

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly



November 2020

**Pull Your Reader  
Into the Action!**



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION CODE:**

**REYCRAFT BOOKS**

# Table of contents

At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests.....	2
Guest Editorial: Lessons From The Dojo by Jon Bard.....	4
Nonfiction For The Education Market, Part 2: Preparing Your Submission Packet by Kimberly M. Hutmacher.....	7
Writing 101: Pulling The Reader Into The Action by Jane McBride.....	9
Editor Spotlight: Eileen Robinson, Executive Editor, Reycraft Books interview by Lynne Marie.....	11
The Writer's Mindset: Easing Back Into Writing by Candice Ransom.....	15
Bonus Market: Teachers & Writers Magazine interview by Sharon O. Blumberg.....	16
Featured Interview: Susan B. Katz, Kid Lit Queen of Multi-Tasking interview by PJ McIlvaine.....	18
Between the Lines: How I Created a Unique Middle Grade Series by Combining Genres, Passion, Expertise by Nancy Kundhardt Lodge.....	24

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

# At Presstime:

## Native and First Nations-focused Imprint of HarperCollins Accepting Submissions

*Heartdrum* is a Native-focused imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books, author-curated by Cynthia Leitch Smith and edited by Rosemary Brosnan. The focus is on Indigenous stories that reflect Native people whose Nations are located within the borders of what's now called the United States and Canada. In this, the publisher is mindful and inclusive of intersectional identities and various modern settings.

Looking for Native and First Nations writers and writer-illustrators to submit picture book, chapter book, middle grade novel, and young adult novel manuscripts as well as middle grade and young adult nonfiction manuscripts, and both poetry and graphic novel formats. Writing that reflects young protagonists and/or youth-related topics are welcome. Emphasis will be on contemporary, near histories and/or futuristic works, including realistic fiction and genre fiction.

The writing should be for young readers as an audience, not writing for adults that is inclusive of a young characters and/or childhood reflections. Check out the *Heartdrum* Brochure from HarperCollins for information about the imprint and the winter-summer 2021 titles. Submit through the contact form at <https://cynthia-leitchsmith.com/contact/> (scroll down to see the form). Type "Heartdrum" at the beginning of the subject line, followed by your title and byline. In the body of the message, include your query for the manuscript (plot summary) along with a professional bio, including tribal affiliation(s), any website or social media links, and, if you're an illustrator or author-illustrator, a link to your portfolio. Dues to the volume of submissions received, any submissions that fall outside of the focus of the Heartdrum imprint will be deleted without a response.

## Two Agents Open to Middle Grade, Young Adult Submissions

**Erica Bauman** is an agent with Aevitas Creative Literary Management (<https://aevitascreative.com/>). She's seeking middle grade in all genres, from contemporary to mystery to fantasy. She loves quirky, funny stories and main characters who are misfits (and proud of it). She'd especially like to see eerie horror (like *Coraline*) and unique magic. In young adult fiction, she's also open to all genres and especially loves fantasy, mystery, and historical fiction. She likes stories based off of mythology, folklore, and obscure fairy tales, and novels that cross genres. She's on the lookout for stories inspired by classic literature/ballet/opera, mysteries and thrillers with unreliable narrators, and books that play with structure to tell a story in a really unique way. She's also open to MG and YA graphic novels, fiction and nonfiction. In particular she'd like to find a biography of a previously overlooked figure from history, or a deep dive into an interesting moment in history, as well as great family stories told in the graphic novel format. Submit a query letter and the first 20 pages of your manuscript through Query Manager at <https://QueryManager.com/EricaBauman>

**Crystal Orazu** is a Junior Agent at Context Literary Agency (<https://www.contextlit.com/>). She seeks new writers of middle-grade and young adult fiction—in particular fantasy/paranormal and coming-of-age novels. She especially encourages writing that centers the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), LGBTQ+, and non-neurotypical persons that bring joy, humor, and emphasize questioning and subverting the status-quo. She loves both sweet meandering stories as well as darker, more fraught narratives. She's open to all genres of MG and YA fiction. Email a short description of your story, a short bio, and 5-10 pages of text pasted into the body of the email to [querycrystal@contextlit.com](mailto:querycrystal@contextlit.com).

**Independent Publisher Accepting Picture Book and Parenting Book Submissions**

Cardinal Rule Press is an independent publisher that produces realistic picture book fiction and nonfiction for parents that empower children through timeless messages of hope, courage and the Golden Rule. Submissions are being accepted now until February 1, 2020.

Seeking realistic fiction picture books for ages birth-3 or 4-10 (word count up to 1,000), and nonfiction books for parents (word count up to 70k). Please first study the current Cardinal Rule Press title to see if your manuscript fits their mission (<https://cardinalrulepress.com/books/>). Please send the complete manuscript (picture books) or a summary with the first three chapters (nonfiction parenting books). The subject line should read: "SUBMISSION (story title) by (author name)". Include a cover letter in the body of the email with a brief description of the story; a short bio of the author, mentioning publishing history or relevant background information; two to three sentences describing the inspiration for your story or parenting book; a listing of three comparative books published in the last five years and a few sentences describing how your book is different; contact information along with social media links. The manuscript should be attached as a WORD document, Google Doc or PDF file. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced. Do not include artwork or photos with your manuscript.

Email submissions to: [submissions@cardinalrulepress.com](mailto:submissions@cardinalrulepress.com). You will get a confirmation email when we receive your manuscript. Respond to all submissions within 4-6 weeks after the submission period closes. You can read an interview with Maria Dismondy, Founder of Cardinal Rule Press, on author Rosie J. Pova's blog at <https://www.rosiejpova.com/blog/chitchat-with-author-editor-and-founder-of-cardinal-rule-press-maria-dismondy>

**Astra International Picture Book Writing Contest Open to Entries**

The Astra International Picture Book Writing Contest is a unique competition designed to encourage, discover and honor talented writers of texts for picture books from all over the world; to foster literary excellence in books for young children; and to promote international cooperation and understanding through picture books. Sponsored by Astra Publishing House, Ltd. (USA), minedition (Switzerland and France), and Thinkingdom Media Group Limited (China), the Contest will name one Gold Prize Winner who will receive \$10,000, three Silver Prize Winners who will receive \$5000 each, and 20 Finalists who will receive \$1000 each. The winners will have the opportunity to sign publishing contracts with the sponsors to publish the manuscripts in different languages. Each winner will be required to agree that sponsors have a one-year priority option to publish the winner's manuscript to receive the cash prize.

Open to published and unpublished writers who are 21 and older, who have a fiction, nonfiction or poetry manuscript for children ages 3-8 of 1000 words or less. The manuscript may be submitted in any of the following languages: English, Spanish, German, French, or Chinese. Go to <http://www.readinglife.com/writingcontest> and follow the links and instructions to complete and submit an application form, including your name and contact information, details about your occupation, previously published works (up to 50 words), writing prizes or honors (up to 50 words), short biography/profile (up to 200 words) and your original picture book manuscript. Entries must be received by 11:59 a.m. ET on April 30, 2021. Winners will be announced in October 2021, and an award ceremony will be held in October or November 2021 (date and location TBD). You may not submit the manuscript to any other contests or publishers while under consideration for this award.

**Book Award for Environmental Children's Books Published in 2020**

Since 2005, the Green Earth Book Award, sponsored by The Nature Generation, has honored 147 children's books about nature and the environment. Now accepting nominations for the 2021 Green Earth Book Award **until December 15, 2020**. Books published in 2020 that best convey the message of environmental stewardship will be selected by an expert panel of judges in 4 categories: Picture Book, Children's Fiction (novels for readers up to age 12), Young Adult Fiction (age 13 to 21), Children's Nonfiction (for readers from infancy to age 12, Young Adult Nonfiction (12 to age 21). Each category will have an award of \$500 to the author and \$500 to the illustrator/photographer (or \$1,000 if the author and illustrator/photographer is the same person). The short list will be announced in March 2021, and the winners will be announced on Earth Day, April 22, 2021. Nomination forms and instructions can be found at <http://www.natgen.org/green-earth-book-awards/>

## Lessons From The Dojo

by Jon Bard

Dear Reader:

I've spent a fair chunk of my adult life training in martial arts, and I often find myself revisiting some of the important lessons I've learned from that experience. In the end, the punches and kicks aren't really the important elements of what I've learned in various dojos. It's the mental lessons that have truly made the largest impact.

While the experience of writing a children's book and, say, mastering a roundhouse kick are clearly different, the mindset is actually quite similar. In this article, I'd like to share some of my most significant realizations, and how they can apply to your own journey as a writer.

### How To Earn Your Black Belt

I'm not the world's greatest athlete. And, as I watched people half my age deliver head kicks and flying, spinning bits of Shaolin-style wizardry, I'd sometimes start to question the path I was on, and doubt that I had what it took to earn a black belt someday.

But my entire mindset changed with a single sentence. A 5th Degree "Master" visited our class and delivered an insight that completely changed my outlook. He said:

*You may look at a black belt wearer and think, "That person is so much more talented than I am" or "That black belt has skills and physical abilities I don't have". And you get discouraged.*

*But here's the big secret. People don't earn their black belts by being better than everyone else. They earn their black belts by not giving up. By challenging themselves to keep going even when it's hard. By working diligently every day to improve.*

And then he said one of the most important things I've heard in my life:

***A black belt is just a white belt who didn't quit.***

That changed everything. Suddenly, I realized that achievement isn't purely a function of talent or luck. It is, first and foremost, the result of *persistence*. Of never giving up, even when you feel you're "less than" others in your field. Because, chances are, those successes, be they 5th Degree martial arts masters or Newbery winners, aren't all that different from you and I.

They just didn't quit. And they worked every day to get better.

There is nothing stopping you from following in their footsteps. Don't quit. Keep getting better. Your black belt awaits.

### Focus on Your Strengths, Not Your Weaknesses

So yeah, no one will ever call me "gazelle-like" or a portrait of grace in action. But, as I moved through my martial arts journey, I soon found that I had real strengths to employ. I have fast hands, a strong center of gravity and the ability to stay calm even under very intense conditions.

So I built a personal style based around those traits. I didn't worry about what I couldn't do. I just pinpointed the things I could do. And I got very good at them.

What are your strong points? Do you give them the attention they deserve, or do you obsess over your perceived weaknesses? Do you move confidently forward, with the mindset “I'm damn good at this, now I want to get better!”, or do you fret over the things you can't do quite as well?

I'll never be able to deliver a spinning head kick. I've come to terms with that. So I built a style that doesn't require me to ever be able to do it. And then I forgot about it.

Stop living inside your weaknesses. Start living inside your (very real) strengths.

### **It's Not About How Hard You Try – It's About Pushing on the Right Spot**

Before the pandemic struck, I was training in Systema, a fascinating Russian self-defense regimen. The key of Systema is simple, understated actions. A shrug of the shoulder or a light push of a body part can have a massive impact – even more than a big kick or a powerful punch.

Watching Systema experts manhandle much larger opponents while barely moving was an extraordinary thing to view. At first, it seemed impossible. A big guy comes storming in and, with barely an observable movement, the defender takes him down and gains control.

I thought “No way. This isn't real.” Until it was demonstrated on me. Yeah, it's real.

The key, I learned, was total relaxation and focusing sharply targeted actions only where they are most impactful. No wasted energy, no flailing around at multiple targets. Just flow and relax, and only do what's necessary for success.

On your journey to writing success, ask yourself “Am I relaxed or tense? Am I chasing squirrels or am I focused on one thing? Is every action I'm taking leading me where I want to go, or am I flailing?”

If you don't like the answers you give, then stop, breathe and recalibrate. Cut out all the extraneous stuff, relax and don't try so hard. Finding success as a writer needn't be a grueling war of attrition. It can be a calm, peaceful and joyful path.

You just have to flow and relax. And you'll be unstoppable.

### **You Know This is Gonna End, Right?**

In the early days of the pandemic, I shared a story from my black belt test that seemed to really connect with folks, so I wanted to mention it here.

We've endured so much this past year, on so many fronts. And, some days, it seems like things will stay this way forever.

But what happened to me on the day of my test has been an important piece of my ability to keep moving forward with a positive attitude, no matter the circumstance. Perhaps it will help you navigate these “interesting” times, and give you the inner strength to carry forward to your writing dreams, even when things seem tough.

*Lessons From The Dojo...continued*

My black belt test was a grueling affair — 8 1/2 hours of intense mental and physical ordeals.

At one point, we were told to run up a steep hill and, when we got to the top, perform one of our forms. Then back down, then back up. Over and over.

People half my age were green at the gills (and worse!) and I wondered exactly how much more I could take. I fought back as my mind told me to just quit. Just then, after coming down the hill, my Sensei (teacher) walked up to me and said:

*"You know this is gonna end, right? This will not last forever."*

Something switched in my brain. Because, when you're running up and down a hill, it's easy to start thinking you'll spend the rest of your life running up and down that hill. When you're inside an intense ordeal, it's hard to see anything else.

Until someone is kind enough to remind you that: "You know this is gonna end, right? This will not last forever."

After that, my mindset changed completely. I immediately told myself "Every step I take, every minute that passes is one step and one minute closer to the end. And then I'll celebrate."

For the rest of the test, I kept the image of receiving my belt and the wonderful feeling I'd have front and center. And I kept telling myself "another minute closer to the end."

Whatever you're experiencing, every moment you rise to the challenge is another moment closer to triumph. Never forget that.

So relax. Focus. Don't quit. And keep moving forward. Your own "black belt" awaits. And it's closer than you think.

Sincerely,

*Jon Bard*



# Writing Nonfiction for the Education Market

## PART 2: PREPARING YOUR SUBMISSION PACKET

by Kimberly M. Hutmacher

To recap, in Part 1 of this series (October 2020 *CBI*), I explained what writing series nonfiction for the education market is and how it differs from trade nonfiction. I also covered the skills required for this type of writing, researching publishers, and crafting writing samples. Now that your samples are ready, there are some other components to the packet that need to be discussed.

### Resume

You do not always need to include a resume, but you should include a resume if the submission guidelines request it. You might also include a resume if your work experience lends itself to this kind of writing. Perhaps you're a teacher or have held writing and/or editing positions with publishing groups. Or, maybe your work experience makes you an expert on certain topics. If you're a historian or work in the field of science, then by all means, definitely include a resume with this information. Your resume should include a letterhead with your address and contact information. The body should be divided as follows: objective, writing skills, editing skills, other specialized skills, education, recent employment history, and references. Moira Allen shares some great advice and resume examples here <https://www.writing-world.com/business/resume.shtml>

### Publication List

If you only have a handful of writing credits, a publication list is not necessary. When I first began submitting packets and didn't have a lot of experience, I would include something like this in my cover letter:

My first picture book, PAWS, CLAWS, HANDS, AND FEET is scheduled for publication with Sylvan Dell Publishing in 2008. I've also had a few poems and stories purchased by the Cricket Magazine Group and *Fun For Kidz* magazine.

If you have more than four, then you should submit a separate list. My list has a section for each different type of credit. I have a list of magazine credits, a list of anthology credits, and a list of book credits. Each list is organized chronologically. This is a sample of a few rows from the book section of my publication list:

#### Book Publications

PAWS, CLAWS, HANDS, AND FEET  
Arbordale Press, 2009

SLED DOGS, Capstone Press, 2010

THERAPY DOGS, Capstone Press, 2010

TELEVISION AND MOVIE DOGS  
Capstone Press, 2010

MOUNTAINS, Capstone Press, 2010

CAVES, Capstone Press, 2010

DELTAS, Capstone Press, 2011

ISLANDS, Capstone Press, 2011

PICTURE BOOK PARTIES  
Libraries Unlimited, 2011

If you do not have any credits yet, you do not need to mention publications at all.

### Cover Letters

While a resume and publication list are optional, a cover letter is not. You should always include a cover letter. You should always also try to address your letter and packet to a specific editor. I've had luck finding the names of specific editors on publisher's websites, LinkedIn, through writing conferences, via publications devoted to writing for children (like *CBI*



*Preparing Your Submission Packet...continued*

and the SCBWI Bulletin), and on Facebook groups and message boards dedicated to the industry of writing for children. I highly recommend following these publishers on social media and also their blogs, if they have them.

Once you have a contact, it's time to start crafting that cover letter. In the first paragraph, you want to state why you are contacting this editor. Did you meet this editor at a writing conference or connect via an online workshop? Are you responding to a call for writers that the publisher posted on social media or in a writer's newsletter? Maybe you simply read their guidelines and some of their books and felt like you would be a good fit for the subject matters that they cover? Whatever the reason, this is the paragraph to explain it.

The next paragraph or two should include your personal expertise and subject areas of interest. If you have a few publishing credits, now is the time to mention them. If you have more than a few, use this opportunity to direct them to your publication list. Are you a subject matter expert? Are you a teacher, or do you work in a specific field that this publisher needs writers for? If you answered yes to any of those questions, include that information. These paragraphs should also include a short list of subject areas you're interested in writing about. For instance, if STEM is your thing, you will want to let them know that you're interested in writing about science, technology, engineering and math. For some of you, history and biography might be a better fit. Wherever your interest lies, this is the place to mention it. To personalize the letter a bit and to let the editor know that you've done your research, this would also be a good time to mention a few books that they've previously published that you especially enjoyed and/or connected with.

Your closing should solidify your professionalism. Look back at the special skills we discussed in Part One of this series. Let the editor know that you are organized, follow guidelines/directions well, and that you meet your deadlines. Last but not least, politely invite the editor to contact you regarding any future assignments they feel might be a good fit, and thank them for their time and consideration.

Most publishers take email submissions now, but for those that only accept snail mail, be sure to include a

business card and either a self-addressed stamped envelope or a postcard for a reply. I send updated packets to publishers no more than twice a year. You want them to keep you in mind, but you don't want to be a bother. They will contact you if they feel that you are a good fit for a specific book/series.

## Markets

As far as finding publishers for the school/library market, Evelyn B. Christensen's author website has an educational publisher market list at <http://evelynchristensen.com/markets.html>. This is a good place to start, but be sure to click through on each listing to get current submission guidelines. There are other ways to find markets. Don't be shy. Talk to your local public children's librarian and/or school librarian/media specialist. Ask if they might be willing to share some of the catalogs they receive from educational publishers. Taking a few hours to scan the children's nonfiction section of the library will also lead to a treasure trove of market opportunities. Remember that you are looking for publishers that specialize in nonfiction series books.

Don't forget about conferences. Conferences hosted by local reading councils, ALA, and individual state school library media conferences all have halls brimming with publisher's booths. If you don't have the funds to attend the actual conference, you can often-times purchase a less expensive pass that allows you to browse the halls. When you do, pick up as many catalogs as possible. You can also search for Facebook groups under keywords like "work-for-hire writing" or "freelance writers". Members of such groups are generous at sharing information about publishers. Next month we'll talk about what happens when you actually land a project. Stay tuned.

## BOOK PACKAGERS

This type of writing work is also available via book packagers. Book packagers are hired by publishers to oversee the development, writing, and editing of specific projects. You would submit the same packet to them that you submit to publishers directly. Keep in mind that you will most likely make less money working for a packager than a publisher directly, but sometimes packagers offer a good opportunity to break in and acquire some needed experience and credits. You can find a list of book packagers on the American Book Producers Association website at <https://abpaonline.org/>

# PULLING THE READER INTO THE



by Jane McBride

**H**ow do we pull readers into the action? More importantly, how do we keep them there? If readers are only spectators in your book, you have lost them early on. Even more importantly, the editor or agent won't get past the first pages of your manuscript without sending it to the reject pile.

So how do we go about it?

**Involve the senses.** Employing the five senses is a great way to yank a reader into a story. Don't just say, "He was stranded in the jungle." Instead, use the senses to say how the main character was fighting for his life in the hostile jungle. Did he smell blood from the fresh kill of a zebra by a pride of lions? Did he hear the flapping of hundreds of wings as birds took off at the scent of hunters? Did he feel the humidity that turned his clothes to wet rags that clung to him? Did he see the evidence of man's encroachment into the jungle in the trenches carved into the ground where pipes would be laid? Did he taste the coming rain? You probably won't use all five senses in every scene, but try to employ at least a couple. Don't forget smell. It is one of the most powerful senses and is often overlooked.

**Consider changing tenses.** I've written in earlier articles that I didn't warm up to using present tense right away. Instead, I held fast to the simple past, and, I admit, that is still my preferred tense for writing. However, I've discovered that using present tense in certain situations gives a sense of immediacy to a story that the simple past can't. If you want to pull your reader into a story's action, try writing in present tense. See if your prose doesn't clip along at a faster rate, thereby making your reader feel as if he's right there with the main character.

**Consider changing point-of-view.** Along with changing the tense, try changing your point-of-view. If you normally write in third person, experiment with first person. It seems to work especially well with present tense. A reader can identify with the "I" character and feel what he feels, think what he thinks, do what he does.

**Use strong verbs.** I can't stress this too much. A strong verb can replace a weak verb and an adverb. It can take so-so writing to the next level simply by enlivening the writing. Consider the following: Sheri talked with the new roommate about the other girls in the apartment. Now compare it to this: Sheri gossiped with the new roommate. Which gives you more of a sense of the conversation? The second, I hope. See below for more examples of using strong rather than weak verbs.

**Pare your writing to the bone.** Repeat with me: omit unnecessary words. What words could be unnecessary in the following:

Kevin walked inside the house. He closed the door loudly. He walked to the kitchen. He found his mother in the kitchen. She was working at the stove. She was cooking. Kevin sat down on a chair.

Poor Kevin. He has the most boring life ever. Let's rewrite this.

Kevin stomped inside and slammed the door. He headed to the kitchen where he found his mother cooking. He plopped on a chair.

We cut the first passage by thirteen words, from 37 to 24. We cut several prepositional phrases (*inside*

*Pulling The Reader Into The Action continued*

*the house, at the stove*) and an adverb (*loudly*). We also did away with repetition. Rather than say “She was working at the stove. She was cooking,” we simply said “he found his mother cooking.” If she was working at the stove, we assume she was cooking. We also added active verbs in the place of bland ones, *stomped* rather than *walked*, *slammed* rather than *closed*, *plopped* rather than *sat*.

**Use the active voice.** Active voice is when the subject of a sentence does an action or completes an action: *Henry rode the horse to town to get the doctor*. In the passive voice, the subject is acted upon. In effect, the subject and the object switch places. If we changed the above example to passive voice, it would read something like: *The horse was ridden by Henry into town*. Not only is the construction awkward, it also puts the emphasis upon the horse rather than Henry.

Active: Everyone had a good time at the family reunion.

Passive: A good time was had by everyone at the reunion.

**Make the protagonist likeable.** Nothing turns a reader off like an unlikeable main character. How can she be drawn into a story’s action if she can’t stand the character? She can’t. We naturally want to like the protagonist. We want to root for her. We want to cheer when she succeeds and to mourn when she doesn’t. Her triumphs become our triumphs, her failures our failures. Make her noble. Make her kind. Make her someone a reader will want to emulate.

But don’t make her perfect. Perfect people are boring people. Give your protagonist a flaw or two. Is she afraid of the water? Great. That will make for wonderful conflict when she has to jump in a lake to save her little sister. Does she have trouble in school because she has dyslexia? Imagine her struggles as she works to earn a scholarship. If your character is courageous, give her something that scares her to death that she must do if she is to save her sister, the school, the planet. Flaws make for conflict.

**Give your protagonist a secret.** Readers love secrets. They want to discover them. They want to be “in on” the secret. When they know something that

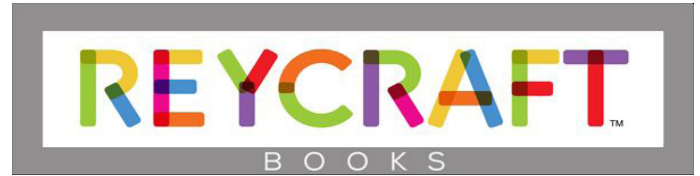
other people don’t know, they feel an immediate kinship with the protagonist. What if you don’t want the secret known right away? That’s okay, too. That will motivate readers to keep reading and find out what the secret is. Perhaps the main character appears to struggle with reading and writing but is really very good at it and is hiding his skill for a compelling reason.

**Raise the suspense.** Whether or not you are writing suspense, every story can benefit by having a suspense element. It need not be a mystery. It can be something as simple as “Will Kevin invite Rosemary to the prom?” It can be “Will I find my way home after running away?” It can be “How do I keep my parents from finding out that I’m gay?” Each of these has an element of suspense. Play it up. Make the reader keep turning the pages in his desire to find out the answer.

**Pose a question.** This goes along with the idea of secrets and suspense. Ask an important question right at the beginning of the story. Herman Melville did a masterful job of this in *Moby Dick*, causing readers to wonder will Captain Ahab be able to kill the huge whale. Everything else pales compared to that over-arching question as Ahab slips further and further into obsession. Readers feel the tension rise with every page as the captain fights with everything he has to achieve his goal. The question you pose in your book may not be as life-altering, but it should be important to your character, and, therefore, to the readers. Perhaps you are writing a picture book about a little boy following the path of a ladybug. He wants to know if the ladybug will make it across the busy sidewalk without being stepped on and crushed. He watches the red-and-black bug intently, all the while praying that it will make it to the other side. Our young protagonist cares about the ladybug and is rooting for it to make the perilous journey safely.

You will no doubt find other ways to pull the reader into your story. Your goal is to make readers feel not that they are reading a story but that they are living it along with the character.

# Eileen Robinson, Executive Editor



interview by Lynne Marie

Eileen Robinson is back with us again to share insights on another facet of her busy life—executive editor and consultant to the publisher at Reycraft Books ([reycraft-books.com](http://reycraft-books.com)), a new children’s trade imprint of Benchmark Education/Newmark Learning that she helped build. She’s also the Publisher of Move Books ([move-books.com](http://move-books.com), see her interview about Move Books in the August 2020 issue of CBI). She brings over 20 years experience to these roles, both independently and in-house at Scholastic and Harcourt. In addition to helping authors individually, she partners with Harold Underdown via [kidsbookrevisions.com](http://kidsbookrevisions.com) for a yearly retreat at Highlights, and workshops and webinars. And she sits on the Connecticut Library Digital Board.

**LYNNE MARIE:** I’m so excited to have more time with you! Your contributions to the KidLit Community are immense and I’m thrilled to be able to share some of your valuable insights. First, please tell us a little bit about how you helped launch and brand Reycraft Books. How would you describe the Reycraft brand? What is its publishing goal?

**EILEEN ROBINSON:** Starting with brilliant editors Sunita Apte (Executive Editor), Wiley Blevins (Editorial Director), and Reycraft’s Publisher, Sera Reycraft, we discussed the kinds of books we wanted to publish and how those books would fit into Sera’s mission for all children to be able to see themselves in literature, and to have their culture and lives represented authentically. The editorial staff expanded within months, and though we weren’t sure what markets we wanted to tackle at the time, we were excited to bring in more books with #OwnVoices, by both underrepresented authors and illustrators, and this is the important thing that I believe

makes us unique.

As a young girl, Sera Reycraft yearned to see herself in literature and worked toward the day she could create an imprint like this for children.

“I remember turning to books, searching for characters that looked like me, characters that mirrored my feelings and experiences. I remember not finding any.”—Sera Reycraft.



This is at the heart of the mission.

**LM:** Please explain how books geared toward the trade, school and library, and mass market might be different from one another?

**ER:** There are lots of differences but to be brief—trade normally refers to the bookstore market, but can include other areas as well. School and library publishing refers to your libraries, both school and public. Then you also have educational publishing for books that go into the classroom. Mass market is more geared to your large retailers, like Target, Walmart, etc, and these are more often just paperbacks.

**LM:** What market does Reycraft books primarily target, or what percentage do you say is the focus for each market?

**ER:** We are a very young imprint, only a year old. We are focusing on both the school/library and trade markets. But many of our books also go into classroom collections which is one of the fantastic things about how

*Eileen Robinson...continued*

we publish. It is an opportunity for authors to have their books read in classrooms and used as supplemental text to the curriculum or in special initiatives and activities teachers might be planning.

**LM:** You originally started in Fall, 2019 with 24 titles. How many titles do you currently have under this imprint? What are your future plans? Has the direction changed at all?

**ER:** We currently have 71 titles as of Fall 2020. We are looking to publish more middle grade and graphic novels and would love to see more contemporary fiction!

**LM:** To give our readers a sense of the imprint and what you are trying to achieve, what five buzz words or phrases would you use to describe Reycraft books?

**ER:** Diverse, Inclusive, Authentic, Underrepresented, and Expansive.

**LM:** Your job description includes developing a marketing strategy for a book. Is there anything that an author can do during the conception and/or development process of their project or keep in mind that will best facilitate an effective marketing strategy? For example, I always recommend that a project have at least three marketable hooks. Thoughts?

**ER:**

- Create a website your potential audience can find. If websites are not your thing, that's OK. Do something that fires you up and keeps you visible. Perhaps it's a blog—if you have the time to maintain one.
- Join online writer's discussions like Kidlit.com's Facebook group to communicate with other writers. If you are stuck, this may give you some ideas.
- Find one social media platform that you enjoy working on where you can maintain connections with and engage with people. Don't make every post about your book. Build connections. Show interest in and support for other people, retweeting and liking posts that resonate with you.
- Connect with local booksellers and librarians. Let them know you are a writer. Spend time there writing when you can or looking at other's books. They will love being a part of your success story. It helps

to build those relationships in the community because it is one of the first places you begin build your readership when your book is published—book signings and readings etc.

These are no-cost or low-cost things that any writer can do. It is the very beginning of branding, marketing, and PR. And as the book gets closer to being published, your publisher will involve you in other plans as well. Sales will come.

**LM:** Another part of your job is to analyze market needs. Is there anything that a layperson might do to have a finger on the pulse of the market? For example, when I sent my first book to Scholastic, I knew they didn't have a school bus book in the last Back-to-School Book Club flier. That was an easy thing to spot—but are there other ways, even if a bit more challenging?

**ER:**

- Read whatever it is you want to publish. If you are publishing picture books, then read picture books. It may seem obvious, but you'd be surprised by the number of writers who don't read what they write. They say they don't want to be “influenced” by another author's work, and then they wonder why their story is rejected. Most of us have to imitate the masters before we break out on our own.
- Read the trade magazines for the market you want to write for. For example, if you're interested in writing for a school and library publisher, check out *School Library Journal* ([www.slj.com](http://www.slj.com)). Then look at those publisher's websites. For trade publishing, you could look at *Publishers Weekly*, *Horn Book*, and *Booklist*. All of these are great resources to keep your knowledge base of the children's industry growing. For instance, *Publishers Weekly's* Children's Bookshelf focuses specifically on children's literature: [bit.ly/childrensbookshelf](http://bit.ly/childrensbookshelf). *Kweli Journal* ([www.kweli-journal.org](http://www.kweli-journal.org)) offers a newsletter and blog for writers, as well as conferences and programs throughout the year pertaining to children's literature.
- Harold Underdown's Purple Crayon ([www.underdown.org](http://www.underdown.org)) is a children's book editor and consultant who regularly works with authors through our Highlights Revision retreats, Highlights Crash Course, webinars, workshops and more. His website offers information on all things writing, illustrating, and

## Eileen Robinson...continued

publishing children's books. He is also the author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books*—a guide that every new writer should have on their shelf. It is in its 3rd edition, and going into its 4th edition (virtual).

- Cynthia Leitich-Smith ([cynthia-leitichsmith.com](http://cynthia-leitichsmith.com)) is a *New York Times* award-winning children's and YA author who is an advocate for Indigenous People and there is much to learn from the publishing professionals she interviews on her blog, Cynsations ([cynthia-leitichsmith.com/cynsations](http://cynthia-leitichsmith.com/cynsations)). Follow her on social media and see her new imprint Heartdrum (Harpercollins), stories by Native creators.
- SCBWI ([www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org)) offers resources and 52 awards and grants for writers every year.
- The Brown Bookshelf ([thebrownbookshelf.com](http://thebrownbookshelf.com)) is a group of authors and illustrators advocating for more representation of African American voices in children's literature.
- We Need Diverse Books ([diversebooks.org](http://diversebooks.org)) is a nonprofit organization that advocates for change in the publishing industry to make diversity more prevalent in children's books.

There are all sorts of lists: Pura Belpré Award, Coretta Scott King Award, Caldecott Award, Newbery Award and "Best Of" lists like the AICL Award (American Indians in Children's Literature, Asian/Pacific American Award, to name a few. Go to ALA (American Library Association) Awards Lists to find more.

These are just a few of the great resources you can use.

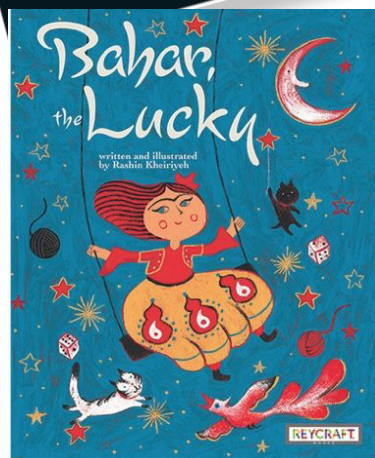
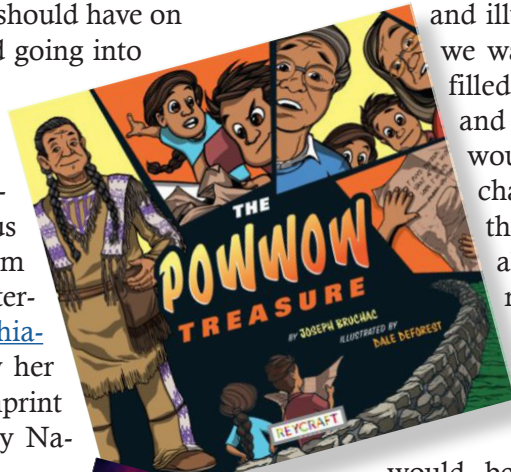
**LM:** As an example, please share a recent book you acquired and how you viewed it in terms of marketing potential. What were the topics and themes? How did these fit?

**ER:** We publish The Powwow Mysteries series by Joseph Bruchac, award-winning Native American author, and illustrator Dale Deforest. We knew we wanted something for readers that filled in the gap between picture books and chapter books. Something that wouldn't be as intimidating, would challenge readers a little and get them ready for the next stage, but also help them feel successful as readers. These books are fantastic hybrids, mixed with prose and graphic novel elements.

So, we published the first in what would become The Powwow Mysteries series: *The Powwow Thief*, a story about two Native American children who love to solve mysteries and do so in the backdrop of the powwows that their grandparents are a part of during the year. Readers are immersed in this contemporary mystery with ordinary kids while getting a peek into the Native American culture.

Joseph Bruchac is a traditional storyteller and enrolled member of the Nulhegan Band of the Abenaki Nation. Dale Deforest, tribally enrolled, was raised on the Navajo Reservation in northwestern New Mexico. So, the authenticity is there and from a marketing standpoint this gives the book strength. This book has been received by reviewers, and in the classroom, trade and library markets. We've worked with Joe on many presentations, webcasts, and at conferences like ALA and SLJ's Virtual Day of Dialogue. This is but a sampling of what the marking involves.

Native American culture has been misunderstood for a long time with books that are error-ridden. Bringing in more contemporary books mixed with traditional culture helps to begin to explain and correct—for new readers—some of what we grew up with.



*Eileen Robinson...continued*

Other books that we've done like this are *Spotted Tail* by David Heska Wanbli Weiden, illustrated by Pat Kinsella (nonfiction for older readers, 2019) which has received 2020 Spur Award, Outstanding Merit for Best Children's Book of the Year from Bank Street and on AICL's 2019 Best of List. We also have *The Reluctant Storyteller* by Art Coulson, illustrated by Carlin Bear Don't Walk (middle-grade, 2020), *The Energy of Thunder Beings* by Art Coulson and Roy Boney, Jr. and *Cherokee Life Today* by award-winning Traci Sorell. Joseph Bruchac also has two more in his series, *The Powwow Dog* and *The Powwow Treasure*.

These all fit very well into our mission. See [www.reycraftbooks.com](http://www.reycraftbooks.com) for more.

**LM:** How do you create your seasonal catalogs? Are there specific holes that you try to fill with each particular season? For example, back to school or holiday tie-in book, etc.?

**ER:** We just want great books like all publishers do. We publish picture books, transitional chapter books, chapter books, middlegrade, nonfiction and graphic novels. If you have a unique story to tell or a perspective or twist on a common storyline, we'd love to see it. Sometimes we don't know what we are looking for till we get it. Other times, we have fun and eye-opening discussions of what we would like to see come in from an author. As we are young and still building, we don't really do seasonal catalogs yet specifically for back-to-school or holiday, but we will promote any titles we have in those categories in other ways.

**LM:** In general, if someone were to submit to Reycraft books via the website, what would the process be like? Would the book be directed to a specific editor? If one editor passes, but knows of another that might be interested, will it get passed along?

**ER:** The process for submission is pretty easy. You submit via the website through [www.reycraftbooks.com/submissions.html](http://www.reycraftbooks.com/submissions.html). There are several readers on a manuscript and we discuss every manuscript in our editorial meetings. We make it a point of giving every manuscript the attention it deserves.

**LM:** Please share your current wishlist, as well as note what Reycraft may be looking for in general.

**ER:** We are looking for stories by underrepresented authors who feel they have a unique story to tell or have a different perspective or approach to a well-worn topic. We'd would love to see more contemporary fiction—that's at the top of our list!

We accept picture books, transitional chapter books, chapter books, middle grade, nonfiction, graphic novels and if you've got something that you are not quite sure where it fits, it's out-of-the-box, send it!

## ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE

CBI subscribers can take advantage of an **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity to Reycraft Books by sending their submission via email to [erobinson@reycraftbooks.com](mailto:erobinson@reycraftbooks.com). The subject line should read **11/2020 CBI ER: (Story Headline) by (Authors Name)**. Or, you can submit through the online submission form at [www.reycraftbooks.com/submissions.html](http://www.reycraftbooks.com/submissions.html) and put "(For Eileen Robinson, 11/2020 CBI)" in the field after the title of your manuscript. Before submitting, study the guidelines at [www.reycraftbooks.com/submissions.html](http://www.reycraftbooks.com/submissions.html). Your cover letter should be in the email. Manuscript may be attached as a Word document (.doc). Will respond to those interested in within 3 months. **This Above the Slushpile code expires December 31, 2020.**

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

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

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

# EASING Back Into WRITING

by Candice Ransom

**W**e are now eight months into this tumultuous time of uncertainty and upside-down expectations. Early on, most of us had trouble concentrating. We set aside works-in-progress. To keep sane, we took up other creative outlets with meditative benefits: knitting, baking bread, birdwatching, painting, gardening. I turned my dining room into a paper crafting studio.

Once September came, and with it that purposeful, back-to-school feeling, our thoughts shifted to our real work again. Summer was over, we had knitted and gardened and painted ourselves out. My frenzied paper crafting efforts stopped. I hadn't been in my home office for ages, except for computer work. I missed writing but wasn't sure where to begin. Ideas and works-in-progress from March had gone stale or seemed irrelevant. How to move forward?

I cleaned my office. It was horrible. Papers, books, and files were stacked everywhere. Two cats live part-time in that room and it was dirty. It took five days to purge files, toss papers, sort books, and scrub every surface. I moved previous works-in-progress out of view. Now my office was a clean slate and I could think more clearly.

Still, I hesitated. Engrossed in grown-up problems for so long, I'd lost my ability to connect with my audience. To reach that part of myself again, I made a list of things I loved as a kid:

- Birds
- Animals
- Cats
- Playing kickball
- Victorian houses with secret panels
- Dinosaurs
- Astronomy
- Ghosts
- Everyday magic
- Drawing
- Reading and books
- Codes, ciphers, secret languages
- Comics
- Mysteries
- Woods, fields, and creeks

How freeing it felt to remember what I loved as a ten-year-old growing up in the turbulent sixties, aware of events, but still a kid! Then I made a second list, this time on the things I loved as an adult:

- Birds
- Animals
- Cats
- Abandoned houses, cars, and trucks
- Photography
- Victorian houses with secret panels and rooms
- Field guides and journals
- Natural history
- Natural history museums and taxidermy
- Books and reading
- Fossils
- Keeping illustrated journals
- Collecting vintage children's books
- Maps and making maps
- Woods, fields and creeks

Some items are on both lists; some childhood interests have expanded. Ghosts and magic didn't make it to adulthood (though the child inside me still wants magic). Basically, I'm the same person I was all those years ago. A new idea began forming in my mind: a setting in the woods, an empty old house with strange writing on the walls, two kids—one a professional ghost-hunter, the other a black holes freak, a cat that eats everything.

If you want to get back to serious writing, ease into the process. Try making a dual list. One list on the things you loved as a kid, the other your adult loves. Make the lists specific, at least 10 to 15 items. What interests are on both lists? What childhood passions have migrated to adult tastes? What do you still love? Most likely, you haven't changed that much. And kids, even though they live in a different world than we did, are still kids.

Now, circle that item you still love. Then start a new list: setting, characters, bits of plot . . . soon you'll be writing again.





interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

Let's meet Asari Beale, Executive Director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative (a resource for teaching the art of writing to people of all ages) and Editor of the Collaborative's publication, *Teachers & Writers Magazine* ([teachersandwritersmagazine.org/](http://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/)).

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Please tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you came to be Executive Director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative and editor of *Teachers & Writers Magazine*?

**ASARI BEALE:** I came to Teachers & Writers Collaborative—and *Teachers & Writers Magazine*—through my deep belief in the power of literature to transform the lives of young people. My professional life has been a combination of writing, teaching and serving vulnerable communities in New York City. When the opportunity to work with Teachers & Writers came up, I jumped at the chance. I wanted to be a part of an organization with such an impressive history of partnering writers with schools and to inspire young people to find their voices through writing. As the Director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, I work with three other senior editors and with several associate editors to publish the online magazine.

**SB:** Could you please explain your magazine's intended purpose?

**AB:** *Teachers & Writers Magazine* is exclusively dedicated to publishing resources for teaching creative writing. We publish lesson plans, interviews, essays, and student writing. Our primary audience consists of teachers and teaching artists. The magazine also serves as a means for the teaching artists who lead Teachers & Writers Collaborative's writing workshops. Their goal is to share their experiences and expertise. Our aim is to provide peer-to-peer resources for educators, based on lived classroom experience—you won't find any generic "Top 10" lists in our magazine.

**SB:** Do you prefer authors who are good/qualified at teaching writing?

**AB:** Yes we do. The reason is because all of our content has to do with the art of teaching creative writing, so we seek authors who are experienced writing teachers.

**SB:** Do the writing techniques featured in articles need to be classroom tested?

**AB:** One of the key elements that our editorial board looks for is a sense that the techniques described are classroom-tested. They like to see how lesson plans have played out in real classroom settings, and how the teacher or teaching artist adjusted or innovated to meet the needs of the students.

**SB:** What types of content are you looking for?

**AB:** We are looking for narrative lesson plans that respond to the needs of the moment. For example, right now we are interested in how social/racial justice themes can be explored through creative writing. We are always interested in innovative classroom writing projects. We are looking for teachers and teaching artists to share the imaginative lesson plans that have inspired their students. We also seek interviews with diverse established or emerging published writers who can reflect on the intersection between teaching and writing.

**SB:** What are some common submission mistakes?

**AB:** The most common submission mistake is for prospective writers to submit a piece that does not have to do with teaching creative writing. The #1 criteria for anything that we publish is that it must focus on teaching creative writing. So pieces about teaching academic writing or basic literacy are not a good fit. Another submission mistake is to submit something written in an impersonal style—for example in the style of a blog or academic paper. We really do look for an authentic, lively, personal voice. The submissions guideline page on our magazine site includes links to sample writing, which can give writers a sense of the style we are looking for: <https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/about-us/submission-guidelines>

*Teachers & Writers Magazine continued*

**SB:** How do prospective writers submit to your magazine?

**AB:** We are now using Submittable to accept submissions. Prospective writers should, first, review our submissions guidelines, and then submit at: <https://twc.submittable.com/submit>.

**SB:** What is the compensation fee that prospective writers are paid?

**AB:** Writers are paid \$75 - \$350, depending on the length and scope of the article.

**SB:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**AB:** We are open to queries as well as full submissions. If a prospective author wants to pitch an idea, they can use the Submittable form to send in the pitch. They should also include a link to something they've written in a similar style to that with which they would write the pitched story.



# SUSAN B. KATZ

## KID LIT QUEEN OF MULTI-TASKING

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**A**ward-winning children's author and speaker Susan B. Katz is the epitome of prolific. Taking the pandemic in stride and adapting with social media, Katz juggles a multitude of projects that would leave most writers exhausted with a mind-boggling 19 books coming out in 2020-2021 (by the time you read this it may be more). Fiction, nonfiction picture books, chapter book biographies, rhyme, trade titles, YA—you name it, Katz has probably written it, or if not, she'll create it. Ideas come to her fast and furious: on airplanes, while traveling, even while sleeping. No writer's block here! A native of Michigan, Katz loves salsa dancing and lazy (or maybe not) days at the beach. Her website is <https://susankatzbooks.com/>

**PJ McILVAINE:** You're an extremely prolific writer. Was it always that way?

**SUSAN B. KATZ:** Yes! I've been writing since I was a kid and started submitting manuscripts in my mid-20s. After teaching for a few years in the US, I moved to Spain to teach at the American School of Valencia. There, I met several visiting authors, including Bruce Coville (whose animated presentation inspired me to want to be an author and bring books to life in-person) and Anne Miranda. I showed Anne my first manuscript, in 1996 and she said, "Send this to my agent." When I returned to California, I sent it out to a bunch of agents and editors and got an agent—not hers, but the agent I am with today. From there, it took ten years of submitting, growing a very thick skin from binders full of rejections, attending SCBWI conferences, receiving critiques in my bi-weekly San Francisco writer's group, until I finally got my first offer from Penguin Random House in 2008.



The book came out in 2010. Along that path, there has never been a shortage of ideas. They come to me while I'm sleeping (I woke up with the idea for the book my agent is currently subbing) and when I am driving (a line of *My Mama Earth*, which won the Moonbeam Gold for Best Picture Book in 2012, came to me in the car and I had to pull over to write it down). I have over 50 unpublished manuscripts on my laptop and, surprisingly, I wrote my first book in the notes of my phone. The day my twin nephews were born, while I was flying back to California from my home state of Michigan, I was struck with the concept of all the things people do for a baby—not to mention, two! *ABC, Baby Me*, was written during the five hour flight and became my first published book with Penguin Random House (2010).

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

**SK:** I wouldn't say aspire as much as felt inspired by words and language. I'm a word woman, first and foremost—I love rhyme, cognates (words that have similar Latin roots in English and Spanish like plural/plural or libro/book and library). I've been writing since I was in elementary school. I wrote my first book, about my dog Ginger refusing to sleep in her new house, in kindergarten. Then, in fourth grade, I had an incredible teacher, named Ms. Schultz, who made us all believe we were poets. I learned how to write haikus, tankas, and cinquains and fell in love with language. More than that, I began identifying as a writer at the early age of nine. In middle school, I entered a Mother's Day poem about my grandma in the *Detroit Free Press* writing contest and won! My high school speeches for student government and valedictorian were all written

*Susan B. Katz continued*

in rhyme. At my high school reunion, people said they weren't surprised at all that I became an author who writes in rhyme. It's been one of my signature qualities since I was a teenager.

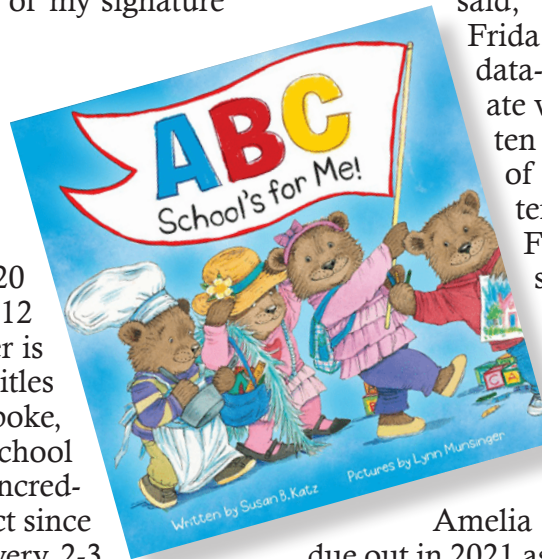
**PM:** You're having an incredible run. I've lost track of how many books you have coming out in 2020-2021.

**SK:** I have seven coming out in 2020 (12 titles total to date) and another 12 coming out in 2021, so that number is 19 for 2020-2021, and two dozen titles total (it went up since we first spoke, some are trade titles and others are school market). It's very surreal, and I'm incredibly grateful for every single contract since I used to have a book come out every 2-3 years (*ABC Baby Me*, PRH, 2010; *My Mama Earth*, Barefoot Books, 2012; *ABC School's For Me!*, Scholastic Press, 2015; *All Year Round*, Scholastic, 2016; *Un Año Redondo*, the Spanish translation which I wrote for Scholastic, 2017). One of my forthcoming titles is that first book I wrote while living in Spain, 25 years ago, and started submitting in 1998. I never gave up on it. I revised, did dummies, submitted it, and, finally, found a publisher who "got" the book. It comes out next year, with a major house, and has an amazingly talented illustrator working on it.

**PM:** How did the nonfiction biographical series come about? Did you pitch the series? What are the criteria for the subject matter in terms of who to write about? Do you envision this as an ongoing series?

**SK:** An editor I'd worked with in the past reached out to see if I'd be interested in writing an early chapter book biography. I struggled at first since I'd never written in that genre before. I was traveling throughout Europe last summer when I wrote the first title, *The Story of Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, and my editor was incredibly patient and supportive as I figured out how to write it like she and the team envisioned. The second book in the series, *The Story*

*of Frida Kahlo*, went so much smoother in terms of process and end product that she wrote to me and said, "That! Whatever you did with Frida, keep doing that!" Callisto is a data-driven company so they generate who they want biographies written about and it is very much a part of an on-going series. I have written seven titles in the series: RBG, Frida, Jane Goodall, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Fred Rogers (Nov 2020), Gandhi (Jan 2021), and other authors have written Hamilton, MLK, etc. I just finished another book for Callisto, aimed at a little higher age-level, about the mystery of



Amelia Earhart's disappearance. That's due out in 2021 as well. It is the longest, and most elaborately-researched, kids' book I've completed at 20k word count. My opinion on what happened to her radically changed after I completed the research. I, of course, I don't let on to that fact for the kids. I just provide clues about her disappearance and let them draw their own conclusion.

**PM:** How much research is involved in these early chapter book biographies?

**SK:** A ton! People have been asking me all summer, given how long we've been quarantined: "What are you reading now?" One full year after I started writing RBG on the Spanish island of Gran Canarias down near Africa, I finally have time to read a book for pleasure that my mom just sent me: *The Book of Lost Names*. It's a huge luxury since I've been reading dozens of biographies and autobiographies as research this past year. I have an entire shelf dedicated to all of the books I read while researching The Story of series. Luckily, after buying many of them, I finally caught onto checking them out from the library instead. The research for Amelia Earhart was very rooted in primary sources, like CIA reports and Navy logs. There are fact checkers, sensitivity readers, developmental and copy editors—aside from my primary editor—so all of my research is



*Susan B. Katz continued*

double, triple-checked. I learned to cite my sources proactively in the comments to make my life easier and help out the many people who comb through the manuscripts.

**PM:** Does writing about people who are still alive have its own set of challenges?

**SK:** It has truly been an honor to write about each and every one of the people featured in The Story of biography series. I actually find it easier to write about icons who are still alive. For example, I had the good fortune of seeing Dr. Jane Goodall speak in San Francisco last November which launched my research for her biography. Nothing like hearing it directly from the source! With RBG, I was able to watch videos of her speaking online and see her, frequently, on the news. For people like Frida and Amelia, I read their diaries and autobiographies, respectively. I listened to audiotapes of Gandhi speaking. I tried to take on each person's life story, in my mind walking a mile (or in Gandhi's case, many miles) in their shoes. It was slightly harder to research Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie since they are from a time when there wasn't YouTube or even, in Marie's case, very many audio recordings. Writing this series reminds me of how much I actually geek out on research. One thing I was challenged by, initially, was remembering how to format a bibliography. It had been years since I was asked to include one!

**PM:** Your first book was published in 2010. How has the kidlit market changed since then? Has it been for the better or worse?

**SK:** I taught elementary school from 1993-2013, so I've been immersed in children's books both as a creator and also as a consumer. I've been to Bologna, as an agent, twice. I think that the quality and palette have improved for the better, overall, with the advent of digital tools like layers in Photoshop, etc. I also see more foreign books being brought into the U.S. On that note, as a bilingual writer, the demand for books that are bilingual has increased along with the rising Latinx population. In the past five or 10 years,

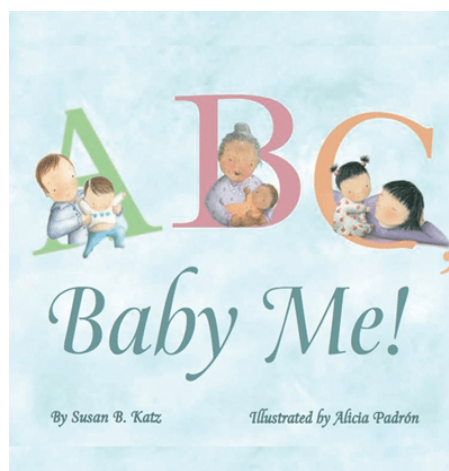
#Ownvoices and #WeNeedDiverseBooks took hold as publishers seek to make books that serve as both mirrors and windows for children. Overall, the quality and quantity have increased. I believe the variety of forms books now take—creatively engineered pop up books, graphic novels, wordless books—allow us to shine and think out-of-the-box. One thing I noticed is that, after I had a few books under my belt, I had more success in pitch meetings in NYC. Editors wanted to see what else I had up my sleeve. I've been an author, agent, and senior editor, so I've experienced the industry from all angles.

Sometimes, rigid rules like not accepting unsolicited and/or unagented manuscripts, feel restrictive. On the plus side, social media is much more crucial for connecting with agents, editors, and other authors: for example, #PitMad pitch wars on Twitter and #mswl (Manuscript Wish List). The best part is we all share a common goal of publishing the highest-quality books for children possible. That's most palpable in Bologna or at an SCBWI conference.

**PM:** Which genre do you prefer, fiction or nonfiction? Is one easier genre to write than the other?

**SK:** Fiction allows me to express my creativity more, while nonfiction lets me share my expertise. Specifically, I like “concept

books” the best, which can sometimes be a mix of F and NF. Teaching children, through literature, about the ocean, months or shapes fills my soul as an educator, using writing as the vehicle. I also love the STEAM-themed (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) books I'm writing now. I studied environmental science at the University of Michigan and spent my junior year abroad working in a Costa Rican rain forest, so topics like ecosystems, biomimicry, and predator/prey relationships are very much in my wheelhouse. The ideas that “come to me” are mostly fiction and concept books that lead to traditional, advance-against-royalty, trade deals. The pure nonfiction is usually more of an assigned, work-for-hire situation which is fulfilling in its own way.



*Susan B. Katz continued*

**PM:** Where do you get your inspiration?

**SK:** The short answer is: from kids! I probably taught hundreds of students over the span of my 25-year career (I still do some part-time work as an educational consultant) and my own nephews inspire me endlessly. In truth, I've upped the age level of my books as they grew almost lockstep.

That first book about them was a board book, then I grew into picture books when they were the target age for that and, now, I am writing chapter books. I also lean into my own experience. If I heard one thing at writer's conferences, almost predictably on cue, it was: "write what you know." My forthcoming book, *Meditation Station* which just won the 2020 International Book Award for Best Mind/Body/Spirit book for kids, is based on my experience meditating and listening to dharma talks. I came up with this book, about mindfulness and trains, to help kids (and let's be honest, adults too!) calm their minds and bodies in order to avoid getting whisked away by their train of thoughts. Little did I know this book would be so timely and in demand given the current prevalence of distance learning and Covid-restricted classrooms. I worked in the rain forest and have two books coming out next year about that, one is a bilingual concept book that teaches the animals names in Spanish and English, and the other is an autobiography for older kids about my work converting La Cangreja into a national park. I just got assigned a how-to book for the school market about a favorite art hobby of mine. My favorite thing to do, aside from dance salsa and samba, is snorkel, which is where the inspiration for my ocean book that is coming out next year (the first one I ever wrote in Spain and never gave up on) came from. See? Never give up and, also, you can write off that trip to Maui—LOL!

**PM:** Do you write every day?

**SK:** Now I do. I have to. I've been on deadline for

one book or another this past year so I have to write every day to keep up (that includes weekends!) Last Friday was the first day in over a year that I didn't have a deadline and, honestly, I didn't know what to do with myself. Then, I decided to develop a book I was inspired to write during my yoga Zoom class. Before this year, I was always balancing working another job full-time—teaching, running Connecting Authors, consulting in schools—so I sometimes didn't want to get on my computer at the end of a long day. I'd say I used to just write mostly on the weekends and some nights when I had another "day job." But, now that writing is my day job, I take it seriously and I do write every day. I feel like it's a treat when I get to work on a book based on my own idea since a lot of my work-for-hire is assigned now on specific, requested topics. I live in California, so my first task every day,

without exception, is to answer all of the emails that come in from my editors who are almost all NYC/ET-based. Once I catch up with revision requests and any other new pitches they want to be sent, then I get to writing. It's a huge, rare luxury for me to go away and not bring my laptop. The longest I've been apart from my laptop in the past 10 years was one four-day trip to Maui. I felt like I was missing a limb but it allowed me to relax by the pool, listen to music, and snorkel! Last summer, every day of my six week trip around Europe, I'd read about RBG while relaxing on the beach and then go back to my Airbnb or hotel and write for hours each night.

**PM:** Do you ever get writer's block and if so, how do you work around that?

**SK:** I get illustrator's block—is that possible? I haven't illustrated any of my books yet and that is definitely a bucket-list goal for me. I find it incredibly frustrating that I can envision what I want to see



*Susan B. Katz continued*

on paper but, when I go to put that on paper, it often does not come out looking like I wanted. The few times I've had writer's block, per se, is when my editor or agent asked me to try rewriting a book in prose. I am very much a verse author. I know they say "Don't write in rhyme," but I loved reading Dr. Seuss as a kid, enjoyed reading rhyming books to my students, and allowing them to do the cloze—or guess what word ends the rhyme. Stories seem to come out of me in rhyme. Plus, kids love rhyme! So, when I'm asked to convert something into prose, I struggle. But, I do it. Actually, funny story, a book I have coming out next year had two columns originally. The left side told the story in verse and the right side had more details in prose. It's a style aimed at addressing multiple age and/or reading levels in one book. My editor wrote to me and said, "I hope you don't mind that I took out the illustration notes." I responded, confused, "What illustration notes? That left side was the book told in verse." We laughed it off but, in the end, that book is being published in prose. Suffice it to say, since this publisher has both a US and an EU division and publishes their books simultaneously in multiple languages (including German), rhyme isn't as easy to translate for them. You've got to be willing to "kill your darlings." I figure, if they want to publish this book and the subject matter really matters to me, I am not married to what format that it ends up in.

**PM:** Do you outline?

**SK:** As you may have guessed by now, I am not a linear thinker. But, I do appreciate that my publisher for The Story of series sends me a detailed outline which I follow as I research. I outline things like marketing plans and do keep a spreadsheet of manuscript submissions—which I highly recommend. In it, I keep track of which editors, at which houses, I've sent which manuscripts. That's as linear as I get. My ideas sort of flow and I try to get them down on paper (or into my laptop, phone, etc.) as quickly as I can so they don't escape. Because, another one will come soon or the phone will ring, or an email will

bing, and I may forget that idea.

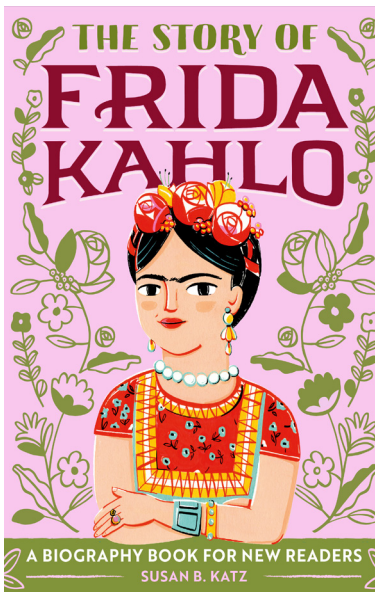
**PM:** How many drafts do you go through before you deem the work ready to be seen?

**SK:** This is an area where I've definitely grown (and learned the hard way) that it is better to polish and perfect before you pitch. For *Meditation Station*, I think I have Rev 20 on my computer, but that was with my editor. Now, I probably go through 2-4 rounds of revisions on my own, and with my amazing writer's group, before I send an ms to my agent or an editor. (I do all of my work-for-hire, NF pitches on my own and my agent pitches my traditional trade books, mostly fiction). That translates into a few weeks or a month before it's really ready to go. The caveat is that I wrote a book recently which I loved, pitched it out and got some feedback, revised it and now it's under consideration by one of my publishers. Sometimes I still jump the gun, but I try to avoid having any spelling or grammar errors, basic stuff, before it goes out. There are ideas I get so excited about, like the book my agent is pitching right now, which come out quicker and take less time to revise

because they are passion projects. Even that one, though, I ran past my writer's group a few times before it went to my agent.

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

**SK:** I am the queen of multi-tasking. I've always held multiple jobs at once and get a bit bored if I don't have several plates spinning at once. Last week, I was finishing the Amelia biography, retweeting Arianna Huffington's praise for *Meditation Station* (<https://twitter.com/ariannahuff/status/1290359786001895430>), marketing *The Story of Marie Curie* which came out on Tuesday 8/18, writing a new book that my publisher is now considering, and pitching new nonfiction projects to a different publisher. All that was happening while I was leading Zoom professional development training for teachers, globally, on how to get their students excited about writing. For the past two weeks, I got up at 4 am and trained anywhere from 18-78 teach-



*Susan B. Katz continued*

ers across the US or overseas on writer's workshop from 5am-9am, then answered the East Coast editor emails from like 9-11 am, took a quick cat nap, and then kept writing Amelia in the afternoon. Zoomba happens in the evenings before I crash and repeat. I'm busy now trying to drum up more books, both fiction and nonfiction. I'm happy to report that, just today, I got my first four-book deal for a series from a publisher I've never worked with before. And, another publisher I have been writing for liked one of my pitches and requested an outline (I do write to them when I'm asked to). As you know, the industry timeline is practically a snail's pace, mainly because books need to be illustrated and printed, so a book that I get an offer on now won't be published until later 2021 or early 2022.

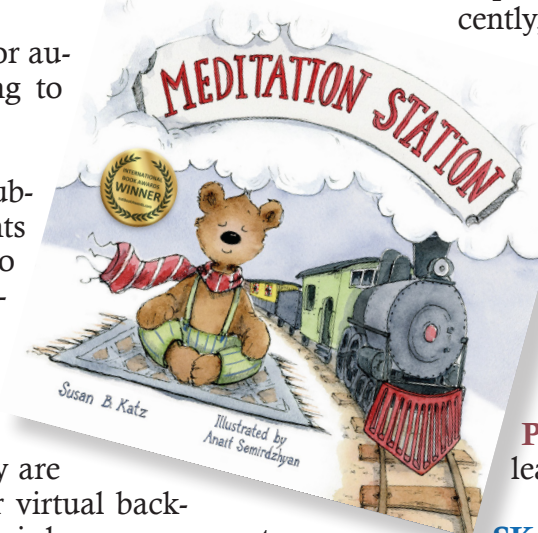
**PM:** Do you have any advice for authors having problems adapting to the new virtual reality?

**SK:** In terms of writing and submitting, more editors and agents are working-from-home now so be mindful of not sending anything by mail to their office. Not that most of us send via snail mail anymore but, just in case. As far as virtual visits go, buy a green screen. They are very affordable and make your virtual background clearer without all the weird aura movement you get when you don't have one behind you. Finally, I think it's a good time to be bold. I've always had chutzpah but, now, we are experiencing first-hand that life is short. Write that story you've always had in your heart. Look up that editor or agent's email and sub the manuscript. Dr. Seuss, JK Rowling, and Laura Numeroff were all rejected myriad times before their books got accepted. It only takes one editor loving your book to bring it into the world. (See the four Ps below).

**PM:** What do you like best—or the least—about the publishing process?

**SK:** My favorite thing to do, without a doubt, is sign books and present to kids. I miss bringing my books to life with puppets, props, songs, and multimedia presentations in-person. Writing is such a solitary job (even more so now) and those events reminded

me why I am a children's book author. To see children's faces light up makes every rejection fade away and keeps you in sync with their boundless, positive energy. When I go out to schools, kids and teachers are surprised that authors and illustrators aren't usually allowed to communicate until the book is complete. I always ask them to guess why that's the case and then reveal that editors don't want authors to influence the artistic, creative process. That being said, I've learned to ask for a pdf before my books go to print. I don't care if my editor runs interference but I do want to see the book and flag any major mismatches between text and images before it goes to print. (Believe me, it has happened and I'm very glad I caught it!) I love connecting with my illustrator to promote the book once it's done. Recently, I had the pleasure of letting Anait Semirdzhyan (the illustrator of *Meditation Station* with Bala Kids/Shambhala) know that we'd won the 2020 International Book Award for Best Mind/Body/Spirit Kids' book. We hopped on Zoom. It was the first time we'd done anything but email and it was a fabulous, first face-to-face celebratory moment.



**PM:** What's the biggest lesson you learned?

**SK:** They say these three Ps are the pillars of publishing: Persistence, Patience, Perseverance. Clearly, I've had plenty of practice with each of those Ps. I've added a fourth P though: People. The relationships you make with editors, other writers, your agent, publicists, librarians, parents, kids, teachers, and influencers who can cross-promote your book, are crucial. I learned to keep my feet on the ground and stay humble. Booksellers, editors, agents, and conference coordinators much prefer to work with kind, humble, grateful authors. And, I do genuinely feel lucky. I don't think luck got me published—that was hard work, grit, determination, and a drop of talent in the rhyming department. But, I do feel fortunate every time I get an offer or a parent tells me how much their child enjoyed one of my books. I don't take for granted that editors and agents, in many ways, hold "the keys to the kingdom."



# How I Created a Unique Middle Grade Series by Combining GENRES, PASSION, EXPERTISE

by Nancy Kunhardt Lodge

I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk about my process and my books for Children's Book Insider. I came to fiction writing late, having spent most of my career as an Art History professor at universities in the U.S. and in Italy with a Ph.D. in Renaissance art. After I stopped teaching, I wanted to write fantasy/sci-fi books that would bring art alive for children between the ages of nine and twelve. This is the golden age of reading when a child is still young enough to believe in magic but old enough to understand sophisticated plots. In the following paragraphs, I will tell you a little about my process, writing for children, and how the three books in *The Lucy Nightingale Adventure* series evolved.

## Genre Blending

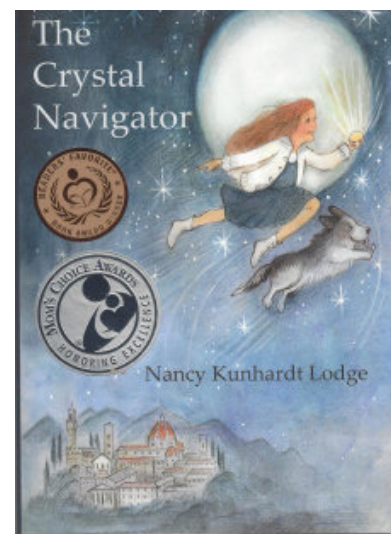
Fantasy means creating a world in which anything can happen, and often incorporates magic or mythical characters inspired by real-world myths and folklore. Sci-fi involves using scientific principles to imagine settings, characters, and plot details such as time travel, flying, high tech gadgets, and, in the case of my stories, incorporating discoveries in physics for plot twists. Science fiction and fantasy can be combined to create characters such as a talking dog who listens for children in trouble with his wavelengths. I took the genre-combining a step further, weaving science, science fiction, history, geography, fantasy, and art to create supernatural mysteries that circle around and elucidate works of art. I love this genre combination because there is no limit to what I can imagine.

I didn't set out to write a series. A series evolved because I couldn't bear to abandon the characters I had created. No matter what genre you're writing in, complex, unique characters are the best foundation for your story. They give you myriad plot possibilities and make the writing process fun. Even

more importantly, multidimensional characters give the readers a reason to stick with the story, because complex characters get themselves into complex, dramatic situations. No one wants to read about an ordinary day with ordinary kids. This is especially true with sci-fi and fantasy. The fantastical premises of these books demand characters with extraordinary attributes and skills. But don't rely completely on out-of-this-world qualities and talents to build your characters. The most compelling stories are built on unusual but believable characters who could actually exist, who are then given one or two fantastical characteristics that help them navigate the otherworldly plot.

Another important aspect of sci-fi/fantasy is incorporating themes into your story that readers can relate to and see in their own lives. Readers still need to identify on some level with what the characters are experiencing, even if the setting is in a magical land or outer space.

Let's look at how I did this in *The Lucy Nightingale Adventure* series. Each book in the series is written like a stand-alone novel, with a new plot arc.



**Book 1 The Crystal Navigator**

My protagonist is an eleven-year-old girl named Lucy Nightingale. She is a fun-loving, athletic girl who loves school, wants to please her teachers, and is terrified of making mistakes. She loves collecting and itemizing her crystal collection. She wears pants tucked into high boots and has a long auburn braid down her back. One more thing, she's a high-frequency thinker who can create things with her thoughts.

Secondary characters: Sam is perhaps my favorite character. He gets all the best lines. Sam is Lucy's best friend, a sweet-faced, stork-like boy with scruffy white-blond falling in his eyes like blunt stalks. He is a genius—witty, articulate, and precise. His mind is much too busy to care what anyone thinks about him, especially a teacher. His rocket scientist parents agree with Sam that school is a huge inconvenience. Sam speaks the language of his dog, Doppler, and he hears things no one else can. Sam thinks the Internet is the devil. He and Lucy share a belief in magic, and they can communicate telepathically.

Wilbur, the magic Wise One, takes the form of a Cardigan Corgi for Lucy. He is mysteriously powerful. He wears spectacles, loves brochures, collects liquid mirrors, and most importantLY, he's Lucy's lifelong friend and guide. Sometimes, he can be a bit befuddled, muttering nonsense, then suddenly, he can change, becoming powerful and angry.

Settings: School, Sam's magnificent treehouse, equipped with a stove, twinkling electric candles in the branches of the tree, a library, and workplace, catacombs, underground rivers, etc.

Themes: The book is about a child's utter loss of confidence when her mind goes blank in the middle of an oral report. She believes she'll only get it back if she gets an A on the next assignment, which is to answer the question. "Are paintings a reflection of an artist's personality?" This very real scenario is the impetus for the plot.

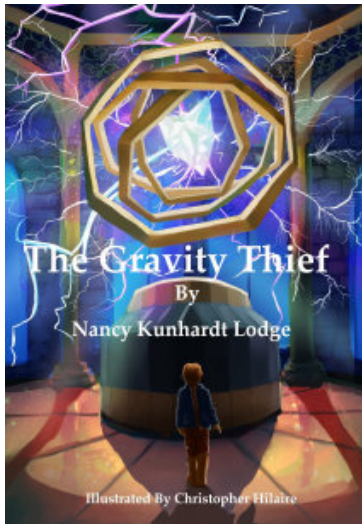
I also wanted to immerse readers in the story with vivid sensory details. Summoning the Wise One she believes helps every child in distress, Lucy meets Wilbur, whose liquid mirrors give her the ability to fly. I wanted the reader to feel the exhilaration as Lucy's feet leave the ground, and she flies through

a star-crowded night back to fifteenth-century Florence. I wanted them to jump onto Botticelli's Primavera and feel the spongy ground of a flower-strewn meadow. And I wanted them to feel Lucy's panic when she flies over the little village that cowers under a van Gogh's roiling sky in Starry Night, as she flies to a hill in the background carrying a dying Wilbur.

**Book 2 Mona Lisa's Ghost**

Once you've got your dynamic, complex characters, you can ask interesting What if? questions to develop more books. Since you already know your characters so well, you have a good sense of how they'll react to new scenarios, as well as areas where they still need to grow in order to handle the conflicts thrown at them.

*Mona Lisa's Ghost* is a supernatural mystery that combines themes of reincarnation and science. There were three sources of inspiration. In 2004 I read an article about the Louvre Museum's plans to scan the Mona Lisa to measure the paint layers. I thought, What if rays from the scanner zoom into the Mona Lisa, causing a ghastly molecule-destroying syndrome? The second source of inspiration was the otherworldly landscape in the background of the Mona Lisa. I thought how wonderful it would be to enter the painting at the horizon-line. Lucy goes through a portal and enters the background of the painting. The third source of inspiration was a theory in physics called consciousness-based reality.



### Book 3 The Gravity Thief

A child falls out of Vermeer's painting entitled the *Music Lesson*, an evil mastermind sends his minions to steal the painting, and the world tilts off its axis. What begins as a hazardous quest to bring the child home soon becomes a race to save the world from extinction.

The research I did about electrons and particle interaction inspired this book. When I learned that electrons behave differently when they are not being watched, I thought if we apply this theory to the figures inside paintings, I could bring them alive, step out of their paintings, and walk in our world. According to the latest discovery in Quantum Field Physics, there is a geometric jewel with infinite sides that lives in the heart of the universe. It simplifies particle interaction and scattering amplitudes. An evil mastermind stole Vermeer's painting for five geometric shapes hidden in the windows of the painting. In the right sequence, they are a blueprint for a chaos-generating machine, powered by an imitation amplituhedron, that could throw the world into a Black Hole. As always, there is a surprising twist in the last chapter.

Teachers have praised the series for introducing readers to complex scientific principles through fast-paced stories. *The Crystal Navigator* is listed on The National Education Association as one of the best historical books for children. It is also on school reading lists in three states, and it won a prize for best Educational Book of 2014. *Mona Lisa's Ghost*

won a Gold Mom's Choice Award and an Eric Hoffer Book Award. *The Gravity Thief* has received excellent editorial reviews from *Kirkus* and *Booklife*. In addition to the publication in English, the three books have been published in Spanish by Madrid publisher, Editorial Kolima. Information about my books is on my website <http://nancylodge.com/> and are available on my author page on Amazon.

### Writing for Middle Graders

It took eight months to write a Ph.D. dissertation and five years and 100 drafts to write *The Crystal Navigator*. I've been told that the reason the books succeed is the dynamic relationship between my protagonist, Lucy, and her best friend Sam. I move the action along through character building and dialog.

Here are some rules you never break when writing for children:

1. The first sentence has to hook their attention. *Mona Lisa's Ghost* opens with, "Snow muffled the footsteps of a master thief the night Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa vanished from the Louvre Museum in Paris. It was over in minutes. Afterward, no trace of the painting remained except the empty frame swinging from a rusty nail."
2. Start the book with a subplot to accelerate the main plot. Example: The beginning of Lucy's adventure in *The Gravity Thief* happens when she sneaks into the museum at night and meets a ghost-child who has fallen out of his painting. Saving him becomes her quest.
3. Chapters should be short enough to read before bedtime.
4. End every chapter with a bombshell, so that the child has to find out what happens next. For example, in *Mona Lisa's Ghost*, I ended one chapter like this. The boat slid forward into the silken mist. Lucy couldn't see what lay ahead until it was almost too late. "Get down!" shouted Wilbur.

5. Every thread must be explained by the end of the book. For example, if you mention a monster who lives in a swamp, you must finish his story or else the reader who will think but what happened to the monster?
6. It's easy to get sidetracked. You might write something you think is wonderful but has nothing to do with the story. When elements of your writing become too fancy, it detracts from the story. Sir Arthur Quiller Couch said, "Murder your darlings." While writing *Mona Lisa's Ghost*, I was lucky to have a group of seventh-grade editors help me with plot, dialog, and what they liked and didn't like or understand. One girl taught me a valuable lesson when she crossed out two pages and scrawled, "What does this have to do with the story?"

However, there are always places to break this rule. Consider this lovely passage from Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*: "Life seemed very magical in those days: a web of symbol, coincidence, premonition, omen. Everything, somehow, fit together; some sly and benevolent Providence was revealing itself by degrees ...." This particular "digression" is intriguing to the reader because it is essentially setting the stage and reminding the reader of the flow of time – of which a novel is a simulacra and a mockery.

7. Bring characters alive through dialogue
8. Every book needs a nemesis
9. Drop the reader into the scene. Make the reader feel as if he were in the room.
10. Exposition brings the plot to a crawl. Avoid explaining insignificant information to the reader. Use backstory only when absolutely relevant, and keep it short.
11. Children don't like repetitive speech tags such as using 'said' in every sentence. (Books for beginning readers need more

speech tags to help the reader keep track of the conversation, but middle graders are skilled enough to follow a conversation with only occasional speech tags if the dialogue itself makes it clear who is speaking.)

12. Readers don't like too many hints about what's going to happen, or how the mystery will be solved, although subtle hints are required.
13. Perhaps, the most important rule in children's book writing is that the story must have a happy ending.

### Self-Editing

- Editing takes time, and the reason most writers get rejected by editors and agents is that they submit manuscripts before they're ready. Here are a few things to be aware of:
- Clarity: Is your writing overburdened with adjectives? If you mention something once, and then, refer to it much later, you will have to remind the reader.
- Redundancy: My first drafts are filled with redundancy and repetitions. The only way I fix it is by printing it out and making notes. Use the "Find" function in your document for word repetition.
- Avoid Cliches: It rained cats and dogs, and maudlin phrases: 'tugged at her heart.'
- Showing not telling. Transform 'I was angry' into 'steam started to boil in my head and blow out my ears.'
- Tension: Does your plot have enough? Tension always escalates the pace, so if a chapter is dragging, add a twist or obstacle that raises the stakes for your characters.
- Use the Active voice whenever possible: Passive voice: *The three-headed monster was calmed when the princess gave him a magic cookie.* Active voice: *The princess calmed the three-headed monster by giving him a magic cookie.*

How I Created a Unique Middle Grade Series...continued

Getting feedback from target-audience beta readers is a great way to know if your book is on track. Ask teachers if they can make this part of a writing lesson, or ask friends with children if their kids will read your manuscript. Middle graders will be honest and take this process seriously. Give readers a form to fill out that asks them to respond to areas of plot and character you're particularly concerned about.

Creating any book takes time. But the rewards are great. Awards are wonderful, glowing reviews boost your confidence, but letters from young readers make every bit of the long, exhilarating, frustrating process worthwhile.

