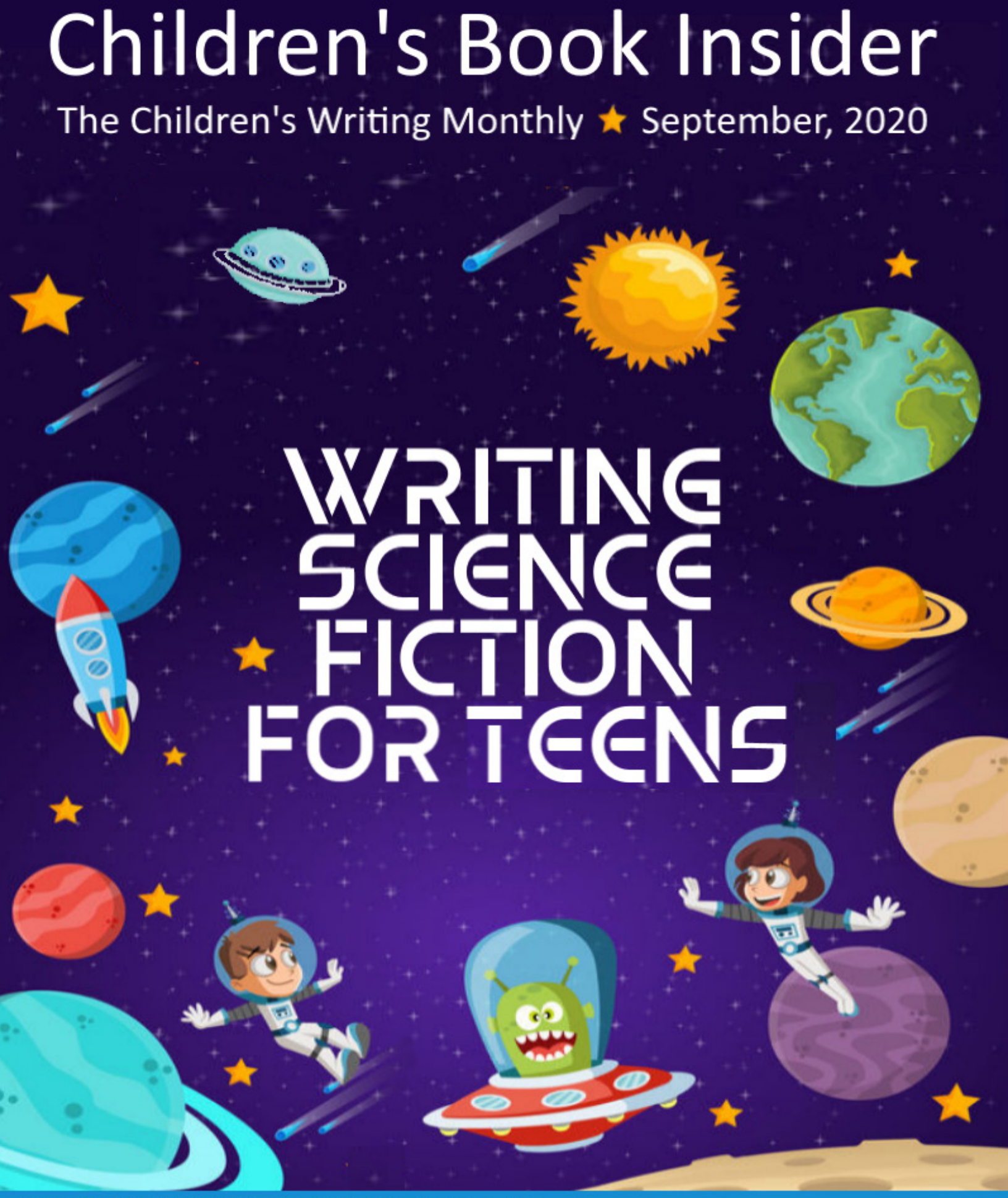
Children's Book Insider
The Children's Writing Monthly ★ September, 2020



WRITING SCIENCE FICTION FOR TEENS

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:

THE SEYMOUR AGENCY

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This issue's contributors

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

Carol Coven Grannick's debut MG novel in verse, *REENI'S TURN*, (virtual) launches on 9/13/20 through The Bookstall, a favorite indie bookstore. Carol loves working on a variety of projects, but one at a time. In addition to her verse novel, she writes poetry and picture books for the very young, poetry for adults, and is a columnist for the *SCBWI-IL Prairie Wind*, reporter for *Cynsations*, and blogger at *The GROG Blog*. Her focus as columnist, consultant, and educator is emotional resilience and the writer's "inner" journey. Visit her at her website: https://carolcovengrannick.com

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

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At Presstime:

Upcoming Twitter Pitch Party Events

Twitter pitch parties are an opportunity for unagented authors to post a 280-character tweet about their completed, polished manuscripts on the pitch party Twitter feed on a specific date. Agents and editors review the thread and "like" pitches for which they'd like to see a full submission. Authors then are responsible for visiting the agent's or editor's website or Manuscript Wish List posting (**www.manuscriptwishlist.com**) for details on how to submit and what should go in the submission package. For more information on Twitter pitch parties, see Laura's interview with PJ McIlvaine (co-founder of #PBPitch) at **https://writeforkids.org/blog/2020/07/kidlitdistancingsocial17/** .

Here are upcoming pitch parties. Check each website for details on times, how many pitches you can post, hashtags, and other rules.

#DVPit, October 26, 8 am - 8 pm Eastern, for children's and teen fiction/nonfiction. **October 27, 8 am – 8 pm Eastern**, for adult fiction/nonfiction and for artists and illustrators using #DVart. For self-identifying, historically marginalized authors & illustrators. For details, go to **www.dvpit.com/**

#PBPitch, October 29, 8 am – 8 pm Eastern. For picture book authors and illustrators. For details, go to **www.pbpitch.com/**

Need help crafting your Twitter pitch? Pitch Wars is a mentoring program where published/agented authors, editors, or industry interns choose one writer each, read their entire manuscript, and offer suggestions on how to make the manuscript shine for an Agent Showcase via Twitter in February 2021. The mentor also helps edit their mentee's pitch for the contest and their query letter for submitting to agents. Open to writers of middle grade, young adult, new adult and adult manuscripts. **Applications must be submitted Sept. 27-29, 2020.** For more information, go to **pitchwars.org/new-start-here/**

Award-winning Publisher Seeks Fiction Submissions, PB through YA

Albert Whitman & Company publishes award-winning picture books through young adult fiction. For current titles, go to **https://www.albertwhitman.com/catalog/**. FOR ALL SUBMISSIONS, send an email query letter with a brief description of story or story pitch (summarizing the book's hook and audience), short bio mentioning previous publications or other background information relevant to your story, and titles of up to three comparative books published in the past five years. These should be books that have a similar audience to your book and that you feel will compare with your book in the marketplace. Explain how your manuscript is different from these books. Attach manuscripts or samples (as per instructions below) as Word documents (preferred) or PDFs. File sizes cannot be larger than 4MB. Subject line must be formatted according to individual category guidelines below. Emails that do not use the subject line formatting may not be read.

For PICTURE BOOKS (fiction and nonfiction, ages 1-8, up to 1000 words), it is not necessary to provide illustrations with the story text, but if you are sending illustrations they should be in PDF or JPEG attachments not to exceed 4MB. Attach entire manuscript as Word or PDF document. Subject line should read: "PICTURE BOOK: (story title) by (author name)."

For MIDDLE GRADE FICTION (ages 8-12, up to 35,000 words) and YOUNG ADULT FICTION (ages 12-18, up to 70,000 words), send story synopsis and/or chapter summary, and first three chapters as Word or PDF attachments. Subject line should read: "MIDDLE GRADE: (story title) by (author name)" or "YOUNG ADULT: (story title) by (author name)."

All submissions should be emailed to submissions@albertwhitman.com. Responds within six months if interested. Simultaneous submissions of the work to other publishers is acceptable.

Independent Publisher Seeks Picture Books with Universal Themes

Flashlight Press in an independent publisher whose books seek to explore and illuminate the touching and humorous moments of family situations and social interactions with captivating writing and outstanding illustrations. Seeking fiction picture book manuscripts of under 1000 words, targeted to readers ages 4-8, that have a universal theme and deal with family or social situations. Study the current Flashlight Press list at **flashlightpress.com/our-books/** to make sure your book is a good fit before submitting.

Send an email query letter that lists each of these elements: Title of Story; Word Count; Target Age; Subject or Theme of story (1-5 words); Summary (3 sentences or less); Your Name; Occupation; City, State, Country; If you have been published previously, list titles, publishers, and pub dates; Anything else you'd like to add. Subject line should read: Query for [title of manuscript]. Send to **submissions@flashlightpress.com**, and attach the full manuscript as a Word doc or PDF. Within a week, you should receive an automated reply that your submission has been received. Responds within three months if interested.

Magazine Seeks Nonfiction for Curious Kids Ages 7-10

Ask is a nonfiction magazine for children 7–10 years old who are curious about science and the world they live in. Each edition of Ask is built around a central theme on some question or concept in the natural, physical, or social sciences, technology, mathematics, history, or the arts.

Ask articles should read as engaging nonfiction, accessible and appealing to newly independent readers (grades 2–5), but also interesting to any general adult reader. They should tell a good story, with an emphasis on ideas rather than just facts. Humor as a teaching strategy is encouraged.

Writers should stretch the boundaries of topic themes and come up with interesting perspectives and unexpected connections. Works by writers of underrepresented groups are welcome. All authors should study several back issues of the magazine before submitting to make sure they understand the magazine's style and focus. Sample copies are available for viewing at the Cricket Media Store, where you can also purchase a current issue. Issues are also available at many local libraries.

Queries that relate to upcoming themes (see theme list below) are being accepted for **feature articles** (400-1200 words, with sidebars. Can also be written in a narrative nonfiction style, such as taking a tour of a Viking blacksmith shop or the unfolding of a significant moment in scientific history.), **photo essays** (400-600 words), **humor pieces** (200-400 words), **profiles/interviews** of scientists, inventors, engineers, artists (200-1000 words), **theme-appropriate experiments**, and **science panel cartoons** (2-6 panels). Queries should give an overview of the proposed article, including scope and treatment, resources, and biographical statement. Attach full manuscript if complete, or writing sample. Rights purchased vary, with option of authors retaining copyright. Query through Submittable at **https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/20689/ask-magazine-for-ages-710-science-nonfiction**.

Upcoming themes (with query deadlines):

JULY/AUGUST 2021 issue: Shell, Sweet Shell. **Query deadline: September 30, 2020.** Possible stories: Why is the ocean full of shelled animals? Why do birds lay eggs that are hard to get out of? How (and why) did cephalopods lose their shells? Different kinds of shells and who grows them; how to grow a shell; humans using shells; hermit crab house swapping.

SEPTEMBER 2021 issue: Plants in Love. **Query deadline: November 15, 2020.** Possible stories: A pollinator for every plant; the first flowers; the oddness of apples; Darwin's moth; sneaky plant tricks, how plants get animals to spread their seeds; boy, girl, or clone? How to tell if a tree is male or female, or both, or neither; genetic engineering for better plants; plants that need humans.

OCTOBER 2021 issue: Making Musical Instruments. **Query deadline: January 15, 2021.** Possible stories: Profile of how an instrument maker makes an instrument (any kind); evolution of the shape of (trumpet, violin?); secrets of a Stradivarius; variations on a theme across the world (blowing into a tube or plucking strings); not for me (why do some people find bagpipes or organ music a delight or torment?); unusual orchestras (vegetables, trash, one-man bands).

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2021 issue: Collecting Collections. **Query deadline: February 15, 2021.** Possible stories: Museum collections: Why do you need 30,000 beetles?; Darwin's collections; stories of particular odd or interesting collections (e.g., collection of old cars rented out to films that need a vintage car); collector who went to extremes to complete a collection; things not on display in museums; online museums; many ways to organize your collection.

WRITING SCIENCE FICTION FOR TEENS

by Jean Daigneau

"It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." This quote, a perfect description of just about any good fiction novel today, is from Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Side of Darkness* published in 1969. With six Nebula and nine Hugo awards to her credit, Le Guin is considered one of the masters of science fiction. Let's find out more.

FANTASY OR SCI-FI? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Science fiction, or "sf" to die-hard readers, and fantasy novels have much in common and books and movies often span both genres. Both are considered speculative fiction. But there's a distinct difference. One of the clearest definitions comes from sci-fi great Isaac Asimov: "Science fiction, given its grounding in science, is possible; fantasy, which has no grounding in reality, is not." Simply put, a science fiction novel must operate within the natural laws of the universe.

As with other genres, science fiction sometimes starts with "What if…?" Often this takes a writer into the realm of yet unrealized possibilities for our own futures or the horrific consequences of past decisions that burden a futuristic society. YA sci-fi author Mindee Arnett says that "speculative fiction allows me to create a framework to examine and criticize real-world issues." Science fiction allows an author to explore the world *as it might be*, even if that *might be* seems improbable.

WHAT MAKES BELIEVABLE SCI-FI?

For YA novelists Kristen Simmons and Sara Raasch, it's all about world-building. Award-winners Simmons and Raasch believe that when it comes to world building it comes down to details, many of which don't even end up in the story. This means that "everything from the presence of gravity, to the history of the civilizations, to the climate and how that affects the food people can eat, to the holidays celebrated and the sports played, and how the young are raised" must be established. They feel "it's important for the writer to know the mechanics of their own world if they expect a reader to buy into it." For the record, Raasch writes mostly fantasy. Their co-authored fantasy novel, *Set Fire to the Gods*, was just released.

Arnett echoes the same thoughts. "I think everything believable in a story, from the world to the characters, comes through the depth of the details. I don't mean the quantity, like a laundry list. That is only surface level. Details that exist deeply beneath the surface are what make a world real."

BUT THERE'S MORE TO THE STORY

As you've read here before, another crucial element is character. Simmons and Raasch ask, "What happens in the story itself? How do the characters grow and change? How do they interact with the world? What is working for/against them?" They also note that "a story can have the most creative world imaginable, but if we can't connect to the characters, it's just a bunch of pretty words. To make it real, make it relatable." This is especially true in a world that has elements of technology and innovation unlike those the reader lives in.

Sci-fi characters don't always belong to the world they find themselves inhabiting. An alien can be out of his element in a humanoid world, just like a human can suddenly discover she's on a distant planet.

Science Fiction continued

Often, the tensions that arise from these different perspectives take the story in unexpected directions. But the elements that motivate those characters and drive their actions have to work within that world. Arnett pushes herself to find the motivation for every character by asking, "Why do they do what they do? Why are they like they are?"

For sci-fi, some writers think of the world they've built as a character that changes or grows. Additionally, every good story needs conflict, which ultimately leads to change, which ultimately affects characters.

Isn't a good story enough?

A great idea doesn't always translate into a great novel. Arnett acknowledges that "the most important thing is maintaining the suspension of disbelief for the reader. It's critical that the world be so real and believable that the reader doesn't start to question it. One way I try to do this is by making sure that any world-building or fantastical detail I add can be explained logically—that it's not just a surface level trimming but a deeply rooted part of the world."

Simmons and Raasch agree and add that "keeping their readers in the story" is imperative. "Good, thoughtful research can create worlds and situations that readers can lose themselves in. Without that careful attention to detail, it's easy for someone to be thrown out of the narrative. Too much of that, and you lose a reader completely. Also, grounding to reality is particularly important. . . . without a connection to our understanding of the world, it's impossible to form a relationship with characters and situations."

Arnett sees this as one mistake that writers often make when tackling science fiction. "The temptation is to just add really cool fantastical detail to a story in the moment of creation without putting in the work of making sure that the detail fits and makes sense." All those details must be seamlessly woven into the story.

While writers break rules all the time, do so selectively. Technology can't work differently in the middle of the story because you need it to, unless there's a believable reason for that to happen.

So what does the future hold for SF?

All three authors admit the genre can be a challenging sell these days. Arnett says flat out that sci-fi is "a hard sell in YA." She attributes that to the fact that like her, some readers don't appreciate the genre. She didn't connect with sci-fi until she was an adult "and started to gain a better understanding of our physical world and the laws that govern it." For Simmons and Raasch, the perks of writing for young adults are worth the challenges of selling it. They love the chance "to focus on the intensity of new emotions, the rawness of grief and loss, and the excitement of first love," though they also acknowledge the market is a little crowded right now.

Up for the challenge?

If you want to try your hand at writing sci-fi for any audience, there are several great places to start. The Internet Speculative Fiction Database, The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, and Locus Online, some of which include fantasy and horror, all offer a wealth of information. Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America, founded in 1965, is the granddaddy of them all. While there is a membership fee, it might be worth the price of admission if you're serious about the genre.

Thinking about writing sci-fi? New worlds await, so what are you waiting for?

For further reading:

***Pacifica* by Kristen Simmons**

***Stronger, Faster, and More Beautiful* by Jacqui Castle**

***Aurora Burning (The Aurora Cycle)* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff**

***Renegades* by Marissa Meyer**

***Article 5* series by Kristen Simmons**

Develop Your Resilience as a Writer by Becoming More FLEXIBLE

by Carol Coven Grannick

Emotional resilience is a foundational tool in our creative toolbox. No worries if you weren't born with it—our brains love to learn. I learned optimism and its main fuel, resilience, from Martin Seligman (LEARNED OPTIMISM) back in the early 1990s, and from ongoing research and resources at the UPenn Positive Psychology Center.

The research-based framework has identified cognitive skills and tools that create, build, and maintain emotional resilience. I devoured Seligman's book, practiced the exercises daily, and gradually noticed that my thinking was evolving to that of a learned optimist. It changed my life and my work as a therapist. And it definitely prepared me for my journey as a children's writer that began in 1999.

Flexibility, or *mental agility*, is one of the great "competencies" of resilience. It's the ability to adjust our thoughts and beliefs based on new, incoming information. Flexibility builds resilience and flows from it.

For some of us, some of the time, these *transitions* occur without thinking. We get a rejection, we turn away from it, send out two or three more submissions and it's done. No big deal.

And sometimes the transitions are harder. We feel attached to the rejection and it seems to take time to "get over" it and move forward.

I think in both cases, we experience mixed emotions, a gift to us we sometimes want to ignore.

There's a mistaken notion that we must have "thick skin", which implies the alleged benefit of not allowing ourselves to feel pain. I'm not big on *not feeling.* We're human. We need our emotions. They are neither bad nor dangerous. They make the tapestry of being human worthwhile. I'm one of those folks who believe that if you can't let yourself feel pain, you're pretty surely going to have some trouble with joy.

Norman Lear, legendary television writer and producer who is still involved in multiple projects at 98, has a well-known philosophy he believes has led to success and happiness. "Over" and "Next", "with a hammock in-between—the hammock is life, living in the moment." Whether we choose a new journey that leaves a previous path behind, or face a slammed door that forces us to find a new way, it's natural to experience loss *and* gain, despair *and* hope, sadness *and* joy. We may not be aware of, or spend time with the forward movement and backward tug, or we may. And we call that *bittersweet.*

In my debut MG novel in verse, *Reeni's Turn*, Reeni makes a misdirected choice she thinks will solve her problems—the fear of, yet longing for, a solo she's desperate to perform, and her struggle to accept her body's changing size and shape. Her choices challenge her flexibility and resilience, propelling her forward and tugging her back.

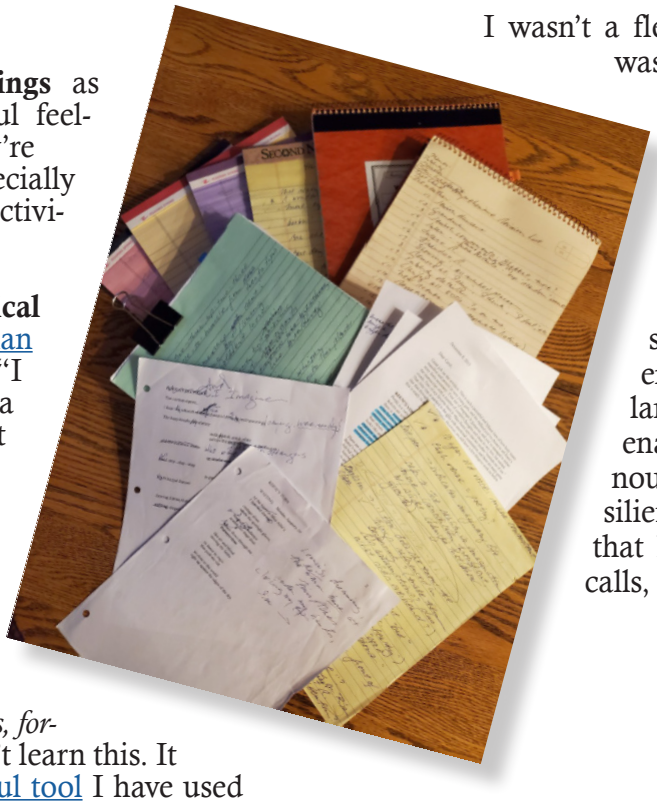
Develop Your Resilience...continued

During the decade I worked on *Reeni's Turn*, there were plenty of small and big rejections, people who wanted this in, that out, verse or prose, Jewish content in, Jewish content out. My belief in my project lit the way forward. Sometimes the closed door hardly mattered, sometimes it mattered more. And one event that felt like a huge meteor-sized crash could have easily ended my journey to publication, just as my heroine, Reeni, encounters an obstacle that could end her life of dancing, no matter how much she loves it.

This "meteor crash" tested my resilience because *it tested my flexibility.* And it tested my flexibility because according to everything I'd learned, my former agent's dozens of submissions to unknown editors severely limited my ability to find a new agent. It was as if many doors to the future were blocked. Wow. Just like my character! Recovery took more time for this particular adversity. But the process was the same, and involved three ways to shore up flexibility and resilience. (Reeni uses them, too!):

- **Accept, even welcome feelings** as natural responses. The painful feelings are not "bad". They're just painful. They'll pass, especially when you add the next two activities.
- **Use (learn) language typical of optimists** (what Seligman named, "explanatory style"). "I am not going to accept this as a dead-end for my book. I'm not sure *what* I can do, but I'm going to try to find out." There's an invitation to flexibility and resilience, far more preferable than, "I can't believe this happened to me. I will never be able to send this manuscript out again", and global language like *always, forever, never*. Don't think you can't learn this. It is singularly the most successful tool I have used for almost 30 years to maintain my resilience.
- **Gather information.** Whether choosing a new direction and leaving the old behind, or searching for a new direction after meeting a closed door, your flexibility wants information to build the bridge from "over" to "next". Reach out for it. Dig it up. Spend the time you need. I spent some time in disbelief after I thought the book I'd worked on for ten years was dead. But it passed as I researched, revised, and began submitting.

I allowed myself my feelings, shored up some optimistic language, and gathered information. *Doing* helped me heal. And as I healed, I saw increasing opportunities, more information. Light appeared. My dream adjusted to new possibilities, ones I hadn't considered before. There was energy, hope, possibilities, and positivity again. Flexibility kicked in. Resilience revived. In early 2019, I signed a contract with Regal House Publishing's MG/YA imprint, Fitzroy Books for *Reeni's Turn*, the book I dreamed of being able to take to young readers and their caring adults.



I wasn't a flexible kid. I thought life was supposed to go a certain way, and I wasn't happy when it didn't. Learning and maintaining emotional resilience—and helping others do so, too—truly changed my life, relationships, and work as a writer. Acceptance, optimistic language, and information enable flexibility. Flexibility nourishes and flows from resilience. And resilience rocks that hammock Norman Lear calls, "life."

Lynnette Novak, Agent

THE SEYMOUR AGENCY
MAKING LITERARY DREAMS A REALITY

interview by Lynne Marie

Formerly a freelance editor for over 17 years who's worked with new writers, advanced writers, *NY Times* and *USA Today* best-selling authors, Lynnette now works with The Seymour Agency, representing children's picture book, middle grade and young adult submissions, as well as adult submissions. She's building her list and eagerly accepting submissions. We're thrilled to have her with us!

LYNNE MARIE: Please share how you came to the agenting side of children's literature. It seems fun, like being a matchmaker! What appealed to you?

LYNNETTE NOVAK: Thanks for having me! I never realized I COULD become an agent. I didn't know that career path existed when I was in university, and once I learned of it, I was under the impression you had to go straight from school to intern at agencies. Clearly, I had missed the boat, and that didn't bother me because I was happy freelance editing.

But then I became a mentor for Pitch Wars, and everything changed. I LOVED going through the slush pile, picking out the project I wanted to work on, helping the author revise and make the work stronger, and then seeing them acquire an agent and get published. After that, I wished I could've been an agent because a lot of this is a part of an agent's job. But, like I said, I thought I'd missed the opportunity.

Still, the "agenting bug" wouldn't leave me alone, so while I was at a conference, I approached an agent and talked to her about my disappointment in not being able to become an agent, that I'd missed my calling. She said with 17 years freelance experience, I could jump right into agenting as long as I was with a reputable agency. After the conference, I contacted a few agencies to see if there were any remote openings. I wouldn't be able to move to NYC, so I'd have to work remotely. I ended up with three offers, but I felt The Seymour Agency was home. I eagerly accepted and have never looked back.

LM: What types of children's books did you grow up reading? How does that affect what you are looking for across your list?

LN: I wouldn't say that what I read as a child and teen has really influenced what I'm looking for because that was a minute ago. What influenced me more were the books I read to my kids, books they've read, and books they're reading now.

Picture books that have influenced me:
Apple Trouble
by Ragnhild Scamell
Memoirs of a Goldfish
by Devin Scillian
The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog!
by Mo Willems
The Wishing Stone
by Steve Smallman

There should be a clear theme and story arc in a picture book. I often see those elements missing, especially in animal stories. I like silly stories but picture books where the child can see themself in the story and identify with the character is always on my "must have" list. I'm also eager to add more #Ownvoices and diverse authors to my list.

Middle grade books:
The Wide-Awake Princess by E.D. Baker
Took by Mary Downing Hahn
Suddenly Supernatural by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel
The Tail of Emily Windsnap by Liz Kessler
Turn Left at the Cow by Lisa Bullard
Alan Cole is Not a Coward by Eric Bell

Lynnette Novak continued

This doesn't mean I want a gazillion princess, mermaid, or ghost books to show up in my box. If you can get ahold of any of these books, take a look at the author's voice. That's what drew me to these books and is definitely something I need to see in a MS, or I won't connect enough to the story. I definitely would like to see more LGBTQ+ and diverse authors as well as their stories in my query box.

Young adult books:
The Young Elites by Marie Lu
One of Us is Lying by Karen M. McManus
The Selection by Kiera Cass
Dorothy Must Die by Danielle Paige
Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi
Caraval by Stephanie Garber

In MG, YA, and adult books, I love dark stories, as you can see. I also love unique worlds, retellings, romance, humor, and #OwnVoices, diverse stories and authors,as well as LGBTQ+ authors and/or characters.

Some recent adult books I've read are:
No Exit by Taylor Adams
The Fourth Monkey by J.D. Barker
Time's Up by Jamey Mack

I grew up on John Saul, Dean Koontz, and Stephen King, and my favorite romance authors are Rachel Gibson and Susan Elizabeth Phillips. I'm always looking for the next Janet Evanovich too.

LM: You seem to like both horror AND light and sweet books or rom/com books. Is there a common thread to what you look for in both of these styles of books?

LN: Strong plot, believable characters, and realistic dialogue.

LM: You have recently taken on my friend Joanna Rowland, author of *The Memory Box*, as well as *The Memory Book, A Grief Journal*, and *Stay the Storm*, into your stable of writers. Does this imply being open to more issue-driven books than in the past? If so, what exactly might you be looking for?

LN: I've always been open to issue-driven books. The trick is finding a unique way to present the issue—something that hasn't been done over and over again. Sometimes, that means a twist to the concept, or maybe the issue is a part of the story but not the main plot.

LM: You thoughtfully have a manuscript wish list with things you will consider: **https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/lynnette-novak/** Has any of that changed? Are you open to accepting nonfiction? Graphic novels? What are some things that you would not be willing to consider?

LN: This list is still current. Thanks for asking! I'll consider nonfiction picture books, but that's the only type of nonfiction. At the moment, I'm not looking for graphic novels, romantic suspense, paranormal romance, historical romance, inspirational, erotica, Christian fiction, adult SFF.

LM: You recently shared this wonderful tip for writing dialogue: Dialogue is so much more than just quotations. It's the pauses, smiles or frowns, body language and mannerisms like crossing/uncrossing legs or ripping a napkin apart without realizing; move beyond the expected and let readers get to know your character on a deeper level. What's another characterization tip that you have that will appeal to writers across the genres?

LN: Readers should be able to tell the difference between your main characters. They should think, act, and speak differently. Make sure there's a character arc, that the protagonist grows by the end of the book. A part of the story would be about their struggles to get to that point.

LM: Notably, you've served time as a mentor for Pitch Wars. Some are still wary about putting their pitches out there. Some doubt the success of the format. What are your thoughts about this?

LN: I would never advise anyone to do something they don't want to do. So, if you don't feel comfortable putting your pitch out there, don't. While Pitch Wars is a fantastic program, it's not for everyone, and it's not the only way to get an agent's attention. You could query agents and/or sign up for online/in-person pitches instead.

As far as how successful the program will be depends on so many variables: the volume of entries, the quality of entries, the author's ability to revise in a short period, how much time and effort the author puts into revisions, the mentor's ability to edit/teach, the market and what agents are looking for, how many agents "show up" for the showcase, how many agents read all the entries, how soon the writer is able to send the MS to the requesting agent, etc.

All that to say nobody can control every part of the program, but those in charge do a super job of running things as smoothly as possible, hoping for as many success stories as they can get!

Lynnette Novak continued

LM: What would you say would be the more common problems you saw in many of the pitches?

LN: Some of the common problems I saw in the pitches are also issues I see in queries.

- word count is too high or too low for that category (by a lot, I'm not talking a few thousand words)
- mentor/agent isn't looking for that genre
- bio is longer than the pitch (Sell the project, not yourself.)
- the pitch is too long and reveals too much about the story (It's just supposed to tease, like the back cover of a book.)
- elements are missing or confusing (I want to know who's the main character, what's their external goal, what's keeping them from achieving it, and what's at stake if they don't attain it. Bonus points for a ticking time bomb!)
- word count missing (When I see this, I don't know if you forgot to mention it or if you know the story doesn't meet the industry's expected word count, so you omitted it. The word count plays a role in whether or not I request, so if I don't see it, I might not request.)

LM: Notably two of your recent sales were Jewish books. Will you be developing a sub-specialty in this genre of books?

LN: I'm always looking for #Ownvoices, diverse authors and stories, including LGBTQ+, not just Jewish books.

LM: This is becoming my *trademark* question, but it really does help to try and capture the essence of what a person looks for. If you could use five words to describe the "spirit" of what you look for in your submissions, what would they be?

LN: Quality, unique, "voicy," commercial, complete.

LM: How important do you feel that comp titles are in a query. Do you like them up front, or do you discuss them later? Do you feel it does justice for a new writer to compare their book to a bestselling book?

LN: I don't need to see comps in a query, but I'm not opposed to them either.

Eventually, the author will need to gather that information for when we go out on sub anyway. I sometimes hear people advise authors to not compare their books to a bestselling one. This is only partially true. Don't say your book is as good or better than theirs. However, you can say it's similar in style, humor, voice, world, conflict, etc. In other words, show us what it is about your story that makes it comparable to the bestselling novel.

LM: What do you want to see specifically in the query?

LN: I mentioned this earlier, but it's worth saying again. Who is the story about? What's their external goal? What's keeping them from attaining it? What's at stake if they don't achieve that goal? Bonus points if there's a ticking time bomb, where the character is under a time crunch, which increases the stakes.

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

Lynnette Novak is offering a special Above the Slushpile submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. She is accepting fiction picture book, middle grade and young adult submissions, as well as picture book nonfiction. Be sure to review her Manuscript Wish List page at www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/lynnette-novak/ for more details. Paste your query letter and the first five pages of your manuscript into the body of an email, and send it to querylynnette@theseymouragency.com. In the subject line, put: [CBI LN] followed by the title of your book, your name, and the age group. **The Above the Slushpile code is valid through September 30, 2020.** Responds to all submissions.

---Please Read Before You Proceed---

Before you submit your manuscript using a CBI Above the Slushpile code, please run through the following checklist:

- You've studied the guidelines of the editor or agent to whom you'll be submitting, and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- You've confirmed your work matches the interests of the editor/agent by reading their CBI interview, and studying recent books on their list or clients they represent.
- Your manuscript falls within standard word counts of the particular age group for which you're writing. (If you don't know standard word counts, get our free Ultimate Children's Writing Cheat Sheet at: writeforkids.org/ultimate-cheatsheet)
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript.
- Your submission packet matches what the editor or agent requests on their guidelines.
- The Above the Slushpile code you're using has NOT expired.

Thank you for following these guidelines and sending our generous editors and agents your best work!

GOOD LUCK!

BREAK the WRITING PROCESS with MULTIPLE DRAFTS

by Jane McBride

If you're working on your first manuscript, you may expect to get everything right in your first or second draft. That's putting a lot of unnecessary pressure on yourself, and not being realistic. Most writers go through multiple drafts per book, with each draft having a different purpose. By allowing yourself to focus on separate aspects of your story with each draft, you'll actually write a better manuscript, and will likely shorten the editing process. Let's discuss these drafts and how you can use them.

Draft one. This is the sloppy draft, the one you write as fast as you can, getting the story down and drawing the characters in broad strokes. You may be doing a lot of telling in this draft, rather than showing. (Don't worry—you'll go back and fix this.) This is the draft where you don't agonize over getting the right word or even getting the grammar and spelling right. This is the draft you might write in NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writers' Month), which is held in November, or at another speed writing venue. Even if you aren't involved in some such venture, you should still write this draft as fast as you can. Your goal is to tell the story while it's exciting and fresh in your mind. Get it down.

Draft two. This is a harder step and requires you to think through the order and structure of your book. If you write in a three-act style (beginning, middle, and end), this is the draft where you pay attention to such things. If you write in a different style, perhaps where you plot the first plot point, the midpoint, second plot point, and black moment of the story, you will take care of those things in this draft. Some writers draw a large W and label the plot points on that, with the points on the W representing the rising and falling tension of the overall story progression.

Draft three. Now we're getting to an even deeper level. You will be paying attention to such things as pacing, backstory, and theme. How do you know if you have the pacing of your story right? Look at the periods of action and reflection. Are they fairly evenly spaced or are there long periods of reflection (thoughts, feelings, description) with few periods of action? Or is it the opposite? Non-stop action with no place for the reader to take a breath can be wearing after a while. Another part of pacing includes scene breaks and chapter endings. Have you presented the reader with a question that will keep her turning the pages at the end of a scene or chapter? You don't have to be writing suspense to have cliffhanger endings. What about backstory? You don't want to dump large chunks of backstory in the beginning of the book, but have you woven the necessary information throughout the rest of the book in subtle strands that will cause the reader to think, "Oh, yeah. That's why he's acting this way"? Have you given the reader what she needs to know to make sense of the plot and characters without resorting to large information dumps? Finally, what of theme? Have you remained consistent to your original theme or have you strayed from it so that the original theme is now unrecognizable? If you have strayed from the theme you started with, is there a reason? Maybe you need to rethink your theme, which will probably cause major changes in the entire manuscript.

Draft four. This is the fun draft for many of us. Here you get to perfect the dialogue. If you're like me and many other writers, you already have the characters talking in your head, demanding that their voices be heard and put on paper or the screen. Sometimes I feel as if I'm more of a transcriber than a writer in this stage. The voices are talking to me so quickly that I scramble to get the words down. Other times, finding the right words is like

Multiple Drafts continued

the proverbial pulling teeth. This is also the time to balance narrative and dialogue. Long passages of narrative can be boring and may even cause the reader to close the book. Subconsciously, most of us scan pages looking for dialogue. Read your draft with an eye to page layout. If there are only long paragraphs of narrative, go back and rework it, trying to include more dialogue. Conversely, you may have too much dialogue and not enough thoughts and feelings. In a recent manuscript, my editor left comments throughout, such as "Dialogue heavy. We need to know the characters' thoughts and feelings."

Draft five. This is the polishing draft, where you go through the entire manuscript and read it with an eye to getting rid of clichés, tending to grammar mistakes, and looking up anything you left blank during the other drafts. Perhaps you're writing a 'tween novel set during the civil war and you didn't know the right term for the weapons used. In this draft, you'll look that up and fill it in. If you're writing a book with a scientific twist, maybe there was a chemical formula or the name of an element or some other detail that you needed to find. This is the time to do that bit of research.

You will also want to identify weak verbs and replace them with stronger ones. Instead of saying "The boy walked across the street," perhaps you could say, "The boy stumbled across the street" or "The boy galloped across the street," depending upon the meaning you want to get across. Another thing you'll want to do is weed out unnecessary words. Is it really necessary to say that the girl had long blond hair that reached to her waist? If her hair reaches to her waist, it's probably redundant to tell the reader that it is long as well.

What other things might you address in this draft? Have you tried to end your sentences with a strong word? Have you made certain that you're using the right word? Pairs of words that can mix up even the most experienced writers include flaunt and flout, affect and effect, lay and lie, among others. And don't forget the infamous triplets: there, their, and they're and to, two, and too. Believe it or not, I've seen mix-ups of these very basic terms in published books.

Some writers read their manuscripts aloud at this stage, listening with an ear to flow and rhythm. If you don't like the sound of your own voice, and many of us don't, ask a trusted friend to read it into a recorder and then listen to it. The ear can pick up many things that the eye misses.

WRAPPING UP

It's not uncommon to have to rework a draft several times before moving on to the next stage. The earlier drafts dealing with overall story structure often require several passes before you're ready to look at how the chapters are structured, or how your dialogue flows. Take as long as you need to get each draft as good as you can before advancing to the next level of edits. It's helpful to have a critique partner weigh in at each phase of the process so you know if you're on the right track. The point is, writing a publishable book is never a sprint. If you're taking your time, you're doing it right.

If you're new to the writing process (or feel stuck), check out our **Writing Blueprints**, which guide you step-by-step through developing and writing a solid draft of a picture book, easy reader, chapter book, middle grade or young adult novel. **Manuscript Magic** will then lead you through every stage of the editing process.

For free trial versions of each program, go to: **https://writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints**

NOT OWNING YOUR VOICE

by Candice Ransom

You look in a mirror, or a darkened window, at your reflection. You see your visible self. The one the world sees, or so you believe. Only your thoughts remain invisible.

The mirror is quiet. If you speak, your reflection cannot hear.

This essay is about #OwnVoices, the 2015 Twitter hashtag attributed to author Corinne Duyvis. As writers for children and young adults, we're invested in and—possibly—concerned about the label designed to classify stories about diverse characters who share the same identity as the author. The goal of #OwnVoices is necessary and admirable, given the fact many diverse groups are underrepresented in children's books, but the movement is not without controversy. To claim the hashtag, Duyvin's guidelines state the author has the same identity as the protagonist, "not their spouse, child, sibling, parent, student, neighbor, friend, etc." Otherwise, young readers might be damaged by inaccurate portrayals of marginalized groups.

During my forty-year career as a writer of children's books, I've kept up with the field, but lagged in this discussion. I spent a month reviewing call-out culture, "staying in your lane," asking permission, good intentions versus true representation, and who is qualified to tell whose story. I still felt confused. Should I add my voice to the discussion?

My books haven't won major awards. I'm not published enough, or maybe the books I have published aren't important enough. Silence is my default mode. It's a form of staying hidden, a tactic that mostly worked during my childhood.

When I look in the mirror, I see a white-skinned woman. Visible identities. I don't see homelessness, domestic violence, poverty, abuse, abandonment, alcoholism, neglect, learning disability, or mental illness. I own each of those invisible identities. Yet I've never written about any of them in my books. Why have I hesitated to use my own voice? I did once. Thirty years ago, I wrote a middle grade novel-in-verse that told my story of homelessness, domestic violence, and abuse. My then-agent submitted the manuscript. An editor suggested rewriting it as a YA novel. "You've already done the hard part." He was wrong. Whenever I revised, I had to crawl back into that dark place. The word "dark" cropped in rejections. "Too dark for this age group." "Too dark," period.

We've all heard kids need books they can relate to (mirrors) or learn empathy from (windows). The truth is, I didn't write "Nobody's Child" for readers facing abuse. I wrote it to find answers. We often write to figure out life. There was no catharsis writing about my childhood. Everyone involved was gone. The ending was still the same.

I put the manuscript away. Years passed. Middle grade books about mature themes became more mainstream. Delacorte editor Beverly Horowitz noted that societal changes "happening now are coming a hundred or a thousand times faster. The fact that you are seeing more serious issues in middle grade is not so much a literary trend as it is a response to these huge cultural changes we're going through."

Maybe it was time for my novel. I wrote to my new agent about the project. She was kind, but also said blank verse is a tough sell, that abuse stories need humor or other aspects to lighten the darkness, and that my story should take place in the present. I put the book away again. She was right about the story's unrelieved darkness, something I could fix, but setting it in the present was a problem. Where were the social workers? Help lines? Why weren't the police called? In the 1950s, none of those options existed. If I set the book 65 years later, it would no longer be my story.

Reading Matt de la Pena's *Love*, I stared at the illustration of the boy and his dog huddled under the piano after the father had upset the furniture. I was that kid behind the chair but there was no one, not even a dog, to comfort me. Some books don't get it right for every marginalized reader. Some texts don't align with a reader's experience. If I had read *Love* as a child, I might have been disappointed by that scene, but no more damaged than I already was.

Recently, *Publisher's Weekly* rounded up middle grade editors to discuss topics of mental health, #MeToo trauma, and graphic novel memoirs. While middle grade fiction about mental issues generally focus on an adult charac-

Not Owning Your Voice continued

ter, editors are seeing stories featuring child protagonists with mental illness. PW reports that "this emphasis on young protagonists with mental health concerns is a more accurate reflection of real life."

People close to me have wondered if I'd consider writing about my own struggle with mental illness. Though I have long experience with my illness, I also still have it. As #Own Voices continues to influence our industry, how long before middle grade authors are asked to disclose private information to prove "lived experience?" We must decide whether telling our story is worth the risk of making uncomfortable confessions. Or just stay quiet.

#OwnVoices is not a passing trend. The movement is producing fine, truthful books for young readers who need them. Don't fret if you don't fit the requirements. Use the voice you've been given.

Look in the mirror again. Do you see yourself as you really are? Physics says no. Particles and time delay change the space between you and the mirror. Your reflection isn't authentic. No one's is.

I write because it's the only way I can speak. Rather than reveal invisible identities, I prefer to explore the many wonderful things in this world, different characters, different experiences.

Outside my window, a mockingbird breaks his silence, tossing his voice into the air. His song, created from parts of other birds' songs, is a delightful melody that is all his own.

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Creating SECONDARY CHARACTERS

by Jane McBride

We love secondary characters. We love them for what they bring to the story: supporting the protagonist or opposing him. We love them for being stalwart; we love them for being snarky. We just flat out love them.

What is a secondary character?

A secondary character is not a minor player or a walk-on in a book but a vital part of a story. He can reveal details that the main character (MC) can't. He can help motivate the MC. He can also provide a sounding board while the MC tries to figure things out. A secondary character always interacts with the MC. This may be in real time or it may be in memory. On some level, he must advance the story and move it forward to its conclusion.

What is the primary purpose of a secondary character? To develop the protagonist. Secondary characters should either support or put up resistance for the MC.

Who are some of your favorite secondary characters? Is it Rue from the *Hunger Games*? Or is it the slave Jim from *Huckleberry Finn*? Is it the Joker from *Batman*? Or Malfoy from the *Harry Potter* series?

How do you go about developing a secondary character?

- Make him distinct. Give him a name that is substantially different from that of the MC. If your MC's name is Jeannie, don't name your secondary character "Jenelle" unless there is a compelling reason to do so. (Offhand, I can't think of any reason for that.) Likewise, don't make the character's names rhyme. Imagine reading a book with the protagonist named Kate and her little brother named Nate. Though the names begin with different first letters, the rhyming of them can become confusing. In addition, give her a couple of memorable traits. These can be funny and endearing or they can be more serious such as perpetually lying. Secondary characters can provide a contrast to the MC in appearance as well. Perhaps your MC is tall and red-headed. The secondary character could be short and dark-haired.

- Give a secondary character a backstory. Develop him just as you would a MC. This is especially important if you are writing a series with recurring characters. Though you probably won't use much of the information you discover about your secondary character, just knowing why he acts as he does makes him seem more real.

- Don't make her all good or all bad. Just as you wouldn't create an MC who is totally good or bad, you will your secondary character to be a mix of positives and negatives. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, good gifts and flaws. I grew up reading Nancy Drew. I always loved cousins Bess and George. They were neither perfect nor overly flawed. They became real people, helped Nancy solve mysteries, and provided a foil for her.

- Tie her to a location. Do you remember Nellie (more about her later) in the *Little House on the Prairie* television series? We associated Nellie with Oleson's Mercantile. She had the run of the store where she could have any of the candies she wanted, any of the pretty clothes the Mercantile carried. Her family also had the biggest and nicest house in town, a contrast with the Ingalls' modest home.

- Give a secondary character a reason for being in a scene. He need not be in every scene; that would detract from the MC and possibly confuse

the reader. For those scenes he is in, though, he should have a purpose for being there.

- Give her a secret that she is keeping from the MC. Perhaps she is keeping it for the good of her friend or perhaps she is jealous of her friend's (the MC) and succumbs to a moment of weakness.

- If the secondary character is playing the role of best friend, don't have him be a "yes-man." Give him the courage to stand up to his friend, especially if he thinks that his friend is making a wrong or unwise choice.

- Keep secondary characters to a minimum. Too many and your reader may be confused. There probably will be other characters in the book who play walk-on roles, which is a different matter. Many years ago, an editor asked me to combine two secondary characters in to one, as the novella's length couldn't support two characters. The editor was right and I had a stronger book because of her suggestion.

- Make the secondary character static rather than dynamic. In this usage, static means the character will not change over the course of the story. She will remain the same, a contrast to the MC who must grow by the book's end. The static nature of the secondary character provides the reader someone to rely on as the MC goes through change. You want your MC to be the focus of the story. His growth arc should be the one that the reader will latch on to. More than one writer has had the experience of having a secondary character grow so important that the MC may be "put in the shade." If this happens in your story, rein in the character or give him a book of his own.

Let's talk about the roles secondary characters can play.

Confidant. This is one of the most important roles a secondary character can assume. This is the friend who keeps the protagonist on track. She is the one in whom the heroine confides her deepest secrets and who dares tell the MC that she is making a mistake. This may not be a best friend. It may be a grandparent or a favorite aunt or a teacher.

Foil. This character is the one who is the foil to the hero's strength. One of my favorite TV shows ever is *The Andy Griffith* show. In it, Andy was strong, honest, self-aware, tall, and handsome. Then there was Barney Fife. Barney became so important and memorable that he nearly stole the show. Barney was vain (adorably so), awkward, short, and fumbling. Who can forget his gun with the one bullet that he kept in his pocket?

Antagonist. Secondary characters can be great antagonists. The role of antagonist may not be an evil one or that of an enemy. It can be the character who does her best to keep the protagonist from achieving her goals. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Cordelia was not a villain, but she did make for a wonderful antagonist. She was the one who pointed out Buffy's weaknesses, who tried to show her up at any and all times, who tried to "one-up" Buffy whenever possible. Nellie Oleson played the role of antagonist. Nellie constantly made things difficult for Laura Ingalls. She put down Laura whenever she could and always acted superior. In doing this, she inadvertently played up Laura's desire to do the right thing.

Villain. Who doesn't love a good villain? Remember Darth Vader, the quintessential villain? He made us root for the hero all the more. Try not to make your villain totally evil. Just as your MC has a flaw or two, the villain should have at least one good trait. The exception to this is if you are writing a parody where the hero is perfect and the villain is irredeemably evil.

WRAPPING UP

Writing memorable and effective secondary characters is like everything else in writing; it takes practice. Experiment with different types of characters; see who fits your story best.

Twitter pitch party success story:

Carolyn Leiloglou

Debut Picture Book Author

When writers participate in a pitch party, it's usually with the hopes of snagging a dream agent. In a felicitous twist of fate, children's author Carolyn Leiloglou found not only an agent but also a publisher for her debut picture book, the charming *Library's Most Wanted* (Pelican Books, May 2020), with illustrations by Sarah Pogue. A self-admitted punster, Leiloglou lives in San Antonio, Texas with her pediatrician husband and four home-schooled children who are a constant source of inspiration and collaboration. You can follow Leiloglou at www.carolynleiloglou.com/ where she blogs and posts book reviews.

PJ McILVAINE: What was the first thing you ever wrote?

CAROLYN LEILOGLOU: I started writing poems when I was about six, and I still write them. Several have been published in children's magazines. But around fourth grade I decided I wanted to be an author. I started a Redwall fan fiction book about a mouse.

PM: Did you always aspire to be a children's author?

CL: I've always wanted to be a children's author. Even though I considered other careers over the years, the desire to write books for children never left.

PM: Did you consider your writing more as a profession or simply a hobby?

CL: I definitely consider it a profession, but it's certainly not my only job. I also homeschool my four kids and help out as part-time office manager at my husband's pediatric practice, so you could say I have a full plate. But writing is something I plan to do for the long haul.

PM: What is the one thing you bring to your writing that sets it apart from everything else?

CL: I'm fairly punny by nature, and I like to bring a sense of playing with words when I write picture books. For instance, in *Library's Most Wanted*, when Libby makes her Wanted Posters, I say she's a "quick draw" which has a double meaning in this case and conjures a sense of the Wild West. At the same time, my stories aren't just about the wordplay. I try to dig out the heart of whatever story I'm writing.

PM: As the mom of four kids, do you find that they're a constant source of inspiration or irritation? Do you write around them or in spite of them?

CL: I get so many book ideas from my kids! Sometimes it's something random they say, but other times, an idea will spark and we might brainstorm it together, particularly with my older kids who are teens. I worry I won't have such good picture book ideas when my husband and I are empty-nesters!

I'd say I write around them. They are proud of me and pretty good about not interrupting if they know I'm writing. Mornings are always for homeschool, but I try to write some most afternoons or evenings.

PM: Do you have a writing routine with set goals?

CL: Not usually. At least, not strict ones. I'm a member of the 12x12 Picture Book Challenge, so I do try to write one picture book draft a month. For longer works, I sometimes set dates for when I'd like to be done with a draft, but I don't do daily word counts or time blocks. I did NaNoWriMo for the first time last November, and I found that tracking my word count toward a goal was very motivating for me, so I use the word count tracking function in Scrivener.

PM: Do you prefer to outline or just see where the road takes you?

CL: I've tried outlining, but it's not for me. I basically know my destination and some stops I'd like to hit along the way, but how I get there evolves as the story goes. That's actually how I write both picture books and novels.

PM: What are your writing tips for plugging away even when it seems like the creative well has run dry?

CL: It's been said before, but Butt-In-Chair. Or standing desk, whatever. I just tell myself this is the time I have to write and start. The inspiration comes along the way. Sometimes, I also realize that I'm not giving myself enough headspace to think about my story. I love listening to podcasts, webinars, and audiobooks. But if I never have time when my mind is quiet, it's hard for my ideas to grow. So sometimes I have to limit what I consume so I have mental space to cultivate as well.

PM: Do you work on multiple projects?

CL: Yes. In fact, I believe that's essential to most picture book writers. You have to go through a lot of drafts to find the gems you want to polish. And even then, you can't get too precious about any one manuscript. I had a manuscript that was a finalist for the 2018 Katherine Paterson Prize, but my agent still wasn't able to sell it. Even the good ones don't always sell. So the more you write, the better your odds.

PM: How many drafts do you go through before you deem it "ready"?

CL: That varies widely, and I don't actually keep track of every draft and revision, but I'd say twenty would be on the low end. It has to pass the critique group before I send it to my agent, and then she typically asks for more revisions.

PM: What was the inspiration for *Library's Most Wanted*?

CL: Most of my picture book ideas start as either an interesting title or pun. It started out as *Library's Most Wanted List* because I liked the alliteration. Then I brainstormed what that could mean—what library crimes would be depicted on Wanted Posters and what does the library actually want—and excavated the story from there.

PM: From the initial concept to publication, how long did *Library's Most Wanted* take?

CL: It was actually pretty quick, only four years. I wrote the first draft in February 2016, submitted summer of 2017, got the offer April 2018 (and signed with my agent), and it was published May 2020.

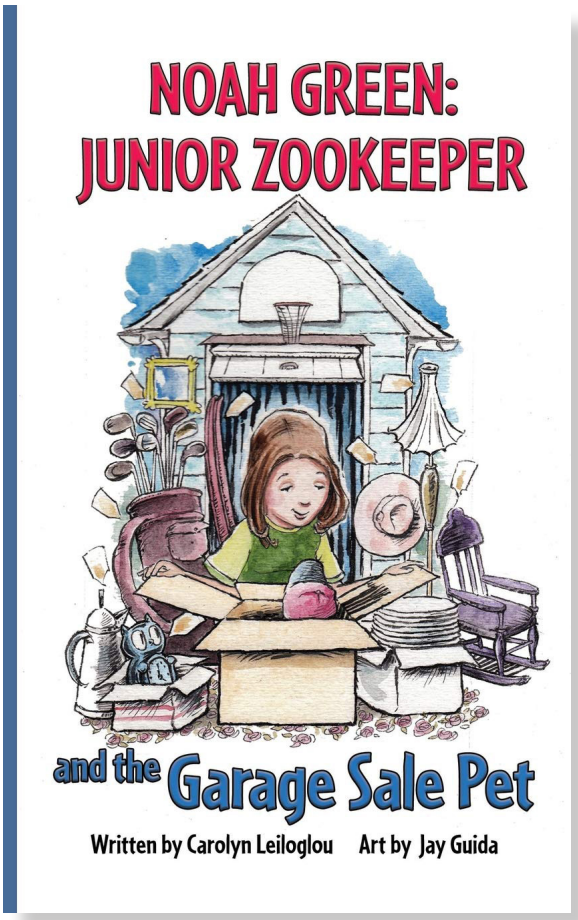
PM: What was the querying process like?

CL: I did lots of research and queried many agents over about two years, and it felt like a long slog. I

actually had a lot more success—agents requesting more work—through Twitter Pitch Parties!

PM: How did you find your agent?

CL: I had multiple agents like pitches over that time, which is an invitation to submit above the slush pile. Two of them asked to see more work. Agents don't typically want to represent a picture book author without seeing multiple manuscripts. One of the agents who requested to see more manuscripts, Bibi Lewis of the Ethan Ellenberg Literary Agency, is who I signed with. But while I was entering these Twitter Pitch Parties, I also got a like on my pitch for Library's Most Wanted from Nina Kooij at Pelican Publishing. Pelican offered on *Library's Most Wanted* while Bibi was considering my other manuscripts. It was great timing because I ended up signing with her, and she negotiated the contract with Pelican. So I got my agent as well as my first picture book deal through Twitter.



PM: Is your agent hands-on editorially? Do you run story ideas by her?

CL: Bibi is an editorial agent, which I like. I like having that extra set of eyes making sure what we submit is ready for the market. I tend to have more ideas than time, so a couple of times a year, I pitch her several ideas that are in an early draft form, and she'll pinpoint a few that most intrigue her.

PM: What if you disagree on a concept or a plot point?

CL: Usually, when she doesn't like something, it's because it's not there yet. On the manuscript we're currently shopping, I wrote at least ten endings before we found one we were both happy with. I like being pushed to make something the best it can be, and Bibi does that in a very kind and supportive way.

PM: Since you got both your agent and publisher through Twitter Pitch Parties, did you have a particular method or plan? Did you change the pitches up?

CL: The main thing I did was continually tailor my pitches. If I didn't get likes in one pitch party, I'd refine my pitches again before the next one. I also got feedback from my critique group about which version of a particular pitch was the strongest.

I made sure I pitched the maximum number of times during each pitch party, following the rules, of course. Most allow a certain number of pitches per manuscript, which is a great advantage for picture book writers who have multiple manuscripts to pitch. In fact, as a picture book writer, you should hold off from pitching until you have four polished manuscripts. If an agent likes the first manuscript you send, they'll ask for more before making a decision, and you want to be ready.

Also, I made sure I used all the appropriate hashtags, not just the hashtag for the pitch party. The hashtags will be listed on each pitch party's website. I think the #W for Western is what got the notice for *Library's Most Wanted* from Pelican since they publish regional books.

PM: What in your view makes a good pitch? Did you tailor your pitches to editors or agents or did the pitches work for both?

CL: The same kind of pitch works for both editors and agents. You want your pitch to be a hook. It has to be specific and show how your story stands out. It should include your character, what they want, their

problem, and a hint at the outcome. Don't give away the ending or ask rhetorical questions.

Also, a strong pitch showcases the tone of your story. If your story is humorous, witty, punny, serious, lyrical, your pitch must be too. Again, this is what makes your story appealing and stand out.

Here's my pitch for Library's Most Wanted:

LIBRARY'S MOST WANTED: Deputy librarian Libby hangs Wanted Posters to drive out little book manglers. But she must lure them back when she realizes a librarian's real job ain't corralling books but rounding up readers.

PM: To those writers who are hesitant to pitch work on social media, do you have any advice or tips?

CL: It's understandable to be protective of your idea. And some ideas, I probably would be hesitant about pitching on Twitter as well. But the likelihood is that your idea isn't all that unique. What is unique is how you tell the story. There were at least nine books that came out last year about pencil/eraser duos. And you know what? They were all great in their own way! And they were all acquired by publishers. Make sure your execution of your story stands out. It not enough to have the perfect pitch. Make your story shine.

Some people also recommend deleting the pitches from your page after a week, which I think is a good practice. I wouldn't delete the pitches that got likes simply because that agent/editor might decide to look you up again.

But overall, if you feel uncomfortable sharing your ideas on Twitter, don't. It's not the only way to get an agent. But for me, it was the right move.

PM: You've also had a chapter book published. What is the difference between a chapter book and a picture book in terms of the target audience, subject matter, word count, and vocabulary? Do you enjoy one genre more than the other?

CL: There's a huge range in word count for chapter books, but mine is around 6,000, more than 10 times longer than the suggested length for a picture book. Because chapter books are for kids just gaining confidence in reading, you have to tailor your word count and sentence length to that audience. Whereas in picture books, where an adult will be reading it to the child, you can use more complex vocabulary and sentence structure. I probably enjoy writing picture books a little more, but you have to choose the right form for the story you want to tell, and chapter book was the right form for *Noah Green Junior Zookeeper and the Garage Sale Pet*.

PM: What are you currently writing? Do you plan to write in other genres?

CL: I'm still writing new picture books, but I'm also working on a middle grade novel. No promises about when or if that will be ready, though! I wrote my first middle grade novel during NaNoWriMo last November, and I'm still letting it sit. But I'm really excited about my current manuscript, even though it's a complete jumble right now.

PM: Are you an extrovert or an introvert? And depending on which you are, how has that helped or hindered you in your writing journey?

CL: I'm an ambivert—a little bit of both—but I lean toward the introvert side a little more. And yes, I think it's helped me. The little bit of extrovert in me along with the anonymity of the internet helps me feel comfortable reaching out to people online that I might be nervous about approaching in person. But the introvert side of me is perfectly happy sitting at home and writing.

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EXERCISE YOUR

Many writers save their New Year's resolutions for the summer--with longer days and less hectic schedules there's finally time to work on that manuscript. Or maybe your goal is to simply get into the habit of writing something--anything--every day. No matter what level you're at as a writer--beginner, published pro, or somewhere in between--you can get better. Your skill will improve with practice, and one of the best ways to "practice" writing is with writing exercises.

In the children's book writing classes I teach, one mention of writing exercises will elicit an audible groan from my students. The words conjure up images of pop quizzes, oral reports and being called on by the teacher. So, in order to get past this gut response, let's begin with two ground rules. First, understand that no one expects your spontaneous writing to be perfect. In fact, if you come out of a writing exercise with two or three perfect sentences, you're way ahead of the game. And secondly, try not to think too much.

The point of writing exercises is to free you from worrying about developing characters, plot and style all at once, and allow you to explore new terrain. Let the exercise take your writing wherever it wants to go. Try a new voice or point of view. You may find you enjoy writing in a style or for an age group you never thought of. You may come up with an idea you want to explore. Remember, this is not "real" writing, so if you don't like what you've created, file it away (I caution against ever throwing anything out, as you may regret it later).

The following writing exercises can either be done alone or in a group. For group writing, give about 20 minutes for each exercise, and then have those who are feeling brave read theirs out loud. If you're doing the exercises alone, try to keep your writing (at least on your first draft) spontaneous. Remember, don't think too much.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

The Objective: To experiment with a voice that is completely different from how you usually write.

The Exercise: Take a fairy tale you know well, and rewrite it in a different tone--humorous, sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek. Or tell the story in first person from the point of view of one of the lesser known characters. The point is to make the story sound like only you could have written it.

Take It a Step Further: Once you've established the voice for the story, write a few pages for three different age groups: picture book (ages 3-7), easy reader (ages 6-8), and chapter book (ages 7-10). Because you are freed up from having to develop plot and characters, you can concentrate on sentence structure, pacing, and word choice.

POINT OF VIEW

The Objective To get a feel for the differences, and limitations, of writing in first and third person.

The Exercise: Think of something that happened to you when you were a child. It doesn't have to be a big event, but you should be able to clearly recall how you felt at the time. First write the event in first person from the point of view of a child the same age as you were when the event occurred. Then write about the same situation in third person, also from a child's point of view. Repeat the exercise, but write as an older child looking back on the event, both in first and third person.

It sounds like you'll be writing the same story four times, but you won't. In first person, you can tell what's going on inside the narrator's head, but no one else's. In third person you get a more overall view of the situation, but you should still be focusing on the thoughts

WRITING MUSCLE

and feelings of your main character. When looking back on the event you are able to allow the narrator to interpret his or her own actions, which you can't do while the event is taking place. But be careful, in the second half of the exercise, to only interpret the events as an older child would see them, not as you see them now as an adult.

Take It a Step Further: Repeat the exercise, but make the main character a child of the opposite sex.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The Objective: To find interesting ways of showing your characters to your readers, rather than telling your readers with lists of physical attributes or personality traits.

The Exercise: Describe a child through the objects in his or her bedroom. You can do this two ways: either by showing the child in the room (and told in first or third person), or by having another character look through the room while the child isn't there. Try to give a sense of the child's physical characteristics from his or her possessions.

Take It a Step Further: It's tempting when creating characters to fall back on stereotypes (the jock, the cheerleader, the brain). Try starting with a stereotype, and adding a few objects in the room the reader won't expect, such as a cheerleader outfit and a chemistry set, or a computer and a collection of stuffed animals.

CONVINCING DIALOGUE

The Objective: To learn that everything people say in real life doesn't end up in written dialogue.

The Exercise: This one takes a bit of work, but it's worth it. First, you'll need to tape record about five minutes of conversation between two people. The best conversations are real, not staged. It's preferable that at least one of the speakers is a child, but the exercise is still beneficial if it's done with two adults. You can record the conversation from the television if you have to. Transcribe the conversation word for word, including all the grunts, "um's," "uh's," etc.

Now you're ready to write the conversation as dialogue. Add "stage directions": have your characters stand up, cough, look around the room, scratch their nose. Write in third person but pick a point of view character and tell what's going on inside his or her head during the exchange.

What you should end up with is the *essence* of the conversation, instead of repeating every word that was actually said. Make it interesting for your reader--as you'll notice by the transcription of the tape, real life conversations can be pretty boring.

Take It a Step Further: Write the dialogue in first person from the other character's viewpoint.

UNIQUE PLOTS

The Objective: To develop an interesting, exciting, or funny storyline following certain established criteria. This exercise lets you get really creative, and it's especially fun with a group.

The Exercise: Take four stacks of index cards. On the first stack, write characters, one per card (six-year-old boy, clown, teacher). On the second write one or two personality traits on each card (loves to read, hates to eat carrots, very neat). The third stack contains events or situations (getting lost, first day of school, visiting Grandma). The fourth stack has locations (school, front porch, neighborhood park). Shuffle the cards and pick one from each stack. Now try to write a story combining all these elements. You'll be amazed at what you come up with!