

# Children's Book Insider

March 2018

## Writing Religious-Themed Books



**PLUS**

Above the Slushpile Submissions Opportunity:  
Bookends Literary Agency

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**Lynne Marie** is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), and numerous stories and articles in magazines, including *Highlights for Children*, *High Five*, *Baby Bug*, *Family Fun*, *Hopscotch*, *Turtle*, *Spider* and *Writer's Digest*. Her website is <http://www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com>

**Jane McBride** is the author of 36 novels, numerous short stories and articles including pieces in 16 Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies, and the CBI Managing Editor. Follow her writing blog at <http://www.janemchoate.blogspot.com>

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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.

Dear Insider:

When *Love* — a new picture book from Matt de la Peña and illustrator Loren Long — was first published, it came under criticism because of one of the illustrations showed a child hiding under a piano while his parents had an alcohol-fueled argument. In his *Time* magazine essay, "[Why We Shouldn't Shield Children from Darkness](#)," Matt said this:

In the book world, we often talk about the power of racial inclusion — and in this respect we're beginning to see a real shift in the field — but many other facets of diversity remain in the shadows. For instance, an uncomfortable number of children out there right now are crouched beneath a metaphorical piano. There's a power to seeing this largely unspoken part of our interior lives represented, too. And for those who've yet to experience that kind of sadness, I can't think of a safer place to explore complex emotions for the first time than inside the pages of a book, while sitting in the lap of a loved one.

As writers for children, we often feel the need to protect our audience. We want to create a place within our books that's safe, happy, and lets readers be kids for as long as possible. And that's not always a bad thing. We aspire to give the youngest readers a secure foundation as they begin to learn about the world. But as they grow, our readers come to understand that life has many layers, some uplifting, some heart-breaking. And to pretend those layers don't exist undermines the most noble purposes of books: to empower readers to face life's challenges with strength, compassion, and the knowledge they are not alone. To stand up for themselves when they've been wronged. To stand up for someone else when they've been bullied. And to treat each other with kindness and respect.

If children have the opportunity to work through interior struggles of their own — and gain empathy for the interior struggles of others — in their books from an early age, they'll be better equipped to overcome the obstacles the world hurls at them as they grow up. Which brings me to the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

No book can ever truly prepare you for witnessing the massacre of 17 of your classmates and teachers. But books can help you survive the aftermath. It's because of authors like Ellen Hopkins, Jason Reynolds, Laurie Halse Anderson, John Green, Lauren Oliver, S.E. Hinton, R.J. Palacio, Jacqueline Woodson, Stephen Chbosky, Angie Thomas and many others that these teenagers didn't curl up in defeat. They've grown up reading books that didn't try to hide the world from them, but instead showed them characters who overcame tremendous challenges and arrived at a place of hope. They devoured stories about their peers who chose to get back up after the world knocked them down, and in doing so became better versions of themselves. By reading about adversity, these students internalized strength. And now they're going to change the world.

Yes, the students of MSD High School have some advantages. They have tremendous support from their families and community. They are well-educated and articulate. Their school library is well-stocked with books. But if we decide as a community of writers that every child and teen deserves these same advantages, we can go a long way toward making that happen. And it starts with the stories we write.

If you insist on creating young adult fiction where your characters have nothing to worry about beyond getting a date for the prom, you're insulting your audience. If you refuse to put any type of conflict in your picture books, young readers will have nowhere to turn when they feel sad or alone. That doesn't mean you can't write happy books. The world is full of beauty and joy, and we need stories that acknowledge that as well. But life is messy and complicated and unpredictable, and exploring the dark as well as the light within the safety of a book can help prepare readers for life's challenges. Kids are aware of much more than we realize. To pretend otherwise in their books does them a great disservice.

Our motto at WriteForKids is "Change the World with Your Words." Now, more than ever, we believe this to be true. Keep writing, and empower your readers to change the world for us all.

So let's talk about this month's issue. We've got some really exciting news from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt with the announcement of their new imprint Versify being open to submissions. Jean Daigneau's Genre Spotlight on writing religious-themed children's books is the perfect primer to the *Pockets* magazine fiction contest and submissions to Kar-Ben Publishing. Pants on Fire Press and Duet/Interlude Press round out the opportunities for all sorts of diverse, innovative writers.

Our articles feature tips on writing romance for teens and new adults, an interview with author Sally J. Pla who writes about neurodiverse characters in her middle grade fiction, a Mini Blueprint on writing powerhouse sentences (the essential building blocks of any book), some inspirational advice on reaching your potential as a writer, and an Agent Spotlight with Tracy Marchini from Bookends Literary. Be sure to check out the Above the Slushpile opportunity at the end of Tracy's interview. She's created a special Submittable link just for CBI subscribers. How cool is that?

I'm also very excited to tell you about the Vermont Writers Roundtable, an intimate writing weekend I'm planning with authors Stephen Swinburne and Peter Lourie on June 22-24 in South Londonderry, VT. It's designed for writers of creative nonfiction for children and teens who want to take their work to the next level. But unlike other writing workshops, participants won't just be taking notes while an instructor lectures to them. In true Roundtable fashion, this will be a weekend of discussion, collaboration, small-group critiques where everyone participates, and a respectful exchange of ideas. For more information, go to [www.VermontWritersRoundtable.com](http://www.VermontWritersRoundtable.com)

Happy March, Insiders!

Best wishes,

*Laura Backes*



But it's not only stars that flame out, you discover.  
It's summers, too.

And friendships.  
And people.

From *Love* by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Loren Long

# At Presstime:

## 2018 Pockets Magazine Fiction Contest

*Pockets* is an inter-denominational magazine for children ages 6-12. Material should support the purpose of the magazine, which is to help children grow in their relationship with God and live as Christian disciples. It is designed to help children pray and to see their faith as an integral part of their everyday lives. While this is the magazine's purpose, all submissions do not need to be overtly religious. Readers include children of many cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Stories should show appreciation of cultural differences.

*Pockets* holds an annual Fiction Contest for stories 750-1000 words. While there is no set theme for contest entries, the primary interest is in stories that can help children deal with real-life situations. Does not accept stories about talking animals or inanimate objects. Biblical and historical fiction based on real events is welcome for regular submissions but is not included in the contest. Stories should contain action, use believable dialogue, be simply written, and be relevant to the problems faced by this age group in everyday life. It is important that the tone not be "preachy" or didactic. Use short sentences and paragraphs. When possible, use concrete words instead of abstractions. However, do not "write down" to children.

Contest entries should be previously unpublished. Entries should include a cover sheet with an accurate word count, and must be postmarked between March 15 and August 15. Send story with cover sheet to Lynn W. Gilliam, Editor, Pockets Magazine, P. O. Box 340004, Nashville, TN 37203-0004. Write FICTION CONTEST on the envelope. Include a SASE if you'd like your entry returned.

The winner will be announced November 1 at <http://pockets.upperroom.org>. The winner will receive a \$500 award and publication in the magazine.

## Award-Winning Small Press Looking for MG and YA Submissions

Pants On Fire Press is an award-winning boutique book publisher of middle-grade, young adult and fictional books for adults. Publishes in both print and e-book format, and is looking for strong writers who are excited about marketing their stories and building a following of readers. Loves big story ideas and meaty characters, especially in the following genres: Action, Adventure, Christian, Detective, Drama, Dystopian, Fantasy, Historical Fiction, Horror, Humor, Jewish, Love, Mystery, Paranormal, Romance, Science Fiction, Supernatural, Suspense and Thriller stories. For recent titles, go to <http://pantsonfirepress.com/>.

For middle grade books, looking for an exciting plot, strong voices, storytelling, and well-developed characters, and a polished manuscript. For young adult, looking for a strong voice that resonates with readers, a premise that can be conveyed in 2-3 sentences, memorable protagonists who are 15-19 years old, and, if applicable to the story, an age-appropriate romantic element, even if it's not the center of the story.

For novels, the body of the email should include your query and the first three chapters along with: a synopsis, the genre of the book, approximate word count, a short pitch, marketing plan, writing credentials, if any, your contact info, agent info (if gented), author bio, and list of any and all previous titles with sales history. Paste the query letter and text in the body of the email and send to Becca Goldman at [submission@pantsonfirepress.com](mailto:submission@pantsonfirepress.com) or [editor@pantsonfirepress.com](mailto:editor@pantsonfirepress.com). Allow 8-12 weeks for a response. Responds only if interested in publishing the work.

### Vermont Writers Roundtable:

*Take Your Creative Nonfiction for Children to the Next Level*, is an intensive workshop held in South Londonderry, VT on **June 22-24**. Limited to 15 attendees with nonfiction works-in-progress, the weekend will feature several small-group critique sessions as well as informational workshops lead by Laura Backes, publisher of *Children's Book Insider*, and award-winning nonfiction authors Stephen Swinburne and Peter Lourie. The Roundtable setting promotes collaboration, an exchange of ideas, and a supportive environment where all voices are heard. Yolanda Scott, Editorial Director of Charlesbridge, will present a session on the editor's perspective. After an empowering weekend, participants will leave with an action plan on how to write, revise and submit their work. Please visit [www.vermontwritersroundtable.com](http://www.vermontwritersroundtable.com) for an information packet and application form. **All applications must be received by April 7, 2018.**

## Publisher Seeks Young Adult Novels with LGBTQ Focus

*Duet* is the young adult imprint of Interlude Press, an award-winning small press featuring quality LGBTQ-focused titles. Looking for well-crafted original novels of 55,000 - 90,000 words featuring diverse casts with lead characters from across the LGBTQ spectrum. Accepting all genres except science fiction and fantasy. Wants stories that infuse literary value into storylines featuring LGBTQ characters, and intelligent literature that treats the readers, the characters, and the community with respect.

Interlude Press/Duet does not publish material that might contribute to rape culture. Manuscripts depicting rape, incest, bestiality, and other extreme material as romantic or titillation devices will be rejected. Does not publish graphic sexual content between minors, or depictions of "gay for pay." For current Duet titles, go to <http://duetbooks.com/>

Accepting electronic submissions only. Include a cover letter pasted into the body of your email with the manuscript's title, genre (or genres), word count, lead characters' gender and sexual orientation, one-paragraph summary (as seen on the back cover of a book), your full contact information, including your legal name (not pen name), email, address and phone number. Send the following as an attachment to the email (as a .doc or .docx file): A one-page synopsis of your story, including the ending; a short bio, including a list of any published works and links to your social media, along with a brief statement on how you plan to promote your book; your complete, polished manuscript. Email your submission to [submissions@interludepress.com](mailto:submissions@interludepress.com) Please do not submit a manuscript that is also currently under submission with another publisher. It may take up to 3-4 months to receive a response.

Interlude Press and its imprints pay authors quarterly per the following guidelines, with royalties increasing as certain sales thresholds are met: Digital short stories and novellas pay royalties of 40% to 60% of net; digital novels (eBooks) pay royalties of 30% to 50% of net; print novels pay royalties of 8% to 15% of the cover price. Advances against royalties are not a standard practice at Interlude Press and its imprints.

## New Imprint at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Accepting Submissions

*Versify* is a new imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers, to launch in the spring of 2019. The list will be curated by Newbery Award-winning author Kwame Alexander, and feature innovative creators with fresh and varied voices. The imprint reflects Alexander's vision that accessible and powerful prose and poetry—in picture books, novels, and nonfiction—can celebrate the lives and reflect the possibilities of all children. Seeking new authors and artists as well as established writers and illustrators.

Accepting fiction and nonfiction picture books, middle grade and young adult books. Send a cover letter and attach the full manuscript for picture books and novels. For longer nonfiction, submit a query with a synopsis and attach sample chapters (or the full manuscript if it's available). For graphic novels, submit a query with a detailed synopsis and attach 3-5 sample pages. Illustrators who would be like to be considered for projects may also send art samples. Manuscripts should be double-spaced and formatted in Times New Roman, with 12-point font. Submit electronically to [Versify.info@hmhco.com](mailto:Versify.info@hmhco.com). If you don't receive a response after 12 weeks you can assume your work is not right for Versify, but you are free to submit a different manuscript.

## Publisher Seeks Books for All Ages With Jewish Themes

Kar-Ben Publishing publishes 15-20 new titles each year. All are books on Jewish themes for children and families. Considers fiction and nonfiction for preschool through approximately 6th grade, including holiday books, life-cycle stories, Bible tales, folktales, board books, and activity books. In particular, Kar-Ben is looking for stories that reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of today's Jewish family. Your story should be concise, have interesting, believable characters, and action that holds the readers' attention. Recent titles include *Scarlett and Sam: Escape from Egypt* by Eric A. Kimmel (time travel adventure for ages 6-9); *The Whispering Town* by Jennifer Elvgren, illustrated by Fabio Santomauro (older picture book for ages 7-11, based on a true story from Nazi-occupied Denmark in 1943); *Goldie Takes a Stand* by Barbara Krasner, illustrated by Kelsey Garrity-Riley (ages 5-9, picture book biography of the childhood of Golda Meir); *Three Falafels in My Pita* by Maya Friedman, illustrated by Steve Mack (board book, ages 0-3); *The Boy from Seville* by Dorit Orgad (historical fiction, ages 10-13).

All submissions should be sent electronically to [editorial@karben.com](mailto:editorial@karben.com). Submit a query letter with a synopsis of the work, and attach the manuscript as a Word document. Do not include artwork or art direction with the text unless you are also a professional illustrator. Allow 6-8 weeks for a reply. For more titles, go to <http://karben.com/>

### Correction from the February CBI:

We inadvertently misspelled the first name of Shari Dash Greenspan, Editor of Flashlight Press, in some places in our *Editor Spotlight*. We apologize for the error. If you submitted to her and spelled her name wrong, she's aware that it was our error.

# Writing Romance for Teens and New Adults

by Jane McBride

**R**omance. The first blush of love. The tingle of awareness, the pounding of the heart, the dry mouth and damp palms when the object of that love is near.

Romance novels for today's teens and New Adults (readers 18-25) venture into areas not heard of, or even thought of, a few decades ago. Today's young people deal with addiction, gang violence, drugs, self-mutilation such as cutting, and a myriad of other struggles. They are also more aware of current events and often involved in social activism. And they fall in love. At the core of a romance, a love story remains.

In this article, we will look at the development of young love, how it starts with the first spark of awareness which then blooms to attraction to the conclusion, whether that be happily-ever-after or happy-for-right-now.

**Awareness.** Do you remember the mixed-up emotions you felt and (sometimes endured) as a teen when a boy or girl first caught your interest? Physiological reactions occurred as you experienced sweaty palms, hoarse voice (or maybe a voice that didn't work at all), a shortness of breath, and a sense of lovely possibilities. It is the latter, I believe, that makes us so open to the potential of love. For vulnerable young people, this awareness can be earth-shattering, perhaps even frightening. What, a sixteen-year-old girl may wonder, is she supposed to do with all these unfamiliar feelings and physiological responses? Who can she talk about these things with? Certainly not her mother! Do not dismiss the feelings of young people as simply "puppy love." Their feelings can run deep and strong. Writing a compelling teen or NA romance is more than simply a meetcute (a film term for a scene in which a future romantic couple meets for the first time), though that can certainly have a place in romance. But don't rely solely on a meet cute to carry an entire book.

**Awakening.** Attraction comes next, a spike of physical and emotional responses as both boy and girl acknowledge that something special is happening. Some label this lust. I disagree. This stage awakens those budding feelings that people of all ages have. Teens and New Adults experience these feelings intensely as their hormones are raging, changes are occurring in their bodies at a sometimes alarming rate, and emotions are churning. Nothing makes sense. At the same time, colors are brighter, smells more intense, touches more searing.

**Meaningful sharing.** In this stage, the girl and boy explore each other on many levels as they learn what makes the other happy, what activities he/she enjoys, what gives them pleasure. They learn more of each other's families and what has shaped them into the people they are today. In addition, they become aware of nuances and shades to their characters. Are they loyal and faithful? Or do they see such values as old-fashioned? Are they goal-oriented or content to let life happen? Do they struggle with mental health issues or battle addiction? Romance does not happen in a vacuum where all other problems and circumstances come to a halt. Rather, the romance develops in the midst of everything else that is going on in the young persons' lives.

**Commitment.** In your romance, do a teenage boy and girl ask for a commitment from each other? Should they? Does it make sense for them to promise each other exclusivity? Are they regarded as a couple by their families and friends? Do they regard themselves as a couple? These are all questions that should be answered by the development of the romance. If the characters are young or middle teens, they probably are not ready for this kind of commitment. They are thinking about the next geometry test or obsessing over the zit that popped out overnight. What about if they are older teens, like eighteen

*Writing Romance continued*

or nineteen? Or in a New Adult book (where characters are in college or just starting a career)? Then the answer becomes “maybe.” Commitment implies more than exclusivity. It carries the promise of trust and loyalty and caring. Whatever the age of the couple, the characters have a right to expect those qualities from each other. If one of the characters is unwilling or unable to give them, that can make for powerful conflict.

**Conflict.** No story is complete without conflict. A love story where all goes smoothly for the characters and declarations of love come immediately is boring. Sure, we wish for that in real life, but it isn't real. More importantly, for the purposes of story telling, it isn't interesting. In the above paragraph, we touched upon one source of conflict, but there are many more. Family background (a la Romeo and Juliet) can incite conflict that neither young person is able to cope with. Race and cultural differences can also exacerbate if not create problems. What about goals? What if a seventeen-year-old girl from a working-class neighborhood is determined to go to the university, but her boyfriend feels he must get a job immediately out of high school to help support his family? Goals get in the way of love and may threaten its very existence.

**Intimacy.** Should romances for teens include physical intimacy? The answer, like so many, is “It depends.” Like romances for adults, the inclusion and level of intimacy varies greatly between publishers and specific lines of romance for teens and NAs. Check the guidelines of your targeted publisher and understand where it draws the line. Ask yourself what you believe. Can you write a book that goes against those values if the story demands it? Do you need to check your beliefs at the door? Should you? We are being woefully naïve if we believe that a number of today's teens are not sexually active. From television shows to advertisements to social media, teens and young adults are targeted with messages of sexual exploration. That said, what you write depends upon your comfort level in writing explicit scenes and your intent in writing this book. Understand that intimacy need not mean physical consummation and that it can be implied rather than described in graphic detail. Young people are sophisticated and don't need a tutorial of “what goes where.” A physically intimate scene should never be gratuitous. It goes without saying that degrees of intensity in intimacy need to be age-appropriate. What may be right for New Adult readers will be vastly different than

that for the fourteen and fifteen year-old set.

**The Future.** Will your story be one of happily-ever-after book or will it be a happy-for-right-now one? That depends largely upon the ages of your protagonists, their level of maturity, the needs of the story, and your purpose in writing the story in the first place.

*Wrapping Up*

Writing romance for teens and New Adults can be exhilarating, fun, and surprising. It can also be poignant, startling, and heartbreaking as you learn what many young people must face at still tender ages. Writing will reveal things about yourself, things you may be unaware of until you see them appear on paper or on screen. Penning stories for this age group also carries with it responsibility as your words can and do influence your audience. Be honest in your emotions. Be faithful to your values. Be true to the theme you want to portray. Finally, delve deep into your mind and heart to find the essence of your story and start writing. You, like your characters, are on a journey, one of exploration and discovery. Enjoy!



# AUTHOR BRINGS NEURODIVERSE CHARACTERS TO MIDDLE GRADE FICTION

interview by PJ McIlvaine

The path to publication is not always a straight road; sometimes there are twists and curves and unexpected potholes that throw you for a loop. Sally J. Pla ([www.sallyjpla.com](http://www.sallyjpla.com)) took upheavals in stride, turning lemons into lemonade with two published books: the critically regarded *The Someday Birds* (Harper Collins 2017), and *Stanley Probably Will Be Fine* (Harper Collins 2018), which garnered a Kirkus starred review and was named a Junior Library Guild Selection of 2018. Her picture book, *Benny, The Bad Day, and Me*, is coming out from Lee & Low in late 2018. Drawn to neurodiverse characters, Pla (pronounced “Blah” but with a P) has found her niche in the ever-expanding kid lit universe of [#ownvoices](https://twitter.com/ownvoices).

**PJ McIlvaine:** You’ve lived in many different places such as New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Venezuela, France, Connecticut, Wisconsin, and now Southern California. How did moving so much, and having to adapt, help you or inspire you in your writing?

**Sally Pla:** Just like Charlie in *The Someday Birds*, I am a person who craves routine and hates disruption. So some of those moves were really tough. But ultimately, I’m glad my life’s unfurled that way. It’s helped me learn to be more flexible. And I’ve learned that sometimes what you assume is total disaster (getting dragged onto a plane to move to Caracas at 15, crying the whole time that my life was over) may actually turn out amazing (I went to a great international high school and spent two of the happiest years of my life!)... Um, sorry for all the drama, Mom and Dad.

**PJ:** Your novels both deal with characters in the “neurodiverse world.” What exactly does that term personally mean to you, and why are you drawn to write about those who feel left out or different or who have difficul-

ty fitting in with expected social norms? How much of yourself do you see in your characters?

**SP:** I like to use Professor Nick Walker’s definition of “neurodiversity” which you can find on his blog [Neurocosmopolitanism.com](http://Neurocosmopolitanism.com) – it is, quite simply, a term referring to “the diversity of human brains and human minds.” But it implies that there is, or should be, a wide, diverse range of acceptance – that to advocate for neurodiversity means that one accepts all of the great range of neurocognitive differences that make us human. And that those differences are valid.

There is another term: neurodivergence. This is used to describe those whose brains vary from the norm. Autistic, dyslexic, OCD, Tourette’s, etc. brains are described as neurodivergent.

And yes, I am drawn to neurodivergent kids. I have an autism diagnosis myself, although my symptoms are much milder now than they were when I was a child. I have an autistic son and nephew, and many friends. Every time I visit a school, I ask, “How many of you have a friend or relative or classmate with autism?” and every single hand always goes up. The rates are one in 68 now – higher in some spots. One in 41 eight-year-olds in

New Jersey are autistic, according to the CDC. Autistic girls are especially under-diagnosed, I suspect. Autistic girls are missed because their symptoms are so different from boys’. They are more socially aware than the boys, generally speaking.

It’s my mission to populate kid lit with more authentical-ly autistic and generally neurodivergent characters. It’s a bit of a personal goal. There are some good books out there, but not enough of them yet. We need more.

**PJ:** Did you always want to be a writer? Do you have a



writing schedule?

**SP:** I did always want to be a writer, although I was also interested in the law for a while. My schedule varies depending on my family, but I do either write or research or think hard about story, every day, now. I keep a few things cooking on the burner at the same time. I structure very carefully, but then, while drafting, I get brainstorms and change everything around. Ugh. It's always a push-and-pull between planning and chance. Maybe that's a good dynamic, I don't know.

**PJ:** Was there anything about the path to publication that was a surprise or a challenge or perhaps not what you expected?

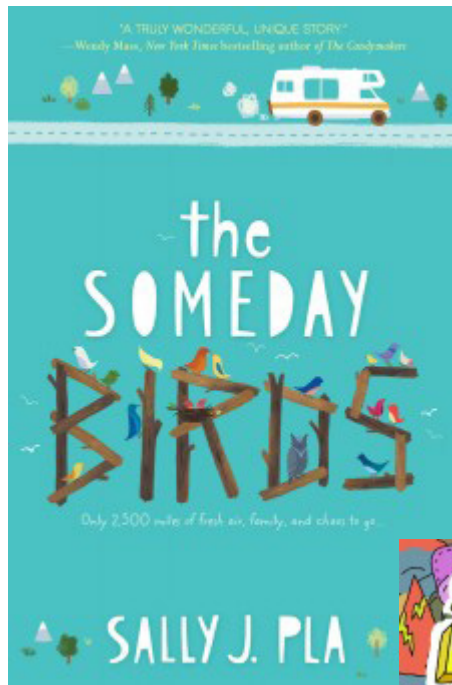
**SP:** It happened really fast for me, and deep inside, I think I don't deserve it. I'm not good enough. Yet.

**PJ:** For someone who says they were a shy child, you seem to enjoy appearances and other related book events. Did that come easily to you? What part of the publicity process do you like the most (and the least).

**SP:** I am still extremely shy, but I try to push myself, because afterward, I usually feel glad that I had the courage to interact with others. I do not enjoy traveling, and find appearances daunting. Even though I'm smiling in my social media shots, my stomach is usually squirming!

But that doesn't mean I don't deeply love people. I do! I adore meeting new friends, fellow writers, kids, teachers, and readers of all types. I guess I'm what Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet*, would classify as an "extroverted introvert."

I just have to pace it so I don't get sensory overload. A few hours a day is my usual max. Then I need to go back home or to the hotel and "detox." It's all about



finding the balance.

I prefer online publicity to physical travel, for sure. Anything I can do in cozy-pants while sipping tea, wins out.

**PJ:** The cover for *Stanley* is awesome. It has the look of a graphic/comic book. How much input did you have in the illustrative process?

**SP:** *Stanley* is not a graphic novel, but it does have some cool interior art by Steve Wolfhard, not to mention his cover. Steve was a storybook artist on Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time*. (When I tell kids that, I get a small cool vibe by association, so I like trying to yoke my name to Steve's, hah.) My original vision was for this book to be a graphic novel, but along the way in the process, it morphed into something more wordy! I do want to try writing a graphic novel, and a web comic someday, and illustrating it myself. On the bucket list.

**PJ:** Your third published book will be a picture book. What inspired you to tackle that genre? Do you see yourself going back and forth between genres?



**SP:** I'd love to do more picture books. *Benji, the Bad Day, and Me* will pub with Lee & Low in late 2018, with great illustrations by Ken Min. It's one of their first with an autistic character, and they are taking good care with it. I guess the point of writing for younger kids, for me, is to start early in portraying autism as a matter of course; as a totally normal, accepted thing. An annoying

thing sometimes, yeah, sure, but still: part of NORMAL LIFE.

There are many, many picture books out there with autism in their title that point at a particular kid, usually a brother, and laundry list his symptoms, so other kids can "understand". This is well intentioned, but it is also,

*Sally J. Pla continued*

in a way, quite “othering” and pathologizing to kids who are trying desperately to find a place to fit in.

I wanted to write a picture book that unfolded naturally, with the autism just depicted as a normal part of family life. Annoying, sometimes, yeah, but still, normal. Because for kids who deal with it, whether themselves or in a sibling or friend, that’s how it really is.

**PJ:** From what I can tell, many writers are still confused about what #ownvoices means. I have seen some writers who are under the impression that because they have a disabled or diverse character (even if its a supporting or minor character) that the material qualifies to be categorized as #ownvoices. Can you elaborate on that?

**SP:** The definition of #ownvoices is that, for instance, you're an author with Tourette's writing a character with Tourette's. You're an autistic author writing an autistic character, a paraplegic author writing a paraplegic character. You actually have the same condition you're writing about.

If have a condition, but your book doesn't mention it or deal with it in any way, then that's not technically an #ownvoices book either. It's really cool, but it doesn't fit the standard agreed-upon definition.

I hope that clarifies!

**PJ:** Also, conversely, is it now a no-no for an author to write outside of his or her own experiences (for example, writing about an autistic character if they themselves are not autistic).

**SP:** Of course it's not a no-no! And it's totally not my place to tell any author what is on or off limits. I hope we're going to get many, many more stories that help to normalize and to widen understanding.

But, that said, I have read well-intentioned stories that have made me feel badly about myself, or upset on behalf of my son. To be honest, some have even made my blood boil in indignation. If you are going to write a character with a disability you don't know about firsthand, first ask why. Is it for novelty's sake? Are you throwing in some diversity because it's the encouraged thing to do these days? Is it for a plot device? Or is it because that particular kind of nuanced, different character will truly enhance your story, and enrich your narrative?

And know that compassionate, careful research is needed. Real kids are reading, and they are sharp cookies, and

they are picking up on the cues in your writing.

A great resource for learning more is to sift through the reviews and articles posted on [disabilityinkidlit.com](http://disabilityinkidlit.com). Books about disabilities are reviewed by writer-reviewers who themselves have those exact same disabilities. It's not too active a site right now, but it still has lots of great content for perusal.

**PJ:** What advice would your adult self give your child self?

**SP:** My child self wouldn't listen, but I would try to tell her to be braver. To value herself more.

**PJ:** Where do you see yourself five years from now, professionally?

**SP:** There are so many things I want to write. More middle grade, and YA, and new adult. All coming-of-age stories because those are the most interesting to me. Although I think we are all, the whole lot of us humans, from babies to seniors, coming of age, all the time.

# WRITING

# POWERHOUSE SENTENCES

by Jane McBride

**W**ords make up sentences, and sentences make up paragraphs, which in turn make up scenes, then chapters, and, finally, a book. In this sense, sentences are the second building block of books.

We know that sentences are the workhorses of paragraphs, but do we know the different types of sentences in a paragraph, such as topic sentences, detail sentences? Do we know the importance of the order of sentences and how they can work together to support a theme of a story? A sentence can seem a humble, even unimportant, part of the writing process. But, despite its humbleness, it is a powerhouse in writing, for it is with sentences, one by one, that stories are composed.

You probably remember lessons from (in my case, long ago) English class on types of sentences. We're going to briefly review those here before getting into the meat of this article.

*Declarative.* Declarative sentences make statements.

When the sun is out, I feel better.

I feel sad that my friend is moving away.

You are my best friend.

*Interrogative.* Interrogative sentences ask a question.

Did you really mean to cheat on your test or did it just happen?

How could you go off and leave your little sister alone?

*Exclamatory.* Exclamatory sentences express strong emotion or feelings. This may be but one word.

Great!

I can't believe I ate the whole thing!

You're such a jerk!

(Keep exclamation points to a minimum. A little goes a long way.)

*Imperative.* Imperative sentences give orders or request action. Notice that in this type of sentence, the subject is implied.

Put down the gun. Now.

Open your algebra book and turn to page 103.

When you get home, please preheat the oven for the roast.

How do you use these sentences in building your story? You combine them to create paragraphs, which, in turn, have their own types of sentences:

A **topic sentence**, usually the first, gives the theme of a paragraph. Any of the above types of sentences will work, depending upon the effect you are going for.

**Detail sentences** do just as their name suggests: they add flavor to the topic sentence, giving bits of spice and interest. Remember that sometimes sentences are only one, such as the above example of "Put down the gun. Now." *Now* is a single word, yet it stands as a sentence and is an example of how varying the structure and length of your sentences gives impact to your writing.

Let's move on to ways to improve your sentences and take them to the next level. In doing this, you will be taking your writing to the next level as well. Take a look at this mini-blueprint for ways to strengthen sentences and add interest to them: (Did you notice the imperative sentence?)

**STEP 1:** Vary sentence structure. The noun-verb (subject-predicate) structure is standard and works well. However, if one noun-verb sentence follows another and another and another, it's ... well... boring. And boring your reader is the last thing you as a writer want to do.

**ACTION:** Mix it up. Start a sentence with an introductory clause or a prepositional phrase. Play around with the structure. Use complex sentences (made up of a prin-

*Mini Blueprint continued*

cial clause and a subordinate clause) and compound ones (made up of two or more simple sentences joined by a conjunction, i.e. and, but, or, etc). Vary the length of your sentences as well. Once again, mix it up. If your usual style is short, choppy sentences, add the occasional long one. If you typically write in a lyrical, flowing style, throw in a terse sentence once in a while. **NOTE:** If you are trying to make a point, you may want to use the same structure again and again. This can have a powerful effect. Just be careful not to overdo it. **SECOND NOTE:** Keep your sentence structure simple when writing for very young children. They recognize and respond to the similar patterns and similar words.

Consider the following passage:

Sally walked to school. She talked to her friends about the new girl in school. She listened to her teacher. She played at recess. She ate her lunch. She returned to class.

Are you bored silly?

If we vary the pattern just a little, we come up with something like this:

Walking to school, Sally gossiped with her friends about the new girl in school. In class, she listened to her teacher but could hardly wait for recess when she would play with her friends. After recess, she ate her lunch and then returned to class.

Still pretty bland fare, but at least it doesn't read like a laundry list of Sally's actions.

**STEP 2:** Keep your sentences in order. Did you know there is an order to sentences in paragraphs? In journalism, reporters are told to start with the most important information, hence the directive "Don't bury the lede." This is great advice for any writing. However, you may want to ignore this counsel when you want to build to the most important point of a paragraph by "starting small" and gradually reaching the crescendo or the exciting conclusion of a paragraph.

**ACTION:** Look at a paragraph of your work-in-progress (WIP) and determine if you have used your sentence order to the best effect. If a paragraph isn't working or seems flat, experiment with the order of the sentences, along with the structure and length and type. Don't limit yourself here. There are no wrong answers, but there may be more effective ways to use your sentences to heighten your reader's involvement and interest in the story.

**STEP 3:** Use sentences as building blocks.


**ACTION:** Look at your sentences as construction tools. Layer them together as a bricklayer might build a brick wall. In each paragraph, you should be building to a point. This point need not be earth-shattering, but there should be a reason for the paragraph, otherwise why include it at all?

**STEP 4:** Put it all together. You are not only a writer; you are an artist. You are painting with words, words which you have crafted into meaningful and artful sentences. When you are writing, imagine your sentences as the colors and lines of a fine painting. Do you want to paint a delicate landscape like Monet or depict the movement of ballerinas such as Degas? Both are beautiful; both are distinctive.

**ACTION:** Create sentences that bring your story to life. Choose each word with care; then, choose the order in which you put those words together into sentences, then the order in which you will put the sentences together. Attention to detail is paramount in writing. Nothing is too insignificant to put to chance. Decide upon your vision and then bring it to life with each word, each sentence. You are the master creating your masterpiece. No one can write a book as you can.

## FINISHING UP

If you can write a good sentence, you can write a good paragraph and, in turn, a good scene, a good chapter, a good book. It starts with one sentence at a time. Make your sentences shine. Polish them as you would your grandmother's silver. In that way, your manuscript will sparkle, making it un-put-downable.



Each month, we will be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, marketing, or self-publishing your book, go to [www.writingblueprints.com](http://www.writingblueprints.com)

# Tracy Marchini

## BOOKENDS LITERARY

interview by Lynne Marie

**T**racy Marchini is both a literary agent and an author. Before coming to BookEnds Literary in 2016, she earned an MFA in Writing for Children and ran her own freelance editorial business. She began her career as an Agent Assistant at Curtis Brown in 2006. Her debut picture book, *Chicken Wants a Nap*, was published last fall and received a starred review from Kirkus Reviews. Her website ([www.tracymarchini.com](http://www.tracymarchini.com)) and newsletter, *The Quacktory*, has tips for writers, information on her latest client books and updates on her own work.

**Lynne Marie:** I am going to first ask the question that is likely burning on the minds of many *Quacktory* followers. Since you love ducks, how did your first book come to be about a chicken?

**Tracy Marchini:** Well, like many authors, my first book written was not my first book published. My first picture book ever to go on submission had a duck, but looking back at it now, I can see why it wasn't published! I am working on revising another ducky picture book with my agent now, so I'm hoping that sometime in the future you'll see some ducks on my book covers!

**LM:** What personal projects are you working on now? Any books about ducks in the wings?

**TM:** Yes! There's a ducky picture book, as well as another picture book without any type of fowl at all. I also have a middle grade project that I'm excited to jump back into.

**LM:** How do you juggle your agenting job with your writing job? What advice do you have for anyone trying to juggle two jobs or their time?

**TM:** One of the great things about being an agent is that your time can be very flexible, but one of the difficult things about being an agent is that you pretty much always have reading to do – and you generally can't do that during the day once your client list is built up. Both my reading and my writing tends to happen on evenings and weekends, and I do have to make an effort to carve out that time.

I've had two jobs for pretty much as long as I can remember. Most entry level publishing positions require you to work a second job if you're living in a high cost area, as I and many of my colleagues did. While I was an assistant, I also freelanced as a newspaper correspondent, book reviewer and copywriter. When I was in grad school, I worked in marketing 20 – 30 hours a week, freelance edited and took a full course load. And during all of this, I was still writing! So honestly, being able to work just on my client list and on my own books feels great in that my work time is always focused on the things I truly want to do long term.



To keep the focus on what's important to me, I've also learned to say no to any ask that isn't an immediate "Heck yes!" If you're waffling about a commitment, I'd guess 9 times out of 10 it's really a "no." And when I build my list as an agent, I work the same way – there are plenty of projects I've passed on that I knew would sell, but I didn't feel like "This book has to be mine." And I'm seeing some of those books come out now, and I'm genuinely happy for the authors, illustrators and their agents who found the right match. Agenting is so subjective, but if the goal is to build a career for that author, you just have to love their work. It's got to be a "Heck yes!" a hundred times over.

I've also worked hard to simplify other areas of my life, so that I can be most efficient with the time I have. This can be silly things – like I tend to only follow one TV show at a time, or I've realized that I don't desire to spend the time to learn to crochet (nor did I really enjoy the limited progress I made) and so I've given away those supplies. And sometimes it means protecting your emotional space, as well as your time. It is so important to have people around you that are going to bring you up – not work to tear you down or, equally as draining but perhaps a bit more passive, can only be happy for you when they feel that they're still on top. Especially in a creative field like publishing. I definitely could not do what I'm doing now without my support system at home and at work. (That said, you do need a critique group that will be constructively critical about your work – which done right is a form of support.)

*Tracy Marchini continued*

**LM:** How important do you feel the pitch is in grabbing an agent's attention? In catching an editor's eye? In successfully marketing a book?

**TM:** In all three situations the pitch can make the difference in someone reading the book or not, so I'd say it's pretty vital! At BookEnds, we frequently workshop pitches together before an agent starts pitching editors. When you're writing your query letter, you should be doing the same. Bring your query to your critique group. If they've read the book (or even if they haven't), then they're a great resource for making sure that you've really gotten to the heart of things in your query.

**LM:** You represent picture books, nonfiction, middle grade and young adult. What about board books? What percentage of your sales would you say each category fills?

**TM:** Board books are really tough unless you're an author-illustrator, and so I'm generally not looking to take on somebody just for board books.

Right now my list and sales skew towards picture books, broken up pretty evenly between authors, illustrators, and author-illustrators. I'm excited though about the middle grade and young adult on my list, and look forward to getting more of it out on submission! I'm also always looking for some more nonfiction, and don't see a lot of middle grade or YA nonfiction in my inbox for the trade market. I'd love for that to change!

**LM:** Have you noticed a rise in nonfiction in the past few years? What are you looking for in particular as far as nonfiction?

**TM:** I think that nonfiction is taking on a greater importance in the current market, where there's a larger discussion in classrooms about how students can tell whether something is true or false, and internet literacy in general.

In picture books, I'm looking for stories of unsung heroines and heroes – as well as little known events that have changed the course of history. Many publishers are moving away from cradle to grave biographies in favor of going deeper into one specific incident, and so I'd be keeping that in mind as well.

In middle grade and young adult, I'm looking for much of the same – though obviously with an older audience in mind. There's nothing really off the table, but I am looking for engaging writing, underrepresented voices, and stories that haven't been told before.

Actually, I suppose there are a few things off the table. I'm not a good fit for true crimes stories or anything

that would fit in the inspirational/religious market.

I also really appreciate nonfiction for tweens and teens that acknowledges that our heroes and heroines were human and doesn't shy away from some of the rougher edges. I think it's important to see that people that have made these fantastic contributions or achieved these amazing things weren't perfect, as I feel like it enables the reader to see that it's possible for them to accomplish something equally as amazing. (I think the reverse is also true – we need to see history's villains as people, so that we can recognize that people who have done terrible things aren't some relic/monster of the past.)

**LM:** You've mentioned that you enjoy stories about unsung heroes and heroines and that you're looking for nonfiction for trade markets, rather than educational markets. Could you define the difference between the two for those who are unclear?

**TM:** Educational presses tend to put books out in series (e.g. a school could buy a set of 20 books on space) and the voice tends to read a bit differently from something that's trying to grab a trade reader.

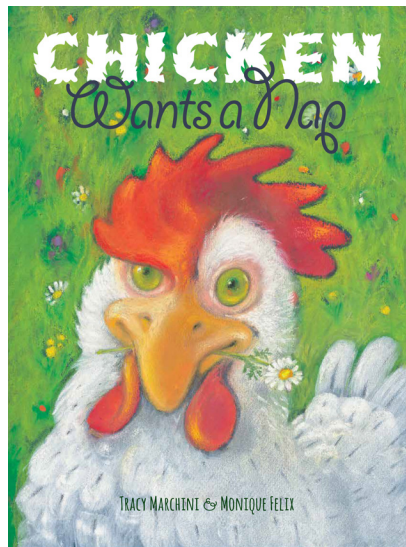
Trade nonfiction is also sold in the school and library market, of course. But I guess one way to think of it is the difference between something you could expect to see on the bookstore shelves and something that's packaged specifically for the classroom.

**LM:** You've mentioned that you love picture books that are “deliciously dark,” or have a “great sense of humor.” Could you define “deliciously dark” and provide examples of books that would comply with these two requests?

**TM:** Sure – I gave some examples in my blog post “What I'm looking for in ‘deliciously dark’ picture books and non-fiction biographies” (<http://tracymarchini.com/2017/04/03/deliciously-dark-and-non-fic-biog-msw1/>), but when I'm talking about deliciously dark in picture books, I guess I'm saying that I'm not afraid of humor where somebody gets eaten! (And come to think of it, my own picture book *Chicken Wants a Nap* has this humor, too.)

I also enjoy misanthropes in picture books, as long as they're relatable to kids, like Jory John and Lane Smith's *Penguin Problems*.

I'll always take a second look at picture books that are clever and witty, and I think the best humorous picture books are those where both the child and adult can laugh together (though not necessarily for the same reason.)



*Tracy Marchini continued*

**LM:** How did *Shark Nate-O* by Tara Luebbe and Becky Cattie come your way?

**TM:** Tara and Becky came through the regular query pile, just like the majority of my clients. (I've also taken on a client from a conference – though that is rare – and signed one or two as referrals from fellow agents.)

Their books definitely hit what I'm looking for in picture book humor. The books are clever and funny to both children and adults, the authors have a great eye for marketable picture book concepts, and their voice is spot on!

I hope you'll check a number of them out - they have a full line up coming including *I Am Famous* (Albert Whitman, March 2018), *Shark Nate-O* (Little Bee, April 2018), *I Used to Be Famous* (Albert Whitman, Spring 2019) and *Conan the Librarian* (Roaring Brook, 2019). There are a few more forthcoming that I can't discuss yet!

**LM:** What are you looking for in middle grade?

**TM:** I talked a bit about what my client middle grade fiction has in common here (<http://tracymarchini.com/2018/02/02/im-looking-middle-grade-fiction-mssl/>), but ultimately I'm looking for a strong middle grade voice (I recently finished and loved Melanie Conklin's *Counting Thyme*), characters that I either would have wanted to be as a middle grader and/or would have wanted to be friends with, and stories that see the character exploring their first real friendships and how to move around in a world when so much is still framed/decided for them. It's those stories where they grapple with things that are bigger than themselves, but ultimately find their way, that really hook me!

**LM:** I know at one time you were looking for a spunky, underdog heroine for a middle grade mystery series. Have you found her yet?

**TM:** NO. Please send!

**LM:** What are you looking for in young adult?

**TM:** The YA market has become much more competitive, and I'm currently focusing on contemporary, historical fiction, mysteries, thrillers and magical realism. My colleagues Moe Ferrera and Beth Campbell are more actively looking for science fiction and fantasy.

Across picture books, middle grade and YA, I'm always looking to add own voices to my list. And in YA specifically, I'm looking for stories where the protagonist is making that shift into adulthood (I know, this is pretty much one of the many working definitions of YA!) in a way that I haven't seen before.

In contemporary YA, I'm looking for a voice that hooks me and makes me root for the character. In historical fiction, I want a story that's relatable to today's teens set against a period of history that we either haven't

seen much of or in a way that adds something new to the conversation. (In other words, I'm intrigued by the Salem Witch Trials, but the book needs to approach it from a fresh angle.) For mysteries, I want to fall for the red herring and be absolutely gobsmacked when the answers are revealed. Send me clever heroines with series potential! Same for thrillers – I want something complex and smart. And in YA magical realism, I lean a bit more literary. I want a spark of magic against a deeper, darker background.

**LM:** You're an editorial agent who usually assists clients through multiple rounds of developmental editing. Please define this term.

**TM:** Developmental editing is looking at the big picture – narrative structure, character development, world building, etc. – and getting that into shape before getting too deeply into things like word choice, grammar, etc. In truth, I'm always looking at everything – from the big to the small – every time I read a draft. But if I know that, for example, a whole scene or subplot has to go, it doesn't make sense to delve into the sentence construction for scenes that will ultimately be majorly rewritten or deleted.

**LM:** What advice do you have to offer to authors and illustrators submitting to BookEnds?

**TM:** When we share queries you will hear back from the person who it was forwarded to, so if the agent you queried passes, that means it's likely that the rest of the team didn't see it and you can feel free to try somebody else. That said, we do use QueryManager to track queries and can see if, say, you queried five of us already. So like any agency, start with the agent that you think will be the best fit first!

Since BookEnds does respond to all queries sent through QueryManager, please do not query another agent at BookEnds until you've heard from the one still considering.

### Above the Slushpile Submission Opportunity

Until April 30th, CBI subscribers can submit to Tracy Marchini through <http://QueryMe.online/tmarchini/CBI>, which will mark all queries as from Children's Book Insider.

After then, you can use her regular submission form at <http://QueryMe.online/tmarchini>.

The form will ask for your query and first five pages of your manuscript. If you're querying a picture book text, please include the whole manuscript where it asks for the five pages.

BookEnds responds to all queries, and Tracy tries to respond within six to eight weeks.



# Writing Religious-Themed Books for Children and Teens

by Jean Daigneau

**W**ith diversity among the world's populations at an all-time high, it's understandable there should be diversity reflected in children's books. Diversity covers many elements—gender, race, religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and mental or physical limitations. Today I'll focus on writing for the religious market.

## What's the Big Deal?

The Pew Research Center's study on the future of world religions for 2010 to 2050 reports the number of people who do not identify with any religion has been rising and will continue to, particularly in the U.S. Although that group is expected to decline among the world's total population, it begs the question: Why write about religion?

Numerous studies point out the benefits of children learning and reading about diversity. These studies show children exposed to diverse religious beliefs, and other diversity issues, have a greater empathy, understanding, and acceptance of the beliefs of others. Religiously diverse books and others spark curiosity; encourage children to be open to others, including other races or cultures; and help dispel inaccuracies about religious beliefs. The ripple effect helps children accept others, whether differences involve ethnicity, gender identification, or disabilities.

For children especially, reading a book where they can identify with the main characters about their beliefs, can instill a sense of belonging. It deepens family ties and adds a connectivity with people of the same faith in their communities, schools, and neighborhoods, while enriching their understanding of friends whose beliefs might differ from their own.

## Avoid Stereotypes

As with all children's writing, avoiding stereotypes is especially important for the religious market. Today's population has people embracing religions that "traditionally" were identified only within certain cultures.

All religions include single parent families; families

whose extended members embrace other faiths, or no faith at all; and members of the LGBT community. And *all* children can identify with feelings of loneliness, sadness at losing a friend, confronting bullying, the repercussions of a parent's job loss, or dealing with a family member's imprisonment, addiction, or mental disability.

## Teach Don't Preach

Editors and agents who publish and represent religious books aren't looking for books that preach, any more than editors of secular books. But, particularly for the religious market, it's especially important to avoid coming off as if your ultimate goal is to showcase a particular religion's doctrine or instill a moral lesson. Kids will pick up on that in a nanosecond. And that might be a reason for them to put *down* your books.

In award winning author Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin's book, *A Party in Ramadan*, her main character, Leena, who is too young to fast every day during Ramadan, decides to fast on Fridays. But when a classmate's birthday party falls on Friday, Leena goes armed with her resolve to fast. Once there, her faith is tested among the chocolate cake and lemonade that her non-Muslim friends are enjoying. Besides showcasing Ramadan, readers can empathize with Leena's predicament and feelings of being different.

## Think Outside the Box

Books with a religious slant are like other children's books, but with an underlying religious theme. That's not to say they're "religious" in the strictest sense. Kar-Ben publisher Joni Sussman says that their books "needn't be religion-based. They can be folktales or holiday-based, stories about Jewish history, Jewish 'heroes' from biblical to modern times, religious to secular stories, the Holocaust, Bible stories, stories about Jewish culture, Israel and other Jewish-related topics."

Consider, for instance, Matt Kocceich's new book series *Imagine*. The first book, *The Great Flood*, takes readers on an adventure that puts them directly in the path of a Bib-

*Writing Religious-Themed Books continued*

lical event of historic proportions. Described as “an epic Bible adventure for kids,” this series brings the Bible to life for its readers, who can enjoy it from many different religious vantagepoints.

Of her writing, Mobin-Uddin says, “I actually don’t feel I write for a Muslim religious market. I feel I write for the general market but with stories highlighting Muslim characters.” She adds that “although symbolism and the inclusion of religious phrases might be appropriate to share the authentic language and way of speech used by a character, it has to convey the culture subtly and not be overwhelming in order to not distract or distance the reader.” Her goal is “to help non-Muslim readers get a glimpse into the experience of a Muslim child,” and “to write books that Muslim kids will see themselves in.”

### So, What About Me?

If I’m a practicing Lutheran, does that exclude me from writing about Jewish holidays or the Holocaust? After all, we’ve all heard the advice *write what you know*.

According to Sussman, “Some of our best stories have come from non-Jewish authors.” As with any project, know your audience and know where to pitch. Having a leg up as an evangelical might give you firsthand knowledge about a religious subject or event, but there are plenty of opportunities to learn and study your subject matter so you can write a masterful story from outside your own faith spectrum.

### Where Can You Go from Here?

The good news is that NPD BookScan, which tracks approximately 80 percent of print sales, reported that from 2013 to 2016, children’s religion book sales increased 22 percent. That’s a huge increase being noticed by Christian book publishers, such as David C. Cook and Tyn-dale.

So, do your research and see what topics are covered, but even more revealing, which topics have not been covered. Look at multicultural publishers and research whether that broad topic covers religious books. (An advanced search on Amazon allows you to input a particular religion as a keyword along with the publisher’s name.) Make sure what you write is what they publish.

“Read, write, repeat” is a good mantra for any writer. Here are some places to start:

- **Diverse BookFinder:** <https://diversebookfinder.org/>

- **Barefoot Books:** <https://www.barefootbooks.com/>
- *Sowing Seeds: Writing for the Christian Children’s Market*, Kathleen Muldoon
- **The Whole Megillah: The Writer’s Resource for Jewish-themed Story: Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry:** <https://thewholemegillah.wordpress.com/>
- *The Christian Writers Market Guide: Your Comprehensive Resource for Getting Published*
- **Muslim Writers Club** (previously Resources for Muslim Writers): <http://muslimwritersclub.com/>
- **Arab American National Museum/Arab American Book Awards:** <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward>
- **We Need Diverse Books:** <https://diversebooks.org/>
- **Christian Children’s Authors:** <http://christianchildrensauthors.com/>

### Don’t Overlook Other Opportunities

Although I generally focus on books, don’t overlook other venues, particularly for Christian readers. While print and e-zines are on the decline, the religious market offers a variety to consider. *The Christian Writers Market Guide for 2018* lists 19 magazines/e-zines open to submissions for children/teens, plus eight listed under *Specialty Markets: Daily Devotional Booklets and Websites*. These markets don’t always pay top dollar, but many pay on acceptance and buy one-time rights, enabling you to resell to other publishers. As always, check for “themes” and guidelines.

### The Final Word

If you’ve never considered writing a picture book or middle grade novel with a religious slant, now might be the time. Sussman says, “Interest continues to grow in religious publishing, in both the Christian and Jewish worlds.” She adds, “Jewish kids—and all kids, really—want to see themselves in the pages of the books they read.”

Mobin-Uddin advises, “This is a great time to tell your story! Be persistent and share the story that is in your heart. Have faith, don’t give up, and let us all benefit from being inspired by your work.”

# REACHING YOUR WRITING POTENTIAL

by Jane McBride

**M**any writers, myself included, have had the experience of finishing a book, sending it in, seeing it published, and thought, "Well, it was okay, but it fell short." Or perhaps we have read another author's book and thought much the same thing. Though the book was entertaining enough, somehow it didn't live up to its potential.

It's a disheartening feeling for an author to acknowledge. I don't believe a writer ever sets out to create a work that falls short or leaves the reader feeling that there should have been more. The question is, "More what?" More emotion? More action? More ... something.

What keeps books from reaching their potential, from being "all that they can be?"

One possible cause is fear. What kinds of fears could hold us back?

- We are afraid to take our writing to the next level. Why could we possibly be afraid to improve our writing to the extent that we have moved to the next level? The "higher" you climb in your writing career, the more that is expected of you. You may have tighter deadlines. You are expected to be more active on social media and other kinds of promotional sites. If you received a four-star rating on Amazon for your last book, you are expected to receive at least four stars on your next. If you made a best-seller list, you are expected to make it again and with a higher ranking. And so on.
- We are afraid what our friends and family will think of us. Check this particular fear at the door. Have you ever written something and wondered what your mother would think about it? Or your husband? Or your children? Or your co-workers? I have. Then I realized that I am never going to please everyone with my writing ... and neither are you. Someone will always find something to object about. I can hear your skepticism. "Hey," you say, "I write picture books for the preschool set. What could anyone object to?" Maybe the mother in your book is a stay-at-home mother and the mother reading the book to her young child is working outside the home. (I never say "a working mother," because all mothers work.) This mother could take offense at your portrayal of the mother in the story. Or maybe it's the reverse of this. You've penned a book about a mother who works outside the home and the mother reading the book to her child is a stay-at-home mother. When I'm not writing stories for children, I write romantic suspense for an inspirational line. What could be wrong with that? Surely it's harmless enough. But some readers object to the mention of God or any Higher Being. The possibilities are endless at the kinds of things people will object to.
- We are afraid if we "rock the boat" in our writing (i.e. take our writing in a different direction) that we may not be able to sell anything at all. This is a big one if your family is partially or fully dependent upon your writing income. You will have to decide upon this with your spouse and family.
- We are afraid of what we will learn about ourselves if we open our minds and hearts and pour out the story that is deepest inside. I've saved

*Reaching Your Writing Potential continued*

this one for the last because it is perhaps the hardest to overcome. Learning about our innermost fears and desires can be overwhelming. It can also be freeing. Open yourself up. You may be surprised and even pleased at what you discover.

Another reason that our books may fail to reach their supernova is complacency. We think, if only subconsciously, "Well, it's good enough to be published. That's all that counts." How can we counteract these limiting feelings? Find ways to restore the passion you felt when you began writing. What made you want to become a writer in the first place? Try to recapture that feeling.

Now that we've discussed why books may fail to reach their full potential, let's get down to business and talk about how can we fix the problem.

- Do some soul-searching and decide which fear may be holding you back. You may find that it is a combination of fears that is keeping you from writing the best book you are capable of. One aid in this area is to keep a journal of your feelings about your writing. A record of how you felt upon finishing a project or starting a new one could be very revealing.
- Once you've identified this fear, do everything you can to overcome it. If you are afraid of taking your writing to the next level, ask yourself what would happen if you took that step. What's the worst that could happen? More important, what is the best that could happen? If you're afraid of what other people will think of your writing, determine what's more important to you: other people's opinion of you or your writing. Go through whatever fears you may be harboring and ask questions. You may find that your fears aren't as big or as important as you thought.
- Ask yourself what you would write if there were no expectations of you. Would you experiment with different genre? Maybe you'd decide to

write in present tense and first person. If there is something you want to do but were held back for any of the reasons listed above or for other reasons, consider taking the plunge. What's the worst that could happen if you veered from your charted course? Could you live with the disappointment of others if you failed to deliver your kind of book? Could you live with your own disappointment or would you be ecstatic at breaking out of your mold?

- Ask yourself if you could improve your craft (and most of us could). Could you be "resting upon your laurels," unwilling to spend the extra time and effort required to write with greater clarity, greater emotion, greater energy? Do you need to brush up on your skills? Have you grown lax in creating fresh metaphors and similes? Are you dredging up the tired clichés and descriptions you were using a decade ago? Styles in writing change just as do styles in fashion and hair and decorating. What worked for you a few years back may now be passé. Are you lazy with your verbs or are you using strong, active ones? Are you relying too much on narrative and passive voice? Are you paying attention to the small things such as ending your sentences with a strong word? What about the big things, such as ending chapters with cliff hangers? Contrary to popular wisdom, do sweat the small stuff and the big stuff, too. Consider taking a workshop on areas where you feel you need to improve. Attend a writers' conference. I always return home refreshed and determined to become a better writer after attending a conference where I can interact with other writers and learn from them.

Take a fearless look at whatever is holding you back from writing the book(s) you are meant to write. Take a fearless and unflinching look at yourself. You may discover that you are far more courageous and bold than you ever thought.