

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  May 2022

## MASTERING HUMOR



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION  
OPPORTUNITY:**



Simon & Schuster

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

# At Presstime:

## Twenty-Second Annual New Voices Award Open to Submissions

Lee & Low Books announces its 22nd annual New Voices Award for a picture book by a writer of color or Indigenous/Native writer. The Award winner receives a cash grant of \$2000 and a standard Lee & Low publication contract, including the basic advance and royalties for a first time author. An Honor Award winner will receive a cash grant of \$1000. The contest is open to writers of color and Native nations who are residents of the United States and who have not previously had a children's picture book published. Writers who have published work in venues such as children's magazines, young adult, or adult fiction or nonfiction, are eligible. Only unagented submissions will be accepted. Work that has been previously published in any format, including online and self-publishing, is not eligible for this award. Manuscripts previously submitted for this award or to Lee & Low books will not be considered.

Manuscripts should address the needs of children of color and Native nations by providing stories with which they can identify and relate, and which promote a greater understanding of one another. Themes relating to non-traditional family structures, gender identity, or disabilities may also be included. Submissions may be fiction, nonfiction or poetry for children ages 5 to 12. Folklore and animal stories will not be considered. Manuscripts should be no more than 1500 words in length and accompanied by a cover letter that includes the author's name, address, phone number, email address, brief biographical note, relevant cultural and ethnic information, how the author heard about the award, and publication history, if any. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced on 8-1/2" x 11" paper. A self-addressed, stamped envelope with sufficient postage must be included if you wish to have the manuscript returned. Up to two submissions per entrant. Each submission should be submitted separately.

**Manuscripts must be submitted by August 1, 2022.** Submit through the online form at [bit.ly/NewVoicesAward](https://bit.ly/NewVoicesAward). The winners will be notified by December 31, 2022. For more info go to [leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award](https://leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award). Manuscripts can't be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for Award.

## Independent Publisher Seeks Picture Book through Chapter Book Submissions

Starry Forest Books is an independent publisher with titles ranging from board books to chapter books published under our Starry Forest® and Little Hero® imprints. Seeking fiction and nonfiction for ages 0-10. Study current titles before submitting at [www.starryforestbooks.com/](https://www.starryforestbooks.com/)

Submissions should be emailed to [submissions@starryforestbooks.com](mailto:submissions@starryforestbooks.com). The email subject should be the title of your manuscript. The email should contain a query of up to one page, which includes the story pitch, a suggested age range, if you are represented by an agent (or plan to be), and a bio that describes your occupation, publishing history, and any other information relevant to your manuscript. For illustrators, also include a link to your website or portfolio. Attach the manuscript as a Word document or a PDF sketch dummy in spread layouts. Responds only to those being considered for publication within four months. Keep up to date with current books and submission needs by following Starry Forest Books on Twitter at [@starryforestbks](https://twitter.com/starryforestbks), or Facebook at [www.facebook.com/starryforestbks](https://www.facebook.com/starryforestbks)

## Agent Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Jennifer Unter of the Unter Agency ([theunteragency.com](https://theunteragency.com)) has worked many aspects of the publishing industry for over 3 decades. The Unter Agency is a full-service boutique agency specializing in quality fiction and nonfiction for adults, and all types of children's literature (picture books, middle grade and young adult). In addition to placing projects at domestic and foreign publishers, Jennifer also sells to audio, film and television. She is open to email pitches for all children's book projects. Email your pitch, which includes a brief synopsis of the book along with the book's hook or unique take on the topic, a brief author bio, and any additional information that is of interest (social media links, areas of expertise, why you are the best person to write this book, etc.) Send to [Jennifer@theunteragency.com](mailto:Jennifer@theunteragency.com). Responds within three months if interested.

## Cobblestone Magazine Seeks Submissions for Upcoming Themes

*Cobblestone* is an American history magazine for ages 9-14. Interested in articles of historical accuracy and lively, original approaches to the subject. Do not forget that our magazine is aimed at youths from ages 9–14. Writers are encouraged to study recent past copies for content and style. (Sample copies are available for viewing at the [Cricket Media 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. *Cobblestone* purchases all rights to material.

Seeking **Feature Articles** (700–800 words, includes in-depth nonfiction, plays, first-person accounts, and biographies), **Supplemental Nonfiction** (300–600 words, includes subjects directly and indirectly related to the theme. Editors like little-known information but encourage writers not to overlook the obvious.), **Fiction** (up to 800 words, includes authentic historical and biographical fiction, adventure, and retold legends relating to the theme), **Activities** (up to 500 words, includes crafts, recipes, woodworking, or any other interesting projects that can be done either by children alone or with adult supervision. Sketches and description of how activity relates to theme should accompany queries.), **Poetry** (up to 50 lines, clear, objective imagery. Serious and light verse considered. Must relate to theme.), **Puzzles and Games** (Crossword and other word puzzles using the vocabulary of the edition's theme. Mazes and picture puzzles that relate to the theme. No word finds).

Submit a query for each individual idea 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; a 2-3 line biographical sketch of the author. Writers new to **Cobblestone** 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." In all correspondence, include your complete address as well as an email address and telephone number where you can be reached. Submit queries via email to [cobblestone@cricketmedia.com](mailto:cobblestone@cricketmedia.com). 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.

**Upcoming 2023 Themes** (with Query Deadline): MARCH 2023: Puerto Rico (query by June 1, 2022); APRIL 2023: Mississippi River (June 1, 2022); MAY/JUNE 2023: Citizenship (July 1, 2022); JULY/AUGUST 2023: Hollywood (July 1, 2022); SEPTEMBER 2023: The Monroe Doctrine (August 1, 2022); OCTOBER 2023: The Oregon Trail (August 1, 2022); NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023: The Wright Brothers (September 1, 2022)

## High Five Magazine Open to Submissions on May 1

*High Five*, part of the Highlights magazine group, will be open to submissions May 1-June 15, 2022. Before submitting, all authors are urged to review the magazine at a library or bookstore, or online at [shop.highlights.com/high-five-magazine-6-months-999](http://shop.highlights.com/high-five-magazine-6-months-999).

Looking for new talent, fresh voices, nonfiction relevant to the daily lives of children ages 2-6, and stories that will grab preschoolers' attention. Most interested in stories and nonfiction. If your story has a young child as the protagonist, that child should be the one to solve the dilemma. Stories should be paced so that they fit on four magazine pages, with a maximum of 160 words total. Nonfiction should connect to the elements of young children's daily lives. High Five does not publish rebus stories, finger plays, stories longer than 160 words, or previously published works.

Work submitted during this time will be considered for publication in 2023 and early 2024. Please submit only one manuscript per submission. You may submit multiple stories or poems so long as each one is a separate submission. All submissions should be sent through Submittable at [highlights.submittable.com/submit/43099/high-five-magazine](http://highlights.submittable.com/submit/43099/high-five-magazine). The submission window closes on June 15, 2022.

# Level Up Your Writing With HUMOR

by Jane McBride

I don't write humor, but I do inject a bit of humor in much of my writing. Even in my inspirational suspense books, I find a place for snippets of humor. Why? Because humor can be used for many things, not just to get a laugh. In fact, if that is your only reason for using humor in a story, you might want to rethink that bit of witty repartee that you inserted in your story because it was so clever.

Humor deserves better, and so does your story.

## How Can You Use Humor?

*Distraction.* Say you are writing a mystery and getting close to the unveiling of the bad guy but don't want to reveal him quite yet. What can you do to slow the pace for a minute or two? Try humor. It acts as a diversion, distracting the readers from what is coming next. Just make certain that the humor fits the story and the characters. Humor can also be used by your characters to distract other characters from seeing what should be obvious. What if you are writing a story about a ten-year-old boy who wants to hide the fact that his grades have plummeted in the last months? He knows his parents, each well-educated, place a huge store on grades. What does he do? He creates a distraction by appearing to be sick. His attempts to "get sick" get funnier and funnier with every try. On one such attempt, he swallows a tiny bit of bubble bath and blows bubbles, hoping his mother will take it as a sign that he has some kind of dread disease. In another try, he pours a smidgen of green dye into the toilet, hoping his father will see green urine as another sign of sickness.

*Escalate or de-escalate tension.* What if the tension in your book is rising at a rapid pace? Should it keep going? Yes. But a short break from that tension can not only give the reader a momentary rest, it can also heighten the tension when the story returns to it.

*Create an unexpected voice.* Not all characters in a book can be humorous. Nor should they be. The character who can convey his thoughts and dialogue with humor should stand out with a distinctive voice. He need not be the main character, though he can be. And he need not be humorous all the time. Think of humor as a fine spice: a little goes a long way.

## Things To Avoid In Writing Humor

*Exclamation points.* Humor should stand on its own. If you need an exclamation point to get the humor across, maybe you need to rethink it.

*Overdoing it.* Humor is best done with subtlety. Depending upon the age of your targeted readership, serve up your humor with a fine hand. Keep it understated so that the reader can pick up on the humor himself without it being forced to him.

*Forcing it.* This goes along with the above. If you aren't particularly funny and don't enjoy a good joke, maybe adding humor to your books isn't for you. Don't worry about it. A dynamite plot, intriguing characters, and riveting dialogue aren't dependent upon humor. They just require good writing.

*Level Up Your Writing...continued*

*Obscenities.* These are never funny and don't belong in writing for children and teens. One could say that they don't belong in any writing, but that's for another article. If you think you need to insert an obscenity to make something funny, you are cheating yourself and your readers.

*Sarcasm.* Making fun of someone with caustic words isn't funny. Ever. If you absolutely feel that a passage of dialogue needs sarcasm, try it. Just remember that sarcasm is dependent largely upon tone. If you can't convey that tone, you may want to consider leaving it out.

## Writing Humor For Different Ages

### *Board Books, Picture Books, Beginning Readers*

Can you use humor in writing for the youngest readers? Of course. The littlest readers love things that are funny and silly, especially exaggerated humor that has a strong visual element. Keep it light, and remember that the story will be read out loud, so amusing words can add to the humor. Hard "k" and hard "g" sounds have been found to be among the funniest. One last thing in writing for the preschool set: it is likely that a parent or a grandparent or maybe a preschool teacher will be reading aloud to the child. If you can appeal to adults as well as little children, you'll be ahead of the curve. Adults love to laugh, too.

*Exaggeration.* Little children love exaggeration. If your five-year-old character loves to dress in pink all of the time, let her choose such bright pinks that they make the eye hurt. Think Pepto-Bismol pink. Think bubblegum pink. (This, of course, is when a wonderful illustrator comes in.) She thinks pink thoughts and dreams pink dreams.

*Repetition.* Little children also love repetition. This can be repetition of words or of sounds or of phrasing. In the board book *Be Fabulous Like a Flamingo!*, the author uses repetition of phrasing.

The first page begins with: "I'm a fabulous

flamingo."

The second page starts with, "I'm a super-splendid sloth."

And the first line on the third page is: I'm a champion chameleon."

Each of the five pages repeats this pattern. Did you notice the alliteration in the two last words? Fabulous flamingo. Super-splendid sloth. Champion chameleon. That is another kind of repetition. Each over-the-top description enchants the young listeners, making them giggle even when they don't understand all the words. This is a favorite book of my three-year-old granddaughter Charlotte. Charlotte and I have read this book so many times that we have it memorized, but she never tires of it.

*Mix up the repetition.* Let's make up a story about a four-year-old boy, Sammy, who loves to make cookies with his mother. He repeats every ingredient she tells him, but he doesn't repeat the words in order. For example, when she says, "A cup of flour," he could say, "Of flour, a cup." A stick of butter could turn into "Butter by the stick." Or, make the mix-up a funny problem. What if Sammy said, "A stick of flour," and added a flower from the garden on a stem to the cookie dough? Preschoolers and kindergarteners love it when an expected pattern is interrupted.

*Rhyme.* What if the narrator of your story says everything in rhyme? In Michelle Medlock Adams's delightful story **Sister for Sale**, the main character relates the entire story in rhyme. And though this can be annoying if done poorly, Ms. Adams does it with such a deft hand, that the result is delightful. Here are a few lines of her book.

*"Dear God,  
I need your help today.  
My sister drives me mad.  
How do you spell 'Sister for sale?'"  
I want to write an ad."*

*Level Up Your Writing...continued*

Are you as enchanted as I am with her words? The rhyme pleases the ear as well as the eye.

*Chapter Books & Younger Middle Grade Novels*

Readers in Grades two through five have a more sophisticated sense of humor. They still love the broad, visual jokes, but they can also appreciate funny dialogue or situations that require a bit of set-up before the punchline is delivered. Anticipating the humorous payoff is just as rewarding as the payoff itself.

*Don't be afraid to use the mundane.* After all, most kids haven't hiked in the Congo jungle, but many have experience walking a dog (or can easily imagine what that's like). What if your 11-year-old protagonist starts a dog-walking business, and his furry clients take off after the ice cream truck while he's on the other end of the leash? And what if this chase goes through the carefully manicured garden of the girl your protagonist has a crush on? The girl sees the protagonist fall head-first into the compost bin, and then stand up, brush himself off, and say, "I just dropped by to ask if I could have some worms from your compost pile for my science fair project."

*On the other hand, don't be afraid to tap into kids' sense of the ridiculous.* Consider the Captain Underpants series with titles like *Attack of the Talking Toilet* and *The Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Woman*. The series (a novel/graphic novel hybrid) centers around two fourth-graders who accidentally turn a made-up comic book character real. The stories combine comic book style characters with mundane, ordinary school life. The jokes are often at the expense of the adult characters, which is particularly funny for middle elementary school readers.

*As your characters approach middle school, don't be afraid to tap into their drama for humorous effect.* But be careful—if readers sense you're laughing at them instead of with them, they'll close the book immediately. Many middle grade humorous books are written in first-person point-of-view for

this reason. If the narrator is being dramatic, sarcastic or self-effacing, it's funny. If the author is commenting on the protagonist's drama through third-person narration, it's condescending. Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is a great example of first-person humorous voice.

*Older Middle Grade and Young Adults*

Teens love well-done humor. Their tastes are growing more sophisticated, but they can still appreciate funny things.

*Try turning a cliché upside down.* Tweens and teens are old enough to understand clichés and appreciate new spins on something old. For example, the saying "If you want something done right, do it yourself" can become "If you want something done right, don't ask me."

*Use family.* This age group is all about independence and individuality. Let your character rebel against his uptight parents using humor.

*Let the humor come from your protagonist.* In younger middle grade novels and chapter books, the humor often comes from the protagonist reacting to a situation. In older middle grade and YA, the humor is funneled through how your protagonist sees the world and interacts with it. In other words, your protagonist sets the tone of the humor, whether it's sarcastic, dry, self-deprecating, witty or observational.

For great books with humorous twists, try *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowen, *Winger* by Andrew Smith, *When Dimple Met Rishi* by Sandhya Menon, *Heretics Anonymous* by Katie Henry.

**IN CONCLUSION**

Writing good humor is like any good writing. It requires choosing the right words, knowing your audience, and practice. Try it. You may discover that you have just the right voice for making your readers laugh.

# ANNA PARSONS

Associate Editor



interview by Lynne Marie

**A**nna Parsons began her career with a MS in publishing from New York University (and bachelor's degrees in history and Spanish from Auburn University) and several publisher internships, including The Overlook Press, Open Road Integrated Media, Holloway Literary Agency and Tor. She currently works as an associate editor for the Aladdin imprint of Simon & Schuster.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Having a broad experience in publishing, what made you decide to focus on editing as opposed to working with a literary agency or other role? What brought you to children's literature?

**ANNA PARSONS:** My internships and grad school were valuable in giving me a solid overview of the publishing industry. I got to experience working in publicity and managing editorial and have glimpses into other departments, and there were elements of each role that I enjoyed. But I realized that what I love the most is seeing the potential in stories and helping authors to reach that potential, and the best place for that was editorial. There is overlap in an editor and literary agent's roles, but I was most drawn to being in a publishing house because I enjoy the process of turning a story into a physical book and the creative collaboration with the author, the designer, and the various other departments.

Working with children's literature was always my goal from the moment I decided to go into pub-

lishing, so it almost doesn't feel like a conscious decision I made. These books, especially chapter books and middle grade, were what made me fall in love with reading, and how we can pass on that love to future generations. Books play such an important role in helping kids understand themselves and others, and while written for a young audience, children's books can contain complex and enduring themes. Working with children's literature also gives some separation between reading for my job and reading for myself since I'm not in the target audience (though I do still pick up kids' books because they're good stories!). Plus, to me, children's books are the most fun to work with!

**LM:** What is the children's book that you feel had the most influence on your becoming a children's book editor and why?

**AP:** I'd love to say there was one book that had the most influence, but I've never been a reader who had a favorite book or series. There was always a collection of many I enjoyed. I first became interested in books because my mom would read to us after dinner, and then the first books I remember being excited to read on my own were *A to Z Mysteries*, followed by Nancy Drew and Gail Carson Levine's fairy tales. But once I was an avid reader, for me it was about finding that next story that would spark my imagination and make me forget the world for a while. And wanting to share that experience with





*Anna Parsons...continued*

kids is what led me to become an editor. Seeing kids connect with books that make them feel excited or understood or inspired is the most rewarding part of my job.

**LM:** You have a degree in history – what is your favorite historical subject? Do you feel that this subject has a place in a children’s book?

**AP:** Going into college I didn’t know yet what I wanted to do afterward, so I think it was my love of stories that drew me to history. I liked learning about different experiences and events and cultures. The topics I enjoyed the most tended to be either those that sparked my imagination—such as ancient civilizations, kings, queens, and battles—or studying more recent history that gave me a better understanding of why the world is the way that it is today. But something that stood out to me about studying history is that so much of our understanding of it is influenced by what we choose to record and remember, and by what viewpoint we tell the story from. It’s rarely as unbiased and factual as we like to think, and there’s a lot of truth to be found in the forgotten details and marginalized stories.

I absolutely believe a wide range of history has a place in children’s literature, from stories that give us an imaginative escape into the past to those that tell stories that deserve to be remembered. And most important are those that help us learn from the past and inform our actions going forward. Plus, what stories we tell about the present and past will shape future generations’ understanding of history.

**LM:** Playing music (a combination of the right notes in the right order) can be likened to writing a successful story. What advice do you have for people who struggle to do this?

**AP:** Just like music, my advice would be to practice! It’s rare to get it right on the first attempt,

so perseverance in trying again and learning from feedback are important parts of the process. And as with music, learning from masters of the genre can be valuable. The more you read books that are similar to what you want to write, the better you can understand the market and learn from what others do well.

**LM:** You are a self-proclaimed lover of Netflix and Broadway. What is your favorite Netflix show? Your favorite Broadway Musical?

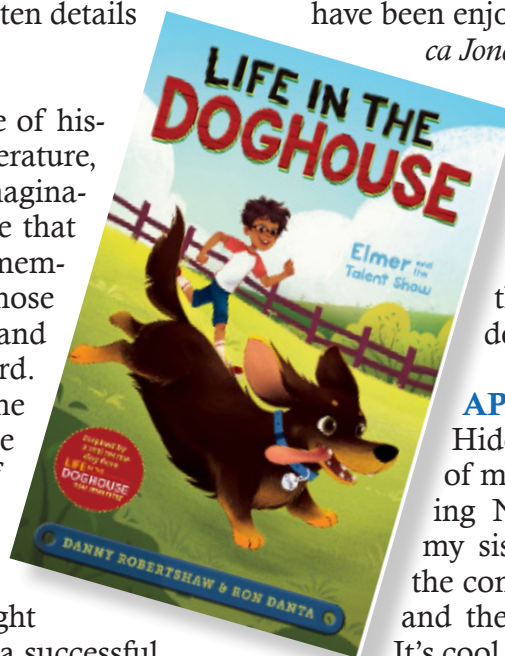
**AP:** There are so many great ones! *Les Misérables* is my favorite musical—I love the storylines of the various characters, and that

it’s sung all the way through. I saw it for the first time in high school and then listened to the album on repeat for a solid six months afterward. It even led to an embarrassing moment of my friend catching me singing it dramatically in my car as I drove past her house. For Netflix, I don’t know that I can pick a favorite! I’m a fan of superhero stories, so have been enjoying shows like *Stranger Things*, *Jessica Jones*, and *Raising Dion*.

**LM:** What is your favorite childhood game? What did you like most about it? Do you believe that publishing can be like a game too? Since some of it is luck, what do you think an author or illustrator should do/know to win the game (success)?

**AP:** As a kid I loved active games like Hide and Seek or Capture the Flag. One of my favorite memories though was playing Nancy Drew computer games with my sisters. We loved solving the puzzles, the combination of the game and storyline, and the collaboration of doing it together. It’s cool to now have the opportunity to work with the Nancy Drew brand as an adult.

It is true that there’s an element of luck in publish-



*Anna Parsons...continued*

ing. In dealing with it, again I think perseverance is important. Most people hear no many times before they hear yes. And while it's important to always keep improving your skills, learning from feedback, and taking the right strategic steps, it can also be helpful to recognize that there are elements that can contribute to or hinder success—like market trends, global events, timing, competition—that are outside of your control. It can be important for authors and illustrators to keep trying and avoid getting discouraged. And it can make a difference to build a strong team around you who can support you and help you to navigate these challenges, such as your agent, publisher, friends and family, or other authors and illustrators who are going through similar experiences.



style for submissions that need heavier editorial work.

For social media, a large following in and of itself isn't enough to make us acquire a book, but coupled with a strong manuscript it can make a difference. Even if an author doesn't have a large social media presence, knowing that they take initiative in self-promotion (such as arranging school visits, connecting with booksellers, etc.) can make a difference.

Beyond those, a factor I consider in authors is if we share an editorial vision. The goal is always to help the author create the best version of the book they want to write. But if we have widely different ideas for how to achieve that, we might not be the right creative partnership. I also consider how the author's experiences or qualifications line up with the subjects they are writing about, and whether the topics of their books are something they're an authority on. And something else I look for in authors is being a nice person! That doesn't mean not standing up for yourself or speaking out when you disagree, but if someone is difficult or rude we're less likely to want to work with them, while being kind and hard-working makes us more excited to champion their books!

**LM:** What do you look for in an author when deciding whether or not to take on a project? How important is the cover letter? Comp books? Social media? Previously published books?

**AP:** The most important part is always the book itself and what it offers to readers, but publishers do look at the author as well. The agent pitch letter and comp titles can create initial interest in a project, but whether the book is well written and offers something unique, exciting, or important makes a more significant impact on acquisitions decisions. But previously published books are an important factor. Publishers and booksellers use them as a gauge for audience interest, though we understand that audiences take time to build. So a strong sales history can add extra incentive to take on more books, while if there's a weak sales history, there often needs to be something special or different about the next book for us to convince sales teams that it will have a different result. We'll also sometimes look at previous books to get a better sense of the author's writing



**LM:** Since you love travel, what are some books you would recommend that bring the reader to another time or place? What about those books do you love most?

**AP:** I think that's a part of why I enjoy fantasy and historical fiction—getting to explore somewhere new whether it's a real place or not. I love books that can create expansive new worlds or new twists on the real world. In the middle grade space, as a kid I loved the *Percy Jackson* series and the world of Greco-Roman mythology, the cat society of the *Warriors* series, and the *Ranger's Apprentice* series. A current series I'm enjoying is

*Anna Parsons...continued*

*Keeper of the Lost Cities* (elves, magic, and a hidden world, what's not to like?).

**LM:** As to your wish list, you are looking for high-concept chapter books through upper middle grade fiction. Please expand upon the definition of high concept.

**AP:** I see high concept as stories that have a strong conceptual hook to the plot where the situation plays a significant role in driving the story. It was explained to me once as the movie *Snakes on a Plane*—while that's an extreme example, you have a good idea of what the story is about from just a few words. What high concept doesn't mean is skimping on character development or having predictable plots. But it's a commercial idea that can be communicated in a concise pitch.

**LM:** Please tell us a bit about how your chapter book about Greta Thunberg came to be.

**AP:** *Greta's Story* was acquired from S&S UK as part of a multi-country book launch, and the UK team acquired the English rights from the Italian publisher DeA Planeta Libri. While I can't speak to the author's original vision, we received it as a translated sample that was always intended to include illustrations and present Greta's story in an easily accessible way. The global nature of this book speaks to just how much of an impact Greta has made, and to the fact that you don't have to be an adult to make a difference in the world. Books with environmental themes are also something we've been seeing more of in both the fiction and nonfiction spaces.

**LM:** You gravitate towards magic and adventure stories as well. What worldbuilding advice do you have for someone trying to weave magic into the world?

**AP:** When creating a world of magic, there's not necessarily a right or wrong way to approach it. I generally advise that authors create a set of guide-

lines for the magic. Even if they're not explicitly stated in the story, rules can be helpful to make sure you're consistent as you write and don't back yourself into a corner of elements you later have to reconcile. It can also make the magic more believable to have certain logic or limits it has to adhere to, and to know what barriers prevent the protagonist from using magic to solve all their problems.

Authors should also consider what assumptions they and their readers are bringing to the story. If you use terms like "magic" or "vampire," the reader probably has ideas in mind for what that means, which might not align with what comes to mind for you. In writing for kids who've grown up with different media influences than the author, it can be important to guide the reader to understand what the terms mean in the context of your story. I would also advise writers to be creative! You don't have to follow the same types of magic systems that others do. And sometimes it can be better to think through what is most authentic to the world you've created rather than mirroring our world.



**LM:** Your wish list includes submissions through upper middle grade. If upper middle grade fiction were part of a Venn Diagram, what things would crossover from middle grade? In a similar diagram, what would it share with young adult novels? What would be the target age for this genre?

**AP:** Middle grade is such a wide category since its readers can be at very different ages and stages of growing up. Middle grade is generally considered as 8–12 years old and YA as 13/14+, but there's a lot of crossover in the 10–14 range. To me upper middle grade is stories for those starting to experience being a teen but without some of the more mature content of YA. It's for readers ending elementary school and wanting to read up through teens starting high school and still enjoying sweeter reads.

In the diagram, overlapping with middle grade is the younger age of the protagonists, often (though

*Anna Parsons...continued*

not always) shorter page lengths, more easily accessible worlds, and the lack of elements like profanity, graphic violence, sex, or drug use by the protagonist. Overlapping with YA are heavier themes, dating and romance, and increased independence and self-awareness of the characters. But there aren't necessarily clear-cut lines—it comes down to the overall tone and voice of the novel, and it's a scale along which books can offer different experiences. At Aladdin upper middle grade is the oldest age range we publish, so the goal for this category is to help readers transition to the next stage of books and to help them navigate the transitions they're experiencing in life.

**LM:** You have a plethora of interests as far as subgenres! Can you name a few books that are good examples of what you are looking for?

**AP:** I've always enjoyed reading lots of different types of stories, so I like to have a variety! Lately I haven't been seeing much science fiction and would love to have a space adventure along the lines of *Lost in Space*. And something I'm especially looking for is more diversity of all types within these subgenres and the escapist fiction space in general. I'd also like to see more action/adventure stories that aren't fantasy.

As for examples, in middle grade I've been enjoying *Amari and the Night Brothers* and *The Problem with Prophecies* in fantasy; *The School for Good and Evil*, *Peter and the Starcatchers*, and *Once Upon Another Time* for fairytales; and the series *Charlie Hernández* and *the League of Shadows*, *Pegasus*, *The Revenge of Magic*, and most of the *Rick Riordan Presents* line for mythology. For light horror I'd love to see books like *The Peculiar Incident on Shady Street*, *Spirit Hunters*, and *The Jumbies*; and I enjoy detective and spy stories like *City Spies* and *Nancy Drew*. For chapter books, I'd love to find sweeter and simpler versions of these same themes, and enjoy series like *What Was?*, *The Kingdom of Wrenly*, or *Magic Treehouse*.

**LM:** As far as stories with animals, what are some favorites? Why?

**AP:** I've always been a fan of books that combine fantasy and animals, like the series *Redwall*, *Guardians of Ga'Hoole*, *The Underland Chronicles*, *Warriors*, and *Eragon*. But I love real-world animals as well! One series I've been particularly excited to work on is the *Life in the Doghouse* chapter book series, which tells stories inspired by real dogs from Danny & Ron's Rescue in South Carolina. In addition to being sweet animal stories, it's exciting to share the amazing work their rescue is doing and to hopefully inspire readers to make a difference as well.

**LM:** One of your recent picture book publications was *The Runaway Pea* by Kjartan Poskitt and Alex Wilmore. I see that this book was originally published in Great Britain in 2019 and published by Simon & Schuster in 2021. How did this book come to be acquired?



**AP:** Yes! Like *Greta's Story*, this book was a partnership with S&S UK. We have periodic meetings with their rights team, and this picture book caught our eye. It's such a fun and high-energy story, so it was exciting to get to add it and its sequel, *Washed Away*, to our list!

**LM:** *The Runaway Pea* has such a fun, rollicking rhyme! Please share your thoughts about books written in rhyme and what you look for when deciding to take on such a book?

**AP:** Rhyme can be tricky since for picture books it can sometimes be used as a writing crutch. Rhyme works well when it enhances the story it's trying to tell and includes wordplay that makes the read smoother or more memorable. But it can cause problems when the story is forced into or overly relies on the rhyme. Some people love or hate rhyme, but for me it comes down to whether the rhyme serves a purpose in the story.

**LM:** What advice would you give to someone writing a story centered around an inanimate object?

**AP:** Writing about objects can be a fun way to apply imagination, but there needs to be some emotional

*Anna Parsons...continued*

core to the story. You'll usually want to either personify that object and explore what the world might be like from its perspective, add a human who has emotions related to that object, or add other storytelling elements that bring in an emotional layer.

**LM:** How important do you feel a message is in a picture book? What might make a message feel too forced?

**AP:** I think that like all books, picture books can have a message, but don't necessarily have to! It's okay for some books to just be for fun. But the book does still need a narrative arc whether it's conveying a message or not.

To avoid being too didactic, it often comes back to that standard advice of "show don't tell." Kids can be more perceptive than we give them credit for, and since picture books are usually read with parents, they can serve as starting points for further conversation. It can be effective to have the protagonist go through an experience in the story and let kids figure out how to relate to it, rather than explicitly telling readers the point of the story.

**LM:** Lastly, please tell us a little bit of what your needs are with regard to nonfiction. Also, what are your thoughts on the current state of biographies?

**AP:** I don't acquire many biographies, but for those I generally focus on current influential figures or untold stories of historical figures. As an imprint, Aladdin's nonfiction list has a commercial focus, which means that we're looking for books that kids will choose to read on their own and that, while having educational value, aren't only intended for the education and library setting. This can be a wide variety of books! Some recent examples we've published are *Black Ballerinas* by Misty Copeland, *A Day in the Life of a Poo, a Gnu, and You*, and the *Kitten Lady's Big Book of Little Kittens*. I'd especially like to see more narrative nonfiction that is a true story but reads like a novel.

Anna Parsons is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. She is currently accepting chapter books (ages 6-10), and middle grade fiction, nonfiction, and graphic novels for ages 8-12 or 10-14. Anna enjoys stories full of adventure, including light or epic fantasy and science fiction, suspenseful mystery and thrillers, and light horror. She's also acquiring select high-concept contemporary and historical fiction, tending toward escapist plots but with characters who tackle real-world issues. Anna loves compelling voices, fresh takes on fairy tales or mythology, surprise twists, and clever schemes; and is open to prose, novels in verse, and graphic novels. For chapter books Anna is looking for strong central characters and compelling series concepts, with universal growing-up experiences plus a dash of mystery or fantasy. In nonfiction, she's looking for accessible narrative nonfiction or illustrated books that offer insights into important social topics or historical events. You can study all Aladdin's current titles at [simonandschusterpublishing.com/aladdin/index.html](https://simonandschusterpublishing.com/aladdin/index.html)

Until May 31, 2022, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of your manuscript, along with other information, via the online form at [bit.ly/May2022ATSAaladdin](https://bit.ly/May2022ATSAaladdin). Anna will read all pitches and respond to those she's interested in by August 31, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of August, consider it a pass.

---Before You Proceed---

For a detailed explanation of the Above the Slushpile submission form, as well as tips for writing your pitch, see [cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/slushpile-new/](https://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/slushpile-new/)

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

# Bending the Rules on Picture Book Plotting

by Laura Backes

**S**tripped down to its essentials, the picture book plot is comprised of five key ingredients:

1. One protagonist, who has a clear problem to solve or goal to achieve
2. Progressive action that pulls the reader through the story as the character tries to achieve the goal/solve the problem
3. Rising tension as the protagonist becomes more invested in reaching this goal
4. A final, successful attempt that is the result of the protagonist's efforts (not because another character stepped in and fixed the problem)
5. An ending that shows the protagonist has changed/learned/grown in a way that is meaningful to the reader

Sounds formulaic, right? But there are infinite variations to who the character is, the nature of the problem/goal, how the character attempts to solve the problem, and what that last grand attempt looks like. The way the character changes by the end of the book can (and should) also be a surprise.

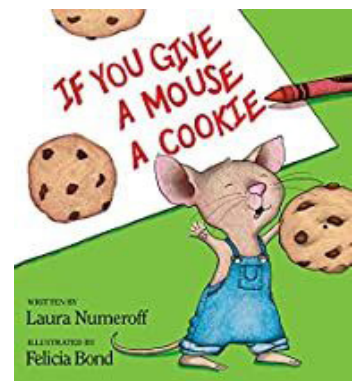
The above five plot components have been woven into storytelling for centuries, and are very satisfying. Children learn at a young age to expect these features in their books. But some ideas don't fit this structure. So are they still viable as picture books?

Yes, as long as you keep the storytelling balance intact. In other words, if you remove one of the five plot ingredients from your story, you must replace it with something just as good, or better.

Let's look at some classic and current examples.

## When the Protagonist Doesn't Solve the Problem

*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Joffe Numeroff, illustrated by Felicia Bond. A mouse asks a boy for a cookie, then a glass of milk, then a straw, then.... The boy continues to fulfill the mouse's requests until they end up back where they started, with the mouse asking for a cookie.



In this story, the boy is the protagonist. Yes, the mouse is the focus of each line of text, but the boy is the one with the problem: If you give a mouse a cookie, he's going to ask for a glass of milk. When you give him the milk, he'll probably ask you for a straw. Because the story is written in second person, the boy really represents the reader in each scene, making it easy for young children to put themselves into the story. At the end of the book, not only is the problem unsolved, but it's implied the entire cycle will start again.



*Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* by Mo Willems. The book opens with a bus driver parking a bus and telling the reader he'll be back shortly, and reminding the reader to not let the pigeon drive

*Picture Book Plotting...continued*

the bus. Then Pigeon appears and tries to convince the reader to ignore the driver's instructions. In the end, though, Pigeon's wish goes unfulfilled.

The pigeon, as protagonist, begs, cajoles, bargains and throws a temper tantrum, but it's clear with each page turn that the reader remains steadfast.



*Still Stuck* by Shinsuke Yoshitake. It's bath time, and a boy tries to take off his clothes all by himself, but his shirt gets stuck over his head. He panics and starts to fear what life would be like if he never got unstuck. Just as he's resolved to make the best of it, Mom ap-

pears and pulls off his clothes. After the bath, the boy tries to get his pajamas on by himself, but...you guessed it. The top gets stuck over his head.

Not only does the young main character have to rely on Mom to solve his problem, but in his next attempt to reach his goal, he's back at square one.

**Why it works:** Each of these books built their premise on exaggerated humor. Even preschoolers understand that characters are supposed to move forward in a story. When they don't, it's funny, as long as their problem isn't too serious. Not only are these characters' problems silly, but readers will recognize bit of themselves in each protagonist. Whenever you can defy expectations with humor and allow readers to laugh at themselves, you have a hit.

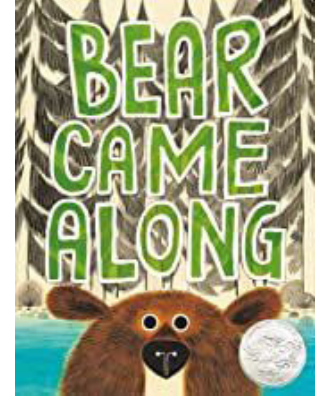
Notice that if the protagonist doesn't solve his problem, he's not able to grow and change. Each of these characters ends up exactly where they started, both internally and externally. But that's part of the joke, and it's not lost on readers. The key to pulling off a story where the protagonist fails is to create a fictional situation where the premise is silly but the stakes aren't too high. And don't strive to weave any profound lesson into your story. Just let it be fun.

**When There is More than One Protagonist with a Problem to Solve**

*Bear Came Along* by Richard T. Morris, illustrated by LeUyen Pham.

*Once there was a river that flowed night and day, but it didn't know it was a river... until...*

*Bear came along.*



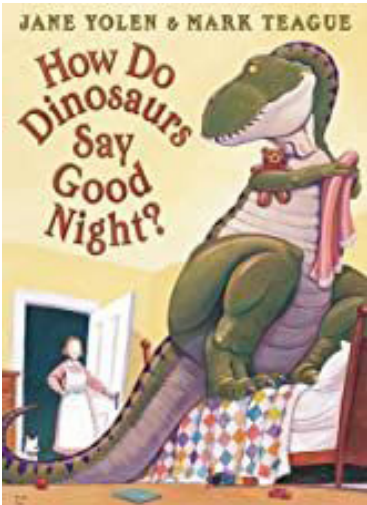
Bear falls into the river and doesn't know he's on an adventure until Froggy hops on the floating log with him. Froggy doesn't know how many friends she has until Turtles showed up. Turtles don't know how to enjoy the ride until... And so the story progresses, which each new character learning something about themselves as they join together for a wild ride. After landing safely in a pool under a waterfall, the story ends with the river, which brought them all together in the first place.

Conventional writing wisdom says picture books should have one protagonist, because readers need to know who has the problem in the story. If that problem is relevant to readers, then they'll identify with the protagonist and care how the story unfolds. *Bear Came Along* has nine protagonists.

**Why it works:** The nine characters are really all parts of one problem. Each one has a weakness—they're bored, buttoned-up, overly-confident, unadventurous, unfulfilled—but together, they become whole. Collectively, their journey brings them joy and community.

If you're writing a book with multiple main characters, the story must demand it. The large cast has to be integral to the idea. The characters need to grow and change in the same way, so the ending is clear and cohesive.

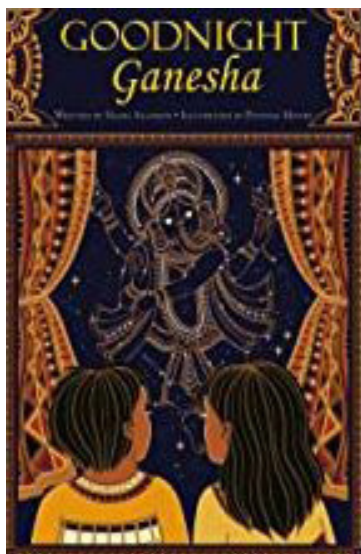
## When the Tension Stays Consistent Throughout the Story



*How Do Dinosaurs Say Good Night?* by Jane Yolen, illustrated by Mark Teague. A rhyming story that begins with the question, How does a dinosaur say good night when Papa comes in to turn off the light?, and offers several possibilities (Does he slam his tail and pout? Does he demand another book? Does he roar?) But then the truth comes out:

dinosaurs are perfect children, giving kisses, hugs, then tucking in their tails and going to sleep.

*Goodnight Ganesha* by Nadia Salomon, illustrated by Poonam Mistry. Two children are visiting their grandparents in India. As nighttime falls and the bedtime routine begins, the children bid goodnight to what they see through the windows, what's inside the grandparents' home, and the loving rituals between generations. This rhyming story has a soothing rhythm reminiscent of the classic *Goodnight Moon*.



While the tension of a traditional story gradually builds towards the plot's climax, some books have a very even pacing and tension, with each page carrying the same emotional weight. The challenge, with books like this, is to provide a reason to keep the pages turning.

**Why it works:** In traditional plots, readers know

there will be a dramatic payoff toward the end. The expectation for the payoff grows as the tension builds. If your book's tension is more level, then you have to provide an emotional payoff with each page-turn.

In *How Do Dinosaurs Say Good Night?*, the first payoff is funny. These dinosaurs, who are first depicted as naughty kids in the illustrations with harried human parents, are not cooperating at bedtime. But then the truth comes out, and the emotion quickly turns into something much sweeter. If readers are inspired to act out the first half of the book, they'll also have to act out the end, and go to be without a fuss.

In *Goodnight Ganesha*, the payoff might be the reader thinking about their own family traditions, or an appreciation of how bedtime routines bring families together, or perhaps seeing one's own culture and traditions reflected in a beautiful picture book. Whatever the reader takes from this book, it's soothing, and rhythmic, and very personal.

Both these examples are bedtime stories, which led themselves particularly well to an even pacing and level tension. It's important to choose the right subject matter for this structure. Readers anticipate slowing down before bed and reading books that make them feel calm and loved. If you tried to force this format on a more plot-based story, you'd probably drain all the dramatic energy from the pages.

## When the Book Doesn't Have a True Plot

*When You Are Brave* by Pat Zietlow Miller, illustrated by Eliza Wheeler

*Remarkably YOU* by Pat Zietlow Miller, illustrated by Patrice Barton

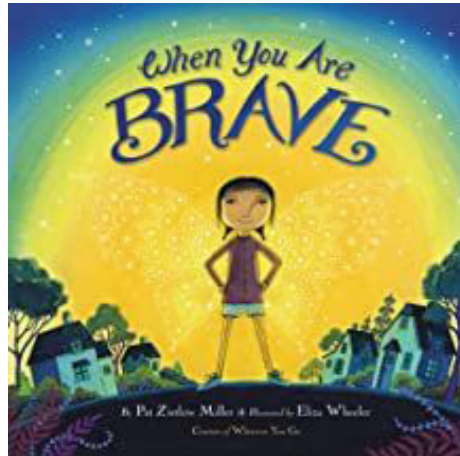
These two titles, like many of Pat Zietlow Miller's books, are based on an idea, not a plot. *When You Are Brave* explores what it feels like to have your world change and be overwhelmed by the unknown, and then to find the courage inside you to



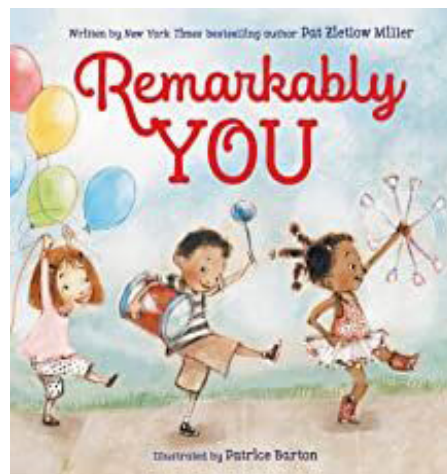
*Picture Book Plotting...continued*

face whatever is ahead. It acknowledges the feelings the readers experience at these times without preaching or condescending, and then gently leads the reader to discovering their internal strength. *Remarkably YOU* is an upbeat celebration of the qualities that make each child unique, and encouragement for every reader to explore their own talents and dreams. Neither title has a true plot arc (through the illustrator for *Brave* did create a visual storyline of a girl moving to a new town, but none of that is mentioned in the text).

**Why it works:** If you're writing a book based on an idea or big emotional concept, make it very personal. The second-person “you” point of view involves the reader immediately. This also forces you to write from inside the reader's experience, instead of your adult perspective. Keep the lectures and lessons out of the book—you and



the reader are on a journey of discovery together, as equals. If you replace the external journey of characters with an internal journey the reader gets to take, kids won't miss the traditional plot structure. And they'll keep turning the pages to see where that journey takes them.



If your idea doesn't fit the classic picture book structure, don't toss it. Think about how you can intentionally make that structure your own. If you add a compelling new plot element for every classic element you're removing, your book will still be in balance. Give kids a reason to stick with your story until the final page, and then beg to have it read again.

Laura Backes is the publisher of *Children's Book Insider*, and the instructor for **Picture Book Blueprint** on WritingBlueprints.com. To learn more about the Picture Book Blueprint course, which walks you step-by-step through creating a picture book from idea through revised draft with video lessons and fillable worksheets, go to [writingblueprints.com/p/picture-book-blueprint-vip-power-bundle](https://writingblueprints.com/p/picture-book-blueprint-vip-power-bundle)

Pat Zietlow Miller is a bestselling author and the instructor for **Mastering the X Factor: Creating a Magical Picture Book with Emotion, Compassion and Heart**, an on-demand 90-minute workshop from WritingBlueprints.com. To find out more, go to [writingblueprints.com/p/the-x-factor-adding-emotion-compassion-heart-to-create-a-magical-picture-book-manuscript](https://writingblueprints.com/p/the-x-factor-adding-emotion-compassion-heart-to-create-a-magical-picture-book-manuscript)

# Inspiration for the Soul

KID LIT AUTHOR

## WINSOME BINGHAM

interview by PJ McIlvaine

As an acclaimed children's author and acquiring editor for Reycraft Books, Winsome Bingham wears many hats: avid learner and student, soul food maven, master cook, disabled veteran, long-time teacher, and patient photographer. Drawing on her experiences in her family's kitchen, Winsome's acclaimed debut picture book *Soul Food Sunday* (AbramsKids, 2021), a heart-warming story of a beloved Granny teaching her grandson how to cook a family meal, the book was hailed by Publishers Weekly as a "nourishing story (that) will gratify soul food aficionados, as well as anyone who's experienced how bonds strengthen through food and traditions." The book was also a best book of the year for *Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Times*, and a 2022 Coretta Scott King Book Award Illustrator Honor Book thanks to the wonderful illustrations by C.G. Esperanza. A prolific writer with a unique writing style/regimen/point of view, Bingham makes her home in Connecticut and has a full slate of seven books on the horizon which you can learn more about at [www.binghamwrites.com](http://www.binghamwrites.com).

**PJ McILVAINE:** First, let me thank you for your service to our country. Is writing something you aspired to as a child or did that come later in life?

**WINSOME BINGHAM:** As a child, I wanted to be a doctor, lawyer, air hostess (stewardess), and a FROG!!!



**PM:** Were you an avid reader as a kid?

**WB:** As a kid, I read. I grew up on an island and books were limited. But my great-grandmother was a reader. As she got up in age and her health got the best of her, she sat in a chair all day and read. Her children, nieces, and nephews sent her every single *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* in print. And she would read them after she read her *Book of Psalms*. When she was done reading, she stored them in a big barrel behind the dresser. I would sneak into the barrel, take the books, and read them. I took them to school and started lending them out. She died in '87 and I always wondered what happened to those books.

**PM:** Who was your favorite author and book?

**WB:** Caroline Keene, *Nancy Drew Mysteries* (all of them!!!)

**PM:** I understand that you have an amazing story to tell about *Life Is Beautiful*, a picture book coming out in 2023: it took you twenty minutes to write, and it sold in seven days!

**WB:** Ah yes!!! So, *Life Is Beautiful* is my first book sold as a professional writer. I remember the day. I was with a friend, and we were headed to Mystic to get seafood. And halfway there, I said, "Take me home!" And she was like, "What? We gonna go get seafood." And I said, "There is a story in my head, and it is ready to come out." So we turned around. I went home, pulled out my computer, and wrote it out. It

*Winsome Bingham...continued*

came out the way it is. I remember saying to her, “This is going to be a quick one.” Because it was already formed. Line by line. Spread by spread. Page by page. I called Marla Frazee and I said, “I wrote this manuscript, and it feels so real to me. Can you give me some feedback?” And she said, “I’ll gladly give you feedback. But it will take a while.” I was in no rush. So I sent it. She called me back in less than ten minutes and she said, “Winsome, I’m crying! This is so beautiful. You should send it to \_\_\_\_\_.” I was like, “Are you sure it is ready?” And she said, “Send it!” So I did.

I didn’t hear from the editor immediately. So a couple days later, Marla called and said, “What did such and such say?” I said, “I didn’t hear from her.” And Marla said, “Send it again.” I emailed the editor and asked if she got it. She said to send it again. So I did.

The next morning, I woke up to a series of emails asking for my phone number. I sent it. And I remember walking into my PTSD group at the VA when my phone rang. I answered, and the editor said, “I’m sitting in the airport, bawling. This manuscript is beautiful. I want to buy it.” I screamed so loudly, therapists, nurses, clinicians bolted down the hallway to the room. I forgot in that minute I was in a hospital. I was so happy. All my sister vets and my therapists were there to bask in that moment with me. I loved that, since they are the first people I read my manuscripts to when writing. They are like my unofficial critique group. Yep, so that’s how that happened.

**PM:** Your debut picture book, *Soul Food Sunday*, is gorgeous.

**WB:** THANK YOU SO MUCH!!! And shout out to the genius visual storyteller CG Esperanza for capturing this moment of Black life that is so joyful, joyous, and delicious!

**PM:** The title is evocative, and the illustrations are so vivid that looking at it makes my mouth water. Where did the inspiration for *Soul Food Sunday* come from?

**WB:** I feel like the inspiration for *Soul Food Sunday* comes from different places. One, from me not seeing books like it on the shelf and not having it in my classroom for kids to compare cultures. And two, from teaching my friend’s child to cook when she was at my house being punished. Teaching her to cook and watching her enjoy the process after complaining fifty-seven times how much her hand hurt. □

**PM:** How long did it take to find a home and what was the publishing process like?



**WB:** This is why it is important to have diverse writers at the table. I wrote *Soul Food Sunday* in 2013 (well, 2012 since I found the original dating back to that year). I remember people reading it and telling me it would not get published because it wasn’t “written the right way.” (That way is the three-time tried and fail format.) I remember one person said the title doesn’t

work. She crossed the title out and sent it to me with a new title: *Sammy Serve Up Soul Food!* And I was like, “Who the hell is Sammy?” This is a conscious bias. Thinking that Black folks should only serve and not have any other agency but being subservient.

The manuscript was in a drawer for years. I signed up for a class at *Highlights* called “Writing Early Readers and Chapter Books.” The facilitator, Reycraft editor Wiley Blevins, reminded me that I didn’t send a manuscript for critique. I didn’t have a chapter book manuscript at the time because I wanted to learn how to write them. So he said, “You can get a critique for any manuscript.” I remember I had *Soul Food Sunday* and I had run across it a couple weeks earlier. So I sent it to him. A few weeks later, I got an email saying, “I don’t know what your agent’s plan is for this manuscript, but we would like to buy it.”

And from there, my agent subbed it out and within a few minutes a few editors offered on it. It went to auction. I spoke to all the editors who wanted to buy it. And I chose [AbramsKids editor] Emma Ledbetter who already knew who she wanted to illustrate it.

**PM:** Did you learn treasured family recipes from your own granny? (I did, without a doubt).

**WB:** My granny cooked. My mom, aunts, uncles, cousin. Everyone is self-sufficient. So I learned to cook over the phone. But I cook all the time. I had a #KidLitDinnerParty at my house and invited writing friends last summer. Friends came by plane, train, and automobile. They like my cooking and I love to cook. I can cook anything and everything. I think I could be a Chopped contestant. I don't know if I can win only because they are professionally trained. But I know I can cook a meal from what's in the basket.

**PM:** How has your career experiences as a master cook, long-time teacher, and veteran infused/enriched your writing and creativity?

**WB:** I think the intersectionality of serving your country, serving food to family and friends, and serving knowledge to children enriched my writing. As you noticed, I write about food, family, the military. My books will mention the military in one way or another. And when I write, I always refer back to when I was in the classroom. I think about what resonated with kids and which books they reacted to the strongest. Then I evaluate the commonalities of those books. I incorporate literary devices that add cadence and musicality. I love music. It is a language all of its own. And rhythm and beat are universal. People's bodies react to the beat of a song no matter the language of the words. I love listening to Spanish music, but I do not understand Spanish. Kids react the same when listening to read alouds. So, I am intentional about musicality and cadence in my writing.

**PM:** You're a prolific author with several books in the pipeline. What comes first in your mind, the text, images, or characters?

**WB:** I write from titles. First, I get a title in my mind. Then I create a first line to tie into my title and set the tone of the book. Then I create a last line because I love full circle manuscripts. Then I go back and write the narrative arc on pages 25-29. Then I fill in the rest to tell the whole story. UNLESS the story is formed in my head and I just type it out and see where I can add make-up to make it look pretty.

**PM:** How do you know when an idea is a keeper?

**WB:** I know an idea is a keeper if the story makes sense when it is done. It is not redundant, and it makes me laugh, cry, or have an emotional response not tied to any of these two things.

**PM:** What is your writing process like?

**WB:** I wake up at 4:30 every morning. I used to write every day. Even if it is just a poem. Now, not so much. I am reading, editing, and critiquing other people's work for my job that I do not write as much for myself.

**PM:** Do you write every day or only when inspiration strikes?

**WB:** I write more now only when inspiration hits. But I am writing a novel and I have been more committed to this process than I did before. So, I won't be writing any picture books for the rest of the year. Normally, I only write 2 picture books in January in one week. And those are the ones going out on submission. I only go out with two books at a time, once a year. In January, I will take a week to craft two picture book manuscripts. My agent will send those out. I love my editors. So, for a picture book, we will give that editor an exclusive. If the editor doesn't want them, then we go widely. But I've been blessed that she loves me and my writing and has jumped on projects I've created. However, I know the day will come when she won't buy everything I create because I want to explore different forms of writing and create different manuscripts and at times, family will not be the center of my stories.

*Winsome Bingham...continued*

**PM:** Do you juggle multiple projects?

**WB:** I have been juggling multiple projects. But it is not working because I forget I started them, or I can't remember where they are saved on the computer. I have had my agent send me an email asking about projects that I forgot I wrote or started writing. That is why it is important and imperative that I write it right the first time because I do not trust my brain.

**PM:** Do you have any advice for writers who might get stuck on a plot point?

**WB:** Yes, tap into your young self and remember how you would explain something to an adult.

This is an effective structure:

Picture yourself talking to your family....

“So, this happened....

“And then...

“And then....

“And then....” Etc.

When you are finished, go back and take out the “And then,” you should have your story in its entirety. You are telling the reader what happened. That is the plot.

**PM:** How do you maintain enthusiasm for a work in progress?

**WB:** If each time I revisit it and I am still excited, then it means that the manuscript has legs. If I lose interest in something I started, I abandon it. Because I have to feel the same way about it each time I visit it. I have a manuscript entitled, *Missing Momma*, about a little girl dealing with a mother with PTSD. I still cry EVERY SINGLE TIME I READ THAT MANUSCRIPT. I choke up. That book will be published by Abrams and comes out in 2024. It is so powerful, and it is so real and evocative and true. (I'm wiping my eyes now typing this!)

**PM:** Do you edit as you go along?

**WB:** I do edit as I go along, but not all the time.

I found myself, as I got more comfortable writing and structuring picture books, to write the story first, then go back and edit line by line.

**PM:** How many drafts do you go through?

**WB:** I don't count my drafts. But for me, I tend to give up if I have to revise more than seven times. I have a manuscript now that I have been editing since June. The only thing that is saving me is that I have so many books under contract and coming out that my editor is in no rush for me to get it right. If my agent didn't sell it, I would have chucked this manuscript.

**PM:** Do you belong to any writer's groups or have beta readers?

**WB:** I don't belong to any writing groups. I have the two BEST WRITING CRITIQUE FOLKS IN THE WORLD - WILEY BLEVINS and K E LEWIS!!!! They are geniuses at plot, pacing, and progression. If they say your manuscript is not working, then YOUR MANUSCRIPT IS NOT WORKING!

**PM:** What if a story, no matter how hard you've worked on it, doesn't jell?

**WB:** If it doesn't jell, in the words of Jen Zeigler, “Re-imagine it.” When stories are not jelling, one reason could be you are trying to tell it in the wrong format. It may not be a picture book, but a short story, or chapter book, or even a novel. Explore different genres. Stories are not meant for one format. The author must be willing to explore, to search, and find the right platform to give the story its voice.

**PM:** Is a story ever truly finished?

**WB:** Nope! Every time I read *Soul Food Sunday*, I'm like, “I should have taken this out.” Or, “I should have rewritten this to read ....” And even after I send it off to my editors, I am always thinking about making it better.

**PM:** You have the first book in a chapter series coming out called *Fort Goode* about military families on an army post. How many books do you see in the series?

*Winsome Bingham...continued*

**WB:** Currently, I only have three books under contract. But I would love to do so many more books in that series. These kids are fun. But the mommas and partners on the backline are the backbones. One thing I think people do not understand is when one person signs up for the military, the WHOLE family serves in the military. Protecting America's freedom is not the act of the one service member on the front lines. Things are being taken care of in the background so that service members are not worried about their families. They can keep a clear head, stay alert, so they can make it home safely to their families. And those people making sure things are squared away are partners, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins. The biggest mission is keeping up morale. Everybody has a job to do.

**PM:** For inquiring minds, what is the difference between a picture book vs. a chapter book?

**WB:** Picture books are designed for an adult to read it to a child. Chapter books are designed for children to read by themselves. That is why readability and target audience is important. It is their introduction to independent reading with fluency and comprehension being the goal.

**PM:** You write both in poetry and prose. What are your criteria for deciding on the best format/way to tell the story?

**WB:** No matter the story, I will always write in POETIC PROSE. I'm a natural poet. Stories with lyricism, rhythm, musicality, and cadence resonate well with me.

**PM:** In addition to writing books, you're also an acquiring editor. Was that a natural progression for you?

**WB:** For years, Wiley has been telling me I should come work for him. We became friends after I met him at Reycraft. We shared manuscripts with each other. And he always said I would make a great editor. So when I graduated with my MFA, I remember saying to him, "I think I want to get into publishing." And he jokingly said, "You better not go work nowhere

else." And I applied at Reycraft, and I love the team. They are so smart and knowledgeable. And I love them. We have full-blown discussions about manuscripts. What works. What doesn't work. How to make it better. Then we decide who would be the best fit to work on that manuscript. If I love a manuscript and they don't feel as strongly about it, they allow me to work with the author (if the author is willing) and resubmit.

**PM:** Do you find it easier to edit other people's works than your own?

**WB:** Most definitely! Other people's work is so, so, so easy. I have a knack for hearing a story or reading it the first time and telling what's wrong with it and how to fix it. If I don't know how to fix it, then it is not the right story for me to edit, acquire, or advocate for publishing.

**PM:** Putting on your editor's hat, what speaks to you in a submission?

**WB:** Musicality and cadence. I love stories that appeal to the ears. I love stories with families. I think we need more stories where children are not navigating the world alone. Black and Brown kids don't get to move freely in the world. They have a support team. And we need to normalize this. Children need to know that they have support. And that it is always okay to go to someone for help and guidance.

**PM:** In submissions what are the pitfalls or red flags writers should avoid?

**WB:** Avoid copying mentor texts. I read a lot and can tell you which mentor texts writers use to create their stories. I want to see authenticity. If I can tell what books you copied, then we have a problem.

**PM:** Do you have an agent?

**WB:** I do have an agent. I have Hannah Mann at Writers House. She is a beast! She is smart! She is not afraid to have uncomfortable conversations with editors, publishers, and writers!

**PM:** What was the agent querying process like?

## *Winsome Bingham...continued*

**WB:** Marla Frazee pushed me to get out there and put my work out there. Hannah wasn't interested in the first picture book text I sent her. But she sent me a box of books and told me I had a middle-grade voice and if I ever wrote a middle-grade novel, please consider her. After Simon & Schuster made an offer on *Life is Beautiful*, I contacted her and asked if she could negotiate the contract. She responded immediately. We scheduled a meeting via phone. I sent her other manuscripts I had. And she offered representation. I signed with Hannah, and she knows how my brain works. We communicate via text and email. And so far, it is working. Everything we sent out on submission has found a home at publishers.

**PM:** Any advice for those in the query trenches?

**WB:** Yes.

- Make sure you have three manuscripts ready to go so if an agent asks for more work, you're ready. If you stay ready, you don't have to get ready. #Facts

- Follow the query submission guidelines agents and agencies put out
- Research the agents and agencies well before sending stuff
- Look at what you write. Do you write like any other author? For instance, do you write empowerment picture books? If you do, look at the other authors who write these. Who are their agents? That is important because you know that agent represents what you write. And that agent has a track record of selling what you write
- Also, DO NOT TURN YOUR NOSE UP AT SMALL PUBLISHERS, BIG PUBLISHERS WERE ONCE SMALL PUBLISHERS

**PM:** If someone asked you to come to their house for a potluck, what would you bring?

**WB:** I'm bringing CHICKEN FEET. I feel like they are so underrated, and they do not get the respect they deserve, 😂



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# IDENTIFYING and DEVELOPING Your WRITER'S VOICE

by Jane McBride

**W**hat is a writer's voice? Is it the same as one's verbal voice? Not at all.

Voice is a writer's unique way of expressing himself. It is made up of word choice, sentence and paragraph length, use of punctuation, employment of metaphors and similes, adhering to or breaking grammar rules, and a host of other things that will probably only become clear to you once you've written thousands and hundreds of thousands of words. Your writer's voice comes from many things, including where you spent your childhood years, your gender, your race, your place in the family constellation, your parents' level of education, your education. It comes from all of these and more. Your voice also comes from your outlook on the world, your sense of humor—or lack of the same, the place you feel you occupy not just in your small part of the world but your place in the universe.

How do you develop your writing voice?

Like anything, if you want to improve at something, you practice and then you practice some more. It took me years to identify and then to fine-tune my voice.

Following are a few exercises to discover your voice and learn how to make it distinctive:

**Freewriting.** Set a time and write about anything and everything. Don't stop to think. Just write. If you want to go a more formal route, choose one subject and write everything you can about it. Be serious. Be playful. Be reverent. Be silly. What feels right to you? Do you find that you write more seriously about the important things in life such as spiritual growth, death, love and that your writing turns more playful when you write about motherhood. Not that motherhood isn't serious, but I find my writing takes on a fun note when I write about my years of moth-

ering five children.

In your work-in-progress (WIP), listen to your narrator's voice. (Remember, a narrator doesn't necessarily have to be the protagonist, although that is often the case.) Try to make his or her voice stand out from your own. Come up with some statements that describe him, such as "I am a bully" or "I think frogs are cute" or "I never sleep." Ask yourself what these traits tell you about the character. Do your fingers itch to write more about this character when you write these descriptors?

Let's make up our own character right now. Ryan is a seventeen-year-old boy who has just found out that his girlfriend of a year has been cheating on him. Worse, she's been cheating on him with his best friend. In this exercise, we're going to try two different voices.

## Voice 1:

"I'm sorry, Ryan." DeeDee reached for my hand, but I slapped hers away.

"Forget it. We're over." No way was I going to take this cheating tramp back.

"You're so mean."

I felt mean. I felt really mean and wanted to let her know it. Even more, I wanted her to feel what I was feeling. I wasn't normally somebody who liked to hurt people, but today, today was different.

I was different.

Having just learned that my girlfriend had cheated on me, and, what's more, with my best friend, sucked. It sucked big time.



*Identifying and Developing...continued*

DeeDee looked at me with hurt in those big brown eyes that used to pull me in until I felt I was drowning in them. Now I knew she used them, just like she'd used me.

No more.

"Okay. Be that way. I never want to see you again." She snapped out the words.

"Fine by me. I don't need a slut in my life anyhow."

**Voice 2:**

"I'm sorry, Ryan." DeeDee started to take his hand, but he pulled his out of reach before she could touch him.

"We're finished. I can't be with someone who cheats on me."

"You're so mean."

Ryan supposed he was being mean, but how was he supposed to feel. She'd broken his heart, and he wanted her to hurt as he hurt. He wasn't exactly proud of it. But he wouldn't take back his words. DeeDee had cheated on him. He wouldn't apologize for not taking her back.

He looked at her and wanted to cry. She'd meant something to him. Once.

But he also knew he couldn't be with her again.

"Okay. Be that way. I never want to see you again," she said, tears sliding down her face.

What is different in these two passages? The first thing that jumps out is that the first one is written in first person point-of-view and that the second is written in third person POV. In the first passage, we get a look at Ryan's anger. In the second, we see his hurt. But the differences go deeper than that.

Notice that DeeDee's dialogue doesn't change, but how it is received in the two versions of Ryan is entirely different.

In the first passage, the narrator (the protagonist) is callous, snarky, perhaps even cruel. His language is flip, even hard. Consider his use of the word sucked. He uses it twice, the words close together. The hard "k" at the end of the word emphasizes his hard feelings. The character in the second passage has a gentler voice. We feel his regret in doing what he knows is necessary. His words are softer.

Consider the first words of the Ryan character in the first passage: "Forget it. We're over." Contrast those with the words of the Ryan character in the second: "We're finished."

It is not only the words themselves, but their sounds. The consonants are tough, verging on harsh in the first passage. The word forget has its strongest consonants in the second syllable, with the hard "g" and "t" sounds. Other word choices are also hard, not just in their meaning but in the sounds they make: slapped, tramp, slut, snapped. Another point is the use of the extremely short paragraph, "I was different." This could easily have gone with the preceding paragraph, but I chose to let it stand on its own, thereby giving it more punch.

**Let's do two more exercises:**

**Exercise 1:** Write a page of dialogue and narrative and try for a lyrical, gentle voice. Using the same subject, write the same thing again, but this time with a hard-hitting voice. When you're done, examine both pages of writing and determine what made the difference(s). In which voice did you feel more comfortable?

**Exercise 2:** Take a passage from your WIP that you are dissatisfied with and write it in a different voice. Experiment with POV, word choice, verbs, punctuation, sounds, figures of speech, and anything else that you can come up with.

**WRAPPING UP**

Discover your character's voice, and your own writing voice, by writing. Write about everything that comes to mind. Write what feels natural. Write about what doesn't feel natural.

Just remember to keep writing.

# A Look Inside the Brand & Content Development of a Big 5 Publisher

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

**S**tephanie Sabol is Vice President and Executive Director of Brand & Content Development Strategy at Penguin Random House Books for Young Readers, as well as being a children's writer. Stephanie said in regards to her writing that she's been very lucky to work with the team that creates the *Who HQ* books and she wrote four of them herself. These are: *What Was The Titanic?* *Where Is Our Solar System?* *Where Are The Constellations?* *Who Is Bruce Springsteen?* She has a special affinity for each of the four topics she writes about ("I'm a Jersey Girl who is fascinated by space AND disasters!"). She is not currently working on anything new, as she has a two year old who takes up what used to be her writing time.

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Could you

please explain exactly what you do at PRHBFYR in your role as Vice President, Executive Director of Brand & Content Development Strategy?

**STEPHANIE SABOL:** I have a really fun job at Penguin Young Readers. No two days are alike! I work on a number of our key brands, mostly on the business side. One of these brands is the World of Eric Carle which Pen-

guin Young Readers acquired in early 2020. We are the owners of Eric's intellectual property which includes rights to his books, merchandise, entertainment, etc. It's a very robust business both domestically and internationally. We have over 175 books in print and this year are publishing an additional twenty. We also work

with over 250 merchandise licensees worldwide who create fun products based on Eric's work, particularly *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. There is a live stage show, an app, and even a permanent Play Park in Tokyo devoted to Eric's art.

**SB:** When a particular series or character makes the jump to "brand", what happens?

Are there certain qualities about that product that help it become a brand?

**SS:** There are no hard and fast rules about

what a brand is. We generally consider something to be a brand when there are at least three books available and sales are growing. Some books lend themselves more easily to becoming brands—for example books that have a recurring character like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. But a brand does not have to be character-based. We consider many of our authors brands themselves.



Penguin  
Random House  
PENGUIN YOUNG READERS

*A Look Inside...continued*

**SB:** If an author or illustrator is hoping for their books/characters to become a brand, is there anything they can do early on, during the creation process, or does this just happen organically? In other words, are brands mostly based on ideas that have wide commercial appeal from the start, or can a book that catches on with young readers in another way evolve into a brand?

**SS:** I do think it happens organically. It's great to have a vision from the start about how something can become a brand, but ultimately consumer response is what determines if something will become and stay a brand.

**SB:** What types of licensing do you oversee, and how does this differ from sales done through the subsidiary rights department?

**SS:** My group oversees the licensing of consumer products—non-book products like plush dolls, bedding, apparel, toys, etc. At some publishing houses this business is overseen by the subsidiary rights department but at PYR we handle it separately.

**SB:** Do authors and illustrators get a percentage of the licensing fees? Are these generally spelled out in the publishing contract, or negotiated separately?

**SS:** This varies from contract to contract but illustrators generally receive a royalty on licensed products based on their illustrations.

**SB:** If an author wants to use something from a PRHBFYR property, such as turn a published story into a play, or reprint an excerpt from a published book in their book, do they go through you, or is that something the permissions department would handle?

**SS:** Generally that's handled by our permissions department but we work very closely with them.

**SB:** Are there ever any instances where an author or illustrator can license an existing character/story and turn it into a new product? If so, how difficult is that to do?

**SS:** Yes, that's possible! Consumer products is a competitive business but there are many different avenues to pursue. Some of the more common products associated with children's book properties are toys, puzzles, games, plush dolls and clothing. However, most licensees want to know a book brand is established and selling strongly before they take on the risk of developing consumer products.

**SB:** Is there anything I have not yet asked you, that you would like to share with children's writers?

**SS:** Don't get discouraged! Writing books might feel like it should be a linear process but it often isn't. It's ok to take one step forward and two steps back. Your publishing team is always there to help you make the best possible book (and consumer products!)



*From the World of Eric Carle Play Park in Tokyo's interactive Play Museum*