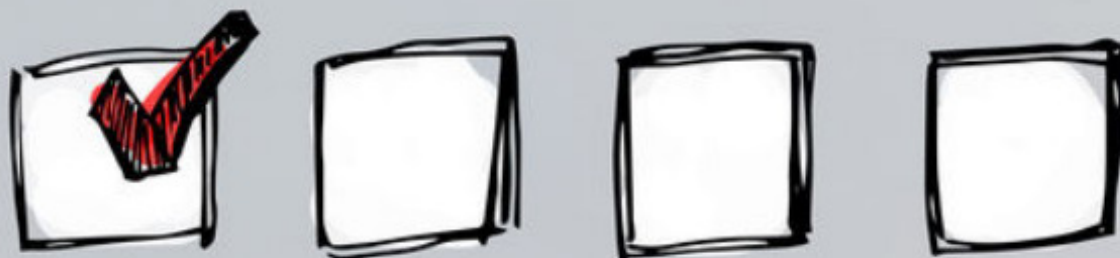


Children's Book Insider

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The Perfect Pre-Submission Manuscript Checklist



January 2020

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This issue's contributors

Laura Backes has published *Children's Book Insider* since May 1990, is the co-creator of WritingBlueprints.com, and WriteForKids.org, and a founder of Picture Book Summit (www.picturebooksummit.com).

Hilari Bell has written five fantasy series for middle grade and young adult readers, and five stand-alone novels (three of which as science fiction). She's currently working on a novel that mixes steam punk with fantasy. Visit her website at <http://hilaribell.com>.

Lynne Marie is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), *The Star in the Christmas Play* and *Let's Eat Around the World* (Beaming Books), *Moldilocks* and the *3 Scares* (Sterling) and more forthcoming, as well as 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](http://www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com)

Jane McBride is the author of 38 novels (writing as Jane McBride Choate), numerous short stories and articles including pieces in *16 Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthologies, and the CBI Managing Editor. See her Amazon Author Page at <http://bit.ly/JaneMcBrideChoate>

PJ McIlvaine is a Jill of all trades when it comes to writing: kid lit, screenwriter, journalist, blogger. She is the author of *Little Lena and the Big Table* (Big Belly Book Co., May 2019) and *Dragon Roar* (MacLaren-Cochrane, TBD). PJ is also a co-host of #PBPitch, the premiere Twitter pitch party for picture book writers and illustrators. Follow PJ's magical adventures at her website <https://pjmacwriter.com>

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901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838.
mail@CBIClubhouse.com
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Layout: Shellie Dougherty
Editor/Agent Spotlight Editor: Lynne Marie
Genre Spotlight: Jean Diagneau
Featured Interviews: PJ McIlvaine
Chief Operations Officer: Jon Bard

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At Presstime:

Award-Winning Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Holiday House publishes award-winning hardcover fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults, ages 4-18. is a publisher of children's books only. The publisher does not publish mass-market books, including pop-ups, activity books, sticker books, coloring books, or licensed books. Recent titles include *A Place to Land* by Barry Wittenstein, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney (picture book about Martin Luther King and the 1963 March on Washington); *Small in the City* by Sydney Smith (picture book); *8 Class Pets + 1 Squirrel ÷ 1 Dog = Chaos* by Vivian Vande Velde, illustrated by Steve Björkman (chapter book, ages 6-9); *A Slip of a Girl* by Patricia Reilly Giff (historical novel in verse for ages 10-14); *Spliced* by Jon McGoran (science fiction ages 14 and up). See all titles at <https://holidayhouse.com/>

Accepting submissions for all ages. Send the entire manuscript, whether submitting a picture book or novel. Author/illustrators may also include detailed sketches or photocopies of original art. All submissions should be directed to the Editorial Department, Holiday House, 50 Broad Street #301, New York, NY 10004. Send your manuscript via regular U.S. Mail. There is no need to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Will also consider submissions by email sent to submissions@holidayhouse.com (paste picture book manuscript and cover letter into email. For longer works, attach manuscript as .doc file to emailed cover letter). Responds within 4 months if interested.

Also accepting submissions from illustrators. Specifically looking for work that is highly original and geared to the trade market; humor, multicultural work, historical work, fantasy and folklore, and jacket art. Seeking illustrators who are professional and competent and have a strong understanding of the process involved in illustrating a children's book. Submit samples (copies only) to: Director of Art and Design, Holiday House, 50 Broad Street #301, NY, NY 10004.

Katherine Paterson Prize Open to Unpublished Submissions

Hunger Mountain is both a print and online journal of the arts that publishes fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, visual art, young adult and children's writing, writing for stage and screen, interviews, reviews, and craft essays. The print issue comes out annually in the fall, and online content changes on a regular basis. The *Hunger Mountain* editorial offices are located at the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Hunger Mountain sponsors the Katherine Paterson Prize for Young Adult and Children's Literature. Entries can be a picture book (with or without illustrations), chapter book or excerpt from a middle grade or young adult novel, or a short story for children or young adults. All entries should be under 8000 words, and should stand alone if a novel excerpt. Must be unpublished. You may enter more than one piece in each category, or separate pieces in multiple categories, but each entry needs its own \$20 entry fee. You may submit to publishers while under consideration for the prize, but let *Hunger Mountain* know immediately if you get a publishing contract.

Deadline for entries is March 1, 2020. All entries should be submitted online at <https://hungermtn.submittable.com/submit/6902/contest-katherine-paterson-prize-for-young-adult-childrens-literature>
For more information, go to <https://hungermtn.org/submit-contests/>

Agent Accepting Submissions

Alexandra Levick is a junior agent with Writers House (<http://www.writershouse.com/>). She is actively growing her picture book, middle grade, young adult, and adult lists. Looking for picture book author-illustrators, and a wide range of middle grade and YA. She's committed to working with writers from diverse backgrounds and is looking to put forth a list of outstanding creators who will be able to provide windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors into all kinds of experiences. She's particularly looking for #OwnVoices stories about historically underrepresented characters, identities, and cultures. Particularly likes a distinctive voice and strong thematic point behind the work. She loves character-driven stories that revolve around BIG topics. Open to contemporary as well as genre fiction.

Send your personalized query letter (which also mentions your intention or motivation behind the work) along with your first ten pages (both of which should be pasted into the body of the email) to alevick@writershouse.com. Query only one project at a time. Responds within six weeks if interested. For more on Alexandra Levick, go to <https://www.alexandralevick.com/>

Middle Grade Magazine on World Cultures Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction

Faces is a world cultures and geography magazine for ages 9-14. Seeking lively, original approaches to the subject using primary resources and up-to-date scholarly research. All material must relate to the theme of a specific up-coming edition in order to be considered. *Faces* purchases all rights to material.

- Feature Articles (700-800 words) include in-depth nonfiction highlighting an aspect of the featured culture, interviews, and personal accounts.
- Supplemental Nonfiction (300-600 words) includes subjects directly and indirectly related to the theme. Editors like little-known information but encourage writers not to overlook the obvious.
- Fiction (up to 800 words) includes retold legends, folktales, stories, and original plays from around the world.
- Activities (up to 700 words) include crafts, games, recipes, projects, etc., which children can do either alone or with adult supervision. Should be accompanied by sketches and description of how activity relates to theme.
- Puzzles and Games include word puzzles using the vocabulary of the edition's theme, and mazes and picture puzzles that relate to the theme (no crossword puzzles).

Send a query letter for each idea (multiple queries may be submitted at the same time for several ideas), that includes a brief cover letter stating the subject and word length of the proposed article; a detailed one-page outline explaining the information to be presented in the article; an extensive bibliography of materials the author intends to use in preparing the article; and a 2-3 sentence author biography. Writers new to *Faces* should send a writing sample with the query. Include your complete address as well as an email address and telephone number. Email queries to: faces@cricketmedia.com.

The remaining themes for 2020 with upcoming deadlines are: September 2020 issue: Elections Around the World (**query deadline February 10, 2020**); October 2020 issue: Birds (**query deadline March 9, 2020**); November/December 2020 issue: New Zealand (**query deadline April 13, 2020**). More 2021 query themes and deadlines will be added to <http://cricketmedia.com/faces-submission-guidelines> in coming months.

Foundation Gives Cash Awards to Writers & Illustrators with Children

The Sustainable Arts Foundation located in San Francisco, CA (<https://www.sustainableartsfoundation.org/>) is a non-profit foundation supporting artists and writers with children. This year, SAF will make awards of \$5,000 each to twenty artists and writers with children. The selection process is focused almost entirely on the strength of the submitted portfolio. Half the awards are given to applicants of color.

To be eligible, the applicant must have at least one child under the age of 18. Given the intense demand for these awards (SAF typically receives over 3,000 applications), and the fact that the awards are based on demonstrated excellence in your discipline, it's not recommended that artists or writers who are beginning their creative careers apply to this program. While it's not required that applicants have published or exhibited their work, the rigor and critique involved in that process can certainly benefit the portfolio. Portfolios of writing or artwork created in a more personal vein for sharing with friends and family are not suitable. You can [view the list of previous awardees](#) and follow the links to their work to get a feel for their level of craft.

Writers may apply in one of the following categories: Creative Nonfiction, Early and Middle Grade Readers, Fiction, Graphic Novel/Graphic Memoir, Illustrated Children's Books, Illustrated Children's Books (Text Only), Long Form Journalism, Playwriting, Poetry, Young Adult Fiction

Visual artists may apply in one of the following categories: Book Arts, Drawing, Fiber Arts and Textiles, Illustration, Installation, Mixed Media, Painting, Photography, Printmaking, Sculpture

Applicants are asked to submit a portfolio of recent work and answer several essay questions. Details can be found at <https://apply.sustainableartsfoundation.org/> **The online application will be available February 1, 2020. Deadline for submitting is February 28, 2020.** There is a \$20 entry fee. Awards will be announced May 15, 2020.

Counting Down to 30: Part Nine The Kids Can Handle It

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader,

In this installment of my series of editorials counting down to CBI's 30th anniversary, I'd like to talk a bit about fear and sadness and compassion. I know January is a month of fresh starts and beginnings, so if you're not in the mood to read about such things, feel free to turn the page. I won't mind.

As I write this, my mother is dying of cancer. After taking care of her for several months in her apartment, we finally moved her into a nursing home in early December. Then, fearing she wouldn't make it until Christmas (she did), we had Christmas three weeks early. My brother flew in with his wife and daughter from California, we decorated a tree in her room, exchanged gifts, and had dinner. My niece Amelia and I built a snowman outside my mom's window.

A few days later, we were all in my mom's room on the morning my brother and his family had to fly back home. I was sitting in the recliner while Amelia painted my nails, and my brother was saying goodbye to my mom as she lay in her bed at the other end of her large room. He was crying—knowing this could very well be his final goodbye—and speaking quietly with my mother. At one point Amelia glanced over at her father. "I'm going to make sure Daddy's okay," she whispered to me. "Stay here," I told her. "Let him be alone with Nana."

She looked me right in the eyes. "Is this hard for you too?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes."

She put her hand on my arm. "You're going to be okay. I love you." Then she smiled up at me and continued painting my nails.

She's seven years old.

Compassion. Empathy. Kindness. These are key words right now in the KidLit community. They're big, important concepts that we know are essential to raising a generation of children that will be connected to each other and the larger world. But when it comes to writing stories for kids, especially the picture book audience, we often worry how much these readers can handle. Can a young child truly understand a character who is going through great adversity, or will it scare him? Will she be able to relate to a character who is experiencing situations the reader has never encountered in her own life? Are kids younger than eight able to handle strong emotions in their stories? If we'd just take a step back and see—*really* see—who these children already are, we'd relax. Kids process strong emotions all the time, we just haven't noticed. All they need from our books is validation and the support to continue being their best selves.

Sure, the final, eternal reality of death may not be something a young child can fully grasp until he's experienced it in his life (and when he does, books can help him through the grief). But compassion, empathy and kindness are woven into the smaller everyday events that make up a child's ordinary days. These gifts are offered spontaneously and without reservation because young children haven't yet learned to be self-conscious. When my son Matt (now "a grown-up" as Amelia calls him) was young, I was often astounded at (and proud of) his innate empathy for others. A few instances that stand out:

When Matt was barely two, a close friend was visiting. She and I were in my bedroom with the door

closed, and she was crying as she told me about a difficult situation she was going through. Matt walked in, took one look at my friend, and walked out. I thought, “Oh no, she upset him.” Moments later Matt was back, carrying a dishtowel, which he handed to my friend to dry her tears. She stopped crying and hugged him. The towel went home with her.

When Matt was three, we were at the playground. Suddenly another boy about Matt’s age started crying in the sandbox. Even though the boy was a stranger, Matt walked over to him, leaned down, and patted the boy’s back. Then he ran to me and grabbed my hand. “That boy needs a Mommy,” Matt said. I was walking toward the boy when his own mother showed up. Satisfied, Matt happily returned to the swings.

When he was in first grade, I picked Matt up after school and he had a classmate with him. “Brian’s dad isn’t here yet,” Matt said. “We need to wait with him.” So we waited until all the parents had come and gone. Still no Dad. I notified the boys’ teacher, who said she’d call the father and wait with Brian. But Matt insisted on staying. “I want to make sure his dad didn’t forget him,” Matt whispered to me. So Matt, Brian and I sat on a bench outside the school office for 20 minutes until the father arrived (in his defense, he worked the night shift and had slept through his alarm. It happens.) As we walked home, I asked Matt if Brian was one of his new friends. “Not really,” Matt said. “We’re just in the same class. But I didn’t want him to be alone.”

When Matt was eight, Jon’s father was in hospice, with just weeks to live. In Matt’s Sunday school class they were learning about compassion. The kids were asked to draw a picture of what compassion looked like. Matt drew a tall flower, representing his grandfather, and a shorter flower, representing himself. A bee buzzed toward the short flower. “It shows how the bee’s going to sting my flower and leave Grandpa’s flower alone,” Matt explained. Okay, so he didn’t yet understand how pollination works, but his desire to take away his grandfather’s pain was clear and touching.

No, our kid’s not a saint. He just experienced the world like all young children do—through how it made him feel. And, like all young children, he was egocentric: if something made him sad, or lonely, or scared, then that thing would make others feel the same way. Matt had never been left at school 20 minutes after the last bell, but he could imagine how scary that might feel. He understood sadness, and how a parent’s comfort can make it go away. And though he had no idea what my friend was crying about, at two years old he already knew that handing her a towel to dry her tears would help.

So if you want to add themes of compassion, kindness or empathy to your stories, don’t overthink it. Feel free to infuse your story with emotion, but know that these valuable concepts don’t need complicated, message-laden plots. In other words, write with a light hand. Don’t tell your readers what to feel; allow them to see bits of themselves in the story and connect the experiences of the characters to what they already know. Then, as readers grow older and are bombarded with peer pressure and bad role models, or they’re reluctant to do the right thing because it will make them stand out from the crowd, your stories will have created a solid foundation to keep them on track.

When my mother was first diagnosed with her terminal cancer, my brother wrestled with how to tell Amelia. “Just tell her the truth,” my mom said. “She’ll be able to handle it.” And while Amelia can’t really grasp the permanence of her grandmother’s passing until she’s lived it, for now she’s handling it fine. And making it easier on all the adults in her life.

That’s pretty incredible for a seven-year-old.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes



Write By the CALENDAR

by Jane McBride

Sometimes, writers, even the most experienced writers, draw a blank when it comes to thinking up new ideas. I know I have. My mind just refuses to come up with something fresh and creative. I need help. And then I came across a book about writing prompts. Among the prompts were “national days.” There appears to be a day for just about everything. In this article we’re going to explore some of these dates and see what can ideas they can spark. Let’s go through the calendar month by month and see what we can come up with. (Note: You can also use these prompts to write stories or articles for children’s magazines. Just be sure to review your target magazines’ guidelines for lead times, especially for pieces relating to a specific date or theme.)

JANUARY. January is High-Tech Month. Could you create a story around a young boy who wants to invent the “next big thing?” He comes up with an idea for a machine that matches his socks when they come out of the dryer. Or he might think up a new device to warn people who are dieting if they’ve eaten too much for the day. Let your imagination take over.

FEBRUARY. We all associate February with Valentine’s Day. But there is much more to the month, such as National Freedom Day which occurs on the first of February. Could you write a book about a teenage girl whose family has come to the United States from an oppressed country? She wants to celebrate America but finds that is out of fashion here in the land where her family has dreamed of coming to for so many years. What are her feelings upon discovering this? Is she disappointed? Do her classmates make fun of her for wanting to celebrate their country because they take it and the freedoms it grants them for granted?

MARCH. Did you know that March is National Pig

Day. What stories could you think up with National Pig Day as a prompt? Could you write a picture book about a new litter of piglets in a barnyard who are competing with each other to be the face of National Pig Day? Each piglet is doing his best to be chosen, including taking a bath and curling his or her tail. Maybe the smallest piglet desperately wants to be on the poster celebrating this special day. His older sister is chosen but he is not. What will he do? Will he be happy for his sister or will he be envious that she has received this honor and he has been passed over? What about all the other piglets who weren’t chosen to be on the poster? Could they make a calendar with each one of them showcasing a month?

APRIL. We all know that April 1 is April Fool’s Day, but do we know that April also happens to be National Humor Month? A story comes to mind of a nine-year-old boy who likes to play practical jokes on his family and friends but he discovers himself in trouble when a joke goes too far and someone is hurt because of it. What does he do? Does he try to banish practical joking from his life or does he learn to control it?

MAY. I hadn’t known that May is National Hamburger Month. What about a story about a ten-year-old boy who wants to compete in the hamburger eating contest sponsored by the local fire station? What would he do to practice for such an event? Would he try increasing his eating hamburgers by one burger every day until he reaches twelve burgers? What are his parents thinking about this? Do they let him participate or do they forbid it? What if his older brother, who is fourteen, decides to participate in the contest as well? Can our young hero beat out his older brother by out-eating him? What if he out-eats everyone but then ends up sick and spends the night throwing up? His mother stays by his side

even though she'd warned him that this could happen, but she never says "I told you so." Could our protagonist come to appreciate his mother more?

JUNE. June 20 is World Juggling Day. Perhaps a twelve-year-old girl wants to compete in a contest, juggling five items at once. Can she do it? Or will it be too much for her? Will her older brother and sister tease her if she fails? Or will they offer support?

JULY. Aside from July 4, Independence Day, July boasts several other holidays such as International Chicken Wing Day on the first and International Joke Day, also on the first. Maybe you could combine the two, Think of the fun you could have with a teenage boy celebrating chicken wings with jokes.

AUGUST. August 6 is National Sisters Day. August 7 is National Raspberries 'N Cream day and Purple Heart Day. What can you do with those? How about a novel set during WWII about two sisters who are both in love with the same young man who enlists in the Army and is killed in action. The sisters, one a senior in high school, the other a junior, endure their grief separately until their mother drags them out for their annual family raspberry picking day, where they realize they need each other to get through this tough time. (Note: National Sisters Day wasn't established until 2012, but the idea of celebrating the bond between sisters can inspire a story.)

SEPTEMBER. Did you know that there is an elephant appreciation day? I didn't. September 22 has been officially proclaimed Elephant Appreciation Day. What story can you come up with about this day? Could a baby elephant want to march in a parade with his mother and father, but he is told he is too small by the judges? What would he do to fix this dilemma? Could he make two pairs of stilts to make himself taller?

OCTOBER. Think outside the Halloween trappings for October and come up with something new. What about a story about school lunches. October 8 through October 14 is National School Lunch Week. Could you create a story around an eleven-year-old girl who wants to effect a change in the school lunches to make them more healthy? Or maybe our young protagonist decides to protest the use of paper and plastic products and campaign for using dishes and silverware. The possibilities are endless.

NOVEMBER. Though I've been writing professionally for nearly forty years, I didn't know that No-

vember 1 is National Author's Day. Off the top of my head, I can think of several stories about this event. Perhaps a twelve-year-old girl wants to celebrate the day by starting writing a book. She runs into trouble, though, when the stories she pens about her family upset them because they cast the family members in an unflattering light. Maybe you could tie this into NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writers Month) where writers challenge themselves to write a 50,000 word manuscript in the month.

DECEMBER. Stories about Christmas abound. What can you come up with that isn't related to Christmas? I loved discovering that the first week of December is Cookie-Cutter Week. Perhaps a five-year-old boy decides that he wants to make cookies shaped like an opossum. What problems could he encounter in making an opossum cookie cutter? And could he then convince family and friends to eat his opossum cookies?

IN CONCLUSION

There are a plethora of ideas from the calendar. Use them to add an extra layer to your writing or a simple prompt to get you started. Does this mean you should not use the major holidays such as Valentine's Day or Thanksgiving or Christmas in your stories? Of course not. Just be aware that there are other days that can spark an idea and your imagination.

Alyza Liu, Assistant Editor



interview by Lynne Marie

Alyza Liu is an assistant editor at Simon & Schuster, joining their team in 2017. Previously, she acquired extensive experience as an intern at Laura Dall Agency, InkWell Management, Overlook Press, Foundry Literary + Media, and Roaring Brook Press. Notably, she's an assistant to the publisher, Justin Chanda, and has worked on projects with talents such as Aaron Reynolds, Jessie Sima, Morgan Matson and more.

LYNNE MARIE: First, I want to say thank you for being our exciting first editor of the year and starting it off with a bang! We're so happy to have the opportunity to learn more about you and Simon & Schuster.

As a student, you graduated magna cum laude from New York University, where you majored in East Asian Studies and minored in English and Studio Art. How does this inform your tastes as an editor? Your eye for art? Does it inform your desire for atmospheric books?

ALYZA LIU: Hi Lynne Marie, and thanks so much for having me! I'm so happy to be here.

When I came to college, I actually wasn't sure what it was I wanted. My interests were all over the place, and I didn't know where to go to satisfy all of my curiosity all at once—I was an art kid in high school, and didn't want to give that up. I was always very enthusiastic about literature and history, but found the cur-

ricula for those departments to be too Eurocentric. I thought I wanted to go into art history, but was frustrated by talking about art without being able to make it.

East Asian Studies was the best place for me to have ended up. It's a multidisciplinary field of study, so you're learning history, language, literature, art, anthropology, and critical theory all at once—it was a little bit of everything I cared about, and it gave me a wonderfully holistic approach to analytical thinking, which has helped me a lot in my editing.



It's impacted my editorial tastes not necessarily in terms of content, but certainly in terms of approach—I look for manuscripts that carry atmosphere not only in the beautiful language they use, but also in the little details that point to a world, and traditions, that exist beyond its protagonists, that feels real and tactile. I look for protagonists who are not only in conflict with other characters, but also in conflict with their societies, whether it's internal (not fitting in), or external (looming war! political conflict!). I love fully-rendered settings that characters react to, push back on, or go along with in realistic ways.

LM: You are able to acquire for all three imprints. Can you tell us how you would differentiate something that was best suited for Simon & Schuster BFYR, Atheneum or Margaret K. McElderry?

Alyza Liu continued

AL: For me, it's largely a matter of instinct—because I work with all of our editors, I know which of my submissions would fit in best alongside their lists, based on genre, subject matter, or voice. In general, Atheneum is our most literary imprint, where we publish Jason Reynolds, Cynthia Kadohata, Ashley Bryan, and Chris Raschka. But it also has a quirky sense of humor and a lot of heart—one of my favorite releases this year is *Duckworth, the Difficult Child* (Michael Sussman, Júlia Sardà), which is about Duckworth (a difficult child), who is swallowed by a snake. I stole an ARC of Aliza Layne's *Beetle and the Hollowbones* from my coworker, Julia McCarthy, which I've loved since she brought it into staff meeting, and which I am so, so excited to read.

McElderry has been doing a lot of fantastic nonfiction, including *The First Dinosaur* (Ian Lendler, CM Butzer), and, of course, it's known for publishing brilliant, genre-defining fantasy in the vein of Holly Black, Cassandra Clare, and Margaret Rogerson. (My coworker, Nicole Fiorica, describes McElderry's YA cover aesthetic as “long-haired girls with swords”, and I'm inclined to agree.) We also do a lot of wonderful middle grade, like Holly Black's *Doll Bones*, the *Fabien Cousteau Expeditions* graphic novel series, and the simply adorable *At the Heels of History* series. We also just added a few middle grade fantasies that I can't wait to be announced.

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers is our flagship imprint, our most commercial imprint, and also publishes Salaam Reads and Denene Millner Books. We have a very strong contemporary YA list, including books by Jenny Han, Morgan Matson, and S.K. Ali. We also publish fantastic science fiction—I was lucky enough to assist on Neal Shusterman's *The Toll* this year, which was incredibly fun and a great learning experience. I also just nabbed a galley of *The Black Kids* by Christina Hammonds Reed from my coworker, Dainese Santos, to read over my winter holiday, and it's hands-down my most anticipated read of 2020.

In middle grade, we do a lot of big-hearted romps (like Whitney Gardner and Stuart Gibbs) and more tender, heartfelt novels like *Just South of Home* by Karen Strong. Our picture book list is also very strong, with a focus on books that are humorous or big-hearted—we publish Jessie Sima, whose books are always such a delight, and the gorgeous *Sulwe*,

by Lupita Nyong'o and illustrated by Vashti Harrison.

LM: With the exception of nonfiction and poetry, you are open to acquiring picture books, middle grade and young adult novels. Once you acquire a book for an imprint, do you stay with the book and work within that imprint for the duration of the book? Can you tell us a little bit about your editing style/process?

AL: S&S Kids don't generally differentiate between acquiring editor and developmental editor—so the answer to your question is yes!

Editing is such a collaborative process overall that it really can vary depending on what individual authors are looking for, what needs the most support, and how they like to work.

In general, my approach is outside-in. I like to start with a conversation with the author, to establish what they intend to do with their work, and discuss any larger notes about theme, plot beats, and character arcs. Once we've talked that through, I'll write it all down in a formal edit letter. Once we get to a point where we're both satisfied with those larger moving parts, we can start line editing and working on more detail-oriented things.

LM: There was no mention of board books—would that be something that Simon & Schuster generally publishes under the imprints you work with? Or would it just be something that you don't work with? If so, what do you look for in them?

AL: Though Simon & Schuster does publish board books (we have an absolutely delightful line of *Bear* board books, for example), they're a little too young to be published by Atheneum, BFYR, and McElderry. Our youngest books are picture books, which are in the 4-8 age range.

LM: What advice do you have for authors struggling to find their author voice?

AL: To read widely, write often, and figure out what feels most truthful for you. It can be hard to recognize what your most honest voice is until you know all the ways a voice can read, and if there is one piece of advice I think is most helpful to keep in

Alyza Liu continued

mind for authors, it's that writing is a practice. Talent will get you on the right path, but it's perseverance and practice that will take you to where you want to go.

LM: What are your thoughts about author branding? Do you feel an author should strive to create a brand, or just write and see what comes naturally as their career progresses? Should a writer try and stay in one lane, or experiment?

AL: I'm a little wary of "branding", because you are not a commodity—your books are. It's true that having a platform can help with community engagement, but I think purposefully trying to craft one can work against you, because people respond best to authenticity. So my advice is relatively corny—be yourself. Some authors can happily write in a single genre for their entire careers, while others are restless and want to try different things. There's no singular way to be—you just have to find the one that feels most comfortable to you. Do the work, and the audience will follow.

LM: I was pleased to see your participation in Manuscript Wish List as it is a favorite tool to use when authors are doing pre-submission research on editors. Please share that link with us.

AL: <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/alyza-liu/>

LM: So many authors struggle with the understanding of a high-concept plot and just how to formulate a story that embodies this. How would you explain this? Do you have any tips for trying to achieve this?

AL: High concept is, in essence, idea-driven, easily summed up. *Pacific Rim*, for example, can be pitched as "big robots fighting big monsters in the middle of an apocalypse." *John Wick* is "Keanu Reeves goes on a rampage of revenge after his dog is murdered." Of course, they are not just that, but their tone, their stakes, and their premises are easy to summarize. There is a strong concept around which the plot, the characters, and the themes are organized.

On the other end of the spectrum, something like *Little Women* is less high concept. "Four sisters grow up in the middle of the Civil War" doesn't quite establish what the story is about, or why we should

care. It takes reading the novel to understand why people love it so much.

I think trying to "achieve" high-concept is an unhelpful way to think about it. I enjoy high-concept work—many people do—but different people like reading different books. "High-concept" is something you use to describe your manuscript after it's been written, not something you strive for before you start.

Write the story that feels closest to the one you want to tell, and figure out the best way to pitch it after—sometimes, some manuscripts are just not high concept, and that's a value-neutral descriptor, not a judgement on its marketability, or its substance, or its publishing viability. There is an audience out there for all books, so it's less about trying to get your book into the hands of an audience that may not respond to it in the way you want them to, and more about figuring out the best way to reach the audience who will.

LM: Likewise, how would you explain low-concept world-building?

AL: Ha! I actually don't think this is a real publishing term—it's just a pithy way for me to describe what I'm looking for in the establishing of a world. I look for more passive worldbuilding, worldbuilding that you absorb through characters' interactions with each other and with the institutions and traditions around them. I'm less interested in worlds that have explicitly described rules and structures, because that feels less real to me, less easy for me to feel at home in.

LM: You mentioned that you are looking to acquire translated genre fiction and graphic novels from Africa, Asia, Central America and South America. What would be the qualifications you would be looking for from a bi-lingual person who might undertake something like this?

AL: I'm not looking for qualifications so much as someone with a philosophy toward translation that complements my own. I grew up reading a lot of translated books, much of it by people who are incredibly qualified—but as a reader, I had an adverse reaction to translations that felt too academic, too dense, too stiff. It often felt like only the literary fic-

tion that was deemed worthy of being translated into English—and it is, of course, but not exclusively so. This is not the case with English-language books in translation—*Harry Potter* is as available as our Important Literary Works. It always struck me as a very narrow attitude to have—that only the Important Works are worthy of American attention. It's an incomplete narrative about a people that focuses only on one aspect of their lives that we find Worthy, and not, for example, what their sense of humor is, or what their romance looks like. What are their fantasies, and what do they see when they imagine the future? It limits the audience of those books to a very small section of the reading public, and I think it does us, as readers, tremendous disservice, as well. I'm inspired by a lot of the work Ken Liu does, for example, in translating Chinese science fiction for Anglophonic audiences to read, and doing so in a way that is commercial, and that reads fluidly and locally in English, without erasing or exotifying the original Chinese. That's what I'm looking for in all translations—to feel seamlessly English, but not divorced from the original.

LM: So as an also-huge fan of Asian Dramas (available on Netflix and the Viki.com app), I must ask what your favorites are and why? Can you share a little bit about why you believe these dramas are so popular the world over and what our readers, especially the novelists, might glean from watching them in the interest of improving craft?

(Full disclosure - I am a HUGE Goblin [Guardian - The Lonely and Great God] fan.)

AL: Two words—female gaze! I remember reading an article somewhere about how the majority of South Korea's television screenwriters are women, and there's no doubt in my mind that that's contributed to their success. A large portion of public viewership is comprised of young women, and it's important that these narratives take us, our desires, and our interests seriously.

Asian dramas are also a lot more willing to make big swings, and to play with format and genre in ways that are exciting—I love watching a historical drama that is in no way historically accurate, or contemporary realism whose protagonist has superpowers that the other characters just roll with—because why not? It's such a fun attitude to have.

I watch so many, but let me see if I can pare them down:

Rookie Historian was one of my favorite dramas this year, about a girl who becomes a historian in order to establish her own independence, and falls in love with a prince who writes romance novels. It's a story about historiography, about women, and about high and low culture that's done in a way that is sweet and refreshing. This is a super good watch for how to make historical fiction accessible.

Nirvana in Fire is one of my favorite dramas ever—it's tightly paced, the political maneuvering is so smart it takes my breath away, and I like to pitch it to people as *Count of Monte Cristo* meets *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Thirteen years after a military upheaval that left the country reeling, a stranger is back to avenge the death of a general and his family. The emotions keep you on the edge of your seat, the ending is satisfying but not indulgent, and even though it seems long, it's paced so well it never feels like it. Watch this one for tightness of pacing and razor-sharp plotting.

Strong Girl Do Bong-soon is also one of my favorites that I watched this year—a girl who has the power of super-strength must protect her friend after the latter is targeted by a serial killer—but at what cost? It's so charming, and though the tone can veer from heavy to light very quickly, I loved all the characters and their relationships to one another. Watch this one for the incredibly charming characters and the way it balances a heavy plot with humour.

Farewell, My Princess is a watch for if you ever want to cry, and a masterclass in writing a love interest whose appeal you understand, but who is also unambiguously the villain. (Though perhaps the villain is actually power and the way it alienates you from your emotions and your humanity?) It follows a naive, carefree princess who is sent east to a treaty marriage with a stronger nation. At first, she thinks her intended loves her—but that's a lie. Then she thinks he doesn't love her—but that's a lie, too. Watch this one for a claustrophobic world that turns all of its inhabitants into victims, or perpetrators, or both. The society the protagonist lives in is as much a character as she is, and influences the plot as much as she does.

Alyza Liu continued

The Story of Yanxi Palace was hands-down my favorite drama of last year, and eschews a withering-violet protagonist for a girl with a bad temper who is out for revenge. It follows a girl who becomes a servant in the palace in order to avenge the murder of her sister. By the end of the first episode, she gets one girl thrown out of the palace. By the end of the third, she gets another banished to the scullery. This is also a drama about the way imperial power corrupts every pure thing it touches, but the highlight of the series is the love between Yingluo and the Empress. Watch this for an “unlikeable” protagonist and the way costume, set design, and myriad small, concrete details can make your world come alive.

I also just started watching *To Get Her*, which is an incredibly lighthearted drama about a girl who breaks up with her popstar boyfriend—but is recruited to save him when his consciousness is stuck in a video game. I haven’t gotten far enough along to say that I love it yet, but I love the way it plays with genre, its cheekiness, and the way it marries the modern with the historical.

LM: Tell us also about your interest in murder podcasts? I too listen to these and feel that there’s something to be learned from them, even in writing picture books, like dramatic pause. What do you think?

AL: For me, murder podcasts are a lesson in framing, and in how to tell a difficult, emotionally-fraught story. The distance is so wide between an ethical, well-told true crime podcast and an unethical, sensationalist one, and I think it’s really worth taking a step back and thinking deeply about why one is more successful and another may not be—how does it treat the victims? Where does the story start? Whose story is being told—the victims’ or the killers’? One podcast that might be worth a listen to this end is *Crime Writers On*, which I’ve been playing a lot of this year. They review true crime podcasts, and not only do they talk about whether or not something is ethical or well-told, they also go into why, which is immensely helpful. Bonus—they’re all authors, too!

LM: Name something you would like to receive as a submission that would start your New Year off to a great start.

AL: Ooh, this is a great question. I would love a YA

or a middle grade *Scooby-Doo*. I’ve also been asking for this for ages, so maybe 2020 will finally be the year—I’d really love to work on a YA Superstore. A bunch of teens who work in a big box store or a supermarket—I can’t think of anything more fun or more chaotic.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Alyza Liu generally only accepts submissions from agents, or from attendees at conferences at which she is speaking. However, she is making a one-time exception for CBI subscribers, so please follow the directions for this amazing **Above the Slushpile** opportunity:

Review Alyza’s current guidelines for picture book, middle grade, and young adult submissions on Manuscript Wish List at:

<https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/alyza-liu/>.

Email a brief cover letter and the entire manuscript attached as a .doc file with CHILDREN’S BOOK INSIDER SUBMISSION in the subject line to: alyza.liu@simonandschuster.com

Submissions will be accepted Monday through Friday on the last week of January only (emails sent January 27-31, 2020).

Please note that Alyza will only respond to those manuscripts she is interested in or authors she would like to see more from. If you don’t hear back by March 31, 2019, you can consider it a pass.

BEFORE YOU



by Jane McBride

When I submitted my first manuscript (which was rightfully rejected), I had no idea of the submission process, no idea of how to revise it, no idea of anything except that I had completed a book and was certain that it would become an overnight success. It didn't happen. Years of writing and attending workshops and conferences followed before I sold my first book.

Looking back, I am grateful that the manuscript was never accepted. It was terrible. I say that not in false modesty, but in cold truth. The hero was unlikable, the heroine was a wimp, the point of view was all over the place, the conflict non-existent, and the dialogue stiff and stilted.

How do you know when you are ready to submit a manuscript? Typing “The End” on the final page does not make a manuscript submission-ready. In fact, the words “The End” really mean “The Beginning.”

As a new writer, the revision process can feel daunting because you don't know what areas of your story you should be focusing on, or what flaws you should be looking for. And you may also be under the assumption that editors will offer publishing contracts to manuscripts based on good ideas, but which are still unpolished. Editors are supposed to edit, right? While editors do spend a considerable amount of time editing works under contract, they need to see that the manuscript has promise, and that the author appears capable of carrying out needed revisions. If you spend your time now revising your work to the best of your abilities, the editor will then be able to help you take your work to the next level.

Here is a list of questions you should ask about your work, broken into broad categories. I suggest you go through your manuscript and answer these questions one category at a time. Revise the big issues first (character, plot and voice), then move on to the

more micro edits (dialogue, sentence structure), and finally look at formatting and mechanics.

CHARACTERS. Whether your book is character-driven or plot-driven, it needs to have compelling characters. Ask these questions to see if your characters make the grade:

- Does your main character have a goal, something for which he strives?
- Does he have something that makes him memorable?
- Is he likable? Will readers root for him or will they find him selfish and lacking? Worse, will they not care about him at all?
- Does he have flaws? Perfect characters are boring. They have nowhere to go, no growth to achieve.
- Does he undergo a change throughout the book or does he remain the same? If he remains the same person that he was at the start of the book, what was the point of the story?
- Have you kept to one point-of-view per scene? (That rule is widely broken, but it is pretty much a given for writers just starting out.) If you aren't certain which character's POV you should be writing in, ask yourself which character has the most to lose in the scene.

PLOT. Plot is what keeps the story moving. Without it, your book is only a series of loosely related anecdotes.

Is there an overarching plot that carries through from the beginning to the end of the story?

Before You Submit continued

- Does your story have both internal and external conflict? Internal conflict are those forces inside the character that keep him from reaching his goal. External conflict are opposing forces outside the character which prevent him from achieving his goal.
- Is the conflict age-appropriate? The conflict in a picture book where a four-year-old boy is struggling to adjust to the arrival of a new baby in the family will be far different than one in a YA novel where a teenage boy is fighting for his life in the Rocky Mountain wilderness after becoming lost from his Scout group. If you read widely in the age group for which you're writing, you'll learn not only which conflicts are appropriate for different ages, but also how to write about difficult subjects for younger and older readers.
- Do your scenes and chapters have cliffhanger endings? This does not mean each scene and chapter has to end on a note of danger, but there should be a question that needs to be answered, another step to reaching the goal that needs to be taken. Give the reader a reason to keep turning the pages. In a recent book that I submitted, the editor made comments on several of my scene endings that there needed to be more suspense. Guess what? She was right.
- Does each scene serve a purpose? Or did you stick it in the story simply because your writing was so beautiful that you couldn't bear to throw it out?
- Have you varied the pacing, mixed reflective scenes with action scenes?
- Have you committed a bait-and-switch, that is starting out telling one story and halfway through switching to another? Stay true to your original premise.
- What distinguishes your voice from that of another writer? Voice is a combination of sentence structure, word choice, theme, and other factors. When I tried to write against my natural voice, I failed completely and miserably. Only when I went back to writing what is organic and comfortable to me, did I start selling books. Two writers can take the same plot, the same characters, and the same conflict and come up with two entirely different books because of voice. Let yours shine through.

DIALOGUE. Dialogue should advance the story and/or reveal character.

- Is your dialogue riveting? Or does it simply transfer information that readers already know?
- Do all your characters sound the same? Each character should have his own voice, especially the main character.
- Can you give your protagonist a phrase that is his or hers alone? Something that distinguishes him from other characters?
- Do your characters reflect their background and level of education? A poorly educated parent might have entirely different word choices than her son who is able to go to school.
- Does the dialogue of your characters fit with the setting of the story? For instance, a southern girl may well refer to her father as "Daddy." (My Tennessee-bred mother referred to her father as "Daddy" long after he passed away and did so throughout her life.) A boy raised in a northeastern city might call his father "Dad."
- Do you skip the boring parts of dialogue? Leave out any mundane conversation such as talk of the weather, unless a hurricane or tornado is imminent.

VOICE. Make it your own.

- Is your voice distinctive? Just as your character's voice will reflect his upbringing and education, so will yours. Have you made your voice your own or is it simply a poor imitation of that of a writer whom you admire?

SENTENCE LENGTH AND STRUCTURE.

- Have you varied your sentence length and struc-

Before You Submit continued

ture or are your sentences all roughly the same length and noun/verb construction?

- Do your sentences reflect what is going on in a particular scene? Generally, action scenes fare well with short, snappy sentences while slower-paced scenes do better with longer, more flowing sentences.

FORMATTING AND MECHANICS. Proper formatting and good spelling, grammar, and punctuation won't sell a bad book, but poor mechanics can keep a good book from selling.

- Have you done your homework by learning how your targeted publisher wants a manuscript submitted. Do you know what the phrase “sample chapters” means? In one of my more egregious errors early in my career, I sent in the first, a middle, and the ending chapter, believing that to be sample chapters. Does the publisher ask for a synopsis and three chapters? Does it ask for only a synopsis? Does it ask for a completed manuscript? It goes without saying that you've already checked that your story fits the publisher's guidelines. You wouldn't, for example, send a fantasy book to a book publisher that specifically states it won't accept fantasy or science fiction.
- Are you meticulous in your spelling? Yes, spell-check will catch a lot of errors, but it won't spot using their when you should have used they're.
- Are you confident about grammar and punctuation rules? If not, brush up on them. Buy a book about style and usage.
- Finally, have you paid attention to word count? If the publisher wants books of no more than 60,000 words, don't send in one that is 120,000 words, thinking that your book is the exception to the rule. Trust me, it's not.

Revision is a complex process that takes time. Don't expect to revise all of these areas in one pass. But if you can learn to enjoy the process of diving into your work and making each layer of your story stronger, you'll truly become an accomplished writer.



For more revision tips, check out **Manuscript Magic** from [WritingBlueprints.com](https://writingblueprints.com), which walks you through editing your work on the story, scene and sentence levels. You can get the free trial version here:

<https://writingblueprints.com/p/manumagic-trial>

Taking Out the Trash: How to Dig Out Your Unique Writer's Voice

by Hilari Bell

The one thing every agent and editor is looking for is “a fresh, distinctive voice.” But everything that’s written, no matter how amateurish, has a voice. What agents and editors are really looking for is a strong, professional voice that stands out from the crowd. Maybe some writers are born with a great voice, like natural singers, but most people have to develop it. And having recently pulled a novel I wrote almost twenty years ago out of the trunk for my publisher, I learned a lot about how I finally managed to develop my own writer’s voice. Sure, in part it’s a matter of more active verbs, more vivid and precise language—but mostly, I think it’s a matter of eradicating the garbage words that smother the good stuff!

Version A (twenty years ago):

The wrinkled face held nothing but kindness and sorrow, but Jeriah suddenly became aware that he had no sword and his right arm was all but useless. If he’d intended some threat to the tinker, he’d have been helpless to carry it out. A chill of wariness brushed him. This man was no fool. But he intended no threat, so it didn’t matter.

“It’s about Tobin, my brother.” He was on his knees, leaning forward in his earnestness. “He followed the sorceress into the Otherworld and I have to get him back.”

The whole story tumbled out...well almost the whole story.

“So you see, I have to get in touch with the goblins if I’m to have a chance of finding them in the Otherworld,” he finished.

The tinker frowned thoughtfully at him. “Seems to me,

lad, that your brother went of his own will. Are you right—”

“But he didn’t know he’d die! He didn’t even know he couldn’t return, he can’t have known it. He promised, he swore to me that he’d come back when I promised him...”

The tinker cocked a curious brow and waited.

“...to stay out of trouble,” Jeriah finished weakly. Todder Yon didn’t laugh, but Jeriah could see it took an effort.

“He broke his promise first,” said Jeriah with dignity. “That frees me from mine. Besides, it’s hardly my fault I was attacked!”

The tinker laughed.

Version B (now):

The wrinkled face held only kindness and sorrow, but Jeriah suddenly became aware that he had no sword, and his right arm was all but useless. If he had intended harm, he’d have been helpless to pursue it. A chill of wariness brushed him. This man was no fool.

“It’s about Tobin, my brother.” Jeriah rose to his knees, leaning forward despite a twinge of pain from the movement. “He followed the sorceress into the Otherworld, and I have to get him back.”

The whole story tumbled out. Almost the whole story.

“So you see, I have to get in touch with the goblins in

Taking Out the Trash continued

order to have any chance of finding them in the Otherworld," he finished.

The tinker frowned. "Seems to me, lad, that your brother went of his own will."

"He didn't know he'd die! He didn't even know he couldn't return. He promised, he swore, that he'd come back, and I promised him..."

The tinker cocked a curious brow and waited.

"...to stay out of trouble," Jeriah finished weakly. The tinker's lips twitched.

"He broke his promise first," said Jeriah with dignity. "That frees me from mine. Besides, it's not my fault I was attacked!"

Todder Yon gave up and laughed.

Hear the difference? Let me take it a step further and demo my process paragraph by paragraph, underlining the awkward language I changed then showing the finished version.

The wrinkled face held nothing but kindness and sorrow, but Jeriah suddenly became aware that he had no sword and his right arm was all but useless. If he'd intended some threat to the tinker, he'd have been helpless to carry it out. A chill of wariness brushed him. This man was no fool. But he intended no threat, so it didn't matter.

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Taking Out the Trash continued

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The tinker’s lips twitched.

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Todder Yon gave up and laughed.

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Small changes. A word echo here. An awkward turn of phrase. Excising a bunch of words that are repetitive, or unnecessary. But see the difference they make? How much clearer and cleaner my voice is with the garbage stripped away?

There are doubtless other things involved in developing a good writing voice—things like vivid verbs, and rooting out passive construction come to mind. And I doubt you could manage it without training your ear to the rhythms and nuisances of the language.

But even the fanciest party decorations won’t show to advantage unless you pick up the clutter, vacuum and dust—and even a strong writing voice can’t shine if it’s buried in junk verbiage. Cleaning up your writing may be every bit as tedious—and much harder—than cleaning house, but if you do it readers, agents and editors will be a lot more eager to come to your next novel.



For more revision tips, check out **Manuscript Magic** from [WritingBlueprints.com](https://writingblueprints.com), which walks you through editing your work on the story, scene and sentence levels. You can get the free trial version here:

<https://writingblueprints.com/p/manumagic-trial>

# Carmella Van Vleet IS (NOT) A BIG, FAT QUITTER

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**A** prolific children's writer, Carmella Van Vleet has been published in a variety of genres: nonfiction and fiction picture books, middle grade, and young adult. With over two dozen books to her credit, she admits (when bribed with PEZ), that she has a particular affinity for the middle grade wheelhouse, largely in no small part to her well-received, Junior Library Guild selection series *Eliza Bing*, about a young tween with ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), inspired by her daughter. An inveterate collector and hobbyist, Carmella makes her home in Ohio with her high school sweetheart, three children, and a dog who thinks he's a cat (and another dog who's just a dog).

**PJ McILVAINE:** What (or who) inspired you to become you an author? What was the first thing you ever wrote? Did your family encourage your writing ambitions?

**CARMELLA VAN VLEET:** I was inspired to write by all the authors whose books I read. I was fortunate that I had teachers who read aloud to the class as well. (I remember falling head over heels in love listening to *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*.)

The first thing I remember writing was a story about *Lassie* in second grade. (I'm sure I liberally borrowed from an episode I'd seen.) My parents were very encouraging of my writing. My mom supplied me with all the books I could read and journals I could use. And my dad was my first editor.

**PM:** At one point, you were a teacher. What grades did you teach? Does being a former educator help

you in your writing or inspire you on what topics young students would enjoy learning or reading about?

**CVV:** I taught Kindergarten and preschool. But I've also worked with kids of all ages in different settings as well. I definitely feel that being a former educator helps me, especially when I'm writing nonfiction. I look at my nonfiction titles as "teaching on paper." I think most children's writers, like teachers, remember what it's like to be a kid and use this to genuinely connect with young people.

**PM:** You write in a variety of genres: picture books, middle grade, and nonfiction picture books. Is there one genre you enjoy more than the other? In fiction, does the character choose you or does story/plot rule the day? In nonfiction, how do you decide what to write about? What do you like best, the writing or the research?

**CVV:** I love writing different genres for different reasons! For instance, I love the research aspect that comes with nonfiction. It's a chance to learn something cool and then say, "Hey! Check this out" to the reader. I only write about topics I'm personally interested in. If I'm bored, the reader will be, too. Conversely, if I'm super into something, I (hopefully) convey that in the writing.

Writing fiction is something relatively new to me, but I love doing it, too. I'm more character-driven as opposed to plot-driven, for sure. I'll sit down and spend 50 pages or so just learning about my character and what they want. Even though I typically read more YA, I've learned that my natural "voice"





*Carmella Van Vleet continued*

tends to be middle grade. I'm totally cool with that. It's a great age!

**PM:** How long does it take you to write a book? How many drafts before you feel it's ready? Do you have a set writing routine? Do you outline or are you a by the seat of your pants writer?

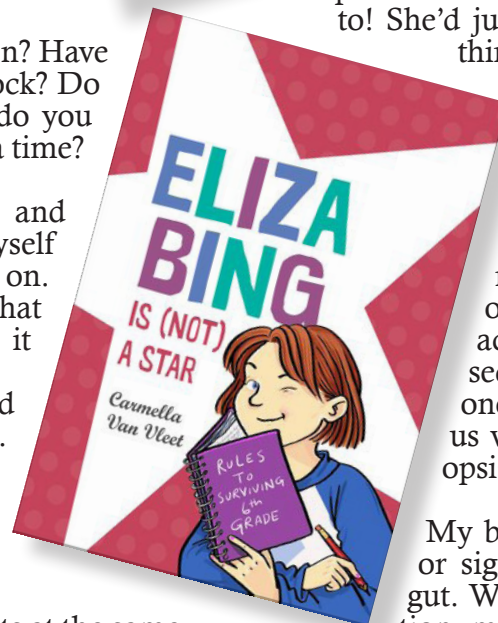
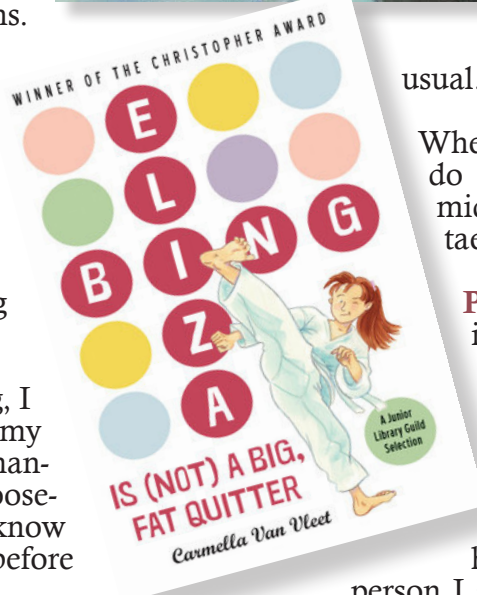
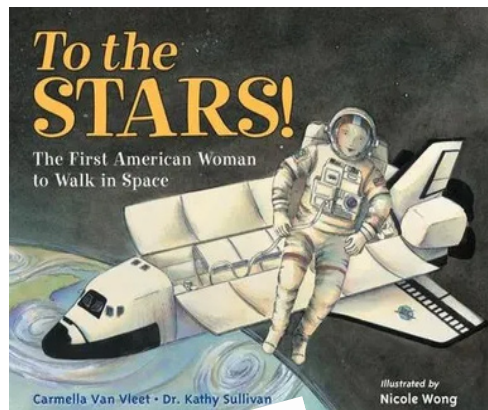
**CVV:** With nonfiction, I can write a book in about 6 months. (Although, my picture book, *To the Stars*, took 10 years from idea to book!) My novels typically take a year to draft and another year to revise. I have a set routine that works for me. Writing is my only job so I can spend as much or as little time I want working each day.

I'm a pantsier-outliner. Meaning, I start off writing by the seat of my pants but then, once I have a handle on the character, I'll start loosely outlining a plot. I always know where the books are headed before beginning, though.

**PM:** How do you handle rejection? Have you ever experienced writer's block? Do you juggle multiple projects or do you prefer to focus on one project at a time?

**CVV:** Rejection? I sigh heavily and make cookies, feel sorry for myself for a day or two and then move on. Over the years, I've learned that it's never personal, even though it sometimes feels that way. When I'm stuck, I'll get up and walk away for the day (or longer). I tend to "process out loud" too, so I might talk through an issue with whoever is available and willing to listen.

I usually work on multiple projects at the same time. BUT they're never in the same genre. And always-in different stages (researching or drafting verses revising).



**PM:** How did Taekwondo inspire your MG series *Eliza Bing*?

**CVV:** *Eliza Bing* is largely inspired by my daughter's ADHD and experiences. But I do taekwondo, too, so there's a lot of "me" in Eliza, as well. I remember what it was like to be a white belt and I remember what it felt like to feel out of place and overwhelmed—I was an adult when I began training and so that's a bit

usual.

When I got my black belt, I felt like I could do anything. And that included writing a middle grade novel. So there's another way taekwondo inspired the books!

**PM:** Do you have an agent? If so, was it a long process? Any tips on the query process?

**CVV:** Yes, I have an agent. I tried to get an agent on and off for many years before writing *Eliza Bing*. But because I mainly did nonfiction, it wasn't a huge priority. My agent was the 48th person I sent *Eliza Bing is (Not) a Big, Fat Quitter* to! She'd just put on her agent hat, so I like to think the universe was just lining up the stars for the two of us. My agent is very editorial. (Which I wanted in an agent.) I don't typically bounce ideas off her before I begin writing a book. But a few months ago, we discussed what projects I might work on next because I couldn't decide. The only time she had input before I began actually writing was when I wrote the sequel, *Eliza Bing is (Not) a Star*. That one was sold on proposal so the two of us worked together to fine tune the synopsis and sample pages.

My biggest piece of advice in looking for or signing with an agent is to trust your gut. When my agent offered me representation, my full manuscript was with two other agents. I let them know about the offer. When I started hoping they'd hurry up and turn me down, I realized that my decision was already made.

*Carmella Van Vleet continued*

And, oh! Meet your agent in person ahead of time if you can. I had a “dream agent” in mind but once I met her in person, I knew we wouldn’t be a good match. Of course, having just said that, I didn’t meet my agent in person until after we sold the first book. (Do as I say, not as I do, I guess, lol).

**PM:** With your nonfiction books, did you write them one at a time or was it pitched as a series?

**CVV:** The majority of my nonfiction books were work-for-hire. In other words, I didn’t pitch them; the publisher would give me a title/titles and then asked if I was interested in writing it/them. They were already-established series.

I did not have an agent for these books. (I’ve since learned that would have been a good idea since agents look out for your best interests.) I got into writing nonfiction books after I pitched another book for the grownup market to my publisher. They didn’t buy that book, but they liked my writing and asked if I’d do a parenting guide for them. Which I did. A few years later, they switched gears to publishing kids’ books and since I’d been a teacher, it was a natural fit for me. I emailed them and basically said, “Hey. I see you’re doing children’s books now, I’m interested.” And they wrote back, “Cool. Wanna write this book for us?” I’m definitely paraphrasing here!

**PM:** How important is social media in marketing and/or branding? Does a writer need their own personal website?

**CVV:** I think you definitely need a website. It can help promote 24 hours a day. I know agents and publishers will look to see how active you are on social media. I have an author Facebook page ([Author Carmella Van Vleet](#)) and a Twitter account ([@carvanvleet](#)) but I’m probably not as active as I should be. I also have an Instagram ([Carmella.van.vleet.author](#)) but it’s mostly an outlet for my photography.

I’m not a huge fan of “branding.” But that’s because I don’t like the idea of getting tied down to one type of book or audience. Personally, my cre-

ative self needs freedom to explore.

**PM:** What’s the one question you wish you were asked (but never are)?

**CVV:** I’m never asked what my favorite candy bar is. It’s Milky Way.

**PM:** You’re quite eclectic when it comes to hobbies. What PEZ dispenser would you love to add to your collection? Have you ever refused to go on a roller coaster because it was too scary? How many more tattoos do you plan to get?

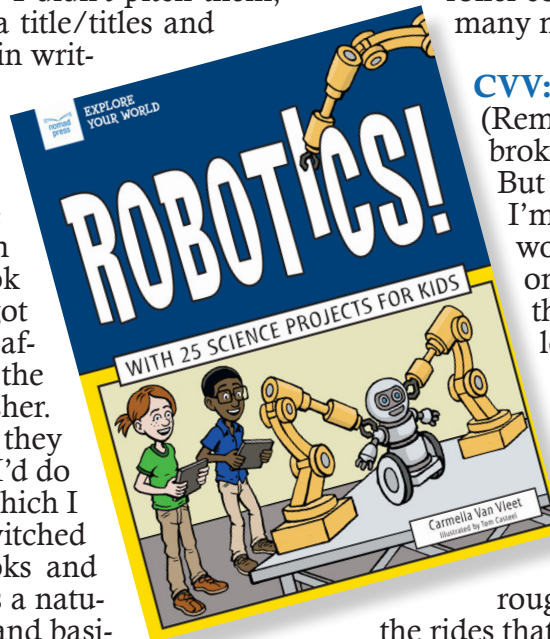
**CVV:** I used to have Tom and Jerry PEZs (Remember that cartoon?) but the Tom broke. It’d be cool to find another one. But I’d probably have to go digging and I’m not that serious of a collector. I wouldn’t spend hundreds of dollars on one. And all my PEZ’s are out of their packages and get used. (Or at least they used to when my kids were little.) What’s the fun of collecting something if you’re not going to enjoy it?

I’ve never refused to go on a roller coaster because it was too scary—but because it was too rough for sure. My body can’t handle the rides that fling you around anymore.

Hmmm. I have nine tattoos. But I don’t currently have any plans for any more. “Currently” being the operative word. They’re a bit addictive. Each one means something special to me, but one of my favorites is my “Alexander” from *Alexander and Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. It reminds me that we all have rough days. I love how kids see the tattoo and recognize Alexander right away, but it usually takes their parents a few minutes to figure out where they know it from.

**PM:** If you could give one piece of advice to aspiring writers, what would it be?

**CVV:** Don’t call yourself an aspiring writer. If you write, you’re a writer. Take yourself seriously as an artist and others will, too.



# What is Your CORE STORY?

by Jane McBride

**W**hat is your core story? Your core story is the one that you tell over and over, whatever the other trappings of your book may be. This does not mean that you are writing the same plot over and over; it means that you have a thematic premise that provides the underpinnings of all of your work. Each writer will have his or her own core story. Mine is that love and faith in the Lord will see you through even the toughest times.

Once you know your core story or theme, you can write in any genre. Your characters may be dressed in Amish garb or they may wear clothes from another era or they may be outfitted as a princess and prince, but your core story will remain constant. One writer acquaintance pens stories set in medieval times, in the Regency era, in the 1930s, and in modern times, yet I always identify her work. Even if I didn't see her name on the cover of a book, I would recognize it as hers within a few pages because her story doesn't change.

Think you don't have a core story? You have one, even if you are as yet unaware of it. It took me over a dozen books and many short stories to figure out what my core story was, but when I did, it was obvious. I just hadn't been cognizant of it.

Why is it important to know what your core story is?

**Knowing your core story strengthens your writing.** Who doesn't want to strengthen their

writing? Not me. Knowing that my story focuses on the healing power of love and faith reminds me to return to that if my book tends to steer off course. (And my books do wander, occasionally. Fortunately, I have a really good editor who guides me back on course by reminding me of what story I'm trying to tell.) Book middles can turn flabby; focusing on the core or essence of the story will get those lazy abs in shape by cutting out the extraneous matter.

Let's see how this works in a story and make up a story about a teenage boy who leaves home after a big blow-out with his parents. Our core story is that home is the place you belong even when that home is far from perfect. Knowing our core story enables us to know not only the ending of the story but what kind of conflicts will interfere with it. If home is at the core of the story, what conflicts can we come up with that will keep our hero from returning there? One of his friends says that the boy is better off without a home, that he is now free to do his own thing with no one nagging at him to do chores, to study, to go to church, to do all the things he is required to do at home. His parents don't understand him or appreciate him, and he's had it with their controlling ways. He is artistic and creative, but his parents want him to concentrate on math and science and go into engineering after he graduates from high school. He hates math and science with a passion. He bums around, staying with one friend after another until he wears out his welcome. He ends up in an aban-



*What is Your Core Story? continued*

doned warehouse now used by homeless kids. As the days turn into weeks, he realizes what he has at home—parents who love him even if they don't understand him and a little brother who idolizes him. Then he receives an offer from a friend to go with him to California and check out the prospects there. Could be that they get hired on at a movie studio as gofers, the friend says, and maybe someone will take notice of them. It sounds fun. It also sounds really dumb. Our young hero has a choice to make. Go to California with this so-called friend or return home. He accepts that his parents want the best for him even if they don't know what that is. What does he do? Perhaps he remembers that tomorrow is his little brother's birthday and he wants to be there for it. He and his little brother are tight, so he returns home, a little wiser, a little more appreciative of his parents. He hopes that he and his parents will find a common ground and can make it work this time. He knows it won't be easy, but the lure of home, of family, pulls at him and he knows he's made the right choice.

**Knowing your core story strengthens your brand.** Do you know your brand? Or are you still figuring out your brand? Either way, your core story can reinforce that brand by making it distinct and yours alone. What if your core story is “Family is forever and should be protected at all costs.” Family is of vital importance to most, if not all, of us. We cherish it. We revel in it. We fight for it. And sometimes we fight with it. If that is your core story, how does it affect your brand? Think visually here. If you had to choose a picture to portray your brand, what would it be? Would it look like a Norman Rockwell painting? Or would it be a more modern picture, like in the opening credits of a current sitcom such as *Modern Family* or *The Neighborhood*? How do you intertwine your core story and your brand? You make certain that everything you post, everything in your website, and everything you write has that core at its heart. When people read a blog by you or see a post by you, they immediately associate your name and your work with that core and that brand. Be intentional in what you

post, even if it is non-writing related. Be aware that you are being evaluated and judged in everything that you do. Sound unfair? Maybe. But it's a fact. Do you remember the adage “You have only one chance to make a good impression?” That's more true than ever these days. Know what image you want to project and then do everything you can to project that image.

**Finally, knowing your core story strengthens your voice.** Your voice is the essence of what makes you you. It is a mix of your education, your upbringing, your spiritual beliefs, your geographical roots, your current place of residence, and a host of other things. Did you spend your elementary school years in the Bible Belt but then your family moved to California when you were in your teens? Both of those places will show up in your voice. Were you home-schooled? That, too, will show up in your voice. Did your family go to church regularly? All of these things will play a part in your voice and in the core story you choose to tell. Ask yourself how you can use those elements of your background to make your core story unmistakable and how that will give force to your voice.

It may be that you reject the idea of a core story, saying to yourself that you are more than a “one-trick-pony.” Of course you are. You can write anything you choose, but that story that is deep inside of you won't be denied. Use it. Embrace it. Make it the best you can. In the end, the story is you.



## How to Discover Your Core Story

Knowing your core story doesn't mean you'll write the same book over and over. Remember, the term "core story" doesn't refer to a book's plot, but rather one or two themes that represent the author's deeply-held beliefs about life and the world. These themes create the lens through which an author views her characters, builds her plots, and even develops her voice. For example, if one author's core story is "Life is a magical adventure" and another's is "Hard work and responsibility build character", each will write a very different story about a 9-year-old girl who wants new rollerblades. Your core story is not so much about the book you're writing as it is about what you, personally, are bringing to that book.

**Think about what books resonate with you.** Do the protagonists share common traits? If so, write down the essential values those protagonists share. Do you feel a connection with certain authors? Think about the themes of their books, or what you take away from their stories. The authors' core stories may be similar to yours.

**Write a list of your most deeply-held beliefs and values.** Notice any patterns, and see if you can sum them up in one or two sentences. Pretend you're writing a quote for your high school yearbook picture and have to telegraph who you are in one pithy line.

**Once you know your core story, put it out of your mind as you write.** The point of this exercise is not to infuse everything you write with the same message, but rather to become comfortable with who you are. If you feel your book is getting off track, step back and consider if it's because you're trying too hard to sound like someone else. For example, if you value family and home above all else, but your protagonist is determinedly unattached to other people (and likes it that way), can you pull off making him a sympathetic hero while remaining a loner? Or, will you feel the need to have him develop a close relationship for the first time in his life? There's no one right answer here, but knowing your core story will help you steer your written story in the direction that you can best tell it.