

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  September 2022



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITY:**



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

ISSN 1073-7596

Publisher: Laura Backes  
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*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/>

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# At Presstime:

## UK Publisher Accepting Picture Books and Middle Grade Submissions

Welbeck Publishing is a London-based independent publisher of books for adults and children. Their titles are distributed throughout the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand. Their children's division is divided into four imprints:

- **Welbeck Editions** is a boutique imprint, passionately curated, matching stunning illustration with brilliantly crafted text to present nonfiction and picture books in original highly designed editions.
- **Welbeck Children's** publishes illustrated nonfiction titles covering multiple themes and subjects including STEM, history, nature, environmental, hobbies and mental well-being.
- **Mortimer Books** is a trend-led imprint that taps into popular culture, gaming and licensing brands that resonate with children of today.
- **Welbeck Flame** publishes middle grade fiction full of hope, heart and humor, originality of voice and above all stories that transport readers to worlds beyond their own.

You can download a current catalog at <https://www.welbeckpublishing.com/trade>. Submissions should consist of a cover letter containing a short synopsis, a list of selling points, the author's professional biography, information on competing titles and up to two chapters or 20 pages of the manuscript, whichever is shorter. All material should be pasted into an email, and sent to [submissions@welbeckpublishing.com](mailto:submissions@welbeckpublishing.com). Try to reply to submissions within 8 weeks, though may take longer around holidays and other busy times of year. **NOTE: Authors do not have to live in the UK to submit.**

## Publisher Seeks Picture Book and Graphic Novel Submissions with Asian Content

Tuttle Publishing has been a leader of publishing books on all aspects of Asia for over 70 years. Their children's books include fiction and nonfiction picture books, poetry and story anthologies, craft books, and manga and graphic novels for upper middle grade and young adults. All submissions must have content that ties in with Asian culture or history. See current titles at <https://www.tuttlepublishing.com/>. Submit a proposal that includes a cover letter describing the work as a whole, including pertinent information about your expertise and why you chose to submit the proposal to Tuttle; a brief resumé and summary of your experience and published writings; information on anything that will give the publisher a sense of your visibility—a link to your blog/website or recorded appearances, the number of followers you have on social media, and any other information that would indicate the current extent of your reach; a description of the target readership for your book; a list of similar, related or competing books which inspired you or which you feel are read by your intended audience. For longer nonfiction, also send an annotated table of contents and chapter outline with a brief description of each chapter and an approximate word count for each chapter, and one or two sample chapters. For picture books, send the entire manuscript. Submit to [submissions@tuttlepublishing.com](mailto:submissions@tuttlepublishing.com). In the subject line, put the category of the submission (children's picture book biography, origami craft book for middle grades, etc.), and embed the entire submission with the email. Responds in about three months.

## #PitchMe Mentoring/Pitching Opportunity Opens September 7

#PitchMe, developed by Krista Van Dolzer, gives unpublished, unagented children's writers the opportunity to submit their pitch, query, and the first 250 words of their manuscript to Krista and author Tara Shiroff. Six manuscripts will be chosen from each age group, and winners will be mentored on revising their queries, pitches and first pages for four weeks. At the end of that time, the pitches will be posted on Twitter and reviewed by 14 agents, who can "like" the pitches and request manuscripts. **All submissions must be sent during two one-hour windows on September 7, 2022**, and follow specific guidelines. For more information, and to see the list of agents who will be reviewing the winning pitches, go to [kristavan-dolzer.blogspot.com/2022/](http://kristavan-dolzer.blogspot.com/2022/)

**Independent Publisher Seeking Graphic Novels for Ages 5-12**

Nosy Crow is an award-winning independent publisher that has recently added graphic novels to its list. For the month of September, Nosy Crow is accepting submissions from authors or author-illustrators for commercial fiction graphic novels in any genre for ages 5-7, 7-9, or 9-12. Submissions should contain a graphic novel script/story (see this blog post for how to format a graphic novel script), a one-page synopsis and a short biography (up to 300 words). If you are also an illustrator, include three double-page spreads of the graphic novel and links to further samples of your artwork. Formats accepted are Adobe PDF for illustration spreads, Adobe PDF, Microsoft Word (or similar) for script, synopsis and biography. PDFs should be no more than 5MB in total. Attach submission to a brief cover letter and email to [graphicnovels@nosycrow.com](mailto:graphicnovels@nosycrow.com). **All submissions must be received by September 30, 2022.**

**Independent Publisher Seeks STEM-related Middle Grade and Older Picture Books**

Tumblehome is an independent publisher producing STEM-related (science, technology, engineering and math) books for children in grades K-12. Most books are geared toward upper elementary and middle school grades (approximately ages 8-12). Currently looking for middle grade fiction with adventure/mystery plots containing scientific facts, engineering design processes and/or genuine historical STEM figures. The company mission is to make STEM education more fun by embedding scientific content into fun, fictional storylines which excite children and help them imagine themselves as future scientists or engineers. Primarily looking for authors who have backgrounds both in writing as well as a STEM field. All publications should align with Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards curriculum (Tumblehome has curriculum experts on staff to be able to assist with this alignment process, but authors should be willing to assist with developing freely-available teacher guidelines and online resources).

Accepting single title and series submissions for middle grade. If submitting a series idea, first study the Galactic Academy of Science series as a guide ([tumblehomebooks.org/book/the-harrowing-case-of-the-hackensack-hacker/](http://tumblehomebooks.org/book/the-harrowing-case-of-the-hackensack-hacker/)) Also accepting picture books for ages 5-10 with STEM-related content from author/illustrators only. All illustrations should contain considerable scientific content. Study current titles at [tumblehomebooks.org/books/](http://tumblehomebooks.org/books/)

Accepting electronic submissions only. See full submission packet details at <https://tumblehomebooks.org/submissions/>. NOTE: Because Tumblehome is a smaller publisher, they pay small advances along with royalties. The publisher asks that you state your minimum advance and royalty requirements with your submission.

**#PitBLK September 21 Twitter Pitch Event for Black Authors**

#PitBLK is a Twitter Pitch Party event that invites unagented Black authors of picture books, middle grade and young adult fiction and nonfiction to “pitch” their completed work to agents and editors on Twitter using the event hashtag #PitBLK and subtags. All authors of African descent are welcome to participate in #PitBLK and agents and editors of all backgrounds are invited to peruse and like pitches. #PitBLK considers “of African descent” to include Black people, both indigenous to Africa and of the global diaspora. #PitBLK organizers ask all participants to be authentic in their self-determination of whether or not they meet this eligibility. Children’s and YA pitches will be posted on September 21st, 2022 from 8am - 8pm EST. For rules and guidelines, go to [www.pitblk.com/faq](http://www.pitblk.com/faq)

Need to practice your pitch? #Prepitblk is a Twitter event where writers can post their Twitter pitches and volunteers will provide constructive feedback to authors. #Prepitblk runs on **Friday, September 9th from 4pm-8pm EST**. You are welcome to schedule tweets if you can’t participate live. Tweet your pitch with the #Prepitblk hashtag during the timeframe. You may make revisions on your pitch and post the revised pitch up to three times for up to three projects. Your manuscript doesn’t need to be complete to get feedback during #Prepitblk. However, you must have a completed manuscript during #PitBLK. If your manuscript won’t be ready in time for #PitBLK, you can still participate in #prepitblk. For more info, go to [www.pitblk.com/faq](http://www.pitblk.com/faq)


**U.S. BOOK SHOW**

# Overview 2022: Mighty Middle Grade

by PJ McIlvaine

Suppose picture books are the building blocks of a children's foundation of learning. In that case, middle grade fiction is the "bread and butter" of children's literature. Hosted by Iyana Jones of *Publishers Weekly*, an eclectic group of MG books was highlighted at the recent *Publishers Weekly* US Book Show on a panel discussion. Middle grade editors spoke eloquently and passionately about upcoming titles ranging from graphic novels, to fiction featuring diverse characters and cultures, and horror based on Jewish folklore.

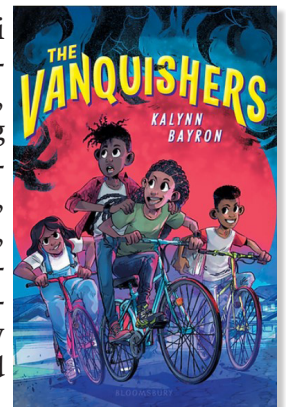


A book about talking insects wasn't the first item on the manuscript wish list of Stacey Barney, an associate publisher at Nancy Paulsen Books for Young Readers at Penguin Random House. But she was "enchanted" with *The Big Dreams of Small Creatures*, the debut novel of television and film writer/director Gail Lerner, a "fresh, lighthearted, and funny adventure that gives a new

and emotionally resonant face to themes of empathy and what it means to be a friend and to take a leap of faith." In this "wonderfully offbeat tale", a budding etymologist discovers she can talk to insects while another kid blames bugs for everything that's gone haywire in his life. The two end up in a "battle for the ages" in an elegant mansion where bugs and humans can speak to each other in a "fun plot" that Barney said should appeal to readers of Katherine Applegate and Kate DiCamillo. "It was a joy from start to finish."

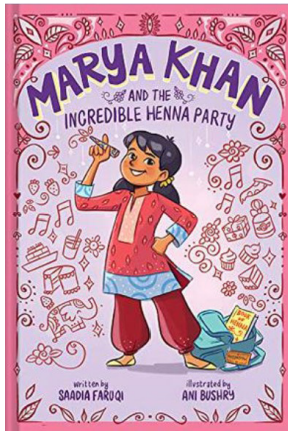
Mary Kate Castellani, Publishing Director at Bloomsbury Children's Books, readily admitted that a book about vampires is nothing new under the sun. But a vampire book in an alternate modern-day reality with black kids in the vein of Marvel and the DC multiverse? Sold! This is the premise of *The Vanquishers* by *New York Times* best-selling author Kalynn Bayron, a para-

normal adventure that Castellani lauded for its "rich world-building" and "inclusive, escapist, joyful storytelling" about "young black kids who are off having adventures, being their sweet, fun, silly selves" and then vampires, long thought gone, return, resulting in a mash-up mixing "traditional vampire lore with really fun humor and just realistic kid life." As Castellani pointed out, "it's kind of hard to have a really big adventure when your parents expect you to be home."



Familiar tropes reimagined in a new way seemed to be a recurring theme, one that Dana Chidiac, a senior editor at Henry Holt Books for Young Readers, was enthused about in the fairy tale retelling fantasy adventure *Mihi Ever After* by Newbery Medalist Tae Keller, the first of a series. Chidiac says the "secretly super feminist book" centers on girls of color and will "teach girls and all kids new concepts that they might not encounter in other stories." Readers will be "kids looking for a story that is adventurous, a lot of fun, full of friendship, and who are interested in thinking about fairy tales in a new way" as the book also explores "the idea that you can decide who you want to be."

For Erica Finkel, an executive editor at Abrams Books, acquiring *Marya Khan and the Incredible Henna Party* by Pakistani American author, essayist, and interfaith activist Saadia Faruqi with illustrations by Ani Bushry, was a no-brainer. "I picked this project as soon as it came into my inbox. I jumped on it." First in a planned

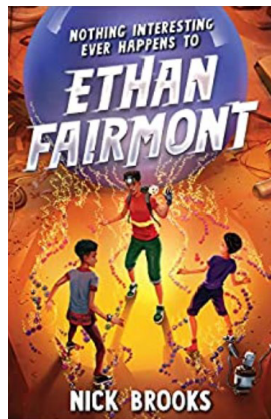


series that is reminiscent of *Ramona* or *Ivy & Bean*, Finkel “fell in love with Maria’s voice right away. She’s a real authentic kid. She’s a little bit flawed, a little bit mischievous. But at the end of the day, her heart is in the right place.” Finkel felt the book was especially timely as Faruqi wrote it “specifically for her daughter who told her that she didn’t see books about kids like her on the shelves, books about kids who have im-

migrant parents or who are from Pakistani American families or Muslim families. (Faruqi) wanted to show these characters in a way that kids can both be proud of their own heritage and see themselves represented or learn about a new culture that they might not know about.” Another aspect of the book is that it includes a fun activity that is unique to Pakistani culture.

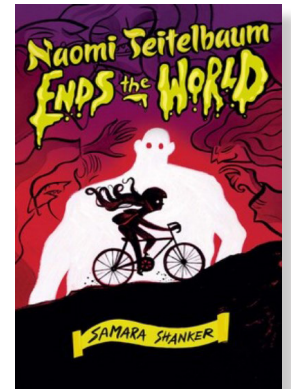
Don’t be fooled by the title of *Nothing Interesting Ever Happens to Ethan Fairmont* by author and award-winning filmmaker Nick Brooks, an ET-meets-*Stranger Things* kick-off to a series that, according to Tracey Keevan, editorial director at Union Square Kids, is a “classic science-fiction story set in contemporary times with a black protagonist” in a small town “facing hard economic times.” Keevan lauded the book for its “incredibly realistic dialogue and effortless prose, which is tricky to do in a middle grade book” that doesn’t “shy away from tough topics.” Also, “there are themes of immigration, social justice, and racial profiling which weave throughout the book in a really powerful, thought-provoking way.” And as in any good sci-fi story, there’s “an adorable alien” that “brings an extra special charm.” So while genres ebb and flow, in Keevan’s opinion “it was time for a classic sci-fi story with a real diverse character set. It’s written for all kids.”

Tricia Lin, an editor with Random House Books for Young Readers, said her pick as one of her favorite upcoming books was *Futureland: Battle for the Park* by debut author H.D. Hunter, a teaching artist and com-

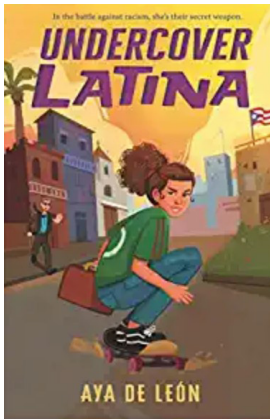


munity organizer, with illustrations by Khadijah Khatib. An action-adventure story (think *Spiderman: Miles Morales*) about a futuristic flying theme park with black kids stepping up “to save the day”, the book features “one-of-a-kind art and design and the after-futurism of Black Panther the entire world fell in love with.” Not only is the book “fun to read” but it’s also important for “readers to imagine a world or a future in which black people have the honest opportunity to reach for their full potential” and “the possibility of a future that both stems from and celebrates black culture, and it all comes together so beautifully.”

Reka Simonsen, the editorial director of Atheneum Books for Young Readers, said that when the fantasy *Naomi Teitelbaum Ends The World* by debut novelist Samara Shanker, a children’s literacy specialist, about a magical Bat Mitzvah gift that goes wrong in unexpected ways came to her, she was “just so excited about the premise. I love a good girl and her Gollum story. But then as I read, I discovered this wonderful novel is so much more than just a great fantasy. It’s packed with action and humor and vibrant details from Jewish folklore, all of which I adore, but it also explores deeper themes of acceptance and faith and personal responsibility, which are themes that feel so resonant right now.” Another aspect that Simonsen liked was that the author took a “very traditional element of Jewish folklore” but “created one that has almost a sense of humanity to it and the way that the kids interact with him and have a feeling of both love and wanting to take care of him but also realizing that they have to let him go is such a special part of how she told this story.”



*Undercover Latina*, the upper middle grade debut by Aya de Leon, an accomplished author of contemporary adult crime-feminist heist fiction, has a young Latina spy masquerading as a white girl to infiltrate a group of white supremacists. Andrea Tompa, an Executive Editor at Candlewick Press, said that the book tackles important issues of “racism and colorism and what it



means when law enforcement isn't protecting people of color the way they're meant to. And I think it's the combination of this really fun adventure story and these important issues that makes this book so special." The book is geared for readers "who are starting to think about the injustices in the world around them and who are ready for just a hint of romance with a "kick-ass heroine of color" who isn't

afraid to take on the patriarchy. "It's such a page-turner and it was a joy to work on a spy novel."

In the Q&A portion of the panel, the top question was what made a title (or submission) stand out? Again and again, the editors reinforced voice, premise, character, world-building, and that special something that makes a title unique and unputdownable, but also a story that defied expectations, as Keevan explained: "When you expect something going in and you hope to experience something else coming out. For me, I always want to be surprised."

But yes, as Lin elaborated, "voice tends to be the biggest aspect that catches my eye. Very often when I'm reviewing submissions and first digging into a new project, it's usually a feeling I get within the first chapters that tingles my spine or I start to get goosebumps."

It's also, as Tompa said, "the feeling that you're in capable hands with the author, they know what they're doing. You can relax and enjoy the story."

Chidiac and Castellani agreed that dressing up a tried-and-true premise or concept in new clothes (i.e. vampires and fairy tales) can take material to a "new level" and as Castellani pointed out, "brings it to the market in a new way."

Finkel likened submissions and acquisitions as "the difference between marriage and dating where there are a lot of great books out there but this is a book that you're going to read, not just once, but a dozen times, and you're going to want to know every character and you're going to have to turn around and talk to your teams in marketing and sales. And then later, the buzz books panel about why this is the book for you. So when I'm reading a book, I have to jump several steps ahead to really make sure I want to commit to

this one."

Given recent events, a question about book banning and potentially limiting content elicited a lively discourse with the consensus being that authors and publishers would continue writing and publishing authentic books that young readers need and want despite challenges and obstacles.

"The writers that I work with are focusing on telling stories that they feel are the most authentic and the most necessary representing all points of view is something that we take pride in and will not back down from," Castellani insisted.

Finkel lamented that "it's a good question and a sad question, but I don't think it's changed our efforts in any way. And sometimes it makes sales go up because it just shows how important these books are. But still troubling."

Chidiac thought that authors would find ways to continue to write about tough subjects "in a way that feels safe for them."

But as Simonsen acknowledged, "there are adults who feel like kids should not be able to read that or they don't want that point of view out in the world. We're maybe dealing with it in a bigger scope at this particular moment, with certain books that have been pulled and they're trying to make laws about." Even so, "we're in it for the long haul. This is a long fight. This has been around for years. This fight, it's really bad right now, and we hope it will get better sooner than later."

Finkel was concerned that book bans are impacting authors financially as they are "disinvited from schools and we know that's especially affecting authors from marginalized backgrounds. That's a source of income for them that they're losing out on. And also, those kids in schools aren't getting to see the books and authors that might mean the most to them."

As for what editors said are the biggest trends in MG books currently, most listed genre fiction, joyful and feel-good stories, humor, climate stories, spooky elements, horror, fantasy, STEM, playing with formats, and genre-blending. As Simonsen said, "it's been a fun time to be looking at middle grade submissions."

# WHO ME?

## Banishing Imposter Syndrome

by Sapphire Chow

**S**o what is Imposter Syndrome? A quick Google search gave me the following: “describes someone who feels they aren't as capable as others think and fears they'll be exposed as a fraud.” Familiar with this feeling? I am. Backed away from an opportunity because of it? I have. If you're nodding, then you, like me, are a victim of Imposter Syndrome.

One manifestation of this phenomenon is the hesitancy to take on any new project that pushes us outside of our comfort zone, keeping us from gaining new experiences and exploring new territory. This one aspect is the focus of my article. I will talk about my own personal experience with Imposter Syndrome and the strategies I've employed to help me overcome this affliction.

Like many of you, I'm an aspiring children's book author. Several weeks ago, I was at the library doing research for one of my books when I was approached by Nicole Georges-Bennett who works part-time at the library. She couldn't help overhearing my conversation with the librarian and asked if I would be interested in presenting to her group of novice writers at the local church. My first thought was “Who, Me?”

Nicole's proposal was to have her group meet and interact with a real, live author. Since I had nothing published, I loosely allowed the use of the word “author” but the cloak of an imposter weighed heavily on my shoulders. We discussed it further and agreed that I should talk about my journey thus far. I felt I could handle that; I wouldn't be pretending to be somebody I'm not. Feeling a little more comfortable about the invitation, I committed to the Zoom meeting. My presentation provided a brief overview of what writing for children would entail – market

awareness, determining the target age they want to write for, decisions for the book (format, POV, tense), planning and plotting, etc. – you know, the basic first steps. And, as was stressed to me at the beginning of my journey, I, in turn, stressed to them - read, read, read, and then read some more. At the end of my presentation, I was filled with relief. *I did it and I'm finished with it. Phew!* But I found my presentation only whet their appetites. They wanted more. I could feel the cloak creeping back on my shoulders. What was this imposter to do?

I had a choice – turn it down or take it on. I took it on. What gave me the confidence? I'm two years into my author journey. I flashed back to my two-years-younger self and compared her to myself now. I came to the realization that, yeah, I know a thing or two about the how-to's for kidlit. In fact, I knew a helluva lot! I looked through my copious notes and roughly outlined a “lesson plan” for the first two learning presentations (baby steps, right?). Now, three months later, I am approaching my fifth presentation with enough material for several more – and I'm enjoying it too - bonus! I'm improving my presentation skills and getting to know and network with other aspiring authors.

Here are my strategies and advice:

- 1. When faced with an opportunity you're unsure of, ask for some time to think about it.**
- 2. Put Imposter Syndrome in a covered jar and place it in the corner of your desk—it's not altogether gone, but it is in the background.**
- 3. Evaluate the skill sets you will need to en-**



**gage in the project at hand (you'll be surprised at your abilities).**

- 4. Make a plan on how you can tackle the project and make it a success.**
- 5. If there are deficiencies, think about how you can overcome them.**
- 6. You should now be in a better position to accept or decline the opportunity.**
- 7. Open that jar. You will likely find Imposter Syndrome has taken a hike.**

Obviously, you cannot fulfill all the opportunities that come your way (and they will), nor should you. But you owe it to yourself to at least evaluate them before you close the door on them. The same opportunity seldom knocks twice.

When Laura Backes asked if I would consider writing an article on my experiences with this writing group—you guessed it—my response was “Who, me?” When I calmed down, I asked for some time. The good lady said, “...take your time. Glad you're thinking about it!” I would be a fool to let this opportunity slip away, but I was afraid to expose myself to readers who are probably more knowledgeable than I am. I was feeling the weight of the cloak for sure. I decided to practice what I preached.

- **Ask for time to think about it—done and granted**
- **Syndrome in a jar—done; had to get a large jar**
- **Evaluate skills—yes, I have the skills; might need a little work**
- **Make a plan—developed a viable outline**
- **Deficiencies—roped in a friend as a sounding board**
- **Can I do this?—FOR SURE**
- **Open jar—hey, where did Imposter Syndrome go?**

One recommended strategy suggests you “share your feelings” and so I brought it up during a coffee chat with a fellow author whom I met at a creative writing course. Ken Bole was my Nike. “Just do it,” he urged. “Never mind the technicalities. Don't get bogged down with details. Just write it and see what happens.” That same afternoon, with this pep talk ringing in my ears, I penned an outline of what I would write about.

Reach out, talk to somebody, ask for help—there's no shame in that. One day, you will help another creative soul on his journey. Opportunities come on their own timeline, not yours. At times you may expect them, at other times they come out of the blue. And you never know from whence they will come. Both of the events I spoke of above are cases in point.

Accept that imposter syndrome will plague you, but rather than allow it to brow-beat you into feeling inadequate, work to mitigate its effects by doing the exercise above. The result is that you will emerge from a place of knowledge to support your decision either way. And should you choose to decline the opportunity, you will know there were sound reasons for it. Don't let Imposter Syndrome hinder your growth.

I will end with one of my favorite quotes:

*You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.  
(Wayne Gretzky)*

# JOYCE SWEENEY



interview by Lynne Marie

**J**oyce Sweeney is the author of fourteen young adult novels, a poetry book and a writing craft book entitled, *The Plot Clock*. In addition, they are a writing teacher, producer and director of community theater productions. Notably, they have mentored over sixty students through to publication since beginning their mentoring programs. Last, but not least, Joyce has brought their experience and connections with them to become an agent with the Seymour Agency since 2020! There, they specialize in picture books and middle grade novels, both fiction and nonfiction.

**LYNNE MARIE:** As one of your mentees, along with my pal Rob Sanders and so many other published friends, I'm thrilled to finally have the opportunity to interview you here! For starters, please share a little bit about the Seymour Agency, your role there and how you made the shift from author to agent.

**JOYCE SWEENEY:** Nicole Resciniti offered me the job and it was a complete surprise. But she knew about my mentoring skills and I think she saw an agent in the making. My heart lit up from the moment I thought about it and yes, it was a perfect fit for my personality. My role in the agency has been to flesh out the kidlit division and I think we have done a great job with that. I am so happy to be here where everyone is so collegial and warm. All the agents help each other to succeed.

**LM:** Since plot is paramount to the foundation of a story, please share a little bit about your famous, invaluable plot clock and the resulting craft book

(<https://amzn.to/3PwyW8r>). Can this be used in picture books, as well as novels?

**JS:** Yes, in fact it was Rob Sanders who asked that question in a workshop and I wasn't sure. So Rob and I plunged into a stack of picture books, searching for the plot points. Sometimes they were just in the illustrations but in a really good (story) picture book, they are always all there.

**LM:** How did your experience with community theater inform the creation of this wonderful plot clock?

**JS:** *The Plot Clock* was all created by the time I got into theater, but I used it to critique and evaluate scripts and coach playwrights. I did learn a lot about writing to an audience while in theater and that helped my writing as a whole tremendously. You have to hold an audience every minute in the theater or you feel it!

**LM:** Speaking to your experience as a writing mentor and agent, what might an aspiring writer use as the rule of thumb to determine whether their manuscript is ready for submission?

**JS:** That's hard to know all by yourself. You know, we have those two voices that inflate and deflate our feelings about our own work. I think you ask outside, qualified, objective critique partners or professional editors. Or of course if you have an agent, ask your agent.



*Joyce Sweeney...continued*

**LM:** As far as agenting, what is your business style? Do you consider yourself an “Editorial Agent”?

**JS:** I can’t not be since I was a developmental editor for so many years. I can’t read a manuscript and not completely mark it up, including the punctuation etc. So I warn my clients about that, but most are very happy to have a strong second opinion on the work.

**LM:** Please share something about yourself or your childhood that informs the types of books you choose for your list.

**JS:** I wanted to be a boy, I was often lonely, I did not have great emotional support from the adults in my life, I felt like a weirdo all the time. You can’t get better training to work in kidlit!

**LM:** As a career agent, rather than a one-book agent, what ideal traits do you look for in a potential client?

**JS:** Resilient spirit number one. No one gets out of a writing career without some bumps and bruises. Open mind. Love of revision. Trust and the ability to collaborate. And a general optimism just because I’m like that and I will nauseate people who aren’t the same.

**LM:** You are an agent who is out there and accessible to your fan base through conferences and workshops both in person and online. Do you consider this type of exposure in prospective clients? What kind of social media and/or connections do you look for, if any?

**JS:** It’s a plus if a client is extraverted enough to speak in public and post on social media, but most writers are not naturally like that. I look at “performance ability” and platform as a plus, but no one needs to have it to be my client. You just need to write a good book.

**LM:** Do you feel that an aspiring writer should have a blog or website in place, or wait until they get that first contract?

**JS:** Nobody has to have a blog. Only people who are great at blogging should have a blog. Every writer needs a placeholder website in place from the time

they start submitting to agents. We look you up!

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

**JS:** My job is to navigate between what the current market wants to buy and what my clients want to create. My purpose is to help them find a place where they naturally fit into what the market needs. I get a lot of queries with ideas that just won’t stand out to editors, so I have to pass on those.

**LM:** What are your thoughts about writing to trends? Please share.

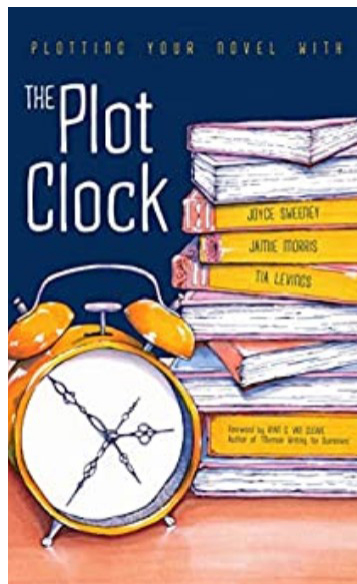
**JS:** Don’t write to what you, as a writer, think is a trend, especially in picture books. The ones in the bookstore now were bought three years ago. So if you write to those trends you will hit a saturated market every time. And you have to be authentic. If there’s a trend you hate, don’t try to do anything with it. Your lack of interest will show. I like when my clients ask me what types of things are in demand and we usually brainstorm around that and find something the client wants to do in that space. There are so many editors and imprints all with different tastes and needs, there’s a place for almost everything.

**LM:** As an author yourself, you have mastered the concept of voice. What do you recommend for those writers who are struggling with finding their own?

**JS:** Voice is the hardest element of writing to teach. It comes from your natural brain patterns and style of expression. But the main thing is to learn the basics of good writing. All bad writing sounds the same. Once you get proficient, your natural voice should emerge.

**LM:** Many writers struggle with the differences between middle grade and young adult and are not sure where their book falls. Please share some insight as to what qualities are inherent in a middle grade novel.

**JS:** How old is the main character? That’s about it. I get MG queries that say the main character is 15. The



Joyce Sweeney...continued

industry says MG is about 8-12 with some variations so 13 is the absolute highest age. And you look for other things. MG readers are more cerebral, YA's more emotional. Romance is sweet and innocent in MG, less so in YA. I can hear a narrative voice and tell right away which genre the writer should be in.

**LM:** It is apparent from your flurry of recent sales that you have a good eye. What excites you about a manuscript? What elements do you look for? Please share an example of a recent sale that you just knew was right for the market.

**JS:** I just had a very fast track sale...which is unusual, but I worked through [Mindy Weiss' PBParty](#) which is a dream come true for agents. The manuscripts are curated and balanced across genres. Editors are weighing in. How much easier can it be? So I saw about 12 entries I loved but I saw one I absolutely knew I could sell: Becca McMurdie's *Building a Beak*, about a toucan in the rainforest who had her beak broken and the wildlife people found a way to give her a new one. I love NF, I love STEM, I love animals and I Zoomed with, and loved, Becca. I connected with the two editors who were interested and ultimately submitted the manuscript to both of them. Both of them wanted R&R's [revise and resubmit] and we went from there, to an ultimate sale to Page Street Kids.

**LM:** What would you include on your "manuscript wish list?"

**JS:** Right now I'm very into graphic novels, which my [Manuscript Wish List page](#) does not say. Some of us never get around to updating. Mostly now I'm excited by things I haven't seen and that I can imagine the editors for. That would go across a lot of categories.

**LM:** What are some of your biggest pet peeves regarding the submissions that you read or dealing with prospective clients?

**JS:** People who don't research agents at all before querying. I get adult projects, YA's...I even get queries from actors and musicians looking for agents. That's an extra email I have to write in my busy day. With prospective clients I vet. I get additional manuscripts, a bio and ultimately if I really love them, I ask for a Zoom. So I really know I want someone

before offering.

**LM:** As a writing mentor, what is your best advice for those writers who are trying to break into the kidlit market?

**JS:** Don't give up, it takes a long time, even if you're fantastic. Know the market and know your genre and style. Obviously work endlessly on craft. I'm still working on craft. It's a lifelong process. And always keep trying new things. Some people keep shopping the same projects for ten years. You learn by writing different things all the time.

Joyce Sweeney is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Until September 30, 2022, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of a **fiction or nonfiction picture book, middle grade or graphic novel manuscript**, along with other information, via the online form at [bit.ly/ATSJoyceSweeney922](https://bit.ly/ATSJoyceSweeney922). Joyce will read all pitches and respond to those they're interested in by November 30, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of November, consider it a pass.

**---Please Read Before You Proceed---**

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

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

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

- You've chosen one manuscript to pitch for each Above the Slushpile opportunity. If the editor or agent shows interest in that submission, you'll have the opportunity to mention your other work.
- 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 work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript so it is ready to submit should the editor ask to see the entire work.

# Kate Rietema

## HOW WRITING FOR MAGAZINES BUILDS YOUR RESUME AND READERSHIP

by Sharon O. Blumberg

**K**ate is a nurse, community educator, speaker, and writer. She lives with her family in West Michigan where they run TriPonds Family Camp Resort. She and her husband have five children through birth and adoption, and have cared for many more in their eleven years as licensed foster parents.

Kate writes for both the religious and general markets. Her work has appeared in several magazines including *Highlights Hello*, *Highlights High Five*, *Highlights for Children*, *Spider*, *Clubhouse Jr.*, *Countdown*, and *Keys for Kids*. Many of Kate's published stories and poems can be found on her website, [www.katerietema.com](http://www.katerietema.com)

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Please tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you came to write for children.

**KATE RIETEMA:** Unlike many authors, I don't recall an inclination toward writing as a child. Although I've always had a deep respect for the written word, I didn't consider writing until the spring of 2020, when I read *River*—a picture book by Elisha Cooper. It was a lovely book, but when it ended, I realized it was a fictional story. This bummed me out. Cooper's story held many similarities to my own experience of bicycling across North America—and suddenly, I felt like I needed to write that story in picture book form.

At the moment, that story is resting peacefully in my computer's later-file, but in the process, I had fallen in love with writing for children. I heard that writing for magazines was a good way to gain experience and get publishing credits, so I set a goal to submit ten things to magazines every month for a year.

**SB:** What kinds of writing do you contribute to children's magazines?

**KR:** So far, I've written poems, songs, fiction, nonfiction, rebus stories, logic puzzles, and devotionals.

**SB:** When writing magazine articles, do you do all your research first and then query with your idea, or do you start with the query?

**KR:** It depends on the magazine and genre you are writing. There are a few magazines that ask you to query first for a nonfiction idea—and this usually includes a list of sources from your research. But for most children's magazines, your story/article/poem must be complete at the time of submission. That said, after you submit, it is possible an editor will ask for revisions. Always double check submission criteria before getting started.

**SB:** Do you write with one magazine in mind that you plan on submitting to, or do you write the piece and then find markets that fit the tone and style?

**KR:** That's a good question. When I begin a new piece, it is usually with a specific magazine in mind. I find this helpful for a few reasons:

- The target age range for each magazine varies, as does their word count requirements.
- Every magazine has its own feel, and you want your writing to fit with the style the editors are looking for.
- I prefer to submit when a magazine puts out a "call for submissions." Your stories are more likely to be placed when editors are actively looking for something specific.

When I receive a rejection, I immediately look to see where else it could fit. Oftentimes, I can tweak a few



*Kate Rietema...continued*

things, and sent it out again. This could include the following changes:

- Making a story longer or shorter to fit within a specified word count.
- Using information from a nonfiction article and reworking it into a fictional story.
- Adding or eliminating a religious element when crossing between these markets.

You might receive a lot of rejections, so it's important to be organized. I keep an Excel spreadsheet of everything I've written for magazines along with the date and where it is submitted.

**SB:** What are some things to keep in mind when writing for religious magazines?

**KR:** There are more similarities than differences between markets, but here are a couple things to consider:

- Make sure your personal beliefs align with the magazine you are writing for so you can promote it proudly.
- Study several magazines before you start writing (this is true for any magazine, but maybe even more important for the religious market).
- When you include lessons or morals, avoid being overly didactic.

**SB:** Do you have any tips for crafting a publishable poem/song?

**KR:** If you are new to poetry, consider taking a class that covers rhythm and rhyme. Keep in mind that most poetry in children's magazines use end rhymes, but in addition, try using other poetic devices like alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and internal rhyme.

**SB:** Once you have broken into many of the high-profile magazines, does it become easier for future submissions, once you have connected with their editors?

**KR:** Hmm, I'm not sure. I think connections with editors are important—but more than that, it's a question of whether your writing fits what they need at the time.

One of my very first submissions was to *Highlights High Five*. In the submission form, it asked for a byline. I had no idea what a byline was. I figured it was like a subtitle, so I made one up and hit submit. The next day, the byline thing was still nagging my brain, so I googled it. And

as every CBI reader already knows, I discovered that a byline is the author's name. I died a thousand deaths of shame and embarrassment, and moved on—fully believing that article would never see the light of day.

A couple months later, I almost passed out in my chair when I received an email from the editor with an offer to purchase it. She never mentioned my byline catastrophe and was even gracious enough to include my name after the article's title.

All that to say, editors say yes because they like your topic, approach, and writing style. Not because of a connection or a mistake-free submission entry (although I do recommend Googling things you don't understand.)



**SB:** What are the highlights of how you cover writing for children with your school visits?

**KR:** School visits are so much fun and magazines are the perfect medium to discuss all forms of writing. To get the most out of these visits, here are a couple things to keep in mind:

- Know your audience. What I plan for a kindergarten class is very different than what I plan for a third or fourth grade class. Have a conversation with the teacher ahead of time to ask what the students will be learning at the time of your visit. If the class is learning about nonfiction, for example, spend extra time discussing this. Kids get excited when they can apply what they are learning, and teachers love this, too.
- Be fun and engaging. When we discuss nonfiction, I read my article about robins and bring along a robin's nest. When we discuss poetry, I read my poem about paper airplanes and then we make and fly our own. You should arrive to the classroom with more than a magazine in hand!
- Encourage independent exploration. Near the end of our time together, I pass out magazines to each student, giving everyone time to explore the contents at their own pace. Allow time at the end for students to briefly share what they learned or enjoyed while looking through their magazine.

**SB:** Is there anything else you'd like to say to authors who want to write for magazines?

**KR:** It's a wonderful feeling to see your work in print alongside someone's beautiful artwork. And the cherry on top is getting paid! I keep track of everything I earn, and this is the money I use for writing conferences, webinars, and professional critiques.

# Where Religion and Cultural Identity Intersect in Fiction

by Jean Daigneau

**T**his past year, as the coronavirus seems to be waning, or maybe we're learning to live with it, it feels like a new beginning. What better time for writers to consider sometimes overlooked markets? Even though we've visited the religious market before, there are some possibilities in this market worth exploring. As you'll read below, some religions are almost synonymous with specific cultures, so while we'll delve into writing fiction for the religious market, it's worth considering that some religious publishers might also consider other books that are not entirely about a specific religion. Let's explore the possibilities.

## FINDING THE NICHE

The latest *Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market* included a surprising 37 book and magazine publishers that accept projects in this market. Considering that religious books are sometimes based on cultural identities, there are another 23 opportunities under the multicultural label, not included on both lists. Since religion is an important part of some cultures, considering some crossover in both markets can open a wider range of opportunities.

Rukhsana Khan, winner of numerous national and international awards, and author of the upcoming picture book *Elephant's Makeover*, along with books for younger readers to young adults, describes the subtleties perfectly. "Religion is a reality. . . a set of beliefs and ideals and even people who are not particularly religious are influenced by the religion they grew up with. It's a vital but often subtle part of who people are. By tapping into the nuances of the way their religious foundation shapes the characters, you can add a dimension to your story that takes it to a whole different level."

Husband and wife authors Wayne and Allison Marks, whose latest book *Tizzy the Dizzy Dreidel* will be released in October, acknowledge that "it is doubly satisfying when we are bringing to the world a story about a lesser-known aspect of a Jewish holiday, a re-imagining of a Judaic folktale appropriate for younger kids, or a part of the culture that adds something unique to the body of Judaic children's literature."

## WHO ARE YOU WRITING FOR?

As with any new project, knowing your audience will define certain elements you include, or don't, in your story and where to market it. Kids and teens deal with many of the same universal issues. Every kid wants to be loved and accepted. They share many of the same fears and struggles. But a story without the basic elements of great children's writing—strong characters, a well-rounded plot, believable characters—can't be saved simply by adding religious elements.

In Khan's current work-in-progress, she notes that "many children are struggling with suicide ideation. . . and yet no one is talking about this! I've been following the trends and the rates are just going higher and higher, and the ages these kids are attempting to hurt themselves is getting younger and younger. I fear that once the full effects of the pandemic are factored in, things will be even worse. This is a topic close to me, because when I was eleven, I almost killed myself." Khan credits her Muslim faith and her love of books for not giving in to the temptation and includes her faith as a strong background to this story. She says her faith sustained her during this difficult time and the books she read "provided just enough respite from the bullying to make me keep going."

Kids today are savvier about the world around them and even though parents may hope to protect them somewhat from the realities of that world, that's not always easy, thanks in part to social media. While the suicide element in Khan's *Surviving Pleasant Valley* may not be something every reader will personally relate to, many will likely be aware of its existence, have a curiosity about the subject, or even know someone touched by it. What better way to introduce kids to a difficult subject than in a story that presents childhood challenges with honesty and hope? Adding religious elements can strengthen the characters and more deeply define and personalize them. And having a religious belief to cling to can be a powerful message to help kids find ways to navigate issues. This is true whether there is a specific religious framework to your book or a general understanding of spirituality outside an established religion.

One way to envision a new story is to decide what *other* genre could be incorporated with a religious slant. Do you love crafting middle grade mysteries? What happens when you add the word "Christian" to that genre? What religious elements will add to the story? How will they affect your main character? How can you tap into an underrepresented market by including specific beliefs? Just remember, while it's important to be true to your own vision for your book, you don't want to lose mystery readers—Christian or otherwise—because your book is didactic or preachy. Writing for children's Christian magazines or weekly pamphlets that rely heavily on biblical passages is much different than writing a story about a Protestant 12-year-old solving a mystery.

The Marksés said this about their recently released middle grade novel *The \$150,000 Rugelach*, "We began mapping out the story first, sprinkling in Jewish elements along the way. Regardless of the approach and the amount of Judaic content that ends up in the book, we believe it's important to incorporate themes and universally relatable characters that make the stories entertaining and meaningful for any reader." That's the way to expand your readership, which translates to a book that is marketable to a much wider audience whether it's individual readers, schools, or libraries.

## RELIGION OR REALITY?

That was a trick subtitle to see if you're still reading,

since religious books, unless they are historical or another specific genre, are often steeped in reality. The question that you, the author, needs to answer is how many religious and/or cultural elements to include.

Khan shared some of her dislikes of the changes in the market since her first book was published more than twenty years ago. She gave a resounding "Ugh!" to many books and the way Muslim kids are featured as they struggle with contemporary issues but "with a 'Wah, wah, wah, poor me!' attitude." To that end, she says, "I believe Islam and Muslim identity should not be the point of a story. It should be part of the setting, like wallpaper. It's the cultural paradigm within which the story plays out; it should influence the attitude and behavior of the characters, but it shouldn't be part of the conflict or the theme." This rings true for books with Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, or Sikh characters as well.

The Marksés agree. For their middle grade novel, *Benny Feldman's All-Star Klezmer Band*, "The challenge was taking this piece of Jewish culture and making it compelling for middle-grade readers who were likely more inclined to listen to hip-hop and speed metal."

One way to approach a project is to consider typical kid issues your characters are dealing with—a best friend moving, a pet dying, a fight with a best friend, a boyfriend break-up. Having the main character tackle challenges while using their own religious convictions to guide them can work well for any readership. But a religious novel for kids should not read like a religious *textbook* for kids. Knowing when to pull back and let the story carry the reader along is crucial. According to Khan, you want to "write a compelling story anyone would want to read and let the Muslim stuff be the seasoning that adds certain *je ne sais que* to it!" She adds, "Write a fantastic story! Delve into all the aspects of what makes your characters tick and it'll help bring your story to life."

## ON A FINAL NOTE

Every author wants to write a book that is loved and appreciated. To find your way into any genre, but especially the religious market, the Marksés echo the advice you've read here many times, but with an added twist. "Our advice to those who would like to break into the Jewish market (or any religious-based market)



*Where Religion and Cultural Identity Intersect...continued*

is to take the time to read what's already been published, research publishing options, and brainstorm ideas to unearth the many hidden gems that have yet to be mined. Try to uncover new angles to traditional stories that may strike a chord with a more contemporary audience."

But do keep in mind, if you're writing about a religion that is not one that you practice, it's important to understand specific beliefs and nuances. And, do consider that some religious publishers will not welcome books based on the celebration of holidays like Halloween, or that center on well-established figures like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.

One way to check yourself is to have your manuscript reviewed by a sensitivity reader as well as someone in a leadership position or who practices the religion you've incorporated into your story. A sensitivity reader, who can often be found by posting a request for recommendations on sites like KidLit411, can

pick up on changes needed to correctly represent a cultural view. Someone connected to a specific religion can help you avoid obvious mistakes that you've made about practices and beliefs specific to a religion.

The Marks suggest that you "look at aspects of the religion or parts of the culture that delight you and see if there's a story begging to be told." And don't forget that even the youngest format—board books—now make up the religious market. The opportunities are wide open!

**SUGGESTED READS:**

*Wanting Mor* by Rukhsana Khan

*Og's Ark* by Allison and Wayne Marks

*Mystery in Crooked Creek Woods*  
by Amanda Clearly Eastep

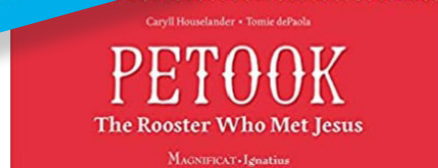
*Welcoming Elijah: A Passover Tale with a Tale* by  
Lesléa Newman

*The Night Before Eid: A Muslim Family Story* by  
Aya Khalil

*Little Pilgrim's Progress: The Illustrated Edition* by  
Helen Taylor



*Petook: The Rooster Who Met Jesus*  
by Caryl Houselander



# Tap Tap! Ride the Bus with Children's Author Danielle Joseph

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Even as a young child, Danielle Joseph had a flair for the dramatic, writing angsty poetry and putting on plays with her Barbie dolls in her basement. In college, she dipped her toe in several different careers, but it was after the birth of her first child that she got serious about writing. Prolific in the kidlit world as a middle grade and YA author, her debut picture book *I Want to Ride the Tap Tap* (FSG/Macmillan 2020), with illustrations by Olivier Ganthier, celebrating Haitian life on a joyful ride on a community taxi bus, was named a Best Children's Book of the Year 2021 (Bank Street). And her YA novel, *Shrinking Violet* (MTV Books, 2009), was adapted into a Disney Original Movie in 2012. Originally from South Africa, Joseph now makes her home in Maryland with her husband, children, and their rambunctious dog Ringo, and enjoys listening to music, the ocean, and taking scenic walks that may or may not involve Starbucks coffee. Learn more about this world traveler at her other works at <https://daniellejoseph.com/>

**PJ McILVAINE:** Your family came to America from South Africa when you were a small child and you've previously said that you experienced "culture shock". How did that affect you and is that a recurring theme in your children's novels? Are your books a blend of fiction and nonfiction?

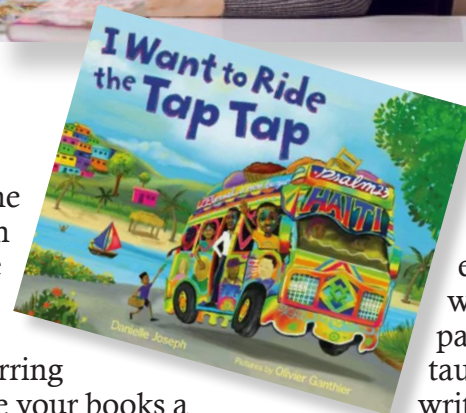
**DANIELLE JOSEPH:** Yes, my story, my journey is a part of who I am and reflects what I write about. Although I haven't published a book yet about my

immigration experience, I do have a couple of manuscripts that I hope to sell. All my works of fiction integrate real-life experiences even if it's only in the details of the story or the initial idea.

As a young child, most of my books were from South Africa or England. I loved Enid Blyton who wrote the Noddy books, and I also enjoyed reading Paddington, and the Mr. Men series. My mom read to me every night and took me to the library often. When I started writing, my parents did encourage me, although my dad was hopeful that I'd become a technical writer because that would be a more stable career.

**PM:** At various stages of your career, you've tried acting, worked in radio and advertising, you were a DJ, and last but not least, a middle school English/Creative Writing teacher. How did these different jobs/disciplines/skillsets shape, hone, and influence your writing?

**DJ:** I loved all of these job experiences and learned a lot along the way. The idea for my first novel, *Shrinking Violet* was taken from my experience working in radio. While working as a teacher, I was able to pass along a lot of the skills that I was taught along the way and also discuss writing and literature with students that were excited about writing. I really feel that I've learned from every job that I had whether it's from the actual work or from the people that I met.



## Danielle Joseph...continued

**PM:** You're a prolific writer in the kid arena. What inspires you? Do ideas come easily to you, or is it tantamount to mining for gold? What is your writing routine like?

**DJ:** I definitely have more ideas than time. Each time I get a new idea I start a document on my computer and keep adding to it. Some ideas haven't seen the light of day yet, but it's great to have options. As corny as it sounds, I'm inspired by the world around me. I pull ideas from reading articles, listening to music, listening to people talk, and from my personal experiences. When I lived in Miami, I had an amazing writing group that I shared ideas with, and we traded manuscripts. I also met several times a week with my critique partner, Christina Diaz Gonzalez who writes fabulous middle grade novels. We used to write side by side at a Starbucks and would discuss our novels as we wrote. Now that I moved to Maryland, Christina and I still exchange ideas and manuscripts online and chat on FaceTime.

I love to learn new things and challenge myself and that's why I write picture books, middle grade, and young adult books. If a topic interests me, I explore it and see how it can make its way into a story whether it's the crux of the story or a subplot.

Sometimes I do work on a picture book and novel at the same time. When I take a break from one, I can work on the other. Since they are very different from each other, it works for me and allows my brain a little time to refocus.

**PM:** Your young adult novel *Shrinking Violet* was made into a Disney Channel original movie. What was that experience like? How much input—if any—did you have? How much of your novel made it into the final film?

**DJ:** Having my first novel made into a movie was a

dream come true and I didn't believe it until I actually went and saw the movie myself at the red-carpet premiere alongside the actors. I did not have a lot of say in the process, but I did get to read the script before production began. I also spent a couple of days on set and that was an amazing experience. The book and movie have a lot of differences, but the main plot and key messages are the same.



**PM:** In the Fall of 2023 you will have a picture book biography *Ruth First Never Backed Down* (Kar-Ben Publishing), with illustrations by Gabhor Utomo, about South African freedom fighter Ruth First. How did that project come into being? How much research did that involve?

**DJ:** I'm really excited about my upcoming picture book. Since I was born in South Africa, I knew that I always wanted to write a book that takes place in my home country. Ruth First's story is incredible and the more I looked into her personal journey and sacrifices, I knew that I had to share what I learned with young readers. I did a lot of research to bring this story to life. I read every article I could find on Ruth and also read her book about her experience in solitary confinement in a South African jail during the height of Apartheid.

Then I contacted Albie Sachs, another South African freedom fighter, and good friend of Ruth's, and asked if he would read the book for accuracy. He was very gracious and also provided me with a foreword.

**PM:** You currently have an agent, can you elaborate on what your query process was? What were you looking for in an agent?

**DJ:** Over the years, I have sold most of my books with an agent and it is very helpful to have someone in your corner advocating for your work. In an agent, I was looking for someone that I could bounce ideas off of and that was enthusiastic about my work. It's also important to me that an agent is organized, business savvy and



*Carrie Finison...continued*

a good communicator. I know the query process keeps evolving, but I think it's really important for writers to do their research and submit to agents that would be a good match for them. If you do get an offer, don't be afraid to ask questions and talk to other clients.

**PM:** Did the pandemic affect your writing?

**DJ:** Yes, it definitely did. Sometimes having too much time to think and write is not a good thing. Like most people at the beginning of the pandemic, I was in panic mode and just trying to get myself and my family situated. But as time went on, I settled into my work and made the best of the situation.

**PM:** How much of a social media platform does a writer need in the current climate? Should writers be concerned if they don't have many followers or aren't on TikTok?

**DJ:** Social media is a great tool to communicate with readers, friends, and others in the industry, but I believe that people should only be engaged in social media if they want to. I released two books during the pandemic and social media was one of

the only ways that I could reach an audience.

**PM:** What are you writing now? Do you have a passion project?

**DJ:** I am working on a YA passion project right now. It's an idea that I've been carrying with me for about four years, an idea that my critique partner kept on asking about over the years, about when I was going to get to work on it. It did involve some research because it's historical fiction but once I finally dove in and found my voice, I knew the timing was right. I'm busy working on it now!

**PM:** If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?

**DJ:** This is a tough question because there are so many places that I have yet to visit. I definitely love being near the ocean and close enough to the city for a night on the town. I also need somewhere with a great independent bookstore, a decent music scene, and some great cafes! I hope this place exists!



# Adding HUMOR to Your Genre

by Jane McBride

**D**o you like humor? I like it so much that I try to put a little in each book that I write. I occasionally add it to short stories and articles as well.

Humor gets us through rough days and makes good days better. Why should we as writers not give that to our readers?

So how do you go about adding humor to your genre?

Each genre has its own expectations and rules. Currently, I write inspirational romantic suspense. The expectation is that there will be roughly equal amounts of those three elements in the books. Can I still add humor? Or would it be too much?

What genre are you writing in? You will no doubt be familiar with the expected elements in it. (If not, familiarize yourself with them, learn what editors and readers want.) Would adding some humor enhance your book? Think about it while you keep reading.

Below are some of the common genres and suggestions for adding humor:

## ROMANCE

What are the elements of a romance book?

**Conflict.** What kind of conflict does your book have? Romances need to have conflict between the hero and heroine. It doesn't matter if the two leads are eight-year-olds or thirty-something-year olds, they need to have conflict. How could humor heighten the conflict? Say you are writing a middle grade reader about ten-year-old Jase and Katie, who secretly like each other, but they can't tell the other, so they try to outdo the other in practical jokes. This is an opportunity to let your funny bone loose and come up with ridiculous practical jokes.

**Strong characters.** What are your characters' strengths? And what are their weaknesses? A well-placed bit of humor can enrich those qualities.

**Attraction between the two leads.** That attraction should be apparent from the first, but it should be thwarted by circumstances keeping the hero and heroine apart?

How will humor change the romance? It may break up the intensity of an otherwise emotional story or it may emphasize the romance compared to droll moments.

## PARANORMAL

What are the elements of a paranormal novel?

**Different worlds.** Much of the appeal of the paranormal is that it describes worlds readers haven't encountered before. One way to add humor is to take a common thing and make it uncommon. In one memorable book, the main character had a bunny, but it wasn't an ordinary bunny. It was a dust bunny. This dust bunny lived under the bed until he wanted something; then he came out and took it.

**Otherworldly characters.** What kind of character are you writing? A selkie, a vampire, a werewolf, or some other creature? Now, ask yourself how you can bring humor to this particular character. Could you have a selkie who doesn't like to have his picture taken, even in a selfie? (Think of the play on words there—selkie and selfie.) Could you have a vampire who gets sick at the sight of blood? Or a werewolf who can't howl because he has laryngitis? Of course, much of this depends upon your targeted readership's age. Different types of humor appeal to different ages.

**Supernatural strengths.** Could you have a witch who can only cast good spells?

**Bizarre rituals.** What kind of paranormal world do you want to create? Does the world at large know about its existence? Or is it a deeply guarded world where visitors may enter only by performing some kind of strange ritual? Could you add a funny ritual which those wishing to enter this world must perform before gaining entrance? The possibilities for humor are unlimited here. Be careful, though, that you don't overdo the humor, turning the book into a comedy rather than a paranormal, unless that's your goal.

How could humor change your paranormal story? It could make the unfamiliar seem more familiar as readers accept that funny things happen no matter if you're

*Adding Humor to Your Genre...continued*

a werewolf or if you're a boy.

**HISTORICAL**

What are the elements of a historical novel?

**Setting.** What setting have you chosen? Is it in Regency England? Or the Civil War? Or perhaps the American West? Adding humor to these settings can be tricky. You don't want to minimize the importance of certain historical events, but you can weave strands of humor in the book with characters, often secondary, who explain the world in their own off-beat terms.

**Different clothing and hairstyles.** Could humor be found in a Revolutionary War set book where an eleven-year-old girl's stockings refuse to stay up?

**Accurate depiction of history.** Describe real events with truth and integrity. That is, unless your book is a what-if type story that poses the question, "What if the South had won the Civil War?"

How can humor change your historical novel? Humor can brighten, if only momentarily, the grim aspects of much of history. The juxtaposition of a bit of light-hearted dialogue with a description of the bleak days of the Great Depression can show readers that the people who lived during that time still maintained their senses of humor even when they faced hard times.

**ACTION/ADVENTURE**

What are the elements of an action/adventure novel?

Excitement and thrills. Action should rule the story as the main character struggles to defeat his enemy or save his town from a flood when a dam breaks.

Suspense/ticking clock. Will the character be able to accomplish his goal in time to save his school from marauding vampires or his family from intruders? Occasional moments of downtime. There should be a few moments of downtime to give readers a chance to catch their breath.

Courageous main character. The MC should be willing to fight her enemies, even when she is terrified.

What kind of action story are you planning? Will it be a tense, life-altering event upon which the world's very existence depends? Or will it be a light-hearted adventure, such as an eight-year-old boy who is certain that his best friend's dad is a spy and sets out to prove it? Both kinds of stories have their place in this genre. Consider an el-

ementary school girl who knows that something is up with the cafeteria lady and is determined to ferret it out. Could she be repulsed by broccoli but eats it anyway in order to get close to the lady, knowing that the cafeteria worker is always trying to encourage the children to eat more fruits and vegetables? Maybe the broccoli-repulsed character pukes up the broccoli, leaving behind a disgusting trail of green slime. What if your book is intended for later teens or young adults? Can it still contain humor? Absolutely. Just be certain to make the humor more sophisticated.

How will adding humor change an action/adventure novel? Humor can bring a respite from nail-biting suspense, drawing a contrast between the life-and-death elements and everyday life.

*Things to remember when writing humor:*

Humor is often best served in small doses. If you decide to go full-out slap-stick humor, be certain that your characters and the story can support it.

Humor can be sly, but it shouldn't depend upon sarcasm. Sarcasm isn't funny; it's only mean.

Humor needs to be age appropriate.

Humor needs good timing. Stand-up comedians will tell you that timing is everything in delivering a punch line.

Humor can be heightened by funny sounding words. Making up your own words can be a delightful challenge.

Humorous dialogue may not work for the main character(s), but it may sound great coming from a secondary character or a sidekick.

Humor can be found in turning a cliché on its head. For example, consider the phrase "tall, dark, and handsome." How can you turn it around? What about "tall, dark, and gruesome?"

**IN CONCLUSION**

Is writing humor for you? The only way you'll know is to try. If it turns out that you and humor don't click, don't feel bad. Write your chosen story in the very best way you can.