


Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  October 2022



Picture Books Today: What's New, What's Hot.



Above the Slushpile
Submission Opportunity:



beach lane books

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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:

Two Agents Open Up to Submissions

Natalie Lakosil is an agent with the Irene Goodman Literary Agency (irenegoodman.com/natalie-lakosil) and has recently become open to new queries. Across all age groups she is prioritizing projects by and about BIPOC and underrepresented voices. Within that, she's particularly interested in projects with intersectionality, trans and disability representation, and anything by Native, First Nations and Indigenous authors. She particularly wants stories where where identity isn't the focus.

For picture books, she likes short-texted (500 words or less), emotionally-resonant, quirky or character-driven books that are emotionally resonant. Loves books with humor, strong voices, strong characters, and texts with fun, clever and unexpected twists at the end. Open to rhyme executed well, author/illustrator and text-only. Also looking for picture book biographies and STEM topics.

In chapter books and middle grade, seeking funny, heartfelt action-adventure ideally with some magic or fantastical elements. Wants commercial plots with big hooks.

In young adult, rom/coms with fresh, strong hooks and rich, atmospheric writing steeped in culture. Also looking for magical elements, as well as dark, gothic horror.

Graphic novels for all ages are also of interest, both fiction and nonfiction.

Submit query and sample pages at <https://querymanager.com/query/natlak> Responds in 6-8 weeks if interested in seeing more of your work.

Maria Vicente is Senior Agent at P.S. Literary Agency (psliterary.com/). She represents all levels of children's books. She's currently looking for picture books (from author/illustrators only) that have a literary feel, as well as picture book nonfiction that is not a biography, and folklore/cultural traditions/history. Accepting all genres of middle grade, especially fantasy, horror, realistic stories with literary prose, and high-concept series for both middle grade and chapter book audiences. In young adult, she enjoys contemporary, magical realism, horror, mystery, thriller, and light fantasy, as well as literary prose combined with a strong voice and high concept. Also seeking graphic novels (from author/illustrators) for all ages.

Your submission should consist of an introductory paragraph (include the title and category of your work, an estimated word count and a brief, general introduction); a one-paragraph synopsis; and a final paragraph with your bio. Paste the first ten pages of text into the body of the email. If your work is illustrated, include a link to your online portfolio or sample art. Address the query to Maria Vicente and send to query@psliterary.com. Responds in 4-6 weeks if interested in seeing more of your manuscript.

Call for Reviewers

Help get diverse books into the hands of the kids that need them! Sign up to be a book reviewer with Multicultural Children's Book Day and receive a FREE diverse children's book. Join their celebration of diversity in children's literature on Jan. 26, 2023, and help make sure all kids have access to multicultural books. Sign up here: <https://multiculturalchildrensbook-day.reviews/>

Multicultural Children's Book Day is a non-profit whose mission is to dramatically increase access to diverse children's books. To date, Multicultural Children's Book Day, along with literacy partners, authors, and publishers, has donated over 10,800 books to parents, teachers, and librarians. These books provide children with mirrors that showcase the wonder of their own lives and windows to show them the wonder of the lives of others.

Two Magazines for Young Children Accepting Submissions

Ladybug, a literary magazine for young children ages 3-6, features original stories, poetry, nonfiction, and activities. In the content, editors look for clear and beautiful language, a sense of joy and wonder, and a genuinely childlike point of view. Of particular interest are stories that explore themes of identity (gender, race and ethnicity, neighborhoods, beliefs and traditions); citizenship and global cultures; scientific and technological exploration; and the creative spirit.

General submissions are open. **Fiction** (up to 800 words, but can be significantly shorter) that includes contemporary stories, original retellings of folk and fairy tales, and funny pieces with human characters or anthropomorphic animals. City settings and stories that take place outside the United States are especially welcome, as well as subject matter that appeals to both boys and girls); **Rebus Stories** (up to 200 words); **Poetry** (up to 20 lines) that explores young children's daily lives and emotions; **Nonfiction** (up to 400 words) that explores interesting places in a young child's world (such as the library and the post office), different cultures, nature, and science. These articles can be straight nonfiction, or they may include story elements, such as a fictional child narrator; **Activities and Games** including unusual and imaginative activities, riddles, games, and crafts (see past issues for examples); **Original Songs** that are lively and interesting, yet simple and short enough for a young child to sing or play on a keyboard with help from a caregiver with some musical background (see past issues for examples—may be submitted as a PDF).

Before submitting, be sure to familiarize read several back issues of *Ladybug*. (Sample copies are available for viewing at the Cricket Media Store or at your library.) Submit at <https://bit.ly/LadybugSubmissions> Allow 3-6 months response time.

Humpty Dumpty is a magazine for ages 2-6. Part of the Children's Better Health Institute, *Humpty Dumpty* is always in need of high-quality stories, articles, and activities with a broad health and fitness focus that shows kids living a healthy lifestyle that is incorporated into the story or article. The material should start at a basic reading/comprehension level but include a sprinkling of more advanced information. Stories should appeal to a broad audience of boys and girls located across the United States and beyond. Seasonal material must be sent at least 8 months in advance. Study current issues before submitting. Libraries carry *Humpty Dumpty*, or request sample copies by writing to U.S. Kids, PO Box 88928, Indianapolis, IN 46208.

Looking for **Fiction** (450 words or less); **Build-a-Book** (short mini-stories of 70-125 words. These should be positive and lighthearted; often humorous. Characters can be children or animals. Welcomes material that deals with kindness, love, good manners, friendship, holidays, and seasons); **Poetry** (4-12 lines); **Crafts** (250 words or less that young children can make with a bit of adult help. Crafts can celebrate holidays or seasons. Materials should be inexpensive and easy to obtain. Include easy-to-understand steps and directions and, if possible, include a photo of the finished craft.) Submit short cover letter and manuscript pasted into the email to humptydumpty@uskidsmags.com. Responds within 2 months if interested.

Educational Publisher Looking for Work-for-Hire Authors and Illustrators

Capstone is an independent, family owned, children's publisher creating educational content for children from preschool through middle school. The publisher is currently closed to unsolicited submissions, but is seeking new authors and illustrators interested in work-for-hire assignments. If you are interested in writing or illustrating work, first familiarize yourself with what Capstone publishes at www.capstonepub.com/. Open to working with authors and illustrators at all experience levels.

Work-for-Hire Authors, please include the following: Cover letter in the body of your email; previous publishing credits; writing sample; topics of interest for writing assignments; your contact information, including telephone number. Email to authors@capstonepub.com.

Work-for-Hire Illustrators, please include the following: Cover letter in the body of your email; link to your website; 3-4 illustrations that showcase your work; previous publishing credits, if available; your contact information, including telephone number. Email to il.sub@coughlancompanies.com.

Due to the high volume of submissions, Capstone will respond only if your submission meets their needs.

Picture Book Overview 2022

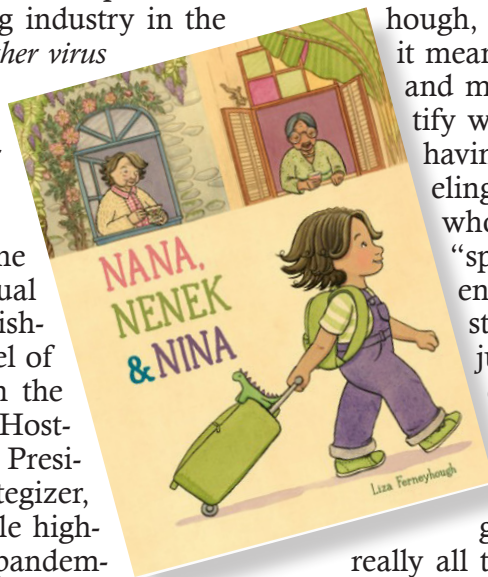
by PJ McIlvaine

The US Postal Office has that famous motto: *Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.* Well, one could slightly tweak that phrase to apply to the state of the publishing industry in the wake of the Covid pandemic: *Neither virus nor Zoom nor quarantine nor vaccinations stays authors, editors, and publishers from the swift completion of their appointed duties.*

Because that, in a nutshell, was one of the takeaways at the recent virtual US Book Show (sponsored by Publishers Weekly) from an esteemed panel of editors discussing picture books in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. Hosted by Libby Morse, a Senior Vice President at Lipman-Hearn, brand strategist, and kid-lit journalist, the roundtable highlighted a number of upcoming “pandemic” picture books that were either acquired or written during a time frame that was filled with doubt, fear, rumor, and not a small amount of chaos.

While all of the books discussed broached a variety of nonfiction (a biography of iconic author Toni Morrison) and fiction (sibling relationships) along with different styles of illustrations, one thing was made clear: despite the challenges that children, parents, and educators are facing in these uncertain and troubled times, picture books reflecting their cultures, realities, and traditions are needed more than ever. Like today’s readers, the books spotlighted couldn’t be shoehorned into one category, and the editors all spoke passionately and eloquently.

Rosie Ahmed, an associate editor with Dial Books for Young Readers (a division of Penguin), admitted that while she wasn’t the acquiring editor of *Nana, Nenek & Nina* by author/illustrator Liza Ferneyhough, she “loved” the “fresh take on what it means to grow up biracial or multiracial and multicultural.” She could easily identify with the book’s “unique element” of having the central character of Nina traveling overseas to visit her grandmothers, who live in different countries, in a lively “spot the difference” book which is “so engrossing to young readers.” Ahmed stressed the importance of Nina not just being “half this and half that” culturally but a “whole girl” in a “natural and organic,” relatable way. “Even though there are so many cultural, location, and language differences on each visit there’s really all the important stuff like the love between family members and the fun and the laughter and all that just remains the same in both places.”



For Luisa Beguiristain, an editor for Roaring Brook Press (an imprint of Macmillan Books), *The Coquies Still Sing* written by debut author Karina González and illustrated by Krystal Quiles, a story about “home, community, and hope” inspired by the rebuilding of Puerto Rico following the catastrophic Hurricane Maria in 2017. The material had touched Beguiristain on a deeply personal level, being a native Puerto Rican who was in Manhattan when Maria tore through the island. Beguiristain related how she had “cried” when reading the book for the first time. “I felt that the book perfectly captured all of the emotions that went into those events. In my case, I didn’t hear from my parents for a week after

US Book Show 2022...continued

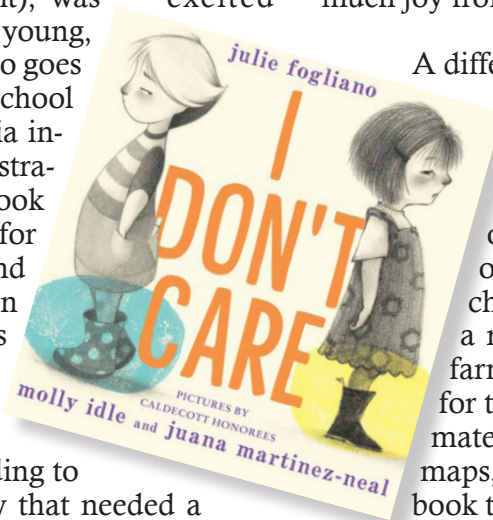
the hurricane had made its destructive land-fall, and that was something that we were able to really tap into while working on this book.” As damaging as the hurricane was, “there’s always a light at the end of the tunnel, but that tunnel can sometimes get very, very dark with family, with friends, with your community, yet we’re able to come out from almost anything. And I just want people to be inspired by that.” It was also important that the book include “amazing back matter” about the shared history between the two countries.



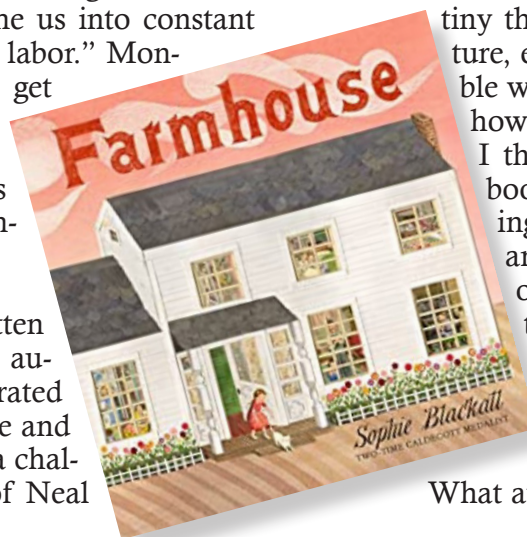
Porter Books at Holiday House (Penguin Random House) that gave him pause even without the additional stress of a pandemic: having two illustrators who are best friends in real life working together on a project about the ups and downs between two BFFs. “I was a little uncertain about how this would work with two illustrators working on a single text, but it turned out to be a joy for all concerned.” Porter marveled that the project “was a true collaboration” in every sense of the word. “I think the reader would enjoy the elegant rhyming of Julie’s text and the fact that the illustrations are perfectly seamless. It makes the book a truly special reading experience. I really hope that readers will enjoy the experiences of these two best friends through thick and thin and take as much joy from the book as we had creating it.”

Sydnee Monday, an associate editor at Kokila (a Penguin Young Readers imprint), was excited about *Sam’s Super Seats*, about a young, Black girl with cerebral palsy who goes out with her besties for back-to-school shopping written by social media influencer Keah Brown with illustrations by Sharee Miller. The book focuses on an important topic for the disabled: the need to rest and how difficult it can be to rest in one’s body in a public setting. As Monday explained, the author addressed her “experiences with shame as a young, disabled Black girl” and also “needing to be in a relationship to her body that needed a little bit more rest.” While the book “is filled with joy and really cute outfits, it also destigmatizes rest which I think is a message we could all use right now. We all feel capitalism trying to shame us into constant contribution, constant work, and labor.” Monday hoped that the book would get readers “thinking about rest in a different way” and “illuminates some things for young readers who are thinking about rest, community, and care.”

The picture book *I Don’t Care*, written by New York Times best-selling author Julie Fogliano and co-illustrated by Caldecott Honorees Molly Idle and Juana Martinez-Neal, presented a challenge for publisher Neal Porter of Neal



A different set of challenges faced Susan Rich, an editor at large with Little, Brown Books for Young Readers in *Farmhouse* by two-time Caldecott Medalist author/illustrator Sophie Blackall, based on a real family and an actual farmhouse on an old dairy farm that Blackall purchased with the intent of turning it into a retreat for children’s book creators. The farmhouse was in deplorable condition, but for the book, Blackall “gathered all kinds of materials, wallpaper, curtains, fabric, paper maps, books” and used those materials in the book to create a doll house effect to “celebrate a storied place.” As Rich pointed out, this was a “Herculean effort” by Blackall who was meticulous with “all of the detailed painting, the cutting out of tiny things” so that “each piece of furniture, each character, each plate on the table was its own piece of art.” And that is how “real history turns into story. And I think that is something of what the book offers to readers, that we are living our lives, creating our own stories and that our stories will live on and on and on” and that it’s an “invitation to think about one’s own family history and to talk about the places where we’re laying down our own histories.”

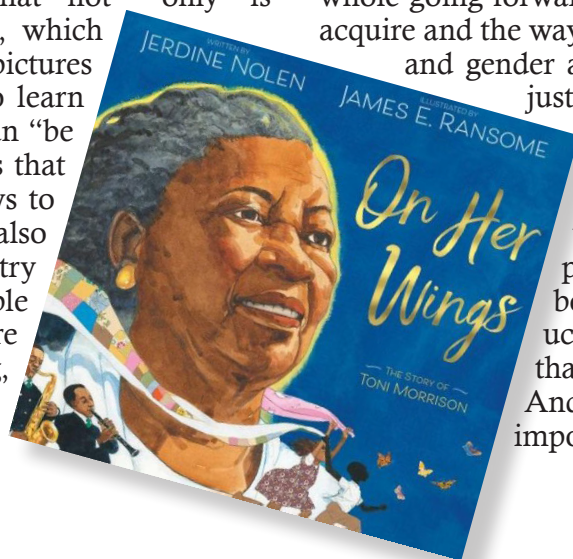
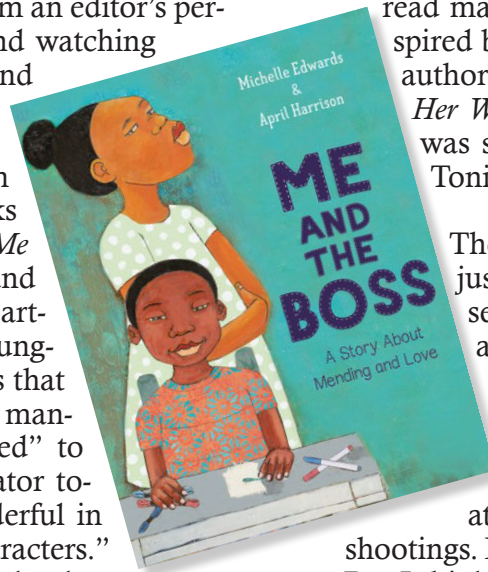


What attracted to Victoria Rock, Founding

US Book Show...continued

Children's Publisher and Editor-at-large at Chronicle books to *Like* by best-selling author Annie Barrows and Pura Belpré Honor Award recipient Leo Espinosa was the author's humorous take on "a perennial message about how humans are very much alike in spite of what might seem like differences, but [Annie] has a particular spin on it that I think will make it stand out that will really appeal to kids. And that will get kids thinking both about how they're like non-human things and animals in the world, but also what makes them human and what makes them connected to other humans" and "or that they might be a different gender or a different color or speak a different language, but that I am fundamentally, very much like them and they are like me." From an editor's perspective, Rock loved sitting back and watching "two masters coming together" and "watch them weave their magic."

"Wonderful voice" is what drew Ann Schwartz of Ann Schwartz Books (an imprint of Random House) to *Me and the Boss* by Michelle Edwards and illustrated by April Harrison, a heartwarming story about older and younger siblings and all the complications that go with it. When she was sent the manuscript, she "immediately responded" to it, and matched author and illustrator together as they were "both so wonderful in capturing relationships between characters." What makes this particular picture book so unique, in Schwartz's voice, is that "not only is this about sibling relationships, which is so central to it," but it also pictures a little boy who badly wants to learn how to sew so his older sister can "be proud of him." Schwartz hopes that the book will inspire young boys to master sewing, but that it will also empower and inspire readers "to try something that they weren't able to do before. They can persevere and keep trying to do something, whether it's learning how to ride a bicycle or learning to sew, or learning to read anything that has given them trouble."



For Paula Wiseman, publisher of Paula Wiseman Books (an imprint of Simon and Schuster), there was never any doubt in her that mind that she would publish a new biography of the great author Toni Morrison, whom Wiseman considers a personal hero in addition to working on three picture books with the acclaimed author. "Morrison changed us in our world, and her work, of course, is groundbreaking. It's as relevant today as when it was first written" and "her legacy lives on and she needs to be better known." The wheels were set in motion when illustrator James R. Ransome called Wiseman shortly after Morrison's passing in 2019 and informed her that he wanted to do a biography. Jerdine Nolen came on board, who re-read many of Morrison's books and was inspired by her "poetic words" to capture the author's early life, legacy, and essence in *On Her Wings: The Story of Toni Morrison*. "It was such a privilege and honor to know Toni and to work with her."

The editors related that they are still adjusting to a post-pandemic world, but several expressed being more deliberate and intentional. As Ahmed put it, "kids are dealing with so much in a way that I don't know if they were even a few years ago, as far as the pandemic and book banning and attacks on trans kids' rights and school shootings. It's a really anxious time for kids right now. But I think we need to be more thoughtful as a whole going forward and with all the books that we acquire and the ways that race and sexuality intersect and gender and climate justice and disability justice and, you know, holding adults accountable."

Perhaps Rich said it best: "Given the work that we do, I think we probably all have some faith in a book's power to connect and to educate and to show us different ways that the world has been and can be. And I'm thinking that books are more important than ever."

Take Your BEGINNING to the

NEXT LEVEL

by Jane McBride

Any writer who has been writing for more than a minute knows the importance of strong beginnings. We know to start with a theme, to start in the middle of the action, to use strong language, to raise questions, to raise the stakes, and to keep the emotions at a fever pitch. But did you know that there are levels for each of these guidelines? It's okay if you want to take them only to the first level, but how high can you go? Don't you want to find out?

Let's take a look at some of these imperatives for writing great beginnings and see how we can come up with ways to knock them out of the park.

Start with a theme in mind. Identifying your theme is vital in penning a can't-put-down-able book. How do you take it to the next level? Try asking yourself why you want to write this book. Here, you'll discover not only what your theme is but why it is important to you. Once you've established that, then you can strengthen that theme. Let's make up a story about eleven-year-old Jenna who is being bullied by two other girls in her middle school. Here's the unenhanced theme: bullying is bad and can be stopped only when you stand up for yourself. But what makes this theme important to you? Way back in the dark ages when I was in junior high (we called middle school junior high then), I was bullied at school, physically and emotionally. One girl in particular terrified me until I was afraid to go out on the playground. There was no help to be had. Bullying wasn't understood then, and

the most you could hope for in a teacher were the words "suck it up." So I spent a lot of time in the girls' bathroom, hiding and trying not to cry. This is why the subject and theme are important to me. When I saw my sweet teenage granddaughter bullied at church (really, church of all places), I talked with my daughter about how we as a family could address this. Eventually, my daughter talked with church leaders and her daughter got some relief. How can we show that through Jenna's story? What if Jenna sees these same two girls bullying another girl, one who had learning and physical disabilities? All of a sudden, Jenna's problem is magnified in that she sees what the bullying is doing to this girl. Jenna doesn't want that for herself or for the other girl. She takes a stand, stating by her actions that bullying hurts everyone, not just the bullied girls but those who are doing the bullying.

Start in the middle of the action, or *media res*. We all know what this means. Don't fill the important pages at the beginning of the book with a lot of backstory. Don't treat that valuable real estate as a dumping ground. To "up" the advice of starting in the middle of the action, understand why you've chosen this particular action to use in the opening paragraphs or pages. What about it stands out? In the above story about Jenna, it would be natural to start when she is being bullied by the other two girls. But is there a better place? Sometimes the most obvious answer is not the best one. Could we start with Jenna hiding in the girls' restroom, trying

to gather up her courage to go out and face others in her class? Could she be holding back tears as much as she could, only to find them flooding her eyes? Could she be holding her breath when a girl comes in to use the restroom? The emotional stakes are high in such a scene and could start the book with a heart-wrenching scene that would hook the reader immediately. If we didn't start there, perhaps we could start with Jenna finding posts about her on Facebook and other social media sites calling her cruel names and telling lies about her family.

Use strong but accessible language. What do I mean here by strong language? Am I suggesting obscenities? No. What I am suggesting is to use the very best words to describe your characters, to showcase your action, to write riveting dialogue. What if you've already done this? Is it enough? Not if you want to take this to the next level. Consider using figures of speech, such as alliteration, lyrical prose, or, its opposite, stand-alone statements that cause the reader to sit up and take notice. Don't be satisfied by ho-hum sentences. Write, then rewrite them, until they are as strong as possible. Then go back and do it again.

Raise a question that needs answering. Who doesn't love a question, especially one that implies a mystery? The straight-forward approach of posing a question is fine, but could we make it more compelling by infusing the question with consequences that affect not only the main character but those closest to her. In Jenna's story, we could ask "Can Jenna keep going to school after the mean girls' latest prank or does she give up and ask her parents that she be allowed to do online school?" That's a great question, but what if the question involves more than Jenna and attacks her family? What about this question: "Could Jenna turn the bullying around when she discovers that her little brother, who has autism, is now the butt of the girls' cruel remarks?" Do you see how this raises the stakes and gives the reader another reason to root for

Jenna?

Raise the stakes. In the above paragraph, we talk briefly about raising the stakes. What exactly does "raising the stakes" mean? Of course, we know that raising the stakes raises the conflicts as well. If the bullies take out their meanness on Jenna's little brother, Jenna automatically keeps fighting. You know how it is: you may be able to put up with intolerable behavior directed at you, but let someone attack your family or friends, and you become ferocious. Now Jenna must defend the other girl who is being attacked but her little brother, indeed, her whole family, as well. Things just got a lot more serious.

Keep the emotions high. We know that an unemotional story is a flat one and will probably never be published. But if, by some chance it is, it will probably not garner the author return readers. How do you turn up the emotional heat even more than you believed possible? We know to "show, not tell." Take this a step further and use visceral words. Let readers see Jenna's stress by showing her physiological responses. Has she cried so much that she can't catch her breath and fears she will pass out? Does she dig her nails into her palms so hard that her hands start bleeding?

IN CONCLUSION

Go back to the items on our list. Do you believe you've done all you can do? Go through them once more and see if there's anything you can add (or subtract) to make your story shine: know why you're writing this story, start with un-put-down-able action, use strong language, raise a question that won't be answered easily, raise the stakes, and keep the emotions high.

DANIELLE COLLINS



beach lane books

PAULA WISEMAN BOOKS

Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing

interview by Lynne Marie

This month we are very pleased to feature Danielle Collins, Editorial Assistant at Beach Lane Books and Paula Wiseman Books, two imprints of Simon & Schuster. She began her literary career as an intern for the editorial departments of Sourcebooks and Yale University Press, and joined Simon & Schuster in November, 2020. She has recently begun building her own list!

LYNNE MARIE: Welcome, Danielle! Please tell us a little bit about yourself and what drew you to the world of children's literature.

DANIELLE COLLINS: Thank you so much for having me! Well, I grew up a big bookworm, as I'm sure most of us did, and ended up studying English Literature in college, as I'm sure lots of us did as well! I latched onto the idea of working in publishing pretty early on. I couldn't imagine a better career than helping to bring new books into the world. My interest in children's literature stemmed from being involved in a few literacy-oriented organizations where I got to work with elementary schoolers on their reading comprehension and writing skills. Spending time reading with the students every week and seeing the spark when they connected with a book really brought me back to my own childhood and the books that made me love reading. I knew that I wanted to be a part of creating books that would connect with a whole new genera-



tion of young readers.

LM: Describe the process of bringing a book you love to acquisitions. Are there many steps to this? Does marketing weigh in? Do you need to make up an estimated profit and loss statement?

DC: It can vary project to project, but one of the perks of working on small editorial teams (both Beach Lane Books and Paula Wiseman Books are just three people each, myself included) is that our acquisitions process is very intimate and collaborative. If I receive a submission I love, the first step is to share it with one of my editorial teams for discussion and feedback. Then we decide on next steps as a group, which may involve getting some input from the Marketing and Sales teams, and often involves whipping up a P&L, but it really does depend on the specific circumstances of each project. If, after that feedback and consideration, everyone is loving the project and thinks it will be a valuable addition to the imprint's list, then we'll move forward with the acquisition.

LM: When you consider a project, do you view it in terms of potential hooks and markets, or does another department do that? How many different hooks would you like to see? Please explain.

DC: I tend to start small and then think bigger

Danielle Collins...continued

and broader. The first question is simply, do I love this project? Because of course I need to feel really strongly about the work in question if I'm going to make others fall in love with it as well. Then I ask, who else will love this project? I always think about which kids are going to want to pick up a book like this, and hopefully want to read it over and over again, since that's the end-goal audience. If I can imagine the readership for the project, then I need to think about the steps along the way to get it into their hands. Which means, will parents and caregivers want to read this to their kids? Will educators want it in their classrooms? Will librarians want it for their collections? And that's really where the hooks and markets come into play. Because if caregivers and educators and librarians already have a dozen books like this, will they want or need another? Is this book going to add something different or special? It's difficult to break things down quantitatively, but I bet a lot of children's book folks are visual thinkers, so I like to think about it visually: What gap on the shelf in a home or a classroom or a library, or all of the above, is this book going to fill?

If I can see a project filling that gap and decide to pursue it, then I'll have ongoing discussions covering similar questions with my editorial teams and potentially other departments as well. But I want to be certain I've given it thorough consideration on my own first so that when I share something I love, I'm ready to back it up.

LM: I see you are a list-maker – as a fellow list-maker, I would like to know how this informs your process as far as acquisition and/or revision.

DC: Indeed I am—I live out of my notebook! In terms of acquisition, list-making helps me stay organized with my submissions, but it also helps me to think of my acquisitions in terms of my personal “list.” As a lover of lists, that's always been one of my favorite publishing terms—that we call houses' and imprints' and editors' collection of published works “lists”! So, when I'm thinking about what I'd like to acquire, I want to make sure each project I bring on is contributing to a well-rounded list for myself, and for the imprints I'm a part of. That

means looking for projects that add a unique perspective to the mix, but also fit with the overall aspirations and values I have as an editor, and that BLB and PWB have as imprints.

In terms of revision, I am all about sharing lists. Most of the authors I work with have probably received a “list” from me at some point—though a much more polished version than the ones living in my personal notebook, and probably in paragraphs instead of bullets. When embarking on a revision, either for a revise & resubmit on a submission or for an acquired project, I start with a list for myself of the main areas I'd like to address. Then I often share that list in a more developed form in an editorial letter for the author. That way we all have the main points written out for us to reference as the revision proceeds. Of course the revision process is always fluid and should evolve, but I like to have that initial list on-hand in case we ever need to refer back to the key points.

LM: How would you describe your editorial style?

DC: I often say that I'm looking for stories that inspire curiosity, and I like to think that my editorial style encompasses that same value. If I've taken something on as a revision or an acquisition, it's because I'm inherently curious about the project. I want to know more about the creator's vision and inspiration. I'm curious to discover where the project started and I'm curious to find out where the editorial path might take us. Often, the former informs the latter—finding out the inspiration and backstory helps to identify the core of the story and inherent goals, which can serve as a guide for where to go next. And I like to approach my edits from a place of curiosity: What is this saying, how could it say it better, what questions might readers have, and so on. One of my favorite parts of my job is that I'm constantly learning. I learn something from every submission I read, and I learn from every step of the editorial process for the books I acquire or work on. So, when editing, I try my best to lead with questions and encourage lots of back-and-forth dialogue. I want to ask, never dictate. If I've taken on a project it's because I believe the creator and I share a

Danielle Collins...continued

vision, so I always come back to that central vision and shared curiosity. So, I guess I'd say my editorial style is being constantly curious!

LM: I see from Publisher's Marketplace that you have acquired *Sourgrass* by Hope Lim. What drew you to this project?

DC: First and foremost, Hope's writing! She has an inspired way with words where a single concise sentence can make you feel an entire range of emotions, and experience each one of those emotions fully and deeply. There are quite a few lines in *Sourgrass* that made me stop in my tracks while reading to soak in all of those feelings, which is always a great sign with a manuscript. The other major component that sparked my interest is the story's subject matter: It's about two friends who have to navigate their changing friendship dynamics when one of them moves away. I moved around quite a bit in my own childhood, so that immediately struck a chord. Then, what really sold me was the fact that the story is told from the perspective of the friend who doesn't move away, but is left behind. I've read a lot of beautiful moving-related stories, but they often tell the story of the person who is doing the leaving. And that was my experience as a kid as well—I was always the one moving away. *Sourgrass* gives this incredibly touching insight into what it's like to be the one who is left behind, and what that feels like, and how to deal with those feelings, with the lightest of touches. And you pair all of that with the stunning and oh-so-poignant sketches I've seen from our fabulous artist, Shahrzad Maydani, and I know it's going to be something truly special!

LM: You've also acquired Robyn McGrath's *A Mind of Her Own: The Story of Mystery Writer Agatha Christie*. What about this project got your attention?

DC: This was actually my very first acquisition, so it has a special place in my heart. Once again, what first drew me to the project was Robyn's beautiful writing. She has cultivated a voice for Agatha that feels deeply truthful and accessible, and it makes her come alive on the page. From the first few lines of the story I felt like I was in Agatha's head, and that's

a real feat to accomplish. As the story progressed, I came to understand Agatha and her feelings even better, so by the end I felt like I knew her intimately. As we all know there are a lot of picture book biographies on the market, but this one stood out to me right away because Robyn has captured Agatha's voice so perfectly. There's also a really intriguing air of mystery running through the manuscript, which is of course the perfect match for the subject matter. I always loved mysteries as a kid, so I could immediately imagine young readers connecting with that element of the story. And I could imagine them relating to another aspect of Agatha's story: She struggled with learning to write as a child, and writing was something she continued to struggle with well into adulthood. As I mentioned earlier, part of the reason I came to the field of children's literature was because of my experiences working with elementary schoolers on their reading and writing skills. I thought about how valuable it would be for those students to see a story about a girl who had to work really, really hard to learn to write and go on to become one of the most acclaimed and beloved writers of all time. It didn't come easy to her, but Agatha kept at it because of her passion, and that's the kind of story I want to end up in kids' hands.

LM: How did these writers come to you? What is your submission policy?

DC: Since those were two of my earlier acquisitions, they actually came in as submissions to Ailyn Johnston at Beach Lane, and she shared them with me thinking I might connect with them—and she was right! Some of my more recent acquisitions have come from submissions directly to me, but that's the beauty of how collaborative our teams are: we're always sharing things with one another. My submission policy is agented submissions only, in keeping with S&S's general policy, except in special cases like SCBWI conferences or opportunities like this! It's always a treat to see what wonderful new stories land in my inbox.

LM: It's refreshing that you are drawn to both factual and fantastical stories. What stories from your childhood may have inspired this passion, and what

Danielle Collins...continued

books do you feel are good examples of this in today's market.

DC: That's partly my fun way of saying that I acquire both fiction and nonfiction, but also that I'm interested in books that blur those lines. Some of my favorite fictional works are those that blend fiction and fantasy with fact and reality. Vice versa, some of my favorite works of nonfiction are those that bring in an element of mysticism or surrealism or adventure—something that makes the factual feel magical. And that was true when I was a child as well. I loved the feeling of finishing a book that felt like a fictional adventure and discovering, wait, that whole thing was a true story? Some of my other favorite childhood books were mythological or fairy tale retellings, like the Percy Jackson and Sisters Grimm series. Although they were completely fictional, I learned a whole lot about classic texts and stories from them.

In today's market, one of my absolute favorite picture books that blends fact and fantasy is *What Miss Mitchell Saw*, written by Hayley Barrett and illustrated by Diana Sudyka. It's a biography, and all of the information is factual, but Hayley's gorgeous writing paired with Diana's whimsical artwork makes the true story feel magical. As a reader, you feel like Miss Mitchell is conversing with the stars and even joining them in outer space. Another favorite genre-defying book of mine for an older age group is *Everything Sad Is Untrue* by Daniel Nayeri. That book is a masterpiece. The author uses history and myths and legends to tell the true story of his childhood, and blends it all together in a way that is surprising and thought-provoking and satisfying. It's part memoir, part mythological retelling, part family history, and all utterly captivating.

LM: Name a book that you wish you could have acquired for your list and explain why.

DC: Gosh, there are so many—I'm filled with editor envy, in the best way! There are countless editors whose lists I admire. I'm going to cheat and name one picture book and one middle grade, and both have become modern classics in their own right, so

I'm sure I'm not alone in my envy.

For a picture book, *Julián Is a Mermaid*. I love everything about it. The art. The story. The message. It's one of those picture books that strikes the perfect balance between written and visual storytelling. It's a story about dressing up, and how freeing and empowering that can be. But it's also about identity and acceptance and self-love and familial support and gender expression and being your truest self. Just thinking about that book makes my heart feel warm and fuzzy—and that's the feeling I'm always looking for!

For middle grade, *When You Trap a Tiger*. It has all of my favorite middle grade ingredients. It has magic, it has mythology, it has sibling dynamics, it tackles heavy topics, it has intergenerational themes, it has complex friendships, and it even has a library as a central setting! The main character is discovering her identity and how it's wrapped up in family history and culture and life circumstances but is also something all her own, and that she has agency over. It approaches big questions with an accessible voice within the framework of an exciting adventure. And the writing is, of course, beyond gorgeous.

LM: Writing a book with heart is something many aspire to and not everything fulfills. Do you have any tips or recommendations to our readers on how to learn how to do this?

DC: That is an excellent question, especially because it's such a subjective question. So much of it comes down to the connection between the reader and the text, whether that reader is an agent or an editor or a young person picking up the book. My advice would be to start with writing something close to your own heart, then shape it for someone else's. I think anything an author writes is going to inherently have heart, because you're putting your heart into it while writing. But if you're looking for something to end up in the hands of a wider audience, you can't write for yourself alone. So, think about that final audience, and all the kids who might stumble upon your book, and what you can do to make your story have a broad enough appeal

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to connect with each of them.

To share a bit more specific advice from a craft perspective, I would say a lot of the books that I consider to have the most heart are written with a light touch. Which is to say, they aren't telling you as the reader what to think or feel. They aren't over-explaining or dictating or spelling it all out precisely. They're leaving things open-ended enough that readers can find something to connect to with their own unique perspectives.

LM: What genres are you currently looking for? Are there any topics in particular you would love to see, or any that you want to avoid? Please explain.

DC: I'm looking for fiction and nonfiction picture books and middle grade. My picture book taste tends to span the genre gambit, and for middle grade I'd say I'm most drawn to contemporary, lighter fantasy (i.e. somewhat grounded in the real world), and historical fiction. There are very few topics I avoid because you never know what is going to surprise you, and I like to be surprised! One area in particular that I would love to see more of is stories with queer themes and queer characters, especially if they're written from an intersectional perspective, in both picture books and middle grade. I'd also love to work on books with a bilingual element, since I'm a big linguistics nerd and enjoy learning new languages—and that's something I very much enjoyed when I was a kid as well.

LM: What are your thoughts on holiday-themed books? Are you looking for these? If so, how far out are these being published. For example, would you be working with books for 2024 or 2025? Please explain.

DC: I am definitely open to holiday-themed books if they are about holidays and celebrations that have been underrepresented in traditional publishing. And I would be looking for books that still have a strong story arc and emotional hook. Which is to say, not solely focused on the holiday itself, but on the people celebrating and what it means to them.

In terms of the publication schedule, we would

publish these kinds of stories like any other book, though of course try our best to have the book go on sale around the holiday date(s). I think that actually helps articulate my point about what I'm looking for: I wouldn't consider any holiday-related acquisitions as a "holiday book" per se. I would just see it as a story I love that happens to feature a holiday setting.

LM: What is a good rule of thumb for an aspiring writer to follow before deciding whether their manuscript is submission ready?

DC: Another great question, and the answer can of course be entirely dependent on the writer and their story. I'll start with two more practical suggestions for picture book writers. First, always read your story aloud. I often read submissions I'm seriously considering aloud to myself, so if you've already been doing that while writing & revising then you're a step ahead. Second, I like to suggest that authors paginate their manuscripts—just for themselves, not necessarily for the submission itself. I think paginating is a great way to ensure that your story is a good length, without relying on restrictive word counts, and that the manuscript lends itself to the physical picture book form. Are there potential page-turn moments? Moments for pausing? Is there a good balance of exposition, action, and resolution? Can you imagine illustrations taking the story to another level? Actually taking your text and laying it out across 32-40 or so pages can be a great exercise to answer those questions for yourself ahead of submitting.

On a more intangible level, I think a good sign that a manuscript is submission ready is if you feel like it can be better, but you're no longer entirely sure how. If you feel like you've done your due diligence with initial drafting and revising, which includes getting external feedback of some sort along the way, and you're ready for a new perspective to bring things to another level, then now might be the time. Because hopefully that's exactly what the right agent and/or editor is going to bring: a new perspective. You want things to be in solid shape, of course, but still be open and eager to grow.

Danielle Collins...continued

LM: What are you looking for in a cover letter?

DC: As a rule of thumb, I like cover letters to be short and sweet: Let the story do the talking! I usually like to see a short pitch/summary of just a few sentences, with maybe a comp or two (but only if it serves you). And then I appreciate a short bio from the creator, again just a few sentences, calling out key information about your background and maybe a personal touch if you're so inclined. If I'm interested in a project, it's nice to feel like I know a little bit about who the creator is as a person right off the bat.

LM: What is your approach to reading cover letters and manuscripts? Do you read the cover letter first? The first paragraph? What if the content doesn't grab you? Please share how important it is for that first paragraph and first page to make an impact and then to carry you all the way through to the end.

DC: I usually skim the cover letter first because I like to get a sense of the creator's vision for the project. If I'm interested in pursuing it, it will be important for us to share a vision, so I like to go in with at least a general sense of that. But, I say skim because I don't want to color my reading experience too much. It's a careful balance, and part of the reason I appreciate succinct cover letters that don't give too much away.

I always try to read as much as I possibly can for submissions, but the first few lines for a picture book or first few pages for a novel are incredibly important. I can often tell from those few lines or pages whether or not I connect with the writing and the voice. To give you a sense of that importance, I could quote the first few lines of all of my picture book acquisitions to you here and now from memory—that's how much they struck me and have stayed with me. One of the keystones of picture books is that we not only want young readers to pick up the book and read it, but we want them to pick it up and read it again and again and again. The same thing goes for me as an editor reading submissions. If I find myself wanting to come back to a submission and read it time and again, then my

interest will without a doubt be piqued.

Now, all that isn't to say that the first few lines need to be perfect, because nailing the start of a story is often a major part of the editing and revising process. It's just to say that you want those lines to be representative of your unique voice, your writing style, and the core of your story. Even if those first lines change down the road, we'll be sticking to that emotional and thematic blueprint that was present from the very start. If your story knows what it is, or at least knows what it wants to be, and I can see that end goal from the very beginning, that's a great sign that I've found something special.

Danielle Collins is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Danielle is acquiring for both Beach Lane Books and Paula Wiseman Books at Simon & Schuster, where she works on fiction and nonfiction picture books and middle grade. Danielle is drawn to both the factual and fantastical, or even a little bit of both, and she is passionate about stories that inspire curiosity and empathy in young readers. Please read the full interview with Danielle to learn more about what she's looking for.

Until October 31, 2022, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of a **fiction or nonfiction picture book or middle grade** manuscript via the online form at bit.ly/Oct2022ATSDanielleCollins. Danielle will read all pitches and respond to those she's interested in by December 31, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of December, consider it a pass.

---Please Read Before You Proceed---

For a detailed explanation of the Above the Slushpile submission form, as well as tips for writing your pitch, see cbclubhouse.com/clubhouse/slushpile-new/

To watch Laura's Kidlit Social interview about how to know when your manuscript is ready to submit, go to writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancingsocial70/

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.
- 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.

Author's Work Spans Magazines for Adults and Children

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

Multi-talented freelance writer, Jessica Kautz, (www.jessicakautz.com) writes for adults and children. In addition to her writing, she has also worked as a grade school teacher, a reporter, and a grocery store clerk, but her favorite job is being the mother of one very cool boy.

Her writing has been featured in *The Sun*, *Bust*, *High Five*, *Highlights*, *Wanderlust*, *the Vail Daily*, and the *Des Moines Register*, among others.

She graduated from the University of Colorado-Boulder. She earned a B.A. in Sociology, a B.S. in Journalism, and a M.A. in Social, Multicultural, and Bilingual Foundations of Education.

SHARON BLUMBERG: Please tell us a little bit about yourself, and what path brought you to your current career?

JESSICA KAUTZ: I grew up on a farm in rural Iowa where I happily filled my days with reading, writing, art and cats. I dreamed of being a professional writer one day, but my pragmatic Midwestern upbringing held me back from pursuing the creative writing I wanted to do as a career. So instead, when I went to college, I studied journalism. I soon discovered my shy nature was a poor match for the interviewing requirements of the job, so I eventually switched gears in my late 20s to become an elementary-school teacher, a career I adored. I quit teaching when my son was born and have been writing in one way or the other ever since. Miraculously, my days once again are filled with reading, writing, art and cats, as well as my incredible kid, and I couldn't be happier.

SB: What kinds of writings do you contribute to children's magazines?

JK: The majority of what I contribute is short fiction. But as memoir and personal essays are favorite genres of mine, it would not surprise anyone who knows me that most of my writing for children is based on fiction-

alized events from real life, too. My students, my son, my friends' kids, as well as my own childhood memories, are all fodder for my work.

SB: Do you ever aspire to illustrate along with your writings, since you are a talented artist?

JK: That's such a nice thing to say. Thank you! Illustrating my work for children is certainly a dream, although I don't see it happening any time soon. I've always approached art as a hobby and haven't been formally trained, but it's absolutely a bucket list item for the future. I'm in the process of teaching myself about how the illustration process in modern times works and the more I learn, the more I realize how unprepared I am for this ... yet. But it's definitely a goal for the future.

SB: Your writing for adults is largely memoir/personal essay/travel pieces. How do you make that switch in focus, tone and audience when writing for children? Did you learn anything from your writing for adults that helped you creating pieces for children's magazines?

JK: Making the switch between the styles of writing I do has always come naturally to me, which I think is because I write in the genres I love to read. Since I'm so familiar and comfortable with these styles, I can jump

right in. (Now, if I was asked to do technical or scientific writing, my answer would be much different!) I also have a trick of picturing someone in my life when I write my stories and essays. I imagine I'm talking "to" that one person through my writing and I believe it helps a more natural voice come out that fits each style best.

My writing for adults has absolutely helped me in writing for children, especially in structural ways. I've learned stories need to have a compelling lead that draws the reader in, use original and interesting language throughout, and wrap up with a satisfying conclusion. But what has influenced my stories equally as much is the work I did with children. I feel like I have a good sense of what



Jessica Kautz...continued

delights them, frustrates them, worries them, and amuses them. The combination of my work in the classroom and my work writing for adults has very naturally led to working in children's literature now. Those experiences have been invaluable.

SB: When writing magazine articles, do you do all your research first, and then query with your idea, or do you start with the query?

JK: For the type of writing I do, I don't need to do much research, so I write my story before I query. The most important thing in this area is to read the submission requirements carefully of the places you send your work and follow them precisely.

SB: Bilingual work is a talent and skill that is always in high demand. How does your educational background contribute to children's writing?

JK: It has influenced my work so much. I have been lucky enough to work at truly multicultural schools where I've taught children from every corner of the world. At the last school where I worked, we'd sing the birthday song in everyone's home language (well, among those who felt comfortable enough to participate) and there were usually around 10 different versions, which shows just how diverse my classroom was. I think this experience has both taught me how universal many things children go through are; they all want to laugh, feel accepted for who they are, and be safe. It has also taught me how to be sensitive to cultural differences and not take anything for granted as the "normal" way to do things. For example, even something most Americans would take for granted – like making eye contact – is not seen as respectful for children to do with their elders in some cultures, and can be a challenge for certain neurodivergent kids, as well. The most important thing for me as a teacher was to get to know, understand, and appreciate every one of my students for exactly who they were; and I hope to reach my young readers with this same sense of openness and acceptance, as well.



SB: Once you've broken into many of the high-profile magazines such as *Highlights* or *High Five*, does it become easier for future submissions, once you've connected with their editors?

JK: That's a great question, but I'm not sure. I submit the same way as everyone else (via the Submittable website); I definitely don't have a back channel to get my work on their desks. I would like to hope that the editors I've worked with more than once remember my name, but so far I feel like I'm an even playing field with everyone else.

SB: Is there anything else you'd like to say to authors who want to write for magazines?

JK: Have fun and have patience. This is not a quick process. Some editors have held onto my stories well over a year before I received a response and even once you have an acceptance, it can be another year or more (probably more) before your story is published. You also have to deal with a lot of rejection, which you absolutely can't take personally. I like to cheekily consider it as being a part of an elite club, a club comprised of those of us risk-takers and rebels who are brave enough to put ourselves out there. I also like to remind myself that no successful creative person has ever gotten where they were without a lot of rejections. It's all part of the work and you have to let it fuel you rather than deflate you.

My final piece of advice, which may sound a little scandalous, is that if you want to write professionally, you should at first let yourself do it badly. Truly! For me, this was the only way I've done anything hard and scary in my life – learn Spanish, get my master's degree, switch careers later in life, and, yes, writing, too. I think so often many people (or at least people like me) get frozen in wanting to do things "right" the first time. But letting go of that expectation has freed me into being more adventurous and daring in following my dreams. And letting yourself do things "badly" (which I promise won't be as bad as you think) is the first step to eventually doing something absolutely fabulous.



CHECKING IN WITH YOUR CHARACTERS AFTER THE FIRST DRAFT

by Jane McBride

Most of us know about interviewing characters at the beginning of a book. We ask them about their hopes and dreams. We ask them what is their place in the family constellation. We ask them if they live with both parents or if they live with only their father or their mother or maybe they live with their grandparents. We ask them if they're happy and, if not, why.

We want to know as much about our characters as possible. We want to know what makes them tick, what makes them afraid, what makes them happy.

One way to do this is to interview characters at after you've completed the first draft. Once they've gone through their trials and persecutions and have faced the obstacles that nearly kept them from reaching an all-important goal, they will probably have greater insights than they did at the beginning of the book, insights that will help us deepen the characterization. But they won't know these things about themselves until they (and you) have reached the end of the book.

Let's make up a story and find out what we can learn after the book is completed. Then we can take what we learn and go back and flesh out the character even more.

Twelve-year-old Wyatt saves his school from a band of marauding zombies, using only his wits and a courage honed by taking care of himself and his grandmother with whom he lives. What kind of answers would he give if we asked him the following:

QUESTION: I hear you saved your school from annihilation from zombies. How does that feel?

Wyatt: It feels great. At the same time, I feel a kind of a let-down because the crisis is over and now I don't know what to do with myself. I've always had to do

tough things, starting when my mother died when I was only four. My dad deserted me, and my grandma took me in. We sort of raised each other, and, now that she's older, I do my best to take care of her..

QUESTION: Was it really hard taking out the band of zombies?

Wyatt: It was harder than I ever thought anything could be. The zombies kept coming and coming. Nothing would stop them. Finally, I remembered an ancient prayer my grandmother taught me a long time ago. I crossed my arms over my chest and repeated it in my mind and then said it aloud. I said it again and again, each time louder. The zombies stopped in their tracks and seemed to wither away. They just ... like, you know ... melted into thin air.

QUESTION: Did anyone else help you?

Wyatt: A couple of the other kids tried to help. They did their best. So did a few teachers, but they didn't have the skills. Plus, they were really, really scared. I couldn't ask them to face the zombies.

QUESTION: What was the biggest lesson you learned from this?

Wyatt: That I can do anything I set my mind to. I just have to want it bad enough to do it and then not give up until it's done.

QUESTION: What do you think you did right? What, if anything, did you do wrong?

Wyatt: The biggest thing I did right was to believe in myself. If I had doubted I could do it, I would have

Checking In With Your Characters...continued

probably run away. What I did wrong was to not listen to my first judgment of the situation. If I had, I would have known what to do much sooner.

QUESTION: How would you do it differently now that you've had a chance to think on it?

Wyatt: Hey, man. Weren't you listening?] just told you.

QUESTION: Do you feel good about yourself?

Wyatt: What do you think? Sure I feel good about myself. But, mostly, I feel relieved that nobody in the school got hurt. If one of my friends or teachers had been hurt, I don't know that I could live with myself. Battling evil is my destiny. I was made to do this. My grandma told me it's in my genes. If anything comes at my school or home or church again, I know I can handle it.

What have we learned about Wyatt?

We learned that he has had to depend upon himself since he was a small child. That could have turned him into a whiner, wondering why his mother died and his father deserted him. Instead, it helped mold him into a strong, independent leader who could and would defeat the enemy.

In answering these questions, Wyatt reveals insights into himself and into the terrifying goal of taking out a band of zombies and thereby saving his school. Use these to give greater emotion and conflict to the book. What about your writing? Let's say you are penning a book about a 16-year-old girl, Jennifer, who faces down discrimination in her church because she stood up for her LGBTQ friend, Tracey. Jennifer and Tracey have been best friends for ten years, ever since they started first grade together. Now, Tracey finds that she isn't welcome when the church hires a new, more conservative preacher.

Let's break this interview into a series of steps, as we like to do in all of [CBI's Writing Blueprints](#):

STEP 1: Ask Jennifer what she felt when Tracey was excluded from all youth events because of her sexual orientation.

Jennifer tells you that she has belonged to this church all of her life and was ashamed of members who didn't welcome Tracey. Use Jennifer's answer to heighten her conflict at the beginning of the book when she knows she needs to stand up for Tracey but is sad about going against her church.

ACTION: Show Jennifer's confusion and angst in taking this step.

STEP 2: Ask Jennifer why she didn't hesitate to stand up for her friend.

Jennifer replies that Tracey would have done the same for her. Plus, it's just the right thing to do.

ACTION: Keep asking Jennifer questions, probing for more complete answers than you had at the beginning of the book. Dig deep. Don't let Jennifer get by with shallow answers. Go back to your story and use these deeper answers to flesh out Jennifer's character.

STEP 3: Check the turning points and midpoint of your book to see if you can strengthen them by including these additional insights.

ACTION: Re-read your manuscript and determine where you can find places that need more depth of feeling and internalization. Then swap these out for your newly minted knowledge of Jennifer and her motivations.

Will this be easy? Probably not. If you're like me, by the time you've finished your book, you are so invested in your characters that you don't want to cause them any more pain or fear than they've already endured. To make your book one that readers don't want to put down, though, you need to conduct this in-depth examination. But your job as the writer is to take the book to the next level, from being an enjoyable read to one that the readers can't put down. And isn't that what we all want?

Over the Moon with Debut Children's Author

natasha khan kazi

interview by PJ McIlvaine

A first-generation immigrant from Bangladesh, debut picture book author/2022 Highlights Foundation Muslim storyteller fellow Natasha Khan Kazi was told as a child by a school guidance counselor that she wouldn't be strong in English because it was her second language. Luckily for us, Kazi disregarded the counselor and aspired early on to write and illustrate children's books celebrating cultural and religious diversity. Her clever text and charming artwork in *Moon's Ramadan* (Harper Collins/Versify, February 2023) highlight how families all over the world celebrate a month of peace and goodwill in one of the most important and joyful holidays in the Muslim community. An expert at being a "new girl", Kazi now lives in California and is the blogger behind *IslamiMommy* where she shares ways to honor Islam through arts and crafts. Be sure to check out www.natashakhankazi.com and on social media.



PJ McILVAINE: You emigrated to America when you were five years old. What was that like for you, and how does that inform and inspire your writing? Were your parents supportive of your ambitions?

NATASHA KHAN KAZI: I started school as an ESL student. But as soon as I learned to read, I couldn't stop. By second grade, my teacher moved me to the advanced reading group. The characters I met in those chapter books — Margaret, Ann with an E, and Laura — taught me a beautiful and complex American culture, but the understanding was not mutual. The books I had access to did not relate

to my experience as a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant. I'm grateful to be telling the stories I needed as a child, and the stories my children need now. I had a late start, my parents were not supportive of me pursuing a career in writing or art. I don't blame them, as an immigrant, your singular focus is financial security. But thank goodness for nagging passions that don't go away.

PM: Did you always dream of being a writer? Did illustrations and art come later? What comes first for you, the story or the art?

NKK: Art was my first love. Every penny counted for our immigrant family, but I knew with glue, paper, and art supplies, whatever I could not afford, I could make. And as I got older, art was the first thing I felt truly good at. Another perk of being a part of an immigrant family, my dad took me to the library every week because everything inside was free! So when I was not making, I was reading. But I never dreamed of writing or illustrating because my family's American dream depended on financial stability. But it is never too late in life to dream. It took me 32 years after landing on New York's shores. Now, as a writer and artist, the story always comes first, the character and what they want. I will often see the pictures in my head, but I have to work out the problem and resolution on paper.

PM: What is your writing/art process like? How many drafts do you go through? Do you jot down ideas as they come or you, or do you wait for a big

Natasha Khan Kazi...continued

idea to sweep you away?

NKK: I keep a composition notebook at my desk for random ideas that pop into my head. They are never fully formed, but it's great to look back and see if there are connections between ideas. Every year, I participate in Tara Lazaar's Storystorm, which gives me an opportunity to reflect on everything I wrote down and then form them into more detailed pitches. I often write the pitch before I write the story so that I can gut-check that it has a hook. For me, if a picture book manuscript does not have a minimum of 10 drafts, it probably isn't ready.

PM: Career-wise, you've also developed platforms that celebrate cultural and religious diversity. How does this blend into your writing? What books would you like to see more of in the marketplace that reflects our diversity?

NKK: Cultural and religious diversity is an avenue for tolerance and empathy. And nurturing a generation full of empathy is my why. Everything points back to my why no matter what I create, whether it's a story or digital content. The more creators we have, the more stories we have, and the bigger we make the world for our kids.

PM: You have two picture books coming out in 2023-2024. What was the genesis of those particular books? How do you avoid being too preachy or didactic in your writing? What is the commonality in your writing, and what do you hope readers glean from it?

NKK: My 2023 debut, *Moon's Ramadan*, was first conceived in 2019. During Ramadan 2019, I spoke to my pre-schoolers' classroom about our special holiday. After school, I talked to my 4 and 3-year olds about additional traditions. And my 4-year-old

said, "This is interesting. You should have shared this with everyone!" I realized I had made the mistake of dumbing down the content for pre-schoolers. Small children are so smart! The desire to share more modern traditions and give my kids holiday magic is how *Moon's Ramadan* was born. My second book has not been announced yet, but the commonality is certainly special traditions and childhood joy.

PM: What was the submission process like? How did you keep yourself from going crazy waiting? What were you doing when you learned there was an offer on the table?

NKK: The submission process truly starts with preparing your work for submission. When my manuscript was submission ready, my agent wanted to include several spreads to show my range as an artist. I am humbled to say my agent called me rather quickly with an offer. I almost passed out because the editor was someone I greatly respected. I felt so much joy but had to

keep quiet. So I spend a lot of time in reflection and thanking the Creator.

PM: How many agents did you query before you got an offer of representation? What were you looking for in an agent? Is your agent a career agent or by the book? Do you run ideas by her? What if you disagree on a story?

NKK: I sent out 16 queries to agents and five submissions to editors. 389Literary, a student-run literary agency pop-up, sent my manuscript to 3-5 additional agents and editors. I only queried around Twitter pitch contests or professional workshops. I wanted to reach out to "warm contacts." In the end, I had 20 rejections, 5 requests for additional manuscripts, and 2 offers for representation. I am a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant, and my stories are rooted in my



Natasha Khan Kazi...continued

experience, so it was important for me to find an agent who represented marginalized authors and illustrators. When I met Tanusri (Prasanna of DeFiore & Company), I knew in my gut that she was a kindred spirit. If I weren't in the room, she would be able to represent my values and wishes. She is the first person I go to with story ideas.

PM: You're very savvy in social media, but many authors still find it offputting. Do you have any advice or tips for those who find putting themselves there challenging?

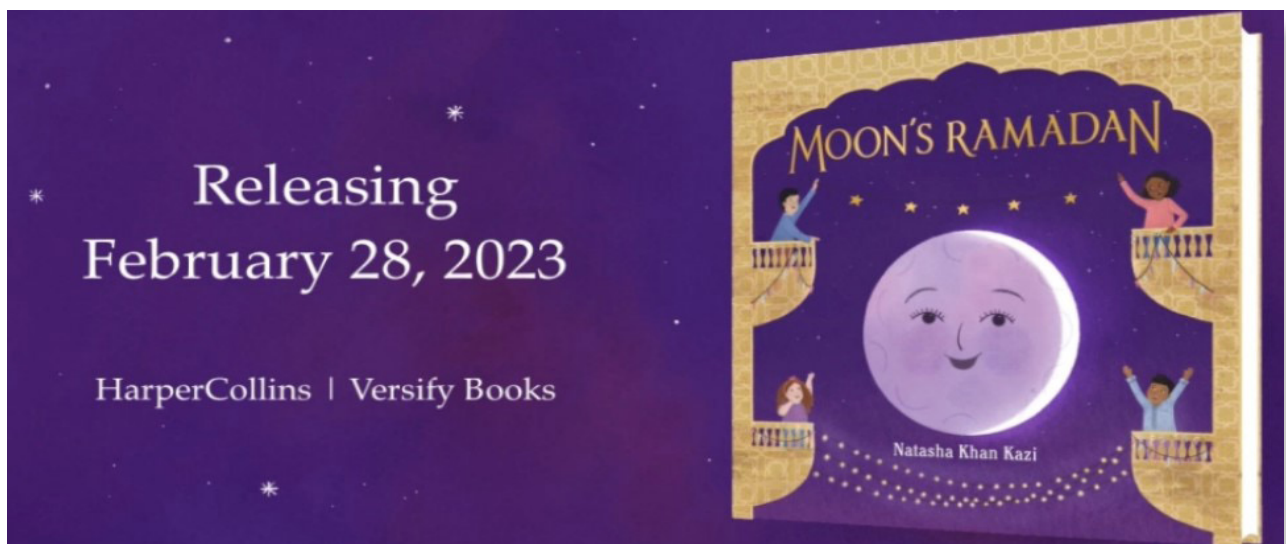
NKK: I built my career in social media marketing and have been doing it professionally since 2006. So I can confidently say that social media should have a warning label. It is detrimental to our productivity and, most importantly, our creativity. At the same time, there is no way around it. We need social media to market. I've always marketed products and brands, but marketing yourself is a whole new ballgame. It is hard for me to be present with my family if I view my life as content. To stay sane, I block my social media time and plot out when I will be posting content. I know I won't be a social media influencer due to my inconsistency, but that's OK with me.

PM: Do envision yourself writing in other genres? What are you currently working on?

NKK: I am currently working on book two with my publisher Versify/HarperKids. And I hope to be publishing more picture books in the future. As far as other genres, I have a middle-grade story I have to tell. So I have been doing some groundwork and reading broadly in the category.

PM: Of the states, you've lived in, which one was your favorite and least? And if you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?

NKK: Picking my favorite and least favorite state is like categorizing my family. Don't make me do it! Bangladesh, Texas, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and California, made me who I am. I am so grateful to have lived in different types of neighborhoods, from majority black to majority white. And to have the experience of rushing through a big city versus saying hello to every person I passed in my two-stoplight town. I think that's where my passion for diversity comes from, knowing that the world is bigger than any one place I lived. Though, if I could live anywhere in the world, I would pick where I am now, southern California, the weather is nice, the food is amazing, and there is so much natural beauty to explore.



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Shaping the Writer You Will be Post-Pandemic

by Jane McBride

Though Covid still exists, we are now learning to live with it and return, for the most part, to our pre-pandemic lives. But it's not always easy. If you're like me, you've faltered, may have doubted yourself, even questioned whether you could or should continue writing at all. We get it. We're all feeling our way to a new kind of living, a new kind of dressing (how many of us have pretty much lived in pajama pants over the last couple of years?), and, for the writers among us, a new kind of writing.

How do we find our way back to our writing or forging a new path in that writing? This may be changing genres or it may be developing a new schedule or changing how we look at the world. It may be letting go of something that fit the you that you were and finding something different that fits the you that you are now.

In the last two-plus years, I've been practicing new life skills, adding some things, subtracting others. How are any of these things helping with my writing? Truthfully, I don't know how much they are helping, but I can see and feel a difference in myself. They are helping me keep myself in balance. And that's important. For my writing. For my life.

First, let's start with what I've added:

- I'm spending more time with my family, especially my grandchildren. I'm taking more trips, like a recent one to Utah to see a new great-grandbaby. (Yes, I have a great-grandbaby, and she is beautiful.) Spending more time with family and friends has allowed me to watch the interactions between individuals and then to use that, when appropriate, in my writing. Our family is messy. The relationships are messy. And isn't that what life is about? Messy relationships that somehow stick. Our family sticks together, no matter our messiness, no matter what goes on between us.

We may fight, but let someone attack any one of us and we come together, ready to take on any and all who would divide us. Since I write mainly romantic suspense, the hero and heroine have a "messy" relationship. Things don't come easily to either of them. They argue; they fight. More importantly, they fight those who would hurt the other.

- I'm spending more time purging, letting go of what I don't need and don't want. Letting go or purging possessions that no longer work for the life I want to have has freed not only space in my house but space in my brain as well. Both are important. Too many things create clutter. After forty-six years in the same house, my husband and I have enough clutter to last several lifetimes. Getting rid of some of it (I'm even letting go of some books) allows me to see white spaces. We all know that white space is important in the pages of a book. We gravitate toward that because we know that white space means dialogue. In a home, white space means freedom from clutter. White space in the brain is vital as it creates a blank page for my thoughts to take shape.
- I'm spending more time finding joy in the small things. Practicing finding joy in small things keeps my "glass half full." In order to write, I need to recognize unexpected moments of happiness, of laughter, of love. This is largely related to spending time with grandchildren. Who can resist a hug from a four-year-old blue-eyed blonde granddaughter who calls me "Meemaw?" These little scraps of joy remind me that the world is full of things to write about.
- I'm spending more time having fun. Spending more time in having fun and doing silly things, like dyeing my hair and eyebrows blue, has awakened that part of me that used to do such things

Shaping the Writer...continued

on a regular basis. With that, I was able to add bits of humor in my last book, which garnered favorable response.

- I'm saying "no" to requests upon my time and energy more often. Saying no to unreasonable requests upon my time and energy has freed up both. In our church, we practice what we call a ministering program. It's a good thing to be able to help others, and I try to do what I can. However, when my husband and I were assigned to one lady who every week had more and more things for us to do, requested more and more things which required ever-increasing physical and emotional strength than we had to give, we finally asked to be released from that particular assignment. Though she was a nice enough woman, she had no sense of boundaries. She took and took, leaving us with little left over for ourselves or anyone else. Post-pandemic, I have found more courage to speak up and say what's working for me and, also, to say what's not working. Reclaiming that energy and time gave me the same to devote to my family and my writing. For a while, I felt selfish in saying "no," but then I realized it wasn't selfish but practical to take care of myself.

Now that we've looked at what I am doing, let's examine what I'm not doing. Have those things, too, helped revitalize my writing? Maybe. So what am I spending less time doing?

- I'm spending less time cleaning house. No, I haven't let the house be condemned by the Board of Health, but I'm realizing more of what is important ... and what's not. Spending less time cleaning house has been great. Not only do I have more energy and time for life's important moments, I also haven't experienced any noticeable change in lifestyle. Post-pandemic, the house isn't perfectly clean; that's a given. But neither was it perfectly clean pre-pandemic. I was scrubbing, dusting, vacuuming, etc., all for a false sense of self-worth. Now, I work to keep the house comfortable and semi-decent. My happiness level shot up, as did my time to day-dream about the next book or noodle around with ideas for trying a different genre.
- I'm spending less time worrying over whether I will sell more books. I will do my best in my writ-

ing, but I'm not going to obsess over it. Using less emotional energy to worry over if I'll ever sell another book gives me the courage to take risks in my writing. Could I add a more in-depth scene to my latest book and would the editor like it? We'll see.

- I'm spending less time accumulating more things. Spending less time in accumulation is just practical. Having a bunch of things means more dusting those things, more re-arranging those things, more trying to find room for those things. My time is much better spent playing with grandchildren and writing.
- I'm spending less time worrying over what others think of me. Spending less time on this has been infinitely freeing. (How else could I carry off having blue hair for over two years?) In my seventies now, I realized I had spent far too much of my life anguishing over what others thought of me. No more.

FINALLY

I have no presumption that what works for me will work for you. These are just a few of the things I am doing differently now. Whether they make me a better writer is yet to be seen, but they are making me a better person.