

CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER

The Children's Writing Monthly  July, 2020

Mastering the Essential
Building Block Of Good
Writing:

THE SENTENCE.

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**

olswanger literary agency

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This issue's contributors

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

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

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/>

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>

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>

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901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838.
mail@CBIClubhouse.com
<http://www.writeforkids.org>

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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

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At Presstime:

Publisher Seeking Contemporary Young Adult Romance

Crush is one of Entangled Publishing's teen romance imprints, focusing on engaging first-love stories set during the characters' teen years. Looking for stories that feature romance along with never-ending drama, ranging from funny to emotional to dark.

Manuscripts should be a contemporary romance featuring characters who are 16-18 years old, 45-60k words in length, and contain at least one strong primary trope and two secondary tropes to the plot (i.e. boy/girl next door, ugly duckling evolves into the swan, opposites attract, wrong side of the tracks, best friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, mistaken identity, etc.) Stories must follow the traditional category story arc focused on the romance with high conflict and high tension. Stories should alternate point of view between the two characters involved in the romance. Third-person point of view is preferred, though not required. Diverse characters are a plus, and any type of romance (M/F, M/M, and F/F) is welcome. Sex is allowed in the stories, but nothing graphic. The tone can be anything from light and funny to heavy and dark, and moving from lighter tones to heavier tones is fine.

Authors are encouraged to study current Crush titles before submitting (go to <https://entangledpublishing.com/> and click on the Crush imprint at the bottom of the home page). Submit the full manuscript with a synopsis through Submittable at <https://entangledpublishing.submittable.com/submit/31407/teen-crush>

Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages that Focus on US Hispanic Culture

Piñata Books, an imprint of Arte Público Press, is dedicated to the publication of children's and young adult literature focusing on US Hispanic culture. Titles range from bilingual picture books (containing both English and Spanish text) to bilingual "flip" books for chapter book, middle grade and young adult readers (complete English text in one half of book, then book can be flipped over and read with complete Spanish text), as well as informative nonfiction and entertaining novels for middle grade and young adults in English. All books accurately reflect themes, characters and customs unique to US Hispanic culture. See current titles at <https://artepublicopress.com/pinata-books/>

All submissions are considered in either English or Spanish. The publisher will provide a translator if necessary. For fiction, submit the entire manuscript. Nonfiction submissions may consist of a query letter and sample chapters. Find the publisher's online submission form at <https://artepublicopress.com/manuscript-submission-form/>. Response time is 2-4 months for queries and proposals, and 3-6 months for manuscripts.

Small Press Seeks Board Book and Picture Book Submissions

Baobab Press is a small, independent publisher located in Reno, NV, that publishes books for children and adults. Baobab seeks books that communicate and support their themes through new and well-articulated means, as well as literary work with a strong sense of place at its core. Anything new or inventive is of interest.

In children's books, Baobab is currently seeing picture books and board books, fiction and nonfiction. Open to working with authors and author-illustrators. Submit the manuscript at <https://baobabpress.submittable.com/submit>. Simultaneous submissions are welcome as long as you inform Baobab immediately upon acceptance elsewhere. Go to <https://baobabpress.com/> to learn more about Baobab and see recent titles.

Picture Book Summit Early Bird Registration is Open

The Sixth Annual Picture Book Summit, the original online conference focused entirely on writing picture books, is now open for Early Bird registrations. Co-founders Laura Backes and Jon Bard (of CBI), Julie Hedlund, Katie Davis and Emma Walton Hamilton are offering a streamlined, more affordable program this year called Picture Book Summit Special Edition, featuring three award-winning keynote speakers: author/illustrator Sophie Blackall, author/illustrator Peter H. Reynolds, and author Lesa Cline-Ransome. Two additional workshops will be presented by Betsy Bird (author/librarian/blogger) and agent Adriana Dominguez. The theme is **Finding Your Voice**. The workshop streams live on October 3, 2020, and replays will be available to registrants through January 2021. Early Bird price for the entire day (including live Q&A sessions), plus access to full replays, is \$147. For details about each presenter's workshop, go to <https://picturebooksummit.com/program-2/> To register at the Early Bird price (available until August 12), go to <https://picturebooksummit.com/2020-registration/>

General-Interest Magazine for Tween Girls Accepting Submissions

Girls' Life is a glossy bimonthly magazine for girls ages 10-15 with features on style, fitness, relationships, life issues, books, recipes and quizzes. Seeking short stories (2500-3500 words) as well as personal essays, general interest articles for feature sections, how-to, humorous articles on lifestyle topics for tween girls, interviews, inspirational pieces, advice articles on friendship/family relationships/school issues, quizzes, recipes and decorating ideas. Most articles run 700-2000 words. Pays \$350 for a regular column piece, \$500 for a feature. Send seasonal material at least five months in advance.

Query first with a summary of your article idea or a synopsis of your story. Every query should have a title, blurb and byline. Author's complete name, address, phone number and email address must be provided on submission. Referrals for art sources are appreciated, if applicable (captions, identification of subjects, and model releases required for any photos the author is providing). All research must rely on primary sources. Manuscripts (if requested) must be accompanied by a complete list of sources, telephone numbers and reference materials, if applicable.

Queries may be sent to Karen Bokram, Editor and Publisher, *Girls' Life* magazine, at writeforGL@girlslife.com. Responds to queries within 90 days (keep response time in mind for submissions of seasonal material). Before submitting, it's essential to study several back issues of *Girls' Life* to get a sense of the magazine's tone and style, as well as content. Go to <https://www.girlslife.com/> to see what's in the current issue, as well as sample articles.

New Agent Accepting Middle Grade/YA Submissions

Jemiscoe Chambers-Black is a new Associate Agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency (www.andreabrownlit.com). She is currently building her list of middle grade and young adult writers. In middle grade, Jemiscoe is most interested in contemporary manuscripts. They can focus on hard themes, but she enjoys those that also weave in humor, whimsy, adventure, and wonder. She's also open to fantasy, which can include paranormal, low fantasy, and magical realism. Horror, mystery, and graphic novels are also of interest.

In YA, Jemiscoe would love to see romance, especially rom-coms. She loves contemporary fiction that deals with friendship—its joys and struggles. She would also like to see fantasy (except high fantasy), mystery and horror.

She is especially open to BIPOC and LGBTQ voices and stories in all the above categories.

Query with a synopsis and the first 10 pages of your manuscript at <https://querymanager.com/query/1851>

Vintage CBI: Feb. 2002

From the Editor

Dear Reader:

This morning I accompanied my son's kindergarten class on a field trip to watch the Olympic torch as it passed through Fort Collins. The excursion was the brainchild of the school's principal, who felt the kids shouldn't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The kindergartners felt differently.

I'm sure attitudes would have been better if there wasn't eight inches of fresh snow on the ground and temperatures in the teens. And the fact that the snow delayed the torch's appearance by half an hour didn't help. The fifth and sixth graders probably liked getting an hour away from class, but the significance of this historic event was lost on the younger kids. Most of Matthew's class doesn't even know what the Olympics is, and "torch" isn't in their everyday vocabulary.

Nevertheless, the teachers and parents led over 400 students through five snow-packed blocks and across busy College Avenue to wait, praying that no one hurled themselves into oncoming traffic. Finally, after many complaints of frozen toes and empty stomachs, flashing lights appeared down the street. The procession of police cars and Coca-Cola floats perked the kids up, but the runner bearing the torch was sandwiched between two tall gray vans carrying Olympic committee officials. Though Matthew gamely waved his official Coca-Cola "I Saw the Flame" flag, I have a feeling he missed seeing the actual flame. Then came the ultimate disappointment: We weren't riding back on school buses as planned, but walking. Since Matthew walks to school every day, the chance to ride on a bus was really the only reason he agreed to come out in the cold in the first place.

As we scurried back to school, I overheard two girls talking about the morning. One turned to her friend and, with typical six-year-old drama, said, "This was the worst morning of both of our lives." As I choked back a laugh, I wondered who the field trip had really been for after all.

Adults often expose children to experiences or ideas because they want to expand children's horizons. Sometimes, this is a good thing. But in life, as in writing children's books, the adult must take the age of the child into consideration. Young children are very "me" centered; history and tradition are only relevant if they impact the child's daily life in a positive way. If the child is inconvenienced, the lesson is annoying. I admit to feeling a mixture of patriotism and awe as the runner jogged by with the torch; Matthew only wanted hot chocolate.

Authors often write children's books because they have something to say about life that they feel children need to hear. It's fine to pass on wisdom, values, or common sense lessons, but before you do, think about whether the child is ready to hear them. Not every message will make sense to young children, and others they won't even care to hear. Children need a certain amount of life experience within which to place the information they receive from books. If you try to teach them something they can't put to use right away, it won't have any relevance to their lives.

Another thing to keep in mind is the way you convey the lesson. Instead of approaching a topic from your own adult point of view, put yourself inside the child's head. Don't start with the moral of the story; think about the process with which this moral was learned. After all, kids ask "Why?" and "How?" more often than "What?"

After we returned to Matthew's school, one of the torchbearers visited his class. The kids got to hold the torch, see the holes where the flame came out, ask the legally-blind woman how she jogged down an icy street without falling down. This was something personal they could touch. This was impressive.

And much warmer.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

Use the Scene/Sequel Structure to Create an *Active Protagonist*

by Hilari Bell

A common mistake among writers, many of them well past the beginner stage, is to assume that if your main character is in the middle of really dramatic events then the story is dramatic—even if all she does is witness and report what she sees. Just as they assume that if their protagonist runs around swinging a sword at everything that moves their character is active—even if he never makes a plan, or launches any of those sword fights in order to achieve his goals. And writers of all genres seem to be downright allergic to having their character sit down and think about what they want to accomplish, and make a plan to accomplish it!

This makes their characters the fictional equivalent of the people who plan to get out of debt by winning the lottery—and they usually do win their fictional lottery, being rescued by chance, or having some other character solve their problems for them. But people whose problems are solved by a lottery win—whether it takes the form of the cool boy liking you, or being crowned king—will never be respected by the reader. In fact, that reader will probably have given up and put down the book in disgust, because the protagonist is just running around in circles witnessing things (and usually being given lots of help by other characters) instead of doing something themselves to solve their problems.

Scene/sequel is a basic, and well-known technique of dramatic structure. Here's how it works: Main Character acquires an overarching story goal in the beginning. After that, she goes into every scene with a short-term goal that she tries to accomplish in that scene. This short-term goal is usually in aid of accomplishing her overarching story goal, but not always. Books (anything more complex than a picture book or easy reader) are usually richer if the MC wants more than one thing in life—hence sub-plots. And it's fine for the MC to set out for goal A, reach that goal, and then decide that what they wanted all along was B—and now that they have A, goal B will be even harder to reach. But whether it's a lesser, sub-plot goal, or a short-term goal in aid of the overarching goal, she has something she attempts to ac-

complish in that scene, and both she and the reader know what that goal is and how she plans to get it.

Then in the course of the scene, obstacles arise that prevent the MC from reaching her goal—she fails. Watching the MC struggle to reach that short-term goal in each scene is the main source of dramatic tension in any story. And her failure is what ratchets up the tension and the stakes.

There will also be times when MC succeeds in reaching her scene goal—but when she does, success doesn't complete her story goal, and she now has a bunch more stuff she needs to accomplish in order to get what she wants.

After every scene there will be a short sequel. The sequels are generally much shorter than the scenes, but they are absolutely essential because they're what holds the story together, maintains dramatic tension, and makes your character work—because the sequel is where they decide what to do next.

Sequels can be done in summary instead of the story “now,” or they can be done with laid out action and dialog, just like a scene. The four steps in a sequel are:

- Emotion, where the MC reacts to the failure in the preceding scene.
- Thought, where she evaluates what the failure meant to her ability to reach her goal.
- Decision, where she figures out what she needs to do next, since the last attempt failed.
- The beginning of Action, which is actually the beginning of the next scene in which she does whatever she decided to do...and that fails in turn, leading to another sequel, leading to another scene, etc.

Sequels, particularly in action novels, are sometimes so short as to be almost invisible. “Bob didn't make

Use the Scene/Sequel Structure...continued

it through! We've got to...." is as long as some sequels need to be. Some sequels, where the main character reflects on the nature and value of their goals and doubts their ability to ever reach them, can be far longer. Frequently (though not always) the sequel is where character growth takes place, because that's where characters generally make their decisions. And that's where they show off the determination to proceed in the face of all obstacles that makes them ultimately the hero.

It's also both how and why your character goes from passive to active, because the sequels are where they think, and establish short and long term goals—instead of running around aimlessly while the story happens to them.

For an example of how this works, let me break down part a story:

Scene: Main Character learns that her parents are planning to move to a dog-free building, so Muffy will have to go. She complains furiously, but parents are adamant—this house is too expensive and they need to be closer to their jobs. She bursts into tears and flees the room, Muffy clasped in her arms.

Sequel: MC resolves to keep Muffy, whatever the cost. But parents are determined to move, so what can she do? Maybe she could find an apartment where they could be near their jobs that would allow a dog. If she can find one, she could talk them into moving there instead!

Scene: She goes to apartment buildings in the area, but all of them have a no-dogs sign on their doors. She finally goes into one and tracks down the super to ask why everyone hates dogs, and he tells her that the mayor has passed a new city ordinance that all buildings in the city must be dog-free.

Sequel: With this new law, there's no way she can find a building that will take Muffy! How hateful and unfair this is. Surely other people who want to keep their dogs must be as angry about this as she is. And mayors are elected—the have to bow to political pressure...but how to raise some? Everyone in town reads the Booyaboo Gazette!

Scene: She writes a letter to the paper arguing against the ordinance, and it gets a big response...from readers, but not from the mayor, who responds with a public statement that dogs are as bad for people who have allergies as cigarette smoke—and how many people want smoking back in public buildings?

Sequel: Dogs aren't cigarettes! They do good, not harm, for everyone who isn't allergic. Clearly more pressure is needed. If protestors in Egypt could bring down a dictator, surely protests can convince an ordinary mayor to change his mind.

Scene: She starts a Twitter account, publicizes it through the paper, and organizes a demonstration in front of the city hall....

These are just a few story beats, but you see how the MC's decisions lead right into action? And how those chains of decision/action/decision/action move the plot forward? And how tension is generated by both her failures and her successes, as the positive response to her letter in the paper forces the mayor to push back?

In any book there will be some exceptions to straight scene/sequel structure, where the MC is in pursuit of her main story goal. You may have sub-plot/lesser goals that she also tries to attain, and that end with success either shortly before or shortly after the climax.

In most novels there will also be a few "character building" scenes where the MC isn't pursuing a goal but just living and dealing with the people around her—and how many of those scenes there are depends on what kind of story you're writing. Character-based problem novels can get by with more of them. Action novels—mystery, fantasy, science fiction—use fewer. But whatever genre you're writing, you should be aware that in scenes where your MC isn't pursuing a defined goal story tension will slacken. In scenes where she is pursuing a goal it will pick up. So even in character-based stories, you probably want to limit those scenes—because another term for story tension is suspense.

Another exception to standard scene sequel/structure is the beginning of the story, where the character is in the process of acquiring a main story goal, and the climax, where they finally achieve that main story goal. And it's their previous failures, watching them struggle, revise their plan and struggle again, that makes their final victory matter to the reader.

But even if your plot demands a number of exceptions to strict scene/sequel structure—and it will!—scenes are the bones of the story, and sequels are the ligaments that not only hold those bones together, but let them move the body of the story forward... and sometimes even make it dance.

BARBARA KRASNER

WRITER and AGENT

OLSWANGER LITERARY LLC

interview by Lynne Marie

Many of us know agent Barbara Krassner first and foremost as the author of a fabulous picture book biography, *Goldie Takes a Stand: Golda Meir's First Crusade* (with art by Kelsey Garrity-Riley, Kar-Ben Publishing). But her qualifications as both an agent and author go far beyond that. She has an MBA in marketing from Rutgers University and experience as a professional copywriter. For many years she coordinated an annual conference for authors and illustrators who wrote to Jewish themes and led workshops for the Highlights Foundation on writing Jewish-themed books. She also serves on the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. In addition, she runs the blog *The Whole Megillah - The Writer's Resource for Jewish-themed Story: Fiction, Non-fiction, and Poetry* and the online Writing Chai Studio, and is an adjunct writing professor at William Paterson University. She's also a poet, having authored the anthologies *Chicken Fat* and *Pounding Cobblestone*. Her middle grade novel in verse, *37 Days at Sea*, about the doomed 1939 voyage of the MS St. Louis is due out from Kar-Ben/Lerner in Spring 2021. Her work has appeared in magazines for adults and children, and she's published several nonfiction books for adults on historical topics.

LYNNE MARIE: I'm excited to mine your experience! Please share about your job as a copywriter. What skills from that job carried over into writing for magazines, picture books, history, or poetry?

BARBARA KRASNER: Copywriting gave me an appreciation of the impact of a single word and the power of revision. Corporate life—I spent 30 years as a director of marketing—also taught me how to write under pressure, incorporate feedback, have a thick skin, and keep ideas coming.



LM: What are a few of the most important things you learned from your degree in marketing that you use in your profession today?

BK: My degree in marketing was granted in 1983. Much if not everything has changed since then. But I would say it's all about the audience, the recipient. Not what you want to sell, but what someone wants to buy (even though they may not yet know it).

LM: How did you take your “first step” into children’s writing? What was your breakthrough?

BK: I had an epiphany while recovering from bacterial meningitis over the course of two weeks in the hospital. I decided to write for children. I wrote very badly as I pitched articles on spec to children’s magazines. Then I received a promotional package from the Highlights Foundation to attend its weeklong workshop at Chautauqua. I attended in 2000 and launched my career in writing for children.

LM: I understand that the wonderful Carolyn Yoder of Highlights/Boyd's Mills Press (now Boyd's Mills Kane Press) was your Mentor at the Highlights Foundation Workshop when you attended. What was the best piece of advice she ever gave you?

BK: Indeed, the best part of the workshop was meeting Carolyn! The best advice she gave me was keep trying. Keep your name in front of that editor. When one idea doesn't work out, try another.

LM: In *Goldie*, the subject character Golda Meir became famous as an adult. How did you make the topic accessible to children?

Barbara Krasner continued

BK: In *Goldie*, Golda is only nine years old. The idea came from reading her autobiography where she discussed her fundraising event to raise money for kids' textbooks in Milwaukee.

LM: What is your best advice for writing short in picture books? In nonfiction? For finding your voice?

BK: It took many tries for me to get the voice right in *Goldie*. And then I just heard Golda's voice. The narrative had to be in first person. My advice for writing short is to first make sure you have something that deserves short. That the story isn't crying out to be a novel or a longer nonfiction narrative.

LM: What are your thoughts on books about the Holocaust in children's literature? I've read that some publishers do not want to see more submissions on this theme. By the way, I am grateful for the database you've cultivated Holocaust Kidlit Database, <https://www.holocaustkidlit.com/search-holocaust-kidlit-database/>. If someone wanted to overcome this challenge, what would be your advice to them?

BK: I will vehemently argue with anyone that the market is absolutely not oversaturated. Only 300 or so books about the Holocaust (not including self-published or educational series titles) have been published in North America between 2002 and 2016. I have the numbers to prove all this from my database. I will also argue that so many stories have yet to be told. My doctoral dissertation will use content and regression analysis to show a shift over time from death camp narratives to those of resistance and rescue. These are stories that still need to be told and there are geographies yet to be covered. The Holocaust affected Jews far outside Germany and Poland. Kathy Kacer recently wrote *The Brave Princess and Me* (Second Story Press, 2019) about Princess Alice of Greece helping Jewish refugees. That's an example of a narrative that deserves to be heard.

It is important for all to recognize that books like *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, for instance, are not recommended for use in the classroom. It is not a true story and it is not based on a true story. There are so many other worthwhile choices. That's what my Holocaust kidlit database is all about. I'll be up-

dating it this summer.

LM: What would be your advice to authors wanting to write Jewish books on a topic other than the Holocaust? What would you, as an agent, like to see in this genre?

BK: I am an advocate for Holocaust narratives, but I am a stickler for historical accuracy in any narrative. I'd like to see more postwar narratives. How did displaced persons settle in? Or a displaced person in Israel or in South America? What did it mean to be a Jew in America in the nineteenth century? Eighteenth?

LM: What would you, as an agent, like to see outside of this genre?

BK: I do have a penchant for Holocaust and Jewish-themed narratives for children and adults, but I also am very interested in novels in verse, whether contemporary or historical. But here, too, I expect more than prose with line breaks. I expect authors to really know and understand poetic form.

LM: It appears from your extensive non-fiction backlist that you do a lot of work-for-hire. Can you explain to our readers a little bit about this type of writing and what it entails? How would a work-for-hire contract differ (in general terms) from a traditional contract?

BK: It's much shorter! Little is negotiable in the contract. Work-for-hire opportunities come typically from educational publishing companies, e.g., Lerner, Capstone, Rosen. They offer a flat fee to a freelance writer. The writer receives a byline but no royalties. There are usually stringent specifications, for instance, leveled vocabulary and sentence construction, and short time frames. Some writers are able to find enough opportunities to work full-time. Others can't. It's all about connection with the editor and timing. I once received a group email from an editor before I stepped into a radiologist's office. By the time I was done, all the opportunities were grabbed.

LM: Would work-for-hire opportunities be something that an agent would generally arrange for a



Barbara Krasner continued

client, or a client would get on their own? Would the contracts be something that you would typically represent as an agent?

BK: An agent is certainly not necessary for securing work-for-hire opportunities nor would a writer want one. The pay cannot accommodate agent commission.

LM: Please tell us a little bit about your position at Olswanger Literary and your job as an agent. How did you come to this position? What genres do you typically represent?

BK: I represent contemporary and historical fiction and nonfiction for both children and adults. The most important element is that a story moves me. If I cry, that's a great sign. I asked Anna in 2017 for an internship. I started as an associate in 2018. I became a full agent in 2019.

LM: Tell us a little bit about *The Passover Mouse* by your client Joy Nelkin Weider that was published this past January. Why did this book stand out for you?

BK: The book that became *The Passover Mouse* had already been selected by the PJ Library (<https://pjlibrary.org/>) and that was an important selling point to Random House. It was based on a Talmudic story and has a universal value to it. Plus, there was a mouse.

LM: You've also sold two middle grades recently, *Backyard Boys* by Karen Poklas and *Everywhere Blue* by Joanne Rossmassler Fritz. What exactly do you look for when reviewing novel submissions?

BK: Overall in a novel I look for a credible plot, believable characters, and lots of tension. *Backyard Boys* is a historical novel based in the 1970s. Karen captured that time and was able to show the intimacy of a family, of a group of boys, and a community against a backdrop of antisemitism. *Everywhere Blue* is a contemporary novel in verse about a brother who disappears. Joanne's writing just moved me—and I cried.

LM: If there were five words to describe the “spirit” of your submissions, what would they be?

BK: Provocative, emotional, accurate, clean (no typos or grammar issues), confident.

LM: What advice would you have for a client who is stuck on a manuscript? Or thinks they may be experiencing writer's block?

BK: I actually don't believe in writer's block. I would suggest that anyone who seems to be stuck engage in free writing, or as the late Ellen Levine used to tell me, “Take your character out for coffee.” I also firmly believe in the Amherst Writers & Artists method (<https://amherstwriters.org/>). Writers can check that website for local sessions, many of which are now conducted via Zoom. The method involves writing to timed prompts and that can be very helpful to a “stuck” writer.

LM: Please share your wish list.

BK: That's a good question. My main wish is that writers don't feel compelled to look for representation too soon. Many submissions I receive just aren't ready for prime time. Take courses, use proofreaders or copyeditors. I want to read stories no one has told before, and I want the author to have some sort of connection to the material.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Barbara Krasner is providing an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. She's accepting contemporary and historical fiction and nonfiction manuscripts from picture books through young adult. For picture books, email a query letter and attach the full manuscript as a Word doc or pdf. For middle grade and young adult, email a query letter and attach the first chapter (Word doc or pdf). Send to barbara@olswangerliterary.com and put “**CBI**” in the subject line along with the type of submission (CBI—historical picture book). **This submission opportunity runs until July 31, 2020.** Before submitting, take a look at the Olswanger Literary site (<https://www.olswanger.com>) to get a sense of the books the agency represents.

SENTENCES

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF BOOKS

by Jane McBride

Books are built out of chapters, chapters out of scenes, scenes out of paragraphs, and paragraphs out of sentences. The lowly sentence is sometimes taken for granted, but it is the basis of everything else when it comes to writing.

In school, we learned of the basic types of sentences. We also learned of the difference structure of sentences. Let's quickly review them now.

SENTENCE TYPES:

A *declarative* sentence makes a statement. It is great for giving information and can be employed effectively in straightforward transitions.

An *interrogative* sentence asks a question. Questions enliven dialogue, both inner dialogue and spoken dialogue.

An *exclamatory* sentence shows great emotion. Surprise, anger, joy, and other emotions find a home in this type of sentence; however, be wary of overusing exclamation points. They can grow repetitive and lose their impact.

An *imperative* sentence voices an order. Imperative sentences can show urgency; they can also show the status between two characters. A grandmother, accustomed to acting in an imperial manner, may say to her young grandson, "Bring me a glass of milk."

What about sentence structure?

The *simple sentence* employs the one subject/one predicate construction:

Her heart ached at his desertion.

Now examine this sentence:

Ashley won the state title in gymnastics and also won the all-around best female athlete at her high school.

What is the structure of this sentence? It is still a simple sentence, though it has two predicates.

A *compound sentence* contains two subjects and two predicates connected by a conjunction. Compound sentences work well to connect two related thoughts.

Ashley won the state title in gymnastics and her sister Jenae won state in cross-country.

A *complex sentence* is formed by connecting an independent or main clause and a dependent or subordinate one. An independent clause can stand alone; a dependent clause cannot stand alone. These sentences can be used effectively to compare and contrast feelings, such as in the example below. Complex sentences often use such words as *however*, *though*, *although*, and *while*.

Though fourteen-year-old Darrin liked going camping with his friends, he didn't like camping with his family.

The *compound-complex sentence* uses a conjunction to connect the two main clauses, plus a subordinate one.

Johnny didn't finish his homework, but his sister Amelia did, despite the fact that she had far more homework than Johnny did.

Why is it important to be able to identify and to use the various types and structures of sentences?

Sentences continued

When you understand how to compose sentences, you can make them work for you. One of the most important functions of sentences is to affect mood. How can we, as authors, employ different types and structures of sentences to affect mood and the tone of a scene?

Sentences can build suspense, a plus at a scene or chapter ending.

The following is a brief excerpt from my work-in-progress:

It was then that he heard it. Not the ominous ticking of exploding bombs in vintage movies. No, it was a high-pitched frequency with which he had become intimately familiar during his time in EOD. Explosive ordnance disposal had trained his senses to pick up on the faintest of sounds.

Where was it?

The whirring noise picked up its pace, and realization set in. He'd accelerated the timer by sitting on the bed. The bomb must be between the mattress and box springs.

No time to think. No time for anything but to move.

He propelled himself off the bed and crashed through the window just as the bomb exploded.

Heat.

Pain.

Blackness.

(This is a chapter ending and earned a "good job" from my editor.)

Notice the different types and structures of sentences used. Declarative sentences are broken up with a question. Sentence fragments mix with compound and complex sentences. Pay particularly attention to the last three lines. All three are sentences, albeit incomplete ones. That they contain only one word apiece doesn't lessen their import. By using only

one word, they emphasize the sensations the hero is experiencing: (heat, pain, blackness). Notice that each of these very short sentences are given a paragraph of their own. They would lose impact if they are written in one line: Heat. Pain. Blackness.

What if I had written the following?

He registered heat.

He felt pain.

He was in blackness.

The information is the same, but the sentences are bland, even boring. They impart no urgency or tension. Remember: it is not only the content of your writing that is important; it is the way you write it: word choice, sentence length, sentence structure.

Sentences affect pacing.

Short, sharp sentences speed up pacing, while longer, more flowing sentences slow it down. Both have their places. Compare the two examples below:

Run! Don't stop! Safety!

The boy knew he wasn't safe for long. But for now, he could rest. A minute. Maybe two. Then he would run. Again.

She felt the tension leave her, mind and body, with every stroke of the brush. One, two, three ... she ran the brush through her hair with the same softness she would use in stroking her calico kitten. Such peace and contentment filled her that even when she reached a hundred strokes, she didn't stop. How could she? She needed this, much as she needed a long drink of cold water after working out.

Do you feel the differences between the two examples? The first evokes urgency, even danger. The second gives a sense of quiet, perhaps after a prolonged period of tension.

*Sentences continued**Sentences affect tension.*

Let's look at two ways the same event could be written:

The water reached higher. And higher. First to his ankles. Quickly, far too quickly, to his knees. Soon, it would be to his waist, his chest, his neck. And then ... Mike knew the choices. Could he scale the slippery walls of the cave and find a rock to cling to until the tide receded? Or did he take his chances in the water? Climb or swim?

Swim!

Mike examined his choices as water filled the cave at an alarmingly rapid rate. He computed the analytics of which choice was more likely to save his life. He could climb to the highest point in the cave and pray the water didn't reach it. Or he could take his chances with swimming into the rushing ocean. He didn't like either choice. He wasn't a strong swimmer. He decided to swim anyway.

Which paragraph or paragraphs heightened the tension? I hope you picked the paragraphs in the first version. The sentences varied not only in length but also in structure and type. There were sentence fragments along with very brief sentences and longer ones. Questions were posed. The final paragraph was a single word, not only denoting his choice but also the finality of it. There'd be no going back.

In the second version, the sentences all had the same structure: subject/predicate. They each began, save one, with the character's name or "he." The lack of variation in the types (all the sentences were declarative) and structure of the sentences became repetitive, toning down the tension until the life-and-death situation was condensed to a math problem. Even the word choice—*examined*, *computed*, *like* reduced the tension. The main character, Mike, seems detached from the problem, leaving the reader also detached.

Sentences can affect dialogue and give it greater meaning.

"Come any closer and I'll knock you into next week."

Sam didn't pay any attention to Trent's warning. His brother was always spouting off that way. Sam knew Trent wasn't going to hurt him; he also knew that Trent was hurting inside. Ever since his girlfriend died in a car accident, Trent had been depressed and that depression came out in anger.

Sam reached for his brother, but Trent held up a warning hand.

"Didn't you hear me? I said to back off!"

"I heard you. But I can't back off." Sam had to swallow back the tears in his throat. "Because I love you."

Could you feel the anger in Trent's voice? Could you also feel Sam's worry and love for his brother? Did you note the different types and structures of sentences used?

IN CONCLUSION

Using the various types and structures of sentences gives your writing not only variety but verve. Experiment with using short and long sentences, as well as simple and complex to show the mood of your characters and of the story as a whole.

A DEEP DIVE INTO



with CHARLOTTE TAYLOR

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

On February 14 each year, Cybils Awards winners are announced. The Cybils Awards (Children’s and Young Adult Blogger’s Literary Awards, <http://www.cybils.com/>) recognizes the children’s and young adult authors and illustrators whose books combine the highest literary merit and popular appeal, as judged by a panel of children’s publishing book bloggers. As a blogger myself, I always look forward to reading the list of winners and then reading their books if I haven’t already. I knew a bit about the awards (I’ve had friends who have participated in the judging process), but I wanted to take a deep dive, learn more, and share that information with CBI readers. Charlotte Taylor was my go-to for everything you and I need to know. Charlotte is an archaeologist by day, volunteer for the Friends of a small New England library by night, and an avid reader. Charlotte is also heavily involved with the Cybils Awards, both as a category chair and as secretary of the Board of Directors. She graciously and thoroughly answered my many questions, and agreed to let me share them here with all of you. Charlotte’s enthusiasm for books and the Cybils are contagious, and if you’re not careful, you’ll find yourself ready to apply to judge next year’s awards!

KIMBERLY HUTMACHER: Could you share a bit about the history of The Cybils Awards? Who founded it and why? What niche does it fill in children’s book awards?

CHARLOTTE TAYLOR: The Cybils Awards were co-founded by two bloggers, Kelly Herold and Anne Boles Levy in 2006, to address the gap they saw between the “high-end awards” given by the American Library Association (like the Newberry and Caldecott Awards), and awards given with less rigorous criteria. Anyone can nominate the books they love, so there’s a public side to the Cybils, but the actual judging is done by committed readers

and reviewers who have tremendous knowledge of the books and their audiences. The Cybils Awards are given in a wider range of categories than other awards, from picture books and early readers to poetry and YA, and the shortlists of 5-7 books generated for each category are a valuable resource for anyone looking for good books for kids and teens.

KH: When and how did you become involved? What have your roles been?

CT: I first became involved as a panelist in 2007, when I was still a rather shy and new book blogger. It seemed like lots of fun, a great way to be part of the children’s book blogging community, and a great excuse to prioritize reading! I became the category chair for Elementary/Middle Grade Speculative Fiction, my own favorite genre, a few years later, a role I’ve held ever since. The Cybils is now a registered non-profit, and I’m the secretary of the Board of Directors.

KH: Could you share a bit about the process of nominating a book? Can any children’s book be nominated?

CT: Anyone who wants can nominate books in all the categories (one nomination per person per category). The public nomination period runs for the first two weeks of October of the current Cybils year. Then there’s a week in which publishers and authors can submit books that were missed. There’s no entry fee. Over a thousand books are nominated every year. Any widely available book published for the first time in the U.S. or Canada during the Cybils time-frame of October 16th in the previous year to October 15th of the current year is eligible; this includes self-published books, and any that have been revised so extensively from their original published form that they are different books. Some category-specific criteria may apply.

A Deep Dive into the Cybils..continued

KH: If a blogger wanted to become a judge, what would they need to do?

CT: The Cybils is no longer just bloggers; anyone who thoughtfully reviews books in an on-line platform (like Instagram, Goodreads, You-tube, or podcasts), can apply to be a judge. The call for judges goes out in mid-August (follow us on Twitter- [@cybilsawards](https://twitter.com/cybilsawards) or Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/CybilsAwards> so you don't miss it), and then the chair for each category assembles panels of judges whose reviews show them to be knowledgeable and thoughtful. Panelists can't have direct ties to publishers with eligible titles in the category, or have eligible books in consideration for their panel.

If you think it sounds like fun, look through the different categories, and make sure you get some good reviews up in your favorite genre for us organizers to read when we're making our selections! At 12 people per category, and 11 active categories, we need lots of people, and we welcome newcomers!

KH: What is required of judges?

CT: Judges must be willing to do a lot of reading and intense online discussing! It's a big time commitment, especially in categories like YA fiction and YA speculative fiction, which might have as many as 150 books nominated. Access to a library system is crucial, because we only ask publishers to send panelists books that aren't available to them otherwise. We expect our judges to put a lot of hard thought into the process; we want them to do more than just pick books they personally love. This includes taking a critical look at diversity and representation in the nominated books. We don't expect our judges to be experts in all aspects of diversity, and so the Cybils Board of Directors, and outside experts the board consults with, may weigh in on problematic books. It's a lot of work, but also a lot of fun, and many judges return year after year.

KH: I know there are multiple levels of judging. How does each level work? What criteria do you ask judges to consider when making their choices? Has there ever been a tie? If so, how was that handled?

CT: The first-round judges must winnow all the books nominated in their category to a shortlist of five to seven titles. Then the shortlist goes to the second-round folks, who must pick one book as the ultimate winner. The two main criteria of the Cybils are literary merit, by which we mean the quality of the writing, or in the case of picture books, the quality of the illustrations and how well they work with the text), and kid appeal (by which we mean that indefinable something that makes young readers fall in love with a book. We have odd numbers of panelists in each group, so we've never had to deal with a tie, although the second-round folks almost always have a hard time picking just one winner!

KH: Please feel free to share an anecdote or two about a particular Cybils that touched you or meant a lot to you?

CT: There have been so many great books that I've been proud to help shortlist over the years that I can't think of one in particular that meant more to me than any other. But the aspect of the Cybils that has been most meaningful to me isn't actually the books themselves, but the great joy of having a chance to connect with all the panelists I've worked with over the years, from famous authors, like Laini Taylor (a co-panelist my second year judging), to folks whose blogs I love to read (too many to name). It's been a tremendous opportunity to be part of a great community, that's made my life much richer (and my bookshelves, and my local public library's shelves, much more full)!

To see lists of past award winners and learn about the Cybils Awards, be sure to check out their website at <http://www.cybils.com/>

Charlotte Taylor blogs all things books at Charlotte's Library <http://charlotteslibrary.blogspot.com/>

It's All About the Hair: Debut Picture Book Author

NANCY REDD

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Powerhouse Nancy Redd didn't take the so-called traditional route to becoming a published kidlit author. Already a best-selling novelist, award-winning journalist, creator, and parent pundit, Redd honed her writing chops crafting numerous picture book "fails" culminating in her charming debut picture book *Bedtime Bonnet*, with illustrations by Nneka Myers, (Random House Books for Young Readers, April 2020), reaching back to her childhood for what Kirkus Reviews called "A celebration of black hair, family, and culture.... This brightly hued picture book with loads of charm will entertain and empower readers." Now married to her college sweetie and a mom of two girls with their own cherished nightly hair traditions, Redd makes her home in Los Angeles and online at <http://www.nancyredd.com>

PJ McILVAINE: Your resume is stellar: you were a former Miss Virginia, earned an honors degree in Women's Studies from Harvard University, you're a media personality, a Webby Award winning on-air host, NAACP Image Award nominee for outstanding literary work, New York Times and USA Today best-selling author, and now in a new and exciting chapter, you're a debut picture book author. Was this an organic development in your career trajectory? Did you always aspire to be a writer?

NANCY REDD: First and foremost: thank you! Of all the stuff I've done, my writing makes me the happiest because it's always been my #1 passion. Growing up in rural Virginia, I was (and still am)

a dorky bookworm, with my besties being libraries and bookstores. I used to dream of having my name on a book spine but had no idea how I could possibly make it happen. Over the years, I collected as much information about publishing as I could and took as many writing courses as possible. I have dozens of hard drives filled with hundreds (literally) of terrible book proposals. *Pageants for Dummies* from 2005 is one of my favorite fails. *Bedtime Bonnet* is my first published picture book, but I've written five or six others that will probably never escape Google Cloud.



PM: When I was a kid I had long, limp hair, and often my French Meme would roll it up with rags before bedtime in a usually failed attempt to give it body and curl, so I can certainly empathize with and chuckle over the premise of *Bedtime Bonnet*. How did you know this was an idea that would lend itself to the picture book format?

NR: Just letting you know that one of the reasons my answers are delayed is that I went down a rabbit hole googling "French Meme" that turned up at first a lot of memes in French, and eventually I realized that you are probably referring to your grandma, which is amazing!

Your adorable, heartwarming, and evocative anecdote is exactly why I knew that there needed to be a picture book about Black nighttime hair rituals. When I looked for one for my own daughter when it was time for her to start wearing her bonnet, I couldn't believe one didn't exist! Many if not most of us have very visceral memories of our child-

Nnacy Redd continued

hood hair routines, and as I started to pass the bonnet tradition down to my daughter I wanted there to be some positive context regarding bonnets and durags as not just being our family's thing, but something much larger than just us.

PM: What was the hardest thing about writing *Bedtime Bonnet*? From first draft to publication, how long did the process take? Did the book evolve? Did you have input into illustrations? What was the editorial direction like?

NR: The hardest thing about writing the book was having to be so patient! I came up with the idea in 2017, sold it in 2018, and it comes out in 2020. There were so (SO!) many drafts, and I was lucky to have input into illustrations (done by the amazing Nneka Myers) as well as a brilliant editor (Sara Sargent) whose insight and honesty pushed me to make *Bedtime Bonnet* the best it could be.

PM: If there's one thing (okay, two) you could change about the publication journey, what would it be?

NR: I would love to shorten the publishing timeline by about 6 months – essentially when you're writing a book and hope to get it traditionally published, you're looking into a crystal ball and hoping your idea is still going to be fresh in two years. That can be harrowing!

PM: You're a mom of two now. Do you have your own nighttime hair rituals?

NR: YES! Bonnets and braids every night for my daughter! When I don't do this, my daughter's hair suffers!

PM: Do you have a literary agent?

NR: I do – agents earn their percentage, by golly!

PM: Writers are told it's vitally important to have

a niche or brand. What do you consider your primary area of expertise?

NR: My primary area of expertise is self-esteem and body image, a focus I've invested in for 20 years. I even wrote my senior honors thesis in college on the historical correlation between women's concepts of selfhood and the evolution of self-help culture! I've used this knowledge to devote my writing life to celebrating that which makes us unique and imperfectly perfect.

PM: What need do you see *Bedtime Bonnet* filling?

NR: At first, my daughter balked at wearing her bonnet because she thought a nighttime head covering was only for old people like me and Grandma, LOL. This is understandable because none of the cartoon characters of color on her favorite shows wore bonnets or durags to bed (a plot hole that makes it really difficult for me to watch bedtime scenes on certain shows now).

My mom and I LOVE our bonnets and wanted my daughter to feel the same way, so I looked for a resource to help normalize and celebrate this age-old tradition, to no avail. When I came up empty handed, I decided to create one myself and the result is *Bedtime Bonnet*!

PM: Do you wish you had this book as a child?

NR: YES! Seeing my daughter evolve from being a reluctant bonnet-wearer to her loving our nighttime rituals and drawing bedtime bonnet fan art alludes to the power of the printed page to promote positivity and pride.

PM: You're a social media beast, but for those writers who aren't as savvy or confident, do you have any advice or tips? How important is having a social media presence?



Nnacy Redd continued

NR: Bahahaha—I am no beast, more like a social media gerbil—I rarely post unless I have a project to promote. I need to do more and actually earn this beast title! I will say it is mandatory. I will say it is terrifying. But mandatory. But time-consuming. And mandatory. Did I mention it's time consuming? But 100% mandatory. My advice is to take no prisoners and go forth and self-promote unapologetically. I hope I can take said advice as I get knee-deep in the *Bedtime Bonnet* promotion zone! I will put this interview on social and tag you as proof of my dedication to improvement!

PM: You've interviewed so many celebrities. What was your favorite interview and why? And you know I have to ask—what was your worst interview?

NR: Hundreds if not thousands of great interviews! It's hard to pick a favorite, but honestly, I loved interviewing the “regular” people just as much as the celebrities. Everyone has a special story or capability that makes them just as “worthy” of kudos as a celeb, and I loved giving regular folks from around the world a chance to shine. My worst celebrity interview was my very first one, who happened to be my mom's favorite singer. I was nervous, he was a man of few words, and I had to somehow fill TWENTY MINUTES OF LIVE AIR TIME with this legend, who tended to answer all my questions with either “mmmhmmm” or “naw.” Now today I would know how to handle this, but at the time I was very green, and boy did it show!

PM: How do you balance family, work responsibilities, and writing? Do you have a writing routine?

NR: Whether I am tethered to my laptop for 12 hours straight or I'm typing in notes on my phone in the middle of a massage after having an amazing idea, I am basically always writing. I have a trifecta of the three most important things in my life: my partner, being a parent, and my professional life. I try to keep all three of these things healthy and not let one overpower the other (so I try to not allow my writing to encroach upon family or partner time, for example). I'm not always successful but remembering my priorities always helps me retain a modicum of balance.

PM: Do you plan to write more in the kidlit wheel-

house? What are you currently working on? Do you have a passion project? If you could write on any topic, what would it be?

NR: Absolutely! I just sold another children's book to my same publisher on a topic that has been my passion for nearly a decade, and I can't wait until I can share more about it with you soon! I feel fortunate to be writing on the topics that I want to be writing about—I don't think I could write well on anything I am not obsessed with!

PM: Where do you see yourself, career wise, five years from now?

NR: I hope to still be writing and helping people! A specific dream is to see one of my books come to life on screen. Hopefully within five years that wish shall come true!

IDEAS

Where to Find Them - When to Keep Them

by Jane MBride

Where do you get them, what do you do with them, and how do you know if one is worth developing? These questions confront me with each book project. Do they do the same with you? Sometimes the most exciting idea, one which has you fired up and ready to devote the next several months or even a year to writing, can fizzle.

Where do you get ideas?

The local paper. Frequently I find ideas in our local paper. A two paragraph article about reintroducing the Canadian gray wolf to Colorado some years ago sparked a book idea. I ran with it and sold a book focusing on the conflict between an environmentalist heroine determined to bring gray wolves back to Colorado and a rancher hero equally determined to protect his stock.

People's names. I also find ideas in people's names. What kind of man does the name "Jake" conjure up? I came up with an ex-Delta Force soldier who bore both emotional and physical scars when he returns home. When called upon to protect a pretty assistant district attorney who is being stalked, he steps forward to save her life. In the end, these two wounded people save each other through love. This book won 4 stars in a review from *Romantic Times*. (Five stars is the maximum.)

My family. In addition to writing suspense novels, I also write short stories for a children's religious magazine. My children and now my grandchildren provide a plethora of ideas for stories. One centered around our eight-year-old granddaughter who wanted my husband and me to travel to New York for her baptism. Unfortunately, we weren't able to make the trip and regretfully told her so. She decided she wanted us to be "present" somehow

and asked us to write a letter telling of our feelings for her and this special event. We did so and an older grandson read it at the time of her baptism. This became a short story entitled "Including Grandma and Grandpa."

Playing "What if?". If you have read many of my past articles in CBI, you may remember that I love to play What if?. What if a 17-year-old girl with special powers and her sister and mother are held hostage in a cult where a charismatic leader exerts supernatural powers over them, sucking in her power for his own evil purposes? Can she escape his clutches, not only physically but psychically as well? I'm still playing with this idea, trying to flesh it out and find the essence of it.

Song and poem titles. A snippet from a song or a poem can trigger an idea. Cast your net broad for words and phrases that speak to you. What poet do you particularly like? For me, it is Walt Whitman. What about Emily Dickenson or Shel Silverstein? Two vastly different writers but equally inspirational. Is there a phrase in a song that plays over and over in your head? Chances are the words are trying to tell you something, to inspire you to act and to write.

How do you know if an idea is worth developing?

This is a tricky question to answer, and the answer varies for every writer. Below are a couple of things that help me in weeding the chaff from the wheat:

Do the characters speak to you? My short stories and books always begin with character. Though character and plot are inextricably connected, character

Ideas continued

comes first, with plot a close second. Characters rattle around in my head, some of them demanding to be set free and given voice. My husband likes to tell people that I don't so much as write as record what my characters are telling me. There's a bit more to it than that, but his quip is true. If a character refuses to speak to me, I realize that his or her story is probably not compelling enough upon which to base a book. If you don't have characters talking to you, that's fine. You may be relieved! Some of my characters are very insistent and won't be quiet until their story is told.

Is the idea timely? Or is it timeless? As we discuss a bit later, what is timely or trendy may well not be current by the time you finish your book, sell it, and the publishing house puts it in print. Look for ideas that are timeless.

How do you know when to abandon a project?

Abandoning a book can be a heartbreaking decision, depending on when in the project you decide to let the idea or book go.

Here, we're going to look at two scenarios: when to drop an idea before you start writing the book, and when to abandon a work-in-progress after you've written several pages or chapters.

When do you decide an idea won't work?

Ask yourself if an idea merits a whole book. I look at the scope of the idea and try to gauge if it is big enough to warrant a book. Will the idea carry 25,000 words, or 40,000, or 55,000 – 60,000 words (that is the length of books I am currently writing). Or will the idea fizzle out after 10,000 or 20,000 words? If so, maybe you would be better off turning the idea into a novella. Perhaps you are writing non-fiction and want to do a book about the effects of loss a child experiences when losing a pet. This is a great idea. But will it merit an entire book? It might be better off as an article in a parents' magazine.

Ask yourself if it will retain your interest for the space of time it takes to write a book. I am not a

fast writer. It takes me at least four months, perhaps more, to write a book. Can an idea hold my interest for that long? Or will I grow tired of it?

Lastly, ask if the idea has staying power. Some of today's trends, whether in fashion or food or books, have a very short life span. That's fine. People thrive on change. But consider the length of time it takes from conception (idea) to publication. If your idea lacks staying power, it may be totally out of date by the time it reaches publication.

When do you decide a book won't work?

When the characters won't speak to you. I've had to stop work on a few books, usually when the characters and subsequently the story won't come to me. Could I have persevered and hammered out a story anyway? Possibly. But I know that it would be a contrived story that failed to touch readers' hearts because it failed to touch mine.

When you lose interest in the story after the first or second chapter. Say you are gung-ho about a book and work feverishly on it for several weeks. You're so excited that you've finished Chapter 2 or maybe you've even reached the middle, but then your interest wanes. You would rather work on anything other than this wretched book. It gets to be a drag, with no end in sight. Do you keep working on it? It depends. Maybe you should shelve it for a while and work on another project and then return to it. Or maybe you should just drop it all together.

Ideas are all around us. Grab those that grab you and will sustain you through the writing process.

If you want to learn more about finding great book ideas for fiction or nonfiction projects, determining which ones are worth pursuing and then developing them, and sustaining your passion for your ideas throughout the entire publishing process, check out our Writing Solutions webinar [How to Generate Amazing Story Ideas](#) with author Stephen Swinburne. Use this link to get \$20 off: <https://bit.ly/ideas-workshop>

Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers was born in 1937 and grew up in Harlem, New York. He dropped out of school at the age of 15 and then joined the army a year later, where he became a trainer and a technician. He sold his first book when he was 29, a picture book titled *Where Does the Day Go?* Since then he has written more than 30 fiction books for children and young adults, and many nonfiction books, including a biography of Malcolm X.

His 1975 book, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and Stuff* won the Coretta Scott King Honorable Mention Book Award, as did *The Young Landlords* in 1980. *Scorpions* won the Notable Children's Book Award by the American Library Association in 1988 (*The Young Landlords* won this in 1979), and was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1989. *Fallen Angels*, which Mr. Myers wrote in 1988, won the School Library Journal Best Book of the Year Award that same year and the Coretta Scott King Award in 1989, and is based on his younger brother who considered Mr. Myers a hero and followed him to Vietnam, only to be killed on the first day.

Mr. Myers writes about aspects of inner-city life, which he says he understands well: gangs, teenage pregnancy, and topics of interest to him like basketball, anthropology, and archeology.

CBI: *What made you want to be a writer?*

WDM: It was a hobby as a kid, no more important than basketball. I dropped out of high school, and then when I got out of the army I had jobs like being a messenger and an advertising manager for a cemetery. Writing was a way of maintaining my self-esteem. When I made \$10,000, I quit my other jobs and became a writer full time.

CBI: *Did you plan to write for children?*

WDM: No. I was into men's stuff, like fiction and adventure, but the men's adventure story was kind of fading away. I saw a contest for Black children's writers, and I sent them a story and it won. [This was *Where Did the Day Go?*]

CBI: *Do you prefer to write for children at this point?*

WDM: I don't see myself as writing for children; I see myself as just writing. I'll probably do a novel in the next year for adults.

CBI: *When you were first starting out, how did you find out about things like how to contact publishers?*

WDM: Well, I worked for a publisher for a while. I was shocked by the truth about pub-

lishing. Before I worked for a publisher I thought an author simply sends a book in and the publisher and editor look for the best. It's not like that. It's a constant scramble to do decent publishing. Most of the books that come out are garbage.



I saw what was wrong with most of the manuscripts that were coming in. The structure was bad. The writing can be bad and they'll publish it, but if the structure is bad, they won't.

Then I realized that the key was to get the manuscript read because people were not reading them. A lot of contracts were being given to people who had never written a book before. Publishers give out contracts at parties and such. So much of this is done. But contract after contract never gets fulfilled. The hard part is getting someone to read your manuscript. There have been times when a book is on contract, and comes back to the publisher with revisions by the author, and it gets returned with a rejection notice because someone didn't know it was under contract. That's how careless they can be about reading incoming manuscripts.

CBI: *You have said that The Nicholas Factor was the worst book you have written that was published.*

WDM: The book got good reviews but I just wasn't that happy with it. Sometimes writing is like that. You know, Joseph Heller wrote his bestselling first book *Catch-22* and then it was about 29 years before his second book was published. I don't believe it took him that long to write a book. I believe it took him a long time to come up with a decent book. After *Roots*, Alex Haley's other books were terrible. Just because you've been published before, it doesn't guarantee that your next books will be winners. Very often as a writer, you have a great passion for the first book, and that comes through in the writing, but if you don't understand structure, it won't help with the second book.

CBI: *In Sweet Illusions, a book about teenage girls at a pregnancy counseling center, how much research did you have to do to make it believable? Did you spend a lot of time with them?*

WDM: I'm Black and I've lived with these people all my life. I've always been a street person. I know these kids.

SPECIAL REPORT!

on the Writing Process

by Liza N. Burby

CBI: *Have you ever tried to sell a book without an agent? How do you do it?*

WDM: Yes I have. But I had already sold books with an agent by then. Figure that your book is going to get forty minutes, and you have to hook the editor in the first few pages. When I'm selling the book before writing it, I describe the book on one page in one paragraph. On the next page, I describe the book more fully. This is in addition to an outline.

The reason for this is that in the first two chapters of a book you have to give a lot of information and then in the third chapter the pace of the book picks up. Very often editors don't read that third chapter. So you give them a lot of information about your book in easy-to-read form.

You can't rely on a publisher to read your entire manuscript. They settle down with a pile of manuscripts and a cup of coffee when they get in the office in the morning and then very often by noon all those manuscripts are headed back to the authors. They know within the first pages of a manuscript whether they are going to accept it or not. What that means is that you have to wow them with your writing and not give them all the details up front, but give them an explanation somehow. Giving them a two-page outline and first three chapters isn't enough. It's the same thing when you go the bookstore and read the jacket of a book. You have about ten seconds to get a person interested in that book if you want them to buy it. You have to enclose a description of your book that does the same thing. You have to get all that information to the publisher very quickly. You want to have your work jump out at this person who is sitting before a pile of manuscripts.

CBI: *Do you mind being edited?*

WDM: Editors are trying to help you make the books better, and that's fine with me. A good editor is someone who knows what I'm talking about and who isn't going to try to make the book what it shouldn't be. This happens often enough. I'd like to say you stick to your guns all the way, but it depends on what your circumstances are.

CBI: *What is your writing process for fiction?*

WDM: I spend three to four weeks just thinking about the book. I make an outline. I call this the pre-writing stage. I figure out what's going to happen -- the plot. Then I figure out who the characters are. I use a piece of oak tag and cut out pictures from magazines of what I think characters, their houses, streets, etc., all look like. I fill out job applications for them, which gives me their names, ages, where they live, and even what their parents do for a living which can help

me determine their economic background. Then I determine what the basic conflict is in the story.

This is the most important stage. If you do this, you don't get writer's block.

Then I start writing ten pages a day. I'm a fast writer, so this takes me four to five hours. I have a first draft done in 20 days. The rewrite part, at which time I'm more careful, takes about three months. Then I send it to the publisher and rewrite it based on their suggestions. I've sometimes been through the rewrite process up to seven times. I have the initial excitement with the first draft and I can sustain it for the second draft, but after all the rewrites, I'm glad to let go of a book.

CBI: *How do you handle nonfiction?*

WDM: When I was writing the biography of Malcolm X, I got a copy of his birth certificate, which gave me his birth date, of course, but the year of his birth also helped me so I could find out what else was going on in history at the time and include that. I also got copies of his marriage certificate, death certificate, school records, even library records. The school records told me what kind of student he was; the library records told me what kinds of books he liked to read. I also went to Omaha where he was born, and talked to people who knew him. Of course, the problem was that everyone said they knew him.

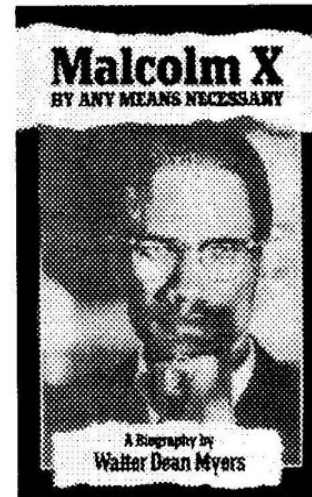
With nonfiction, the pre-writing stage is twice as long, and all kinds of questions come up, so research is ongoing.

CBI: *What do you think it takes to be a writer?*

WDM: You need two skills. You have to have a facility with words, and you have to have discipline. Even if you only write two pages a day, five times a week, you could still do two books a year.

CBI: *What advice do you have for beginning writers?*

WDM: Read as much as you can. I'm a firm believer in writing something everyday. The market is changing and more and more young adult books are being used in schools as a part of reading classes, so there is a need for good young adult writers out there.



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Liza N. Burby is a writer for The New York Times and numerous magazines, as well as a book editor and writer of nonfiction books for children and young adults.