

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  December 2020



**WRITING PARANORMAL FICTION FOR MIDDLE GRADE & YA**

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION CODE:**



**BLUE WHALE PRESS**

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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:

## Scholastic Open to Unagented Submissions from BIPOC Authors for Two Weeks

The Scholastic 0-8 team, which publishes board books through early chapter books, is opening up submissions to authors who identify as a Person of color, Indigenous, Native American or Pacific Islander. **The submission window closes at 11:59 PM EST on December 15, 2020.** Scholastic hopes to open another round of submissions at a later date.

Only one submission per applicant. Email a query letter with your project title and format in the subject line (example: THE BIG RED HOUSE\_picture book). Send to [BIPOCsubmissions@scholastic.com](mailto:BIPOCsubmissions@scholastic.com). Will respond to all queries within 6 months.

The Scholastic 0-8 team consists of Cartwheel Books (board and novelty books) for ages 0-5; Orchard Books and Scholastic Press (picture books for ages 3-8); Acorn (early readers for ages 4-7); and Branches (early chapter books for ages 5-8). For details on each imprint, sample titles to study, and detailed submissions guidelines, go to [bit.ly/ScholasticBIPOCOpenCall](https://bit.ly/ScholasticBIPOCOpenCall).

## 2021 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer/Illustrator Awards Open to Books Published in 2020

Two awards will be given to a new writer and new illustrator for picture books written and illustrated in the tradition of Ezra Jack Keats that highlight the universal qualities of childhood and the strength of the family; reflect the multicultural nature of our world; have an original text and original art (no folk tales or retellings of folk tales); unify illustrations and text; avoid stereotypes; are respectful of the child's intelligence, sensitivity, curiosity, and love of learning; and display freshness and originality of language and literary expression (for writer), or demonstrate excellent command of the chosen medium and display freshness and originality in style (for illustrator).

To be eligible, the author or illustrator will have no more than three children's books previously published. The book submitted for the award must have a 2020 copyright date. Self-published books are not eligible for the award. Each award will have a cash prize of \$3,000, coupled with the esteemed Ezra Jack Keats medallion (inscribed with the recipient's name), and will be presented to the winning author and winning illustrator at the award ceremony, which is held every year in April during the [Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival](#) at the [University of Southern Mississippi](#). A gold seal with the iconic image of "Peter" in a red snow suit (from *The Snowy Day*) is made available to the publisher to affix to copies of the book.

A copy of each entry must be sent to each member of the awards committee as well as the award's Executive Director and Curator (10 copies in all). See <https://www.degrummond.org/ezra-jack-keats-book-award-guidelin> for names and addresses of committee members. **Entries must be postmarked by December 31, 2020.** Selection will take place in January 2020 in time for the award presentation in April.

## YA Speculative Fiction Podcast Open to Submissions

Cast of Wonders (<https://www.castofwonders.org/>) is a young adult speculative fiction podcast, which professionally produces YA stories into 30 minute audio broadcasts, and also prints the stories under the podcast link on the website. Looking for original works for ages 12-17 under 6000 words in length. Stories that evoke a sense of wonder, have deep emotional resonance, and have something unreal about them are preferred. No gratuitous or explicit sex, violence or pervasive obscene language. Strong pacing, well-defined characters, engaging dialogue, clear action, and a proper narrative structure and a prose style not laden with clichés and over-worn idioms are a must. All forms of fantasy, science fiction, horror, comedy, steampunk, age-appropriate paranormal romance, superheroes, and other genres welcome. Pays \$.08 per word for four months exclusivity for text and audio for original stories. **The open submission window is from December 1 through December 31, 2020.** For sample podcasts, detailed guidelines and how to submit, go to <https://www.castofwonders.org/submissions/>. For a list of future open submission windows, go to <https://www.castofwonders.org/submissions/schedule/>.

**STEAM Magazine for Ages 9-14 Accepting Submissions**

*Muse* is a discovery magazine for ages 9-14. The editors seek fresh and entertaining articles from the fields of science, technology, engineering, art, and math. Timeliness and trustworthiness is essential, but humor, irreverence, and atypical angles are also hallmarks of *Muse*. Each edition focuses on a central theme and open-ended organizing questions about the theme. Articles should build on and extend the existing knowledge most young people in grades 4–8 have. Interested in articles that feature innovators, scientists, and engineers who can explain what they’ve done in a clear and understandable way. Articles that explore new developments related to or make claims or assertions backed up with evidence are especially welcome.

Submission categories include Feature Articles (800–2,000 words, including sidebars); Profiles and Interviews, particularly of underrepresented STEM professionals (500–800 words); Activities and Experiments (500–800 words); Photo Essays (100–300 words); Science Fiction or Science-Focused Fiction (800–1,200 words); Infographics. Interested writers should familiarize themselves with *Muse*’s style and content (sample copies are available at the [Cricket Media Store](https://cricketmag.submittable.com) where you can also purchase a current issue). *Muse* purchases all rights. Submit a detailed query with a cover letter, outline of the proposed article including scope and treatment, and proposed resources. Writers new to *Muse* should provide a resume and writing sample. Send through Submittable: <https://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/58980/muse-magazine-for-ages-914-science-nonfiction> (scroll to the bottom of the page).

**Upcoming themes: September 2021 issue: LAYERS OF MEANING (query deadline, January 15, 2021).** Organizing questions: Which places and things reveal overwritten histories, and what stories do they tell? Possible topics: Specific places/cities as the layered text of history; Urban archaeology; Myths and languages that build on one another; medieval palimpsests; Artwork overlaid on earlier works or drafts, and how discovered/restored; 20th anniversary of Wikipedia

**October 2021 issue: SCIENCE OF FEAR (query deadline, February 15, 2021).** Organizing questions: When is fear normal, and when is it problematic? Why do we feel scared? Possible topics: Evolutionary role of fear; Physiology and psychology of fear; “Fun” kinds of fear, especially in entertainment and Halloween events; Developmental stages: what’s scary when; Do animals get scared?; Passing fears vs anxiety disorders, PTSD, phobias

**November/December 2021 issue: COLORS AND ART THERAPY (query deadline, March 15, 2021)** Organizing question: How can science help us see—and feel—colors in a new way? Possible topics: Discovering the rainbow: Newton’s prisms; Ingredients of modern vs historical art materials; Combining colors; Illusions and vision tricks; How animals see color; Color Blindness; How colors affect emotions; Therapeutic artmaking; Color’s role in various cultures and rituals

**Agent Seeks MG, YA and Graphic Novel Submissions**

Paloma Hernando joined Einstein Literary Management (<https://www.einsteinliterary.com/>) as an associate agent in 2020. Her favorite books often have a bit of magic in them, and she loves being able to dive into any world, real or invented, presented on the page. She is looking for both graphic novels and prose fiction for YA or adult, including more mature stories, particularly ones that deal with difficult emotions and nuanced characters. She loves romance, particularly queer romance, science fiction that feels fresh, high fantasy, and middle grade with a good sense of humor. She is interested in nonfiction for all ages, especially anything that digs into media analysis or an event in history. She loves a story with a strong voice and solid construction. Submit a query letter and the first ten double-spaced pages of your manuscript in the body of the email (no attachments except for graphic novel submissions below) to [submissions@einsteinliterary.com](mailto:submissions@einsteinliterary.com). Put “Paloma Hernando, [title of your manuscript]” in the subject line. For illustrated works, if you’re submitting a comic or graphic novel, please attach appropriate pitch materials to your email and link to your portfolio. A graphic novel pitch packet includes a full, detailed synopsis of the work, intros and descriptions of the main characters, any relevant setting descriptions, and 10 finished comic pages. Responds to submissions within 6 weeks if interested.

Dear Reader,

Matt attended elementary school about seven blocks from our house, and in the early years I walked to school each afternoon with our dogs to pick him up. At about the halfway mark lived a gentleman named Carl. Back then Carl was already retired, and he liked to spend his weekday afternoons from 3:00 to 3:30 sitting on a chair in his driveway as kids made their way home. The kids knew him as the friendly old guy who waved and called many of them by name. But as a mother, I saw much more. Carl wasn't just being neighborly, he was watching over his youngest neighbors. He reminded kids to buckle the chin strap on their bicycle helmets. He noticed which kids walked alone, and made an extra effort to say hello. He paid attention when groups of school children reached the corner and mentally calculated that they all turned in the right direction to get home. When Matt returned to school after being out sick, Carl asked if he was feeling better.

Carl was as dependable as the sunrise. On warm days he'd be in the middle of the driveway, sometimes joined by his wife. If it was cold or snowing, he'd sit inside his garage next to a heater, leaving the door open so he could still watch the street. When Matt got older and started walking home by himself, one of my first instructions was, "If you ever need help, go to Carl's house. He'll be there."

It's been 12 years since Matt graduated from sixth grade and moved on from the neighborhood school. In those years I've expanded my dog-walking routes beyond those seven blocks. I lost track of Carl, though I'd sometimes walk by his house outside of school hours and wonder if he still lived there. And then the pandemic hit, schools closed, and everyone stayed home.

This past October I happened to be walking Rosie on Carl's block the first day schools reopened. I'd completely forgotten about it—we're not tied to the school schedule anymore—but when I saw kids heading home from school, I made my way past Carl's house. And there he was, looking remarkably the same: his back still straight, his head still full of silver hair, wearing the same plaid flannel shirt. I saw two chairs stacked on the driveway, and hoped that meant his wife continued to join him on sunny days. I waved and said hello, but I don't think he remembered me—he'd seen hundreds of new children and parents in the years since Matt was a regular. But he waved back. And in that moment I felt a peace and joy that I hadn't felt in months. Carl was still on the job. Everything would be okay.

This has been a very long year full of changes we've been forced to accept. We do our best to adapt and keep going, but sometimes we need to revisit a part of our lives that remains exactly as we left it. It recharges us, and gives us strength to face the next wave. As I walked home that day, I realized certain children's books are the Carl of our literary lives. We all have books on our shelves that we've been carrying around since childhood, or long after our children have outgrown bedtime stories. Some of these books are tied to specific memories or periods in our lives, and just seeing their covers takes us back to those times. But other books go even deeper—they taught us a timeless, universal truth about ourselves or the world, which we are reminded of every time we pick up

that book to dust behind it on the shelf, or open the cover and page through it. The book anchors us not only to that truth, but to its moment of discovery—the instant the world opened up a bit more, or we looked a little deeper inside ourselves and found something remarkable. When we revisit that moment years later, we see that it hasn't changed. It remains an unwavering part of who we are. And no matter what's happening in our lives now, as long as that truth still exists, everything will be okay.

In the last several months I've gotten emails from some of you asking if you should write about the pandemic. Will publishers be looking for children's books that explore this period of time? I don't have a crystal ball, so here's my best answer: If you feel the need to write about the world in 2020, to help children process and understand everything we've lived through, then go for it. If you don't want to cover the pandemic in your books, then don't. Here's a reality of publishing: a generation of readers lasts about five years. Every five years, kids age out of a particular category of books and move on to the next age group. Then a new generation of readers steps in. Will the readers two or three generations from now need books about a pandemic? I can't answer that (again—no crystal ball), but I guarantee they will need books that reveal universal truths that give them strength to face the challenges of a lifetime. They'll need stories that show what friendship really means, characters who stand up for what's right, ideas that invite them to look at the world in a new way, books about little-known people from the past whose acts of courage or innovation created ripples of greatness that still exist today. They need those moments of discovery that show them the possibilities of who they can become. And as adults, we need to revisit those books and be reminded of who we are.

Whether or not those books are set against the backdrop of a pandemic is up to you. But that's what you should write.

And please, please have fun! One of the most significant books of my early childhood was Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham*. Not just because it was the first book I could read on my own, but because I have a very vivid memory of lying on my bed in the summer before first grade, reading *Green Eggs and Ham* when I was supposed to be taking a nap, and suddenly realizing that the story was about more than what was happening on the page. It was about not judging something too quickly; it was about being brave enough to try new things. And in that moment I felt that Dr. Seuss had reached through the pages and whispered an incredible secret just to me.

So write those moments. Because schools have closed down again and we're settling into winter. But with your books we can be strong in the knowledge that spring will come, life will go on, and Carl will still be on the job.

As we round the corner of 2020, I am especially grateful for that.

Take care,

*Laura Backes*

# Writing Nonfiction for the Education Market

## PART 3: PREPARING YOUR SUBMISSION PACKET

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

Let's recap. In the first article of this series (October 2020), we covered the differences between writing series nonfiction for the education market and trade nonfiction. We also discussed the qualities that make a writer a good fit for this type of work and how to create samples for a submission packet. In the second article (November 2020), we covered all of the other components that make up a submission packet—resume, cover letter, publications list, business card, and SASE. We talked about market research and connecting with specific editors. In this final article, we are going to talk about what to expect when you land your first assignment and how to navigate this first opportunity.

### Series Guidelines

Congratulations! You've been offered your first assignment and the contract has been signed. Now what? In most cases, the editor will give you a set of series guidelines. The series guidelines include the theme of the series, titles of books included, page count, word count, and reading level. They will also include an explanation of the intention of the series, text style and tone, structure, content focus, and research requirements. The guidelines will let you know what to expect as far as front matter (title page, table of contents, etc.) and back matter (index, glossary, extra facts, etc.).

Editors will often include a sample book or two that have already been completed for this specific series or samples from similar series. You'll probably receive an outline. I've had some assignments where I had to develop the outline, a few assignments where I was given a very basic and general outline, and a few assignments where I was given a very detailed and specific outline. After you've had the chance to look over the guidelines, samples, and outline, feel free to ask the editor any questions you have or anything you need clarification on.

### Research

As far as sources, I begin at my local library. I check out the most current books available for the topic I'm

writing about. Your editor is not going to want to see books and articles that are more than five years old. The newer, the better. Other children's books cannot be used as sources, but they might help you to get a better understanding of the material you are supposed to cover.

I find most of my sources online, but not just any website is an acceptable source. Reputable organizations like National Geographic and the Smithsonian would be acceptable. Government websites like NASA and the Environmental Protection Agency would be acceptable sources. Educational institutions and online newspaper and journal articles are also great options. Lexis-Nexis (<https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/gateway.page>) is a database of newspaper and magazine articles. It costs to subscribe, but your local library may have a subscription, or, if you're getting assignments consistently, you might consider it a good writing investment for yourself. For the most part, personal web pages, blogs, and Wikipedia are not considered good resources.

You may need to interview an expert on the topic you're covering. For instance, if you are assigned to write a book about the job of a zookeeper, your best source is probably going to be your local zookeeper. Don't be shy. Send an email or give them a call. In my experience, once I explain what I'm doing, most of the experts I've reached out to have been happy to help.

You will have to include footnotes and submit a bibliography when you turn in your manuscript. I highly recommend that you begin a new bibliography at <https://www.easybib.com/> right away. As you collect resources, add them to your easy bib list.

### Organization

As I've mentioned in previous articles in this series, these assignments often have a very quick turnaround time. Excellent organization skills are a must! There are lots of ways to go about this, but the following is what works for me. I begin each new project with a large binder. The binder includes the set guidelines,

*Writing the Book...continued*

outline, and any samples given to me by the editor. Every new source article I find is printed and added to the binder. All of the notes I take from each new book I source is added to the binder. Any email conversations with experts are added to the binder. Don't forget that as I'm adding sources to the binder, I'm also adding these sources to my easy bib page. If I'm assigned multiple books in a series, each book gets its own binder.

Once I've accumulated all of the research I think I'll need, I begin to write—but not on regular lined paper or my keyboard. My writing always begins on index cards. I refer to the outline/samples the editor provided. If the guidelines say that the book will have 24 pages of text, then I will use 24 index cards. I like to use index cards because I can deal with the book spread by spread in small chunks, and I can easily move information around and reorganize if I need to. I make sure to jot down what source was used for each fact on the back of each card. This will make footnoting a breeze.

Once I've written on all of my index cards, it's time to go back over them. I need to make sure the word count, sentence/paragraph length, and word choice is correct for each page. I often use this free readability checker <https://readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php> to make sure I'm on point for reading level. I also need to make sure the tone and structure is correct and that I've included all of the content asked for. Once I've done all of this, I type it up on the computer just like any other manuscript. Don't forget those footnotes! Then, if I have time, I let it sit for a day or two. When I come back to the manuscript, I read through it again carefully. I compare it to the guidelines, outline, and samples given and make sure I've followed every direction to a tee.

Once I'm satisfied, it's time to turn it in to the editor. There is almost always one round of revisions and sometimes two or three. Don't get frustrated by these requests. This is the normal process. Just do your best to make the changes requested, and if you don't understand a specific revision request, don't be afraid to ask the editor for clarification. After a round or two of revisions, hopefully, you can say that you've completed your very first nonfiction series book for the education market.

Congratulations! Cheers to your completed book and hopefully to many more assignments to come!

**More on Research**

<https://www.dummies.com/education/language-arts/creative-writing/how-to-research-a-non-fiction-childrens-book-topic/>

<https://writerunboxed.com/2015/01/11/a-step-by-step-guide-to-conducting-the-research-interview/>

<http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/teacher-resources/style-guide-resources-mla-apa-cse-chicago/>

[https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/undergraduate/evaluating\\_web.html](https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/undergraduate/evaluating_web.html)

**Books by Kimberly M. Hutmacher**

To learn how to create a steady, satisfying career writing for the school and library market, be sure to register for our webinar, "Writing for the School & Library Market", presented by Lionel Bender, editorial partner of the book packager Bender Richardson White. It takes place live on Tuesday, December 8 at 3 pm eastern/12 pm Pacific. \$47 fee includes the live event, lifetime access to the replay, a hefty handout packet and Q&A session. Register at: <https://writeforkids.org/writing-for-school-library>



# SPEAKING UP WITHOUT FREAKING OUT

## SPEAKING COACH **MATT ABRAHAMS**

interview by PJ McIlvaine

In the list of things people hate to do, speaking in public ranks right up there with taxes, funerals, and removing lint from the dryer. Talking to a crowd (or even a small one) is just one of those things that doesn't come naturally for many people, myself included. My palms get sweaty and my voice sounds like Minnie Mouse on steroids. Over the years I've gotten better at it, but it's not my natural habitat. But it doesn't have to be that way, thanks to Matt Abrahams, an innovative and passionate educator/coach and the author of *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, a book designed to help people communicate more confidently and effectively. Abrahams is a popular lecturer at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and is a co-founder of Bold Echo Communications Solutions, an industry leading presentation consulting and coaching practice. You can learn more about Abrahams and his techniques at <https://www.nofreakingspeaking.com/>

**PJ McILVAINE:** How did your career path lead you to become a motivational/communicator/speaker?

**MATT ABRAHAMS:** The career path that led me to be a communicator and speaker started when I was actually very young. When I was 14 years old, first day of high school, my English teacher had everybody introduce themselves. Based on my last name, Abrahams, I went first. At the end of class, he called me up and said, "Hey, you're really good at this speaking thing. I need you to go to a speech and debate event this coming weekend." So, doing what I was supposed to do, I followed my teacher's directive and I prepared a presentation. It was a presentation on the martial arts, something that was, and still is very important to me. I was very nervous on the morning of the presentation. I was presenting in front of my friends, in front of the girl I liked, and the judges were parents of friends of mine. So I was very nervous, so nervous that I forgot to put on my special karate pants. So I started my speech with a karate kick and you guessed



it. I ripped my pants from belt loop to zipper.

At that moment and from that moment, I learned the importance of anxiety and its effects on speaking. And from then, I have been very interested in speaking, very interested in communicating, and very interested in helping people become more confident and less nervous when they speak.

**PM:** What do you see is the biggest issue or impediment in public speaking and why are so many authors (including me) anxious and fearful?

**MA:** That's a big question. Most people are nervous—85% of people report anxiety in high-stakes situations. And I think the other 15% are lying. It is a nerve-wracking experience, and it's for many reasons. One, we're being judged, two, we have goals we want to achieve. For authors, you've worked very hard on something and you want people to see the value in it and you're afraid they might not.

So a lot of this has to do with the fact that we are focused on ourselves and not our audience. So to me, the biggest impediment is where we put our attention. If you put your attention on your audience and focus on their needs and the value you can provide them, then you will be less nervous. That said, there are many, many techniques that somebody can learn and practice to become less anxious based on other sources of anxiety, like evaluation goal, etc.

**PM:** What techniques, tricks, or tips can content creators utilize to become more adept at speaking in public and sound authentic and genuine?

**MA:** The same skills that go into good writing go into good speaking. Organization, content, thinking about your audience. Those are all critical. So the skills writers have should help them in creating their content. Now, in terms of sounding authentic and genuine, really getting away from writing out word

*Matt Abrahams...continued*

for word and memorizing is the way to go. Create a structure, an outline, perhaps just a list of questions that you want to answer. That will help you sound more real and genuine. Additionally, try to be more conversational. Use conversational language, inclusive terms like you, us, we. Nervous speakers use distancing terms like, "the audience should." And try to use questions. Questions engage the audience, make it more conversational.

**PM:** In the age of Covid-19, virtual meetings have pretty much become the norm for authors to make presentations, lectures, speaking engagements, etc. But that presents a particular set of challenges and new skill sets.

**MA:** Virtual presenting and virtual meetings are about two things: engagement and presence. Engagement is about getting your audience involved, using inclusive language, asking questions, taking a poll, having your audience type into the chat, etc.

Another way to get them involved is to use language that invites people to see things in their heads, saying things like, "Imagine," or, "What would it be like if?" or, "Picture this." Analogies also get people engaged. Really, a lot of good writing techniques can be used to engage your audience.

Presence is about being big and balanced and still. A lot of people slouch. You want to pull your shoulder blades back, look straight at the camera. You want to be balanced with your idea still and upright, not tilting. Don't rock or shake; being still will increase your presence. Vary your voice. Your voice becomes much more important when you are virtual. So make sure you vary the tone and emphasize important points.

**PM:** I understand you've mentored authors challenged by public speaking. How did that come about? Isn't the idea of being an author that you choose writing over other, more visible, forms of communication and you don't want to have to explain your work?

**MA:** More and more these days with the advent of platforms and marketing, nobody is just an author. Nobody is just a speaker. It all blends together. Anyone who has an important story to tell—I don't care if it's fiction or nonfiction—really needs to be adept at both writing and speaking. That doesn't mean you have to be a professional speaker, but you need to be

able to represent yourself and your ideas well. Because of my book *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, authors sought me out to teach them anxiety management techniques. I've helped them learn how to explain their ideas in a clear and concise way, and how to answer questions. Those techniques are really important.

**PM:** In this market where books are being adapted into many different forms like movies, TV series, and video games, does it help writers to have a more confident speaking approach when dealing with agents, producers, directors, etc.?

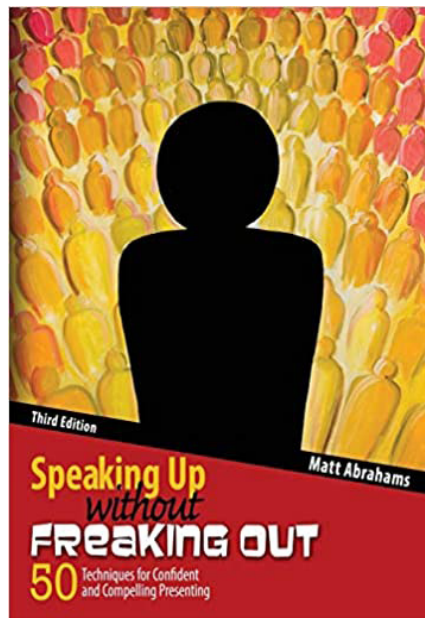
**MA:** Absolutely. It is important to have a confident approach to speaking, no matter whom you're talking to. Clearly knowing your audience, what's relevant and important to them, is critical. That doesn't mean you're always going to be devoid of anxiety. All of us have anxiety. I still get nervous speaking in certain situations in front of certain people. But it means you can begin to do the work that needs to be done to be as comfortable as possible.

**PM:** If you could communicate one thing in an effective and confident manner, what would that be?

**MA:** From my point of view, it's fundamentally true that everybody can be more comfortable and confident speaking to groups, and you do so by focusing on the needs of your audience, and having a clear goal. A goal is about information, emotion, and action, and then structure the message in a way that's easy to understand.

**PM:** What's the best—and worst—thing that's happened to you while giving a speech?

**MA:** Well, I think I shared the worst thing. I ripped my pants as a high school boy in front of peers and the girl I liked. I don't think it gets much worse than that. What's the best thing? You know, there's been lots of joy in my communication. Seeing somebody get an idea that I've shared that can really help them be better communicators means a lot in the teaching I do. Seeing my students understand and appreciate the information and then being able to translate it and take it even beyond what I had taught, and then, in turn, teach me good things. So the best is being able to connect with students and audience members and really being able to enter into a conversation where we both learn from each other.



# Alayne Kay Christian

Co-founder and Creative Director



interview by Lynne Marie

**A**layne Kay Christian is the acquisitions editor, creative director, and co-founder of Blue Whale Press ([www.bluewhalepress.com](http://www.bluewhalepress.com)), now an imprint of Clear Fork Publishing. She is also an award-winning children's book author and the creator/instructor of a picture book writing course, Art of Arc. Her most recent book, *The Weed that Woke Christmas: The Mostly True Tale of the Toledo Christmas Weed*, illustrated by Polina Gorman, was selected by *Kirkus* for a feature. In addition, her recent editorial project, *A Horn is Born*, written by Bill Borders and illustrated by Melizza Chernov, released on November 1 to great reviews.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Welcome, Alayne! I'm excited to share your knowledge and experience with our readers, as you have worn many hats—author, editor AND publisher! To start off, please tell us a little bit about Blue Whale Press and its inspiration.

**ALAYNE KAY CHRISTIAN:** Thank you for inviting me to chat with you, Lynne Marie. Blue Whale Press is an independent publisher of children's books sold through retail and wholesale distribution. Retail shoppers can find our books at Amazon.com, Booktopia, and Barnes & Noble, among many other outlets, while those in the trade can obtain our books from Ingram Content Group. Our focus is high-quality picture books. It was founded by a couple who probably couldn't be more different in backgrounds and personalities—my husband, Steve Kemp, and me. Yet we complement each other so well, and I'm proud to say, have for decades. And now, it is owned by Clear Fork Publishing as the imprint Blue Whale Press.



Steve is a retired marketing and business development executive from the high-tech arena who has authored and/or edited thousands of pages of the web, technical, and marketing copy over the span of a 35 career. He served as the chief editor for Blue Whale Press up until the Clear Fork acquisition in May of 2020. Now he focuses solely on book production without the tedium of working on administrative functions. As for me and what I bring to Blue Whale Press—as you mentioned, I'm an award-winning children's book author. I'm the creator and teacher of a picture book writing course, Art of Arc. I've been a professional picture book and chapter book critique writer since 2014, and I worked for three years for Julie Hedlund's 12 X 12 as a critique ninja. I've spent the last twelve years studying under some of the top names in children's literature. I'm proficient in book design and layout and have a keen eye for quality. In addition to all my other hats, I acquire the stories we publish, choose the illustrator for each book, and then work with authors and illustrators to coordinate the path to quality books.

**LM:** Coming from an author background, how did you have to shift your perspective once you became an editor and publisher?

**AKC:** When it comes to calling on my experience to choose and edit the stories we publish, I don't think it's as much about being an author as it is about being a teacher and critique writer. Over the years, I have developed a keen sense of what makes a quality story and how the art can enhance the story and bring it to life. I learned to appreciate the magic that

*Alayne Kay Christian...continued*

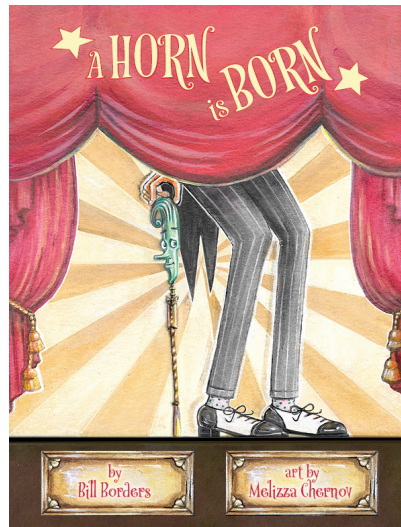
two creative spirits working together can produce in a completed book. But really, as a publisher, I will take the risk of sounding vain and say it's really the magic of three creative spirits working together (author, illustrator, and me with my many hats—the team usually consists of many more people with big publishers). The reason I say this is because, after editing, the story in the published book seldom looks like the manuscript that was submitted. And the art seldom goes unchanged during the production process. It is the magic of author, illustrator, editor, designer, art director, and sometimes even marketing all combined that makes the book that ends up released to the world.

My perspective from writer to published author was the first step to shifting my perspective as a writer and then later to the publisher. The first surprise was that authors don't always get much input when it comes to illustrations, and editors often suggest changes that stray from original text. I've found that most authors are pretty open to rewriting their stories, and I'm so pleased that in the end, they are happier with their stories. I've found that the harder thing for authors is to let go of their visions of how the characters will look and how the book will be illustrated. But again, I'm pleased to say that once authors accept that it's only fair to allow the illustrator their creative freedom, in the end, they are thrilled with their books. It's important for authors to understand that more times than not, the illustrator has ideas and visions that the author never even dreamed of—ones that will make the book even better than the author imagined. We are a team. The author's, illustrator's, and publisher's names all go on the book. It stands to reason that they will all do everything in their power to make the book the absolute best that it can be. And one to be mighty proud of.

So, I guess after my stream-of-consciousness answer written above, the biggest shift in perspective when considering a story is how all the pieces will come together. How the story will enhance illustrations, how illustrations will enhance the story, how the story will be marketed, what's the best title, what is the best art style, and on and on. Previously, as an author, I took all that into account, but for the most

part, I was in my writing bubble. But I believe there is nothing wrong with an author being in their writing bubble—it's our job to write. It just helps to stop and consider the journey it will need to take along its way to publication. And it will make life a lot easier for any author who is prepared for working with a team and trusting the process.

**LM:** Your small press is constantly growing and blooming, and is now a part of Clear Fork Publishing, owned and operated by Callie Metler, which is also growing and changing in wonderful ways. Please explain what it means to be an independent publisher.



**AKC:** I believe that the authors and illustrators get more attention and are more involved in the process than those who work with larger publishers. And I like that. One of my favorite things about being an independent publisher is bucking the trends. That's not to say that you don't have to be aware of them. However, to be able to produce books that dare to lean towards traditional (but with their own uniqueness) brings the books we produce back to basics. What do I mean by that? They are books that allow children to be children. While the rest of the world seems to be bent on a certain direction of messaging,

we can remain on our path of messaging of solid traditional values while being funny, entertaining, educational, and at times, touching. Independent publishing also means that we can offer opportunities to authors and illustrators who might not have otherwise had a chance to have their work published because agents tend to look for what the big publishers are looking for (trends), as are editors of the big publishers. I know that agents and editors often say that we shouldn't write to trends because it takes so long for a book to be published that by the time it's done the trend will be over. Yet, trends continue to be created and requested by both agents and editors. There are many other advantages to being an independent publisher, but this will be a long enough interview without me stating them.

**LM:** What would you consider the mission statement of Blue Whale Press? Is it true that you will be moved toward more of a STEM-based focus? How

*Alayne Kay Christian...continued*

would you recommend a writer to envision your target reader?

**AKC:** Our vision is quality books that have so much staying power that they have the potential to one day be called a classic. We will entertain, inspire, and educate readers of all ages. We will launch authors and illustrators into long-lasting careers that they love and are proud of. And most likely as with most publishers, we envision books as award winners on best-sellers lists.

Our target market is all readers and buyers of picture books. However, most of our books have a strong appeal to teachers and librarians. As far as STEM, we do lean toward STEAM (I added the A because we also lean toward the arts.) When it comes to STEAM, we are looking for clever, fun, and entertaining approaches to STEAM topics. Adding humor or heart never hurts either.

Please keep an eye on our website and read our books to see what we are publishing. In addition to STEAM, we have so many wonderful books published or on the way. When reading submissions for these books, some of the stories made me cry, some made me smile or laugh, some made me want more, some taught me something new, some made me think, “This is special! It has to be published.” And on and on.

If you are interested in reading our STEAM books, read the following. In parenthesis, I share what attracted us to the submission, and why we acquired it. You can find descriptions of most of the books on our website, with descriptions for new acquisitions coming soon.

**STEAM BOOKS PUBLISHED BY BLUE WHALE PRESS**

*Randall and Randall* by Nadine Poper, illustrated by Polina Gortman (SCIENCE, predator and prey, symbiotic relationships, and more —Educates while being funny, engaging arc with good tension and compelling page-turners, powerful darkest moment/turning point, unique characters and situations, great character and writing voices, and more!)

*Porcupette and Moppet* by Nadine Poper, illustrated by Alicia Young (SCIENCE, explores predator and prey and more—Educates while being funny, excellent arc with good tension, thought-provoking ending and message, inside joke that requires readers’ attention, somewhat predictable (maybe) but yet a good surprise twist at the end, unique characters and situations, great character and writing voices, and more!)

*Who Will? Will You?* by Sarah Hoppe, illustrated by Milanka Reardon (SCIENCE, introduces children to different kinds of pups in the animal world—Educates and engages, a simple plot with repetition and refrain of Who will? Will you?, predictability that causes tension, heart and emotional core, good character and writing voices, payoff at the end in learning what’s in Lottie’s wagon.)

*A Horn is Born* by Bill Borders, illustrated by Melizza Chernov (THE ARTS—Introduces different instruments to children, addresses bullying and coping, well-written rhyme to match the tone of the story, unique and engaging characters, unique and compelling story, arc that makes readers root for the underdog, tension, good messages, universal appeal, possible niche market, and more.)

**STEAM BOOKS COMING IN 2022**

*Mixed-Up Menagerie* by Jackie Kruzic, illustrator TBD (SCIENCE—This fun, partially metafiction book teaches about a variety of animals using clever humor, inside jokes, and tension. It also has many layers that offer good messages and a separate but related visual story that adds to the entertainment. Keep an eye out for this one. It’s going to be fantastic!)

*O Possum’s Predicament* by Patti Richards, illustrated by Melizza Chernov (THE ARTS AND SCIENCE—This fun story introduces children to the theater and Shakespeare. Back matter also provides facts about opossums, Shakespeare, and the theater. Watch for this one. It is super entertaining. By the way, the title isn’t misspelled. “O” is the character’s

## Alayne Kay Christian...continued

first name “Possum” is his last name. ;-)

*Bert and Wert: We Do the Dirty Work (How Turkey Vultures Help Keep the Earth Clean)* by Midge Ballou Smith, illustrated by Terry Sirrell (SCIENCE—Great characters, excellent character and writing voice, educates while being incredibly entertaining and funny. Back matter offers more fun facts about turkey vultures. This will be a graphic/cartoon-style book that is sure to capture kids and adults alike. It’s so good.)

**LM:** So many writers shoot for the Big Five publishers, but in my experience, books may get carried on a backlist longer and stay in print longer with smaller publishers. What are some of the things you would consider the benefits of going with a small publisher?

**AKC:** I agree with your point that independent publishers keep books active much longer than some other publishers do. My book *Butterfly Kisses for Grandma and Grandpa* has had a long life, and it continues to sell after ten years. It lives on under the Blue Whale Press imprint with Clear Fork.

As I’ve said elsewhere, smaller publishers sometimes offer opportunities to authors and illustrators that bigger publishers won’t take a risk on. I also believe that in many cases the experience with the independent publisher is one of being more informed along the way. And at least with Clear Fork and Blue Whale Press, authors and illustrators are part of a family that supports one another.

**LM:** As the creator of Art of the Arc, please share a few reasons why a narrative arc is so important in a story.

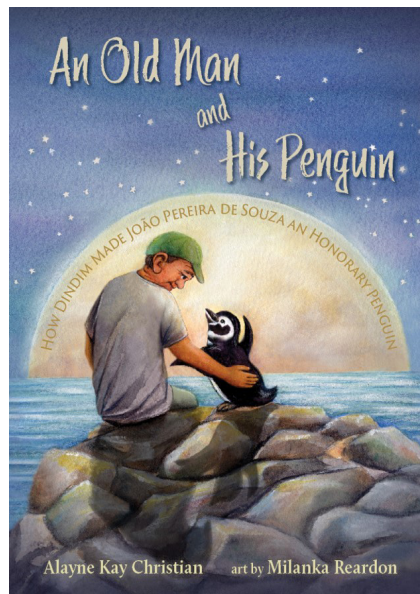
**AKC:** The character arc is the structure that shows how the character develops (grows/changes/learns) over time. Without a change, the story would be flat, and the reader would not have much to relate to. Usually, the main character starts out with some sort of conflict that he tries to work through, and he is eventually forced to make a choice that leads to his

change in thinking or growth. Sometimes the change in thinking is acceptance. In picture books and chapter books, the narrative and character arc are often closely related. Character arc is sometimes confused with character motivation (the thing that makes the character take action).

Motivation is the “why” of the protagonist’s action.

The arc is the “how” of the change and growth that occurred because of the action he took.

So, motivation is the driver. It is the energy that moves the protagonist to react or act. His growth is the result of the actions that he took.



The arc gives your story structure and focus. It gives you the beginning, middle, and end of your story in a way that compels the reader to keep turning pages. It energizes the story. Without a good arc, your story will fall flat. It gives your story the strength and power that propels your idea and words forward into something worth following as a reader.

Arc determines the ups and downs that set the pace of your story. A good arc is key to engaging readers from beginning to end. There are many picture books based on a similar idea or theme. The arc

helps to differentiate one of those same-topic picture books from the other. In picture books and other kid lit, the character arc and narrative arc sometimes seem inseparable. They develop simultaneously as the story progresses. The narrative arc (also called story arc) is related to the external events and the character arc is about the protagonist’s inner journey, hence the importance of some sort of growth in the character by the end of the story. But still, the two arcs form a symbiotic relationship. They rely on each other. The situations and challenges that your characters face are part of the story arc. The choices your character makes and the action he takes that lead to growth and change all fall into the character arc zone.

Why are these arcs so important? Because your char-

*Alayne Kay Christian...continued*

acter can't develop unless your plot creates events that prompt or spark your protagonist's growth or change. Your plot can't develop unless your character reacts to the plot events through action that moves the story forward, hence developing the plot.

**LM:** How might a writer work to strengthen a weak narrative arc? A weak character arc? What is one way a writer might determine that these areas are weak?

**AKC:** Maybe it would be helpful if I point out some of the mistakes that I see people make. I think in doing that, writers can ask if their story is strong or weak in the areas that I mention. These are all components of a story that help build an arc.

I see a lot of episodic stories. I explain episodic stories on my blog. <https://alaynekaychristian.wordpress.com/2016/06/29/12-x-12-critique-ninja-and-episodic-stories/>

If you test your story for episodic components (using the list in the blog post), you will likely find some areas that could be strengthened.

Along the same lines as being episodic, stories often lack focus because they have a weak or nonexistent cause and effect thread.

Many stories have a lack of growing tension or lack of variety in action.

It's common to read stories where it's not clear who the protagonist is. When I query the author, we often find who they "think" the protagonist is does not convey in their story. This is usually a sign of an episodic story or a weak or nonexistent arc.

I find that the darkest moment and inner and outer climax are either weak or missing.

There is often a lack of motivation or stakes that drive the protagonist to take action. This and a lack of obstacles (or try and fail scenes) result in a story with very little to no emotional core. The lack of stakes and obstacles prevent the rise in action and the tension that keep the reader engaged.

I see many weak beginnings that don't hook me as a reader. They don't create questions in my mind that make me want to keep reading. They don't set up any expectations that make me want to keep reading.

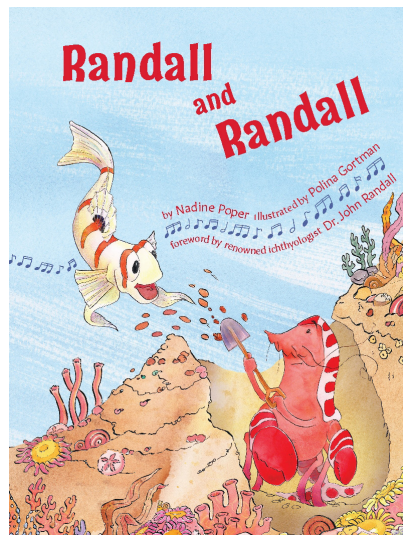
And then there are weak endings. Just a few examples: The story is resolved too easily. Someone else steps in and saves the protagonist. It might be predictable. There are loose ends left dangling.

**LM:** What are your feelings about concept books and/or slice-of-life books, or is that not at all what you would be looking for?

**AKC:** Unique, well-written books of any kind always catch our attention—even concept and slice-of-life

books. But I'm more drawn to books with a strong arc. I want to add that even concept books and slice-of-life stories can have components of an arc. A good example would be tension. Here is a link to a little tidbit about concept books and plots/arcs: <https://suebe.wordpress.com/2015/05/07/story-arc-how-to-plot-your-nonfiction-picture-bookbook/>

**LM:** What about nonfiction? How strong should the arc be in that type of project? How does what you are looking for in fiction differ from what you are looking for in nonfiction?



**AKC:** It depends on what kind of nonfiction you are talking about. For example: I love the books *Unusual Creatures* and *Bubble Homes* and *Fish Farts*. They present interesting facts and images and unique topics. As far as bios or stories about specific events and people, I still look for an arc. Most true stories offer writers a natural arc. In most cases the idea of the true story wouldn't have appealed to an author if they had not seen the arc (maybe in disguise, but it's usually there). The trick is how to put it all together in the limited words of a picture book. Do the arcs in true stories always follow a perfect formula? No. But then neither do those in fiction. However, there has to be enough tension, progression, and change to make me want to keep reading. There still has to be a strong beginning that tells me why I want to continue reading and then compel me to do so via rising action in the middle.

*Alayne Kay Christian...continued*

There must be a satisfying ending. And with most books, emotional core always makes a difference.

**LM:** How do you handle the challenge of being both editor and art director on your projects? Where do you select your art talent from? Are you open to receiving illustrator postcards or portfolios?

**AKC:** I don't see what I do as a challenge. I love wearing both hats. Editing is second nature to me. The wonderful thing about wearing both hats is it gives me more power than I have as a writer or as an editor. Because the artist and I can work to let illustrations do some of the heavy lifting that was necessary for the text to do in the original manuscript. In other words, we can simplify the text that was necessary to "show" the story before illustrations were added. And the author is usually happy to see their story work so well with the illustrations.

Anyway, back to the question. I really enjoy working with the artists. I think we tend to learn from each other. I find the artists in many different places. Some come from portfolio links and sample submissions. I keep an eye on SCBWI portfolios. I really like Instagram. I watch Twitter and Facebook. Sometimes authors know someone. That is just a sampling. It's a lot of time-consuming work to find just the right illustrator.

Postcards would be a waste, since I work remotely, and the cards would end up going to the Clear Fork location.

**LM:** Please tell us about *Randall and Randall* by Nadine Poper, and illustrated by Polina Gortman—a *Kirkus* Indie Blue Star and Top 100 Book!

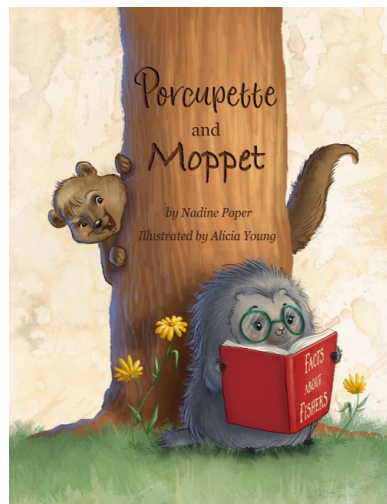
**AKC:** I'll start with an excerpt from *Kirkus* Reviews and move on from there.

*The ingenious aquatic tale also encourages readers to realize they can find friendship even if they don't see eye to eye with their cohorts.* —*Kirkus* Reviews

This is such a fun book. I believe it is the pairing of the author, Nadine Poper, and the illustrator, Polina

Gortman, that makes this book so special and entertaining. Here is what the story is about: Randall, the pistol shrimp, is a master at excavation. Randall, the goby fish, is his skittish, yet happy-go-lucky watchman. The problem is that both have quirks that drive each other bananas until one day their relationship is driven to the breaking point. This very funny informational-fiction story about one of the sea's naturally-existent odd couples illustrates how certain species depend upon their symbiotic relationship for survival. It also shows children how two very different beings can embrace each other's peculiarities and become best of friends.

This is a fantastic book to study as a writer or an illustrator. Nadine did a super job of using narrative and character arcs to create page-turning tension and to educate in a way that's funny and entertaining. Polina did a fabulous job of creating even more tension with her lively and expressive art. She also added to the humor. She made the story even more engaging to children by using bright colors and cartoon-like panels. In addition, there is a lot of fun detail to watch for in the illustrations.



Nadine was also able to get a foreword written by expert Dr. John E. Randall, senior ichthyologist emeritus, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii. Sadly, Dr. Randall left his earthly home earlier this year. To learn more about *Randall and Randall* and Dr. Randall check out my blog post here <https://alaynekaychristian.wordpress.com/2020/05/23/what-in-the-world-is-an-ichthyologist-2/>

**LM:** Please share a little of the journey of *A Horn is Born* by Bill Borders and illustrated by Melizza Chervon.

**AKC:** Here is what the book is about: "Surrounded by the hustle and bustle of musicians in a backstage room, Shoehorn has nothing to do but slide stocking feet into shoes and life is dull. But he knows he is destined for something greater—something that will rival the group's trio of bullies: Trumpet, Trombone, and Flute. Shoehorn takes their bullying in stride and refuses to let those blowhards dent his pride. He waits patiently for his big break until one day, with a twist of fate, Shoehorn saves the day and shines brighter



*Alayne Kay Christian...continued*

than the best-in-the-band."

It was a long journey, but well worth it. I loved the story from the start, but it needed some polishing. First, after agreeing to work together, Bill and I worked along with author Kim Norman to perfect the rhyme and meter. Bill and I even tweaked the text a bit later in the game. That's because we are cut from the same cloth—always thinking and always looking for the best book that we can bring into the world. Next, it took quite some time to find the perfect illustrator for this unique and quirky story. At one point, we thought we had found what we were looking for. But after working with the person for quite some time, it seemed that working with a process and guidance didn't work for this person, and we found ourselves back to square one. I believe with all my heart that this was meant to be because we found "the" perfect illustrator. Melizza Chernov impresses me, and I am so proud of the fantastic job she did on this book. Not to mention, she was an absolute pleasure to work with. I would have her on my team any day.

Of course, creating art like Melizza created takes time. She even went to the Library of Congress archives to find public domain posters that she could duplicate for one of the scenes. I'm sure Bill could tell you the exact amount of time it took to get from contract to publication. But it was not our typical Blue Whale Press turnaround time. I felt so bad. I'm sure Bill thought at times that his book would never be published. But he hung in, and I'm grateful.

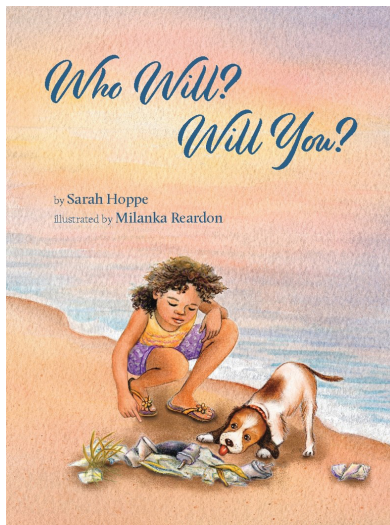
As you said, the book is being well-received. Who could ask for more? Following is a brief excerpt from one of the book's many rave reviews.

*"It's a welcome addition to not just picture books about music, but those encouraging flexibility, adaptive thinking, and approaches to reinventing one's life purpose. Very, very highly recommended as a standout picture book story."--D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review*

**LM:** Please share a little of the journey of *The Weed That Woke Christmas: The Mostly True Tale of the Toledo Christmas Weed*, written by you and illustrated by Polina Gortman and *The Old Man and His Penguin*:

*How Dindim Made João Pereira de Souza an Honorary Penguin*, written by you and illustrated by Milanka Reardon.

**AKC:** Both books were inspired by stories in the news. Both final versions of the stories ended up looking nothing like the original versions. Although it was a long journey, *An Old Man and His Penguin* was an easier writing journey than *The Weed That Woke Christmas* because the basic story never changed—it pretty much follows the true unusual-friendship story. What changed was the execution of the idea via storytelling. The first versions were very wordy and went through rounds with critique partners. But it never felt right until I decided to try a mild form of free verse and rely more on illustrations to help tell the story. Thinking in terms of free verse forced me to write more concisely. The final version has hints of free verse and other poetic devices. With that, the book gets down to the heart of the story without a lot of stage direction or fluff.



Also a long writing journey, my approach to *The Weed That Woke Christmas* took a long time to figure out. Although the true story is a beautiful story for adults, I felt that being factual was robbing the story of a chance to appeal to kids and to deepen the message. I wanted it to be something kids could relate to. I tried writing from a child's perspective, but I felt like the true star of the story needed to be the weed. So, I decided to include a little girl as a star for one of the storylines within the multilayered story, but to tell the story from Weed's perspective. That's when everything started falling into place. Once again, I leaned on the idea of free verse, which helped me focus and find just the right words. Like *An Old Man and His Penguin*, the story has hints of free verse and poetic devices, which leaves lots of room for illustrations. The art adds yet another layer to this multilayered story. I'm excited to share that The Toledo Blade Newspaper featured *The Weed That Woke Christmas* in their November 13, 2020 publication. The book has also been included in the Society for Children's Writers and Illustrators' (SCBWI) recommended reading list for books about kindness in 2020. <https://www.scbwi.org/scbwi-reading-list/?cat=pb>

**LM:** What would be expected of a Blue Whale Press

*Alayne Kay Christian...continued*

author as being part of a small press team? What role does their social media plan in this? Is a marketing plan a plus?

**AKC:** As with all authors and illustrators, marketing is king when it comes to book sales. And this doesn't mean just have a book launch and the job is done. Marketing is a long-term job. I don't believe we can dictate that authors and illustrators work to market their book, but if they want their book to be successful, that is the only way to go. As a small press with a limited budget and limited staff hours, we do what we can to support our authors and illustrators, but note the word "limited." Those who work to keep their book in front of potential buyers are always more successful.

A marketing plan is always beneficial.

**LM:** What is your feeling about art notes? Are they all right to include if essential to understanding the story?

**AKC:** If they are essential to the story, I'm all for them. But if they litter the story to the point where the text gets lost, I will become frustrated. I've actually asked some of our authors for art notes to help me be clearer about the story. One case example is a story that made me cry when I read it, but I felt I needed more of a visual to get a feel for how the story would work with art. Asking for some art notes did the trick. Actually, this happened with two books we acquired.

Although, I'm not against art notes when used effectively and for good reason, I want to be very clear that I am not encouraging writers to use art notes. Relying on art notes can indicate lazy or ineffective writing, which isn't a good thing when crossing an editor's desk.

**LM:** What are some subjects you have on your current wish list? Some things you would like to see, and things you don't want to see.

**AKC:** As I said earlier, the best way to learn what we publish is to stay aware of our published and forthcoming books. We are not interested in trends. We can't do board books or novelty books. And we aren't interested in didactic books or faith-based books with heavy messages.

I believe some of my earlier answers are a good indication of what kind of books we are attracted to. We are looking for more of the same.

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE**

Though Blue Whale Press is currently closed to submissions, Alayne Kay Christian will accept submissions from CBI members during the month of December 2020. First, review the submission guidelines at [www.bluewhalepress.com/submissions.html](http://www.bluewhalepress.com/submissions.html). Email a cover letter and paste your manuscript into the body of the email as per the guidelines (attachments will not be read). The subject line of the email should read **CBI BLUE WHALE: (Story Title) by (Authors Name)**. Send to [submissions@bluewhalepress.com](mailto:submissions@bluewhalepress.com). **Deadline for submissions is December 31, 2020.** Alayne will contact any authors of manuscripts she's interested in within 4 months. If you don't hear back within 4 months, consider it a pass. She will also post a message on the Blue Whale Press Facebook page once all decisions have been made [www.facebook.com/BlueWhalePress/](http://www.facebook.com/BlueWhalePress/).

NOTE: Some browsers will show that the Blue Whale Press website is not secure. This is because the site is being transitioned to the Clear Fork Publishing System. But the site is safe to browse, and no personal information is gathered or saved.

**---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](http://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.
- Your submission packet matches what the editor or agent requests on their guidelines.
- The Above the Slushpile code you're using has NOT expired.

# PARANORMAL FICTION

## for the Middle Grade and YA Markets

by Jean Daigneau

**T**his year has been a frightening one. And, no, I'm not talking about politics. With COVID-19 basically running our lives, it's hard not to wonder what evil force is behind it. Is there some poltergeist out there wreaking havoc? That takes us to this month's topic—paranormal fiction for middle grade and young adults. Let's find out more.

### This is Not Your Father's Casper the Friendly Ghost

Paranormal fiction spans a wide range of sub-genres from dark fantasy to romance to mystery. Throw a few ghosts or witches into the brew and you're all set right? Wrong! Karen Kasey, author of *The Evil Within*, the first book of the *Witches of Blackstone* series, and who writes adult romance under the name Colleen Green, says this, "Some people may think if you have a problem you can simply have a character use a superpower to defeat their enemy." She adds that "you need to set a precedent for a character having a power before they can bust it out during the height of a situation that goes from bad to worse."

That goes for adding supernatural elements. Even a reanimated corpse needs to have a reason to appear in your novel..

### Who You Gonna Call?

As with much writing, research can be an important element. Paranormal writer Gaby Triana, author of the *Haunted Florida* series and other YA novels, notes that "ghost stories tend to have lots of history tied to a location." She suggests pulling "little-known facts out of history" to spice up your writing. Often, she starts with a ghost or legend in mind and devises the story to fit that element. That paranormal research can help you learn the signs of a ghost's presence, including "drops in temperature, feelings of disorientation, high EMF readings." Yeah, I had to look

that one up, too—electromagnetic fields.

My own research led me to Christopher Chacon, the world's foremost authority on all things paranormal and unexplained. If you've never written paranormal, a good place to start is to google the guy to find some great YouTube interviews. Of course, you can fall down the rabbit hole and lose yourself in your research when you should be writing, so viewer discretion is advised!

Reading novels in your genre is always helpful. But this is one place where reading adult books can add some meaningful information about the subject. While middle grade elements, like romance, vary greatly from adult writing, you can learn a lot about poltergeists, possession, or sorcery by stretching your reading muscle.

### Ramp Up the Terror Factor

Paranormal readers have already bought into the supernatural and can suspend belief in all things unexplained. But one element that shines through this genre is the fright factor. We've all probably felt that heart-pounding, mind-numbing, hair-raising feeling of being scared. But take that past experience to a new level by relying on real situations rather than memory. When was the last time you walked through a cemetery? Alone? In the dark? Visited an abandoned prison? Crept into an old basement? Correct--no lights! While we might remember what that was like as a teenager, reliving that in the here and now can go a long way to helping you flesh out those scary feelings again.

Sometimes the imagining of what's coming can be as frightening as the reality of what that something is. This important element in paranormal writing is what Triana calls the "slow burn development of the plot." She suggests "the slow uncovering of what's going on, hints of the ghosts before we actually see

them. Give them [readers] a little bit at a time and add atmospheric elements in the meantime (rain, wind, crickets, creaks in the stairwell). . .” This is where classic paranormal elements can ramp up the tension. Triana suggests taking it to a new level. “It’s more about what we CANNOT see than what we CAN see, so that by the time you DO see what’s haunting you, you’re already terrified.”

Kasey reiterates this in her writing. “I create a world where the impossible is possible by showing the reader how my witches use their power. By using them first in a situation, like a learning experience, I set the stage for my readers to believe the story when the crisis happens....”

### **Capitalize on Setting**

One major element of paranormal novels is the world where supernatural beings exist. Triana believes paranormal fans expect certain Gothic elements. She says, “A mysterious house, abandoned building, somewhere that would hold onto negative energy even over time, a place where unresolved issues might be festering,” add much to the story. The setting can go a long way to making a scary situation scarier.

But as with all writing, paranormal elements must make sense in the world in which they exist in order for your readers to buy into them. While adding a psychic phenomenon, occult experience, or haunting can up the fear factor, those elements have to make sense in your story to work. You still must make the unrealistic as realistic and authentic as possible.

### **That All Important Character**

Kasey uses characters to make sense of the unknown. In *The Evil Within*, a young boy is trapped in a haunted house. It’s the characters that determine why that happens in the first place, which is as important an element as how he gets out.

Triana recommends that the ghost or other otherworldly element can’t carry the entire conflict. “The main character is also usually dealing with some inner turmoil themselves,” she says, “whether it’s out in the open or they’re repressing it.” She adds that

“the ghosts and demons are merely the ‘physical’ representation, the monster that symbolizes what the main character is battling internally.”

### **A New Look at Old Ideas**

Ghosts stories have been around for centuries. A Roman statesman and author, Pliny the Younger, wrote in the first century A.D. about his house being haunted by an old man with a long beard and rattling chains. In 856 A.D., a family in Germany reported the existence of a ghost in their farmhouse who threw stones, started fires, and made loud noises.

So what’s a writer to do to make their story fresh and relevant? Kasey says that she takes inspiration from stories she finds then adds her own personal twist. Her formula is three parts familiar characters that paranormal readers can love mixed with two parts new twists, which involve a rationale about why something is happening. Triana loves seeing her living characters interact with “someone they loved who may have passed or characters learning about a house they knew nothing about . . . the idea that this house holds onto a lot more than it appears.”

While writing a paranormal novel might be a scary experience for some of us, who wouldn’t want to be the next Stephen King? Okay, how about Stephanie Queen?

### **For Further Reading:**

Here are a few spine-tingling novels to get you started.

*Cemetery Boys* by Aidan Thomas

*These Witches Won’t Burn* by Isabel Sterling

*The Ghost Collector* by Allison Mills

*The Fell of Dark* by Caleb Roehrig

*Crave* by Tracy Wolff

*A Blade So Black* by L. L. McKinney

*The Angel of the Crows* by Katherine Addison

*City of Ghosts* by Victoria Schwab

# JULIANN DOMAN

## Debut Picture Book Author

interview by Jane McBride

**J**uliann Doman recently published her first picture book *How Long is Five Minutes?* The book is as charming as Juliann herself is. Read more to find out about it and about this very talented author.

**JANE McBRIDE:** Please share with us a few background notes about yourself.

**JULIANN DOMAN:** I have always loved to craft voluminous, wordy, twisty-turny sentences that, to me at least, leave no question as to the perfect clarity of my meaning. (See what I mean!) My English teachers did not always see it the same way. I have adapted a new tactic in writing for children. I have written multiple stories for *The Friend* magazine, and an article in *Sunshine for the Latter-day Saint Child's Soul*. I love adventure (well most adventure), sans things that take me to the extremes of the earth, or shall I say literally “off” of earth, such as scuba diving, sky diving, things of this nature--I have actually never done those things. I did marry an Air Force pilot which is pretty much synonymous with adventure! We have loved experiencing the people, cultures and beauty of the world, including much of the United States and Europe. I love to hike and have hiked several 14ers (as we Coloradoans—I am a former Coloradoan) like to call them. I enjoy trying healthy recipes, and my family is very good to kindly eat whatever the experiment produces. I especially love to sing and am in the process of fulfilling a life-long dream to sing with the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square. We have been blessed with four wonderful children, who along with my husband, are my dearest friends and life-encouragers. Being a mom is my greatest joy!

**JM:** Tell us how you came to write *How Long is Five Minutes?* What was your inspiration?

**JD:** Years ago when I was tucking my youngest

daughter into bed one night I told her I would come back and check on her in five minutes. She asked, “How long is five minutes? Is it as long as a rainbow sparkles in the sky? Is it as long as it takes a spider to build a web or a bird to build its nest?” And the idea for this book was born!

**JM:** How long did it take you to write the book once you got the idea?

**JD:** Well, it was more than 10 years in the “think tank,” but when I really dedicated myself to putting words to paper, it took me a couple of months.

**JM:** With their very limited word count, picture books can be the hardest of all writing. Each word must count. How did you know when you hit upon the right word in a description?

**JD:** I tried to write in a child’s voice, so I would say that the “right” words for this descriptive story are sublimely simple! And in keeping

with alliteration, I had a lot of fun writing word pairings like “bird’s song sung”, “perfect pumpkin,” “baby bird,” and “great big grassy green hill!” I think both parent and child alike will feel a sweet serenity as the words go lilting by!

**JM:** Your book is done in a charming rhyme. Was that difficult? Would you do another book in rhyme? Do you suggest that for other writers?

**JD:** I didn’t originally intend to pen these wonderings of a child in rhyme. But the innocent questioning seemed to skip along a delightful brook as it dances down the hill, and the musical rhythm sang back to me. If it spoke to me in that way, yes I would do another book in rhyme. See what your heart is telling you.



**JM:** What is the best tip you can give a beginning writer of picture books?

**JD:** Being a picture book, understandably, the illustrations are key. Choose an illustrator that speaks to your heart. This is what both parent and child will cherish first. Ask yourself along the way, “Am I creating a treasure that will continually spark joy for both child and parent?”

**JM:** What is your best writing tip overall?

**JD:** Write from your heart what you love and you will be filled with joy. Whatever happens beyond that is pudding!

**JM:** Most writers are voracious readers. Is that true of you?

**JD:** I have always loved to read. I especially delight in engaging with my family and friends in the sharing of ideas as we read and study great books together.

**JM:** Did you do much revision? Authors have their own revision process. What is yours?

**JD:** Guess I revised it in my head. I don't think I put it to paper until it felt good in my soul. As far as a revision process in general for me, I do lots of writing and rewriting, sometimes reconstructing a sentence multiple times before it sits right.

**JM:** Please share with us your self-publishing process. Did you need to learn a lot of new skills?

**JD:** Had I heard the entirety of what I would need to do to self-publish may have deterred me from beginning! I am glad I was not dissuaded. Each step has been a learning process, a stepping stone leading to the next step. I didn't know how to even begin but I had a graphic designer friend who helped guide me along. First I found an illustrator. I then sent the copy and illustrations to the graphic designer who created the book format. I found a local printer to print my book. I then approached local merchants who agreed to carry it in their stores. I am hoping for calls of second editions!

**JM:** How did you find your illustrator?

**JD:** This was fun! That same graphic designer friend told me about a website called Fiverr that showcases the work of many very talented illustrators for hire. It has been rewarding finding an illustrator who captures so well the tender expressions of a young child's innocent wonderings about the majesties of our beautiful world.

**JM:** In your bio, you mention having four children. What role did they play in your writing? Did they inspire you?

**JD:** My children inspire me every day. I could write a book inspired by each one. *How Long is Five Minutes?* happens to be inspired by my youngest daughter, Christine.

**JM:** Tell us about your writing experience up to writing *How Long is Five Minutes?*

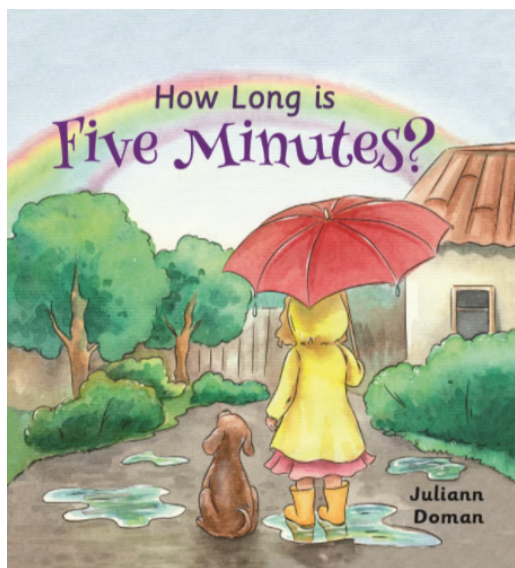
**JD:** I wrote a short piece for *Sunshine for the Latter-day Saint Child's Soul* years ago when I was a young mother. I realized how much fun it was to write about something I now had intimate knowledge about—children! I have gone on to write approximately 40 articles for *The Friend* children's magazine. I have always wanted to write a book,

and the pure experiences of children are beautifully and naturally right there for us to witness every day.

**JM:** Do you see writing stories for magazines as a good stepping off point for writing a book? How do the processes differ—writing a short story and writing a book? How are they the same?

**JD:** Yes, I do see writing stories for magazines as a good stepping off point. I have found that writing a short story actually exacts “exactness” from an author. Get in, say what you are going to say, and then get out. (I think that's what my English teachers from long ago were trying to tell me. As for me I wanted to linger and then slowly saunter out the back door.) It has been a honing skill that I think will serve me well in all my future writing.

You can find out more about Juliann and her writing at <https://julianndoman.wixsite.com/website>. I predict we will see more beautiful books from her with inspiring messages in the very near future.



# Classic Fairy Tales Live On in



interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

**E**nchanted Conversation is a free webzine published 11 times a year, geared toward young adult and adult fairy tale lovers and creators. Each issue features original fairy tales and related essays. The EC blog (on the website's home page) offers almost daily fantasy book reviews, author interviews, articles, and special submission opportunities. I recently had the chance to interview Kate Wolford, the founder and heart behind *Enchanted Conversation*.

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Please tell us a little about yourself, and how you came to be editor of *Enchanted Conversation* magazine?

**KATE WOLFORD:** About 13 years ago, I started teaching a college class on fairy tales, so I started a blog about fairy tales and folklore to support the class. Over time, the initial site evolved into *Enchanted Conversation: A Fairy Tale Magazine*. I decided it might be fun to publish some new fairy tales and took it from there.

**SB:** What kind of audience reads your magazine?

**KW:** The audience is YA and up. It definitely isn't a young children's publication. Mostly, the audience is adult women (but a sizable minority of authors and readers identify as male). The audience is very well educated and highly versed in folklore and fairy tale history. They are often fantasy readers, but *Enchanted Conversation* is not a high fantasy,

world building site. It's a place where the classic fairy tale structure is valued.

**SB:** What are you looking for from writers?

**KW:** People who succeed in getting published at EC love fairy tales. They don't look down on it as a genre. They love the challenge that the structure gives them, and they take that old structure and make it fresh. The new stories and poems do not have to be based on classic fairy tales, but should retain their essence. Transformation is a key component, as is the supernatural, however small.

Writers who don't read EC, won't be published on it. I get dozens of submissions every month that so obviously come from people who have never read a story on the site—it's pretty shocking, even after all of these years. By becoming a regular fan, writers massively increase their chances of eventually being published. They learn what works for the site, then they give it a very distinctive slant of their own.

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

**KW:** There's only one way, and that is through email. My submission guidelines, which are at [www.fairytalemagazine.com/p/submissions.html#.X8MzfmhKjDd](http://www.fairytalemagazine.com/p/submissions.html#.X8MzfmhKjDd), detail how to submit. I have detailed guidelines, because I do about 90

*Enchanted Conversation....continued*

percent of the work alone and the rules keep me sane. When people follow them, the work improves, which makes my job much easier.

**SB:** How do you respond to writers' submissions?

**KW:** I send one generic email acknowledging receipt. I do not send out notices of rejection, nor do I explain editorial decisions or provide feedback. On the 10th of the month, I always publish the names of authors whose work will be published that month. That's how I respond to submissions.

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

**KW:** Starting in January of 2021, EC is purchasing first electronic world rights only, with archiving rights. EC will also retain the right to use purchased work in promotions and on audio and video. The rights will still revert to the author immediately upon electronic publication on the site, but EC retains the archive rights, along with the promotion, audio and video rights.

The theme for 2021 is "Healers, Midwives and Cunning Folk."

Submissions geared toward young adults and adults are accepted from the first through the third day of each month for the next month's issue. Accepting fairy tales and essays of 750-1000 words, and poetry related to the 2021 theme. Be sure to follow the submission guidelines at [www.fairytale-magazine.com/p/submissions.html#.Xp3gFvhKjIU](http://www.fairytale-magazine.com/p/submissions.html#.Xp3gFvhKjIU) and read back issues at [www.fairytalemagazine.com/p/about\\_29.html#.X8M6nmhKjDc](http://www.fairytalemagazine.com/p/about_29.html#.X8M6nmhKjDc) before submitting.

Pays \$50 for first world electronic rights and the right to use the work in promotional material. After the work is published in Enchanted Conversation, you are free to publish or sell it elsewhere. EC will keep the story or essay indefinitely on the site unless you request that it be removed. EC can use the work for promotional purposes for one year.

For more information, go to [www.fairytalemagazine.com](http://www.fairytalemagazine.com)



# How to Write When You Don't Want to Write

by Jane McBride

**N**o doubt about it, it's been a hard year. A really hard, really long year that has tested many of us in ways we never expected. Sometimes I wondered if I would make it through, much less write, but deadline demands dictated that I write, like it or not. And so I came up with a few “tricks of the trade” to help me write, whatever else was going on in a world turned upside-down and inside-out.

**Set a timer.** Choose a length of time that seems reasonable for you and your circumstances. Write for that span of time, whether it be 15, 30, or 45 minutes. I don't recommend going for more than 45 minutes at a time, though that might work for you. I personally write for fifteen minutes at a sitting. That way I don't feel pressured to keep up the pace. Then I write as fast as I can, not bothering with editing or word choice or any of the other things that will need to be addressed at a later time.

**Use music.** Sometimes I write to music, choosing a favorite song or sound track. Once again, I limit the amount of time I write. I challenge myself to write for the introduction to *Phantom of the Opera* or another favorite piece. A plus of writing to music is that the music distracts my left brain from trying to edit as I write. For some people, editing as they go works well, but it only slows me down and prevents me from the important task of immersing myself in the story. Editing can be done at another time.

**Get an accountability buddy.** It can be a tremendous help to have a writing buddy to whom you account on how you did in achieving your daily goals. You can share your writing goals, while you and your partner offer encouragement, commiseration to each other, and a kick-in-the-seat when needed.

**Give yourself permission to “write bad.”** My first drafts are pretty horrible. I do my best to get my thoughts on paper, or screen as it now is, knowing that the horrible words aren't written in stone. Giving myself the freedom to write badly eases much of the anxiety of feeling I have to write well. One of my favorite writing quotes is “Books aren't written. They are re-written.”

**Switch it up.** I get stuck on projects, especially book projects, when my brain doesn't want to come up with another piece of dialogue, another source of conflict, another description of scenery. When that happens, I feel helpless to make progress on that project. I then turn to writing a short story or a non-fiction piece or something—anything—else. Not only am I still being productive, I return to the original project with a new outlook and fresh energy.

**Treat writing as a job, not a hobby.** Believe me, the IRS will treat any money you make from your writing as a job and will tax you accordingly. So it's to your benefit to treat your writing as the job it is. When you treat your writing as a job, it reminds you that you have an obligation to show up for it. It becomes a mind-set. It is easy to think of writing as different from your “real” job, but it is a job. Part of writing—a large part—is just showing up, putting your seat in the chair, and beginning. Just as you wouldn't think of not showing up for a managerial job at an office or a teaching job at a school or a mechanics job at a garage, or any other job, you need to show up for this job. Would you think of skipping out on your other job? Of course not. I know that it can be difficult to sit down and write when you have other people wanting (demanding) things from you. Following are some tips I've learned over the last 40 years in showing up for my writing: Tell

*How to Write...continued*

the important people in your life that you will be writing at certain hours and that you need to have uninterrupted time. Develop a routine for your writing. If you can't write full-time (and many writers can't), find the hours you can write during the day and show up for it every day at that time. If you find that the hours of 6 am – 8 am are the only hours of the day that you can write, guard that time. Similarly, if you find that you can write only after the household has gone to sleep, set aside 10 pm – 11 pm, or whatever hours that might be. I get it. We all have families who need us, household obligations, volunteer work, and a myriad of other things that need to be done. I'm still willing to wager, though, if you truly want to write, you will find the time.

**Get a change of scenery.** Sometimes, you need to change your place of writing. Many writers developed the habit of taking their laptops and heading to the nearest coffee shop or library or some other place conducive to writing. In this time of lockdowns and health concerns, though, that may not be possible. In that case, move to a different room in your home. A change of view, even if it's only looking out the kitchen window, can perk up your creativity and your energy. If the weather cooperates, go outside and work. Fresh air and the beauties of nature can be inspirational.

**Change up your tools.** I love my laptop computer and wonder how I ever survived without it. But just as a change of scenery can jog your brain cells, so can a change of tools. What about writing long-hand? Get yourself a pen—a really nice pen—and use it to write a character sketch or even a whole scene. Go colorful. Write with colored gel pens, just don't get so caught up in the beauty of the colors that you forget that you're supposed to be writing! Try using different colored pens for different parts of the writing, such as pink for characterization, red for conflict, blue for dialogue.

**Get moving.** Your brain will benefit from exercise as much as your body will. After all, your brain is another organ in your body. Challenge yourself to get up and move every half hour or whatever interval suits you. Tell yourself, "I'll write until it's time to get up and walk." You may discover that you look

forward to returning to your writing.

**Reward yourself.** When you reach your writing goal for the day, reward yourself by reading the newest book on your nightstand or going to a movie or indulging in a Godiva chocolate. Be careful, though, to keep the rewards, especially chocolate, within reason.

**Free write.** This is not a paying gig. Write something foolish or silly or funny. Write in a different style from your normal writing. Make up a character who is totally removed from your WIP character. Give him outlandish traits. The important thing is that you are writing. When you go back to writing, see if you can bring the fun of free writing with you.

## IN CONCLUSION

Writing when we don't want to write is like any other chore. Yes, I said it. Writing can be a chore. But it is also a joy when you see words connect and form inspiring sentences which then in turn form inspiring scenes and then chapters, and, well you get it, books.