

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  December 2022

## How to Really Connect with Your Readers



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITY:**



**SIMON & SCHUSTER**  
Books for Young Readers

## Table of contents

At Presstime: New Market Listings, Conferences and Contests.....	2
From the Editor – How Old Books Can Teach Us New Tricks by Laura Backes.....	4
Book Publishing Today – LGBTQ+ Books and the Evolution of Publishing by Jean Daigneau.....	9
Editor Spotlight – Dainese Santos, Associate Editor, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers interview by Lynne Marie.....	13
Your Publishing Career – Forging Relationships with Readers by Jane McBride.....	19
Featured Interview –Debut Picture Book Author Michelle Nott interview by PJ McIlvaine.....	22
Inspiring Ideas – Make a Map to Visualize Setting by Candice Ransom.....	26
Bonus Interview – Author Turns Teaching Experience into Writing Career interview by Sharon O. Blumberg.....	28
Celebrate! CBI Subscriber News.....	30

### This issue's contributors

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

**Sharon O. Blumberg** is a retired school teacher, having taught Spanish and English for over 20 years. In addition, she is a children's writer and voiceover artist. Her voiceover website and additional bio can be found at: [www.sharonoblumbergauthor.com](http://www.sharonoblumbergauthor.com)

**Jean Daigneau** is the author of *Code Cracking for Kids* and *Ellis Island and Immigration for Kids: A History with 21 Actives*, both from Chicago Review Press. She's been published in newspapers and magazines, including *Highlights* and *Fun for Kidz*, and in *Guide to Literary Agents* and *Children's Writers' and Illustrators' Market*. She is a former regional and assistant regional advisor for SCBWI Ohio North and currently serves on the executive board. She runs [Two4One Kid Critiques](http://Two4OneKidCritiques) with author Gloria Adams.

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

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

**PJ McIlvaine** is the author of picture books *Little Lena and the Big Table* and *Dragon Roar*, and the middle grade historical mystery *Violet Yorke, Gilded Girl: Ghosts in the Closet*. Her YA alternate history adventure *The Conundrum of Charlemagne Crosse* comes out Sept. 2023. PJ is also a co-host of #PBPitch, the premiere Twitter pitch party for picture book writers and illustrators. <https://pjmacwriter.com>

**Candice Ransom** is the author of over 150 books for children, including 14 *Step into Reading* titles. She has an MFA in writing for children from VCFA and an MA in children's literature from Hollins University. See all her work at [www.candiceransom.com](http://www.candiceransom.com)

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

ISSN 1073-7596

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

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

Text copyright © 2022 Children's Book Insider, LLC. Subscribers may reprint up to 300 words with credit to Children's Book Insider, [www.writeforkids.org](http://www.writeforkids.org). For longer reprints, email Laura Backes at [Laura@CBIClubhouse.com](mailto:Laura@CBIClubhouse.com).

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

# At Presstime:

## **Independent Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages**

Creston Books is an independent creative-driven press in the San Francisco Bay Area with the mission to keep the art of children's books alive. Distributed by Lerner Books, Creston publishes picture books (fiction and informational nonfiction for ages 4-8, biographies for ages 6-11), chapter book fiction, middle grade and young adult fiction, and graphic novels. Submissions have a timeless, artful quality. Many of their books have won awards and "Best Book" listings. Visit [crestonbooks.co/](https://crestonbooks.co/) to study their books before submitting. Submit the entire manuscript for a picture book with a brief cover letter, or a query and the first two chapters for longer works. All submissions should be emailed with the entire submission pasted into the email. Attachments will not be read. Send to [marissamoss@crestonbooks.co](mailto:marissamoss@crestonbooks.co).

## **Publisher Accepting Queries that Celebrate Multicultural Experience and Black Culture**

Just Us Books is the nation's leading independent publisher of children's books that celebrate the diversity of Black culture, history and experiences. Titles include board books, picture books, chapter books, middle reader titles, poetry, biographies and young adult fiction. Their Marimba Books imprint focuses on board books, picture books, chapter books and middle grade with diverse multicultural characters or topics.

Just Us Books is currently accepting both fiction and nonfiction queries for both Just Us Books and the Marimba Books imprint in all categories (picture books, chapter books [target ages 7-9] and middle grade [target ages 9-12]). Looking for unique story ideas, cultural authenticity, interesting characters, compelling, high-interest plot lines. See current titles at [justusbooks.com](https://justusbooks.com)

Submit a query letter pitching your manuscript (include your email address and list any previously published books), a synopsis of your manuscript, 3-5 sample pages of your manuscript. Submissions may be sent via mail or email. Emailed submissions (paste the entire query and sample pages into the body of the email) go to [submissions@justusbooks.com](mailto:submissions@justusbooks.com). Or mail submission to Just Us Books, Submissions Dept., P.O. Box 5306, East Orange, NJ 07019. Will respond within three months if interested in seeing more of the manuscript.

## **Young Adult Imprint Accepting Submissions in Any Genre**

Flux is an imprint of North Star Editions, Inc., publishing young adult fiction in a wide range of genres, including contemporary, fantasy, science fiction, paranormal, special needs and disabilities, LGBTQ+, social themes, romance, adventure and suspense, thriller, horror. Accepting queries for well-crafted YA. Submissions should include a query letter with a 1-2 paragraph plot synopsis, a short bio mentioning any previous publication and writing credentials, 3-5 comparative books published within the last 5 years with an explanation of how your book both ties into a trend in the YA genre and offers something unique, your email address and phone number. Attach the first three chapters of your book as a Word document. Email to [submissions@northstareditions.com](mailto:submissions@northstareditions.com). The subject line should be the working title of your book. Study current titles before submitting at [fluxnow.com](https://fluxnow.com)

## **Publisher Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction with Social, Emotional and Educational Themes**

Free Spirit Publishing ([www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com)) is the leading publisher of learning tools for youth and educators that support young people's social, emotional, and educational needs. Currently looking for strong proposals for ages birth-18 in the following categories:

**GIFTED & SPECIAL EDUCATION:** Books on academic, social, and emotional development for young people of all ages with diverse learning needs, including gifted students and students with learning differences, ADHD, behavioral difficulties, or autism spectrum disorders.

**BULLYING PREVENTION & CONFLICT RESOLUTION:** Picture books and books for kids and teens, and resources for teachers, counselors, and other educators, to help young people understand, prevent, and respond to bullying incidents. Will also consider fiction for kids and teens that relates to these topics.

**CHARACTER EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:** Picture books and books for kids and teens to help young people build character, discover their leadership potential, and engage in their communities. Will also consider fiction for kids and teens that relates to these topics.

**BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:** Board books for infants to age 4 and picture books for ages 3 to 8 that focus on social skills and getting along, early learning, character education, self-esteem, and other topics related to positive early childhood development. Books can be fiction or nonfiction.

**COUNSELING & SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING:** Picture books and books for kids and teens to help children and teens deal with grief and loss, health and wellness, depression and other mental illnesses, stress, social skills and friendship, anger management, LGBTQ issues, manners, family, self-confidence, and more. Books can be fiction or nonfiction.

Free Spirit is NOT looking for: Books with animals or mythical creatures as the primary characters; poetry; material with religious or New Age content; single biographies, autobiographies, or memoirs; general self-help for adults.

Submit a proposal through Submittable ([freespiritpublishing.submittable.com/submit](https://freespiritpublishing.submittable.com/submit)) The proposal will include a cover letter briefly outlining your project, the intended audience, and your relevant expertise; a market analysis with a comprehensive list of similar titles and a detailed explanation of how your project differs from available products; a description of your personal promotion plan for the proposed book (including both in-person and social media outreach; and either the full manuscript for picture books or a detailed chapter outline and two sample chapters for longer work. Responds to queries of interest within six months.

## **Literary Agent Accepting Middle Grade, YA and Graphic Novel Submissions**

Tess Weitzner is a Literary Agent with Trident Media Group ([tridentmediagroup.com](http://tridentmediagroup.com)), representing both adult and children's authors. In children's book submissions, she is mostly looking for middle grade but will selectively take on picture books, YA, and graphic novels. She is looking for spunky fiction and nonfiction stories that embrace joy, have a strong narrative voice, and are seemingly "quiet" but crack open larger questions or underrepresented experiences. She is a better advocate for stories set in our world but will happily review the occasional sci-fi or fantasy. Submit a query letter with additional author information in the form on the company website at <https://www.tridentmediagroup.com/submissions/>. Specify Tess Weitzner in the drop down field called "Send Email To." See many of Trident Media's clients on the website home page.

# How Old Books Can Teach Us New Tricks

by Laura Backes

Dear Reader,

“If you want to be a writer of children's books, you must be a reader of children's books.” This is good advice, which is why you hear it so often. When you see excellent writing modeled on the page, you start to internalize those techniques and apply them to your own work.

But the advice is usually followed with this caveat: “Focus on books published in the last 10 years.” Why? Because styles of writing change. Formats evolve. You want to be creating books that can get published today. This doesn't mean you should only write about current topics — historical fiction (loosely defined as anything that takes place before your readers were born) — is still popular, but the pacing and tone of the text, and conflicts the characters face, must be relevant to modern readers.

Still good advice, but...what about all those books you loved as a child, or that you read to your kids? Don't those count?

Yes, because the writers you're studying today learned from the authors of the past. And you can too, once you know what to look for.

If you're new to writing, or haven't read a lot of children's books (and by “a lot”, I mean 100 books written for the same audience that you're writing for), start with those published in the last 10 years. First, read each book just to see if you like it, if it hits you on an emotional level. If so, then go back and read the book as a writer, noting which techniques that author is particularly good at — dialogue, character development, chapter beginnings and endings, presenting information in an unusually compelling way, etc. If a scene or line stands out as being especially masterful, type it out. Feel how the words and sentences are structured as your fingers move over the keyboard.

You're also going to take note of big-picture elements of current books. How are they paced? How much description is devoted to setting and character appearance? When is the protagonist's problem introduced to the reader? How many characters appear on average in picture books, and what purpose does each character serve? In novels, which characters are central to subplots, and how do they impact the main plot line? How many words/pages of the book remain after the character solves their problem in the story's climax? How do nonfiction authors use voice, humor, format, and even their own point of view to convey information to readers? Do these techniques change depending on the age of the audience?

Once you have a good sense of books published for today's market, then you can revisit some of your favorite books from the past. You already have an emotional connection to these works; now you can

analyze why they've stuck with you all these years, and what you can pull from them for your own writing. You'll also understand which techniques would need to be updated if these books were published today.

Let's look at a few classic books and see how the authors handled one important aspect of writing: hooking the reader with the opening paragraphs.

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

"I don't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight.

"Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."

"Do away with it?" shrieked Fern. "You mean kill it? Just because it's smaller than the others?"

Mrs. Arable put a pitcher of cream on the table. "Don't yell Fern!" she said. "Your father is right. The pig would probably die anyway."

Fern pushed a chair out of the way and ran outdoors....

(from *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, published 1952)

The opening of this beloved novel does everything a modern editor wants. It begins in *medias res* (in the middle of the action), with an unsettling juxtaposition of a bucolic family breakfast and the image of Papa heading to the hoghouse, ax slung over his shoulder. Told entirely through dialogue with no narrative description, we immediately understand how young Fern's empathy for animals and sense of justice is at odds with parents' need to be practical. But the reader can't help but side with Fern, who's willing to throw herself in front of an ax to save a tiny pig. Gotta love that girl!

What would change if this was written today? E.B. White had a tendency to move from the omniscient to the limited third person viewpoint, sometimes within a paragraph, which was a common style of the time. He was such a masterful writer that it doesn't ruin the flow of the story, but a current editor may ask him to reign it in a bit. Sometimes the omniscient point of view is necessary, as when he's setting up the scene at the county fair. But in an opening scene, it can pull the reader out of the action.

Every time I read it, this one line — "*I don't see why he needs an ax,*" continued Fern, who was only eight — implies something different to me. Fern is only eight and doesn't understand the ways of the farm. Fern's not quick to put two and two together, but that's expected because she's only eight. Fern's awfully inquisitive for her age. Fern's asking insightful questions for one so young.

The phrase "who was only eight" (specifically, the "only") qualifies an otherwise omniscient scene of dialogue, and passes judgment on Fern's statement. What Fern said may have been sensible or silly, appropriate or impertinent, but it's someone's *opinion*. Whose? Not the reader — we don't know enough about Fern to judge her yet. Perhaps Mrs. Arable's, though if she's going to make a point about her daughter's age, wouldn't she do it out loud so Fern could hear it? Is it the author's opinion? Possibly. The technique of the author popping into the story was common 70 years ago, and the reader would have glossed right over that phrase. But today, it stands out.

*From the Editor..continued*

If I were editing *Charlotte's Web* today, I'd ask E.B. White to take out reference to Fern's age in this opening scene, and weave it in later *if it's absolutely necessary*. Perhaps when Fern catches up with Papa and tries to wrestle the ax away from him. He might say, "You're only eight, you're not old enough to understand all the decisions you have to make when you're running a farm." I'd love to hear Fern's answer to that.

Another note: Referring to Fern's parents as Mrs. and Mr. Arable is also out of fashion, especially if we're inside Fern's viewpoint. Mama (or Mother) and Papa work just fine.

Sometimes, an author chooses to insert an opinion via the omniscient narrator because it's necessary information for the reader to have, and it can't come from the protagonist. Gary Paulsen did this skillfully. Here is the opening sentence from *Brian's Winter* (1996, ages 9-13).

Fall came on with a softness, so that Brian didn't realize what was in store—a hard-spined northwoods winter—until it was nearly too late.

The central conflict of *Brian's Winter*, like its precursor *Hatchet*, centers on whether or not 12-year-old Brian can survive alone in the Canadian wilderness. *Hatchet* proved that he could make it through the summer until he was finally rescued. *Brian's Winter* imagines an alternate ending; though Brian was able to pull the survival pack out of the downed plane, he did not activate the distress signal, and so was never rescued. Readers know what Brian endured during the warm months. Now winter is coming, so the stakes are even higher.

But Brian doesn't know that.

After revealing the highest-possible stakes to the reader, Paulsen quickly moves into limited third person, which serves to build even more tension because we see that Brian has become soft.

He had never thought he would be here this long. After the plane crash that marooned him in the wilderness he had lived day-by-day for fifty-four days, until he had found the survival pack in the plane. Then another thirty-five days through the northern summer, somehow living the same day-to-day pattern he had started just after the crash.

And then angry. His bout of rage wasted more days he could have been preparing for winter.

When it finally ended—wore away, was more like it—he felt a great sense of relief. It was as if somebody he didn't like had been visiting and had finally gone. It was then that he first really noted the cold.

Giving the reader information the protagonist doesn't have is a great way to build tension from the first lines. But don't wait too long to get inside the protagonist's head. Paulsen knew readers would want to immediately follow Brian's thought process and see how long it took him to catch up.

Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago: A Novel in Stories* by Richard Peck (1998, ages 10-14) shows that first person point of view can also perform the heavy lifting of introducing the main character, the time

period, and the book's premise, all via a single incident:

You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body. We were growing up there back in the bad old days of Al Capone and Bugs Moran. Just the winter before, they'd had the St. Valentine's Day Massacre over on North Clark Street. The city had such an evil reputation that the Thompson submachine gun was better known as a "Chicago typewriter."

But I'd grown to the age of nine, and my sister Mary Alice was seven, and we'd yet to see a stiff. We guessed that most of them were where you couldn't see them, at the bottom of Lake Michigan, wearing concrete overshoes.

The first three spreads from *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1963), demonstrate how to introduce character and plot problem quickly in a picture book, without extra words:

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind

and another

his mother called him "WILD THING!"

and Max said "I'LL EAT YOU UP!"

and so he was sent to bed without eating anything.

The unusual structure of the text — long, run-on sentences — creates a rhythm that flows from page to page, just like Max's voyage to where the Wild Things are. It also forces the reader to pause and study the illustrations before each page turn. All these elements make the book timeless and as perfect today as it was nearly 60 years ago.

The iconic *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault (1989, picture book), proves that engaging, unusual approaches to nonfiction concepts will appeal to generation after generation:

A told B  
and B told C,  
"I'll meet you at the top  
of the coconut tree."

"Whee!" said D  
to E F G.  
"I'll beat you to the top  
of the coconut tree."

Chicka Chicka boom boom  
will there be enough room?  
Here comes H  
up the coconut tree,



*From the Editor..continued*

Note how fun this book is to read aloud, and how easy it is for preschoolers to join in the refrain. This book set the pattern for young picture books that we're still following today.

The value of a mentor text doesn't depend so much on the book's pub date, but on the skillful quality of the writing. Once you learn what editors, and readers, are expecting in modern books, you can revisit classic books and see if those authors had distilled their craft down to the timeless essence of good storytelling. If so, by all means use them as models for your own work. But even if your beloved childhood favorites don't hold up style-wise, look deeper. Perhaps the characters were multidimensional and believable. Maybe the plot took surprising twists that you remember decades later. A story's complex and sophisticated theme may have inspired you to think in new ways.

In other words, old books can, indeed, teach us new writing tricks.

I'll finish with one of the most masterful first paragraphs ever written:

Claudia knew that she could never pull off the old-fashioned kind of running away. That is, running away in the head of anger with a knapsack on her back. She didn't like discomfort; even picnics were untidy and inconvenient: all those insects and the sun melting the icing on the cupcakes. Therefore, she decided that her leaving home would not be just running from somewhere but would be running to somewhere. To a large place, a comfortable place, an indoor place, and preferably a beautiful place. And that's why she decided upon the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

*(From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler by E.L. Konigsburg, ages 9-12, 1967)*

What would I change if this were published today? Not one word.

Sincerely,

**Laura Backes**

# LGBTQ+ Books and the Evolution of Publishing

by Jean Daigneau

Today, books with LGBTQ+ characters and themes have become a staple of the kidlit landscape. As we celebrate the inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices in the publishing world, it's worth taking a look back at the path traveled to reach this moment. We'll also see how today's authors are including LGBTQ+ characters and themes in their work.

## A LONG AND CHALLENGED HISTORY

While these books have appeared prior to 1969, many literary historians mark the publication of the late John Donovan's novel *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, as a milestone. Donovan's work marked the first time a novel from a mainstream publisher depicted a kiss between two teenage boys. It's worth noting that 1969 was, coincidentally, also the year of the Stonewall Riots in New York City that brought the fight for LGBTQ+ rights to the forefront.

But even after this success, and prior to about 2000, these books were most often published by small, feminist presses or by authors who self-published. Author

Lesléa Newman turned to self-fundraising, with friend Tzivia Gover, when she found no publishers "large, small, mainstream, and alternative," as she notes, willing to publish her book *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Published in 1989, the book was picked up six months later by Alyson Publications and continued there for over 20 years. In 2015, Candlewick published a new edition, and Newman says, "Heather continues to march through the world in her awesome purple cowgirl boots!"



## PUBLISHING EVOLVES

Early books featuring LGBTQ+ characters were often more about what it's like to be LGBTQ+, or to have LGBTQ+ family members. More recent stories simply include characters that happen to be members of that community. Sexuality is part of who they are, but so are other characteristics, like empathy, courage, and compassion. Regardless of who they love or how they live, many of today's stories feature characters who are just trying to get through their childhood or teenage years while navigating family life, school, and romantic



*LGBTQ+ Books...continued*

relationships or any number of other issues. My research has shown that today, LGBTQ+ books tend to be less didactic than some previous titles.

The central theme of *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, a picture book by Sarah S. Brannen, lies in the conflict the main character Chloe faces, not because her favorite uncle is marrying a man, but because he might no longer have time to do their favorite things, like flying kites. In a recent interview, *Uncle Bobby* author Sarah S. Brannen reported that when she speaks to young children, she often sees that the idea of men marrying isn't something these kids have thought about. She says they sometimes say, "Oh, I didn't know that," and then move on to other questions, like whether she's ever been a flower girl herself or how old she is. (An interesting side note: The book was originally published in 2008 by Putnam, with the characters drawn as guinea pigs. In 2020, little bee books reissued the title in partnership with GLAAD, featuring new illustrations by Lucia Soto with human characters.)

### FINDING A PLACE ON THE SHELF

As with so many kids' books, the importance of supporting, encouraging, and advocating for LGBTQ+ books is twofold. Educator Emily Style originated the idea of mirror and window books in the 1980s. The idea focuses on ways kids can *mirror*, or reflect in on, their own lives and window, or look out on, the lives of others. Another term, which author Rob Sanders refers to, is "sliding glass door books," which help kids "step into a new world or to step into their own identity."

All kids need books where they can find characters they can relate to. Kids need a safe haven where they can explore their own emotions, learn about issues that are facing their own families or friends, and find answers to questions they might feel uncomfortable talking about. At the same time, studies

show that kids who learn about lives that are not their own tend to be more open-minded, tolerant, and supportive of others.

### WRITING LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS? POINTS TO REMEMBER

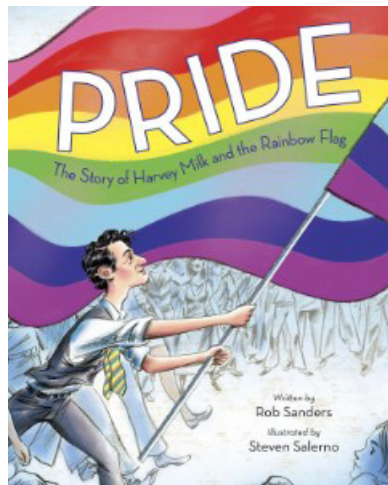
One of the major rules to follow is to avoid stereotyping. Members of the LGBTQ+ community should not be defined strictly by their sexuality. All boys who like to wear dresses are not "sissies," nor are girls who like to play with trucks "tomboys." Authors should strive to create characters that are three-dimensional, with backstory, challenges, and life-changing situations they may confront showcasing the entirety of who they are. This is true if your character is a shy, middle school girl who wants to ask a girl to a dance or a non-binary superhero fighting to save the world.

That said, if your character's sexuality is a big part of the story, consider all angles of that element. Are you showcasing these characters in a positive way? Are you portraying their experiences so readers will be vested in them and their stories? How has their upbringing affected who they are? What societal events have had

an impact on them? And, most of all, what message are you trying to send your readers?

On the other hand, don't patronize your characters and make other aspects of life easy for them, just because you empathize with the challenges of living in a world that isn't always welcoming to this community. Is sexual identity important? Of course. But that's not the only consideration when creating characters. It's about writing a plot that's believable and magical or scary or emotional or that encompasses any number of themes that kids' books are about today.

As Sanders says, "... I'm not publishing kids' books for the LGBTQ+ community. I'm publishing books



for all readers. Some of my books happen to explore LGBTQ+ history, heroes, themes, and events and include characters who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. . . . Even when I published *PRIDE* back in 2018 there were few picture books—fiction or nonfiction—that dealt with people or topics related to the LGBTQ+ community. But things have changed considerably since then. Many publishers are publishing books of every genre and type that share these topics with kidlit readers from preschoolers to teens. So that’s a huge change. . . .”

One study of LGBTQ+ picture books in 2021 indicated that LGBTQ students raised the point that there needed to be more books about them that depict average, “day-to-day” experiences. If you write in this genre, consider how your story can *mirror* the lives of these characters as well as offer a *window* to all readers about this community.

Don’t write a book with an LGBTQ+ character because your agent mentions the need for more books in this genre. Write the book you want to write because you’re passionate about the story you want to tell. But if you’re not a member of the LGBTQ+ community, look for people, resources, and other information so that your character can be accurately depicted. The biggest disservice you can do as an author is to write about any community inaccurately.

With these ideas in mind, Sanders sees positive improvements in the publishing world. One big change he acknowledges “is that LGBTQ+ representation can be seen in characters and illustrations that aren’t specifically about LGBTQ+ topics, and sexuality and gender identity are often depicted now not as a problem or an issue or the main part of a character’s personhood, but rather as one aspect of a fully-developed character—just as in real life.” Newman echoes these sentiments. “I hope that every child (and adult!) who reads my book comes away with the message: you are fine just the way you are. You are more than fine—you’re fabulous! There are as many ways to be in this world as there are people in this world. You are unique. You are a gift to the world. Or as Oscar Wilde so famously said, ‘Be

yourself. Everyone else is taken.’”

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As with all children’s writing, especially when writing books about underrepresented communities, Newman acknowledges, “It’s a complicated issue. I would suggest that each author ask themselves, ‘Why am I the person to write this book?’ ‘What is my motivation for writing this book?’ ‘What is my connection to the community I am writing about?’ ‘What is my intention?’ ‘Am I willing to work with authenticity readers to vet my work?’”

Sanders suggests authors find their “community” and learn their “craft.” He says, “No matter your passion, no matter how distinctive your voice is, no matter how unique the story you want to write might be, you must be able to write powerfully, clearly, and with authority. And get help. Any creative endeavor can be a lonely journey. Finding others on the same path will help.”

## MAKING AN IMPACT

Imagine your reaction if your book was called out for any reason. Sanders and Newman both encourage authors to stand together on issues surrounding negative publicity, challenges to publication, and outright attacks on what kind of books are available to kids. But, first and foremost, Newman points out that when Heather was challenged, “an activist was born.”

She adds, “I really hope that these books will stop being attacked. These books are about families, just as books that feature mom-and-dad families and cis-gender characters are books about families. There is so much work to be done to repair our broken world. Let’s leave the books on the shelves and turn our energy to other issues. There is so much suffering in this world. Let’s all work together to make our beloved planet a safer place for all.”

No one knows what the future holds for books of *any* genre or topic. But now that mainstream pub-

LGBTQ+ Books...continued

lishers are finally getting on board showcasing diverse characters, we are all stronger for it. There are a number of supportive communities where voices can be heard whether it's advocating for your own book or any other. Our children and grandchildren will be better for it as well.

Further reading:

*Jullian at the Wedding*, by Jessica Love  
*Federico and All His Families*, by Mila Hernández  
*My Maddy*, by Gayle E. Pitman  
 The Heartstopper series, by Alice Oseman  
*Bitter*, by Akwaeke Emezi  
*Ravensong*, by Cayla Fay

## A HISTORY OF BANNED AND CHALLENGED BOOKS

While LGBTQ+ books continue to break through to reach readers of all ages, they also find themselves challenged on a regular basis. Newman's *Heather* book has been challenged over 40 times by parents, legislators, and others.

According to Pen America's list of banned books, as well as the American Library Association's annual Top 10 Most Challenged Books list, 41 percent of books banned from July 2021 to June 2022 "explicitly address LGBTQ+ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ+," including a 9 percent "subset of titles for transgender characters or stories." Additionally, not all banned books are called out because of explicit or gratuitous sex. That's an entirely different category on the Pen America List. Nor are all of these books about issues that are only specific to LGBTQ+ families.

But still, the sheer number of banned and challenged books can give authors pause. We can all help support these authors, Sanders says. "Authors (and illustrators) need to read banned books and be informed, write positive reviews for these books, and share the books with others. We need to stand together against book banning by educating our friends, neighbors, and relatives; by attending school board meetings and letting our voices be heard; and by voting. Most importantly, we need to continue to write stories we're passionate about without fear or intimidation."

There will likely always be banned books. It's what we do about the issue that's important.

# DAINESE SANTOS

Associate Editor



SIMON & SCHUSTER  
Books for Young Readers

interview by Lynne Marie

**P**rior to becoming an Associate Editor for Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, Dainese Santos graduated NYU's publishing program, as well as the University of California, Riverside, with a B.A. in English Literature. She's the daughter of Filipino immigrants and a born and bred Southern Californian.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Congratulations on your first acquisition! Please tell us a little bit about Emily Calandrelli's *Ada Lace Gets Famous*, a continuation of the Ada Lace Adventures chapter book series (illustrated by Renée Kurilla), and what drew you to this?

**DAINESE SANTOS:** Thank you so much! *Ada Lace Gets Famous* is the sixth book in the Ada Lace Adventure series, about intrepid inventor and kid-scientist Ada Lace who has a deep love of science and engineering as well as a nose for trouble, and in this adventure, Ada takes on the internet!

When Ada learns that her teachers are in dire need of new school supplies, she's eager to lend a helping hand. Most ideas seem out of reach for a kid like her, until her friend Tycho suggests Ada tries her hand at posting interesting, informational videos. If she's able to build up a big online viewership, she could easily raise funds for their school. And with Nina as her visionary director, Milton as her comedic co-host, and Ada as the scientist star, making fun videos will be a piece of cake—or so they think. What starts as an earnest try at making fun, science-based shorts end up becoming a whole mess for Ada and the gang as they gain popularity and take on peer pressure, trolls, and tests of their own friendships. With her rising internet stardom, will Ada be able to stay true to herself?



Though the previous book in the series was published in the spring of 2019, talks about continuing the series have always been present. The series is an in-house favorite and even the president of the S&S children's division voiced his interest in an upcoming adventure. With all this support, I just knew we had to sign up the next book. I've also kept in touch with Emily and her agent throughout my tenure here at S&S. Emily has always been excited to continue Ada's adventures and is a fount of ideas as a result. While she pitched me a few ideas as options, what really drew me to the concept of *Ada Lace Gets Famous* is how it felt like both a return as well as a refresh to the Ada Lace series. We have the familiar themes of friendship and emotional learning that's present in the other books in the series, but we're also tackling new, older-kid topics like peer pressure, popularity, and learning the importance of staying true to yourself. We really wanted this Ada to feel fresh while never losing her familiarity. Emily also took inspiration from her personal life, as she knows all too well the pressures that come with being a public figure, and you can really feel that personal connection in the read.

*Ada Lace Gets Famous* is sure to charm and delight fans old and new, and I'm so excited for it to reach readers.

**LM:** On this note, please share your thoughts about chapter books. Are these something you are looking for more of? Please share some examples of chapter book series that you feel are something you would have liked to see on your list?

**DS:** If you asked me this question when I was a wee editorial assistant who had just started working in publishing, I would have said full-length novels

## *Dainese Santos...continued*

were more of my speed. But after working on *Ada Lace* with Emily and her co-writer Tamson Weston, my opinion on the format has definitely changed. The best thing about chapter books is that they are so kid-centered. These are stories about kids' daily lives or and their fantasies, stories that a kid would tell another kid, using words and language that they use. When I think of *The Bad Guys*, one of my current chapter book favorites, I think, "That's something a kid wants to see, that's a story a kid wrote." The format has so much inherent joy and fun, especially with its illustrations, making it the perfect entry point for kids who are getting used to reading longer books. Growing up, I actually wasn't that big of a reader; I found novels to be intimidating. But I remember loving chapter books—Amelia Bedelia, Judy Moody, and Junie B. Jones were my favorite series. I loved stories about girls with big feelings and even bigger personalities, who would make mistakes and messes before learning how to fix them. I've also always loved characters who made me laugh. My tastes then are the same as my tastes now, and I would love to work on a chapter book series that would make kid-me feel excited to read.

**LM:** Prior to becoming an acquiring editor, what are some of the projects that you worked on? What important takeaways did you learn from working on these projects?

**DS:** The first book I ever edited, and received co-editing credit on as an editorial assistant, was Mary H.K. Choi's *Yolk*, a beautiful, heartrending story about two estranged sisters who find their way back to each other after one of them is diagnosed with cancer. Poignant, raw, and with a sense of humor that takes you by surprise, *Yolk* is about the messiness of sisterhood and what it takes to heal—from illness, from relationships, and from the worst parts of yourself. Even before starting my career in publishing, I was already a fan of Mary's work, and so I was over the moon when I learned I would get the chance to work on her next book. While I had previ-

ously given editorial notes for my supervisors' books (such as *Spy School Revolution* by Stuart Gibbs and an early draft of *The Together Tree* by Aisha Saeed, illustrated by LeUyen Pham), *Yolk* was the first time I got the chance to be in the weeds for an edit. It was so different from the other times, wherein I acted in more of a supportive role to the supervising editor, and the most important lesson I learned from this process was that change doesn't happen overnight. Transformation can be incremental. I can't recall anymore how many drafts we went over for *Yolk*, much less how many drafts Mary had gone through before she even sent us her official "first" draft, but through the whole process I was reminded of the value of taking time, of collaboration, of figuring things out more as you go. I can say with confidence that I have loved every draft of *Yolk* that came in, from first to final, but I've learned that rushing towards a perceived finish line can stop a *good* book from becoming *phenomenal*.

**LM:** Please share a little bit about your involvement with Salaam Reads, as well as the Mission Statement of that imprint.

**DS:** I'd love to! In addition to being an acquiring editor, I support Deeba Zargapur in her role as the commissioning editor for Salaam Reads. For our day to day, that means that together we tackle the administrative tasks that the imprint requires in its upkeep. Salaam Reads is a boutique imprint under the umbrella of Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers (S&S BFYR), so all BFYR editors can acquire for Salaam Reads.

Founded in 2016, Salaam Reads is an imprint that celebrates the joy, vibrancy, and variety in stories of Muslim life. We publish books that explore a diverse panoply of experiences lived by characters who are united under a shared umbrella of Muslim identity. Our books span a wide range of genres, from contemporary to fantasy to science fiction, and across all ages, including picture books, chapter books, middle grade, and young adult. And while our books always feature characters who are faithful, faith isn't



*Dainese Santos...continued*

necessarily the primary focus of all their stories, but rather an innate and important part of who they are and how they see the world as they go on wild adventures, solve mysteries, or fall in love.

Salaam Reads is a home for literature that widens the lens of what it means to be Muslim, offering readers a way to see themselves reflected in the pages of the imprint's books and to discover the wide variety and many intersections of what the Muslim experience can be.

**LM:** As a newly acquiring editor, please share some of your goals as to what type of books you hope to acquire and publish.

**DS:** We tend to be jacks-of-all-trades at BFYR, so many of us, myself included, acquire across all genres, formats, and age ranges. I still think of myself as a novel-editor, but as I continue to learn the nuances of my tastes and build a full list, I'd like to keep my options open. In the most general sense, I hope to publish books that speak to kids first and foremost—books wherein they recognize themselves, their struggles, dreams and fantasies, their senses of humor. I'm very much a joy-centered reader and editor, and so I'd love for the books I publish to bring kids the same joy that it first brought me during acquisition.

**LM:** What is your business style? Are you more of a developmental editor or a line editor?

**DS:** I'm definitely a developmental editor. I've always been a big-picture kind of person, even in my day-to-day life. Thankfully, I've had the great fortune to work with so many talented editors as my mentors and supervisors that I've learned the importance of a line edit. But for me, I can't get in the weeds until we tackle the big things first—plot points, character arcs, understanding the themes we want to tackle, etc.

My business style mirrors my daily conversation style. I'm a generally cheerful, sunny type of person and I think friendliness puts people at ease, whether that's at work or in my daily life. As an editor, then, I tend to be effusive, open, and more collaborative versus directive. I really see my role as an editor as akin to being support staff; I'm here to make suggestions, but ultimately I trust the author to know

what's best—it's their book after all!

**LM:** What do you feel makes a good children's book? What gives it heart? Please share some examples of this.

**DS:** For me, it's all about character. As a reader, caring for the character comes first, and the story second. There are certain character types and traits that I'm more drawn to than others (for example, I like cheerfulness more than broodiness), but if I can get a strong sense of your character, and more importantly your character's voice, in the first few pages of your manuscript (or, in the case of picture books, the first few lines) then even if they're the total opposite of my "type," I'll still be sold. The imperative question to ask then is why would a kid care about this character? What qualities or struggles will a kid relate to when it comes to this character and their journey?

One of my most beloved books from my childhood is the classic, *Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine. That was the first book I read that made me cry. Like many other kids, I recognized that desire for autonomy, even though I didn't know how to articulate it myself, and I also knew what it felt like to be unable or scared to voice my opinion; seeing those feelings on the page through Ella, with her acerbic wit and tenacious nature, felt like hope to a kid like me. I, too, could overcome a curse, just like Ella.

**LM:** What are some of the biggest challenges you face in finding the perfect fits for your list?

**DS:** Because I'm still learning the nuances of my tastes, one challenge that I'm running into is figuring out the differences between what I enjoy reading versus what I enjoy editing. For example, I really love reading mysteries, but I find editing them very labor-intensive. Knowing how my interests and limitations work together is something that I'm always thinking about when it comes to finding a good fit for my list.

Then, beyond my own tastes, I also have to think of the needs of my imprint and our list as a whole. We're a fairly large team of acquiring editors at BFYR and we also have a number of sister imprints in S&S Children's. Taste overlap can happen, so to avoid that, all of us are analyzing how our specific



*Dainese Santos...continued*

tastes can fit the needs of both the imprint and the house, while also appealing to our interests. There are times when I have had to pass on things that have been too similar to a backlist title or a title that is yet to be published at one of the other imprints. It can be a challenge to juggle your imprint's needs as well as the needs of your own list, but personally, I've found it has helped me acquire with intention.

But I think the hardest challenge when it comes to finding the perfect fit is learning how to trust your gut. So much of being an acquiring editor comes down to instincts and having confidence in your tastes and opinions. At my level, I'm usually not getting things that are perfect and ready to publish from the first draft; so what ultimately ends up being the right fit for my list is purely based on the potential I see in an author and the story that they want to tell. And confidence is definitely a skill that takes work to build.

**LM:** You are an avid movie watcher. How might watching films inspire and cultivate a better understanding of character and plot?

**DS:** Oh, I love this question! My favorite thing about movies is that watching them can really hone your skills when you're character-building. In movies, characters have so many visual and audio clues to help color them—the clothes they wear, their body movements, their speech pattern, and the sound of their voice. While books don't have the same visual language of movies, these character details and quirks can all potentially and easily be incorporated in your writing. One of the notes I like to give when I'm line-editing is, "How are they moving? Where are they and what are they doing as they're saying this?" In a scene where the main character is fighting with her mom, how are they both moving in relation with each other, how are they physically reacting to the things that are being said? I'm a big believer in using body language to convey what characters are too afraid to voice out, and I think that when used in the right amount, it can elevate not only a scene but the reader's understanding of the character and their relationships, which is exactly what happens when you watch how an actor moves on screen.

**LM:** As another huge Nora Ephron and millennium rom-com fan, let's discuss! What are some of your absolute favorites? Why? What are the qualities you

believe makes these stories heartfelt and memorable?

**DS:** I must be frank—believe it or not, I had to rewrite my answer to this at least five times because I kept thinking of rom-coms I love. I at first had only wanted to name my top three, which changed to my top five, and then suddenly I had more than ten on my no-skips-only-hits list; and I knew that not only was this suddenly unwieldy but also growing exponentially the more I gave this question thought. So for the sake of using them as an example and as jumping off-point for the rest of my answer here, I'll mention *When Harry Met Sally...* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as two of my absolute favorites. I'm drawn to these for the same reason I said I'm drawn to books: characters. Here are two examples where the writers knew exactly what kind of characters they wanted to depict, as well as how they wanted them to grow and change through the course of the movie. The specificity of Harry and Sally, of Toula and her whole family, made them feel so familiar to me. I recognized myself, my friends, my own family, even if this was a situation I'd never experienced before. It's advice I like to give authors—specificity is what makes characters and their story shine.

**LM:** Since you are a huge Asian Drama Fan (as am I), I am jumping at the chance to plug this drama sub-genre, which is really catching on around the world. What is it about these dramas that really elevates them and makes them so worth watching, despite the subtitles?

**DS:** For me, I really glommed onto Asian dramas (K-dramas specifically but I also watch Filipino dramas and Chinese dramas) because I was starved for rom-coms. After the early 2000s, I think we really entered a drought in romances in the United States. Gone were the days of the mid budget, movie theater rom-com; it was big-budget blockbuster or bust. Asian dramas really filled the need I had for romance. Moreover, I could live in this world and really enjoy the slow-burn of true love over the span of a sixteen-episode series—my dream! When the rom-com genre fell away in the U.S., I had always got the sense that the genre was seen as shameful or embarrassing; but seeing the rate at which rom-coms are churned out and enjoyed outside of the country, it's clear that romance is a genre that's worth acknowledgment and respect. Regardless of the language

*Dainese Santos...continued*

the leading actors speak, it's just so nice to watch two people fall in love.

**LM:** What is a drama or two that you would recommend as examples of fabulous plotting? Amazing characters? Both? Where would the readers find these?

**DS:** *Goblin* is a masterpiece that I recommend to anyone who is new to Korean dramas. It's a fantasy epic about a goblin seeking a bride to break his curse of immortality. It is impeccably acted and a guaranteed tear-jerker. And if you're looking for something on the lighter end and a more recent recommendation, this year I really loved *Business Proposal*, which is based on a Korean webtoon (another media format I recommend!) about a young woman who agrees to pose as her best friend on a blind date... with her boss. I haven't watched a drama that has made me laugh out loud in a long time, but this one did it. You can watch *Goblin* on Rakuten Viki and *Business Proposal* on Netflix.

**LM:** I often liken episodes of these dramas to chapters in a really compelling young adult novel. Plus, since they are subtitled, if you don't speak the language, you are reading the text, much like a novel, with the pictures filling in the details. What are your thoughts about this and how might it be applied to a novel?

**DS:** I totally agree! Especially with the more contemporary, slice of life romances, the zaniness of those characters as well as the commonly-used trope of first love give off a very youthful vibe that is a great tonal match to YA. I think what dramas always do best is have a great sense of pacing and movement. As a fan and connoisseur, you'll start to recognize a pattern really quickly, like when the first kiss happens or how many episodes it will take for our leads to reunite after a misunderstanding. I think having a strong sense of structure applies to novel-writing as well. When I'm editing, to help with plot work, I like to strip down a manuscript just to its main events and make a timeline to see the spots where we're languishing and/or speeding through. Just like watching a drama, you can feel when a story you're reading starts to lag a bit or when you're wanting to live in a scene just a smidge longer.

**LM:** What are the qualities that you like to see in a good plot, and which of these are essential for a YA

author to cultivate in a novel?

**DS:** This is going to sound very publisher-y of me, but what really cinches a good plot for me are its hooks. If I can identify the things in a plot that would appeal to readers (and also to my team, my Publisher, and ultimately to booksellers) then in less than a minute I can pitch someone this book and pique their interest. As editors, we're constantly justifying why we should publish a book over another one, and for me, what has always helped me in my acquisitions is having a clear sense of a book's hooks. With plot hooks, we're also never only talking about one, as stories tend to juggle multiple at once; hooks often work together, like a romantic hook and a structural hook (for example, you could have a book where the romantic hook is friends-to-lovers romance and the structural hook is that it's an epistolary novel), and these are tools that you can use not only to pitch your book but also to help you as you write. A friends-to-lovers romance requires different story beats than a rivals-to-lovers romance; whereas emotional beats are written differently in verse than in prose. While I'm not a proponent of trope-only writing when it comes to original fiction, I think the vocabulary of tropes and hooks can serve as good food-for-thought as you build your characters and world. Hooks can be the blueprint, but you still have to do the work with your characters to build the house.

**LM:** While YA novels are your sweet spot, you will be accepting pitches from our readers in other genres. Please outline.

**DS:** I acquire across all genres, ages, and formats in children's, save for younger picture books, baby books, and board books. Generally, I love stories that are steeped in joy, particularly from authors with historically underrepresented backgrounds and experiences, and I'm not a great fit for dark themes, issue-driven stories, or stories where the conflict is centered on marginalized identity. I tend not to be a great fit for literary fiction since my tastes are very commercial across the board. Characters with big feelings, goofy senses of humor, and unforgettable personalities are something I gravitate toward whether that's in picture books, middle grade, or YA. I tend to like only contemporary fiction in YA and picture books, but with middle grade I'm more open to genre, especially of the "kids on adventures" type.

*Dainese Santos...continued*

The one genre that breaks the mold of my general taste is horror—I love it, and will always agree to look at it, but I enjoy ghost stories and folklore more than murder-thrillers. I’m also open to looking at nonfiction in picture books and middle grade, and while my interests are wide, I am especially drawn to topics regarding nature, environmentalism, activism, and little known histories.

**LM:** Please share the definition of magical realism and share some titles that readers can look to in order to better understand the genre.

**DS:** At its most basic definition, magical realism is when magical elements are added to a story that is grounded in reality. Often, the magical or fantastical elements are used to tackle, understand, or articulate challenging topics, like death, grief, or trauma. Some of my favorite magical realism titles from the children’s space is *The Astonishing Color Of After* by Emily X.R. Pan; *Sia Martinez And The Moonlit Beginning Of Everything* by Raquel Vasquez Gilliland; *That Thing About Bollywood* by Supriya Kelkar; *When You Trap A Tiger* by Tae Keller; and *Ghosts* by Raina Telgemeier.

**LM:** Ghost stories and folklore also rank high on your list of passions! Are there any criteria that you could share for writing in these genres? Any tips to better understand the genres?

**DS:** I’ve found that mood and atmosphere is so important in ghost stories. The best kind of ghost stories are the ones that give you that campfire-story feeling, where you’re unsettled and waiting to figure out why. Horror is also the child of mystery, I think, because you can’t be adept at writing horror unless you know how to craft a mystery. Just like in a mystery, there are red herrings and twist endings in a ghost story, and you want the slow-burn reveal to be paced just right. Whenever I’m dealing with lots of story elements like those, I always like to create a timeline of events, a character sheet, and an outline so that I have an extremely good grasp of who the players are and what they will be doing at any given time. It also makes things easier to move around as you continue to write. As for understanding the genre, my suggestion is to read as well as watch horror! Especially when it comes to movies, you get a pretty good sense right away when a ghost story is told well and when it falls apart (usually in the third

act). In terms of books, I recommend *Summer’s Edge* by Dana Mele (wow, talk about setting a mood) and for watchable media, *The Haunting of Hill House* on Netflix remains one of my favorite horror watches of all time.

**LM:** Do you have anything that you hope to see in a submission? Anything that you do not want to see in a submission? Please explain.

**DS:** I would love to see submissions from more authors of underrepresented backgrounds and experiences, such as rom-coms that center characters with disabilities or horror inspired by non-Western folklore. As for things I don’t want to see, I am most definitely not someone who enjoys trauma for trauma’s sake, particularly when it comes at the cost of marginalized folks’ histories. I read for escapism and fun and if there isn’t some element of that in a submission, it tends to be a pass from me.

Dainese Santos is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. Until **December 31, 2022**, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of a picture book, chapter book, middle grade or young adult manuscript, along with other information, via the online form at [bit.ly/ATSDec22SSBFYR](https://bit.ly/ATSDec22SSBFYR). Dainese will read all pitches and respond to those she’s interested in by March 31, 2023. If you haven’t heard back by the end of March, consider it a pass. NOTE: Dainese is not interested in board books or very young picture books. Please read the full interview before submitting to see what she’s especially interested in acquiring.

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

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

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

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

# FORGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH READERS

by Jane McBride

**H**ow can writers build relationships with readers? Through social media, of course, but there is more—much more—that an author can do. Today, we’re going old-school.

Let’s take a look at some of these relationship-building blocks:

## Include Dear Reader letters in Your Book

Have you ever written a “Dear Reader” letter? If not, you’re in for a treat. My current publisher wants a letter for the back of every book. These letters need not be long. In fact, shorter is better. The letters are a way to connect with readers on a very personal basis.

If you’re self-publishing, consider adding a Dear Reader letter to the end of your book. If you’re traditionally published, mention the possibility to your editor. Many children’s books (fiction and nonfiction) include back matter. Perhaps some of that information can be repurposed for a Dear Reader letter to add a personal touch.

The Dear Reader letter can include any or all of the following:

**Personal details about you.** Young readers who love to know things about the authors whose books they read. You can also talk about why you wrote the book, or what sparked the idea.

**Contact information so readers can get in touch with you.** This may be to a dedicated email address or through your publisher. Also include your author website.

*An invitation from you to readers asking them to share feedback on your book, or anything else they’d like to talk about.* A Dear Reader letter lets readers know that you, the author, and they are a team, that you want to hear from them and that you care how they feel. A letter reminds them that without them, the readers, you would not be able to write the books you do.

*If your book has a section for parents or teachers, A Dear Reader letter can ask adults how you can continue to give them the information they want for their children or students.*

## Speak at Local Venues

Are you good at public speaking? That’s great. You already have a leg up on one of the most important ways in connecting with readers. Even if you’re not a “Toastmasters” level speaker, you might consider addressing small groups with whom you feel comfortable.

**Offer to speak at your children’s schools.** If you don’t have children or grandchildren in the area, offer to speak anyway. Teachers are eager to bring in community professionals, and you will be treated like royalty. I have spoken at my children’s middle school, answering questions from students about what it’s like to write and publish a book. Their questions were insightful, thoughtful, and sometimes downright funny. One connection I made was being asked to mentor a budding writer. We worked on her writing—both in skills and in story ideas—for six weeks. Her excitement and wonder at the writing process gave me a boost in my own writing.

*Forging Relationships...continued*

**Offer to participate in a library event.** Librarians are also eager to recruit writers to share their experiences, perhaps even give a book reading. Imagine coming dressed in a shark costume to read your nonfiction book about sharks and whales to a group of young children.

**Offer to speak at a senior living facility.** Seniors are avid readers. When I visit friends at independent and assisted living facilities, I notice shelves (and shelves) of books of all kinds. And though those people may not be reading books for children and teens, they often have grandchildren and great-grandchildren for whom they buy presents, books being a favorite. They love the opportunity to buy personally-autographed books as gifts.

**Offer to speak at service organizations.** My daughter is president of the Kiwanis group in her town. She tells me they, too, like to recruit interesting members of the community to address their members. And who is more interesting than writers? It may be that someone in the service group you speak to has children who would love to read your nonfiction book about the Civil War or your early reader about the teacher who was a dinosaur and needed glasses.

**Offer to speak to book clubs.** I have done this several times. Members love hearing from “real writers.” They may well choose your book as the month’s reading matter. Even if they don’t, you are establishing a connection there. They may well take your name and your book titles home with them to share with their children. (Ask your local librarian if they know of any parent-child book clubs in the area. If you write young adult books, many adult book clubs read YA.)

**Offer to speak at a church event.** Do you belong to a local church? If so, you are probably aware that churches often sponsor mid-week events, bringing in speakers from different professions and areas.

## Have a table at community events

Farmers markets, summer festivals and holiday craft fairs are great places to purchase a table and

sell your books. If you only have one or two books out, consider partnering with another author or two to create a bigger draw. Have something that draws kids’ attention and gets them to stop at your table—a craft or game, a chance to win a free book, a contest to name the character in your next book.

## Become an Expert

Have you ever considered yourself an expert on something? The idea was totally foreign to me until I started going through the skills and knowledge I’ve accumulated over the years.

**If you write nonfiction, you are probably an expert on your chosen subject(s).** Do you write how-to books? Offer to teach a class at your local community center. Do you write cookbooks for children, especially young children? You will be a hit at a daycare center or a kindergarten class. You can ask your local book store if they’d give you space to teach a class related to your book, and advertise it in their newsletter or events calendar. This gives the store the opportunity to sell your books, and brings people in for something other than a traditional book reading and signing event. Don’t overlook local museums, historical sites, or even children’s clothing and toy stores as possible venues for a live event where you can incorporate a hands-on activity or teaching while talking about your book.

**What if you write fiction?** Does that mean you don’t have any expertise? Of course not. My friend who writes historical romance set in the Texas Hill Country has become a de facto expert on mid-19th century dress, customs, food, and history. She is a favorite on podcasts, radio programs, and even TV news shows. If you’re comfortable being interviewed, research podcasts and other programs that focus on topics related to your book, and pitch the host an interesting discussion topic that ties in with your book, but that’s not completely centered on book promotion. Your book gives you the “expert” status, but the discussion should be broader than that.

**If you’ve published a book or two and have been writ-**

*ing for a while, you probably have a lot of insight into the writing process and the ups and downs of the writing life.* Think about sharing that with other aspiring and working writers. Many podcasts focus on writing, and magazines like [Writer's Digest](#) and [The Writer](#) accept queries on the writing process as well as the business of publishing. Even though your article or interview is reaching an adult audience, your children's books will be part of your bio, and you can reference them when talking about your writing journey.

## WRAPPING UP WITH TWO MORE THINGS

**Number 1:** You may notice that I haven't included any social media platforms in this article. That was intentional, since you are probably already well aware of the ways to establish relationships with readers via that. I am challenging you to look beyond Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms, to put yourself "out there" in forging bonds with readers. This may require you to go outside your comfort zone. Talking with any group of people is way outside my comfort limits, but I keep trying.

**Number 2:** Are you scratching your head right along now, wondering how you, as a writer for children, can appeal to events geared for adults? Don't be. Your cachet as a writer is fascinating. Consider how many people you've heard say something like, "I've always wanted to write." For every person who says that, there are very few, if any, who follow through. Writers are mystical individuals who have achieved something that many others want to but have no knowledge of how to go about it. You are building connections and relationships simply by being yourself.

### Should you speak for free?

Many libraries, stores, museums, and even schools are happy to host an author event, but don't have the budget to pay. This puts the author or illustrator in a difficult position. You want to share your work with readers, but you also know that you worked hard to create this book, and you deserve to be paid for your time. So, if you're asked to do a live event for free, make sure it's strategic:

*Can you sell books at the event?* If you're able to sell author copies of your book (purchased at a discount) for the cover price at the event, you could turn a profit. If published traditionally, check your contract to verify that you can sell author copies.

*Will the school or library order copies of your book to have on hand?* If the school orders books through your publisher, you'll earn royalties on those sales, and the publisher sees you're promoting your books, which helps when you want to negotiate your next contract.

*Will the teacher or librarian write a letter of recommendation for your live event?* You can post quotes from these letters on your website and in your school visit materials to help get booked with paying appearances.

*Do you want to gain experience or confidence speaking to kids?* If you're speaking for free, there's less pressure to be perfect. Use these events to hone your presentation and try out different styles or topics. Once you're confident in your material, start asking for payment.

*You want to give back to your community.* Speaking for free, especially to schools and nonprofits like The Boys and Girls Club, is a terrific way to volunteer your time in your community. But if your goal is to keep writing and publishing new books, there's nothing wrong with setting a limit on your free events. Pick a number you're comfortable with per year, and stick to that. Other requests can be scheduled the following year, or quoted your regular rate.

Debut Picture Book Author

# Michelle Nott

## on Literacy and French Bread

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Children's author Michelle Nott has traveled from the Alps to Belgium and back to the United States, carrying her love of books and literacy with her like an old cherished old friend. As she so rightly puts it, "literature is the easiest way to travel." Nott's critically acclaimed debut picture book *Teddy, Let's Go!*, with illustrations by Nahid Kazemi (Enchanted Lion Books, October 2022), about a young girl and her beloved childhood companion was hailed by Kirkus Reviews for its "straightforward prose...about the unconditional love of a stuffed animal will provide reassurance for anyone outgrowing a comfort object." Now living in North Carolina with her family, Nott loves to cook and bake when she's not writing.

**PJ McILVAINE:** You've been writing from an early age. What was the first thing you ever wrote? What made you decide to focus on children's genres? What do you hope your readers take away from your books?

**MICHELLE NOTT:** The first story I wrote that resembled a children's book was one I wrote in 3rd grade. It was entitled, *The Girl Who Wanted to Play Baseball*. But years before, as soon as I could write my letters, I remember filling pages and pages of vowels and consonants and eventually full words and sentences. I loved the act of writing, how it felt to hold my pencil, to see all my "work." And then my teacher said I could start learning cursive letters! Oh my, that was an exciting day.

I explored poetry and short stories (just for fun) through high school. At university, I minored in Creative Writing (just for fun) and entered a variety of poetry contests with encouraging success.

But after graduate school, my writing got pushed to the side as I pursued teaching. I loved teaching, but

it didn't leave much time to write. So, it wasn't until my family moved to Belgium that I had a chance to really write again. We were raising our children to be bilingual and the day I noticed there were more French titles on their bookshelves than English ones, I decided to write a story for them, and another, and another....

I hope my readers take away a sense of love and belonging from my books. Sharing a book with someone you love, having a little one sitting on your lap, that moment creates such a powerful connection. If my books can offer an opportunity for such a connection, then I'm pleased with my work.

**PM:** You were also an avid reader as a child. What was your favorite book? You have a family now, do your children share your love of reading and literacy?

**MN:** As for my favorite book growing up, three titles come to mind: *The Poky Little Puppy*, *A Snowy Day*, and the *Amelia Bedelia* books.

My daughters are both at university now and have always loved reading and still do. Their love of reading started very young, I read them books even before they were born and then at every naptime and bedtime. When my youngest was still a baby and needed to be fed, I would ask her big sister (only 22 months older) to choose a few books and we would all read together while I nursed the baby. These moments associated books and words with a lot of love. And then, when they were a little older and running around, I would declare, "It's quiet book time" when I needed to go make dinner. They would cheer, get a book from their little shelf and plop down somewhere to read. They haven't stopped since. In fact, I often forward them emails and Instagram posts now



## Michelle Nott...continued

about new books coming out. And they are quick to let me know which ones they would like.

**PM:** What was the inspiration for your newest book *Teddy, Let's Go!* Did you have your own cherished toy as a child? How many drafts did you write? What was the acquisition process like? Did you have input into the artwork?

**MN:** Yes. My grandmother made me my first teddy bear when I was barely a month old. I've kept my Teddy ever since. He now sits on a shelf in my office. Although *Teddy, Let's Go!* is not a memoir, Teddy was certainly the inspiration behind it.

I wrote countless drafts over many years until I found it was the best manuscript it could be. Then, I queried it. Then, I shelved it. At the time, eight to ten years ago, I just kept hearing that it was "too quiet."

But then I found an agent who loves quiet, literary books. Essie White at Storm Literary was a huge champion for this manuscript as soon as she read it. But it didn't sell immediately. We still received rejections. As kind as they were, they were still no's. Finally, Claudia Bedrick, the publisher at Enchanted Lion Books read the manuscript and responded that she wanted to publish it. I was delighted, of course. I've always loved ELB's titles. A few months later we received the contract. I spoke a lot with Nahid about what the manuscript meant to me, the messages and feelings behind it, but she brought Teddy to life with her own inspiration and talent.

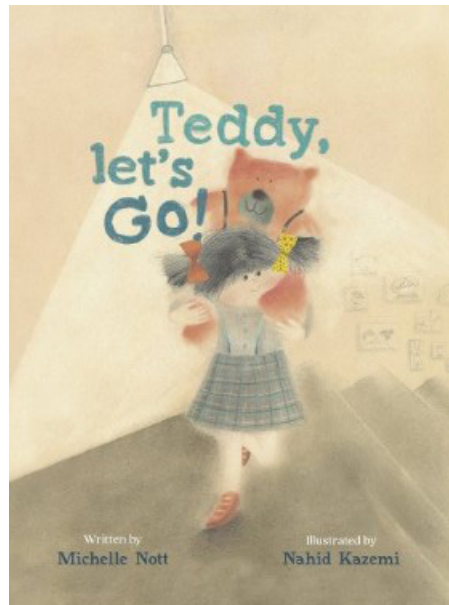
**PM:** How has being a teacher and also living abroad informed and influenced your writing? Was it an adjustment returning to live in the states, as you are now? What is one of your fondest memories as an expat?

**MN:** Being a teacher has influenced what I write. I still think about students I had 20 years ago, their personalities, needs, strengths, struggles, and dreams.

Living abroad allowed me to experience children from various communities and cultures. Brussels is a very international place, and we easily made lo-

cal Belgian friends as well as friends from all over the world. That environment made me search for children's books with diverse characters for my own daughters, but there weren't many. I'm so glad that more voices are given an opportunity to tell their own stories now, although there is still far to go. That interest inspires me to tell the stories I best can and hope that they touch and connect to all readers.

Belgium is also the home of a rich history of comic books and storytelling. Places like the Hergé museum, the creator of Tin Tin among other characters, and the Comic Museum, not to mention art museums like the Folon Foundation and the Magritte were all short drives from our home.



Returning to the U.S. was a huge adjustment! Repatriation could be another interview entirely. But I will tell you that within the first 24 hours of landing back in the States, we went to the nearest library, got our cards, and signed up for summer workshops. I will say that I had missed spacious, activity-filled American libraries.

But I have so many fond memories of being an expat, taking part in local traditions, traveling to amazing places, meeting extraordinary people (from interesting neighbors to Belgian royalty), but my favorite memory is the birth of our second daughter. What a precious souve-

nir!

**PM:** For the newbies among us, can you explain the differences between picture books, early readers, and chapter books? Do you prefer one format over the other? Have you tried writing in rhyme? What makes you choose one idea over another?

**MN:** Picture books are the perfect combination of text and art. Each tell their own layer of story while coming together to create an entertaining and meaningful story. Early readers also provide entertaining and meaningful story. But because the purpose of these books is to support children who are learning to read independently, the pictures are more literal interpretations of the text and can help readers find clues in the images to help them to decode words and understand the story. As the name implies, chapter



## Michelle Nott...continued

books are longer written works that are significantly more text heavy than illustrated.

I don't prefer one format or the other. My first two books were early readers. My third book is a picture book. And I have had a couple ideas for chapter books swimming in my head for years. I hope I can get to them one day.

I write in prose and verse, but not in rhyme. My first publications were free verse poems for adults. So, I have a deep love of poetry. I have a couple manuscripts written in verse currently on submission with my agent and I am revising a MG verse novel.

The decision to write in prose or verse comes from what I want the manuscript to accomplish. If I want to stress the emotional arc of the main character, I will most likely choose verse. I believe poetry is a great tool to evoke feelings. Of course, prose can do that as well. But if the story is more plot-driven, then I will probably choose prose.

*Teddy, Let's Go!* conveys a lot of emotion in combination with the events happening to Teddy. I found that a more literary, poetic prose worked best to tell this story.

**PM:** Where is your favorite place to write? Do you write every day or only when inspiration hits? Have you experienced writer's block? If so, do you have any tips for moving forward? What's your favorite thing to do outside of writing?

**MN:** My favorite place to write is in "my library," the room with bookshelves along the walls and a nice big farm table to spread out books, papers, coffee and teacups, all around my laptop.

I write something every day. Some days, and as of late, it's a lot of pre-publication/publicity things, like interviews and promotional materials. But I do try to write and advance my own projects every day. I notice a very unsettled feeling if I go even a couple days without writing. When my days are really busy with a number of tasks, I find that even responding to a writing prompt for 5-10 minutes can be very sat-

isfying.

I often have several projects going at once. So, if I feel stuck on one project, I'll work on another one or on a client's manuscript (I do freelance editing) or go for a long walk. Usually by the time I return, I feel re-motivated and inspired. My advice to anyone who is experiencing writer's block is to change gears, get up and move, dance, bake cookies, read a book... you'll be surprised by how quickly your brain figures out a solution for whatever got you stuck in the first place.

Outside of writing, my favorite thing to do is probably cooking or baking. It's another way of being creative and bringing people together.

**PM:** You have an agent now, but that wasn't always so. How did you get an agent? Any advice for those in the querying trenches?

**MN:** I queried for years, multiple projects at various times. However, the manuscript that landed me an agent was *Teddy, Let's Go!* I had sent Essie White a middle grade manuscript. Because she liked my writing, she asked if I also wrote picture books. So, I sent her three PB manuscripts and she really loved my teddy bear story.

My advice to anyone querying is to have several manuscripts ready to show. Thankfully, I had many other stories I could quickly send when requested. You don't want to lose any opportunity or interest from an agent.

**PM:** In addition to writing, you're also a freelance editor. Since it's difficult enough to self-edit, how do you accomplish that in an effective way that doesn't feel like you're killing all your darlings (even if you are?) Do you find it easier to edit someone else's work rather than your own? How do you process notes that you may not agree with or doesn't emotionally resonate?

**MN:** If killing darlings refers to favorite lines, I always cut and paste those lines in another document. That way, they are never gone entirely. They may eventually spark a new idea or be a great bit of de-



## Michelle Nott...continued

scription for another piece.

As far as character darlings, I recently had to “kill a darling” in my verse novel. I gave myself two options: either flesh out the character more to make her more important and vital or combine her with another character. After stepping back, I realized that this character and the other one were serving more or less the same purpose. It would not have served the story to flush out the “darling.” And so, I chose to combine the “darling” with the more prominent character. Now, this character is so much stronger and carries her role better.

I do find it easier to edit other people’s work because I am not emotionally attached to it. I can have an unbiased view when looking at the work as a whole and in the details. To arrive at this point in order to self-edit, I have to set the manuscript aside for a while. This is so hard! A couple of months is ideal. But I am so impatient, I usually crack and go back to it after a few weeks. Having multiple projects going helps. When I am busy with other projects, I have been able to go months, even years.

I sincerely appreciate feedback from my agent, editors, and trusted critique partners because if they can see something I don’t to make the work better, that’s awesome. So, when I receive feedback, I’ll read it, consider it, then set the work aside and let my mind “simmer” over the suggestions and how to address them. It’s not always obvious. And not every bit of advice resonates, but it could indicate a problem elsewhere in the manuscript. In one case, I was told that the ending of one of my PB manuscripts wasn’t quite working. And someone else suggested that if I tweaked the beginning, then the ending would work. That was brilliant advice. And so I always keep that in mind, that even if one part seems to be falling short the solution could be somewhere else entirely.

**PM:** What are you working on currently? Do you juggle multiple projects?

**MN:** I’m currently revising a historical fiction MG

verse novel and exploring an idea for a picture book poetry collection. I always have a few projects going. That way, if I’m not in the mood to work on one, I have others to on which I can focus.

**PM:** You use the term “Third Culture Kids” in relation to your children. What does that mean, exactly? Is that a theme in your writing?

**MN:** A Third Culture Kid is a child who is being raised in a culture that does not belong to either one of the parents. I grew up in America. My husband grew up in France. And we were raising our children in Belgium.



I did start writing a chapter book with a TCK protagonist a few years ago but haven’t worked on it in a while. Now that you’ve reminded me, maybe I will. But themes of culture, exploration of self and family, intergenerational issues, etc. do appear in my work.

**PM:** If you could invite your favorite character over for a party, who would it be and what would you serve?

**MN:** I must preface my answer by explaining that during lockdown, my husband took great interest in planting a garden and specifically growing lettuce. So, as a joke, I bought him *Escargot* by Dashka Slater and Sydney Hanson. We both laughed and enjoyed it so much! The voice is spot on for a French snail. So, my favorite character right now is *Escargot* from Slater and Hanson’s books. I would, of course serve “a salad with croutons and a light vinaigrette.”

**PM:** Do you prefer Belgian or French chocolate? What foreign treat or delicacy do you pine for?

**MN:** I prefer Belgian chocolate to all others... and I say that in a low voice because not only do I have French citizenship, but also once lived in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

The delicacy I miss the most is the most basic... bread, a good crusty baguette or country loaf.

# Make a Map to Visualize Setting

by Candice Ransom

In March 2019, I stood in the Morgan Library in New York City in front of a map of Middle-earth, hand-drawn by J.R.R. Tolkien for his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*. A band of orcs couldn't tear me away from the exhibit, "Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth." The map captured my rapt attention. It had penciled scribbles and pasted-on patches where Tolkien had made changes over the years. It was less a work of art and more a work of work.

Tolkien once advised writers of fantasy and adventure stories create a map first to avoid mistakes and discrepancies. I was three years into a middle-grade magical realism novel with little to show. My fictional town was described in a hodge-podge of written notes. I found myself stuck in scenes where the characters walked to, say, the cemetery on the edge of town. How long would it take them? Did it matter if I didn't know? It did according to Hemingway: "A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing."

I couldn't visualize my town. I needed to make a map. How many children's books include a map? *Winnie-the-Pooh*, the Narnia books, *Mary Poppins*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. And how lovingly we as young

readers pored over those maps? Mine wouldn't be artistic, but it would help me avoid hollow places. I gathered plain copy paper, a number H pencil, a fine-line black marker, and colored pencils. I roughed in the streets, then buildings—simple squares—then woods, and the mountain. Ah, the characters would go down or uphill a lot!



Map from *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, published by The Macmillan Company, 1902

Fantasy writer Cressida Crowell (*How to Train Your Dragon*) says, "A map helps to make an imaginary place real. The more detail you put into your beautiful lie . . . the more it comes alive for you and your readers." She adds that a map can generate ideas. Robert Louis Stevenson's 12-year-old stepson once painted a map of an island. Stevenson added names like *Spyglass Hill* and *Graves*, and at the top wrote *Treasure Island*. From that map out stalked Long John Silver with wooden leg and parrot. The rest is literary history.

Another children's fantasy author, Abi Elphinstone (*The Dreamsnatcher*), draws a map to begin her story "because it is only when my characters start moving from place to place that a plot unfolds." Elphinstone admits to being dyslexic and by sketching the setting her ideas become concrete. She adds that on days "when the words sit stubbornly out of reach," she

*Make a Map...continued*

doodles imaginary places to break the block, not beautiful drawings or to scale.

Consider your map as a frame. Because writing is often about making connections, your imagination will eagerly fill in empty spaces. Don't discount the world you knew as a child. Both Crowell and Elphinstone grew up in the wilds of Scotland and their stories are often haunted by their childhood landscapes. Even if your past is littered by trips to the mall, don't discount your background. History soaks through the soil even if there's a Walmart on top.

In my novel, I didn't consider how the landscape would affect the character's story until I drew the woods on my map. What was the significance of a few scattered pine trees? This: those clumsily drawn trees told me their worries. My imaginary town sits on the site of a little-known Civil War skirmish. The woods are haunted by horse soldiers and earlier in-

digenous people. That fact helped me understand that my character has a gift to see and hear spirits. And the story turned in a different, more logical direction. Pay attention to what comes out of your pencil.

After my initial sketch, I redrew my map, this time taking more care with the structures (multi-stories, porches, flower beds, etc.). I colored in all the features (so satisfying!) and even added a compass rose for directions using a motif from my novel.

Have fun! Drawing your world, fantasy or realistic, is a chance to step away from the computer, sit at the kitchen table with colored pencils, and let your mind run free. Don't feel it's an indulgence ("I should be *writing!*"). The more effort you devote to your fictional setting, the easier it will be to craft scenes. Make your world, whether an imaginary planet or a cozy neighborhood, so real you'll want to move there. And so will your reader.

## RESOURCES:

*The Writer's Map: An Atlas of Imaginary Lands*. Edited by Huw Lewis-Jones. University of Chicago Press, 2018.

[Not only is this book packed with beautiful maps, it contains essays by writers and illustrators such as David Mitchell, Chris Riddell, Lev Grossman, Joanne Harris and many others.]

"The Wonder of Maps." Cressida Crowell. BookTrust.

[booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/2016/december/the-wonder-of-maps/](https://booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/2016/december/the-wonder-of-maps/)

[How names help create landscapes]

"How to Make a Fantasy Map: A Guide." SkillShare Blog.

[skillshare.com/en/blog/how-to-make-a-fantasy-map-a-guide](https://skillshare.com/en/blog/how-to-make-a-fantasy-map-a-guide)

[Nuts and bolts guide]

"How to Map Your Fantasy World." Tyler Moss. Writer's Digest.

[writersdigest.com/there-are-no-rules/how-to-map-your-fantasy-world](https://writersdigest.com/there-are-no-rules/how-to-map-your-fantasy-world)

[An overview of how Christopher Paolini created a map for his book *Eragon*]

# Author Turns Teaching Experience into Writing Career

interview by Sharon Blumberg

Gail Skroback Hennessey dipped her toe into the publishing pool while she was still a classroom teacher: she was on the teacher advisory boards for *Instructor Magazine* and *Time for Kids*. Working as a teacher consultant, Hennessey also contributed to social studies, science and reading textbooks, and written test questions for the ACT Testing Company and the New York State Department of Education. Her monthly teaching guides appeared in several Cobblestone magazines from 2006-2012, as well as other publications.

All of this gave her a hefty resume post-retirement to write her 35 children's books, many of which are picture books with history/culture/social studies themes. Her most recent titles are *Mrs. Paddington and the Silver Mousetraps*, and *Fashion Rules! (Customs of the Middle Ages)*, both from Red Chair Press. Still a teacher at heart, Hennessey has published dozens of Reader's Theater scripts that can be used in the classroom, primarily biographies of historical figures that she sells through the Teachers Pay Teachers website ([teacherspay-teachers.com/](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/)). Hennessey's own website ([gailhennessey.com](https://www.gailhennessey.com)) also provides numerous resources and downloads for teachers.

Hennessey currently writes for *Highlights for Children* and *Jack and Jill* magazines, and her work has appeared in *Time for Kids*, Scholastic classroom magazines, *Faces*, *Muse*, *Boys' Life*, *Ranger Rick* and more.

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Could you please share with us how you obtained your first byline, writing for children?

**GAIL HENNESSEY:** I decided I wanted to write and set about finding topics to develop for fun readings for kids. I did an interview with the California Raisin. That was back in the 1980s. I reviewed magazines and thought one in particular might be a good fit for the piece. I called the editor of *Dynamite* (a Scholastic publication) and the editor actually picked up. She was polite but said she didn't take freelance. I persisted

and asked if I could send her the write-up. I did. Several days later (pre-email), the editor called and said it was going to be the cover story! Never give up! I started as a regular writer for the magazine until it ceased publication.



**SB:** As a teacher of over 30 years of experience, how did you work your experience into a second career writing for educational publishers as a consultant?

**GH:** I always loved writing and wrote plays for puppets and wrote short stories as a kid. When I began teaching, I was doing a unit on Money/Being a Wise Consumer. I didn't find many materials for my age group and decided to write stories to explain economic concepts. I thought, why not compile my resources and try to sell it as a book for teachers. It took about 13 publishers but I found a

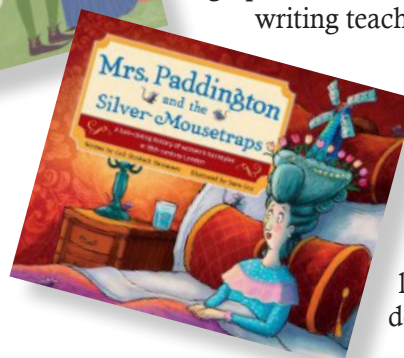
publisher who published my first book. I went on to publish one with this company.

**SB:** What preliminary steps would you advise to teachers who may be considering this?

**GH:** If you believe you have something that other teachers might find of value, be persistent and try! Today, I also have a teaching store with Teachers Pay Teachers where I have Reader's Theater Scripts on famous people in history, science and literature, as well as short reading passages and WebQuests ([webquest.org](https://www.webquest.org)) on different topics.

**SB:** How did you get started writing for high-profiled children's magazines, including writing teaching guides?

**GH:** Again, my biggest piece of advice is TRY and think big. I wanted to write for Disney so I sent a letter to the president, Michael Isner. A few weeks later, I got an assignment doing teaching guides for



## Author Turns Teaching Experience...continued

a series of filmstrips (wow-that's something we don't have anymore!) As for *Ranger Rick*, *National Geographic*, *Scholastic Highlights* and others, do your homework. Get the names of the current editors. Make contact. Review the magazines to get an idea of what types of stories they use. "Don't give up" sounds like a cliché but it is so true. I could paper a room with all the rejections I've gotten over the years.

**SB:** What background in your teaching helped you to write books for children, and questions for standardized tests?

**GH:** I have a masters in the teaching of Social Studies. Write from what you are interested in. That's so important. I love developing materials on women who have made contributions to our world that perhaps kids aren't aware of (some examples are female soldiers during the Civil War, female pilots during WWII, or female spies during the Revolutionary War). Being in the classroom, you get a feel for what kids might find interesting. Writing for ACT and NYS Social Studies testing was again in my field of interest. I made contact with both ACT and the NYS Education Department and asked if they had any needs for test writers. I did this for several years but decided I preferred writing over developing test questions.

**SB:** How did you get started writing biographies for Reader's Theater? What was your process for this?

**GH:** My students loved learning about mummies so I decided to write a play on King Tut using the *To Tell the Truth* model (a Mark Goodson Productions TV show which debuted in 1956, in which a celebrity panel questions contestants in an attempt to determine the actual person associated with a story). I got permission from the company to develop such plays on other famous people. I wanted kids to know that all famous people started out like them; a beginner in something. Many had the same problems that they face in school today. For example, Socrates was bullied for his looks and kids called him "frog face". Michelangelo had a father that didn't support his love of sculpture. Both overcame such obstacles. All my plays, including the *To Tell the Truth* series, or my newer series, Ms. Bie Ografee's Talk Show, have questions about a famous person's childhood, what type of student they were in school, what sparked an interest in what they became famous for doing and lots of fun tidbits.

**SB:** How did you become connected and work with a publisher from India?

**GH:** I spend lots of time on the internet looking for possible story topics, kids to highlight, etc. I found Aadarsh Publishing and said I was interested in writing for them. They were just starting a new series, Purple Turtle, where young kids learned about friendship, honesty, being helpful, helping the environment, etc. from animal friends of Purple Turtle. I went on to write a large number of books for the company.

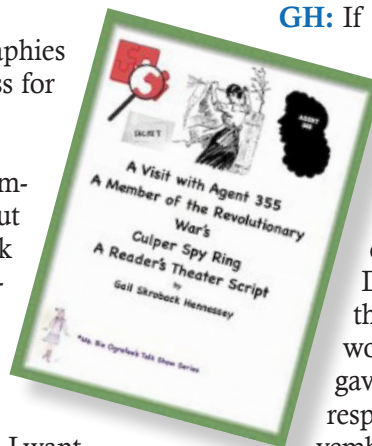
**SB:** You write about places from all over the world. Do you have any suggestions for research strategies for writers?

**GH:** A key element in writing is to be interested in the topic. If I find something is interesting to me, maybe kids will find it interesting, too. I love writing for kids and I learn so much doing interviews. I think whenever possible, you must go to the primary source. You can't rely just on articles you come upon on a topic. Make contact with the person. Today, you can do most interviews via email or Skype. I have rarely found someone not willing to talk to me about what they are doing!

**SB:** Is there anything else you would like to add regarding writing for children, that I have not asked you?

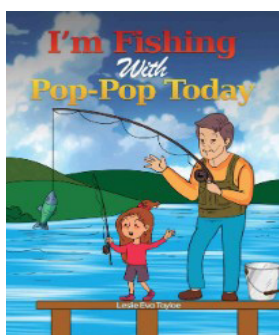
**GH:** If you DON'T send an article, it is a definite rejection. Always try. Think BIG and be persistent. Last December, I contacted the White House for a Q&A article for *Highlights* on Dr. Jill Biden. After doing some detective work, I made contact even though my first attempt wasn't successful. I sent the questions through some insider contacts, and Dr. Jill Biden responded, so I could conduct the interview online in April. I had to edit it for word count. I resubmitted it to her contact, who gave it to Dr. Jill Biden, who then retweeted the responses again. The Q&A appeared in the November 2022 issue of *Highlights for Children*.

Writers need to be detectives. Once I've decided on a subject for an article, often I have to search for a contact on Facebook and Twitter to try and connect. If I want to interview a child for a piece, I first find the town where the child lives and then the school that child attends, then contact the secretary or principal and hope they'll pass on my request to the child's parent. I recently Skyped a grocery store in Cornwall where I read the family of an interview subject shopped, asking the manager to contact the family for me! This "searching" for a contact takes much of my time for each article I develop!



# Let's Celebrate!

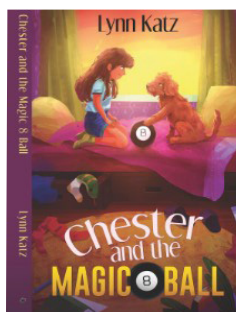
## **CBI MEMBER PUBLICATIONS**



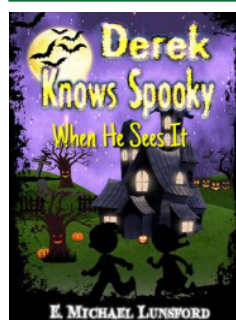
**Leslie Eva Tayloe** announces the publication of her picture book, *I'm Fishing with Pop-Pop Today*, by Austin Macauley Publishers on October 31, 2022. Rosie wants to catch a BIG fish but Pop-Pop won't allow her to hold her own fishing pole, bait her own hook, cast her own line, or reel in her own fish. Will Rosie ever get to catch her own BIG fish? Use the code AUTHOR1022 at checkout for a 25% discount until 12/31/22, when purchasing from the publisher's website ([austinmacauley.com/book/i%E2%80%99m-fishing-pop-pop-today](https://austinmacauley.com/book/i%E2%80%99m-fishing-pop-pop-today)). View the book trailer at: [youtu.be/Dw9z0Pw9TJI](https://youtu.be/Dw9z0Pw9TJI)



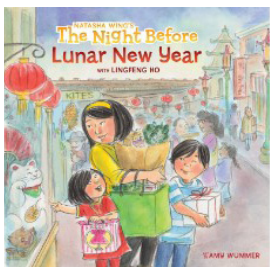
**Ellie Huynh** ([elliehuynh.com/](https://elliehuynh.com/)) is excited to share that her picture book, *A Dive into the Blue*, will be released from Beaming Books on May 23, 2023. She connected with Beaming Books through a CBI Above the Slushpile opportunity in May, 2021. The story uses lyrical text and enchanting illustrations by Bao Luu to explore a child's imagination as she learns to believe in herself and overcome her fears. It's now available for preorder at [beamingbooks.com/store/product/9781506486345/A-Dive-into-the-Blue](https://beamingbooks.com/store/product/9781506486345/A-Dive-into-the-Blue).



**Lynn Katz** ([lynnkatzauthor.com](https://lynnkatzauthor.com)) announces the publication of her debut middle grade novel, *Chester and the Magic 8 Ball*, to be published by Black Rose Writing on February 9, 2023. 12-year-old Georgia believes her rescue dog can tell the future with a Magic 8 Ball. But when it's a matter of life or death, Georgia must learn the difference between probability and magic to increase the odds of a happy ending. Available for pre-order anywhere books are sold. [blackrosewriting.com/childrensmg/chesterandthemagic8ball](https://blackrosewriting.com/childrensmg/chesterandthemagic8ball)



**E. Michael Lunsford's** ([lunsfordmichael.com](https://lunsfordmichael.com)) funny middle grade paranormal novel, *Derek Knows Spooky When He Sees It*, was published on November 15, 2022 by Pen It Publications. Derek Hyde, a spookaphobic twelve-year-old, desperately hopes to get rid of two headless ghosts haunting the Hyde Funeral Home & Used Coffin Outlet where he lives with his mortician parents, Jack and Formalda. But first he must deal with the ghosts' son, who's determined to put Derek in the embalming room—as a client. Find it on Amazon at [amazon.com/dp/1639843566](https://amazon.com/dp/1639843566)

Celebrate!...continued

**Natasha Wing's** new Night Before book, *The Night Before Lunar New Year*, will be released by Grosset & Dunlap on December 27, 2022. Cultural consultant Lingfeng Ho contributed to the creation of the story.



**Candice Ransom** announces six new easy readers that pubbed in 2022: *Monsters in a Mess* and *Race for First Place* (both in the Red Truck Monsters easy reader series from Simon & Schuster), *Uni's Wish for Wings* and *Uni and the Butterfly* (as for the Uni the Unicorn easy reader series, Random House), *Grandparents Day!* and *School Day!* (Step into Reading series, Random House). See all her books at [candiceransom.com](http://candiceransom.com)

## OTHER GOOD NEWS



**Marta Magellan** ([martamagellan.com](http://martamagellan.com)) has received an excellent review from Booklist for her picture book biography *Just Wild Enough*, Mireya Mayor Primatologist. She is also on the long list for the Russell Freedman Award for Nonfiction for a Better World. The launch for her book was held at the Miami Children's Museum on November 6th with special guest star Dr. Mireya Mayor herself, the female Indiana Jones.

**Shelia Lewis** shares that, "After zero replies to queries, two agents contacted me for full submission of my MG novel." Good luck Sheila!



**Shannon Anderson's** picture book, *I LOVE Strawberries!*, illustrated by Jaclyn Sinquett, received the Good Housekeeping Top Rated Picture Book for 2022 Award!

## Send us your good news!

**If you'd like to announce a recent publication** (book or magazine, traditionally or self-published), please send a short description of the project (title, publisher, age range, pub date, and 1-2 sentence description) along with a JPEG of the book cover or, if available, the magazine cover/spread of article. Also include up to two links (your website, Amazon listing, etc.) Please note that we don't have the staff to hunt down any details that you forget to include. We'll print what you send us, so you may want to wait until you have a book cover and firm pub date to take best advantage of this announcement.

**If you'd like to share other good news** (you found an agent, started a blog, finished revising your manuscript, were invited to speak at a local festival, etc.) please send a brief description of your news, up to two links you'd like to share, and, if desired, one related image as a JPEG. (NOTE: If you sign a contract for a book, you can announce the signing under Other Good News, and then send more details and the book cover near the publication date for CBI Member Publications).

Email all material to [mail@writeforkids.org](mailto:mail@writeforkids.org), and put "Celebrate" in the subject line. All material must be received by the 20th of the month to appear in the following month's issue.