


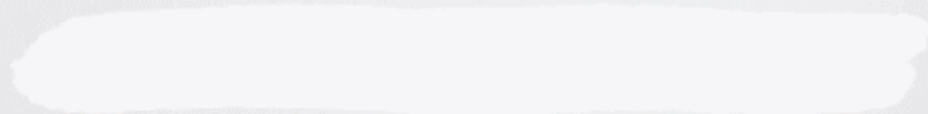
# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  January 2022


## SET - AND REACH - YOUR 2022 WRITING GOALS:

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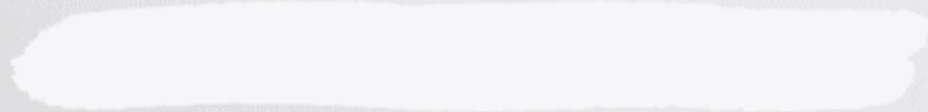
I WILL START...



I WILL STOP...



I WILL BE...



TWO ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITIES!

PAGE STREET  
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Sky Pony Press

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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:

## Foundation Gives Cash Awards to Writers & Illustrators with Children

The Sustainable Arts Foundation located in San Francisco, CA (<https://www.sustainableartsfoundation.org/>) is a non-profit foundation supporting artists and writers with children. This year, SAF will make awards of \$5,000 each to 20 artists and writers with children. The selection process is focused almost entirely on the strength of the submitted portfolio. Half the awards are given to applicants of color.

To be eligible, the applicant must have at least one child under the age of 18. Given the fact that the awards are based on demonstrated excellence in your discipline, it's not recommended that artists or writers who are beginning their creative careers apply to this program. While it's not required that applicants have published or exhibited their work, the rigor and critique involved in that process can certainly benefit the portfolio. You can view the [list of previous awardees](#) and follow the links to their work to get a feel for their level of craft.

**Writers may apply in one of the following categories:** Creative Nonfiction, Early and Middle Grade Readers, Fiction, Graphic Novel/Graphic Memoir, Illustrated Children's Books, Illustrated Children's Books (Text Only), Long Form Journalism, Playwriting, Poetry, Young Adult Fiction

**Visual artists may apply in one of the following categories:** Book Arts, Drawing, Fiber Arts and Textiles, Illustration, Installation, Mixed Media, Painting, Photography, Printmaking, Sculpture

Applicants are asked to submit a portfolio of recent work and answer several essay questions. Details can be found at <https://apply.sustainableartsfoundation.org/> The online application will be available **February 1, 2022**. Deadline for submitting is **February 25, 2022**. There is a \$20 entry fee. Awards will be announced May 15, 2022.

## Middle Grade Magazine Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction

*Jack and Jill* is a magazine for ages 6-12 published by U.S. Kids Magazines. Looking for high-quality stories and articles with a broad health and fitness focus. The editors would rather show kids living a healthy lifestyle than dictate a healthy lifestyle to readers, so health topics should be incorporated into the story or article, not be the focus of it.

**FICTION:** (600-800 words) The tone of the stories should be fun and engaging, hook readers in the first paragraph, and convey a positive message that comes organically from the story and is not just tacked on. Humor is very important; dialogue should be witty instead of just furthering the plot. Possible themes could include self-reliance, being kind to others, appreciating other cultures. Payment: \$25 and up.

**NONFICTION:** Accepting nonfiction manuscripts of 700 words or less. Especially interested in features or Q&As with regular kids (or groups of kids) in the *Jack and Jill* age group who are engaged in unusual, challenging, or interesting activities. No celebrity pieces. Payment: \$25 and up.

All material should appeal to a broad audience across the United States. Seasonal material should be sent at least 8 months in advance. Study back issues at libraries. A table of contents of the current issue can be found at <https://uskidsmags.com/magazines/jack-and-jill/>

Submit the entire manuscript for fiction, and a query OR the entire manuscript for nonfiction. If sending the entire manuscript, include a brief cover letter with contact information, any relevant publishing credits, and a 1-2 sentence synopsis of the story or article. Note if this is a simultaneous submission. Buys all rights and pays on publication. Responds to submissions within about 3 months. Submissions can be mailed to U.S. Kids, *Jack and Jill*, P.O. Box 88928, Indianapolis, IN 46208 (indicate in cover letter if you want the submission returned. If so, also include a self-addressed, stamped envelope). Submissions can also be emailed (paste the entire submission into the body of the email) to [jackandjill@uskidsmags.com](mailto:jackandjill@uskidsmags.com). Address submissions to Jennifer Burnham, Senior Editor.

**Two Agents Accepting PB, MG, YA and Graphic Novel Submissions**

**Sera Rivers** is a Senior Literary Manager at Martin Literary Management (<http://martinliterarymanagement.com/>) and is currently accepting queries for middle grade and young adult fiction and graphic novels, as well as the occasional picture book. She welcomes queries by children's authors and illustrators who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ and other underrepresented and marginalized identities and cultures. Sera is specifically looking for:

**Young Adult**—fast-paced, compelling, and mind-bending stories with unreliable narrators. Stories that incorporate setting as a character (such as *Stolen* by Lucy Christopher) and twisting plots with endings that are surprising yet inevitable. She would love to see contemporary stories that tackle tough topics, especially if they incorporate a magical element to them (such as *We Are the Ants* by Shaun David Hutchinson); horror (no demonic possessions or gratuitous gore/sex); ghost stories; psychological thrillers; and speculative fiction. **Middle Grade**—contemporary stories that tackle tough topics (such as *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* by Janae Marks; *Melissa's Story* by Alex Gino).

**Graphic Novels**—graphic stories in all genres of the children's market, especially stories with a parallel imaginative or magical world to them. **Picture Books**—Only looking for picture books that tackle tough topics (such as *Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* by Daniel Beaty and Bryan Collier; *The Breaking News* by Sarah Reul); and horror (such as *Creepy Carrots* by Aaron Reynolds and Peter Brown; *Bone Dog* by Eric Rohmann).

Query Sera via Query Manager at [querymanager.com/query/SeraRivers](http://querymanager.com/query/SeraRivers). She tweets at [@writeloudly](https://twitter.com/writeloudly).

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**Kristin Ostby** is an agent at Greenhouse Literary Agency (<https://www.greenhouseliterary.com/>), representing authors of middle grade and young adult fiction, as well as picture book author/illustrators. In **middle grade**, Kristin is looking for voicey, character-driven stories of the commercial or literary variety. She is drawn to middle grade that uses humor as a tool to reveal funny, unspoken truths about kids' experiences or to carry heavier themes about family life or the world at large. She loves books that honor children's capacity for understanding and imagination. In **young adult**, Kristin is seeking contemporary literary fiction, rom-coms with unconventional narrative structures, mysteries, and thrillers. She enjoys subversive narratives, genuinely surprising twists, and unreliable or unexpected narrators. Kristin is also seeking to add **illustrators who write picture books** to her client list, as well as graphic novelists—particularly those creating works for the younger end of the spectrum (5–7 years).

Kristin is not accepting picture book manuscripts from authors who do not illustrate, issue books, or nonfiction at this time. Query Kristin through Query Manager at [querymanager.com/query/kristinostby](http://querymanager.com/query/kristinostby)

**Independent Publisher Accepting Middle Grade, Young Adult Fiction**

Pants On Fire Press is an award-winning boutique book publisher of middle-grade, young adult, travel and fictional books for adults. The editors are on the lookout for big story ideas with compelling characters, particularly in the following genres: Action, Adventure, Christian, Detective, Drama, Dystopian, Fantasy, Historical Fiction, Horror, Humor, Jewish, Love, Mystery, Paranormal, Romance, Science Fiction, Supernatural, Suspense and Thrillers.

Accepting submissions for middle grade and young adult fiction from writers who are excited about marketing their stories and building a following of readers. Middle grade manuscripts should feature an exciting plot, strong voices, developed characters and strong storytelling. Young adult submissions should include a strong, believable voice; a premise that can be conveyed in 2-3 sentences; protagonists who are 15-19 years old; memorable characters readers care about and can relate; and an optional age-appropriate romantic element even if it's not the center of the story. All submissions should include a query with the following: synopsis, the genre of the book, approximate word count, a short pitch with the book's hook, marketing plan, writing credentials (if any), your contact info, agent info (if the work is agented), brief author bio, list of any and all previous titles with sales history. Paste the query and the first three chapters into the body of an email, and send to Becca Goldman, Editor at [submission@pantsonfirepress.com](mailto:submission@pantsonfirepress.com) or [editor@pantsonfirepress.com](mailto:editor@pantsonfirepress.com). Responds if interested. To see current Pants on Fire titles, go to [pantsonfirepress.com/](http://pantsonfirepress.com/)

## On Slushpiles, Pitches, and Lightening the Load for Editors and Agents

Dear Reader,

Happy New Year! Here at CBI we're starting off 2022 with a fresh approach to our special **Above the Slushpile** submissions. We're confident this new system will open up submission opportunities to a larger number of agents and editors, and help you write your best query. But before we explain “how” the system is changing, a little background on the “why”.

Late in 2021, BookEnds Literary Agency president Jessica Faust wrote a “year in review” blog post in which she summarized her agency's submission data, in part, like this (with my comments):

- Approximate Number of Queries Received: 30,000 (this is with a number of their agents closed periodically throughout the year!)
- Submission request rate: 3% (this is the number of queries that resulted in requests to see the full manuscript)
- New Clients: 50 (those whose manuscripts were good enough to seal the deal)

BookEnds' numbers aren't unique. In the 34 years I've worked in publishing, editors and agents have consistently mentioned that about 3% of the slushpile submissions make it past the first round of readings. And the other 97%? Form rejections (or non-responses), for the following reasons:

1. The manuscript was far from ready to submit (idea is not original enough, the writing isn't strong enough, the author doesn't understand the genre/age group, etc.)
2. The manuscript didn't fit the needs of the editor or agent as per their published guidelines.
3. The manuscript is too close to something the editor has already published, or to a published work by an agent's current client.
4. The author didn't follow proper submission procedures.
5. The editor or agent just doesn't feel passionate about the work for a variety of reasons.
6. The editor or agent has a similar work under contract which is not yet published.

Six explanations I've heard over and over from editors and agents for 34 years. Guess how many of these points authors have control over? You can't know about every book under contract that hasn't been pub-

*From the Editor..continued*

lished yet, though you can be aware of many yet-to-be-published deals by subscribing to [Publishers Marketplace](#) or *Publishers Weekly's* free ezine Children's Bookshelf. And you can't force an editor or agent to care about your work if it simply falls outside their sphere of interest, but you CAN increase the chance of giving them something they want by following their social media, reading interviews, checking their [Manuscript Wish List](#) posts, joining [Query Tracker](#). So I'll deduct half a point on numbers 5 and 6. But numbers 1-4...those are entirely within your power.

Imagine having part of your job description read: “You must spend several hours per month on a task that will give you only a 3% success rate.” How happy would you be to add that item to your regular to-do list? And yet, agents and editors who keep their doors open to submissions ARE happy to read queries, because they're always hoping to find the next extraordinary book. And it's because of these publishing professionals that new authors continue to have a chance to see their work in print. So let's thank them by making their jobs as easy as possible, and cutting as much clutter as we can from their inboxes.

First off, if you're embarking on any type of manuscript submission (whether it's using an Above the Slushpile code, a regular At Presstime listing, or finding the market another way), understand that you are hoping to enter into a professional business relationship with the agent or editor. Your query is your job application and your manuscript is a product you're looking to sell. You want to make sure both your query and your manuscript represent you, your idea, and your skills in the best way possible. The editor and agent will work to take your product to the next level, but you have to give them something to work *with*. Remember, there are 29,999 more queries waiting in the wings—yours needs to say, “This book is special.” And then the manuscript must seal the deal by indeed *being* special.

In this article I can't go into the myriad ways to develop a winning idea, write the manuscript, edit your work, and find the best markets for submission. But, we've spent the last several years creating tools to teach you all those things and more at [WritingBlueprints.com](#). And we'll continue to give you tips and advice to strengthen your craft each month in the pages of CBI. But wait...there's more! On my January 4, 2022 free Kidlit Social webcast I'll feature an agent and editor explaining how to know when your manuscript is ready to submit. We air live at 8 pm Eastern on January 4, and you can join us at <https://bit.ly/kidlit-social> If you miss the live event, you can catch the replay after January 4 at [writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancingsocial70/](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancingsocial70/)

So...you've taken the time to work on your craft, polish your manuscript, receive feedback from your critique group or beta readers, and verify that your work is ready to submit. Terrific! You're already poised to rise to the top of the slushpile. Now you're ready to take advantage of our exclusive Above the Slushpile opportunities each month. Our new system will help you target your submission, focus on a strong pitch, and cut back on the number of emails editors and agents receive. If you're as excited about this as we are, read on!

## Our New Above the Slushpile Submission System

**What's staying the same?** As a CBI subscriber, you'll get one Spotlight interview each month by our contributor Lynne Marie that will feature either an agent or an editor. The interview will detail the subject's preferences and what they're currently looking for in submissions. *Should your finished manuscript match their wish list topics* (remember, target those submissions appropriately!), you will have one month to submit to this agent or editor and have your query read sooner than their regular slushpile queries (or, in some cases, you'll be able to submit to someone who is otherwise closed to submissions).

**What's changing?** Instead of all of you emailing separate queries to our Spotlight subjects (adding hundreds of emails to their inboxes), you'll fill out an online form during the month, and I will compile all the responses and send them on one spreadsheet. The agent or editor will have up to 90 days to review the responses and contact authors to see the entire manuscript. If you haven't heard back after 90 days, you can assume it's a pass.

**How will I find the Above the Slushpile Submission Form?** At the end of each Editor or Agent Spotlight interview will be a box with the link to the form for that month's ATS submission opportunity. The link will expire at the end of each month. (Reminder: This link is a perk of being a CBI subscriber. Please don't share it.) It's a Google Form that you fill out online (you don't need to download anything), so you can click the hyperlink directly from the newsletter to open it, or, if you prefer, type the link into your browser.

**What's on the form?** There are clear fields to fill in your name, your email, your social media, the title of your manuscript and word count. Check boxes allow you to select your target age range from picture books to young adult, and whether the work is fiction, nonfiction (informational or narrative), or a graphic novel. If you are also an illustrator, there's a field to leave a link to your online portfolio or book dummy.

Three long answer fields (they expand as you type) are **Manuscript Pitch** (up to 350 characters), **About the Author and/or Illustrator** (up to 250 characters), and **Comp Titles** (an optional field to list 2-3 published books that either appeal to the same audience as your manuscript, or help describe the tone or genre of your work. Check out *The Dreaded "Comp Titles": What Are They and How Do You Use Them?* by Jacqui Lipton of Raven Quill Literary Agency: [ravenliterary.com/what-are-comp-titles-how-to/](https://ravenliterary.com/what-are-comp-titles-how-to/))

**Are there hashtags to describe the genre as with Twitter pitches?** No, because we couldn't include all possible hashtags in one form. But we give you 350 characters for your pitch (70 more than on Twitter), and because you won't have to include your work's title, the age range or word count in the actual pitch, you'll have room to mention the genre or other info if you feel it's important.

**Can I attach sample pages or chapters to the form?** No, this works more like a Twitter pitch than an emailed query with attachments. Again, we're trying to create a lighter workload for our agents and editors, thereby keeping submission opportunities open for you. Your pitch is meant to give the agent/editor enough information to know if the manuscript fits their current needs, and if it sounds like something they'd like to read more of. They will then contact you directly and ask for sample chapters or the entire manuscript.

*From the Editor..continued*

**This doesn't seem fair. How can an agent or editor judge my work from a “pitch” without reading the actual manuscript?** Great question! An online pitch form, a Twitter pitch party, or even a traditional query letter without any attachments aren't meant to be the final word on the quality of your writing. The editors and agents understand this. What the pitch will do is highlight the unique aspect—or hook—of your work that will make it stand out. You can also add a few words that show how the work fits into the current market (like STEM or LGBTQIA+). Remember those 30,000 queries? Why is your manuscript the one that deserves a closer look? The pitch answers this question quickly.

**If an agent or editor asks to see more of my work, does that submission go into the regular slushpile?** No! At that point your work is SOLICITED, meaning the agent/editor requested it, and you should note that prominently on the submission. If you're sending by email, put “Manuscript Requested by [Editor]: [Title] by [Your Name]” in the Subject line. If you're sending by mail, put “Requested Submission” on the envelope, and begin your cover letter by thanking the editor/agent for requesting more of your work.

## Crafting the Pitch

**Okay, I'm in. How do I write a 350-character pitch that gets my work noticed?** A pitch should highlight the protagonist (fiction) or subject (nonfiction), and give a few specific, interesting details about the plot (fiction) or approach to the topic (nonfiction). These details will give a sense of the genre and tone of the work, and what's unique about your book (the “hook”). Think of the pitch as the blurb on the book jacket, or what you'd say at a cocktail party if someone asks what your book's about and you have about 20 seconds to answer.

The best way to understand how to write a pitch is to read some examples. Posts about writing Twitter pitches will be most helpful (remember, you'll have 350 characters for your pitch, more than the 280 allowed on Twitter, but the approach is the same). Here are two to get you started:

*The 35-word and Twitter Pitch Simplified* from the Pitch Wars blog: [pitchwars.org/resources/the-35-word-and-twitter-pitch-simplified/](https://pitchwars.org/resources/the-35-word-and-twitter-pitch-simplified/)

*Three Ways to Write the Perfect Twitter Pitch* by Sara Seitz: [thewriteprompt.com/2021/02/23/3-ways-to-write-the-perfect-twitter-pitch/](https://thewriteprompt.com/2021/02/23/3-ways-to-write-the-perfect-twitter-pitch/)

Also read articles about writing strong query letters. Here are some good posts:

*Your Query Letter Hook and Revealing the Ending* by Mary Kole: [kidlit.com/your-query-letter-hook-and-revealing-the-ending/](https://kidlit.com/your-query-letter-hook-and-revealing-the-ending/) (Mary Kole is also the instructor for our [Manuscript Submission Blueprint](#).)

*Seven Parts of a Query Letter and How to Nail Them* by John Fox: [thejohnfox.com/2021/01/7-parts-of-writing-a-query-letter/](https://thejohnfox.com/2021/01/7-parts-of-writing-a-query-letter/)

Another great way to pinpoint a book's hook is to read the deal announcements in [Children's Bookshelf](#) (called “Rights Report”). The hook is usually described in one sentence. This one-sentence hook could be



*From the Editor..continued*

fleshed out with a few specific details from the book to reach the allotted 350 words on the Above the Slushpile form. Here are the hooks from a few upcoming publications announced in 2021 (remember, the ATS form has fields for the target age group, so don't waste pitch characters on that):

- *Chloe and the Kaishao Boys* by Mae Coyiuto, [is a YA romcom] about a Chinese-Filipino girl from Manila whose father sets her up on a marathon of dates in hopes that she'll get a boyfriend and want to stay in the Philippines for college instead of going to school in the U.S.
- *You're Breaking My Heart* by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich. The YA debut follows a teenager grieving her brother's death and her last words to him before he died—who then discovers a portal to another dimension underneath New York City, one that just might offer an opportunity for a do-over as a better version of herself.
- *Girls to the Front*, written and illustrated by Nina Mata [is a] middle grade nonfiction anthology [that] highlights and celebrates Asian-American and Pacific Islander women throughout American history whose contributions helped create, shape and inspire our nation.
- *Naomi Teitelbaum Ends the World* by S. Rose Shanker, [is a] middle-grade novel that gives traditional Jewish folklore a modern twist. Naomi is preparing for her bat mitzvah when she receives a mysterious gift: a Golem that obeys her every command. When the Golem gets out of control, Naomi and her friends are sent on an adventure to set things right before the Golem accidentally brings about the end of the world.
- *I'm From* by Gary Gray [to be illustrated by Oge Mora]. The author's picture book debut is an exploration of the sum of all the little moments, from bus rides to pick up games, that play a special role in defining where a little Black boy is from.
- *Cedric's Tail* by Amani Uduman [to be illustrated by Agnès Ernoult]. In this picture book, Cedric must come to terms with the advantages and pitfalls of his new limb when he wishes for a tail on his fourth birthday.

Note: Learning to write a good pitch for your manuscript will serve you when writing longer query letters as well as using the Above the Slushpile submission form.

**What if I can't identify my book's hook?** If you truly can't identify anything unique or special about your protagonist, your plot, or your nonfiction approach, then it's time to step back and reevaluate your idea. Chances are, you rushed the execution and didn't explore your idea long enough to find its distinctive twist. Review the basics like story structure and character arc, and read some published work in your genre to get a feel for what works. In other words, the manuscript's probably not ready to submit. But the good news is you just saved yourself waiting 90 days for a response that was never going to come. And the better news is now you have an idea why your story isn't ready, which is a great place to start your revisions.\*

**What if I don't feel I can effectively sell my work on a pitch alone?** Then don't. You have plenty of other markets listed each month in the At Presstime section of CBI, many of which ask for sample pages along

*From the Editor..continued*

with a full query letter. Do keep in mind that some of these listings may take longer than 90 days to respond.

**Okay, let's do this!** Great! A few final points I need to make:

- You can only submit one pitch to each Above the Slushpile link. And you CANNOT revise your pitch after it's been submitted. Therefore, please write and polish your pitch and your author/illustrator bio in a different document before pasting them into the ATS form. You can revise before you hit "Send", but once you hit that button, there's no going back. (Just like submitting the old-fashioned way.)
- You will receive a copy of your pitch at the email you provide on the form.

Whew! Thanks for hanging in there until the end of this epic editorial. And thanks for trying out our new system. We'll tweak any kinks as we go along, so let me know if you run into problems. And definitely let me know if you get a contract with an agent or editor.

Good luck!

Sincerely,

**Laura Backes**

**P.S.** \*I'm sure some of you are thinking, "But wait! I've read many books that don't have a clear, unique hook. Sweet rhyming bedtime stories where the child and parent are going through their nightly routine, concept books that highlight the alphabet, straightforward retellings of traditional folktales, etc. What if I've got a manuscript like that?"

Another great question! First, many of those books are vehicles for the illustrator, so if you're an author/illustrator with a unique style, you have a better chance of selling them. Second, if you can already identify several titles on the market that are similar to yours, and your manuscript doesn't have anything that makes it stand out, you're going to have a hard time selling it. Remember, at their core, books are a product that you've created, and you're asking the publisher to invest a lot of money to bring that product to market. If you can't make a case that the world needs your product because nothing like it yet exists, you're going to have a hard time finding investors.

But, that doesn't mean you can't try if you truly believe in your book's merit. Research the smaller publishers who do books in the same tone or genre as what you write. Submit sample pages, when possible. You can even give the Above the Slushpile Submission Form a shot if you feel the editor or agent would be a good fit. Just know that these types of books can take a while to find their market.

# Kayla Tostevin, Editor



interview by Lynne Marie

**W**e are pleased to start off this year's amazing adventure with Page Street Kids editor Kayla Tostevin! Kayla started off her own adventure in publishing as a marketing and publicity assistant at Page Street and quickly climbed the ladder to Editorial Assistant and now Editor. Kayla heads up the children's department for the company and is always looking for topics full of an adventurous spirit, wonder and story.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Many writers don't realize all the facets that go into an editor determining whether or not to buy a book. It's not only the voice, the story and/or the writing—it must be a book that has hooks and that the publisher can market and sell. With that in mind, please share your process for determining whether a book is marketable and how you use your marketing experience to do that.



**KAYLA TOSTEVIN:** To be totally honest, my initial reaction when reading a submission I love is to focus on and get excited about the voice and other great qualities I like on a personal level—which is why it's so important for the next step to be sharing it with my bosses, including our director of marketing/publicity for children's/YA, to make sure my subjective opinion isn't clouding our judgment for whether the manuscript is really a good acquisition for us. My own marketing experience comes in handy for thinking about potential key sales points to share along with the manuscript, so that right away I have some reasonable strategies for how we might be able

to sell it (which also work as arguments in favor of acquiring). These key selling points can be anything from topics that are currently popular, to evergreen lessons, to entertainment qualities (Is it funny? Is it relatable? Does it just have that classic storytime feel to it?)—any positive quality can be turned into a selling point if presented at the right angle. Oftentimes that marketing side

of me can predict when my bosses will say no to a book I really want, but the excited editor side of me brings it to the table anyway because it doesn't hurt to try, and maybe they'll have ideas that didn't occur to me.

**LM:** Page Street publishes about 150+ titles per year. How many of those are allotted to Page Street Kids? Do you have specific slots to fill each year as far as holidays, seasons and/or topics? What do you get too much of? Not enough of?

**KT:** Our children's picture book program is *much* smaller than our adult nonfiction department, and even a little smaller than our young adult department. Our target is to take on 12 titles per year (4 per season). Considering all the picture book possibilities out there, this really isn't a lot, and I have to be incredibly selective. Occasionally our publisher will want to pursue something specific, but mostly I have control over what manuscripts to bring to the table, and I'm more often considering just overall, gut pull than seeking out specific topics. However, if I'm two books into acquiring for a season and they're both books with animal characters, or both humor books, or

Kayla Tostevin..continued

similar in some other way, then I'll try to hold off on that topic for the rest of the season. I try to keep an eye on the diversity of our characters, authors, and illustrators within each season too.

**LM:** Please highlight your typical day as a Page Street editor. Do you also handle the pairing of author with illustrator?

**KT:** Most days are some combination of: reviewing submissions, editing manuscripts, checking over circulating pages, weekly in-house meetings, skimming through the latest industry news, emailing, emailing, emailing. Waiting is also a huge part of the job since so many different pairs of eyes need to be on so many different things, so the work distribution is often not as even as ideal—I'll often go from a day where I feel like I'm drowning in work to a day where there's really not much to be done. So I use those lulls to get ahead on everything I don't have time to do when I'm scrambling: writing jacket copy and title information sheets, looking through the general submissions inbox, updating info in our internal systems, and so much more. I do actually get to play a significant part in the art process, which is super fun! Our designers handle most of the big stuff, but I get to contribute ideas and opinions about illustrators, and then weigh in on all the art as it develops, with a special eye for making sure it's working well with the text.

**LM:** You have a unique and exciting lineup of picture books coming out that you acquired, and you have updated your wish list to include fun and interesting topics outlined in your manuscript wishlist: [Kayla Tostevin - The Official Manuscript Wish List Website](#)

What is your first consideration for acquiring a topic—subject matter? writing? theme? voice?

**KT:** Writing and voice are usually what first grab me—if it's written well enough and presented in an entertaining/interesting enough way, any topic or theme can be gripping. Subject matter and theme are definitely important to consider as I've touched on in some previous answers, but if a manuscript or dummy makes me genuinely *feel* something as I'm reading, that's when

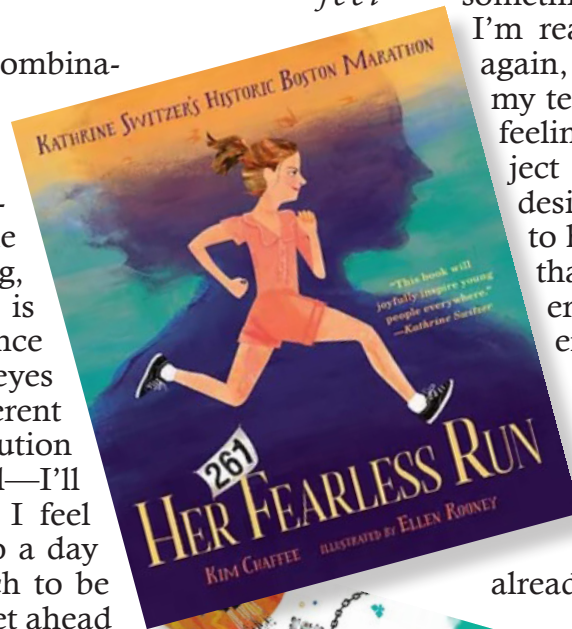
I'm really going to perk up, read it again, want to share it with the rest of my team. And if I don't get that gut feeling from a story, even if its subject matter and/or theme is super desirable, then I'm probably going to hold out for a different story in that vein that grips me more powerfully, because I want our readers to feel that way too.

**LM:** Do you have any tips for our readers to determine whether their project is one that's unique and will stand up and out against what is already out there?

**KT:** First step is simply trying to keep up with what's out there! Regularly skim the picture book shelves at bookstores and at the library, especially the prominent displays, even if you're not thoroughly reading all those books. Sign up for some email newsletters, skim through some online trade reviews. If you already have a specific topic you want to check, I recommend searching for it online

I recommend then more closely looking at anything that seems similar, and then you'll be able to play up whatever differences and strengths your own book has, or come at it from a different angle from the very beginning of the writing process.

**LM:** Also, if a project has proven unique, except that there's a book already out there on the topic (like *Swimming Towards a Dream* or *Hello, Opportunity*), what qualifications would it need to have and perhaps be considered by Page Street? What



*Kayla Tostevin..continued*

stood out to you about the Yusra bio or *Opportunity* story that made it a must-have?

**KT:** Aside from some obvious differences from what's already out there, it's really still just about what's grabbing us tightly. With *Swimming Towards a Dream*, we've been aware of fellow picture book bio *Yusra Swims* (Creative Editions, 2020), but this text is a lot more detailed with the events, and the author's voice is so incredibly beautiful. Some stories absolutely deserve multiple tellings, and I think Yusra's is one of them. We're hoping a documentary Netflix has coming out next year about Yusra and her sister Sara, *The Swimmers*, will also help spark fresh interest in this story. I actually didn't acquire *Hello, Opportunity*, so I can't for sure speak to what Courtney (the children's editor before me) saw in it, but what I like most about it and think makes it stand out is that it kind of feels like nonfiction lite—it's very informative and scientifically/historically accurate, but with the high emotion and accessibility of a fictional story, making it an especially great pick for very little ones who might not have the attention or comprehension for denser nonfiction yet.

**LM:** It has been conveyed by some publishers that bios are not as in demand as they once were. But yet they continue to be published and sell. What are your thoughts about that? About STEM and STEAM?

**KT:** Funny, I'm not sure I've heard that! I definitely acquire more fiction than nonfiction—usually 3 of my 4 per season are fiction, but that fourth is always a bio, because I think one of the huge strengths of biographies versus other nonfiction is you can tell the story of a person's life just as you would any fictional story—there are going to be ups and downs, emotions, a clear arc, the kinds of hooky elements that aren't natural-

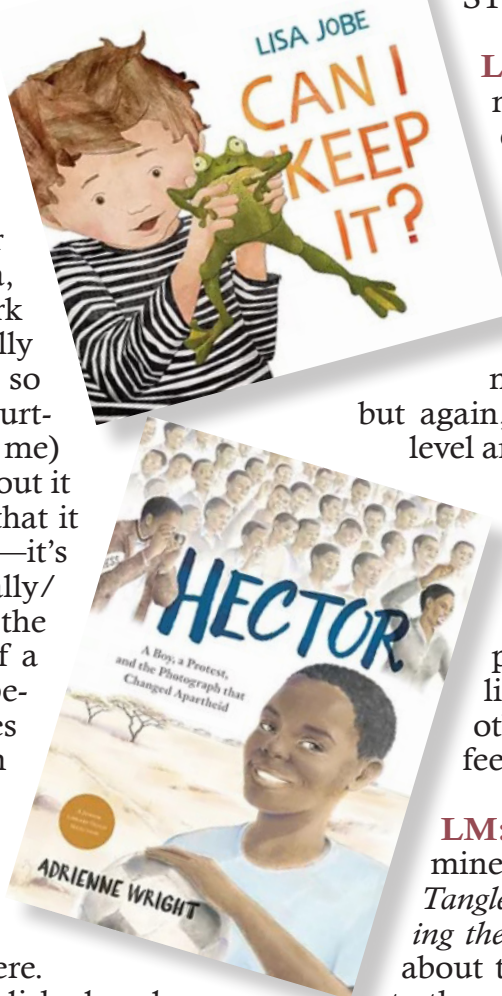
ly present in a book that's pure facts, or simply more didactic in nature. If looked at that way, it's just one bonus facet that they're also true stories about real people, which I would think gives them an edge! Her *Fearless Run*, a bio about the first official female Boston Marathon runner, has been one of our best-selling backlist picture books. I don't think I have anything different to say about STEM/STEAM bios in particular.

**LM:** What do you look for in a nonfiction picture book? Which elements do you feel are most important? What are your thoughts on birth to death narratives?

**KT:** As evidenced by my breakdown above, I'm a much more fiction-leaning editor, but again, the quality and entertainment level and overall *story* feel is what I look for in my nonfiction as well; I prefer facts woven into a larger plot rather than as the main focus. So birth to death can work for me, as there is definitely a progression there—but I'd need a little something more to it, some other unexpected quality, to really feel drawn to it.

**LM:** As far as fiction, you seem to mine the most fabulous concepts, like *Tangle-Knot*, *Cloud in a Jar* and *Mending the Moon*. Please tell us a little bit about these books and what drew you to them.

**KT:** I've always loved concepts that feel mostly grounded in reality with just one or two weird, fantastical curveballs thrown in there. *Tangle-Knot* is very much that, as it's a typical mother-daughter relationship and the girl just, you know, has some birds living in her hair. The other two lean a lot more fantastical, but even then, *A Cloud in a Jar* starts in a regular town with one kid tapping on another kid's window, and *Mending the Moon* has a certain practicality to it: well, the moon fell down and shattered, but now how can a normal



Kayla Tostevin..continued

girl and her grandfather help fix it? I always have and always will love that childlike feeling that anything can happen anytime, and I hope these stories spread that special kind of magic.

**LM:** Where do you find these fun and fantastical ideas? Do many appear in your inbox, or are these a result of the Twitter pitch parties that you attend?

**KT:** Many of them do just fall into my lap! Largely thanks to agents who are very good at their jobs, but I have pulled a story or two out of the notorious slush pile (that's what happened with *A Cloud in a Jar*, so sending to general submissions inboxes is not always as hopeless as it may seem). But yes, I am a *huge* fan of pitch parties, and have acquired several titles that way. Pitch parties are especially helpful opportunities for me to pay much needed extra attention to marginalized voices and underrepresented subject matter, since I can focus on certain sub-hashtags first and then move on to everything else if I have time, or make sure I make it to specialized pitch parties like #DVpit, #LatinxPitch, and #PitchDis, to name a few.

**LM:** As far as pitch parties, you are very present and active and the Kidlit community appreciates that! Please tell us about any deals that these have resulted in.

**KT:** *Mending the Moon* came to me as a #PBpitch! And *Swimming Towards a Dream* came through #Pitmad, albeit a bit unconventionally since I accidentally scrolled too far back in a sub-hashtag and liked the author's pitch from 3 years before. (The agent who began repping her in the meantime reached out to me to essentially say, um, I think you've made a mistake, but we do still have the MS if you want to see it?) We have another title coming out in between those in Winter 2022, titled *I Want to Be Big!* (boy can't wait to grow up and literally grows into a giant, oops—just brimming with fun and Black Boy Joy) and that one came through #DVpit.

**LM:** Please share what you look for in a pitch.

**KT:** I know it's hard to do with the character limit, but I appreciate when I can get a sense of voice

already in the pitch. Definitely be sure to include whatever makes your story stand out, and that it's clear what it's actually about. Other than that, there's no one right formula.

**LM:** Thank you so very much, Kayla, for your time in expertise. Congratulations for being the top-selling, #1 Children's Picture Book Editor in [Publishers Marketplace!](#) Well done!

Kayla Tostevin is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Until January 30, 2022, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of your PICTURE BOOK, along with other information, via the online form at <https://bit.ly/ATSJan2022PageStreet>. Kayla will read all pitches and respond to those she's interested in by April 30, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of April, consider it a pass.

### ---Please Read Before You Proceed---

Before you submit your manuscript please run the following checklist. This will ensure that editors will continue to offer us Above the Slushpile codes:

- You've chosen one manuscript to pitch for each Above the Slushpile opportunity. If the editor or agent shows interest in that submission, you'll have the opportunity to mention your other work.
- You've studied the submission guidelines and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- You've confirmed your work matches the interests of the editor by reading their CBI interview, and studying recent books on their list.
- You have reviewed Laura's editorial explaining how to write a good pitch and how to use the **Above the Slushpile Submission Form**. You can also tune into the free Kidlit Social on **January 4, 2022** at 8 pm Eastern at the link [bit.ly/kidlit-social](https://bit.ly/kidlit-social) to learn how to know if your manuscript is ready to submit. If you miss the live event, see the replay at [writeforkids.org/blog/kidlit-distancing-social-replays/](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlit-distancing-social-replays/)
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript so it is ready to submit should the editor ask to see the entire work.

# SETTING AND SUSTAINING YOUR WRITING GOALS

by Jane McBride

**W**riters talk a lot about meeting page or word goals. But how do we sustain those goals? How do we consistently turn out those pages/words every day? Whether our goal is to write 500 words or 5000 words every day or to produce two pages or twenty pages a day, we need techniques to keep doing it, day after day, week after week.

It's relatively easy to keep a goal for a day, maybe even a few days or a week. Sustaining it for longer takes discipline. Look at the number of people who start a diet on January first and abandon it by January fourth. Discovering how to keep to your writing goals is just as important as making them. One of the frustrating things about developing such a plan is that what worked for you at one time may not work again. That's why it helps to have a number of techniques in your arsenal.

After 40 years of writing, I've developed a few tips and tricks.

**We'll start with the tips.**

**STEP 1:** *Carve out a writing space that is yours.* Many of us are not fortunate enough to have a dedicated writing space. We all dream of the richly paneled office complete with leather furniture, built-in bookcases, and an ergonomic chair. That's the dream. The reality may be a closet you've converted into a mini-office. Or a desk you've plopped in the middle of the laundry room so that you can write and do twenty loads of laundry at the same time. Find a place that allows you to write and then do it every day. Consistency is key here.

**ACTION:** Make it clear to your family, your significant other, or your dog that this is your space and yours alone. Be nice but firm. This is YOUR space.

**STEP 2:** *Appeal to your senses.* Most of us who have been writing for a while know the importance of appealing to the readers' senses in our stories. We know to involve each of the five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Do you know that you can use the same tip to improve both the quantity and quality of your writing?

**ACTION:** Make your writing space a haven. If you respond to scents, light a candle or spray a bit of your favorite cologne in your writing area. If you like looking out a window, set your computer where you can do just that. (Hint: don't let the view distract you.) If you are stimulated by taste, have a couple of fine chocolates at your fingertips. This can be dangerous if a few chocolates grow into a whole bag of Dove bars! Does music trigger your creativity? Play a CD of your favorite songs. I sometimes write while listening to *Phantom of the Opera*. Andrew Lloyd Webber's haunting words play in the background while I write a scene between the hero and heroine of my work-in-progress. Finally, consider using your sense of touch. Did you know that petting a cat or dog can lower your blood pressure? It can also stoke your mind and soul as you let the soothing motion and soft texture free your imagination.

**STEP 3:** *Kill your internal editor.* Well, maybe you don't really have to kill her. Just put her on pause or mute her while you write. Internal editors are great when it comes to finding that dangling participle or catching you when you've typed "discreet" when you meant to type "discrete." We all need those pesky editors. But turn her off when you're working on getting in your words or pages for the day. That editor will cause you to pause, then stop while you struggle over finding just the right word. She is not your friend during your writing session. I

*Setting and Sustaining...continued*

have been known to waste a half hour looking for a synonym for “fear.” My search took me to all sorts of websites devoted to providing synonyms and antonyms. In retrospect, I should have typed “fear,” moved on, then come back to it during my editing time. That internal editor is, in fact, your enemy.

**ACTION:** Turn your internal editor off when you’re writing and turn her on again when it comes time to revise and rewrite. Until then, tell her to take a hike.

**Now for the tricks.**

**STEP 1:** *Tell yourself that you have to write only a hundred words.* (Hey, a hundred words is a hundred words. Nothing to scoff at when you realize that a hundred words over a hundred days equals 10,000 words.) Still, you want to produce considerably more than that. But saying that you want to write 1,000 words or 2,000 words a day is daunting, overwhelming, and even downright terrifying. A hundred words? No problem. You can do that standing on your head. Well, maybe you’ll want to sit on your seat, but you get the idea.

**ACTION:** Write your hundred words. Remind yourself that that’s all you have to do for the day. Chances are once you get into the story, you’ll discover that you’ve written a great many more words than the hundred you started out with.

**STEP 2:** *Set a timer.* It can be the time on your stove, on your FitBit, or your watch. Set it for fifteen minutes. That’s right. Only fifteen minutes. Then write as fast as you can. Don’t worry about grammar or punctuation or POV or anything else. Just write. How much have you written?

**ACTION:** Once fifteen minutes are up, pat yourself on the back, walk around the room, get a drink of water, then do it again. Do this four times over the course of a day. You can do the sessions back-to-back or you can spread them out.

**STEP 3:** *Turn on a favorite television show.* (That’s right. I’m giving you permission to watch TV while you’re supposed to be writing.) When a commercial

appears, go in and write. Tell yourself that you are not allowed to write beyond the commercial. When you hear the show resuming, get up and return to it.

**ACTION:** Do this for the length of the TV show. You will probably discover that you’ve written more than you think. Once you’ve done this enough times, you’ll find that you’ve started ignoring the start of the show and have continued writing.

**STEP 4:** *Stop in the middle.* Writers know the importance of starting in the middle (*media res*) in beginning a book. We are told to start on the day that is different or plunge into the action. Here, I’m telling you the opposite. Stop in the middle.

**ACTION:** Force yourself to stop in the middle of a scene, paragraph, or even sentence. Turn off your computer and walk away. When you return to your writing the following day, you’ll be excited to complete that unfinished scene, paragraph, or sentence. Your energy will run high as you fulfill the vision you have for it.

The more you write, the more tips and techniques you’ll develop to help you keep to your goals. Don’t be afraid to experiment. The only thing that matters is that you’re writing ... and that you keep writing.



## 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:

[writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints](https://writingblueprints.com/p/free-trial-editions-of-our-top-blueprints)



## Seasonal Adventures and Other Stories

# Johnny Ray Moore

## Poet and Children's Author

interview by Lynne Marie

**A**uthor Johnny Ray Moore is a dual threat in kidlit: he can write in verse and in prose. The author of six published picture books, Moore's newest book is a diverse, heartfelt lyrical celebration of winter, spring, summer and fall along with the joys of fatherhood in the aptly titled *Seasonal Adventures* (Reycraft, June 2021), illustrations by Cbabi Bayoc. The book was hailed by Kirkus as "a pure ode to nature and sincere Black boy joy." A member of The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and a graduate of The Institute of Children's Literature, Moore lives with his family in Raleigh, NC.

**PJ McILVAINE:** When did you realize you had a way with words?

**JOHNNY RAY MOORE:** I realized it when I was in the third grade, because I started making excellent grades in the Language Arts and anything literary.

**PM:** Did you plan on being a kidlit writer as an adult?

**JRM:** No. I did not. My plan was to write no more than three children's books for the sake of the challenge and settle for writing poetry. But, I became hooked on the beauty of children's books, especially board books.

**PM:** What were your writing and reading influences growing up?

**JRM:** I had no "writing and reading influences growing up!" My family and I were very poor. I did not have the "extras" during my childhood that so many other children enjoyed. I just had a BURNING desire to learn.

**PM:** What is your daily writing routine like?

**JRM:** I don't really have a daily writing routine. My day starts at about 5 a.m. At that time, I prepare to exercise; I look over my List of Things to Do; I read and study some of my writing resources; and, if I am approaching a writing deadline, I will then work on what is at hand. But I do not make it a habit to write each day or to write, routinely, even.

**PM:** Are you an outliner?

**JRM:** No. I am not an outliner. The way that schools teach to outline DESTROYS my creativity. So, I just make a rough list of things I will include in the various things I write.

**PM:** Since you write in both prose and rhyme, is there one format you prefer over the other?

**JRM:** No. I have no preference. Of course, I do find it so much easier to write prose. But I do work at making my prose read like poetry, and I work at making my poetry read like prose.

**PM:** How many drafts do you do before you decide a work is ready for the world?

**JRM:** I do not have a specific number of drafts that I do before deciding a piece of writing is ready for the world. At times, it does take me 3 to 5 days to complete a single poem or a short writing project. I make it a point to let my completed writing project simmer for a couple of days. During that simmering period, I will do a bit of rewriting of the piece. And, I NEVER rush a piece of writing.



*Johnny Ray Moore...continued*

**PM:** Where do you get your ideas from?

**JRM:** My writing ideas come from life, in general; from things people say and do; from things I read and even write; from Nature; and from the essence of my five senses.

**PM:** Do you get writer's block?

**JRM:** No. I do not get writer's block. I don't even believe in writer's block. Writer's block is really due to a person not spending enough time thinking about what he or she wants to write. Also, a person could be tired, physically and mentally. Therefore, the effects of what I just mentioned may keep that person from writing as he or she may wish to write. The cure for "writer's block" is to analyze why you are feeling what you are feeling and power through it all.

**PM:** What was the seed for your latest book, *Seasonal Adventures*?

**JRM:** The seed for my latest book, *Seasonal Adventures*, was my desire to share some things about Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter in a way that young children would be able to relate to and enjoy. I have always been a lover of nature. And, I wanted to entice young children to experience some of what I experienced as a child.

**PM:** Did you have any input into the illustrations?

**JRM:** No. I did not have any input into how *Seasonal Adventures* would be illustrated. From a writing standpoint, I made it my business to create images in words that any illustrator could work with. I was the foundation on which the illustrator could create and/or build as he felt would be best for the book.



**PM:** From first draft to publication, how long did the process take?

**JRM:** I received the contract for *Seasonal Adventures* on 21 February 2020. *Seasonal Adventures* was released on 30 June 2021. I cannot give you an accurate date for the completion of the first draft, though, because I had written *Seasonal Adventures* as four separate board book manuscripts originally. Each board book manuscript was written at different times. They were *Welcome to Spring*, *Welcome to Summer*, *Welcome to Fall*; and *Welcome to Winter*. But Reycraft Books felt that those board book manuscripts would make a much better picture book. So, I agreed!

**PM:** You've published several books. Did the process differ with each book and what did you learn from each one?

**JRM:** Yes. The process did differ with each book I've written. In writing *Howie Has a Stomachache*, only 100 words, I worked extremely hard to write a complete story with a beginning, a middle and an ending. The shorter the word count is in my books, the more difficult the writing was. In writing *So Many Questions*, a much longer picture book that contains prose and rhyming verse, I struggled to move the story forward in a timely manner and not be boring. All in all, from the various lengths of all of my children's books, I learned to pay very close attention to my intended audiences. Plus, I knew I had to communicate stories that would INSPIRE and EMPOWER.

**PM:** Do you have an agent?

**JRM:** No. I do not have an agent, currently. I once

Johnny Ray Moore...continued

had an agent for about two years. When my contract with that agent had ended, I did not care to sign with another agent. By the way, I have sold my last six children's book manuscripts without the representation of an agent.

**PM:** How do you get your material to editors without an agent?

**JRM:** I spend quality time researching children's book publishers that I feel may be interested in the types of manuscripts that I write. I study various publishers' mission statements; I study their submission guidelines; I study their book catalogs; and, I learn a little about the main people who are instrumental within the various publishing companies that interest me. Once I find a publisher that I feel is a good fit, then I submit my manuscript.

**PM:** Are you an extrovert or introvert? It seems to me that to be a successful writer, you need to be a little of both!

**JRM:** I am a bit of both, thank you.

**PM:** How do you keep your enthusiasm and passion alive when the querying process/publication can be as slow as a tortoise (and even slower during the current pandemic)?

**JRM:** I keep my enthusiasm and passion alive by enjoying other areas of my life. I love interacting with my family—exercising; biking; gardening; working on projects around my home; playing my bass guitar and my kalimba—just to name a few other things I do. Therefore, I am not bothered by how long it may take for me to hear from a publisher that I have submitted a manuscript to. Writing is a part of my life. It is not and will never be something that will consume and control my life, or spill over into other areas of my life.

**PM:** Has your family been supportive of your writing?

**JRM:** Yes. My family has been and is still supportive of my writing.

**PM:** Do you find it hard to juggle work and family like so many of us?

**JRM:** No. I have never found it hard to juggle work and family around what I do as a writer. Because, my family has always come first. Even from the very start of my writing career, I would not allow ANYTHING to interfere with my family life. And, I continue to keep family time separate from the business of writing.

**PM:** What are you currently working on?

**JRM:** I am currently working on an early reader series for young children; a middle grade novel; and a novella. While I am working on the writings I have mentioned, I change the pace, often, by writing a few poems I feel I must write.

**PM:** Do you have books in other genres besides picture books?

**JRM:** Yes. One of my books, *But Still, We Dream*, is a novel in verse. Unfortunately,

that book is out-of-print. And, I wrote the bestselling, board book classic, *The Story of MLK, Jr.* My King board book, only 200 words, has sold well over 103,000 copies and is still selling very well.

**PM:** What do you see yourself writing (genre wise) five years from now?

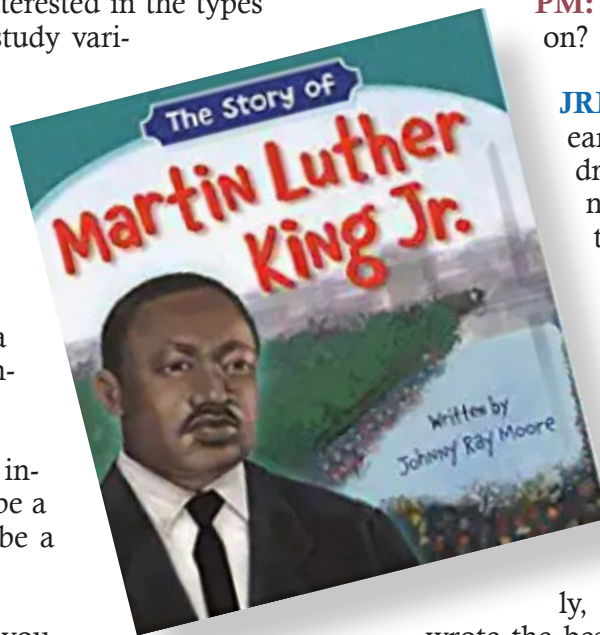
**JRM:** Five years from now, I see myself writing more board books; another collection of poems; a chapter book; and a novella.

**PM:** What book do you wish you had written?

**JRM:** I wish I had written *Baby Shark (Meet Baby Shark)*, the board book. As simple as that book is, it really captures the attention of young children!

**PM:** And what book do you wish you could rewrite?

**JRM:** It would have to be *Howie Has a Stomachache*. It was the first children's book I got published. And, I would rewrite that book in lyrical verse.



# Nicole Frail

Senior Editor



Sky Pony Press

interview by Lynne Marie

**W**e are pleased to start off this year cooking—with not one but two amazing editors!

Our second featured kidlit professional is Skyhorse Publishing/Sky Pony Press' Senior Editor Nicole Frail. Nicole has been with Skyhorse since 2012 and has brought over 200 books to life! She acquires and edits both fiction and nonfiction for children—including picture books and practical nonfiction, and also nonfiction for adults including cooking, lifestyle, crafting, art/interior design, humor, travel, mind/body/spirit, health/diet/nutrition, and pets/nature.

Nicole offers vast publishing experience and expertise. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in communications/journalism and minors in English, Psychology and Sociology. She previously worked as a content developer/editor at an educational book production company and now juggles full-time editing with being a wife, mother and writing mentor. She wears many hats each day.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Many aspiring writers enjoy the act of writing for kids so much that they forget about the psychology of children—that they are basically egocentric and need tangible examples in order to learn and understand the world around them. Using your background, how would you recommend a writer approach writing a story for the picture book

target age?

**NICOLE FRAIL:** Great question! And good point—when people think of children's books, many of them tend to go right to “What can my child learn from this book? What's the message/lesson?” And while that's a good thing to look for, as a parent, it's not usually the part that hooks the kid. In addition to the lesson you want to teach through the book you're writing, you want to make sure the story is entertaining or amusing, not too simple but not too complex. There's a balance to strike, and it's so important to hit it because you want the reading experience to be enjoyable and fun, not feel like a chore.

**LM:** Do you have a writing exercise that you might recommend in order to get writers in the kid zone?

**NF:** Yes! Very simple: once you have a draft you're happy with, write a new draft using a different point-of-view and see if you like it better, if it feels different. I often see picture books, specifically, written in first-person that, when written in third, take on an entirely different feel and work so much better.

**LM:** What approximate age should the main character be in a picture book? How much flexibility is there in this?



*Nicole Frail..continued*

**NF:** If I'm considering a book where the main character is a child, I look for characters who look to be about five or six years old (this doesn't have to be stated in the manuscript, of course). This makes the characters relatable to the older readers in the picture book range (Sky Pony's range is 3–6). Younger kids tend to be more accepting of and interested in older characters than older kids (preschoolers and pre-K students) who may not want to read about “babies.” I think six years old/first-grade is the oldest characters should be in picture books.

**LM:** If the main character in a picture book is an adult, how might a writer portray the adult so that it is accessible to kids?

**NF:** Don't over-complicate their background; young readers don't need to know about everything the main character experienced up to the point the story takes place. Try to keep the stress out of the story, as well. The story should be realistic, of course, which may mean the story is serious or emotional, but picture book readers shouldn't feel weighed down by the adult's experience.

**LM:** How many titles do you oversee per season? About what percent is fiction and what percent is nonfiction? How many seasonal catalogs do you roll out each year?

**NF:** Skyhorse/Sky Pony Press is distributed by Simon & Schuster, and we have three seasons each year (spring, summer, fall). The number of titles on my list changes every season; the average is usually ten to twelve. In the past, I had much bigger lists, but we've shifted in recent years to smaller lists that allow us to focus more on each title.

My lists are usually half adult nonfiction and half children's books. And the children's books tend to be nonfiction, as that's been Sky Pony's focus recently, with an occasional picture book.

**LM:** Please highlight your day in the life of a Skyhorse editor. Do you also handle the pairing of author with illustrator?

**NF:** Every day is different! Though I can say that most days are all about emails; editing usually happens very late in the day or at night. Connecting with authors/illustrators and agents, working on metadata, reviewing passes from production, communicating with sales, gathering endorsements, researching trends, reviewing submissions, pitching submissions, negotiating contracts—just kind of bouncing from one thing to the next on my to-do lists.

The preference is finding an author and illustrator as a complete package (either via someone who is an author-illustrator, or there is an illustrator who has already agreed to be part of the project), but if I've only purchased the manuscript from the author, I do hire the illustrator separately. I usually consult the authors when I have a few samples in to get a feel for preference.

**LM:** Is there anything in particular that you are currently looking for as far as topic or theme?

**NF:** For children's books, I'm looking for anything related to health (mental, emotional, physical) and the sciences, as well as workbooks and activity books. I'm picking up limited picture books, mostly related to holidays or milestones. I am not currently looking for children's fiction such as chapter books, middle grade novels, or young adult books.

For adults, I'm looking for practical books, like cooking and crafts: step-by-step instructions, lots of photos or illustrations, something you can do at home.

**LM:** What are your thoughts about holiday books? Obviously, these are evergreen topics, but how might a writer make certain that their story would stand up and out in the current market, and/or pique an editor's interest?

**NF:** I love holiday books! They're challenging, because they can only sell during a certain window (for example, we pitch Christmas books to buyers in February/March and release them in September and they're off shelves in January), but if they're not too specific to a time frame or year, they may back-

*Nicole Frail..continued*

list well and come back strong the next year. I tend to be drawn to holiday mashups, and also evergreen themes like the importance of friendship and family.

**LM:** What are some holiday books that you have acquired, and why? Is there a best time to submit these? How far in advance of a holiday or season?

**NF:** *Groggle's Monster Valentine* written by Diana Murray and illustrated by Bats Langley and the upcoming *Groggle's Monster Halloween* by the same team. These manuscripts are wonderful and fun, but I truly fell in love with Groggle the moment I saw him. I couldn't resist Valentine, and its success led us to the upcoming Halloween.

*Latkes for Santa Claus* written by Janie Emaus and illustrated by Bryan Langdo and the upcoming *Easter Eggs & Matzo Balls* by the same team. I love the way Janie is able to bring two different holidays and their traditions together in these books, educating readers about each and showing them how they can be celebrated alongside each other. And Bryan's artwork, and the details within it, are whimsical and fun.

The Fall 2022 season will see Katie Otey and Samantha Wrinkler's *Every Other Christmas*, which follows a child whose parents are divorced as he spends every other Christmas in the United States and Colombia, as well as *Rocky's Road to the Big City* by Jessica DelVirginia and illustrated by Courtney Ling, which is based on the true story of the little owl that came to Rockefeller Center by way of its annual Christmas tree in 2020. It's a popular story, but Jessica and Courtney are putting their own spin on it.

**LM:** I love that many of the books you acquire focus on celebrating life and events! With that in mind, what five words would you use to describe what you are looking for in manuscripts?

**NF:** Smart, emotional, aspirational, entertaining, and fun!



**LM:** What do you look for in a nonfiction picture book? Which elements do you feel are most important? Please explain what you consider to be practical nonfiction.

**NF:** Nonfiction picture books should be informative but still entertaining. Illustrations or photos should be fun, detailed, but still simple enough to follow if that's the purpose. In most nonfiction picture books, I'm looking for things like informational sidebars, "based on true story" notes, glossaries, space that allows for readers to jot down notes or reflect on content—supplemental materials to shed additional light on the topics discussed in the story. When I look for practical nonfiction, I'm looking for anything that you can pick up and apply to your life: projects, crafts, recipes, gardening, drawing, journaling pages, how-to's and guidebooks.



**LM:** As far as pitch parties, you are very present and active and the kidlit community appreciates that! Please tell us about any deals that these have resulted in.

**NF:** Oh, I love pitch parties and I hope to be more active with them in 2022! (I've admittedly been basically dormant on Twitter for a while now. Social media, specifically Twitter, has taken a backseat to parenting for me. But that's a different conversation!) I think the most recent deal might be *Latkes for Santa Claus* written by Janie Emaus and illustrated by Bryan

Nicole Frail..continued

Langdo, which has led to *Easter Eggs & Matzo Balls* by the same team, set to release in Spring 2023.

**LM:** What are your thoughts about art notes? Page numbers? Comp titles?

**NF:** I appreciate the inclusion of notes to the artist, as well as how the author anticipates the pages will break down, but I tend to ask the authors to keep these light and to be flexible. A note here or there is fine but avoid full paragraphs listing tons of details. I understand that authors tend to envision their books unfolding in a certain way, but I like for the illustrator's first sketches to be their own, the way they envision bringing the manuscript to life. From there, we can make suggestions and tweaks and collaborate on the vision for the illustrations.

Nicole Frail is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Until **January 30, 2022**, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of your **FICTION PICTURE BOOK** (holiday or milestone themes), or **INFORMATIONAL NONFICTION PICTURE BOOK**, along with other information, via the online form at [bit.ly/ATSJan2022SkyPonyPress](https://bit.ly/ATSJan2022SkyPonyPress). Nicole will read all pitches and respond to those she's interested in by **April 30, 2022**. If you haven't heard back by the end of April, consider it a pass.

**---Please Read Before You Proceed---**

Before you submit your manuscript please run the following checklist. This will ensure that editors will continue to offer us Above the Slushpile codes:

- You've chosen one manuscript to pitch for each Above the Slushpile opportunity. If the editor or agent shows interest in that submission, you'll have the opportunity to mention your other work.
- You've studied the submission guidelines and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- You've confirmed your work matches the interests of the editor by reading their CBI interview, and studying recent books on their list.
- You have reviewed Laura's editorial explaining how to write a good pitch and how to use the **Above the Slushpile Submission Form**. You can also tune into the free Kidlit Social on January 4, 2022 at 8 pm Eastern at the link [bit.ly/kidlit-social](https://bit.ly/kidlit-social) to learn how to know if your manuscript is ready to submit. If you miss the live event, you can see the replay at [writeforkids.org/blog/kidlit-distancing-social-replays/](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlit-distancing-social-replays/)
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript so it is ready to submit should the editor ask to see the entire work.

# ENDINGS: The Good and the Bad

by Jane McBride

Let me share with you two incidents regarding story endings that happened to me recently.

**Incident #1:** I finished a book, a romantic suspense, and was feeling okay about it. Everything jelled. But the more I read and re-read the ending, the more dissatisfied I was with it. There was nothing technically wrong with it, but it fell flat. Or maybe it felt flat. Either way, I feared it would leave readers disappointed and fail to entice them to pick up another one of my books. Try as I would, though, I couldn't find a way to fix it.

**Incident #2:** I DVR'd a movie and spent two hours (two hours which would have been better spent on something—anything—else) watching it. The movie, an action/adventure one, ended on such a sour note that I wanted to write to the producers to tell them they'd wasted a whole bunch of money on making it. The hero died; the young girl he was supposed to save died. What was the point of the movie if the two lead characters both died? With a top star as the lead, it should have been a stellar movie. Instead, it left me depressed and resolved to never watch another movie with this particular star.

In both cases, the endings disappointed. Big time.

Fortunately, I ended up fixing the ending of my book.

Before we talk about fixing bad endings, let's review some different types of endings:

*Happy ending.* Here, the main character (MC) or protagonist achieves his goal. Twelve-year-old Brandon sets a goal to earn his Eagle Scout award in scouting by his 13th birthday. Though it isn't easy and he faces a number of setbacks, including an unsupportive father, he manages to reach his goal.

*Unhappy ending.* In this ending, the MC fails to achieve his goal. Brandon doesn't earn his Eagle

Scout despite doing all that he can do. Some call this a bitter ending.

*Ending revolving back to the beginning.* This ending takes the protagonist and reader full circle back to the beginning of the story. The MC is often found reflecting on what brought him to this point. This is frequently a very satisfying ending. Take the case of seventeen-year-old Charlotte at the beginning of her senior year in high school. Long ago, Charlotte had set a goal of winning a full-ride scholarship to a prestigious university so that she could get a good job and come back to help support her single mother and younger siblings. She had to work twenty-five hours a week at a part-time job while maintaining a 4.0 GPA and still help out with her brothers and sisters when she could. At times, she considered giving up. It was all too much. But she kept going. At the end of the story, Charlotte has won the scholarship and looks back at what had brought her to this point.

*Unresolved ending.* Questions still remain. Loose ends are not tied up. This kind of ending is often used in a series where one book leads to another. The unresolved ending causes readers to want to continue with the series. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series is a good example of this. A note of caution here: An unresolved ending where there is no sequel or other books forthcoming can be unsatisfying. Don't cheat your readers.

*Long-term ending.* This may take the form of an epilogue or it may have a small header saying "Two months later" or even "Two years later" at the beginning of the final chapter. There, the readers can see where the protagonist now is in life, the problem or struggle he or she faced now resolved. Is the cheerleader who was considered nothing more than a pretty face but wanted to go to college now in her senior year of college and preparing to take the LSAT? Is the little boy who resented his mother remarrying now happy with his stepfather and calling



*Endings...continued*

him “Dad?” The long-term ending can show these things.

*Deus ex machina ending.* This is the kind of ending you and any writer should avoid at all costs. This is a Latin term, a translation from a Greek phrase literally meaning “God out of the machine.” According to Wikipedia, “Deus ex machina is a plot device whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem in a story is suddenly and abruptly resolved by an unexpected and unlikely occurrence. Its function is generally to resolve an otherwise irresolvable plot situation, to surprise the audience, to bring the tale to a happy ending, or act as a comedic device.”

These endings are an easy out and are therefore considered cheap. Consider a story where a teenage boy, Hyrum, is tasked with saving his school from a zombie apocalypse. Thirteen-year-old Hyrum is a quiet, introverted boy, who is more interested in art and pottery than he is in athletics or video games. He has no special qualities or skills that would allow him to fight zombies. However, at the crucial point in the story where he must defeat the zombies or have his school completely devoured by them, he is suddenly endowed with super powers and is able to spear fire from his fingertips and leap over a horde of approaching zombies. There is no earlier mention in the story of how Hyrum could have developed these skills or where they might have come from. They are just abruptly and unbelievably there. Well, you might say, a zombie story is unbelievable to begin with so what difference does it make if he suddenly has these powers? True, a zombie story is unbelievable, but it is the author’s job to make Hyrum’s powers believable over the course of the story. Even in a make-believe world, there should be a reasonable explanation of how Hyrum came by these extraordinary powers.

What if we have Hyrum interested in family history rather than art and pottery? He traces his genealogy back 12 generations and finds that several of his early ancestors have a history of possessing supernatural powers. He finds a book in the attic about developing these powers and begins to experiment with them. Still, he doesn’t believe he can do anything special until he encounters a crisis where his friends’ lives are at stake. This forces him to dig deep and find the hidden powers that lie within him.

With this set-up, it is not surprising or contrived that Hyrum now has the powers that allow him to defeat

the encroaching enemy.

**FIXING A BAD ENDING**

Below are some ways to beef up a flat ending or make an unbelievable one more believable:

**Bring in a forgotten character.** In my book with the ho-hum ending, I went back to the middle of the book and brought in a largely forgotten villain. Through a series of plausible events, he attacks the heroine, giving the ending a much-needed punch of danger and suspense.

**Set up the ending from the beginning.** In the example of Hyrum finding the skills within him to defeat the zombies, we have given him an interest in family history which leads him to find the book on his ancestors and their supernatural powers. Do a deep dive into your protagonist’s personality and background and see what skills he might bring to bear to defeat the enemy and/or achieve his goal.

**Infuse the ending with emotion.** It may not be the events that are happening that make for a poor ending but a lack of emotion. Use words that evoke feelings and sensory perceptions. Go deep in your MC’s point-of-view and let the reader feel what he is feeling.

**Give the reader something to ponder.** A flat ending will leave a reader thinking, “Okay, so what’s the point?” A strong ending will have the reader think, “I get it” and maybe want to go back and read the book again.

**IN THE END** (pun intended)

If you aren’t certain about the ending of your WIP, experiment. If your book is a longer one with two or more points-of-view, try a different one. Look at your word choice. Have you chosen strong verbs and concrete nouns? Make your ending shine and invite readers back for more.

For more on choosing the best ending for your book, check out our Writing Solutions Webinar “Finish Big: Mastering the 5 Kidlit Story Endings” by Jes Trudel. You can purchase the recording and get the PDF handouts at [writingblueprints.com/p/finish-big-mastering-the-5-kidlit-story-endings](https://writingblueprints.com/p/finish-big-mastering-the-5-kidlit-story-endings)



interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

The monthly *Chess Life* and bi-monthly *Chess Life Kids* are the official magazines published by the United States Chess Federation. *Chess Life* is advertised as the "most widely read chess magazine in the world," and reaches more than a quarter of a million readers each month. It focuses on American chess players and tournaments, instruction, human interest, and US Chess governance matters. The November 2020 issue of *Chess Life*, with its cover story on The Queen's Gambit, available for free here: [new.uschess.org/news/gift-world-november-2020-issue-chess-life](https://new.uschess.org/news/gift-world-november-2020-issue-chess-life)

Writers who wish to submit content for adult readers with a serious interest in chess can study the *Chess Life* guidelines at [new.uschess.org/for-contributors](https://new.uschess.org/for-contributors), and query editor John Hartmann at [john.hartmann@uschess.org](mailto:john.hartmann@uschess.org).

*Chess Life Kids* is geared toward players ages 8-12 who are starting to compete in local, regional and state level chess tournaments, as well as their parents and coaches. We recently spoke with Melinda J. Matthews, *Chess Life Kids* editor, about how writers can contribute to this bi-monthly publication.

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Could you please tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to hold your current position for *Chess Life Kids*?

**MELINDA MATTHEWS:** I started out as an Assistant Editor to Dan Lucas (then the Director of Publications for the US Chess Federation) in 2017 and was promoted to Publications Editor in 2019, after Dan accepted his current position as Senior Director of Strategic Communication. As Publications Editor, I serve as the editor for *Chess*



*Life Kids*, and I also am responsible for ancillary print publications such as tournament programs and governance documents. Before joining US Chess as an employee, I was a chess parent, occasional blogger for *Chess Life Online*, and wrote a couple of tournament reports for *Chess Life*.

**SB:** How do readers find your magazine? Is it subscription, newsstand, online, and etc.?

**MM:** *Chess Life Kids* comes out six times a year and is available to members only. A digital version is free to all members. A print subscription can be added to any membership for a nominal fee (currently it is \$4.75/annually). A few specialty outlets, such as US Chess Sales or the Q Boutique at the World Chess Hall of Fame, carry issues for purchase as well.

**SB:** What kind of audience reads your magazine, such as chess parents, caregivers, school staff who work with chess students, etc.?

**MM:** *Chess Life Kids*' target audience is scholastic players ages 8-12 who are more comfortable at the local, regional, and state levels. With this in mind, *Chess Life Kids* includes a mix of kid-friendly tournament reports; lessons on improving your game; informative articles for parents, chess coaches, and others who may be stepping into the chess world for the first time; inspirational interviews with popular players; and interactive puzzles. We have several regular columns as well.

**SB:** What kind of background do writers need to have?

**MM:** Writers should have a background in writ-

*Chess Life Kids Magazine...continued*

ing! I ask new writers to send at least three writing samples or links to their work to see if they might be a good fit for our magazine. Our magazine focuses on chess, of course, so most of our articles are rooted in tournament reports, game analysis, and the likes. That being said, writers don't necessarily have to be serious chess players if they have a story angle that would appeal to our audience. While having a basic understanding of chess and chess culture is preferable, it's not a deal-breaker if the story is right.

**SB:** What is the best way for writers to submit to your magazine, and what is your word count?

**MM:** Writers can email me at [mmatthews@uschess.org](mailto:mmatthews@uschess.org) with their story ideas, resume, and writing portfolio. Word counts vary depending on the article and the space allocated for it.

**SB:** How do you respond to writers' submissions, and how long does it generally take for you to respond back?

**MM:** I usually respond by email the next day. If I am in deadline mode, I may take a little longer, but generally you'll hear from me within three days. Don't be afraid to send a follow-up email if too much time has passed, as sometimes messages go into spam.

**SB:** What kinds of rights do you buy from writers?

**MM:** We own the rights to the article, but depending on circumstances, it can be reprinted with our permission and attribution.

**SB:** How are authors who write for you paid?

**MM:** We pay our authors by the page, not the word. Our current rate is \$75 per page, and most articles run from 3-6 pages long. Writers can use 500-700 words per page as a ballpark number.

