

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  April 2021



*Find Your Next Great Story Idea*

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION CODE:**

**FLANNERY LITERARY**

# Table of contents

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

Guest Editorial: Rethinking the “Active Protagonist”  
by Lyn Miller-Lachmann.....4

Magazine Markets: Diversifying Your Magazine Work  
by Kimberly M. Hutmacher.....6

Mini Blueprint: IDEAS – How to Give Birth to Them and How to Find Them  
by Jane McBride.....9

Agent Spotlight: Dan Cramer, Associate Agent, Flannery Literary  
interview by Lynne Marie.....11

Editing Workshop: Self-Editing: Getting Down to the Nitty Gritty  
by Gloria G. Adams and Jean Daigneau, Two-4-One Kid Critiques.....14

Featured Interview: Building A Career For The Long Term: Nonfiction PB Writer Jacquie Sewell  
interview by PJ McIlvaine.....17

Writing Workshop: Know the Difference Between Your Plot's Black Moment and Climax (and how they work together)  
by Jane McBride.....20

## This issue's contributors

**Kimberly M. Hutmacher** has written over 150 articles, stories, and poems for print and online magazines and has published 42 books for children. She also helped to create the STEAM Powered Poetry website <https://steampoweredpoetry.com/> with her partner in rhyme, Heidi Bee Roemer.

**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.LiterallyLynne-Marie.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>

**Lyn Miller-Lachmann** is an author and translator (from Portuguese and Spanish to English) of fiction and nonfiction for young readers. Her published novels are the award-winning YA historical novel *Gringolandia* (2009) and its companion, *Surviving Santiago* (2015) and the pioneering own voices middle grade novel *Rogue* (2013). Her forthcoming books include the middle grade historical novel in verse *Moonwalking* (written with Zetta Elliott), the historical YA novel *Torch*, and collection of biographies of women filmmakers (written with Tanisia “Tee” Moore). Read more about Lyn at her website and blog: <https://lynmillerlachmann.com/>. Earlier versions of this article appeared on her blog in March 2013 and February 2021.

Published 12 times/year by Children’s Book Insider, LLC,  
901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838.  
[mail@CBIClubhouse.com](mailto: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 Daigneau  
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/>

Text copyright © 2021 Children’s Book Insider, LLC. Subscribers may reprint up to 300 words with credit to Children’s Book Insider, [www.writeforkids.org](http://www.writeforkids.org). For longer reprints, email Laura Backes at [Laura@CBIClubhouse.com](mailto:Laura@CBIClubhouse.com).

*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:

## Award-Winning Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Holiday House publishes award-winning hardcover fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults, ages 4-18. The publisher does not publish mass-market books, including pop-ups, activity books, sticker books, coloring books, or licensed books. Recent titles include *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera* by Candace Fleming, illustrated by Eric Rohman (picture book); *I Talk Like a River* by Jordan Scott, illustrated by Sydney Smith (picture book); *A Hippo in Our Yard* by Lisa Donnelly (easy reader); *Brother's Keeper* by Julie Lee (middle grade, historical fiction); *Six Feet Below Zero* by Ena Jones (middle grade); *Hey 13!* By Gary Soto (ages 10-14).

Accepting submissions for all ages. Send the entire manuscript, whether submitting a picture book or novel. Author/illustrators may also include detailed sketches or photocopies of original art. All submissions should be directed to the Editorial Department, Holiday House, 50 Broad Street #301, New York, NY 10004. Send your manuscript via regular U.S. Mail. There is no need to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Will also consider submissions by email sent to [submissions@holidayhouse.com](mailto:submissions@holidayhouse.com) (paste picture book manuscript and cover letter into email. For longer works, attach manuscript as .doc file to emailed cover letter). Responds within 4 months if interested.

Also accepting submissions from illustrators. Specifically looking for work that is highly original and geared to the trade market; humor, multicultural work, historical work, fantasy and folklore, and jacket art. Seeking illustrators who are professional and competent and have a strong understanding of the process involved in illustrating a children's book. Submit samples (copies only) to: Director of Art and Design, Holiday House, 50 Broad Street #301, NY, NY 10004.

For a full list of recent titles, go to <https://holidayhouse.com/>

## National Geographic Kids Accepting Submissions

*National Geographic Kids* is a general-interest nonfiction magazine for 6- to 14-year-olds, whose tagline is "Dare to Explore." It publishes articles on a broad range of topics, including natural history, science, geography, history, and human interest. For regular departments, looking for animal anecdotes and cool vacation ideas. Accepting queries about unique articles that have kid appeal.

Here are things to consider before pitching to *Nat Geo Kids*: Geography, archaeology, paleontology, and history story suggestions must answer the question, "What's fun about that?" Science and technology story ideas must answer the questions, "How does this directly affect a kid's life?" and "What's in it for a 10-year-old?" Natural history story ideas must be tightly focused and exciting. For example: Don't pitch a general story about cheetahs. Do pitch a story on how a cheetah's physical attributes make it the ultimate hunting machine. For *Amazing Animals*, looking for animal stories that tell about unusual abilities, animal heroes, friendships, or silly situations. Entertainment story ideas must offer some behind-the-scenes perspective that is unusual and informational.

Before submitting, study three years' worth of back issues to make sure your idea hasn't been done recently. Submit a query letter of up to 250 words that includes a headline that suggests what the story is, a deck that amplifies the headline, a strong lead, and a paragraph that clearly sets out the premise and approach of the piece. The query should represent the style in which the piece will be written. Also mention which area of the magazine your story fits into. Include clips or writing samples that show a fun sense of style and tone, as well as a resume. Email the query to the appropriate editor: Features: Kay Boatner, Senior Editor, [Kay.Boatner@natgeo.com](mailto:Kay.Boatner@natgeo.com); Departments/Games: Allyson Shaw, Associate Editor, [Allyson.Shaw@natgeo.com](mailto:Allyson.Shaw@natgeo.com). Queries by mail should be sent to the appropriate editor at 1145 17th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036.

### **Agent Seeks Middle Grade and Young Adult Submissions**

Andrea Somberg is a literary agent with Harvey Klinger, Inc. (<https://www.harveyklinger.com/>). She represents adult, young adult and middle grade authors. In fiction, she is looking for strong narrative voices. For nonfiction, she wants books that look at the world in a new, unusual way, or that give her insight into a topic that I may not be familiar with. Open to any genre, but in particular, she is on the lookout for YA or MG novels that have a speculative edge or verge on horror; YA or Adult novels that are based on a true story from the 20th century; YA contemporary love stories/romantic comedies; magical realism for YA or MG market; MG or YA novels that feature diverse protagonists; YA psychological thrillers; MG mystery novels; MG novels that are funny and/or are illustrated; MG or YA novels with strong emotional undertones to the plot; unique nonfiction for MG or YA.

Email a query letter and the opening five pages of your manuscript, all pasted into the email, or [andrea@harveyklinger.com](mailto:andrea@harveyklinger.com). To keep up to date with Andrea Somberg's current needs, visit her website at [andreasomberg.com/aslitagent/](http://andreasomberg.com/aslitagent/)

### **Independent Press Seeks Books for Children and Parents with Family Focus**

Familius is a division of Workman Publishing, with the mission-driven belief that the family is the fundamental unit of society, and all of their books should reflect at least one of their 10 Habits of Happy Families: love together, learn together, read together, give together, play together, talk together, laugh together, eat together, heal together, work together. Publishes children's picture books and board books, parenting, relationships, self-help, family fun, education, cooking, and health and wellness for both adults and young adults. Familius does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, age, nationality, disability, or sexual orientation in any of its activities or operations. For a full list of current titles, go to <https://www.familius.com/catalog/>

Accepting proposals for books in any of the above categories. The proposal should include:

- A one-page cover letter giving a brief description of the project, why you think Familius should publish it, what's included in the proposal, and your contact information. (If your proposal is a simultaneous submission, please indicate this in your cover letter.)
- An outline, introduction, sample text/chapters, sample illustrations or photographs, sample captions, sample recipes or projects, as applicable. (When submitting artwork, do not send original art because it won't be returned.)
- A market analysis of the book's potential audience. Who is the target reader? Are there similar titles? Be sure to include a list of those titles, their publishers and publication dates, and how your book is different.
- A biography (with publishing credits and relevant credentials) for the author, illustrator, and photographer as applicable. Also describe any markets you've worked with in the past, including radio stations, newspapers, magazines, organizations/corporations, speaking engagements, and your own social media reach.
- If the manuscript is still in the works, include an estimated completion date.

Send your proposal to [bookideas@familius.com](mailto:bookideas@familius.com). Responds within three months if interested in publishing.

# Rethinking the “Active Protagonist”

by Lyn Miller-Lachmann

Dear Reader,

As writers, agents, publishers, and readers address the need for more diversity in children’s books, a call has emerged for different types of stories that reflect the experiences of historically marginalized peoples. It’s not enough to have diverse authors and characters. Characters must be authentic, and authors shouldn’t have to write for the “white gaze” with its preference for traditional Western story structures like the Hero’s Journey.

The Active Protagonist has also come under scrutiny. Like many other writers, I’ve struggled with characters who are seen as too passive, whose goals consist of survival or fitting in, or who do more observing of the world around them rather than taking charge of it. Years ago, as my middle grade novel *Rogue* was in production, I started a second middle grade novel with an autistic protagonist, this time a seventh grade boy obsessed with hurricanes. His visions of nature’s death and destruction reflected major changes in his own life and the potential breakup of his large family at the hands of Children & Family Services.

The problem was that in these chapters, a lot happened TO my protagonist, but he didn’t actually achieve anything himself. Except maybe fret about a hurricane and a mysterious letter that his alcoholic mother was ignoring. In fact, when other kids tried to push him around — he was frequently the target of bullies — siblings or friends of siblings stood up for him.

Basically, I started this novel because people liked this secondary character in a YA contemporary novel manuscript that I’d finished drafting. Neither the YA novel nor the MG spinoff found a publisher, but for different reasons. In the process, I discovered that the kind of passivity acceptable in a secondary character didn’t work when the character became the star of the whole show. The protagonist of the YA novel battled on behalf of this younger boy, and I’m glad that beta readers of the earlier manuscript believed he was worth the fight, but that didn’t make this secondary character a worthy protagonist in the eyes of publishing professionals.

I trunked the middle grade manuscript in 2014, around the time We Need Diverse Books initiated the discussion of representation in kidlit that continues today, broadening its scope and range. In a recent Twitter discussion, BIPOC and other creators who have experienced marginalization in society and in publishing pointed out that often their protagonists have little control over the world around them, and under those circumstances, survival is a legitimate goal. In the eyes of agents and editors, survival implies passivity because the protagonist is reacting to forces larger than they are rather than trying to change those forces. Editors and agents have also rejected the desire to “belong” as too passive, not a strong enough goal to drive the story. But for disabled protagonists routinely excluded from their communities, the desire to belong, to be a part of those communities we’ve watched from afar, is at the top of the list.

## Rethinking the "Active Protagonist" continued

Wanting to belong, to have a friend, drives Kiara's decision in *Rogue* to befriend Chad even though his family ensnares her in a very bad business. In my spring 2022 middle grade verse novel *Moonwalking*, co-authored with Zetta Elliott, it drives my autistic protagonist JJ's decision to reach out to a classmate across the racial divide; he invites Pie to start a punk-rock band even though he has no idea how bands get together. In my forthcoming YA historical novel *Torch*, wanting to be part of the popular crowd drives Tomáš, who is also on the spectrum, to defy his father and the secret police by seeking friendships with a dissident who has a dangerous plan and a bully who has targeted him in the past.

While Kiara seeks to become a superhero like her favorite X-Men character, both JJ and Tomáš come to realize that they don't need to be the leader or the Chosen One to achieve their goals or to grow as people. The individualistic Chosen One narrative is a Western capitalist construct in which there are leaders and followers, bosses and workers, winners and losers. But the band is much more than the frontman. Singers who get the glory would be nothing without composers, lyricists, guitarists, bassists, drummers, keyboardists, and so on. Families, natural and found, and communities can be protagonists, with the success of the group dependent on the actions of all the individuals within it.

With the pandemic, we are now coming to realize how much individualism has failed us. We need to look at other models of social organization and other kinds of narratives besides the Active Protagonist and the Hero's Journey. These include non-Western traditions, multiple points of view (including community stories like Kekla Magoon's *How It Went Down* and *Light It Up*), and the revolutionary narratives of people challenging oppression and marginalization. We need stories of survival and belonging, the narratives of those who have lived to fight another day, and who have come together to continue the struggle. We cannot count on superheroes and Chosen Ones to save us, and our stories need to reflect this truth.



# DIVERSIFYING Your Magazine Work

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Sixteen years ago, as I was beginning to dip my toes into the world of writing for children, I read over and over again that the children's magazine market was a good place to start. What I read was correct, and I was able to rack up several early publishing credits by focusing on this market. Though the earliest successes were in traditional children's magazines, I soon learned that I had experiences and knowledge that could result in sales to other related magazine markets as well. Let's take a closer look at children's magazines, parenting publications, classroom and educational periodicals, as well as religious materials, and how these might intertwine and enlarge your submission and publication possibilities.

## Children's Magazines

One of the first writing events I ever attended was a local conference hosted by the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). One of the speakers was Paula Morrow, an editor with the Cricket Magazine Group. Paula shared behind the scenes stories of how the company worked and specifically, the kinds of submissions each magazine was looking for. My children's bookshelves were full of copies of both *Babybug* and *Ladybug*, two of the magazines published by the Cricket Magazine Group. These magazines were well-loved by my children and myself. Having had already immersed myself in these magazines and with tips gleaned from Paula at the conference, I submitted five original poems for consideration. Two of the poems were accepted for publication in *Babybug* and one was accepted for publication in *Ladybug*.

Children's magazines target both children and teens. They publish any/all of the following: fiction, non-fiction, activities, and poetry. They cover a variety of subjects. Some are general interest like those magazines published by *Highlights* and *Cricket*. Some are targeted to a more specialized audience like *Legacy*

*Kids*, which showcases the children of military families. If you love reading children's magazines, and if you've spent a lot of time around children and understand their stages of development, interests, likes, and dislikes, this market might be a good fit for you.

A sampling of children's magazines:

*Highlights For Children:*

<https://highlights.submittable.com/submit>

*Cricket Magazine Group:*

<https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit>

*Fun For Kidz:*

<http://bit.ly/FunForKidzSubmissions>

*Girl's Life:*

<https://www.girlslife.com/Writers-Guidelines>

*Jack and Jill:*

<https://uskidsmags.com/writers-guidelines/>

Whichever magazines you decide to target, be sure to do your research. Study market guides and submission guidelines carefully. Take advantage of resources at your public library and read several issues of the magazine you would most like to write for. Pay attention to subject matter, tone, length of articles/stories, audience age level, etc. The goal is to strategically diversify and target your work for optimum success.

## Classroom and Education Magazines

Many of us who write for children, also have some experience with educating children. Maybe you're a teacher or a teacher's aide. Maybe you're a librarian or you have spent a career in education administration. Maybe you've spent countless hours volunteering in your child's classroom. I spent some time teaching in a traditional preschool classroom setting,

*Diversifying Your Magazine Work...continued*

and I also homeschooled my children for several years. If you fit into any of these categories, classroom and educational magazines may want to hear what you have to say. These publications are diverse and run the gamut of material from scholarly pieces on educational philosophies to popular trends in education. You might contribute an inspirational essay on a personal teaching experience or a lesson plan or classroom activity that earned you an 'A'!

A sampling of classroom/education magazines:

*TEACH Magazine:*

<https://teachmag.com/submissions>

*American Educator:*

<https://www.aft.org/article-submission-guidelines>

*Teachers and Writers Magazine:*

<https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/about-us/submission-guidelines>

*The School Magazine:*

<https://theschoolmagazine.com.au/contribute>

*Homeschooling Today:*

<https://homeschoolingtoday.com/write-for-us/>

## Parenting Magazines

Many of us who write for children have also parented children. Topics for parenting magazines are endless. Health and fitness, recipes, extracurricular activities, social and emotional development, finance, kid-friendly weekend getaways, seasonal crafts and activities, and education just skim the mountain of possible subject matter for these publications.

Local parenting magazines love to feature local writers who can focus their material on subjects as they relate to that specific region. For instance, if you were to pitch an article about kid-friendly healthy lunches, you might share the offerings of a few local restaurants featuring menu options that kids and health-conscious parents can both love. If you were to pitch an article about teaching children financial responsibility, you might mention the local community college that offers a child's summer course on money and budgeting basics.

There are several larger market parenting magazines

that are more generalized, like *Today's Family Fun and Parents*, but in my experience (and there are of course exceptions), it's much easier to break into regional parenting markets and use that experience and those clips to then later step up to more high-profile markets.

A sampling of parenting magazines:

*Chicago Parent:*

<https://www.chicagoparent.com/uncategorized/write-chicago-parent/>

*Metro Parent Magazine:*

<https://static.metroparentmagazine.com/writers-guidelines/>

*A Fine Parent:*

<https://afineparent.com/write>

*Her View From Home:*

<https://herviewfromhome.com/contact-us/write-for-her/>

*Today's Family Fun:*

<http://bit.ly/TodaysFamilyFun>

## Religious Publications

It wasn't too far along my journey into writing for children, when I noticed the Sunday school papers my children brought home from church. The papers featured that week's gospel story written in kid-friendly language and at their reading level. It also featured a fictional story related to the gospel theme, a few questions for children to think about and talk about, and a few related activities. I researched the publisher online and found that they were open to submissions and they had posted an upcoming theme list. I got to work, and it wasn't long before I had sold a few stories and a few activities.

This market covers not only Sunday school publications, but also religious magazines and devotionals targeted toward children. I have a few notes of caution with this market. Though you don't necessarily have to belong to the specific faith you're writing for, you need to do your homework. You need to know the specific beliefs of the religion you're writing about and the differences between different denominations. You want to be respectful to the faith you're



*Diversifying Your Magazine Work...continued*

writing about and to their individual practices and beliefs. Last but not least, as in any other area of writing for children, it's important not to preach to your audience. Don't talk down to them. You'll want to share believable and relatable stories with realistic problems, characters, and outcomes.

*Nature Friend:*

<http://bit.ly/NatureFriendSubmissions>

*Bread For God's Children:*

[https://marketlist.com/writers\\_markets/1305/bread-for-god-s-children](https://marketlist.com/writers_markets/1305/bread-for-god-s-children)

*Devozine:*

<http://bit.ly/Devozine>

*The Friend:*

<http://bit.ly/TheFriendSubmissions>

*Group Publishing:*

<http://bit.ly/GroupPublishingSubmissions>

## Finding More Magazine Markets

Though I've shared links to a handful of possibilities for each market above, the following are links to books and databases with numerous magazine market options.

All Freelance Writing:

<https://allfreelancewriting.com/writers-markets/>

2020 Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market:

<http://bit.ly/2020CWIM>

2021 Magazine Markets For Children's Writers:

<https://www.instituteforwriters.com/magazine-markets-for-childrens-writers-2021.html>

Freelance Writing Market Database:

<https://www.freelancewriting.com/writers-guidelines/>



Magazine Writing Blueprint, from WritingBlueprints.com, covers all the steps of magazine writing from generating ideas, to researching and querying markets, to writing the piece. **We will be relaunching the updated version of Magazine Writing Blueprint on April 15, 2021**, with a special VIP price. Watch your email for the announcement and link to join the Launch Party. In the meantime, you can check out the free trial edition of Magazine Writing Blueprint at <https://writingblueprints.com/p/magazine-blueprint-trial>

# IDEAS

## HOW TO GIVE BIRTH TO THEM AND HOW TO FIND THEM

by Jane McBride

**H**ow do you analyze an idea to see if it has enough substance for a book, or to decide if it's better suited for a magazine piece? And then, once you land on the idea, how do you work with it and develop it so that it goes beyond the ordinary and is something you can build a plot around? You may employ different techniques depending on how the idea comes to you; for example if you first think of the character, or if you read something in the newspaper and it sparks a plot thread.

Let's examine these points in a Mini Blueprint form:

**STEP 1:** Determine if the idea has enough substance for a book or if its scope is only broad enough for a magazine piece. This applies to both fiction and nonfiction work.

**ACTION:** How do you know if an idea is “book-worthy?” First, ask yourself if the idea excites you. Then ask yourself if it excites you enough to sustain you throughout the length of a book. Remember, you will be living with this idea, its inception, birth, and growth for a long time. Even a picture book or an early-reader book takes time to develop. If the answer is “yes” in both cases, do your homework and find out what other books have been done on the subject. Is the market saturated books similar to your idea? Or is your idea fresh enough to garner new interest, both from editors and readers? If you answered “yes” once again, prepare to start, doing an outline, or synopsis, or however you begin a book. What if you can't answer “yes” to these questions? Does that mean you should toss the idea? No. Consider it for a short story for a magazine. If the idea is for a nonfiction piece, it could be turned into an article. Once again, do your homework and determine if the magazine you're targeting has recently done

a similar story or article. If so, don't give up. You may turn it around or approach it from a different slant and find a welcoming home for it. Or you may find another children's or YA magazine to submit to. The important thing is that you are narrowing your idea, whether for a book or a magazine piece, to something that will sustain you and your writing of it for the length of time necessary.

**STEP 2:** Decide how you will work with it (the idea) to make it go beyond the ordinary. Chances are that your idea has been done in some way, in some form by another author. Or maybe more than one. How do you make your version of the idea stand out?

**ACTION:** Brainstorm. Try a variety of techniques for brainstorming. Make a list of all the ways you could use this idea. If your idea is for a talking pool inflatable animal, list the ways the animal could get in trouble or help the children who play on him. Make another list of plot points or characters that come to mind. Don't censor yourself. Let your mind go where it will. (This is, after all, the whole idea of brainstorming.) Draw a circle in the middle of a page and then connect off-shoots of the idea to it. Make a collage—you can do this the old-fashioned way with paper, glue, and magazine pictures or you can do a virtual one. Play the what-if game. Ask yourself as many what-if questions you can come up with. For example, say your idea centers around a 16-year-old girl Janine who is planning on trying out for a dance scholarship to a prestigious dance school. Here are some what-if questions to get you started. “What if Janine learns that the scholarship is given out to only a fraction of the number of students who apply?” “What if she decides to drop out of high school in order to get a job to pay the tuition because she is certain there is no way she can earn

*Ideas...continued*

a scholarship?” Or, “What if she is applying for the scholarship secretly because her parents want her to study to be a doctor and she knows there is no way she can do that?” Play around with questions like these concerning your work-in-progress.

**STEP 3:** Define the techniques you will use.

**ACTION:** Ask yourself more questions about the style the book will take. Decide if you will write it in first person or third person. Will you write in present tense or will you write in the simple past tense? Will you write in a humorous tone or a serious one? Will you rely upon character to carry the story or will it be more plot-driven? Will you decide to do it in a series of texts, letting those carry the action? Or will you write letters from one character to another? Let your imagination soar here.

**STEP 4:** Finally, be open to nontraditional places to find ideas.

**ACTION:** Most of us know to look around us for ideas: our families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, communities. Expand that to look through newspapers (I’ve shared before about finding an idea in our local newspaper about wolves being re-introduced to certain areas—this idea turned into a well-received book), Facebook and other social media posts, and craigslist (yes, craigslist). There are any number of weird and fun things offered there, any of which could spark an idea in you. Once on the craigslist free section, I saw an ad for two Nigerian dwarf goats. Immediately I tried to picture these goats. Would they be the size of a small dog? Would they have “beards” or would they be clean-shaven? Would they be docile and sweet or mischievous? (I’m hoping for the latter.) What kind of idea could we come up with starring these two goats? What if the two goats were adopted as a pair? What if they were competitive with each other? What kind of trouble could they get into in their antics to gain their new owners’ attention? Maybe one could learn to dance and entertain the owners’ children with his fancy footwork. Maybe the other could learn to sing popular music, only he can’t use words but only a goat voice. Okay, perhaps you don’t like the idea of a fiction piece about goats, Nigerian dwarf or not.

Could you do some research and write a nonfiction article about these goats, telling about their heritage, their peculiar habits, what makes them different from other goats? Are you seeing where I’m going with this? A simple ad on craigslist can spark all sorts of ideas. All you have to do is to be open to them.

**IN CONCLUSION**

Ideas abound everywhere. What you do with them is limited only by your imagination and your refusal to see things as everyone else sees them. Be open to finding ideas in strange places, such as craigslist, or a television commercial, or the back of a cereal box. You are as creative as you feel! In the words of Dr. Seuss, “Why fit in when you were born to stand out?”



writing blueprints

Need more help coming up with ideas? Check out How to Generate Amazing Story Ideas from Writing Blueprints (<https://writingblueprints.com/p/how-to-generate-amazing-story-ideas>). Led by prolific author Stephen Swinburne, this 90-minute session is packed with tips for finding ideas, analyzing which ones have “legs”, and then developing them into books or magazine articles. **Use the code JOYFUL at checkout to save 20%!**

# DAN CRAMER

## Associate Agent

### FLANNERY LITERARY

interview by Lynne Marie

**D**an Cramer started by interning at Flannery Literary (<https://flanneryliterary.com/>) in 2017. His first tasks included reviewing manuscripts, helping organize files, and learning as much as he could from Jennifer Flannery. Early in 2019, Dan was promoted to Associate Literary Agent. Since then, he has been building his client list of children's literature authors.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Welcome, Dan! Do you consider Flannery Literary to be a boutique agency? Why or why not? If yes, what do you feel are the benefits to signing with a boutique agency?

**DAN CRAMER:** I do consider Flannery Literary a boutique agency. It always has been. Jennifer takes such great care with her clients throughout the entire publishing process. I think that's the greatest lesson I've learned from her, taking care of the authors you represent. For me, the benefits of working at a boutique agency is I get to work on projects that I am passionate about and I'm given the autonomy to seek them out.

**LM:** Your agency has a midwest location. Do you feel that affects your relationship with the New York and east coast-based publishing houses in any way? Why or why not?

**DC:** I haven't felt separated because this is all I know. The internet, email, and social media really are the new New York. I have been able to connect electronically with other agents, editors, and authors. Granted, virtually isn't the same as in-person contact, but that is our

reality now. The last year has shown that being located in NYC is no longer essential as in years past. Work from home has shown to be a feasible proposition, and Jennifer and I think that the industry will not go 100% back to pre-pandemic office-bound, New York-centric ways.



**LM:** What is your education and work history and how does that experience inform your current job?

**DC:** I have two undergraduate degrees from West Virginia University in Forensic and Investigative Sciences and Psychology. I also have two Master's degrees from Benedictine University in Management and Business Administration and Management and Organizational Behavior. My first job right out of undergrad was as a Physical Scientist for the FBI. I was with them for about three and half years. I met a lot of interesting people, worked on a lot of messy and high profile cases, and learned how to prioritize tasks. After I resigned from

the FBI, I moved to the Chicagoland area with my then boyfriend and now husband. I worked as a background actor for TV and movies for a year before I started my current position as an Internal Affairs Investigator for the Cook County Sheriff's Office. All of this experience really doesn't add up to becoming a literary agent, but I've always had a love for books, especially children's literature. And I've always been a creative person – writing, drawing, baking, crafting, and being a general goofball. But my careers in law enforcement don't really have much room for creativity and I really missed that in my life. So, in 2017, I emailed Jennifer asking if she had any internships available and I poured my heart

*Dan Cramer...continued*

out in that email. It must have worked or was just good timing because here I am doing something I absolutely love. Even though my education and work history isn't geared specifically toward being a literary agent, it does have some advantages. I am able to keep a pretty rigid work schedule, learn and adapt quickly, and prioritize tasks. My business background has been indelible to starting my own agency. A definite weakness though is the pace of publishing. I'm very much used to being told to do this and get it done right now. Publishing is a slower pace, where you really get to dive deep into a project – get lost – and somehow come out refreshed instead of stressed. So, there are times where I have to wind myself down and be patient.

**LM:** In particular, what sub-genres of children's and young adult literature do you focus on? Do you do represent authors who write board books, early readers, chapter books, non-fiction picture books, rhyming picture books, etc.? Are there any sub-genres, like paranormal, dystopian, historical or science fiction that you are not open to? Or, do you just read all submissions and hope to be wowed?

**DC:** I read all submissions that I receive. I just never know when I'll find a gem and don't want to limit myself to any particular sub-genre. I am really drawn to books that put positive vibes out into the world and are inclusive. Being gay and growing up in the late 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, there weren't many, if any, books that I found myself represented. I don't want kids and teens to face the same today.

**LM:** Of all the submission categories named, what would you like to see more of? Less of?

**DC:** I would like to see fewer rhyming picture books. I don't have a poetry background and I can't really help the author elevate their manuscript. I'm not a big fan of picture books that are just lists of funny things and no plot nor am I a fan of picture books that are written more for the reader than the listener.

**LM:** If you had a wish list for each sub-category that you represent, what are some of the topics that would be on it?

**DC:** This question makes me sweat. If you look at my Twitter (@[FlanneryLiteral](#)) I tweeted just this year that I don't like doing #MSWL (Manuscript Wish List). My reasoning is I feel it puts undue pressure on writ-

ers to make their manuscript fit my wants or it makes me come off as exclusive. I still do it, sparingly, because maybe something piqued my interest and I'd like to see a manuscript similar. I would rather be open to everything children's literature has to offer because my tastes are varied. The most important thing I look for is authentic writing that draws me in from the first line.

**LM:** With agents being particularly selective about taking on new clients these days, please share some of the qualities that should be on a writer's checklist before submitting to your agency.

**DC:** The first thing I look for is if the author followed submission guidelines. I want to work with someone who took the time to follow directions. To me, that speaks volumes to their work ethic. After that, I want to be drawn into the story with a great hook at the beginning that gets me asking questions and turning pages. Every client I've signed drew me in this way.

**LM:** Which of the above items tends to be most lacking in the submissions you receive? Can you offer any advice on how to avoid this lack?

**DC:** There is a surprising percentage of potential authors who don't follow submission guidelines. There are also submissions where, on the first few pages, the author hasn't made their main character the most important thing. I can't be hooked if I'm not rooting for the main character. For me, everything else is secondary to the main character on those first few pages.

**LM:** Many agents look for a pitch in the query letter, but you prefer a non-pitchy summary. What is your reasoning behind this?

**DC:** I'm looking for a great hook, the characters, and the stakes. I don't need a lot of summary or what inspired the author. I sometimes like comparable titles, but if I haven't read the title the author is comparing their work to, it doesn't have an effect on me. Plus, I'm more interested in the author's writing, not the writing of other authors.

**LM:** What process would you go through to determine the marketability of a book?

**DC:** I try not to focus on marketability because what is marketable today might not be tomorrow. If I'm excited about a book, I can see how it will evolve, and I can read

*Dan Cramer...continued*

it multiple times, then I will give everything I have to find it a forever publishing home.

**LM:** For those who will submit a synopsis to you, is there a particular resource that you can recommend they check out?

**DC:** At Flannery Literary, we don't ask for a synopsis, just a query letter. I've found Eric Smith's (P.S. Literary) blog on query letters to be a helpful resource. The main thing to remember is hook, plot, and stakes.

**LM:** What are your thoughts on submitting to smaller and start-up publishers? Do you feel that there are benefits or drawbacks?

**DC:** I don't think the size of the house has as much impact as the editor themselves. I've had great email communications from editors and I've had the editors who don't respond at all. That's the industry. People work in different ways and it's all about finding the editor that works best for the project you are presenting. If an editor doesn't respond to a particular project, they weren't the right editor for that project and I just move on.

**LM:** Should you take on a client, what would be a typical example of your representation style? Do you only work on one project at a time? Are you an editorial agent? Do you keep the client posted with all updates? Are you likely to give up on a project you took on after a certain number of submission rounds, or do you keep at it?

**DC:** I am always transparent with my authors with updates, communications from editors, anything. My editing style is always collaborative with them. This is their book, their baby, and I want them to feel confident in the story we present to the world. So, sometimes I have to be a story development editor and send them crazy ideas and writing prompts, like have you tried writing this in mask voice or what if this were a graphic novel instead of a picture book. Let's see where that takes you. Other times, I'm a line editor checking for the little things or pacing. The number of projects depends on the author. Some have three projects with me and we'll be working on all of them. Others, like working on just one project at a time.

**LM:** What factors do you consider to determine marketability of a book?

**DC:** If I can't stop reading a book from the first line, it's

marketable for me.

**LM:** Please share what you consider to be your "best advice" to writers.

**DC:** Patience. The writing process is long and not meant to be quick. You have to write often, rewrite even more, and develop thick skin. Rejections and critiques happen far more often than the yeses and praise. But, oh, do those yeses and praise feel great when they happen! You should always be learning by reading the genre you're writing, attending conferences when you're able to, looking for online, reputable resources, and never quit.

Dan Cramer is offering an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to CBI subscribers. He is open to all types of manuscripts (picture books through young adult). You can follow him on Twitter at [@FlanneryLitera1](https://twitter.com/FlanneryLitera1) and search his tweets for the hashtag #MSWL to see any special interests. Email a succinct and descriptive query letter, and paste the entire text for a picture book or the first 5-10 pages for longer work into the body of the email following the query letter (no attachments). The letter may be addressed to Dan Cramer, but should be emailed to [Jennifer@FlanneryLiterary.com](mailto:Jennifer@FlanneryLiterary.com). In the subject line, put QUERY CBI-JFL. Responds in 2-4 weeks. There is no time limit on this Above the Slushpile offer, so take your time and thoroughly revise your work before submitting.

### ---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://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.

# SELF-EDITING

## Getting Down to the Nitty Gritty

by Gloria G. Adams and Jean Daigneau,  
Two-4-One Kid Critiques

**W**hen it comes to self-editing, books on point of view, creating deeper characters, authentic dialogue, and many other aspects of revising can more than guide you through big picture elements. But there are things that some authors gloss over when it comes to self-editing and, oftentimes, these smaller details can make or break a project.

### Don't Tell—Show!

Most writers know the term “show don't tell.” But how exactly do you do that?

One example Jean wrote years ago was the line: *He was nervous as he picked up his drumsticks and began to play.* A friend's revision— *His hands shook as he reached for his drumsticks*—drove home the difference for her. When you show your character's experiences with words, you also show emotions. Eliminating passive verbs like “was” or “is” can bring that experience directly to your readers.

Another way to avoid telling is by using active verbs. But don't settle for active verbs. Kick it up a notch and reach for stronger active verbs. For instance, your character could cry, but “wept” definitely evokes stronger emotion. What about “sobbed”? That captures other physical images that drive home a character's feelings. Using more active verbs also works for other elements in your story besides character. A campfire can be hot. But what if it glows? And what comes to mind if that fire hisses or spits? By pushing your writing just a bit with stronger active verbs, you also push those connections your readers make to new levels as well.

### Says Who?

Unless your book has illustrations that clearly show who is speaking, you will need to let your reader know who is saying what. The way to do that is through the use of dialogue tags, such as, “he said.” While tags are used more frequently in early readers, generally you don't want to overdo them. One way is to use action to indicate who is speaking.

*Jenny set the supplies on the table. “Where do you want me to start?”* In this sentence, we don't need to add “she said.” We know it's Jenny who is speaking.

Adding a tag when it's already clear who is talking is called a “double tag.”

*Joe reached inside the box. “Ouch! What's in here!?” he yelled.* “He yelled” is the double tag and unnecessary.

Double tags can be subtle; in this sentence, *Sam shrugged and said, “Why?”* the words “and said” are not needed. Simply write, *Sam shrugged. “Why?”*

Comb through all the dialogue in your manuscript and eliminate the double tags. But make sure that the reader always knows who is speaking.

### You Can See the Difference, but Can You Taste or Smell It?

Imagine life without the taste of chocolate on your tongue or the smell of bacon frying. Using all five senses, particularly the forgotten ones—taste and

*Self Editing...continued*

smell—can help your writing connect with your readers more intimately. Rather than telling your readers your main character has gone to the attic, let that character, hence your readers, *smell* that experience. How can you enhance an emotion, such as loneliness? Does the sound of a wailing siren in the pitch black of night add depth? Does the taste of blood on her lips conjure up a deeper connection?

One way to see this through a wider lens is to highlight in different colored markers or with different colored font each sense used in your manuscript. This shows where you might want to add sensory details. Every scene doesn't need to be packed with every sense, but by utilizing all five senses, you connect with your reader on a much stronger level.

Adding descriptive layers to your story also helps to bring more depth to your characters, objects, or settings. Here's an example: *Great Aunt Alice was old and crotchety*. Instead, try this: *Great Aunt Alice looked like a grape left out in the sun too long: small, dry, and wrinkled, but not nearly as sweet*. Who can't imagine that?

Look for places where you can enhance details for a richer story. A chart like this can help:

Object/character	Name/brand	Color	Age/condition	Size/length	Other
Car	Chevy	Blue	1960/dented	Sedan	
House		White w/red shutters	Needs paint, neglected, overgrown	Small, 1-bedroom	One story

Even if those words don't appear in your manuscript, they'll give you a better sense of the world or setting you've created.

**Past or Present—Tense, That Is**

Wondering which tense to use for your book? Past tense is the most common and probably easiest to read in the majority of books. But present tense can also work well.

One of the best ways to figure out which one works best for you is to write the whole picture book or the first chapter of a longer book both ways. Then read them each out loud. It also helps if you have critique partners to check on your work.

**Past tense:** *I dipped my finger in the ink, then took a sniff. What was that smell?*

**Present tense:** *I dip my finger in the ink, then take a sniff. What is that smell?*

But watch out for another pitfall: using both tenses

in the same sentence. It can really confuse the reader (and turn off an editor). This might sound obvious, but it's easy to fall into past tense when you're writing along in present tense: *Jody dips her finger in the ink, then took a sniff. What is that smell?*

Search your manuscript for mixed tenses, then double-check by reading it out loud.

**Turn the Page—Please!**

What's the one thing you *don't* want a reader to do with your book? CLOSE IT! The best way to keep your reader turning the pages (besides writing a great story) is to pay attention to "page turns." This applies to all levels of books, from board books to adult novels.

A page turn is a tool to use either at the end of a page, such as in picture books, or at the end of a chapter for longer works.

For picture books, a repetitive word or phrase is often used as the page turn.



Self Editing...continued

*And every day, he liked to say, Let's give a big, Hip, Hip... (page turn) Hooray!*

Questions work also: *Did Piggy follow Duck?... (page turn) Yes he did!*

Try using a picture book dummy template to lay out your text to help with page turns.

For chapter books, you might use a cliffhanger, a question, or a foreshadowing of something that's about to happen.

Cliffhanger: *Suddenly, Abby's foot slipped, sending her over the edge of the bridge!*

Question: *Jamie knew it was risky, maybe even deadly. Would Tim back him up?*

Foreshadowing: *There was no way this would end well. And it was going to end tonight.*

Ramp up your page and chapter endings; it will keep your reader turning those pages.

### Do You Really Need to Say That?

Replacing typical, overused adverbs like “very, really, or especially,” can deepen your reader’s experience. If you focus on strong verbs, you don’t need adverbs. This is another place where the “find” feature on your computer can really—see how that slipped in?—help. Think of adverbs you overuse. Many end in “ly.” Doing a find on those two letters or other words like “quite” or “just” can highlight

places where a stronger verb works better.

Years ago, in emails between Jean and author Jerry Stanley, he passed along this tip: “Write in verbs and nouns and avoid all modifiers, namely adjectives and adverbs, which are deadly.” At the time, Stanley had won numerous national awards. He used fewer than six modifiers per book. So beef up those verbs and enhance those nouns. Your readers will thank you for it.

Think about strong nouns. What the heck are they? Your character might eat breakfast. What about cereal and toast? What about pre-sweetened cereal and cinnamon toast? Even better? Fruity O’s and cinnamon toast with Nutella. Make every word work for you.

### One Final Note

In spite of our best efforts, it can be challenging to get an agent or editor to review a submission. You don’t want to give that editor or agent a reason to quit reading because of inconsistencies or typos. This means that once your submission is ready, read it through one final time, focusing on it, *word by word*. When you’re close to a story, it’s easy to read over mistakes. Don’t forget stumbling block words like “its” and “it’s” or “their” and “there,” which are easy to miss.

Finally, **bee shore two Czech yore spelling; due knot expect Spellcheck too dew it four ewe!**

For more information about **Two-4-One Kid Critiques**, go to:

<https://two4onekidcritiques.wixsite.com/mysite>

## Building A Career For The Long Term Nonfiction PB Writer

# Jacquie Sewell

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Being a successful writer isn't often just a matter of being at the right place at the right time. It takes dedication, persistence, faith, and patience, and sometimes, distance. Kid lit author Jacquie Sewell didn't give up on her writing when faced with rejection when submitting what eventually would become her published debut picture. Instead, she took a break and let the material percolate in the back of her mind like a fine cup of coffee. The result was *Mighty Mac:*

*The Bridge That Michigan Built* (Peninsulam Publishing, 2017), followed by *Whale Fall Cafe* (Tilbury House, April 2021, illustrations by Dan Tavis) about an amazing undersea food ecosystem. You can learn more about her at <https://www.jacquiesewell.com/>

**PJ McILVAINE:** How did you make the crossover from freelance writer and children's librarian to writing children's nonfiction? Did you always write, even as a child? Have you ever been tempted to just pack it in?

**JACQUIE SEWELL:** I've always been a writer — even before I could write. As a child I would dictate poems and stories to my mom who wrote them down for me. I took a creative writing class or two in college but never thought of writing as a career. While I was raising my sons I took writing classes at Lansing Community College with Linda Peckham. She taught a great course on Writing for Publication. Sometime in that era of my life I submitted my first article to *Lansing City Limits Magazine*. That led to regular assignments from the editor. I branched out to other local publications and built quite a nice “clip” file.

Becoming a children's librarian was a gift from God.

I'd mentioned to the principal of my boys' school that I would love to work in the library. The summer after my oldest son graduated high school and it was time for me to think about earning some serious money (freelancing doesn't bring in the big bucks like being a librarian does. : ) that same principal called to tell me her librarian had retired. Would I like the job? I jumped at the opportunity and fell in love with the job. Working with children and books, #BestJobEver!



Although I thought I knew children's literature, having been a voracious reader all my life, and even having completed the Institute for Children's Literature course years earlier, I discovered I had a whole lot to learn once I was surrounded by kid's books!

I fell in love with picture books and today they are my favorite genre. Thirty-two beautifully illustrated pages — the perfect portal to introduce a child to whole new worlds.

Along the way I discovered storytelling which has helped me craft my stories.

ries.

My background in the sciences (I earned a degree in Medical Microbiology from the University of Wisconsin) and my love of history skew my writing toward nonfiction but I have several fiction picture books waiting for the right editor to fall in love with them.

And yes — I have often thought about “packing it in”. Especially after several heartbreaking (and I don't use that word lightly) broken promises (and a contract!) from editors regarding my first picture book, *Mighty Mac*. And I did for a while. I was working and

*Jacquie Sewell....continued*

busy with life and didn't make time to write. But I really believed the children of Michigan would love to learn about — needed to learn about — how Michigan came to build our magnificent "Miracle" bridge. So I took my manuscript out of the drawer and started submitting again. Seventeen years after I wrote the first word, my book was published by a small regional press.

**PM:** What part of the process do you enjoy more, the research or the actual writing? Do you outline first? How many drafts do you go through? From first draft to querying to publication, how long did it take?

**JS:** I love the research. I love digging for treasure — interesting, little known bits of information about a person, an accomplishment, how something works, a historical event . . . I love following the breadcrumb trails that lead to serendipitous discoveries.

But I also like writing — finding the right words, the best way to phrase a thought; sharing something or someone I find fascinating or inspiring, with children. What I don't like is the business aspect, the selling and promoting. That's very difficult for me.

I do not outline first, unless a magazine or editor requests an outline. I wish I were disciplined enough to outline first.

I've lost track of the number of drafts I went through with *Whale Fall Cafe* (my newest book releasing April 6.) It started out as a much longer, nonfiction chapter book for middle school readers. But that wasn't where my heart was. Did I mention I love picture books? I tried writing it as a magazine article and submitted to several children's magazines with no luck. Then I decided to try it as a picture book. That required a lot of winnowing. So much information! So few pages! A critique partner suggested moving most of the info to the back matter, and focus my text on the creatures that live on a whale fall. It worked! That manuscript (after a few more revisions) was bought by Tilbury House Publishers in October of 2019.

**PM:** What is your writing routine like? Do you write every day? How do you juggle life and writing without losing your mind and drive? Are you a multi-task-

er? When you're not writing, what do you enjoy? Do you find taking a break from writing helps you?

**JS:** Remember I mentioned earlier that I wished I was disciplined? I find it hard to stick to a routine for anything but brushing my teeth. I have so many interests and activities I'm involved in, that sometimes days go by without me writing a word.

I do not write every day. But I feel challenged by the advice Lee Wind shared at a recent online book launch to try "writing sprints" every day. I think he got the advice from Linda Sue Park — just sit down for 10- 15 minutes every day and write. We all can find 10 minutes. And if that 10 minutes leads to 20 or 30, well, Hallelujah!

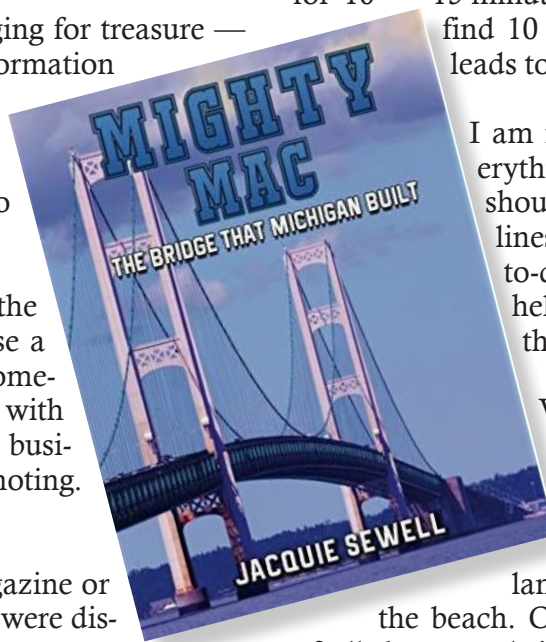
I am not a multi-tasker so juggling everything I need to do, want to do, should do, is always a challenge. Deadlines help. And I've started keeping a to-do list next to my computer. That helps me focus on getting the next thing done.

When I'm not writing I love to read. And listen to (and sing) music. And get outdoors for a walk or a bike ride. My husband and I recently moved to Holland, Michigan. We love going to the beach. Our favorite is covered with rocks of all shapes and sizes. We vow we are NOT picking up any more rocks but always come home with our pockets full!

I'm a firm believer in balance in all things. So yes, I take breaks from writing. Daily breaks: I try to turn off the computer and spend time with my husband and friends every day. Weekly breaks: I try to honor the Sabbath and keep Sundays reserved for God and rest. Yearly breaks: sometimes called vacations. Funny thing though, it's while I'm "on a break" that I often get great ideas for a story.

**PM:** Do you have an agent? If not, are you looking for one and what is your querying process?

**JS:** I have tried to get an agent. It's as difficult (in my opinion) as submitting to the slush pile. So I focus most of my time and energy on honing my manuscripts and submitting to publishers who are a good



*Jacquie Sewell....continued*

fit. If I hear of an agent who is open and looking for PBs I will query but I am not actively researching agents.

**PM:** You got the inspiration for your first nonfiction book, *Mighty Mac*, from a student. Where did the inspiration for *Whale Fall Cafe* come from? Do you see yourself writing nonfiction exclusively?

**JS:** The idea for *Whale Fall Cafe* came from an article in *Audubon Magazine* about Dr. Craig Smith and his discovery of a natural whale fall in 1987. I knew kids would love the zombie worms and hagfish and other creatures that live on a whale's carcass.

I enjoy nonfiction but I also write fiction and would love to see some of my fictional works published.

**PM:** What advice or tips would you give an aspiring kid lit writer? What do you wish you would've known starting out?

**JS:** If you want to write kid lit you need to read kid lit. Read picture books. Read the Newbery winners. Read across the genres. Read books that you would like to write. The best way to do this is to go to your local library. Your librarian is your friend. Library books are free. Read them often.

Spend time with children. If you don't have your own, borrow some. Volunteer in a school or at church. Know what kids are curious about, what makes them laugh, what scares them.

Don't quit. If you have something you want to share with kids keep honing your craft through SCBWI, writing classes and webinars, critique groups and just plain writing.

**PM:** How has the ongoing pandemic affected your writing? Do you find it harder to write or more challenging?

**JS:** Wow! I really thought a year ago that all this enforced time at home would result in prodigious pages of wonderfulness. It didn't happen. For the first 6-8 months I was in a funk. No other way to describe it.

Creating anything new seemed impossible. I couldn't put my butt in the chair long enough to do anything but scroll Facebook and get depressed. Thankfully *Whale Fall Cafe* was pretty well underway and I just had to make some minor edits, find pictures, etc. More task-oriented tasks vs. creative tasks.

Finally the wall came down — enough for me to start writing again. I wrote a fun story (IMHO) about a curious hermit crab. He's out on submission now. I got out some older stories and did some major revisions.

So things are looking up.

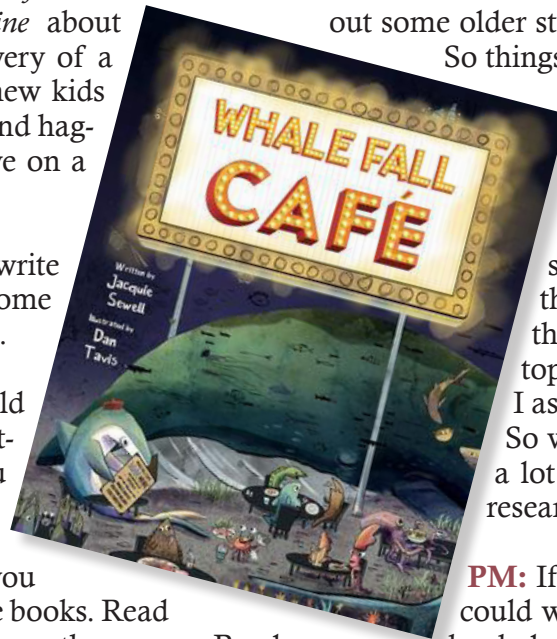
**PM:** What project are you working on now?

**JS:** My publisher at Tilbury House suggested I collaborate with one of the scientists who gave us a quote for the dust jacket of *Whale Fall Cafe* on a topic he would be interested in seeing. I asked the scientist and she said "Yes!" So with a bit of fear and trembling, and a lot of excitement, I am beginning the research.

**PM:** If there were one topic or subject you could write about, what would it be? What book do you wish you'd have written?

**JS:** I want to write about Edward Adrian Wilson, amazing person, scientist, artist and explorer. Edward died in Antarctica with Robert Falcon Scott in 1912. I've read extensively about Edward, visited his home in Cheltenham, England and been a "fan girl" for over a decade. I just haven't figured out the "story" yet. Or maybe I'm afraid I won't do him justice.

First thought is *Harry Potter*. Because kids of all ages love his books. (I had pre-literate first graders checking them out! My son in college at the time read them all twice!) And because Rowling made a boatload of money. But really — I'm glad she wrote it. That way I get to read the books and just enjoy them. And I learned fairly early on that I'm not in this for the money. Which is good because, truth be told, children's authors make even less than children's librarians. I write because I love kids and I love sharing our wonderful world with them and one of the best ways to do that is through books.



# Know the Difference Between Your Plot's BLACK MOMENT and CLIMAX (and how they work together)

by Jane McBride

**W**hat is the black moment of a story? What is the climax? The terms are frequently used interchangeably, when, in fact, they refer to different events within a story.

The *black moment* occurs when the main character has lost all hope. To bring about your protagonist's black moment, determine his or her dreams and goals and then ruthlessly, mercilessly shatter them. (Of course how this is done will depend upon the age of the reader and the tone of the book.) This causes the reader to worry, which leads to her turning the pages. The black moment typically shows up near the end of Act 2, where it provides a lull that lends impact to the plot's second turning point that propels the story toward its climactic moment.

*Climax* comes from the Greek word for "ladder" and refers to a point in the story at which the tension hits the highest point. An essential structural part of the plot, it is the point at which the highest intensity and emotional response is achieved.

To better understand black moments and climaxes, let's take a look at examples of each. We'll start with black moments.

Can *black moments* vary or do they all follow the same course? We all know about plot-driven stories and character-driven ones. In character-driven stories, the event of the black moment emotionally shatters the main character. Whatever progress he or she has achieved along the storyline is lost, or, at the very least, seems like a mistake. What about in plot-driven stories? The black moment makes the main character's (MC's) plans to overcome obstacles seem impossible. Those plans are no longer viable and must be discarded.

**Character-driven story:** Sixteen-year-old Sienna has taken care of her alcoholic mother for six years, a heavy burden for anyone, but especially for a child. Sienna longs to find a way out of the poverty and despair her mother's illness has reduced them to. She has a plan. Despite almost overwhelming obstacles, she has maintained a 4.0 GPA and has managed to graduate from high school 18 months early. She has a partial ride scholarship to her dream college, where she plans to study to be a social worker while working part-time—she wants to help other families like her own who are in the grips of alcoholism. Her aunt has promised to take in Sienna's mother and care for her so that Sienna can go to college. Sienna has counted on this as the answer to everything for as long as she can remember. Everything is on track until then IT occurs, the *black moment*. Sienna's aunt calls her and tells her that her own daughter has been killed and that she (the aunt) needs to take in her grandchildren and raise them. There won't be any room or energy to care for her alcoholic sister. At this moment, the blackest moment Sienna can ever remember, she sees all her dreams dissolve. She understands her aunt's dilemma and grieves for her and the children involved, but she is also grieving for herself. She longs to make something of herself, as well as to help others. She resigns herself to taking dead-end jobs that will barely support her mother and herself. Sienna spirals downward and fears her life will take the same course as that of her mother: alcoholism. If that is her fate, she doesn't want to live. Why continue fighting against everything placed in her path when she can't win?

**Plot-driven story:** Eleven-year-old Ryan knows he is different. Sparks sometimes shoot from his hands when he gestures; sometimes, fire spears out of his

fingers. He tries to tell himself that he has imagined this, that it can't be happening. But he knows that it is. So far he has managed to keep these special powers hidden from others, but he knows it is only a matter of time before he can't hide them any longer. He has little control over when the light and fire from his hands will erupt. His feelings are confirmed when his science teacher asks Ryan to stay after school one day. He tells Ryan that he (Ryan) has been chosen for a special task: to save the school from an attack of mutated zombies. If the zombies win, every teacher and student in the school will be consumed. Ryan listens disbelievingly to the story, certain that his teacher is making it up. After all, how can an eleven-year-old boy save a school from total annihilation? As Ryan listens more, however, he begins to believe his teacher. Under the teacher's tutelage, Ryan begins training and learns how to focus his power. Zombies appear, one or two at a time. Ryan takes them out by zapping them with a single spear of fire from his hands. As his power increases, so does his control. He is unstoppable. He prepares for the showdown when a group of zombies is due to attack the school all at once. He grows cocky in his power and allows his ego to take over, alienating friends and, indeed, the entire school. He alone has been chosen for this task. Others should be grateful to him. And then it happens, the black moment: Ryan's superpowers are taken away. He doesn't understand what has happened. The school is doomed, and so is Ryan.

What is the *climax* in these stories?

Sienna's story climaxes when she looks at the bottle of alcohol she finds hidden in her mother's drawer. What would it be like to drown her sorrows in the bottle as her mother has? Would it be so bad? She and her mother can drink together. She can let go of her plans to go to college, get a degree, and eventually help others.

Ryan's story climaxes when he tries to gather other students and teachers to fight the zombies and no one will follow him because he's been such a jerk. Will the zombies defeat him and destroy the school because he went on an ego trip?

How do our stories end?

Sienna accepts that her plan for her mother (leaving her in the care of her aunt) is not the only one that will work. Sienna had counted on that for so long that she couldn't see any other possible scenario. When she realizes that there may be an alternative plan, one that is even better, she accepts that she can still make her dream come true, but it may take a different route than what she first imagined. She finds custodial care for her mother, which she can pay for by volunteering at the treatment center twenty hours a week. It will stretch her energy and determination and may delay her graduation from college, but she won't allow despair to defeat her.

Ryan realizes that he has become arrogant in his pride of being the savior of his school. He accepts that he has been a jerk to others with his out-of-control ego. He challenges students and teachers alike to fight the zombie plague that is descending upon their school. He gathers the other students and teachers around and tells them what they are facing. He apologizes for being an arrogant jerk and rallies them to fight the zombie invasion together. They overcome the evil forces because they work together.

## WRAPPING UP

Black moment and climaxes work together to heighten a story's intensity and raise the stakes. When you understand the differences between them, you will take your writing to the next level.