

# ***CHILDREN'S BOOK iNSIDER***

The Children's Writing Monthly  June 2022

## ***GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR YOUNG READERS GO.....***



## ***HOW TO START WRITING YOURS TODAY***

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITY:**

  
**bookends**  
a literary agency

# Table of contents

At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests.....	2
Genre Spotlight: Graphic Novels for Beginning Readers by Jean Daigneau.....	4
Agent Spotlight: James McGowan, Agent, Bookends Literary interview by Lynne Marie.....	6
Bilingual Books: How to Write the Mixed Bilingual Picture Book by Marta Magellan.....	9
Mini Blueprint: Relatability - The Secret Ingredient by Jane McBride.....	12
Featured Interview: The Secret Diary of Salma Hussain, Debut Middle Grade Author interview by PJ McIlvaine.....	14
Writing Exercises: Practice Bringing Your Character to Life by Jane McBride.....	18

## This issue's contributors

**Jean Daigneau** is the author of *Code Cracking for Kids* and *Ellis Island and Immigration for Kids: A History with 21 Actives*, both from Chicago Review Press. She's been published in newspapers and magazines, including *Highlights* and *Fun for Kidz*, and her work has appeared in *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writers' and Illustrators' Market*. She is a former regional and assistant regional advisor for SCBWI Ohio North and currently serves on the executive board. She runs Two-4-One Kid Critiques with author Gloria Adams.

**Marta Magellan** received her MA in Linguistics at the University of Florida and taught ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) for a decade in Brazil and Japan before moving to Composition and Creative Writing as a full professor at Miami Dade College. She leads an SCBWI critique group in Miami and writes mostly nonfiction picture books. Her latest is *Just Wild Enough: Mireya Mayor Primatologist*, coming out fall of 2022 with Albert Whitman & Co.

**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 41 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.), *Violet Yorke, Guided Girl: Ghosts in the Closet* (Darkstroke Books) and *Dragon Roar* (MacLaren-Cochrane). 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,  
mail@CBIClubhouse.com  
<http://www.writeforkids.org>

ISSN 1073-7596

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

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

Text copyright © 2022 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:

## **New Visions Award Open to Middle Grade and YA Submissions by Writers of Color**

Tu Books, the middle grade and young adult imprint of Lee & Low Books, is sponsoring the tenth annual New Visions Award for a middle grade or young adult novel, graphic novel or narrative nonfiction by a writer of color or a Native/Indigenous writer. The Award winner receives a cash prize of \$2,000 and a standard publication contract, including basic advance and royalties for a first time author. An Honor Award winner receives a \$1000 cash prize.

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 middle grade or young adult novel published. Only unagented manuscripts will be accepted. Work that has been published in its entirety in any format (including online and self-publishing as well as other countries) is not eligible.

Manuscripts should address the needs of children and teens 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 LGBTQ+ topics or disabilities may also be included. Submissions may be any fictional genre novels, narrative nonfiction or graphic novels for children ages 8 to 12 (up to 75,000 words) or young adults ages 12 to 18 (up to 95,000 words). Novels in verse are also welcome. Particularly interested in literary fantasy and science fiction, but also welcome contemporary, historical, mystery, suspense and genre fusions. Narrative nonfiction should have strong educational appeal, centered around a person or people from marginalized groups. Graphic novel scripts in those categories are also welcome (up to 150 scripted pages with 6-10 pages of final art samples). Submissions should include a synopsis of the story plus the first five chapters, 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. Do not send the entire manuscript. For graphic novels, include the equivalent of 24-30 scripted pages and 6-10 pages of final art samples and optional character sketches in PDF format only if you are an author/illustrator.

Submissions should be submitted online at [bit.ly/NewVisions2022](https://bit.ly/NewVisions2022). Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this award. Submissions will be accepted through August 1, 2022. The winners will be notified by November 18, 2022. For more info, go to [leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-visions-award](https://leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-visions-award)

## **Publisher Seeks Pitches for Hi-Lo YA Novels in Verse**

West 44 Books is a fiction imprint of the educational publisher Enslow that publishes hi-lo (high-interest, low reading level) novels for middle grade and young adult readers. Currently looking to expand their YA novels in verse. Tough topics that appeal to readers in grades 9-12, but written at a grade 2-4 reading level, can include racism, mental illness, coming out, substance abuse, domestic violence, and body image, as well as stories of survival, adventure, and dystopian worlds, and contemporary fiction that includes diverse characters.

A verse novel is a book with a complete story arc that is told in a series of connected loose verse poetry. Sample pages from West 44 Books YA verse novels can be found in the "Young Adult" section at [www.west44books.com/#books](https://www.west44books.com/#books). Accepting pitches from authors for novels in verse that are approximately 10,000 words in length, written in simple language with ample line breaks for maximum reading accessibility and comprehension. Author must be willing to work with a set production schedule and be open to promoting their book, with the committed support of the West 44 Books team. Interested authors should submit a pitch that includes a brief synopsis of the novel, a short author bio, and a writing sample of no more than 500 words to [submissions@west44books.com](mailto:submissions@west44books.com).

### Independent Publisher Accepting Board Book through Middle Grade Submissions

Sleeping Bear Press is an independent publisher of fiction and nonfiction board books, beginning readers, picture books, and select middle grade titles. Subjects of interest include language arts stories (i.e. picture books with word play), science, technology, social studies, diverse characters and cultures, holidays, nature, humor, families, concepts). Accepting submissions for all ages. Email submission with the subject line of “New Submission, title of work, fiction/nonfiction (specify which), subject (i.e. science, nature, humor)”. The body of the email should be the cover letter and include: your full name, your postal address, any previous publishing experience, word count, and a brief summary of your manuscript. Attach the entire manuscript as a Word document, and email to [submissions@sleepingbearpress.com](mailto:submissions@sleepingbearpress.com). Responds within six months if interested. For current titles, go to <https://sleepingbearpress.com/shop>

### Little Brown Emerging Artist Award Open Until June 15

The Little Brown Emerging Artist Award seeks promising new talent and encourages the development of high-quality picture books that resonate with readers of diverse backgrounds and experience. Open to picture book author/illustrators who are not represented by an agent, and who have not been published. Qualifying submissions should draw from the rich cultural experiences of this country—whether they manifest in character, theme, setting, plot, or are derived simply from the artist’s own experience of identity. *Diversity* includes literal or metaphorical inclusion of characters of underrepresented ethnicity, religious background, gender identity, class, mental or physical disability, or any other nondominant populations.

The submission will consist of a mock-up of a 32-page picture book, up to 1200 words long, with sketches and 2-3 spreads of finished art. One winner will receive American Express® gift cards totaling \$1,500, and a portfolio review by a Little, Brown Books for Young Readers’ professional children’s book design and editorial team, and artist mentor Michaela Goade. The winner of the Little, Brown Emerging Artist Award will also have an opportunity for his or her submission to be reviewed by the Little, Brown Books for Young Readers editorial team for possible future publication.

Full rules and submission details are at [lbartistaward.com/rules](http://lbartistaward.com/rules). **Deadline for submission is June 15, 2022.**

### Magazine for Independent Readers Accepting Submissions

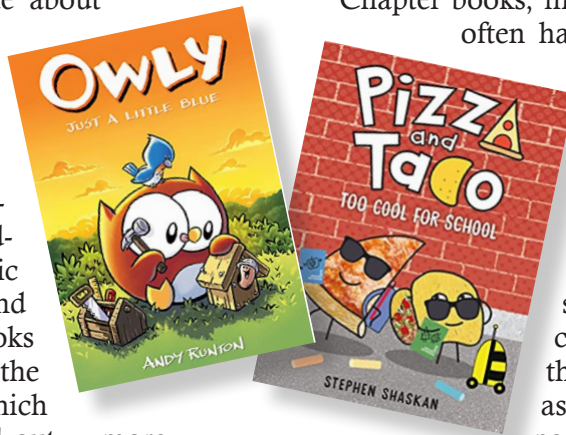
*Spider* is a literary magazine for children ages 6-9, featuring fresh and engaging literature, poems, articles, and activities for newly independent readers. Editors seek energetic, beautifully crafted submissions with strong “kid appeal”. Before submitting, authors should study several back issues which can be found at most libraries or can be viewed at the [Cricket Media Store](http://CricketMediaStore.com).

Seeking **Fiction** (300-1000 words) with complex and believable characters and settings; **Poetry** (up to 20 lines) that are succinct, imaginative, and accessible; **Nonfiction** (300-800 words) on topics such as well-researched articles about animals, kids their own age doing amazing things, and cool science discoveries (such as wetsuits for penguins and real-life invisibility cloaks). Articles should rise above a simple list of facts and be an engaging narrative; **Crafts and Activities** (1-4 pages) clever crafts, recipes, games, and puzzles that a reader would be able to perform on his/her own, with minimal parental assistance. Submit through Submittable at [cricketmag.submittable.com/submit](http://cricketmag.submittable.com/submit) (click on *Spider*). Allow 3-6 months for a response.

# GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR BEGINNING READERS

by Jean Daigneau

There's very little to celebrate about the recent pandemic, but one plus involved strong sales of puzzles, toys, and books. Included in those numbers, graphic novel sales—both adult and children's titles—rose by 65 percent from 2020 to 2021, according to NPD BookScan. Graphic books now span many genres and audiences, including graphic books for younger readers that fall into the easy or early reader category, which I'll call early readers. Let's find out more.



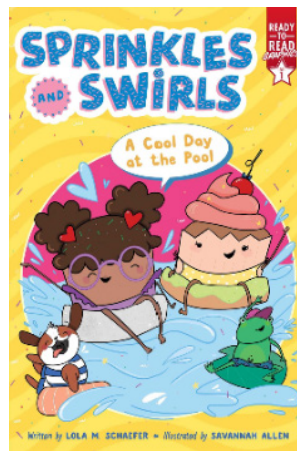
Chapter books, marketed to kids ages 6 to 8 or older, often have between 5,000 to 15,000 words.

These books have more leeway when it comes to vocabulary, but, of course, are less sophisticated than books for older readers. The story in chapter books is a bit more complicated than early readers, which often have a simpler and somewhat linear plotline. But while chapter books might have subplots, they typically are kept to a minimum, as these readers are just learning to navigate chapters and a more complex story.

## Small Differences Mean a Lot

It's easy to confuse early readers and chapter books. But their somewhat small differences are monumental when it comes to readability for kids starting their reading journey. That's one reason author and illustrator Lola Schaefer enjoys creating them. Schaefer says, "I like the idea I'm providing a gateway book that will build the reader's self-confidence and encourage him/her to read more, more, more."

Typically, early readers target kids ages 4 to 6. But because of differences in reading skills, these books can be marketed to readers up to age 8. They're rarely more than 1,500 words, but they often have chapters similar to books for older readers. While their physical size is fairly distinct—slightly larger than a paperback—pages can vary from 32 to 60. Colored illustrations are often used, but black and white artwork is not unusual. Vocabulary in early readers is actually much more specific than that of picture books, even though the latter are targeted to younger readers.



## The Magic of Words

When it comes to word choices, it's not just about active verbs, shorter sentences, and less text per page for early readers. Some publishers actually use preferred vocabulary lists. Author Renee Trembl notes that "my publishers and I spend a lot of time discussing word choices and vocabulary. It's so important for this age group—I don't want a new reader to get bumped out of the story by too many unfamiliar words."

References like the *Children's Writer's Word Book* can be helpful to determine appropriate words for each age level. Another option is to reach out to a local elementary school for spelling or reading books that are being replaced.

Connecting with a primary teacher as a beta reader can help you zero in on issues specific to early readers. Targeted word lists can also be found online. While these resources might not work for every publisher, they can give an author a good sense of words that fit the appropriate level.



Another valuable option is the

## Graphic Novels for Beginning Readers...continued

Flesch-Kincaid readability stats tool in Word. While this won't target individual words, it can be a good barometer for other information. For any project, it's eye opening to see how many passive sentences there are, as well as the number of words per sentence and even characters per word. Additionally, knowing the percentages for reading ease or grade level can give you a good feel for whether you're meeting the mark for younger readers. When words are limited, every word counts even more.

Then, too, pacing is crucial to a story where word count is minimal. And because of the layout of graphics and text, don't overlook page turns, which play an important role as well.

### Meshing Words and Pictures

Having text supplemented by pictures can ease the transition into novels for kids who might face reading challenges or who are reluctant readers. For the author who does not illustrate, Schaefer says, "Each scene must have illustrative suggestions of what to show. . . . The text is so minimal that it relies on the illustration to carry the meaning." While illustrations in other books supplement the story, in graphic early readers, often the pictures give readers clues to some of the vocabulary they might be unfamiliar with.

Trem1 allows "the illustrations to replace hundreds of words that would otherwise be needed to describe emotion, action, and setting." She adds that while "a reader still must examine and interpret all the drawings, this format can seem less daunting to a new reader with a disability." Additionally, part of the fun for the illustrator is "to play with facial expressions and body language and to develop ridiculous scenarios and costumes."

That said, Trem1 still begins with a written story synopsis and creates "running dialogue," then works on sketches to get "timing and pacing correct." She adds, "I can actually see where ideas and dialogue aren't working." For Schaefer, it helps to "see the story as a movie." She says, "I write the illustrative notes as I write the text." While she notes that "it's important for the artist to have room to add the illustrative narrative to the story, as well," in her early readers *Sprinkles and Swirls*, she "had many more illustrative suggestions than actual text." It's not about dictating the pictures, or words and pictures competing; it's about words and pictures supporting each other to seamlessly tell the story.

One technique Schaefer used in her *Sprinkles and Swirls*

manuscripts as she outlined in a Kidlit Distancing Social webinar ([writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancing-social68](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancing-social68)) was to include illustrator notes, but to put the dialogue for Swirls on the left side of the page and the dialogue for Sprinkles on the right. Keep in mind that in a graphic novel, dialogue tags—she said, he shouted—are not used. So anything you can do to help an editor understand how the story progresses from the eyes of the characters is helpful.

### The Benefits of Breaking In

Many early readers and chapter books are published in-house. According to former agent Mary Kole, "They are usually written by editors, interns, or writers-for-hire." That's one reason many agents don't rep authors who don't have other projects. Connecting with an editor at a conference or writing event is one way to break in. Additionally, having book characters that are strong enough to expand into a series is not only important, it's also a benefit. Having only one standalone early reader will make it harder to get a foot in the door. But one advantage to writing a series, as Schaefer notes, is that, "as the series progresses, I write fewer notes because I realize that Savannah [Savannah Allen, the *Sprinkles and Swirls* illustrator] knows the characters I do and she will add appropriate detail."

### The Final Word

While finding your niche in the early reader or even chapter book market can be challenging, Trem1 says, "There's no easy way to put it—creating a graphic novel is hard work and consumes an enormous amount of time and creative energy. If you love your story and it suits a visual format, then it's worth every bit of sweat or tears you can put into it." Schaefer echoes that sentiment as well. "There's nothing to compare to watching a child pick up a book, read, and give an emotional response. As an author, I know that I've hit a homerun if the reader engages and is entertained. It's what drives me to continue to write for children and to improve in my craft." When you're writing for kids who are exploring the world of independent reading for the first time, what can be better?

### SUGGESTED READING

*Sprinkles and Swirls* series by Lola M. Schaefer

*Super Adventures of Ollie and Bea* series by Renee Trem1

*Pizza and Taco* series by Steven Shaskan

*Owly* series by Andy Runton

*Fox and Rabbit* series by Beth Ferry

*Hello, Hedgehog* series by Norm Feuti

# James McGowan

Agent



interview by Lynne Marie

**J**ames McGowan is a former intern at BookEnds Literary and is now a literary agent with BookEnds Jr. While working as an intern he fell in love with agenting (and kidlit). Over the past few years he has worked his way through the ranks and now represents his own extensive client list.

**LYNNE MARIE:** If the career of publishing kidlit was a building, what would you say brought you through the door?

**JAMES MCGOWAN:** Definitely all of the cool people going inside. Who wouldn't want to be surrounded by creatives who are making all of the incredible books of today?

**LM:** You've had a multidimensional experience at BookEnds as you started there in summer 2015. What were some of the positions you filled and what is something that you learned in that department that affects how you agent today?

**JM:** I've worked in just about every arm of BookEnds. I've been an intern, a part-time assistant, a full-time assistant, a social media manager, a client contract liaison, I've worked in the banking and royalty department, and everything in between. I always say how grateful I am to have started where I did, as I feel I've got a strong sense of everything an agent can and should be doing for their clients. I'm perhaps most grateful for my work with the royalties/banking. Money questions come up at every stage of a book deal and being able to confidently assist and guide my clients is crucial to me.

**LM:** From reading your [agency bio](#), it's clear you have a sense of humor! How important do you think

humor is in writing? Can you think of any examples where humor would not be an asset in a book?

**JM:** Ha! Thank you. I'm really incapable of holding in a laugh. Not everything needs to be so serious... right? I really look for humor in books. It's such a useful tool. In kidlit, it's a way to really engage our young readers, but also our adult readers. If an adult finds a book funny, they may be open to reading it again, or gifting it, and not putting it on a shelf too high for the kid to reach. In novels, humor is perfect for helping dispel tension and keep your reader fully engaged in the characters and what's happening. Super dark books can benefit from splashes of humor that help dispel tension and reset your reader.

**LM:** You self-profess that you are fluent in sarcasm, which is an intriguing form of humor. Do you believe that humor is innate, or can be learned? Why or why not? What are some suggestions that you have for those wanting to write with more humor?

**JM:** What a good question! I suppose I don't know. I think humor and seriousness really go hand in hand, so people should know when to be either or. Can it be learned? I suppose so! I suppose we all learn our humor – from those around us, the content we consume, the experiences we go through. The best advice for those who want to write humor is to lean in. If you have a great concept, go all the way. Don't hold back your jokes, get it all down on the page. You can edit later.

**LM:** Your list focus is on board books, picture books, chapter books and middle grade, as well as adult nonfiction and mystery/suspense novels.



*James McGowan...continued*

What is it that you love about, or what is the why behind these genres, in particular?

**JM:** Anything illustrated really lights me up. I love the marriage of art and text and it's never not a rewarding process. As a reader, I love mystery/suspense novels. A compelling, twisty crime is fun to figure out and go along for the ride on. I'm newly a nonfiction reader, as I've been loving learning about different things I never had interest in as a kid (*cough*, science).

**LM:** Since this is a more elusive genre to many (and there is often a tendency to just try it because it will be easier), what guidelines do you like to see followed for the board books submitted to you? Are you looking for any subject matter in particular?

**JM:** First, read a ton of board books, please. Know that they're not the same format as picture books – they're shorter. And that they're not the same demographic. Your board books should be geared towards readers age 0-4. Also, keep in mind the language that you're using. It should be super easy to follow.

**LM:** What are some examples of good mystery/suspense books that you like? Are you looking for this subgenre in your middle grade wish list, as well?

**JM:** I'd be happy to see middle grade mysteries! For adult, I've been loving *The Maid* and *The Thursday Murder Club* which have a great balance of humor and tension. I'm a huge fan of Tana French and Attica Locke, too. I would love to see an upmarket mystery in my inbox.

**LM:** You certainly have an intriguing list of clients, which can be viewed here: [jmcgowanbooks.com/clients](http://jmcgowanbooks.com/clients) If there was one, two or three things in common with your authors, what would you say they were? Illustrators?

**JM:** This is tough! I would say the thing most in common is that they all genuinely love the genres they're working in. My picture book clients are invested in the community and the market, same for my adult clients. I really like to work with people who have an investment in the art they're creating.

**LM:** What is your process for determining whether an author is a good fit for your list? How important is the cover letter? Pitch? Social media presence?

**JM:** None of those things are super important to me when it comes down to fiction. For me, I want the idea to hook me in, and the writing to keep me

there. If the book is something I'm super excited about, I like to get on the phone to see if we are a good fit before offering representation.

**LM:** Historically, have you been one to request R&Rs (Revise & Resubmit) before signing, or do you work with the author after acquiring?

**JM:** I really do not like R&R's. I find it's a lot of work for both me and the author for a maybe. If I have a vision that requires a lot of changes, I might get on the call with an author to see if they'd be on board. I try to use the writing they've already sent me to determine if my vision is realistic. I've had two examples of R&R's not going the way I hoped they would and the authors signing elsewhere, and it feels like if I'm resonating that strongly with a project, sometimes figuring out together with the author if it can be a match is the way to go.

**LM:** Name a craft book that you think should be recommended to all children's writers.

**JM:** *Writing Picture Books* by Ann Whitford Paul.

**LM:** What are your top five most frequent reasons for rejecting a manuscript?

**JM:** 1 - It's not a genre I represent. 2 - The idea is not grabbing me or feeling very fresh. 3 - The word count, especially in picture books, is way too high. 4 - I have something very similar on my list. 5 - A shocking number of queries are rude or offensive to me, my clients, the genres I work in, or agents in general.

**LM:** Please share a submission tip or two or three here.

**JM:** Track. Everything. Dates, passes, guidelines, etc. You never know when you might need it. Also, have a querying support group. Find other writers who are doing the same work you're doing. Perhaps you can work together, or commiserate, and hopefully celebrate.

**LM:** As a blogger/reviewer, I had the honor of reviewing your debut book, *Goodnight, Oppy!* ([Three Reasons to Read Good Night Oppy](#)) Please tell us a little bit about the process of this idea. How did it come to you? How did you determine that it was a viable idea? What creative decisions did you make to bring this sweet and interesting book to life?

**JM:** The idea came to me with the news breaking! I love space, so once I learned about Oppy's mission coming to an end, I had to dive right in. As for the



*James McGowan...continued*

process, it was a long one and the book changed so many times. It started as fiction, and as I continued to write and revise, it became more and more informational.

**LM:** What research and thought processes did you use to determine a submission list for this project?

**JM:** My agent did this. Yes, agents have agents, too! It's hard to be subjective about your own work.

**LM:** What genre would you categorize this book as, and why?

**JM:** Informational fiction. There's a lot there I made up (in terms of Oppy's narrative arc and even anthropomorphizing her), but the sidebars and inspiration for the story were factual.

**LM:** In that regard, what do you consider to be the current nonfiction classifications? (i.e., creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, informational fiction, etc.)

**JM:** I use nonfiction and informational fiction. Nonfiction is a book that has nothing made up in it. Informational fiction is a blend. Melissa Stewart

coined the term, and I've found it to be incredibly useful.

**LM:** It has rippled throughout the community that nonfiction biographies are out and STEM nonfiction is in. What are your personal thoughts on this? What do you feel makes a nonfiction book stand out?

**JM:** Biographies are incredibly difficult. They are of course not impossible, but for me to take one on, it would need to feel fresh and exciting, and to have a real narrative relevant to today. STEM is always exciting, and I think the same would apply – having stories that are really relevant to current events and/or curriculum will help them stand out.

**LM:** To ask one of my trademark questions: If you could use five words to describe the “spirit” of what you look for in your submissions, what would they be?

**JM:** Something I can't put down.

*See more tips from James McGowan on the [BookEnds Literary YouTube channel](#).*

James McGowan is offering an **Above the Slushpile** opportunity for CBI subscribers, to get their pitches read faster than regular submissions. First, check out his current Wish List at [bookendsliterary.com/myauthors/james-mcgowan/](http://bookendsliterary.com/myauthors/james-mcgowan/) In children's books, James is looking for board books, picture book texts, picture book illustrators and author/illustrators, middle grade fiction and middle grade graphic novels. Submit your pitch via the Above the Slushpile online form at [bit.ly/June2022ATSBokEnds](http://bit.ly/June2022ATSBokEnds) by June 30, 2022. James will respond by August 31, 2022 to those submissions that interest him, and request the full manuscript.

---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/](http://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/](http://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.

# How to Write the Mixed Bilingual Picture Book

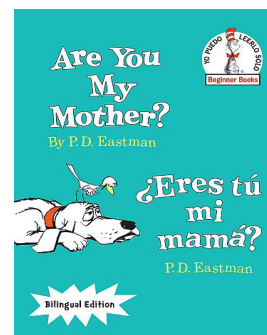
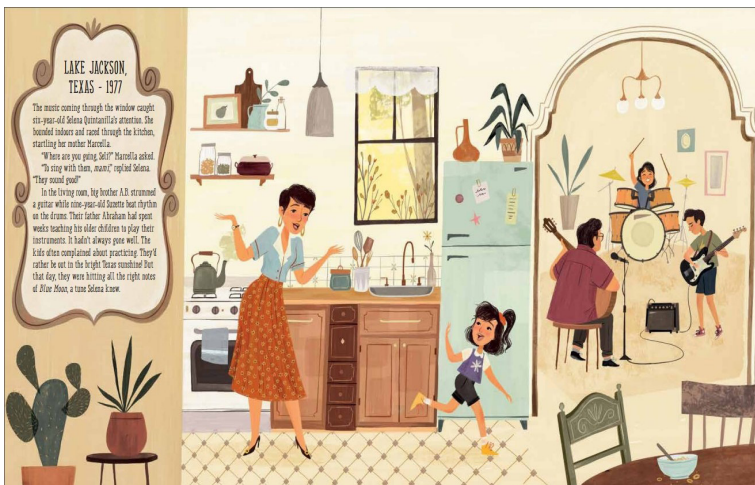
by Marta Magellan

**C**elebrating different cultures is becoming increasingly valued in the world of children's literature. Diverse characters are often represented, and in bilingual versions, language itself is a major participant. For one, these books encourage bilingual children to have a positive attitude toward their parents' language and perhaps even use it more frequently. But monolingual children can also benefit from bilingual books. Through them, they become familiar with another language and culture. In other words, the second language is either a heritage language or a target language depending on who is reading.

**Translated books, dual-language books, and mixed bilingual books** are three ways a book's text can be presented in two languages. Some publishers are generating a separate **translated** version if the subject warrants it. For example, Silvia Lopez's was written in English, but the publisher had it translated into Spanish as a separate book.



In **dual language editions**, rather than print two different books, publishers include the translation side by side within one text. P.D. Eastman's *Are You My Mother?* was given a larger format to accommodate the full translation into Spanish. Several publishers such as Lil' Libros and Mantra Lingua Books specialize in side-by-side multilingual books for children.



## Mixed Bilingual Picture Book...continued

The bilingual books I am seeing more of recently, however, are **mixed bilingual**, or mixed-language versions written in English and peppered with words in an alternative language. In this country, it has been mostly Spanish, due to its predominance here. Ana Siqueira's *Bella's Recipe for Success*, for example, sprinkles in Spanish words and phrases within English syntax.



Librarians and many parents know (and research shows) that children do benefit from learning a second language. Being multilingual not only enhances cognitive development and analytical thinking, but also often catapults children to future success in our connected world.

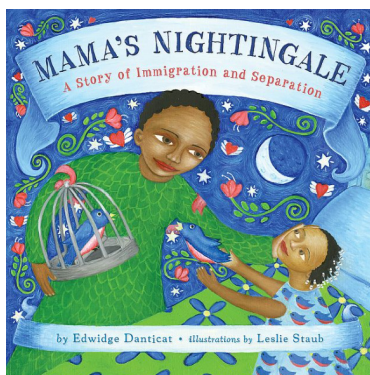
But do these mixed bilingual books meet language-learning expectations?

Illustrated children's books certainly introduce children to other languages in a painless and entertaining way. However, English syntax with random vocabulary thrown in may not be helping monolingual children learn much. Unless the book can be read without constant reference to the glossary, it may even make the child uncomfortable with the target language, which is exactly what the writer wants to avoid.

Because of this, the ideal dual-language book can be read without referring to a glossary. To successfully accomplish a fluent reading of the text, the writer must make sure the sprinkled-in vocabulary is understood from the context, internal translation, or illustration.

As a co-leader in a Miami critique group, I see many bilingual manuscripts, mostly in Spanish, but Haitian Creole and Yiddish have also made appearances. These books are written in English with nouns sprinkled in the heritage language. I'm all for seeing culture-specific words that have no adequate translation and would require multiple words to explain. But too often I am confronted with haphazard nouns chosen for no particular reason with no translation.

*Mama's Nightingale* by accomplished author and memoirist Edwidge Danticat adds Haitian Creole phrases to a serious picture book about immigration. These books are an excellent glimpse into another culture and experience, but parents of English-only children also see them as language-learning tools.



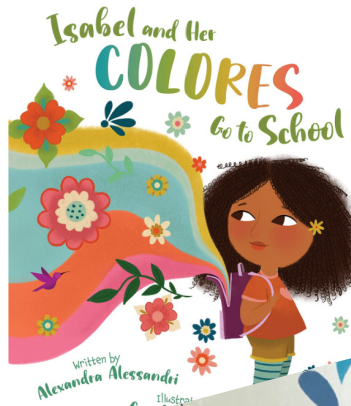
Editors might publish these books, but it is a disservice to parents who want their child to learn a language. Any English teacher knows that memorizing a list of vocabulary words will never result in meaningful learning. Occasional Spanish words inside English syntax are still English. Author/illustrators have an advantage because they can depict meaning through their drawings. The rest of us must work diligently to make sure everything is

*Mixed Bilingual Picture Book...continued*

understood in context, either immediately translated, or by plugging in those dreaded art notes.

Some writers in my Miami critique group claim their use of mixed language (Spanglish is what we call it) is organic. It is the way they speak in their homes. Yet, that mix of languages is not an actual dialect. When the speaker substitutes a word for one in their heritage language, it may be because it is more descriptive, or the translation doesn't quite capture the meaning correctly, or they forget the word in English and exchange it. In other words, the process of speaking the mixed language is idiosyncratic.

If the monolingual reader has no idea from the context what the word means, fluency will be com-



promised. Reading aloud to children does not give a parent or teacher the acceptable option of pausing to look up the word. Because of this, some editors are justifiably now requesting bilingual books without glossaries. In Alexandra Alessandri's *Isabel and Her Colores Go to School*, for example, the author often translates the Spanish as in: "No entiendo," she whispered. She didn't understand." She also uses a form of bilingual echoing: "Amigas," Sarah repeated. "Friends."

With translations and illustrations, a well-written dual-language book will be read fluently and flow organically. It will engage and captivate all children, bilingual or not, while displaying another language and culture.

### Tips for Writing Mixed Bilingual Picture Books

- Translate those words that differ due to the culture (i.e. a *barrio* in Tijuana, Mexico isn't quite the same as a neighborhood in Athens, Georgia).
- Choose words with no adequate English equivalent which would take a multi-word translation (i.e. *quinceañera*, a celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, when she transitions out of childhood).
- All words chosen in the target language should be easily illustrated or otherwise understood in context.
- Translate into English words that are essential to your story yet cannot be illustrated or otherwise understood in context.
- Choose phrases that would be used often in the heritage language, i.e. "Sí, cómo no," followed by the English translation "of course."
- Above all, avoid translating random nouns out of a hat. Be diligent with your choices.

# RELATABILITY: THE SECRET INGREDIENT

by Jane McBride

**A**ppealing characters, riveting dialogue, strong conflict, and a plotline that won't quit all go to make for a great book. But something's missing. I hear you asking, "What else do we need?"

## RELATABILITY.

Relatability is that frequently indefinable something that pulls readers into the story and won't let them put the book down until they finish it. Relatability is what draws me to Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* time and time again, because it perfectly draws the love between sisters, reminding me of my relationship with my own dear sister. Relatability is what makes a nine-year-old boy want to read a book about a teenage boy going through a breakup with his girlfriend because the boy's parents are divorcing. Relatability is crucial to enticing readers not just to pick up your book but to go finish it and then to read your backlist.

How do we make our writing relatable to our readership? Does that mean referencing the latest in clothes, shoes, music, pop stars, etc.? Just the opposite. Such references will soon grow out of date and readers (if you have any) will shake their heads in disgust at the outdated names. Does it mean using the latest slang? Again, no. What it does mean is to write stories that make your story accessible to your audience, whatever their age.

A boy who is afraid to go to school because he is the target of online bullying is relatable. A twelve-year-old girl who wants to be popular in her middle school is relatable. A small child who is confused when his parents no longer live together is relatable.

Below is a Mini Blueprint of how to go about put-

ting relatability into your story:

**STEP 1:** Go simple. Relatability doesn't have to be complicated. In fact, it's often better if it isn't. Readers don't want to have to sift through lots of "stuff" to get to the meat of the story; they want to feel it as it is happening.

**ACTION:** Identify which emotion you want to tap into and then use the tools in your writer's toolbox to showcase it. Strong emotions are, at their base, rooted in basic needs. After the need for shelter, food, and air are met, basic needs include that to feel safe, to be loved and to belong, to be admired or esteemed, to realize self-actualization. If you need a brush-up on these, Google Abraham Maslow's [hierarchy of needs](#).

**STEP 2:** Go back in time. We all have a treasure trove of examples to draw upon from our own experiences, those of our children, or grandchildren.

**ACTION:** Think back to your own childhood and teenage year and come up with an incident that caused you great embarrassment or tremendous pride or some other strong emotion. I felt real pride when I was inducted in the National Honor Society while I was in high school. (This goes with the need to be admired on the hierarchy of needs.) On the flip side, I felt real embarrassment when I was a college freshman and discovered that I had totally mixed up the time of my final and had to find the professor and ask to make it up. (This also goes with that same need, coming at it from the opposite direction. In this example, I lost esteem.) I've drawn on those two experiences many times to help me find the crux of those emotions when describing

*Relatability...continued*

a character's feelings. Use these emotions to flesh out your character's feelings and thereby entice the reader to feel the same. Readers want to relate to the protagonist. They want to feel his pain when he fears he has lost everything because he made a stupid mistake. They want to participate in his glory when he accomplishes something great. They want to understand his angst when he realizes he's allowed his pride to supersede his compassion. They want all of that and more.

**STEP 3:** Go sensory. Little brings relatability more fully to bear than involving the senses.

**ACTION:** Bring all the senses into play. Don't stop at sight and hearing, the two most common. Invoke taste, touch, and smell. Don't give the reader a list of physical attributes of the boy the fifteen-year-old heroine likes. Saying he "had blond hair, brown eyes, and shoulders to die for" evokes little if anything. Instead, let the character react to those physical qualities. But don't stop there. Let her discover that he smelled of grass because he mowed yards in the late spring and summer to earn money to help his single mother and two younger brothers. Let her taste the salt of sweat on his lips when they tentatively kiss for the first time. Let her feel the calluses on his palms when they hold hands. Involving the senses also includes using well-chosen metaphors and similes. Be careful here, though, and don't go overboard. Too many analogies can start to sound like an English lesson in how to write a good simile or metaphor.

**STEP 4:** Go timeless rather than timely. What is the difference between the two? Timelessness will not go out of style no matter how many years have passed; think little black dress. Timely may remain "hot" for a season, maybe even two, but it does not have inherent staying power.

**ACTION:** Do your best to leave out current references to trendy styles and brands. I started writing in the 1980s. Trying to be "trendy," I used name-brands that teenage girls like. (I had a teenage daughter at the time.) An editor called me on it and

said that I was dating the book before it was even published. Another way of dating your writing is to write themes that are popular right now but may not be popular in two years or five years. Again, before your book is published, certain themes may well be out of favor. Werewolves, vampires, and such other-worldly creatures have come and gone and may well come again, but you can't count on that. Am I saying to never write books about these themes? No. What I am saying is to be aware of the difference between timeless and timely.

**A MADE-UP STORY**

Let's make up a quick story of seven-year-old boy, Tommy, whose parents are divorcing. Divorce is a commonplace occurrence that lots of kids can relate to, but even those whose family hasn't gone through a divorce can still relate to the feelings Tommy is experiencing. Tommy is feeling confused, scared, and guilty. We understand the confusion and fear, but why is he feeling guilty? It turns out that Tommy left his bike in the driveway last week, and his father ran over it with his car. He shouted about it so loud that the neighbors came out of their homes to see what the problem was. Tommy tried to apologize, but his father wouldn't listen. Now Tommy wonders if that is why his parents are divorcing. A reader can relate to the feelings of guilt, of having made a parent really mad. Maybe the young reader remembers her mother getting angry because she (an eight-year-old girl) didn't remember to take her backpack to school and the mother had to deliver it to her at school and was late for work because of it. Tommy tries to make things right between his mom and dad but fails. Now he has added failure to the list of bad emotions spiraling through him. Again, readers can relate.

**IN CONCLUSION**

Relatability doesn't just mean your story will touch the heart of readers because they have experienced the same thing. It means that the emotions will resonate with them. If readers can imagine what characters are feeling, it helps them practice empathy and compassion, even if they haven't directly lived through the same experience.

# THE SECRET DIARY OF SALMA HUSSAIN

## Middle Grade Debut Author

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**I**n general, the publishing industry isn't known for being speedy. Take it from someone who knows, the road is often paved with potholes galore. It can literally take forever to get any kind of response, positive or negative (and I'm wholeheartedly in the camp of preferring a quick no than a drawn-out one). But for new kidlit author Salma Hussain, it was simply a matter of being at the right place at the right time with the right material for a savvy publisher to snatch up her semi-autobiographical middle grade novel *The Secret Diary of Mona Hasan* (Tundra Books, May 2022). The book is about a year in the life of an inquisitive tween from a bustling city in the United Arab Emirates who relocates with her family to a rural Canadian town when the first Gulf War unfolds. Now living in Toronto, Hussain immigrated to Canada when she was thirteen years old. Published in several prestigious literary magazines, Hussein ([www.salmahwrites.com](http://www.salmahwrites.com)) writes poetry and prose for both adults and children.

**PJ McILVAINE:** Your middle grade debut is about Mona, a young Muslim girl leaving a big city (Dubai in the United Arab Emirates) and moving to a small Canadian town. How much of Mona is autobiographical since you also emigrated to Canada at a young age?

**SALMA HUSSAIN:** Great question! Certainly the broad arc of the novel is autobiographical — as you



stated, I, too was a young Muslim girl living in a big city in the Middle East and emigrated to Canada as a teenager! The specific details in the novel, however, veer from my own life — I never pulled a fire alarm to meet a boy, nor did I dress up in a chicken suit to entice customers to my father's business (events which occur in the novel). However, some scenes *are* based on lived experience — I did have a teacher accuse me of cheating when I arrived in Canada and handed in my first assignment, and there's a tomato-throwing scene that happens in this book which has a basis in reality, too. Overall, though, the book is more fictional than autobiographical. Or maybe I should say, it's *aspirational* — never say never — pulling a fire alarm and dressing up in a chicken suit are events that could *yet* happen in my life!

**PM:** Did you have a secret diary as an adolescent?

**SH:** Yes, I've kept secret diaries since forever! I don't journal as frequently as I used to in adolescence, but it's an activity I always enjoyed and hope to do more of in the future.

**PM:** What makes Mona a character that today's readers can relate to?

**SH:** Mona's story of migration and displacement is sadly one that is extremely relevant right now. Unfortunately, it is also one that has always been

*Salma Hussain...continued*

relevant. We ‘see’ and read about various conflicts around the world on our screens every day. Every day, families from around the world are faced with making tough decisions about relocating away from their homes and communities due to conflict and issues of safety. I wanted to explore these stories of migration. Who are the ordinary parents and children behind the newspaper accounts? How does one adjust to new cultures and communities? How do young people navigate their sense of self and belonging right in the middle of going through the ecstasies and agonies of puberty? The immigration at the heart of Mona’s story is a metaphor for the journeys that we are all always on — for our true selves and for our sense of self-worth, as well as the journey for “home” and belonging.

**PM:** Do you envision the book as a standalone or as a series?

**SH:** Can I say neither? I think this novel absolutely stands on its own, but I’d also love to write “companion” pieces around it — explore the voices and experiences of the other characters in this novel.

**PM:** Your writing background is primarily poems and short stories. What made you decide on telling Mona’s story as a historical middle grade novel?

**SH:** I had so many ideas floating around! I was tinkering with a short story collection, a poetry collection, and a novel for adults! Everything! But one night, as I was putting my then-5-year-old to bed, she turned to me sleepily and asked, “You were born outside Canada, right, Mama? Were you a regular kid just like us?” That one question sparked the novel. Immediately I had a voice in my head, I knew the structure I wanted the novel to be in (i.e., diary format) and I had the basic timeline (a year in the life of). I also knew that I wanted a child to answer my child’s question and so I picked ‘middle grade’ as the genre. The second Gulf War was the impetus

for my own family’s immigration, but I moved the story back to the first Gulf War so as not to overwhelm young readers with history. The genre and the time period seemed to fall into place pretty organically! Also, I am a huge history nerd and love the 80s and the 90s — such fantastic times in music, fashion, and movies.

**PM:** What tips do you have on making the character’s voice authentic?

**SH:** Feedback! Feedback! Feedback! I had originally written Mona as older, but the early feedback I received was that she should be aged down so readers can more realistically follow Mona through her ‘Firsts’ — first period, first kiss, first school dance, etc. My advice is to join and/or create writers’ groups and workshop your writing as often and as early as possible. I was a member of two writing groups when I was writing this novel. I also went through a mentorship program through [Diaspora Dialogues](#) (an amazing free mentorship program in Canada) and received invaluable feedback through that process. Also, spend as much time conversing with kids the same age as your MC as possible! And of course, the standard Read. Read.

Read. Then read some more.

**PM:** How do you get literary representation?

**SH:** After I finished the mentorship program through Diaspora Dialogue, I submitted 10 sample pages to a program called [Pitch Perfect](#), which is hosted by a literary festival here in Canada ([Fold Literary Festival](#)). At this program, a writer is paired with an industry professional for a “flash assessment” of their opening 10 pages. The industry professionals are a mix of literary agents and/or editors at publishing houses who volunteer their time to support the arts. It just so happened that my industry professional was a literary agent who instantly “got” the story





*Salma Hussain...continued*

and loved it. She requested the full manuscript, after which she offered representation! We spoke over the phone and we vibed really well. I signed with her. She was the first agent I ever submitted to. Because of her love for the manuscript, she was able to sell the manuscript six months later and my book comes out May 3rd of this year through the Tundra imprint of Penguin Random House! Everyone says publishing moves slow, but in my case, I felt it moved really fast! I love my agent. She's down-to-earth and sweet and really champions children's literature and it's been a fantastic ride so far!

**PM:** So not a long process at all?

**SH:** In my case, it was not a long process from receiving representation to being published. I realize how atypical my situation is and I feel I massively lucked out by being in the right place at the right time.

**PM:** Was the book complete when you queried?

**SH:** My manuscript was not fully complete when I submitted it for its flash assessment. I had a fairly good skeletal draft though. I had written my ending and I had written the major scenes — however, everything needed more fleshing out. My agent suggested some changes to the story, and I agreed with those and followed that advice.

**PM:** How hands-on is your agent?

**SH:** I feel like we are friends! I keep her in a loop about my projects as well as my personal life. I trust her judgment and value her advice.

**PM:** Do you run story ideas by her?

**SH:** I do.

**PM:** What was the submission process like?

**SH:** We submitted to a number of traditional publishers and received an offer from Tundra in six weeks.

**PM:** Can you give us a window into what happens after the book was acquired — were there many edi-

torial revisions after it was bought?

**SH:** Yes. Before the contract with Tundra was even signed, I had a phone call conversation with the editor, Lynne Missen, who stated that she wanted three (what I felt were fairly major changes) and we talked those through. I agreed with those changes. In fact, two of those revisions were ones that I anticipated. We agreed to go into two rounds of editing. I'm so thankful for those back-and-forth conversations and editing rounds. Though the tone of this book is humorous, and I worked really hard to make my readers laugh out loud, there are also some pretty heavy topics discussed in this book – war and conflict, colourism, sexism, classism, and there is an “Uncle Annoying” character who engages in acts which in today’s language, we recognize as predatory “grooming” behavior. We wanted to handle these topics with sensitivity and intelligence. My novel is so much stronger for having received Lynne’s invaluable insight.

**PM:** Did you have any input into the cover design?

**SH:** I was asked which MG covers I liked most. My book is a homage to Sue Townsend’s brilliant and hilarious, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole 13 ¾*, so I pointed to its cover. They recreated something unique and spectacular, but which also honors the Adrian Mole cover. Tundra secured [Jameela Wahlgren](#) as the illustrator and I’m so glad they did! She did a terrific job of translating the character’s personality into a beautiful cover!

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

**SH:** I don’t believe in writing every day. It’s just not something that works for my life. I believe in zoning out and taking breaks, and coming back to the writing-table replenished and eager to tackle the next writing project. When I do decide to focus on a writing project, I then get fairly obsessed about it and write like a crazed banshee. This just seems to work for me.

**PM:** Are you a panster or a plotter?

*Salma Hussain...continued*

**SH:** A little of both. I start out pantsing and at some later point, I need to make an outline, too.

**PM:** What comes first for you, the story or the characters?

**SH:** Usually the characters. But I also have some idea of what I'd like to happen to them. Sometimes, I just need a really good first line and I can take off running from there.

**PM:** Are you a continual tinker or is there a point when you say no more?

**SH:** Continual tinker. I won't be able to read *The Secret Diary of Mona Hasan* when it comes out because I'll want to mark it up and edit it.

**PM:** Who reads your work first?

**SH:** Really depends on the piece and the genre. But shout out to my bestie, Christine Cheung, who has been reading my bits and bobs (i.e., shitty drafts) since we did undergrad together! Another shout out to my wildly brilliant and sweet niece, Zara E., who has been cajoled into becoming my sounding board for all things tween.

**PM:** When do you know that your work is ready to be shared?

**SH:** When there's a general consensus that it's good. I take it to my writing group of other writers before it goes to my agent. It has to be pretty good.

**PM:** Do you find it difficult to have other people look at your work?

**SH:** No. Luckily, I took creative writing classes during my undergrad, so workshopping pieces is something I am used to, and perhaps thrive on. I am most comfortable receiving feedback and criticism. Praise is the harder thing to accept.

**PM:** How do you tackle the revision process?

**SH:** I let suggestions take time to sink in. Let the feedback percolate and sit in your system for a while. Address the underlying concerns your reader has — is it confusing? Boring? Unrealistic? How can you address readers' concerns in your own unique way?

**PM:** Do you have any tips for accepting or rejecting notes?

**SH:** If something is really important to you, stick to it. I had a piece I wrote 15 years ago that I loved but was rejected by every literary magazine I sent it to. I didn't change it. I shelved it. It was published, without any revisions, earlier this year, in a literary magazine I love. There is a tremendous amount of luck and pixie dust in publishing.

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

**SH:** I am tinkering with an MG novel, either told from the POV of Mona's younger sister or her brother. Maybe both!

**PM:** What do you think Mona would be doing now?

**SH:** Mona is such a fun character. The adult Mona is still on that journey for love and belonging. She is stumbling and fumbling her way towards joy — hopeful and hungry.

# Practice Bringing Your CHARACTER TO LIFE

by Jane McBride

**B**eginning and more seasoned writers alike struggle with bringing characters to life. After writing 41 books and hundreds of short stories, I still wrestle with this. How do we create appealing, intriguing, funny, heartwarming, sympathetic characters? How do we keep the characters from all sounding alike and looking alike?

Practice, and building characters with layers. You can accomplish both with some writing exercises..

## **Have your character write a letter to his younger—or his older—self.**

Write a letter that your character might write to his younger self when he finds himself mixed up in a cheating scandal at school. What would he tell the younger version of himself? Would he warn him against wanting to win a scholarship so much that he was willing to do anything, even betray his deeply held values, to win that scholarship and now face charges by the school board? What about a young character, say eight-years-old? Is he frustrated that he can't do all the things his older brother can do and so writes a letter to himself to be opened when he is the same age as his fourteen-year-old brother?

## **Have your character write his own obituary.**

This sounds morbid, doesn't it? But in writing a future obituary, the character can reveal to himself what he wants to be remembered for. In the obit, let him dream big in naming the things he's accomplished, like winning the Nobel Peace Prize or joining the Navy SEALs and leading a hunt for the world's most wanted terrorist. In your actual

story, you can translate those dreams to more realistic ones like having your character join a service club because he wants to make his town a better place to live or have him join the ROTC. These can be stepping stones to the things he wants to achieve when he is grown.

## **Have your character make a sweeping statement about himself, like “I am the king of the universe” and then set out to disprove himself.**

Does your character suffer from low self-esteem and therefore makes grandiose statements about himself and then list all the reasons why he can't be the “king of the universe” to show that he's a loser and what's more, know that he's a loser? Write down the reasons he thinks he's a loser. Then write down reasons to disprove that. Let your character both demean and praise himself. Ask him why he feels this way. Did his parents put him down when he was younger? Did a bully frighten him and he now feels he's a coward and not worthy of anything good happening to him?

## **Show your character encountering a “thriller” situation. This need not be in the book; it will, however, show how he faces great fear and conflict.**

Put your character in a life-or-death situation. Of course, this will vary according to the age of the main character (MC). If your protagonist is a five-year-old boy, the situation you choose will probably differ from the one a seventeen-year-old boy might face. Does the character flee or fight? Do his palms sweat? Does a young protagonist perhaps

*Practice Bringing Your Character to Life...continued*

wet his pants? Does he look for a way out or does he face the danger head-on? Then use these reactions in your story. Even if the story does not call for the MC to encounter a terrifying situation, he might face a moral dilemma which can be equally as frightening. If he flees from danger in your sample situation, he might duck responsibility when he is called upon to step forward in a different kind of danger. For example, the twelve-year-old boy who sees a boy in his class being bullied because he has epilepsy has a choice to make. Will he stand up for the boy or will he go along with the other boys and make fun of him? Does the sixteen-year-old girl who is challenged by girls of the “popular” group to steal something from a store go along with it or does she walk away? Showing moral courage can be every bit as challenging as showing physical courage.

**Write a page or two of your character’s backstory. This will not be used in the book itself except for reference.**

Go into detail here. Include why the protagonist never felt that her parents loved her as much as they did her sister. Tell why he joined the football team even though he despises the game. Explain why she can’t score well on standardized tests even though she is a 4.0 student. In these details, you might discover motivation for other feelings and thoughts and actions that are included in the book. Does the protagonist who joined the football team even though he despises the game do so because he wants to make his father proud of him? Is it his father’s constant bragging about his own “glory days” and nagging for his son to “be a man” and join his school’s team that makes the teenage protagonist so against sports of any kind, even when he has a chance at an athletic scholarship? What about the fifteen-year-old girl who makes such a poor showing on standardized tests? Does that kind of pressure intimidate her so much that she can’t perform? Is that why she struggles to speak in public or participate in a piano recital? The more you know about your character, the more you can flesh her out and give her plausible and sympathetic reasons for her actions.

**Describe your character physically in great detail, right down to the mole at the corner of her mouth or the way his cowlick refuses to stay down.**

Take this description deeper and use it to explain why your teenage girl has low self-esteem because she must wear a back brace for scoliosis. Tell how this makes her feel and how other kids treat her because of it. Do her classmates make fun of her or are they sympathetic? Does this give the protagonist more sympathy for other people who have a visible “flaw” such as bad acne or alopecia? Or does she make fun of these kids so as to draw attention away from herself?

**Describe how your character dresses.**

Though this may seem superficial, the clothes a character chooses say much about him. Does he go for the preppy look or a sloppy look or somewhere in between? Does she like expensive clothing and uses her parents’ credit cards to buy the latest things? Or is she happy with the things her mom picks out for her at Goodwill because the family can’t afford to shop retail. Maybe she’s not happy with the second-hand clothing and resents being unable to afford more stylish things like her friends buy. Does your character’s manner of dress change according to her moods? Does she have to wear a uniform to school and so chooses to dress in jeans and t-shirts after school? Are clothes a way of rebelling or a statement of who she is?

## IN CONCLUSION

There are many character exercises you can do. Choose two or three and try them out. “Try on” characteristics and then listen to your character’s reactions. Experiment. Let your character have fun. Likely, you’ll have fun along the way as well.