

Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  February 2021



BUILDING YOUR
STORY'S MIDDLE

Above the Slushpile
Submission Code:

Storm Literary Agency

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

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At Presstime:

Independent Publisher Seeks Picture Books from Authors & Illustrators of Color

Nosy Crow (<https://nosycrow.com>), is an independent publisher of fiction and nonfiction for ages 0-12. Normally closed to unsolicited submissions, Nosy Crow is opening up submissions of picture books for ages 3-5 from writers and illustrators of color until **February 18, 2021**. Accepting up to three manuscripts of 1000 words or less (fiction or nonfiction) from each writer that represent a diversity of experiences and voices. Texts can be in rhyme or prose, and be in any genre. Submissions are accepted from anywhere in the world, but they must be written in English. Email a synopsis of each story and a short biography in the body of the email, and attach the manuscript(s) at Word files of Adobe PDF documents. If you are a writer-illustrator, texts can be accompanied by your artwork. PDFs should be no more than 5MB in total. Also include a link to your website and/or social media where more of your work is on display.

Send all submissions to Alice Bartosinski, Senior Commissioning Editor of Picture Books, Nosy Crow, at submissions2021@nosycrow.com. If you haven't heard back by April 30, 2021, you can assume your submission is not a fit for Nosy Crow at this time. **Deadline for all submissions is February 18, 2021.**

Leapfrog Press Fiction Contest for Middle Grade and Young Adult Books

Leapfrog Press, a small, independent publisher focused on discovering new talent and books that are overlooked by the big houses, is accepting submissions for its 2021 Leapfrog Global Fiction Prize. This year, Leapfrog is teaming up with UK-based Can of Worms Press. Leapfrog will publish the winners in the US, and Can of Worms in the UK. Adult, young adult (YA) and middle grade (MG) novels, novellas, and short story collections are accepted. Minimum word count: 22,000. Individual stories in a collection may have been previously published in journals. Books that have been self-published will be considered "unpublished" if fewer than about 200 copies were printed. Looking for literary fiction and mainstream fiction. Genre fiction is accepted (especially science fiction), but the story is more important than the genre.

All manuscripts will be reviewed by at least two Leapfrog editors, and those that go to the second round of judging may be read by editors at other small presses as well.

The Award consists of a **First Prize** publication contract offer from Leapfrog Press and Can of Worms Press, with an advance payment, and one or two critiques of the manuscript from contest judges, permanent listing on the Leapfrog Press and Can of Worms contest pages as a contest finalist, along with short author bio and description of the book. A **Finalist Prize** consists of \$150 and one or two critiques of the manuscript from contest judges, permanent listing on the Leapfrog Press/Can of Worms contest pages as a contest finalist, along with short author bio and description of the book. One **Semi-Finalist** receives their choice of a free Leapfrog book and a Can of Worms book and permanent listing on the websites. An **Honorable Mention** gets listed on the Leapfrog Press and Can of Worms websites.

Entrants can submit as many manuscripts as they'd like. Each is submitted separately through Submittable at <https://leapfrogpress.submittable.com/submit> and requires a \$35 entry fee. Entrants may submit their manuscripts to other contests as well as agents and editors while under consideration for the Award. **Manuscripts must be received by May 3, 2021.** For more information, go to <http://leapfrogpress.com/contest.htm>

Picture Book Twitter Pitch Party Coming Up

The next #PBPitch event will be **Thursday, February 11, 2021**, from 8 am - 8 pm EST. You can pitch as many polished picture book manuscripts as you'd like, but you can pitch each manuscript only twice. Agents and editors will read your pitches and "favorite" the ones they want to see. For more information, as well as tips for pitching, go to <http://www.pbpitch.com/pbpitch-twitter-event.html>

Small Press Accepting Picture Book Submissions on Issues of Character, Faith, Compassion

Flyaway Books is an independent press that publishes picture books in three age categories: 0-3, 3-7 and 6-10. Seeking manuscripts that reflect themes of diversity, inclusivity, compassion, care for each other, care for the world, social justice, and contemporary issues. These would be appropriate for a general trade market and found in bookstores, libraries, and schools. Also open to manuscripts appropriate for progressive churches, religious schools, and readers who value faith inside and outside of a church setting. For current titles, go to www.flyawaybooks.com/view/all-books

Email a cover letter that includes information about the intended audience, biographical information, any previous publications, and relevant promotional activities you currently engage in, such as school visits, speaking events, or blogging. Paste the complete manuscript into the body of the email and send to submissions@flyawaybooks.com. You may submit more than one manuscript at a time if each is sent in a separate email. For author-illustrators, place the text within the body of the email and provide a link to view an on-line book dummy or sample illustrations. Responds only to submissions that fit their publishing program. If you have not heard back in 6 weeks, you may assume the work is not right for Flyaway Books.

Agent Accepting Middle Grade and YA Submissions

Elizabeth Copps is the founder of Copps Literary Services in Denver, CO (<https://www.coppsliterary.com/>). She specializes in middle grade, young adult, and adult fiction in the following genres: contemporary with a literary bent, historical, horror, magical realism, thriller/mystery/suspense, book club, and women's fiction. In nonfiction, she seeks platform-driven memoir and biography. She is drawn to fresh takes on timeless plots; stories that are thought provoking and discussion spurring. She loves complex characters who are brimming with personality and burst off the page. Who are irreverent and dark. Smart and sarcastic. Creative and wise. For Fiction: submit only finished, polished novels. Include an attention-grabbing query letter that includes word count, genre, comparative titles, and writing credentials. For Nonfiction: submit a complete proposal including a chapter outline, author credentials, positioning and market considerations, comparative titles, and 2-4 sample chapters. Send all submissions through Query Manager at https://querymanager.com/query/QueryManager_ElizabethCopps

Submissions Accepted for YA Short Story Anthology

Submissions of short stories are being accepted for *OUT THERE: Into the Queer New Yonder!*, a young adult anthology to be published May 2022 from Inkyard Press. *OUT THERE* will feature stories written by queer YA authors, about queer teen protagonists. Set in the future (1 day, 1 million years, or anything in between), these stories can be in any genre. Submissions will be considered by the review panel, featuring editor Sandra Mitchell, and award-winning authors Tehlor Kay Mejia and Julian Winters.

Story requirements: 4000-8000 words; YA fiction set in the future (any genre); queer author, queer protagonist; does not have to be #ownvoices; does not have to contain romantic elements. If selected, you will receive \$900 plus a prorated share of any royalties received on the sale of the anthology. Inkyard Press asks for exclusive rights from acceptance to 2 years from publication date. All rights revert 2 years from publication date of *OUT THERE* anthology. Asks for publication and audio rights for that term. All other rights remain with you. You must be at least 13 years old to submit to this anthology. Authors 13-18 years old must co-sign their contract with their parent/guardian if selected for publication.

How to submit: Send your story as a TXT, RTF, or DOC attachment to OTANTHOSUBS@gmail.com. **Deadline for submissions is March 1, 2021.** Acceptance letters will be sent by March 15, 2021. For more information, go to <https://saundramitchell.com/subs/>

Why Look at OLDER BOOKS?

by Sallie Lowenstein

Dear Reader,

Creativity is precious and not just for those of us who are creative, but for the society at large. It is the source of all problem solving and new ideas, and is so valued, both historically and inspirationally, that it is preserved in museums around the world.

In 1979, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote a picture book, illustrated by James Brunzman, called *Leese Webster*. It is worth looking at if you are a creative person or want to encourage creativity in children. In the book a spider named Leese Webster is born in a deserted castle where, inspired by the tattered remains of tapestries, she weaves spider web copies of the deteriorating artworks. All of her brothers and sisters ask her what good her tapestries are. Why bother—after all, the purpose of a web is to catch food. Leese persists because she is driven to create beauty. In the end, her webs are discovered and put behind glass to preserve them. And, the little spider is swept outside. There, for the first time, she creates an original web. In the morning light, Leese finds the dew caught in it, and thinks it the most beautiful thing she has ever made. The message is clear: it is one about individuality and originality, which Le Guin obviously valued highly when she said so poignantly in her 2014 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award: “We are going to need all the beautiful, creative minds that write original stories in the coming years... We’ll need writers who can remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality.”

Books are a common way for children to explore that “larger reality.” They are easily available depositories of ideas and topics, of emotions and experiences that all kids can access. They are the passageways into the past through history (*Silk Roads* by Peter Frankopan, in both an illustrated middle school version and an adult version; *History of Art for Young People* by H.W. Janson) and historical fiction (*I, Claudius* by Robert Graves, *Lovely War* by Julie Berry). They carry us into the future through science (*Animalium* by Jenny Bloom and Katie Scott, *Animals Born Alive and Well* by Ruth Heller), science fiction (*Odd John* by Olaf Stapledon, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury), into the realms of pure imagination found in fantasy (*Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke, *The Earth Sea Trilogy* by Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving,) and magical realism (*Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *Music and Mr. Moon* by Philip and Erin Stead). The best books have universal themes that we can all relate to no matter our origins or nationality (*My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok, *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton, *Infinity and Me* by Kate Hosford) or information that challenges us to learn (*A Compendium of Collective Nouns* by Woop Studios, *Bayou Farewell* by Mike Tidwell). And each and every great book takes a look at these things in a uniquely different way.

Books are also one of the common ways that young people are inspired to try their hand at original writing.

When I was a kid, my mother and father made constant trips to the library with me, as I read 11 books a week on every topic imaginable. Nothing was out of reach, and every book I read fed my curiosity and imagination. I read about other countries, about heroes and politics. I read superhero comic books, I read history,

Why Look at Older Books continued

I read fantasy, science fiction, poetry and literature. My brother is eleven years younger than I, so as a teen I was blessed to read children's books and picture books with him again, and as a teen I began to write for him. I spent my childhood making up stories that my friends and I acted out, yet I have never wanted to perform in a play. Instead, these stories and my vast range of reading ended up depositing themselves in my books.

And I am forever grateful for the range of my reading. As an author, I constantly draw on the love of language that I learned by reading so widely. When kids ask me what my favorite book is, I can honestly say, I don't have one. I have many favorites for many reasons, but they are all books that left me with an aftertaste of wonder.

Over the years, I have mentored hundreds of young authors (ages 10-18) in ongoing writers' workshops and in teen courses at colleges, and my collection of books and reading has been invaluable. And for years, the kids I have worked with have begged me for lists of good books to read. Invariably I put books that left me with wondrous thoughts and invariably they find many of their favorite reads, not in the last five years of books, but in the last 100.

As well as being an author/illustrator, I am a professional fine artist, exhibiting my two-dimensional works and my stone sculptures in museums and galleries around the US. I have never heard anyone in the art world advise artists that if they want to be exhibited, they should look at art from the last five years.

Of course, we look at what our contemporaries are creating, but we also seek out great museums and past artists to study and learn from. Art history is part of all artists' educations in order to give them as many tools and perspectives as they can absorb for their own creative endeavors.

The same applies to books. If you want to be a good writer, you need to read and read, both older books and new ones. To understand the interdependency of story, language, rhythm and mood in books and see what is possible, you need to read both old and new books. To be a writer you have to be a reader. The books of the past are our mentors. And the great books of the past will still be great books in the future when the marketing trends of the moment are forgotten shadows on the walls.

In one year or in six years, today's trends will be out of date. But *Winnie the Pooh* by A. A. Milne, which has sold 50 million copies since it was published in 1923, will still be read to and by children. Pooh was not written to sell. It was written out of love of storytelling and delight in childhood and language. The syntax and rhythm of the language in the *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling (1902) will still delight the ear of readers and writers alike, long after today's trends have passed. Long into the future people will read and remember *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Margaret Taylor (1976) for its dignity, its language, and its respect for its characters and its readers. And every time these books are read by someone new, they will be a new book to that reader, delighting their ear, expanding their worlds, challenging their thinking.

And isn't that every writer's goal?

Among Sallie's other accomplishments (see her bio on page 1) she writes and publishes a newsletter called **Old Books, Young Readers: Backlist and Forgotten Books for Babies through Teens**. If you'd like to subscribe to the newsletter you can do so by texting 22828oldbooks or emailing her at oldbooksyoungreaders@gmail.com

GOALS for 2021

by Jane McBride

Now that we've had a month to shake the dust of 2020 off our shoes, it's time to set goals for the new year. In normal times (and who doesn't long for some kind of normalcy after this last crazy year), goal-setting isn't a big deal. We figure out where we need to improve, where we need to step up our efforts, and we do it to the best of our abilities.

But 2020 put a kibosh on many of our goals, turning our normal energetic selves into people we don't recognize. If this isn't you, skip this article. You don't need it.

It is me.

My writing was sidelined by anxiety, lethargy, and just a downright I-don't-care attitude. Only the thought that I had deadlines to meet kept me writing.

So today, I'm not going to bore you with how to set goals. You know how to do that. I hope to help you find the wisdom to set goals that fit your current circumstances. Those circumstances can vary wildly between individuals.

Do you have elderly parents who are confined to home and you need to be there for them, doing their shopping, visiting (if safe), helping with chores, and a myriad of other tasks? Or do you have children and teens who need help as you and they navigate the intricacies of home-schooling? Or maybe you've been laid off from your day job and are struggling to make the mortgage or pay the rent. You think to yourself, "Well, I'll just spend more time writing to make up the shortfall with increased writing income." Only stress and worry have turned your normally creative mind to mush and you are hard-pressed to come up with a new thought much less an idea big enough to sustain an entire book.

Whatever your circumstances, give yourself a break when it comes to your writing. Families and loved ones need help immediately. Give them your best and then turn your attention and energy (if you have any left) to your writing.

There. I said it. Don't put your writing first. After years of preaching "Make writing a priority," I'm saying the opposite. Put yourself and your family first.

Let me share with you something that my husband and I faced this year. Our 13-year-old grandson McKay was extremely depressed. Suicidally depressed, our son, McKay's father, feared. His rages and darkness were bringing down the entire family and causing havoc as every resource went to helping him, giving little time or attention to the other three children in the family. Humbly our son asked us if McKay could come stay with us for a while and get a new perspective. Because I have dealt with chemical depression for most of my adult years, my husband and I have some experience with it. Our son knew this and prayed that we would say yes.

What could we say but yes?

McKay arrived, sullen, rebellious, and hurting. We hurt for him. The first days, the first weeks, tried us to the depths of our souls until we were hanging on by our fingernails. Considering I've been a lifelong nail-biter, this was not a happy condition. We tried our best. We prayed. We gave everything we had, and still it wasn't enough. Then we found a psychiatric nurse who agreed to treat McKay. She got him on a therapeutic dose of antidepressants and things started looking up. (Medication is not always the right treatment for depression, but, in this case, it definitely helped.) We also got him on a regular schedule of meeting with a family counselor. My

Goals for 2021...continued

husband took off work (his job was considered essential) and I put my writing on hold.

Things got better. Not all at once, but slowly, quietly, their progress measured in how many tears were shed on any given day.

I share these things with you to tell you that I understand when life gets in the way of writing. I wrote in bits and pieces and, in a few stolen quiet moments, tried to put them together. I wasn't fulfilling the writing goals I had naively set in January of 2020. I was fortunate to write a sentence here, a sentence there.

We—my husband, McKay, and I—came away from this experience battered but stronger. Eventually he returned to his home and seems to be doing well. I'm trying to find my writing rhythm again.

For 2021, I didn't set lofty goals. I set a few, I hope, realistic ones. Nor am I as quick to judge others who don't appear to be serious about their writing. Who am I to judge anyone—ever?

- *Return to the basics.* What are the basics of writing? Writing with purpose. Writing with heart. Paying attention to the small things like good grammar and word choice and making dialogue sparkle rather than a litany of "How are you?"

- *Always ask why I'm writing a particular article, story, or working on a book.* Am I devoting time and energy to a piece that does not resonate with me? Am I giving my depleted resources to a story that doesn't feed my soul and lighten my heart? If I am, why? Paying the bills is a good reason, and I don't discount monetary needs. Ask yourself if your purpose in working on a piece is sufficient to take your energies away from other projects.

- *Find joy in my writing.* Joy had been conspicuously absent from my writing as I struggled to meet deadlines over the last years. Now when I work on an article, such as this one, I feel satisfaction in knowing/hoping that maybe it will help someone else. If nothing else, it may help me find the impetus to fit my family life and my writing life together.

- *Honor myself enough to occasionally or more than occasionally let my writing slide as I work to regroup and readjust my life to my new realities.* During the months that McKay spent with us, my husband and I played "tag," trading off time with him and supervising his schoolwork. I took several hours off to spend with friends. My husband went to his office, work being easier than trying to coax a thirteen-year-old boy away from his devices.

You alone know what goals are right for you this year. It may be that you need to finish projects from last year, projects that were set aside as you dealt with the needs and problems that seemed to pop up every day of 2020. It may be that you put aside projects that were going nowhere and start on something new. It may be that you look at your writing and decide to re-shift. Were you writing picture books and now feel burned out? Maybe it's time to try a novel for middle grades or a 'tween age book.

Whatever goal you decide upon, know that you aren't alone. Writers tend to be an incredibly generous community and will listen as you pour out your frustrations and fears that you may never write again. (This was a big one for me.)

Be gentle with yourself in 2021. You deserve it.

LISA AMSTUTZ Associate Agent



interview by Lynne Marie

We are excited to share news that Lisa Amstutz, a multi-published fiction and nonfiction author and former Rate Your Story Judge, has joined Storm Literary as their newest agent. She brings valuable experience, having crafted over 100 books and created relationships with publishers such as Albert Whitman, Capstone, Cherry Lake Publishing, Chicago Review Press, Dawn Publishing, Discovery Library/Rourke Educational Media, Pebble Publishing, Sourcebooks and more! She's also the former Assistant Regional Advisor for the Ohio: North chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. In addition, Lisa has worked as an outdoor educator and holds degrees in biology and environmental science. She has recently opened for submissions and has been kind enough to offer an "Above the Slushpile" opportunity to *Children's Book Insider* readers!

LYNNE MARIE: This is wonderful news! Please share how this shift from author to agent came about.

LISA AMSTUTZ: The idea slowly grew on me over the past few years. I'd been doing a lot of critiquing and mentoring and realized one of my greatest joys is helping other authors succeed. After a few conversations with Vicki Selvaggio at Storm Literary Agency (who is also my agent), I realized that I could do that in a more focused way as an agent. I spent a good portion

of last year learning the ropes with Vicki and Heather Cashman.

LM: As you build your list, what will you be looking for in the way of submissions? Will you be concentrating on nonfiction primarily?

LA: I am seeking nonfiction for all ages (preschool-adult), picture book and middle grade fiction, and picture book author/illustrators. I love books with heart; science, agricultural, and environmental topics; new insights on history, culture, or the arts; strong characters and settings; humor; lyrical texts; and multicultural themes. I also enjoy a good rhyming story, but please be sure the meter is strong and consistent. I'm not a good fit for dark, angsty, or dystopian books.

LM: What business style will you be adapting with your clients? Do you feel you will take a very hands-on or laid-back approach? What is something that you would like prospective clients to know about you?

LA: I am editorial and will work with my clients to polish submissions as needed before they go out. I spent many years working as a freelance editor, so will bring those skills to this new role. For the most part, I



Lisa Amstutz...continued

anticipate working with clients to help build their career, although there may be cases where I'd consider a single book. In general, I see the writer/agent relationship as a team effort to get wonderful new books out into the world.

LM: Regarding nonfiction—how do you feel about picture book biographies? Do you feel that this genre is over-saturated? Why, or why not?

LA: I do think it's a bit saturated at the moment, so if you're working on a PB bio, it really needs to stand out: the story's really timely, the writing is stellar, and it's something of high interest to kids.

LM: What kind of back-up documentation do you wish to be submitted along with any nonfiction submissions, if any? What style of bibliography do you prefer? What is your communication style?

LA: I'd like to see a bibliography that is clearly and consistently formatted (MLA style is pretty standard.) If you've had the story vetted by an expert, let me know that too. I'm a stickler for accuracy in NF, so if you can't document a fact, don't include it.

LM: You are a founding member of Nonfiction Ninjas, who share information and inspiration with aspiring and fellow nonfiction writers and authors. Please tell us a little bit about this group and how our readers might benefit from following it. Readers, here is an interview with Lisa which shows the inspiring story of how she came up with the idea for *Finding a Dove for Gramps*: <https://www.nonfiction-ninjas.com/blog>.

LA: The Nonfiction Ninjas are a group of mid-career children's writers who met at a retreat and formed a critique group. We later started adding other resources to share information about writing nonfiction, including a blog and newsletter. A subset of that group also started NF Fest, an annual challenge for writers of nonfiction that takes place in February. Check it out for lots of great information and inspiration!

LM: Have you developed a general submission strategy? What might that look like?

LA: As is standard with our agency, I develop a targeted submission list and send out small batches of sub-

missions at a time. Based on editorial feedback, I may or may not ask for more revisions before sending the story out to the next batch of editors.

LM: Of course every nonfiction writer must find their own way into a story—however, what do you recommend as far as a preliminary approach? Do you feel it's best to avoid the life cycle method of telling about a person from birth to death, or do you prefer an illuminated event in a person's lifespan that conveys information and shows who that person is?

LA: For picture book biographies, a slice of life can work well; otherwise, just focus on pertinent events, not everything that ever happened to the person. Only include the parts that help to build your narrative arc. The rest of the fascinating info you find can go into the back matter.

LM: How does what you are looking for in nonfiction differ from what you are looking for in fiction? Please explain.

LA: I'm not sure there's a big difference—in both, I'm looking for a good story, well told. A story that will fascinate or move readers. For nonfiction, an expository style can also work well, but it needs to be more than a straightforward listing of facts. Find a way to frame it creatively and use interesting, kid-friendly language.

LM: As a Rate Your Story Judge for these past 5 years, you have rated hundreds of member submissions, which is quite similar to reviewing an inbox. In your experience, what would be some common mistakes that writers have made, and what is your suggestion to remedy these?

LA: What I've noticed is that there are a lot of good stories out there. There are far fewer great ones. Sometimes the story arc isn't as strong as it could be; sometimes the writing itself isn't quite there. I'm looking for stories that stand out above the crowd.

I like to browse my local bookstore occasionally and ponder what makes me pick up any given book, and furthermore, what would make me decide to pay \$16 for it. It's that spark that has to be there to grab first an editor and then readers.

Lisa Amstutz...continued

As far as remedying these issues, keep studying recently published books and getting feedback from critique partners and professionals in the field whenever possible. Try the exercise I described above. How could you give your story that same spark?

LM: How would you like your submissions formatted? Are you particular about formatting? How do you feel about page numbers? Art notes?

LA: I use QueryManager, which doesn't allow for a lot of formatting. But please double space and use paragraph breaks appropriately. If I get submissions directly from a conference or other event, I prefer standard formatting with page numbers. Use art notes only when necessary to convey something that's otherwise not obvious to the reader. If you have back matter written, please include that too.

LM: Is there anything in particular on your wishlist? Please share any details.

LA: The wishlist on the Storm Literary Agency website is up to date; I can't think of anything to add at the moment. (<https://www.stormliteraryagency.com/submissionguidelines>)

LM: In order for us to get a sense of your tastes, please share one or two of your favorite books in each genre you are accepting (nonfiction, picture books and middle grade).

LA: I always draw a blank whenever someone asks me my favorite books—there are just so many--but here are a few: *Owl Moon* (Yolen), *This Moose Belongs to Me* (Jeffers), *Hoot* (Hiaasen), *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle), *Some Writer* (Sweet), and *Giant Squid* (Fleming).

Lisa Amstutz is offering CBI subscribers an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for the month of February 2021. She is seeking nonfiction for all ages (preschool–adult), picture book and middle grade fiction, and picture book author/illustrators. Lisa loves books with heart; science, agricultural, and environmental topics; new insights on history, culture, or the arts; strong characters and settings; humor; lyrical texts; and multicultural themes. She enjoys a good rhyming story, but please be sure the meter is strong and consistent. Lisa is not a good fit for dark or dystopian themes or graphic content. She is not acquiring YA or adult fiction at this time. If your work fits her present needs, query through the special form at [QueryManager.com/2006/CBI](https://www.querymanager.com/2006/CBI). She will try to respond to all submissions within 30 days. **Expires February 28, 2021.**

---Please Read Before You Proceed---

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

- 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 manuscript falls within standard word counts of the particular age group for which you're writing. (If you don't know standard word counts, get our free Ultimate Children's Writing Cheat Sheet at: [writeforkids.org/ultimate-cheatsheet](https://www.writeforkids.org/ultimate-cheatsheet))
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript.

CHARACTER CHANGE

THE KEY TO KEEPING READERS INVOLVED

by Jane McBride

Character change should always be taking place over the course of a story. If the character starts and ends in the same place, what is the purpose of the book? To keep readers involved in the story, show that change.

In a book's beginning, the changes may be small, building to the BIG one. Of course, the changes must be appropriate for the age and experience of the character. A five-year-old character may want to overcome his fear of spending the night away from his parents. He wants to change to become brave enough to spend the weekend with his grandparents. A 15-year-old character may want to overcome his fear of coming out to his parents. He also wants to change to become braver.

STEP: Have a mentor—a best friend, a fairy godmother, a teacher, a grandmother, whatever—point out a change to the character that he is not himself aware of.

ACTION: Often, having another character point out the change is more effective than having the character himself realize and verbalize it. Let's make up a story about 12-year-old Rachel who struggles with stuttering. Years of speech therapy have helped her tremendously, but she still stutters when she gets nervous or scared. When her English teacher tells the class that each student will be required to give an oral report, Rachel knows that she can't get out of it. She prepares her report and practices it over and over. Still, she is anxious and growing more so as the date for the report looms. The more Rachel practices, the more she stumbles over her words. In tears, she goes to her best friend, Olivia. Olivia has known Rachel since both were in kindergarten. She points out that Rachel has come a long way with

her speech and encourages her. Olivia's words spark Rachel's confidence.

STEP 2: Use metaphor to symbolize the change.

ACTION: Find a metaphor that represents Rachel's desire to change. She watches as the family dog works to walk again after an operation to fix a broken leg. Each day, the little animal takes a few more steps than the day before. She wonders if that is like herself, every day challenging herself to speak up more when in the past she would have remained silent.

STEP 3: Have the character notice a change in someone or something else and then realize that she, too, has changed.

ACTION: Look for a change in someone else that mirrors the intensity that your character is experiencing in her own fight to change. Rachel notices that her mother, who has always struggled with her weight, is slowly but steadily losing pounds. In fact, her mother has fought her weight ever since Rachel becomes aware that she has a problem with stuttering. She compliments her mother on her newly slim figure. Her mother smiles and says that she is doing it one pound at a time. This causes Rachel to recognize how far she's come in her own struggle.

STEP 4: Have the antagonist (remember, this doesn't have to be a villain, but can be a parent, the weather, a classmate, etc—anyone or anything that keeps the main character from achieving her goal) work to keep the character from changing.

Character Change...continued

ACTION: Remember, conflict needs to escalate throughout the story. Incorporate conflict with the process of change. As the conflict grows, so should the level of change. When an antagonist tries to force the protagonist to stay in her original state, the conflict grows. Let's return to our story of Rachel. She takes courage from Olivia's words, but she is still nervous. In the school hallway, she runs in to another girl she has known since they were in grade school, Victoria. Victoria is never happy unless she is sniping at someone else. Innocently, she asks Rachel if she is ready for the oral report. Sweetly and falsely sympathetic, she reviews some of Rachel's epic stuttering failures. Rachel knows that Victoria is trying to undermine her confidence. She tells herself that she won't let the other girl get to her, but Victoria keeps at it. What is something else that might keep a character from changing? Let's move on to a different example. Seventeen-year-old Heath must spend two nights alone in the mountains to earn a scouting badge. Heath has always been afraid of the mountains after he was lost in them ten years ago when he was a little boy, but he is determined to overcome his fears and earn this badge. He has a little over three months before he turns 18, the deadline in earning the badge. He's on track until an unexpected rain comes. The rain turns the ground slippery, and Heath takes a bad fall. Fortunately no bones are broken, but can he make it for the full 48 hours necessary to earn the badge? Or will he have to return home early? He is sorely tempted to give up and go home, rationalizing that he has the perfect excuse. Do you see how the weather is acting as an antagonist and Heath's struggle to change and achieve his goals?

STEP 5: Have the protagonist resist change and seek to return to her comfort spot.

ACTION: Increase the fears or anxieties your character experiences in the face of change until she is certain that she cannot change after all. Rachel can't get Victoria's words out of her mind. Past experiences in speaking in public rear their ugly head, and Rachel relives in painful detail her humiliation and mortification in the past. On one occasion, she started to cry when giving a report in class and had to excuse herself and take her seat. It took months

to live that down and to be able to hold her head up again. Her thoughts spiral. What will she do if that happens again? The family will have to move. She'll have to change schools. Rachel decides to not give the report even though that means taking a much lower grade in the class. This is a big deal to her because up until now she has had straight A's.

STEP 6: Determine what can cause the protagonist to resolve to continue with the change.

ACTION: Make this resolve to continue with the change coincide with the timing of a dramatic moment. What is more important to your MC than the need to cling to her old ways? In Rachel's story, she overhears her older sister and a friend talk about how important it is to be able to speak in public in college. Rachel's long-term goal is to attend college and then medical school and become an oncology doctor. (Cancer took her grandmother.) She wants that more than anything. Will she let her fear of speaking in public keep her from achieving her ultimate goal? She realizes she can't keep living in fear of embarrassing herself and resolves to give the report, stuttering or not.

IN THE END

Showing the character wanting to change, her struggles to do so, the set-backs that will inevitably occur, the resolution to do what is necessary to make the change makes the victory—changing—all the sweeter.

 writing blueprints

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

LOTS OF LITTLE BLESSINGS: CHILDREN'S CREATOR

KATHLEEN LONG BOSTROM

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Writing, like most everything, is a discipline. The more you do it, the better you get at it, along with a healthy amount of persistence, humility, talent, and faith. A prolific and prodigious children's author in addition to being an ordained Presbyterian pastor, Kathleen Long Bostrom found her niche and followed in her passion creating in the religious market. The author of over 50 books, Bostrom has sold over two million books and her *Little Blessings* series has been translated into over 20 languages. In 2013, she was honored with the 2013 Distinguished Alumna of Princeton Theological Seminary, and in 2014 was named the David Steele Distinguished Writer, the most prestigious award given by the Presbyterian Writers Guild. Bostrom presently lives in California with her husband and family, writing full-time in an office overlooking a grove of eucalyptus trees. You can learn more about Bostrom and her latest book *Will You Be Friends With Me* (illustrated by Jo De Ruiter) and *The Worst Christmas Ever* (illustrated by Guy Porfirio) at www.kathleen-longbostrom.com.

PJ McILVAINE: As a child, were you an avid reader? What was your favorite book and author and why? What inspired you to become a children's author?

KATHLEEN LONG BOSTROM: I've been a reader my entire life! My favorite early reader was Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat*, so I suppose Dr. Seuss could be listed as my favorite childhood author. I read everything I could get my hands on, from cereal boxes to comics to anthologies of stories we had in our home. One of my favorite days in school was the day our Scholastic book orders arrived. I'd

bring my stack of new paperbacks home and devour them, ready for the next book order. I still remember the excitement and thrill of choosing and receiving those books.

PM: You're a writing machine. As a seasoned writer, how do you keep your writing fresh and current?

KB: That's a good description of me! I was more of a well-oiled machine when my children were young. I served as a pastor with my husband and had very limited time to write, so I protected the little time I had while my kids were napping or at school. I find that as I've aged and also become a full-time writer, I seem to procrastinate more! Lots of distractions when working at home. I never run out of ideas, and sometimes get bogged down trying to figure out which manuscript should have my attention. I want to work on all of them! Once I have a contract and a deadline, the machinery kicks into gear again.

I deeply believe that writing for children is my ministry now, and what I'm supposed to be doing with my life. That helps when I get discouraged with rejections. Writing from the heart, listening carefully to children, keeping current on publishing needs, and paying attention to the ideas that keep poking at me for attention all help me know where to focus. Loving what I do, and getting photos of little children with my books, inspires me and keeps my writing fresh. Sometimes, I have to let go of a manuscript and let it sit, then come back to it. I also have a fabulous writing group where we critique each other's works and support one another through the discouraging times.

PM: Writing for the religious market is tricky. How



Kathleen Long Bostrom....continued

do you maintain the balance between being didactic and too preachy? Since you are an ordained Presbyterian pastor (not a priest), how have your beliefs impacted your writing?

KB: Since I was a preacher for 30 years, it would be understandable to be preachy, except that I worked very hard not to be a preachy-preacher, if that makes sense. I felt that telling a good story, focusing on one point rather than trying to cover all the bases, writing well, and always looking for what was new and fresh to me in the Scripture passage helped me keep my preaching from being too didactic but still teaching about the passage.

I'm an ordained Presbyterian (U.S.A.) pastor, not a priest, although I've been called a priestess by people who didn't know what else to call me (been called a few other things, too!). My faith impacts everything I do, everything I am. I didn't grow up in church and only started attending in high school, so I'm a latecomer to theology. I always did have an interest in the spiritual, however. Some of my own childhood questions are addressed in my books. When I write books for the Christian market, I try to convey the joy of my faith, my belief in a living, loving, forgiving God. I am very careful not to be preachy, not to be pushy, but to invite readers into a story.

PM: Style-wise, how do you decide which format (i.e. prose or rhyme) is the right way to tell a particular story?

KB: I've always loved the rhythm and rhyme of words, and perhaps growing up reading Dr. Seuss from an early age is why. I also had a mother who quoted poetry, so I grew up with an appreciation for that style of writing. I started writing some of my early books in rhyme, but kept hearing that editors hated rhyming books. I didn't understand that, as children gravitate towards rhyme. The reason, I learned, is because editors receive so many manuscripts with poorly written poetry that they cringe when one passes their desk. I worked very hard to write well, whether poetry or prose, but especially

in poetry. And I once heard the advice that when a writer chooses to write a book in poetry, s/he should try writing it in prose to decide which works better. I always share that advice when someone comes to me wanting advice on writing in verse.

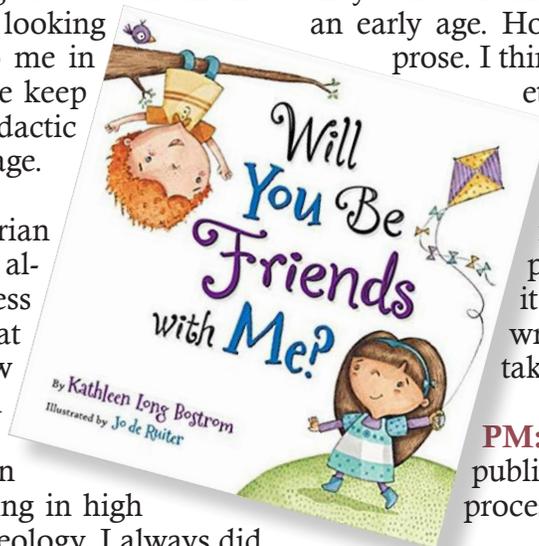
The main question to ask is, which format serves the story? I like rhyme because children can chime in with words as the book is being read to them, so they start to learn words and the fun of poetry from an early age. However, for a longer story, I write prose. I think I write more of my books in prose.

I think I write more of my books in poetry because I love the challenge of getting everything just right, no forced rhymes or words. I have been told that I excel in writing in poetry, which makes me happy, because I work very hard to get it right. That sometimes means re-writing a book 25 times! Whatever it takes to do it well.

PM: What was the first book you had published? How has the publication process changed since then?

KB: The first book I had accepted for publication was *What is God Like?* I wrote this book to address children's questions about God, with answers based on Scripture passages. And all written in verse! Try conveying a deep theological concept—in rhyme—that a three-year-old can understand! It's a huge challenge but I love it, and it helped me figure out how I thought about God and theological concepts, and how I could explain them in ways that people could understand.

I began writing children's books for the secular market but veered into Christian publishing because I was a pastor and married to a pastor and always trying to find ways to help people of all ages understand biblical and theological concepts. I wrote all kinds of books, secular and Christian, and kept sending them out to editors. It took me four years and over 250 rejections before an editor at Tyndale House called and said, "We want to publish your book!" That first book led to 7 more in a series eventually named *Little Blessings*. *What is God Like?*



Kathleen Long Bostrom....continued

stayed in print for 22 years before going out of print this year, much to my sorrow.

In the old days (late 1990's), editors were much more open to submissions from unagented writers. That has changed tremendously! Now, most editors require agented submissions. Also, with the closing of so many independent bookstores, and the rise of online bookstores with low prices, the publishing world has had to grapple with keeping relevant to the changing times. It's much harder, I think, to get a book noticed without bookstores. It eliminates that "browse the bookstore and see what book grabs my attention" way of finding out about books. Now, we authors rely on social media (I'm not very good at that) to get a book noticed. However, all the online ways of promoting books can also be a great way to get people to notice a book.

PM: When you write, do you see the illustrations in your mind? Do you include art notes? Do you have input into the illustration process?

KB: When writing a picture book, the writer has to visualize the changing of scenes so that an illustrator has a variety of options. Each page turn should shift to a new setting. Much of the description has to be omitted so that the details can come to life through the illustrations and not just the words.

One of the first things I learned when I started writing (and publishing) picture books is that for the most part, the author has no say in choosing an illustrator. Art notes are often discouraged, except in rare occasions. Editors are much more open in books that are written and illustrated by the same person, but when I started writing this was not true. It didn't affect me as I can't even draw a decent stick figure! But it opens the door now for writers who can visualize and put that into illustrations.

In my early career, I didn't see the illustrations for my manuscript until a copy of the finished book arrived in the mail, often two years after my manuscript had been accepted for publication.

As the years went on and I gained respect as a writer, editors began to share with me some of the early sketches for a book and ask for my input. However, that input was more about finding discrepancies and just enjoying being invited into the illustration process rather than making numerous suggestions.

I've learned to trust the process. I've had fabulous illustrators, who know what they're doing, and understand art and scenes better than I ever could. With the exception of one book, I've been delighted with all the illustrators who have brought their inspiration and insight into making my words come to life.

PM: Do you have an agent? If so, what was the process like?

KB: I didn't have an agent when I first started publishing in the late 1990s, so my first two books were unagented. Once I began having more and more books being accepted for publication, a writer friend suggested I hire an agent to handle the contract negotiations and to be an advocate for me. He recommended his agent, who did take me on as a client for a few years. However, the agency did not focus much on children's books so even though we had a wonderful relationship, the agent suggested I find someone more knowledgeable about the field of children's books.

I reached out to an agent I'd met at a retreat through The Presbyterian Writers Guild a few years earlier. We'd hit it off, and she was glad to take me on as a client. We had many wonderful years as agent/writer until she retired.

At that point, I started sending queries to agents I'd heard speak at SCBWI conferences. I had interest from several, but they didn't quite work out. I contacted Books & Such Literary Agency because my most recent agent had been on their staff for a few years. They hadn't had an agent who focused on children's books since my agent had left, but I took a chance and contacted them. Turns out, one of their agents had young children and decided to focus on children's books, so we talked and liked each other, and she signed me on. I've been with my current agent for 4 years now and she's great.

I have friends who are excellent writers and have been published in the past who have struggled for years trying to find an agent to take them on. It seems harder and harder to get an agent these days, so I am very fortunate.

PM: What is your writing routine? Has the on-going pandemic affected that? Do you find it easier or harder to write with all the craziness?

Kathleen Long Bostrom....continued

KB: My routine has changed over the years. When I first started writing for publication, my children were young, and I worked part-time as a pastor with my husband. I wrote during their nap times and when they were at school. As they grew and my books kept coming, I had more time to write and attend conferences, but my writing career was secondary to my vocation as a minister. In 2013 I retired from active ministry to focus on my writing. It was a tough transition and I struggled at times to sit down and write. When Greg and I moved to southern California in 2014 and I had my own office at home for the first time, I thought I'd be writing constantly! Again, it took me a while to get settled in.

I write morning and early afternoon, but not every day. I'm very focused when I have a book under contract and a deadline. Working from home can be distracting as I always have something I need to do, like take the dog out, walk along the beach, or do laundry! I do like to read a lot and consider that helpful to absorb quality writing. During COVID I have gone for long walks on the beach early in the morning when hardly anyone is there, then I come home and read, then after breakfast get to work on my writing. A lot of writing time is answering emails, reading websites and blogs, and keeping up with the ever-changing publishing business.

PM: When do you know that an idea is a keeper? Do you go through many drafts? Do you self-edit as you go along or wait until you have a first draft? Where do you get inspiration?

KB: I have stacks of folders with finished or partial manuscripts and notes on ideas. I know an idea has taken hold when it keeps coming back to me and I can't get it out of my head. I find myself writing when I'm walking, exercising, or trying to fall asleep. I have a wonderful writer's group that meets twice a month (now on Zoom). We read and critique each other's manuscripts and the feedback I get helps me home in on the edits I need to make. I have rewritten manuscripts 25 times trying to get it right. I actually love the editing process, as I always want the manuscript I submit to be polished and professional.

I get inspiration everywhere! On my beach walks, from my dog, conversations with parents, interactions with children, movies, books, TV. I'm always jotting down ideas; not sure which one will rise to

the top!

I sometimes self-edit but find it more helpful to just sit down and get something on the page and then I feel less stressed and ready to work and rework the story.

PM: You've also written for the popular *VeggieTales* series and you have your *Little Blessings* line. How did that come about?

KB: The first book in the *Little Blessings* series, *What is God Like?* was also the first book I had accepted for publication. It was a solo book at the time, but the publisher loved it so much they asked me to write another, which became *Who is Jesus?* That led to another and then another, and the series was born. I wrote six picture books and two board books for that series and loved every bit of that adventure.

The *VeggieTales* books I've written came about because an editor with whom I'd worked asked if I'd be interested in writing one. Of course, I said yes! My kids had been a little too old for VT when they first started, but I remembered them from my days as a pastor. We used the videos at the church for Sunday School. I made charts on the personality traits of each of the VT characters, which were lots of fun. Because the editor asked me to write and gave me the topic, those books were work-for-hire, which meant I didn't get the copyright for the words and was paid a flat fee, no royalties. I haven't written one for a few years but would be happy to do so again since they're fun to write and children love them.

PM: What's the most important life lesson you've learned from being a children's author? What do you hope your readers take away from your books?

KB: I've learned to believe in myself, to be persistent, to never give up. Publishing is tough, and even though I've published over fifty books, I get rejections all the time. I love what I do, and it feels like a calling to me, as was my ministry. I hope I can keep writing for a long, long time.

I hope my books convey the joy of words, wordplay, stories, books; the wondrous connection between reader and child; the foundation of my faith; and curiosity and excitement about the amazing world in which we live. Each day is a precious gift.

WRITING 101:

Building Your Story's MIDDLE

by Jane McBride

If the purpose of a story's beginning is to introduce the elements that make up the book and the ending is to resolve the conflict, what is the purpose of a story's middle?

That is a question that has plagued many writers over the years as they struggle with avoiding the dreaded “sagging middle” and with keeping up the tempo that they began in the beginning. I've written articles on sagging middles and still I struggle with getting it right.

But this article is not about dealing with sagging middles; its purpose is to help you write the middle of your story. Frequently, writers, especially beginning ones, flounder around the middle of a story. They wonder what comes next. After writing 39 books, I still find myself floundering, still wondering, still worrying.

Following are a few of the things I've learned about writing middles. As always, pick what works for you and discard the rest.

WHAT SHOULD A MIDDLE CONTAIN?

Give the character bigger obstacles to overcome. In the beginning, the character must deal with obstacles. Grow those obstacles into bigger ones. For example, let's make up a story about 10-year-old Julianne, who is dealing with her parents' decision to divorce (a pretty big obstacle already). She now learns that she and her mother are moving to a different state so that they can be closer to her mother's parents. First, our character is reeling from the knowledge that her parents (who were supposed to love each other forever) are divorcing. Now she must deal with leaving her home, her friends, her school. She wonders if she will ever see her best friend again. What other obstacle could we throw in her way? What if her mother tells Julianne that she can't take her dog, Sissy, with them because the apartment where she and her mother are moving to won't allow pets? Julianne has had Sissy since the dog was a puppy. How can

she say goodbye to her?

Development of the subplot. Ideally, the subplot will add complications to the main story problem. What could a subplot be to the above story? What if Julianne discovers that her father is seeing another woman and wants Julianne to meet her? Though Julianne objects, she ends up going to dinner with her father and his girlfriend. To Julianne's chagrin, she discovers she likes the lady. This is a definite complication to Julianne's primary problem: that her life is being completely uprooted and that she wants her family to be a whole family once more.

NOTE: In general, picture books won't contain subplots because of their short text and younger audience. However, many picture books have texts that imply sub-plots that the illustrator can then develop in the pictures. A good way to see this in action is to read several picture books where the text tells one story and the illustrations tell another (for example, *This Moose Belongs to Me* by Oliver Jeffers, and *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* by Mac Barnett, illustrated by Jon Klassen).

The character's reinvestment in solving the story's problem. What is the story's main problem? As Julianne tries to get her parents back together, she discovers that neither of them want that. She can't let that stop her. With her father seeing another woman, Julianne redoubles her efforts to reunite the two people she loves most in the world.

A dramatic midpoint. The midpoint of your story is a decision point where the MC must commit to continuing with her quest or, conversely, to abandon it. She has likely experienced both triumph and failure in striving to reach her goal; now, at the midpoint, she re-evaluates. Will she move forward or will she give up? In the example of Julianne, if she decides to keep to her goal of reuniting her parents, how will she overcome the opposing odds that align themselves against her? If she decides to give up that goal, what will she do instead? Perhaps the new goal

Writing 101...continued

is one that is a more evolved version than the first, and this is the goal she will pursue for the rest of the book.

In picture books, the midpoint may simply be your character deciding to try one more time to solve her problem, or an unexpected success after a series of failures that gives your reader the courage to keep going. It's not the full resolution of the plot, but something that signals to the reader, "I'm not giving up yet."

Build-up to the black moment. The black moment is a dramatic point in your story where your character is faced with her biggest obstacle yet, and her goal seems impossibly out of reach. It comes after your character has been trying and failing, overcoming smaller obstacles and steadfastly continuing on to the next plot point. It is usually a surprise and generally comes toward the end of the middle, though this may vary. After the black moment, the protagonist tries one last, desperate attempt to achieve her goal. In Julianne's story, the black moment arrives when her parents gently but firmly tell her that they won't be getting back together. Julianne had pinned all her hopes on this. She runs away, believing that her parents will have to reunite in order to find her.

For picture books, the black moment may simply be the last in a series of obstacles the character overcomes (but it stands out from the previous obstacles in some way), or something more subtle like a disappointment or bad luck. The black moment takes one page in the picture book, which may be a little as one line of text, and then the story turns in a new direction on the next page.

WHAT IF YOU'VE INCLUDED ALL OF THESE THINGS AND YOU FIND YOURSELF STUCK IN THE MIDDLE? WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO?

Introduce a new character. Chances are you have one or more secondary characters in your book already. Introducing a new one can shake things up. In Julianne's story, the introduction of her father's girlfriend has definitely shaken up her world.

Move the venue. Julianne's world of her home in a small town with her school and her church is suddenly moved to the big city where her father has moved. He tells her that this is his home now and that when she visits him, it will be here in the city.

Julianne doesn't like the city with its noise, pollution, and tall buildings that block the sun. Her father's apartment is cold and sterile, not at all like the cozy ranch house where her family had lived.

Deepen the conflict. This is a biggie. The conflict you introduced in your story's beginning cannot be allowed to stagnate. It must build with every page. You will not resolve the conflict during the middle of the book. Rather, you will add to it, making it more important than ever, with continually rising stakes. Julianne's conflict deepens when she realizes that her father has already moved on with his life by dating another woman and she discovers that her mother doesn't care.

Use the rule of three. Why three? The number three gives a feeling of completeness. Also, an odd number is generally more pleasing, visually and mentally, than an even one. How can you use the rule of three in your story? You can give the main character (MC) three challenges she must complete if she is to reach her goal (this is especially effective in picture books). You can introduce three new characters. In the story about Julianne, her father's girlfriend enters the story as well as her grandparents. Though Julianne loves her grandparents, she doesn't like it when they make unkind remarks about her father.

Have your character experience temporary triumph or false failure. Imagine your character overcoming every obstacle in her way in reaching her goal. She is sailing right into a victory. She reaches her goal—or she thinks she has—but then something snatches it from her grasp. Her sense of defeat is greater than ever because she was so close to achieving her goal.

WRAPPING UP

Writing a story's middle isn't easy. The excitement of starting a new project is gone; the joy of finishing the book has yet to come. You are stuck squarely in the middle. Use your imagination. Use the above techniques and others you have picked up along the way in your writing journey. Then write a middle that will surprise and delight and intrigue your readers!

For tips on writing beginnings, see *Writing 101: The Essential Elements of a Story's Beginning* in the **January 2021 issue of CBI**.



Magazine Helps Educators Connect With **LITERATURE-BASED RESOURCES**

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

If you have a background connected to education or the library, you may consider writing for *Book Links*, which is a quarterly supplement to *Booklist*, the subscription review journal of the American Library Association. *Book Links* magazine is designed for teachers, youth librarians, school library media specialists, reading specialists, curriculum coordinators, and others interested in connecting children with high-quality literature-based resources. *Book Links* articles provide comprehensive information on using books in the classroom, including thematic bibliographies with related discussion questions and activities, author and illustrator interviews and essays, and articles by educators on practical ways to turn children on to reading.

Here, we meet Associate Editor Maggie Reagan who will share with us how to write for this evolving publication.



SHARON BLUMBERG:

Could you please tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to hold your current position of Associate Editor in the Books for Youth Department for *Book Links*?

MAGGIE REAGAN: I started at *Booklist* as an editorial assistant in 2014, helping to process children's books for review. Eventually, I started to take a more active role in the production of *Book Links*. Currently, I oversee the publication from its editorial planning stages through to its final layout, and work closely with the freelance contributors.

SB: How do readers find your magazine? Subscription, newsstand, etc.?

MR: *Book Links* is a quarterly supplement that is packaged with *Booklist* magazine, the review journal of the American Library Association. Subscribers to *Booklist* receive an issue of *Book Links* four times a year, generally with a September, November, January, and April issue of *Booklist*. It's also available online as a digital publication.

SB: Could you please tell us a little bit about *Book Links* Magazine? What type of audience reads it?

MR: *Book Links* was founded in 1990 by former *Booklist* editor Barbara Elleman. Its target audience is teachers, school librarians, and other educators; it provides teaching resources for the K–8 classroom centered around both recently published and backlist books. Generally, the content consists of two main feature types: Classroom Connections, or annotated bibliographies on a specific subject, and Books and Authors, generally an interview with an author, librarian, or publishing professional accompanied by teaching activities or additional resources. Each issue is developed around a specific theme aligned with teaching standards (e.g. STEM, social studies, language arts).

SB: What kind of background do your contributors need to have?

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MR: Since our target audience is so specific, it's helpful for our feature writers to have some sort of background either in education or in libraries. We have contributors who work in academic fields, some who work as teachers or school librarians, and others who work in public libraries. For all contributors, a knowledge of children's books (and an interest in these stories) is also a must.

SB: What is the best way for writers to submit to your magazine?

MR: We're always accepting pitches! If someone has an idea for a feature that they think would be a good fit for us, they're welcome to send it to me at mreagan@ala.org along with a brief bio. We encourage everyone who is interested in writing for us to familiarize themselves with the types of features we publish and our general format (examples can be found on www.booklistonline.com/issues)

SB: How do you respond to writers' submissions?

MR: Though we aren't able to respond to all submissions, if we think your pitch is a good match for us, we'll be in touch.

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

MR: *Booklist* owns the rights to all our content—we don't purchase rights from writers the way a publisher does. We contract with all our feature writers on a freelance work-for-hire basis, and the rest of our content is written by in-house staff.

SB: Is there anything else that I have not asked you, that you would like to add?

MR: While *Book Links* focuses on the K–8 classroom, we're always evolving as a publication—currently, we're exploring ways to include content for teen librarians, as well as incorporating more features on remote and digital learning. We're so grateful for everyone who continues to engage with our content during these difficult times!

