


# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  June 2020



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## This issue's contributors

**Jean Daigneau's** book, *Code Cracking for Kids*, was published by Chicago Review Press in October 2019. She's been published in newspapers and magazines, including *Highlights* and *Fun for Kidz*, and her work has appeared in *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writers' and Illustrators' Market*. She is a former regional and assistant regional advisor for SCBWI Ohio North and currently serves on the executive board. Jean is represented by Vicki Selvaggio, Associate Agent at the Jennifer Di Chiara Literary Agency.

**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), *Moldlocks* 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>

**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, and teaches in Hollins University's graduate program in children's literature. [www.candiceransom.com](http://www.candiceransom.com)

**Natasha Wing** is both a traditional and self-published children's book author. She has been publishing for 28 years. *Saltwater Sillies: 300+ Jokes for Buoy & Gulls* was published January 1, 2020 by Wing Books, thanks to Kickstarter and her backers. She is considering publishing more passion projects. <http://natashawing.com/>

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

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

# At Presstime:

## 2020 Walter Grant for Unpublished Diverse Authors and Illustrators

We Need Diverse Books is currently accepting applications for its 2020 Walter Grant. Named after author Walter Dean Myers, the Walter Grant provides financial support to promising diverse writers and illustrators who are currently unpublished. Ten grants of \$2000 each will be awarded.

Open to unpublished (either traditionally or self-published), diverse authors and illustrators living or taking refuge in the United States. Applicants may be published in magazines, but will be considered “published” if they currently have a book contract for an as yet unpublished work. Applicants must identify as diverse (defined as a person of color, Native American, LGBTQIA+, a person with a disability, or a marginalized religious or cultural minority), and be working toward a career as a children's author and/or illustrator. Applications include a cover letter, a brief statement explaining how the applicant intends to use the grant money to further their writing career, an essay discussing how diversity impacts the applicant's writing and illustration career, and a work sample in the genre for which they are seeking grant support (not a piece that is currently out on submission). **The submission window for applications will remain open until WNDB has received 300 entries OR until June 30th, 2020, whichever comes first. Applications must be in by 11:59PM EST on June 30th.**

For full application instructions, go to

<https://diversebooks.org/our-programs/walter-grant/submission-guidelines/>

## Literary Agent Seeks Submissions Across All Age Groups

Clelia Gore, a literary agent at Martin Literary Management (<https://www.martinlit.com/>) has recently updated her submission needs. She is currently looking for author-illustrators of picture books that are funny, have a big emotional impact, or are commercial, character-driven books that can be developed into a larger property (merchandising, animation, etc.) She's also looking for author-illustrators of nonfiction picture books on subjects other than biography.

Another area of interest is platform-based clients (those who are experts in their field, have built a strong social media fan base, or who have a substantial built-in audience of potential readers). Willing to pair up these experts with co-authors or ghostwriters.

In middle grade, she's looking for contemporary realistic stories, adventure books (no time travel), historical fiction that resonates with modern readers, complex family/friendship stories, complex heroes and commercial hooks. Also open to chapter books with strong commercial hooks that lend themselves to a series.

MG and YA nonfiction needs include memoir, focused histories, how-to books, anthologies and narrative nonfiction. Loves to work with experts in the field who can make information accessible to kids and teens. Also seeking author-illustrators of graphic novels across all age groups, including nonfiction.

For a detailed list of submission needs, go to <https://cleliagore.com/>. Query online only through Query Manager at <https://querymanager.com/query/1447>.

## Twitter Picture Book Pitch Party

PBPitch is a Twitter pitch party exclusively for picture book creators. Participants pitch their picture book manuscripts on Twitter using the hashtag #PBPitch twice during the day (once before 2 pm and once after). If you are an author/illustrator, you can attach one image to your PB manuscript pitch. Include a subgenre hashtag if it applies (#NF=nonfiction, #C=concept book, #L=lyrical, #I=interactive). Agents and editors who are interested in seeing your manuscript will Favorite your pitch. It's then up to participants to research the editor's or agent's guidelines before submitting.

**PBPitch will take place on Thursday, June 18, from 8 am to 8 pm Eastern. Go to <http://www.pbpitch.com/> for more details.**

**Sydney Taylor Middle Grade Manuscript Competition Open to Entries**

The Association of Jewish Libraries sponsors the annual Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition. A cash award of \$1,000 will be given for the best fiction manuscript appropriate for readers ages 8-13, written by an unpublished author. Unpublished is defined as not having published any works of fiction (commercially or self-published) for young readers. The book must be a work of fiction in English with universal appeal of Jewish content for readers aged 8-13 years, both Jewish and non-Jewish. It should reveal positive aspects of Jewish life.

Each entrant may submit one manuscript (64-200 pages) not currently under consideration by a publisher or another competition. Material should be a literary work of fiction in English. The story should serve to deepen the understanding of Judaism for all children. Short stories, plays, poetry, or collections of short stories are not eligible. Manuscripts should be submitted in PDF format by uploading through the AJL website. Hard copies of the manuscript will not be accepted.

To assure impartiality, the manuscript MUST NOT include the author's NAME on it anywhere. DO include the TITLE at the top of every page of the manuscript. Each entrant will submit a cover letter and a curriculum vitae. The cover letter should include a short personal statement and a summary of the manuscript. Combine your cover letter and curriculum vitae into a single document and upload via the AJL website.

**The deadline for submission of manuscripts is October 6, 2020.** Do not submit elsewhere until January 31, by which date the winner will be determined and all competitors notified. For full rules and an application, go to [https://jewishlibraries.org/content.php?page=Sydney\\_Taylor\\_Manuscript\\_Award](https://jewishlibraries.org/content.php?page=Sydney_Taylor_Manuscript_Award), or go to <https://jewishlibraries.org/Awards> and click on "Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award".

**Publisher Seeks Submissions for All Ages**

Albert Whitman & Company publishes fiction and nonfiction picture books, and middle grade and young adult fiction. Open to submissions. Due to the number of submissions they receive, the editors cannot respond to manuscripts that are not a good fit for them. If you have not heard back on your submission in six months, you can consider it a pass. Does not require exclusive submissions.

**For all submissions,** include a cover letter in the body of your email that includes your contact info and phone number, a brief story pitch or description, short bio mentioning previous publications or other background information relevant to your story, titles for up to three comparative books published in the past five years. These should be books that have a similar audience to your book and that you feel will compare with your book in the marketplace. Explain how your manuscript is different from these books. Attach manuscripts as WORD documents (preferred) or PDFs. File sizes cannot be larger than 4MB. Subject line must be formatted according to individual category guidelines below. **Emails that do not use the subject line formatting may not be read.** Send all submissions to [submissions@albertwhitman.com](mailto:submissions@albertwhitman.com).

**Picture books:** Seeking fiction and nonfiction for ages 1-8, up to 1000 words. Send a cover letter with the entire manuscript. For author-illustrators, send illustrated work in PDF or JPEG attachments. Subject line should read "PICTURE BOOK: (story title) by (author name)."

**Middle Grade:** Fiction for ages 8-12, up to 35,000 words. Send a cover letter with story synopsis and/or chapter summary and full manuscript. Subject line should read: "MIDDLE GRADE: (story title) by (author name)."

**Young Adult:** Fiction for ages 12-18, up to 70,000 words. Send a cover letter with story synopsis and/or chapter summary and full manuscript. Subject line should read: "YOUNG ADULT: (story title) by (author name)."

For a list of recent titles, go to <https://www.albertwhitman.com/>



## Tips for Writing

# Picture Book Biographies

by Jean Daigneau

As I started my column during these challenging times, I researched some interesting information. During Shakespeare’s most prolific years—about 1603 to 1613—London playhouses were closed due to various plagues for *78 months*—about 65 percent of the time. But in spite of financial concerns and worries about personal health and safety, the Bard, who had a stake in two playhouses and a theater company, managed to knock out more than a few successes—*King Lear*, *The Tempest*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, among others. Pretty good use of his quarantine time, wouldn’t you say?

While stress may or may not put you at your best when it comes to writing, today’s heroes during this pandemic might be the subject of some interesting stories in years to come. Which leads me to my genre subject—picture book biographies. Let’s find out more.

### So Many People, So Little Time

As with any nonfiction topic, you’re going to spend a lot of time on research. When considering a subject, picture book biographer Julia Mosca, says, “Only write what you’re passionate about, because that will come across in the work and make it a success.” Mosca’s books focus on lesser known females who have overcome an obstacle and work in the STEM field.

But does that mean you can’t tackle someone like George Washington or Harriet Tubman? Of course not! The trick is to find that one nugget that will set your book apart. It’s finding a new angle for what sometimes amounts to an *old* subject. Calkins Creek senior editor Carolyn Yoder has this to say about choosing a subject, “I never provide a wish list be-

cause I like to be surprised. And, many times, I have never heard of some of the people we have devoted picture books to. Or never knew *that* about a well-known personage. Mostly, I look forward to what an author brings to a manuscript and the journey I will go on with him or her. It is the same for illustrators. I am always astounded by their interpretations of the words.”

Research has a lot to do with finding that one kernel of information about a well-known person *or* a lesser known one. Vivian Kirkfield, author of picture book biographies on Sarah E. Goode and the friendship between Ella Fitzgerald and Marilyn Monroe considers herself “an archaeologist, digging to discover hidden treasures. I always feel like a detective, searching for clues to uncover the mystery of why someone did what they did.” Discovering that one unusual characteristic or emotional spark about a person can mean the difference between unearthing a new dinosaur species or digging up your pet’s long buried bone.

### Just the Facts, Ma’am

Biographies are usually structured in one of two ways. Either a person’s life is told chronologically, or one life-changing incident is told in a dramatic way. Regardless, the most important point for any structure is to pique a kid’s interest. Nothing says success to a biographer than a reader wanting to know more about the subject *after* reading his book.

Today’s biographies are competing against extremely creative nonfiction *and* fiction. So rather than a litany of facts, authors need to find the voice that best portrays the subject, just like a good storyteller uses voice to tell a story. *Children’s Book Insider* editor

Laura Backes says, “Voice is the way each author approaches the act of writing. It’s how plot, characters, dialogue, setting, pacing—all the elements of a book—come together to form a story. Voice is like a fingerprint; it makes the story uniquely yours.”

For Mosca, who writes in rhyme, the focus should be on the subject and not the narrator. She says, “I like to keep the voice light and fun enough to keep children engaged, while attempting not to overshadow or diminish the seriousness of the character’s journey.” While some reviewers have been critical of her use of rhyme, she believes that “serious concepts *can* be taught in a fun way.” With a target audience of 5- to 6-year-olds, fun is imperative.

Another important side to writing biographies is narrowing down all that information. Which is what Kirkfield loves about writing biographies. “The character is the real person. And the plot is how that life unfolded or the event that I’ll be focusing on.” The challenge then is making that person come alive on the page.

Yoder explains it this way when it comes to things picture book biographers should remember: “They don’t have to put every detail in—the SHAPE of the story is key.” She goes on to explain that every word counts and authors need to keep in mind how the story unfolds. She adds, “Also, keep in mind the visual elements of the story. Picture books are a combination of words and illustrations.”

## He Said, She Said

Primary sources are an important key to digging deep into your subject. But be aware that primary sources aren’t all they’re stacked up to be. People often forget important details about events they’re sure they’ll always remember. And more than a few of us are known to boast about our accomplishments. Just ask me about mine! Here’s an excellent article about one author’s experience with primary sources: [bit.ly/usingsecondarysources](http://bit.ly/usingsecondarysources). It puts a different spin on that first-hand information.

So what’s an author to do? Remember, in order for your biography to be classified as a biography—meaning nonfiction—*everything* has to be true. Kirk-

field says, “The actual words of the person can be very powerful and give the reader a true sense of that character.” But, she adds, “As soon as you add something fictional, it’s not nonfiction.” So don’t say it if your subject didn’t.

Online resources are great, but don’t overlook other data. When Kirkfield researched Goode, she found the patent for her character’s cabinet bed invention, including “detailed explanations, drawings, and even her signature.” She also found census records including information about Goode as a young girl and later as a married woman. A Chicago newspaper carried an advertisement from 1884 for Goode’s furniture store. And sources at the Chicago cemetery where Good is buried provided detailed information about family members.

Mosca begins her research with online information and compiles a timeline of her subject’s life. But, because she and her editor highlight *living* pioneers, Mosca finds the recorded interviews with her subjects as well as their own publications invaluable. Her attention to accuracy has garnered her a 100 percent satisfaction rate when her subject reads and offers feedback on the project.

For Kirkfield, the personal connection sometimes involves family members or others close to her subjects. For *Making Their Voices Heard*, she had a phone conversation with Fitzgerald’s promoter for 37 years. For a yet-to-be announced sale, Kirkfield connected with her subject’s great grand-nephew. Along with stellar research, this connection corrected a small detail in the upcoming book which Kirkfield was happy to change.

Yoder has this to say about research, “I am a stickler for extensive research and firmly believe that original writing is directly linked to original research. That means relying on the most up-to-date and classic research, primary and secondary as well as adult and children resources. It also means relying on *experts* as part of the research, not simply as a reviewer of the final manuscript.”

Remember too, that using accurate historical details not only brings your story to life, but also helps your reader feel as if she is living the story, along with

your subject. Kirkfield explained it this way, “In *Making Their Voices Heard*, I use certain words that are from the 1950’s: Ella’s voice flowed with a *shu-be-doobie-doo* and Marilyn wowed her audiences with her baby blue eyes and her *boo-boo-be-doo*. The reader isn’t familiar with those words, so it helps create the setting of the 1950’s.” What’s not to love about *shu-be-doobie-doo*?

## The Research is Done, Now What?

Just like any good book, grabbing your reader’s attention from the beginning is crucial. Kirkfield calls the opening “the doorway into the book for the reader.” Her books, written in a lyrical voice, come full circle to an end that satisfies as well.

If you check out the selected biographies listed, you’ll see that a great hook is just one thing today’s biographies share. Structure and subjects are limited only by authors’ imaginations. Another important part of

today’s bios is making use of all that research. Back matter is a given, but today it runs the gamut, from a connection to food history, to fun facts, to a photographic guide.

## Thinking about Biographies?

Kirkfield shares her 4 Ps for writing picture book biographies: Be PASSIONATE about the person you’re writing about, PRACTICE with lots of writing, be PATIENT finding the focus and heart of your story, and be PERSISTENT to revise, critique, revise, and repeat.

Mosca acknowledges that while the competition is tough, “if you really and truly love the person you’re writing about—and your main goal is to touch the hearts of kids who will be as inspired by your subjects as you are—you’ll always find your audience.” Here’s hoping your subjects inspire you to be as prolific as Shakespeare.

## For Further Reading:

### **The Crayon Man: The True Story of the Invention of Crayola Crayons**

by Natascha Biebow

### **Dancing Hands: How Teresa Carreño Played the Piano for President Lincoln**

by Margarita Engle

### **Feed Your Mind: A Story of August Wilson** by Jen Bryant

### **A Girl Called Genghis Khan: How Maria Toopakai Wazir Pretended to Be a Boy, Defied the Taliban, and Became a World Famous Squash Player**

by Michelle Lord

### **It Began with a Page: How Gyo Fujikawa Drew the Way**

by Kyo Maclear, ill. Julie Morstad

### **Just Like Rube Goldberg: The Incredible True Story of the Man Behind the Machines**

by Sarah Aronson

### **Magic Ramen: The Story of Momofuku Ando** by Andrea Wang





interview by Lynne Marie

**Y**eehoo Press is part of Shanghai Yihe Industrial Co. (SYIC) founded in 2007, which publishes over 200 titles per year. In addition to expanding SYIC's book market to the US, Yeehoo Press also works with SYIC's publishing partner Phoenix Publishing and Media Group (PPMC) to publish the Phoenix English Magazine, an English learning magazine aimed at readers in China. Besides her role as Yeehoo Press' Associate Publisher, Helen H. Wu is also a children's book author and illustrator, translator and graphic designer. She is a proud first-generation immigrant who loves to share inspiring stories from her own immigrant experience.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Please tell us a little bit more about Yeehoo Press and how you came to be in your present position there. Also, please share the meaning of the symbol of the horse.

**HELEN H. WU:** I've been passionate about writing and drawing since I was a kid; however, I never thought it would be a career option growing up in China. After I graduated from the University of Georgia with a MS in Economics, I landed a job in the marketing field. To make attractive marketing materials, I learned how to use Photoshop. Then, I found tutorials on how to draw in Photoshop. I was completely blown away by what could be done in the program. I did several digital drawings and put up a portfolio online. To my surprise, someone asked me if I could illustrate their picture book.



Gradually, I illustrated more self-published picture books. I got involved in every step of bookmaking, from illustration to layout to cover design, typography, and book printing. I began considering writing my own story; however, that thought scared me since English is my second language. One good thing about self-publishing is that there's nobody out there to judge you. With all the fear and lack of confidence, I still took the leap and wrote and illustrated my first self-published picture book in 2014. I marketed my book among my friends, and the positive feedback encouraged me to do more.

At the beginning of 2018, with 10 picture books that I wrote and illustrated under my belt, I felt I couldn't go any further. However, my writing and illustrating skills greatly improved along the journey. I realized I wanted more than just a book

out there; my dream was to write a book that would be carried by Barnes & Noble and reach a wider audience. I knew I needed a professional team of an editor, designer, and art director and marketing resources to back me up. Traditional publishing was the route to take. I started looking for agents and submitting to some traditional publishers that took unsolicited manuscripts.

Meanwhile, I attended SCBWI events to connect with editors and fellow authors and illustrators. At the end of 2018, I signed up with my previous agent and we went on submissions for a few rounds (she left the business a year later). The resources from



SCBWI helped me a lot along the journey.

In August 2019, I attended SCBWI conference in Los Angeles and met Mr. Zhang and two editors from Yeehoo Press. I met Luyang, the acquisition editor, and pitched my manuscripts to her. She told me they were looking for someone to take charge of the US division of their publishing house. They wanted someone who could speak Mandarin and English and had experience in children's book publishing and connections with authors in the US.

My background was a perfect fit for Yeehoo's criterion. They invited me to visit their offices in Shanghai and Suzhou in September to have a more in-depth discussion with the whole team. After a few months of discussion and planning, I officially joined the team in November.

Before I joined the team, Yeehoo had acquired the Chinese rights of 15 picture books to be published in China by authors from the US, UK, Brazil, and China. This year, Yeehoo began to acquire books to publish in the US and China.

The logo of Yeehoo Press is a hobby horse, a traditional toy that has brought joy to children around the world. We hope our books can serve as the cultural bridge and pass on the joy of reading through the generations.

**LM:** For a newer publisher (to the US), you have quite a full, accomplished staff and are able to pay respectable advances to authors and illustrators. How many books do you plan to publish per year? What are your plans for growth? Can you tell us a little bit about how your books are distributed?

**HHW:** We publish 15–20 new titles a year in the US and China. Starting with the US and Chinese markets—two of the largest children's book markets—our goal is to find common ground between different countries and cultures and provide books with universal interest and appeal for readers worldwide.

In China, we share the marketing channels and resources with our publishing partner, Phoenix Media & Group. We have distributors in different provinces in China and for online and offline bookstores. In the US, we also partner with the distributor here to

make our books available to teachers, librarians, and booksellers through the usual channels. We send our books to be reviewed by all the major children's literature journals and submit them to national, state, and numerous other awards.

**LM:** You are the author and/or illustrator of over 20 children's books. What have you learned from that experience that you find most helpful in your current role as publisher?

**HHW:** I believe a successful book is a combination of compelling writing and illustrations, quality book production, and strategic marketing. I've seen authors who are great marketers, but their books lack professional editing—or vice versa, talented authors who don't know how to market their quality books. Children's books are one of the channels that connect children with the world, and they also have the potential to pass on the joy from generation to generation. Many years later, we will still remember the good times we had snuggling on the laps of our parents and grandparents to read a book together. Every detail matters, from the story itself, editing, illustration, design, and the feel in your hands. We want to make books that readers will treasure. For our marketing approach, we'll make a strategic marketing plan for each book. What are the main messages of the book? What makes it special and different? What is the story behind the story when the author creates it? What lesson plans can we make to support our teachers and librarians to present the book to their students? What local and national resources can we reach? We have a list of questionnaires to make a marketing strategy, and we apply this approach to every book we make.

**LM:** As an author who loves culture and strives for global reach for my stories, I was fascinated with Yeehoo Press's focus on dual and world markets. Can you explain in a little more detail how this works? How far is the global outreach?

**HHW:** We have a team that understands the US and China book markets, and we attend book fairs around the world to keep updated on the newest trend in children's literacy. We will do in-depth market research on the books we're ready to acquire in the US and Chinese markets. For the acquisition process, I go through stacks of submissions, con-

sider what I think may work for our program, create a memo to share with the team that includes a positioning statement about the topic of the book and why someone would want to buy it, a brief description of the story, an author bio, and comp titles. Our team in China reviews all of that information and does market research for the titles in the Chinese market to determine if the title fits our list. In the US, the books will be published and promoted individually. In China, books are commonly sold and promoted as collections or series, with a similar theme by different authors and illustrators. For a series, it could be from three to ten books. We usually will need to acquire at least three books about a particular theme—say emotions, STEAM—to establish a series.

Depending on the market, readers' tastes differ and the way to promote books is different. We try to find books with themes that have common ground between different markets. Once our books are published in the English and Chinese editions, I believe it will be easier to reach other countries and cultures and be enjoyed by readers around the world.

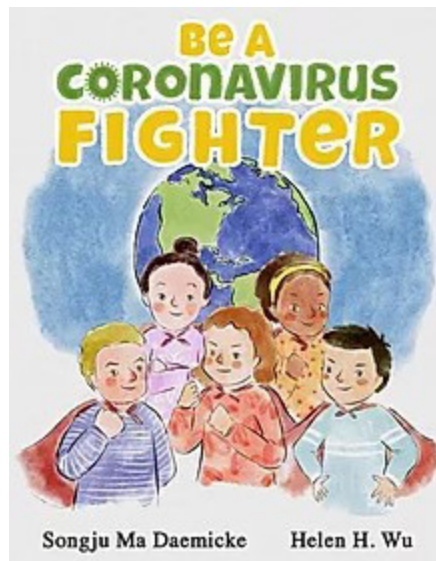
Recently, we acquired Amalia Hoffman's book *How to Make a Mean Monster* (working title). I think Amalia's books were a particularly easy sell because of the monster element, the friendship theme, the drawing process, the handcraft art style, and the critical thinking angle.

**LM:** Speaking of global outreach, I noticed that Yeehoo Press's book *Be a Coronavirus Fighter* by Songju Ma Daemicke and illustrated by you was translated into several languages. Please share a little bit about this book and its journey.

**HHW:** This is a book outside of our publishing schedule, and it was made in around two weeks. I've been following news about the coronavirus outbreak since January. In early March when the virus spread to more and more countries, I felt the strong urge to write a picture book about it to help kids understand the situation so they might feel less confused and

anxious. The biggest challenge for me was to produce a book in such a short time. Many projects I have worked on took me months or years to polish. So, I decided to collaborate with another author.

Songju submitted a very well-written manuscript to Yeehoo Press a while ago. I contacted Songju to see if she would be interested in collaborating with me on writing the book. Songju was truly amazing; she immediately agreed and started working on the project. As an illustrator myself, I felt it would appear unprofessional for a publisher to ask an illustrator to finish a book in several days, so I decided it would be best to illustrate the book myself. After ten days, Songju sent me a draft, and we revised and finalized it. Then I spent about one week on the illustrations. I drew characters with different skin tones, hairstyles, and hair colors to reflect people of various ethnic groups all around the world.



After we released the English version, we received messages from many readers. They said, “The book is a great resource,” and “It spreads knowledge, lessens fears, and empowers people.” Soon, teachers and translators from other countries contacted me for permission to translate the book into their

native languages and share it with readers there. We made a web version and a print-ready version for each edition, so it would be easier to browse on cell phones and parents could print it out on paper for kids to read over and over again.

As Songju and I started this process, we wanted to make a book to help kids understand this difficult time and that we're all in this together. We wanted to emphasize that people in different jobs and locations are all working hard to fight the virus and that kids can also be part of it and contribute to winning the battle.

**LM:** Notably, you were able to manage illustrating and publishing this book in the middle of a global pandemic, with all sorts of complications, both physical and emotional. What advice do you have

for writers and artists struggling in the current time?

**HHW:** It's definitely a tough time for everyone. I kept a simple journal to write down what I'm feeling, in whatever way it comes out of my brain—the fear, anger, and frustration many of us are feeling bubble up during this pandemic. If it makes you feel something, write it down, no matter how random it seems. Take the time to enjoy what you've written, regardless of if anyone else ever sees it.

**LM:** One question authors often wonder is how valuable are pitch events. As a publisher who participates, what are your thoughts about this? Have you ever found promising/successful projects from these events?

**HHW:** We have found promising projects from pitch parties, and we discussed them at our acquisition meetings. Pitch parties can be a great way to get feedback on your project and network with others in the industry. The creativity on display is amazing. It certainly can't hurt anything to try; you may even end up getting published. I landed my previous agent this way (she left the agency a year after).

Some tips I have for participants:

1. Think of the characters and stakes in your story.
2. Create a few different pitches. It's a good idea to vary your pitches and note which ones get the most retweets and/or likes.
3. Research before you submit. There are legitimate publishers and agents, as well as some vanity presses, book promoters, or similar services. Know who and what you're dealing with before you submit your work.

**LM:** As Associate Publisher, what would be your role in acquisitions? How hands-on are you when working on the project?

**HHW:** In our acquisition process, I'll read all the submissions and make recommendations to our team, based on the market potential and how compelling the writing is. After the acquisition, we have several editors in the US who will do the actual ed-

iting with the author. They all have years of experience working in large publishing houses and will make the manuscript the best it can possibly be. The editor, the author, and I will have several phone calls to discuss possible revision directions. I participate in every project, from text editing to the illustration process, but I'm more just looping in to have an idea of the direction of the revisions, ensuring the projects are on schedule, and liaising between various teams in the US and China.

**LM:** How would you describe what Yeehoo Press is looking for in a children's book?

**HHW:** We strive to create and publish fun, enchanting, and socially responsible children's books for audiences around the world with an emphasis on quality writing and appealing illustrations. A specific wish list is included on our submissions page (<https://yeehooPress.com/submissions/>). We continually update our manuscript wish list as we evaluate current and future projects. We promote books in series in China, and we usually need to acquire at least three books in a particular theme—say, emotions, STEAM, narrative nonfiction, folktales—to establish a series. We might remove or add categories in our wish list when we have acquired enough books in certain series or have discovered a new theme to establish a new series. Basically, anything with universal appeal, for educational purposes, and a commercial hook will fit our list.

**LM:** Please share your wishlist, if any, for *Phoenix English Magazine*. Is there any particular reading level that you are looking for, in general? What is the best way to approach these submissions?

**HHW:** Our readers are students who are learning English as a second language. *Phoenix English Magazine* has six levels for ages 6–15, serving as the supplemental materials beyond the textbook. It contains a wider range of topics, including history, geography, nature, cultures, and etiquette, as well as classic and new stories. We have sample pages on our website for authors to get a feel for the magazine (<https://yeehooPress.com/magazine/>).

**LM:** As a talented artist yourself, would you be willing to accept art submission and pass any of interest along to the art director?



**HHW:** Absolutely. For picture books, the illustrations and the style tell a lot of the story. The style has to reflect the tone and emotion. When you look at the various styles out there, they might all look beautiful, but some styles speak better for certain stories. The personal aspect of working to bring the books to life with so many talented illustrators with different art styles is invigorating, and it is what keeps the job interesting and fresh. It is also rewarding to discover new talent and see their work gain acceptance and praise within the industry.

**LM:** Please share your thoughts on “own voices.” Would you consider a story about a setting that is outside of the author’s own culture if they have a connected experience or passion? Or do you prefer own voices only for these types of projects?

**HHW:** We work with writers and illustrators from all communities and are not averse to writers who write cross-culturally. What is most important to us is that the author works authentically and from personal experience or from a well-researched position, is aware of the stories we as readers seek out and promote, and carefully considers the perspectives of the people who write those stories. If the author shares an identity with the character or has a deep understanding of every possible facet of that particular life, the story will have an added richness. Overall, we hope the writer or illustrator who is immersed in the subject can create authenticity for the people it represents and, effectively, for a wide audience.

**LM:** If an “other-than-own voices” author were able to successfully pull off a certain manuscript with impressive writing and a compelling story, would/could you pair them with an illustrator from that culture?

**HHW:** I think they will be a good pair for such a project. Sometimes an illustrator from the same background as the people in the story can add subtle details that enhance the cultural specificity of the illustrations.

**LM:** Lately, my own voices writer and author friends have expressed concerns because they don’t have any pending own voices stories and agents and editors aren’t wanting to see their own more generic work. Do you have any words of advice and/or en-

couragement for these friends on how to move forward or how to mine more stories?

**HHW:** Different publishing houses have different goals and manuscript wish lists. Some publishers tend to publish their own voices, and some publishers tend to publish more generic work. I would suggest finding editors and publishers whose interests line up with the work. By developing a wide range of work that fits various publishing houses, authors will have a better chance to find the best home for their projects. As an author myself, I think it would be great to work with different editors and publishing houses to get a sense of their editorial process and marketing resources and build a connection with publishing professionals. In the long term, these connections and resources are all helpful in building a successful career for an author.

**LM:** From time to time, your publishing house offers free webinars for writers. Please tell us a little bit more about these and where our readers can get more information.

**HHW:** In the future webinars, I will introduce our acquisition process, revision process, illustration process, and book production process. As an author, I’ve always been curious about these inside processes of how a book is made from scratch. I believe the information will help authors and illustrators get a better understanding of Yeehoo Press and prepare better for submissions and have a clearer picture of the book publishing industry as a whole.

## ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Helen Wu is offering an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to CBI subscribers. She’s accepting fiction and nonfiction picture book manuscripts, as well as manuscript/illustration packages from author-illustrators, and portfolios from illustrators only. Current submission guidelines are at <https://yeehooPress.com/submissions/>. Email submissions to [submissions@yeehooPress.com](mailto:submissions@yeehooPress.com), with the subject line “6/20 CBI PB: (Story Headline) by (Author’s Name)” or “6/20 CBI PB ART by (Illustrator’s Name).” Only one picture book manuscript per Above the Slushpile submission. There is no deadline on submissions.



## GO LEAN AND GO DEEP WITH

## SENTENCE-LEVEL EDITS

by Jane McBride

**W**hat does it mean to write lean? Does it mean only to take out all adverbs and adjectives? Does it mean to take out many prepositional phrases? Or does it go deeper? If I am writing leaner, not just from a word count standpoint but from an "internal audit" of what a story needs and what it doesn't, I am also going deeper.

## GOING LEAN

*"If you see an adverb, kill it."*—Mark Twain

Twain's advice remains as true today as it did more than 150 years ago. Use adjectives and adverbs with a light hand. Question whether or not you need that adverb that beckons to you or if a strong verb could take its place.

*Not eager to face his parents after being caught skipping school, Luis walked slowly home.*

*Not eager to face his parents after being caught skipping school, Luis trudged home.*

*Matt studied extra hard to pass his trig test the next day.*

*Matt beefed up his studies to pass his trig test the next day.*

*Hailey looked at her reflection in the mirror and smiled hugely.*

*Hailey preened at her reflection in the mirror.*

It's not difficult to see the difference between the first example of each pair and the second. In every case, the verbs have been strengthened and made more exact without the use of adverbs. In the first and third pairings, the sentences have also been

shortened. Shorter is not always better; sometimes it takes a few extra words to get the image you want across. In general, though, aim for shorter sentences rather than longer. It goes without saying that your sentence structure, length and word choice must be age appropriate. The youngest readers like word repetition and short sentences. They also respond well to rhyme and rhythm. Older readers can handle more complex sentences, though don't forget the power that a short sentence can pack.

What about adjectives?

When I was in school (somewhere around the Jurassic Period), English teachers loved to challenge students with coming up with as many great adjectives as possible to modify nouns. We (the students) learned to write flowery sentences that contained as many adjectives as we could reasonably and sometimes unreasonably cram into one unsuspecting sentence to describe one innocent noun. Times have changed. Spare sentences are in style. Like adverbs and verbs, many adjectives are unneeded when a strong noun is employed.

Let's take a look at some adjectives that this sentence and the world would be better off without:

*The tiny, little baby had the cutest, sweetest, prettiest face you ever did see.*

Oh, my gosh. That poor baby has a lot to live up to. It's assumed that a baby is tiny and little, so those adjectives can go. What about cutest, sweetest, and prettiest? What if we just choose one?

How does our sentence sound in its pared down version?

*The baby had the cutest face ever.*

This is certainly not a Hemingway-worthy sentence,

*Sentence Level Edits continued*

but it gets the point across and, what's more, does it in four fewer words.

Let's try another:

*The extra steep cliff was a sheer face of rock that only the most experienced climbers would attempt.*

In this sentence, the word "extra" is actually an adverb, modifying "steep." We could simply say,

*The cliff was a sheer face of rock that only the most experienced climbers would attempt.*

We've taken out "extra" and "steep," already implied with the phrase "sheer face of rock."

Did you notice something else in that sentence? By using a figure of speech, "sheer face of rock," we no longer needed the modifiers. Let's try using a figure of speech again:

*With his twisted features and malevolent expression, the man had a scary, terrifying face.*

*With his twisted features and malevolent expression, the man was a gargoyle.*

In this sentence, we kept two adjectives, "twisted" and "malevolent," but we eliminated "scary" and "terrifying," while giving a much stronger image with the metaphor, "the man was a gargoyle."

## GOING DEEP

Okay, you've done the easy part, ridding your writing of extraneous adverbs and adjectives. Now, we're getting to the hard part. By going lean in writing, you can also go deep as you eliminate extraneous matter from your book while deepening your point of view as well.

Say you are writing a book about a thirteen-year-old girl who is the daughter of alcoholic parents. Already, we're rooting for this girl who must face things no child should have to face. But you want to make certain that your readers know just how terrible this girl's life is. So you begin making a list. You tell about how she can't have friends over because she never knows how her parents are going to act. That's a pretty good detail. But you keep going, ex-

plaining her fears and her embarrassment and her shame of her parents and how her family lives. You describe the slovenly kept house, the shabby exterior, the car in the front yard that sits on blocks from the time she can remember. How many of these details do you really need? It is really necessary to describe her fear, her embarrassment, and her shame? If you've done your job as a writer, you don't have to list these emotions because the reader already knows them. Let's take out all the details mentioned above and see what we come up with:

*A knock at the door startled Sheila from the funk she'd fallen into upon returning home. The house was as she remembered, a cluttered chaos of trash and pain. She peered out the window and saw Talia, her one friend from school, on the front step.*

*No!*

*Sheila cringed. Had her mother's beer cans been thrown away or did they sit on the kitchen table, lined up like so many drunken soldiers? And what of her father's whiskey bottle? It normally stood on the end table, a silent testament to the sickness that was strangling her family and choking the life from her.*

Did you notice that the above paragraphs were not free from adverbs and adjectives? Though I tried to use them sparingly, I didn't completely do away with them. Did you also notice the use of similes and metaphors: "drunken soldiers" and "a silent testament to the ..."? More importantly, did you note that I didn't use any of the "feelings" that I had earlier listed: embarrassment, shame, and fear? Nor did I use all the details that described her home. Instead, I zeroed in on those details, the beer cans and the whiskey bottle, that symbolized her life.

By going deep, we've cut words and focused on Sheila's despair and shame.

## IN THE END

The words you choose, the details you give, all are a function of your voice. Use those words and details with the precision a fine chef might give to using an expensive spice. In the end, the choice and the voice are yours.

## SHOULD YOU CROWDFUND TO

# SELF-PUBLISH?

by Natasha Wing

One way to self-publish is to pay for the book yourself. Another is to raise capital through crowdfunding. Funding a book yourself means coming up with thousands of dollars, and then putting the pressure on yourself to recoup your investment. Raising money via a crowdfunding site means having the pressure to reach your monetary goal, and then really and truly producing a book.

I've done it both ways. For the first book I paid for an illustrator and the printing and years later I still haven't earned back my investment. Recently, I self-published a joke book via the Kickstarter crowdfunding platform. The illustrator got paid, the printer got paid, and I'm not out any money. Each sale is profit, not investment payback.

If you're not familiar with crowdfunding, it is a way to raise funds for a project (such as the publication of a book) by asking a large number of people to donate small amounts of money during a specific period of time (generally a few weeks to a few months). Donors contribute toward the full amount specified for the project, and they are usually rewarded with a product or service that will be developed with the funds raised. Some campaigns have additional rewards (or "perks") for larger donors. Crowdfunding happens online, making it easy for the person raising the money (and their sponsors) to share the campaign on social networks.

There are several crowdfunding options but the two I checked out were Indiegogo and Kickstarter. Indiegogo is a way to solicit funds for ideas, art projects or start-up businesses, and has a Writing & Publishing category. Kickstarter helps people raise funds for creative projects such as games, comics, music and publishing. The big difference is this: with In-

digogo there is a Flexible Funding option so you get to keep all that you raise, even if you don't meet your full funding goal. However, you still have to fulfill any of the "perks" promised to backers (gifts they receive for their funding, such as a signed copy of your book). Or, you can choose to simply refund the backers their money. Indiegogo suggests that you set your goal to the smallest amount you need to complete your project and fulfill your perks, or run several smaller campaigns to raise money for each step in your production (one for hiring the illustrator, one for getting books printed, etc.) With Kickstarter you have to reach your dollar goal or you can't keep any of the money raised. It's all or nothing. But backers won't be charged until your goal is met so there's no "refunding" necessary. In both cases, there's a chance you'll raise more than your goal and get to keep it. (Note: Indiegogo also has a Fixed Funding option, similar to Kickstarter. There are other differences between the two, such as how developed your product needs to be before you launch a campaign, and the fees charged on money collected. This article explains the differences in more detail: <https://www.lifewire.com/kickstarter-vs-indiegogo-3485780>). You can also get a good overview with this video: [bit.ly/godaddy crowdfunding](http://bit.ly/godaddy crowdfunding).)

Kickstarter's all-or-nothing method is designed to motivate the creative to fulfill their ultimate goal, which is to publish a book. Otherwise, if you don't raise enough money, you might never complete and publish your project. Kickstarter also motivates you to produce a book because often that's one of the rewards offered to backers (most backers really want your book). And you have to fulfill your promise to your backers!

## *Should You Crowdfund...continued*

I picked Kickstarter because the illustrator I was going to work with had done several Kickstarter campaigns for his own books, so he was an excellent guide through the process.

In general, I have a hard time asking people for money—especially from family and friends! But with Kickstarter, it's a win-win for everyone since the backers will get rewards of value to them. This is also a way that people can feel good about supporting a local author and independent publisher. With Kickstarter's global reach, it provided the potential to involve a larger group of people with my project so when I released my book, I'd have a built-in group of cheerleaders around the country who would share my good news. I was also looking for a way to help raise money for a cause. By tying my project in with a non-profit, it was a win-win-win situation.

Once you choose your crowdfunding platform, it's time to build your campaign.

### **Ten Tips for Running a Crowdfunding Campaign**

**1.** Set up and build your network of friends before you launch. Pump up your social media by inviting more people to join your pages. If you don't have a Facebook or Instagram account, open one so you can post your progress. Cross promote on your social media that you are about to launch a crowdfunding campaign and ask your followers to invite their friends to join your sites so when it does launch, more people will know about it. Ask the non-profit you are supporting to help promote your campaign on their social media sites, and offer to promote their organization on yours.

**2.** Create pre-launch excitement weeks before you launch. Post information on upcoming rewards that are especially fun. For *Saltwater Sillies*, the artist offered to do a caricature of the high-level backer as the star of one of the jokes, and we'd publish it in the book as a full-page illustration. The "One-Liner" pledge of \$15, that proved to be the most popu-

lar reward, included a signed copy of the book plus a digital copy. Post about why you want to publish your book so people can connect emotionally to your project. Announce who the non-profit tie-in will be. Do a cover reveal.



**3.** Have something of your project already done, preferably the cover. This will cost money up front, but factor that into the amount of money you want to raise. With a finished cover, you can use that to promote your campaign. A cover also makes the project feel more real to both you and the backers.

**4.** Don't ask for too much or you might not reach your goal. Do a budget sheet beforehand to give you a good sense of what it'll cost to produce and print your book. (I went on KDP and used their formula for figuring out how much it would cost to print a book by choosing a trim size, color or black-and-white, estimated pages, and print run size. Here's their page link: [https://kdp.amazon.com/en\\_US/help/topic/G201834340](https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G201834340)). You can always



*Should You Crowdfund...continued*

add new incentives during the campaign to push your funding goal higher. For example, you can tell potential backers: “If I earn \$500 above my goal I will be able to pay for color interior art instead of black and white.” Then you add new backer rewards to spark extra funding opportunities.

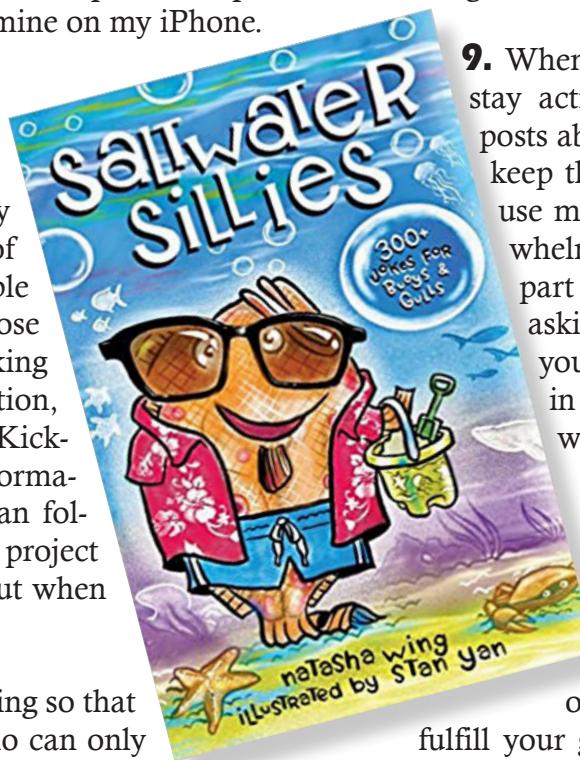
**5.** Do a video about why you want to create this project. It doesn't have to be slick professional, but it does have to be genuine and to the point. Keep it under three minutes. I filmed mine on my iPhone.

**6.** Come up with fun rewards for your backers that tie into your creative project. Keep your rewards simple and easy to fulfill, like digital copies of the book. Or memes people can post on Facebook. Choose a realistic fulfillment date taking into consideration the production, printing and mailing time. Kickstarter provides contact information of each backer so you can follow up with updates about the project and then send their rewards out when ready.

**7.** Offer various levels of funding so that there are choices for those who can only donate a token amount to those who have the ability to be a major funder. Keep in mind the time of year you are launching your campaign. Does it conflict with another high-spending time of year such as Christmas or summer vacation time? Has the economy tanked and is therefore causing people to be tighter with their expendable income? Then offer more lower-priced rewards. You'll have to work harder at raising your funding goal, but the upside is you'll have more backers to reach out to when the book is done.

**8.** Choose a non-profit that ties in to your project. It gives your project a needed emotional tug and makes your project more worth funding knowing a cause will be getting the backers' support as well.

Even though I was publishing a book with ocean-themed jokes, I still wanted to use the sales as a way to support a cause I believe in. So I chose to donate part of my eventual profits to Inland Ocean Coalition, an organization that helps educate people who don't live by the ocean how their waste habits affect the sea. While you can't directly fundraise for a charity, you can choose to donate to a non-profit via sales on your product, just not by using backer funding.



**9.** When you do launch your campaign, stay actively involved in it with steady posts about your project. Be creative and keep the posts fun (be upbeat and also use memes) so you don't bore or overwhelm people. This was the hardest part for me. I didn't want to be a pest asking for money all the time, but you do have to keep your campaign in the forefront so potential backers will click through and fund you.

**10.** Be gracious! You can't thank your backers enough for their support. They are the reason why your dream book will become real. Even those who only donated \$1 are helping you to fulfill your goal. And if you plan to do another crowdfunding campaign in the future, you'll want to be able to go back to these people with good relationship vibes between you.

If you have a project you absolutely want to see the publishing light of day, then check out Kickstarter. They have more tips and tried-and-true ways to help make your campaign a success on their website at <https://www.kickstarter.com/>. If you're interested in Indiegogo, you can download their guide from <https://www.indiegogo.com/>.

# Amy Houts

## Children's Author Embodies the Three P's: Prolific, Passionate and Persistent

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Children's author/creator Amy Houts could've spent years sending out queries and waiting just as long for replies (if any). Instead, Houts found her own path to publication with both mainstream and faith-based publishing houses. Dedicated to the craft of writing and incredibly prolific with a mind-boggling 15 books slated for publication in 2020, Houts writes every day and probably even in her sleep. A self-professed city girl married to a farmer, the grandmother of twins plus one makes her home in Northwest Missouri, writing with the encouragement of her faithful companion Gina, an Australian Shepherd mix.

**PJ McILVAINE:** Your middle name should be P for prolific! How do you decide to pursue an idea and how do you pick which format or genre would be most suitable?

**AMY HOUTS:** Thanks! I like my new middle initial. : ) Most of the books I've written were on assignment, so I didn't choose the idea. The topic, genre, format, grade level, and word count are all decided "in house," which means by the editor and marketing department.

When I first started writing, I didn't know that writing for young children was my favorite age group. Now, most of the time I write picture books because that's what I like to do. I write what I hear in my head, so if I hear prose, I write prose. If I hear

a rhyme, I write rhyme. Sometimes when I develop one of my own ideas, I have to discover what I've written after it's completed. For example, last year, I started writing what I thought would be a rhyming Christmas picture book for young children. However, after I had worked on it several times and felt I

had said what I needed to say, I realized it wasn't a picture book at all, but a poem for adults. The theme and language I had used was much too complex, not child-friendly at all.

**PM:** You have 15 (I had to check that twice) titles being published by Highlights Press this year. How do you stagger all these books? Have you ever experienced writer's block? And this is probably one of the toughest aspects for me and I bet many other writers: when do you know that a manuscript is done before sending it off into the world?

**AH:** The nonfiction books I wrote for Highlights Press in 2019 were short, around 200 words. Topics were series, 4-6 books on a specific sub-

ject. Five were due every other week. I worked on them *nearly* every day. My husband only works part-time, 4 days/week, and I find it hard to concentrate when he is home, so if I can, I take my weekends off. Even if I don't have an assignment, I write about 4 days/week. Juggling a few titles at a time works well for me. When writing work-for-hire (WFH), tight deadlines are expected. So, ideal-





*Amy Houts continued*

ly, related to my Highlights assignment, I wrote my first drafts one day and revised the next day. I always reread and revised again, if needed, the second week. On this particular project, my husband read all my work and gave me feedback. I don't write outlines, but I do write out thoughts by hand. I've read that the mind-body connection is very important. Then I type up my notes. Once in a while I'll go straight to the computer and start typing, but not as a rule. If an outline is required to turn in with an assignment, which they often are, I write the assignment first and then write the outline. (I know that is backward, but my mind doesn't work that way.)

When I have an assignment, I am very motivated. If I experience writer's block, I do more research. Then I go back to writing. I experience more writer's block with my own, creative work. Working on assignment is very focused and narrow. When you can write on anything and everything, it can be overwhelming. How do I know when a manuscript is done? With either an assignment or on my own, I work and work until I can work no more, until I can't figure out anything else to say or change, until I FEEL it's done. I read it aloud (quite often during the process). I ask others to read it. I ask for feedback. Bring it to a critique session. Pay for a professional critique. I admit that I am guilty of sending off a manuscript before it has reached its full potential. In fact, I've sent in a later version to an editor. (Editors don't like that.) With an assignment I don't have the luxury of time. I try my best, send the manuscript in by deadline, and my editor lets me know if more work is needed.

**PM:** In another life you were a children's librarian and a preschool teacher. Did those experiences inspire your writing and publishing journey? How did you get into the niches of educational and faith-

based publishing, and do you have any tips for writers who'd like to get into those specialized markets?

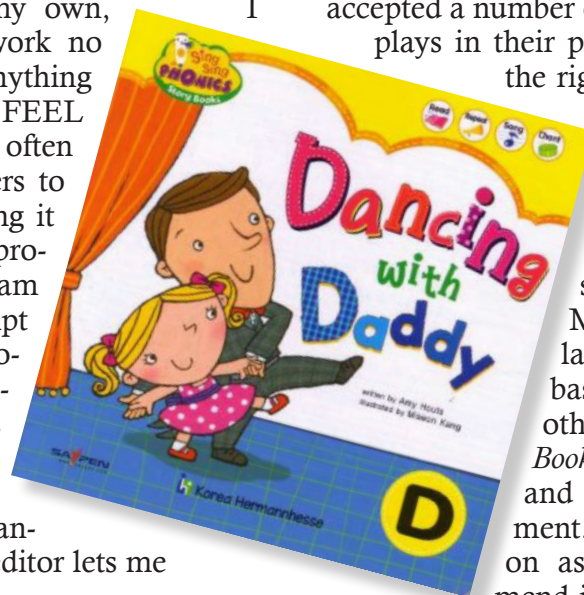
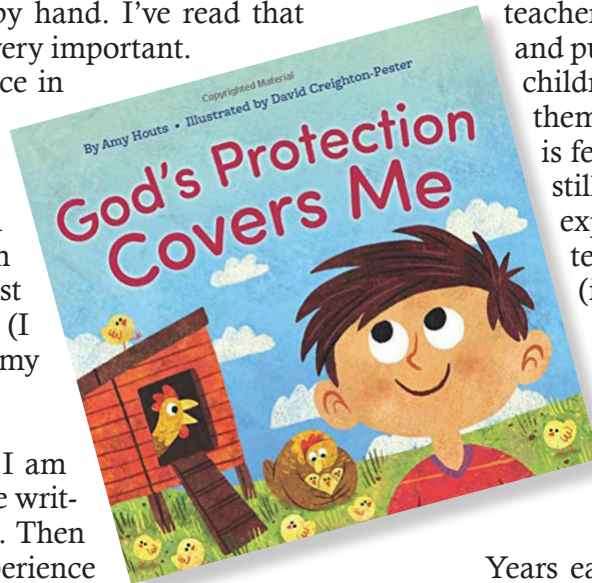
**AH:** Yes! Studying early childhood in college, working as a children's librarian, and as a preschool teacher absolutely inspired my writing and publishing journey. Observing young children, seeing what is important to them, and the dynamics of the group is fertile ground for ideas and stories. I still remember specific conversations, experiences, and struggles. I still love teaching children through my books (instead of the classroom).

My very first picture book was published by Christian publisher Standard Publishing in 1993. I was submitting manuscripts to both mainstream and faith-based publishers at the time.

Years earlier, Standard Publishing had offered my mom a contract on a picture book she had co-written. That was one reason I sent my Christmas-themed ABC book to them. I was fortunate—right place, right time. But having that writing credit lead to other publications. For years after, Standard accepted a number of my poems and a few children's plays in their program books. It is hard to find the right mix of teaching and story. In

fiction, a good story should always come first. If it teaches about acceptance or friendship or love, that's a bonus—and a good story usually does have something to tell us, a takeaway. My ABC book was the only freelance book published by a faith-based publisher until 2017. All the other faith-based (*BOZ the Bear's Big Book of Bible Fun*; *Active Bible Play*, and more) were written on assignment. If you are interested in writing on assignment (and I highly recommend it!) send your resume, a cover letter, and a writing sample to a publisher that gives assignments.

**PM:** As a mature writer, what is the one bit of advice you would have given your younger self? Does be-



*Amy Houts continued*

ing an older writer present more challenges? How do you keep your passion and enthusiasm going?

**AH:** My advice to my younger self would be to trust myself and my journey. I had so many doubts about writing—if it was the “right” thing for me to do, would I earn enough money to consider it worthwhile, should I spend time doing it? I found that I couldn’t stop writing, and if I would have known that earlier, it would have been easier psychologically.

Being an older writer is very freeing. The kids are grown and I can spend all day working if I want to. Having a good friend who is also a writer helps me keep a positive attitude. I think only another writer really knows how you feel. Reading and writing, my writers groups (Missouri Writers Guild and the SCBWI), attending conferences, reading about others' success, help my passion and enthusiasm. It doesn't get any easier to receive rejections.

**PM:** On your resume, you've also been a writing instructor. What were some common mistakes you saw in fledgling writers? What would you consider a constructive critique? Any advice on how to handle rejection?

**AH:** Common mistakes are telling, not showing. Writing a picture book in rhyme when prose would be better. Not bringing a scene to life with sensory details. A constructive critique is encouraging. A good editor lists things they like and ways to improve. A good editor gives examples, information, and instruction. A good editor focuses on a few specific aspects of a work and doesn't overwhelm a writer. I handle rejection by doing more market research and sending out a manuscript again. I try not to take it personally. There are so many reasons for a rejection. It doesn't mean your work is poorly written, only that they are not currently looking for that type of book. Chocolate is

helpful, too.

**PM:** Your website <http://www.amyhouts.com/> is very comprehensive. What makes for a good author's website? Are you active on social media?

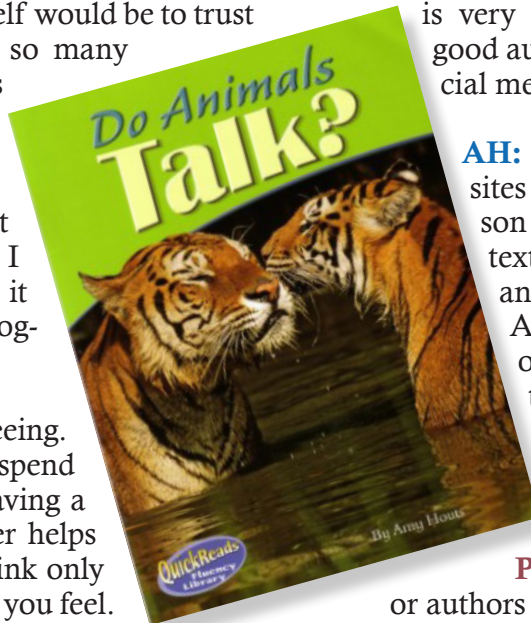
**AH:** Thank you. I like to see author websites that let a reader get to know the person a little better through photos and text, to see the books they've authored, and find out about their background. Activity packets/freebies are nice, too, or extending activities that relate to their books. I'm active on social media, "Author Amy Houts" on Facebook and @AmyHouts on Twitter and Instagram.

**PM:** What were your favorite books or authors growing up? What are you currently reading?

**AH:** For chapter books: Rumer Godden (*The Story of Holly and Ivy*, *Miss Happiness and Miss Flower*), Phyllis A Whitney (*The Mystery of the Green Cat*), Lois Lowry (*Number the Stars*), C.S. Lewis, (the *Chronicles of Narnia* series) Madeleine L'Engle (*A Wrinkle in Time*), E.L. Konisburg (*From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*), J.K. Rowling (the *Harry Potter* series), Louisa May Alcott (*Little Women*). For picture books: Margaret Wise Brown (*Goodnight Moon*), Russell Hoban (*Bedtime for Frances*), Else Holmelund Minarik (*Little Bear* books). Also, Esphyr Slobodkina (*Caps for Sale*), Ruth Kraus (*The Carrot Seed*), and Ezra Jack Keats (*The Snowy Day*).

**PM:** What do you like best about children's literature? What do you hope readers take away from your material?

**AH:** Children's literature transports me, stretches me, lifts me up. A really good story shows that all the intangibles (love, hope, faith, friendship, family) are what is important. I hope that readers are comforted by my picture book, *God's Protection Covers Me*. I hope my readers gain knowledge, wisdom, and joy.





# The Armchair MFA: How Cross-Genre Exploration Can ENRICH YOUR WRITING

by Candice Ransom

**W**hen I obtained my MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College (now VCFA) in 2004, the program focused on writing in our chosen field. Next, I entered the graduate children's literature program at Hollins University to earn an MA, still directed at the children's book industry. While I was a student at Hollins, I taught at Spalding University for a year in their MFA creative writing program.

Spalding's low-residency program covered poetry, nonfiction, fiction, children's books, and screenwriting. Each residency began with a book selection everyone read and discussed, regardless of their chosen genre. Students and faculty were encouraged to attend all lectures. It didn't take me long to realize that the interrelatedness of the arts would strengthen my children's writing. Poetry added lyricism, screenwriting helped my dialogue, nonfiction assisted my research.

At home due to Covid-19, I felt restless, unable to write or even read. Since I couldn't go to the library or bookstore, I turned to my own bookcases, pulling titles at random. I plucked *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings off the shelf, sat down, and settled into Depression-era Florida.

I found other Rawlings' books in my collection: *Cross Creek*, about her life as a writer in the Florida Scrub, her first novel, *South Moon Under*, a later children's book, *The Secret River*. A biography of Rawlings fell into my hands next, along with her cookbook, *Cross Creek Cookery*. That night, I watched the 1983 movie *Cross Creek* on DVD, including the interview with Mary Steenburgen, the actress who portrayed Rawlings.

Something in me stirred. I may have been shelter-

ing in place, but I was far from my suburban house. Mentally I moved to Cross Creek, where I could bake an almond cake, visit and write about the people who inhabited the Creek's green backwaters. By crossing genres, I sank deeply into a topic by combining biography, memoir, cookbook, novels, movie, even the interview. I understood the power of setting better, how to create characters from composites of real people, how to research new experiences and how those experiences can be worked into novels.

I had stumbled on a mini-MFA program without leaving my house. If you are feeling equally restless or uninspired, choose a subject and create your own armchair MFA program. You don't have to have a huge private library. There are plenty of resources on the internet.

For example, I've always been fascinated by Brian Selznick's illustrated novel, *Wonderstruck* (2011). It's a multi-layered book about the deaf culture, silent movies, New York City in the late 70s, museums, and wolves. How did Selznick build a project like that?

I turned to the *Wonderstruck* website and struck gold ([www.wonderstruckthebook.com](http://www.wonderstruckthebook.com)). First, under Essays, there are twelve excellent essays by experts on such book-related topics as "The Queens Museum of Art," "Painting Diorama Backgrounds," "Lightning Safety," and "The Gunflint Lake Region." Click on the Brian Selznick tab and you'll find his bio, other projects, and toy theater puppet shows that add another dimension to his art, a deeper understanding of how he found his way into *Wonderstruck*.

The News tab contains reviews, interviews, televi-

### *The Armchair MFA... continued*

sion appearances, teaching with Selznick's books, and his 2015 May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture. Pulling up YouTube offers a plethora of interviews.

And then there is *Wonderstruck* the movie, released in 2017. Selznick wrote the screenplay. The website provides a clip from the movie. You can buy the movie on DVD, or, if you're a member of Amazon Prime, watch it for free.

I'm sure more material exists, but there's enough here to create a mini-MFA on just one book through print, web, film, audio lectures, and traveling art exhibits. I learned how art creates words and words create art, how making projects by hand (such as a diorama or puppet theater) expands mental images into tangible objects, I learned how research acts as a springboard for plot and character, as well as world-building.

Do you have a favorite adult or childhood book? How much do you know about the author or how the book came to be? Explore it like an archeologist. Is the character partial to Mozart? Listen to Mozart. Is the book set in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? Study that huge, remote park on a map.

Pick a subject. Find out all you can about it without leaving home. Give yourself an education and rev up your writing in the process.

**SPECIAL REPORT:** *Creating An Effective Cover Letter**by Jonathan Schmidt, Associate Editor for Knopf Juvenile Books*

**T**he somewhat inverted logic of the cover letter is that while a professionally composed letter will not greatly improve the chances of your being published, a poorly written or carelessly conceived cover letter *will* create an unfavorable impression, and could hurt the chances of having your manuscript reviewed sympathetically.

An editor may glide over a cover letter in as few as twenty seconds. The key is to use the extremely limited time and space available in a cover letter profitably. Don't waste time by taking up time. Be brief. Be direct. Be precise.

The following is a random sampling of cover letter "low points." They are not extreme cases, but common, everyday mistakes that are easily avoided.

- Enthusiasm is fine, but temper your enthusiasm with common sense. Don't oversell yourself to an editor by promising something you probably can't deliver. At least three times a week a manuscript comes in from an author who is convinced it is "the next *Catcher in the Rye*." It never is. Do you think Salinger sent in *his* manuscript with a note comparing it to *Huckleberry Finn*?
- Don't lecture editors. Trust them to make responsible judgments. A cover letter drenched in superlatives sounds disingenuous. Don't use the cover letter to pitch the book or make exaggerated claims about it.
- One plaintive letter began: "Why aren't there any quality books for children anymore?" The author's intention might have been to suggest that *his* book was the

quality manuscript we were looking for, but the arrogance of his assumption is hard to ignore. We have published what we feel are very good books. Don't commit to print anything that could be misinterpreted.

- On a similar note, another author complains that "No editor in New York has the vision to recognize the quality of my work. That's why I am approaching you." Translation? Every editor in the world has rejected this manuscript, and you are my last chance.
- Upwards of 75% of the manuscripts that cross my desk come with testimonials from children who have read—or who have been forced to read—the material in question. It may seem like a good idea to mention in a cover letter that "little Bobby" loved your manuscript. Very few children have the heart, though, to tell you what they really think. What might be of more interest is if you asked the child how vigorously he would pester his parents to *buy* the book at \$14.95!
- We have a large and well-paid sales force whose only job is to sell books. Don't waste space in a cover letter outlining *your* plans for what *you* think will be a successful marketing campaign. Limit yourself to getting your manuscript published.
- It may be tempting in a cover letter to suggest that, for instance, ten years' experience as an elementary school teacher qualifies you to write for children. In-



deed, it may be that your profession is an advantage. But never imply that it *qualifies* you to write. Talent is what qualifies a person to write. No editor I ever knew read a manuscript on the strength of a writer's career description. So use that information sparingly.

- It is also not necessary to explain in any detail what you hope your manuscript will do—or what your reasons might have been for writing it. Avoid sentimental appeals that may sound genuine but really mean nothing: “I’ve always loved books.” “I’ve always loved children.” So what? Similarly, don’t sour an editor with a dreary monologue on the depressing issues of teenage illiteracy, drugs, broken families, MTV, or the like. What an editor wants to know quickly is what the manuscript is about and what age group it’s targeted to.

A cover letter is designed to introduce an editor to the general themes of a manuscript and a brief—very brief—synopsis of the plot. Biographical information may be a plus if it bears directly on the manuscript. And of course any mention of previously published works is helpful in building credibility. But in general you should restrict yourself to providing essential information only. Keep your tone professional. Do not try to impress an editor with your literary pedigree. The impression you make on an editor should be relatively neutral. What you do not want to do is create a negative impression.

Always proofread for appearance and grammar. Check the accuracy of job titles. A courtesy to an editor is to research the publishing house before submitting your manuscript. Know what kinds of books the house pub-

lishes. And if possible, find out which editor worked on what books. Don’t send an editor a picture book manuscript if his/her specialty is young adult non-fiction. No matter how good your cover letter might be, if the material is wrong you’ve wasted time—the editor’s and yours. Don’t feel you have to *sell* yourself in a cover letter. Quality has a natural buoyancy, and a good manuscript will sell itself. With the hundreds of manuscripts editors are required to plough through each week, it may seem difficult that any could be reviewed with the care and attentive spirit you might hope for. But for the most part, they are. Consider the cover letter, then, the appetizer. It cannot, and should not, do more than whet the appetite.

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#### ***Points to remember when submitting your manuscript to a publisher***

- The manuscript should be typed, double-spaced. Avoid sending pages with too many errors crossed out or corrected, and check spelling.
- The manuscript pages should be clean. Pages containing coffee stains, rips or bent edges need to be re-copied.
- Be sure your name, address and *phone number* is on the cover letter and on the first page of the manuscript. Editors need to contact you quickly if they want to make an offer on your book.
- Number the pages of your manuscript, and make sure the pages are in order before sending it out.
- *Always* include a return envelope with postage. If you don't want the manuscript returned, mention that in the cover letter.

***NEXT MONTH:*** An interview with best selling author Judy Blume