

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  August 2022

## Mastering First Person POV



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITY:**

**THE SEYMOUR  
AGENCY**

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## This issue's contributors

**Jon Bard** is the Chief Operations Officer of [WriteForKids.org](http://WriteForKids.org) and [WritingBlueprints.com](http://WritingBlueprints.com), and has run both companies with his partner/wife Laura Backes for 32 years.

**Sharon O. Blumberg** is a recently retired school teacher, having taught Spanish and English for over 20 years. In addition, she is a children's writer and voiceover artist. Find out about her voiceover work here: [www.voiceofsharonolivia.com](http://www.voiceofsharonolivia.com), and visit her author website at: [www.sharonoblumbergauthor.com](http://www.sharonoblumbergauthor.com)

**Catherine DePino** has written over 20 books for mainstream publishers. Her credentials include a doctorate in curriculum theory and development, three decades as a teacher/department head in city schools, and many years as an adjunct assistant professor of education and a student teaching supervisor at Temple University.

**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 forthcoming, as well as numerous stories and articles in magazines, including *Highlights for Children*, *High Five*, *Baby Bug*, *Family Fun*, *Hopscotch*, *Turtle*, *Spider* and *Writer's Digest*. Her website is <http://www.LiterallyLynneMarie.com>

**Jane McBride** is the author of 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 <http://bit.ly/JaneMcBrideChoate>

**PJ McIlvaine** is a Jill of all trades when it comes to writing: kid lit, screenwriter, journalist, blogger. She is the author of *Little Lena* and *The Big Table* (Big Belly Book Co., May 2019) and *Dragon Roar* (MacLaren-Cochrane, TBD). PJ is also a co-host of #PBPitch, the premiere Twitter pitch party for picture book writers and illustrators. Follow PJ's magical adventures at her website <http://pjmawriter.com>

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

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

# At Presstime:

## Magazine Seeks Submissions for Ages 6-12

*Fun For Kidz* is a magazine for boys and girls ages 6-12, with ages 8-10 being the target market. It's published 6 times a year. Fun For Kidz publishes articles and activities that deal with timeless topics, such as pets, nature, hobbies, science, games, sports, careers, and anything else likely to interest a child. Each issue revolves around a theme.

Looking for lively writing that involves an activity that is both wholesome and unusual. The ideal length of a *Fun For Kidz* nonfiction piece is up to 300-325 words for a one-page magazine article or up to 600-650 words for a two-page magazine article. Especially looking for entertaining, informative nonfiction involving kids ages 6 and older. Nonfiction submissions should be accompanied by sharp, high-resolution photos (at least 950 pixels wide, at least 260 dpi) that support the article. It is better to submit several photos rather than just one or two. Photos should be in color.

Also seeking poems and puzzles that tie in with the issue's theme. Pays \$10 minimum.

Pays a minimum of five cents a word for both fiction and nonfiction, with additional payment given if the piece is accompanied by appropriate photos or art. Payment is \$5 per photo. Buys first American serial rights and pays upon publication. Sample copies may be purchased online at [funforkidz.com](http://funforkidz.com)

Submissions accepted by mail only. Submissions should be typed, double-spaced, with your name and all contact info (including email and phone) on each page of the manuscript. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the acceptance or rejection letter. Include a short cover letter and send the entire manuscript to *Fun For Kidz* Magazine, ATTN: Submissions, PO Box 227, Bluffton, OH 45817-0227. Simultaneous submissions are accepted if noted on the cover letter.

Upcoming Themes (with issue date):  
Terrific & Terrifying Teeth - January 2023  
Inventions - March 2023  
Planting & Farming - May 2023  
Birds - July 2023  
Dinosaurs - September 2023  
Enormous! - November 2023

## Award-winning Publisher Accepting Submissions for All Ages

Charlesbridge is an independent publisher that produces high-quality, award-winning books for young people with a goal of creating lifelong readers and learners. Believes that books for children should offer accurate information, promote a positive worldview, and embrace a child's innate sense of wonder and fun. Charlesbridge publishes fiction and nonfiction board books, picture books, early readers, middle-grade fiction and nonfiction (ages 8-12), and young adult novels (ages 12+). Nonfiction tends to focus on nature, science, math, social studies, biography, history, and the arts. Currently not seeking alphabet books, coloring books, activity books or novelty books.

All manuscripts must be submitted electronically. Submit your manuscript as an attachment (Word or PDF). Don't paste your story into the body of an email. Submit only one manuscript at a time. Manuscripts should be double spaced. Include your name, address, and contact information on your manuscript and in your email. For picture books and other manuscripts under 30 pages, send a complete manuscript. For fiction books longer than 30 manuscript pages, send a detailed plot synopsis, a chapter outline, and three chapters of text. For nonfiction books longer than thirty manuscript pages, send a detailed proposal, a chapter outline, and one to three chapters of text. For young adult novels, send a plot summary and the first three chapters of text.

Submissions of board books, picture books, early readers, and middle-grade books should be emailed to [childrens.submissions@charlesbridge.com](mailto:childrens.submissions@charlesbridge.com). For YA novels, email [ya.submissions@charlesbridge.com](mailto:ya.submissions@charlesbridge.com). If you are an author/illustrator, you can attach a PDF dummy to your submission or sample illustrations. Due to a high volume of submissions, responds within three months only to those projects Charlesbridge is interested in publishing. You can download the current Charlesbridge catalog at [charlesbridge.myshopify.com/pages/download-the-catalog](http://charlesbridge.myshopify.com/pages/download-the-catalog), or see recent titles at [www.charlesbridge.com/](http://www.charlesbridge.com/)

## Sydney Taylor Middle Grade Manuscript Competition Open to Entries

The Association of Jewish Libraries sponsors the annual Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition. A cash award of \$1,000 will be given for the best fiction manuscript appropriate for readers ages 8-13, written by an unpublished author. Unpublished is defined as not having published any works of fiction (commercially or self-published) for young readers. The book must be a work of fiction in English with universal appeal of Jewish content for readers aged 8-13 years, both Jewish and non-Jewish. It should reveal positive aspects of Jewish life.

Each entrant may submit one manuscript (64-200 pages) not currently under consideration by a publisher or another competition. Material should be a literary work of fiction in English. The story should serve to deepen the understanding of Judaism for all children. Short stories, plays, poetry, or collections of short stories are not eligible. Manuscripts should be submitted in PDF format by uploading through the AJL website. Hard copies of the manuscript will not be accepted.

To assure impartiality, the manuscript **MUST NOT** include the author's NAME on it anywhere. **DO** include the TITLE at the top of every page of the manuscript. Each entrant will submit a cover letter and a curriculum vitae. The cover letter should include a short personal statement and a summary of the manuscript. Combine your cover letter and curriculum vitae into a single document and upload via the AJL website.

The deadline for submission of manuscripts is September 30, 2022. Do not submit elsewhere until January 31, 2023, by which date the winner will be determined and all competitors notified. Read the full rules here: <https://jewishlibraries.org/sydney-taylor-manuscript-award/> Find the online application and submission form here: <https://jewishlibraries.org/sydney-taylor-manuscript-award-submission/>

## Publisher Seeks Picture Books, Middle Grade and YA Fiction and Nonfiction

Pelican Publishing Company, is an independent company with a backlist of over 2,500 titles and 30 new titles produced yearly. Children's and young adult fiction should have a regional or historical focus—in particular, relating to the South. Currently seeking **YA fiction and nonfiction** (adventure, regional history, biography) for ages 12 and up with a minimum of 25,000 words; **middle grade fiction and nonfiction** (adventure, regional history, biography, cooking) for ages 8-12 with a maximum of 25,000 words; and **picture book fiction and nonfiction** (adventure, holiday, regional history, biography,) for ages 5-8 with a maximum word count of 1100 plus an Author's Note to children.

NOTE: All queries must be pasted into the body of the email. No attachments, please.

**For middle grade and young adult submissions**, send an email to [editorial@pelicanpub.com](mailto:editorial@pelicanpub.com) with the subject line "TITLE—Submission for Publication", containing a query letter (for details, see below); author publication credits (ISBN/link to Amazon) if applicable; sales history (life to date and first 12 months), and translation/subsidiary rights sales if any; author platform, including social media links; research references if nonfiction; synopsis (max 250 words); table of contents, if applicable; first chapter.

**For picture book submissions**, send an email to [editorial@pelicanpub.com](mailto:editorial@pelicanpub.com) with the subject line "TITLE—Submission for Publication", containing a query letter (for details, see below); author publication credits (ISBN/link to Amazon) and sales history (life to date and first 12 months) if applicable; author platform, including social media links; full manuscript. Accompanying artwork may be attached to email. If that period expires, they will continue the evaluation on a nonexclusive basis. Please note that these books are 32 illustrated pages when published, with a maximum Flesch-Kincaid reading level of second grade (2.0).

**Query letter tips:** The query letter should discuss the book's content (general description as well as subjects covered); anticipated length (in double-spaced pages or in words) and number of black and white and/or color images if any; intended audience; ideal publication date or season (spring or fall); three competing titles, with links to Amazon, and how your title differs from the competition; any promotional ideas and contacts you may have.

To review current Pelican children's and YA titles, go to <https://www.arcadiapublishing.com/imprints/pelican-publishing?thematicfacet=Kids>

# Book Bannings: Seeking Sanity in a Dangerous Time

Dear Reader:

Laura recently hosted an episode of the Kidlit Social featuring the founders of #FReadom Fighters, a group of Texas librarians pushing back against an effort by state legislators seeking to ban certain books from libraries. (You can watch it here: [writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancingsocial82](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancingsocial82))

The response was overwhelmingly positive. The nominal bit of pushback we received, however, argued that the proposed book bannings were intended solely to keep explicit pornographic imagery out of school libraries, and that those pushing back against censorship were doing so for purely political reasons.

We take feedback from our readers very seriously, so I want to use this as an opportunity to share a few thoughts on the matter.

## *Are We Actually Arguing About the Same Thing?*

We live in a highly politicized age. And, regardless of where you are on the political spectrum, we are subject to media outlets and politicians who find it far easier to provoke and inflame us, rather than unite and connect us.

One way they do this is by creating alternate framings of certain issues that may distort the actual subject at hand. In this particular case, we are told that a group of Texas legislators are fighting to keep obscene and pornographic material out of the hands of children.

Positioned that way, it's hard to find fault. Of course children shouldn't see explicit pornographic imagery. And, if we were giving exposure to a group of librarians who believe kids **should** be able to access hardcore pornography, we certainly would leave ourselves open to warranted criticism.

It's fair game to debate whether certain books are age-appropriate, or provide good-faith discussions of sensitive topics. But that's not what's happening in Texas.

The reality of the Texas situation (and others around the country) is that the use of the word "pornography" is *wildly* misleading. And, because the framing of a topic is much easier to share and disperse than the actual matter of the topic, the framing typically wins out in setting the agenda.

The movement to ban library books stems from a Texas politician named Rep. Matt Krause. Have a look at the books he and his colleagues have targeted to ban ([bit.ly/tx-booklist](https://bit.ly/tx-booklist)).

You'll quickly see it's about *far* more than pornographic sexual material. Here are some of the books included on the proposed ban list:

- *Racial Justice in America: Topics for Change*
- *The Confessions Of Nat Turner* - William Styron
- *The Cider House Rules* - John Irving
- *The Abortion Battle: Looking At Both Sides*
- *It's So Amazing!: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families*
- *They Called Themselves The K.K.K.: The Birth Of An American Terrorist Group*
- *The Ultimate Guys' Body Book: Not-So-Stupid Questions About Your Body*
- *October Mourning: A Song For Matthew Shepard*

*From the Editor..continued*

- *The Undivided Past: Humanity Beyond Our Differences*
- *Respecting The Contributions Of LGBT Americans*
- *Eyes On Target Inside Stories from the Brotherhood of the U.S. Navy Seals*
- *Tell Me Again How A Crush Should Feel*
- *Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics*
- *Launching Our Black Children for Success: A Guide for Parents of Kids from Three to Eighteen*
- *Peaceful Fights For Equal Rights*
- *Everything You Love Will Burn: Inside the Rebirth of White Nationalism in America*
- *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*
- *The Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears*
- *The Handmaid's Tale*
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*
- *A High Five for Glenn Burke* (a novel inspired by the first openly gay Major League baseball player)
- *Race and the Media In Modern America*

As you leaf through 16 pages of book titles, it becomes pretty clear that this isn't really about "pornographic" books at all — it's about preventing young people from being exposed to ideas that fall outside the political beliefs of certain people.

We're talking about books that simply *acknowledge* things like homosexuality, race, discrimination, treatment of Native Americans and sexuality as topics worthy of age-appropriate discussion.

For one to consider a book featuring a gay baseball player or a book about the Native American Trail of Tears to be pornographic, one has to see the ideas in the books as obscene. If you do, that is your right as an American. But no one has the right, particularly via the government, to impose that conclusion on anyone else. Especially in public schools or libraries.

How we understand and relate to one another, and how we, as a society, move forward on issues of individual liberties, personal bodily autonomy, racial equality, gender equality and other fundamental issues will determine whether we have a successful society in the future — or a future at all.

The way to do that is by trusting teachers and librarians to do the job they were trained for — giving balanced, age-appropriate treatment to these topics with a wide range of viewpoints. They can't do that if half of those viewpoints are banned.

(And yes, this does go both ways. Intolerance and illiberalism can come from the left as well. No one is immune from the notion that they, and only they, know what's best for everyone else.)

### ***Is the Problem What's in the Books — or that the Books Exist At All?***

You may or may not be of the opinion that homosexuality is an acceptable topic for young readers. And you may or may not be of the opinion that discussing the treatment of minorities and Native Americans throughout American history may be too guilt-inducing for white students to endure.

Again, you're absolutely free to have those opinions. But you don't get to decide things for everybody else.

What we can debate is *how* we go about addressing these vitally important issues in our nation. But we can't just erase half of the conversation because it might make a child feel anxious or upset about what happened in the past, or because those books don't align with a particular political, religious or cultural view we may have.

We all *should* feel anxious and upset about some of the things in our history, just as we should feel proud and patriotic about many other things. But, in either case, we — no matter our color or political affiliation

*From the Editor..continued*

— are not personally responsible for any of those events, and deserve neither credit nor blame.

We are, however, responsible for addressing the impact of those troubling events, just as we are responsible for carrying on the grand traditions that have made America a great nation.

And the way to do that is to introduce different viewpoints to our children, so they understand that history and culture are narratives, and narratives can be written from many viewpoints. Just providing one viewpoint does our children a disservice and guarantees that our society will continue to be torn into pieces.

*One Event, Multiple Viewpoints. What is the “Truth”?*

As a kid, I was told Columbus discovered America. It was only many years into adulthood when I thought *“Wait, how can we say a place where millions of people were already living was ‘discovered’?”*

But that's what happens when only one viewpoint — in this case, the European viewpoint — is offered. No one in Europe knew the place existed so, in their minds, it was a new discovery. Now we know that there are always two sides to history, and the story of Columbus takes on a very different tone when told from the perspective of the millions of people who were already here and whose way of life was about to be altered forever.

Both sides are true, from the perspective of the people who wrote them, so let's teach both and use critical thinking to suss out the ultimate truth. That's what education should be about, not indoctrination into one way of thinking about things.

The books I listed above — the books these Texas legislators seek to ban — are not pornographic. Rather, they are books that provide a different viewpoint.

*What This Means for Writers*

For authors, it can sometimes feel as if we are under attack from all sides. We live in an age where everyone is on high alert, everyone has staked out a position and nuance is a distant memory.

As we sit down to craft our work, we cannot help but feel the weight of potential landmines that may await us. Am I practicing cultural appropriation? Do I have the right to give voice to a character whose ethnicity or culture differs from my own? Am I expressing ideas some parents (or legislators) may take issue with? Will I be attacked for promoting an “agenda”?

And even, “If this gets published, could I actually be putting myself at personal risk?”

Those are heavy, heavy questions, and there are no pat answers. But free societies only remain that way if people fearlessly express, distribute, and, if need be, defend a wide range of views and ideas.

There are certainly things you can do to avoid many of the issues that could end up putting you in a harsh spotlight:

First, find the answer to this vital question:

*If someone takes offense to the content of this book, would it be based on a legitimate concern, or would it be purely political or cultural grandstanding?*

That's probably not a question you can answer on your own, so start some conversations with the people around you. Most importantly, try to find some folks who have opposing social or political viewpoints and run the idea past them. If you don't know anyone like that, think about where you might find them.

Nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, colleges, and media outlets are fertile territory for discovering people who hold viewpoints that represent the audience who may take issue with your work.

A friendly email or letter asking to open a brief but important dialog could open the door to a positive and

*From the Editor..continued*

enlightening discourse. (Something we could use a whole lot more of.)

You'll likely get one of these results:

- What you thought would be problematic turns out to be no big deal. If so, carry on and write.
- You discover that there are reasonable objections to be had, and you rework your story to overcome them.
- You hear objections, but they seem unreasonable, reactionary or ideological. In this case, you can seek more feedback to determine whether those objections can be rightfully ignored.

*Some Tools at Your Disposal*

If you're writing a book outside of your own cultural experience, use the tools available to you to bypass potential trouble. Sensitivity readers are a fantastic resource to help ensure fair and accurate representations (visit [bit.ly/3PHaj9n](https://bit.ly/3PHaj9n) for more on this topic). Our workshop *The Courage to Write Outside Your Own Experience* with Teresa Funke is a phenomenal guide to give you tools and courage to break out of your cultural comfort zone. (Get more details here: [bit.ly/3ciGDRw](https://bit.ly/3ciGDRw))

If you're writing about hot-button cultural or political issues, it's always worth the time to visit with your local school or public librarian. They're on the front line of the censorship battle and can provide up-to-the-minute input on the bumps you may encounter.

*The Structure for Assuring Fairness Is Already in Place. Use It.*

The purpose of this discussion is not to generate a debate about LGBTQIA+, Black Lives Matter, abortion, religion or any other subject matter. Goodness knows there's more than enough screaming and yelling out there already.

Rather, we share these views because of the people we ultimately serve — children's writers, and the children and parents they reach — and our desire to see sane, rational discussion and compromise replace banning, canceling and government intervention to address differences in opinion.

So here is our plea:

If, as a parent or citizen, you have a concern with how a particular subject is being taught, or whether the balance of available information fairly represents all sides, *don't* empower a politician to ban books.

Rather, reach out and start a respectful conversation with librarians, school administrators and your child's teacher. You may learn something, the person you're conversing with may learn something and you might just create constructive change.

It is not the job of the government to pick and choose the viewpoints that introduce our children to our past and our present. It is, however, the job of teachers, parents and librarians to assure that a broad selection of reputable and age-appropriate material is available to kids, and that someone is there to help them absorb, make sense and synthesize this information into a world view that is fact-based, empathetic, decent and honorable.

I hope that's something all of us can agree upon.

Feel free to email with your thoughts: [jon@cbiclubhouse.com](mailto:jon@cbiclubhouse.com)

All the best,

**Jon Bard**



# JONATHAN ROSEN



**J**onathan Rosen is the author of *Night of the Living Cuddle Bunnies*, *From Sunrise to Sunset* and other humorous middle grade novels. He's a former educator and jack of many trades. As the newest agency hire for The Seymour Agency, Jonathan is currently building his list in a variety of genres. Check out his humorous, popular Facebook posts at [www.facebook.com/JRosen18](http://www.facebook.com/JRosen18).

**LYNNE MARIE:** Many know you for your humorous middle grade novels, and as editor of *Coming of Age: 13 B'nai Mitzvah* stories. Recently, you became the Seymour Agency's newest agent. Please share a little bit about what brought you from authoring to agenting. What is your occupational background?

**JONATHAN ROSEN:** For quite a while I have been wanting to represent the stories that I want to see published. So I approached my agent Nicole Resciniti, and she was on board with the idea. Several of the agents at Seymour pitched in to help train me and show me the ropes, and for that I am grateful.

**LM:** It's always exciting to spot a new agent, and see what they are acquiring, which is not always the case with a seasoned agent. What will you be looking for as far as genres?

**JR:** I am working with all the genres and spreading them out among my clients. But if I am enthralled with a project, I will take it on! So basically I will take a look at anything (board books, picture books, young adult,



interview by Lynne Marie

new adult and even adult stories, nonfiction, novel and memoir). The only thing that I am not actively seeking is middle grade. I am also actively looking for mysteries. Since it is rare, I would also love a mystery picture book to shop!

**LM:** What are you looking for in a prospective client?

**JR:** For me, it's all about the writing. Social media and a platform can help, but can be developed at a later date. I do check social media and websites (but websites are not essential for an unpublished writer) to make certain there are no red flags, and then I conduct a Zoom interview to make certain that we are a good fit to work together.

**LM:** What types of children's books did you grow up reading? How does that affect what you are looking for across your list?

**JR:** Growing up I was a voracious reader. I read anything and everything I could get my hands on. My father always brought me to Walden Books or B. Dalton's and I would leave with a book. *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is my all-time favorite book!

**LM:** Those who know you, and have read *Night of the Living Cuddle Bunnies* and *From Sunrise to Sunset*, know you are a funny guy! Where did that come from?

**JR:** My dad and my uncle were funny people. Great senses of humor. I also grew up watching the Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Peter Sellers and other come-



*Jonathan Rosen...continued*

dic giants which really fostered a sense of humor in me. So I would credit watching movies again and again!

**LM:** Tell us a little about your humorous social media posts.

**JR:** I do spend more time than I should creating social media posts. I am always looking for material to post to allow us all to laugh and not take ourselves so seriously. At the time I started social media, there were so many serious posts or posts about food, so I wanted to be different by writing the things no one else was writing.

**LM:** How do you transfer that to your writing for children? Is there any formula you use to decide what is funny for kids, as opposed to adults?

**JR:** I actually just write the things that I find/found funny, both what I found funny as a child, and now as an adult.

**LM:** Humor is a wonderful tool in writing for children. Please explain why/how this works.

**JR:** Humor is extremely important in breaking tension and allowing kids an escape. There's enough drama going on in real life. Kids need a release valve.

**LM:** Please share a little bit about your project, *Coming of Age*. How did this come about? How did you cull authors for the project? Will there be any similar compilations in the future? How would one keep current with updates on this?

**JR:** This came about as a result of my desire to see more Jewish stories and representation across more genres. I did this despite hearing that Jewish stories don't sell, so it was a passion project for me. I reached out to authors that I knew and was pleased that most were able to be a part of the project. I am considering doing another project in the future. It may or may not be Jewish.

**LM:** You are an avid movie-goer and fan of this creative genre. What can watching movies and noting loglines teach a children's writer?

**JR:** Looking at movies can help tremendously. Read reviews, advertisements and posters. You will see the hook right up front. A great way to practice writing your pitches is to take a movie you know well and write a logline or back cover copy for that movie.

**LM:** What are you looking for in a pitch? What are you not looking for in a pitch? Please share a tip on how to



write a pitch that will grab you.

**JR:** I am looking to be hooked. I don't want a summary or synopsis, just something that will intrigue me to want to read the manuscript. I want to see the character plus the inciting incident and the obstacles in a way that will make me want to read more.

**LM:** How important do you feel that comp titles are in a query? Do you like them up front, or do you discuss them later? Do you feel it does justice for a new writer to compare their book to a best-selling book?

**JR:** For me, I don't care about the comps whatsoever. I need to be grabbed by an engaging story, both in the query and the manuscript. So, in closing, just write something that resonates with the reader and is a good story!

Jonathan Rosen is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers. **Until August 31, 2022**, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of your manuscript for all genres of fiction and nonfiction board books, picture books, young adult, and new adult (no middle grade at this time). He's especially looking for mysteries, historical fiction, romantic comedy and other humorous fiction, biographies, memoir, pop culture, entertainment, and sports. Submit via the online form at [bit.ly/ATSAugust2022Rosen](https://bit.ly/ATSAugust2022Rosen). Jonathan will read all pitches and respond to those he's interested in by October 31, 2022. If you haven't heard back by the end of October, consider it a pass.

### ---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/)

To watch Laura's Kidlit Social interview about how to know when your manuscript is ready to submit, go to [writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdiscantingsocial70/](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdiscantingsocial70/)

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

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

# Tap Into Your INTUITION to Write and Sell Your Book

by Catherine DePino, Ed.D.

**Y**ou've always dreamed of writing a book, but you haven't gotten serious about it until now. I'm going to give you some tips that have helped me publish over 20 books. I worked as a teacher/department head in an urban school system for over three decades while raising my children. I dreamed about writing but it seemed I never had time. One day I decided to use my intuition to help me become the writer I'd always dreamed of becoming. Since then, I love using my intuition to help me get in touch with my creative side. It works every time, and I'm going to show you how to make it work for you.

I decided that the best way to launch a career as a writer was to start with small steps. I wrote short articles for my local paper in the guest opinion section. I didn't get paid, but I didn't expect to be reimbursed for my work because I knew that this was training for my future as a writer. Readers enjoyed my slice-of-life articles, and I loved writing them.

I progressed to writing articles for magazines. One day, after I retired and took a part-time position as an adjunct assistant professor in a university, I decided that no matter how busy I was, I would write a book. My inner voice advised me that my first book should be a grammar book for kids. After all, I'd taught English all my life and loved seeing sentences come to life and turn into articles people enjoyed reading. I queried an educational publisher and included clips from the local newspaper and magazine articles I'd published.

The editor replied that she didn't need a grammar book but asked if I'd write a study guide for teachers.

"Yes," I said a little too enthusiastically, thrilled that a publisher would give me the chance to write my first book.

A few months after the company published the study guide, the editor asked to see the grammar book I'd originally proposed. The company published it, and it's still in print. I called it *Grammar Workout*.

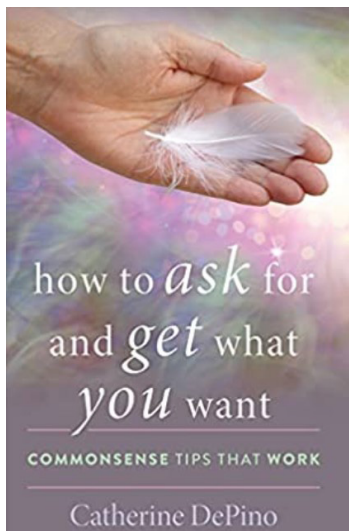
If I can make my dream of publishing a reality, you can too. But it takes more than dreaming. It takes hard work and the willingness to drop everything and write, no matter how busy you are with home or work. It takes a willingness to go with your hunches and act on them. Most of all, it requires you to grow a thick skin when rejections come.

How do you begin to write a book? Here's what I do. Throughout the process of writing and selling my book, I tap into my intuition. My intuition prompts me to think of an enticing title, helps me flesh out my book by brainstorming ideas, and helps me decide how to go about publishing my book.

My intuition also gives me ideas for a great title. I rely on it before calling on my logical mind to confirm my idea. I ask myself what would be a riveting title while I'm mulling over the book's content. I always rely on my gut to come up with a good answer. If I think about it with my logical brain for too long, the answer won't come.

Ask yourself what title would draw readers to your book. If you want the best idea for a title, then check in with your logical mind to verify what you intuitively think is best. Go with your first feelings and don't overthink.

To me, a good title offers a springboard to jumpstart writing the book. A few years after writing my kids' grammar book, I wrote a grammar book for adults, *Excuse Me Your Participle's Dangling: How to Use Grammar to Make Your Writing Powers Soar*. Here's a title for my bully prevention book for kids and adults: *Elliot K. Carnucci is a Big, Fat Loser: A Book About Bullying*. One of my latest books, *How to Ask for and Get What You Want: Commonsense Tips that Work*, first came to my intuitive mind. After activating my intuition, I decided that the title would work for me, and so I used it. All these titles came quickly, rather than having to rack my brain for ideas. Try it and see how this method works for you.



## Tap Into Your Intuition...continued

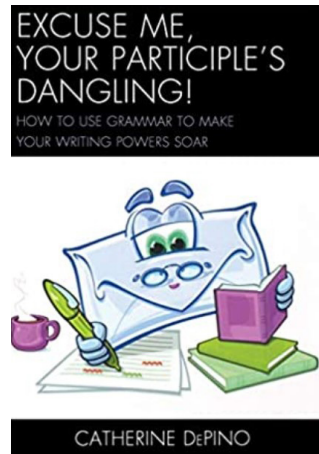
When thinking of content for my books, I use a couple of intuitive processes to help me develop and create content. I brainstorm with myself to dream up ideas for chapters and to create the content for each chapter. When I brainstorm, I simply write in sentence or phrase form what chapter titles I want to include in the book and what information I want to include in each chapter. I always use a pencil when I brainstorm so that I can add or detract from the information later. A large opened file folder provides a great backdrop for recording your ideas.

Another intuitive technique I use to outline my book's table of contents and to describe the information I'll include in each chapter is called clustering (See the workbook, *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Lusser Rico.) After I cluster the chapters, I cluster the content for each chapter. As when I brainstorm, I use pencil since the content in my cluster diagrams may change as I update it. It's a flexible plan to help me figure out my chapters for the book and my content for each chapter. Once you give your intuition free rein to figure out the best content for your book, you'll be on a roll. You can use this process for writing fiction or non-fiction books. Here's another helpful thing to do if you're writing fiction. By thinking about my main character's name for *Elliot K. Carnucci is a Big, Fat Loser*, my fiction book for all ages, ideas flooded my brain about the protagonist's personality, and I was off and running. I used my intuition to visualize the main character, and gradually he came to life in my imagination.

Whether you're publishing the old-fashioned way or self-publishing, you'll need to edit your book or hire an editor. As you read your first draft, print a copy (rather than read it from your computer), and write questions all over the manuscript. Make comments to yourself about what you think you should change. Use your intuition to help guide you in making good choices for your content and knowing what to add and omit from your book. Base your corrections on your self-talk, and you can't go wrong. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Browne and King is the best book I've read to help you edit your writing.

If you're self-publishing, decide whether you want to write an ebook, a print book, or both. Many self-publishing companies charge a steep price for a print copy. It's usually better if you start with an e-book so you don't have to put out the additional expendi-

ture of a print book. If you're writing an ebook, you'll have to format it yourself or pay a company to do it. You'll also need an eye-catching cover design. If you don't design it yourself, you can hire a cover designer. Sometimes the company will provide one for a fee.



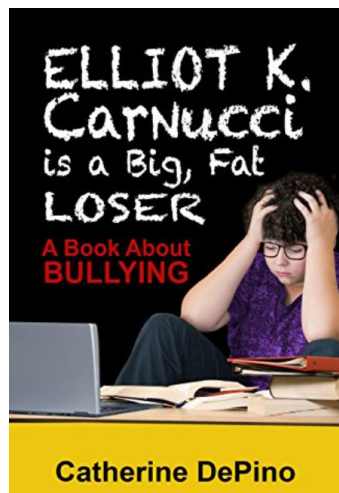
Whether you write nonfiction or fiction, make your writing reader-friendly by using simple words that everyone understands rather than muddling your book with big words that baffle readers. Use active verbs, specific nouns, and avoid adverbs. Edit out words like *that*, *only*, *just* and *well*. You also have your expressions that you sometimes use but don't need. Omit them as they slow down the text and detract from your book's smooth flow. Look for them when you edit by doing a *find* on your computer with each of these words and expressions. Also, do this with adverbs by searching for *ly*. While choosing your vocabulary and sentence structure, trust your intuition in helping you decide what you think will resonate with readers and what won't.

Most important, cut unnecessary words in your book. Pare your writing down to get to the essence. Use a variety of simple, compound, and complex sentences. Avoid too many complex sentences as they tend to weigh down your writing. Slip in a simple sentence every so often to reinforce a point or to alert your reader you're going to slip in a new idea. Rely on your inner voice to steer you along the best path. Ask yourself what sounds best to you and go with it. Keep paragraphs short. Make them eight sentences or fewer because readers don't enjoy reading big blocks of text.

If you're self-publishing, decide whether you want to write an ebook, print book, or both. Self-publishing companies generally charge more for print copies. If you're writing an ebook, you'll have to format it or pay a company to do it.

Before you send out your book, you'll have to write a one-page query letter to the current editor or editorial assistant.

This letter includes a brief synopsis of your book and your qualifications for writing it. If the editor asks for a synopsis, send one. Be sure to observe the specifications for writing it in your *Writers' Market* or the publisher's website. It's important to address the editor by name; you'll find this information in your market guide. Sometimes it helps to write to an assistant editor as they're often on the look-out for



*Tap Into Your Intuition...continued*

new talent.

Before you decide how to publish your book, research the *Writers' Market* or a specialized market like the *Children's Writers' Market*, for a list of traditional publishers. *Writers' Market* also publishes a free list of self-publishing companies on the internet. If you don't have a *Writers' Market*, borrow it from your library or look for it in a bookstore. Research at least five traditional markets and three self-publishing companies for your book (you can find these online). See if the companies give advances (only traditional publishers do) and how their royalty system works.

If you're dealing with a traditional publisher, you may have to wait to hear from the company. If you're working with a self-publisher, feedback comes quickly because the sooner they publish your book, the sooner they get paid. If you don't hear from the publisher in a reasonable amount of time, send a reminder. Tell them you'd like to check on the status of your manuscript that you sent on a specific date.

The bottom line is that there is no right or wrong way to publish your book. You have to decide what's best for you. Do your research and listen to your inner voice. Sometimes thinking out-of-the box may work for you. If your intuition tells you to take a chance and try a certain publisher, don't hesitate.

Look at publishers' websites, and try to find the best potential publisher for your book by considering the material posted there. Examine some of the books they've accepted. Your intuition can kick in here too. Think about how looking at the company's online presence and products makes you feel. If you get a positive vibe, you may want to consider them. If you favor self-publishing, do the same with self-publishing companies after viewing self-publishing companies on the internet.

From my experiences with different types of publishing, I can tell you there are major differences between traditional and self-publishing that you should know before you embark on either path. Once you know these differences, you can make good decisions about choosing one or the other. First, let's consider traditional publishing.

Many writers prefer traditional publishing because they think it offers them a better chance to sell their books. When people ask where writers published, they're often pleased to give the name of an established publisher. Many writers also believe that with a company to back them up, they'll have a better chance of selling more books. A traditional company also offers more security for a writer because it has a reputation

and offers their book publicity on their website and in catalogs.

However, as self-publishing becomes more acceptable and writers find success with it, more people are willing to self-publish, mainly because of obstacles the traditional publishing route puts in their path. That's not to say you should automatically assume that one type of publishing supersedes another. The choice is yours. Go with your intuition.

A major criticism writers give about traditional publishing has to do with lack of responsiveness from publishing houses. Writers often never hear from traditional publishers they query, even if they send repeated emails about the status of their manuscripts. Often, when they receive rejections, they get impersonal form letters. Sometimes they get comments like, "Sorry, not for us." Who wouldn't get discouraged?

Another problem with traditional publishing deals with how long it takes to get published. A couple years ago, I had a hunch I should call a publisher I hadn't heard from in months about my spiritual book. I usually always follow up if I don't hear, but this one must have slipped through the cracks. I almost ignored the voice inside me, but I'm glad I listened. When I called, the publisher invited me to send the book because he'd never received it.

During our subsequent phone conversation, the publisher expressed interest in my spiritual book and told me he wanted to publish it and two sequels. Be sure to follow up with an email or phone call if a reasonable amount of time has elapsed and you haven't heard from an editor.

Case in point: a friend from The Philadelphia Writers' Conference hadn't heard anything from a magazine editor, not even a form rejection. Years later, an editor (the original one was long gone by now) sent her a letter accepting her short story. It, like my manuscript, was lost in the shuffle. This happens too often in the publishing world, so always take the time to follow up about your book query within a couple of weeks. This writer had a feeling something was wrong. If she'd listened to her intuition and acted on it sooner, she would have realized her publishing dream sooner.

The bottom line that you can take away from this article is this: it's easy and rewarding to tap into your intuition during the writing process, from the first spark of inspiration until you see your book in print. With your intuition's help, you're on your way to becoming a published writer.

## Building a Rewarding Career

# WRITING FOR MAGAZINES

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

**S**ara Matson is a freelance writer who loves a good story, whether it is true or made-up. As a reader, she has spent hours of her life lost in books. As a writer, she has published more than 150 stories, articles, crafts, and activities for children. Her work has appeared in *Highlights*, *Highlights High Five*, *Cricket*, *Boys' Quest*, and *The School Magazine of Australia*, as well as on some educational websites such as [IXL.com](http://IXL.com), and [ABCMouse.com](http://ABCMouse.com).

In her free time, Sara enjoys watching BBC mysteries, knitting stuffed lions, raising and tagging monarch butterflies, and cooking healthy meals. She lives in Minnesota with her husband and twin daughters. Her website is: <http://saramatson.com>

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Could you please tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you became a freelance writer? Did you want to become a writer, even as a child or teen?

**SARA MATSON:** I can remember composing poems in 2nd grade and the pride I felt when the teacher posted one of them on the bulletin board. Later on in elementary school, I remember setting aside an hour each morning one summer to write stories--although that didn't last long because I didn't know what to write about! In high school and college, I was recognized as a good writer, but somehow, it never occurred to me that I could or should pursue writing as a career. I became an elementary teacher instead. However, the chaos of the classroom wasn't a good fit, and I left teaching after seven years.

I didn't pursue writing seriously until after my twins were born. After taking a writing class through community ed--just to get out of the house--I caught the writing bug and began writing every day. That led to joining a critique group and submitting my stories to magazines. My twins are 21 now, so I've been working at this for a long time!

**SB:** You have written for a number of high-profile magazines such as *Highlights*. How difficult was it for

you to break into these kinds of magazines?

**SM:** I tried to break into *Highlights* for three or four years before I cracked that market. *Cricket* took longer, and I'm still trying to break into *Spider!* I think I had the most success with *Highlights* because I wanted it so badly, and I kept on sending them manuscripts.

**SB:** What are some things to keep in mind when writing fiction for magazines? How is this different from writing a picture book?

**SM:** A magazine story and a picture book story are very different. There are some good articles out there that describe the differences, but basically, magazine stories contain more description and dialogue than do picture books, and picture books usually have more depth, which makes you want to read them over and over.

As for what to keep in mind when writing magazine fiction, I would say to know your markets. Each magazine has a different feel to it in terms of the kinds of stories it publishes—their tone, topics, and genres. It won't

do you any good to, for instance, send a well-written story with a melancholy ending to a magazine that only publishes stories with upbeat endings. (I'm speaking from personal experience!)

**SB:** When writing magazine articles, do you do all your research first and then query with your idea, or do you start with the query?

**SM:** When writing a pitch or query for a magazine editor, I'll do just enough research to describe the scope of the article and to hook the editor's interest.

**SB:** Most children's magazines take submissions of crafts and activities. Do you have any tips for creating original ideas that are also kid-friendly?

**SM:** I once wrote an article on that very topic! Here are four tips that helped me create crafts that editors wanted:



*Sara Matson...continued*

**-Make it historical.** One of my first published crafts recreated a pair of scytales (cypher tools used in ancient Greece) out of cardboard tubes. Tying the craft to a historical event or period, and even including a short informational blurb, can make the craft more interesting to kids.

**-Make it smaller.** Kids like cute things, so I often tried to create a miniature version of a familiar item. For instance, one craft I sold was a God's eye that used toothpicks instead of craft sticks.

**-Make it cheaper.** Base a craft on an existing toy or game. I sold crafts based on modified versions of the game Labyrinth and a treasure-hunt game that I once saw at a toy store.

**-Make it active.** Kids love to move. Crafts that get kids outside or running around are always a hit.

I don't write crafts much anymore, but I do have a soft spot for them. My first sale to *Highlights* was a craft manuscript!

**SB:** How is writing for educational websites different from writing for magazines? Did your magazine work make it easier to land the website gigs?

**SM:** Writing for educational websites often has more parameters than magazine writing. Although I have some freedom to choose my subject or plot, there are usually more requirements as to reading level, sentence length and complexity, vocabulary, etc. than there are with magazine manuscripts. I've also found website work to be steadier, which helps pay the bills.

I do think my magazine writing made it easier to land the website gigs. In fact, my first website gig came about through a connection with a magazine editor I'd written for. After she left that magazine to work at an educational website, she reached out to ask me about writing for her there.

**SB:** You have written a number of pieces for adult magazines as well. Do you have any preferences for writing among the two, and if so, why?

**SM:** I prefer children's writing, so that's where I spend most of my time. However, I enjoy occasionally writing devotions for adults or personal stories to submit to *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. The two kinds of writing ful-

fill different needs for me.

**SB:** Once you have broken into many of the high-profile magazines, does it become easier for future submissions, once you have connected with their editors?

**SM:** Yes! With *Highlights*, for example, I sold several crafts, then stories, then a few queried articles. My name became familiar to the editors, and one day, one of those editors contacted me out of the blue and asked me to write an article for one of the magazine's regular features. Completing that successfully led to more of that type of "assigned" article and a stronger connection with editors. As I mentioned previously, one of those connections led to working for an educational website. In addition, those connections have allowed me to somewhat bypass the traditional method of submission and pitch directly to the magazine's editors.

**SB:** Do you have a system for keeping track of magazines that are accepting submissions?

**SM:** No. Because of time constraints, I don't produce as many unsolicited submissions as I used to. When I write something, I tend to write it with a specific magazine in mind, and I usually stick to magazines that have published my work before.

**SB:** Is there anything else you'd like to say to authors who want to write for magazines?

**SM:** Magazine writing is so rewarding! It offers a chance to connect with a large number of readers all over the world. You can learn new things and meet new people through writing articles or interviewing subjects for profiles. And let's face it: waiting for a book manuscript to be accepted can take years and often ends with a "no." Magazine writing gives more of us a chance to feel the thrill of being published. There's nothing like seeing that acceptance email in your inbox—and then seeing your story or article in print.

If you're interested in getting started, pick a magazine, study multiple issues of it to get a feel for its style and tone, and then write something that you think would be a good fit. Submit, and then keep trying until you break in. It worked for me!



# FIRST PERSON POV

## IS IT FOR YOU?

by Jane McBride

**H**ave you ever been tempted to write in first person point-of-view?

After years of eschewing this, to me, radical way of writing, I tried it in some short stories for a children's magazine and found that I liked it—to an extent. Would I want to write a novel in it? Probably not.

Writing in first person can be tough. There's the whole thing about all the "I's," "me's," and "my's" overtaking the story. I struggled with it and finally found some ways to deal with it.

In deciding from which POV to tell your story, consider the following article:

### SOME DEFINITIONS

Before we go any further, let's do a quick rundown of first, third, and second person POVs.

**In first person POV**, everything is filtered through the protagonist: his thoughts, his feelings, his observations. This means that the reader can experience the story only through the eyes of this character. This is the "I" character.

**In third person POV**, the protagonist is a "she" or "he" character. In fact, there may be two or more main characters in the story. In the romantic suspense books I write, I have both the heroine and the hero's POVs, though in separate scenes. Other books may have a number of POV characters.

**In second person POV** (infrequently used these days), the narrator is speaking to the readers as if they are in the story. Think of stories in the 19th century, where the author addresses the reader with such things as "Dear reader ..." This is the "you" character.

How do you know which POV is best for your story?

If you want to create a strong relationship between your main character and your readers, first person may be the right choice. Just remember its limitations. Coming-of-age stories can be showcased well

in the first person. However, if you want to present the story from two or more POVs, you may do better to choose the third person POV.

### PROS AND CONS

Let's talk about some of the **pros** in writing in first person POV:

- First person POV establishes an intimate relationship between the character and the readers. The closeness that first person brings to a story is the primary reason (at least in my opinion) for choosing it.
- First person POV creates intrigue. When the reader understands that all information is filtered through this character and only this character, he wonders what is going on off screen that he doesn't know about. This can heighten suspense in mysteries, as well as any story.
- First person POV gives a story credibility and relatability, allowing the reader to emotionally invest in the character. If done correctly, it can pull a reader into the story and not let him go.

Now we'll move on to the **cons**:

- The POV character can come off as self-centered. When the character is consistently saying "I did this" or "I felt that" or "I thought that," readers can quickly grow weary.
- The POV character may not be relatable. If you choose a narrator that your readers have trouble relating to, they're not going to want to invest in this character's journey. "Relatable" doesn't mean exactly like the reader, but there should be a universal truth to that character's experience.
- The POV character may go off on a tangent, forgetting that he is starring in a story and not just rambling off a jumble of unrelated thoughts and feelings.



*First Person POV...continued*

- If your first-person narrator is NOT the protagonist, she/he should be a significant character in the book and is telling the protagonist's story. (think of Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories).

**HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY WRITE IN FIRST PERSON POINT OF VIEW**

**STEP 1:** Stay in character. No, I don't think you're going to slip into another character, but it's easy to let your own opinions, feelings, and thoughts come through rather than those of your protagonist.

**ACTION:** To stay in character, make sure you stay out of your own head. Don't impose your thoughts, feelings, and words upon your character. Jane, the writer, might use the word "egregious" in a conversation. But my seven-year-old grandson would not use that word. If I'm writing a story from his POV (or from that of my 13-year-old grandson), I would not use that word. Nor would I allow my own opinions, whether on politics, religion, or anything else, creep into the protagonist's thoughts.

**STEP 2:** Have a great opening. Of course, this is vital in any writing, but especially in writing in first person.

**ACTION:** Try to open with action or dialogue or a startling observation, like "The glacier split apart, leaving all of us stranded without a way off the massive float of ice." (Note the use of the word *us*, the plural of "me.")

**STEP 3:** Keep tags to a minimum.

**ACTION:** Avoid beginning every sentence with "I thought" or "I saw" or "I felt." This gets boring really quickly. Find another way to start a sentence and work in the "I thoughts" in a different way. Better yet, leave out those filters. Instead of saying, "I saw the boat float away on the tide," write "The boat floated away on the tide." Or, rather than writing, "I grew tired trudging through the snow," write instead, "The deep snow sucked my feet into its depths, making every step harder and harder."

**STEP 4:** Keep your pronouns corralled.

**ACTION:** In first person POV, pronouns include I, me, mine, my, we, us, ours. Don't let third person (he,

him, his) or second person (you, your, you're) pronouns slip in.

**STEP 5:** Be aware of your tenses. Do you want to write in first person/present tense? Or do you want to write in first person/past tense? Either can work, though the present tense can be a bit annoying.

**ACTION:** Be consistent and understand why you are choosing one tense over another. First person/present tense is gaining in popularity and can give a real sense of immediacy to your story. At the same time, though, as stated above, that can verge toward annoying. As with writing in the past tense, you would go to past perfect when referring to something in the past, in writing in the present tense, you will go to the simple past. Occasionally, I find that first person/present tense can be a lot to deal with in reading a story written in the manner. I often feel like I am translating in my mind, either turning first person to third or present tense to simple past. Again, understand why you've chosen this combination.

**STEP 6:** Make your narrator memorable.

**ACTION:** Give him a strong voice and an interesting backstory. Think of Holden Caulfield, the protagonist in J.D. Salinger's iconic novel *Catcher in the Rye*. Caulfield's irreverent, sarcastic voice may not be appealing to all, but it is intriguing, as is his backstory. Suzanne Collins used first person POV in her *Hunger Games* novels. Readers take a thrilling ride with Katniss as they eagerly anticipate what will happen next. While you're creating a strong protagonist, do the same with the secondary characters. Your protagonist should not be walking through the story on his own. Give those characters interesting lives and dialogue; this can help to balance all of the "I's" and "me's" of the main character.

**SUMMING UP**

If you haven't tried first person POV, you might experiment with it, see if it's for you. Perhaps you could try it in a short story rather than tackling a novel in it. You may find that it feels awkward or cumbersome. If so, that's all right. Stick with third person. On the other hand, you may discover that it suits you and the story you are telling. Then, embrace it and run with it.

## The Golden Rule

# Carrie Finison

Children's Author

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**L**ike many kid lit creatives, Carrie Finison carried her love of reading into a sustainable career. An accomplished picture book writer (Dozens of Doughnuts and Don't Hug Doug) in prose and rhyme, Finison has two books coming out in 2022: Lulu and Zoey (Running Press Kids), illustrations by Brittaney Jackson, about the adventures of warring sisters, and Hurry Little Tortoise, Time for School (Random House Studio) with art by Erin Kraan, about an enthusiastic tortoise determined not to be late for the first day of school. Based in Massachusetts, Finison loves a good mystery novel, trying out new recipes, and movie nights with her family. Check out <https://www.carriefinison.com/books> for a host of writing activities and useful tips.

**PJ McILVAINE:** As a young child, were you an avid reader? What was your favorite book and author? Was reading encouraged in your home? Was being a writer something that was always on your radar or did that come later in life? What was the first thing you ever wrote?

**CARRIE FINISON:** I did a lot of reading as a child, on my own and with my parents. I vividly remember my mother breaking down in tears while reading *Charlotte's Web* to me — maybe the first time I really witnessed the power of a story. When I was young, my favorite picture books were *One Morning in Maine* by Robert McCloskey and *What Do People Do All Day* by Richard Scarry, along with the Frances books by Arnold Lovel. As I grew older, I loved series fiction and read a lot of Nancy Drew, Anne of Green Gables, the Betsy-Tacy books, and everything by Edward Eager, Beverly Cleary, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, and Cynthia Voigt. I was also a big re-reader, so I read

almost everything more than once. I liked to write and was told by teachers that I was good at it, but I didn't spend a lot of time writing for fun, and I'm not sure that "being a writer" was something that ever registered with me as an actual career path, until much later in life.

**PM:** You've worked in educational publishing as an editor and content writer, and also as a producer of educational software. How did you apply/adapt those skill sets to your own creative writing? Also, you've had numerous short stories and poems published in various children's magazines. How is that market different? Do you have any tips for writers hoping to break into the area? Have you done work-for-hire projects?

**CF:** My first real job out of college was working as an editorial assistant for a nonprofit organization that published a literature-based social studies curriculum. From there, I moved to an educational software company where I was first an editor working on teacher's guides and student materials and then a producer managing the design and development of products. Part of my job was to visit classrooms where teachers and students would beta test our products in development, and I think that helped me key into some important things about how an audience (especially a kid audience) will respond to things, especially humor and storytelling. It also helped me get used to accepting feedback without taking it personally — an important skill for a writer.

After my son was born, in 2005, I left full time work but continued to write content for educational publishers on a freelance basis. Just like my mother read



*Carrie Finison...continued*

to me, I read to him – children’s magazines and picture books. And I started to think that in addition to my freelance work, I would like to try my hand at my own creative projects. It took about two years of writing poems and short stories before I got my first acceptance from *Babybug* magazine, and another fove to six years before I got my first picture book contract.

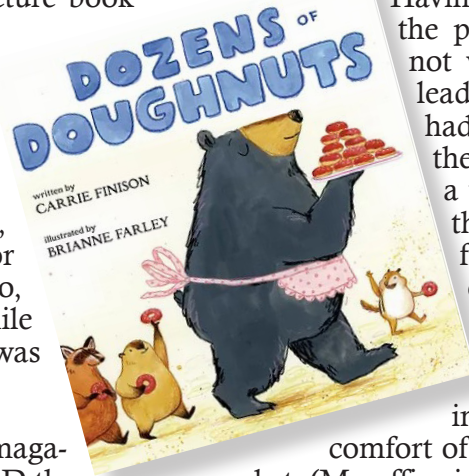
Magazine writing was definitely helpful to me in my development as a writer, and especially as a writer of rhyme because it enabled me to practice writing in rhyme with short pieces, rather than having to sustain rhyme for a long picture book manuscript. Also, getting magazine acceptances while waiting for my picture books to sell was very uplifting.

For writers trying to break into the magazine market, my biggest tip is to READ the magazines before you submit to them. Get at least three back issues and really analyze them. How many poems do they print? How many stories? Fiction, or nonfiction? Are they on a single page, a spread, or multiple spreads? Who are the characters, and how many are there? Take note of the language, the voice, the setting. Write all of this down. I have a long list of magazine writing and submission tips on my website: [www.carriefinison.com/magazine-writing-tips](http://www.carriefinison.com/magazine-writing-tips)

**PM:** You’ve had books published about a bear who makes donuts for their woodland friends, a boy who doesn’t like hugs, battling sisters who don’t like to share, and a worried tortoise who doesn’t want to be late on the first day of school. They seem like very different topics, on the face of it, but is there a common theme or thread? What should readers glean from your books? How do you make your writing not too preachy or didactic? Are there any subjects you’d find difficult to write about? Do you feel the kidlit market has changed since the pandemic?

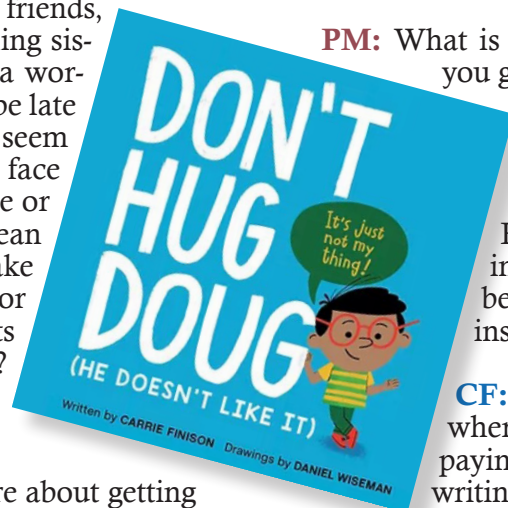
**CF:** I think many of my stories are about getting along, appreciating each other, and the “golden rule” – treating others as you would want to be treated. I never set out to write a story with a message, but I do like to have some kind of takeaway for the reader. It can sometimes feel like a minefield to accomplish that without making it too heavy handed. I find that using

humor and keeping things light hearted helps keep my stories from feeling didactic. Also, in general, if you can SHOW the heart of your story with your characters’ actions, that feels less preachy than if you TELL it in the narrative text.



Having my first two books come out during the pandemic was difficult and for sure not what I had envisioned in the years leading up to my debut. I still haven’t yet had an in-person bookstore event. But there were silver linings. I loved having a virtual launch party over Zoom that the illustrator could attend, as well as friends and family from all over the country and globe. That certainly couldn’t happen with an in-person event. I’ve also enjoyed connecting with teachers and students by doing virtual classroom visits from the comfort of my desk, slippers, and electric blanket. (My office in our attic can get chilly!)

I think it is still hard to say exactly how the kidlit market has changed since the pandemic, and what are short term changes versus long term ones. In fact, most of the books coming out right now were likely written and sold just before the pandemic began. It does seem that the level of competition to get an agent and subsequently a book contract is more intense than ever. But publishing has always been a long (very long) game. Keep writing, keep submitting. The only thing to do is to persist.



**PM:** What is your writing routine like? Where do you get your ideas from? What comes first, the characters or the plot? How long does it take you to write the first draft? Do you outline? How can you tell when something isn’t working? How do you keep your enthusiasm going through several drafts? Who is your best critic? How much of your writing is inspiration and/or perspiration?

**CF:** The old saying that “ideas are everywhere” really is true. You just have to start paying attention to them and (important!) writing them down. I credit Tara Lazar’s *Storystorm* challenge, where writers spend the month of January writing down one idea a day, with helping me stay in the habit of capturing my ideas. (See [taralazar.com/storystorm/](http://taralazar.com/storystorm/) for details.)

For me, ideas often come from wordplay. For exam-

*Carrie Finison...continued*

ple, my friend Diana Murray was working on a manuscript called *Double the Dinosaurs*, and I loved the alliteration in that title. I woke up one morning with the phrase “Double the Doughnuts” in my head, thinking that could be a fun story. Eventually it became *Dozens of Doughnuts*. The idea for *Don't Hug Doug* also came from the rhyme Doug and hug. I also get ideas from conflict and seem to enjoy writing stories where I put my main characters in situations that are not only difficult but somehow go against their nature. In *Dozens of Doughnuts*, LouAnn is a bear and is getting ready to hibernate – she doesn't just want a snack, she MUST eat before winter comes. Doug is a boy who doesn't like hugs – not something he can change about himself. In *Hurry, Little Tortoise, Time for School*, the main character Little Tortoise thinks she is incredibly fast and will be the first one to school but...she's a tortoise. This sometimes makes it hard for me to resolve conflicts in a traditional way (the character learns, grows, and changes) because often the central issue is around something the character can't change. It makes for interesting, but not easy, storytelling.

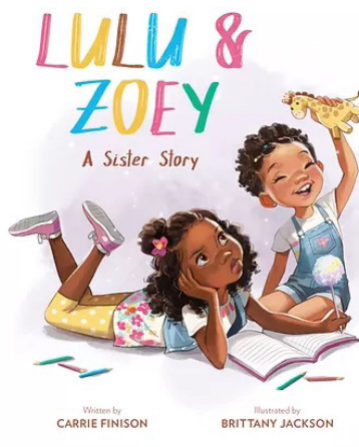
Often, once I have an idea a first line or a refrain will pop into my head at some point, and then I can begin building the story from there. I find having the language or voice of the story essential. Once I have that firmly in mind – especially whether the story will be in rhyme or in prose, then I can write a first draft fairly quickly. Then I go through several iterations with my critique groups. I have one online group that exchanges monthly via email, one in-person group that has a monthly meeting, and one online group that's focused on poetry and rhyme and uses a bulletin board system. These groups all serve me in different ways and I've found it's a good combination to get fresh opinions on revisions. It's also helpful to have group deadlines to keep me moving forward.

A key step in my process is always to create a miniature book dummy, with text and stick figure drawings, which helps me figure out if the pacing and page turns are working. I make these out of printer paper folded in half and then cut, so it's essentially a quarter size of a full sheet of paper and small enough that I can carry it around with me in my bag. If I have some time waiting for my kids at sports practice or a music lesson, I'll pull it out and study it. I will also sometimes read it before I go to bed at night and then wake up in the morning with fresh ideas.

I also find it helpful to put a manuscript away in between drafts, sometimes for months, while I work on other things. This helps me to keep forward momentum across projects, while giving my brain a rest from a story that is giving me trouble.

It can be hard to tell when a story is “done” but I find that my critique partners help with that. When the feedback I'm hearing is almost completely positive, I know I'm close. At that point, I might also choose to send it to a friend who has never seen it before, because regular critique partners can also get fatigue if they've seen a story several times. And of course, my agent's feedback is important to deciding whether a story is ready to go.

**PM:** Your picture books have been published by several different houses. What was the path to publication like in each house? Were they alike or did they differ? How did you determine which house was the best fit for the story? How much input did you have into the book illustrations? Did you have art notes in the manuscript? Are you happy with the final results or is there anything you wished you had changed, in hindsight?



**CF:** I've been lucky to work with some amazing editors and production teams at Putnam, Running Press Kids, and Random House Studio. My experience with these has been pretty similar across the board. Generally, we come to a final

draft of the text before there is any talk of hiring an illustrator. Once the text is done, which can take several iterations with the editor, they send me a list of illustrators they are considering. At this point, I can weigh in on who I'd prefer, but a lot also depends on the timing and the illustrators' availability. Honestly, it's difficult for me to make a choice because the illustrators under consideration are usually all amazing!

With the illustrator on board, my role is pretty hands off. I usually see one round of character sketches, one round of a complete sketch pass through the manuscript, and one close-to-final dummy. At the sketch stage, I try to look for ways in which the storytelling could be strengthened through the characters' actions or facial expressions. I also look for anything that might be confusing, and I try to “read” the story without the text. What I don't comment on is anything about how the characters or setting looks, the style of the art, color choices, etc.

In general, I include very few art notes in a manuscript but sometimes they are important. For example, in *Lulu & Zoey: A Sister Story*, older sister Zoey is using a special pom-pom pen that her sister Lulu envies. This leads to a conflict between them. But the pen wasn't specifically mentioned in the text so I needed to make sure it was there in the illustration.

**PM:** You had three different agents before you sold your first book, can you elaborate on that? How do you view the client-agent relationship, more business than personal? What were the qualities you looked for in your agent search? What are the keys to maintaining a good, solid, working relationship with an agent? How editorial is your present agent? What happens if you write a book that your agent doesn't spark to? Do you have any tips for writers currently in the query trenches?

**CF:** I signed with my first agent in 2013, from a cold query. She was a newer agent at an established agency, and she helped me tremendously with getting some of my early manuscripts ready for submission. Unfortunately, after about a year with no sales, she had to leave the industry due to health issues. I then was offered representation by another agent in the same agency, but she turned out to not be as good of a fit in terms of her interests (she was selling a lot of YA at the time and not focused on picture book manuscripts) and communication style. I left that agent after about a year and a half and spent time working on new stories to get back into the query trenches.

I queried my current agent, Linda Epstein, after meeting her at the Rutgers One-on-One conference. She was a member of my 5-on-5 discussion group at that conference (a round table with 5 editors/agents and 5 writers) and had by far the most helpful and knowledgeable answers to the questions that the writers in the group asked. She also checked my boxes in terms of strong communication. She always answers my emails within a day and if she can't, she'll let me know when she can. She also provides a complete submission list and updates me regularly with editors' responses. She is not super editorial but does give general feedback, for example if she feels the pacing isn't quite right or the ending wasn't satisfying.

Like any reader, my agent doesn't necessarily LOVE everything I send to her, and I take her feedback seri-

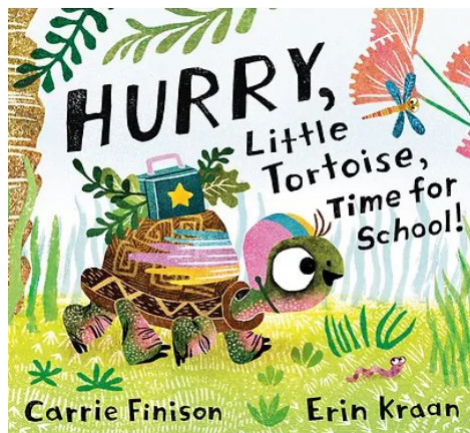
ously. She also has a much broader view than I do of what is selling right now. In the beginning, she called the shots about what to submit, when, and to whom. But at this point in our relationship, she tells me that if I feel very strongly about something that she's just so-so on, she will still send it out because she trusts my judgment and it is a partnership. Similarly, I trust her judgment and that sometimes means putting away a story I love because she thinks it will be a tough sell. In this current market, where it is taking longer and longer to get responses from editors, I don't want to spend months submitting a story I'm not confident about because that means I can't submit anything else to those editors until we get a response from them on the first submission.

My tips for writers in the querying trenches is just to stick with it, and always, ALWAYS, be working on your next story. Especially with picture books, there are so many elements that come into play when a purchase decision is made, with luck and timing being at least part of it. You need an arsenal of stories ready to go. Personally, I also find that working on the next thing (or the next several things) keeps me from fretting too much about whatever is on submission.

**PM:** What are you currently working on? Do you plan to write in other genres? What book do you wish you had written?

**CF:** I'm currently working on a chapter book graphic novel, which has been really fun to write. It began as a picture book that was told all in dialogue and I got the feedback from some critique partners (and from Jane Yolen at a Picture Book Boot Camp) that it might make a good graphic novel so I'm giving that a try. I also think that the market has become more difficult for picture book writers and stretching out into other genres will be a good thing.

Also, in general, I'm working on adding more humor to my stories. I really love and admire authors like Ame Dyckman, Jonathan Stutzman, and Tammi Sauer. Humor is WAY underrated in terms of awards and literary honors, but those are the books kids reach for again and again, and for me, that is the highest honor.



## A Chat With Renowned Children's Author

## SUSANNA LEONARD HILL

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg



Susanna Leonard Hill grew up in New York City with her siblings and parents, and an assortment of cats. She received her B.A. in English and Psychology from Middlebury College, and her M.A. and M.Ed. in Counseling Psychology and Special Education of Children with Learning Disabilities from Teacher's College, Columbia University. She worked

for many years teaching dyslexic students, but stopped after her third child was born. She currently spends her time writing, teaching writing, and visiting schools, as well as being a mom and grandmom.

Susanna has published nearly thirty books for children, her first being *The House That Mack Built* in 2002. In addition, Susanna has landed on many awards and bestseller lists, among them, *New York Times* Best Seller List, *Wallstreet Journal* Fiction Bestseller, *Publisher's Weekly* Children's Picture Book Bestseller, Junior Library Guild Selection, Amelia Bloomer Feminist Books For Youth, Book Sense Children's Pick, Children's Book of the Month, Gold Mom's Choice Award, Itabashi Translation Award, *Parents Magazine* #1 Board Book of 2017, CBC Bank Street Best Children's Book of 2017, CBC Bank Street Best Children's Book of 2018, Amazon Editor's Pick Best Books ages 3-5, Amazon #1 Bestseller, Amazon Top 100 Best-sellers, CYBILS Award Finalist, and Bookroo Book Box Selection.

**SHARON BLUMBERG:** What major life events in your childhood led to your destined, future career as a legendary and renowned, children's author?

**SUSANNA LEONARD HILL:** My goodness! "Legendary and renowned" makes me sound a whole lot more amazing than I am! And I'm not sure there was any major life event that led to me wanting to write

books for children. For me it was probably a lot of little things. I was a shy girl, always more comfortable in a quiet corner with a book than in the center of school social shenanigans. I belong to a family of readers, so I was always surrounded by books, always read to, always shown that reading was valued. My dad used to tell us the stories of Shakespeare in his own words when we were driving in the car – *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*... (His dad, my grandpa, was an English professor and the dean of Principia College, so we all know where that came from ☺ And maybe my interest in writing, too. My grandpa wrote a play called *White As Snow...But She Drifted* ☺) My mom often read to us at the kitchen table during meals as well as at bedtime. The bedroom I shared with my sister had a big bookshelf made of glass bricks and espresso-colored boards and filled—I mean filled!—with books. *Make Way For Ducklings*, *Mike Mulligan And His Steam Shovel*, *The Camel Who Took A Walk*, *Harry The Dirty Dog*, *Green Eggs And Ham*, *Bedtime for Frances*. . . And later all the Little House books, all of Anne of Green Gables, all the Nancy Drew mysteries, all the Black Stallion books, and many others. I loved them all. And a blank sheet of paper has always held a special magic for me—so full of possibility! I remember sitting on the floor of that bedroom in front of that bookshelf looking at the picture books and thinking, someday I'm going to write one and have my name on the cover as author. And although it took a few decades, I've been lucky enough to have that dream come true.



Me and my grandpa circa 1967

*Susanna Leonard Hill...continued*

**SB:** You have won many awards for your children’s books. Does this make it any easier when dealing with publishers, or do you endure rejections just as newer writers experience?

**SLH:** When I’m writing, I don’t think about awards. I just think about writing the best story I can and getting it to a publisher who will love it as much as I do (which is implemented by my outstanding agent and good friend, Liza Voges of [Eden Street Lit.](#)) While having awards may make it easier for some people to sell manuscripts, I have not found that to be the case for me. In fact, just the other day I had three manuscripts rejected—ouch! 😊At the end of the day, awards or no, you still have to write the best stories you can write and get the right manuscript across the right editor’s desk at the right time. Even your best work isn’t always going to get accepted if the publisher doesn’t need that particular kind of manuscript at that time, or if they don’t feel it’s a book they can market successfully because the market is flooded, or a host of other reasons. But was becoming a New York Times Bestseller one of the high points of my life? Absolutely, positively, resoundingly YES! 😊So reminding myself of that accomplishment makes it (a little!) easier to deal with rejections!

**SB:** How has the industry changed since you published your first book 20 years ago?

**SLH:** Oh, gosh. I think the biggest answer to that is social media. It really didn’t exist when I started out – at least not at all the way it does now. It was still exciting to get email (if you can imagine that 😊), and being online was still a novel concept. I remember when my first editor asked me to send her a small revision by email, and I had to ask someone how to send an attachment! When I published my first book no one was expected to have a platform, to be visible on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, or to have a blog because, for the most part, those things were in their infancy or didn’t exist yet. Authors weren’t expected to be major participants in their own marketing and publicity. Looking back, it was luxurious! All we had to do was write! Social media is time-consuming, and for all it can be a great source of camaraderie and support (and I do absolutely love that part, especially because writing can be isolating and it’s nice to have a group of friends only a mouse click away), it can also undermine self-confidence to see scads of other authors posting their publishing announcements and selling books right and left if you’re in a slow period not selling much, or if you’re just starting out and are not yet published.

**SB:** Could you please share one of your most outstanding or memorable school visits?

**SLH:** Over the years I’ve been lucky enough to have many fantastic school visits. Rooms full of eager, excited kids who participate in my presentations with great enthusiasm and seem to really enjoy my books. Such a treat! There have been some very entertaining moments, including repeated instances where I’ve been asked how old I am and when I say, “How old do you think I am?” the most popular answer is “100!” (In case you’re wondering, I am not 100 😊Not yet, anyway 😊)



But sadly it is not these visits that really stand out. I think my most memorable school visit was my very first one. My local indie bookstore was owned by Scott Meyer, a wonderful man who was very supportive of authors and illustrators. When my first book, a little pop-up board book called *The House That Mack Built*, was published, he asked me if I’d like to participate in an Author’s Day at Mill Road Elementary School in Red Hook. I said, “What would I have to do?” (Remember, I was the shy girl who liked to hide in corners and read, so the idea of having to get up in front of anyone and (gulp) SPEAK! was terrifying.) “Oh, there’s nothing to it,” he assured me. “Just sit in the classroom and read your book.” That sounded okay. I could read. And it would be kindergartners. I love kids. In fact, I have several of my own, so that was pretty well-known territory. That couldn’t be too scary, could it? “Okay,” I agreed. Big mistake. HUGE! Raise your hand if you know how long it takes to read a board book with 6 spreads and less than 200 words. The answer is, NOT half an hour! About 5 minutes tops if you’re seriously dawdling, and then what do you do with 30 five-year olds for the next 25 minutes? Let me tell you *just how long* those remaining 25 minutes can be..! 😊 Suffice to say that when I went on my second school visit (a preschool where I did 9 presentations in one day—whole different kind of mistake 😊) I was extremely well-prepared with a presentation that would actually keep my little friends interested and engaged for the full duration of the visit!

*Susanna Leonard Hill...continued*

**SB:** In writing your children’s books, do you go through any kind of specific writing process?

**SLH:** Okay. This is very secret, so please don’t tell anyone.

First, I enter the Cone of Silence.

Next, I drink a magic potion which includes chocolate because, shouldn’t everything?

Finally, I recite a spell backwards in a whisper, place my fingers on the keyboard, and produce a perfect final draft on the first try, which immediately goes to a seven-house bidding war and sells for stupendous amounts of money, followed by a dog-eat-dog scramble for movie rights. Fame and fortune follow.

Oh.

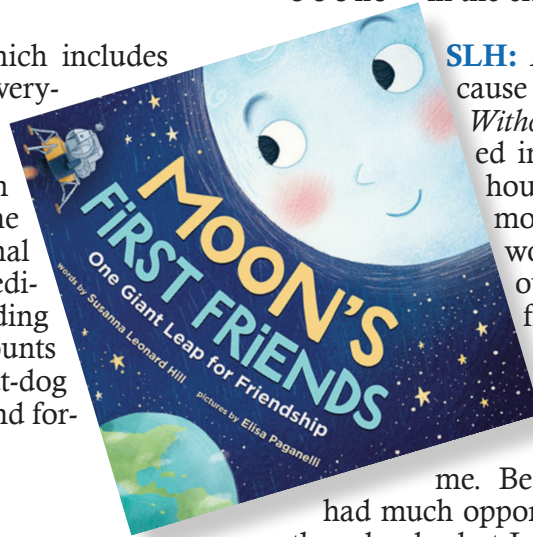
You wanted reality? 😊

Let’s see. I usually get ideas in pieces while I’m washing the dishes or walking the dogs or trying to extract the bit of pretzel my son inserted into the baby’s ear. I need more than one piece to write a book. So, I tuck those pieces into the back of my mind and let them roll around there for a period of days, weeks, months, years... however long it takes for them to roll into another piece that sticks to them and makes them into enough of an idea to be actually usable. I do a lot of the initial writing in my head, rehearsing little bits until I can get to some form of writing utensil and paper because, why does most of your best work happen in the shower, while driving, or while changing someone’s diaper? Once I’m at the point where I’m ready to write, I write all my first drafts in pen on paper.

Only after I have a draft I’m semi-happy with do I transfer it to the computer. I don’t know why—maybe it’s because I’m extremely ancient and grew up in the last millennium—but I think better with a pen in my hand, physically writing. When I have a draft on the computer I revise ad nauseum until I feel it’s ready to either give to my agent or to be used as hamster bedding because my agent should never have to waste her time on such rubbish! Voila! My process in a nutshell 😊

**SB:** Two of your best-selling picture books, *Moon’s First Friends* and *Mars’ First Friends*, blend actual events from space exploration with anthropomorphized characters.

**SB:** Did you have any trouble selling these concepts to your editor? Have teachers found ways to use these books in the classroom?



**SLH:** *Moon’s First Friends* was written because an editor who loved *Can’t Sleep Without Sheep* asked if I’d be interested in writing a book for his publishing house for the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. He said they knew there would be a lot of nonfiction coming out for the anniversary, but he wanted fiction. I said I would love to do it. *Mars’ First Friends* was the requested companion book. So, no, I didn’t have trouble selling the concepts because the publisher approached me. Because of the pandemic, I haven’t

had much opportunity to do school visits related to these books, but I assume teachers use them because I see reviews, and teachers I know tell me they like the books and use them in their teaching. The publisher also created a classroom guide for *Moon’s First Friends*, which I’m sure is helpful to teachers. The back matter in both books is nonfiction and at a higher reading level than the stories, so there is a lot of useful information there that can enhance curriculum, and it also makes the books appealing to a wider age range.



**SB:** You are a mentor in a number of different ways to future children’s writers. Do your professional activities as a writing mentor help you with your own writing? And if so, in what way?

**SLH:** Teaching writing and helping other writers is absolutely helpful to my own writing. For starters, I wrote the course I teach, so I had to think very carefully about the process of creating a story. It’s not a formula, of course, but there are certain elements—character, conflict, setting, etc.—that must be included, and they must be presented in an order that makes sense. In order to teach it, I gave a great deal of thought to the writing process, which was something I hadn’t examined with as much care before. In addition, helping other writers with their process is helpful in the same way that being in a critique group is helpful—it gives me the opportunity to read and evaluate other people’s



*Susanna Leonard Hill...continued*

work and then try to identify and articulate what works and what doesn't in a constructive way. This is great practice for evaluating your own writing. It can be very difficult to judge your own writing objectively because you're so close to it. Going through the process of evaluating other people's work helps hone the skills for approaching your own revisions.

I also run writing contests on my blog, and a mini writing challenge series, which gives me an opportunity to stretch my creativity at the same time it (hopefully!) encourages other writers to stretch theirs.

**SB:** What is some standard advice you give to beginning children's book writers?

**SLH:** I'd like to offer something pithy, some guaranteed formula that would allow new writers to jump right onto bookstore and library shelves, something brilliant that has never been mentioned by any other author in one of these interviews—Susanna's Seven Steps To Certain Overnight Success! Alas, I have pretty much the same thing to say as most of my esteemed colleagues.

**READ... A LOT!** – Immerse yourself in current picture books so you get a feel for what editors, parents, teachers, and children are looking for now, today. Although certain subjects in picture books have been around forever—"bedtime" books, new baby stories, first day of school, etc.—*how* they're written has changed. Get a feel for what sells today. Also, read the classics. *Goodnight Moon* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *Where The Wild Things Are* and *Guess How Much I Love You* have been around for decades for a reason. Try to identify what makes them such evergreen reads and incorporate those elements into your own writing. (Easy, right? ☺)

**WRITE... A LOT!** – Like anything else, practice makes you better. The more you write, the better you'll get. As an added bonus, the more you write, the more ideas you're likely to get. It's as if writing gets your brain into a special gear that allows you not only to see ideas all around you, but to see them in a way that lends them to story.

**EDUCATE YOURSELF** – take classes like Renee LaTulippe's [Lyrical Language Lab](#), Arree Chung's

[Storyteller's Academy](#), or my own [Making Picture Book Magic](#); participate in webinars; attend writing conferences; read books on craft, like Ann Whitford Paul's *Writing Picture Books: A Hands On Guide From Story to Publication*

**JOIN WRITING ORGANIZATIONS and CHALLENGES** – [SCBWI](#), [Children's Book Insider](#), Julie Hedlund's [12x12](#), Tara Lazar's [STORYSTORM](#) (annually in January)

**JOIN A CRITIQUE GROUP** if you can, or at least see if you can find a critique partner (see the question above for the rationale.)

**ENTER WRITING CONTESTS** – great practice writing to specifications and a deadline, nice prizes if you win or place, and potentially a writing credit you can mention when you're trying to sell your first book and don't have publishing credits yet.

**READ... A LOT!** Oh, did I say that already?☺ It bears repeating. The better versed you are in the genre you want to write in, the better you'll understand what you need to bring to the table if you want to get published.

**SB:** What's next for you? Do you have any new books on the horizon?

**SLH:** *Alphabedtime*, illustrated by Betsy Snyder and published by Nancy Paulsen Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House, is my next book due out. I am very excited for this book! The book sold in June of 2013, and the few edits were completed by September. It was due out in Summer 2015, but there were numerous unfortunate delays. It has been well worth the wait, however, and will be making its debut on October 25, 9 years and 4 months after it sold. I think it deserves a prize for that ☺

I have two other books coming out December 6th — *What Little Girls are Made Of*, illustrated by Talitha Shipman, and *What Little Boys are Made Of*, illustrated by Natalie Vasilica, both from Sourcebooks Wonderland.



Find out more about Susanna Leonard Hill's books online:

Website: <https://susannahill.com/>  
 Blog: <https://susannahill.com/blog/>