

Children's Book Insider

April 2020

**10 Ways
To Keep Your
Writing Career
Moving Forward.**

Right Now.



ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE SUBMISSION CODE: Raven Quill Literary Agency

Table of contents

At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests.....2

From the Editor: Counting Down to 30: Part Ten---It All Counts
by Laura Backes.....4

Marketing Tips: Selling Books Outside of the Box
by Kimberly M. Hutmacher.....7

Writing Workshop: Getting to the Core of Character Motivation
by Jane McBride.....9

Agent Spotlight: Kortney Price, Agent - Raven Quill Literary Agency
interview by Lynne Marie.....11

Books in the Classroom: Create Your Own Curriculum Guide
by Candice Ransom.....14

Featured Interview: A Day In The Life Of Best-Selling Kidlit Author Jill Twiss
interview by PJ McIlvaine.....16

Mini Blueprint: Rediscovering the Joy in Writing
by Jane McBride.....20

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).

Kimberly M. Hutmacher In addition to participating in Poetry Friday, Kimberly M. Hutmacher is the author of 32 books for children and 150+ articles, stories, and poems published in magazines. She co-founded with Heidi Bee Roemer, the STEAM Powered Poetry vlog- a one-stop shop for teachers wishing to implement poetry into their STEM curriculum. New poetry and resources are added every month <https://steampoweredpoetry.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>

Candice Ransom is the author of 150 books for children, including *10 Step into Reading* titles. She has an MFA in writing for children from VCFA and an MA in children's literature from Hollins University. She currently teaches in Hollins University's graduate program in children's literature. www.candiceransom.com

Published 12 times/year by Children's Book Insider, LLC,
901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838.
mail@CBIClubhouse.com
<http://www.writeforkids.org>

ISSN 1073-7596

Publisher: Laura Backes
Layout: Shellie Dougherty
Editor/Agent Spotlight Editor: Lynne Marie
Genre Spotlight: Jean Diagneau
Featured Interviews: PJ McIlvaine
Chief Operations Officer: Jon Bard

Children's Book Insider, *The Children's Writing Monthly* is an electronic monthly newsletter that is included in the paid membership to the Children's Writing Knowledge Base (<http://www.CBIClubhouse.com>). The cost of membership is \$49.95 per year, or \$5.49 per month if billed monthly. For more information, go to <http://writeforkids.org/come-join-the-insiders/>

Text copyright © 2020 Children's Book Insider, LLC. Subscribers may reprint up to 300 words with credit to Children's Book Insider, www.writeforkids.org. For longer reprints, email Laura Backes at Laura@CBIClubhouse.com.

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

At Presstime:

Twentieth Annual New Voices Award Open to Submissions

Lee & Low Books announces its 20th annual New Voices Award for a picture book by a writer of color. The Award winner receives a cash grant of \$2000 and a standard Lee & Low publication contract, including the basic advance and royalties for a first time author. An Honor Award winner will receive a cash grant of \$1000. The contest is open to writers of color and Native nations who are residents of the United States and who have not previously had a children's picture book published. Writers who have published work in venues such as children's magazines, young adult, or adult fiction or non-fiction, are eligible. Only unagented submissions will be accepted. Work that has been previously published in any format, including online and self-publishing, is not eligible for this award. Manuscripts previously submitted for this award or to Lee & Low books will not be considered.

Manuscripts should address the needs of children of color and Native nations by providing stories with which they can identify and relate, and which promote a greater understanding of one another. Themes relating to non-traditional family structures, gender identity, or disabilities may also be included. Submissions may be fiction, nonfiction or poetry for children ages 5 to 12. Folklore and animal stories will not be considered. Manuscripts should be no more than 1500 words in length and accompanied by a cover letter that includes the author's name, address, phone number, email address, brief biographical note, relevant cultural and ethnic information, how the author heard about the award, and publication history, if any. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced on 8-1/2" x 11" paper. A self-addressed, stamped envelope with sufficient postage must be included if you wish to have the manuscript returned. Up to two submissions per entrant. Each submission should be submitted separately.

Send to: Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, Suite 1205, New York, NY 10016. ATTN: New Voices Award. **Submissions must be postmarked by August 31, 2020.** The winners will be notified by December 31, 2020. For more information go to <https://www.leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award> Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this Award.

Middle Grade Magazine Puts Out Calls for Submissions

Cricket magazine publishes the highest quality fiction, poetry, and literary nonfiction for readers ages 9-14. The magazine had a particular interest in stories that explore themes of identity (gender, race and ethnicity, neighborhoods, beliefs and traditions); citizenship and global cultures; scientific and technological exploration; and the creative spirit.

While general submissions remain open, *Cricket* is seeking submissions with the following two themes:

Best Friends Forever? (submission deadline: June 15, 2020). Contemporary and historical fiction, science fiction and fantasy, folk tales, myths and legends, and poetry touching on the theme of friendship. The focus can be on the happy times (planning a friend's surprise birthday party), or sad times, like moving away. Stories can also include friends who compete with each other, friends who help each other through difficult times, friendships that suffer from a misunderstanding and need repair; someone who is mistaken or disappointed in a friendship; and BFFs that don't last forever.

Tales of the Sea (submission deadline: July 15, 2020). Seaworthy fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for the theme of tales of the sea. Pirates, mythical sea monsters, scientific expeditions, shipwrecks, ancient trade routes, and those who make their living from the sea are all topics of interest. Stories with a seaside setting are also welcome. Include a bibliography with nonfiction.

Fiction and nonfiction averages 1200-1800 words, though fiction can be as short as 600 words. Articles should be carefully researched and include a solid bibliography that shows that research has gone beyond websites. *Cricket* articles humanize history and discovery by telling a story clarifying how inventors and pioneers solved their problems and overcame difficulties. Including childhood anecdotes often helps readers identify with people of great accomplishment.

Poetry ranges from 3-35 lines, but most poems are 8-15 lines. Keep in mind that *Cricket* is for pre-teen and early teens. Poetry should feel contemporary, never singsong or moralizing.

Submit through Submittable: <https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/17789/cricket-magazine-for-ages-914> Allow 3-6 months for a response.

Agent Seeks Middle Grade and YA Fiction Submissions

Megan Manzano is a literary agent with D4EO Literary Agency (<https://www.d4eoliteraryagency.com/>). She is seeking middle grade and young adult stories that burrow into her mind and don't let go. She loves stories with a strong voice, unforgettable characters, and a plot that keeps her flipping from page to page, eager to find out what's next. Genres of interest include science fiction, fantasy, contemporary, thrillers and romance. Also, friendship/sibling stories, geeky characters, anti-heroes, and diverse characters. For more details on what she's currently looking for, see her Manuscript Wish List page at <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/megan-manzano/>

Submit a query, synopsis and the first five pages through Query Manager here: <https://querymanager.com/query/MeganManzano> Follow her on Twitter [@Megan_Manzano](https://twitter.com/Megan_Manzano).

Publisher Seeks Books for Parents, Teachers and Children About Developmental Disabilities

Woodbine House specializes in books about developmental disabilities such as Down syndrome and autism. Especially receptive to books that are written expressly for parents or other family members of children with disabilities, from published and unpublished authors. Also publishes children's books for or about children and teens with disabilities. For current titles, go to <https://www.woodbinehouse.com/shop-all/>

Books for adults (primarily parents and teachers):

It is essential that you have hands-on experience with one or more children with disabilities and that your book reflect that experience. Current needs include the following: parents' guides to raising children with specific disabilities; books focused on specific issues related to a given disability (e.g., communication skills); practical guides on topics that concern parents or teachers of children with disabilities in general (e.g., special education, sibling issues); reference books on disability-related topics; memoirs written in a literary vein about living with a disability or about parenting or teaching a child with a disability.

Submit a proposal that consists of 2–3 sample chapters; a list of books in print on the subject, explaining how your book differs from the competition; a list of potential markets, including specific organizations and groups of individuals that might buy your book; a vita or biographical note describing your qualifications to write this book; samples of previously published or unpublished writing, if desired. Submit proposals by mail to Acquisitions Editor, Woodbine House, 6510 Bells Mill Rd., Bethesda, MD 20817. Note in the cover letter if this is a simultaneous submission. If you wish to have your proposal returned, enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) large enough to accommodate the manuscript. Otherwise, enclose a stamped #10 envelope or email address for a reply. Allow 12 weeks for a response.

Books for children:

Current needs include the following:

- Picture books or board books for or about young children with developmental or intellectual disabilities (Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, ADHD, Tourette syndrome, etc.)
- Books about children with developmental or intellectual disabilities for siblings or peers (stories should be universal in nature to be relevant to a large audience, not personal to your family)
- Hi-lo (high interest, low reading level) books on topics that interest older children, teens, and young adults with disabilities

Does not want stories in which talking animals or inanimate objects play the roles of children with disabilities, or books that are written solely to impart a message about people with disabilities to people without disabilities. Prefers stories with narrative drive or plot (conflict/resolution) rather than "a day in the life" type stories. Does not publish books with a religious viewpoint. Prefers picture books and board books that do not require elaborate, full-color illustrations (instead, if the story can be illustrated with photographs or simple line drawings, it has a better chance of acceptance). Experienced illustrators can submit sample illustrations along with their manuscripts.

Submit the entire manuscript (along with color photocopies of illustrations, if applicable) to Acquisitions Editor, Woodbine House, 6510 Bells Mill Rd., Bethesda, MD 20817. If you want materials returned, enclose a SASE with sufficient postage. Otherwise, provide an email for a response, or include a stamped #10 envelope for a reply.

Counting Down to 30: Part Ten It All Counts

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader,

How are you? Really, how are you? Depending on where you live and your individual circumstances, I imagine you answered that question anywhere from “I’m hanging in there,” to “I’m not sure how much longer I can hang on.” Regardless, please know that Jon and I are thinking about each and every one of you, and wishing you health, strength and sanity during this time.

Something that’s probably crossed your mind at least once in the last few weeks is your writing. A lot of factors affecting your ability to write and market your books are currently beyond your control. First, stress. Let’s face it—the entire planet’s stressed out right now. It’s difficult, sometimes impossible, to focus on a creative act like writing when your brain is ping-ponging in 50 directions. If you’re one of those lucky people who can compartmentalize your stress and use writing as an escape from current events, good for you. But if you’re like the rest of us, it’s almost impossible.

So instead, let’s focus on what we can control. I’ll start. I’m giving you permission not to write during this time.

Whoa! you’re probably thinking. *CBI’s full of articles about managing your writing time, writing every day, sticking to a writing schedule...and now Laura’s telling us not to write?*

Not exactly. I’m giving you *permission* not to write. I am removing the guilt. I’m saying that if writing is one of the things that’s working for you now, and it brings you joy, then by all means write. But if you have other concerns taking up your brain space, that’s okay. Write because you *choose* to write, not because you feel you *should* be writing. And if you don’t write a single word, you won’t be alone. My guess is that the vast majority of authors will emerge from this time at exactly the same place writing-wise as they were in mid-March. And everyone will just pick up where they left off.

This series of editorials reveals truths I’ve learned about publishing as we count down to CBI’s 30th anniversary. Here’s a truth I’m absolutely sure of: the process of writing a book and getting it published is not a race. You don’t have to beat out all the other authors for a set, finite amount of publishing slots. If an agent loves your work, she’ll represent it now, or a year from now. If an editor believes in your book, she’ll find a way to publish it regardless of how many other books she’s currently working on. There will always be new books, and we’ll always need authors to write them.

So, if you need to sit out the next few weeks, you won’t lose any ground. The only thing you may have lost is some momentum. And, let’s be honest, *that’s* what’s really bugging you, isn’t it? Not that you haven’t penned 250 words a day of delicious prose, but that you no longer feel like a writer. And you’re wondering how long it’s going to take to get that feeling back when we all get to return to our regular lives.

So, just because you deserve it, I’m going to reveal an additional publishing truth this month: my 30+ years in the business have taught me that the act of creating a book has many facets, and every one builds momentum leading to the finished product. Here are some ways to keep your author mojo alive in the coming weeks:

Gather Ideas: My hunch is that when the world is past this crisis, publishers will be on the lookout for humorous books for kids. We're all going to need a good laugh. We're also going to need books for young children that make them feel safe. And books for teens (who have spent their entire lives in the era between 9/11 and the coronavirus) that give them hope and show them that the world can, indeed, make sense. Books that impart these themes without heavy-handed preaching or messaging, that empower their characters and inspire their readers. You may not be mentally-equipped right now to write these books (and you may need a little more perspective before you are), but you can start jotting down ideas.

Read: Reading has always counted toward your writer education, and it's more important now than ever. Read for fun, read to escape. But also read like a writer. If you don't know what that means, watch my video on the CBI Clubhouse: <https://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/video-chat-laura-on-how-to-read-like-a-writer/> (You must be logged in with the same email and password you used to set up your CBI subscription to access the video.)

Can't focus enough to read? **Try watching a movie based on a children's book instead.** This is a great way to get the kids involved. Watch the movie together, then ask your children questions, such as:

- What can you tell me about the main character? (personality traits, talents, flaws, what motivates this character, etc.)
- How do you know this? (Was it because of what the character did or said, or because of how other characters treated him/her?)
- What's the thing this character wants most in the whole world?
- What's the character's plan for getting this thing?
- What are some of the obstacles standing in the character's way?
- Did the character learn anything during the movie, and how did this lesson help the character? Did the character make any mistakes? How did the character recover from those mistakes?
- Did you like the way the movie ended? Can you think of a better ending?

(Substitute "subject" for "character" and you can ask the same questions about many documentaries.)

Take notes. This is research on how to effectively build a character and plot for your target audience. If the movie is based on a book you've already read with your children, discuss how the movie is different. Did the kids like the changes? Why or why not? Here are two lists of book-based movies to get you started:

Huge List of Children's Books Adapted into Movies:

<https://imaginationsoup.net/childrens-books-adapted-movies>

50 Great Movies Based on Children's Books:

<https://youthlitreviews.com/2013/05/27/50-great-movies-based-childrens-books-plus-15-movies-for-teens/>

Observe and listen to your children at this time. What are they talking about? Thinking about? How are they processing these events? Take notes and add them to your idea file. They will inform your characters for your future work.

Research publishing markets. If you've been continuing to read industry newsletters during this time, you're aware that many publishers are considering postponing the pub dates of some of their spring titles, because distribution and marketing channels are shut down and bookstores are closed. No one knows exactly how many titles will be postponed or for how long as this is a constantly-evolving situation. It's unclear at this time how this will affect publishers' submission policies. But whatever happens, it will be temporary. So even if some companies close to submissions for a while, they'll open back up again. And when that happens, you can be ready.

Start compiling your submission list now by researching appropriate publishers and literary agents for your work. Read industry publications and note who is publishing what (*Publishers Weekly* has made all their material free online, including the Children's Spring Announcement issue: bit.ly/PWspringannouncements). Peruse the websites of agents to see what they represent and how to submit to them. Even if your manuscript is far from submission-ready, get your list together so you can hit the ground running once you've finished your final edits.

Write something that doesn't count. Compose your Costco list in rhyme, describe what you see out your window, imagine a conversation between two people walking their dog past your apartment. Journal your thoughts for 10 minutes when you wake up. It doesn't have to be good. It doesn't have to ever appear in your book. Just write. It counts.

If you've purchased one of our [Writing Blueprints](#) but don't have the energy to dive into the program, **just watch one video a day.** Don't worry about filling out the worksheets right now. Simply absorb the writing or editing techniques and then go on with your day. The information will be working in your subconscious and you'll draw from it when you're ready to write.

Read and file away CBI articles. It was tempting this month to only run articles that can be put to use if you're sitting at home and struggling to write. Or to preface every article with "Keep this info on hand for when stores open back up and you can talk to them about carrying your book." But we want our articles to be as evergreen as possible, and we archive five years of back issues for those of you who have purchased an annual subscription. I don't want you to pull up an article a year from now, when you're ready to put the information to use, and be reminded of the pandemic. So, our publishing calendar will go on as usual. But, since you've got time on your hands, this is a terrific opportunity to print out your issues and file the articles into whatever system works for you, so the info will be easily accessible when you need it.

Do anything else creative. Plant flowers. Knit. Cook (bonus points if you can pull together a meal from whatever's in your kitchen right now). Sketch. Sing. It all feeds your creative spirit.

And finally, **pat yourself on the back for every baby step you take.** Learning how to write, crafting and editing a book, submitting and finally getting published are all a series of small steps. Every one counts.

Even if you can't write at this time, you can still feel like a writer. To that end, Jon and I will be holding some free community-building events in the coming weeks. Keep an eye on your email for more details. And know that each little thing you manage to do now will lead to a big pay-off down the road.

Take your time. You'll get there. We'll help.

Be well,

Laura Backes



SELLING BOOKS **OUTSIDE** OF THE BOX

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

When my first picture book, *Paws, Claws, Hands, and Feet*, was about to be published by Arbordale Press in 2009, they asked me to help develop a marketing plan for the book. Until that time, when it came to selling books, the first options that came to my mind were online and brick and mortar bookstores, schools, and libraries. I soon learned that I was going to have to think a little bit outside of the book selling box.

My book was a rhyming romp through several habitats exploring ways in which different animals used their appendages. I contacted several zoos in my area. The zoo in my hometown hosted my launch party and signing, and several other zoos hosted signings and carried the book in their gift shops.

I live in central Illinois—the Land of Lincoln. When a friend published a picture book about Abraham Lincoln, her book was sold at all of the local Lincoln sites including The Presidential Library and Museum. I asked some kidlit friends to share some of their own outside of the box book selling experiences.

Marlene Targ Brill has several children's books in

the Jewish genre. She's had wonderful luck getting these books into several museum gift shops. Her Civil War title, *Diary of a Drummer Boy*, has been sold at reenactments, forest preserves, and museums. When her book, *Annie Shapiro and the Clothing Worker Strike* came out, she was able to speak at the annual conference of the union that Annie helped found. She sold every book she brought with her that day.



Patricia Hruby Powell's publisher helped get her books of Navajo retold folktales, *Zinnia: How Corn was Saved* and *Frog Brings Rain*, into several gift stores throughout the southwest including at the Grand Canyon. She was also able to get her first book, *Blossom Tales*, into some arboretums and floral shops. Ellen Warach Leventhal's *Don't Eat the Bluebonnets* was

in The Texas Wildflower Center. If your book has anything to do with plants/flowers, don't forget to contact botanical gardens, too.

When Michelle Schaub's *Fresh Picked Poetry: A Day at the Farmer's Market*, was released, Michelle connected with a local apple-picking farm that agreed to sell the book in their gift shop. A Seattle area

Selling Books Outside of the Box continued

farmers market also ordered several to sell to their customers. For Michelle's newest book, *Dream Big, Little Scientist*, her publicist is working on connecting with science museums to have it for sale in their gift shops.

David Kent's book, *Midway Airport*, can be found in a jewelry store near the airport. I'm told it's a hot seller. Customers come in for a \$2 watch battery, but also leave with his \$20 book.

Marissa Moss' book, *Mira's Diary: Lost in Paris*, features several artists including Degas. Her book is sold in the gift shop at Art Institute in Chicago. If your book has any kind of art connection, seek out opportunities to get it into gallery shops.

Melanie Weiss' YA book, *Spoken*, has been chosen for several book club picks. She has been able to sell several more books with these opportunities, and she's also been invited to speak at several book club gatherings.

Seek out those spaces for your particular niche. Kathleen Hillicker Burkinshaw's book about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is selling at the Japanese American National Museum. Donna L. Martin's *History's Mysteries: Ship of Dreams* is selling at Titanic Museums in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee and Branson, Missouri. Jennifer Berne's Neil deGrasse Tyson biography sells at space museums and planetariums, and her Emily Dickinson biography is set to debut at the Emily Dickinson Museum and the Eric Carle Museum.

Lee Wardlaw has a book about bubble gum that sells in candy stores. Her toddler books sell in children's clothing stores. Her Hawaiian folktale, *Punia and the King of Sharks*, was available in aquariums, natural history museums, and gift shops all over Hawaii.

You know what every major airport has? That's right—a gift shop! Parents know those children preparing to board planes are going to need something to keep them occupied. Several authors mentioned being able to get their books into airports.

Does your book have anything to do with fish? Contact aquariums. Birds? Call those bird feed stores

and pet stores. Last but not least, don't forget about fairs, festivals, and conference halls. Booths are almost always available for a small fee, and it's an opportunity to get your book in front of hundreds if not thousands of new eyes. And don't forget to hit up your vet, pediatrician, hair dresser, and local boutiques. The worst they can say is no, but if they say yes, that's many more eyes on your books and many more potential sales. Don't be shy. Think outside of the box and sell those books!

If you are published traditionally, you can approach these outlets about signings, but you may need to connect with your publisher about getting the books into these outlets. Though my small publisher permitted me to sell my books directly, many publishers do not. Your marketing department can help. If you are working with a smaller publisher that is okay with you selling directly, or if you are self-published, your approach can vary. It's always nice if you know someone who can help make a connection. If that's not the case, I found a lot of success by calling or visiting the establishments in person. I introduced myself and shared a bit about my book. I provided them a copy of a one-sheet of the book. If the book was already available, I showed it to them. Some self-published authors work with distributors. If that is the case, be sure to share your distributor's contact information with them. Be brief, polite, and professional. Most of the spaces I contacted, were excited and happy to help. Best of luck!

Getting to the CORE of CHARACTER MOTIVATION

by Jane McBride

What makes the difference between a believable story line and an unbelievable one? What distinguishes a so-so book from a great one? What makes one character totally forgettable and another eminently unforgettable?

Motivation.

Motivation is the secret ingredient to bring characters to life and to give them the needed impetus to act outside their comfort zones.

Following are some methods to come up with believable, sympathetic motivations for your characters:

- Don't take the first motivation that comes to your mind. Low-hanging fruit is seldom the most delicious. Dig deep for the reason why your clean-cut 16-year-old boy suddenly starts hanging out with the school thugs.
- Challenge yourself to come up with at least three, preferably more, reasons why your protagonist is acting the way he is.
- Delve into the protagonist's background to find the real motive behind his actions.
- Look for surprises. Your character may surprise you with his reasons for doing something.

Distinguish between external and internal motivation. Most of us know about external conflict (conflict caused by outside forces) and internal (conflict caused by inner forces) conflict. The same principle applies to motivation. External motivation is that applied by forces outside of the character; internal motivation is that applied by the character herself.

Those who have read my articles in the past may recall that I love to play "let's pretend."

Let's pretend that we're writing the following stories with these protagonists.

Twelve-year-old Chelsea, who has always been a good student and a loving big sister to her eight-year-old sister, Lisa, who has Down Syndrome suddenly slacks off at school and is impatient, even angry, with her younger sister. Why? Why is Chelsea acting out of character?

Possible reasons:

- She is on the cusp of the hormonal surge of pre-teen girls. This is an okay motivation, but not particularly original.
- She is tired of being the "goody-goody" at school and at home. Once again, this is an all right motivation, but it's slightly predictable.
- She overheard her parents talking about the future one night and their concerns about caring for Chelsea's younger sister when they are gone. Chelsea loves Lisa, but does she want to care for her for her entire life? Ah. Now, we're getting somewhere. Chelsea has internalized her parents' fears for the future. That's a lot for a 12-year-old girl to take on. She worries that she won't be able to take care of Lisa. What if something happens to her parents at an early age? What if she and Lisa are left alone when they are still children/teenagers?

What happens with Chelsea? In the end, she talks with her parents and tells them of her fears. They

Getting to the Core... continued

reassure her that they will make provisions for Lisa in their wills and that Chelsea won't be solely responsible for her sister. Chelsea recognizes her fears as irrational and returns to her previous behavior.

Fifteen-year-old Ryan has always loved track and field events. He particularly shines in long-distance runs. Though Ryan is running better than ever, beating all records, he's angry all the time. His temper has gotten him into trouble more than once. It comes out that he's been taking steroids. His parents are devastated and Ryan is kicked off the track team. He halfheartedly tries to get off the drugs, but isn't successful. When he turns sixteen, he turns around his life. What has caused Ryan to be able to stay off drugs when he couldn't do it previously?

- He sees drugs as destructive. Good for Ryan, but ... yawn.
- He has a girlfriend who wants him to get clean. This is better, but we're not there yet.
- He witnessed a friend who was also taking steroids have a heart attack and die. Okay, better still.
- He looks at what's happened with his life since he started taking drugs and realizes he is losing the person he used to be. This is different than just seeing drugs as destructive; in this scenario he finds the courage to enter a program.

What if we combine reasons three and four (the last two)? With that, Ryan has both an external motivation and an internal motivation to stop taking drugs.

Nine-year-old Rudi runs away with her seven-year-old sister Samantha. Rudi is quiet and obedient, never causing any problems for her parents. She does well in school and tries to help at home. But when she hears that her grandfather is coming to visit, she takes Samantha and heads to a homeless encampment she visited with her Girl Scout troop. (There, she had met some good people who were just down on their luck.) Why? What would motivate Rudi to take her little sister to a potentially dangerous place?

- She doesn't like her grandfather. Okay, but why?

- She doesn't want to give up her bedroom so that her grandfather has a room to himself when he visits. This is not a sufficient motive at all.
- She thinks her grandfather is a bad person and doesn't want Samantha around him. Again, why?
- Her grandfather started abusing Rudi when she was seven and she doesn't want the same thing to happen to Samantha. Now, we're getting somewhere.

We learn that Rudi's grandfather sexually abused her from the time she turned seven. She did her best to stay away from him, but any family reunion or birthday or holiday, he forces himself on her, warning that if she says anything that he'll deny it and that her parents will take his side. She was willing to take her chances with that until his last visit when he didn't come into her room at night. When he's ready to leave, he winks at her and she understands that he intends to move on to Samantha during his next visit. She can't bear the same thing to happen to Samantha, so she takes her sister and keeps her hidden away in a place where her parents would never look. Fortunately, Rudi's story has a happy ending. Her parents find her and, after some coaxing on their part and lots of tears and their and Rudi's part, Rudi tells them that she's afraid her grandfather will abuse Samantha, too. Rudi receives therapy. The grandfather is brought to justice and is sent to jail. Do you understand Rudi's motivation? Protecting her sister was all that mattered. She could do for her sister what she could not do for herself. This is a dark story, one I probably wouldn't write. But it's a good example of extreme motivation on the protagonist's (Rudi) part.

IN THE END

Finding sufficient and credible motivation for characters to behave as they do is critical in developing a plot with real conflict and sympathetic, believable characters. If you can't find the right motivation for your character in his background, perhaps you should re-think how you've drawn him. Give him real feelings that go to the core of his being. Repeatedly ask yourself what is the true reason your character is acting as he is. Then give that reason heart and passion.



KORTNEY PRICE

Literary Agent

interview by Lynne Marie

We are excited to catch up with Kortney Price, just arrived at the newly-formed Raven Quill Literary Agency. She formerly worked at Corvisiero Literary Agency as an Associate Literary Agent, where she worked on picture books, early readers, chapter books, middle grade and young adult novels.

LYNNE MARIE: I just love the name of the new agency! Is it inspired by Edgar Allan Poe? As I know that you have a tendency toward “dark” materials, is it a nod, or does it shed a light on the path that the agency hopes to follow? Please tell us a little bit about the new agency.

KORTNEY PRICE: Isn't it awesome?? I love the name and to be honest I'm not totally sure where Jacqui came up with it... I definitely do tend toward darker stories but for every horror story I adore, there's a rom com I love just as much! I think the agency is just as varied. We all like different kinds of stories and have different projects we're passionate about within the kidlit realm.

LM: For those who are interested in submitting “dark materials” to you please explain all things dark and wonderful.

KP: Oh gosh, I have an entire Pinterest board dedicated to this! I have a major soft spot for the psychological thrillers, spooky and magical stories, ghosts,

and anything where the setting is part of the mood of the story. Think cursed, enchanted gardens or fog bound in a castle with a killer. Stories like *The Madman's Daughter* by Megan Shepherd are the kinds of stories I live for.

LM: What are some examples of some dark picture books that intrigued you? Chapter books? Middle grade? Young adult?



KP: *Heggity Peg* by Audrey Wood, *Goosebumps* books, *Series of Unfortunate Events*, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, the *Theodosia* series, *Serafina and the Black Cloak* by Robert Beatty, anything by Lois Duncan, *The Cellar* by Natasha Preston, *Accident Season* by Moira Fowley-Doyle and of course *The Madman's Daughter* by Megan Shepherd.

LM: On the opposite side of the spectrum, what are some books that were not your usual fare that surprised you? Why do you feel they appealed to you?

KP: I have pretty broad tastes and to be honest my affinity toward the darker lit, heavier topics and horror stories is something that took me by surprise. As I was reading submissions, I just ended up gravitating toward these books. However, on the opposite side, I ADORE a sweet romance story, especially if it features something I connect with (competitive swimming, painting, dance, differently abled rep, special needs rep, small town life, theatre, etc.)

Kortney Price continued

LM: As a newer agent if there were five words to describe the “spirit” of your submissions, what would they be?

KP: Unique, Relatable, Deep, Adventurous, Mysterious

LM: Please tell us about your first acquisition and what drew you to it? How hands-on are you editorially?

KP: The first book I ever signed was a MG horror story about a cavern full of hybrid monsters. I loved the adventure of it as well as the uniqueness of the premise. I’m a very editorial agent. As a newer agent, I am in the unique position where my list isn’t huge and so I can spend more time on edits. The best part of my job is helping authors make their dreams a reality but a close second is working with authors to strengthen their stories.

LM: How did you approach submissions with this manuscript? What would you typically do on a first round? How many rounds might you go out before shelving for a cooling off period?

KP: I pitched the first manuscript a bit more conservatively, small batches that were closer together. Since then my network has grown as has my confidence and knowledge of the industry, which naturally led to the rounds getting larger as well. I don’t have a set amount of rounds before shelving a manuscript. When we’ve exhausted our options or notice a definite shift in the market, I’ll chat with an author about whether or not shelving a project and shifting focus is the best option.

LM: How might a prospective client put their best foot forward in query—what do you want to see in the first paragraph? What matters most? Pitch? Manuscript? Bio/experience? How long should the query be? Should magazine writing or other non-book publications be included?

KP: Research how to write a query. If I open up a query and it’s only a couple sentences, I’m not going to take it as seriously. You’ve put so much work into your manuscript, why wouldn’t you put at least some care into your query?

The most important part of a query is the pitch and the pages. Your query should draw the agent in like the back copy of a book pulls in a reader. Your pages should be polished. If an author has major errors in these pages, we can only assume that these errors are present throughout the entire manuscript.

LM: What type of personal experience would you want to see in a query?

KP: If you have personal experience that ties in with the story. For example, I worked at an animal hospital all through college and for a couple of years after. If I wrote a story that took place in an animal hospital, I would definitely include that in my query. If your story is #ownvoices then definitely mention that. I tend to be drawn more to these connections than to writing experience or whether or not someone has an MFA. Writing credentials or degrees are still relevant, but if you don’t have them, don’t fret over it.

LM: In general, do you usually represent one book or an entire career, or would it be on a case-by-case basis?

KP: I am a career agent, but I’m not automatically going to work on every story my authors share with me. That’s part of an agent’s job. We help authors decide where to focus their energies in hopes of establishing a lasting career.

LM: What would you be looking for in the ideal client?

KP: Open communication, respect, trust, and a sense of humor.

LM: If you were to look at digging into a manuscript like grave digging, what would you like to uncover beneath the surface?

KP: Love this question! I’m always looking for the iceberg hidden under the surface. Character depth, emotional connection, things that when I’m reading it for the 15th time, I’m still discovering and enjoying the subtle beauty. Like in *Rebel of the Sands* by Alwyn Hamilton, we find out the main character can’t lie like two-thirds of the way through the

book? I went back and read again just to marvel at how the author wove that into the ENTIRE story without giving herself away. In other stories it might be a beautiful connection between the emotional journey and the setting. Authors who can create that moment where everything comes together and you just have to sit back and marvel about how they put the pieces together are amazing to me.

LM: How open are you to STEM and STEAM in fiction and/or nonfiction? Would that be a good fit for you? Why or why not?

KP: Completely. I like to see new and exciting things in stories. Robotics competitions, movie making, computer programming and basically all things math- related aren't things I have a personal connection to, but want to learn about in the stories I work on. I want all kids to feel seen and like they aren't alone so I'm always excited to see new interests showcased in stories.

LM: You seem to have an affinity for fairy tales. What draws you to them? Do you prefer them to stay truer to the original or the more fractured, the better? Why or why not?

KP: I definitely do ... I've always loved fairy tale retellings and reimaginings as a reader and it translated over into agenting. The first story I recommended as an intern was an *Alice in Wonderland* retelling with a time travel element (and I've never even watched/read *Alice in Wonderland*). It depends on the story for how closely they follow. *Pride and Prejudice* or *Beauty and the Beast* retellings are everywhere and so from a marketing standpoint it would probably be better to not hinge the story on the fact that it's a retelling. I love the skill involved in using a fairy tale base to create a whole new and exciting world, but having those little moments where you pay tribute to the original can definitely create an even more wonderful story. I mean, even the new *Jumanji* movies paid tribute to the original and who didn't love that they showed Alan Parish's treehouse in that movie?

LM: How would you explain the nuances between middle grade and young adult fiction apart from the obvious one, age?

KP: It's all about what the characters are discovering about themselves or the world around them. Middle grade and younger tend to be about discovering the world around them or specific qualities within themselves. Young adult tends to be more about coming into who you are as a person. Other things to keep in mind include level of darkness that's acceptable, language, violence, dating/relationships on an emotional and physical level (there's no MG erotica for a reason—yes I've been queried with one of these... ew.)

LM: Which do you believe comes first—character or plot? Which do you believe is easier to fix? Why? Please share a relevant tip to try to do this.

KP: Character. Hands down. You can have the most amazing plot in the world but if your characters lack depth, it won't be an immersive story. Plot fixes are usually more straightforward. Writing characters with depth requires more introspection and care. My favorite tip for characterization is to try and put yourself into their headspace. Some authors use vision boards, I've always found that playlists catered around each character are a sure-fire way to dive into a point of view.

LM: Please share your wish list.

KP: <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswlp-post/kortney-price/>

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Kortney Price is offering an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers through **April 30, 2020**. She's accepting fiction submissions for picture books, early readers, chapter books, middle grade and young adult (please review her Manuscript Wish List link above). Submit a query, brief synopsis and the first five pages via Query Manager at [QueryMe.online/KortneyPrice/CBI](https://www.querymeonline.com/KortneyPrice/CBI) (submitting through this link will tag your query as from CBI and will automatically move it to the top of the pile). Put "*Children's Book Insider*" in the box that asks who referred you. She responds to all submissions.

CREATE YOUR OWN

CURRICULUM GUIDE

by Candice Ransom

With more children’s books hitting the shelves every day, teachers, librarians, and parents can benefit from curriculum or discussion guides. Mandated Common Core standards means educators need help incorporating cross-curriculum literature to meet those standards. Give your book, fiction or nonfiction, a leg up by providing supplemental materials.

Content Providers for Hire:

Consultants can provide teaching materials for your book. Google “author services” and find individuals—often literacy specialists—as well as marketing services to create your teaching materials. Rates and services vary.

Some publishing houses create curriculum guides for their authors. You can ask your publisher if they will develop teaching materials for your book. Keep in mind that promotion budgets are stretched thin. Usually only “big” books and authors merit that kind of expense and attention.

Suppose you can’t afford to hire a curriculum professional, or your publisher doesn’t have room in their budget to develop a guide for your book? That’s the situation I found myself in when I refreshed my outdated website. Many of my featured books needed teaching materials. I developed them myself. You can, too, even if you aren’t an educator.

First Things First:

Begin by studying available curriculum guides. Download guides in your genre: picture books (fiction or nonfiction), novels, and nonfiction for older

children. I reviewed 25 guides created by publishing houses, hired consultants, and authors.

Divide the guides into categories. Some might only consist of a few pages of discussion questions. Others will practically be books with content for STEM, STEAM, geography, writing, reading, and social studies connections. Most will include Common Core standards.

Compare different guides, circling or highlighting features you like and would work in yours.

Age Groups:

Next, check with your publisher to see what grade levels or age range will be assigned to your book. Age categories are generally based on word count. For example, while picture books are generally for ages 0 through 5, that range slides depending on word count: fewer than 300 words for babies, 500 words maximum for toddlers, 1000 maximum for preschoolers. Some picture books are geared for even older children.

To accurately target reading comprehension, employ a readability analyzer. Fry, Flesch-Kincaid, Lexile, and others will analyze texts for word count, number of words per sentence, characters per word, number of sentences, and more. I prefer Renaissance Learning ATOS. It’s free and simple to use. Include the scores in your curriculum guide.

Common Core:

After determining your book’s grade levels, study the Common Core standards for that range. Not all states adopted the Common Core Initiative. You

Create Your Own Curriculum Guide continued

might want to look at the standards for key states like Texas, Indiana, and Florida. Note that Common Core emphasizes math and reading. Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) provides performance standards in science. For my nonfiction picture book, which is set in Virginia, a state that has its own standards, I reviewed Common Core, NGSS, and Virginia Standards of Learning.

It's spade-work to match standards to your text, but worth the effort. In the curriculum guide for my book, *Bones in the White House: Thomas Jefferson's Mammoth*, I focused on reading, writing, social studies, and science.

Creating Content:

The fun part! Games and activities for readers, supplementary material for teachers, and assignments for classroom units. You should include a summary of your book, applicable Common Core standards, author bio, and additional resources and websites.

Developing your own curriculum guide means you can tailor it to individual books. Some original back matter in *Bones in the White House* had to be cut. I put it back in as supplementary material, along with student and classroom activities that expand the story. Visuals are important. I use credited sources, pick-up art from the book, and my own photographs.

The Nitty-Gritty of Design:

Your teaching guide can be formatted using a simple Word document or a fancy template. For my first book guides, I tried newsletter templates from Microsoft Publisher. Word wrap and other pernickety features drove me nuts. When I switched to a Mac, I previewed Pages newsletter templates, but found them too limiting. Finally, I figured out how to create my own templates. You can also buy downloadable templates.

Whichever format you choose, expect a learning curve. While I loved the snazzy templates in Pub-

lisher and Pages, I gave up some frills to create a curriculum guide that best suited my book.

Bells and whistles are not always better. Keep your design clean and easy to read.

Going Public:

When your curriculum guide is finished, add a copyright in your name and a sentence or two to the effect that the guide is free to educators, but cannot be sold for commercial purposes. You don't have to register your copyright—the statement is merely a measure of protection.

Convert your guide to a PDF file for teachers to download from your website. You may want to print out samples as a give-away at signings and conferences.

I found that creating my own supplemental materials was satisfying, allowing me to reclaim the bond I once had researching and writing my book.

Helpful Websites:

Common Core Standards:

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Next Generation Science Standards:

<https://www.nextgenscience.org>

Text Complexity, Atos, & Lexile Measures:

<https://www.renaissance.com/products/accelerated-reader/atos-and-text-complexity/>

Candice Ransom's curriculum guide for *Bones in the White House: Thomas Jefferson's Mammoth* can be found at <https://candiceransom.com/books/picture-books/bones-in-the-white-house/> Click on "Teaching Guide" near the bottom of the page.

A Day In The Life Of Best-Selling Kidlit Author

Jill Twiss



interview by PJ McIlvaine

In another universe, Jill Twiss ends up on a deserted island with a Butane lighter that never quits. But in this dimension, Twiss is an acclaimed *New York Times* best-selling children's author of the clever parody *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver Presents: A Day In The Life of Marlon Bundo* with illustrator E.G. Keller (Chronicle Books, 2018). Her publishing credits also include a picture book about new friendships called *Someone New* (Harper Collins, June 2019) and a story about the importance of voting, speaking up, and using your voice in *Everyone Gets A Say* (Harper Collins, August 2020), both also illustrated by Keller. A bundle of energy, Twiss has won multiple Emmys, WGA Awards, and Peabody Awards for her work as a former staff writer on *Last Week Tonight*. Currently following her muse penning a play about the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, the first women's rights convention held in the United States, Twiss also has another gig writing sentences for the Scripps Spelling Bee (yep, that's a real job). You can follow Twiss at <https://www.jilltwiss.com/>, on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/jilltwiss>, and Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/jilltwiss/>

PJ McILVAINE: You have such a strong and eclectic writing resume/bio and you've won just about every award there is except a Golden Globe.

JILL TWISS: Thank you! I always joke that I want to EGO TH (Emmy Grammy Oscar Tony Heisman, obviously.)

I have not won so many awards, but the best thing is that I got to give an Emmy to my parents to keep at their home in Custer, South Dakota. If you ever win a trophy I very highly recommend letting your parents have it. That Emmy has made the rounds—it went with my dad to Rotary Club; it went with my mom to her bunco game. My parents are now SUPERSTARS in Custer, South Dakota.



PM: Did you always know you wanted to be writer? Was it something you thought you could make a living wage at?

JT: I did NOT! When I was a kid I wanted to be the President (at the age of 6, I made bumper stickers that said "You Can't Miss With Twiss!") Then in college I was music major, focusing on clarinet. I moved to New York City to be a musical theater actor, and sort of fell into the world of stand-up comedy. And that's what led me to want to be a comedy writer.

That said, writing has been the one constant my whole life and it's strange to me now how little idea I had that you could do that for a living. In college I used to write "Princess Jill" stories about dorm-room life and tape them up on the inside of bathroom stalls so my hall mates would have something to read. When I got dumped by a boyfriend, I wrote an entire 180-page revenge novel using the full name of the girl my boyfriend left me for (don't worry, that novel is still hidden deep in a drawer.) I've always dealt with tough situations by writing and joking my way through them, so in

Jill Twiss continued

retrospect I think the only one who was surprised I became a writer was me.

PM: You spent six seasons as a comedy writer on *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver. How did that lead you to a brand new career as a children's writer? Was it something you had on your radar or did the opportunity present itself and you ran with it?

JT: Marlon Bundo is, as you may know, a very real bunny that is owned by our Vice President, Mike Pence. And real bunny Marlon Bundo has an excellent Instagram that I was obsessed with. When the Pences announced that they were releasing a book on Marlon Bundo, I immediately pitched that *Last Week Tonight* do our own, and somehow John said yes! Obviously we all knew we wanted it to be for charity, so that got everyone even more excited about it.

PM: The *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* spoof book seemed to have coalesced very quickly. From first draft to publication, how long did that take and were there any surprises along the way?

JT: I think from my pitch to the publication date was around five months. Which at the time I thought was very slow. Obviously I have since learned otherwise. In retrospect I am in awe of everyone that made it happen in that amount of time. I truly have no idea how they did it.

PM: Were there any unexpected or unique challenges in switching gears from churning out material for a fast-paced late evening talk show vs. writing books for younger audiences that adults would also enjoy?

JT: In my heart, I think I never believed the book was real and would actually come out, so it was truly the easiest thing I ever wrote. There's something about the complete, absurd confidence of having no

idea what you're doing that just lets you run wild. Needless to say, nothing in the world of kids' books has been quite that easy again.

PM: Were you surprised at the popularity of *Marlon Bundo*?

JT: YES. Shocked is a better word. We sold out on Amazon in maybe the first couple of minutes. It only took a few minutes after the show aired to realize that this was maybe gonna be a thing.

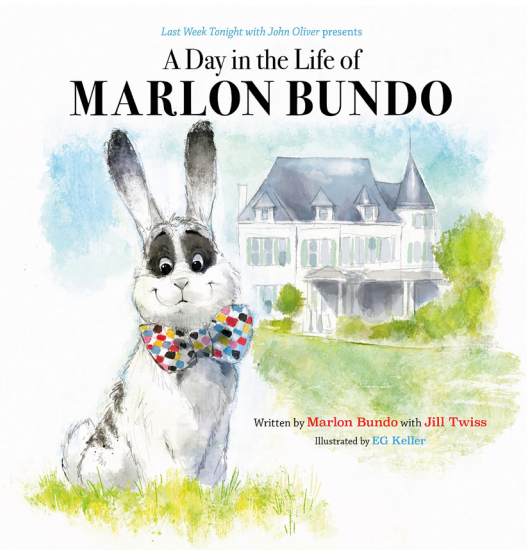
PM: How much input did you have into illustrating your books? Your second and third books are with the same illustrator, how did that team evolve?

JT: My illustrator for all three books is E.G. Keller and he's a genius and I'm so lucky to know him, much less get to write three books with him. He was hired specifically for *Marlon Bundo* and we have been working together ever since.

My second book, *The Someone New*, is where I really started to learn the process of publishing

a book, since Bundo was such an anomaly. So, to answer your question, if I have something I desperately want in the illustrations, I might make a note in my text. For example in *The Someone New*, the first page depicts a chipmunk named Jitterbug in her home. I really wanted the chipmunk's home to have a book in it called *Crazy Rich Acorns* because I am a sucker for a pun. But in the end it's really the E.G. Keller's artwork, so he has to have final say (and of course our editors at HarperCollins get a vote too!) In that case, though, I was very lucky that my illustrator was nice enough to give me my dumb pun! Mostly though, I just trust him and whatever he comes up with has always been so much cooler than anything I could have imagined.

PM: Do you have different writing routines or schedules for the material you write? How do you juggle it all?



Jill Twiss continued

JT: I do have different writing routines, but to be honest it's always a haphazard mess no matter how hard I try! Right now I'm typing this as I have another tab open that's a play about the Seneca Falls Convention I've promised to finish ASAP, one for lyrics for a musical podcast I'm supposed to have written by the end of the month, and another one that's a piece for work due at the end of the week. I also have a thesaurus, a rhyming dictionary, Twitter, and six Google docs open for good measure. Just typing those words stressed me out!

My only constant is deadlines. I would revise something for the rest of my life if I could, so deadlines (created by me or by someone else) are the only way anything gets done.

PM: Do you have a different mind-set when it comes writing children's literature?

JT: Hmmmm...I don't think I do. Obviously I'm writing on a slightly different level with a slightly different vocabulary when it's for kids, but to be honest there is something in all my children's books that I want to tell grown-ups too. I wrote *The Someone New* because I was so upset about what was going on with children being separated from their parents at the border. Now the book isn't strictly about immigration because kids encounter new things all the time—new kids at school, new neighbors, even new foods. But what I wanted to get across to kids and adults is basically “it's ok to be nervous about someone new, but kindness has to be stronger than fear.”

(Here's an article where I talk more about that if you like: <https://www.glamour.com/story/i-couldnt-change-grown-ups-minds-so-i-decided-to-talk-to-kids-instead>)

PM: Do you write every day?

JT: Yes, even if it's just on Twitter. Twitter, by the way, is a great place to hone jokes. It's maybe a ter-

rible place for a lot of other things, but it's a great place to learn to write a good joke.

PM: Do you outline first?

JT: I've never outlined a kids' book or a play or even the secret novel I wrote. TRUST ME, I'm not saying you shouldn't. Or even that I shouldn't. I'm saying I haven't.

PM: How many drafts do you burn through before the material is ready to be seen by anyone?



JT: With kids' books I'll usually give to my agent after a couple of drafts. For my third book, *Everyone Gets a Say* which is about voting, I probably gave 5-ish possible different stories to my amazing editors before they decided that was the one they wanted to make into an actual book. Then I did a few more drafts to make sure we all got the story we wanted. (That one comes out August 2020.)

PM: Do you ever go through periods where you think it's all just junk and why on earth did I think I could do this?

JT: Yes. About six times a day. I'm not even kidding. There are days where I feel like I know less about comedy than I did before I had never written a single word of it professionally. About two-thirds of the way through every project I have, I go, “Oh no. This is the one that ruins my career.” Then I take a walk and sit back down, and usually that gets me through another couple of hours.

PM: How do you know when an idea is a keeper?

JT: I don't! I usually know when I have an idea I want to fight for though. Can I promise it'll sell or that anyone else will like it? Absolutely not. But I know when I need to write something, even just for myself.

Jill Twiss continued

PM: How do you balance writing and having a life, I mean, a real life??

JT: I do not! I always joke that everything I do is tax deductible and that's sort of true. In my free time I read books and see theater and read and watch comedy and those are all parts of my job too. I tried to take up crossword puzzles just so I'd have something that is a REAL HOBBY, but I am very bad at them!

The good news is, I guess, that something I spent my whole life doing for fun is now my job(s). And all the things I'm writing about are the things I want to be talking about. And the people I'm collaborating with are the people I'd want to be hanging out with anyway.

PM: You have a literary agent, was that a long or difficult process? Do you run ideas by your agent? Is she hands-on editorially?

JT: Depending on how I think of it, it either took a couple of days of emails or decades of trying to get anyone to pay attention to my writing. But the immediate answer is that I had an offer to write a YA novel from a publisher. So since I already had a job offer, it was pretty easy to find an agent.

I ended up signing with my amazing agent, Brenda Bowen, honestly, because she was the only one who told me I should turn down the deal. She was like "I love your writing. I'll work with you either way. But I think maybe this isn't the best deal for you."

Ironically I had secretly already written *Marlon Bundo* and wasn't allowed to tell her about it (the entire book was a HUGE secret. No one, including my entire family, knew about it until it was announced on television.) So when she found out the night *Bundo* came out, she said "Oh! Jill, you need to be writing picture books!" and I was so lucky that she was so great at helping me enter that world.

PM: What would you like to write in the future, kidlit-wise? Do you see yourself branching out to other genres like middle grade?

JT: My favorite books as a kid were the *Ramona Quimby* books and I'd LOVE to write something in that vein. I have this theory that my favorite books are all basically Ramona Quimbys at different ages. Like *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?*—she's definitely an adult Ramona Quimby.

PM: Who is your favorite author? What book are you currently reading? Is there a book you wish you had written? Do you have a pet or passion project?

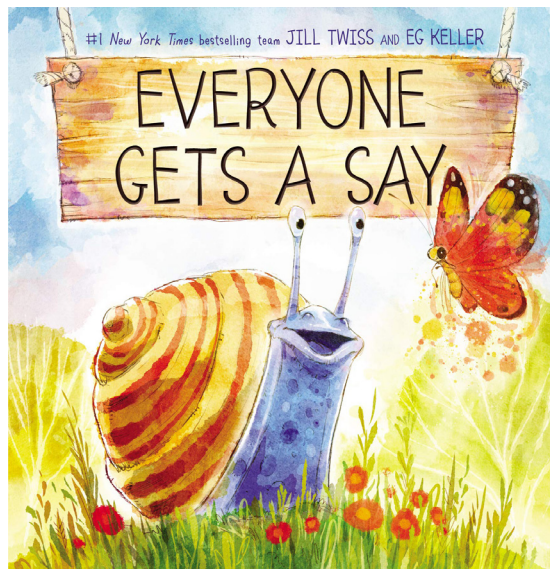
JT: Favorite authors: Beverly Cleary (obviously!), Curtis Sittenfeld (I cannot WAIT for her new book *Rodham* to come out), Christopher Durang (playwright.) I absolutely wish I had written *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?*

My current passion project is the play I'm writing. It's a comedy about the women who first demanded the right to vote at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Did you know one of them—Martha Coffin Wright—was 41, pregnant, AND READ A HU-

MOR PIECE? They are such bold, weird, badass women. I love them all so much and want everyone to know and love them as much as I do.

PM: If you were stranded on a desert island, what three things would you take with you?

JT: Oh man....matches? I feel like *Survivor* taught me that if you don't have fire you're screwed. Also that's how they find you! And a pen and paper. Or a pencil. Which one lasts longer? Which one works wet? Well great, now I'm not going to sleep tonight.



REDISCOVERING THE JOY IN WRITING

by Jane McBride

Writing can be a discouraging business, with rejections, low advances, long periods between sales, etc. If you are a writer who hasn't experienced these setbacks, skip this article. It isn't for you. But if you find yourself looking for the joy that you once had in your writing, if you remain discouraged for long periods of time, read on.

I have been a working writer for nearly 40 years. During that time, I've sold 38 books, over 500 articles and short stories to both publications for children's and adult magazines, including 17 stories to the Chicken Soup for the Soul series. During that time, I've also received more rejections than I want to admit to. Manuscript after manuscript was rejected before my first sale. After that sale, I went for three long years before I made another book sale. I suffered through the typical rejection letters of "Sorry, this isn't for us" to scathing ones, such as "You would do well to find another profession." In between book rejections, I also received hundreds of short story and article rejections. I bragged that my rejections (back when they came in paper form) could wallpaper everything from mansions to out-houses. Though other writers have claimed that, it is literally true in my case. I used to keep a notebook of all my rejections until I decided that was an exercise in self-flagellation.

That being said, I keep writing. To do that, I have to find (and re-find) joy in the work itself. Naturally, I'm pleased when I sell a book or another piece of writing, but I have to remember to find satisfaction and joy in the act of writing. It's been a journey of self-discovery, honest evaluation, and rethinking of what is truly important in my life.

Here's what has worked for me. You will doubtless find other things that will sustain you in your writing and spark it and your life with joy.

STEP 1: Recognize that you write because you have to. It's that simple and that complicated. Real writers write because they have to, not for a paycheck (as royalties can be woefully and heartbreakingly small), not for fame and glory (as they are fleeting if indeed they come at all), not even for the satisfaction of having written. We write because something inside us compels us to do so.

ACTION: Choose your projects carefully. If you write something that fills you with disgust or shame, you aren't likely to experience joy. Not until I started writing for the Christian book market did I find the true joy I was seeking. What project gives you that satisfaction? Is it crafting charming picture books or writing first chapter books for the beginning reader? Could it be creating coming-of-age novels for older teens ready to leave the comfort of home and family for the first time? If you are just starting out in writing, you may have to experiment with different genres and types of writing.

STEP 2: Be realistic in how much you can take on. You likely have other demands on your time and energies beside writing. Few of us write in a bubble. We have children or elderly parents to care for. We may have day jobs or volunteer work that fulfills us.

ACTION: Don't overschedule yourself. Don't take on more writing projects than you can reasonably and happily handle. A writer friend who has been at the game for more than 40 years recently decided to limit herself to one book a year, though she had been selling two to her publisher (who encouraged her to keep to her two-book-a-year schedule). One book, she says, doesn't send her spinning out of control. If you are fortunate enough to be able to write full-time, schedule in some other activities, whether it be exercise or learning a new craft. You need to enrich yourself to keep your writing fresh and current.

Rediscovering the Joy... continued

STEP 3: Pay attention to how you feel when you're writing.

ACTION: Determine if you are feeling stressed in your writing, trying to meet a deadline or trying to write something that isn't you because of market pressures. At one point in my career, I tried writing a gritty, hard-hitting novel replete with foreign sounding (to me) expletives and values that were not my own. I didn't like how I was feeling. In addition, the book didn't sell. I believe that I was subconsciously sabotaging my writing in attempting to write something that didn't match my values and tastes. Needless to say, joy was in short supply during that writing project.

STEP 4: Step back occasionally and take stock of your work and yourself.

ACTION: We all (writers and non-writers) need to take stock of our work and ourselves. Evaluate where you are in your personal growth and in your career growth. Do you feel like you are just treading water, trying to stay afloat? Or do you feel like you have made progress both on the personal and the professional sides? Do this as often as you feel necessary. Ask yourself where you want to be in one year's time, in five years, in ten years. Are you on the right trajectory?

STEP 5: Get real about finances. Financial stress can eat away at even the most joy-filled careers. That includes writing. Recent studies have shown that many writers do not make a living wage. In this case, writers either have day jobs or have a spouse or partner whose job takes up the slack.

ACTION: Ask yourself the hard questions. Are you dependent upon your writing income for your day-to-day expenses? Is that income supposed to pay the major bills, like the mortgage, food, and utilities or is it for extras such as trips for the family or other luxuries? These are questions only you, with input from a spouse or partner, can answer. Is worry over money robbing you of much of your joy in writing? If so, can you negotiate with your publisher or have your agent, if you have one, do it for you for higher advances? Can you supplement your book-writing income with a side hustle? If your income is based

solely on book writing, can you fit in penning short stories or articles? Can you sign up for some speaking gigs? Can you edit for other writers? Can you teach writing, whether at the community college level or at a university? Or maybe you can teach a small class held in a church or your home. Be careful here. Adding in too many things can upset the balance of Step 2. Know yourself and your limitations. Maybe the answer to your financial stress is to cut back on expenses or to devise a more effective budget so that you can live more comfortably on your income.

STEP 6: Realize that you consciously chose writing as your vocation and avocation.

ACTION: Reaffirm that choice every time you start a new project and every time you finish a project. Embrace writing with all its ups and downs. You chose it because you are a very special individual; it chose you for the same reason.

IN CONCLUSION

Discovering your joy in writing, or rediscovering it, is not a one-time process. You will probably need to do it over and over as you ride the roller coaster of a writer's life.



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, editing, submitting, marketing, or self-publishing your book, check out free trial editions here: <https://writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints>