they find books. It's a bit of a mixed bag.

As for how my responsibilities have changed, I wouldn't say much has. My job has stayed pretty much the same, probably credited to the fact that I could do so much of it from home in the first place. I don't need an office space to read submissions or edit titles or acquire new books. The only thing that's different is the lack of social interaction with my co-workers and the way other departments had to adapt their responsibilities, which in turn affects my job.

The biggest challenge has been maintaining productivity when my bed and my Nintendo Switch (*Animal Crossing*, anyone?) are literal feet away from me. My parents are working from home, too, and they're constantly distracting me. Creating an intentional routine and work-life balance has been the most difficult part. There's nothing really stopping me from hopping into my work email at 9pm on a Saturday anymore. I also always feel like I'm forgetting to do something, especially because we had to adapt all of our admin work too, which has been harder than keeping up with my editorial responsibilities.

LM: Certain editors have already reported a deluge of pandemic books in their inboxes and have asked that these not be sent. What do you feel about this obviously timely, but likely to be over-saturated topic?

AR: I can't say I've had a ton, though I have had some "end of the world" type submissions in the past few weeks that all come with the caveat that they're absolutely not about a pandemic or a literal end-of-the-world. I've always been a speculative reader and deeply enjoy the "what would you do if the world was about to end" angle of a story, which happens to be much more interesting in fiction than in real life. (For example: my "what would you do at the end of the world" narrative seems to revolve exclusively around taking too many naps and occasionally going out on to my porch for that sweet, sweet vitamin D.)

All that to say I, personally, think it's an interesting time for these stories, and they're all going to promote their own sort of conversation. Is it the right time? Is this the right story? Am I going to take the leap of putting a novel like this out into the world two years from now when we have no way of knowing what our society is going to be like then? There's a lot of uncertainty with them as a genre and—while I hesitate to say "trend," because that sounds crass in this situation—inboxes are going to be oversaturated with them in the way that inboxes become oversaturated with anything that's working or culturally relevant.

LM: I enjoyed your S&S bio in which you shared that you joined S&S "to much fanfare from your loud, Puerto Rican family." How would you say your background influences what you look for in a book? In theme? In character relationships?

AR: I didn't even realize until very recently that my background could inform the way I look at life. I was very adamant, growing up, that I be seen only as this

sort of homogeneous, vaguely human-shaped thing. I grew up in an almost exclusively POC community, so I was very good at code-switching, which didn't become apparent to me until I went to a predominantly white college. And that doesn't even take into account the class mechanics of my upbringing, but you're not here from my life story.

My childhood and my background inform how I approach character, and how I approach different writers. I always want to get into the nitty gritty of their little bubble of society, because I think it brings a much richer color to a story and more interest to a character as a whole.

In a much simpler vein, I simply... love big, loud, messy character relationships. In the most basic sense, I am always looking for the same two things—deep and meaningful relationships of all kinds that are felt through the lens of a character who hasn't been heard from before. I've always been the kind of person to surround herself with people, even if I wasn't directly interacting with them, because I love variety and I love people. I love found families, atypical family structures, sibling stories, parent-and-child relationships, girl gangs, the works—if it comes with a cast of eccentric characters, I'm in.

LM: What types of books are you currently looking for to supplement your current list? What are some MG, YA and graphic novels that you have worked on that you feel are best representative of the type of projects you are looking for? If you could choose five words that would capture cross-over between these, what would they be?

AR: I'm always looking for diverse, fun, commercial young adult fiction, middle grade fiction, and graphic novels. I love contemporary YA, fanciful middle grade adventures, and bold and gripping graphic novels. I'm also trying to add more nonfiction to my list! In that vein, I definitely steer away from periods of time or biographies—I'm more of a *How Does It Work* and a *How It Came to Be* kind of reader.

I tend to say I'm not a great match for picture books, chapter books, or anthologies, and I generally stand by that, but occasionally I'll consider something in those formats. However, it has to be special and clearly catered toward my interests, which I'm always very vocal about, so I can't imagine it'd be hard to find a good fit. For picture books in particular, I'm much more interested in author / illustrators as opposed to just text.

Amanda Ramirez continued

Most of my own titles haven't come out yet, but I'd definitely look toward *Pepper's Rules for Secret Sleuthing* by Briana McDonald (Sept 2020) for what I gravitate toward in middle grade. *Fake Blood* by Whitney Gardner is also a good indication of my tastes, and I happen to be working with Whitney on her next graphic novel, *Long Distance* (June 2021). For young adult and graphic novels, I love rom-coms, romps of all kinds, and stories that are speculative and make you think; Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End*, Mindy McGinnis' *The Female of the Species*, Rainbow Rowell's *Pumpkinheads*, and Jen Wang's *The Prince and the Dressmaker* are some of my favorites that I always come back to.

I go more into what I'm looking for specifically on my website, and you can also find a list of some of my favorite books, and books I've edited that have already been announced or released: <http://amandaisabelramirez.com>

If I had to describe my taste in five words, I'd have to use... lighthearted, queer, clever, heartwarming, and humorous.

LM: Please forgive me, because I know you like superhero stories, but who is your favorite superhero or heroine and why? Why do you believe that superhero stories speak so loudly to such a diverse population and such a varied age group of readers? And if you could create your own superhero, what power would they have?

AR: Anyone who's spent any amount of time with me knows that my favorite superhero has been and always will be Iron Man, a.k.a. Tony Stark (I should mention for any comic buffs out there, I'm talking almost exclusively about the Marvel Studios / Robert Downey Jr. iteration, so do with that what you will). He's such an incredible character, I love him so, so much, and I could probably write an entire book on him, but I'll refrain. His story has it all: a fall from grace, a spectacular redemption arc, a sordid past, humor, vulnerability, genuine growth from beginning to end, setbacks—the works. Tony is the kind of character that everybody hates because they see too many of their own flaws in him and just don't want to admit it. Tony Stark—and any good character in general—is a mirror, and that's what makes him so ridiculously awesome.

A key character element that every superhero absolutely has to have is a sense of internal moral conflict, which sounds silly when you think about the concept of creating a dynamic, 3-dimensional char-

acter, but it's the truth. Many villains, while still being fully realized and complex, don't have the kind of moral conflict with what they're doing that the hero of the story often will. This is because adding a strong, but vacillating, moral compass to a character who's supposed to be a villain makes them an anti-hero, and from there, we spiral.

That's what a good superhero needs to have. A sense of right and wrong and an ever-present conflict of which is which. They don't thrive in the gray area the way a good villain does, so heroes are constantly searching for the right answer. That's what makes superhero stories so compelling and universal; sure, there's action and adventure, explosions and intrigue, but at the end of the day, people go to see superhero movie because they're invested in the characters. I know Marvel Studios is something of a monolith, so you can take this with a grain of salt, but they've proven that fact—even when their stories go off the rails, the audience keeps coming back for more because the characters make us care about what's happening (even when their time travel logic doesn't make sense—*Endgame!*)

I think about creating my own superhero a lot, actually, but I tend to always settle for something relatively simple, like spatial manipulation. I'd love to be able to teleport, manipulate time, make myself invisible, so I always envision a character doing the same. Think of it as Kitty Pryde and Nightcrawler put together but dialed up to eleven. Doctor Strange would probably be a good comparison, actually.

That, or just being, like wicked strong.

LM: Since you, like many, love to nap, and your reading is often done on the train or at home, what is your best advice on how to hook a reader to keep them awake and engaged?

AR: I love a story that starts with an action. (I'm also partial to stories that start in media res, but I know that tends to throw people off, so I don't see it much, unfortunately!) Having a good sense of pacing is imperative to keeping someone's attention. I'll oftentimes stop reading a submission ten pages in if nothing's happening, and if I get 100 pages in and the main conflict of the story hasn't arrived, then I know there's a structural issue. One of my mentors once told me about her 70-pages rule: if the main conflict of the story doesn't happen by page 70—if the overall catalyst for change doesn't occur by then—then the story isn't going fast enough.

Amanda Ramirez continued

LM: You've said you often use to-do lists and Post-it Notes to get things done during the day. Is this part of the editorial process as well? Are there any list or post-it methods you might recommend to the author for tracking key elements of a novel?

AR: I'll admit that I'm actually incredibly disorganized when it comes to any sort of note-taking skill. My office is covered in Post-its simply because I tend to leave information everywhere and need access to it at all times. I have to-do lists in notebooks, on my iPad, in the notes app on my phone—none of it is consistent. But that's just how my brain works. If I can make the hunt for information engaging, then I'm less likely to get bored with whatever I'm doing, especially if it's an admin task.

I'm much more streamlined when it comes to editing though, because it all happens in the margins of the manuscript. I edit almost exclusively in Microsoft Word using track changes. If I'm hitting a roadblock or if a story has major structural edits coming for it, I'll work on a hard copy. I can get very arts and crafts with it and sometimes a change of scenery (like a screen to a piece of paper) does me a world of good.

I have a colleague who creates excel spreadsheets to keep track of the plot points of her manuscripts, and that works for her! If I tried to do that, I'd use it as a procrastination tactic and start trying to make it visually appealing—sometimes, the act of “trying to get organized” derails me more than dealing with the fact that I'm simply not that organized.

LM: I love your quote that you say, “There are a lot of letters between A (write the thing) and Z (publish the thing), and you can't expect to have a full alphabet without them.” This is an important reminder that marketing strategies, promotion hooks, revisions, and other considerations are all part of the process. Do you have any other gems to share with our readers?

AR: One thing that I always try to remind writers, especially when they're deep in the trenches of querying and revising, is that publishing has always been and always will be a collaborative process that involves a lot of different people (if you squint, the A-Z analogy works here as well!) Writing can tend to be an extremely lonely and insular process and, because of that, it's hard to be vulnerable with other people when it involves your work, and it's hard to take constructive criticism if you're expecting to be a lone wolf the entire time.

The best and most important thing one can do as a writer is accept and understand the fact that they are not the only person who's going to work on their story. A book may belong to the author at the end of the day, but the fact of the matter is that it takes dozens of people to make it a physical thing. Publishing doesn't happen in a vacuum. Authors need to be aware of the fact that, once they're done writing, they have to be able to let up on the reins a little bit and allow other people into their process. An agent, an editor, a publicist, a production coordinator, a copyeditor, a designer—all of these people shape a book into what is then put on a shelf. I've definitely met some authors who couldn't handle that because they had been so exclusionary in their process. So that's definitely an important thing to prepare yourself for, going forward, as that loss of control can really throw people sometimes.

LM: What are your thoughts on diversity and how to approach writing diverse stories?

AR: I get this question a lot and my response rarely ever changes. Diversity is the spice of life (instead of variety. Get it?). The idea that a story isn't inherently diverse is... quite frankly, inaccurate in our society, regardless of whether it's written from the perspective of a marginalized voice or not.

The most important thing a writer—and the industry at large—needs to understand is that diversity isn't a trend and it's not a hook. It's not something that's going to go in and out of fashion like vampires and dystopian fiction. It's a reflection of real life. Marginalized kids should be allowed to see themselves in vampire novels and dystopian fiction; their stories shouldn't be relegated to narratives that use the trauma of their experience as a marginalized person in our society as the basis of a story. They should be allowed to fall in love and fight dragons and solve mysteries without having to continually be a lesson for a privileged audience.

Furthermore, diversity is not a checklist: I'm not going to sign up a queer rom-com and then never sign up another queer rom-com ever again because “I already have it on my list.” In the same vein, at no point should we be thinking of diverse characters as having to check off boxes. We should be able to have a queer, disabled, POC character without someone turning around and saying that it's not realistic, because that's just not true. And I, as an industry professional won't allow anyone to imply that it is.

As long as you're writing from a place of love and

Amanda Ramirez continued

genuine want to bolster the voices of others, you're doing it right.

LM: What advice do you have, if any, for writers writing outside their own culture, who truly believe they still have a story to tell and authority to tell it?

AR: Thoughtfulness and sensitivity are key. I'm not in the business of telling someone what they can and cannot write—it's not up to me. The only thing I have control over is whether or not I decide it's a story I find worth championing.

If a writer believes they have a story to tell, they first need to examine why they think they're the authority on it, and what their intention is behind it. Is it to contribute to the slowly growing amount of marginalized narratives? Is it because they realized that something was missing in the market and knew they could do it justice? And further to the point: Is this a story that could easily be flipped and told from the perspective of "their lane" without compromising its intention? Are they prepared to receive scrutiny, and are they prepared to then go a step further and fight for the voices of the marginalized perspectives they're writing from? Are they willing to approach someone who is an authority to help make sure their work is told as sensitively as it can be?

There are so many more questions they need to ask themselves before they decide that they're the best person to tell that story. It might not be easy to write "outside of your lane," but it's even harder getting marginalized voices through the door in the first place, so they'll also have to consider the story they might be inadvertently shutting out because they have the privilege of writing a diverse narrative from a place of power.

Intention and thoughtfulness, a willingness to listen and accept critique, and a devotion to amplifying the voices of those who would otherwise be silenced are incredibly important in this kind of situation.

LM: Please tell us about your most recent acquisition. What is it about? How did it come to you? What made it stand out from the rest?

AR: My most recent acquisition has not actually been announced yet, so I can't say too much about it, but I can tell you that it's a young adult graphic novel. The illustrations are absolutely gorgeous, and the script is action-packed and full of heart. The author and the illustrator are both such great collaborators (which is my favorite part of publishing, as you can tell), so working with them is going to be a blast

and I can't wait to share it with the world.

It came to me by the recommendation of a colleague who had received it as a submission; it wasn't really the right fit for her, but she knew my taste well enough to be confident that I'd enjoy it. That's what I love about the people I work with—we're always very vigilant in lifting each other up and helping out where we can.

LM: You had mentioned that you would like to be the person who picks the songs that play in the background of movies. I'd be happy to assist with that! Name some movie soundtracks that are particular favorites. Do you listen to these as you work? As you write?

AR: When I'm in a crunch, I'll just play the score for David Fincher's *The Social Network* by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross over and over and over, because it's all instrumental and really atmospheric, which is something I prefer for white noise. I don't tend to listen to a lot of music with lyrics when writing or editing because I've always been very moved by music and tend to perform for myself so it can be. Distracting.

But one of my favorite movie track lists has to be from Riley Scott's *The Martian*. It provides such great levity to a script that could've very easily been... so gritty and dramatic.

Also, I just really love disco.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

As mentioned, Simon and Schuster only reviews agented submissions. However, Amanda Ramirez is offering an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for CBI subscribers during the month of May. She will accept submissions of middle grade, young adult and graphic novels until **May 31, 2020**. Study Amanda's current wish list before submitting at <https://amandaisabelramirez.com/mswl/>, as well as <https://amandaisabelramirez.com/editorial/> to see the list of titles she's worked on. Send a query letter and the first chapter pasted into the body of the email to Amanda.Ramirez@simonandschuster.com. Graphic novel author/illustrators can include a link to an online portfolio with illustration samples. Each manuscript should be sent with a subject line "**CBI AR/MAY SPOTLIGHT: Title/Author.**" Please note that she will only respond to those manuscripts that she is interested in pursuing. If you don't hear anything back by July 1, 2020, you can assume it is a pass this time around.

HELP YOUR READERS EXPERIENCE YOUR STORY ON AN

EMOTIONAL LEVEL

by Jane McBride

We all want to infuse more emotion into our writing, but how do we go about it? We don't just say, "He was sad" or "She was frustrated." We show it. But how?

Use setting to underscore emotion. No, I'm not suggesting that we use the infamous "It was a dark and stormy night" to tell readers that you are writing a suspense novel. What I am saying is to use whatever setting your characters might find themselves in to highlight a character's emotions. Consider using contrast to achieve this. Let's make up a story about a 13-year-old girl who is camping in the mountains with her family. What should be a wonderful weekend outing away from the pressures of school, work, and home is instead fraught with tension and resentment due to her parents' bickering over money which turns into a full-blown fight. In contrast, the day is glorious with the sun radiant and the sky an interrupted sea of blue. The beauty of the day contrasts sharply with the simmering emotional storm about to erupt over the next pages and chapter.

Build emotion over the course of a book. Think of a book's emotions rising in a crescendo the way an orchestra playing a dramatic piece of music gradually rises in volume. Just as the wind and brass and string and percussion sections grow louder with each measure of music, the plot's tension grows more prominent with every page, and those pivotal plot points arrive closer together as you near the book's climax.

Use your own experience to tap into a character's greatest fear. What is your greatest fear? Is it heights? Or contracting a dreaded disease? Is it los-

ing someone significant in your life? My greatest fear was losing my only sister to the cancer that ravaged her body and spirit for nine years. In the end, when she could no longer fight the disease, when my fear became reality, I had to ask myself if I could go on without her. The outcome was iffy for a while. Then I started living again and looked for ways to help others since I could no longer help my sister. I used those emotions to help me write a book where the hero loses his much-loved brother. Can you use your fear, whatever it is, to help you write a story where the characters face something so monstrous, so fearsome, whether it be a zombie invasion or a fire or a flood, that they don't know if they will survive? A teenage wrestler fears his father's disapproval if he loses a match. What happens if the boy not only loses the match but loses badly in the one match that his father attends? Forcing your character to face his fear, and then raising the stakes at your character's most vulnerable moment, is a sure-fire way of creating an emotional connection with your readers.

Employ nonverbal tags to convey emotion. Imagine reading a book where every dialogue had taglines like "he said sadly," "he asked loudly," or "she murmured softly." Don't you just want to take those adverbs and drop-kick them right out of the story? I do. A few adverbs can enhance a story; too many will bog it down into a never-ending stream of "lys." What do you do instead? One way is to use body language to convey emotion. Instead of writing "I can't go," she said sadly," how about "I can't go. Her shoulders slumped." Another way is to have the character do something that is the opposite of what she is feeling. Suppose an 18-year-old girl just received a rejection letter from her first-choice college.

Help Your Readers...continued

Instead of sharing her disappointment with her parents and siblings, she acts as if it's no big deal. The contrast of her actions and her feelings will be far more powerful than if she simply says to her family, "I'm so disappointed."

Show a range of feelings. No one has only one emotion. We all experience a range of emotions, from happiness to deep despair and everything in between. My husband and I used to joke that our then teenage daughter could experience 12 emotions in 12 minutes, she was that volatile. Ideally, your main character(s) will grow over the span of a book. His emotions will grow as well. Perhaps he is a fairly self-absorbed character who rarely sees anything beyond his own sphere. What if this character is a 12-year-old boy who is assigned by his Scout troop to visit a homeless shelter and help serve food during the lunch hour? He grumbles about it, unable to see why he has to do this. After all, he didn't cause the people in the shelter to be homeless. But his parents use a bit of gentle persuasion and get him there. For the first time in his life, he is exposed to true poverty and need. He talks with a boy his age whose family is living at the shelter and learns that there is no privacy, barely enough food, nothing which our young MC (main character) is accustomed to. The boy doesn't have an Xbox; he doesn't have a backpack; he doesn't even have a bed but sleeps on a cot with a thin blanket, his only protection against the night's cold. Our MC first feels astonishment, then shock, then pity, and, finally, shame that he had ever complained about anything in his life. For the remainder of the book, he tries to come to grips with what he witnessed and how he might make a difference in this boy's life.

Show growth of character over the story. In the example above, our 12-year-old MC grows in ways he never expected. His life was going along just fine until he is confronted with a picture of true poverty. He doesn't turn into a saint, but he does start to question the things he always took for granted and resolves to do something besides beg his parents for the latest gadget.

Symbolize emotion through a tangible object. In one of my early books, the heroine wears a pendant necklace with a rainbow charm on it. For her, the rainbow represents hope. When it appears that all is

lost, not just her relationship with the hero, but also the chance to help her nephew for whom she is a guardian walk again after a terrible accident, she fingers the charm and wonders if she was a fool to ever believe in the power of hope and prayer. She considers removing the pendant in despair but decides against it. In the end, she finds a way to recover her hope along with her dreams. The rainbow charm reminds her to keep going even when all appears lost. Think about your work-in-progress and ask yourself if there is a physical object that can represent a character's deeply held feeling. Perhaps a nine-year-old girl who has been put in foster care because her mother can't take care of her keeps a picture of her mother and herself inside the backpack she takes from foster home to foster home. Every night she looks at it and promises herself that someday, she and her mother will be reunited.

Writing with emotion isn't easy. It takes a willingness to dig deep, both inside yourself and inside your characters, but the results will be worth it.

Living the Dream: Children's Author

Katelyn Aronson

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Writing isn't a sprint, it's a marathon, and children's book author Katelyn Aronson is living proof. The writing bug hit her at an early age, but finding success after years of honing her skills was a longer journey. Traveling overseas and working in the children's department of bookstores allowed her to study and learn the picture book craft as well as hosting storybook parties and dressing up as picture book characters. 2019 turned out to be a milestone year for Aronson by selling five picture books, the first one, the charming *Piglette*, to be published this month by Viking Books for Young Readers. The story, featuring illustrations by Eva Byrne, is about a pampered pig with perfume on her mind who heads for Paris. A sequel is on the way. Still enjoying the expatriate life in Switzerland, Aronson is currently represented by Christa Heschke of McIntosh & Otis. You can learn more about Aronson and the writing services she offers at <http://katelynaronson.com>

PJ McILVAINE: You're quite the world traveler, roaming the European continent and settling down in Switzerland with your husband. How have your travels inspired your writing?

KATELYN ARONSON: Looking back, it's been the beauty and variety of landscapes, cultures, and

languages I've encountered throughout Europe that fired my imagination. Also, the sheer age of things here gave me a sense of being in touch with history and my own European roots. I grew up loving European fairy tales, so I think finally being "on location" gave me the desire to spin tales of my own.



PM: In your biography, you say that television wasn't a big part of your life growing up, but that your parents were wonderful storytellers. Did you aspire to be a writer from a young age?

KA: I started writing my own stories and poetry around third grade. But drawing was my talent back then. I told everyone that I wanted to be a *Disney* illustrator (there's that fairytale streak again). Then, along the way, I got frustrated with my art and abandoned

it for writing...which remains one of my biggest life regrets. If only I'd held on to both! Today, even though words have taken over, my story ideas come to me visually. I also storyboard my picture books, sketching them out to explore flow and page turn dynamics. So maybe the artistic tendency is still there. And maybe someday I'll have the courage to reclaim it.

PM: You have also worked in children's bookstores. How did that shape the kind of stories you

Katelyn Aronson continued

want to tell?

KA: Yes, I worked in children’s books for 6 years, first as a hand-seller, then as a manager and buyer. Every reader’s taste is different, but I’ve learned there are four dimensions of a picture book that are most important to me as a reader:

- language (diction/lyricism)
- movement (action/adventure)
- playfulness (“lightness,” humor)
- soul (appealing to something deeper)

So I try to honor these dimensions in my own storytelling.

PM: You’ve had a banner year in 2019 with selling five picture books. Congratulations! It sounds easy, but of course, it’s well known that in publishing, nothing comes easy or fast. What was your timeline like for each book, from first draft to the actual offer and sale? What was the inspiration for each story? After the first book sold, were the other sales easier to achieve, or were there unexpected pitfalls or roadblocks? How much input did you have, if any, in the illustration process? Do you see any of the books as a series? Has anything about the publication process surprised you?

KA: Thank you, PJ! You’re right: publishing is a rollercoaster. The first book I sold, *Piglette* (due out May 26th), was a manuscript I wrote back in 2015—the year I decided to seriously pursue writing. That book got an offer in 2019. So, four years may not seem so bad, but it felt like forever! My second book sold in a span of 2 years (from draft to offer). My third book sold in a span of months (to the first house we sent it to, incredibly). Then the publisher of one of the above books asked for a sequel, so that went very quickly as well. All these

things just happened to coincide in 2019. Over the past five years, I have seen my career both speed up and slow down at different stages. Some things have gone lightning-fast; others molasses-slow. Everything can change overnight. All you can ever do is keep going!

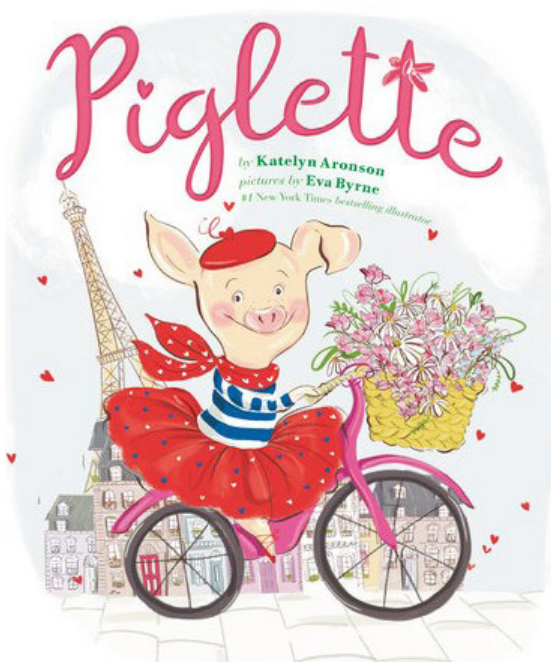
The honor of choosing illustrators and watching my stories come to life has been the most thrilling part of the process, period. I chose two of my favorite illustrators for *Clovis: A Bull & His China Shop* (Page Street Kids, 2021) and *Poo-Dunit?* (Candlewick, 2022) and I’m still pinching myself that they said yes!

PM: Do you have beta readers or a writer’s group?

KA: I don’t have a critique group, per se, but I’m active in various writing communities (12x12, SCBWI, etc.) and I have individual critique partners with whom I exchange manuscripts—writers whose talent I admire and whose opinion I really trust. I’m so grateful for their support, as I try to get 5 “opinions” on any new piece prior to sending it to my agent.

PM: Rejection is part of the writer’s toolkit. How do you handle rejection? Have you ever experienced writer’s block? How do you know when you’re on the right track in your writing?

KA: Rejection is rough. I went through years of it before breaking in, and I know I’ll face it throughout my career. There were plenty of days I wanted to give up on my writing dreams. But prolonged sadness in any realm of life leads to passivity, loss of hope, and eventually giving up. So I’ve found it’s best to move from sadness to anger as quickly as possible. There is a healthy anger that fires my resolve and gets me back in the game, in order to write something newer and better. Call it a creative



Katelyn Aronson continued

act of defiance.

As for writer's block, etc: Every time I finish a new manuscript, a pang of terror tells me I'll never come up with anything again. (But I always do!) So I've learned to step away from the act of "producing" in those moments and spend time refilling my creative well. That means going out and living, enjoying cultural experiences: maybe a movie, a museum visit, or a hands-on project. Anything that fills up my imagination. Inspiration always strikes again. When I'm in the middle of writing a story and get stuck, I go for a walk or a run. It works like a charm!

PM: What is a day in your life like? Do you have a writing routine? Do you write every day? Are you a multi-tasker or a one book at a time writer? Do you outline at all? Do you envision yourself writing in other genres? Do you have a pet passion project?

KA: No, I don't write every day. My weekdays are full of teaching French and English as foreign languages. Saturday is full of errands. There isn't much time for writing! But all through the week, I'm thinking about my writing, mulling it over. Finally, Sunday arrives, a.k.a. My Holy Writing Day. It's become a precious time of the week so I've learned to use it efficiently.

I generally have a list of ideas and projects that need attention, and I work through them one at a time. I always have something going, whether drafting or revising.

Yes, I do envision myself writing other genres—particularly YA. I'm outlining a novel at the moment, but it's not something I'm rushing myself on.

PM: You offer manuscript critique and pitch services at your website. Do you find it easier to give notes on other people's material than it is editing your own writing?

KA: Not at all, actually. I prefer writing and revising my own stories—much easier! I believe that to edit another's manuscript well, you have to be capable of seeing the diamond in the rough. You have to have enough vision to hold out a lantern in the mist while pushing a fellow writer down the path of

what their story may yet be. That isn't always easy. But when I see potential in someone else's work, critiquing is a real joy.

PM: What book are you currently reading? Who is your favorite author and why?

KA: Currently I'm finishing *The Tipping Point* by Malcom Gladwell and *The Spell of The Sensuous* by David Abram. Because, while I prefer writing fiction, I tend to read nonfiction...plus the occasional gothic novel (*Dracula*, *The Historian*, *The Essex Serpent*).

My current favorite author is Winston Graham (who wrote the *Poldark* series set in Cornwall) because his exquisite writing has encouraged me to read more fiction.

PM: If you could live anywhere in the world free of financial or familiar considerations, what would be your dream country and why?

KA: It's not an easy choice for me, so it depends on the day you ask me. Today I'll say Ireland. I've never seen such a fresh, wild, and verdant country as Ireland. I love the smell of the peat fires and the fog. Plus I used to practice Irish dance, used to (try to) play Celtic harp, and I adore Irish music in general. Guinness, not so much.

PM: Croissants or Brioche? (Me, I'm a croissant girl).

KA: I'll take either one! But after twelve years in France, what I crave more than any French pastry is a good old toasted "everything" bagel with cream cheese. Ha!

EXERCISES FOR FLABBY SETTINGS

by Jane McBride

When you plan a story, what do you think of first? For me, it's characters, as my stories are character-driven. For other writers, it's plot. There is no right or wrong answer here.

Did you know that setting can play a big part in a story? Think of books you've read where setting became a character in itself and helped drive the plot. The Swiss Family Robinson comes to mind.

The family is marooned in an uninhabited place where they must depend upon themselves to survive. There are no other people there until they discover a young girl being pursued by pirates. The jungle setting allows the family to forage for food, build an elaborate tree house, and set up booby traps for the pirates. Could they have done all that in another setting? Probably not.

What brings setting to life? A good place to start is with the five senses. Let's examine them one by one.

Smell. The sense of smell is frequently overlooked in describing a setting, yet the olfactory sense is one of the strongest we experience. It remains in the memory far longer than other senses. Smell also affects taste, so you could use it to enhance a character's experience with eating a new food.

Exercise: Take the setting of your current work and ask yourself if you've employed the sense of smell. If you are writing a YA book set in the Alaskan wilderness in the summer, what do your characters smell? If it's summer, do they smell the shoots of greenery poking through the ground? Plants have smells, just as animals do.

Sight: Most of us rely on sight to give us our first impression of a scene. Choose a scene from your work-in-progress or one from our made-up Alaskan story. What does the main character first see? Is it a vast array of nothingness? Is it a stark patch of ice

surrounded by small buildings huddled together. Get specific. What are the buildings made of? What does the ice look like? Is it white and blue? Or are there tiny streaks of yellow going through it from an almost non-existent sun?

Exercise: Pick a setting—any will do—and list 20 things you see in it. It can be a teenage boy's bedroom. Plates stuck halfway under the bed come to mind! Look for the small things, the telling things, as well as the bigger items. If you are describing a flower garden, what do you see besides flowers? Do you see bees and butterflies? Perhaps there is a delicate ladybug clinging to a leaf. Is there freshly turned soil or mulch? Or do weeds poke their way through the rows of vibrant flowers?

Touch: What do the stranded characters feel? We're not talking emotional feelings here; we're talking what can they touch and how does it feel.

Exercise: Write a scene with these characters or those from your own work-in-progress and show what they touch and feel. Don't just stick with the obvious like hot and cold. Go deeper. Let's switch our Alaskan setting to winter. Suppose your main character becomes lost in the wilderness and is clinging to life in a crudely built snow fort. Does he experience the tingling of limbs going numb and the drowsiness that comes with extreme cold? What do his fingers feel like? Does the skin feel rubbery? Or does it feel raw? Does he feel the brittle nature of snow so frozen that it can't be hacked at with a knife? If your book is set in the steamy heat of a Florida summer, does your main character feel the slick texture of the leaf of a tropical plant? Don't settle for imprecise words. Use specific nouns and verbs. Make touch not just a sensory description but an active experience.

Taste: Taste is closely connected to the sense of smell. Did you know that air can have a taste?

Exercises for Flabby Settings continued

Exercise: Employ the sense of taste in a scene in your work-in-progress. The character need not be tasting food. Maybe your protagonist grew up on a farm in Iowa and is visiting his California cousins for the first time. Could he taste the air in Los Angeles? What is his reaction to it?

Sound: The sense of hearing can play an important role in a setting. If your character is new to the city, what sounds are keeping him up at night? Does he hear the grumble of garbage trucks early in the morning? Or does he hear the nightlife of a big city, a contrast to the quiet nights of his Iowa home?

Exercise: Make a list of sounds and words to describe them. Did you notice that I used the word grumble to describe the sound of garbage trucks? Try making the descriptors active words.

What else can we include in our setting?

Seasons. What time of year is it? Think of how the season plays a part in your story. Is it summer in hot, humid Atlanta? Or winter in Maine? In our Alaskan set story, we moved it from summer to winter to emphasize the different elements the character might experience.

Exercise. Take your work-in-progress and change the season when it is taking place. How does that change the plot? It may be that it affects the plot only marginally. Or it may affect it a great deal. How does a change in seasons affect your characters? It could change whether or not an eight-year-old main character is in school or is off for the summer. It could change how he spends his free time. What if the character's parents are divorced and he spends summer with his father? The story dynamics change dramatically if that is the case.

Weather. Let's go back to our story set in Alaska. The weather there dictates not only the manner of dress but also the ability to move around, even to go outside. If our story takes place in winter, the characters may be affected by the long hours of darkness. What if your main character is afflicted with SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) and suffers from the long periods of little or no sunlight? Think of how he must cope with that.

Exercise. Make up an extreme set of weather circumstances, the bones of a plot, and a main character. What if your protagonist and his family are stranded in the Rocky Mountains when their small plane goes down. What do they do to survive the treacherous cold?

Climate. Related to both seasons and weather, climate affects a myriad of things, from how a character dresses to what he does outside. A story set in the Bahamas will have a vastly different tone than one set in Nebraska.

Exercise. Choose two different climates and write five things that are distinct about them. It helps to choose climates that are opposites of each other.

Social climate. This is a bit more nebulous. What is a social climate? It is the culmination of factors—income, education level, demographics, political leanings, etc—that compose the mood and tone of a community. My husband and I have lived in the same house for 43 years. (We are rooted here and have way too much stuff to ever consider moving.) The neighborhood is mostly a quiet one of middle-class homes and middle-class values. Yes, values are a part of a setting.

Exercise. Write a page describing the social climate of your work-in-progress. Is it stable? Or is it in flux? Is the neighborhood in transition? Perhaps it's undergoing gentrification. Social climate can include everything from the state of the schools to the number of police per capita in an area. Does a neighborhood typically “dress up” for the holidays? Do the neighbors decorate their homes for Christmas? Is Halloween a big thing? Can neighbors turn to each other for help? Or are they insular and have no idea of the names of their neighbors?

WRAPPING UP

Setting should not be a mere list of descriptions. It should be an active, integral part of your story. If your setting is only a sentence or two of how the mountains look, you are missing a beat in your writing. Bring your setting to life by showing how your characters interact with it, how it affects them, how it influences the plot. Then you have a real setting.