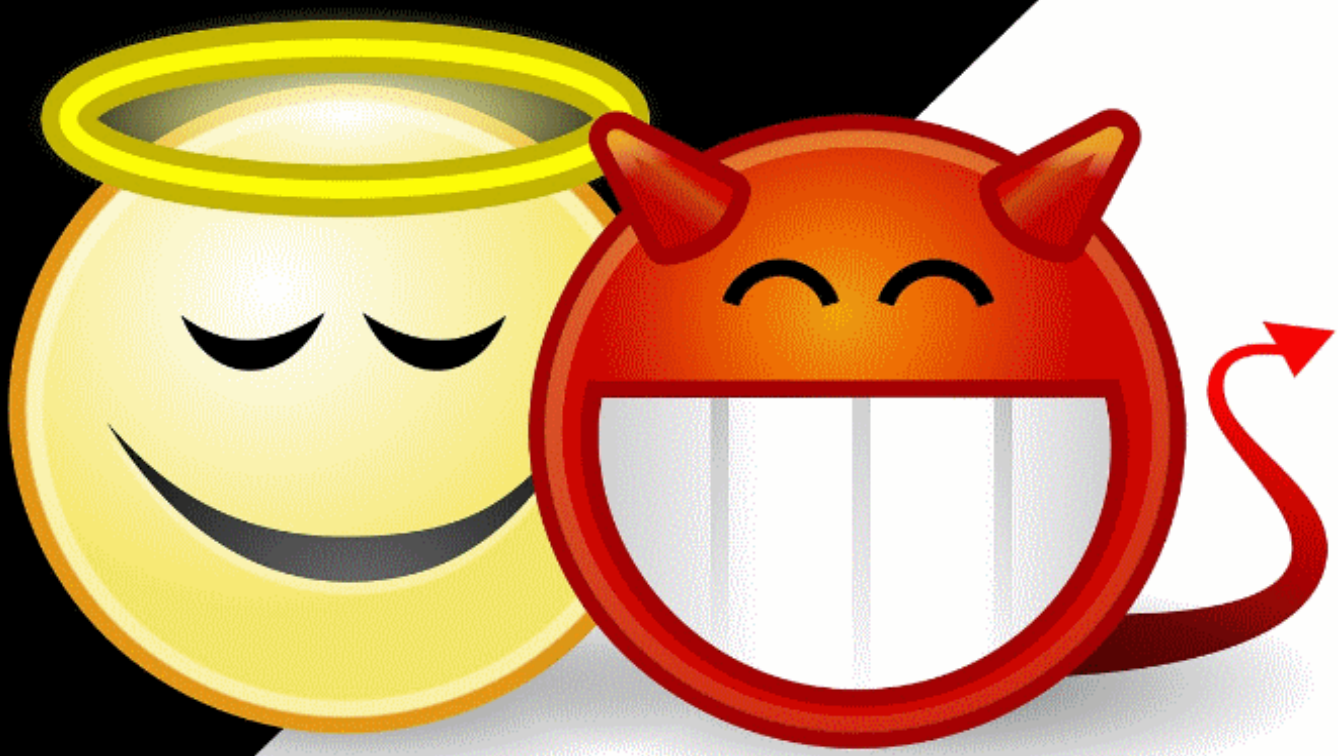
Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly | December 2021



CRAFTING THE ANTI-HERO

ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE SUBMISSION CODE

Table of contents

At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests....2

Genre Spotlight: Defining Magical Realism
by Jean Daigneau....4

Editor Spotlight: Wiley Blevins, Associate Publisher of Reycraft Books
interview by Lynne Marie....7

Writing Workshop: Scenes and Point-of-View—How They Can Play Nicely
by Jane McBride....12

Featured Interview: Persistence Pays for Children's Author Debra Kempf Shumaker
interview by PJ McIlvaine....15

Writing Workshop: Creating the Anti-Hero
by Jane McBride....18

Bonus Interview: Glenda Armand: Writer, Teacher, Librarian
interview by Sharon O. Blumberg....20

This issue's contributors

Jean Daigneau is the author of *Code Cracking for Kids* and *Ellis Island and Immigration for Kids: A History with 21 Actives*, both from Chicago Review Press. She's been published in newspapers and magazines, including *Highlights* and *Fun for Kidz*, and her work has appeared in *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writers' and Illustrators' Market*. She is a former regional and assistant regional advisor for SCBWI Ohio North and currently serves on the executive board. She runs Two-4-One Kid Critiques with author Gloria Adams.

Sharon O. Blumberg is a recently retired school teacher, having taught Spanish and English for over 20 years. In addition, she is a children's writer and voiceover artist. Her voiceover website and additional bio can be found at: **www.sharonoblumbergauthor.com**

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**

Jane McBride is the author of 38 novels (writing as Jane McBride Choate), numerous short stories and articles including pieces in 16 *Chicken Soup for the Soul* anthologies, and the CBI Managing Editor. See her Amazon Author Page at **http://bit.ly/JaneMcBrideChoate**

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**

Published 12 times/year by Children's Book Insider, LLC,
mail@CBIClubhouse.com
http://www.writeforkids.org

ISSN 1073-7596

Publisher: Laura Backes
Layout: Shellie Dougherty
Editor/Agent Spotlight Editor: Lynne Marie
Genre Spotlight: Jean Diagneau
Featured Interviews: PJ McIlvaine
Chief Operations Officer: Jon Bard

Children's Book Insider, The Children's Writing Monthly is an electronic monthly newsletter that is included in the paid membership to the Children's Writing Knowledge Base (http://www.CBIClubhouse.com). The cost of membership is $49.95 per year, or $5.49 per month if billed monthly. For more information, go to http://writeforkids.org/come-join-the-insiders/

Children's Book Insider makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses and literary agents before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers or agents with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. All "At Presstime" listings are current at the time of initial publication. Members are urged to verify listings past the month of publication.

At Presstime:

Independent Publisher Seeking Submissions from Diverse Authors and Illustrators

Levine Querido is an independent publisher established in April 2019 by Arthur A. Levine (former President and Publisher of the Arthur A. Levine imprint at Scholastic) with a focus on publishing the writing and artwork of authors and creators from underrepresented backgrounds, including people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, Latinx creators, indigenous artists and writers, creators with disabilities, members of minority religions, and more. Looking for books that have great storytelling, undeniably powerful and beautiful artwork, and a fearless commitment to telling deep truths, as well as authentic emotion and original ideas or perspectives. Debut authors and illustrators are welcome. For current titles, go to **www.levinequerido.com/books**.

Accepting picture books (by authors and author/illustrators), chapter books, graphic novels for ages 8 and up, and middle grade and young adult fiction and nonfiction. Send a query and full manuscript for picture books, a query and synopsis with two chapters for longer works. All work should be submitted online through Submittable at **levinequerido.submittable.com/submit** (the submission form for each category of manuscript or illustrations will specify what needs to be submitted). Note: If you are met with the message "There are presently no open calls for submissions," that means the monthly limit on queries has been reached. Please wait until the first day of the next month to submit your query. Tries to respond to all queries within six months.

Query letter writing tips from the publisher: A query letter is a one-page description of your manuscript that illuminates its strengths and captures our interest. What is your manuscript about? Why would a reader turn to your book? What makes it original or memorable? Try to answer these questions in a way that reveals the character of your writing and gives us the overall feel of the manuscript. (Often good queries sound like jacket copy, the text on the inside front flap or back cover of a book, or the descriptions found in publishers' catalogs.) Don't think of a query as a form to fill out—your letter should be as individual as the book it describes and the author it introduces. Consider it an opportunity to make an impression, to introduce your work to readers who might enjoy it. And don't forget to proofread your letter thoroughly before sending it!

Publisher Accepting Picture Book Submissions with Universal Themes

Flashlight Press is an independent publisher of fictional picture books. Accepting manuscripts under 1000 words targeted to children 4-8 years old with universal themes, that deal with family or social situations. All submissions must fit with Flashlight's current list, which can be found here: **flashlightpress.com/our-books** All submissions must be sent by email, in the following format: 1) Email Subject: Query for [title of your manuscript]. 2) The body of your email should list each of these elements: Title of Story; Word Count; Target Age; Subject or Theme of story (1-5 words); Summary (3 sentences or less); Your Name; Occupation; City, State, Country; If you have been published previously, list titles, publishers, and pub dates; Anything else you'd like to add. 3) Attach your manuscript as a .doc, .docx, or PDF. Email the query to **submissions@flashlightpress.com** Within a week, you should receive an automated reply that your submission has been received. If the publisher is interested, they will contact you within three months.

2022 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer/Illustrator Awards Open to Books Published in 2021

Two awards of $5000 each will be given to a new writer and new illustrator for picture books written and illustrated in the tradition of Ezra Jack Keats that highlight the universal qualities of childhood and the strength of the family; reflect the multicultural nature of our world; have an original text and original art (no folk tales or retellings of folk tales); unify illustrations and text; avoid stereotypes; are respectful of the child's intelligence, sensitivity, curiosity, and love of learning; and display freshness and originality of language and literary expression (for writer), or demonstrate excellent command of the chosen medium and display freshness and originality in style (for illustrator). To be eligible, the author or illustrator will have no more than three children's books previously published. The book submitted for the award must have a 2021 copyright date. Self-published books are not eligible for the award. For information on how to submit books to the awards committee, go to **degrummond.org/ezra-jack-keats-book-award-guidelin** **Entries must be postmarked by December 31, 2021.**

Nonfiction World Cultures Magazine Seeks Submissions for Ages 9-14

FACES is a nonfiction magazine on world cultures and geography for ages 9-14. Lively, original approaches to the subject are the primary concerns of the editors in choosing material. Writers are encouraged to study recent past copies for content and style. (Sample copies are available for viewing at the Cricket Store, where you can also purchase a current issue.) All material must relate to the theme of a specific upcoming edition in order to be considered (themes and deadlines given below). FACES purchases all rights to material.

Seeking QUERIES ONLY for **Feature Articles** of 700–800 words (in-depth nonfiction highlighting an aspect of the featured culture, interviews, and personal accounts); **Supplemental Nonfiction** of 300–600 words (subjects directly and indirectly related to the theme. Editors like little-known information but encourage writers not to overlook the obvious.); **Fiction** to 800 words (retold legends, folktales, stories, and original plays from around the world, etc., relating to the theme); **Activities** up to 700 words (crafts, games, recipes, projects, etc., which children can do either alone or with adult supervision. Should be accompanied by sketches and description of how activity relates to theme.); and **Puzzles and Games** (No crossword puzzles. Word puzzles using the vocabulary of the edition's theme. Mazes and picture puzzles that relate to the theme.)

Submit a query for each individual idea (multiple queries can be submitted at the same time) that includes a brief cover letter stating the subject and word length of the proposed article; a detailed one-page outline explaining the information to be presented in the article; an extensive bibliography of materials the author intends to use in preparing the article; and a 2-3 sentence author biography. Authors are urged to use primary resources and up-to-date scholarly resources in their bibliography. Writers new to FACES should send a writing sample with the query. If you would like to know whether your query has been received, please indicate in your subject line with "RESPONSE REQUESTED." **Email queries to: faces@cricketmedia.com.**

Note: Queries may be submitted at any time, but queries sent well in advance of deadline may not be answered for several months. Requests for material proposed in queries are usually sent five months prior to publication date. Due to the volume of submissions received, unused queries will not be acknowledged.

Open FACES 2022 Issue Themes (and query deadlines)

- April: Spring (celebrations/folktales/cultural events). Queries by: December 13, 2021
- May/June: Capturing the World on Film (iconic images). Queries by: January 10, 2022
- July/August: Hot and Cold (hottest and coldest places on the planet). Queries by: February 14, 2022
- September: Sweden. Queries by: March 21, 2022
- October: Snakes. Queries by: April 18, 2022
- November/December. Chile. Queries by: May 23, 2022

Independent Publisher Accepting Nonfiction Picture Books, Chapter Books and YA

Tilbury House is a 40-year-old independent publisher that produces books for adults and children. Their primary focus in children's books is on nonfiction picture books (500-1000 words) that appeal to children ages 3-10 and their parents, that have solid learning content for the education market and strong popular appeal for the national and international bookstore trade. Picture book texts for the younger end (ages 3-5) should be under 800 words. Also interested in picture books that explore cultural diversity and nature and the environment, as well as history, biography, and science and engineering picture books. Good back matter and accompanying teacher's guides/classroom connections are useful adjuncts to nonfiction picture books. Will also consider nonfiction chapter books and graphic nonfiction for middle grade readers (ages 8–13), and nonfiction for young adult readers (YA, age 12+). See **www.tilburyhouse.com/children** for current titles.

Manuscripts and illustration portfolios may be submitted online at **www.tilburyhouse.com/submissions** (scroll down to see submission forms). You can also find instructions to submit by mail at the same link. Due to the number of submissions received, responds only to submissions of interest within 6 months.

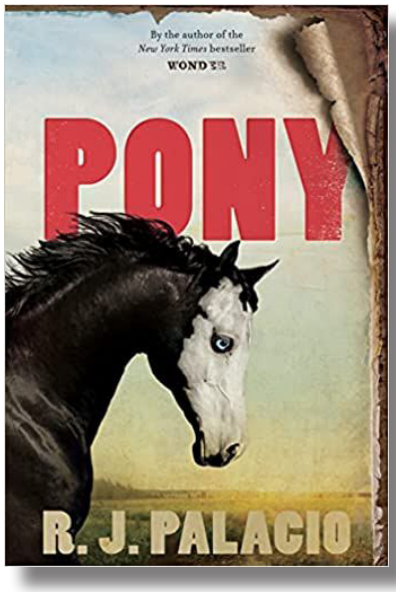
Defining Magical Realism

by Jean Daigneau

It's easy to get buried in a great sci-fi or fantasy read, especially when the dishes need washed, the car has a flat, and the laundry is piling up. But another genre that also works as an escape magnet is magical realism. I'll admit that while I've read in this genre, without putting a name to it, I really had no idea what it was. Let's find out more.

A Genre with a Long History

The term magic realism, later changed to magical realism, was first used by a German art critic to describe a popular German art style in the 1920s. The term gained prominence in 1935, when Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges penned a collection of short stories whose translated title is *A Universal History of Infamy*.



The genre took on a more political meaning when Latin American authors and others used it as a commentary on society, particularly to showcase cultures oppressed by Western civilizations. Writers of other nationalities, including American-born British-American author Salman Rushdie and Japanese author Haruki Murakami, are also masters of this realm.

So What Exactly is It?

It's understandable to grab onto the word "magical" and compare this genre to fantasy, especially with all the latter's sub-genres today. But there are a number of distinctions between magical realism and any sub genre of fantasy, though the two are sometimes confused.

Magical realism stories occur in the real world. You won't find dragons, wizards, and gnomes here. Typically, the magical element of these books is limited to one or two phenomena that have no rational explanation. In R. J. Palacio's middle grade novel *Pony*, the main character Silas's companion is a ghost named Mittenwool. There's no explanation for why this ghost assumes an important role, and even less explanation as to why Silas has accepted him as a companion since childhood. To Silas's father, Mittenwool is his son's imaginary friend. To Silas, he just is.

In magical realism, the character connected to the otherworldly happening takes it totally in stride. She makes no attempt to reject or explain it. There's no rational reason for the magical element to be there and there doesn't need to be. But sometimes, it's the readers who have to suspend belief, even more so because of the real world elements that dominate these stories.

Often the characters are ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. The magical element, at least for them, is part of that ordinariness. The

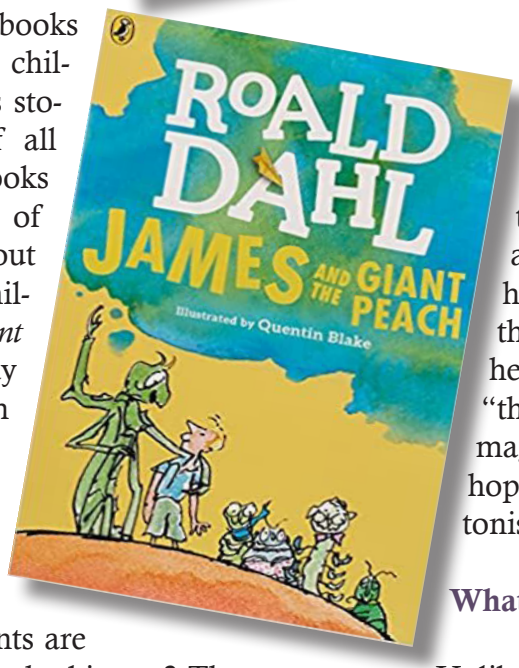
Magical Realism…continued

magic seems to occur almost organically, as do beliefs taken from stories some of us grew up with based on folklore. Many of these stories have some connection to those tales.

As author Gabriel Garcia Márquez stated, "Magical realism arises out of tales told to children by the Grandmothers as if the events occurred. Because the Grandmothers believed they did." Sometimes these stories exhibit a harmony with nature or at the least a respect for it, which is also the basis of tales from many cultures.

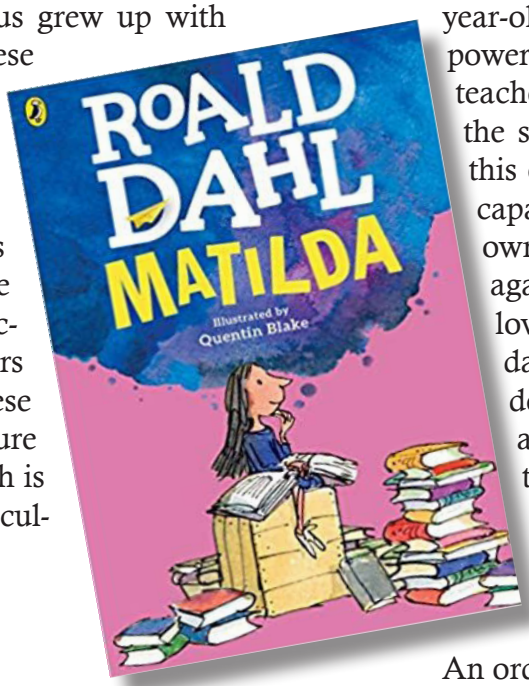
An Author That Feels Familiar

Many of us have probably read books by British author Roald Dahl as children or to our own children. His stories have entertained readers of all ages for decades, although his books have been panned for a number of reasons that you can read about elsewhere. But, in fact, his first children's book, *James and the Giant Peach*, celebrated its 60th birthday this year and still resonates with kids today.



From the start, the magical elements inform the reader that something unusual is going to take place. After all, James' parents are eaten by a rhinoceros. Aren't they herbivores? The rhinos, not the parents. Living a miserable and lonely life, James receives a bag of magic green crystals, which he accidentally drops at the base of a peach tree. The resulting gigantic peach gives James the opportunity to befriend a group of anthropomorphic insects, but also to escape his life of drudgery and cruelty at the hands of his two aunts.

In Dahl's *Matilda*, Matilda Wormwood is a five-year-old who discovers she has the power of telekinesis. The fact that she teaches herself to read at age 3 plants the seed for the reader early on that this otherwise ordinary girl might be capable of extraordinary things. Her own traumatic childhood is played against the dire straits of her beloved teacher Miss Honey. Matilda uses the skillset learned from dealing with her own childhood along with her magical powers to turn the tables on Miss Honey's nemesis, the headmistress Miss Trunchbull. One simple, unexplained magical power makes everything right with the world. An ordinary, real world.



What resonates in these and many books involving magical realism is the hopefulness the reader embraces at the end. While the main character still might live a somewhat ordinary life, things have changed dramatically and for the better. According to Kate Bernheimer, author, critiquer, and editor, "the so-called magic may be the least magical thing in the story: survival or hope may be the most remarkable, astonishing thing."

What About the Rules?

Unlike a fantasy world, where there are specific rules that are followed, magical realism doesn't have any. That said, there are certain conventions that apply to many, but not all, books in this genre.

- The setting is always real.
- Typically, there are one or two magical elements

Magical Realism...continued

in the story, but the magic is not what the story is about. It's the magic within the story that makes it work. By limiting the unbelievable, it becomes more believable.

- Time is often circular and not linear. There's a sense that what happened could certainly happen again.

- Like Dahl's stories, it's sometimes people in positions of power or authority who not only impact the main character, but are often the ones who are at the receiving end of the magic component.

- The reader might wonder how the magic can happen; the main character doesn't question it in the least.

- Elements of folklore or even tales from childhood, like the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, can inform these stories and can appear as believable as any other aspect of real life. Sherman Alexie drew on his Native American culture in his acclaimed adult novel *Reservation Blues*.

- While characters lead ordinary lives, they are hardly one-dimensional. The magical element worked seamlessly into the character's life makes for more well-rounded characters.

- Unlike more conventional stories, magic realism books don't always have clear beginnings, middles, or ends or typical arcs. Then, too, the ending sometimes allows for a few loose ends.

Embrace the Magic

Magical realism might seem like a totally new genre that appears daunting to tackle. But if you have a good, solid story in the making, why not give your character the power to levitate or to see through walls? Who knows what possibilities might open up?

There are a number of great books that incorporate magical realism. Here are a few to get you started.

The Book of Form and Emptiness: A Novel by Ruth Ozeki

The Mysterious Disappearance of Aidan S. (as told to his brother) by David Levithan

The Wide Starlight by Nicole Lesperance

The Ten Thousand Doors of January by Alix Harrow

Sing, Unburied, Sing; A Novel by Jesmyn Ward

Bob by Wendy Mass and Rebecca Stead

Wiley Blevins

Associate Publisher

REYCRAFT BOOKS

interview by Lynne Marie

Wiley Blevins is a multi-published author (www.wileyblevins.com), reading specialist who holds an Ed.M. from Harvard, and the former Vice President of Macmillan/McGraw Hill, as well as the former Editorial Director for Scholastic. He has taught elementary school in both the U.S. and South America and has published over 16 books for teachers. He currently is Associate Publisher at Reycraft Books and a Literacy Consultant for Benchmark Education. Wiley has written over 90 children's books, including *Trevor Lee and the Big Uh-Oh!*

LYNNE MARIE: I want to thank you for sharing your time and expertise with us this month — it's a wonderful holiday gift to our subscribers! As someone who gravitates to reading stories from all the world's cultures and who has their own collection of Reycraft Books, I really appreciate Reycraft's varied and ever-expanding collection of cultural stories. How would you describe the type of stories you seek?

WILEY BLEVINS: We are focused on publishing books by authors and illustrators from under-represented communities and want to give them a space to tell their stories authentically. It means that we have an expansive view of storytelling. Many cultures tell stories in different ways, and we want to share these stories with our readers. While our stories often focus on common childhood experiences, it is important that they retain the truth and vision of the storyteller. We like to challenge the way people look at diversity and storytelling.

LM: If you were to choose five words to encompass what you are looking for in a Reycraft book, what would they be?

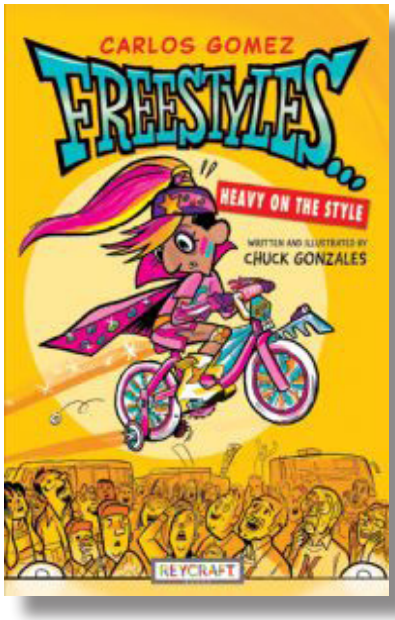
WB: authentic, engaging, beautifully-written with emotional impact

LM: Please share some of the various main characters you have introduced to readers so far, as well as any you would love to share in the future.

WB: We are most proud when we can create something new. Our Max and Friends series is the first transitional chapter book series to feature a trans main character. This series, written by National Book Award finalist Kyle Lukoff and illustrated by Luciano Lozano, features a trans boy named Max and his two best friends having typical childhood adventures that all children can relate to. They just happen to be characters you have never seen in books before. Our Powwow Mystery series by the uber-prolific Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac and illustrated by Dine artist Dale Deforest, is the first transitional chapter book series featuring contemporary Native American children. Our JLG Gold Standard selection graphic novel *Carlos Gomez Freestyles* introduces a boy whose family is the only Mexican-American family in their small Midwestern town. It is a provocative look at his life, but filled with humor and love. Our SLJ Best Book of the Year *The Woodpecker Girl* introduces the reader to a real-life girl with cerebral palsy who became a renowned artist. It is a beautiful and painfully true look at her struggles. These are the characters our readers will remember long after they close our books. These are the kinds of characters we like to introduce our readers to.

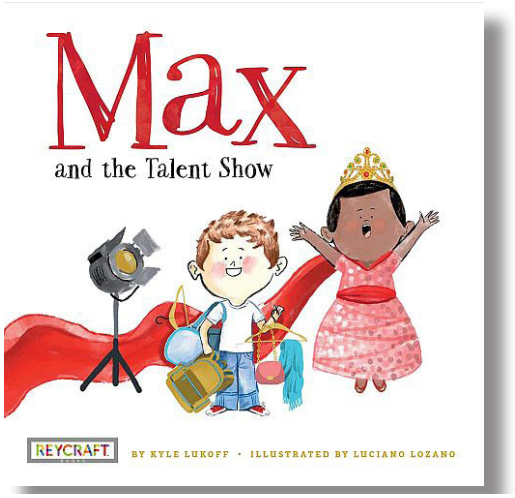
Wiley Blevins...continued

LM: Please define universal appeal for those who struggle with that aspect of character/plot. If possible, share an example of what drew you to one or two of these characters, as well as discuss their appeal.



WB: My dad used to say that people all over the country and world were more the same than different. We all value family, love, and tradition. We all seek happiness and security. We all tell stories and love to be entertained. The things that make us a bit different are the things that make us interesting. So, while the main characters in *Max and the Talent Show* are a trans boy and a boy who sometimes wears dresses, the story is really about friendship--a sweet friendship that all children desire and can relate to. It elevates above the things in the story that might be different from a reader's everyday experiences. It highlights our shared humanity. That's universal appeal to me.

LM: What is your process for vetting submissions? [i.e., Do you read the cover letter first and then the beginning of the manuscript? Or, do you read the manuscript until you lose interest (hopefully to the end) and then maybe or maybe not the cover letter?] How important is previous publishing experience to you?



WB: Writers will hate to hear this, but we don't read the cover letter unless we are interested in the book and need to contact the author or need more information about the writer's connection to the story. There are two big problems with cover letters: 1. They often over-promise and when we read the manuscript we are disappointed. 2. There are so many templates and classes about cover letters that they now all feel the same. Nothing stands out, so they have little impact. As I tell our writers, we don't publish cover letters; we publish books. Focus your time on revising your book. Keep the cover letter short and simple: name, contact info, your connection to the story. Also, we accept unsolicited manuscripts because we want to discover new talent. We have an editor who is focused on talent development. If we get a manuscript that we are intrigued by, but it's not ready yet for submission we will sometimes reach out to the writer and see if he or she will work with our talent development editor to see where we can take the manuscript together. We also know that new writers need more time going through the publishing process. It is long and sometimes confusing. Things feel like they are sitting for a long time. It can take weeks for a book to go through the contract process with the legal team. It can take months to find an illustrator, then months of waiting to get on the illustrator's schedule. Also, books have to be done about six months before their pub date to be sent to reviewers and so on. All of this can make little sense to a writer who is unfamiliar with the process. A writer often has expectations about the process that are different from reality. Picture book authors are always surprised that the book is really half the illustrators. They cannot direct the illustrator or the in-house designers. It can be challenging for new writers to give over that control of their stories and trust the process. There is a huge team in a publishing house with experience and the desire to make their book the best possible. It might not look like what you picture in your mind when you turn it in (in fact, mine rarely do), but that's part of the process and part of what makes it exciting--when your manuscript comes to life and becomes something even greater than you could have ever imagined.

LM: What are some instances that might cause you to stop reading or lose interest in a query, cover letter or manuscript? What are the essential items that you want to see in a query/cover letter? What do you consider yourself to be most picky about?

WB: The two biggest reasons we stop reading a manuscript are (1) we have no emotional response to the story and (2) it feels like something we have already

seen before. We read so many manuscripts that are well-written, but lack an emotional arc. We just don't feel what we need to feel; it's emotionally flat. The book *The Emotional Craft of Fiction* by Donald Maass should be required reading by all writers. Also, taking the extra time to elevate specific word choices can help. We read storylines that are familiar and filled with common ways of saying things. A few early sentences with descriptions that feel fresh and exciting can really cause us to sit up and read on. Writers really need to think about each part of their story and how they can tell it in a way that is unique to them—not like what they've read before. Avoid those cliche ways of describing things. Also, trust your reader. Too many writers show then tell just to make sure their reader gets it. It is a big red flag for an editor when a writer doesn't trust their reader to make even the most basic inferences. Kids are smart. They get it. Just show or just tell, but don't do both to make the same point. For example, if your character throws a book and stomps his foot you don't then need to tell the reader he's angry. Too many writers do this. The last big issue is that we sometimes get stories by writers that are clearly adults trying to remember what it was like to be a child of a certain age. These don't ring true and we stop reading. If your main character is eight years old, you need to fully inhabit the mind, heart, and soul of an eight-year-old and never slip in that adult perspective.

LM: How interested are you in social media platform or a marketing strategy from an author? Comp titles? What do you feel is the most important consideration for taking on an author, apart from a book that you think you can sell.

WB: Comp titles—not at all. We want some stories for which there are no comp titles. We want to break new ground. Also, a writer doesn't need a social media presence. That's our job to get the book in kids' hands. We love it when a writer or illustrator has ideas and does things like school visits, but it's not required and not a consideration when acquiring a book. Do what you feel comfortable doing. You don't need to do anything else. I will say, however, that if you are on social media we will look at your profile and postings. How you carry yourself on social media can be a topic of conversation when we discuss your book.

LM: Can you share a tip or two you may have for holding an editor's interest in a query/cover letter? In a manuscript?

WB: Surprise us. Excite us. Be yourself and write in your own unique way. Break the rules.

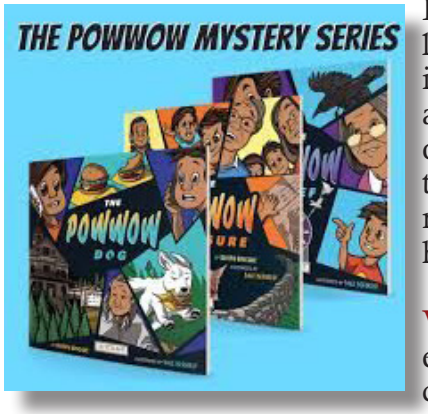
LM: What are your thoughts about word count? What should writers be striving for as far as word count and words per spread count? What are your thoughts on pagination and art notes? If yes to pagination, would one typically start on Page 2/3 and end on Page 32?

WB: We never count words in picture books. Never. This obsession with word count has caused writers to take an emotionally rich and full story and strip out the heart so that what is left are just the bones by the time we get it. So, we don't feel anything and we pass on the manuscript. While it is true that many picture book manuscripts are overwritten, tell your story completely. We can help you trim what really needs to be trimmed during the editing and art process. I am a STRONG advocate of pagination. While we might alter the pagination, how can you know that your picture book works in terms of pacing and page turns if you don't paginate? You can't. I also think the "no pagination" rule has led writers down the wrong path. During your writing process make sure your picture book can work in the traditional 32-page format. You can begin on page 3 or the first full available spread (pages 4-5). That's your choice. When we get a manuscript that is not paginated, the first thing we HAVE to do is paginate it to see if it works. If it doesn't, it's an automatic pass. Don't send an editor something that is easy to pass on. Make it difficult for us to say "no." Regarding art notes—you are not the illustrator so they are not needed unless there is a visual joke or something that needs to be in the art that might be unclear to the editor or artist from just the text. So, only include them sparingly and when necessary for understanding. When I get a manuscript with lots of art notes it's a huge red flag. It usually means the writer wants to micromanage the art process, which isn't what will happen. That means the writer will most likely be disappointed if the main character's hair isn't red like her daughter's hair or the dress isn't blue like she imagined it. It makes for a challenging work relationship on the book and can be a reason to pass on the manuscript.

LM: What types of projects do you work on at Reycraft? How many books do you roll out each season? Will you be expanding in the future? Which genre will you be focusing on most, if any?

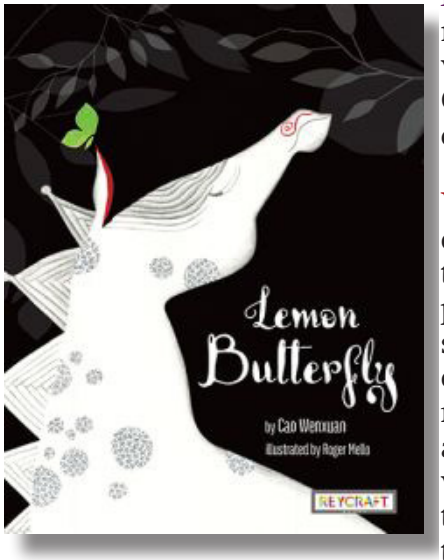
Wiley Blevins...continued

WB: We aim for 100 books a year and would love to grow beyond that. As Associate Publisher I read everything and follow all of them through the process. Some books have other lead editors, but I also am involved. We don't get enough unique nonfiction submissions (most are more appropriate for the school library market--very straightforward, which isn't what we are looking for) and we don't get enough chapter book and middle grade novel submissions. I would love more submissions from writers who are taking creative risks. Don't hold back.



LM: How important do you think "heart" is as a component to the story? Name some books on your list that are good examples of books with heart.

WB: Essential. Most books have a strong story arc, but few have a strong enough emotional arc. We have to feel something. So do our readers. It's what you feel that sticks with you long after you finish the book. Heart sells!



LM: Regarding phonics, please share your definition of accountable text and how it helps children to read. Can you share some better known examples of effective accountable texts?

WB: Accountable text is a term I coined to describe the role of text in early reading. A text must hold students accountable for their learning. So, there needs to be a close match between the phonics skills and high-frequency words children are taught and the beginning stories they read. This accelerates their mastery of these skills so they can then transfer them to all reading and writing situations. These books also hold the teacher accountable. If I teach X, then give my students books to practice X and they struggle, it tells me I need to re-evaluate my instruction to better meet my students' needs. As students learn more and more skills, these more controlled texts become less and less important and we can wean students off them and into less controlled texts. Some students will start to self-wean even earlier if we give them the tools and the understanding of how the English sound-spelling system works.

LM: What is the role you play in Benchmark Education? Are you also looking for authors and/or illustrators in that capacity? If so, share a little bit about what your needs are. How would one go about being considered for this type of opportunity? Please share submission info if any, and if looking to hire.

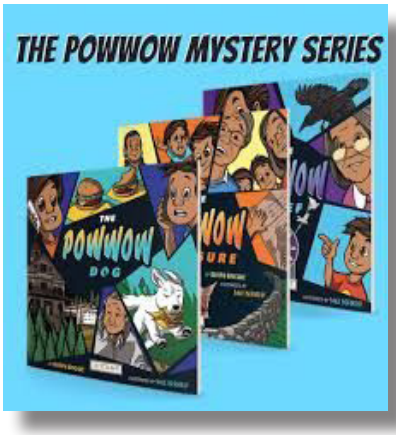
WB: Benchmark Education is a large educational publisher and is the sister company of Reycraft Books. They also create hundreds of original titles each year. These books are written on spec (given to the writers) and are included in their instructional programs and resources. They are always looking for writers and illustrators. This is fast, work-for-hire type work. Writers can submit resumes, writing samples, and so on directly to Benchmark Education, located in New Rochelle, NY.

LM: To expand its reach in the global marketplace, Reycraft has partnered with the China Press & Publication Group. What does this mean for Reycraft authors?

WB: We have partnered with publishers around the world to bring books to the United States. It has helped us provide books with a more expansive view of storytelling. It has also enabled us to work with award-winning authors and illustrators from around the globe. The quality of their work is amazing and we are thrilled to share their stories with children in the United States. It has also clearly established our quality bar. We want beautifully-written and beautifully-illustrated books. One reviewer commented that our book *Lemon Butterfly* "redefined the potential of picture book art." It is perhaps the greatest compliment we could have received.

LM: What do you see too much of in your inbox? What don't you see enough of? Do you have any particular wants on your wishlist? Any themes you would like to see?

Wiley Blevins...continued



WB: We always want everything. Right now we need more LatinX submissions, more chapter books and middle grade novels, more funny books, more everything really. Send us anything you think we might be interested in. We don't publish books designed solely to "teach a lesson" or that are overly didactic.

LM: Editors (and agents) often receive submissions that are not "submission-ready." What advice do you have for our readers in making absolutely certain that their manuscripts are ripe?

WB: Very true. We often write back that a book isn't ready "yet" and try to give some piece of advice to work on to get it there. This is a tough one. Writers really need to find a community of other writers who can give them targeted feedback. It's not easy finding the right group or right person to help. Some writers don't have the money or aren't in an area where that is possible. That is why we have an editor focused on talent development and are looking at ways to get resources to writers to help them polish their manuscripts before they submit them. There is a LOT of raw talent out there that just needs a little guidance to take it to the next level. We are working on helping with that. We hope to have some free and inexpensive online modules next year for writers that focus on precise aspects of manuscripts that often need work. More to come . . .

LM: What are your feelings about writing to trends? Do you have any tips for writers about how to determine whether a book is evergreen or overdone?

WB: Hmmm . . . only write the story you want to tell. I usually hear that by the time a trend becomes noticed, it's on its way out. It takes years after acquisition to publish a book, so the trend might very well be over by the time you write and get your book published that addresses that trend. It doesn't seem like a good way to write. Simply write YOUR story. It's true that trends can open doors, like the emergence of more graphic novel titles. So it's good to at least be aware of them. Interestingly, we tend to get manuscripts around similar concepts or topics or genres at the same time. For example, we started getting a ton of submissions with kids cooking with their grandmothers. We acquired one by Geisel award-winner Kelly Starling Lyons (called *Grandmother's Hands*), so were unable to acquire others. I think some trends emerge naturally and run their course. I'd rather start a trend than follow one!

LM: Describe a recent acquisition and what drew you to it.

WB: Given the past few years, I was desperate for something funny. An escape. However, we were getting NO humorous manuscripts. Then one week I got two by Ed Masessa. They were laugh-out-loud funny. One, called *Snowman's Big Adventure*, just came out and I am thrilled kids will have something that will make them giggle! They need it.

Wiley Blevins is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to CBI subscribers. Go to Reycraft's Submission Page on their website and, after studying the guidelines, click on the Manuscript submission button. In the "Organization/Affiliation" field, put the code "**2021-12 CBI/WB—as per Blevins' interview in Children's Book Insider**". There is no deadline for submissions.

---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)
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript.

Scenes and Point-of-View

How They Can Play Nicely

by Jane McBride

We've talked about structuring scenes in previous articles and know that scenes are units of action. In this article, we're going to delve deeper and talk about the interaction of scenes and point-of-view (POV).

What does POV have to do with setting up and ending a scene? My editor is strict about having only one POV per scene. When the POV ends, so does the scene. New York Times selling authors can get away with two (or twenty) POVs per scene or chapter. The rest of us probably need to stick to the rules.

Let's take a look at a scene from a book aimed at upper middle grade readers:

The set-up: Twelve-year-old Joanie is surprised to have been invited to a slumber party thrown by the most popular girl in seventh grade. She assumes it's because her mom works with the girl's mother, but she still sees this as her opportunity to raise her social status beyond "invisible." The only problem is that Madison will be at the party as well. Though Madison and Joanie were close friends in elementary school, they drifted apart in middle school when Madison became popular and Joanie was left behind. That wouldn't be so bad, but Madison has made it her mission to put down Joanie whenever she can. At the party, Joanie discovers she's been tricked, invited only because the girls want to make fun of her.

Here's the ending of a scene where Joanie has been teased unmercifully by the other girls. The teasing is instigated by Madison, who does her best to make Joanie feel ugly and stupid.

The girls laughed, some politely behind their hands, others openly. But Joanie knew. They were laughing at her. They were always laughing at her. She'd hoped, oh, how she'd hoped, that tonight would be different.

But it wasn't.

Madison slid her a sly look and smiled, just enough to let Joanie know that she was enjoying the show.

Joanie tugged on her bottom lip with her teeth. If she bit down hard enough, maybe she wouldn't cry and humiliate herself in front of the other girls. If she bit down hard enough, maybe she could make her lip bleed and that would give her an excuse to leave the party. If she bit down hard enough, maybe she could forget the pain caused by Madison's hurtful words.

If.

In this scene, we know Joanie's intimate thoughts and feelings. What's more, we feel with her. Do you notice that though the other girls' actions were observed, it was done through Joanie's POV? Never did we slip into another POV, even that of the odious Madison.

Let's try it again, this time including both Joanie's and Madison's POV.

(Joanie's POV):

The girls laughed, some politely behind their hands, other openly. But Joanie knew. They were laughing at her.

They were always laughing at her. She'd hoped, oh, how she'd hoped, that tonight would be different.

But it wasn't.

(Scene continues in Madison's POV):

Madison couldn't be seen laughing openly at Joanie. That wouldn't do. She had to appear sympathetic. So she made her way over to Joanie and slid her arm around her one-time friend's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding not sorry at all. "I didn't think the girls would laugh because you brought your stuffed bear."

"You're not sorry," Joanie said, shrugging off Madison's arm. "You're not sorry at all."

Madison raised her eyebrows in mock horror. "Of course, I'm sorry." She looked to her friends in appeal, letting them know that she'd tried and been rebuffed. She smiled to herself, knowing that she would come off as the compassionate friend and that Joanie would appear selfish and childish for not accepting the overture of friendship.

(Back to Joanie's POV):

Joanie rushed out of the room and fumbled in her backpack for her phone. She called her mother. Please pick up, she begged silently. I need to go home.

Did you notice the words that sent the reader into Madison's POV? The sentence "Madison couldn't be seen laughing openly at Joanie" lets us know that we're now seeing Madison's interpretation of the action. Likewise, Madison raising her brows in "mock horror," "looked to her friends in appeal, letting them know…" and "…knowing that she would come off as the compassionate friend…" tell us that we are inside Madison's head, seeing her motivations and feelings about what's happening around her.

What version appealed to you the most? I hope it was the first where we were in deep POV for Joanie. There, we can not only see her anguish, we can feel it. Another point in favor of the first version is that it ended with a cliffhanger. It wasn't one of physical danger, where readers wonder if the MC will come out alive, but one of emotional danger, where readers are left despairing with Joanie. Will she find a way to leave the party? If not, how will Joanie get through this?

If we were doing a two POV book and wanted to include Madison's POV, how would we do it? The simplest way would be to finish Joanie's scene, then do a drop down (hit "enter" and add a # to indicate a scene change, then hit "enter" again) and start Madison's.

The girls laughed, some politely behind their hands, others openly. But Joanie knew. They were laughing at her. They were always laughing at her. She'd hoped, oh, how she'd hoped, that tonight would be different.

But it wasn't.

Madison slid her a sly look and smiled, just enough to let Joanie know that she was enjoying the show.

Joanie tugged on her bottom lip with her teeth. If she bit down hard enough, maybe she wouldn't cry and humiliate herself in front of the other girls. If she bit down hard enough, maybe she could make her lip bleed and that would give her an excuse to leave the party. If she bit down hard enough, maybe she could forget the pain caused by Madison's hurtful words.

If.

#

Madison couldn't be seen openly laughing at Joanie. That wouldn't do. She had to appear sympathetic. So she made her way over to Joanie and slid her arm around her one-time friend's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding not sorry at all. "I didn't

Scenes and Point-of-View...continued

think the girls would laugh because you brought your stuffed bear."

"You're not sorry," Joanie said, shrugging off Madison's arm. "You're not sorry at all."

Madison raised her eyebrows in mock horror. "Of course, I'm sorry." She looked to her friends in appeal, letting them know that she'd tried and been rebuffed. She smiled to herself, knowing that she would come off as the compassionate friend and that Joanie would appear selfish and childish for not accepting the overture of friendship.

Fixing the POV problem didn't require re-writing. It only required setting up a scene break. You can also stay with one POV for the entire chapter, and change POVs at the chapter break. If you choose this technique, make sure the first sentence of your next chapter makes it clear to the reader which character's POV they are now reading.

WRAPPING UP

How do you know if you want to write a book with multiple POVs or if you want to stay in the POV of the protagonist for the entire book? You may not know this when you start writing. The answer comes with experience. Should you decide to use a second POV or a third or a fourth, understand your reason for doing so.

Finding the perfect chemistry of scenes and POV isn't easy. After 40 books, I'm still struggling to get it right and occasionally get marks on my manuscript from my editor indicating where I've slipped into a second POV.

Read with an eye to POV. Find out what works and what doesn't. Then write the best scene you are capable of and then do it all over again.

If you're thinking of writing a story with multiple points-of-view, here are some examples to study:

Middle Grade

Schooled by Gordon Korman
Because of Mr. Terupt by Rob Buyea
The View from Saturday by E.L. Konigsburg
Wonderstruck by Brian Selznick
Wonder by R.J. Palacio
Dough Boys by Paula Chase

Young Adult

Dreamland Burning by Jennifer Latham
Lies You Never Told Me by Jennifer Donaldson
The Impossibility of Us by Katy Upperman
I Have Lost My Way by Gayle Forman
The Art of Being Normal by Lisa Williamson
The Sun Is Also A Star by Nicola Yoon

PERSISTENCE PAYS FOR CHILDREN'S AUTHOR DEBRA KEMPF SHUMAKER

interview by PJ McIlvaine

When you don't succeed at first—keep pitching away and eventually something will land. Debra Kempf Shumaker is the personification of persistence when it comes to picture books. After several disappointing near misses, Debra finally scored with her hilarious, out of the box idea *Freaky, Funky Fish* about funny fascinating fish with illustrations by Claire Powell (Running Press Kids, 2021) to be followed by *Peculiar Primates* also illustrated by Claire Powell (Running Press Kids, 2022). Debra also has *Tell Someone* about the power in speaking your feelings even when it's hard (Albert Whitman, October 2021) with artwork by Tristan Yuvienco. Debra is a founding member and co-host of the popular Twitter pitch party for picture book creators known as #PBPitch. A Wisconsin farm girl at heart, Debra now lives in Northern Virginia with her family. You can learn more about Debra at debrashumaker.com

PJ McIlvaine: You grew up on a small dairy farm in Wisconsin with eight sisters (boy, does that sound like material for a book). When did you realize that you had the writing bug? Were books your escape to another world? What was your favorite book growing up? Who are your writing influences now?

Debra Kempf Shumaker: First, thank you for having me, PJ!

Growing up, I wanted to be a writer. But I also wanted to be a teacher and a doctor and a newswoman, LOL. Every year I changed my "dream job." But I was always a reader. Books were definitely my escape to another world. On a farm—with cows needing to be milked twice a day—we were never able to travel. So I traveled in my books—both geographically and in time. I loved the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, Nancy Drew, and any book with horses.

My writing influences now are too numerous to list!

PM: You'd be the first to admit that your path to publication had a lot of twists and turns. I understand you had several picture books on submission before hitting the jackpot with *Freaky, Funky Fish*. What was that process like? How did you keep your spirits up without going bonkers?

DKS: The querying process to find an agent felt so long and tortuous, that when I signed with Natascha Morris with BookEnds Literary in July 2017, I had this blind optimism that with an agent we'd sell something in a few months. When we went on sub with that first book, I had numerous revise/resubmit requests, three or four acquisition meetings, and I felt really good that my dream was coming true. But every one of those editors ended up turning me down! Those rejections definitely stung.

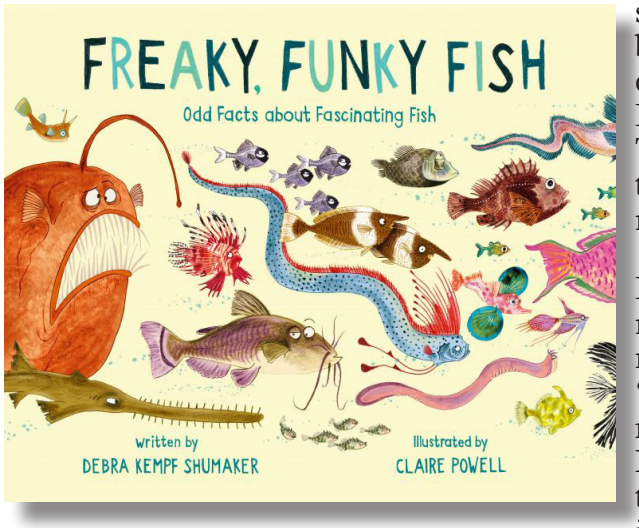
Then we went out on sub with three MORE books, but to small rounds of editors as they were kind of niche—one more acquisition meeting with another "No" and not much else. At this point, nearly a year and half into our relationship, we had been on sub with four books and no offers. I was beginning to lose hope, but kept telling myself that it would never happen if I quit, so I just kept at it. When we

Schumaker...continued

went on sub with *Freaky, Funky Fish*, I didn't have high hopes. After all, it was a rhyming, expository picture book. But within two months of being on sub, we were told it was going to acquisitions. The acquisition meeting was a few days before Christmas, though, so it was mid-January of 2019 before I got the actual offer.

PM: What drew you to the subject of oddball aquatic creatures and, for an upcoming book, weird primates? Do you see this as a series?

DKS: In the spring of 2018, I had been focusing on writing PB bios or lyrical, concept PBs. Natascha encouraged me to branch out and try something different. I always loved rhyming and had read so many fun, nonfiction picture books about water, leaves, squirrels, bugs, etc. I thought I would give rhyming nonfiction a shot. While brainstorming for a topic, I recalled researching for a fiction picture book I had written years earlier that had two fish characters and remembered that there were some really strange fish out there. I started digging into research and found so many more odd fish, and we knew I'd found my topic. The book came together in just a few months.



And yes, *Peculiar Primates* comes out in October 2022. I had an option clause in my contract and my editor mentioned that the team would love to see one on primates, so I wrote it. I was so pleased they loved it! I would love for it to become a series—I've actually written two more in this "odd animal" concept since I have so much fun writing them. We'll see if they say "Yes" to another one!

PM: Another book that came out in October, *Tell Someone*, is very different from those nonfiction books. What was the genesis of that? As a kid did you find it difficult to express your emotions?

DKS: Yes, *Tell Someone* came about very differently. In January of 2020, my agent called to tell me that an editor had asked her if she had any clients willing to write a book on spec. They were specifically looking to publish a book to encourage open communication, in good situations and hard ones. And since I had written a different manuscript based on the Social/Emotional Learning that we had been on sub with, she thought I could be that writer. My first reaction was "No" because I'm a cautious person and the topic was a bit out of my comfort zone, but in the end I knew writing out of your comfort zone was the best way to grow. So I said "Yes." It took a few tries of different structures to find one that Albert Whitman liked, but in the end, I got the contract. And I'm so happy with the result. Tristan Yuvienco, the illustrator, did an amazing job with my words.

I did not find it easy to express my emotions as a kid. I think many of us were taught that "children are best seen but not heard" when I was a kid. Plus, I was VERY shy. I hope this book helps kids realize it is important to talk about their feelings.

PM: You have a different agent now (James McGowan of BookEnds), but you were in the query trenches not so long ago. Did you have a method to querying? How did you know this was the right agent for you? What is your agent-author relationship like, do you run story ideas by James? Is he an editorial agent? Do you have a critique group?

DKS: Yes, I was in the query trenches for a long time, but James is actually my second agent. I signed with Natascha in the summer of 2017, but she left BookEnds in 2020. Since our contracts were with the agency, not the agent, we had the option of staying with BookEnds. James asked to represent me. He had given me feedback on some stories of mine when he was an assistant agent and our tastes and communication style clicked. I was happy to stay with BookEnds.

James is awesome to work with. He's very timely

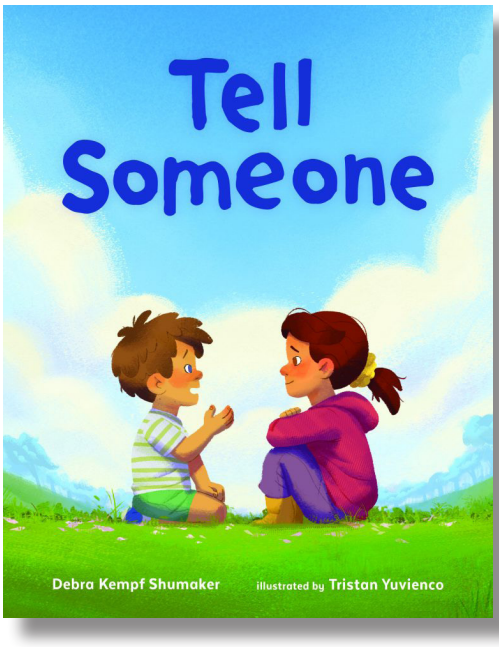
Schumaker...continued

in his communication and he never makes me feel like I'm taking up his time or I have silly questions, which I'm sure some of them are, LOL. He is editorial and I trust his feedback. At times, I run ideas past him when I'm debating on story ideas. But sometimes I just run with something because it's bursting to come out of me.

As for critique groups, I would not be a published author without them. I am in four!

PM: What is your writing routine like? Do you write every day or when you're on a deadline? Are you a panster or a plotter?

DKS: I do not write every day, especially since Covid. I have three teens and it feels like at least one of them has been in the house every hour of the day since March 2020. While they don't need me for things like toddlers do, just their physical presence in the house seems to distract me, LOL. But I am always able to meet my deadlines and I have cranked out several new stories, so writing here and there seems to be working. However, I do "writerly" things most Mondays - Fridays. If I'm not writing, I'll at least do some research, work on promotion, read writing blogs, etc. I take a break from writing and social media most weekends and I'm chomping at bit to get back into it on Mondays.



PM: You co-founded #PBPitch, the premiere Twitter pitch event for picture book creators, and also serve as a co-host. What advice would you give to aspiring kid lit writers who may be leery or fearful of pitching their material in public?

DKS: I understand the concern, but it's important to remember that you are pitching stories that are completed and polished. If someone loves your idea and wants to copy it, you are so much further ahead because your story is written! In addition, that person wouldn't write the same idea the same way you write, so your stories would be different.

With that being said, if you are not comfortable in participating in pitch parties, that's fine! It's only one tool in the query arsenal. While agent or editor matches do happen through pitch parties, most people still find their agents or editors through the traditional query slush pile.

PM: What are you currently working on now? Do you plan to write in other genres? What book do you wish you had written?

DKS: I'm always working on new picture books in various stages of research and drafting or revising older ones. I mostly write nonfiction or concept PBs, as fiction plots with a twist seem to challenge me. But someday I hope to sell a fiction picture book!

There are so many books I wish I had written. Off the top of my head I'll say *Ten Beautiful Things* by Molly Beth Griffin. Her language is so lush, her sentiment in the story is so sweet, and the illustrations by Maribel Lechuga are stunning—it's just the perfect package.

PM: In terms of writing, in hindsight, is there something you would've done differently? Or wish you had learned earlier?

DKS: While I wish I had found success sooner, I don't know what I would have done differently. I probably queried too early—my stories weren't polished or unique enough—but I think the only way to find that out IS by querying. There is no magic button or knowledge and everyone's journey is different.

PM: One of your hobbies is cooking. If you could whip up a dish for one of your favorite authors, what would it be and why?

DKS: I think cooking up a dinner with Laura Ingalls' family would be a fun challenge. Growing up on a farm, I've milked cows, canned vegetables, and helped butcher chickens so I think I could survive on the prairie and even cook a decent dinner. But I wouldn't want to do it every day. :-)

Creating the Anti-Hero

by Jane McBride

Wearing my other "writing hat," I write romantic suspense novels for the Christian market and am well-acquainted with creating heroes and heroines. While not perfect, these characters generally behave nobly and honorably.

But what would it be like, I wondered, to write an anti-hero? An individual who did not always behave honorably, who sometimes looked out for himself rather than the next guy?

If you, too, are interested in writing a hero who doesn't fit the norm, who bucks the system, and exhibits traits not found in a heroic character, you may find this article helpful. Even if you aren't interested in writing anti-heroes, you might still find these suggestions useful in creating multi-dimensional characters.

A DEFINITON

What is an anti-hero? Is he simply a character who looks to take care of himself first and doesn't care about his friends and family and fellow men?

No.

A well-drawn anti-hero is far more multi-faceted than that. An anti-hero is one who occasionally does heroic things but often not for the right reasons. He (or she) finds courage in things or people that others might shun.

To find a better definition than my own, I went to the experts:

Merriam-Webster defines an anti-hero as a protagonist or central character who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities.

Studiobinder.com gives this definition: An anti-hero is a narrative protagonist who is defined by their own self-interest. The anti-hero often feels rejected by society, and veers down a self-destructive path that results in isolation or death.

EXAMPLES

Kinsey Hayes, Klive King, and Jase Taylor in Lynessa Layne's *Don't Close Your Eyes* must fight a biker gang named Inferno. Their methods are unconventional and not always noble, but they get the job done. Readers are hanging in suspense as they wonder what boundaries these three unlikely heroes will push to triumph over evil.

In Cassandra Clare's The Mortal Instrument Series, typical teen Clarissa "Clary" Fray's search for her missing mother takes her to an alternate New York City called Downworld, filled with a host of otherworldly creatures including vampires and demons, faeries and warlocks. Challenged and tested in ways she never expected, Clary finds her life turned upside down when she learns that she belong to a race of demon hunting humans who bear the blood of angels.

ANTI-HEROES FOR YOUNGER READERS

Can there by anti-heroes in books for the youngest readers or even those who cannot yet read and are read to by their parents? My initial response to this was No.

I was so wrong.

Naturally, anti-heroes for preschoolers and early grade school readers will be far different than those for teens and young adults. The characters' antics usually veer toward the funny and silly rather than the dark and punishing. Characters such as the Pigeon in Mo Willems' series of picture books manage to incorporate a message of fun with a mischievous pigeon who manages to get into all kinds of ridiculous situations.

Mo Willems' hilarious books include such delightful titles as *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus, Don't Let the*

Creating the Anti-Hero...continued

Pigeon Stay Up Later, The Pigeon Wants a Puppy, and *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog.* In *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, a weary bus driver needs a break. The Pigeon volunteers to take his place. However, this unconventional driver finds that he must wheedle, cajole, and complain to fulfill his duty. This book for preschoolers accurate and humorously describes a small child's temper tantrum.

HOW TO CREATE AN ANTI-HERO

1. Show how the character changes the lives of others for good through unconventional ways. How could the protagonist (main character) in a book for young readers change the life of his family for good in an unconventional manner? Could five-year-old Jimmy find a way to convince his father to let his Meemaw (grandmother on his mother's side) stay with them? Jimmy loves his Meemaw very much. When his grandfather was still alive, he and Meemaw took Jimmy to their farm outside of town and let him play with the animals and gather vegetables from their kitchen garden. Grandpa is gone now, and Meemaw can no longer live on her own. Meemaw and Daddy have never really gotten along, and he is objecting to her coming to live with them. Jimmy decides to act out to convince his father that his parents need help in taking care of him. Jimmy's acting out includes drawing with a Sharpie on the back of his father's balding head when his father is sleeping and un-matching the socks in his father's dresser. Jimmy's plan doesn't succeed, but his father relents and invites Meemaw to stay with the family when he realizes to what lengths Jimmy is willing to go to achieve this.

2. Create a backstory that hints to the protagonist's experiences that have hardened her outer shell but shows a tender heart capable of softening. Could 17-year-old Gemma, who was thrown out of several foster homes for lying and stealing and is considered incorrigible, find a soft spot for a young foster brother in her latest home? Ten-year-old Ryan doesn't know what to expect in this, his first foster family, and acts out. When it's discovered that some money has been stolen from the foster mother's purse, Gemma steps up and takes the blame for it, even though Ryan confided that he'd stolen the money, thinking he would use it to run away.)

3. Make the character three-dimensional. Let's go back to Gemma. Gemma has earned her reputation of being incorrigible by being exactly that. She doesn't give an inch when it comes to the social service agency threatening her with being put in a group home, but when Ryan, whom she is quickly coming to think of as being a foster brother, is threatened, she won't stand for it. She figures she can survive being placed in a group home, but that Ryan can't.

4. Force the character to make hard decisions despite the possibility of difficult consequences. We're returning to Gemma once more. When Gemma claimed responsibility for stealing the foster mother's money, she knew what would happen. Her reputation for being "a bad seed" would only grow and she would face harder discipline at the group home than she might have ordinarily received. She was willing to take that punishment to save Ryan.

5. Motivate the character with noble actions that make sense to him and also help others even if those actions don't make sense to everyone else. Anti-heroes often have different reasons to help others, to right wrongs, from their more conventional counterparts. Could 15-year-old Celia decide to join the cheer squad at high school, even though she detest such things, because her twin sister Casey needs her there for confidence?

6. Strengthen the character's inner conflict with powerful emotions and credible reasons. Twelve-year-old Steven suffers from ADHD and dyslexia. His overworked middle school teachers don't feel they have time to give him the extra help he needs. Feeling persecuted, Steven acts out in destructive ways, including spraying graffiti on the school hallways. He is suspended and sent home for a week. His parents are angry and at their wits' end. At home, Steven finds that his little sister also struggles to read, and has just been diagnosed with dyslexia herself. Steven tries to help her, but discovers that it's really difficult to teach reading to someone who sees things backwards. He gains more sympathy for his parents and his teachers. In helping his younger sister, he also helps himself work with his teachers, instead of against them.

WRAPPING UP

Use these ideas as possible springboards when you begin exploring your own anti-heroes, and you'll discover even more ways to add depth to their characters and bring out their hidden heroic streaks.

Glenda Armand:
Writer, Teacher, Librarian

by Sharon O. Blumberg

Glenda Armand is a former teacher, high school and middle school librarian, and now, a full-time writer of four picture book biographies: *Song in a Rainstorm: The Story of Musical Prodigy Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins* (Albert Whitman), *The Story of Trailblazing Actor Ira Aldridge, Ira's Shakespeare Dream,* and *Twelve Miles Long* (all from Lee & Low). At the beginning of her career, Glenda was the winner of the Lee & Low's New Voices Award in 2006. Glenda loves reading about history and is passionate about sharing the stories of enslaved African Americans and little known historical figures with children, both as a writer and as a librarian. Here, Glenda shares some of her experience helping connect kids to books as a librarian, as well as how she got started as a writer herself. You can find out more about Glenda at **glenda-armand.com**

Sharon Blumberg: Please tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you came to be an author, teacher, high school, and middle school librarian. How do you help children and young adults enhance their love of reading?

Glenda Armand: Growing up in Los Angeles, I was an avid reader and always planned to become a teacher. In the meantime, I wrote poems and stories from the time I learned how to write. I have taught pre-Kindergarten through eighth grades in private and public schools. In middle school, I taught English and history.

After teaching for 30 years, I became a school librarian, serving middle and high schools. All during this time, I have been writing. Although being published is relatively new for me. My first published book, *Love Twelve Miles Long*, a story about a young Frederick Douglass, came out in 2011. I have several books coming out in the next couple of years, so as I end my time as a school librarian, I will happily spend my time on my third career, a full-time writer of children's books.

SB: You won the Lee & Low New Voices Award in 2006, which led to your first contract for *Love Twelve Miles Long*. What do you think made this manuscript so appealing to the award committee?

GA: *Love Twelve Miles Long* takes place during one evening in the life of Frederick Douglass, when he was about 4 or 5 years old.

In one of his three autobiographies, Frederick Douglass writes about how his enslaved mother would walk twelve miles to visit him on another farm after she had worked in the cornfields all day. I was touched by this story of a mother's love. Douglass later wrote that, when he sat upon his mother's knee, he felt like a king upon a throne. "I was not just a child," he wrote,"I was somebody's child."

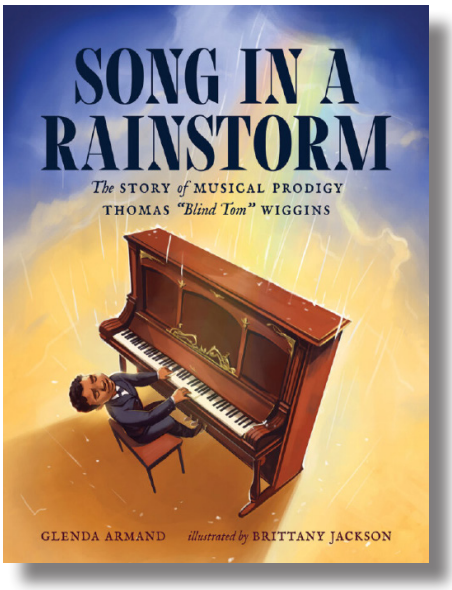
While I was writing the manuscript, I attended the 2006 SCBWI Summer Conference. I attended a workshop presented by Louise May, editor at Lee & Low Books. I got up my nerve and approached her after the workshop and told her about the book I was writ-

Glenda Armand...continued

ing. She said,"Well, finish it and enter it into our New Voices Contest."

That was the first time I was hearing about the contest. I finished the manuscript and entered it, and to my utter astonishment, I won first prize which was $1000, and most importantly, a contract! That is how I became a published author.

If I had to guess why the manuscript won, the teacher/librarian in me would say, "it checks several boxes":



- Children can relate to Frederick. They know what it is to miss a parent.
- It's a counting book. Children can get involved in the story-telling by helping to count the miles.
- It brings up a difficult topic, slavery, in a way that children can understand.
- It's a bedtime story. Several parents have told me that their child wants to hear the story every night.
- Even though I can sympathize with the parent (having read *The Cat in the Hat* about 5,000 times}, I can't help but feel honored.
- And I know that Frederick's mother, Harriet, would be thankful to know that her simple act of love would have such a profound effect, not only on her son, who grew up to become a friend and advisor to Abraham Lincoln, but on children she would never know.

SB: How did you help children find books they liked when you were a school librarian?

GA: Sometimes a child already knew what he/she wanted. Some liked to read something funny or scary. Perhaps they wanted to read about horses, how to bake, and etc. Naturally, it depended on the children's interests.

In those cases, it was easy to lead the student to the right book. I usually knew the student's reading level, or if I didn't, I had the student read a passage from a book to me. In our school library, we have books written at all grade levels. So, if two students came to me, both wanting to read about elephants, I might have given one student a book written at the fourth grade level and the other, a book written for high school students.

Some students came to the library because they were told that they had to read a book, and they had no idea what they wanted to read. I found it helpful to give those students a little fun quiz with the following questions: What's your favorite subject, sport, TV show, etc.? What do you do in your free time? After a little questioning, I found the right book for that student.

SB: What kinds of books are popular for different age ranges?

GA: For middle school students, love stories (tragic ones) are popular. Horror and fantasy are perennial favorites. I am also in touch with the librarian who replaced me and she reminded me of the popularity of Manga.

SB: What age groups are attracted to graphic novels and illustrated books?

GA: As a middle school librarian, I worked with children who were 12-14-years-old. Graphic novels were very popular with that age group, especially boys. I am pleased that graphic novels now cover a variety of subjects: from Shakespeare and Malcolm X to fantasy and humor.

SB: Do you find that children are attracted to books their friends like?

GA: Yes. Many students will only read books recommended by their friends.

SB: Are there holes in the market for the kinds of books that children are asking for?

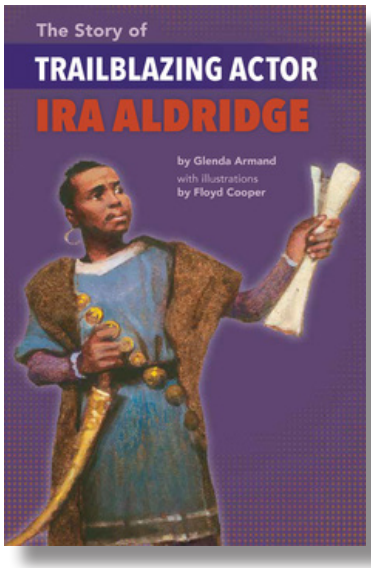
GA: I find that publishers are very responsive to students' interests. For instance, the Wimpy Kid and Dog Man series are a hit with middle school students. And

Glenda Armand...continued

publishers keep 'em coming! The Twilight series is still popular and publishers have been quick to come up with similar series. Children's book publishers are very much attuned to trends. And they know that children's interests can change rapidly.

SB: Though not as common for older children, what kinds of books are great read-alouds for children and young adults?

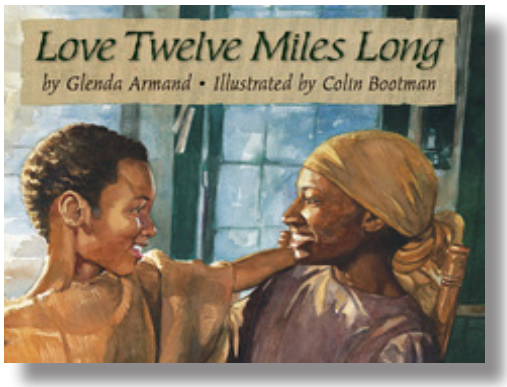
GA: When I taught middle school history, I often introduced a unit with a picture book biography. It was a way to pique the students' interest in the new topic. For instance, I might have read a picture book biography of Harriet Tubman before teaching a lesson on the Underground Railroad. Middle schoolers still enjoy being read to (as long as you read with a lot of expression!).



SB: Are there any authors that you notice who are currently popular, or becoming popular with children and young adults?

GA: R. L. Stine, Jeff Kinney, and J.K. Rowling are still popular. Reina Telgemeier, John Green, Rick Riordan and Stephanie Meyer are very much in demand.

SB: What advice can you give to writers to tap into the mindset and interests of their target audience? Sometimes, teachers and librarians find ways to get to know their students such as through observation as well as interaction. So perhaps they'd have some good advice for writers as well?



GA: Ideas for stories, must come from you as the writer, from your reading, your day-to-day life, your childhood experiences, and your curiosity. If you are passionate about the subject, I think you will be able to get children to love it as much as you do! However, along these lines, today's children would, in fact, be interested in reading about games medieval children played!

I do think that we as children's writers, have to spend time with children who are the age of our target audience. And that could even be children in our own family. Although, you would never tell a potential editor that your children or grandchildren "loved it." Because of course they did!

SB: Do teachers and librarians welcome volunteers in the classroom/library, since that is another way writers can get to know their audience?

GA: My books are meant to be read-alouds. I write them for adults to read to children. So I have adults read them or I read them to children. I ask these questions: What sentence seemed awkward when the adult read it? What rhyme was forced when I read it aloud? What did the children not "get"?

As a teacher and librarian, I welcomed parents into my classrooms. (I refer to the library as the biggest classroom in the school. I also call it the heart of the school, while the main office is the brains.)

All schools have their own volunteer policies, so a writer might look into her neighborhood school or her kids' school to see what their policies are. (Of course, these days, the pandemic will be a factor.) It would be wonderful to develop a relationship with a particular group of children. They and their teachers would be happy to provide children's writers with honest feedback for your stories. And, whether through their rapt attention, their squirming, or their questions, kids will always give you their honest opinions.