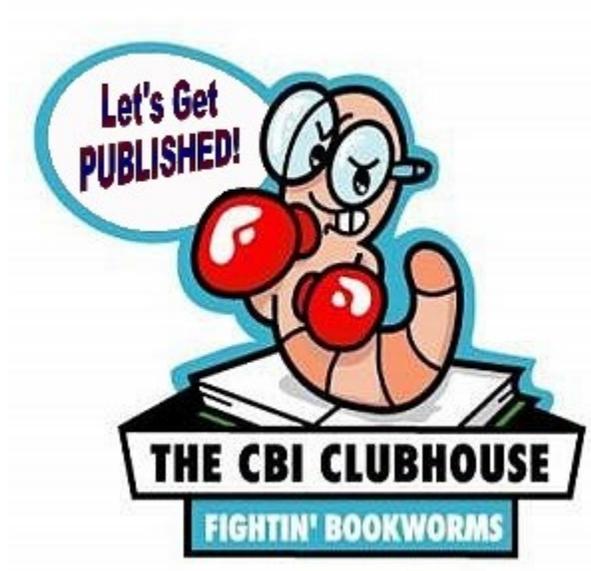


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Quit!**

# DON'T QUIT.



## **What To Do When You've Done Everything Right – But Still Can't Get Published.**

***Advice for Children's Writers from the Expert Guides of  
CBIClubhouse.com***

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## Here's How It Started.....

A little while back, we sent this missive out to our e-mail list:

*Hi Updaters, Jon here. And I need to vent a little bit.....*

*You see, Laura and I have been running Children's Book Insider for 23 years now. And it's been nothing but a blessing. Well, almost.*

*There's one fly in the ointment, and it's this:*

*We keep encountering people who have the talent and the desire to write amazing children's books -- but quit before they've really given it a fair shot. When we poke or prod a little bit to find out why they walk away from their dream, we often hear some combination of:*

- \* I'm too old (or too young, or too male, or too female, etc.)*
- \* I don't have time*
- \* I don't have the right college degree*
- \* I'm afraid of people laughing at me if my work isn't any good*
- \* I don't understand ebooks or new technology*
- \* I'm confused about the process -- it's just overwhelming.*

*For us, hearing these things are, frankly, kind of heartbreaking. That's because they're all so easily addressed. The truth is this:*

- \* No publisher would turn away a great story because of the age, gender, ethnicity, location or occupation of its author.*
- \* People who are \*far\* more busy than you or me regularly get published.*
- \* You don't need a college degree to write a children's book.*
- \* Anyone who would laugh at your work is a jerk and a clown. Rule #1 - the opinions of jerks and clowns mean nothing.*
- \* You can learn new technologies. They're really not that complex.*
- \* Same goes for the submission and publishing process. It's easy stuff, actually.*

*We try to tell folks this, and we often manage to sway them and help keep their dream on track. But, we've found, far better than telling them is to show them. (Hey - "show, don't tell"! It really \*is\* good advice!)*

*So, in case any of you are doubting your dream right about now, I present Debbie Dadey and Cyndie Sebourm.*

*Debbie was a first grade teacher and librarian who did more than just daydream about writing for kids. She took action. The result? Debbie Dadey has authored more than \*150\* children's books!*

*Recently, she sat down with Laura for a discussion about her life as a writer.*

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*Watch it and you'll soon discover that Debbie is not some superwoman. She's a regular, down-to-earth person with a lovely disposition and a well-rounded life. And she's proof positive that desire, a willingness to learn and persistence are what makes a great writer. And those are things that any of you can develop and practice. Debbie did it, and so can you.*

Here's were to watch the video: <http://bit.ly/dadey>

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*Cyndie Sebourn, a member of the CBI Clubhouse Fightin' Bookworms, was struggling to find a foothold as a children's writer. When we launched our CBI 1-2-3 System back in January, Cyndie saw her opening immediately.*

*Inspired by our interview with Karen Robertson, CBI's App Publishing Expert Guide, Cyndie decided that creating a children's app was her path to success. She contacted Karen, learned what she had to learn and now she's the proud author of "Smarty Britches: A Southern Boy Discovers Nouns", a wonderful new app.*

*Cyndie is the perfect example of a "regular person" who's charting her own course to success. She didn't know anything about creating an app a few short months ago, and now it's her career!*

*Is there any reason you couldn't do something similar with apps, ebooks, self-publishing or print on demand? Nope. Not a one. You just need some direction and some encouragement and, hey, that's what we're here for! :)*

Read Cyndie's story here: <http://cbiclubhouse.com/2012/02/fightin-bookworm-spotlight-cyndie-sebour/>

*So take heart, writer. You **\*absolutely can\*** do it. And, if you're truly committed, you **\*absolutely will\*** do it!*

The response was incredible – an outpouring of gratitude and hope from authors who really needed a pat on the back and a little encouragement.

There were only a few dissenters:

\* an author who doubles as a party clown took joking exception to our statement that “the opinions of clowns mean nothing” (Sorry, Chuckles!)

\* and, a few authors who expressed an opinion that really did hit home:

*“We've done everything right – we've thought positively, we've battled through rejection, we've honed our craft, we've attended conferences, we've networked...but we still can't get published. What about us?”*

Here's, specifically, is how one author put it:

*I'd love to hear advice for others like me - good, solid writers who may have (like me) had agents, had many close calls (acquisitions committees), won awards for unpublished manuscripts, but just can't seem to get a foot in any door at this point. The favorite tagline of editors and agents, that a shining ms. will always catch their eye, is simply not true any more - if your eyes are closed to the shining manuscript, you can't see them.*

*But again, what about those of us who are writing as well as (or, I'm sorry to say, better than) what's being published? The traditional recommendations just aren't working anymore. It's quite discouraging.*

It's a great, utterly legitimate question. So we asked our amazing team of Expert Guides from the [CBI Clubhouse](#) for their takes. They've each battled through the ups and downs of children's writing and have come out on top. What do they have to say to writers who are still in the thick of the battle to get published?

Let's find out.....

## Kirby Larson: Middle Grade Expert Guide



Kirby Larson is the acclaimed author of the 2007 Newbery Honor Book, *Hattie Big Sky*, a young adult historical novel inspired by her great-grandmother, Hattie Inez Brooks Wright, who homesteaded by herself in eastern Montana as a young woman. Kirby's passion for historical fiction is reflected in *The Fences Between Us* (Scholastic, Dear America series; September 2010) and *The Friendship Doll* (Delacorte; May 2011). She is currently at work on a sequel to *Hattie Big Sky*.

In 2006, Kirby began a collaboration with her good friend, Mary Nethery, which has resulted in two award-winning nonfiction picture books: *Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship and Survival* (illustrated by Jean Cassels) and *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine and a Miracle*. They have their eyes peeled for another project to tackle together.

I feel this writer's pain. I've LIVED this writer's pain: In 1994, (after 3 years of collecting rejections), I was over the moon to publish my first book; I published a second in '96, ghost wrote 2 books and then in '97 got a picture book published. Five books! I was certain I'd made it as a writer. Then, between 1997 and 2004, I did not sell one thing. I even received a rejection for a 10-word story for *Baby Bug* magazine.

Seven years of publishing drought. It was discouraging, depressing, heart-breaking. During that time, I cried, moped, railed against the universe. I had been in charge of our region's twice-yearly SCBWI party for published authors. I found I couldn't honestly be happy for those folks anymore so I resigned from that post. But I also tried to find ways to learn to continue. For me, that meant reading books that inspired/comforted me (I highly recommend Maira Kalman's *Principles of Uncertainty*, and Bayles & Orland's *Art and Fear*), relying on understanding writing friends, and stealing Carolyn See's idea to write "charming literary notes" to book world folks whose work I admired (I gotta tell you, getting a cute postcard from Kate DiCamillo can really brighten a day!). I also taught writing, wrote book reviews for our local paper, and learned to ballroom dance (badly -- but the exercise was good for me!).

In 2000, I took a risk and began my first-ever historical novel; it was published in 2006. The lesson I took away from that long publishing drought is said very well by Winston Churchill: "Never give up, never give up, never give up."

I also am a pretty hopeless optimist so I absolutely believe good stories will find a publishing home. The thing is, we have no control over the timing. We only have control over our work. It sounds as if this writer is doing many things to make her work the best it can be. What about enrolling in the Nevada SCBWI's mentoring program -- I've heard great things about it! Or participating in one of the short term residency MFA programs -- the Whidbey Island program



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allows auditors and other programs may, too. I know I got a real charge out of sitting in on classes taught by poets or non-fiction writers -- something very different than I was writing then.

These suggestions might not be right for her; she definitely needs to do what makes sense to her to feed her soul.

I used to tell my kids that it will all turn out okay in the end; and if it's not okay, it's not the end.

## **Helen Landalf: Young Adult Expert Guide**



Helen Landalf's debut young adult novel, *Flyaway*, was released by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in December, 2011. She is also author of two picture books, including *The Secret Night World Of Cats* (Smith & Kraus, 1998), which was illustrated by her autistic brother, Mark Rimland, and received a 1998 Parent Publishing Association Honor award, as well as five nonfiction books for teachers on integrating dance and drama into the curriculum.

She was born and raised in San Diego, California, where she majored in Drama at San Diego State University, and then relocated to upstate New York, where she studied in the Professional Actor's Training Program at SUNY Purchase. She finally landed in Seattle, Washington, and completed her B.A. in Drama and received a K-8 Teaching Certification from the University of Washington. She also holds a Certificate in Editing from the University of Washington's Extension Program and has worked as a freelance content and copyeditor.

To those of you who are on the verge of giving up on the idea of being a published writer, I say, "I totally get it." I tried for 10 years to publish a Young Adult novel. I took workshops, attended conferences, and read books. I drafted, revised, and polished. I submitted and submitted and submitted...and for 10 years, all I got were rejections. One agent, whom I submitted to several times, even told me that she thought the quality of my work was going downhill. At that point, I'd just about had it. In a final effort, I sent the first pages of my novel to one last agent, and I told myself that if I got another "no," I'd take the hint and quit trying to make this publishing thing happen.

Guess what? The agent loved my novel, and after a revision, he signed me. Then he started submitting my manuscript to editors and got nothing but "thanks but no thanks" in reply. After nine months, I was again feeling discouraged. But my agent reminded me that it only takes one "yes" to make a sale. We finally got that "yes," and my debut YA novel, *Flyaway* sold to an editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and released last December.

So what's my advice to you? Write because you love it. If you don't genuinely enjoy the process of writing and revising, you should set your sights on something else, because dealing with the rejections and disappointments and long wait periods that are part of this business won't feel worth it. If you DO love writing, keep at it. Do it for fun and satisfaction and don't be in such a hurry to get published. At the same time, stay optimistic. For all you know, your success might be just around the corner. Last of all, remember what my agent said: It only takes one "yes" to make it happen. Keep honing your craft and cultivating connections, and chances are that someday, the "yes" will be for you.

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## **Anastasia Suen: Easy Readers & Chapter Books Expert Guide**



The author of 135 books, Anastasia studied library science in junior high and worked in the public library in high school. She taught kindergarten ESL, first, fifth and sixth grades. After her children's books were published Anastasia went back to the classroom as a visiting author. She co-taught children's literature at the University of North Texas and taught teacher inservice for Staff Development for Educators. Today she teaches writing at Southern Methodist University and online, and has written with students of all ages in workshops all over the globe.

Anastasia's many honors include Association of Educational Publishers' Award ([Wild Animals series](#)), Best Girl Reader (second grade), New York Times Best Illustrated Book ([Window Music](#)), Nick Jr. Best Book ([Toddler Two Dos años](#)), Smithsonian Notable Book ([Baby Born](#)), Time Magazine Best Book ([Window Music](#)).

It's all a numbers game. There are only so many slots available each season on a publisher's list, and if all of the slots are all filled, then the answer you and I hear to our submission is no. So try what the illustrators have been doing for years...and diversify.

Artists illustrate books, but they also create art for all sorts of other clients. You don't have to put all of your eggs in one basket, either. Write for more than one market. It's not all or nothing unless you decide to make it that way.

Hearing no doesn't mean that your only option is to self-publish. The "Big Six" publishers in New York are not the only game in town. Yes, it's marvelous to sell a book to the Big Six, but when they say no, go knock on someone else's door. Write for someone else. That's what writers do, we write. As my father used to say, "A little bit of something is better than a whole lot of nothing."

## **Kathryn Lay: Writing for Magazines Expert Guide**



Kathryn has published more than 1600 articles, essays, and stories ranging from religion to children's stories, essays to fantasy fiction, parenting to marriage, humor to how-to's.

A few of the many publications in which she's appeared are *Woman's Day*, *Guideposts*, *Home Life*, *Woman's World*, *Grit*, *Writer's Digest*, *The Writer*, *Cricket*, *Healthy Childcare*, *Kiwanis*, *Christian Parenting Today*, *Discipleship Journal*, *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul*, *Stories for the Family's Heart*, *Heartwarmers Love Stories*, *Chocolate for a Woman's Blessings*, *God Allows U-turns*, and many more.

After twenty years of writing in the children's market, I've seen things change. And I've had to make changes and adjustments myself...in my way of thinking, in what I will or won't do, in what I'll say yes to. When I first started, the market was hard, but there were probably twice as many book and magazine publishers as there are now. I was still learning, especially with book writing, but it seemed I received lots more personalized letters from editors who were encouraging and helpful. I had lots more responses to partials asking for whole manuscripts. And I had memorized the editors at most of the publishers.

But now, with the need for an agent being so much stronger and editors moving and houses closing or being gobbled by corporations, it is more difficult for new writers to break in and established writers to continue to find their place. There used to be lots more opportunities to sell short fiction and nonfiction. More publications, more church take-home papers, and more places who took first and reprint rights.

I find that these days I make more money than I did before, but its because I have changed some of my ideas about getting published. My goal had always been to be published in New York, through traditional trade publishers for books and to never sell all rights for magazines. But with the many changes, I've found that if I want to have the income from my writing where I don't have to work retail, see my work published and my byline, as well as more opportunity for school visits; I've spent much of my time the last two years writing for work-for-hire and educational markets and selling short pieces as all rights.

I think with the many changes, writers are needing to ask themselves what they want out of writing? To be famous and see their books on bookstore shelves? To make money? To write and be published? Sometimes your goals change and sometimes they change with the changing needs in publishing. I've had more friends jump into writing for work-for-hire markets, ebooks, computer apps and they've found joy in knowing their work is being read, even if they aren't going on book tours or bookstore signings.

## **Natasha Wing: Picture Book Expert Guide**



Natasha Wing has been writing children's books for 20 years and has published 22 books with more on the way. She is best known for her Night Before series that puts a twist on *The Night Before Christmas*. *The Night Before Kindergarten* has sold more than 1 million copies. Some of her books have been on best-seller lists, state school reading lists, and notable books lists.

She writes about holidays, dinosaurs, artists, and girls who want to get kissed. She also Skypes with schools and has presented at writing conferences.

Do you want to be the person that other writers are glad dropped out of the game? I remember during the early part of my writing career, going to a conference and there was a huge assembly room filled with children's book writers and thinking, No wonder it's so hard to break in! Look at all these people here who are trying, plus how many others are not here? It put things into perspective. It's hard to break in to the book world!

But being one who swims around obstacles, I did every thing I could to better my chances - a critique group, reading how-to books, reading competitor works, getting an agent, attending conferences to network with editors, and just sticking to the plan of wanting to get published. I heard that it took eight books before I should quit my day job, so between books I had part-time work. But I stuck to my plan. Write, write, write and continue to submit. I knew there'd be fellow writers who would give up and so in my mind, there was less competition, which bettered my chances, so I kept at it. Sometimes it's about outlasting. Sometimes it's about skill. Sometimes it's about luck. But if you can stack as much as you can in your favor, you'll create opportunities. Maybe the story you wrote is not sought after at this time in publishing history. The pendulum always swings, so when it does, be ready with the best story possible, and your chances for publication will increase. Don't be a drop-out. Be a still in the gamer.

## Jane McBride Choate: Traditional Publishing / General Writing Technique Expert Guide



Jane McBride Choate has been a CBI Contributing Editor for several years, offering valuable tips and advice on a wide range of writing and publishing topics. She has written 32 novels, primarily historical fiction and romance. Her work has also appeared in nine Chicken Soup for the Soul Collections (*Stress and Messages from Above* will be published in 2012), two anthologies by St. Martin's Press (*The Spirit of Christmas* and *Christmas Miracles*), and many magazines for children (*Friend, Alive for Teens, Children's Digest, Starsong*), adults (*Better Homes & Gardens, Family Circle, Woman's Day*), and writers (*Writer, Writer's Market, Romance Writers Report*).

Do you want to give up writing? Fine. Do it. If you can live with the knowledge that you didn't care enough to live your dream. If you don't want to give up, start looking at writing as a journey. Celebrate every step along the way. Did you send off a query today? Pat yourself on the back. Did you finish that difficult chapter that's stumped you for weeks? Give yourself another pat, but don't reward yourself with a movie. Spend that time you would have spent at the movie writing. Did you send a partial to an agent? Did you hear back in the affirmative?

I can think of few other professions where one expects immediate success without putting in the time for a learning curve. Are you a mechanical engineer, as is my husband? He went to school five years to learn his trade and is still learning. Are you a teacher? How long did you spend in school to get your degree? Treat writing in the same way. Put in the time. Put in the hard work. Then do it all over again.

## Linda Arms White: Picture Book Expert Guide



Linda is the author of both fiction and non-fiction books for both children and adults. Her picture books include *Too Many Pumpkins*, *Comes a Wind*, and most recently *Too Many Turkeys*.

Her *I Could Do That: Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote* won the prestigious Christopher Award for material that “affirms the highest values of the human spirit.”

Her non-fiction books include *Cooking on a Stick: Campfire Recipes for Kids*, *The Pocket Guide to Camping*, and *Log Spirit* – a design book for log homes. For the last ten years, Linda has been co-owner of Children’s Authors’ Bootcamp, with Laura Backes, helping others learn to write for children.

A few weeks ago, I taught a picture book class. One of the participants was just like this author -- she had won awards for unpublished work, had lots of kind editor comments on rejections, etc. During the course of the class, it became obvious she had a gift for knowing what a good story is. Also during the class, she revealed she was there as a last ditch effort. She was discouraged and ready to quit writing all together if she didn't get something from the class that urged her on. (But no pressure!)

As I taught plotting by three-act-structure, I could see bells going off in her head. Two days after the class, I received a lovely thank you note saying she had had to pull over three times on the way home to jot down ideas and they just kept coming. Ideas for new stories and ideas to fix old ones. She was definitely not quitting.

Perhaps this borderline author, borderline between not published and published, might find one more tool for her toolbox that would put her over the top. I suggest she look at each and every level of her stories and see if there is any layer that she could improve upon even slightly. Could her plots be any more solid, her characters a bit more real and enticing, her writing style any more lively? Recognizing it could help her fix it herself or she might find someone particularly good at that element to mentor her, teach her.

Above all, I would advise her not to quit. She is too close. I believe as the economy improves, publishers will be buying more fresh material. In the past poor economic years, publishers have brought forth material they didn't have to spend much on to flesh out their lines. They republished old material and put new illustrations on public domain stories. A publishing house can only do that so long before they have to bring out new and exciting books. I think that time is now.

## **Bonus Article: Resubmitting A Rejected Manuscript**

Here's a fascinating question Laura received a while back. It brings up an interesting dilemma faces by writer who receive "personal" (as opposed to form) rejection letters.

Although getting a rejection letter is no fun – even if it's directly from an editor who clearly enjoyed your work – you've actually established something quite important...a relationship with a real live editor.

Here's how Laura advised one writer about taking advantage of this great opportunity:

*Hi Laura,*

*I seem to have clawed my way to the near the top of the slush pile; I am now receiving signed, personalized rejection letters rather than photocopied forms. Several of the letters have included favorable comments, but so far I have received no suggestions for revisions of the manuscripts, or requests that I do so. My question is, if I revise the manuscript substantially, can I send it back to the same editors again? Or does 'no' mean 'no, no, never, never'?*

Congratulations on getting those personal rejections. In publishing (unlike the rest of the world) being rejected "personally" is much better than being rejected anonymously. It's frustrating, though, if the editor doesn't tell you why your manuscript was rejected (that's up to you and your writer's group to figure out). If the editor doesn't specifically say she wants to see the manuscript again, then "no" means "no". However, she may say she'd like to see other manuscripts from you. If that's the case, be sure to send her something else, and remind her in your cover letter that she requested another story. Even if she didn't mention seeing more work, I'd still send her another manuscript (provided it's the kind of thing that publisher is looking for) and in your cover letter thank her for taking the time to respond personally to your previous submission, and say "Here's something else I thought you might like." It's never too early to start forming relationships with editors -- this is often how the first sale is ultimately made.

## **Bonus Article: Tips For Revising Your Manuscript**

If your manuscript keeps collecting rejection letters, perhaps it's time to take a cold hard look at it. It may need some serious revising.

Revision is an intricate and important part of the writing process, and one which many writers would rather ignore. After the initial excitement of finally finishing your book, the thought of going over the manuscript again and again can seem tedious. But books that have not been carefully revised will almost always be rejected, so spending the time now can save you frustration in the long run.

An editor will read a promising manuscript several times, first looking at the whole story and then at the details. Your revisions should follow the same pattern. The following are tips to help you make the most of your rewrites.

### **1. Put the manuscript away**

The most useful thing you can do, upon completing your manuscript, is to set it aside for at least a week and start on something else. Once you've put some distance between yourself and your work, you'll be better able to read it again with an objective eye.

### **2. Read the whole book from start to finish in one sitting**

Don't make any changes now, but jot notes to yourself in the margins of the manuscript if anything pops out as needing work. With this reading, look at the whole story. Does the beginning grab the reader? Does the action flow smoothly from chapter to chapter? Did you leave out important details that the reader needs to be able to follow the story? Is the ending logical and satisfying? Now go back and revise these big structural points. Repeat Steps 1 and 2 until you're satisfied with the overall story.

### **3. Cut, condense and tighten**

Once you have the major elements of your book in place, you're ready to cut. Almost every book is overwritten in the early drafts. Look at long scenes and see where you can eliminate unnecessary details to keep the action moving. Condense lengthy passages of dialogue down to the essential elements. Replace two words with one,



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especially with verbs (“plodded to school” has more emotional weight than “walked slowly to school”). With nonfiction, check if you've repeated points over and over. The hardest thing to do as a writer is to cut, but if you can learn to sacrifice individual words, sentences, even chapters for the good of the whole book, you'll find your job is much easier.

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## Children's Writers: Come Join The Fightin' Bookworms!

For about the price of a latte every month, you can get:



A fresh issue of *Children's Book Insider, The Newsletter for Children's Writers*, featuring up-to-the-minute market leads, exclusive interviews and unparalleled guidance for your writing career.



Access to our exclusive **CBI 1-2-3 System**, a new approach to teaching that makes writing, publishing and promoting a children's book easier than ever before.



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