

Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  March 2022



a chat with legendary author

AVI

*Above the Slushpile
Submission Opportunity:*



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Lynne Marie is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), *The Star in the Christmas Play* and *Let's Eat Around the World* (Beaming Books), *Moldilocks and the 3 Scares* (Sterling) and more forthcoming, as well as numerous stories and articles in magazines, including *Highlights for Children*, *High Five*, *Baby Bug*, *Family Fun*, *Hopscotch*, *Turtle*, *Spider* and *Writer's Digest*. Her website is <http://www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com>

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At Presstime:

Agent Opening Up March 1 for MG and YA Commercial Fiction

Elana Roth Parker is an agent with Laura Dail Literary Agency, Inc. (www.ldlinc.com), who is opening up submissions starting March 1, 2022 to commercial, high-concept middle grade and young adult fiction manuscripts. Seeking good plots with page-turning twists and a strong voice in any genre. Think escapist stories with high emotional stakes, escapist stories.

In middle grade she likes funny, mad-cap adventures, stories about kids who find out their worlds have a magic twist they didn't know about, friendship and family stories, and strong series ideas. In young adult she likes romantic tropes (enemies to lovers, love triangles, fake dating, etc.), big sweeping feelings, really well-drawn worlds, and a great twist. A sense of humor (or at least, wit) is a plus. Stories that know how to adapt the well-established literary traditions in a new way. NOT interested in horror or Vampires, talking animals as main characters in novels, Christmas stories, or stories about spirituality or faith with dogmatic or polemical bents.

Submit a query through Query Manager at querymanager.com/query/queryelana. Responds within 12 weeks.

Independent Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Tanglewood Publishing produces board books, picture books, and books for middle grade and young adult readers. They seek stories readers will pick up for the pleasure of reading, written in an authentic young reader's voice that allows children to feel seen and understood.

Accepting submissions for all ages, but particularly looking for middle grade and YA fiction and narrative nonfiction (history or biography). Open to most fiction genres, as long as the manuscript has authentic, 3D characters and a strong plot. While Tanglewood is not looking for high fantasy, elements of fantasy or the fantastical are always welcome. Emotional depth is important, but the publisher is not looking for a manuscript that is more about teaching a lesson than telling a great story. Plots should contain universal themes that can appeal to a wide audience. Email full picture book manuscripts or a query letter with sample chapters for middle grade or young adult books to Acquisitions Editor, submissions@tanglewoodbooks.com. Include your name and email address on your manuscript and not just the query letter. For author/illustrators, also send a link to your online portfolio or website where samples of your work are displayed. To study Tanglewood's current list, go to tanglewoodbooks.com/books

Small Publisher Accepting Submissions for Ages 12 and Under

Star Bright Books is an independent publisher established in 1994 that focuses on board books, picture books, easy readers, chapter books, and early middle grade. Seeing submissions for board books, picture books, and chapter books, both fiction and nonfiction. Looking for works that satisfy the publisher's goal of publishing books that are entertaining, meaningful, and sensitive to the needs of all children. Of particular interest are unique voices of color; interesting and/or original picture book biographies; early math learning and concepts; special needs; social and emotional learning; survival stories of all kinds, including the Holocaust and being a refugee; and stories emphasizing diversity and/or inclusion.

Before submitting, study the publisher's "About Us" page on their website, as well as current titles at starbrightbooks.com. Submit the entire manuscript with a cover letter containing a brief synopsis and author bio information to Star Bright Books, ATTN: Submissions, 13 Landsdowne Street, Cambridge, MA 02139. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want your manuscript returned. If an email response is sufficient, be sure to include your email address. Include your phone number as well. Make sure your name and address appear on your cover letter, and your name and page numbers appear on each page of your manuscript. Allow up to six months for a response.

International Competition for Unpublished Middle Grade and YA Writers

The Times/Chicken House Children's Writing Competition is open to unpublished, unagented authors of middle grade and young adult books for readers ages 7-18 years old (30,000-80,000 words). Sponsored by independent British children's publisher Chicken House Publications (www.chickenhousebooks.com/about-us/), the competition consists of two prizes: First prize is a worldwide publishing contract with Chicken House with a royalty advance of £10,000, plus an offer of representation from Louise Lamont, literary agent at LBA Books in London (lbabooks.com/). Another entry will be awarded the Chairman's Prize—a publishing contract with a royalty advance of £7,500 plus an offer of representation from Louise Lamont. The Chairman's Prize will be awarded to a manuscript hand-picked by Barry Cunningham, Publisher and the Chairman of the Judging Panel, for work that promises outstanding potential but requires more editorial input than the overall winner.

All longlisted entrants will receive a reader's report of their work.

The deadline for entries will be at midnight on June 1, 2022. Open to writers all over the world, entries can be submitted online at www.chickenhousebooks.com/submissions. A £20 entry fee is required for each entry, and must be paid at the time of submission. Entries consist of a single Word document containing the following submission materials:

- A page-long covering letter explaining why you believe your novel would appeal to children and a bit about yourself.
- A page-long synopsis of your story. Please include all the main points of your plot in your synopsis, including 'spoilers.'
- The full manuscript.

Please note that all materials submitted online will be read digitally on e-readers so exact formatting will not be retained. If you have any questions regarding entry to the competition, please see [Competition FAQs](#) or, if you can't find your answer, email hello@chickenhousebooks.com. Chicken House aims to announce the longlist on their website in July, the shortlist in August, and the winner in October. You can follow them on Twitter ([@chickenhousebooks](https://twitter.com/chickenhousebooks)) to keep up with all the latest news.

Award for Unpublished, Diverse Picture Book Writers is Open to Submissions

Sleeping Bear Press is sponsoring its annual Own Voices, Own Stories Award for children's picture book manuscripts written by BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ authors with the intention of recognizing and amplifying new and diverse voices with underrepresented perspectives. Open to previously traditionally unpublished BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ writers who are United States residents. Projects must be unagented at time of submission. Manuscripts that have been previously submitted to Sleeping Bear Press and/or the Own Voices, Own Stories Award will not be considered. Authors who have self-published books will be considered, but the submitted story must be original (i.e. not the self-published title).

Submitted stories should speak to the authentic experiences and perspectives of BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ children—or children of LGBTQ+ families—with the purpose of engaging readers in narratives that reflect underrepresented voices and communities. Submissions should be for ages four through ten and may be fiction, nonfiction, or poetry. Text must come in at under 1,300 words (not including backmatter or ancillary material). Only stories with human protagonists will be considered. Authors may submit up to two manuscripts per award period. Each manuscript must come via separate submission. Manuscripts cannot be submitted to other publishers or contests while under consideration for the Award.

Deadline for entry is March 31, 2022. Submit via the online form at sleepingbearpress.com/ovos. Winners will be notified by August 1 and announced by September 15.

A Grand Prize winner will receive a \$2,000 cash prize, in addition to a publishing contract with advance and royalties standard for new Sleeping Bear Press authors. At least one Honor Award winner will be selected and will receive a \$500 cash prize as well as one consulting session with a Sleeping Bear Press editor. Submissions selected for the Sleeping Bear Press Own Voices, Own Stories collection will be offered a publishing contract.

Tips for Writing URBAN FANTASY

by Jean Daigneau

Most of us are familiar with the fantasy genre. But within that genre are many subgenres such as paranormal romance, dystopian, high or epic, or steampunk fantasy. Most of these stories span more than one subcategory; and the same can be said of urban fantasy. Another trait most fantasy novels usually share is a strong fan base and their appearance on best seller lists.

One author who knows that world well is Cinda Williams Chima, author of the *Heir Chronicles*, and the *Seven Realms* and the *Shattered Realms* series. The first novel in her upcoming two-book *Runestone Saga* series, *Children of Ragnarok*, is due out in November. Besides appearing on both the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists, Chima has received awards too numerous to mention here. Not bad for a kid who nearly flunked first grade because she daydreamed too much! Chima's first *Heir Chronicles* is set in a small town. Since it bridges the subgenre of urban fantasy among others, we're going to explore that here. Let's find out more.

Location, Location, Location

Often urban fantasy focuses on a large city. But smaller towns and other locales work as well. For many of these novels, the setting almost becomes a character itself. That's why this aspect of world-building is crucial. As Chima notes, if you get the details of a real location wrong, expect to get emails like, "Oh, they took out that stoplight two years ago."

Because of the importance of getting the details right, Chima set her first novel, *The Warrior Heir*, in fictional Trinity, Ohio. Growing up in Ohio, she drew from her own life to flesh out the particulars, without having to mesh seamlessly with a real city. This allowed her room to focus more on other aspects of the story. But later books in the series take place in downtown Cleveland. That "gritty, industrial vibe that is more characteristic of the urban fantasy genre . . . fit the story I was telling," she says. So choose your location wisely. It's not a matter of picking only what you

know; it's making what you know work for the story you're telling.

Attention to Detail

Along with choosing the best locale is getting the details right in the world you've created, whether it's New York City in 2022 or during the stock market crash of 1929. Setting can inform your story by adding to the world events, and therefore the challenges, your characters need to tackle. Fighting wizards during World War II takes an entirely different approach than dealing with them during the recent pandemic.

Then, too, think about your location and what your readers need to experience. Ask ten people what location comes to mind when they think of New York City and you're likely to get ten different answers from Chinatown to Madison Square

Garden to Ellis Island. It's okay to narrow your setting to one area within a city to meet the needs of your characters and their story. It's not okay to get it wrong. As Chima says, "One thing that makes the *Heir Chronicles* accessible even to the



Tips for Writing Urban Fantasy...continued

non-fantasy reader is that it is solidly grounded in the world of a high school student and his friends before elements of magic are introduced.”

Define Your Limits

As with all fantasy, solid world building is imperative. Chima suggests “spending time on the magical element up front.” She notes that whatever magic you instill in your story, “it must be coherent and consistent.” Readers, she says, “will want to know the rules, and they will not tolerate changes in the rules when the author gets into a tight plot corner.”

Setting limits doesn't just mean the magical aspect of the world within your story. It also means the limits you set on the powers or capabilities of your characters. Limits make your hero relatable. It brings the reader into her world and helps them to empathize with her. No one will cheer on a character with limitless power. But when she's backed into a literal street corner by a zombie and the reader knows the amulet she needs to disappear has fallen from her pocket as she raced to get away, now you've made her vulnerable—read human—and you've upped the tensions dramatically. As Chima points out, even Superman had his kryptonite.

This is especially true in a series. Your readers might question when that same character noted above can now disappear in book 2 or 3 or 4, *without* her lifesaving amulet. If you change the rules, you better have a pretty solid reason why and how that happened.

Made-Up Doesn't Mean Made Easier

Writing in a fictional world gives an author some freedom to fly by the seat of his pants when it comes to imagination. But losing the confidence of your reader because you weren't truthful about some aspect of your world is a deal breaker. Chima explains it this way, “Every fantasy world is built from the bones of the real world—otherwise readers wouldn't understand it. Let's say that your fantasy world has swords and horses.

If you don't get details about horses right, all of the horse people will dismiss you. The same with sword enthusiasts.”

For her current *Runestone Saga* series, it wasn't enough to know about Norse mythology after Ragnarok, which in Scandinavian mythology is literally the end of the world of gods and men. Chima also had to research “Viking longships, sails, rigging, clothing, agriculture, societal norms, e.g. the role of women, weapons, bathing habits, herbal remedies, and on and on—in addition to the Norse pantheon of gods and magical systems.”

Taking shortcuts on those details will have your readers calling you out in a nanosecond. And that means potentially losing some of those same readers who love and buy your books.

The Final Word

As with any writing, weak plots, static characters, and easy resolution are not likely to get your book much attention. “It's important to remember that all of the other rules of good writing apply. It's not enough to have a cool premise and fancy magic. If readers don't connect with your characters, they won't keep reading. If the plot has major holes in it, they won't keep reading. Adding magic won't help a story that doesn't work,” Chima says.

It should come as no surprise then that Chima's advice is the same thing you've heard here time and again, “All writers stand on the shoulders of those who came before. If you want to write any kind of fantasy, begin by reading it.” In other words, read, write, repeat.



SUGGESTED READS

Great writing starts with great reading. Here are a few urban fantasy titles to get you started.

The Witch Haven, by Sasha Peyton Smith
The Dark Artifices series, by Cassandra Clare
The Okay Witch, by Emma Steinkellner
How to Hang a Witch, by Adriana Mather
Daughter of Smoke and Bone, by Laini Taylor

MARISA CLEVELAND, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & LITERARY AGENT



interview by Lynne Marie

Marisa Cleveland joined The Seymour Agency (theseymouragency.com) as an author in 2009 and signed her first picture book client in June 2020. She's looking for a manuscript she can't put down until the last page and can't stop discussing. Voice is definitely key for her. If she's going to sign (and sell) someone or recommend someone, then the writer's voice must speak to her. She must be able to listen to that voice through revisions and edits and book after book. She wants to find characters she'd like as her best friends and partners-in-crime long after the story ends, whether it's in this world or an alternate universe.

She is currently building her list as an agent and eagerly accepting submissions. She was an honored Guest at our [first KidLit Social of 2022](#) and we're happy to have her back with us.

Lynne Marie: Please share how you came to the agenting side of children's literature after being an author of YA, romance, and nonfiction. What ap-

pealed to you?

Marisa Cleveland: Everything about children's literature appeals to me! In April of 2020, I attempted to write a picture book about being adopted. This process gave me an entirely new perspective for the challenges and joys of writing in the children's space. I had a conversation with my agency's president about representing authors of children's books, and I signed my first client in June of 2020.



LM: As an agent, you read hundreds of queries and partials, and you've said that voice is crucial for capturing your attention. What do you recommend for those writers who are struggling with finding their own?

MC: I think all writers already have a voice in their works, just by the way they choose to tell a story. But if they're struggling to find the voice they want to use, then there are two ways to approach this. One is through their authorial voice. The other is through the voices of their characters. Their authorial voice is distinc-

Marisa Cleveland...continued

tive to them, and readers know an author by their voice through the words they choose to use and their sentence structure. Writers can study other authors with voices they like, but I think the best recommendation I can make is for an author to be authentic in how they tell their story.

LM: What would some differences be in writing a young adult romance and writing romance for adults?

MC: Audience, perspective, and themes, although these can overlap. Perspective in how a situation is framed from the character's point of view definitely changes as they age, and a teenager facing a tough decision or a challenge will process the situation differently than an adult in a romance novel.

LM: Speaking of voice, what advice do you have for those who are struggling to achieve an effective and target-age voice in a story, specifically in picture books?

MC: Read your manuscript out loud and record yourself. Then, listen to it back. Even better, have someone else who has never read it read your book out loud. I've found this technique to be so helpful in understanding how your words and phrasing are interpreted by a reader.

LM: How might the voice in an middle grade project differ from one in a YA project?

MC: I think the internal voice differs in MG and YA. I've noticed the MG projects that really capture my attention have a playful and inquisitive internal narrative. They are reacting to what's happening to them, and I can feel the character's emotions and how they process what they're feeling. The YA projects I've fallen in love with have a different internal narrative. Those characters might spend more time reflecting on what's happening to them and deny or rationalize how they feel about it, and that's shown in the way they talk to themselves (intrapersonal communication).

LM: Apart from a strong voice, what draws you to a story? What keeps you connected?

MC: Something that I can relate to or that is a new experience for me. I know that's pretty broad. Relate to as in it's happened to me or I know someone it happened to, and I can nod and laugh and be in that moment. New experiences open my worldview, and I love that moment in the story where it's something new that I've never considered or experienced.

LM: As someone who is lucky (and I truly mean that) to have you as an agent, I know that you are extremely organized and efficient in the way you conduct your business with clients. Please share a little about your business organizational strategy.

MC: Awwwww. Thank you! You're such a fantastic author to work with! My organizational strategy is different with each client, but process-wise, I prefer Google Drive so we can share docs and spreadsheets.

LM: What is it that draws you to an alternate universe?

MC: I love books that incorporate world-building in such a way that I'm not even sure when it happened but I know the rules and idiosyncrasies of that world just from the flow of the narrative.

LM: As an adopted child, I am drawn to superhero stories as they are almost always orphans or adoptees. You are originally from South Korea and an adopted child. How do these two perspectives give you a unique worldview?

MC: I think I enter a book without a preconceived notion of what is normal. I don't have that mindset – or maybe it's a filter – of what's possible or not. For me, I just think anything could be possible. I'm not sure if that's because I'm a transracial adoptee or if it's because I've always had supportive people in my life who listened to my crazy ideas and said, "Why not?" I learned

Marisa Cleveland...continued

to believe in my ideas and so I like to think that I have an open mind when other people present ideas to me.

LM: What types of children’s books did you grow up reading? Can you give us some examples?

MC: I remember my mom and I spending so much time in bookstores and at the library. She read me just about any book I picked up, and then I started reading everything else. I had several books that also had records that went with them, and I would listen to those books and follow along. There are waaaaay too many to name, and I don’t want to leave any amazing titles off the list, but I pretty much read every genre, except horror, growing up.

LM: How does that affect what you are looking for across your list?

MC: Now I’m really into character-driven stories across all genres and for all age groups, and I think that’s because the books I remember most were about someone’s journey.

LM: Generally you are only accepting queries in MG/YA, General Fiction and Nonfiction (Business and Leadership) and others by referral only, but are you willing to review pitches for picture books and/or chapter books in connection with this submission opportunity?

MC: Of course.

LM: What in particular would you like to see come across your desk? Are there any special topics that you are always happy to take a look at?

MC: I’m more of a “I’ll know it when I read it” person. I have so many talented authors I’m currently working with, and I’m always open to new ideas and topics. I’m always happy to take a look

at character-driven stories.

LM: What do you want to see in a query letter? How long do you think a query should be? What do you recommend apart from pitch, marketing paragraph and bio?

MC: The basics for queries for me include the title of the work, genre, word count, and one-liner. Once I know the genre, I can use that information to determine if the one-liner has the kind of conflict to keep the story going for the length of the word count. Blurbs are great, because they can deepen my understanding of the conflict and the journey of the characters.

LM: What are some things you absolutely do not want to see come across your desk?

MC: Horror.

LM: What advice do you have for those in the query trenches?

MC: Advice is such a funny thing. What works for someone may not work for someone else. But here’s my advice – if you’re in the query trenches and you’re not making any progress, change the trench that you’re in. This could mean expanding the circle of people in your writing community or switching approaches to researching and landing agents. If you believe in your work, then keep looking for ways to make those connections that will build your ladder out of the trenches.

LM: To ask one of my trademark questions: If you could use five words to describe the “spirit” of what you look for in your submissions, what would they be?

MC: Emotionally satisfying roller coaster ride.

Marisa Cleveland...continued

Marisa Cleveland is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Until March 31, 2022, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of your character-driven fiction manuscript of any genre except horror, for any age audience from picture book through young adult, along with other information via the online form at:

bit.ly/ATSMarch2022SeymourAgency

Marisa will read all pitches and respond to those she's interested in by June 30, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of June, 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:

- For a detailed explanation of the Above the Slushpile submission form, as well as tips for writing your pitch, see cbiclubhouse.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/kidlitdistancing-social70/
- 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.
- 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.

To learn more about Marisa Cleveland, visit her website at marisacleveland.wordpress.com/ and be sure to read her post [Before You Query Me](#)

You can also check out Marisa's [YouTube channel](#), and follow her on Twitter [@marisacleveland](#)

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

by Jane McBride

For years I have attended seminars and workshops about drawing and creating characters. They were all helpful, but none gave me the skills to go deep into my characters. One memorable workshop compared characterization to peeling back the layers of an onion.

Writers were told to remove one layer at a time, with the top layer being the most superficial qualities such as appearance. Another layer represented family. Was the character an only child or did he fall in the middle of the children? Were his parents divorced? What is his greatest fear? What is his greatest accomplishment? And so it went. This was fine as far as it went, but I didn't feel I had reached the core of my characters, the deep emotions that brought them memorably to life.

Only when I started tapping into myself, using those experiences that affected me down to my very soul did I find the depth of feelings I wanted to use to bring my characters fully to life.

In one of my romantic suspense novels, the hero had lost his much loved brother. His grief was inconsolable. I never had a brother, but I did have a sister. (I still do, though she is in heaven now.) When I asked myself the hard questions, questions like "How do I go on without my sister?" and "What is the point of going on in life without my other half (for that is how I thought of her)?"

You don't have to lose a dear family member or friend to understand grief. Grief comes in many different forms and is triggered by a myriad of things. What experience have you had that has affected you down to your soul? Did you lose out on a promotion which you deserved because a co-worker claimed credit for your work? That's a big one. Did you feel betrayed? Was the co-worker also a friend? How can you use this experience in your writing? What if you are writing a book about a seven-

teen-year-old girl working toward receiving a scholarship? Part of the scholarship was academics; part was participating in community affairs. Our young heroine, let's call her Raleigh, worked her butt off to get the requisite grades. Even more, she spearheaded a project to collect socks, underwear, and t-shirts (the three most asked for items by homeless people) for a local shelter. She spent countless hours asking for donations, organizing fund-raising projects to buy items, and then sorting the socks, underwear, and t-shirts into sizes and gender. She did this for the scholarship, but also because she has a tender heart which wanted to help people less fortunate than herself. Sounds like a winning combination: excellent grades and a really well-thought out project to help others.

What happened?

Her best friend, who had contributed a few hours to the project, stepped in at the last moment and took credit for the whole project. Unbeknownst to Raleigh, this so-called friend arranged with the principal to have a special school assembly where she presented the dozens of filled boxes to the head of the shelter. Raleigh's name was mentioned only briefly along with other volunteers.

Raleigh was blindsided. Not only had she been betrayed, she was betrayed by her best friend.

Now dig into your heart for the feelings you experienced when you were passed over for a promotion because a friend and co-worker stepped in to claim credit for your work. What went along with the feelings of betrayal? Chances are you experienced physical symptoms as well as hurt feelings. Use those visceral responses to heighten your character's reactions. Did your stomach start to roil? Did your blood pressure spike? Did your face turn red? Or did it turn sheet white with anger? Did your palms grow sweaty? Or did you grow cold inside as your disbe-

Writing From the Inside Out...continued

lief and hurt overcame you?

Saying “He felt betrayed by his best friend” isn’t nearly as effective as saying “Anger curdled his stomach, until the acid spilled into his throat, making him feel that he was going to retch right then and there.”

Are you beginning to see how you can use your pain, your anger, to deepen your character?

What about stories for younger children? Can you use adult-sized emotions to describe the feelings a small child might feel upon learning that her kitty had gotten out of the house and was run over by a car? Sally’s grief is real as she tries to comprehend that her six-month old kitty had run out of the house and into the street. Can you bring to bear your sense of loss and emptiness when your mother died? One minute the world is one thing, and the next it has changed into something else entirely.

Let’s make up a story about twelve-year-old Ryan who desperately wants to make his seventh grade basketball team. The trouble is Ryan is not gifted athletically. He practices and practices, but still he fails to develop the skills of dribbling, passing, jumping, etc.

Have you ever tried to develop a talent only to find that you weren’t any good? It was not from lack of effort, only that you didn’t have the necessary skills to make good on it. I wanted so much to be good at art. I took classes in school and, later, as an adult, I took community classes on art. And still I couldn’t make my paints, watercolors, and pencils convey what was in my head. The disappointment was huge.

What can you bring from your experience to depict Ryan’s disappointment? Did you feel that you might as well not try anything ever again, because you’re just a failure? (That’s how I felt for a long time.) Or did it spur you to channel your efforts to another goal? In Ryan’s story, he discovers that he’s really good at art and goes on to win several school and district prizes with his pencil drawings and paintings of homeless people.

Let’s reduce all of this to a Mini Blueprint:

STEP 1: Identify the emotion you want your character to portray. In the example of Raleigh, she feels betrayed (the emotion) by her best friend

ACTION: Use that emotion to go down deep inside your character

STEP 2: Look for visceral responses.

ACTION: Use vivid words to describe those responses. Don’t just say “His face turned red in anger.” Try something like “I felt the heat of her glare hit me right between my shoulder blades.”

STEP 3: Find a way to turn the character’s emotion to a triumph.

ACTION: Ask your character questions about what else he wants in life. In Ryan’s case, he wanted to draw, especially pictures of the homeless people whom he saw on his way to school every day.

WRAPPING UP

You may never have had the experiences your character is undergoing, but you probably will have had similar ones. Use them. Be ruthless with yourself and ask how you handled betrayal, grief, disappointment, and other hard stuff. Don’t hold back. Let yourself be vulnerable and then let that vulnerability show through in your characters. You’ll find that not only are you a better writer for it, you may discover some truths about yourself.

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



Making Things **WORSE** by Making Them **BETTER**

by Todd Mitchell

Writers talk a lot about provoking characters to transform by making things worse and worse for them until they're exhausted, and are left with no choice but to change. That's what stories are usually about in a nutshell: transformation in the face of adversity. It's the old "hurt the hero" game. As *Star Trek* and sci-fi writer David Gerraald so eloquently put it:

"Transformation occurs because the self is exhausted—it surrenders to the moment. And then surprises itself by reinventing itself. Transformation is the reinvention of the self by the self."

The standard procedure here on exhausting characters is to give them a problem that unbalances their world (this often forms the inciting incident of the plot), and then, instead of solving that problem, make it worse and worse in all the devious ways you can think of. By making things worse, you can strip away a character's previous coping strategies and denial tactics, until the character has their dark night of the soul moment and recognizes "I'm the problem" and transforms. (This is something I talk about in my novel writing and Art of Conflict classes, and in posts like [this one on the importance of desire](#)).



More stuff! It's my lucky day!

But here's another little jujitsu move I've been thinking about lately that often gets overlooked: sometimes the way to make things worse for characters is to make things better. Let the main character get what they think they want, because nothing is more devastating than achieving our dreams, goals, or long sought-after desires, and realizing it's not what we wanted after all, and it doesn't really change anything.

Usually, this happens in Act II, in what screenwriter Blake Snyder refers to as the "Fun and Games" section of a story. This is where, in the bizarre world of the second act, the character might finally achieve what they've always desired (or at least consciously desired). However, the character's unconscious desire must still be unfulfilled for the story to have dramatic tension. (For more

on the two types of character desires, and how they can be used to create character conflict, check out this post).

By achieving their conscious desires, or having things momentarily get better, the stakes can be increased. We're never more fearful than when we have something to lose. And in addition to the increased stakes, there's the crushing realization that comes with getting what we want and still not being happy, as many lottery winners (like [Jack Whittak-](#)

Making Things Worse...continued

er, who won \$315 million, then, after the money ruined his life, said “I wished I’d torn that ticket up”) have experienced. Oddly enough, there’s even a fear of wealth, called [Plutophobia](#), for which you can be medicated (or I can help you solve this by relieving you of the underlying problem of having too much money).

So sometimes in Act II, stakes are increased and tension is developed through the push and pull of having things get better for characters, then worse, then better. The key thing to remember here, though, is that the plot must escalate, so everything thing that is gained, and everything that is lost, must be greater to the character than what came before (otherwise the middle will sag).

Sometimes the character achieves their conscious desire in Act III as a false climax. *Silver Linings Playbook* is a good example of this, when, in the last fifteen minutes of the film, it looks like Pat will finally achieve his initial conscious desire and win his wife back. The trick to making the false climax work is to have it become clear to both the reader/viewer and the main character that the thing they truly want (their unconscious desire) is actually quite different from what they initially thought they wanted (just as, when Pat finally wins the attention of his wife back, *spoiler alert* he goes running after Jennifer Lawrence’s character).

Having characters get what they think they want can be a way to push their unconscious desires to the surface, and reveal who they truly are — which is not only transformative, it’s often the point of fiction.

Try it out. Let your characters achieve their conscious desires. Then see what they do with it.



Todd Mitchell (toddmitchellbooks.com) is an award-winning author, Associate Professor and Director of Creative Writing Pedagogy at Colorado State University, and instructor for the WritingBlueprints webinar ***BREAKTHROUGH: Following the hero's journey to the creative transformation you deserve.*** To purchase the recording of this unique webinar that uses the Hero's Journey story structure as a template for reframing and reigniting the writer's creative journey, go to bit.ly/creativetransformation. This article originally appeared on his website.

TWISTING Your Plot and DELIGHTING Your Readers

by Jane McBride

Do you have problems in plotting? Do you have problems in having enough plot to get you through an entire book? Do you have problems in keeping the plot fresh? Do you have problems in making your plot cohesive, in not having the plot points seem episodic?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, you may find this article helpful.

We're going to talk about plot twists. Plot twists are happenings in the plot that are unexpected, that take the story ... and the reader ... in a different direction.

What are some examples of plot twists?

- A change in weather.
- A crime.
- A betrayal.
- A mistaken identity.
- A natural catastrophe.
- A secret.
- A surprise.
- A visit from a long-lost relative or friend.
- A new character is introduced.

What makes a plot twist effective? Humor is one thing. Finding the funny spot in a story is nearly always appealing to readers, whatever their ages. Even if the book is a serious one, there can still be humorous elements in it. Another is relatability. Readers of all ages want things with which they can relate. Even if the book takes place in outer space, there should be parts which the reader can relate to. Drama is another, though it's not necessary. Think over-the-top. If you have to scale back later, that's okay.

All of these things, plus countless others, can take your plot down an unexpected path.

Before we start with the meat of this article, a little caveat here: As in all aspects of writing, plot twists must fit the age of the intended readership and the theme and tone of the book. A murder is probably not going to work in a picture book about a baby dinosaur looking for his mommy. But it could work in a YA novel about an eighteen-year-old boy trying to extricate his younger brother from a violent gang.

First, let's look at some examples of plot twists in published picture books.

Eat Pete by Michael Rex. In this charming story, Pete is terribly lonely and is desperately looking for someone to play with. When that "someone" arrives, Pete is happy ... that is until he learns that the new friend he'd hoped for is actually a monster determined to EAT PETE.

Snack Attack by Terry Border. Another kind of monster shows up in this fun book and you'll never guess who. Cheese Doodle, Cookie, and Pretzel are having a fine old time in the kitchen, enjoying their freedom. But when a monster shows up in the form of a hungry kid, they must scramble for safety.

Interrupting Chicken And The Elephant Of Surprise by David Ezra Stein. The little red chicken is certain that no elephants will appear in her favorite books. Her father tries to explain that maybe the elephant of surprise is actually an element of surprise. Stein takes his readers through adventure after adventure in sequels to this book.

Do you notice that each of these books has a humorous plot twist, designed to delight little children?

Now let's look at books with plot twists for teens:

Twisting Your Plot...continued

Choker by Elizabeth Woods. Lonely and bullied in school, teenage Cara is over-the-moon happy when she reconnects with her best friend Zoe. Zoe helps Cara re-discover her self-confidence. However, her delight turns to questions when kids in her school start dying.

Heretics Anonymous by Katie Henry. When Michael walks through the doors of Catholic school, things can't get much worse. His dad has just made the family move again, and Michael needs a friend. When a girl challenges their teacher in class, Michael thinks he might have found one, and a fellow atheist at that. Only this girl, Lucy, isn't just Catholic ... she wants to be a priest.

The Good Girls by Clara Eliza Bartlett. The "good girls" include the popular cheerleader, the ambitious overachiever, the defiant troublemaker, and the dead girl. The first three are expected in a normal high school. But the fourth is not. When the remaining three girls, each of whom is a suspect, try to find who killed Emma, they discover a shocking secret. Emma isn't dead after all.

These are all serious books with sobering subjects, but that is not to say that books for teens and YAs can't have humorous plot twists as well.

Let's go back to the two stories at the first of this article and make up some plot twists.

In our story of the baby dinosaur looking for his mother, could it be that he fails to see her though she has been beside him all time because he was too busy comparing himself to the other animals he encounters? Or it might be that our young dinosaur is not really a dinosaur at all but a dog who thinks he's a dinosaur and eventually discovers that he is a dog and that his mother is right there at home.

Let's go with the plot twist that the dinosaur is not a dinosaur at all but a dog. The twist of a character not being who the reader thought he was is a common and an effective one. Why? Because it works.

Doug, who thinks he is a dinosaur, believes that because he does not look like his brothers and sisters.

His mouth is too big. His tail is too long. His head is too small. How can he be a dog when he is clearly a dinosaur? That is why he searches the neighborhood for his mother. And that is why his patient and loving mother, a sweet golden Lab, trots along beside him, pointing out other dogs with whom he has a lot in common: four legs of more or less even length, unlike dinosaurs whose front legs are often shorter than their back legs are, soft fur, unlike dinosaurs who have rough skin, and a snout, where dinosaurs have none.

Doug eventually believes his mother and trots home with her, content to be who he is.

What elements from the plot twist list does this story contain? Humor. Mistaken identity. Surprise.

What of the story about the teenage boy who is doing his best to extricate his younger brother from the gang? That narrator Jules is eighteen and determined to keep his younger brother out of gang life. As we read of Jules who does anything and everything in his power to protect his younger brother from joining a gang, we root for him and think what a wonderful big brother he is. He teaches Dom, his little brother, that gang life, especially with the one that runs their neighborhood, is a terrifying life, one that does not allow its members to escape. Throughout the book, Jules proves that he loves his brother and will sacrifice anything. At the end of the book, Dom asks Jules why he devoted so much time and trouble to keep him from gang life. Jules pulls up the sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt (which he always wears) to reveal matching tattoos on his forearms and confides to Dom that he (Jules) is the gang's leader. Dom is stunned, and so is the reader.

What elements from the list do we find here? Surprise. Betrayal. Secret. Crime.

IN CONCLUSION

Plot twists can take your story from ho-hum to wow, but be careful to keep any twists within the realm of believability. A twist thrown in just to make a story longer or more interesting is unlikely to work. Keep twists organic to the story and to the character.

A Chat with Legendary Author

Avi

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

In his long and prolific career, Avi has had a huge impact on modern children's literature. He is the award-winning author of over 80 books for children and young adults, with books number 84 and 85 — *Loyalty and City of Magic*, scheduled for publication in 2022. Raised in Brooklyn in New York City, Avi was a serious reader from early childhood on, as he grew up in a home where books and reading were encouraged and important (he comes from a family of writers extending back into the 19th century). Born Edward Irving Wortis, his twin sister started calling him Avi when they were a year old, and the unique and legendary name remained.

Few authors have amassed as many prestigious awards as Avi. Here's just a sampling: Newbery Award for *Crispin: the Cross of Lead*, Newbery Honor for *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, Newbery Honor for *Nothing but the Truth*, Boston Globe Horn Book Award for *Poppy*, Scott O'Dell Historical Fiction Award for *The Fighting Ground*, Christopher Award for *Encounter at Easton*, and the Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature. So far seven of his titles have been named ALA Notable Books: *The Barn*, *Crispin at the Edge of the World*, *The Fighting Ground*, *Nothing But the Truth*, *Poppy*, *Silent Movie*, and *Who Was That Masked Man Anyway?*



Avi's website (avi-writer.com) features his Word Craft blog with posts on his writing life, and the listing each of his titles includes "The Story Behind the Story", where readers can learn where he got the idea for the book. Terrific information for fans of Avi's books, as well as aspiring authors.

SHARON BLUMBERG: Your first book, *Things that Sometimes Happen*, was published in 1970. Now, over 80 books later, you're still going strong. What are three things you've learned in the course of your career that you wish you had known when you started your writing career?

AVI: I think the key to becoming a good writer is to first become a good reader. My mantra is "Writers don't write writing they write reading." When you write for young readers, that is even more important. You must please and engage them. I don't think anyone is a born good writer. You become a good writer. And there is no end to that becoming. Good writing is hard and elusive. It is a rare skill. If you are not humbled by trying to write well, you are not working hard enough.

SB: Since you first started writing for children after you became a father, were there any earlier experiences, including your childhood, that

Legendary Author Avi...continued

perhaps put you on the path to becoming the author you are today?

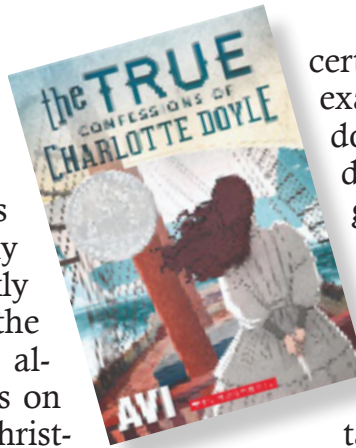
AVI: I grew up in a home in which books and reading were especially important. When I was a child, I was read to nightly by my mother. Family visits to the local library were weekly occasions. I was encouraged to use the library on my own as soon as age allowed. There were never restrictions on what I read. Every birthday, every Christmas I received at least one book. (I still have a few of them.) My siblings and I were encouraged to have our own libraries. It's hardly a coincidence that my twin sister is also a writer.

SB: You have won a number of prestigious awards, among them, a Newbery and two Newbery Honors. How did this change your career as an author? Did winning an award make it easier to sell your next manuscript, or did you still have to endure rejections like less-established authors do?

AVI: The Newbery is never anything you deserve. It is always a gift. I think it's a mistake to believe otherwise. One of my first thoughts upon hearing I won the Newbery was, "Oh, Lord, the next book better be good." And indeed, that next book was one of my hardest books to write, and not necessarily a particularly good one.

Winning a Newbery gives you, if you will, a brand name. You do earn more in a profession that is famously hard to make a living. I think the award can give you the self-confidence to go on, but it does nothing to help you actually write. In fact, it may make it harder, as you try to live up to your (given) reputation.

It can also make it harder to work with



certain editors. They can think I know exactly what I am doing, even when I don't. Their disappointment when I don't come up with something really good is palpable.

SB: You never seem to pigeonhole yourself as an author. You write across genres, age groups, and have used both animal and human protagonists in your work. Does each new type of book require developing a specific new skill set as an author?

AVI: I think each book is its own story and I have to find my way with each one. While I am sure readers will find some similarities among my many books, I think each had its own set of rules. Each has to find its way. I am very much an intuitive writer. I discover things as I write, including the story itself. I don't have rules for myself or my work, other than it must be good. I am not interested in teaching but in narrating experiences.

Over the years the books have become harder to write. I'd like to think that's because my standards are more demanding.

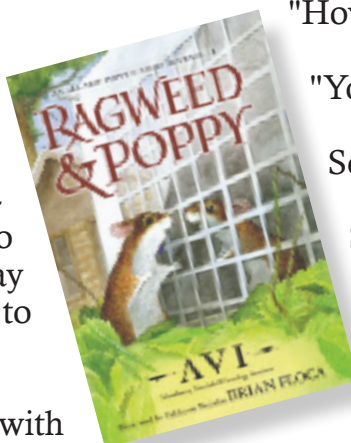
Of late, I've been struggling with a new book. Yesterday, at the end of the day, my wife said to me, "It went well for you today, didn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"Your typing was fast."

So much for the process.

SB: You've written more than once that the idea behind a book came from something you overheard while going about your everyday life. Is it important for authors to keep their ears open for story connections that



Legendary Author Avi...continued

may spring from other people's lives? Can you give one or two examples of how this came about for at least one of your books?

AVI: *No More Magic, S.O.R. Losers, Catch you later, Traitor, Seer of Shadows, Wolf Rider, A Place Called Ugly*, to name a few, are based on things that happened to me.

Crispin, The Button War, The Secret School, Nothing But the Truth, Sometimes I Think I Hear My Name, were predicated on experiences I heard others relate, or overheard.

The key tools for writers are ears and a heart.

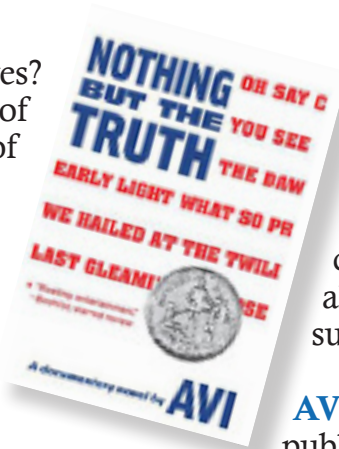
SB: You visit and Skype with students in schools from all over the world. Could you please share with us some of your most interesting interactions and also share some of the most memorable comments you've received regarding reader feedback?

AVI: It always surprises me that what I'm asked by young readers is so similar no matter where I am.

"Where do you get your ideas?" "How long does it take for you to write a book?" "What's your favorite book?" and so on. Interesting questions. "What's your opinion of adjectives?" "How has writing changed you?" "What do you think makes for a good book?" "How, over the years, has your writing changed?"

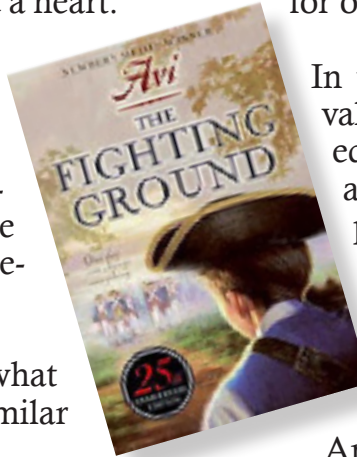
SB: How are you able to so successfully create characters, conflicts, dialog, and stories that are topical, fresh, relevant, and relatable to today's teens?

AVI: I have no idea other than I try to live in the world.



SB: The publishing industry has changed dramatically since you began writing children's books in the 1970s. Do you have any advice for new authors on how to develop their craft, or keep their focus and passion alive as they navigate through today's submission and publishing process?

AVI: The most important people in your publishing world are your spouse or partner, your agent, your editor, and your publicist. In that order. Treat them well, with great respect, and while you can disagree, never argue. There's nothing wrong with writing for yourself, but professional writing is writing for others.



In today's world, we do not put a high value on reading, learning, or knowledge. We overvalue personal feelings and judgements. Speaking is more important than listening. But I think beyond all else, the good writer needs good ears, good memory, and a love of reading and language. The rest is a willingness to work.

And using a spell-checker.