Children's Book Insider
The Children's Writing Monthly August, 2020

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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:

Publisher Seeks Picture Books with Science or Math Tie-ins

Arbordale Publishing is an independent press that publishes fiction and narrative nonfiction picture books for PreK-third grade readers with a science or math lesson woven into the story. Each book includes a 2-6 page, nonfiction "For Creative Minds" section to reinforce the educational component of the book (activities, crafts, or fun facts). Authors will be asked to provide separate facts that will be incorporated into this section. (Standard book format is 13 illustrated spreads of text, followed by two spreads of For Creative Minds.)

Manuscripts must be less than 1000 words and must meet ALL of the following four criteria: be fun to read (mostly fiction with nonfiction facts woven into the story--narrative nonfiction should not read like a textbook); national or regional in scope; must relate to science and math subjects taught at the elementary school level (any manuscripts with a social studies connection such as culture, history, or geography must also contain a math or science component); must be marketable to schools as well as special outlets such as zoo, aquarium, or museum gift shops.

The publisher is interested in stories with elements of physical science, engineering, earth science, and science or math topics with a cultural/social studies connection. All manuscripts should align to Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), or state-level Social Studies standards. Currently not looking for manuscripts written in rhyme, or about the following topics: pets, new babies, magic or fantasy, biographies, counting books, ABC books, fairy tales, series of any kind, holiday-related books.

Because Arbordale relies on authors and illustrators to actively promote and market their books, the publisher is currently only accepting submissions from those living in the US and Canada. Arbordale is accepting manuscripts written in Spanish by bilingual authors. Submit the manuscript in Spanish and English, and all accompanying materials in English.

All manuscripts should be submitted via email to **submissions@arbordalepublishing.com**, and addressed to Acquisitions Editor. Put the manuscript title and "manuscript submission" in the subject line. Include an author biography of up to 300 words, and mention any previous publications. Include a paragraph explaining why you wrote the manuscript; list any competing works on the market (author/illustrator, publisher, year published, sales data if available, etc.). If there are competitive books, explain why your book is different and why you believe it should sell better. Also list any ideas you have for how you might help market the book. Include a bibliography of research done on underlying science concepts in the story. The full manuscript text can be either pasted in the message or attached as a Microsoft Word document. Do not submit art unless you are also an illustrator. Author/illustrators may attach 1-2 JPEG illustrations (realistic style) or a link to their online portfolio.

Please submit only one manuscript per email. Simultaneous submissions (manuscripts that are also under submission to other publishers) are accepted. Visit **arbordalepublishing.com** for current titles.

Agent Seeks Author/Illustrators, MG and YA Submissions

Fiona Kenshole is an agent with the Transatlantic Agency (**transatlanticagency.com/**) which represents adult and children's book writers in the US and Canada. She represents picture books, middle grade and young adult. For picture books, she's currently only accepting submissions from author/illustrators, especially those with an animation background. In middle grade she especially likes funny stories, real children in magical worlds, and any kind of animal story. She is passionate about the natural world and saving the planet and looks for stories that reflect those beliefs, and would especially like to find more native American writers. She likes feel-good YA and romcoms, as well as clever high school politics. Overall, she's looking for quirky contemporary: humor; unreliable narrators; wilderness adventures; immigrant stories; sister stories, practical feminism, and ghost stories. She is not open to rhyming picture books, picture book submissions from non-illustrators, poetry, faith-based stories, or sad endings. Query her through Query Manager at **https://querymanager.com/query/QueryFiona**

Publisher Seeks Picture Books, Activity Books on Mindfulness, Compassion and Meditation

Shambhala Publications, an independent, family-owned publisher founded in 1969, creates books that contribute to the development of a thoughtful, kindhearted, and contemplative society. Its children's book imprint, Bala Kids, is dedicated to encouraging the values of wisdom and compassion for children of all ages with books on Buddhism, meditation, yoga, and mindfulness. Looking for picture books and activity books for children ages 0-8 in the categories above. Email a cover letter that includes a short author biography and book summary. Attach the entire manuscript as a .doc file, and 2-3 JPEG illustrations of you are an from author/illustrator. Send to Submissions Editor, **balakids@shambala.com**, with the subject line "Bala Kids Submission." Responds within four months. Accepts simultaneous submissions if noted in the cover letter. Study the current Bala Kids list at **shambhala.com/about-bala-kids** before submitting.

Publisher Seeks Authors for Work-for-Hire Assignments

The Capstone Press imprint of Capstone Publishing publishes fiction and nonfiction with accessible text on topics kids love to capture interest and build confidence and skill in beginning, struggling, and reluctant readers, grades pre-K-9. While Capstone is not open to unsolicited manuscript submissions, it is looking for new authors interested in work-for-hire assignments on existing or new series. First, take a look at Capstone Press' current titles at **capstonepub.com/consumer/publisher/capstone-press/**. For nonfiction assignments, email a cover letter with a short author bio, previous publishing credits, a list of topics of interest for writing assignments, and a writing sample to **authors@capstonepub.com**. Actively seeking Own Voices contributors; please specify in your cover letter if you identify with a specific community. The editors will respond if your application meets their needs.

Capstone Managing Editor Julie Gassman is currently looking for authors interested in work-for-hire assignments for humorous fiction for grades K-2. Send an appropriate writing sample along with author bio and any previous publishing credits to **jgassman@capstonepub.com**. Actively seeking diverse writers.

Publisher Seeks Nonfiction for Ages 7 and Up

Chicago Review Press publishes an award-winning line of children's and young adult nonfiction books that cover a wide range of subjects about history, science, math, music, literature, and art. Most of their children's books feature hands-on activities and projects that extend learning for children ages 7 & up. Among these are the bestselling For Kids series, the build-it-yourself Science in Motion series, and the multicultural A Kid's Guide series. Chicago Review Press also publishes a young adult nonfiction biography series Women of Action that introduces young adults to women and girls of courage and conviction throughout the ages.

Looking for nonfiction in the above categories for ages 7 through young adult. Submit a proposal with the following: A one sentence summary of your book; a brief synopsis of your book in 1–2 paragraphs; the estimated word count of the final manuscript; the estimated completion date; author biography specifying credentials and past publications credits, where appropriate; approximate sales of previous books published, if any; a complete table of contents and/or a complete outline of the proposed chapters; the first three chapters; any information regarding photographs or artwork for the book; a description of the target audience and any information about the market; a list of competing and comparable titles and how your book differs—be sure to state what makes your book unique. For children's activity books, include a few sample activities with a list of the others you plan to use in the book. Email your proposal directly to Jerome Pohlen, Senior Editor at **jpohlen@chicagoreviewpress.com** See the publisher's current children's titles at **chicagoreviewpress.com/children-s-nonfiction-pages-350.php**

Agent Seeks YA Genre Fiction

Analieze Cervantes is a new agent with the Harvey Klinger Literary Agency (**harveyklinger.com**), where she's building her own list and is looking for stories in YA and adult fiction. She specializes in sci-fi, romance, thriller, suspense, and mystery (no fantasy). She is especially open to BIPOC and LGBTQ voices in the above categories. Query through Query Manager at **https://querymanager.com/query/AnaliezeCervantes**

From the Editor...

Dear Reader,

I've taught hundreds of writing workshops over my 34-year career, and have loved working with aspiring writers. Some of my favorite teaching moments happened during the 10 years I traveled around the country with author Linda Arms White, presenting our Children's Author's Bootcamp. Every city we went to had a slightly different feel—a new group of students, a unique blend of talent, humor and experience—that captured the personality of the region. But one thing was consistent everywhere we went. All the students were eager to learn the basics of writing for children, but they were even more focused on finding out how to submit their manuscripts to publishers.

Children's Author's Bootcamp lasted two full days; about 14 total hours of instruction. Linda and I talked about submitting to agents and publishers in the final hour of the second day. Everyone's brains were saturated, yet Bootcampers summoned a final burst of energy to take copious notes and ask questions. We prefaced all the submission information with, "We're giving you this overview of the process because we know you want it, but understand that your manuscripts won't be ready to submit for quite a while." Some listened (over the years we happily heard from Bootcampers who got publishing contracts). But many, I'm afraid, did not.

I get it. You're passionate about your idea, you've found creativity and fulfillment in getting your words down on paper, and then suddenly reality hits when you learn that taking the next step is more complicated than pasting your manuscript into an email, addressing it to an editor and hitting "Send." Those of you who have been writing and submitting for a while already know this, and you can skip the rest of this editorial. But we've got a lot of new CBI subscribers (welcome!), and so I feel it's important to review a few realities of the process, just to save you some frustration down the road.

Editors and agents aren't just looking for manuscripts. Most editors—and quite a few agents—are, quite frankly, *drowning* in manuscripts. They've got more submissions than they can handle. What editors and agents want are excellent manuscripts. Excellent doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen with one writing workshop. It takes months, often years, to develop. I don't think there's an author on the planet who came out of the womb with the ability to write an extraordinary manuscript in one or two drafts.

But this editorial isn't about how to write exceptional manuscripts (we cover that monthly in CBI, and in depth at **WritingBlueprints.com**). What I want to talk about is many authors' burning desire to leapfrog over the steps necessary to take their work from good to excellent and jump straight to submitting. And this urge is particularly strong when they hear about some special, limited-time submission opportunity. Their rationale goes something like this:

I just learned (through a CBI Spotlight article/at a writing conference/on Twitter) that this editor/agent is open to submissions for the next 30 days. I read her interview/listened to her presentation and she sounds like she'd be great to work with. I've revised my manuscript once, and gotten some feedback from my critique partner. It* might *be ready to submit—maybe I'll just do a few of the changes my critique partner suggested. It's more important that I jump on this submission opportunity because these don't come along very often.

(Cue buzzer) Wrong answer! Sorry, but hearing about a submission opportunity does not mean you get to pass Go and collect $200.

From the Editor continued

I know it's hard—*really* hard—to pass up a submission opportunity that seems perfect for your manuscript, ***if only it was ready***. Part of your job as a writer is learning how to know when your work is ready to submit, and that in itself is a process (we cover this in great detail in our **Manuscript Magic** editing Blueprint, **https://writingblueprints.com/p/manumagic-trial**). Another part of your job is practicing self-control. This boils down to resisting the urge to send your brilliant, heartfelt, unique idea out into the world before it's morphed into a saleable book.

But you have to do it, and here's why. You know what happens when thousands of writers submit their work to publishers prematurely? Those special submission opportunities disappear.

Publishing is a business, and besides being creative, kind, hardworking people who champion talented authors and illustrators, editors and agents are business people. They have the same number of hours in a day as the rest of us. They can't possibly read 1000 manuscripts a week (yes, that's the number of manuscripts some large publishers get weekly), and continue to fulfill the rest of their duties. Yet most of those manuscripts aren't submission-ready, which means that about 97% of what editors and agents receive is either unpublishable or completely inappropriate for their lists. (I'm not making this number up—I've gotten it several times from different editors.) If you were responsible for developing new products for your company and spent that much time focused on something that had no chance of making your employer any money, how long do you think you'd keep your job? Or even want to go into work?

But here's the thing: editors and agents have no control over what ends up in their inboxes. You do. And here's another thing: we're all in this together. Publishing is a collective community. It relies not just on the work of one or two people, but of many. It's up to all of us to learn the craft, write and revise, get feedback, revise again, let our manuscripts sit, revise yet again, and then focus our submissions on the right editors and agents. If we try to short-circuit this process, we're not just hurting ourselves. We're hurting everyone.

Why do all the Big 5 publishers, and many mid-sized houses, only accept submissions from agents? Because they have no choice. It's either rely on agents to curate submissions, or hire extra staff to read 1000 mostly-unpublishable manuscripts a week. Why do some editors and agents turn down offers to speak at workshops? Because they know that, the week after their presentation, their inboxes will be flooded with manuscripts that have no business being submitted.

So, my final point is this: please take your time. If you read about a submission opportunity that seems perfect for your work but it's not ready to submit, file that opportunity away. When your manuscript is revised and polished, research if that editor or agent is still open to submissions. They might be, and then you've just raised your odds of making a great first impression. If the submission window has closed, another will open. I promise.

You get one chance to wow an editor or agent with each manuscript. A special submission opportunity is a gift, but only if you use it wisely. If we're all smart, the gifts will keep coming, and there will be enough to go around.

Sincerely,

Laura Backes

IMPORTANT PS: Some of our Above the Slushpile submission codes have expiration dates. If you read one of our Editor or Agent Spotlight articles and the submission code has expired, you cannot use it. Editors' and agents' submission needs and policies change constantly, and using an expired code means you're creating extra, unnecessary work for someone who has been generous enough to give CBI subscribers an exclusive opportunity. Let's keep these opportunities coming—read CBI early in the month, and plan your appropriate, revised submissions accordingly. Thank you!

When You Can't Go to Kenya (or even Kansas): "New Normal" Research Methods

by Candice Ransom

In late 2017, I had an idea for a nonfiction picture book and began collecting materials. By fall 2019, I realized the subject was bigger and changed the format to middle grade. I planned to delve into serious research and travel in early 2020. That travel involved going to the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian), an easy trip for me on the commuter rail, taking Amtrak to New York for additional museum research and interviews, then north to Yale University. Later, a family trip out West would cover regional sites.

You know what happened. All avenues of research slammed shut during the quarantine. Public libraries. Universities. Museums. Travel was discouraged. Months into the pandemic, still very much with us, venues are slowly opening. On-site research is once again a (limited) possibility. Depending on where you live, libraries and museums might be back in business. Experts on your subject might be willing to meet for an interview.

Desperate to start my book, I read about car-camping research trips, skipping motels and sleeping in the car, eating street food or from convenience stores. I'd never recommend anyone doing this, much less consider it myself. Yet how could I find materials without leaving home? Then I remembered Laura Hillenbrand.

Hillenbrand is best known for her adult nonfiction bestsellers, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* and *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. She is less known for the fact she has had a debilitating illness since 1987 that keeps her mostly confined to her home and makes everyday actions like walking or reading a challenge. How did she manage to deeply research historical events without going to a library? She developed workarounds.

For *Seabiscuit*, she bought old newspapers on eBay, studying them not just for information pertinent to her topic, but the surrounding details like classified ads, movie showtime, and other news that helped her steep herself in the Depression era. By phone, she talked to 100 elderly people connected to the story.

In researching the racehorse, she turned the page of a 1938 newspaper and found an article about a running star named Louie Zamperini. He became the subject of her second book, *Unbroken*. Zamperini was still alive, but Hillenbrand couldn't travel to meet him. Instead, she conducted hundreds of hours of phone interviews over a period of seven years.

If Laura Hillenbrand could figure out how to write accurate nonfiction books from home, I needed to rethink my project . . . and my research methods. First, I decided to whittle the middle-grade nonfiction book back to a nonfiction picture book. Not that the picture book will be any less accurate; more that the scope of the middle-grade was simply too big. Second, I've already collected many research books and other materials; I'm buying more books.

Third, I'm spending more time on the internet. Primary sources can be found online if you're willing to *really* dig. Using source notes in secondary texts, you can often find reliable texts for local color, sensory descriptions, and conversations. Though most primary sources are located in institutions, I've accessed original texts on Google Books, Google Scholar, Library of Congress, National Archives, Smithsonian Institution Archives, and Biodiversity Heritage Library, to name a few. Experts at universities and museums may be working remotely. Check if they're available to do email and/or phone interviews.

My final tip for at-home research isn't popular, but it works for me. Instead of just printing online articles and other documents, type important sections into a computer file. When I print out documents, I don't always read them carefully. Typing an author's words forces me to slow down and comprehend difficult concepts.

Five years ago, when I began researching my nonfiction picture book, *Bones in the White House: Thomas Jefferson's Mammoth*, the first thing I did was type out chapter two of Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction*. My computer file of typed reference notes for Bones is 120 single-spaced pages, some 50,000 words. Even now, I remember that information more readily than all the Post-It-noted reference books and highlighted articles.

The "new normal" is upon us, but we can still find a way to research responsibly and get on with our work.

EILEEN ROBINSON, Publisher

MOVE BOOKS
MOVING BOYS TO READ

interview by Lynne Marie

Eileen Robinson is an editor and publisher who brings over 20 years experience to those roles, both in-house and independently at Scholastic and Harcourt. She's worked in educational publishing, school and library, trade markets and even magazines, book fairs, and book clubs. In addition to owning the F1rst Pages critique service (f1rstpages.com), she and Harold Underdown partner in KidsBookRevisions.com and she's founder and publisher of Move Books, an independent press dedicated to creating middle grade books for boys. She's also on the editorial team for Reycraft Books, an imprint focused on diversity and #OwnVoices authors (we will spotlight Reycraft in a future issue of CBI).

LYNNE MARIE: Please tell us a little bit about how your childhood experience shaped who you are today with regard to publishing children's books.

EILEEN ROBINSON: I never thought I would get into children's book publishing. Like many of my peers, I loved to read and I followed my own yellow-brick road and it led me from a stint in the music industry to publishing. And I could not have planned how it has shaped me. I knew I belonged there the minute I walked through the doors of Scholastic but as I rose and moved on, I would often be the only one in the room. And after a while, that "alone-ness" shapes a person. I honestly didn't know how important that was or that my being there made an impact in itself. I was just driven and loved books and wanted to make them.

As a teenager, I spent summers in the library but never gave any thought to how books were made or that it was even a business. My reading experience was shaped by my Aunt Bernice who believed that education and imagination were two of the most important things a child could own and something that could never be taken away. And I grew up believing the same thing. Books were #1 and they began to shape my desire to want to get into publishing.

A friend and still mentor, Pamela Crowley, who I worked for in Scholastic Marketing at the time, encouraged me to go for an editorial position. In that position, I somehow realized that one day I'd make a difference. This is a very truncated version, of course, of my experiences but today feel I have a responsibility to mentor in this industry, publish new voices, own voices, and above all, bring all children together and help them find a love for reading.

LM: Because you originally tried to get into magazine publishing and landed in children's publishing, I have to ask you that question so many writers want to know the answer to—how can you tell if your manuscript is a magazine story or a children's book?

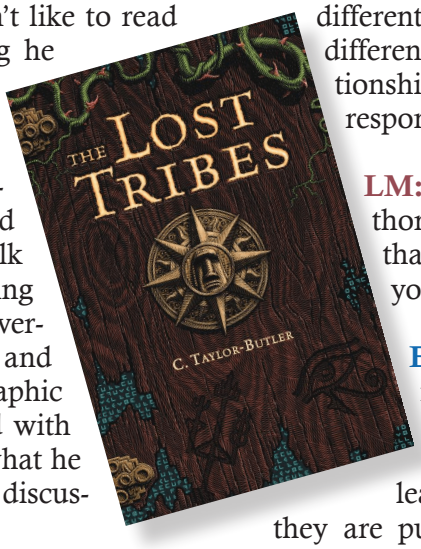
ER: A picture book manuscript needs to have a "read-it-factor" that a magazine story doesn't necessarily need to have.

LM: Please share a little bit about the inspiration for Move Books (move-books.com), which I believe was your son, Michael.

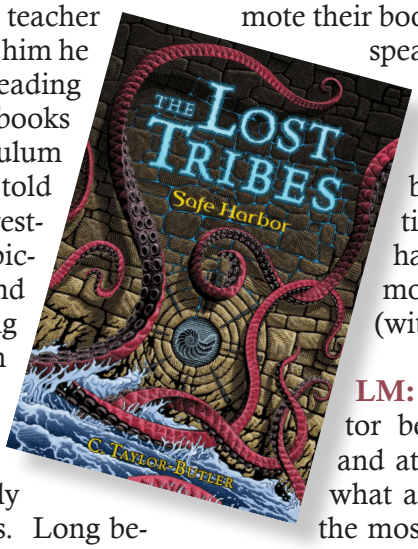
ER: Yes! Michael was a reluctant reader and it seemed

Eileen Robinson continued

he and other boys his age all saw reading as "school work" rather than for pleasure. He didn't like to read so I was determined to find something he would. And I tried everything. I'd show him a bunch of covers and tell him to pick the most interesting. Then we read the first few pages to see if it was a winner for him. I'd let him read to me or I'd read to him and we'd just laugh and talk about it. I'd try to refrain from analyzing what we read and let him lead the conversation and bring his own experiences and feelings to the table. I let him choose. Graphic novels and books that were interspersed with illustrations or comical drawings were what he leaned toward and it opened doors for discussion.

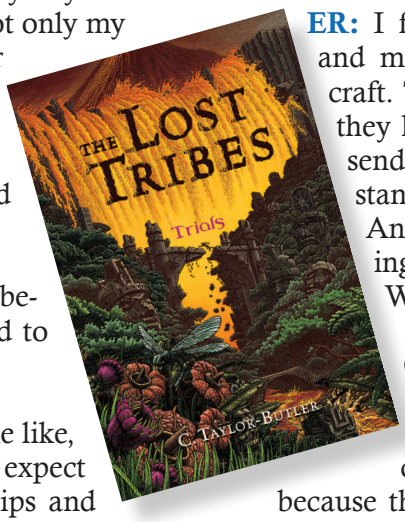


He once had an experience where a teacher snatched a book from his hands and told him he couldn't read it because it wasn't on his reading level, and another tell him that picture books were for babies. I understood curriculum needs, but it wasn't the right approach. I told him if there was something he was interested in we could read it together—that picture books were for older readers too and we could embark on the more challenging novels together. I also took the approach through movies—always something we had in common. We began to discuss the character development, plot, emotional development in them, especially franchises, and transferred that to books. Long before my son was born, I had seen a hole in the market for books directed at getting boys to read. But it was only during his struggle and that of many boys that it the idea really took root, as I watched not only my son but many boys in general, no matter the background or ethnicity, shy away from reading unless they had to, especially between the ages of 8-12. So I decided I wanted to make this a focus and grow this side of the business.



LM: What qualities/elements do you believe that these middle grade books need to have to keep boys reading?

ER: Adventure, suspense, danger, and the like, are great elements and what one might expect to hear, but so are meaningful friendships and other emotional interactions. Boys just respond a little differently than girls and I think therein lies the difference. So understanding how they see relationships and experiences, their reactions and responses, or lack thereof helps.



LM: You've helped develop many new authors. What is it that you see in an author that gives you the "green light" to invest your time and attention in them?

ER: That they understand that there is more work to do once their book is published. That they know something about or are willing to engage in and learn more about the market in which they are publishing. They are willing to engage with bookstores and libraries in their area to help promote their book—like book signings, sample readings, speaking engagements. But most importantly, they have sent me a story that is as close as they can get it and are open to suggestions and willing to collaborate because making a book is a collaboration. Once you set it in another person's hands, part of it ceases to be yours anymore and you must be open to discussion (without losing your soul of course).

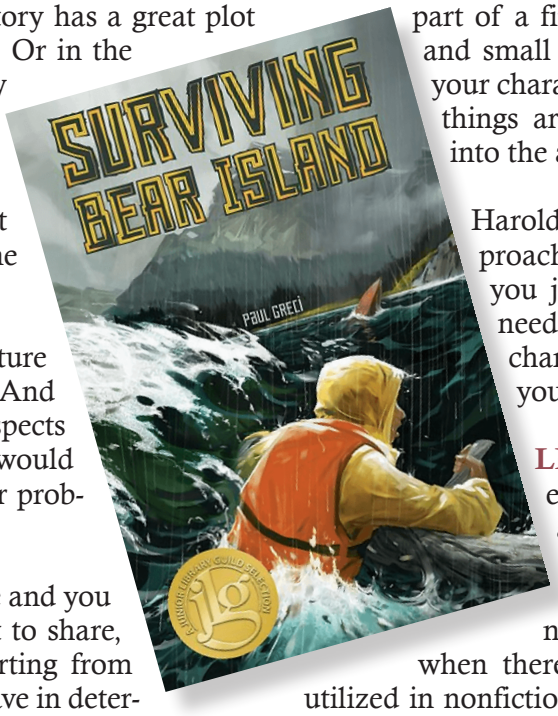
LM: You have extensive experience as a mentor beside Harold Underdown both online and at Highlights for Children workshops. In what areas do you find writers generally need the most mentoring? Is it in the actual writing? Or in the storytelling and structure? What advice do you have for readers struggling with similar issues?

ER: I find most come to Harold Underdown and me because they want to work on their craft. They want to make the story better, and they hope to get it to a point where they can send it to an agent or editor, but they understand, to some extent, the value of revision. And they are looking to get unstuck or looking for new ways to generate new material. We try to provide more for their toolbox.

Our writers are all at different stages—some beginners, some published—and so we are mentors for so many kinds of challenges. Writers could be struggling because they start out wanting to write a picture

Eileen Robinson continued

book but it's really a chapter book. Or their secondary character is really shouting to be their main character and they don't realize it. Or the story has a great plot but the emotional arc is suffering. Or in the case of many picture books, they start off with a bang, falter in the middle because they don't build enough for the reader to appreciate the ending or the ending is flat and doesn't support what has come before, or worse it is cliche.



Bookmaps or charts can help picture book writers to "see" the story. And perhaps highlighting different aspects you want to look at like dialogue, would give novelists a focus on particular problems.

LM: I have heard you speak before and you always have some valuable insight to share, no matter what the topic. So starting from the beginning: What tips do you have in determining whether a concept is worth pursuing?

ER: I find that many who want to write, don't read. And the answer is always "I don't want to be influenced by another's work." But if you don't know what's out there, it can be difficult to see where you stand or see how you can come at it from another angle or think out of a box. I would advise against overwhelming yourself with everything because that can tend to be discouraging too but if you think you have a unique idea, do a search or ask a librarian or children's inventory manager at the bookstore. See what comes up. And then brainstorm on paper. Or you can just write your story, have fun with it, and then see what's out there and how you can put your own spin on it. We all have something to offer. We just have to find that thing. What is it that you want to say?

LM: What tips do you have for a writer approaching a first draft? For approaching the revision?

ER: Approaching a first draft? Just write. Don't think about periods and commas and structure. Just get it down and have fun with it. Get to the second chapter even if the first chapter isn't perfect yet. That's part of a first draft. Don't get stuck on verbs and small stuff. Once you have a story and your characters are flying then you can move things around, play with it, and later dig into the art of line-editing.

Harold Underdown and I teach that approaching revision varies for writers. Do you just go with the flow? Or do you need things to be more formal, like charting and highlighting to see where you are?

LM: You have extensive experience in working with both fiction and nonfiction authors. What would you say is different in the approach of a fiction book and nonfiction book in today's market, when there are so many fiction techniques utilized in nonfiction, as opposed to nonfiction of the past?

ER: Nonfiction is real. You can't change the facts to suit how you want to tell it yet you have to find a way to tell that story in an engaging way. And you have to be careful about how you take that liberty. I learned the hard way when I published a K-2 book on Dr. Seuss and a 5000+print run had to be trashed and reprinted because the way something was worded made it incorrect. So you can visualize and dream as you do in fiction but word choice and syntax are important. I was a true beginner then and luckily they liked me enough to let me keep my job!

LM: Focusing on formatting for a moment—how important is this to a submission? What do you feel about indenting paragraphs (or not), single- or double-spacing, double-spacing between scenes, page numbers and, art notes? Do you recommend portraying line breaks as they would be in a picture book?

ER: Formatting is important because we have to be able to read it. So traditional double-spacing is still the standard, not necessary between scenes, and no fancy

type, and yes, page numbers. No art notes unless it is something special that you really feel needs to be there, a twist that the illustrator might not get. Walking an illustrator through a book diminishes and discourages their own imagination and you may miss out on what the book can become. Trust your editor as much as you can.

LM: Do you have any criteria to recommend for a writer to determine whether a manuscript is ready for submission? What do you feel is the downside of submitting too soon?

ER: If your plot, characters, emotional arc, and other elements are intact and you've entrusted others to read it, whether it's a beta reader or your critique group or an expert, and you've exhausted those avenues, and you now find yourself messing with the little things, it's probably time to let your book out into the world.

The downside to submitting too soon may be not having done any of the above things, and risking that first impression.

LM: Please tell us about a bestselling backlist book that best exemplifies Move Books. How and why did you acquire this book?

ER: All the books we've published so far have done really well and we've gone into reprint on all. *The Lost Tribes* series, in particular, intrigued me because not only did it have an African American boy protagonist, which is rare, but it featured kids from all backgrounds that were engaging in science, history, and traveling to awesome places. The series is quite challenging yet so engaging for sci-fi fans.

Like fantasy, you have to hold a whole world and its rules and complications in your head. But this series not only challenges the reader but makes them feel like they can read anything. One teacher sent us a video of her student saying thank you and showing how his reading score and vocabulary had increased because due to The Lost Tribes. Wonderful stuff!

LM: How important is diversity in your decision to acquire a book? Own voices? Social media platform? Previous works?

ER: Own voices is important and I look forward to publishing these books. This is what I do with Reycraft Books where we focus on underrepresented authors and illustrators. At Move Books, I am looking for great stories and this includes all voices. But in saying that, it is important for us to have diverse voices as there is a great hole for children of color where even in schools, classic and supplemental books/texts are still primarily by white authors and many children (of color or not) leave school without any exposure to the many great writers from other cultures—whether it be contemporary or classic works. There is so much out there that hasn't been worked into the curriculum yet and I hope that changes. Children need to see themselves and their experiences and see other's experiences as well and see where we all "meet" as human beings. As an African American, of course, diversity is important to me but not every book will be that.

Social media platforms are great for promotion and can help with sales but they shouldn't suck time from the writer's ability to be able to write the next book. If you enjoy doing it, do it. If you don't, leave it alone and concentrate on what you do best. Having a platform doesn't factor into my choice of acquiring a good manuscript. But your willingness to be a part of your own success once the book is published does.

Previous works can help sell books if the writer has a huge following but new writers can write excellent books that sell too. It's important to let the writing and story hold their own and shine through.

LM: What do you look for, in particular, in a query?

ER: It's important to know who to query, spell their name right, and give a good hook that will make the editor want to read more.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Eileen Robinson is offering an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to CBI subscribers. Submit the first 25 pages of a middle grade novel aimed at boys ages 8-12 featuring boy protagonists and, when included, strong secondary female characters. Looking for strong character development and emotional arcs. All genres welcome, including contemporary, historical fiction, humor, adventure, mystery, horror, fantasy/sci-fi, and graphic novels. See the Move Books submission guidelines & submission form at https://move-books.com/manuscript-submission/. Put **[CBI SUB]** before your title in the Title Field of the submission form. There is no deadline for submissions.

PARAGRAPHS

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SCENES AND CHAPTERS

by Jane McBride

Last month, I talked about sentences as the building blocks of paragraphs. Paragraphs have their own place in the process of book-writing. Paragraphs are the building blocks of scenes, which, in turn, are the building blocks of chapters. And while picture books don't have chapters, the structure of the paragraphs on the page often contributes to the tone and pacing of a particular spread or scene.

What factors should we take into consideration in writing these important building blocks?

Length of paragraphs. Like sentences, paragraphs should vary in length. Some will be long, composed of four or five sentences. Others will be much shorter. Aim for a variety of paragraph length. Not only will it make your writing easier to read, but it will also break up your page. Paragraph after paragraph of the same length can grow boring not only to the reader's mind but also to his eye. (Note: In some picture books the paragraphs are intentionally similar in length to create a specific rhythm to the text. This is fine, as long as it is a deliberate stylistic choice.)

Is there a place for extremely short paragraphs? Absolutely. What is the point of writing a very short paragraph? A paragraph that consists of only one sentence or even one word creates emphasis because it breaks up the narrative's rhythm.

Let's make up a story as an example. Fourteen-year-old Dan is in the woods, camping by himself to fulfill a scouting requirement. In the next two paragraphs, Dan is on the way back to the trailhead where he'll meet his troop leader and other scouts.

Dan stopped in the middle of the trail. Something felt off. The forest went quiet. Even the birds had ceased their chirping. He shifted his backpack to better use his arms and reached for the knife in the scabbard at his side. His hand closing around the hilt, he felt the presence. Slowly, he turned and saw it, the bear the park rangers had warned him of.

Do. Not. Run.

Do you see how the second paragraph, consisting of only three words, stands out? It breaks the rhythm of the narrative, drawing attention to itself and emphasizing our hero's order to himself.

Sentence variety within a paragraph. In other articles, we've talked about employing different kinds and lengths and shapes of sentences. The same thing applies to writing paragraphs. What kinds of sentences make up your paragraphs? Ideally, you will have all types of sentences.

Tramping through the heavy woods, Dan kept his eye out for snakes. They had been known to hang from branches, ready to snap out and bite the unwary. He had packed an anti-venom kit, but he'd be just as glad to not need it. Remain alert at all times. That was one of the many dictums from his scoutmaster. All Dan had to do was to obey every single one and he should be all right.

What kind of sentences do we have in the above paragraph? Complex, compound, and simple. Even a sentence fragment (remain alert at all times). They all go to make up a varied and interesting paragraph. Is there ever a time when you want to use the same sentence style over and over? Yes, if you want to make a point. Let's look at a paragraph where all the sentences are not only of the same type but they all begin in the same way:

Dan stood his ground. He stood his ground as the bear attacked. He stood his ground as the bear raked his chest with a massive paw. He stood.

Do you notice how the repetition of the same words and sentence structure lend strength to Dan's bravery?

If you are writing a picture book for the youngest readers/listeners, you may also want to repeat the same sentence style to create rhythm or so the read-

er can anticipate what comes after the page-turn. But most of the time in novels and picture books, sentence variety makes for better storytelling.

What functions do paragraphs serve?

Paragraphs to indicate dialogue. We know how to write dialogue. For each new speaker, the dialogue is indented and treated as a paragraph. Some newbie writers fail to understand that each speaker needs his own paragraph of dialogue; even a few experienced writers forget that.

The set up: Dan is trying to convince his parents that he's old enough and competent enough to spend the night in the woods by himself.

"Don't do this, Dan," his mother begged. "You can take care of the requirement some other way. You're only fourteen."

"Don't you get it?" Dan nearly shouted the words in his urgency to make his mother understand. "I have to do this. It's the only way I can earn my Eagle."

Dan had earned every requirement for the Eagle Badge of Honor but for this one. He had to do this. He had to.

What if the same speaker continues his dialogue but you want to indicate a little break?

Once again, you indent the dialogue paragraph and, of course, use quotes. This time, however, you won't end the preceding paragraph of dialogue with quotes.

"Mary," Dan's father said, "let the boy go. He's more responsible than a lot of men I know.

"Including your brother Jerry. Jerry's forty-five-years old. He couldn't find his way out of a paper bag without help."

Here, we've given a slight pause in the dialogue without interrupting it simply by starting a new paragraph.

Paragraphs to indicate transitions. Transitional paragraphs can move readers through space and time when you don't want to use a scene or chapter break.

How could we write a transition paragraph for the above example about Dan and the bear?

The animal charged. Dan held his ground, his knife at the ready. *You can do this.* His father's voice found purchase in Dan's mind and he fought with everything he had when the large animal was upon him.

He found the fleshy part of the bear's neck and plunged the knife in. A sickening sound ensued, a harsh gurgle that abruptly ended in a mighty wheeze. The bear made one last swipe with his huge paw, then sank to the ground.

Dan shook with reaction and from blood loss. The animal had gotten in some nasty swipes of his lethal paws, raking Dan's arms and chest.

No mind. They'd heal. Now he had to deal with the carcass. He couldn't leave it here to be ravaged by other predators. His father's words about never killing without honoring the animal stuck in his mind. Once more, he used his knife, this time to take what the bear offered.

The grisly task completed, he headed back to where he'd started. He had to let the ranger know that the bear was dead.

The last paragraph (starting with "The grisly task…") indicates the transition: the bear is dead and Dan is going to deal with it. We don't need to know all the details of how Dan cut it up and packaged it to be carried out of the woods. All we need is that short transitory paragraph to take us to the next place in the narrative.

Paragraphs to conclude a main idea or action or to hint to the next action. In essays or articles, ending paragraphs are all important. They wrap up the main thought of the piece. In fiction, a scene or chapter's ending paragraph can perform the same function. They subtly remind the reader what has happened or hint to the next action. In the above example, the transitory paragraph also serves the function of wrapping up the action.

IN CONCLUSION

Apply the elements of this article to the paragraphs of your work in progress. Do they vary in length? Do they vary in sentence structures? Do they serve one or more purposes? Be ruthless in editing your paragraphs, eliminating sentences or even whole paragraphs that don't add to the story. In the end, you'll have a stronger, tighter story.

Choosing COMP TITLES for Your QUERY LETTER

by Mary Kole

Editor's note: *Agents and editors often ask authors to list comparison ("comp") titles in their query letter. Comp titles are books that are similar to yours in either in content (the style/tone/subject matter) or the market (your book will appeal to the same readers). Comp titles help agents shorthand a book's hook and potential for editors, and help editors determine who and how big the audience might be for the book before offering a contract. But choosing the right comp titles is important. Here, editor Mary Kole weighs in with her best tips on choosing comp titles for your query letter.*

Questions about comp titles in a query are common, because book comps can either be a powerful part of your pitch, or a big potential pitfall.

The conventional wisdom about book comps is that, if you have good ones, use them. If you have outlandish ones that communicate your delusions of grandeur (*I'm Rick Riordan meets Suzanne Collins!*), skip them.

The purpose of strong book comps is to make a realistic comparison between your work and someone else's. Ideally, the author or book you're choosing is thoughtful, rather than just a runaway bestseller. It's always best to give reasoning for your choices, if you can. For example:

My manuscript has the quirky sensibility of ***How to Say Goodbye in Robot*** *and the freewheeling voice of* ***Sorta Like a Rock Star****.*

Both of these comps are older than I'd use (see below), but they came easily to the top of my head because they're both so very specific. Here are some more considerations:

Age of Book Comps

It's best if your comp titles are recent, published within the last three years or so. This does double-duty and communicates to the literary agent or publisher not only your comparison, but that you're keeping up with the marketplace.

But don't despair if your perfect comparable title is older. If you simply must weave *The Giver* by Lois Lowry into your pitch, pair it with a more recent comp and, ta-da!, the best of both worlds.

Relevance of Comp Titles in a Query

Per the "reasoning" point, above, your comp titles should be relevant to your current pitch. It's okay to compare your middle grade historical to a young adult dystopian comp only if you give a specific rationale. For example, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *The Sun is Also a Star* by Celina Yoon don't have a lot in common in terms of premise. But they both explore societal pressures and race in different ways, and those are connections you can draw for an unlikely "meets" comparison (*My story is X meets Y.*)

As long as you're thoughtful about it and guide the literary agent or publisher on why you made the choices you did, and the choices make sense, you can do whatever you want here.

Similarity to Your Book

You can get away with book comps that aren't really similar to your book, except for an element or two. But what if your comp titles are too similar? This is a fine line. If you're pitching a story about a

Choosing Comp Titles..continued

disfigured girl whose mother hides her away during World War II and using *The War That Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley as a comparative title, you're maybe calling too much attention to the fact that your idea already exists. And then you may have to justify how yours is different or better. It's a better idea to pick books that are similar but not eerily so.

Picking Comp Titles from the Agent or Publisher's List

Some smart writers customize their comp titles in a query to reflect books represented by the literary agent they're querying, or the publisher they're submitting to. This can be an effective strategy. Keep in mind, however, that agents and publishers won't want to cannibalize their own lists. So if the book you're pitching is too close to one the agent represents or the publisher has published, this might actually be a liability for you. Their loyalty will always be to the author and project that already exists in their portfolio.

Number of Comp Titles

The ideal number of comp titles in a query is two or three. I recently read a query with six book comps mentioned. That writer had clearly done their research, but they needed to tone it down. Two strong comps are better than four lukewarm comps and way better than six comps that just all happen to be in the same category. The more specific the better, so you don't want to dilute your pitch by citing too many other books.

How to Find Book Comps

This is a quick answer: Read! Read in your category. Read outside your category. I will never, ever, ever understand writers who refuse to read because it pollutes their process. Spinning in your own echo chamber is fine, but it also tends to produce (ironically) derivative fiction because the writer doesn't know enough about what's out there to realize that they're repeating common tropes, using cliché language, or not exposing themselves adequately to what's possible.

Reading is a delightful way to get to know the publishing landscape, discover new voices, add fresh ideas to your own writing toolbox and, yes, discover book comps that you can use in your pitch.

Mary Kole is the instructor for Manuscript Submission Blueprint from CBI's WritingBlueprints.com, a step-by-step guide on researching editors and agents, assembling your query and submissions packet, navigating the submission process, and dealing with rejections. Check out the free trial edition here: https://writingblueprints.com/p/submissions-blueprint-trial

DON'T BAIT-AND-SWITCH, UNLESS YOU NEED TO

by Jane McBride

We know what happens when a story does a bait-and-switch, perhaps starting out as a lighthearted family story only to evolve into a dark tale of sibling rivalry. Characters can also do a bait-and-switch, suddenly altering their personalities, even their very natures, partway through the book. This leaves readers bewildered, confused, and maybe even angry.

Let's take a look at what might cause a character to do a bait-and-switch. Because I love the Mini Blueprint style, we'll do it in that format.

STEP 1: Ask yourself if your character moves from one personality to another solely because of the needs of a scene.

ACTION: If that is the case, your scene probably needs work. Think about how you can rewrite and revise it so that the character stays true to herself. A character can make a mistake, even a bad one, and try to repair it or make amends, but the mistake should be one that readers can understand. A character who shifts personalities and assumes traits diametrically opposed to his real self because of a poorly crafted scene won't hold a reader's interest. In fact, the story will probably not make it to readers, because you will have lost the editor's and/or agent's interest. Whether you are writing a hero or a villain, the character should stay true to his or her nature.

Do you remember the fable of the scorpion and the frog? The scorpion wants to get across a stream and asks the frog for a ride. The frog is reluctant to agree and asks why he should trust the scorpion. The wily scorpion reasonably points out that if he stings him, both of them will die so it's in his best interest not to sting the frog. The frog cautiously agrees. The scorpion climbs on the frog's back and they begin their journey. Partway across the stream, the scorpion stings the frog. Bewildered, the frog asks "Why?" The scorpion answers, "I couldn't help it. It's in my nature." This dark tale reminds us of the importance of keeping consistent with the character's nature, even if that character is a mean-spirited scorpion. Does this mean that a hero can have no faults or that a villain can have no virtues? Not at all. It simply means that those faults and virtues should remain consistent to the character's nature and temperament.

STEP 2: Determine if your character performs an action completely out of her norm and, if so, why she is behaving this way.

ACTION: Spend the effort and time to develop a strong character profile. This goes far beyond a physical description and general background. Think about your character's past, and how those events (good and bad) influenced who he is today. Map out your character's personality, her strengths and weaknesses, skills and shortcomings. All your character's actions need to have a believable foundation. If she's taking a risk, and you've portrayed her until this moment as someone who is risk-averse, ask yourself why your character is now acting this way. Is it because you're bored with her? Or you're bored with the story? If so, it's time to rethink your story and your character.

Dig deeply into your story goals and the goals of your character. What has caused him to want to perform an action that brings the reader to a halt, scratching his head, asking "Why?" For example, if a 15-year-old girl is normally a good student and well-behaved at home and at school, why would she start hanging out with a rough crowd and skipping classes and letting her grades slip? If there is a relatable reason for this, like her project for the

Don't Bait-and-Switch...continued

science fair got passed over for a project that was totally inferior for first prize and she is acting out of resentment and bitterness and disappointment, then work that in. Maybe her disappointment is extra sharp because the prize went to a girl who had bullied our character for years and got away with it because she pretended to be nice when others are present. But for our heroine to completely go against her real nature with no cause will ring false. Give your character real motivation to act against her nature. And then give her a reason to revert to her real self. In this scenario, perhaps she sees that acting out won't bring her satisfaction or happiness.

STEP 3: Ask why a normally intelligent, rational character suddenly becomes stupid or forgets information he should already know.

ACTION: Make certain that it is clear what your character knows and then be consistent. If, for instance, he knows that eating peanuts will send him into a severe allergic reaction or even anaphylactic shock, why would he suddenly eat a candy bar with peanuts and have to be rushed to the hospital? What might cause a character to eat peanuts when he knows how sick they will make him? What if he knows that his parents are going to question him about why he skipped school? He knows that if he ingests just a tiny amount of peanuts, he will be sick and that will divert his parents' attention from his skipping school. Or is he feeling jealous that his younger sister gets so much attention for her amazing piano-playing ability? Did he want an equal amount of attention? In each of these instances, the character has a motive for acting as he did. But what if you, the writer, just decided that your scene needed some drama? That is not a good reason for your character to do something foolish. If that's the case, find another way to achieve it. Stupid characters are not attractive or appealing to thoughtful readers.

STEP 4: Consider instances of the unreliable narrator. An unreliable narrator is a character whose viewpoint is compromised. Either out of ignorance or self-interest, the narrator lies, speaks with bias, or makes egregious mistakes in relating what is happening, turning him into an untrustworthy viewpoint character. Novels with unreliable narrators are often written in first-person point-of-view. Robert Cormier's iconic YA novel I Am the Cheese is a classic example of an unreliable narrator.

ACTION: What if your story needs, even demands, a switch in the narrator's personality? If so, carefully and subtly plant clues throughout the story so that once the reader sees the switch they can look back and realize they should have seen it coming. This is extremely difficult to do. Cormier, in his dark YA novels, managed this, but it takes skill.

WRAPPING UP

As I went back and re-read this article, I realized that the words "reason," "motive," and "consistency" show up a lot. There's a reason (pun intended) for that: Readers want to read about characters they can count on to act in ways that they can understand, even if they don't approve of those actions. A character who is the victim of a bait-and-switch will disappoint your readers if he lacks an adequate motive for behaving as he does. Disappointing your readers means losing them … maybe forever.

writing blueprints

Frequently we will be incorporating Mini Blueprints into CBI, which are based on the step-by-step way of learning in our full Writing Blueprints. If you're not familiar with our longer Writing Blueprints that take you through the process of writing, editing, submitting, marketing, or self-publishing your book, check out free trial editions here: **https://writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints**

Are You Yeti Yet? Kid Lit Author Heather Ayris Burnell

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Growing up in Salinas, California, Heather Ayris Burnell loved to spend hours in the library and read. She translated that love into a passion that led her to become a published children's book author with her debut picture book *Bedtime Monster,* illustrated by Bonnie Adamson (Raven Tree Press, 2010), followed by *Kick! Jump! Chop!* illustrated by Bomboland (Sterling, 2017), and now the highly popular Unicorn and Yeti unique early reader/graphic novel series (Scholastic/Acorn Books) illustrated by Hazel Quintanilla. Now living in an old farmhouse on an organic garlic farm with her family and assorted animals in Washington, Burnell also works as a librarian and is active on social media with her private Sub It Club group on Facebook. You can learn more about Burnell and sparkly magical things at **https://www.heatherayrisburnell.com/**

PJ McIlvaine: What inspired you to start writing children's books?

Heather Ayris Burnell: I spent a lot of time at the library when I was a kid. It felt like a magical place with stories waiting to be discovered. Of course, all that reading made me want to make up my own stories too. My elementary school was very active with creative writing projects and I loved them. I had my work printed in a couple of publications through the school. It seemed amazing to me back then when I wrote something then saw it in print later. It must have stuck with me, but I didn't think of writing for publication until much later in life. For the longest time, I wrote for myself, just to relax. But, with a growing family one doesn't have too much time for relaxing! One day I decided that if I was going to spend so much time on something that it should be for a purpose, otherwise I was just taking time away from my family. That's when I started studying how children's books are written and submitted. Children's stories are what I love writing the most so it only seemed natural to start there.

PM: How has being a librarian helped you in your writing journey?

HB: Being at the library is always inspirational! As a librarian I, of course, see a steady stream of books all day long. I get to find the perfect books for storytimes, read with children, help plan the Summer Library Program, talk with all sorts of people about books, and so much more. I love learning who the kids' favorite authors are, and it's so fun to talk about their favorite books with them. That is the best! Of course, I try to make sure to have my go-to books on the shelves from my favorite authors. I find more books that I love every day which means that I'm always sure to have books I know and love to share with kids who come in wanting help finding a book.

PM: Where did the idea for your Yeti and Unicorn series come from? What made you decide to pick those particular animals to be the lead characters? The format is also a bit unusual, as you have several stories in one book. How did that develop or did that come about in the revision process?

HB: The Unicorn and Yeti series did not start out as a story about the pair. I actually had a Unicorn picture book manuscript that I was working on. It went through a ton of revisions. In one draft Yeti showed up at the end and it was a funny joke (at least it was to me.) After that, I kept thinking of Unicorn and Yeti together. I knew that they had a lot of humorous story potential. During one of my long talks with my amazing agent, Sean McCarthy, he suggested that I write some early readers. Early readers are what I had really loved to write back when I had started thinking about submitting my work but had pretty much quit writing them to focus on picture books. I was thrilled, to say the least.

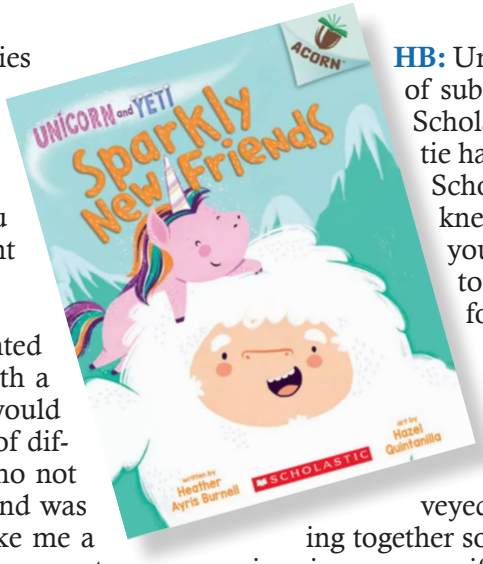
I had a lot of fun writing stories starring Unicorn and Yeti and we submitted a group of three stories. The timing was right when the submission connected with Executive Editor Katie Carella at Scholastic. She was working to find stories to launch the Scholastic Acorn line. It was Katie who brilliantly suggested the unique graphic novel/early reader format, which I could not adore more. I love

Heather Ayris Burnell continued

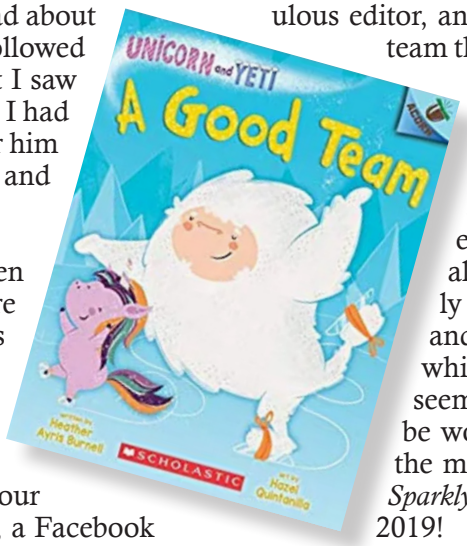
writing in that way and it suits the stories perfectly.

PM: How did you get your agent? Any tips or tricks you can share to those in the querying process? What were you looking for in an agent? Is your agent hands-on?

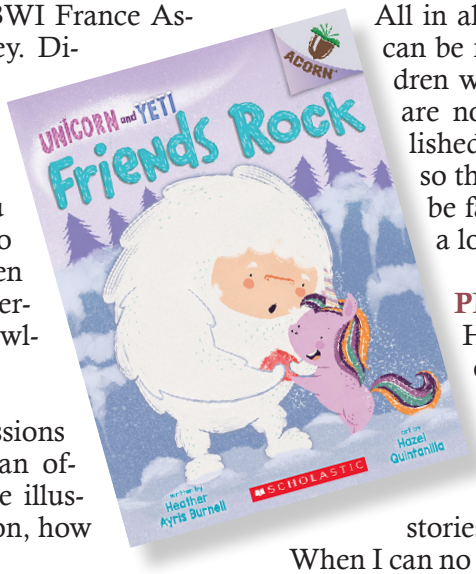
HB: I was looking for an agent that wanted to represent my writing as a whole with a look towards a career, an agent who would be in it for the long haul. I write in a lot of different styles and I wanted someone who not only liked my writing but also got it, and was able to give me the advice to help make me a better writer. And, of course, I wanted an agent who had the connections to sell books. I found all of that and more in my agent, Sean McCarthy. Sean had been on my radar for a while as I had read about him when researching agents and I followed him on Twitter. It just so happened that I saw that he had started his own agency when I had a manuscript I thought might be right for him so I followed his submission guidelines and queried him.



While there is a lot to figure out when querying any particular project there are things writers can do to help themselves for the long haul that querying most often is. There are so many resources these days, from Twitter to blogs to magazines to books. It helps to have writers to talk to about submitting your work. That is why I started Sub It Club, a Facebook group where we talk about all things submissions, with my critique partner, friend, and SCBWI France Assistant Regional Advisor Dana Carey. Digesting a steady stream of information on querying, what agents and publishers are looking for in your genre, query writing, and the plethora of things that help you when you are querying is something one can do a little bit of every day. That way when you are ready to query it's not as overwhelming because you have a knowledge base to start from.



PM: How many rounds of submissions did you go through before getting an offer? Did you have any input into the illustrations? From first draft to publication, how long did it take?



HB: Unicorn and Yeti went on just one round of submissions. Sean and I chose to go with Scholastic and Katie for many reasons. Katie has edited so many amazing books! The Scholastic Branches line is awesome so we knew the new Scholastic Acorn line for younger readers would be a great thing to be a part of. Plus the vision Katie had for Unicorn and Yeti was truly magical.

Because of the graphic novel format I do get to go over the illustration sketches and give feedback. We want to make sure that each story is conveyed through the words and pictures working together so that a new reader can decipher what is going on, even if they are not sure of all of the words. The whole team, from Unicorn and Yeti illustrator Hazel Quintanilla, to the cover designer, the sales team, my fabulous editor, and even more people on the Scholastic team that I barely even hear about, work hard to make sure that the books work as a whole. I make revisions as necessary to make the stories work better not only with the illustrations but with an eye toward the amount of words in each panel, word usage, repetition, and all of those important elements that early reader books need. Katie and I go back and forth on things as simple sounding as which words to bold! A lot goes into such seemingly simple books and it seems to be working. *Parents Magazine* said, "Behold the modern early reader." And they named *Sparkly New Friends* a Children's Best Book of 2019!

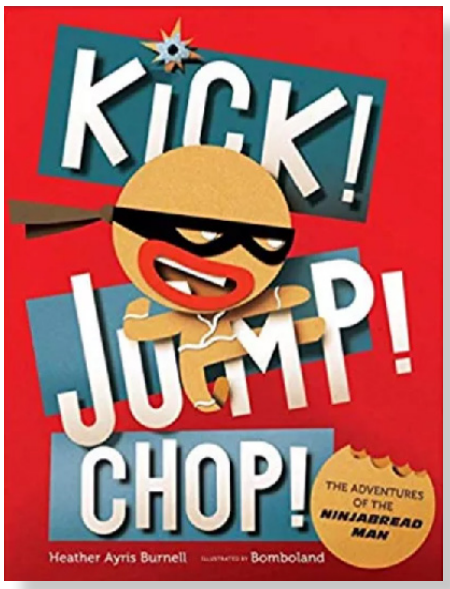
All in all we want the books to be the best they can be for our very important audience of children who are just learning how to read. There are now three Unicorn and Yeti books published in the series and three more on the way so the time from first draft to publication can be fast and furious, which is unusual but it's a lot of fun.

PM: What is your writing process like? How do you decide on what idea to work on? Do you belong to a writer's group and/or have beta readers?

HB: I usually write my first drafts out by hand, even with longer pieces. New stories seem to flow better for me that way. When I can no longer make sense of things easily on my

Heather Ayris Burnell continued

paper full of cross-outs and arrows I type it up, adding to the story as I go. I print the manuscript out and carry it around with me. I revise wherever I can; during breaks at work, while waiting for my kids, at sporting events, and while I'm sitting with my family in front of the TV. I write wherever I can. And I tend to be very short on time these days so it has pushed me to write fast. Critique partners have been extremely important to my growth as a writer and I am lucky to have been connected with some amazing writers and critiquers for many years. Receiving as well as giving critiques has taught me so much and I think writers groups are very important. All of this has prepared me for the pace of writing the Unicorn and Yeti books where I send work straight to my editor and we decide how best to go forth with revisions.



PM: How do you manage family and work responsibilities and still find time to write? You have three kids, how interested are they in your writing? Do they suggest topics or do you bounce ideas off them?

HB: My children have grown up with me sitting by them, writing while they play. Sometimes we'd make up stories together. When they were little I'd write special stories for one or all three of them, and sometimes they'd tell stories to me. We have had a lot of fun coming up with ideas, my husband included. Now that everyone is older we don't make up stories together as much as we used to and I even have a proper office to write in when I want, but we still have a lot of fun when we start talking about story ideas. My family is always happy to hear a wacky idea from me but I tend not to talk about things too much when I am working on a particular manuscript. I find that it's better for me to write things down than to talk them out.

PM: You're extremely active on social media. Do you have any advice for those of us (ahem) who go online and procrastinate?

HB: Me being on social media is procrastination! I do try to make my procrastination useful. If I am doing things online that help me forward my writing in some way then surely it is not procrastination! Of course, I check in with the Sub It Club private Facebook groups daily, not only to make sure things are running smoothly, but also to help others when I can. Twitter is a great place for learning, so is it really procrastinating? Maybe a little. But it's fun, and I have come to accept that a certain amount of procrastination is part of my process. For some reason when I'm writing I very much need to do other things for a while until I get into the groove and just write. I used to resist it but now I just go with it because I know the fooling around will get me to story writing eventually. If your writing life is a part of most of the things you do online you can really count your procrastination as working. That's what I like to think anyway!

PM: What are you working on now? What your goals, writing wise? Do you see yourself writing in other genres? Do you have a passion project?

HB: Right now I am working on the next three Unicorn and Yeti books in the series. Each book has to be written and revised. Then Unicorn and Yeti illustrator, Hazel Quintanilla, does the sketches. Then it's back to me for more revisions. Off to Hazel again for color art. Back to me for final revisions... so it's quite an intense process in a short amount of time. I am slowly working on other manuscript drafts and ideas when I have a chance but when it's my time to work on Unicorn and Yeti I have no time or energy to focus on anything else.

The Unicorn and Yeti series honestly makes me feel like I have hit my writing goal: to be a well-published author with books that kids seem to love. Of course, I want to publish more books. I don't limit myself to any one genre but at the advice of my agent I do my best to focus on one thing at I time and I think it has been really beneficial.

PM: If you could be a unicorn or yeti, which would you choose?

HB: I don't know if I could choose between being a unicorn or a yeti. Being a unicorn would be so much fun because you could fly and have sparkles and do magic. Who doesn't want that? But being a yeti would also be so much fun. Not getting cold in the snow would be awesome. I love the outdoors in winter and can really relate to so many of Yeti's qualities. (I might know someone who, like Yeti, likes the thought of being fancy but doesn't want to put that much work into it.) I really feel like the two of them together, Unicorn and Yeti, are really the best of both worlds. Having a non-judgmental, accepting friend who is there to help you no matter what, just like Unicorn and Yeti are, is what I choose to be.

SPECIAL REPORT:

Advice from Author, Illustrator

Barbara Seuling is a writer and illustrator whose best guess at her lifetime publishing record is "three to four dozen books." Her titles cover both fiction and nonfiction, including the popular young adult "Freaky Facts" series published by Lodestar. Ms. Seuling worked as an editor for 11 years, first at Dell books before they had a children's publishing program, and then with Delacorte Books for Young Readers. She moved on to be the acquisitions editor at Lippincott and then became a freelance editor. She now divides her time between her own writing and illustrating, her editorial service and teaching writing classes, where she especially loves to work with beginners. Ms. Seuling's book *How to Write a Children's Book and Get It Published* (Scribners) is an indispensable tool for writers of all levels.

Has the industry changed since you started creating children's books?

It's so different. I think the biggest difference is that editors no longer have the power they once had to buy something they're excited about. Now they have to get an awful lot of permission before they can buy anything. I think that takes some of the *pizzazz* out of it. There's an adrenaline that flows when you're an editor and you discover someone, and that doesn't happen anymore. Everything is bought by committee. Editors have to guess what will please the editorial board. I'm not putting editors down, but I feel bad that they have to second guess what will sell and make money for the company rather than being able to go with their instincts on what they think is a good book.

So the tone and focus of the publisher's whole list takes precedence over an editor's gut feeling about an author?

I think so. I think in some cases it works out. For example, Bernette Ford, the editorial director of Cartwheel Books at Scholastic, takes an interest in everything that comes in and is very involved with every book. Those books are also bought by committee, but Bernette has that old fashioned enthusiasm. It's still done by modern methods — they have to know the book will sell before they buy it — but she's managed to keep her stamp on each book like editors used to. There are a few editors around who still can do that.

What are the chances today for a new author who doesn't have a track record?

I have so many students, and I'm always looking for the positive side of things because I want them to stick with it and have the hope you need in this business. I just think there are ways to go about breaking in that are very important. One is to develop your skills to the utmost degree. We used to encourage people with good ideas to send things out even if their writing was a little rough at the edges. I think now that's a danger, because even if something's quite good it can be rejected if it's not in publishable form. So it is harder for beginners because they have to have their work at a higher level when it's submitted. People with editorial services are trying to plug that gap.

Do you think more people are trying to write children's books than before?

It seems that way, but I don't know if it's true. I think more of them are coming out of the woodwork because there are ways for them to learn, such as writing courses and the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators. There are so many more ways for people to get involved in the writing of children's books that there are more people trying it.

Has the practice of multiple submissions (submitting the same manuscript to several publishers simultaneously) encouraged people to submit their work before it's ready?

I think it has made a difference in the number of poor manuscripts that get on an editor's desk, but I wouldn't change it. There was a time when you would hear me say never multiply submit, because I worked as an editor and I knew what it meant to have to read all the submissions. I don't know if it's because I became a writer myself, or because things changed so drastically in the business, but my feelings about multiple submissions changed. I used to write a column for the SCBWI newsletter and I got so many questions from people who said a press had been holding their manuscript for a year and a half and they wanted to know what to do about it. It used to incense me — what right did the publisher have to hold people up this way when they knew it was an exclusive submission? No other business in the world works that way. So little by little my old feelings got chipped away, and now I have a different viewpoint on the submission process. I encourage multiple submissions strongly. None of us have the kind of life span needed to wait for each publisher to respond before sending the manuscript to someone else.

As a teacher and editor, do you see some common mistakes beginners make over and over?

The main character is a big one. So often beginning writers will use boy and girl twins as the main character, or use more than one main character, such as a pair of boys going off to

and Teacher Barbara Seuling

have an adventure and you can't pick out which one is the hero of the story. There should be one viewpoint to the book, and this rule hasn't changed since children's books first began. You can occasionally get away with it if you shift the focus to another character when you start a new chapter, but you have to do this very carefully.

Point of view is another one. I always feel you should know how to use point of view so you can break the rules. There are a lot of cases where the rules of point view are broken very successfully, such as in *Charlotte's Web*. You can bend the rules but you have to be as good as E.B. White to do it.

What kinds of stories are beginning writers creating these days?

People tend to remember what they liked as kids, and they want their kids to like the same things. *Curious George* will always be popular, but many writers are not hitting kids today where their interests are. Many books that were snapped up forty years ago that wouldn't get published today. Kids had a very different kind of focus on reading back then. Their early years were without television, so they had different reading habits. Kids today who grow up with television are reading books that compete with TV, so the stories have to grab kids in a different way. When reading was the main activity for entertainment, kids had a longer attention span and they would still read about talking animals when they were 11 or 12. Now, the tolerance level is different. Writers have to get into the action right away. I always cringe when I tell my students that they can't spend so much time at the beginning of the story setting up the mood, and I think it used to be so nice when a writer could sail into something slowly and build up the atmosphere, but kids don't have that kind of patience anymore.

What about the use of talking animals in children's books?

Writer/editor James Giblin once said, "It depends on what they have to say," which is a classic answer. There are two ways to approach talking animals. The big differentiation depends on the story. Either the animals have to truly be animals, or they are really kids that happen to look like animals. If you're writing a story that just needs a substitute child, then you can decide if it's a soft furry animal or a funny-looking animal. It's funny to see a pig in children's clothes, but they always have some pig-like characteristic, such as a large appetite. If you're writing that kind of story, then it's fine to have the animal act like humans.

In a book like *Charlotte's Web* the animals were very true to their natures, and it was important that they were. Even Templeton the rat was not a sympathetic character. In a story where you're getting close to the animal world, you need to keep animals as true to their natural selves as possible. What you don't want is the animals doing animal-like things part of the time when it's convenient to the story, but then at other times have hands or stand upright and talk to each other. That never works.

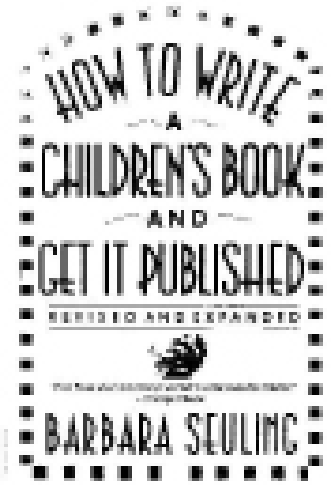
Any thoughts on using rhymed text to tell a story?

I have no problem with rhyme, but I detest bad rhyme. Writers must learn to write rhyming verse well before using it in a story, and in the meantime they should write in prose. Reading poetry is a great way to learn about it. I think people try to escape the discipline of writing in prose by writing in rhyme, and it's very transparent when they do that. If they tell a story in verse and it's bad, I always tell them to try it in prose. I love verse, and editors must as well because there are a lot of books written in rhyme. I think from all the bad manuscripts that came across editors' desks the word got out to not write anything in verse, but if it's good an editor will love it.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

I think you have to develop a kind of persistence and patience that you never had before. I don't think anyone gets into this business without loving it a lot, so you start out with high motivation and enthusiasm. To keep that going, you have to nurture certain aspects of your personality. If you're going to be hurt easily by rejection, work on that. Patience is incredibly important because of all the waiting that goes on in this business. So there are areas of your personality you can work on that won't make you a better writer, but will help you in this profession. Good teachers and writing groups help, as well as being connected with news of the profession which helps you feel part of the writing community.

I think it's important to write every day. Things come a lot more smoothly. You don't face as many fears when you go back to your desk. If you have a busy life, take a few minutes every day and write something creative, just to get words flowing on paper. It keeps you in touch with the writing mode. It's a luxury to write every day, and when you're not being paid for it yet it's hard to do. It's like exercise, you may not like it but you know it's doing good things for your body.



How to Write a Children's Book and Get It Published by Barbara Seuling (Scribners)