

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  May 2021

## HOW TO FIND YOUR WRITING VOICE



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE**  
**SUBMISSION CODE:**



**beaming**  
**books**

# Table of contents

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

Writing for Magazines: Researching and Analyzing Magazine Markets  
by Kimberly M. Hutmacher.....4

Mini Blueprint: SETTING – A Living Story Element  
by Jane McBride.....6

Editor Spotlight: Elizabeth Schleisman, Assistant Editor, Beaming Books and Broadleaf Books  
interview by Lynne Marie.....8

Writing Workshop: Finding Your Voice as a Children's Writer  
by Laura Backes.....11

Featured Interview: The Fast and the Furious Nancy Roe Pimm, Nonfiction Author and YA Writer  
interview by PJ McIlvaine.....13

Writing Workshop: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Squeeze Play  
by Jane McBride.....17

## This issue's contributors

**Laura Backes** has published *Children's Book Insider* since May 1990, is the co-creator of [WritingBlueprints.com](http://WritingBlueprints.com), and WriteForKids.org, and a co-founder of Picture Book Summit ([www.picturebooksummit.com](http://www.picturebooksummit.com)).

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

**Lynne Marie** is the author of *Hedgehog Goes to Kindergarten* and *Hedgehog's 100th Day of School* (Scholastic), *The Star in the Christmas Play* and *Let's Eat Around the World* (Beaming Books), *Moldilocks and the 3 Scares* (Sterling) and more forthcoming, as well as numerous stories and articles in magazines, including *Highlights for Children*, *High Five*, *Baby Bug*, *Family Fun*, *Hopscotch*, *Turtle*, *Spider* and *Writer's Digest*. Her website is <http://www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com>

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

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

Published 12 times/year by Children's Book Insider, LLC, 901 Columbia Road, Ft. Collins, CO 80525-1838. [mail@CBIClubhouse.com](mailto:mail@CBIClubhouse.com) <http://www.writeforkids.org>

ISSN 1073-7596

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

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

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

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

# At Presstime:

## Twitter Pitch Party for Dark-Themed Middle Grade, YA and New Adult Fiction and Nonfiction

#PitDark is the first and only Twitter pitch event to highlight literature of a “darker” nature. This is not limited to horror works, however any pitched manuscript must contain an element of horror or darker writing. Examples of such categories include pure horror novels, dark fantasy, murder mysteries, psychological horror stories, non-fiction works about darker subjects, etc. Genre mashups, such as dark fantasy, are fine, as long as you’re not just trying to pass off your book as something that doesn’t contain “darker” themes. Middle grade, young adult, new adult and adult age categories are welcome.

**The next #PitDark will take place on May 20, 2021 from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern.** You can find the agents and publishers that participated in previous #PitDark events [here](#).

The contest will happen on Twitter under a common hashtag (**#PitDark**). During the 12-hour window, authors with completed and polished manuscripts who are seeking representation or publication can tweet a pitch for their books (at most, once per hour).

Agents and publishers will make requests by marking pitches as a favorite on Twitter. If your tweet is favorited, please follow the agent or publisher’s submission guidelines.

For more details on how to pitch, as well as a list of genre hashtags, go to [jasonhuebinger.com/pitdark](http://jasonhuebinger.com/pitdark)

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

Lee & Low Books announces its 21st annual New Voices Award for a picture book by a writer of color or Indigenous/Native writer. The Award winner receives a cash grant of \$2000 and a standard Lee & Low publication contract, including the basic advance and royalties for a first time author. An Honor Award winner will receive a cash grant of \$1000. The contest is open to writers of color and Native nations who are residents of the United States and who have not previously had a children's picture book published. Writers who have published work in venues such as children's magazines, young adult, or adult fiction or nonfiction, are eligible. Only unagent-ed submissions will be accepted. Work that has been previously published in any format, including online and self-publishing, is not eligible for this award. Manuscripts previously submitted for this award or to Lee & Low books will not be considered.

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

Send to: Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, Suite 1205, New York, NY 10016. ATTN: New Voices Award. **Submissions must be postmarked by July 31, 2021.** The winners will be notified by December 31, 2021. For more information go to [leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award](http://leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-voices-award) Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this Award.

### **Independent Publisher Accepting Submissions**

Andrews McMeel is a global independent publisher distributed by Simon & Schuster. Especially looking for authors with a distinct point of view and manuscripts that are profound and also have wide appeal. Before submitting, be sure to study the current children's catalog at [https://issuu.com/andrewsmcmeelpublishing/docs/amp\\_kidscatalog\\_spring\\_2021](https://issuu.com/andrewsmcmeelpublishing/docs/amp_kidscatalog_spring_2021). Most books are Lexile rated and many include a More to Explore activity section that teaches STEM skills. Titles include board books, picture books, early chapter books and middle grade fiction and activity-related nonfiction, as well as comics, graphic novels, and interactive books. Submit a proposal with sample chapters (or entire manuscript if a board book or picture book) at <https://publishing.andrewsmcmeel.com/submissions/>. Responds if interested. Does not require exclusive submissions.

### **Publisher Seeks Nonfiction, Informational Fiction for Babies Through Pre-Teens**

Muddy Boots is a division of Lyons Press, an imprint of Globe Pequot. Titles include nonfiction for babies through pre-teens, as well as activity books and fiction picture and board books. Fiction should have an informational focus. Recent titles include *After the Snowfall* by Rich Lo (lyrical picture book ages 3-8); *Counting on Caribou* by Patricia H. Partnow, illustrated by Diana Magnuson (informational fiction picture book for ages 6-10); and **Can Princesses Become Astronauts?** by Carmela LaVigna Coyle, illustrated by Mike Gordon (from the Do Princesses... series for ages 3-7). For a complete list of titles, go to <http://muddybootsbooks.com/>

Send a proposal with a cover letter that includes a description of the book; a table of contents, an overview of your platform, experience, and online presence (how you will help promote the book); and a market analysis (Who will buy this book? Why publish this book now?) with a list of current competitive titles. Include the entire manuscript for a picture book, or a sample chapter for longer works. Prefers email queries (paste the entire proposal and manuscript into the body of an email), send to [editorial@lyonspress.com](mailto:editorial@lyonspress.com). May also be mailed to Globe Pequot Press, Submissions, 246 Goose Lane, 2nd Floor, Guilford, CT 06437. You can follow up after four months if you haven't heard back. Will recycle any hard copy submissions that are not of interest. If the submission is more appropriate for a different imprint at Globe Pequot, the submission editor will pass it on to the proper imprint (you do not need to resubmit).

### **Reese's Book Club Offers Writer's Fellowship to Diverse Female Authors**

Reese's Book Club (<https://reesesbookclub.com/>), founded by actress/entrepreneur Reese Witherspoon, features adult and YA books written by women with a woman or female teen at the center of the story. Reese's Book Club is sponsoring LitUp, a writer's fellowship for five emerging writers who will be awarded an all-expenses-paid retreat, a three-month mentorship with a published author, and marketing support from Reese's Book Club. Applicants must be unagented, unpublished women writers who identify as diverse. The application includes an original adult or young adult fiction manuscript featuring a woman or female teen at the center of the story that is completed and written in English (genre fiction is OK, but no nonfiction); a 750-word synopsis of your manuscript, and responses to a series of short essay questions within the application. Applications must be submitted by May 30, 2021. Fellows will be announced by Winter 2021, and the retreat will take place in early 2022 (dates TBA). For more information, go to [reesesbookclub.com/litup/](https://reesesbookclub.com/litup/)

# RESEARCHING and ANALYZING MAGAZINE MARKETS

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

As with any area of writing for children, when you target your submission well, you substantially increase your chances of success. Let's take a deep dive into the research and analysis of magazine markets required to hit the bullseye and hopefully receive news of an acceptance.

## Market Guides

The first resource I use in my magazine market research is the annual *Institute For Writer's Magazine Markets For Children's Writers*. It's easy to understand and follow and offers a bevy of useful information. Each magazine covered in this market guide includes subjects, age level, genres, freelance potential, contact and submission information, and information about rights and payments. The following is how I use this tool and others to target my poetry submissions, but you can use these same steps to target any genre.

I like to write poetry for younger children. Specifically, I usually write for birth to age six. As I browse the magazine listings in the guide, the first thing I look for is whether or not the publication accepts poetry and the targeted age range of the publication. I don't want to waste time submitting poems aimed at preschoolers to a magazine targeted toward ages 7-10. As I study the listings, I find some possible options. *Babybug*, *Ladybug*, *Chirp*, *The Friend*, *Guardian Angel Kids*, and *Hello* all fit my target age group and accept poetry submissions. That's great, but now I have to dig deeper and read further. As I read more about each magazine, I see that *Guardian Angel Kids* targets 2 to 12-year-olds. That's quite a wide age range, and my poems won't appeal to more than half of the bracket. The *Friend* publishes material to help children follow the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As I look through the poems I'm hoping to submit, I realize I don't have a poem that would be a good fit for them.

## Study Online Submission Guidelines

Now that I've narrowed my options down to four possible publications, I visit the submission guidelines on the websites of each contender. In my experience, you'll gain even more insight when you take this next step.

On the specific day that I visited the Cricket Magazine Group's website, I learned that *Babybug* was currently open to general submissions and that new special calls for submissions would be coming soon. They also had a list of possible subject areas based on a baby's development and their everyday interactions and experiences. The same information was shared for *Ladybug* as it pertains to 3 to 6-year-olds.

When I visited the *Hello* website, I learned that they were open for submissions and that they were looking for material targeting the specific themes of shapes, celebrations, hide-and-seek, and what family means. Please keep in mind that submissions open and close for these magazines and that needed themes change regularly. You need to check back often. As I looked over the themes, I realized I had one poem that would probably be a good fit for the celebrations issue.

Last but not least, I visited the OwlKids Books website (home to *Chirp* magazine). I learned that they had a very limited open call for submissions, but it was specifically open only to Canadian citizens and permanent residents of Canada. This publishing company is based in Canada, so this makes sense.

## Read the Magazines

Now that I've narrowed my options down to *Babybug*, *Ladybug*, and *Hello*, I take a trip to my local library. I pull several issues of each from the last few years, and I read them cover-to-cover. As I read, I pay attention to style, tone, language, length, subject

matter, and how each piece is illustrated. So much can be learned from this exercise. I believe the best writing advice I ever received was to read lots of whatever I wanted to write.

After reading and studying all of the issues, I've decided that I have one poem that might be a good fit for *Hello*, three poems that might be possibilities for *Babybug*, and one poem to submit to *Ladybug*. The more you get to know a specific publication, the less research you'll have to do, but if it's been a while since you've submitted to a magazine, I suggest repeating all of the steps. As times change, topics of interest, target audiences, and even styles and tone can change. Ultimately, I don't know yet if any of these poems will be accepted, but I know that by doing my research and analysis, I've substantially increased my odds for success.

## Getting the Most Buck for Your Research Bang

One way of getting the most from your research is to multiply your possibilities for sales of pieces on one particular topic. For example, let's look at the topic of flower life cycles. You could target one magazine with a nonfiction piece covering the basics of the flower life cycle along with an activity where readers plant their own flower seed and observe its changes and growth. You could use some of the same research to target another magazine with a fiction piece about children who want to clean up a littered vacant neighborhood lot by planting a community flower garden. You could also use your research to write and submit a full lesson plan about the flower life cycle to a teaching magazine like *The Mailbox*.

You can also get more buck by selling the same piece multiple times. Some publications buy all rights, but many only buy first rights or are open to reprint rights. The following is a brief overview of rights and what they mean. Sometimes you can negotiate rights. Hopefully, this information can lead to more publication credits for your writing resume and a few more dollars in your pocket.

**All rights-** It means exactly what it says. The publisher is buying all rights, and you cannot use or resell the work again.

**All serial rights-** The publisher can use your work in serial form as much as they want—newspapers, magazines, anthologies, and/or as a chapter in a book.

**First rights-** The publisher has the right to publish your work for the first time in any media specified. You retain reprint rights.

**First North American serial rights-** The publisher has the right to publish your work first in North America. You retain reprint rights and the ability to sell the piece outside of North America.

**Second and reprint rights-** The publisher is given the right to publish your piece even though it's been published elsewhere, and you retain the right to resell it as many times as you want.

**One-time rights-** A publisher is given the right to publish your piece only one time—either as the first time or as a reprint.

For more information on writing for magazines, check out the free trial edition of **Magazine Writing Blueprint** at [writingblueprints.com/p/magazine-blueprint-trial](http://writingblueprints.com/p/magazine-blueprint-trial)

# SETTING

## A LIVING STORY ELEMENT

by Jane McBride

**D**o you find that setting is often the last thing you consider when planning a novel? If so, you may want to re-think how you are using it. Setting should show the character's surroundings as they affect him. More, it should do this without stopping the story to describe those surroundings. In other words, show the setting as the character moves through it/interacts with it/notices it. This can differ with the type of story, i.e. contemporary vs historical vs fantasy world.

As I write this article, our yard, our street, our town, our northern Colorado area are blanketed with snow. It is white. It is beautiful. It is deadly. What would I write about it if I was using it in a novel?

That depends.(Don't you just love that answer?)

It depends upon what the plot needs to move forward. Setting is not simply the place where a story takes place. It is an integral part of the plot designed to enhance the action and give yet another source of conflict to the main character (MC) as he strives to reach his goal. Let's develop a story's setting with the Mini Blueprint system.

**STEP 1:** Describe only those things that are important to the plot.

**ACTION:** Leave out the things that don't matter, the boring things, the fillers, the "purple prose." This advice applies to everything in writing, but never more so than when describing the setting. Readers don't want to know that the mountains are beautiful; they want to know how the mountains are going to keep the protagonist from achieving his goal.

**STEP 2:** Use setting to highlight danger, whether physical or emotional.

**ACTION:** Employ sensory details to accentuate the danger of the setting. Let's go back to the winter wonderland I described above. What if the beautiful snow is not beautiful at all when the heavy snow downs a power line to the home where 12-year-old Gayla is tending her little three-year-old sister Mimi? Mimi is on oxygen and needs it to stay alive. What will Gayla do? She races for her phone, only to find that it hasn't been charging because of the storm. Can she make it through the several feet high drifts to the nearest neighbors' home, a half a block away, and use their phone to call 911? Should she take Mimi with her? She can't leave a three-year-old on her own, but it will be hard enough for her to make it through the drifts without having a little girl with her, especially when Mimi is already having a hard time breathing. In the end Gayla decides to take Mimi with her. They bundle up, but the snow nearly swallows them. Mimi is too small to walk through the drifts of snow and the slippery sidewalks where someone has shoveled so Gayla carries her. Gayla doesn't see the beauty of the snow but only the treachery of it. What kind of sensory details can we use to bring the mood and tone of the scene to life? Have you noticed that snow has a taste when it blows into your mouth? Gayla could notice that. She could also notice the sting of the snow as it hits her face and she tries to protect Mimi from it. Thirdly, she might notice that while the snow itself is silent, the effects of it are not as she hears the scrape of snow shovels on the sidewalk, the thud as big globs of snow fall from the trees. Lastly, she will notice the slippery sidewalk as she carries Mimi. Each of these sensory details add to the setting and the danger the protagonist faces.

**STEP 3:** Use setting to underscore turning points in MC's storyline.

Setting...continued

**ACTION:** Bring in details of the setting to emphasize turning points in the character's journey. Let's pretend that we're writing a story about a 12-year-old boy on a camping trip with his scout troop. Jeremy isn't the outdoors type. He prefers reading, playing on his devices, and drawing. But he's going on the trip to please his father who was an Eagle Scout. One of the requirements of this trip is to build a fire. Jeremy does his best, but he can't get the hang of it. Or so he tells his Scout leader. The truth is Jeremy is terrified of fire, having survived a house fire when he was only five. The memories have stayed with him, haunting his waking and sleeping hours. Jeremy doesn't care if he passes the requirement or not. He can NOT build a fire. The idyllic woods setting changes in an instant when a friend's camp fire grows out of control, spreading so rapidly that Jeremy and the boy, Archie, are trapped. Archie starts to cry and clings to Jeremy. They have no way out to reach the rest of the troop but to go through the fire. He must find a way around his fear. The setting—a forest fire—forces Jeremy to face his fear and overcome that fear if he is to save himself and his friend. This is the climax of the book. Can Jeremy find his courage or will he and his friend die a horrible death?

**STEP 4:** Show, don't tell.

**ACTION:** How many times have we heard this writing counsel? Probably too many times to count. Just as it's vital to describe the action as it happens, it's equally vital to describe the setting as it impacts the MC's world. Make the setting come alive with threat, with danger, with energy. Use words to breathe life in to the setting. It should not be a stagnant element but one that changes over the course of the story. In the above example, the setting is a wooded mountain area. But that setting changes as fire engulfs everything in its path. The acrid smell, the sight of flames snapping through the forest, the heat of the fire, all need to be shown through the character's eyes.

**STEP 5:** Use setting to describe the character's ordinary world and subsequently to contrast it with his new world when he accepts the call to adventure.

**ACTION:** Choose telling details to show what the MC's world is like. Does he live in a middle class home with comfortable, if not fancy, appointments? Now use this to contrast when the MC is forced into an environment totally different from his own comfortable circumstances. Have his parents divorced and his now single mother forced to move her and her children from their comfortable home in the suburbs to an apartment in the city, where the smells and sounds are totally foreign?

**STEP 6:** Be aware of the differences to highlight depending upon what kind of novel you are writing.

**ACTION:** A contemporary novel will emphasize different things than would a historical one or one set in a fantasy world. Stay true to the setting, both in place and time. Nothing draws a reader out of a story more than anachronisms or inconsistencies.

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

- Describe what's important. Leave out the rest.
- Use setting to highlight danger; treat it as a character in its own right, an adversary, even a villain.
- Employ setting to emphasize turning points in the character's evolving story.
- Show, don't tell, the setting through the character's eyes.
- Contrast the setting of the MC's ordinary world with that of the world when he answers the call to adventure.
- Stay true to the place and time of your setting. Don't add or subtract things for convenience.



If you'd like more info on how to "show, don't tell", check *Mastering Show, Don't Tell* from Writing Blueprints (<https://writingblueprints.com/p/mastering-show-dont-tell>), led by bestselling author and teacher Emma Walton Hamilton. **Use the code JOYFUL at checkout to save 20%!**



# ELIZABETH SCHLEISMAN

## Assistant Editor

beaming  books



Broadleaf Books

interview by Lynne Marie

**E**lizabeth Schleisman is an assistant editor at 1517 Media for the Beaming Books (children's books) and Broadleaf Books (adult nonfiction) imprints. She comes from a magazine editing and entertainment background and received a degree in Cultural Studies and English from University of Minnesota Twin Cities. After interning at Free Spirit Publishing, she came to Beaming Books and now serves as lead editor of at least four books per season.

**LYNNE MARIE:** You came on board at Beaming Books/Broadleaf prior to the pandemic. How would you say the publication process has evolved from then to now? Do you work and hold meetings via zoom?

**ELIZABETH SCHLESIMAN:** The publication process at Beaming hasn't changed too much since the pandemic began. We started working from home last March, and our team quickly adapted to holding meetings and collaborating virtually. We're hoping to slowly work our way back to the office for a few days a week beginning this summer and fall.

**LM:** Has the process slowed from then to now? Or do you find it to be business as usual? What effects have you seen, if any, in any aspect of your acquisitions?

**ES:** We did slow a little bit last summer, taking some time to regroup as a team and as a company, as I think many people did. I slowed down in acquiring, as I also joined the Broadleaf team last summer. But Beaming is in full swing, with lots of exciting titles queued up in the upcoming seasons, and I'm excited to be picking up acquisitions work again.



**LM:** Have you found the pandemic to have changed the spirit of what the publisher is looking for in a book? Should COVID sensibilities be represented in a book, or do you find that something like that would limit or dwell too much on our struggles or date the book?

**ES:** The pandemic further solidified what we have set out to do as a publishing company: to help kids thrive emotionally, socially, and spiritually. We seek out this connection in each of the submissions we receive. As for representation of COVID sensibilities, there are great resources out there, including picture books, that teach kids how to be safe in regard to COVID, but I don't believe picture books should feel that they have to represent COVID precautions, unless it has direct ties to the subject matter. One day, when it is safe for everyone to do so, we hope to move around the world a little more freely, and while we value the timeliness of books, it's important for them to remain timeless as well, and to be relatable years in the future.

**LM:** How might what you are looking for in a book differ from what the other editors are looking for? Or is the acquisitions process such that everyone must be on board. Please share the acquisitions process, and how it is decided who will edit a certain book?

**ES:** Typically, most (if not all) of the team is on board with a project that we move forward through the acquisitions process. While we share a vision for Beaming and the kind of books we'd like to add to our list, we all bring our own interests and perspectives that draw us more to a particular submission than others. For example, my recent work on a few longer, nonfiction

## Elizabeth Schleisman...continued

middle grade titles, such as *Mightier Than the Sword* by Rochelle Melander, have made me interested in finding more.

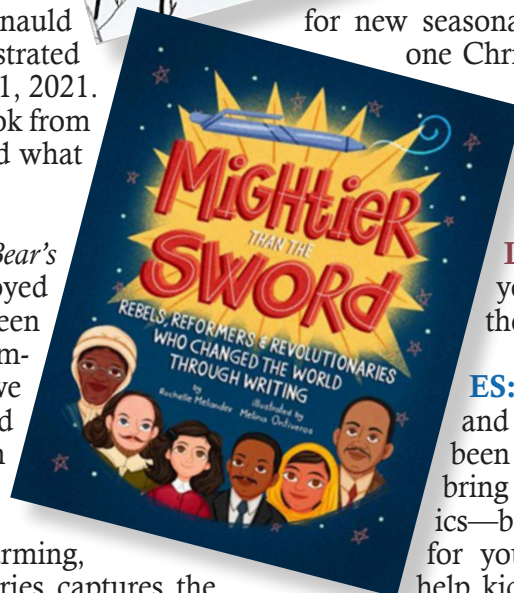
Most of the time, the editor who acquired a project will edit it, but sometimes we pass off projects (before and after projects are officially acquired) based on capacity or if another editor feels passionately about it, or has a strong vision for it.

**LM:** The first of the books you have acquired, *Squirrel's Sweater* by Laura Renauld (author of *Porcupine's Pie*) and illustrated by Jennie Poh releasing November 21, 2021. Please tell us a little bit about this book from a current Beaming Books author and what drew you to it.

**ES:** I had worked with Laura on *Bear's Bicycle* (April 2021), and I really enjoyed collaborating with her. That had been the second book in what was becoming the *Woodland Friends* series. So, we brainstormed some ideas for a third book for the fall, and we landed on *Squirrel's Sweater*—the characters are so sweet, but it is Laura's storytelling that brings them together in charming, organic ways. Each story in the series captures the theme of friendship, while allowing our main character to shine. The themes Laura chooses are such core, social emotional lessons, and she introduces and works through these problems/solutions with refreshing, accessible storytelling.

**LM:** Another forthcoming book, *The Totally True Book of Strange and Surprising Bible Lists* by Carla Barnhill and Marc Olson, illustrated by Kelsey Heaton, is scheduled to release 11/2/2021. Please tell us how this book came to you and a little bit about it.

**ES:** During a brainstorming session with the editorial team, I presented an idea to engage kids with the Bible in new ways—a book filled with lists highlighting the strange, weird, and wacky stuff of the Bible. I reached out to Marc Olson (author of our



*Curious Kids* series) and Carla Barnhill to co-author the book, and Kelsey Heaton's cool and quirky illustrations really bring it together! It's been such a blast developing such a fun nonfiction book.

**LM:** Your publishing house has had success with Christmas and Easter titles. Is this something that you would be looking for? Do you strive to present new books on these topics each season?

**ES:** We do continue to keep our eyes out for new seasonal titles, usually publishing at least one Christmas title every fall, and we try to position one of our religious titles around Easter each spring (if we do not have an explicitly Easter title).

**LM:** Please tell us about what helps you decide to commit to publishing the manuscript?

**ES:** On top of having a strong hook and tie to our mission, projects that have been catching our eyes are those that bring unique perspectives on tough topics—books that offer tangible takeaways for young readers. How does this story help kids thrive? We commit to publishing diverse books that represent different identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

**LM:** Please share a little bit about yourself and your editing style. What can an author expect from working with you and this publisher?

**ES:** I love working with authors and helping them shape their manuscript into the best book it can be. I seek out to strengthen and lift their voice, and to champion their vision for the story as much as possible. When the team has another direction in mind, our process for feedback and revision welcomes the opportunity of collaboration.

**LM:** Please share what you are looking for from authors and/or illustrators for your list for the Beaming Books imprint, as well as any wish list particulars that

*Elizabeth Schleisman...continued*

you may have. Will you be editing any nonfiction titles?

**ES:** I am looking out for strong stories with SEL themes (social emotion learning), that center kids and their experiences, especially diverse, LGBTQ, and/or disabled characters. I'm also looking out for books on mental health, including depression, ADHD, OCD, mindfulness, etc. I'd love to see books on gender/pronouns, books on eating/diets (vegetarian, flexitarian, etc.), and progressive, faith-based picture books that approach Christian values/the Bible in new and inclusive ways. I have been working on a few middle grade nonfiction titles, and I welcome seeing proposals for engaging nonfiction books for upper elementary and middle grade audiences.

**LM:** What should be the author's mission or goal when gearing a book to Beaming Books? Name five adjectives that would describe the content of spirit of the submissions you are looking for.

**ES:** The spirit of their submissions should be refreshing (creative, unique takes), revelatory (rather than being just relatable, what does the story uncover?), engaging (how would a kid interact with this book? Is the message clear, is it too wordy?), inclusive (who is represented, who does the book speak to?), and graceful (how does it address potentially difficult themes and subjects? How well does the book execute its goal?).

**LM:** How do you want submissions to be formatted? What do you feel about page numbers? Art notes? What might be a deal breaker for you?

**ES:** If you have a vision for your book, we welcome page numbers and art notes—these can come in handy for envisioning your book (and for briefing the illustrator if we acquire your book). However, these notes and directions are likely to change as revisions are made, and whether we introduce an alternate vision for the book's art. We appreciate submissions in a separate word document or PDF, rather than in the body of the email. This makes it even easier to share with the rest of our team!

**LM:** What would you like to see in a query? Do you like to see comps? What about the author's experience or tie to the subject?



**ES:** I love to see an author's elevator pitch for their book, as well as a bit of market research. What comps are out there, and how is your project different? I like to hear about the author's previous experience, especially if it is relevant to the book's subject, whether they used to be a teacher or counselor, or if they've published a book before, etc.

Beaming Books publishes high-quality children's books that help kids thrive emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Looking for fiction for ages 3-8, nonfiction for up to age 12. Go to [beamingbooks.com/catalogs/](https://beamingbooks.com/catalogs/) to download the current catalog. Though Beaming Books only accepts agented submissions, Elizabeth Schleisman is offering CBI subscribers a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity **until May 31, 2021**. Query Elizabeth Schleisman with a brief letter containing a short synopsis of the work and identifying the target audience, and attach the entire manuscript for picture books, or first two chapters for longer works, as a .doc file or PDF. Email to [submissions@beamingbooks.com](mailto:submissions@beamingbooks.com). The subject line should read **CBI MAY: (Story Title) by (Authors Name)**.

### ---Please Read Before You Proceed---

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

- You've studied the submission guidelines and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- You've confirmed your work matches the interests of the editor by reading their CBI interview, and studying recent books on their list.
- Your manuscript falls within standard word counts of the particular age group for which you're writing. (If you don't know standard word counts, get our free Ultimate Children's Writing Cheat Sheet at: [writeforkids.org/ultimate-cheatsheet](https://writeforkids.org/ultimate-cheatsheet))
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript.

# FINDING YOUR VOICE

## As a Children's Writer

by Laura Backes

**M**ost often, when asked what they're looking for, editors say they want "fresh, new, original, passionate voices." Which tells you pretty much nothing. But that's not the editors' fault. Aside from being able to define the kind of books they publish by age group, fiction or nonfiction, or terms like "STEM" or "concept books," most editors (if they're honest) really don't know what they're looking for until they see it. What editors crave is for you to show them something they've never seen before.

So what is "voice" anyway? Voice is not concrete, like dialogue, description or plot, but it's intricately connected to all three. Voice is the way each author approaches the act of writing. It's how plot, characters, dialogue, setting, pacing—all the elements of a book—come together to form a story. Voice is like a fingerprint; it makes the story uniquely yours. And even if you have all the building blocks of a story in place, if your voice is missing there's little an editor can do to help the manuscript.

Voice is the simplest thing in the world to learn, because it's already in you. But it's the hardest to achieve, because it involves trusting yourself. It means learning what goes into a children's book and then forgetting it, or rather placing all those important things into your subconscious and then allowing yourself to write.

All stories start with an idea. In that moment, that first exciting spark when anything is possible, we think, "This would make a great book." And then we start plotting out the story in our heads. We begin to worry about the characters and the dialogue, when the climax of the plot will take place, how it will end. I'd like to suggest that in that first moment of inspiration you stop and ask yourself, "Why do I need to write this story?" Forget about your audience. Be selfish. Why do you need to write this book? What's in it for you? You might try brain-

storming on paper, freewriting where you jot down anything and everything that comes to mind. You need to find a reason for creating this story that speaks to you, to your writer's heart, in order to speak to your reader's heart.

If you feel you must write this story because children need to hear it, then you're going to end up preaching to your audience. Children do need books that deal with a range of issues, but the issue must be as important to the writer for it to come alive for the reader. Another way of looking at this is to ask yourself, "When I was five, did I need this book?" Try to answer this question from your 5-year-old consciousness, which still lives inside you, rather than from your current adult perspective. If the answer is no (you wouldn't have sat still for this story) then you're writing it for the wrong reasons.

Discovering why you need to create this work—and this applies equally to fiction and nonfiction, magazine pieces and books—leads you to that passion editors talk about. If you're writing the story or article because something inside of you needs to hear it told, then you're writing from your heart. Another related question to ask while the idea and inspiration are still fresh is, "What do I bring to this story?" What part of yourself will be in this book? What element of your human experience, your journey that encompassed being a child, a sister or brother, a friend, will find its way into your work? These are all universal, timeless experiences, and yet you felt them, and you remember them, differently from everyone else. If you're writing nonfiction, your own way of looking at the world, and your excitement for whatever topic you're researching, will affect how you write the book or article. And it will give your work a soul.

Asking why you need to write this story, and what you will bring to this story, help build the passion,

*Finding Your Voice...continued*

heart and soul of the book. These things will motivate and sustain you through the writing process, and give your work direction. But you still need to develop a technique that translates this passion from your imagination to words on paper. Over time — with a lot of practice — your voice will emerge, if you let it. This involves spending many hours just writing, without the pressure of creating a manuscript that you intend to submit to a publisher. Don't feel every time you put pen to paper it has to result in something that you're actually going to show to anyone else. Don't always have a goal in mind of creating a short story or two more chapters of your book — sometimes you need to write simply for the pleasure of writing. This process of stretching your writing muscles with no pressure to actually produce something substantial allows you to relax, and eventually your voice will emerge.

If you vary these creative sessions by sometimes writing dialogue, sometimes describing a setting, and other times fleshing out a character, you'll also see where your strengths lie as an author. Every writer is very good at something, and if you're lucky you're good at several things. But in the beginning, discover what you're particularly good at and work with that. I think something all writers should do is experiment with poetry. Poetry is very liberating in one sense, because you don't have to develop a plot, and you don't even need characters. You're capturing a moment in time, as vividly and succinctly as possible, or you're creating a snapshot of a person or a feeling. Poetry teaches you how to express these things in a few words (very important for children's books). It also helps you discover your writing rhythm, or the way your words best flow on paper. Don't worry about rhyme or meter or form or any of those poetic terms. Remember, this is just for you, so have fun and experiment with how words and rhythms fit together.

One thing that separates great authors from mediocre ones is that their writing feels effortless, even if it took tremendous work to achieve. A forced voice happens when authors try too hard to sound like a writer. I think the best voices appear when authors write as they speak. Has a story ever sounded profound and lyrical in your head, but lost something when you put it on paper? That's because in your head you're telling the story to yourself in your speaking voice, and when you write it down

suddenly you're trying to be a WRITER. You go searching through the thesaurus for the perfect word, something you'd never use in normal conversation. You use three words of description, just because you can, rather than one word which really says everything you need to say. And suddenly in that process of writing down what's in your head, you've lost your voice. You've adapted the voice of someone else, or the voice you think your writing should have. So the next time you write, try writing exactly what's in your head. Type your writing exercise with your eyes closed, so you can't see the computer screen. Closing your eyes also helps you focus inward where the story is being conceived. Then you'll be guided by how the words sound and feel, and that's the closest thing to your true voice. Writing as you talk also helps you tune in to your unique storytelling rhythm. Dr. Seuss was a master at rhythm — once you entered his stories they seemed to snowball and you couldn't help but go along for the ride, especially when reading them out loud. But rhythm is just as important even if you're not writing in rhyme. Once you've become comfortable with your unique writing rhythm, it will lead you to the words that best fit your style. Very often those words are simple and clear, but strung together in a way that's all your own. Next time you read the classic children's books *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown or *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, note how their simple language conveys vivid pictures, and their pacing and sentence structure evoke two very different moods, in two very different voices.

After you've found your writer's voice, the fun really begins. You'll learn that voice is not a stagnant quality; it can be changed to match the tone each story requires. And if you're open to trying new age groups and genres, you may find talents you never knew you had. Maybe you really possess a strong middle grade writing voice, but you've been determined to produce picture book texts. If you're flexible and can analyze your work honestly, your niche will emerge.

Allowing your voice to develop is a gentle, natural process, which will only be hampered if you try too hard. Give it time, and remember that each of you already possesses your distinct writing fingerprint. If you're patient, you can coax that fingerprint to emerge and indelibly mark your work.

# THE FAST AND FURIOUS

## NANCY ROE PIMM

### NONFICTION AUTHOR AND YA WRITER

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**A** born and bred New Yorker, Nancy Roe Pimm knew she was a writer in her bones. But a lack of support and encouragement made her doubt her dreams. Years later, she decided to follow her childhood dream once and for all and never looked back. Now the published author of eight nonfiction children's books, Pimm is flying high on her latest release, *Fly, Girl, Fly! Shaesta Waiz Soars Around The World* (Beaming Books), the amazing true story of a female aviator refugee from Afghanistan who overcame her fear of flying to become the youngest woman to circumnavigate the globe solo in a single-engine aircraft. A big believer in reaching for the stars, Pimm makes her home in Ohio with her retired race car husband, kids, grandkids, and several animals including a snake named—what else—Monty Python. Other fun facts at [nancy-roepimm.com](http://nancy-roepimm.com)



**PJ McILVAINE:** What was the first thing you ever wrote?

**NANCY ROE PIMM:** I wrote my first narrative nonfiction book at age ten. I purchased a black and white composition notebook at the corner store and wrote *Horses, Horses, Horses*. I wrote in cursive and cut horse pictures from magazine articles to illustrate the book.

**PM:** Did you aspire to be a writer as a child?

**NRP:** Yes. Unfortunately, I was discouraged from following my dream. I was told that I needed to pursue a

“real job.” I also loved to teach. Now I love teaching writing workshops at author visits.

**PM:** Who were your influences growing up?

**NRP:** Dr. Seuss and Walter Farley. I loved the fantastical worlds of Dr. Seuss. *Horton Hears a Who!* was a favorite. As a child, I appreciated the wild imagination of Dr. Seuss, his invented words, and wonderful rhyme. Although Dr. Seuss is a controversial figure at this time, he has delighted many young people and inspired many young minds, including my own. I read every Walter Farley book to feed my obsession with horses while living in Brooklyn, New York. I also loved Robert McCloskey, Maurice Sendak, and P.D. Eastman.

**PM:** You've had several nonfiction books published in a variety of settings: military animals, car racing, and female aviators. Where do you get your story ideas from?

**NRP:** My husband raced in the Indy 500 and the Daytona 500 and I worked in the pit crew. So, I had some really great primary sources! My first published book was *The Indy 500: The Inside Track* in 2004, and *The Daytona 500: The Thrill and Thunder of the Great American Race* followed years later. I live very close to The Columbus Zoo and worked as a volunteer. I drove a van full of zoo animals to school assemblies and gave presentations with alligators, snakes, opossums, and prairie dogs.

*Nancy Roe Pimm....continued*

While giving zoo tours, I found my fascination with gorillas. As for the military books and the aviation books, my ideas came from watching the news. I was amazed to learn we used military working dogs in combat situations. I needed to know more! While doing the research, I uncovered some fascinating stories and was immediately hooked!

As for the aviation books, I knew Amelia Earhart disappeared while trying to fly around the world, so when a news story broke about the 50th anniversary of the first woman to fly around the world, it got my attention. When I learned a housewife from a small town in Ohio circumnavigated the globe in 1964, I needed to write this inspirational story for young readers. When I called Jerrie Mock to request an interview, I told her how brave she was and how she could motivate others to follow dreams of their own. Jerrie had said, “I was just having a little fun in my plane.” I hopped in my car and drove to Florida. I had to meet this woman in person! During the interview, she told me a young Afghan-American girl had recently stopped by for advice on flying around the world in a single-engine aircraft. Soon after, I met Shaesta Waiz while promoting *The Jerrie Mock Story* at the Oshkosh Air Show in Wisconsin. Many times, my new books arise from the old books!

**PM:** How much of the actual work is research vs writing?

**NRP:** Once I have the bud of an idea, I begin the research. I search through books, magazine articles, YouTube, documentaries, internet articles, history books, and podcasts. I check the bibliographies of books to find more books on the subject. When possible, I go directly to the source with personal interviews. I also find experts in the field and send emails requesting interviews or help with fact-checking. While collecting data, I try to form the story in my head and make a decision on the best way to weave the facts to build a compelling narrative. I try to connect on a personal level to find the heart of the story. Many times, this gets worked out while on long walks with my dog, Tessie.

**PM:** Inspiration vs perspiration?

**NRP:** The inspiration gets me excited about the project, but then I need to get my BIC, Butt In Chair, advice I received from the prolific Jane Yolen.

**PM:** How do you know when a story is a “keeper”?

**NRP:** When I connect personally with the subject matter, it captures my curiosity and imagination. If the narrative flows, and I uncover really cool and interesting facts, I know I have to do what it takes to write this book.

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

**NRP:** It depends where I am in the process. Sometimes I need to travel for research. Other times I am reading. But when it is time to get the story written, I set a deadline for myself and get to work. I like to set weekly deadlines so it doesn't seem overwhelming.

**PM:** Do you outline?

**NRP:** I never outline when writing fiction. For nonfiction, especially larger works, I need to create an outline to submit to editors and agents. I usually complete the first two chapters and write a chapter-by-chapter outline.

**PM:** How long does it take you to write a book?

**NRP:** That depends on the book. Picture books take a lot less time than my middle grade or young adult nonfiction. On average I'd say about 6 months to one year. I am currently working on a young adult narrative nonfiction that will take about two years. It is about a prisoner of war during World War II, and I need to dig deep and do some meticulous research.

**PM:** How many drafts?

**NRP:** Many, many drafts! My picture book *Fly, Girl, Fly!* went through about 15 to 20 drafts. My first draft, the rough draft, is usually a hot mess. But it gives me the bones I need to flesh the story out.



*Nancy Roe Pimm....continued*

**PM:** Do you have critique partners?

**NRP:** I am a part of the Central Ohio SCBWI picture book critique group, and my main critique group meets once a month. I am also very fortunate to have a group of about ten writer friends that support one another year-round and retreat together with a mentor for one week out of the year.

**PM:** How do you maintain enthusiasm and passion for a project over the long haul?

**NRP:** I don't go into a project unless I am passionate about the subject. The WOW factor is the thread that keeps me motivated.

**PM:** Your latest book was acquired by an editor with Beaming Books at #PBPitch, a Twitter pitch party exclusively for picture books. How did you decide on the pitch?

**NRP:** I was at a week-long writer's retreat with nine fellow writers. My roommates helped me to tweak the pitch. Then I said a prayer and sent it off!

**PM:** How many likes did your pitch get?

**NRP:** ONE!

**PM:** How long did it take to get an actual offer?

**NRP:** I sent the complete manuscript that same evening. I worked with the editor on a couple of revisions, the book went to an acquisition meeting, and I had a signed contract in three months. Beaming Books was wonderful to work with and #PBPitch offers writers an amazing opportunity!

**PM:** How did that process differ from your other books?

**NRP:** I don't have an agent, so I usually send a bunch of queries to find homes for my other books. Except for *Colo's Story*, I was asked to write that one! #PBPitch is a wonderful resource for unagented writers. I am very thankful for the opportunity to get my work before

agents and editors and avoiding the dreaded slush pile!

**PM:** What tips or advice do you have for a writer who might be a little leery about participating in pitch parties?

**NRP:** I was very leery myself. At the time I sent *Fly, Girl, Fly!*, Shaesta's story was not on the radar. I worried that someone would steal my idea. I know it is cliché, but you have to be in it to win it. Agents do look, editors look, and maybe they are looking for your story too.

**PM:** Several of your books highlight "dreamers" who dream big and found the determination and grit to ignore the naysayers. What attributes did they have in common that allowed them to overcome obstacles?

**NRP:** Perseverance, persistence, and grit. Isn't that what we all need to succeed? Every failure is just a stepping stone to success. I can relate to all of my subjects because I was told I would never be published. I wrote my first book at age ten, but the adults in my life told me I needed to get a "real job." Unfortunately, I took their advice for too long. I wish I believed in my twenty-year-old self, but instead, I became a dental hygienist. I didn't pursue my dream of becoming a children's book author until I was nearly 40! Now I love to go to schools and encourage the students to have a dream and chase it down—despite the naysayers.

**PM:** How can today's readers apply this to their own lives?

**NRP:** Don't be afraid to fail, as long as you learn from failing. As writers, we will get rejection, but we need to brush ourselves off and try again. Read books like *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamont and *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. There are many motivational books on writing in the market. Those are two of my favorites. Read lots of books in the genre you are writing. And write. You can't finish writing a book unless you sit down and write it!

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





*Nancy Roe Pimm....continued*

**NRP:** No, but my next goal is to get an agent. Before the pandemic, I went to lots of SCBWI conferences and workshops. By attending the workshop, I was given an opportunity to query the editor in attendance. Now I am attending virtual conferences.

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

**NRP:** I plan on querying agents by researching them on Manuscript Wishlist, SCBWI, Publisher's Weekly, Querytracker, and Literary Rambles. I will use an Excel sheet to keep track of the process.

**PM:** How as the pandemic affected your writing and your life in general?

**NRP:** I love to travel and meet fellow book lovers, and the pandemic cleared my calendar of all travel and book events. With my debut picture book, *Fly, Girl, Fly! Shaesta Waiz Soars Around The World* released in September 2020, it was a difficult pill to swallow. But there is so much more to be thankful for. I can still work through this pandemic, as a matter of fact, I have more time than ever to get my work done. I've taken advantage of the generous offerings made available through webinars on craft and marketing. Most of all, I continue to write. It is my therapy! With my cattle dog snoring by my side, I have written 6 picture books during the pandemic, and my young adult narrative nonfiction will be complete in May.

**PM:** I gather from your website that you enjoy doing in school visits. How has the pandemic impacted this?

**NRP:** I LOVE doing school visits. Engaging with the students and the energy that flows through the room during author visits is priceless. When a new book is released, I usually book quite a few visits. With the release of *Fly, Girl, Fly!*, due to the pandemic, there were none. I took a wonderful webinar about creating interactive, informative, and fun virtual author visits from Kate Messner. But I think the teachers and the school systems are still overwhelmed with how to navigate the pandemic. Understandably, author visits are not a priority at this time. When the teachers and librarians feel the time is ready to book visits, I'll be prepared for vir-

tual or in-person author visits.

**PM:** What are you currently working on?

**NRP:** I am currently working on a young adult narrative nonfiction titled, *Captured!* While I was promoting *The Jerrie Mock Story* at an air show, I met a 97-year-old WWII veteran who had survived POW camp and a death march. While a POW, he read books, prayed, and wrote an amazing book of poetry. When the American Airman returned home from the war, he spent 62 years looking for the German pilot who shot him from the sky because he believes you can only be truly liberated when you show forgiveness. He has a true story to tell, and I hope to get this story of survival into the hands of young readers. I'm also revising the six picture books I wrote during the past year.

**PM:** Sounds like you are a happy multi-tasker!

**NRP:** Yes! I love writing picture books while I am writing longer works. I find the combination works for me.

**PM:** Do you see yourself expanding into fiction or other genres?

**NRP:** Yes. I wrote the first draft of a middle grade and a young adult novel. But since I keep uncovering amazing true stories, I have a few more narrative nonfiction books to write. Once completed, I will return to my novels. I also love writing picture books, and I would like to explore poetry.

**PM:** If you were a racing car, what model would you be? Ford? Ferrari? Fast and furious? Or more methodical?

**NRP:** A Ferrari for sure. I am a born and raised New Yorker. I write fast, revise fast, I even drive fast and talk fast. I am not methodical, but writing has taught me the valuable lesson of patience. The writing journey has made me slow down, let the motor idle, and enjoy the journey.



# Between a Rock and a Hard Place

## THE SQUEEZE PLAY

by Jane McBride

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

Writers are often told to be tough on their characters, to be mean, to make them sweat and hurt and go through all manner of painful things that will test them in ways they never thought to be tested before they can achieve their goals. Instead of simply being tough on your characters, try adding a squeeze play that will put them between two hard things, the proverbial rock and a hard place.

### What do I mean by squeezing?

Let's start with an example. Thirteen-year-old Sandra has the chance of earning a scholarship to a summer camp. Going to camp is something she's always wanted to do but knew her family could not afford the fees, not just for the camp itself but for the "extras" like horseback riding and everything that goes with it. The only problem is that the scholarship interview takes place on the very day of her brother Jeremy's graduation from high school. Jeremy, who had suffered a traumatic brain surgery when he was nine years old, had struggled in passing his classes, both in middle school and in high school. He sometimes gets discouraged, even depressed. That he is able to graduate from high school is a credit to his determination. He has had to work twice, even three times, as hard as other kids and could still barely keep up with his classes at times. Sandra has talked with her parents about the choice. Secretly, she wants them to tell

her what to do. Making the choice isn't something she's equipped to do on her own. When she tells them that, they only smile and tell her that if she can't make a choice by herself that they haven't done their job as parents well enough. They finish by telling her she was old enough to choose what would be right and refuse to try to influence her in any way. Though she wasn't going to tell Jeremy about her dilemma, he learned of it and urged her to go for the scholarship interview. Such a chance, he tells her, may not come around again. Graduation ceremonies are a dime a dozen, he goes on to say, but Sandra knows he will be disappointed if she's not there. She goes back and forth in making the decision and finally decides to try for the scholarship. After all, hadn't Jeremy encouraged her to do just that? She couldn't be blamed for doing what he told her to do, could she?

### What are some elements of "squeezing your character?"

*-The choices should be of roughly equal weight.* In the above example, Sandra's choices—go for the scholarship or support her big brother—are both worthy things. Each will enhance her life, one way or the other. What if the choice had been between trying for the scholarship and going to an amusement park with her friend? No choice there. The scholarship wins every time. Yes, missing out on the amusement park would be disappointing, but it wouldn't devastate her.

*-The choices should reflect each other.* Sandra pictures herself attending the summer camp and coming

home geared up to help Jeremy write the essay he's been putting off to earn a scholarship to college. (Sandra excels in writing and has in fact won several awards for it. Because of his TBI, the college Jeremy has applied to and been accepted to has given him extra time to turn in the scholarship packet.) Wouldn't it be okay if she missed his graduation in order to try to earn a scholarship for herself, she reasons, and then she would know some inside tips to help him try to do the same? She rationalizes her way to deciding to go to the scholarship interview. Of course, many choices will not be as clear-cut mirror images at this one, but you get the point.

*-The choice the character ultimately makes should speak of her higher values.* In the end, Sandra does what her heart tells her to do: be there for the biggest day of Jeremy's life. He is her big brother and she loves him with all of her heart. She doesn't see this as a sacrifice but as part of belonging to a family. Most readers respond positively to characters who display high moral values. Though some books and television shows portray villains as heroes, the ones that stick with us and touch our hearts are those where the main character is a hero or heroine in some way. That is not to say that the MC should be perfect (boring), only that he or she should have qualities that make the reader think, "Gee, I want to be like that." Part of our job as writers for children and teens and young adults is to influence them for good.

*-The choices should be age appropriate.* Have you noticed how many times this counsel—be age appropriate—comes up in articles on writing? That's because its importance can't be overstated.

### **What is an example of this for a younger reader?**

Nine-year-old Charlie desperately wants a Golden Retriever puppy. His parents tell him if he gets good grades on his report card, they'll get one for him. And then, the day after Jeremy brings home top grades, his grandmother falls and breaks a hip. His parents talk about having Grandma come to live with the family while she recovers, which may be about three months. Charlie loves his grandma and is fine with that. The only problem is that

Grandma is allergic to dogs. Can Charlie postpone his dream of having a dog in order to help his grandmother? This is a big deal to Charlie. He is old enough to understand Grandma's plight and to even have empathy, but he is young enough to feel like waiting three months for a puppy is forever. What is he going to do?

*-“Squeezing” can mean making your character uncomfortable as a way of showing the reader what he's made of.* First, Charlie has to wait to get what he wants. Waiting can be very difficult for children. How he handles this waiting reveals his character to the reader. When squeezing a character with something like “waiting,” which is a passive event, remember to complicate it with unexpected action or choices the character may be making. Perhaps Charlie does odd jobs around the house and uses the money to buy supplies for his future puppy, and then “stores” them in Grandma's room after he hears his parents talking about how Grandma's recovery is taking longer than they expected. He knows Grandma feels bad about keeping him from his dream of having a dog, but this little reminder won't hurt. Maybe Charlie tries to “speed up” Grandma's recovery by urging her to do more of her exercises than prescribed, or asks her to bake his favorite cake so he can tell Mom that Grandma has no trouble navigating the kitchen on her own. He justifies this by wanting Grandma to feel independent, because he knows that's important to her.

*-Your character's heightened discomfort leads to choices, which intensify the conflict.* Once Jeremy starts pushing Grandma to recover sooner, he has to choose whether or not to keep the effort going. This involves lying to his mother about how mobile Grandma really is when Mom's at work, and pretending he doesn't see Grandma wince in pain when she moves. Mom says she's relieved, because secretly, she'd been worried that Grandma could no longer live alone, and would have to move in with them permanently. Jeremy starts to feel bad. He doesn't want Grandma to get hurt again, but he doesn't want to give up his dream of a puppy, which he worked hard to earn. He swallows his guilt and tells himself he's helping Grandma get better.

Done right, making the choice between two equal-

*Between a Rock and Hard Place...continued*

ly hard things will intensify tension throughout the story.

*-The final choice should leave the character stronger in some way.* One day Grandma, who has been pushing herself to recover so Jeremy can get his dog, falls in the kitchen while cooking lunch. Jeremy calls 911 and then calls his mother at work. At the hospital, they learn Grandma's fine, but Jeremy decides he needs to tell Mom the truth about Grandma's recovery. He knows his actions probably mean the puppy's off the table, but he sees that Grandma could have gotten hurt. Mom's angry at Jeremy, but says she understands how hard it is to let go of his dream of having a dog. Then Jeremy comes clean with Grandma and apologizes. He tells her she's more important to him than a puppy and he's glad she's moving in with them.

While giving up his dream isn't easy for Jeremy, he accepts it. If you're writing for upper middle grade or young adult readers, accepting the morally superior outcome of a difficult choice may be where you end your story. But younger readers need a sense of hope or satisfaction in their books' resolutions. We see that Jeremy made the right choice, but it's still a sad ending. What if, in the final chapter, Jeremy is visiting a friend who has a dog, and learns this dog was bred to be hypoal-

lergenic? The friend's father is allergic to dogs, but has no problem with this one. Once again, Jeremy has hope. This dog isn't his coveted Golden Retriever, but maybe if Jeremy adjusts his dream a bit, and earns his parents' trust again, he'll get his puppy. The book ends with Jeremy hatching his new plan on the way home.

However you decide to end your book, spend the extra time and planning and thought in your character development. Show him or her gaining the emotional skills and fortitude (guts) to move forward with life. These have to be written throughout the book, not just thrown into the final pages.

## IN CONCLUSION

Squeezing your character takes extra thought and care in writing. It means delving deep into her mind and heart and soul to identify the two things that will tear her in opposite directions. There will be consequences with either choice. If you do it well, you will reap compliments, and, more importantly, devoted readers who will follow your stories wherever they take them.