

Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  June 2021



The Hero's Journey: 12 Steps to Mastering a Vital Technique

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**



PELICAN PUBLISHING

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Published 12 times/year by Children's Book Insider, LLC,
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ISSN 1073-7596

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

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At Presstime:

Upcoming Twitter Pitch Parties for Unagented Writers

#PBPitch, for picture book authors and author/illustrators, will be **Thursday, June 17, from 8 am to 8pm EDT**. Pitch your picture books with 280 characters or less on Twitter using the #PBPitch hashtag. Pitch manuscripts only once in the morning and once in the afternoon or evening. If you are an author/illustrator, you can attach an image to your PB manuscript pitch.

Include sub-genre # if it applies: #NF = Nonfiction, #C= Concept, #L= Lyrical, #I= Interactive. Only agents and editors should FAVORITE a pitch. If they do, check their submission guidelines (and do your research) before submitting to them.

For more information, go to www.pbpitch.com/pbpitch-twitter-event.html

#PitchDis was created to showcase pitches from the disabled community, which has been historically underrepresented in the publishing industry. The first #PitchDis will take place on **Tuesday, June 22, 2021 between 8am and 8pm EDT**. During this time, unagented authors who self-identify as disabled (including neurodivergent and chronically ill) may pitch their complete, polished fiction or nonfiction projects on Twitter. Include hashtags that specify age category and genre. Agents and editors who are interested in seeing more will "like" the pitch and the author can then send the requested materials to the agent or editor. For more information and a list of hashtags, go to www.pitchdis.com/

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

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

The contest is open to writers of color and Native nations who are residents of the United States and who have not previously had a middle grade or young adult novel published. Only unagented manuscripts will be accepted. Work that has been published in its entirety in any format (including online and self-publishing as well as other countries) is not eligible.

Manuscripts should address the needs of children and teens of color and Native nations by providing stories with which they can identify and relate, and which promote a greater understanding of one another. Themes relating to LGBTQ+ topics or disabilities may also be included. Submissions may be any fictional genre novels, narrative nonfiction or graphic novels for children ages 8 to 12 (up to 75,000 words) or young adults ages 12 to 18 (up to 95,000 words). Novels in verse are also welcome. Particularly interested in literary fantasy and science fiction, but also welcome contemporary, historical, mystery, suspense and genre fusions. Narrative nonfiction should have strong educational appeal, centered around a person or people from marginalized groups. Graphic novel scripts in those categories are also welcome (up to 150 scripted pages with 6-10 pages of final art samples). Submissions should include a synopsis of the story plus the first five chapters, accompanied by a cover letter that includes the author's name, address, phone number, email address, brief biographical note, relevant cultural and ethnic information, how the author heard about the award, and publication history, if any. Do not send the entire manuscript. For graphic novels, include the equivalent of 24-30 scripted pages and 6-10 pages of final art samples and optional character sketches in PDF format only if you are an author/illustrator.

Submissions should be submitted online at <http://bit.ly/NewVisionsSubmission> Manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for this award. **Submissions will be accepted through July 31, 2021**. The winners will be notified by April 1, 2022. For more information, go to <https://www.leeandlow.com/writers-illustrators/new-visions-award>

Cricket Media Puts Out Special Requests for Magazine Content

Spider is a literary magazine for ages 6-9, featuring fresh and engaging literature, poems, articles, and activities for newly independent readers. **Fiction** runs 300-1000 words (fantasy, folk or fairytale, sci-fi, historical, humorous, or realistic); **poetry** is up to 20 lines; nonfiction is 300-800 words (well-researched articles that rise above a simple list of facts; looking for kid-friendly **nonfiction** shaped into an engaging narrative); and **crafts and activities** of 1-2 pages that a reader would be able to perform with minimal parental assistance. Current calls for special submissions:

Legendary Kids (deadline: August 15, 2021): Fresh retellings of folktales, fairy tales, tall tales, and myths that cast a child—not an adult—as the clever problem-solver. Anthropomorphic fables with young animal heroes are also encouraged. We are particularly interested in tales with origins outside of classic European and Western canon. Please provide the editors with information on the original source material but take new youth-empowering directions in your adaptation. Tales may be up to 1000 words, though shorter is appreciated.

Outside of the Box (deadline: August 15, 2021): Material that falls outside of contemporary fiction. This might be plays, science fiction, or historical fiction and nonfiction. It might be simple, but inventive, activities like recipes, games, crafts, magic tricks, science experiments, or silly quizzes. It can be anything that defies categorization. Also seeking stories or poems with accompanying hands-on activities or nonfiction components. Manuscripts must be 1000 words or fewer. Activities should be one to two pages and include reference photos.

Submit online at cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/17817/spider-magazine-for-ages-6-9

Cricket magazine for ages 9-14 publishes fiction of most genres that is well-plotted and character-driven with a satisfying conclusion (600-900 or 1200-1800 words), thought-provoking nonfiction on a wide range of subjects (1200-1800 words. Include solid bibliography with submission); poetry up to 35 lines; and puzzles, crafts, activities. Current calls for special submissions:

Ancient Worlds (deadline: August 15, 2021): Historical fiction, nonfiction, myths and legends, and poetry about ancient cultures, including ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, India, China, Africa, the Americas, Pacific Islands, and more. Submissions might focus on powerful political leaders and crises; legendary heroes; gods and goddesses; engineering and artistic achievements; cultural, religious, and scientific practices; or modern archaeological discoveries. Also welcomes historical fiction featuring the everyday dramas and cares of children in the Cricket age range concerning school, friendships, families, and sports.

Game On! (deadline: August 15, 2021): Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry featuring a competition, game, rivalry, or challenge. Submissions might focus on a school sports team, a kid trying out for the school play or newspaper, even on entering a local flower show or bird-watching competition. You could feature a warm family situation, such as playing checkers with Grandpa or the dreidel game at Hanukkah; or imagine a medieval fantasy about rival knights at a jousting tournament or battling the village dragon. You could also focus on a child's challenge to overcome a fear, learn a new skill, advocate for change at school or in the community, or help a friend.

Submit online at cricketmag.submittable.com/submit/17789/cricket-magazine-for-ages-9-14

Three-Month Mentorships for Pre-published Queer Authors and Illustrators

The #QueerKidlit mentorship is for pre-published (yet to be published in traditional publishing), queer writers and/or illustrators who would like guidance on a specific project. Mentors will connect with mentees at least once per month for a three-month period via email, phone, or video chat. Applicants should have not been traditionally published (having up to two self-published projects is allowed) and can demonstrate advanced progress on their projects. People with intersectional queer identities that have been historically marginalized in children's publishing are encouraged to apply. There is no application fee or charge for the mentorship. You must be at least 18 years old to apply.

The application period is June 1 - 15, 2021. Writing categories: Picture Book Text, YA or MG Novel, and Chapter Book. Illustration categories: Picture Book Dummy, Graphic Novel or Kidlit Illustration Portfolio. A few self-publishing mentors are available. For more information and an entry form, go to <https://queerkidlit.weebly.com/mentorships.html>

5 KINDS OF NONFICTION

by Jean Daigneau

Melissa Stewart knows nonfiction. With 180 titles under her belt, this award-winning author is a tremendous source of information on this genre. But in 2012, Stewart began looking at nonfiction and devising a way to classify it into sub-genres, similar to those well-known genres for fiction. On her blog, she proposed a five-category system to compartmentalize children's nonfiction that literally took the book industry by storm. Embraced by children's book writers, teachers, editors, librarians, agents, and writers, Stewart's 5 Kinds of Nonfiction approach helped classify nonfiction books in ways previously not thought of. Let's find out more.

Where It All Began

Stewart's first book, *Life without Light: A Journey to Earth's Dark Ecosystems*, was published in 1998. Over the next five years she published 35 titles, all in the field of science. With a degree in biology and membership in several major science associations, Stewart has the chops to write this genre. Her research into ways to classify children's nonfiction led to a conversation with others in the field, including a group of "highly-respected educators who called themselves the Uncommon Corps," she has since written.

As Stewart continued to research and explore, she came across terms like "browseable" and "active nonfiction." That's when she knew she was onto something. So she revised her original classification system into five types. The reaction was "astounding," as Stewart describes it. In 2019, as a presenter at an American Association of School Librarians' conference, she was approached by representatives from Lerner Publishing Group and several book wholesalers, who wanted to classify books using her system. The

rest, as they say, is history.

Here is a breakdown of Stewart's 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system. While the category names come from a number of sources, Stewart has written almost everything out there on the topic, so credit for most of the following information, including book titles listed, goes to her. Stewart notes that most books fit specifically into one category. She refers to those that do not as blended books.

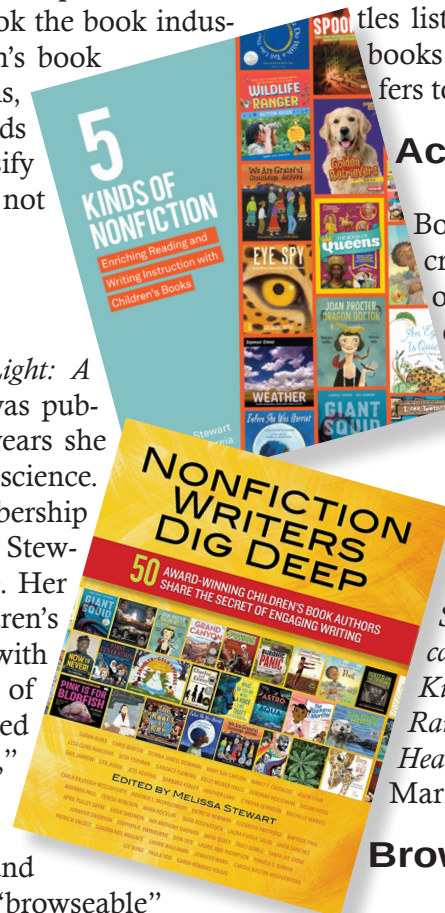
Active

Books in this category include recipe and craft books, field guides, and books that offer a wide range of experiments or projects. These interactive titles teach children specific skills. Text is presented in a "clear, straightforward language" and written with an expository writing style.

Titles in this category include: *Code This!: Puzzles, Games, Challenges, and Computer Coding Concepts for the Problem Solver in You*, by Jennifer Szymanski; *Chicano Eats: Recipes from My Mexican-American Kitchen*, by Esteban Castillo; and *Wildlife Ranger Action Guide: Track, Spot & Provide Healthy Habitat for Creatures Close to Home*, by Mary Kay Carson.

Browseable

Inspired by the ground-breaking Eyewitness Books series, these titles rely heavily on extensive and creative illustrations, with lots of kid appeal. The text, offered in bite-size blocks of unusual and/or interesting facts, also utilizes an expository writing style. These books allow an alternative to cover-to-cover reading, giving kids the opportunity to skip to specific topics that pique their interest.



5 Kinds of Nonfiction continued

Titles in this category include: *Do You Know? Dinosaurs*, by Nicholas St. Fleur; *North America: A Fold-Out Graphic History*, by Sarah Albee & William Exley; and *Trees: Rooted in History*, by Piotr Socha & Wojciech Grajkowski.

Expository Literature

This category includes books written about “narrowly, focused topics.” The subjects are presented creatively with a strong hook, and the text engages young readers with a strong voice and “rich, engaging language.” Stewart notes that these books often “reflect the author’s passion for the subject,” and “typically feature an innovative format and carefully chosen text structure.”

Titles in this category include: *Homes in the Wild: Where Baby Animals and Their Parents Live*, by Lita Judge; *Seashells: More Than a Home*, by Melissa Stewart and Sarah S. Brannen; and *We Are Still Here! Native American Truth Everyone Should Know*, by Traci Sorell and Frané Lessac.

Narrative

For readers who prefer a storytelling experience, Stewart points out that narrative nonfiction utilizes “real characters and settings; narrative scenes; and, ideally, a narrative arc with rising tension, a climax, and denouement.” Typically, the text is presented with a chronological sequence structure, but some of these titles include an in media res opening that hooks readers, before showcasing a person’s life or an event in history.

Titles in this category include: *All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys’ Soccer Team*, by Christina Soontornvat; *The People’s Painter: How Ben Shahn Fought for Justice with Art*, by Cynthia Levinson and Evan Turk; and *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera*, by Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann.

Traditional

These “all-about” books cover broad topics and are often published as part of a series. The language is “clear, concise, and straightforward” and presented with an expository writing style.

Titles in this category include: *Lift as We Climb: Black Women’s Battle for the Ballot Box*, by Evette Dionne; *Behind the Scenes Gymnastics*, by Blythe Lawrence; and *Monster Trucks*, by Matt Doeden.

So What’s In It for Me?

As an author, using the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system to think about nonfiction in creative new ways can be quite a challenge. I found that it required looking at the genre with an entirely different set of glasses. But the benefits are tremendous. As Stewart says, “It can help writers determine the best way to present information to young readers.”

Just like targeting specific publishers, knowing these categories and being able to fully understand and articulate them in a query letter or submission proposal can help you connect more specifically to the right publisher. After all, you wouldn’t pitch your dystopian romance to a publisher that focuses on social-emotional picture books, right? The same goes for nonfiction.

With that in mind, Stewart shows just how much sense this all makes. “Understanding the categories can help people interested in writing children’s books frame the ideas and information they are passionate about in ways that are likely to catch an editor’s attention.”

The Final Word

Besides her children’s nonfiction titles and *5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children’s Books* (co-written with Marlene Correia), Melissa Stewart is the editor of *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-winning Children’s Book Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing*, an anthology geared toward helping educators think about how nonfiction is taught in schools. But aspiring children’s books writers can also benefit, says Stewart: “Reading the essays and doing the activities can help writers of all ages identify their own truth and their own voice. They will feel empowered to craft the book that only they can write.” She likens reading it to “sitting down to have a cup of coffee with a good friend.” Who doesn’t enjoy that?

In the end, utilizing Stewart’s 5 Kinds of Nonfiction categories can help kids sort out the kinds of books they want to read and help writers sort out the books they want to write. And that’s a win-win for all of us.

For all level of writers interested in nonfiction, Stewart encourages you to join the NF Fest community’s Facebook group at: www.facebook.com/groups/NFFest To see all of Melissa Stewart’s books and teaching resources, go to www.melissa-stewart.com/

The HERO'S JOURNEY Gives Structure to Your Plot

by Jane McBride

Are you a structured kind of person? Do you outline and/or write a lengthy synopsis before you ever start writing? Or are you a pantsner, like I am, and just start writing with your only goal being that of a happy ending? Either way, your main character (MC) will be taking some kind of journey, whether or not he identifies it as such. What kind of journey the MC takes depends upon his age, your targeted readership's age, his goal, the tone of your book, and a host of other things.

One well-accepted structure for a book is The Hero's Journey. Different variations and outlines of it exist. I like the 12-step outline, which we'll discuss here. We're going to follow our 12-year-old hero Jack who starts on his journey through these steps (the hypothetical story details that follow are very rough, but should demonstrate some details of each step in the Hero's Journey).

Step 1: The ordinary world. This is the hero's life before the story begins, before the inciting incident sets things in action. Jack considers himself an ordinary kid. Though he's really smart, he lacks self-confidence and is often the object of ridicule by the school's popular kids. We won't start our book by saying, "Jack made his bed, practiced his trumpet, and wolfed down breakfast before leaving for school." Boring. But our readers do need to know what Jack's ordinary world looks like. Choose interesting, active details that give readers a sense of Jack's life and who he is, but also get the plot moving. For example:

Jack saw Lucky's ears perk up just as he hid the last raisin from his oatmeal in his napkin. "School bus is coming!" Jack called in the direction of his Mom's office down the hall. He grabbed his backpack and kissed Lucky's head before banging out the kitchen door and jumping over the

three steps to the driveway. Jack raced toward the streetlight two houses down that marked the school bus stop, skidding into place just as the bus doors opened. "Perfect timing again Jack!" Mrs. Shaub declared. She nodded toward the seat in the first row. "I saved your spot."

Step 2. Call to adventure. The hero doesn't see what's coming. He is going about his life, not thinking about much other than getting through the day. On the bus ride to middle school, Jack is harassed by kids from the back of the bus because he chooses to sit right behind the driver. The truth is, Jack always chooses that seat because he is often a target of bullies, but also because he likes talking to Mrs. Shaub about their favorite zombie movies. They often debate if the movie directors truly understand the zombie genre. Now, Jack just wants to stay under the radar and get through his classes. But on his way into the school, he sees a girl being verbally taunted by three boys. Normally, Jack would just keep walking, but this time something snaps in him and he punches one boy in the nose and threatens the other two. A teacher steps outside before the boys can retaliate, and they leave. The girl thanks Jack, then grabs his hand and tells him that he's been chosen to save his town from a plague of zombies who will appear before nightfall. Jack, dumbfounded, is digesting this information as the girl slips into the school.

Step 3. Refusal of the call. Jack thinks he must have imagined the whole incident. The girl's words are nonsense. He almost believes that she's a figment of his imagination but for one thing: the fist which he used to slug one of the bullies is sore, his knuckles reddened. He runs away from the girl as fast as he can and doesn't look back. In the familiarity of his homeroom, he is able to convince himself that he dreamed the incident and that he got the bruised knuckles when he tripped getting off the bus.

The Hero's Journey...continued

Step 4. Meeting the mentor. Jack goes to his math class and finds a substitute teacher, who is Mrs. Shaub, the bus driver. She gives the class a pop quiz, and then walks around the room as the students answer the questions. When she gets to Jack's desk, she leans down and whispers that Jack alone can save his town from the oncoming horror. He must start now. She casts a spell over Jack so that he appears to be in his classes while, in reality, he is starting his preparation. Over the next hour, she and Jack go over all the details of how zombies were destroyed in the horror movies they always discussed on the bus. Jack's analysis of the movies give him insight on how zombie's minds work, and Mrs. Shaub tells him he can do this as long as he keeps a cool head and lets his movie knowledge guide him.

Step 5. Crossing the threshold. Jack is finally willing to acknowledge that he didn't imagine the whole thing and to accept the challenge he is given.

Step 6. Test, allies, enemies. Here, the hero encounters friends and foes alike. He may find a friend in the most unlikely place or unlikely source. Jack decides to enlist three of the strongest boys in the school to help him. Unfortunately they are the same boys who were bullying the girl. Can he convince them to help him fight the coming apocalypse? When he goes to them asking for help, they ridicule him and start chasing him down the hallway. As he runs, Jack looks over his shoulder and notices that the bullies are no longer running, but lurching in a very zombie-like manner. Jack ducks into his English class, normally his third class of the day, and sees the other "Jack," the one Mrs. Shaub created so the real Jack would appear to be in his classes, sitting at his usual desk. The real Jack quickly hides in a closet at the back of the room, just as the zombie bullies enter class. The bullies lurch toward fake Jack, causing enough commotion that real Jack can get back to the hallway.

Jack looks in every classroom, trying to find the girl he helped who was bullied and originally told him about the zombies. Now that Jack knows the zombies are real, he sees them everywhere. He has a few close calls (forcing him to practice his zombie-outsmarting skills), when he finally finds the girl in the school library. He realizes he knows who she is—Allie, who has a reputation in school for being weird. Allie says

she's been waiting for Jack to find her. She's always known that their town contains a portal to evil and that zombies have been weaving their way into the fabric of town life for years. She confides that she is a descendant of a hereditary witch and can see the zombies, even though they look like normal people to everyone else. When she grabbed Jack's hand outside the school, she passed this power on to him.

Step 7. Approach to the innermost cave. The innermost cave can be a physical location or it can be a deep reflection on the hero's part where he acknowledges his weaknesses and frailties. For Jack, the cave is the portal where Allie leads him. As he walks through he passes videos projected on the walls of all the times he was bullied, and other times where he saw others being bullied and didn't intervene. The further Jack and Allie get into the portal, the more the bullies in the videos turn into zombies. But why did they just bully Jack and the other students, and not kill them? Far into the portal, Jack and Allie discover a desk with a computer. On the screen is an open document with a script for a zombie movie. Jack scans the script and sees that the bullies aren't full zombies, but are being mentally influenced by the zombies who wait just on the other side of the portal. When enough bullies infiltrate the town, they'll generate enough fear among students that the portal door will open and all the zombies can come through. According to the script, that level should be reached by midnight that very night.

Step 8. The ordeal. Here, Jack must make a decision—keep going and save the town, or run home, grab his mom and Lucky, and get far away. Jack decides that he must save the town, and in order to do that, he has to face down each bully and stop him or her from being influenced by zombies, which will keep the door to the portal closed. In doing so, Jack realizes that the bullies use much the same thought process as zombies when stalking their prey, so Jack's zombie movie knowledge is put to good use.

The ordeal is more than a decision. It's a physical and mental test of the Hero. The Hero's friends/allies can help, but ultimately the Hero needs to face the final ordeal alone. This is the high point tension-wise of the Hero's story, and everything important to him is on the line.

The Hero's Journey..continued

Step 9. The reward. The reward can range from a physical or monetary reward or a more subjective one. In Jack's case, he comes away with the knowledge that he and Allie defeated an evil force threatening to take over his town. Together, they saved their families, their school, and their town.

Step 10. The road back. This should be simple, right? Only it's very complicated. The hero must deal with his feelings of wanting to be lauded for his victory, only to discover that no one even recognizes what he's done. Or he may receive so much praise and adoration that it goes to his head. Either way, he has a choice to make. Once Jack seals the portal door and returns back to school, Mrs. Shaub tells him that no one will have any memory of what happened except for her, Jack and Allie. To everyone else in school and the town, they'll only remember the "fake" Jack and how he went through his regular day. Jack is disappointed, but relieved as well. He didn't want to have to explain to his mother, and everyone at school, all the details of what he'd been through.

Step 11. The resurrection. Finding his way back to the ordinary world, the hero is subjected to one more ordeal, the most challenging and dangerous of all. For Jack, he discovers that the portal door he sealed shut that allowed the zombies into his world will not stay forever closed unless he is willing to make a sacrifice. For some heroes, the sacrifice is their lives. For Jack, it is being willing to stand up for what he knows is right when he sees someone getting bullied, even if it costs him in his goal of being invisible at school and staying under the radar of bullies. Can he do it? Will he accept that challenge?

Step 12. Return with the elixir. The elixir may be anything, a magic potion to save a poisoning victim, a chest of gold to pay off an evil landlord, or a new-found knowledge. Sometimes the more elusive the elixir, such as knowledge or self-confidence, makes for the most satisfying discovery. Jack's elixir is discovering that he is stronger than he ever thought. He doesn't have to settle for being the wimpy kid whom no one pays attention to. He is a slayer of bullies, whether they be zombies or kids in his class who want to hurt others. He is a hero!

POINTS TO PONDER IN WRAPPING UP

- You may not want to include each of these steps. They may not fit the parameters of your story. Choose which will work for you.
- You may want to combine this structure with that of another story structure, such as the three-act one. For instance, the first three steps of the Hero's Journey may correspond with the first act of the three act structure. And so on.
- You may find a completely different structure that works for you and disregard more formal structures. If so, good for you.
- Use this as you would any writing tool: choose what works for you, let go of what is extraneous, and find your own way. Ultimately it is your words, your story, your book.

SCOTT CAMPBELL

Publisher



interview by Lynne Marie

Scott Campbell is now at the helm of Pelican Publishing, which is based in New Orleans, LA, and focuses on titles of local and regional interest. He comes to Pelican from River Road Press, which he founded and where he served as Publisher since 2014. Prior to that, he worked for almost a decade as the head of sales for Pelican's mid-South region. His duties included overseeing sales for nine states, setting up author visits, and more. In addition, he's the former owner of a successful event production company and has additional experience in marketing, public relations, and development. Pelican Publishing is an independent, mid-size general trade and children's publisher. Scott's interests for this imprint lie in publishing local and regional titles but he is open to other marketable ideas. He is looking for authors who are passionate and willing to work hard to market and promote their own work alongside the publisher.



This month, he will be offering an **Above-the-Slushpile** opportunity to Pelican Publishing for our readers!

LYNNE MARIE: How do you feel that publishing has changed over the past year, from when you started as Publisher at Pelican, until the present time?

SCOTT CAMPBELL: When I started at Pelican we were in the middle of the pandemic and things were getting worse. Book sales were not the best. Now it seems that things are really improving health wise and

sales reflect that improvement. I am very optimistic for the Fall on all fronts.

LM: Despite Pelican being a smaller publisher, your books are available to major and independent bookstores including Barnes and Noble, as well as gift shops, museums, libraries, on Amazon, and through distributors. I see some books are available in digital format, as well. What are some other places that carry these books?

SC: Although Pelican is not a big publisher, we are an imprint of Arcadia, who also has History Press and Wild Sam. The overall company is significantly larger than just Pelican. Being part of Arcadia gives us much more breadth in regards to sales channels. Our titles are available in many non-conventional places such as local groceries, hardware stores, and pharmacies. We also maintain a strong presence at fairs and festivals, either by selling ourselves or by having someone else carry our titles.

LM: Pelican offers substantial marketing and promotion forms for an author to fill out before the book is published to assist in preparing for the book release. What are some ways that Pelican helps the author maximize the potential of their marketing plans?

SC: We expect every author to be part of the marketing team. The author form is to determine who they know in the community, and through a collaborative approach with our publicity department and through coordinated efforts we can be the most effective spreading of the word. We have strong relationships with the

Scott Campbell...continued

media and signing venues across the country and will provide press kits, including review copies to prospective print, video, digital, and radio outlets. Our team will schedule signings and author appearances in conjunction with the media coverage. This two-pronged approach maximizes an author's exposure and sales opportunities.

LM: How involved would a Pelican author be in the process of the book coming to life? What is their role prior to the onset of the actual promotion and marketing phase?

SC: One criterion when choosing a title is assessing the author's desire to promote and sell their own book. We solicit their input every step of the way; it is a true collaboration.

LM: As head of sales for Pelican's mid-South region, you used to pitch to major accounts including Barnes and Noble. What advice do you have for making an effective manuscript pitch in a query?

SC: I suggest that any prospective author include a sales and marketing plan that details what they are planning to do to make their book as successful as possible.

LM: What else would you like to see in a query to engage you in the author and/or subject matter of the book? Do you investigate/consider social media platforms?

SC: The author should do research to determine similar titles on the market. We look into the author's visibility and online reputation.

LM: Do you require comp titles? What do you feel these titles show you about a project?

SC: They show us two things. First, if there are lots of books that are similar, if their book is somehow better or takes a more interesting approach to the same subject. Second, if they have a truly new idea. Both of those are exciting.

LM: I recall a conversation when you spoke about how you can make a good book better, but you can't make someone go out and market their own book. This is something that a lot of authors don't consider when wanting to get published. What traits are you looking for when you screen for this type of person?

SC: I try to determine if the prospective author actually has the time to promote. If this person has two jobs and five kids under the age of ten, then I question if realistically they can carve out the time required to adequately promote the book. If the author is already attending fairs and festivals and already has a retail presence, then I consider that a real plus. As far as traits are concerned, I am looking for a person who is a great communicator, a person who genuinely enjoys sharing their book with other people. The people I do not want are the ones that sit at a book signing and text on their phones while customers walk by. The author should be an ambassador/greeter for the store, for Pelican, and for their book, engaging with people and making friends.

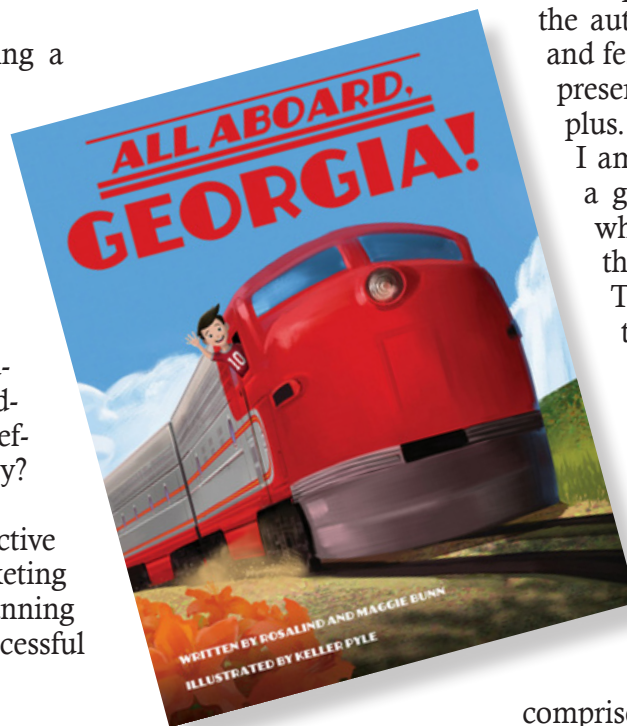
LM: Your list seems to be comprised of fiction and nonfiction, picture books, chapter books, and novels. With such a large backlist, what holes are you trying to fill at this time? Do you have any particular unique item on your wishlist?

SC: We are of course looking for everything, but we have not received as many cookbook submissions lately and would welcome more of those.

LM: What concepts, topics, or themes should be avoided when submitting to you?

SC: The primary thing to remember when submitting is that we are focused on local [Louisiana] and regional [Southern-themed] books.

LM: Name a children's book you enjoyed as a child that might still be sold and have relevance today.



Scott Campbell...continued

SC: *Cajun Night Before Christmas*, of course. Every family in Louisiana has a copy of that book. You find the person in the family who can produce the best Cajun accent and read it every year.

LM: Please share a slush pile success story for an upcoming book and tell us what drew you to that particular submission.

SC: This isn't exactly a slush pile story, but worth telling. There is a mother and daughter team from Georgia who submitted several manuscripts that were not regional and they were rejected. They did not give up; they came back and submitted a great regional title called *All Aboard, Georgia!* The book is about an imaginary train that travels around Georgia visiting all of the notable sights. What I liked about the book was that it would be of interest to locals who were happy to see their part of the state represented, tourists who wanted to take home a remembrance of their trip to Georgia, and teachers who could use the book in the classroom to teach about the state. The book could be marketed and sold to everyone and not just one group. In addition, the authors are real go-getters who sell and market themselves and set up events for book signings. That book will be out this Fall.

LM: How do you go about pairing artists with your authors? Do you have a stable of artists you work with, or do you accept submissions? If so, what are the particular guidelines for artists?

SC: Many children's books already come to us illustrated. If the art is good and the book is good that gives the book a distinct advantage over someone just submitting a manuscript. When a manuscript arrives with no art, we ask the author if they have an illustrator that they suggest for the book. That illustrator needs to be a good fit for the book, needs to be available, and needs to be within the budget. We do have a stable of illustrators that we work with on a regular basis. We pair the illustrator and their style to the type of book that is to be illustrated. If the book is nonfiction, we get an illustrator who is more realistic in their art. If the book is silly, we get a more "cartoony" illustrator and so on. Once the illustrator is contracted, we provide an art template for the illustrator, which includes trimline dimensions and bleed parameters, etc.

Scott Campbell is offering CBI subscribers a special **Above the Slushpile** submissions opportunity until **June 30, 2021**. Email a query letter and whole manuscript for picture books or query letter and first ten pages for longer works. Submit to editorial@pelicanpub.com with code **CBI June Above the Slush Sub** in the subject line. Because of Pelican Publishing's small size, they can only respond to manuscripts they are interested in. If you don't hear back within three months of submission, consider it a pass. Before submitting, it's advised that you study current Pelican titles at www.pelicanpub.com/ and submission guidelines at pelicanpub.com/viewer.php?region=92

---Please Read Before You Proceed---

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

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

Show—Don't Tell—Emotions

by Jane McBride

Can we write without naming emotions? Can we describe that a character is feeling sad without using the word sad or hopeless or despair?

Let's try writing a passage, the first with lots of emotional tags, and the second with none.

Matthew was going on his first deer hunt with his father and older brother Jessie. Matthew was afraid. He didn't want to shoot anything, to kill anything, but he was even more scared to tell his father the truth. His father put a lot of store in a man's ability to provide food for his family. He would think Matthew wasn't a real man if he didn't go hunting.

Matthew was ashamed of his feelings. Embarrassed and ashamed.

When his father, brother, and Matthew found the scat indicating that deer must be close by, Matthew swallowed down his fear and did as he saw his father and Jessie do. He checked his rifle. He drew it closer.

Fear filled his throat, but he did his best to swallow it down and pretend that he was eager, even enthusiastic to kill.

He saw his brother give him an odd look. Matthew pretended he didn't see it. When a big buck came into view, Matthew's father said, "You take it, son. It'll be your first kill."

Matthew sighted down his rifle. He aimed. But he couldn't pull the trigger. He just stood there.

"What's the matter, Matthew?" his father asked. "Is your rifle jammed?"

Matthew wanted to jump on that excuse. "No, sir. I can't do it. I can't kill that animal. Not today. Not ever."

Humiliated, mortified, he waited for the lecture.

It didn't come.

What emotional words did I use? *Afraid, scared, ashamed, embarrassed, fear, humiliated, mortified.*

Let's try it again.

"I bet you can't wait for your first hunt," Jessie said.

Matthew pulled a long blade of grass and pretended to suck on it, avoiding looking at his brother. "Sure am."

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yep."

Matthew didn't have more than single syllables in him at that minute. Please don't let Jessie ask any more questions.

It was the first hunt of the season, and Matthew wanted to puke. He'd already done so this morning, sicking up the breakfast of biscuits and eggs his mother had made. His father put a lot of store in a man's ability to provide food for his family. Would his father think that Matthew wasn't a real man if he couldn't shoot an animal?

"I remember the first hunt Dad ever took me on," Jessie said. "Best day of my life."

No way would this be the best day of Matthew's life. He only prayed he could get through it.

With his father and brother, Matthew climbed into the burly looking SUV, his father's pride-and-joy, next to his hunting rifle. The ride to the forest took an hour, but the minutes whizzed by, and they were there far too soon.

Maybe they wouldn't see any deer. Maybe he wouldn't have to kill.

When a big buck ambled into view, Dad said, "You take it, son. It'll be your first kill."

Matthew sighted his rifle. Aimed.

Bile filled his throat. Acid churned in his stomach. His hands were so wet with sweat that it was a miracle he didn't drop the gun.

But he couldn't pull the trigger. He just stood there, rifle propped against his shoulder, and stared at the beautiful animal. The deer hadn't asked to be killed.

"What's the matter, Matthew?" his father asked. "Is your rifle jammed?"

Matthew wanted to jump on that excuse. "No, sir. I can't do it. I can't kill that animal. Not today. Not ever."

Emotions...continued

He waited for the lecture.
It didn't come.

Did you see that we used much of the original version, including some dialogue, in the rewriting of the passage, but there was no emotional telling. Instead, I focused on physiological or visceral words to describe Matthew's horror at the idea of killing an animal: *bile filled his throat, acid churned in his stomach, his hands grew so wet*. Earlier, Matthew relates how he'd "sicked up the breakfast ..." In addition, I included a bit of dialogue between Matthew and his brother, where Jessie picks up on Matthew's fear, and the ride to the forest, which Matthew describes as "the minutes whizzing by," bringing him ever closer to what he fears most. What details could you use to describe Matthew's reluctance, even his terror at killing?

Let's try the same thing with a passage from the viewpoint of a seven-year-old character from a picture book.

The first version:

Jeremy was happy his grandma was coming to visit. Jeremy loved his grandma more than anyone else in the world. She made Jeremy feel good about himself. His parents were always telling him to stand up straight, to do better, to be a little man. Jeremy didn't want to be a little man. He was only a boy.

Now for the second version:

Jeremy cleaned his room before Grandma's visit. He put his clothes away in the drawers. He made up the bed and smoothed out the lump that was always in the bedspread. He even pulled out dirty dishes from beneath the bed and snuck them into the kitchen.

"All done," Jeremy told his mother.

Mom glanced around Jeremy's bedroom, her mouth pulled tight like a balloon when all the air left it. "Jeremy, why haven't you changed clothes yet? And for heaven's sake, stand up straight," she said. "You know your grandma is coming. Why can't you be more grown up and act like a little man?"

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. His stomach got that tight feeling inside that it did whenever his mother told him to do better.

He thought about Grandma. She never told

him to stand up straight, to be a little man. She was happy that he was a boy.

Do you notice what I added in this version: "her mouth pulled tight like a balloon when all the air left it," "his shoulders slumped. His stomach got that tight feeling inside ..." Normally, I am an advocate for fewer words, not more, but in this case, the details show Jeremy's feelings more than any bland words such as *happy* or *excited* or *sad* or *disappointed*.

Does this mean we should never name our character's emotions? Not at all. Sometimes, it's okay to tell what a character is feeling, but showing those emotions with carefully chosen details elevates your writing to the next level. Practice showing emotions with the following exercises, and then incorporate these techniques into your work-in-progress.

Exercise #1:

Take a passage from your work-in-progress where you have used telling words to describe the character's feelings. Now rewrite the passage without using those words. Focus on details and visceral responses to convey the feelings. A good way to write physiological reactions is to inventory yourself and ask how you feel when you are excited or happy or terrified. Does your stomach churn as in Matthew's case? Does your mouth grow dry when you're scared? Does energy flow through you when you're happy? Do you feel on top of the world, certain you can do anything.

Exercise #2:

Make a list of emotions and by each one, write a physiological response. For example:

Fear: His sphincter clenched so tight he imagined he could open a bottle with it.

Shame: Her cheeks heated with the knowledge she'd been wrong.

Sad: A gray cloud pressed down on his shoulders until he was certain he would collapse under it.

Exercise #3:

Use well-chosen details to show emotions. Go through your WIP and identify a seemingly small thing to highlight what your character is feeling.

Seizing the Moment: Debut Middle Grade Author

"J.R. POTTER!"

interview by PJ McIlvaine

When life hands you lemons, make a fantastic adventure. Debut middle grade author JR Potter took a winding road to becoming published, but his journey infused his book, *Thomas Creeper and the Gloombsbury Secret* from Fitzroy Books/Regal House Publishing, 2021. It's a gripping tale about a teen mortician/budding spy who lives in a town where the sun only shines a couple of times a year (think Jules Verne times ten). "In *Gloombsbury*, creative powerhouse J.R. Potter has created a rich and haunting alternative to Hogwarts, filled with captivating characters and enthralling mysteries. For every fan of young adventure, illustrated fiction, and all things supernatural..." said Phillip Kennedy Johnson, DC Comics writer of *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Aquaman*. Potter was also the co-creator of the illustrated comic *The Glimmer Society*. Potter lives in Virginia with his wife Amy, and assorted furry creatures. Check out Potter's whimsical website: jamesrobert-potter.com

PJ McILVAINE: You certainly have an eclectic background: musician, comic illustrator, graphic artist, butcher's assistant, fast food delivery guy, and now published kid lit author. How have these different careers/jobs brought you to the space where you are now? When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? Did you play pretend spy or detective games?

J.R. POTTER: Great questions! Growing up, I was this spark plug kid with too much energy who fell in love with writing, music, and drawing and just wanted to do it all. There's a powerful scene at the end of the film *The Hurt Locker* where the bomb-diffusing expert

father played by Jeremy Renner leans over the crib and says to his son (I'm paraphrasing here) "When you're this age you love everything, but as you get older you that love gets narrowed to fewer and fewer things." I've never really succeeded in that narrowing, winnowing process, I'm afraid!

I consider myself a failed adult but a successful child. I think a multiplicity of creative outlets and jobs feed that desire to not let wonder and curiosity slip away. For example, there was this old jockey that used to come and sit at the bar I was working at. He would order a steak and cut it up into three pieces in front of me (one piece for that day, another for the next, and so on). Just that whole ascetic process was fascinating to me and peculiarly human and lonesome, and it would go on to inspire a song of mine called "Old Jockey, Old Horse." I knew this guy wasn't making millions from riding and competing because he still had a day job. But it was like he was so caught up in years of weighing in and weighing out that maybe he couldn't get out of the arc of that story even if he wanted to. That's profound to me, and if you keep your eyes and ears open and you're not afraid to talk and listen to people, you'll meet a whole mess of stories out there just waiting to be told.

I come from a family of artists and art gallery professionals. Some of my earliest memories are reading the spines of giant retrospective art books. I knew the names of Milton Avery, Pablo Picasso, and Frida Kahlo even before I knew their actual work. Names are really important, especially in stories. With all the fun spooky and nerdy stuff, from "crypts to cryptology" as my novel *Thomas Creeper and the Gloombsbury*



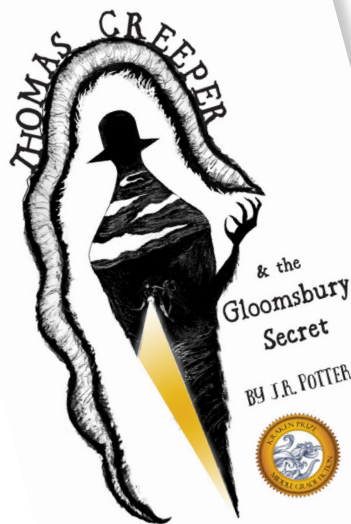
J.R. Potter...continued

Secret strives to encapsulate, that comes from my love of the teen gothic novels of John Bellairs and his amazing illustrator partner, the great Edward Gorey. Combine all that with the films of Tim Burton, along with Indiana Jones, Blade Runner, Hellboy, Mary Shelley, and James Bond, and you pretty much have a sum total picture of what makes this shadowy character known as J.R. Potter tick!

PJ: What comes first, the story or the artwork? Do they go hand-in-hand or does one inspire/elevate the other? Since I can't draw a straight line to save my life, can you explain the art/illustration process in terms a complete novice (i.e. dummy) like me can understand? Do you use any special computer software to achieve the look you want or is it all drawn by hand?

JR: The story comes first, but that's not to say the inspiration and impressions I see in my mind are not there before the fingers type the first word. One of the things that helps propel a story for me is figuring out what a character looks like, and oftentimes it's based on an actor or actress I like, all their quirks and mannerisms. And that's how the character starts to look to me when I imagine them in certain rooms, leaning against a bookshelf, or tromping through some secret underground tunnel. I can follow the film going on in my head and translate that film with my fingers.

The tricky thing with illustration is showing the reader an image they can't unsee. This is an example of how artistic choices can limit imagination instead of enhancing it. For example, in the illustrations I made for *Thomas Creeper* I never show Thomas's whole face. It might be hidden behind a book, or the shot is from behind. The image the reader has created in their mind about a character is so rich and unique that I don't want to limit that value and process. As for techniques, like Bob Dylan being asked about his tunings, I can't give away my few tricks I've picked up! I will say that I combine analog with digital, sketching by hand and taking that to a certain place. Because at this stage in my life I can't afford gobs of ink, paint, and drawing paper, the overlay of digital inks and mixed media elements is an affordable alternative that can be really rewarding and fun if you get to know the program well enough. It all starts by hand, and I would like to



get further into all analog illustrations as I get older and less reliant on digital techniques. Ninety percent of my illustrative heroes never touched Photoshop and look what they accomplished!

PJ: What was the genesis of *Thomas Creeper*? And what were your major influences on it? How many books do you plan for the series? How much research did it entail re the funeral home? The level of detail is amazing—I actually felt like I was in the embalming room (not the corpse, mind you). How many drafts did you write and long did it take to write it? Do you have a writing group or critique buddy?

JR: Great questions again! I know I wanted to tell a story about underdogs. I think you would be hard-pressed to find a character in my writing who isn't an underdog in some way (even the villains). Underdogs have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I was able to talk about the subject of underdog heroes and heroines in children's literature recently on a great podcast ("A Conspiracy of Lemurs" a Regal House Publishing podcast series). With *Thomas Creeper*, I thought about how hard it was to be 13 and feeling all over the place and even rudderless to some extent, and I imagine how even more intense those feelings and conditions would be like if that 13-year-old had a family situation that was equally intense (like living and working in a funeral home). I regret that I haven't gone the true blooded author route of someone like a

Hemingway who drove an ambulance in WWI and lived a huge part of the story he would tell in *A Farewell to Arms*. I did, however, buy the textbook on embalming and study it closely. The funeral home provides the backdrop like a stage for *Thomas Creeper*, and while the actual science and business of operating a funeral home is important, it's largely secondary to the greater soul of the story: the hero's call to action and their great adventure through the supernatural.

As far as writing goes, I believe I began composing a rough draft around 2014. I knew I was writing a "love letter" to everything I loved from John Bellairs' books, to *The X-Files*, to Lovecraftian influences on Mike Mignola's Hellboy stories. Over the next five years the manuscript would see contact with three agents and eventually one editor. I received useful

J.R. Potter...continued

feedback from all of them and that went into my editing process. I'm writing the sequel to *Thomas Creeper and the Gloombsbury Secret* right now, and will be getting drafts under as many helpful critics as I can. I want to get better and better, both as a writer and as an illustrator. How long will I get to carry on the adventures of *Thomas Creeper*? For a long, long time, I hope.

PJ: Do you have an agent? If not, are you trying to acquire one?

JR: I currently don't have an agent. I would love to find a serious, long-term collaboration with a great one (I realize that sounds like I just placed a personals ad), although an amazing publicist might be more important at this stage in trying to build and grow out of debut status. At this point I do all my writing and illustration, all my marketing and promotion—from designing the flyer to emailing the bookseller. I create an alter ego character for readings and plan his speech and outfit. I make my own book trailers and write the music for it. That sounds like an awful lot of grand-standing, but it's to show that writing is a full-time job... and I already have two other jobs! I'm not complaining, because it's the nature of the beast. It's not enough to make something good, or even great, these days and expect people to seek it out like moths to flames. We're flooded with content. There are millions of talented people out there, and most will labor in obscurity their whole lives. Talent is just one part of the recipe. It should be enough, but it's not. At the end of the day, writers need to be writing, and not just tweets and eye-catching hashtags. Whether an agent, publicist, or both, I'd love to get to the position someday of doing 80% creativity and 20% publicity.

PJ: Fitzroy Books/Regal House, your publisher on *Creeper*, is a reputable, acclaimed, independent publisher. How was that process? When you submitted the material in their 2019 Kraken Book Middle Grade Fiction Contest (which you won and led to publication), did it include the artwork?

JR: I've had a very good experience working with Regal. I frankly don't know how they are able to seek out, obtain, help edit and produce so many titles with such a small staff! It's definitely out of passion for books. Jaynie Royal, my editor, who also happens to be Regal's publisher and founder, uncovered a lot of things

I couldn't see in the novel and inspired me to flesh them out (and in other cases weed them out). That's so helpful to have someone at bird's eye view, which I believe is the literary altitude great editors operate in, when you the writer are so close up to the material, you might not see what's hiding right under your nose. I didn't include illustration in the contest submission, both due to the contest guidelines and because I had only a limited amount of sketches of *Gloombsbury* completed at that time (they would be composed later, often behind the same bar as I mentioned earlier!). I want the young reader who stumbles across *Thomas Creeper* to see that it's something I went 200% into, and that they can do the same thing too, even if it's not a book. It can be anything they pour their heart into. Love something all the way, don't half-ass love is kind of my motto. Your creation (I can't say that without thinking of a caricature of Dr. Frankenstein shouting "My creation! My creation!") is your passport

to greater connection and communication. I think at the end of the day, big publisher or indie press, huge gallery or small sideshow, it's all about communication, communicating this beautiful and bizarre experience of being human.

PJ: What is your writing routine like? Do you outline or just let it free flow? Do you juggle multiple projects? Do you have a pet or passion project?

JR: I write every day. As far as outlining, I do a combination of loose and tight, I'd say. I know all the points I want to hit, but if something magical pops up in the process and changes that adventure into more of a choose-your-own-adventure, then I let that happen. For example, I know the clincher, cathartic end scene in the sequel to *Thomas Creeper* I'm writing now (*Thomas Creeper and the Purple Corpse*), the one that hopefully will hit everyone like the big reveal in *The Usual Suspects* or *The Sixth Sense* (a guy can dream, right?) but I'm not sure exactly how the previous scenes will set that up.

As for multiple projects, YES! I juggle so many because an idea will hit me often when I'm on a long run and the brain's focused on repetitive motion, so the subconscious can sort of sneak into consciousness. Recently, I had a month-long bout of whatever they call writer's block, though for me it was more that I knew the next pages were like indelible ink even if I played around. It was pressure, but a good kind, a



J.R. Potter...continued

reason to take a beat and assess. I didn't want to just start writing and see what came out. I wanted to get the room right and everyone in it. As far as a passion project, after the sequel to *Thomas Creeper* I have the beginning of a sci-fi teen novel that is sort of like a more multicultural *Avatar* set three thousand years into the future on a very, very different Earth. To go back to Hemingway, I read somewhere that he always liked to end the writing day feeling all abuzz and stop there so the next day would begin with that excitement. That sci-fi project is like a prolonged buzz on the backburner for me. Just knowing that there's something very different and exciting down the road a bit, that's a great choose-your-own-adventure ahead of me.

PJ: The ongoing pandemic caused millions of us to shift gears, and quickly. What was the biggest change for you? From your interviews with *Good Morning America*, I gather that you saw it as an opportunity to follow your dreams. Can you elaborate a bit more on that? But it couldn't have been easy—I know for me it wasn't. Were there days where you had “all is lost” moments? If so, how did you rebound and keep your focus? How do you maintain your passion and enthusiasm for a project over the long haul?

JR: There are millions out there who have been hit harder than me, so I won't disrespect their collective experience here. Fortunately, I've been very healthy so I could pivot and work with hands. We lost all our income from gigs that paid for our health insurance; others lost their lives. You see what I'm getting at? I also believe that constantly glossing over hard-hitting feelings, having that stiff upper lip all the time isn't always healthy, either. There was so much unknown at that beginning of that first phase that you really didn't know that if just by walking down the street you were putting yourself in harm's way or your loved ones. I definitely have “dark nights of the soul” from time to time. I have a mantra I repeat even when it isn't really true: “This is where I thrive.” The other one is more of an all-caps thing: GET ON WITH IT ALREADY! The pandemic put a very frightening “What if this is it?” thought into a lot of minds. That can be paralyzing for some and it's hard to move forward. For me, it's been an additional kick in the pants to get on with it, to try to make something that hopefully communicates both individually to each reader and on a general human level. You can't control that reception too much, all you can do is refine and try to transmit the clearest signal you can send out.

PJ: Are you an extrovert or an introvert? (I sense a bit of the theatrical too!) If you weren't writing, what would you be doing?

JR: I'm a weird balance of homebody and extrovert. I love nature and space. As a bartender and musician, I can't just be some shady guy in the corner polishing a glass or strumming hum-drum chords on a guitar; it's theatrical things and you're largely the catalyst to bring people out of their shells (it may help that in both instances adult beverages are available). I'm a country mouse who could maybe become a city rat if there was a park nearby and enough cheese to go around. I like being left alone most of the time to explore and tinker in my little studio. Do animals count in the extrovert question? Probably not, I suspect. I could spend a year with just my wife and our dogs around...oh wait a minute, that was basically 2020!

As for alternate careers, if I was better at the piano and faster at sight reading I'd love to be a concert pianist performing Brahms second piano concerto or Schumann's concerto in A minor. That was a dream of mine when I was a kid. I'd also love to be an actor, though I'm so goofy most of the time I'm not sure if I could really bring it home in a serious drama. If there was a quirky but heartfelt role that I could play in the style of a Sam Rockwell or a Paul Rudd, I'd love a shot at that.

PJ: Where do you see yourself in five years, writing wise?

JR: Writing the screenplay to the *Thomas Creeper* movie! Ha! That's a dream, for sure. In five years, I'd love to be continuing this adventure of connection and communication through libraries, schools, and bookstores. I know there are better writers and illustrators out there than me, but I think I belong to a smaller group of people who can realize and produce the whole intense vision of a project. A lot of my creative process begins with deluding myself into thinking I can pull something off I've never done before. What follows next is a lot of luck and sheer will, forcing that delusion to happen, until at the end of the magic trick there really is a live rabbit inside the hat. That's the best way I can describe it. The fun (and probably a bit of the stress) comes from not knowing if I can pull everything off. But that's what makes a live-wire, theatrical feel to the work, so nothing is rarely boring or staid. If I'm so fortunate enough in five years that bookworms are still devouring my weird works of alchemy and imagination, then I'll consider that a major success. You never know your impact. If I can get one reader who feels out of sorts like Thomas, unhappy with how they fit into their present world, and by Thomas's example show them that good things happen when you follow your own voice, then what better living sequel to a book could that story be?

Try the KANBAN SYSTEM to Move "To-Do" to "Done"

by Jane McBride

Are you familiar with Kanban? Until recently, I had never heard of it. Kanban is a Japanese term meaning visual sign or card and is formatted upon the belief that improving work is done through visual management.

To understand Kanban, it helps to know a little of its history: The Kanban name comes from two Japanese words, “Kan,” meaning sign, and “Ban” meaning a board. In the early 1600s, Japan was prospering. Small business owners wanted to attract customers to their wares, but they were competing against many other such merchants. They came up with the idea of creating placards to invite potential customers to their places of business.

Fast-forward several centuries: Following World War II, Kanban was re-conceived by Dr. Edward Deming who wanted to streamline American manufacturing efficiency. Corporate America didn’t receive the philosophy well, sending Deming and his compatriots to Japan to put it into practice there.

In 1953, Toyota began using the Kanban system in the machine shop of their main plant. By using the four core principles of Kanban—visualize work, limit work-in-progress, focus on flow, and continuous improvement—Toyota was able to show employees how to move materials smoothly through the long production process, making Toyota one of the most efficient manufacturing businesses in the world.

I hear you asking right along now, “But what does this have to do with writing?” It turns out, a lot.

Imagine a board with three columns. One column is marked “to do”; the next “working on” or “in progress”; and the third, “done.” Sticky notes of different colors for different projects are placed in the to-do column, moved to the working on column and then moved once again to the done column when completed. If you work on a short story for part of the day but aren’t done, the note stays in the working-on column. Some notes may remain in the working-on column for a period of time if,

for example, you are writing a book. That’s okay. Your goal isn’t to see how fast you can finish something but to let you view—in a concise manner—what you are working on.

One writer friend prefers the book system. Sticky notes move from one column to the next, as in the board system, but rather than a board, she has a “thin” book that opens up flat. The advantage of this system is that she can take her book with her if she is traveling or even if she is going only to a local coffee shop or library along with her laptop. Having her work organized in such a fashion allows her to have an instant picture of where she is on any given project.

Let me share with you why I find Kanban so appealing. Throughout my 40-year writing career, I have consistently worked on several projects at once. Part of this stemmed from my growing bored with one project and wanting to move on to a new one. Another part came from my tendency to get stuck in one project, particularly when writing a novel, and, not wanting to waste my time, I would move on to another project, whether another book or a short story or an article. In short, I had trouble staying on task, as an elementary school teacher once remarked upon one of my children many years ago: “Your student has difficulty staying on task.”

Switching back and forth between one project and another without any system in place to keep track of what I was doing made for confusion and wasted time—the very things I was trying to avoid. When I had a number of projects in the works, I couldn’t keep track of each of them and found myself frustrated as I struggled to move back and forth between the various works. Adding to my disorganization were the demands of parenthood as my husband and I raised five children. Their needs had to come first, so my writing was fit in between nap times, kindergarten hours, soccer practice, and other “mom” things. Employing the Kanban system helped me stay on task.

How could you, personally, use this system? Say you are working on a middle grade novel, a short story, and an

The Kanban System..continued

article all at once.

You would set up your board with the three columns with different colored sticky notes for each project—a short story, novel, and a nonfiction article. If you spend a morning working on a short story, place its sticky note in the in-progress column. By afternoon, you've decided you need to focus on your novel. Once again, you place the sticky note in that column. Not only does this let you know what you've spent time and effort on, it also lets you know that perhaps you need to spend time on the article the following day.

What if you don't work on several projects at once and stick with one project until it's completed? Can Kanban work for you?

Absolutely. Kanban helps keep track of mini projects in one big one like writing a novel. An example could be "work on chapter 7 to increase conflict" which is in the to-do column. When you start working on it, you place the sticky note in the in-progress column, and then in the done column when it's finished. Revising a chapter will likely take more than one day so that note remains in the in-progress column until it is completed. Let's go back to the example of the short story. What if you are able to finish it in a day? Your sticky note for it then goes into the "done" column.

Here, again, are the principles of Kanban, and some ways they can individually and collectively benefit you and your writing.

1. Visualize work. Are you a visual learner and organizer as I am? Do you need to see your organizational process?

Kanban allows you to do this. At a glance, your works-in-progress are there, reminding you (perhaps even nagging you) that they are waiting to be moved from the to-do list to the in-progress list or from in-progress to done. Think of these sticky notes as visual prods.

2. Limit work-in-process. For someone like me, who likes starting new projects but is slow to finish existing ones, the Kanban method reminds me to keep the number of projects I start to a reasonable one. I've discovered that three is reasonable; six is not. Having 12 projects in the works at one time may sound admirable, but is it really? Or is it a way to keep a writer from completing any of them and thus saving him from having to submit anything? Of course, the number of projects you are working on at any given time is highly individual. Do what works for you.

3. Focus on flow. The Kanban system allows you to see if you are falling behind on a certain project that has a close deadline. For example, if you are working on your middle grade novel, which you're really excited about, but have an article for Parents magazine due in a week and you haven't even begun to work on it, your Kanban system can help motivate you to start the article and move it from the to-do list to the done list.

4. Continuous improvement. Most writers, however many books and stories they've published, believe that they still need to improve. We are never too old or too experienced to learn. Kanban allows us to use the craft we are striving to improve in concrete ways. As we gain writing expertise, we will see projects completed and submitted in a more timely fashion. We will also take greater pride as we constantly work to advance our writing techniques.

