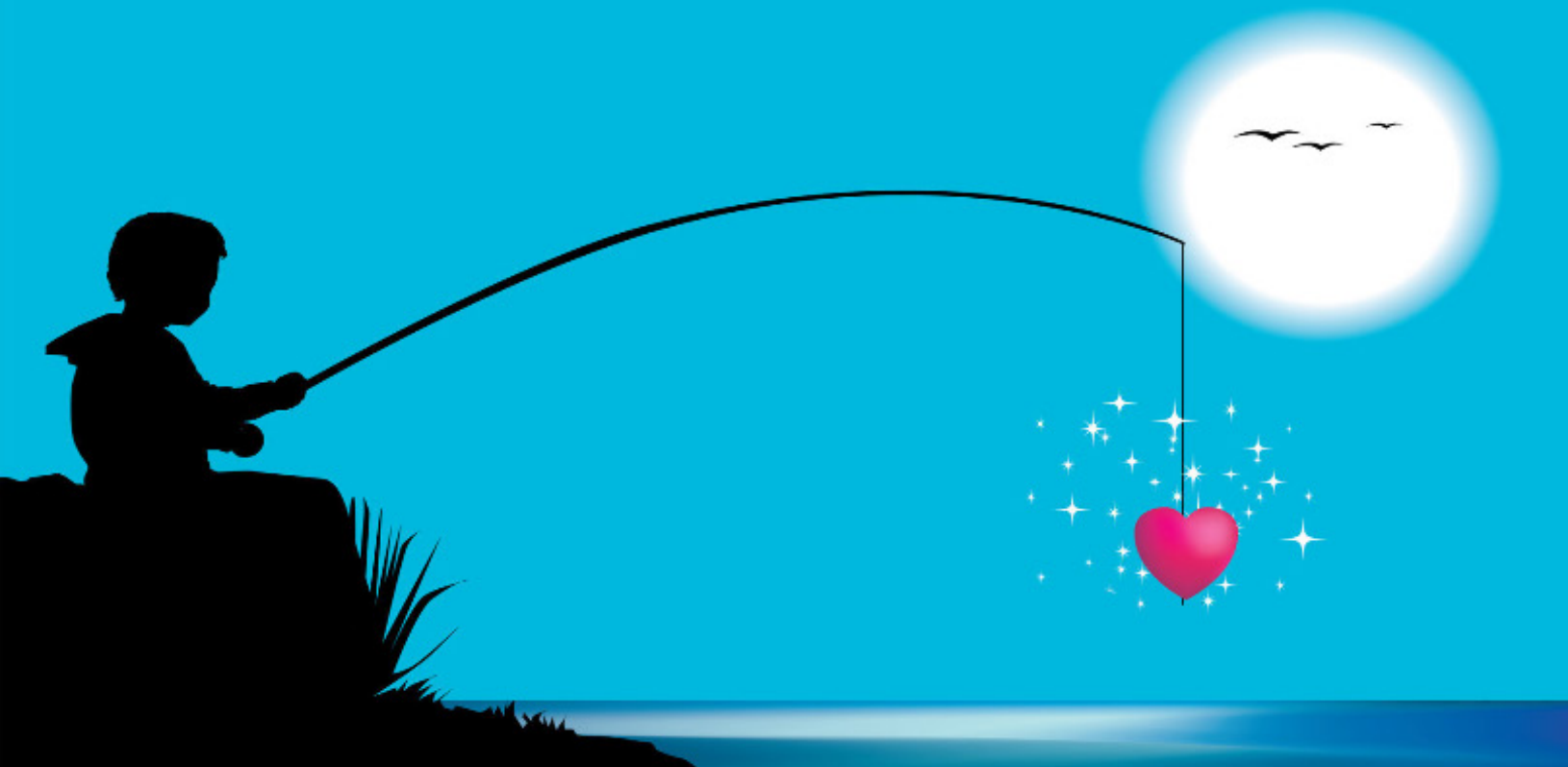


Children's Book Insider

September, 2018

How to Hook Readers & Make Your Manuscript Irresistible



PLUS: Above the Slushpile Submission Code: Kar-Ben Publishing

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At Presstime:

Shambala Publications Adds Children's Imprint

Shambala Publications is an independent publisher of titles on meditation and a wide range of spiritual traditions from Buddhism and Taoism to contemplative traditions within Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sufism, as well as books on health, wellness, yoga, and martial arts. In Spring 2019, Shambala will launch *Bala Books*, a picture book imprint for children ages 0-8. Seeking authentic, engaging and meaningful picture books in the categories of Buddhism, mindfulness, meditation, and yoga. All manuscripts, along with any accompanying illustrations (from author/illustrators), should be submitted with a cover letter that includes a short author biography, book summary, and the complete manuscript. Email submissions to Juree Sondker, editorial director, balakids@shambhala.com with the subject line: Bala Kids Submission. Attach the manuscript as a Word document. Author/illustrators may attach two sample illustrations as jpeg or pdf files, and including a link to an online portfolio. If the combined file size of your attachments exceeds 2 MB (this should happen only if your submission contains many images), upload the large files to a cloud storage service such as Dropbox, Hightail, or Google Drive and include the link in your cover letter. Responds in about two months.

Titles on the Spring 2019 list include *Everything is Connected* by Jason Gruhl, illustrated by Ignasi Font; *Where's Buddha?* By Marisa Aragon Ware; *Sitting Still Like a Frog Activity Book: Fun Mindfulness Games for Kids* by Eline Snei. For more about Shambala Publications, go to <https://www.shambhala.com/>

Literary Magazine for Middle Graders Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction

Cricket is a literary magazine for readers ages 9-14. Be sure to read several issues before submitting (sample copies are available for viewing at the Cricket Media Store at <https://shop.cricketmedia.com>, or you can order a current issue by calling 800-821-0115). Issues are also available at many local libraries.

Seeking fiction (1200-1800 words, and shorter stories of 600-900 words) in the genres of realistic contemporary fiction, historical fiction, science fiction and fantasy, folk tales, myths and legends, and humor. Welcomes works by and about underrepresented groups (people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQAI+ folks, and other marginalized peoples). All fiction should be well plotted, character-driven, and have a satisfying conclusion. Include a bibliography of sources for retold tales. Also open to thought-provoking nonfiction articles (1200-1800 words) on a wide range of subjects: history, biography, true adventure, science and technology, sports, inventors and explorers, architecture and engineering, archaeology, dance, music, theater, and art. Articles should be carefully researched and include a solid bibliography. Poetry of 8-15 lines in any form. Puzzles, Crafts, and Activities such as logic and math puzzles, crafts, recipes, science experiments, as well as games and activities from different historical times and cultures. All submissions must be done through Submittable at <https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/17789/cricket-magazine-for-ages-9-14>.

"Curtain Call" – *Cricket* is currently seeking fiction, nonfiction and poetry about music, theater and the performing arts. Most *Cricket* readers play musical instruments, and many perform in plays or dance. They enjoy poetry and contemporary fiction that reflects their challenges and triumphs. Cricket regularly publishes nonfiction and historical fiction about the history of music or theater, the biographies of famous composers and artistic innovators, the making of instruments, and non-Western artistic traditions. Profiles of people, whether or not they are well-known, who are working professionally in the performing arts are also welcome. **Deadline for submitting on performing arts topics is September 15.** Use the same Submittable link as above for Curtain Call submissions.

Independent Publisher Seeks Picture Books with Modern Energy and International Appeal

Immedium is an independent publisher of picture books based on fresh ideas with modern, dynamic perspectives and international potential. Currently seeking picture books for ages 4-8 or 6-10 with universal appeal, as well as contemporary Asian-American topics and viewpoints. No holiday books. Prefers prose to poetry. Standard book contracts include royalties, though some projects may require work-for-hire compensation. All authors should review Immedium titles at <http://www.immedium.com/products/> to see the tone and style of the company's current list before submitting.

Submit a cover letter with a brief synopsis, your relevant background and qualifications, book's target market and reader, comparable titles on the market, and why you want to work with Immedium. Attach a resume that summarizes your career, education and interests. Include the full manuscript with page breaks indicated within the manuscript (where the pages would break in the finished book). Author/illustrators only may include up to 5 color copies of illustrations, including a cover design, main character and sample interior page (artists must be able to supply final art as digital computer files in CMYK TIF format). Illustrators should also include a link to an online portfolio or website for more samples.

Mail to: Submissions Editor, Immedium, P.O. Box 31846, San Francisco, CA, 94131. If you want your materials returned, include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) with the appropriate amount of first class postage. However if you just want a reply, include a letter-sized SASE or your email address. Responds in about two months.

Ezine Offers Opportunities for New Writers

Kid's Imagination Train ezine is open for submissions for 2019, and welcomes work from first-time authors. In addition to giving writers the opportunity to get published, KIT was created to encourage children to read and learn by giving them the opportunity to draw illustrations for the features and have them published online. Each issue contains stories, articles, puzzles, book reviews and much more. Payment is \$5.00 for fiction and \$10.00 for nonfiction.

Kid's Imagination Train accepts manuscripts from adults and artwork from children. We encourage writers to include children's drawings with their submissions. Poems should run about 300 words and stories and articles should aim for 500 words. KIT looks for whimsical stories and poems with likeable protagonists. For nonfiction, we would like to see three reliable sources and an expert review. Nonfiction should be educational and entertaining. Writers may query editor Randi Lynn Mrvos with topic ideas before submitting. Please visit <http://www.kidsimaginationtrain.com> for the complete guidelines.

Charlesbridge Teen Seeks New and Diverse YA Voices

Charlesbridge Teen publishes 3-5 books per year for young adults. Looking for fiction in all genres, and is especially interested in diverse authors, settings and points-of-view. Open to new authors with fresh voices and the ability to write more than one book. Mail a detailed plot synopsis, a chapter-by-chapter outline, and the first three chapters of text. Cover letters may be addressed to Executive Editor Monica Perez, but the envelope should be addressed to Submissions Editor, Charlesbridge Teen, 85 Main Street, Watertown, MA 02472. Please mark the envelope YA NOVEL ENCLOSED, and do not include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Due to the high volume of submissions, Charlesbridge responds only to manuscripts of interest. Submissions may also be emailed (paste entire submission into the body of the email) to YAsubs@charlesbridge.com.

Recent titles include Marit Weisenberg's *Select*, the first book in a new paranormal series about a girl who accidentally jeopardizes her family's anonymity by demonstrating her super-human powers; *Running Full Tilt* by Michael Curinder, which deals with the bond between a cross-country runner and his autistic brother; and *My Free Fall Summer*, Tracy Barrett's semi-autobiographical novel about a girl whose mother dies skydiving. For more titles go to <https://www.charlesbridge.com/pages/charlesbridge-teen>

Correction

The hyperlink to author Barry Wittenstein's website in the August Featured Interview had an extra character, and so didn't work if you clicked on it.

Check out all Barry's great books by clicking here:

<https://onedogwoof.com/>

Work-For-Hire 101: Writing Educational Series Nonfiction

by Kimberly Hutmacher

What is Educational Series Nonfiction Work-For-Hire?

Nonfiction work-for-hire (wfh) books are published mainly for school libraries. They are written in a series and cover subject areas written at specific grade levels for K-12.

You may be asking how these books differ from trade nonfiction? When you write a trade nonfiction book, you come up with your own idea. You not only decide the topic, you choose the age range to write for, and the style/tone of the book. When you've finished researching and writing the book, you submit your manuscript to publishers and hope that someone will show interest. If/when you do get an offer on the book, you will probably be offered an advance and future royalties. You will probably also be expected to help market the book.

For the wfh education market, you identify publishers that focus on these types of books and submit a packet containing a cover letter, resume, and a few writing samples to each. It is okay if you do not have a long list of publishing credits yet. If you have magazine or newspaper credits, include those. If you're a teacher, include that information. If you have specialized knowledge (perhaps you have a degree in history or science and/or work in one of those fields), be sure to include that information as well. You can also use your cover letter to let a potential editor know that you are a professional that follows directions well and delivers quality work on time.

If you're asked to write one or more books for a wfh publisher, they will usually provide you with a set of guidelines for the book(s). The guidelines will include the subject of the book, what types of information they would like you to cover, age range, word count, and instructions for back matter. They will most likely also include a sample to give you an idea of style and tone. With wfh titles, you are paid a one-time fee for each book with no future royalties.

Why WFH?

So, why would we want to write books that offer no future royalties? These books give you an opportunity to build your resume and sharpen your writing skills. You will not be asked to promote or market these books in any way, but you are almost always given credit as the author and allowed to list them on your website and/or resume. In a business where we can sometimes go for very long stretches without making a trade sale, wfh books provide a welcome opportunity to make some income. Payment is usually very prompt. These books can lead to school visit invitations. Last but not least, once you've submitted good work to a publisher, you will most likely receive invitations to write for them again.

You've Got The Gig – Now What?

Once you get a gig, it is time to get organized and get to work. These assignments often involve a fairly quick turnaround time. You'll begin by reading all of the guidelines and samples carefully. If there is anything that you're not sure you understand, do not be afraid to ask the assigned editor. Once your assignment and instructions are clear, it is time to go to the library. If you are assigned more than one book, just focus on the first book. I pull several current, relevant books on the topic. These, along with online quality journal pieces and articles, will make up my sources. You might be wondering if you need to read every single word of every book? Absolutely not! Your subject will be fairly narrow, and you will have a pretty good idea of topics the editor would like covered from the guidelines. Look at the table of contents and subject headers, and use your glossary to find the information you need.

Now that you've studied your subject thoroughly and taken notes, it is time to start writing. Again, follow the guidelines carefully. Many of the publishers that I have worked for have asked to see an outline and

Work-For-Hire continued

sample first chapter before I move on. This is good. If there is anything the editor wants changed on the outline or in the style of writing, it is so much better to get that information as early as possible. Once your outline and sample first chapter are given the thumbs-up, you're free to move on with the rest of the book. Keep your research organized. I keep a file of online research for each book, and I keep my book research with that stack. Be sure to cite anything that is not general knowledge. I try to have my draft complete 3-4 days prior to the actual due date. I don't turn it in right away, though. I let the manuscript sit for a few days and then I go back for a second look with fresh eyes. I then make any revisions I think are necessary. Make sure you deliver your work on time.

You will most likely be asked to do at least one round of revisions, maybe more. Again, if you have any questions about the editor's revision notes, be sure to ask. Make sure you fully understand what you need to do. Never complain or argue. If the editor asks you to include information that your research contradicts, share your research with them. They may not be aware, or they may have more up to date research than you have. Always be kind, respectful, and professional.

If you're working on multiple titles in a series, you will go through the same process for each individual title. Once all of your final manuscripts have been accepted, if you liked the work, be sure to let the editor know that you enjoyed the project and that you hope they will keep you in mind for future series.

Following Up

If 6-12 months have passed without hearing from a publisher that I have worked with previously, I send an updated cover letter, resume, and samples. This jogs the editor's memory, and if they have anything that they feel might be a good fit, they make contact. I do not send these packets more than twice a year to each publisher. Editors are busy. They get it. They will hire you if they feel that you are the best person for the job. Happy submitting and good luck!

Besides series nonfiction, there is also work-for-hire opportunities writing lessons and test passages for educational publishers. Some of these assignments require a teaching degree, but many do not. Read publisher's guidelines carefully and submit accordingly.

The following are links to a handful of work-for-hire series nonfiction publishers. Evelyn B. Christensen has a comprehensive list of both series nonfiction and educational publishers on her website:

<http://www.evelynchristensen.com/markets.html>

She updates this list a couple of times a year.

A Sampling of Work-for-Hire Publishers

Capstone Press

<http://www.capstonepub.com/consumer/service/submissions/>

Bearport Press

<https://bearportpublishing.com/faqs>

Mitchell Lane Publishers

(request guidelines via contact page)
<http://www.mitchelllane.com/contact>

Contemporary Fiction for the Young Adult Market

by Jean Daigneau

The market for books for teens is bigger than ever. And while some genres, like fantasy and mystery, often have crossover appeal to middle grade or even adult readers, one genre that involves issues specific to today's teens is contemporary fiction. What issues impact this writing? Let's find out.

Differences Exist

First of all, it's important to define what a teenager is. According to Merriam-Webster, a teenager is a person who falls into the 13 to 19-year-old category. But there are vast differences between a 13-year-old 7th grader and a college bound graduate. As with any genre, there are younger and older readers within this target audience. YA designated for ages 12 and up may be read by students in sixth through tenth grades, depending on the maturity of the reader and the school's library. Upper YA (ages 14 and up), tends to be read by high school students. Keep that in mind when you're writing.

But, generally speaking, when you think "teenager," what words come to mind? Disrespectful? Drug addicted? Promiscuous? While teen years are often associated with rebellious and risk-taking behavior, it might surprise you to know that statistically speaking, today's teenagers are better behaved in many ways than teens even 10 years ago, according to the Center for Disease Controls' Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey.

According to the 2015 report, today's teens are less likely to be sexually active or have tried cigarettes or alcohol. But with changes in today's social attitudes, it might come as no surprise that marijuana use and vaping have increased somewhat. Then, too, teens today tend to eat fewer veggies, text while driving more – an issue that wasn't even factored in a few years ago – and are less physically active. You must know your audience.

Kids today develop at a fast rate. What generation hasn't said that? But, one unique issue today is connectivity to the internet and social media and teens' access to smartphones. One click of a mouse or a tap on a phone and teens can read about the #MeToo movement, racial profiling, and transgender surgery. But, while teens are savvy, smart, and informed, they still sometimes tend to be more inwardly focused on how they'll fit into the world around them.

How Realistic is Realistic Fiction?

Today's teens have to deal with the fear that a shooter may show up at school – something possible now more than ever. According to the website *Stage of Life*, approximately 90 percent of teens in 2015 believed in climate change; almost 50 percent had experienced a major weather disaster or event. Worldwide, issues dealing with undocumented immigrants can't be overlooked. Many more teens today fall into that category themselves or go to school with someone who does.

One hallmark of modern YA fiction is that the protagonist is facing an adult experience or event for the first time, with potential adult-level consequences. This can be anything from personal family issues to societal problems to life-and-death situations. Unlike many middle grade characters, YA protagonists can anticipate the consequences of their actions, but that doesn't mean they won't ignore those consequences and still make mistakes. But at the end of the book, they have taken a substantial step toward becoming an adult, or have learned something that will affect them for the rest of their lives.

But teens are still teens and some elements remain unchanged. All kids, teens included, want to be accepted, to feel good about themselves, and to have friends that care, particularly as issues like LGBT identification and cyberbullying get more attention. Young adult writer Chris Crutcher, whose books like *Staying Fat for*

Sarah Byrnes and *Whale Talk* are among the most challenged or banned in the U.S., says, “Human behavior is human behavior.” One way he stays on top of issues is by paying attention to current events. The foundation of his writing is the premise that “there is no us and them...just us.”

Talk the Talk

One of the most important elements of writing for teens is dialogue. But peppering your manuscript with OMG’s or awkward slang is like really like not going to cut it like ever. A former student asked me if I could “do her a solid.” My grandson once questioned if I was “throwing shade on his girl.” While this terminology might resonate with kids today, in a few years teen readers might have the same reaction I did. What? Okay, I did kind of know what they were saying. But if your reader has to think too hard about what your slang means, it’s not serving your story and can work against you.

That doesn’t mean you have to cut all slang out of your contemporary fiction. Every book is set in a certain time and place, and slang solidifies it. But use it sparingly, and choose words and phrases that will be understandable even five or ten years from now. For example, “throwing shade” means disparaging or demeaning someone. But words with more obscure meanings or linked to texting shorthand may be obsolete sooner than you think. For a list of current teen slang, check out: <https://netsanity.net/teen-slang-parents-guide/>

Laugh and Kids Laugh with You

Humor is a useful element in any writing. But particularly in contemporary novels, it can help lighten even the most serious subject. Crutcher says it’s one of the things that make it possible for him to explore tough topics. “...As long as I add the element of humor... that keeps me afloat.” Equally important is that humor helps us connect with others. It can help your readers connect with your story.

Let the humor come from your characters (in their dialogue, through their reactions to what’s happening around them), or by placing your characters in situations your audience would find funny. They’ll laugh while they’re emphasizing with a character’s embarrassment, as long as the situation isn’t mean-spirited (then they’ll just empathize). But, as with slang, use it

sparingly and, more importantly, realistically. Throwing humor into an emotional scene isn’t going to work if it isn’t relevant.

How Much is Too Much?

So, what about those difficult topics? First of all, gratuitous sex or strong language doesn’t work, even for teens. And, while readers enjoy strong characters, a main character doesn’t have to be likable, as long as he’s real. Plots, too, must be compelling enough to hook readers.

Teens today have strong convictions and aren’t afraid to act on them. A main character that’s wishy-washy or gets involved in a situation that isn’t plausible is the perfect reason for a reader to quit reading. While teens can’t vote or legally drink alcohol, that doesn’t mean they’re uninformed or don’t have strong feelings about those issues.

One reason to be aware of the “younger” and “older” reader designations in YA is that if you’re writing for the 12 and up category, chances are your protagonist will be 13-15 years old. These characters can’t yet drive, probably won’t have a job aside from babysitting or working at a family business, and are less likely to be left alone by parents for long periods of time than older YA characters, who tend to be 16-18. Older YA features teens with more independence and resources, who are able to interact with the larger world in a way their younger counterparts might not be. Take all of this into consideration when placing your protagonist in real-world situations.

Some Things Never Change

When writing contemporary fiction, keeping it real is number one. This was true with books like *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, published over 50 years ago, and it’s true today.

Here’s a shortlist of mistakes to avoid when writing for teens. This list, first published online by *Writer’s Digest* and paraphrased here for brevity, was compiled by teen author and activist Jamie Margolin.

- **Avoid teen slang.** While kids might use acronyms like LOL, most teens don’t talk the way some people think they do. Don’t fall into that trap.
- **Love at first sight?** Not. Having teens fall in love over

Contemporary Fiction continued

their first romantic run-in is not realistic.

•**Watch out for trouble.** Readers root for characters that can stare trouble in the face and endure. But making a character “troubled”, simply as a vehicle to get readers’ sympathy or empathy, won’t do that.

•**Stereotypes don’t work.** Having a minority character who only deals with issues of racial discrimination is problematic. People don’t fit into boxes; neither should your characters. I would add that including a minority character simply for a multicultural dimension is even worse.

•**Strong doesn’t equate with appealing.** While strong characters are important, turning a typical popular, pretty girl into someone that’s kick-ass can be a turn-off. (Editor’s note: A character shift from soft to strong can work if it’s a logical, believable outcome of the plot, but don’t force a makeover on your character just because you’re sending a message to the reader.)

•**Happily ever after isn’t always necessary.** Characters aren’t perfect, and endings don’t need to be either. Life sometimes works out, but not everything wraps up perfectly, all the time. Your books don’t need to either.

Walk the Walk

Crutcher’s advice is timeless and you’ve read it here before. “Write a good book.” He adds, “I read the books I love twice...once for enjoyment of a good story and once to figure out how the author did it.”

Reading popular contemporary YA is a good way to tune into issues teens care about, and see how skillful published authors allow their characters to be authentic. Nothing turns off a teen faster than an adult author trying too hard to sound hip. Don’t impose your own worldview on your characters – let them be flawed and real, stumbling on their own path toward growing into a better, more mature version of themselves. Most of all, respect the concerns of today’s teens, even if those concerns are outside of your own experience. Remember, you may be a great writer, but if you can’t convince teens that you not only understand the issues important to them, but more so, how they feel about them, you won’t have to worry about them as readers. They won’t be.

SUGGESTED TITLES

Books set in the current day and age are the basis for contemporary writing. Books relevant to teens in the current day and age are the basis for great contemporary writing. Here are a few titles to look at. Ask your local librarian to recommend more.

Losers Bracket by Chris Crutcher

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

Turtles All the Way Down by John Green

The Summer of Broken Things
by Margaret Peterson Haddix

Solo by Kwame Alexander

When My Sister Started Kissing
by Helen Frost

People Kill People by Ellen Hopkins

REELING IN READERS

by Jane McBride

Can reeling in readers be likened to reeling in fish on a hook? I think so.

First, we entice readers with the beginning (the bait), then we cause the readers to care about the story's characters (the hook), and finally we reel them in with the character's journey and the obstacles and conflict that stand in his way (the catch).

Start with the bait. What is there about your work-in-progress that is the bait? We've all read articles about the importance of strong beginnings. Strong beginnings pose questions that demand to be answered. Make your questions important; make them cause the reader to want to dig for answers. Strong beginnings are not filled with backstory; nor are they long descriptive passages. Let's make up yet a story for a young adult novel about a girl who is cutting herself. The story opens as fifteen-year-old Klara traces a path down her arm with a thin bladed knife. Klara watches in fascination as blood trickles from the cut.

Now for the hook. Have you ever started reading a book only to put it down and never to return to it? I have. In questioning why I didn't finish the book, I realized that I didn't care about the characters. To make a book compelling, you must make the characters compelling.

Is Klara a compelling character? She is a star athlete on her school's volleyball team. She is also a straight A student, president of the debate club, and actively serves in the community. She is first chair flute in the school band. Beautiful, perfect Klara has everything going for her. Everyone tells her so. Her parents are "button-busting" proud of her. They occasionally unfavorably compare her younger brother Justin to her. In trying to be perfect for everyone else, Klara is miserable. She can't keep all the balls in the air without sacrificing something. What she ends up sacrificing is herself. When she returns home after a full day of being perfect, she goes to her room,

locks the door, and does the only thing that relieves the misery that has become her life: she cuts herself. She has learned that if she makes shallow cuts, the bleeding is minimal and the scars fade away until they are nothing but tiny white lines. Klara is also fading away. She knows that if something doesn't change, she will resort to something else, something worse, to relieve the pain. Klara hasn't told anyone about what she is doing, but Justin discovers it. Klara begs him to not tell their parents.

Finally to the catch. What is it about your character's journey that makes your book un-putdownable? What is its catch? In the above example, Klara's journey is one of self-realization. Klara needs help, but she doesn't know where to go. In a desperate attempt to find comfort, she takes up with a group of kids who are everything she is not. They have dropped out of school, have no ambition, and jeer at those who work hard. Klara is drawn to what she sees as their laid-back attitude but is, in reality, an aimless and joyless existence. These kids don't have to make straight A's or practice hours a week on the flute or serve at the community kitchen. They can do whatever they want. Klara seeks refuge with them, pulling away from her family and friends. She is still miserable, but the pain is numbed. From there, she spirals ever downward until she takes a hard look at herself and sees her for what she is: someone who needs help. Eventually, she finds it and her path to the life she wants.

Let's turn the above into a Mini Blueprint.

STEP 1: Choose the best beginning in crafting your story's opening. Great beginnings force the reader to ask a question compelling enough that she'll stick around until she finds the answer. Klara's story opens with her cutting herself.

ACTION: Experiment with different beginnings for your WIP. What can you use to start your story? Does your story open with action? Dialogue? Both are good open-

Reeling in Readers continued

ings. Less strong is a litany of descriptions or the character's thoughts as she travels somewhere. Both tend to be snooze-fests.

After you've written the beginning of your story, go back and see if you can make it better. Trust me, you can. Beginnings beg for revision. If you opened with dialogue, try opening with action. See which works best for your story.

STEP 2: Draw your characters.

ACTION: Peel back the layers of your character and reveal her essence. Start with the physical, then go deeper. What about Klara? Physically, she is tall, slender, and athletic-looking. We know that she is ambitious, an over-achiever, anxious to please others, intelligent, talented, and a host of other things. We also know that she is driven and desperate and in so much pain that cutting herself is the only way she feels she has any control over her life. What do you find when you peel back the layers of your character? Is your character like Klara, hiding her true feelings from the world, or is she more open? You won't know until you discover what lies beneath the outer skin or appearance.

ACTION: Conduct an interview and ask your character questions. What is she most afraid of? What or who makes her happy? Who will she sacrifice everything for? What is her home life like? Is her family a happy one? Or is it sad? We know that Klara is overwhelmed in trying to keep up her perfect image. You can find character charts and interviews online or you can take a workshop on the subject if you are unsure about character development. (All of the full Writing Blueprints on www.WritingBlueprints.com have extensive character development worksheets.)

STEP 3: Determine what the "catch" is, or how your character's journey will unfold in a way that will hold your reader's attention. The character's journey can be simple and straightforward, as in a picture book where a small puppy is looking for his mother. Or it can be complicated, as in Klara's example where she is looking for a way to stop the pain and pressure of always being perfect. You'll want to make your character's journey consistent with the genre and age group you are targeting.


ACTION: Make the catch fit the bait and hook. In a young picture book story of a lost puppy looking for his mother, the character's journey is straightforward. He

looks and looks for his mother, running into other characters on his way. All shake their head when he asks if they are his mother. Finally, he finds his real mother. To keep young readers hooked, the puppy may experience some funny or suspenseful events along the way, but he ultimately gets back on track. In Klara's story, the catch (her journey) does not take her down paths that will heal her, at least not at first. Klara must face her demons and overcome each obstacle placed in her path. With each twist and turn, she moves farther away from her goal until she accepts that it is only she who is demanding that she be perfect. Once she understands that, she is on her way to healing.

ACTION: Understand that the journey should be one of growth. Ask yourself if your character shows growth or if he remains the same throughout the book. Then brainstorm ideas of how you can take your character down the most compelling path to growth for your audience. Older readers expect bigger obstacles along the way.

WRAPPING UP

Crafting a strong beginning (the bait), creating intriguing characters (the hook), and weaving in a journey to reach the goal (the catch) takes practice. We gain that by writing and by keeping writing.



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

Joni Sussman, Publisher



interview by Lynne Marie

Just in time for the Jewish High Holidays this September, our featured Editor is Joni Sussman, the Publisher of Kar-Ben Publishing, a division of Lerner Publishing Group. Joni has been with the company for 14 years and has been the Publisher since 2007.

LYNNE MARIE: Since Lerner purchased Kar-Ben in 2001, the imprint has published over 300 books and publishes 18-20 new books per year. How would you categorize the type of manuscripts that Kar-Ben publishes?

JONI SUSSMAN: Kar-Ben seeks Jewish-themed children's picture book manuscripts, generally from 850-1000 words. We also publish board books as well as select middle grade novels. Topics may be fiction or non-fiction, having to do with all aspects of Jewish life, from Jewish holidays, to Jewish history, Jewish life in Israel, folktales, Jewish values, interesting Jewish biographies, Bible stories and Jewish life cycle events.

LM: 850-1000 words is on the high end for today's picture books. Will Kar-Ben review shorter manuscripts, and if so, what is their take on appropriately-themed board books?

JS: We review manuscripts of all lengths. Our typical board book has 100-200 words, picture books about 800-1000 words, and middle grade fiction upwards of 10,000 words.

LM: How would you sum up the books that Kar-Ben

seeks in a sentence? If you could describe your imprint using five adjectives, what would they be?

JS: Kar-Ben seeks stories that reflect the rich diversity of today's Jewish family. We want every child on the spectrum of Jewish observance – from secular to observant – and no matter what their family configuration, to be able to find themselves in Kar-Ben stories. My five adjectives would be: Jewish-themed, original, compelling, inclusive, and imaginative.

LM: I really enjoyed the guest post you wrote for the Highlights Foundation Workshop you mentored at. Can you please share that link here?

JS: Certainly! <https://www.highlights-foundation.org/5592/guest-post-joni-sussman-smell-the-camel-four-tips-for-writing-a-good-childrens-bible-story/>

LM: As a division of Lerner, in which way do you operate separately? What resources, if any, do you share with Lerner?

JS: Kar-Ben, because of our niche market, do our own acquisition, editing and marketing, but we have the luxury of access to Lerner's talented design, production and distribution teams, as well as their ebook platforms and other resources.

LM: I have noticed your catalog of books has kid-friendly, but modern and beautiful art. As publisher, what role do you play in the art direction of your books?

JS: While our design team handles the specifics of art directions, one of my favorite parts of my job as publisher is selecting illustrators for our books! I'm also the one who usually writes the art direction notes as much of our content is Jewish-themed and requires expertise in Jewish rit-



ual. I often send research photos along with art direction so, for example, the illustrator, who usually isn't Jewish, will be able to accurately portray Jewish holiday scenes such as Passover seders and Hanukkah candle-lighting (illustrators often don't know that Hanukkah candles must be lit in a certain order!).

LM: What would you say, using adjectives, are the five things you are looking for in art for your books?

JS: Creative, richly colored, un-cartoon-y, professionally drawn, imaginative.

LM: Which editors acquire for the imprint? How would the vetting process for prospective books play out?

JS: I handle acquisitions for Kar-Ben. I sometimes run manuscripts past focus groups of parents, educators and kids for additional insight if I'm on the fence about a story but really like the theme or other aspect of a manuscript. I also seek input from our sales and marketing team if I'm on the fence about how well a book will sell.

LM: I noticed that you have a selection of Sesame Street-themed books. Are these books work for hire? If so, how would one go about possibly creating a book for this series?

JS: We love our partnership with Sesame Street. Both manuscripts and illustrations are work-for-hire. I contract with authors I know well for these books, and I've written several myself. We don't accept unsolicited manuscripts featuring licensed characters.

LM: You have a very active backlist with a wonderful selection of books. Are there any particular "holes" in the list that you may be trying to fill? What's on your wishlist?

JS: I'm always looking for Passover and Hanukkah stories as those holiday stories generally sell well. But I'm also especially looking for non-didactic outside-the-box stories that highlight Jewish values couched in an interesting and page-turning story.

LM: What are some series that have proved successful for Kar-Ben? Are you looking for other books with series potential? If so, what would be the criteria you look for in a "series" book?

JS: We have quite a few very successful series. The most popular is our iconic *Sammy Spider* series, about a curious spider who, through fun and funny adventures,

learns about Jewish holidays and life cycle events. Our 17th *Sammy Spider* book, in which Sammy attends a Jewish wedding, is due out in Spring 2019. We also have *Sammy Spider* activity books and board books. In addition to our Sesame Street series (with board books soon to come), other popular series include our board book holiday series by Tracy Newman and Viviana Garofli, *[Holiday] is Coming!*, our *Engineer Ari* series about a train engineer living in 1890s Israel, a Nature in Israel series and several others. In terms of creating a new series, we generally commit to a single story and if it does well, we might expand it into a series.

LM: What is something that your mentors, Kar-Ben founders Judye Groner and Madeline Wikler, taught you about children's publishing that you can share with our readers?

JS: Judye and Madeline started the company – incidentally named after their two oldest children Karen and Ben, thus Kar-Ben – when their children were little and they realized that there were virtually no picture books in which their Jewish kids could find themselves. Not only did they want to create books that celebrated Jewish religion and culture but they also wanted those books to be as beautifully illustrated and produced as the best secular books so children would want to read them. I've taken both these lessons very much to heart and Kar-Ben's goals continue to focus on bringing such books to the Jewish community, which is, by the way, a much different community than when Judye and Madeline started the company almost 45 years ago. Today's high rate of secularism and intermarriage make Jewish children's books more important than ever, with many parents learning about Jewish topics through reading our books with their children.

LM: What in a submission will make you read further? What will stop you from reading? What are the biggest mistakes you see when submitting to your imprint.

JS: A clever opening sentence that grabs or intrigues the reader is important. My suggestion for many authors would be to delete the first two lines of what they've written and start with line three as their opening. Too much "set up" is a flag for me; these are picture books so it's important to cut to the chase. Also important to remember that the illustrations will tell part of your story, so no need to describe every detail. I also toss stories that clearly haven't been proofread for spelling and grammatical errors. No excuse for those mistakes; it signals to me that the author is sloppy with words and that generally means their story could be better.

LM: Share the last three projects which you signed, and why. What can prospective author learn from these examples?

JS: The funny board book *Does Your Dog Speak Hebrew?* by Ellen Bari, the lovely biographical Holocaust story *The Secret: Miep Gies, Anne Frank and the Hiding Place* by Barbara Lowell, and *Sammy Spider's First Book of Prayers* by Sylvia A. Rouss, the next in our *Sammy Spider* series. Your readers can see that these are very diverse stories, albeit all with Jewish themes.

LM: How can our readers submit to you? Will they receive a response? At what point should they consider it a pass?

JS: Submissions should be emailed to editorial@karben.com. More information can be found at: <http://www.karben.com/submissions>. Manuscripts are logged and I review them all, sorting them into yes, no and maybe. The maybes go into a file which I review periodically. We receive about 800 submissions a year, from first-time authors to experienced published authors. Because we receive so many manuscripts, we respond only if we wish to acquire the story. Generally authors can assume that, if they don't hear from us in three months, we're not interested. However, they're invited to e-mail us for a definitive answer at that time.

Above the Slushpile

Joni is offering a special Above the Slushpile submission opportunity to our readers. Please follow the submission guidelines in the link to the left and submit with code: **CBI - JS Karben Above-the-Slush Submission**.

This opportunity expires December 1, 2018.

Good Submission Practices: An Important Reminder

We've heard from a few editors and agents who have appeared in At Presstime or the Editor/Agent Spotlight that some subscribers aren't following the submission guidelines. They're either sending inappropriate work (submitting a picture book to an agent who only represents middle grade and YA, for example), not addressing the submission properly, or not including exactly what's requested, without additional material. These submissions often get deleted, with no explanation to the author (and that's fair, because editors and agents have a lot of submissions to read, and can't spend time explaining to offenders how they've made a bad first impression). So, we'd like to remind all authors and illustrators that there is no wiggle room on the guidelines. Please send just what's requested, and take the time to edit and proofread your submission before you hit "Send". And make sure your manuscript actually fits with what the agent or editor is looking for. Not all markets are a good match for all manuscripts. Let's show the industry that CBI subscribers are at the top of their game, and we'll be able to continue to bring you new market opportunities.

Meet SAADIA and Her Early Chapter Book Series

by PJ McIlvaine

When I was a kid, computers were huge unwieldy behemoths and cell phones were nothing more than a dream in Steve Job's eye. As a voracious reader, my face was usually planted in a book and not checking my Facebook feed. As much as I loved my beloved *Trixie Belden*, the *Bobsey Twins* and *Nancy Drew*, now, in hindsight, I have to admit that they all reflected a culture and society that today must seem pretty quaint, if not backwards and outdated. Now, thanks to the power of the [#OwnVoices](#) movement and the growing demand for diverse authors, Saadia Faruqi, a Pakistani-American Muslim author, celebrates her groundbreaking early chapter book series *Meet Yasmin*, which Kirkus Reviews hailed as "utterly satisfying." Faruqi makes her home in Houston, Texas with her computer literate husband, two young children in elementary school, and her extended family, enjoying "back home" food, cheeseburgers, pizza, and lots of books.

PJ MCILVAINE: Your background is the textbook definition of eclectic: a fierce background in creative writing in fiction and nonfiction, a world traveler, blogger and essayist, voracious learner/student, a cultural sensitivity trainer, and as your bio on your website (www.saadiafaruqi.com) describes it, a "self-styled" interfaith activist. How do all these different interests and specialties mesh in your writing?

SAADIA FARUQI: They're all part of my activism, I believe. I emigrated to the U.S. as a young bride in 1998 and was a college student in Florida when 9/11 happened. Like so many Muslim youth, I was also in-

delibly changed by that horrific act of violence, and decided to utilize my skills and talents for removing the very horrible stereotypes about my culture and faith that I saw rising in my American neighbors. So I began freelance writing – essays and columns – which garnered local attention and led to small interfaith group discussions, then speaking gigs, and ultimately the yearlong sensitivity training for the Houston Police Department, which was recently featured in *O*

Magazine. I actually got really burned out by all this after a decade or more, and turned to fiction not only as a stress relief but also because I recognized the power of storytelling to change minds. So all the different facets of my work emerge from one overarching goal: remove stereotypes and eliminate false information.

PM: Your debut children's easy reader, *Meet Yasmin* (Capstone, August 2018), is about a young, imaginative Muslim Pakistani-American girl and her multi-generational family. Is the main character based on your personal experiences growing up? How many books are planned for the series?

SF: The main character Yasmin is inspired by my daughter, who was almost Yasmin's age when I began writing this series. Some of the stories are things that happened to my daughter, some are complete imagination. What was important to me was to highlight this immigrant family and show them to be normal and average. We have too many books about minority groups where the plot focuses on their minority status, and how they are different. I agree that those are needed, but I also felt strongly that issues books,



however essential, result in othering people even more. Through Yasmin, I'm hoping to showcase what a perfectly ordinary American family looks like. As for how many in the series, we're playing it by ear for now.

PM: Being a Mom of two and currently now living in Texas surrounded by extended family, do you find that today's kids are more sophisticated and aware than say, those of us who came of age back in the sixties and seventies? Do you think it's harder being a child today with all of our modern technologies and pressures? It sounds to me as though Yasmin relies more on her imagination and creativity than her cell phone and computer.

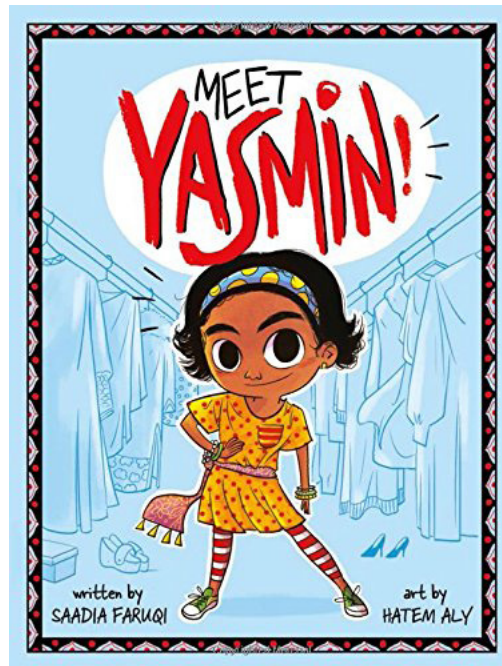
SF: Things are definitely different now than my own childhood, and for me particularly, because I grew up in Pakistan where technology in the 80s and 90s was even more rudimentary. As a mother I'm very strict about screen time, and don't allow my kids too much television or video games. Certainly neither of my children have cell phones or computers of their own, even though the older one is in middle school. I agree that it's probably difficult for our kids to focus and stay on task with all the distractions they have going on, but I think books are a great way to attract kids to more old fashioned pursuits.

PM: There is a huge discussion in kid lit about #OwnVoices and the need for diverse books. What can a writer do to ensure that their work is authentic and appropriate?

SF: I'm of the view that if you're not intimately familiar with a culture, then leave the writing of it to someone else. I've had to call out a few authors recently because they wrote about main characters that they had only seen as outsiders. No matter how careful you are, you can't really know what a community is like and what nuances are within it unless you've lived it. I grew up with books that did this all the time: books about the Indian Raj with negative brown characters, books with white heroes and white heroines. It's extremely damaging because you completely internalize a sense of inferiority without even realizing that you're doing this. So I beg authors – especially children's authors – to think of their readers before thinking of themselves, and to al-

ways remind themselves that they have a responsibility to be authentic and honest. I know there are some stories that are really important to tell, so my best advice to a writer who isn't from a particular culture is to collaborate with someone who is. Co-author a book, give credit to the culture that you're talking about. Bring in experts. But if at all possible, allow someone more appropriate to write that book. There are plenty of other topics to write.

PM: From the first draft to publication, how long did the process take? Did you have any input into the artwork? What was the editorial process like?



SF: It took about six months to get everything in order text-wise. My text had extensive art notes, and my editor agreed with most of them. I had a lot of input on the art. I sent detailed descriptions of how I wanted each character to look, what sort of clothes they should wear, etc. and I shared pictures on Pinterest to show the design team what I was looking for. I'm very blessed to have Hatem Aly (<https://www.metahatem.com/>) as my illustrator because he's got a similar cultural background and he knows exactly what I need to make this series as authentic as possible. So we go back and forth with his sketches and I am always free to suggest changes until the last possible moment. The

entire design team at Capstone has been wonderful in this regard, and I think it's because authenticity is an important goal for them as well.

PM: Do you have a writing routine? Do you write on a daily basis or when inspiration strikes? Do you work on one project at a time or are you a multitasker? Have you ever had writer's block? What do you like best about writing, the plotting, research, or rewriting?

SF: I have office hours that are the same as my children's school timings! I begin work at 8:30 or 9 am and work until 2 pm most days. Sometimes I have appointments to speak somewhere, but typically I put in those regular hours. I've usually got several projects going on together. I have a grant writing business, so my clients take priority, but then some days I work solely on fiction especially if I have a deadline coming up. I'm a

Saadia Faruqi continued

total multitasker, I find it very difficult to work on the same thing for more than an hour or so at a time, so I have to break things up into smaller segments.

I often get writer's block; yes it's very real, and based on my mood. Often I'm just not getting any inspiration, and then I turn to reading other writers' books, or spending a day at the library just soaking in ideas. I hate plotting, it's my weak point, and I rely heavily on my awesome agent Kari Sutherland at Bradford Lit to brainstorm with me. My favorite part is writing, and I try to make draft 1 the best possible because going back to edit is really scary for me!

PM: What tips or advice would you have for an aspiring writer on the path to publication? How do you deal with rejection and self-doubt?

SF: It's a tough career, but if you find peace while writing, then go for it! My best advice is to read constantly, which I realize is something everybody says. But it holds so true for me, and I've improved so much by reading other works, especially books that win awards like the Newbery. Another tip I give aspiring writers is to write short stories. This really helps improve your craft, and even if you never get them published you'll be a better novel writer. Rejection and self-doubt is part of the career, there's no way to avoid it! I have a friend who eats chocolate every time a rejection comes in. Other people just put their heads down and keep working. It's all a matter of attitude, but I suggest don't begin to submit your work to agents or editors until you're really ready. A lot of my early rejections came in because I was too hungry to get published and I dashed off novels that were quite poorly written in my haste to query. Now I look at those early works and cringe! I wish I'd taken my time to improve my writing first.

PM: You're represented by Kari Sutherland at Bradford Literary. How long did it take to find your champion?

SF: It actually wasn't too bad. I signed with Kari after a couple of years of querying. I tried with 3 different manuscripts, two adult and one kid lit, and got some very nice rejections and some great feedback. With my latest adult manuscript, a short story collection about refugees in Texas – I got an instant response from several agents. And then the deal with Capstone for Yasmin happened within the next couple of months after that. So I've been very blessed in this regard.

PM: How important is having a strong social media presence for today's writers? For some writers, being on Twitter and Facebook can be intimidating. Do you have

tricks of the trade on how to network and develop contacts for blog tours, etc.?

SF: I think it's essential. Much of my workday is spent on social media, and it's all about relationships. I don't often promote my own book, unless something very cool has happened like a cover reveal or the recent starred review by Kirkus! Usually I share other authors' book news, and participate in sociopolitical conversations online. The key is to be authentic and look at social media as a tool to build long-term relationships that require give-and-take. It can't be selfish, and it can't be one-sided, and it definitely can't be about you or the book. Social media is for building a brand, and for me the brand is interfaith activism/cultural issues, so I share a lot of articles and media pieces about Islam, or about interfaith work, or Pakistan. On my Facebook author page I share good news coming out of Pakistan, beautiful pictures of their natural beauty, etc. So I have a strategy for each platform and it's less than 30% my books.

PM: What are you currently working on? Do you have a passion project? What do you hope to accomplish in your writing?

SF: I have several irons in the fire, and hope is to fulfill my overarching goal of cultural and religious understanding. I'm co-authoring a middle grade novel with another writer, and I've got a picture book or two in the works as well. My agent has her hands full with all the ideas I'm constantly sending her! And of course my work on Yasmin continues.

Ladder to **SUCCESS** the Climbing

by Jane McBride

Writers are all at different places in their careers. Some people have yet to publish. Others have published one book and are hard at work on their second. Still others are multi-published but want to take the next step on the ladder to success, such as making one of the best-seller lists. Wherever we are, we want to achieve more, to jump the next hurdle, to climb the next mountain.

Reaching the next rung on the writing ladder requires self-honesty and a willingness to put in the necessary time and work.

1. Begin at a place of abundance rather than scarcity.

Even if you haven't yet published, you have some measure of abundance on your side. It may be a great writing chapter or group. It may be a friend who is an excellent critique partner. It may be that you've won a contest for the best first chapter. It may be that you write characters who come alive on the page. Focus on whatever it is and build upon that. Another measure of abundance is giving back. If you have the opportunity to mentor a beginning writer, consider doing so. In teaching and mentoring, you will sharpen your own talents as well as helping someone who doesn't have your experience. If you concentrate upon abundance rather than upon what is lacking, you are that much further ahead in your career.

2. Admit where you are at.

Are you stuck in mid-list limbo? Are you stuck on trying to finish your first manuscript? Are you stuck in the dreaded second-book syndrome? I've been "stuck" in a couple of those places. It took me five long years to

sell my first book. With that, I thought, naively, I was on my way to best-sellerdom. Little did I know that it would take me an additional three years to sell the second manuscript. After selling twenty-four books, I was once again stuck. It took six very, very long years to sell again. Many times I considered giving up. But I didn't. I assessed where I was weak in my writing (plotting and conflict) and worked on those areas with single-minded perseverance. (Some might say obsession.) I didn't sugarcoat my weaknesses; I just kept writing. I researched new markets. I kept current on what editors at the publishing houses I'd targeted wanted. I also kept current on which editors have moved from one house to another. Most importantly, I refused to give up on writing. I refused to give up on my dream. Wherever you are at, admit it, then do everything you can to move past it.

3. Decide where you want to be.

Do you want to sell your first book? Do you want to sell your second? Or your 32nd? Do you want to be able to make a living with your writing? Until you know where you want to be, you can't get there. We all know the value of goal-setting. The first step in making a goal is to know what you want. For as long as I could remember, I wanted to write. I wanted to write stories that touched the hearts and minds of others. I started with short stories. It didn't matter that I wrote for pennies. What mattered was that I was writing and that someone wanted to pay me, however little, for those stories. I took workshops, joined a writers' group, and subjected myself to the sometimes humiliating experience of reading my work in public for critique. However you determine your goals and whatever method you use to reach them, do it consistently. Write down your goals. It's fine to have them in your mind, but it's far more powerful and motivating to commit them to paper ... or to the screen. Per-

Climbing the Ladder to Success continued

haps you keep your goals and the steps to reach them in electronic format. Maybe you do a spreadsheet. Just make certain that they are listed in a place that you can easily access, a place that you will regularly see them, a place where they will prod you to action.

4. Commit to the steps that will take you to where you want to be.

Do you need to improve your writing skills? Do you need to network more? Do you need to find and to increase the amount of time you spend on writing? This relates to the above step. If you need to improve your writing prowess, commit time and money and energy to that. You are, after all, investing in yourself. Do you need to network more? Do the same. Many writers are introverts and networking, whether at a conference or a workshop or just at a monthly writers' meeting can be painful. Reward yourself for every step taken. If you need to increase the amount of time you spend on your writing, find extra pockets of time in your day. If you are a full time parent, ask your mate to give you an hour every evening when he/she can take over and you can spend that time on your writing. Then do it. Don't fritter away your time on social media, watching television, or talking on the phone. If the budget allows, hire someone to do chores that eat into your writing time. Or barter with a neighbor or friend to free up some time—you drive carpool one week and they drive the next. Get creative. Whatever is standing in the way of you committing to the steps necessary to reach the next step in your writing, find a way to move past it. And if you can't move past it, go under, above, or around.

5. Lastly, give bad habits and negative thoughts the heave-ho.

Do what is necessary to fill your mind and your life with positive things and people. Make up a list of affirmations and read them aloud every morning and night. Read self-help books. Filling your life with positive elements may include avoiding people who bring you down. Don't we all have at least one of those in our life? If it's your spouse's parent who spews negativity into your existence, you may not be able to cut him from your life completely, but limit the time spent with him. Negative comments from negative people can bring you down like nothing else. Do you tend to fixate on what is wrong in your life? Do things to re-wire your thinking to focus on the positive rather than the negative. At one particularly difficult time in my life, I kept a gratitude journal. Every day I wrote down something, usually a small thing, that I was grateful for. At another time, I wrote a gratitude

blog, expanding upon that theme.

I admit it: these steps can be scary. They may test your resolve, your courage, your commitment. They may even make you question why you wanted to be a writer in the first place. But if you approach them with unflinching honesty and a genuine desire to do what is necessary to reach the next rung on your writing ladder, you will succeed. Then reach down and give someone else a hand up.

