

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  April 2022

## *Writing the (Not So) Humble Board Book*



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITY:**

**KANE PRESS**

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

# At Presstime:

## New Independent Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Marble Press ([marblepress.com/](http://marblepress.com/)) is a new independent publisher whose first list of 12-15 will appear by the end of 2023. The publisher is comprised of three imprints: Marble Books, which focuses on picture books, Bu-looga Books, which publishes books for young readers, and Taltos Books, which publishes middle-grade and young-adult materials. The publisher's mission is to produce books that inspire children, challenge their imagination and ignite their curiosity. Books that make a difference, stand out because of their style and substance, or offer new perspectives are welcome.

Open to submissions from unagented authors and author/illustrators. For **board books and picture books**, seeking charming, character-driven stories that delve into the wonderful complexities of a young child's world; humorous, quirky, and/or out-of-the-box stories; non-clichéd stories about the everyday lives of children (this may include family matters, adapting to the evolving changes in society, and themes of culture and diversity; adventure-filled journeys, including magic or mystery, where the main characters have a potent and substantial arc; and uplifting, emotionally gripping stories about love, resilience and encouragement. For **early chapter books** (ages 5-8), looking for series ideas, including graphic novel formats. For **middle-grade novels and graphic novels**, looking for stories with humor and vision; relatable, compassionate stories about middle-school fun and hardship; adventure-filled journeys, including magic or mystery, in which the main characters have a potent and substantial arc; and uplifting stories about love, resilience, and ingenuity. In **young adult**, looking for commercial fiction, narrative nonfiction, graphic novels and graphic nonfiction.

Query online. Put PB, MG, or YA and your book title in the subject line. Your query should contain the title of the book, a concise elevator pitch, word count, and age range. For MG and older audiences provide a 1-5 page synopsis that includes a summary of the main plot with the subplots and plot twists from the first chapter to the last one, a short description of your primary and secondary characters. For all queries, include a bio that describes your occupation, publishing history, your website/social media links, and any other information relevant to your submission, e.g., a few sentences about what inspired you to write the book. Please indicate if it is a non-exclusive submission. Also include a listing of three comparative books published in the last six years with a few sentences describing how your book is similar or different. Attach your full manuscript (for all submissions) as a Word document. Send to [submission@marblepress.com](mailto:submission@marblepress.com)

Author/illustrators should email your query letter and send the manuscript as a Word document. For bigger files, like a dummy, use a link. For a picture book dummy, include at least five fully illustrated pages and six additional pages of sketches (the full dummy with a few finished, color illustrations is ideal). For graphic novels, send your synopsis, the whole manuscript, and a minimum of ten pages of sketches. Submit to [submission@marblepress.com](mailto:submission@marblepress.com)

Responds in 6-8 weeks if interested. Does not require exclusive submissions, but does ask to be notified if you sell the work elsewhere.

## Agent Opening Up to MG, YA Submissions

Lauren Spieller, an agent with TriadaUS Literary Agency ([www.triadaus.com/](http://www.triadaus.com/)) is opening up to submissions as of April 1. She is seeking Middle Grade (high concept contemporary fiction, magical fantasy and kid-friendly sci-fi, exciting historical, spooky horror, and graphic novels set in the real world) and Young Adult (books with a strong voice and a great hook, especially fantasy, contemporary, suspense/thrillers, horror, graphic novels, and romcoms). Query through Query Manager at [querymanager.com/query/LaurenSpieller](http://querymanager.com/query/LaurenSpieller)

## **Book Packager Seeks Authors to Work on Intellectual Properties**

Working Partners, Ltd., a division of Coolabi ([coolabi.com/](http://coolabi.com/)) is a London-based book packager of children's fiction books, television shows and apps. Looking for writers to create books based on Intellectual Properties (IP) such as licensed characters and book adaptations of TV shows. Need authors who write fantasy or adventure for ages 7-9, and middle grade science fiction/fantasy and adventure. Unpublished/unagented is fine. Pays advance and royalties. Interested authors should send a bio and 10 pages of relevant writing (can be first 10 pages of a work in progress if it fits the genres above) to Kate Brauning, Editor, [KateB@workingpartnersltd.co.uk](mailto:KateB@workingpartnersltd.co.uk)

## **Leapfrog Press Fiction Contest for Middle Grade and Young Adult Books**

Leapfrog Press, a small, independent US publisher focused on discovering new talent and books that are overlooked by the big houses, is accepting submissions for its 2022 Leapfrog Global Fiction Prize. Leapfrog is teaming up with UK-based Can of Worms Press. Leapfrog will publish the winners in the US, and Can of Worms in the UK. Adult, young adult (YA) and middle grade (MG) novels, novellas, and short story collections are accepted. Minimum word count: 22,000. Individual stories in a collection may have been previously published in journals. Books that have been self-published will be considered "unpublished" if fewer than about 200 copies were printed. Looking for literary fiction and mainstream fiction. Genre fiction is accepted (especially science fiction), but the story is more important than the genre.

All manuscripts will be reviewed by at least two Leapfrog editors, and those that go to the second round of judging may be read by editors at other small presses as well.

The Award consists of a **First Prize** publication contract offer from Leapfrog Press and Can of Worms Press, with an advance payment, and one or two critiques of the manuscript from contest judges, permanent listing on the Leapfrog Press and Can of Worms contest pages as a contest finalist, along with short author bio and description of the book. A **Finalist Prize** consists of \$150 and one or two critiques of the manuscript from contest judges, permanent listing on the Leapfrog Press/Can of Worms contest pages as a contest finalist, along with a short author bio and description of the book. One **Semi-Finalist** receives their choice of a free Leapfrog book and a Can of Worms book and permanent listing on the websites. An **Honorable Mention** gets listed on the Leapfrog Press and Can of Worms websites.

Entrants can submit as many manuscripts as they'd like. Each is submitted separately through Submittable at [leapfrogpress.submittable.com/submit](http://leapfrogpress.submittable.com/submit) and requires a \$35 entry fee. Entrants may submit their manuscripts to other contests as well as agents and editors while under consideration for the Award. **Manuscripts must be received by May 2, 2022.** For more information, go to [leapfrogpress.com/the-leapfrog-global-fiction-prize-contest/](http://leapfrogpress.com/the-leapfrog-global-fiction-prize-contest/)

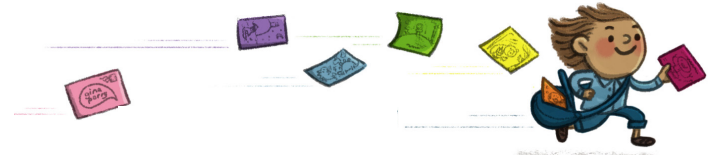
## **Independent Publisher Seeks Original Concepts for All Ages**

Sky Pony is the children's book imprint of Skyhorse Publishing. Sky Pony publishes a wide variety of picture books, chapter books, middle grade, and YA fiction and nonfiction; educational books; and novelty books. Open to any genre and style, and always looking for original concepts, fresh voices, and solid writing. For current titles go to [www.skyhorsepublishing.com/sky-pony-press/](http://www.skyhorsepublishing.com/sky-pony-press/)

To submit a manuscript or proposal to Sky Pony, send an email to [skyponysubmissions@skyhorsepublishing.com](mailto:skyponysubmissions@skyhorsepublishing.com). Put your query letter in the body of your email and attach all materials to be considered as a Word document, or in the case of art, as a jpeg. To make sure your email is received, be mindful of the size of attachments included in your message. If art makes the file too big, include a link to an online portfolio in your query.

# Illustrators Showcase Their Work With

## #KidLitArtPostcard



by Nancy Goulet

Like clockwork, illustrator Gina Perry regularly shipped out cheerful postcards to children's publishing art directors and editors to drum up work. The New Hampshire artist launched the practice shortly after building her portfolio back in 2006. Since then, Perry has devotedly mailed her promotions several times a year.

Then Covid hit. Like many industries, most in publishing abandoned their offices and began working from home, leaving no forwarding addresses for illustrators to send their cards. "It was a waste of time, effort, and money to send anything out at that moment," Perry said.

Yet without the essential marketing tool, Perry wondered about her promotional prospects. And she knew she wasn't alone in this conundrum. "I knew there had to be something better for us," she said.

Perry mulled the problem over. She brainstormed with friends and fellow illustrators. Eventually, a plan hatched. Perry devised a monthly social media event with an exclusive hashtag. Being an illustrator, Perry prepared to launch her idea by doing what she does best. She whipped up a promotional banner to post. Then she formally announced her idea on her blog ([ginaperry.com/blog](http://ginaperry.com/blog)) and her social media accounts (Twitter: [@ginamarieperry](https://twitter.com/ginamarieperry), Instagram: [@ginaperry\\_books](https://www.instagram.com/ginaperry_books)).



Gina Perry, Founder  
#KidLitArtPostcard

"Since Covid made mailing postcards futile, illustrators (especially without or in-between agents or representation) have to create and maintain huge email lists, or throw their work online and hope for the best. I'd like to try something different," she wrote. "Using Twitter, Instagram, and a very specific hashtag, let's meet to share one special image and make new connections."

And so #KidLitArtPostcard was born, appearing the first Thursday of every month on Twitter and Instagram starting in May 2021.

She did not expect what happened next. "I think it broke my Twitter," she joked.

While Perry hoped for good results, she never anticipated the online event's success. In the first month the announcement amassed 72,000 Twitter impressions. Perry herself gained approximately 350 social media followers. And within the first six months, 2,500 posts with the hashtag sprouted on Instagram, according to Perry's statistics.

Perry was elated with the results. And the benefits of the monthly online event mushroomed beyond her initial intent. "It's been all positives," she said.

For one, the event has built a community. "At a time when it is hard to connect with illustrators, this was an accessible, fun, and exciting way to see each other's work." The event also provides

*Illustrators Showcase Their Work...continued*

regular inspiration. “This one-day event can be a great way to see the work of your peers, get inspired, and then move back to your desk work,” she added. And it offers motivation through a little social pressure. There’s an imposed deadline to create new work to show monthly. “I rarely sent more than two postcards a year by snail mail,” said Perry. “But I managed to create fresh work most months.”

While Perry isn’t sure how many the hashtag has directly helped, she has heard many anecdotes from artists who have landed agents and book deals. One of those artists is South Carolina illustrator Tatjana Mai-Wyss (find her on Twitter: [@mai-wyss](#), Instagram: [@tatjanamaiwyss](#), web: [tatjanamaiwyss.com](#)).

“I don’t love promoting myself,” Mai-Wyss confessed. But #KidLitArtPostcard felt like a good fit. “It’s like a billboard. People know where and when to look.” Prior to the event Mai-Wyss mailed cards up to three times a year. But since the launch of the event, she’s posted regularly. “It’s made me much more consistent,” she acknowledged. Eventually, her efforts caught the attention of agent Caryn Wiseman, Executive Agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency who now represents Mai-Wyss.

Adam Ming also struck gold partly due to the event (Twitter: [@AdamMingArt](#), Instagram: [@adammingstudio](#), Web: [AdamMing.com](#)). “Every time I participated, something big seemed to happen,” said the Malaysian artist. Several in the industry retweeted his first post causing Lydia Silver of the Darley Anderson Illustration Agency to take note and eventually sign Ming. Since then, he’s been contracted to work on five books. Ming credits some of his success to Perry’s event, saying the hashtag helped swell his following which connected him to opportunities. Before he began the #KidLitArtPostcard posting, 80 people followed him on Twitter. Since, the number has grown to 800+.

“The hashtag works because it’s being thoughtful to both illustrators and people looking for illustrators,” said Ming. “It helps by introducing artists and people in publishing to one another, as well

as maintain top of mind at regular intervals.”

Those in the business enthusiastically agree. Wiseman said it’s helped make her job of discovering new talent easier. “I’m always on the lookout for new, up-and-coming illustrators,” she said. With the hashtag, the search is “all in one place. It makes it easy to scroll quickly.”

Wiseman said she peruses the feeds regularly throughout event days and attributes the hashtag with the introduction of three new clients. “What they posted just caught my eye and made me want to delve into their portfolio. They called out to me,” she said.

Lori Kilkelly, literary agent and owner of LK Literary Agency, often drops in on the monthly events and highly recommends participation to any illustrator interested in working in children’s lit. “Professional illustrators know that in order to get work, people who may hire them need to not just know about them, but on a somewhat regular basis be reminded that their work could be/is a good fit,” she said. #KidLitArtPostcard provides this great reminder. “There’s incredible creativity out there in the midst of a fairly hellish last two years.”

Many have cheered Perry’s efforts to help make their promotional efforts during these trying times a little less hellish. Now a year later, as the event celebrates its first anniversary, the need remains. Many publishing professionals have committed to working from home and some publishers have closed offices for good, leaving many illustrators questioning whether #KidLitArtPostcard will become the new norm for illustration promotion.

Meanwhile, Perry hasn’t mailed out a new printed postcard since the event started and she has no plans of resuming. As she wrote in her blog, “I’m hoping that this idea resonates with my community of kidlit illustrators and we can put enough beauty and enthusiasm into this to make editors and art directors look forward to #KidLitArtPostcard almost as much as our old snail mail postcards.”

## How to Create Your **SUCCESSFUL** Digital Postcard

Looking to make your #KidLitArtPostcard images attract eyeballs? Here are some tips to help create art that captivates.

### **MAKE GREAT ART**

First things first, create compelling work. That's going to differ for every artist. But no matter what, make it the best you can. "Make sure it's art that puts you in the best light," said Caryn Wiseman, Executive Agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency.

"A successful image is one that manages to make an impression," added illustrator Adam Ming. "In one image it tells the agent/editor/etc. who you are. To me that means it should feel like a gift to the person receiving it. It should entertain or delight the recipient first, before they ask."

### **HAVE FUN**

Show the kind of work you want to work on. If your engines rev drawing trucks, make sure to showcase vehicles. If you enjoy anthropomorphized animals, go wild. You get the picture. The idea is that you'll get hired based on your passions. And also, your love for the subject will rub off on the work. "Make sure it's something you're going to have fun with," said #KidLitArtPostcard creator Gina Perry.

### **PORTFOLIO**

Beyond the post, make sure your portfolio also exhibits more of your favored subjects, further showing your capabilities and proving you're more than a one trick pony. And be sure that your portfolio contains enough professional work to give viewers a full understanding of all you have to offer.

### **OWN IT**

Like traditional postcards, professionals interested in work will reach out to illustrators directly should they wish to work with an illustrator. Agents, editors, and art directors need to know how to contact you once their interest has been piqued. So, it's important to include your contact information in an obvious manner. Make sure to label your piece with your name and contact details. "If someone saves or prints out one of your illustrations you want them to be able to identify and find you easily," said Lori Kilkelly, agent and owner of LK Literary Agency.

### **INCLUDE YOUR DEETS**

For the same reason, also include your website, said Kilkelly. Slap it on your post, make sure it's linked in your Twitter and Instagram profile. And once the viewer checks out your site, list your contact information in an obvious fashion, either in a contact link or at the bottom of every page. Remove every hurdle for the professional and show them how easy it will be to work with you.

### **THE RIGHT TYPE**

Since contact is the goal, make sure that your details are legible and integrated with your image in some way. If you're skilled with hand-lettering, Ming suggested implementing this skill as yet another tool in your kit.

### **SIZE MATTERS**

Don't forget to properly size your work and consider the composition for the platform you're posting on. And since many professionals tend to view the work from their phones, be sure it looks good on the small screen, Wiseman reminded. For proper dimensions, visit: [blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-image-sizes-guide/](http://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-image-sizes-guide/).

### **BE UP FRONT**

Advertise what you're looking for. If you're looking for agent representation, say so. If you're seeking work, don't be shy, advised Wiseman. "I've gone down the rabbit hole before just to find out the person's work I'm interested in already has representation. It's a huge waste of time."

### **TAG IT**

Don't forget the obvious. Include the hashtag #KidLitArtPostcard in the description area of your post to make it easy for professionals to find you come event day. It may sound obvious, but easy to forget. *Don't!*

*Illustrators Showcase Their Work...continued*

**Participating in #KidLitArtPostcard**

The event occurs the first Thursday of every month. On that day editors, art directors, and agents peruse postings on Twitter and Instagram using the event hashtag (#KidLitArtPostcard). Be sure to mark your calendar if you'd like to participate in the next event. The upcoming 2022 dates are: April 7 / May 5 / June 2 / July 7 / August 4 / September 1 / October 6 / November 3 / December 1

New to social media? Learn more about how to post by visiting these handy tutorials:

[help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/how-to-tweet](https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/how-to-tweet)

[help.instagram.com/351460621611097](https://help.instagram.com/351460621611097)





# HAROLD UNDERDOWN

Executive Editor

## KANE PRESS

interview by Lynne Marie

When I started my journey to become a children's author many years ago, there weren't as many resources as there are now. Two of the best were The Purple Crayon website ([www.underdown.org](http://www.underdown.org)) and the *Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books*, both created by Harold Underdown. Over the years, these have become tried and true resources that are still relied upon today.

Harold's career also has shown staying power, with editorial experience as Vice President of [picturebooks.com](http://picturebooks.com), editorial director of the Charlesbridge trade program, and an editor for Orchard Books and Macmillan. He has also worked for many years as a consulting/independent editor, a writing and revision teacher, a workshop/retreat leader, and an online writing teacher.

Since October, he has taken on the role of Executive Editor at Kane Press, an imprint of Astra Books for Young Readers. We're thrilled that he has offered to share his expertise and welcome submissions from our readers this month.

**LYNNE MARIE:** I've always considered publishing a long and winding road and you have traveled far and wide on the road. What are some important truths that you have discovered on this journey?

**HAROLD UNDERDOWN:** There are so many, it's hard to sift through them and pull out the *most* important, but here are two that apply in a lot of different situations:

Working with others and treating them well while you do are crucial in our business—it's not just working alone at your desk or drawing table. Every successful book has dozens of people behind it, and some intensely collaborative work along the way. As a corollary to that, our world is a small one, and the overworked editorial assistant you say a kind word to today may be an acquiring editor at another company in five years.

My second truth is that there are no unimportant books. Every book that is published will find its own audience, provided that each of us involved does our best to make it be the best book it can be. Never settle for "good enough" just because a book is a work-for-

hire nonfiction title instead of a dreamed-of Newbery-worthy middle-grade novel. The reader of either book doesn't care about your perceptions of the worthiness of it—they just want to be engaged, informed, moved.

**LM:** You took a detour away from trade publishing after you worked at Charlesbridge. What were you



*Harold Underdown...continued*

doing during that time, and what are you bringing back into trade publishing?

**HU:** I left a wonderful job at Charlesbridge for family reasons, and took a job at a dot-com children's book company that turned out to be sketchier than it had appeared from the outside. When that company went under, I landed at a textbook publisher, and spent some years learning about a very different branch of publishing, though one also focused on children.

This gave me some outside perspective on what we do in the children's trade publishing business, and also gave me knowledge of educational standards and trends in education, which are useful in my work at Kane Press. Also important was that I didn't leave the trade business behind. I continued to be involved with the SCBWI and the Highlights Foundation, and did a wide range of freelance work.

That, in turn, gave me a deeper understanding of the revision process, so that I gave a whole series of workshops and webinars on revision in partnership with Eileen Robinson. I also got to explore "reader response" theory, which is a way of looking at reading that many of us understand intuitively, and which has important implications for what we do.

**LM:** I remember attending one of your "How to Get Out of the Slush Pile" breakouts at a conference many years ago. What is a piece of advice that still stands from that time, as well as one that has changed, and why?

**HU:** That presentation was based on my experience as an editorial assistant and then a junior editor, as I read dozens of submissions every week in search of the one that would grab me. Back then, large

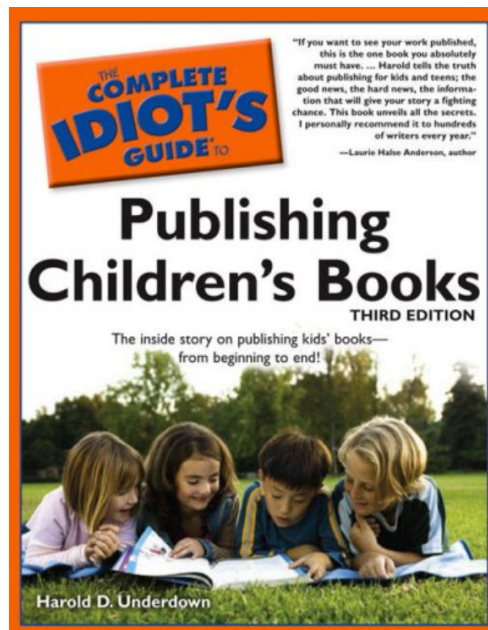
publishers like the one where I worked (Macmillan Children's Books, now gone after it was merged into S&S) still read unsolicited submissions, a time-consuming but necessary task they have now, in effect, outsourced to agents, by closing their doors to anyone who doesn't have an agent.

When I look at the article on my website that I developed out of that presentation—[www.underdown.org/slush.htm](http://www.underdown.org/slush.htm)—I see surprisingly little that needs to be changed! I can see I do need to update what I say about using "snail mail," because both agents and publishers still open to submissions have now converted to email (or to use of systems like Query Tracker), but my advice to not chase hot topics or to write stories about anthropomorphized animals with alliterative names? Still valid!

Incidentally, anyone who wants to know about how I got into children's book publishing and the early stages of my career can read about them in [this interview](#) from a few months ago.

**LM:** Do you feel that "getting out of the slush pile" has become more difficult in the last few years? What advice do you have that you would add to this presentation, or to your *Complete Idiot's Guide*, given the current state of the industry?

**HU:** My sense is that breaking into children's book publishing, though never easy, has become more difficult, due in part to the success of *Children's Book Insider*, SCBWI, the Highlights Foundation, and other groups in educating aspiring writers (and illustrators). Though there are still plenty of people who don't take the time to learn the craft or how the business works, there are certainly more people who are actively developing their skills and making an effort to be in the know than there used to be.



*Harold Underdown...continued*

So, though this isn't advice that I would add, but rather advice to which I would give more emphasis, I would say to anyone getting started, or even some way along: be aware that you may need to keep at it for some time (years, that is) before you really get anywhere. And so, be sure to find ways to get pleasure and satisfaction from what you are doing now, and to build up a supportive network of others in the same boat. You'll need that support in order to keep going.

**LM:** Many writers don't realize that an editor may have to work up a profit and loss statement in connection with the proposed acquisition of their book. What are some things considered when making up this statement, and how can a writer relate it to the material they are writing?

**HU:** A profit and loss statement, sometimes called a P&L, is a very simple tool that is meant to take into account all of the costs involved in publishing a particular book, from royalties to unit costs of paper, printing, and binding. It's meant to demonstrate that if a book is acquired and then published with the right number of copies printed, and all production costs accounted for, the publisher can expect to make a profit.

Editors need to build in the intended page count (a 320-page graphic novel is more expensive to produce than a 160-page one); whether or not illustrations are included, and if so, whether they are color or black and white (color is more expensive); any special features such as a poster on the inside of a jacket or fold-out pages.

But I don't think that writers need to keep P&Ls in mind when they are writing. They should be concerned about writing the best story, or presenting information in the most effective way. As long as what they are writing can realistically find a home at a publisher, if it will speak to a child or teen and fills a need in the market, the editor will take care of the P&L. Having said that, if anyone wants to read a detailed look at what goes into a P&L, Jane Friedman has provided it here: [www.janefriedman.com/book-pl/](http://www.janefriedman.com/book-pl/)

**LM:** At Kane Press, you will be focusing on series publishing. First of all, thank you so very much for opening this space up for outside proposals! Next, what do you look for in an idea to determine whether it has series potential?

**HU:** This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer, and I have to say that I don't have a list of criteria! To a very considerable extent, my feeling about series potential is "I know it when I see it."

Of course, that doesn't help the folks reading this interview. So here are a few things to think about. One crucial point to start with is that we publish both fiction and nonfiction series, and those do work differently.

For fiction, I look for a strong character or set of characters around whom a variety of stories can be written. There also needs to be a good central focus with an educational angle. Our series "Milo and Jazz" would be a good example of both of these—two strong characters and a focus on problem-solving and thinking skills.

For nonfiction, I look for an approach to a topic that is both of interest to children and that ties into school needs (most nonfiction topics do, one way or another!). Our "Eureka! The Biography of an Idea" series would be a good example here.

Folks can read about these two series on our imprint page on the Astra Publishing House website: [astrapublishinghouse.com/imprints/kane-press/](http://astrapublishinghouse.com/imprints/kane-press/)

**LM:** What is your first consideration for acquiring a topic—subject matter? writing? theme? voice?

**HU:** I would say a strong central concept comes first and foremost. I want to see a creative and kid-friendly way of approaching the subject matter. Subject matter comes second, and strong writing comes next. All three of these are important, of course, but in my experience, less-than-stellar writing can be improved, provided the core concept and the subject matter work.

*Harold Underdown...continued*

**LM:** Are you more looking for series that expand the categories that you have featured, or proposals that will create new ones? Please explain.

**HU:** We are already publishing the range from picture book to middle grade, both fiction and nonfiction, with a variety of topics. We aren't looking to go into YA at this time, but other than that we are open to just about anything in that range, including graphic novels, a format you won't find in our program yet, though that will be changing.

Also, folks looking at our backlist will come across series like "Math Matters" and "Science Solves It"—series with a broad topic within which we explore many more specific topics. We are NOT looking for more series like that. Those were developed in-house and are being added to in the same way. We are instead looking for series with a narrower focus.

**LM:** Related to age level, what would you recommend as the best resource for ascertaining reading level?

**HU:** When I was working in textbook publishing, I developed a healthy skepticism about tools like the Lexile score, which assess reading level looking at factors like vocabulary and sentence length. They don't assess and really can't assess all of the elements that go into "readability." Having said that, we do get GRLs and Lexile scores on our books and make that information available in our marketing. Writers may find the Flesch-Kincaid reading level tool that's built into Microsoft Word helpful, if they have no idea at what grade level their writing falls. But when I'm working on a manuscript, I rely on my own experience to assess whether a given text "works" for a particular age group, and I believe that writers also develop an understanding of that, with experience.

**LM:** Your series proposal guidelines ask for marketing ideas. As marketing is always an important element on the path to success, what should a series author be prepared to do as far as marketing?

**HU:** I should explain first that we ask for a writer's ideas about where and how WE could market a se-

ries in order to get a sense of their understanding of where it belongs in the market.

We don't expect writers to do that marketing themselves! Realistically, a publisher with a marketing department, a sales team, and full national distribution is going to be able to do far more for a book or series than the author can, unless they are a celebrity.

Instead, we expect pretty much what any trade publisher does. If we ask an author to go to a conference such as PLA, ALA, or NCTE when their book comes out, we are doing that because we think that doing so will have a real impact, and we expect them to be open to going.

We also hope that they will make a noise on social media, if they are active on social media. But we don't expect them to bang away over and over for weeks. That kind of approach doesn't work too well!

In the end, it's far more important that writers work on their next manuscript than try to "drive sales" of a particular book, or to increase their number of followers on Instagram or their virality on Twitter.

**LM:** Some writers struggle with writing funny or making learning fun. What tips do you have for a writer who wants to add funny or fun to their story?

**HU:** We say we want our books to be "fun and educational," and I want to clarify that "fun" and "funny" are not the same thing. We hope that children will enjoy reading our books, be excited and engaged by them. That's "fun." If they also laugh while reading them, that's "funny," and that's a bonus. Not everyone can write kid humor naturally. Writers who want to write funny should ask themselves if they enjoy kid humor. If they don't, they probably won't be able to write it well! If they're not sure, I'd encourage them to check out the books of authors known for writing humor well. One possible place to start would be the winners of the SCBWI's Sid Fleischman Humor Award, though they haven't recently updated the list of winners: [www.scbwi.org/awards/sid-fleischman-award/](http://www.scbwi.org/awards/sid-fleischman-award/)

*Harold Underdown...continued*

When they read these books, do they enjoy them? Can they dig in and understand how the humor is working? Then writing humor might be for them.

**LM:** What should our readers include in their series pitch? Theme of the series? Prospective titles? They will also have a space for their bio. Is it important to note whether they are published or agented? Please let us know what is most important to you given the space restrictions.

**HU:** I encourage folks to read our series proposal guidelines, and also get to know some of our existing series. I'm looking for a pitch that would get at the core of what we look for in a series proposal. What topic or topics will the series cover? How will individual titles in the series be set up? Tell me what's distinctive about what you are proposing—feel free to compare it to existing series, and tell me how it will be different.

The pitches that make me exclaim "That's an interesting idea!" will be the ones for which I request full proposals.

We usually require that submissions come in from published authors or agents only, but I'm waiving that requirement for the CBI only. However, authors without experience with series should spend some time researching how they are put together, and be aware that if I express interest, I will then want to see a complete proposal (as laid out in our guidelines) and a complete sample manuscript in a timely manner.

In someone's bio., I want to see relevant writing or personal experience.

**LM:** Before we close, let's look at the bigger picture. You started your new position in October, a year and a half into the covid pandemic. From what you have observed over the past few months, what do you think has been the impact of the pandemic on children's book publishing, and in what kind of shape do you think we'll emerge from it?

**HU:** It's been interesting to get back to working "in-

house" again after a long period away from it.

A lot of the business hasn't changed—the editorial process is the same, the overall publishing process is the same, and so on—but due to the pandemic, working "in-house" is very much not the same! I've been working at Kane Press for six months now, and I have yet to visit the physical office in Manhattan, though I live only a few miles away in Brooklyn.

Publishing (like other businesses) managed to go to working from home very successfully, and I think in the long run that will change the way we do business. I expect once we are "back in the office," that few of us will actually go to the office every day. And that's all to the good.

In the industry overall, there's still a reckoning needed when it comes to workload. Recently there's been some discussion about young staffers being asked to do too much, but I also know more senior folks at some companies who work seven days a week. This isn't healthy and it can't continue just because "it's always been this way." I'm happy to say that I've found a healthier environment at Astra and hope that there are changes in the industry generally.

In terms of the business, publishers weathered the pandemic surprisingly well. Book sales held up, unlike our experience in recent recessions. However, I am concerned about independent booksellers, who we need to help us build audiences for new books. They struggled. Writers should be concerned about this because sales of frontlist (new) titles went down during the pandemic while backlist (old) titles went up. Consumers couldn't as easily "discover" new books without bookstores to find them in. I hope bookstores will recover well and continue to make it possible for us to get new books to readers.

**LM:** For fun—If your childhood was a series, what would you name it?

**HU:** "The Boy Who Read"

See the following page for this month's Above the Slushpile submission opportunity

## APRIL ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE SUBMISSION

Harold Underdown is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Until April 30, 2022, you can submit a pitch for a series for picture book through middle grade readers (ages 3-11) via the online form at [bit.ly/ATSApril2022KanePress](https://bit.ly/ATSApril2022KanePress). Harold will read all pitches and respond to those he's interested in by July 31, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of July, consider it a pass.

The Above the Slushpile submission form is slightly different this month, so please read these notes before you continue:

First, read the Kane Press Series Proposal Guidelines at [astrapublishinghouse.com/pdfviewer/kane-press-submission-guidelines](https://astrapublishinghouse.com/pdfviewer/kane-press-submission-guidelines), and study the current titles published by Kane Press and their focus on STEAM concepts and curriculum connections woven into entertaining fiction and nonfiction series.

**The Kane Press guidelines say only published or agented authors can submit proposals. HOWEVER, Harold Underdown is accepting series pitches from unpublished and unagented authors until April 30, 2022.**

While the Kane Press Series Proposal Guidelines at the link above state that authors should include marketing ideas, titles for several books in the series, analysis of comparable series, and the manuscript for the first book, the CBI Above the Slushpile form asks for a more pitch (the overall idea and hook of the series). You will have about 200 words to describe your series and the potential market. Harold will ask for more information from pitches that interest him. Please send only what is specified in the Above the Slushpile form.

It's strongly advised that you have the first manuscript in the series written, revised and polished, should Harold ask to see it along with a full proposal after April 30.

For more information about the hows and whys of our Above the Slushpile submission form, click on the links below:

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

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

# Finding—and Resolving— Conflict in Unexpected Ways

by Jane McBride

**W**e read about conflict; we write about conflict; we work to implement conflict in our stories. But sometimes our efforts go stale as we use the same conflicts over and over. How do you infuse your stories with new conflict? And how do you explore interesting ways to resolve those conflicts?

**Option 1:** Look to your character’s environment. What do I mean by environment? Yes, it includes the physical aspects of a scene—mountains, streams, rivers, weather. But what if that environment becomes a threat?

Identify what is going on in the main character’s environment in terms of what he doesn’t have. Novels are about characters overcoming problems. A big problem can be lack of resources.

What kind of resources are we talking about here? Suppose a family lost in the mountains doesn't have the necessary gear to survive. They are spending the day in the mountains for a hike and have brought snacks, bandages for blisters, and bottles of water. But what happens if a sudden snow storm occurs and they can’t make it off the mountain by dark? They don’t have a tent, sleeping bags, or extra food. They don’t have the tools to start a fire. What’s more, they don’t have the skills to forage those things. Their lack of resources are going to seriously up the conflict in their quest to survive.

**Option 2:** Explore broken alliances. Most characters don’t live in a vacuum. They have family, friends, schoolmates, work associates, etc. A character comes to depend upon those individuals. What if the “tribe” a character has depended upon for a long time suddenly deserts him?

Ask yourself why that important alliance has been

broken, and what it will cost your protagonist to repair it. In a hypothetical young adult novel, our character, fourteen-year-old Samuel, has been best friends with Jack and Corey since kindergarten. The friends helped Samuel through the death of his father from cancer in third grade, and Samuel’s house was a safe place for the other boys to gather during the ups and downs of middle school. Now in ninth grade, Samuel finds his two friends making excuses when he tries to get together with them. He discovers Jack and Corey are hanging out with a group of older boys, including one 18-year-old who was expelled from school last year. Samuel, always the introvert of the trio, feels lost without his friends. When the older boy offers Samuel entry into the group, he jumps at the chance. The initiation? Call in a fake bomb threat to the school.

**Option 3:** Create a broken hero. Most individuals have flaws and weaknesses, but some are broken at a much deeper level, which affects how they relate to other people and the events in their lives.

Ask yourself why your character is broken. Is her “brokenness” something that can be healed, or is it a permanent part of her? Then use that brokenness to increase the character’s problems and intensify the obstacles that prevent her from reaching her goal. Sixteen-year-old Katie is broken because her father dropped out of her life when she was twelve. To the outside world, Katie has coped well with her father’s walking out on the family, but inside, Katie has built a wall around herself to be sure she never trusts anyone, or puts herself in a position where she’s vulnerable. How will this affect her ability to perform with her partner at a dance recital where a scout from a performing arts school will be in attendance? Kate desperately wants to win a scholarship to the school, but her partner, though a talented dancer and the

*Finding-and Resolving-Conflict...continued*

only one who can perform the moves Kate wants, keeps skipping practice.

**Option 4:** Turn adversaries into even stronger enemies.

An adversary is someone working against you. You want to defeat the adversary, but in some cases compromise will solve the problem. Adversaries can become allies with enough work and understanding.

An enemy is someone you absolutely need to defeat. Between enemies, compromise is seen as weakness. If a character is battling a true enemy, only one will be victorious.

Step out of the box in identifying the enemy. What if the enemy is a beloved teacher who has stolen a high school senior's coding formula which can be worth a fortune if marketed correctly? The enemy need not even be a person. What if a nine-year-old boy must learn to walk again after a car accident? In this case, his damaged body is the enemy. An enemy can also come from within: a fear, an addiction, a bad habit, a closely-held erroneous belief that is preventing the character from reaching her goal. Anything that must be removed from the character's life so that character can move forward and grow can be an enemy.

Try upping the conflict by reinvisioning adversaries as enemies, and see what that does to your story.

## RESOLUTION

Equally as hard in finding a worthy conflict is to find an effective and believable resolution to that conflict.

**-Environment.** If your character is to overcome some threat from his environment, he must bring some skills, though they don't have to be skills that are obvious assets. In Gary Paulsen's novel *Hatchet*, thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson is stranded alone in the Canadian wilderness after a plane crash with nothing but a small hatchet. But what gets Brian to take the first steps toward survival is recalling advice

from a teacher, who had once told him, 'You are your most valuable asset. Don't forget that. You are the best thing you have.' Brian focuses on cultivating an attitude of positive thinking and persistence, and analyzes every mistake he makes so he can learn from it. These traits are ultimately what help him survive.

**-Broken alliances.** Finding and forging new alliances is key, but to completely resolve the conflict, the character must weigh the costs of maintaining old alliances against the benefit of moving on. This shouldn't be an easy decision. Readers value loyalty, so if your protagonist isn't going to be successful at repairing broken alliances, he needs to gain something of value that will help him walk away.

**-The broken hero.** Use those broken pieces to find a stronger element and develop layers in characterization. In the example of Katie, who struggles to trust, she uses that lack of trust to work harder than ever to make herself the best. In doing so, she earns the admiration of her partner, who, in turn, strives to bring out the best in himself.

-In the case of a **much stronger enemy**, it's essential that your protagonist actually defeat the enemy without someone older/stronger/more powerful stepping in and doing it for him. Give your protagonist skills he can draw from, or ways of learning those skills, that end up being more powerful than the enemy in the end. Make the skills surprising to the character, and the reader, so the plot isn't predictable.

## WRAPPING UP

The above are just a few examples of conflict taken to the next level and out-of-the-box thinking in solving those conflicts. Turn a character's weakness into a strength. Let him forge new alliances when old ones have turned sour. If a character is broken, don't try to fix him with a Band-aid. Instead, let him find his own way to heal. Be creative in taking out the bad guys. Don't turn your hero into a superhero. Turn her into the best version of herself she can be.



## Nonfiction Author

**Kirsten W. Larson**  
Books for curious kids



interview by PJ McIlvaine

**U**nlike many budding authors, Kirsten Larson didn't have a burning desire to write books as a child. While she was a voracious and avid reader, creating stories for inquisitive minds came much later, when Larson was a young mother with curious kids of her own. In another life, Larson worked with rocket scientists at NASA, so it was a natural progression to meld her love of STEM, science, and writing. Now a prolific author of over twenty-five acclaimed nonfiction picture books for the school and library market (with more picture books on the horizon, and now branching out into middle-grade), Larson has found her calling and niche. A Lego-ophile who plays tennis and loves to travel, Larson makes her home in California with her family and a Lhasa Poo dog. You can learn more about Larson and her upcoming books for 2023 at [www.kirsten-w-larson.com](http://www.kirsten-w-larson.com)

**PJ McILVAINE:** You once worked for NASA and now you're a successful children's author. That's quite a segue. How did you mesh these interests—STEM, stars, and writing—into a cohesive unit? Was writing something you knew you wanted to do early on or did that come later in life? Were you an avid reader as a child? Name your favorite book and writer growing up. Are you writing the kind of books you wish you could have read as a kid?

**KIRSTEN LARSON:** All my jobs have involved lots of writing. That includes my work at NASA where my job was to communicate to the new media and the

general public about all the amazing things NASA does. With that said, I didn't plan to be a writer. That came much later when I had two young boys who loved to check out nonfiction at our local library. As I read those books, I realized I could write them, and it would be a blast.

As a child, I read everything. *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle is one of the earliest non-picture books I remember reading and loving, probably sparking my interest in science. But I was a big mystery reader as a kid including all the Nancy Drews and Agatha Christies. In many ways, non-fiction writing is like solving a mystery. You have to chase down clues and try to puzzle out their meaning.

**PM:** As an author of nonfiction picture books, how important is it for a writer to figure out what their niche or brand is? We hear a lot about branding as writers, but how do you do that exactly, in practical terms? Any tips for a writer who'd like to write STEM-focused books?

**KL:** I think most nonfiction writers connect to their work deeply and feel passionate about their subject matter. I can link the subjects and themes of most of my books back to my childhood interests and concerns. For example, my latest book, *A true Wonder: The Comic Book Hero Who Changed Everything*, illus. by Katy Wu, was born of my childhood obsession with Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman. There's even a



*Kirsten Larson...continued*

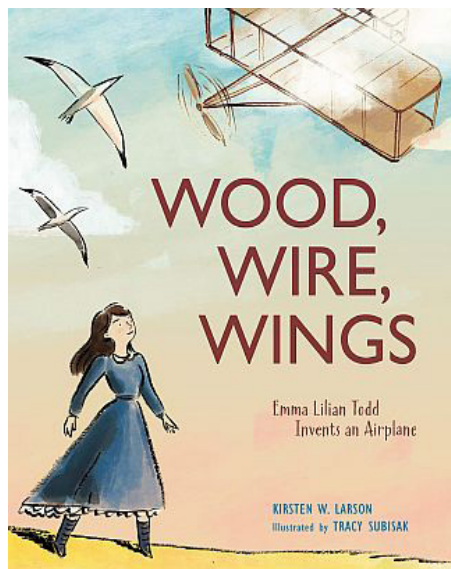
picture of my sister and me in our Wonder Woman Underoos in the back matter.

With that said, I think as nonfiction authors, our passions and interests lead us to our brand. Some people specialize—in STEM books or artist biographies or untold slices of black history, for example. That may make it easier to sell book after book to the same editors. I'm a generalist though with an insatiable curiosity about everything. I use the tagline "books for curious kids," which encompasses just about anything I choose to write about. Following your curiosity is my best advice for everything.

**PM:** What do you like best in kidlit writing: coming up with ideas, the actual writing, or research? How do you know when an idea is a keeper? Do you juggle multiple projects or do you prefer to work on one book at a time?

**KL:** My favorite part is probably the writing, or more accurately the RE-writing. It's always a challenge for me to figure out the best way to tell a story in terms of structure and voice. There's nothing like the feeling that you finally got it "just right." It often takes me a long time.

I do interrogate my ideas quite a bit before I commit to a subject. If I'm writing a biography, it's not enough that someone was first to do something or "the best." I immediately wonder about the larger message/takeaway kids will get from the book. What are the additional hooks that ensure the book can be used in many different ways in a classroom? For example, *Wood, Wire, Wings: Emma Lilian Todd Invents an Airplane*, illustrated by Tracy Subisak, tells the story of the first woman airplane designer. That's great for Women's History Month. But the book also shows how failure is an inherent part of inventing, and the story can be used to model the engineering design process. That's what I mean about multiple hooks. When an idea comes to mind, I start considering these larger issues because nonfiction books are such a time commitment.



I juggle multiple projects, especially at this stage of my career, where I may be researching one book, drafting another, and doing revisions with an editor on a third. I schedule different blocks of time for these tasks, and because I'm a morning person, drafting or revising is always the first-morning block. I used to write without music, but now I'm experimenting with using different playlists to help me move between projects. I also used to put existing projects on hold when I got a revision deadline. But it's really hard to get back into a project once you've been away from it for a long time. Now, as best I can, I try to dive into all my existing projects, even if it's just thinking about each of them for a few minutes a day.

**PM:** What is your writing routine like? Do you write every day or when you're on deadline? How many drafts do you go through? Do you have a writing group or critique partners? How do you handle the revision process? What if you get notes that don't resonate with you?

**KL:** This is my "day job." I typically do a short writing session with my accountability partner M-F at 5:30 a.m. before the rest of my house is awake. Then I come back to the writing just as soon as I can after I drop my kids at school. If I'm researching another book at the same time or fact-checking things, I save that for later in the day after my cre-

ative time.

I have a couple of different critique groups, which I find valuable for "fresh eyes" since I often try out my manuscripts several different ways before I feel like they're right. I've found that over time I've developed pretty good instincts for when a story is ready to go to my agent and out on submission. Also, through many years, it's become easier to understand what critique partners *mean* versus what they may say and to see how their comments illuminate problems in the draft. But there are still times when I realize someone may just not get what I'm trying to do with a story. And that's fine.

*Kirsten Larson...continued*

**PM:** How long did it take you to find a literary agent? How hands-on/editorial is your agent? Do you bounce ideas off her? What is the submission process (to editors and publishers) like? How do you handle the ups and downs of the writing life?

**KL:** Like many writers, I submitted my work too soon. I started looking for an agent in 2014 when my work really wasn't ready. I'd only been learning the craft for a couple of years, and I'm a really slow learner. I took a break from querying until I could build up a better body of work. When I queried again a couple of years later, things happened pretty quickly for me. I think I sent out 10 queries over about a month before getting a request for more material, which ultimately turned into an offer of rep.

My agent, Lara Perkins of Andrea Brown Literary Agency, is editorial, but even better, she's a great person to bounce ideas off of especially when I'm struggling with a draft. She has a knack for saying just the right thing that nudges me in the right direction.

Submissions now are a bit different than they were earlier in my career since I now work with several editors who may have an interest in current manuscripts. With my early manuscripts, it would often take several months and a dozen or more "no's" until I finally got just the right yes. It's all part of the process. I've found the best thing to do while on submission is to write the next book. I can keep my spirits up as long as I know there's always a new possibility on the horizon.

**PM:** You've gone through the publishing process several times over, but as a debut author, is there anything that initially surprised you? Looking back, what would you tell your younger self?

**KL:** I'm always amazed at how long the process takes to create a book—from initial idea to researching, writing, submitting. And then once you sell a picture book manuscript, it's still at least 3 or 4 years until you can hold the book in your hands. I first

conceived the idea for *Wood, Wire, Wings* in March 2014, and it was published almost six years later. Lillian Todd invented her own airplane in less time!

**PM:** Do you see yourself branching out into other genres in the future? If you could write a book on any subject, what would it be?

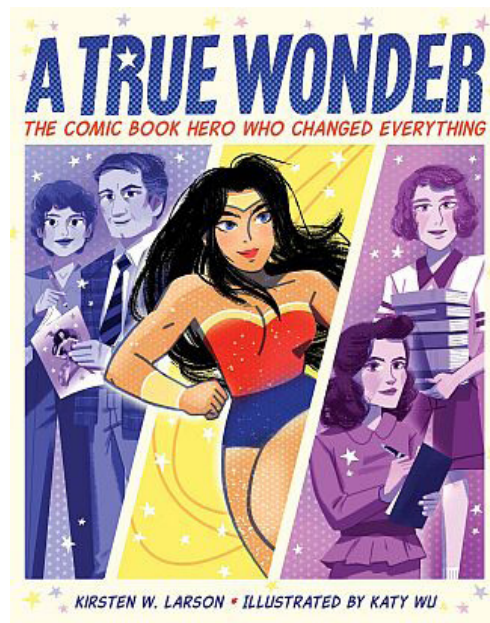
**KL:** I've already branched out into middle grade. My first graphic nonfiction, *The Light of Resistance*, illustrated by Barbara McClintock, is scheduled for 2023. And I've been learning the craft of middle-grade novels too. I wrote a now-shelved MG mystery in 2020/2021 that I'd love to transform someday. And right now, I'm drafting an MG fantasy while researching a nonfiction picture book. I do better—especially in pandemic times—when I can keep my brain busy.

**PM:** Have your kids/family inspired you in your writing? How do you maintain a balance between family and writing?

**KL:** As I mentioned previously, my kids inspired my whole career. My boys are much older now, in middle school and high school, and very busy with their own activities. When I started writing, I had nap time. That was it. And I would shut out the world and focus. Now I have full days to research, write, work on marketing, etc. But having older kids also means the afternoons get busier running them around to all their activities. I save a lot of my social media time and reading in my genre/categories etc. for the times I find myself waiting in the car. And I've been known to write blog posts during piano lessons.

**PM:** And since you did work for NASA, I can't resist asking: do you believe in the possibility of life on other planets?

**KL:** I'm pretty sure there's life on other planets but the big question is what does that life look like? My guess is it's far less complex than human life or even little green men, probably single-cellular.



# BOARD BOOKS 101:

## Telling a Story for the Youngest Readers

by Johnny Ray Moore

I started my writing career as a poet. I wrote a lot of inspirational poems and a few sad poems. Some of my poems rhymed; and some of my poems did not. By writing poetry, I learned how to tell a complete story with very few words.

As time passed, I decided to try writing a board book. After all, it is so much easier to grow young readers and learners while they are in their formidable years than it is to convert them to readers and learners once they are much older.

I had already read a few board books written in rhyming verse. They told a complete story with very few words, just like some of the poems I had written. But I knew I still had much to learn about the board book format. So I did extensive research.

I started reading, studying and collecting award-winning and bestselling board books. I knew I had to read and study board books that would challenge me and force me to grow. The titles below are ones I collected during the time I did my research. They remain timeless, excellent examples for anyone to study.

*Max's Bath* by Rosemary Wells (published 1985 by Dial Books for Young Readers) has 12 pages with a total of 142 words, for ages 2-4.

*Fuzzytail Farm* (A Chunky Flap Book) by Cynthia Alvarez, published 1996 by Random House) has 18 pages with a total of 107 words. This board book is written for beginning learners, ages 2 to 5 years old.

*Barnyard Dance!* by Sandra Boynton (published 1993 by Workman Publishing) has 24 pages with a total

of 150 words, for ages 1 to 4.

*The Little Red Car* by K. K. Ross (published 1990 by Random House, reissued in 2000) has 24 pages with a total of 107 words, for ages 2 to 4.

*Hello World! Backyard Bugs* by Jill McDonald (published 2017 by Doubleday) has 24 pages and a total of 136 words (excluding the words in the sentences preceded by asterisks). This nonfiction board book is written for young learners, ages 1 to 4 years old. I am including this more recent book on the list because all the information I am sharing is applicable to narrative nonfiction board books as well.

**Note:** Board book page counts are always in multiples of two. You can have as few as 8 pages in a board book, but the most common lengths are 16-24 pages, or 8-12 two-page spreads. Page 1 will start on the back of the front cover and page 24 is on the front side of the back cover. Occasionally, the back of the front cover (usually considered page 1 of the story) will contain copyright and dedication, and page 2 will be a title page, with the story starting on page 3. Of course, you'll always find exceptions: some board books are 16 pages including the front and back cover, for example. But in general, you want your story to be told in an even number of two-page spreads, which can consist of two separate pieces of text and illustration on facing pages, or one bit of text and one illustration spanning the entire spread.

As I ease into some of what I discovered about board books, let me share with you that there are two categories of board books: those that teach concepts such as numbers and letters; and those that have a narrative structure, whether fiction or non-fiction. A fiction narrative structure follows charac-

*Board Books 101...continued*

ters through a series of events. Nonfiction may tell a simple, true story (such as a biography), or explore a topic in an active, engaging way that builds from one scene to the next. I will be covering board books with narrative structures. I will also be focusing on board books that were written and published as original board books, not picture books that have been abbreviated and republished as board books.

As you may already know, a toddler's or young learner's ability to comprehend and understand the content of board books depends on what that child has been exposed to. If that child's parents have been reading to and interacting with that child from the start of his or her life, that child will comprehend and understand more. If that child has not been read to or exposed to the simplest of things from the start of his or her life, that child will be a little slower at comprehending and understanding the content of board books. That's why publishers give board books a fairly broad age range.

A board book should have the elements of an outstanding story. And, because a board book is always read out loud to a young child, it should hold the young child's interest with both the text and illustrations. A compelling board book is no different from any other compelling piece of literature. Because your audience is toddlers and preschoolers, your board book should contain concrete ideas, not abstract ones. Your board book should center around no more than three concrete ideas that can be portrayed through 2-page, active scenes that can be illustrated. Stay mindful of ideas and situations your audience will be familiar with and that will be engaging for the short attention spans of young children.

For example, in *Barnyard Dance!* by Sandra Boynton, opens with action:

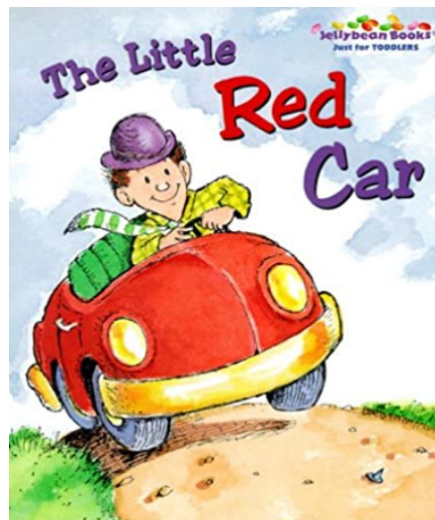
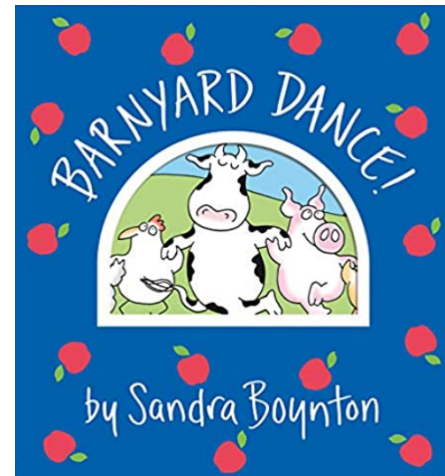
**STOMP YOUR FEET!  
CLAP YOUR HANDS!  
EVERYBODY READY**

**FOR A BARNYARD  
DANCE!** (First page)

Right from the start of this lively board book, you are drawn in by the joy and excitement of those rhythmic lines. The playful text that follows begs the reader to jump up and join in the action.

**Bow to the horse,  
Bow to the cow.  
Twirl with the pig if you know how.**  
(Second page)

As you can see, *Barnyard Dance's* compelling plot demands attention!



A board book should have great pacing. The story must show progression by quickly moving forward with each page turn. For example, *The Little Red Car* by K. K. Ross starts like this:

**The little red car  
got a flat tire – BOOM!** (First page)

**and woke the sleeping baby –  
WAH! WAH! WAH!** (Second page)

**who dropped her dolly – MAMA! MAMA!** (Third page)

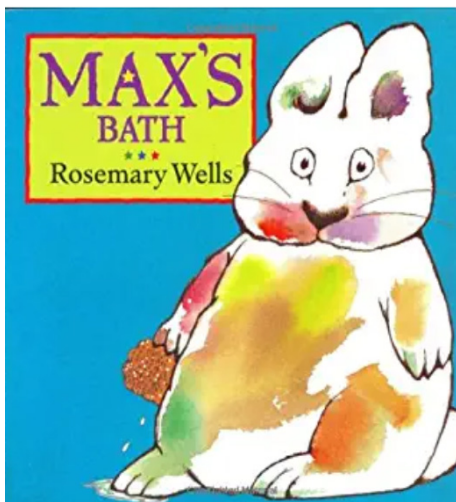
Right away, you experience the motion of that little red car as it rolls along, from the beginning of the story to its end. The use of onomatopoeia (creating a word out of a sound, such as BOOM!), adds another sensory layer to the action.

*Board Books 101...continued*

The characters or the situations in a board book should be relatable and as engaging as possible. But remember, to a toddler or preschooler, “engaging” can mean a funny or subversive twist on an everyday event. For example, *Max’s Bath* by Rosemary Wells reads...

**Max was still hungry after his strawberry jam and lettuce sandwich.** (First page)

**You’re still hungry, Max, said his sister Ruby, because your sandwich isn’t in you, it’s all over you.** (Second page)



Just discovering what Max has eaten, and seeing how messy he is, makes kids laugh out loud! And, the humor continues until this charming board book ends with a silly twist.

Nonfiction board books also need to engage readers. One technique is a “call to action”, enticing young children to put the information to use. For example, *Hello World! Backyard Bugs* by Jill McDonald opens as a conversation between the author and the reader.

**Who lives in your backyard?** (First page)

**Let’s go and explore!** (Second page)

**Look up in the sky.**

**Do you see a bee buzzing by?** (Third page)

**Buzz!** (Fourth page)

Finally, a board book should have a satisfying resolution or conclusion. But unlike picture books, board book characters don’t have to solve

a complex problem or go through a significant change that helps them grow. Keep it simple. *Max’s Bath* ends with Max getting clean, and his sister Ruby with jelly all over her clothes. To a toddler, that’s hilarious. Sometimes a satisfying ending is simply checking off the chores for the day.

For example, in *Fuzzytail Farm* (A Chunky Flap Book) by Cynthia Alvarez, begins with:

**Farmer Sue gets up early to take care of her farm.**

**Fuzzytail Kitty just woke up too!** (First page)

**Moo!**

**Farmer Sue milks**

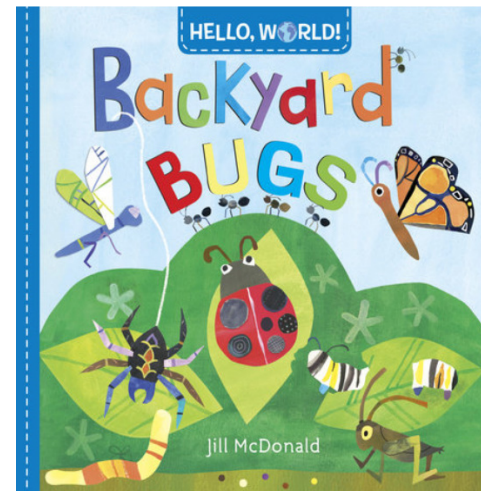
**Fuzzytail Cow twice a day.** (Second page)

**Mother Hen sits on her nest to keep her eggs warm.**

**Look – Fuzzytail Chick is being born!** (Third page)



Young children enjoy the structure of moving through the regular farm chores and seeing how both Farmer Sue and the animals experience their day. Each page depicts one clear activity that can be illustrated, written in simple declarative sentences. The rhyming stanzas help reinforce the rhythm of farm activities.



## Board Books 101...continued

While many board books rhyme, you can see by the above examples that a rhyming text is not a requirement for a board book. Text in prose can still have a satisfying rhythm and structure that sounds good when read out loud. Remember to keep your sentences short, with one idea per sentence.

If you do decide to write your board book in rhyming verse, please keep the following tips in mind:

1. You must still tell a great story from beginning to end.
2. Use perfect rhymes, not paired words that almost rhyme. The rhymes help pre-readers predict which word will come next. Perfect rhyme also helps create a more consistent meter for reading out loud.
3. As with writing in prose, every word of a rhyming book must be necessary and be the best word to help tell your story. Do not use words just for the sake of making a line rhyme.
4. Also, remember that good meter is a matter of paired lines having the stresses in the same place. Good meter is not a matter of syllables. Rhymes must sound natural when read aloud.

## Never Stop Learning

Every so often, I would review the information I had compiled on How to Write a Board Book. To this very day, I continue to review the information. My thinking was (then) and is (now) to always be prepared for an unexpected opportunity.

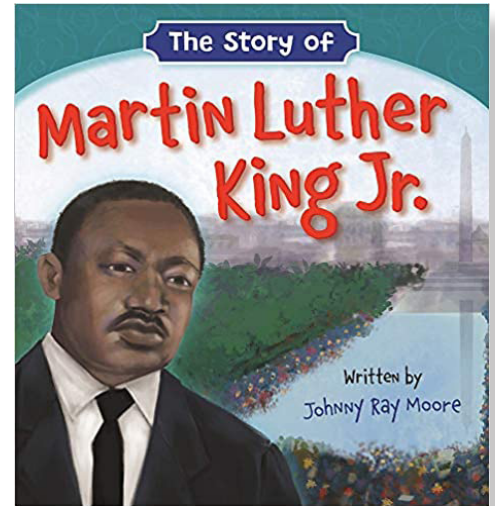
Then on Wednesday, 9 May 2001 at 5:00 a.m., an unexpected opportunity came my way! My former literary agent sent me the following email:

*“Hi Johnny Ray,*

*I know you think I’ve forgotten you, but that isn’t the case by a long shot. And today, an opportunity opened up that*

*seems made for you. Ideals Publications called me to ask if I knew anyone who could write a board book on Martin Luther King, Jr. for young children. Probably, 300 words is the maximum. Would you be interested? I’ll call you on Friday, if I haven’t heard. Many thanks for considering.”*

I gladly accepted this opportunity! Immediately, I began reading about and researching Martin Luther King, Jr. I figured young children would be able to relate to Martin’s childhood. Plus, I was searching for an approach in writing that board book that would capture and inspire anyone who read it, especially young readers and learners.



After about ten days, I had written *The Story Of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ... in only 200 words! It was a very difficult board book to write. Nonetheless, I worked extremely hard and got the job done. *The Story Of Martin Luther King, Jr.* was published in 2001 and is now a bestselling classic. That board book has sold well over 103,000 copies (to date) and is now in its third edition.

Even though writing a board book requires more time and effort than is apparent at first glance, I will always cherish the hard work that goes into writing one. But it is well worth it because young readers and learners deserve our very best. And, I am sure you will grow to cherish the hard work that goes into the board books you will write as well!

To get you started with the writing of your board book immediately, here is some of what I have shared:

Board Books 101...continued

1. Become familiar with original board books by reading and studying them.
2. Spend time reading to young children.
3. Make a list of ideas that young readers and learners are familiar with.
4. Think about how you can create a narrative structure (fiction or nonfiction) around one central idea, using an average of 6-12 scenes with concrete action that can be illustrated.
5. Then ... let the writing begin!
6. When you are ready to submit, go to a bookstore and study recently-published board books, then look on the publishers' websites to see if they are taking submissions. If you envision your board book to have novelty elements (lift-the-flap, touch-and-feel, etc.) target publishers who do those types of books. Generally, the novelty elements are determined by the art director and illustrator, but check the publisher's guidelines. Many board books are produced for publishers by book packagers (also called book producers). Here's a list of book producers to study: [abpaonline.org/find-book-producer/](http://abpaonline.org/find-book-producer/)

### A List of Newer Board Books to Study

Note how many board books combine nonfiction concepts with an entertaining narrative structure that may or may not feature fictional characters. Board books are, at their core, a way for toddlers and preschoolers to learn about themselves and the world around them, build language skills, and become acquainted with the process of turning the pages of a book and seeing action progress from one scene to the next.

*I Love My Tutu Too!* (A Never Bored Book) by Russ Burach, 2020, Scholastic

*Mail Duck: A Book of Shapes and Surprises* by Erica Sirotich, 2020, Abrams Appleseed

*Stanley's Toolbox* by William Bee, 2020, Peachtree Petite

*A Very HUNGRY Wolf* by Agnese Baruzzi, 2020, minedition US

*Who Is Making a Mess?* by Maria D'Haene, 2020, Amicus Ink

*Oh No, George!* by Chris Haughton (Candlewick, 2015)

*All Aboard! The Airport Train* (An Abrams Extend-a-Book) by Nichole Mara, 2019, Abrams

*Cerca / Close and Lejos / Far* by Juan Felipe Herrera, 2019, Candlewick. (Two bilingual board books that teach spatial awareness with a simple narrative structure.)

"Baby Loves Science" series by Ruth Spiro (multiple titles), Charlesbridge

*Let's Be Friends* by Violet Lemay, 2021, HarperFestival

*The Story of "The Star-Spangled Banner"* by Patricia A. Pingry, 2005 and 2014 editions, WorthyKids/Hachette Book Group

*The Story of Martin Luther King, Jr.* written by Johnny Ray Moore, third edition published in 2021 by WorthyKids/Hachette Book Group



# SMALL Details Yield BIG Results

by Jane McBride

## “The devil is in the details.”

This saying has been around at least as long as I have. I can only concur. Details matter. I have never subscribed to the philosophy of “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” Small stuff matters, in our relationships and in our writing.

What’s the small stuff, you ask.

The small stuff is that body of things beyond characters, setting, plot, dialogue, etc. You know, the big stuff.

Small stuff, or details, make readers pause, sit up and take notice of what is going on during the big stuff. Small stuff beefs up emotion without you, the author, ever having to say “She was feeling scared.”

Let’s make up an example. (If you’ve read my articles before, you know that I love to make up stories or play “let’s pretend.”) The heroine of our story is twelve-year-old Gemma. Gemma is tucked in the corner of the laundry room where she can overhear her parents arguing in the kitchen.

Gemma listens as her parents yell at each other. They throw obscenities around with such casual abandon that Gemma cringes with each one. She never heard her mother or her father say those things before and now they’re saying them to each other, to the person they supposedly love most in all the world.

Gemma covers her ears with her hands, but it’s not enough to block out the meanness and deliberate cruelty she overhears. Every word uttered feels like she is being struck with a huge fist, and she flinches with pain. *Please, she prays, make it stop.*

*Make it stop.*

And then she sees it. A tiny cobweb in the corner. That is proof in itself that her mother was not herself. Ordinarily a cobweb would have better sense than to locate itself in the house which her mother keeps immaculate. Gemma looks closer and sees a tiny spider patiently weaving the web.

She hunkers down lower to get a better look at the industrious creature. Its minute actions are so small that they could be easily overlooked, but the results are obvious. Infinitely slowly, the spider wove its web. It’s creating a home, Gemma decides. A home where it is safe.

Gemma keeps watching, all the while still hearing the curses her parents hurl at each other. She wishes she could be a spider, safe in its protective web. Safe.

But is it safe? What if her mother sees the web and sweeps it away with a broom? It is so fragile that it won’t withstand such rough

*Small Details Yield Big Results...continued*

treatment. The spider's home would unravel with one harsh strike.

And what of her? Would her home also unravel with one harsh strike?

Pretty soon, she no longer hears her parents fight. She imagines herself weaving a web around her and is one with the spider. She pushes away the thoughts that the web will soon be destroyed. It is enough that the spider is safe now.

Is the spider weaving his web important to the story? No. Gemma's parents continue to fight and eventually divorce, Gemma being divided between them like the spoils of war. But the spider and its web are important to Gemma. Rather than saying, "Gemma was scared that her parents were fighting," we show it with her fascination with the spider and its patient work to surround itself with a safe home.

What are the important things to remember if you're going to use a small detail to showcase big emotions?

**-Choose something that is inherent in the scene.** Make it a natural part of what might be seen or overheard. Don't look for some grand metaphor or simile; instead, go with the small and familiar. In Gemma's story, we chose a spider web, something that might be found in any house. We didn't choose a big, showy thing to represent her feelings, nor did we bring in something that would be out of place in a laundry room.

**-Choose an age-appropriate way for the protagonist to make the connection.** Would a five- or six-year-old notice the spider's web? Perhaps. But making the comparison between the fragility of the spider's home and her own home wouldn't immediately happen. She might impulsively sweep away the spider's web with a broom, and then realize how easily the spider's home could be destroyed. This might make her wonder if her own home was

in danger as well. In addition, she may feel responsible for her parents fighting, just like she was responsible for the spider losing its web.

**-Choose something that may not be immediately visible.** Gemma doesn't see the spider web right off. It is only as she is trying to block out the hurtful words coming from her parents that she notices the web and its tiny architect. It provides something for her to focus on rather than the ugly scene she is witnessing.

**-Choose something that is relatable to the character's present situation.** Would Gemma noticing the web when all is going well with her family be important? No. Most of us have seen spider webs and have either dusted them away or simply ignored them. The web becomes important only because it represents a home and Gemma feels that her home is threatened.

**-Choose something that causes the character to think and to feel.** In our example, Gemma hasn't said a word, nor does she go into a long litany of how her life will change if her parents continue on this course, but her observations tell us all we need to know about her thoughts and feelings. She fears that her life will unravel, just as the spider's web might unravel if it is touched in the wrong way.

## IN CONCLUSION

Small details, used well, can boost your writing with unexpected flavor and surprise. Discover what is unique in your characters, your setting, your plot and then find the details that will make them shine.