


Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  November 2021



ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
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**THE**
OBIAS
LITERARY AGENCY

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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 <https://pjmacwriter.com>

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At Presstime:

Chicken Soup for the Soul Accepting Submissions for Two Upcoming Anthologies

The *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series is accepting true short stories for two upcoming anthologies, *Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul* (for ages 9-12), and *Chicken Soup for the Teen Soul* (ages 13-19). Both books are expected to be published in late spring 2022.

Seeking uplifting, true stories and poems about how the author used the power of gratitude to change his or her own life while navigating the preteen and teenage years. Suggested topics include: learning that less can be more; developing the right attitude toward technology, clothing, cars, and other things that kids want; realizing that possessions are not as important as other things, like relationships and family; adopting a healthier attitude towards money; appreciating the elderly family members in your life; doing for others – volunteer work, random acts of kindness; doing your very best and making an effort—because you only have one life; maintaining a positive attitude even when times are tough; appreciating your mentors, such as teachers and coaches; doing the right thing – even when it’s the hard thing; things that worked, such as gratitude journals; simplifying, and finding joy in that, as well as other topics that apply to gratitude practices for the target audience.

Chicken Soup for the Soul stories should be 1200 words or less, are written in the first person, and have a beginning, middle and an end. The stories often close with a punch, creating emotion, rather than simply talking about it. A good story causes tears, laughter, goose bumps or any combination of these. A *Chicken Soup for the Soul* poem does the same job as a story. The reader goes away having learned your story, just through poetry instead of prose. Pays \$200 and 10 copies of the book one month after publication for non-exclusive rights.

Deadline for submissions is December 20, 2021. For more information and to submit to either anthology, go to <https://www.chickensoup.com/story-submissions/submit-your-story>. Responds only to submissions interested in publishing. If you haven’t heard back by 60 days prior to publication of the anthologies, consider it a pass. See www.chickensoup.com for upcoming pub dates.

Publisher Seeks Picture Books, Chapter Books with Jewish Themes

Hachai Publishing produces high quality children’s literature with Jewish themes. Their books promote universal values – such as sharing, kindness, and charity – and teach Jewish history and tradition for children from birth to age 12. For a complete list of titles, go to www.hachai.com/productcat/all-titles/

Hachai Publishing is currently interested in picture books for the very young (ages 2-4) and slightly older children (ages 3-6). Looking for stories that convey the traditional Jewish experience in modern times or long ago; traditional Jewish observance such as holidays and year-round mitzvos such as mezuzah, tzitzis, honoring parents etc.; and positive character traits (middos) such as honesty, charity, respect, sharing etc. Also seeking historical fiction adventure chapter books for readers ages 7-10 that highlight devotion to faith and the relevance of Torah in making important choices. Is not interested in no animal stories, violence, preachy sermonizing, or elements that violate Jewish Law.

Submissions can be sent by email (addressed to Devorah Leah Rosenfeld, Acquisitions Editor, editor@hachai.com), and consist of a brief cover letter with synopsis and the entire manuscript (picture book) or first three chapters (longer works) pasted into the body of the email. Submissions can also be mailed to Devorah Leah Rosenfeld: Acquisitions Editor, Hachai Publishing, 527 Empire Boulevard, Brooklyn, NY 11225. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address on the title page of your full manuscript, as well as a cover letter. Mailed submissions should include a business-size self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) if you’d like a written reply, or a larger SASE with enough postage to return the whole manuscript, if you don’t want the manuscript to be recycled. Also looking for new artists with skill in children’s book illustration. Send photocopies, tear sheets, or email links to website portfolios to the addresses above.

Native and First Nations-focused Imprint of HarperCollins Accepting Submissions

Heartdrum is a Native-focused imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books, author-curated by Cynthia Leitch Smith and edited by Rosemary Brosnan. The focus is on Indigenous stories that reflect Native people whose Nations are located within the borders of what's now called the United States and Canada. In this, the publisher is mindful and inclusive of intersectional identities and various modern settings. Looking for Native and First Nations writers and writer-illustrators to submit picture book, chapter book, middle grade novel, and young adult novel manuscripts as well as middle grade and young adult nonfiction manuscripts, and both poetry and graphic novel formats. Writing that reflects young protagonists and/or youth-related topics are welcome. Emphasis will be on contemporary, near histories and/or futuristic works, including realistic fiction and genre fiction.

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

Publisher Seeking Unconventional Books for All Ages

Quirk Books publishes a highly curated list of entertaining, enlightening, and strikingly unconventional books for adults and children in a number of genres and categories. Children's books range from board books through young adult, fiction and nonfiction. Before submitting, authors must study Quirk's current catalog to get a sense of the type of books they publish (www.quirkbooks.com/books) For general submissions, send a query letter and full manuscript (for picture books) or first three chapters (longer works) pasted into the body of the email to submissions@quirkbooks.com. If you think your project is a good match for a specific editor, note that in your query. Editors accepting general and specific submissions are:

Alex Arnold (Senior Editor) is looking for high-concept stories. In YA, she'd especially like to see genre-bending, high-stakes fiction that grapples with social justice in surprising ways; psychological thrillers; queer rom-coms; and nonfiction at the intersection of pop culture and social issues. In middle grade, she's drawn to dark and strange magic a la *Coraline*, clever twists, and nonfiction that uses fun, humor, and inspiration to bring readers to new topics. In picture books and board books, she's looking for concept-driven, funny, and joyful read-alouds. In all categories, she is on the lookout for diverse, underrepresented voices, stories that play with structure and format, characters that could step off the page, and atmospheric settings that make her feel transported.

Alex is also seeking writers to audition for a YA mystery/thriller set in the world of social media influencer culture. Writers who tend towards dark humor and social commentary, and who are fascinated by social media and the influencer industry, are encouraged to apply. Especially enthusiastic to see submissions from women of color. For this submission ONLY, email alexsubs@quirkbooks.com with the subject line "YA influencer novel audition". In the body, include a brief cover letter telling a little bit about yourself, previous writing experience or publications (if applicable), and your interest in the project. Attach approximately 25 pages of sample material in the genre.

Jessica Yang (Editorial Assistant) supports Alex Arnold and develops select projects for the YA and kid's list at Quirk. She's drawn to middle grade with a pinch of magic and plenty of heart, YA romance that plays with beloved tropes, and science fiction and fantasy that steps away from or critically engages with Western canon.

Jessica is also seeking writers to audition for a YA science fiction/mystery novel that takes place on a royal space station. Writers with an affinity for character-driven writing, vivid worldbuilding, complex plotting, and compelling queer romance are encouraged to apply. Especially enthusiastic to see submissions from queer writers of color. (Note: Quirk does not expect or require writers to disclose their identities.) For this submission ONLY, email jessicasubs@quirkbooks.com with the subject line "YA science fiction novel audition". In the body, include a cover letter telling a bit about yourself, previous writing experience or publications (if applicable), and your interest in the project. Attach approximately 25 pages of sample material in the genre.

Email Marketing for Authors: 6 Messages to Send Your Readers

by Lauren Ranalli

Did you happen to read some emails today? If so, then you are in good company. Reading email is a daily occurrence for many of us.

As an author and marketing coach, I'm often asked about social media. I think social media is great. Want to know why? Because it can help you get people onto your email list. And if I had to choose between a huge social media following and a huge email list, I would choose email list every time.

Here's why: the social media algorithm is always changing and you and I have very little control over who sees our content and when. But with email, we can control when content is distributed, who receives it, and we can track our open rates, engagement rates, and clicks to our website or sales platforms. I encourage all of the authors I work with to have an email sign-up on their website, but you can start off with just using your own email account before investing in a platform like [Flodesk](#), [ConvertKit](#), [Mailchimp](#), or others. Don't yet have an email list? You can also start by sending messages to your friends, family, and other contacts. It doesn't have to be fancy; it just needs to happen.

Of course, the next natural question is, "well, what should I say in these emails?" Let's get really concrete and start off with six messages to send your readers. If you plan out these six messages over the course of six months or even a year, you'll have a great foundation for connecting with people through email communications.

Get ready to hit "send"!

Email #1- The "Behind the Scenes" Email. Sharing "behind the scenes" content is a great way to connect with readers. It gives them insight into your process, who you are as an author, and even teases some upcoming news without screaming "buy my book!". I've sent "behind the scenes" emails about why I love to sign each copy of my book, sharing news of getting a local bookstore contract, and other small glimpses into my life as an author and marketing coach.

Email #2- "The Reveal" Email. When you've hit an exciting milestone with your book, like starting draft illustrators or finalizing the cover, let people know! Again, you're not focused on saying "buy my book" because if you only have draft illustrations, your book isn't even ready for purchase yet. But you're taking people along on your journey and getting them excited for the launch.

Email #3- The "Special Bonus" Email. At least once a year you should plan on having a special bonus. Typically, this may be tied to a book launch or announcing pre-orders, but it doesn't have to be. The "special bonus" is all about something extra people can get when they buy your book.

Email #4- The "Reviews are In" Email. I'm a big proponent of getting and SHARING your reviews. Reviews that just sit on Amazon have some value, but you have the ability to really

Email Marketing for Authors..continued

maximize their impact when you share them on social media and through email.

Email #5- The “Holiday Special” Email. This is pretty standard as a lot of us already think about Black Friday, Small Business Saturday (my personal favorite), or Cyber Monday. But there are lots of holidays throughout the year that may tie into your book theme so don't feel like you can only send this email in December. But for better or worse, I think people have come to expect some sort of deal around the winter holidays, so you might as well put together a discount or free shipping offer and email it out to everyone you know!

Email #6- The “Thank You” Email. It's really important to take a moment to say thank you to everyone who has supported you during your author journey. This isn't a direct pitch for a sale, it's a moment of gratitude and reflection. Send your readers, friends, and followers a quick message to let them know how much you appreciate them. This act of gratitude goes a long way!

Ready to get started? I encourage you to set a goal of sending out an email in the next 48 hours—don't overthink it and just see what happens!

Continuing to Build Your Email List

You'll want to continue to grow your email list over time. The best thing you can do is to make it easy for people to sign up! Here are areas to focus on:

Your Website: Ideally your website would promote your email/newsletter sign-up in three places. 1) As a tab in your header banner, 2) in the footer on each page, and 3) and as a display ad that pops up after someone has been on your site for at least 20 seconds. Check out my website at www.laurenranalli.com to see these three examples in action!

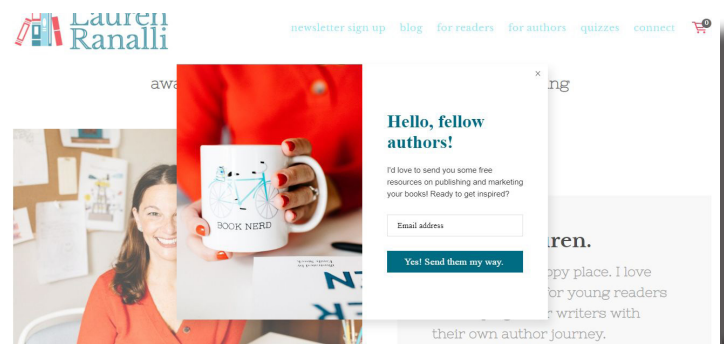
Social Media: Be sure to put a link to your newsletter sign-up in your social media profiles. You

can also then direct people to your profile link in your posts. For example, “Want to get updates on my latest book release? Sign up for my email list! Link in bio.” See how I've set this up on my Instagram page [@lauren.ranalli author](https://www.instagram.com/lauren_ranalli).

Author Events: Any time you're at an event you should have a sign-up sheet available! Better yet, have a giveaway available for anyone who signs up for your email list.

How many people do you currently have on your list? 100? 250? 0? Whatever it is, set a realistic goal for trying to increase it over the next six months.

Remember, none of this has to be perfect so just get started and see how it goes!



Loud or Soft

USE THEM TO TAKE YOUR WRITING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

by Jane McBride

When my sister and I were growing up, we were always being told "Speak up" or "Talk louder." We both had naturally soft voices. By contrast, my husband was told by his mother, teachers, and any other adults in his vicinity to "Speak softer. You're too loud."

What Does This Have to Do with Writing?

How can we use the concepts of loud and soft to improve our writing? Those of you who took music lessons know that pianissimo (pp) means to play very softly, while the word fortissimo (ff) means to play very loudly. The contrasts heighten the emotion and mood of the piece. That's what we're going to do with our actions, dialogue, and characterization.

Go Loud or Go Home

How do you make an action loud? Do it with pizzazz. Do it with verve. Do it with exaggeration. The teenage boy, normally a pretty good kid, can make an obscene gesture before walking out on his parents who are concerned when they find marijuana in his backpack. (He has marijuana in his possession so that the police won't find it on his best friend who already has a couple of drug busts on his record. His actions are heroic, loud, if misguided.) The five-year-old girl whose cat has run away can fall to the floor and cry as though her heart is breaking. (Which it is.) The twelve-year-old girl who has found out that her best friend has not invited her to her birthday party can laugh loudly at a boy's (a boy whom she doesn't like) joke in the school hallway when all she really feels like doing is crying. These are all loud actions. Loud in ges-

ture. Loud in appearance. Loud in volume.

What about dialogue? Can we make it louder as well, while not having characters shout and scream their words to each other? Consider the teenage boy in the above example. Could he use very precise words in telling his parents to stay out of his belongings? Perhaps he normally uses causal words common to his age group, but our young hero possesses a larger-than-ordinary vocabulary, one he rarely shows off because it wouldn't look cool to his friends and classmates. Does he resort to that to emphasize his point to his parents? Do they in turn react with astonishment that their "C" high school student has an amazing vocabulary? What about the little girl whose cat has run away? What action can she take that is louder than usual? Could she run away as well? What if she is a timid little girl who doesn't like to leave the house without her mother or father? This out-of-the-ordinary action suddenly assumed huge proportions. Finally, there is the twelve-year-old girl who has been left out of his best friend's birthday party. What action could she perform that would show her hurt and bewilderment? Could she crash the party? Could she sneak a bottle of her father's beer from the refrigerator? Could she write a scathing letter to her friend and then email it?

Finally, let's move on to characters. How can characters be louder than they would ordinarily act? The sixteen-year-old boy can throw out the expensive earbuds his parents gave him for his birthday, knowing how much that will hurt his parents in an attempt to make himself feel better since they hurt him. He could take his father's new Corvette for a ride, against all rules. The little girl whose cat has run away can lock herself in her bedroom. Or she can leave the house by herself without telling any-

Loud or Soft..continued

one to go look for her cat, even though she knows it will worry her family. And what about our mixed-up twelve-year-old character whose life has just been ruined, or so she thinks, because she hasn't been invited to the birthday party of the year? What would make her character bigger than life? She could fill the pool in her friend's backyard with dye that will turn the skin of anyone who gets in cobalt blue. She could do a "SWAT" call on her friend's parents' house where SWAT officers arrive and search the house. She could take the underwear and outerwear of all the girls who were invited to the party when they were at school and in swimming class. Mind you, I'm not suggesting any of these activities, only showing what could make a character larger than life. The important thing here is to make it a logical to her mind action. What would make this last example logical? Has our twelve-year-old heroine been so devastated by being left out of the party that she would do anything to embarrass her friend and the other girls?

Have you noticed that in each of the examples above the character is acting against type? He or she is doing the opposite of what comes naturally to him or her. That in itself makes the action, dialogue, and characterization big and loud.

Let's Go Soft

Okay, we've talked about making actions, dialogue, and characters loud and in-your-face. Let's move to scaling actions, dialogue, and characters back. This does not mean to make them boring or milquetoast kinds of characters. On the contrary, a small action or seemingly insignificant action or word can often have more impact than something big and showy.

Let's start with action: What of our sixteen-year-old boy who has been wrongly accused of using drugs by his parents? If his normal way of leaving a room is to saunter out and leave the door wide open or if it is to slam the door when he's angry, what about having him close the door with exquisite precision. The very control it takes to close the door in such a way expresses the depth of his feelings, yet it is a small, nearly silent action. Our little five-year-old girl, heartbroken over her missing kitten, may resort

to a behavior she had when she was two and younger: sucking her thumb. And the twelve-year-old girl left out of what was supposed to be the party of the year, what could she do? Could she write a story featuring her feelings and, on a whim, send it to an online publisher of teenage angst-ridden stories?

How do we make dialogue smaller? Must everyone whisper their remarks? Of course not. What if the sixteen-year-old boy simply stopped talking, at least to his parents? The little girl could cry so much that she temporarily loses her voice, and the twelve-year-old girl finds her voice in writing, but she can't express her words vocally for the moment. There are all sorts of ways to make dialogue small, even by using small words with soft, sibilant sounds.

As for making characters smaller, that's really a misnomer. We want to make them seem insignificant so that when they burst forth in a show of strength, we (and our readers) say, "Yes, that's how I feel. I know what it's like to be unheard and unseen and now I am both seen and heard." The sixteen-year-old boy could finally tell his parents about the drugs in his backpack, that he had been protecting a friend. The little girl can get her favorite stuffed animal and carry it around with her. And our twelve-year-old middle-schooler can find a new persona through her writing.

By the way, each of our characters will have a happy ending, but they must go through a period of suffering first.

In Conclusion

To make actions, dialogue, and characterizations loud or soft, you must first know your characters inside and out. You have to understand what would motivate them to act against their nature and then show that.

Natascha Morris

Senior Agent



interview by Lynne Marie

In this month of Thanksgiving, I am grateful to feature an agent who has championed so many of my favorite books! Natascha Morris is a Senior Literary Agent and Director of Children's Department of Tobias Literary. She has earned B.A. in English Literary Studies and a M.S. in Publishing and has represented such successes as the ALA award-winning book *Queen of Physics* by Teresa Robeson; *The Library of Lost Things* by Laura Taylor Namey; *Lexi Magill and the Teleportation Tournament* by Kim Long, and *One Hug and Grandpa Grumps* by Katrina Moore. She's also worked on gems like the *New York Times* bestseller and Reese Witherspoon Bookclub pick, *A Cuban Girl's Guide to Tea and Tomorrow* by Laura Taylor Namey, the Indie Bestselling *Oona* illustrated by Raissa Figueroa, and *Sugar and Spice and Everything Mice* illustrated by Christee Curran-Bauer. Here is a link to just some of her projects: [#TeamNat \(bookshop.org\)](#)



LYNNE MARIE: As an avid reader and fan of the above books, I can't wait to see what is coming next from your clients! Please tell us a little bit about your selection process for picture books, as well as how that played out in a pending release.

NATASCHA MORRIS: Honestly, I am probably pretty boring. I read through the queries. A lot of it comes down to my gut, aka my reader knowledge, and what appeals to me in that way. I do have a cheat sheet from my days in editorial, but once I like someone's work, I request more. I am looking for the consistency of strength. A number of recent clients did this: Jessica Stremer, Laurie Carmody, Mariana Ríos Ramírez all showed a body of work that overall I connected to as a reader. As for an author with an upcoming book that did this? Eija Sumner and her *Crocodile Hungry*. She probably showed me the most range in picture books and I just thought, "wow, this person can do it all."

LM: You also do a lot of MG and YA and are current-

ly looking for more YA projects, so is the process the same then?

NM: I don't ask for multiple manuscripts, lol. But yes. There I tend to be a little pickier since I know exactly what I want to see. Middle grade is probably the area I am pickiest in because the voice has to hit my sweet spot. But overall I am looking for high concept books with excellent writing. Two authors, Allison Bitz and Gabrielle Prendergast, did that so well recently. Both authors had me hooked. As far as upcoming books, I would say Megan Paasch her *Dream to Me* book. When I first read it, I remember clutching my Kindle tighter, I was so giddy with excitement. Weaving a tapestry of a novel together is not easy, and authors who do it so well make it hard to pick it apart to edit, but those are the authors you want.

LM: If you could pick five words to describe what the bulk of your sales have in common, what would they be?

NM: Joy is always #1. Quality. Fun. Colorful. Entertaining.

LM: What are you primarily looking for as far as submissions to the children's department of the agency?

NM: I am primarily looking for picture books, middle grade and young adult manuscripts across most genres, including graphic novels. Illustrators are welcome! We love stories here, and we are kids in a bookstore who can't stop picking up great books.

LM: What is your business style? Are you very hands on or do you have a laid back approach? Are you an editorial agent? Do you offer contracts book by book or career? What is something that you would like prospective clients to know about you?

Natascha Morris...continued

NM: We offer contracts for the career. And I would say I am a mix: I can be very hands-on when I need to be, and very laid back when I need to be. The situation, and client, can change how I need to work. I am an editorial agent, so expect notes, and I don't go away once you sell a book, but I more hover around until you need me at that point.

LM: What is it that you are looking for in a client? How important is previous publishing experience? A strong platform on social media? A strongly polished project?

NM: A strongly polished manuscript is critical, no matter whether you are querying an agent or sending to your agent. You want to put your best foot forward. And once you have an agent, their skills are in certain areas, but you want to respect their knowledge and expertise by giving them your best work.

You don't need previous experience in publishing. Some of my first and best published clients now never had anything published before they first sold. Great work stands on its own legs. Same goes for a strong platform on social media if you are writing fiction. If you write nonfiction, then you might need to have some authority in the subject matter, but there are always exceptions to this.

As for what I am looking for in a client, I like to use elements of what I love about my clients when I am looking for new ones. I love the joy Raissa Figueroa has for her craft. I love the dedication and commanding nature Laura Taylor Naemy exhibits towards her work. I love the plethora of work Jessica Stremer, Eija Sumner, and Circe Moskowitz are able to produce. And I love the sheer creativity all of my clients have. So when looking for someone new to join my list, I don't think about whether this person is going to work well with me, but I think about the larger community of my list and how this book/person vibes within that brand. I am totally odd, I know.

LM: It has been said that picture book nonfiction is saturated with biographies, yet they continue to be published and receive acclaim. What are your thoughts on the state of this genre?

NM: I think it is the same with how everyone says YA fantasy is saturated. It means that naturally editors are going to be more selective when looking at biographies. They will still exist, but to truly stand out, they have to have that extra sparkle.

I am selling for 2024 right now, to give you an idea of how far ahead publishing is working. So when you are seeing books coming out, these might have been signed up in the 2018/2019 area. And now editors are ready for the pivot.

LM: What are you personally looking for in connection with a nonfiction project in general?

NM: In picture books, I love narrative nonfiction, like *Skulls!* by Blair Thornburgh, or *People Don't Bite People* by Lisa Wheeler. In the longer format, I would love to see something along the lines of Netflix's *Explained* series. I think smart nonfiction, that is not memoir or biographies, can be so cool. Jessica Stremer hooked me there.

LM: Is there anything in particular you are looking for at this time, in addition to what you have already posted on your manuscript wish list Twitter thread (mswishlist.com/agent/SoCalledYALife)?

NM: #MSWL is probably the most updated thing for me. I tend to tweet as the ideas come to me.

Natascha Morris is offering an Above the Slushpile opportunity for CBI subscribers. Send a query through Query Manager at <https://QueryManager.com/natascha>, and put the code CBI 11/21 in the "Referred by" section. Natascha responds to all queries, so if you haven't heard back it's because she hasn't yet looked at your submission. Please be patient!

---Please Read Before You Proceed---

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

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

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Social Media When You're Not-Yet-Published

by Beth Stilborn

Social media is touted as a must for writers and illustrators. More and more, agents request social media links in queries. How can we best engage with social media? Let's explore that.

Carol Doeringer is a picture book writer and blogger who writes about the natural world at [Tales from a West Michigan Wood](#). I write middle grade fiction and blog about a variety of subjects on my website [By Word of Beth](#). Neither of us is published yet, although Carol soon will be. We had a conversation about using social media and our blogs prior to publication to build connections and community.



Beth Stilborn

BETH STILBORN: Carol, your blog is a treasure-trove of information and education about animals and other creatures of your woods. How did you decide on that focus? Who did you hope to reach?

CAROL DOERINGER: I began blogging when I could no longer resist sharing the creature stories I watch and film out my window. Whether sad, silly, or surprising, the behavior I film almost always makes me wonder how or why. In my posts, I show videos and write about what puzzled me, and what I learned after looking for answers. My initial goal was to reach new and old friends who share my wildlife inquisitiveness.

BS: I'm glad you couldn't resist sharing! I find your blog fascinating, and your focus amazing. I had already been blogging on different topics before I became active in the online writing community in 2011/2012 and started my writing blog. I tried sever-

al different approaches, starting with a focus on the arts then adding writing-related posts. It took me a while to find my niche. I'm okay with that. I've found that the best route is to be true to myself and to my interests. It seems you knew that from the beginning.

How does your blog relate to your writing? Do you see it as part of creating a distinct platform?

CD: Before blogging, I'd tried and had been frustrated writing nature-themed picture books. I realized my wildlife posts captured what was missing in my manuscripts: wonder. That sent my nature picture books in a new direction. Now I build stories that pique—and satisfy—curiosity about our natural world.



Carol Doeringer

About a distinct platform, I'd like to think that people are beginning to connect my name to my blog. I'm blogging to shine a light on my nature interests and by extension, my nature-themed picture books. So, yes—but with an asterisk. I also write kid-entrepreneurship books, leveraging my day job educating bankers.

BS: It's great that your blog helped you find what was missing in your writing. I have so many passions, it took trial and error in both my writing and my blogging before I found my "sweet spot." Since I write fiction rather than non-fiction, there is less emphasis on needing a platform, but I still want to be recognizable in the large field of KidLit. In being true to my passion of sharing resources, teaching, and exploring books and words—"books, encouragement, teaching, hope"—I

am building strong connections. There's a reason I share those words in that order to describe my focus. Check out the initial letters.

We don't blog in a vacuum, nor do we blog only to inform our writing. How do you extend your reach beyond your blog? Do you feel you're reaching your intended audience?

CD: Social media has been a great help. On Twitter and Facebook, I share a link with every blog post. I also share videos and photos apart from my blog. When a photo or video resonates with Twitter wildlife enthusiasts, wow... it really travels. I have about 3,000 Twitter followers between two accounts, but one video—wood ducks flirting—has been seen more than 200,000 times. A few other photos and videos have also bounced around quite a bit. When a tweet succeeds like that, I see upticks in blog views and subscribers. I get blog boosts from similar Facebook posts, but Twitter gives me the best chance of being noticed, in that platform and on my blog.

I'm pretty sure that, like me, many wildlife enthusiasts love giving nature-themed picture books to kids. So fellow nature lovers seem likely bets for purchasing my future books. I'm making good progress reaching that audience. But I have more work to do elsewhere, as I believe my books will have broad appeal. And when the time comes, I'll hope I've earned promotion help from others in the KidLit community.

BS: That's impressive! Most of my connections on Twitter and Facebook are within the KidLit community, where I try to be as helpful as possible: answering questions, particularly those of new writers, boosting friends' book announcements and the like. I haven't shied away from sending friend requests to influential people in the KidLit world, as well as my peers in the writing journey, and all these connections have enriched my world. I am sure many of these people will celebrate with me when the time comes. In terms of reaching an audience beyond the KidLit world, I have found that some of my blog posts have a wider reach than I expected when I wrote them. Nearly every day, someone reads one of the posts in my series about *Reading Aloud to the Elderly*, which was first posted in 2016. That tells me there's a lack in the wider world that my posts are filling. (I wish I'd used a term other than "elderly," but that's how people are finding the posts.) I still get visits to my blog because

of my past involvement in Susanna Hill's *Perfect Picture Book Fridays*, with hits on old *PPBF* posts daily. That tells me that participation in such activities is golden. I've also had the joy of sharing many interviews on my blog, some with quite prominent people in the KidLit world and beyond. That has drawn in readers, too.

I understand that teachers are starting to use your blog with their students. How did this come about? How might other writers connect in this way?

CD: About a year ago, a teacher and STEAM club leader contacted me through my blog. She said my posts were a great help in supporting the club's activities, which the pandemic had made virtual-only. She had an awesome request. Would I add an online tree-ID guide to my resources page? One of her students had found the guide and thought it would be a great addition to my site. And it was! After that, I began engaging with teachers online. When a few mentioned using a video or a blog post, I stepped up my social media exchanges with teachers and school librarians. That's probably a good way for any pre-published writer to connect with schools. Maybe a teacher asks about resources related to something a writer has researched for a book, or a librarian is building a book list on a topic. Writers can help with titles, supporting other authors along the way.

BS: You certainly know how to leverage connections. Early in my blogging, when I was blogging a lot about drama, I made connections in the world of drama-for-kids, but since my focus has shifted, there's work to be done for me to find other similar connections. I've realized that it's important to nurture such connections, as well.

Could you talk further about how social media plays a part in the way you connect with your intended audience, and with other writers/illustrators in the KidLit world? What would you suggest for others in terms of using social media?

CD: I've had great success using social media to connect with wildlife enthusiasts, and to a lesser extent, writers and illustrators.

In April—finally! I landed a publishing contract. My picture book won't release until spring, 2023, so I'm using the long lead time to ramp up my KidLit-world

participation. At the publisher's suggestion, I opened a second, author account on Twitter. There and on Facebook, I've been working hard to find, follow, friend, retweet, reply, and comment.

I also began adding KidLit to the videos and photos I share. I include a snippet of information about the featured creature or plant. Then I recommend a related kids' book that I love. For example, I shared a photo of an Autumn Hawkbit seed head. Like its dandelion cousin, the Hawkbit's seeds are a stunning example of nature's geometry. The image made me think of a beautiful book: *Little Dandelion Seeds the World* by Julia Richardson, illustrated by Kristen and Kevin Howdeshell.

In these tweets and posts, I tag the author, illustrator, and publisher when they're on the platform. That has prompted retweets, replies, shares, and comments. So far, those responses have been modest but encouraging. I've made some terrific connections with a few wonderful authors and illustrators who now follow and sometimes comment on my other tweets and posts. So over time, I think my name recognition and my brand, if you will—nature writing—will grow.

Any writer can use a similar mutual-support approach on social media. I'm lucky to have years of interesting photos I can use to snag a scroller's attention. But lots of writers post photos of recommended books, or even a purchase link that brings up a preview image. The key is sharing other authors' work. When we share, we add to the buzz about their books, tap into their networks, and invite them to discover ours. With luck, some of those authors will remember and reciprocate when we have books that need some noise.

BS: Congratulations on your publishing contract! I'm eager to read your book when it comes out. Great tips about social media. Sharing, retweeting, celebrating others' good news—all that will come around at some point. I enjoy sharing friends' good news—publication news, book birthdays, interviews, awards. I also find that my involvement in KidLit411 leads to more connections. When I have a book contract, I'll do more toward connecting with appropriate groups related to that book's topic.

Do you belong to online groups, such as those on Facebook? How do they help you a) in your own writing journey and b) in making connections in the

KidLit world?

CD: I'm in several KidLit Facebook groups. KidLit 411 is a favorite, as is NF 4 NF Nonfiction Children's Writers. They're wonderful groups where I find not only helpful resources, but new folks to friend and follow. I also belong to Facebook groups that are directly connected to my writing journey. These include the Picture Book Blueprint User Group, Renée LaTulippe's group for those who have completed her Self-Study Lyrical Language Lab, and the Rate Your Story members group. Group questions, answers, and discussions keep me thinking about what I learned. They also expand my community contacts.

Since landing my debut book contract, I've joined several other Facebook groups whose members include potential book buyers. The book is about a skunk (I won't make a detailed announcement until the publisher selects an illustrator). So, I've joined several related Facebook groups. Some are sponsored by wildlife rescue groups. Others are individuals with pet skunks. I have no plans to adopt a skunk. But I'm learning about skunk- and other wildlife rehab. And I'm finding opportunities to connect now and later with people who might appreciate my book. In September I attended SkunkFest, a fundraiser for a skunk rehab center. I chatted with skunk owners, the rehab team, and vendors. I'll be wearing my new skunk earrings when I sell books at the 2023 SkunkFest!

BS: Skunk earrings? Cool! So much involvement inevitably leads to more connections. I'm most active in KidLit411, where I chip in often. I've rarely met a question I didn't want to find the answer for! I've had many friend requests from people who have seen me regularly on KidLit411. I'm co-admin for the Children's Book Hub Facebook Group, which keeps me on the lookout for appropriate articles and posts to share. That helps in my "platform" of books, education, teaching, hope. On my personal FB, I'm connected to many writers, where, as mentioned before, I share good news and celebrate on many, many announcement posts. I want to give a shout-out to the [CBI Kidlit Social](#), too! It's a great way to connect as well as to learn. Every connection we make builds on the others.

Do you have other plans, thoughts or suggestions about extending your reach in the online world prior to publication?

Making Connections..continued

CD: I'm already on Pinterest, but haven't touched it in years. Many teachers use Pinterest to find classroom resources, so I know I need to return. I write with curriculum support in mind, so I'll soon restart my Pinterest presence. I'm not on Instagram, where my photos and videos would be a natural fit. But I worry about spending too much time managing social media, so I'm on the Instagram fence post.

I'll also spend more time on [Teachers Pay Teachers](#). I already purchase from TPT when I write. I find that teacher-crafted lessons and materials let me see what and how kids are learning about topics my books touch. TPT resources sometimes list related picture books, too. That's a big help with comp titles and queries. Now that I need to extend my online reach, I plan to check seller profiles for social media links. When lesson plans, worksheets, or activities mesh with my writing interests, it makes sense to follow and engage with the authors.


Finally, I'm wrestling with a question. Should I add more KidLit content to my blog? Its focus is critters and nature. One page recommends kid-friendly nature resources and activities. I recently started recommending related kids' books with every post. But so

far, I haven't blogged directly on KidLit topics. I'm a little uneasy about changing the character of my blog. So, I've been studying other authors' websites, wondering if I should create another site distinct from my blog.

BS: Lots to think about! I understand your reluctance to change the nature of your blog. I have three websites. One is my general writing-and-everything site, and another is under the pen name I plan to use for my children's writing, Elizabeth Starborn. It was initially completely focused on the arts, but I've branched out in recent years. The third is for my freelance copy editing business. It's tricky to keep three websites up-to-date, but I hesitate to combine the two book-and-writing ones, as I want to keep a separate online presence for my pen name. I think the message here is that blogs, websites, and social media are not a one-size-fits-all entity, nor are they carved in stone. It's okay, and inevitable, to have growing edges.

In summary, as in writing, in social media it's important to follow your passion. You might not find your niche right away, and that's okay. Keep reaching out, keep active, and you'll find your following.


By Word of
 ≡ | Beth
 Beth Stilborn: Books ~
 Encouragement ~ Teaching ~ Hope




Welcome!

Books,
 Encouragement,
 Teaching, and Hope

Tales from a West Michigan Wood MENU



Hang On Tight, Raccoon Kit



For ten years, it was the squirrel tree.

Squirrels popping in and out of holes like whack-a-mole, minus the whacking. Chase scenes straight out of Disney—squirrel

Acclaimed Caribbean Middle Grade Author

SHAKIRAH BOURNE

interview by PJ McIlvaine

Barbadian-born tomboy/author/filmmaker Shakirah Bourne would probably be the first to admit that writing a middle grade novel thinking it was really a young adult book in 28 days to make a contest deadline wasn't, in retrospect, a recipe for success. But it worked! Swimming against the tide, Bourne's United States middle grade debut, *Josephine Against the Sea* (Scholastic 2021) is the story of a young teen who is determined to save her father from the devilish clutches of an enchanting sea siren—or is she? Also in the pipeline are two other Caribbean mythology inspired MG adventures, also by Scholastic, scheduled for 2022 and 2023. An accomplished writer in several genres, Bourne follows her heart and inspiration (but please, no horror movies). A self-proclaimed plotzer, Bourne enjoys exploring old graveyards, daydreaming, eating mangoes (hopefully not in the graveyard), and staring out at the sea thinking up new amazing stories to tell.

Her credits are too numerous to mention, but you can learn more at <https://www.shakirahbourne.com/>

PJ McILVAINE: What was your childhood like growing up on Barbados, and how did that impact and influence your writing? Were you a voracious reader? Who were your favorite authors? Did you know early on that you wanted to write? Did your family support your ambitions? What was the first thing you ever wrote?

SHAKIRAH BOURNE: If you've read Enid Blyton stories like the *Famous Five* or *The Secret Seven*,

then you'd get an idea of my childhood in Barbados. I was a tomboy, and enjoyed going off to find adventures with my cousins and explore places, especially those that were restricted. People always wonder how children are able to get away with some of their actions in books, but I had a ridiculous amount of unsupervised time, mainly because I was raised in a community-oriented area where neighbors and aunties generally looked out for your well-being, and as long as I was back home before dark, then all was well. As you can imagine, as there was no easy access to computers or the Internet, we had to use our imagination to entertain ourselves. We liked to spy on people, and may have stumbled upon a few secrets, and these observations about situations and characters help in creating a realistic world that I think readers can relate to.

I did not come from a family of readers, so my friends at school sparked my love for reading when they lent me *Babysitters' Club* and *Sweet Valley High* books. When I discovered the library, I swear, my mind exploded. I could not compute that I get to read books for free. That's when I started to read R.L. Stine books such as *Fear Street* and *Goosebumps*, and I adored the *Animorphs*, *Sweet Dreams* and *Fearless* series as well. I mentioned Enid Blyton earlier because I consumed any of her books with adventures and mysteries—*Nancy Drew*, *Hardy Boys*, *The Naughtiest Girl in School* series. I read every single children's book in the library in record time. Eventually, I moved onto Mills and Boon novels (the lovely librarian let me borrow them despite my age). Romance books



Shakira Bourne...continued

were my gateway to mystery and even literary fiction books.

I did not know I wanted to write; I just knew I enjoyed writing. In that period while I was waiting on new books to read, I started to write my own stories. At ten years old I created a story called *Jealousy Can Kill*, which I later realized was *Sweet Valley High* fan fiction, complete with cheerleaders, love triangles, and murder. I re-read it recently and it's not bad, but as I was imitating all that I was reading, the main characters were white with blue eyes and blonde hair.

When I quit my first job at an events company to write full-time, my mother didn't know what to think. My background was in Business Management, and up to that point, writing had only been a hobby. My mother supported me financially, and didn't kick me out of the house, but she was never keen on writing as a career until I got featured in a local newspaper and she was able to show off the article to her friends.

PM: You write in several different genres: kid lit, adult fiction, short fiction, film, and plays. Where do you get the discipline and energy? Do you prefer one format to the other? How do you decide what form the story should take? Do you juggle multiple projects?

SB: I am motivated by experimentation and I love discovering unconventional narrative styles, genres and formats. I challenge myself to explore different forms of writing, and to be honest, I think I would get bored if I kept writing in the same genre and mediums. It's funny that you ask where I get the discipline, because I complain about my lack of said discipline. I always wonder how many more projects I may have been able to complete if not for my tendency to procrastinate.

I used to say that adult literary short fiction is my husband and comedic screenwriting is my outside

lover. They both will always have a place in my heart, but I have discovered a passion for writing kidlit that I never would have imagined was inside me. It is my soulmate, and even if I take a break to write a movie or an adult book, I can't imagine not coming back to writing these kinds of books.

I don't decide what form a story should take; the story decides this itself. I just listen.

Normally, I'm only able to work on one book at a time. If I have too many characters in my head, it can get confusing. However, when I want some distance from a story to figure out a plot hole or to take a break in between drafts, I do take on projects that could be finished in a short timeframe.



PM: The backstory to your debut middle grade book is quite a tale and I'd urge everyone to read the longer version at your blog. As I understand it (and please correct me if I'm wrong), there's the North American version and a Caribbean edition published two years apart. How did that come about and what were the challenges/opportunities? Are there substantial changes in the two versions? For example, the editions have two different titles. How long did it take you to write Jose-

phine? Is it based on folklore? Do you see yourself in the main character?

SB: I never thought about writing for kids until I decided to enter a writing competition called BURT Award for Caribbean YA Literature, 24 days before the deadline. The first idea that came to mind was inspired by a story I read in English class about a fisherman who became obsessed with a mermaid.

Though villagers warned him to stay away, he visited her by the river everyday. At night, she took over his dreams; he stopped caring for his family and himself, and one day, villagers found his clothing on the riverbank, and neither he nor the mermaid were ever seen again.

Shakira Bourne...continued

I always wondered what could have happened to them. Who was that mermaid? What if the fisherman's daughter tried to find him? In those three weeks, I wrote a 28,000-word book to answer those questions. Though it was mighty stressful, I had so much fun writing that book, and as a freelance writer, I was so accustomed to writing for others and for survival, that I forgot what it was like to write for fun. I have always had a love for fantastical tales, and this story gave me the opportunity to delve further into Caribbean folklore and create a modern day adaptation set in Barbados.

To my surprise, the book, *My Fishy Stepmom*, was shortlisted for the prize, which meant publication by a Caribbean publishing house. However, I had signed with a US agent around that same time, and after some discussions, the publishing house, Blue Banyan Books, acquired Caribbean rights. I revised the book with both my agent and Caribbean editor at the same time. Thankfully, they had a similar vision, and it was a smooth process, and at the end of it, the book was 45,000 words.

I went on submission to US editors with this version of the book, and we got a revise and resubmit request from my editor at Scholastic. In *My Fishy Stepmom*, Josephine knows her Dad's new girlfriend isn't human, and spends the majority of the novel trying to figure out the identity. In *Josephine Against the Sea*, Josephine has figured out her identity by the middle of the book, and spends the second half trying to figure out how to stop her. This version is 61,000 words, so though the characters are the same and the general plot is similar, there are substantial changes between the two versions. I encourage people to read both of them!

PM: On your blog, you also detail your hilarious journey to finding a literary agent which everyone who has been in the query trenches can empathize with. In hindsight, what would you have done dif-

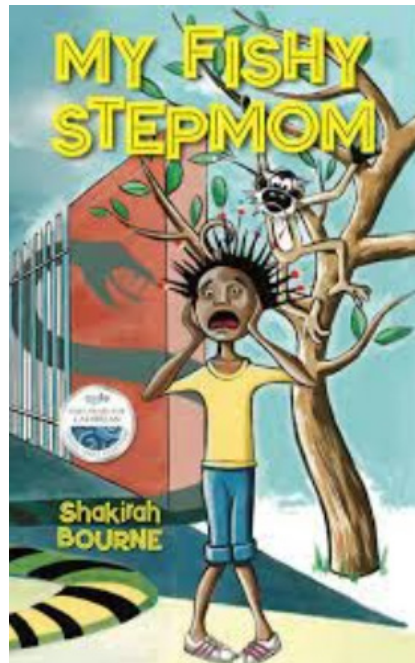
ferently? Was being somewhat naïve and clueless about the process a blessing in disguise? What was the most difficult part of it all? Once you signed with your agent, what was the revision/submission process like? How long did it take to get an offer on the book?

SB: Everything worked out for me so I'd be hesitant to say I'd do anything differently, but as you know, I had a lot of faux-pas, so maybe I would have at least done enough research to realize that my 28,000 word adventure with an 11 year-old main character who saves her Dad from a sea creature, is typically categorized as middle grade and not young adult.

Being clueless was definitely a blessing in disguise, because if I had known the statistics and how difficult it was to get an agent and secure a publishing deal with a traditional publisher, I would not have tried! I had self-published a short story collection, and had great success with that, so I can imagine I would have just waited to see if I was shortlisted for the BURT competition, and if not, I would have self-published the story.

Submission was HANDS DOWN the most difficult part of the process so far. At that point, I had been revising the book for nine months with my agent and Caribbean editor, and I was hoping that I would be one of those lucky persons who sold in one week. I was totally not prepared for the level of anxiety that submission brought. It took serious willpower to not spend all day refreshing your inbox, knowing that on any given day, you could get an email that would change your life.

We went on submission in October 2018 to nine editors, and it took a month before I got my first rejection. Other passes trickled in until we got an R&R request from my editor at Scholastic at the end of January 2019. She was so passionate about my story, and I agreed with all of her editorial sugges-



Shakira Bourne...continued

tions, and so I worked together to revise the first six chapters, until May, when the book was ready to go to acquisitions. And then we waited. And waited. It was torture; according to statistics, only 80% of R&Rs are actually successful so I kept trying to prepare myself for a rejection. Thankfully she made an official offer for *Josephine Against the Sea* in June 2019. I was on sub for a total of eight months.

PM: Do you have a daily writing routine? Do you outline your stories?

SB: I wake up early in the morning to write because I find that's when I am most productive. I feel my productivity level drop the moment I put any food in my mouth so I will work until I am too hungry to concentrate. Fun fact: I found out that intermittent fasting works the same way, which explains why I tend to lose weight when I have numerous upcoming writing deadlines. Sometimes, if I get too distracted during the day, I try to write late at night when the world has already gone to bed. Honestly, I just try to listen to my mind and do whatever I can to make the writing flow.

I spend a lot of time staring out of the window, listening to nature's music. I wish I could write to actual music but I inevitably end up dancing or singing along, instead of writing.

I am a plotter-leaning pantster. When it comes to novel writing, I like to know the beginning, turning point one & two, midpoint and ending of a story before I start writing. I plan as much as possible because I find that writer's block occurs when I don't understand the story or know where it's going. However, my outline is for peace of mind and it's just a guide. I find that no matter how many story details I try to work out beforehand, I learn more about my characters and the world while I'm writing that first draft. I still leave room for characters to surprise me and I am flexible enough to include new scenes or other plot elements that appear during the writing process.

PM: What are you currently writing? Do you have a passion project?

SB: I am currently writing a middle grade horror

called *Duppy Island*, which is coming out in 2022. It's about a 13 year-old filmmaker, Serenity, who follows her family to a silent retreat on a mysterious island to get footage of a rare butterfly, and discovers that the island is haunted by faceless children. It's inspired by Caribbean folklore—a *douen* is a child who has died before they're baptized.

I have SO many story ideas, a half-finished novel, and several unfinished screenplays, but I don't currently have a passion project right now, and I'm glad that I don't. As I mentioned, I mainly work on one story at a time and I'd be really distracted and frustrated that I can't work on something that I love.

PM: Where do you see yourself, writing-wise, five years from now? If you could write anywhere in the world (not including the beach) where would it be?

SB: Five years from now, I hope to have numerous middle grade, young adult, and adult books. I can imagine I'd have a story to suit any kind of reader. I hope that my unpredictability will be exciting to readers.

I lived in Scotland for a year and fell in love with the Highlands. It's a dream to split my time between Barbados and Scotland, so if I can't write on the beach (or have a sea view), I'd be typing away in the Scottish Highlands, watching hairy cows eat grass from my window.

What **STAKES** Are Your Characters **RISKING**?

by Jane McBride

We often use the word "stake" to denote how much one has to lose in any given situation. For example, "I'll stake my reputation on his honesty." Or we may say, "How much is a stake?" Or "What is at stake?"

In a novel, characters will eventually ask themselves "What is at stake if I don't do this?" "What is at stake if I don't stop the school bully?" "What is at stake if I don't accept the assignment to save the world from a rapidly growing mold that threatens to consume all human and animal flesh?" "What is at stake if I don't find the lost heir to a kingdom?"

Check your story and ask yourself what stakes your main character (MC) faces. If you can't identify the stakes involved, perhaps you need to re-think the story or go back to your character to see what he or she is most afraid of losing.

KINDS OF STAKES

What are some common kinds of stakes that characters can face?

- Loss of love and/or attention
- Loss of reputation
- Loss of opportunity
- Loss of self
- Loss of relationships.
- Loss of material goods

Let's make up examples for each of these:

Loss of love and/or attention. For the younger set, four-year-old Raphael whose parents have brought home a new baby sister from the hospital may fear losing his parents' love and attention. Though this may seem like a minor thing, this potential loss is huge. The most important things in his world are at

stake—the love and attention of his parents. These are not only emotional losses, they are physical ones as well. His very survival depends upon his parents taking care of him. And though he may not be able to put this in words, he understands enough to know that he needs his parents to take care of him.

Loss of reputation. This is a big one. Consider 17-year-old Josh who is about to be cut from the varsity track team because he can't pass senior English lit. Do you remember English lit where you studied Chaucer and other such authors? It turns out that Josh can't read. He doesn't know it, but he has dyslexia. He has faked his way through elementary school, middle school, and the first three years of high school, but now that he is in senior English, he can't disguise his inability to read any longer. What will happen when his teachers, his classmates, his parents find that he can't read any better than a six-year-old first-grader? What, you may ask, is so important to his reputation about being able to read? It's isn't that he has an impressive school record—he is a C- student at best. It's that everyone will know that he can't do a basic thing like reading.

Loss of self. The stakes of losing one's self are unbelievably high. Without believing in yourself, what else do you have? Let's make up a story about 14-year-old Amber. Amber has the perfect life. Her parents love her dearly. She has a sister who is four years younger whom she loves with all her heart. She does well in school, and though she's not the most popular girl in her class, she had some really good friends. Then she overhears a conversation between her parents where they discuss their decision to tell Amber that she is adopted. Amber is shaken to her core. If she's not her parents' "real" daughter, who is she? She doesn't know and starts to act out. At the same time, she begins a quest to

What Stakes Are Your Characters Risking?...continued

discover who her biological parents are. Everything Amber believed about herself has vanished.

Loss of relationships. Twelve-year-old Catherine's parents are moving across country so that her father can take a better job. Catherine doesn't care about jobs. She cares about her two best friends who live on her street. If her family moves, she will lose them. She and her friends have promised to stay in touch, that they will always be best friends, that a paltry thing like three thousand miles won't affect their friendship. But, of course, it will. The stakes are devastating to Catherine. She and her friends have known each other since pre-school. They went to elementary school together and are now in middle school together. Without her friends, Catherine knows she can't navigate the minefield that is middle school with all its unwritten rules and social strata.

Loss of material goods. I've saved this for last because, at least in my opinion, it is the least important. But many people consider material goods, aka money, fancy house, expensive cars, etc., a high priority. Take 16-year-old Laurel. She enjoys the good life. Her father is a money manager and her mother a lawyer. They give Laurel everything, including a designer wardrobe, "real" jewelry, and the latest "it" purse. But when it comes out that her father cheated hundreds of people, he and her mother have to sell everything they own to pay back the people even a portion of what they are owed. They ask Laurel what she thinks about this, expecting her support. What are Laurel's stakes in this? She's only a teenage girl. She won't be held responsible for what her father did. He isn't going to jail, and sure the family will have to move to a much more modest house, but that's not so bad. Right? Wrong. Laurel has lost everything that defines her. Without all the luxuries and lavish lifestyle, she wonders if her friends will still want to hang out with her. For Laurel, the stakes are tremendous.

Many times these losses are interconnected. For example, Laurel has lost not only her material goods, but also her self-esteem and relationships. Everything is tied together. It may be that she has also lost opportunities if she can no longer go to college as she's always planned. And what of her reputation? Will others blame her for what her father did?

Stakes that are connected become more important and more high risk.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PUBLIC STAKES AND PRIVATE STAKES

Public stakes are just what you would think: the character risks losing those things that make him important to others.

Private stakes are far more important: the character risks losing the very essence of himself. The example of Amber learning that she is adopted is an example of this. If Amber continues with her journey to discover her biological parents, she risks learning things she doesn't want to know, about her adoptive parents, her biological parents, and herself.

THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT STAKES

Make them age-appropriate. The stakes for four-year-old Raphael are naturally different from those of 16-year-old Laurel.

Make them important. Amber's stakes in finding her biological parents are very important. If she succeeds in finding them, what will happen to her relationship with her adoptive parents and with her sister? Will her biological parents want a relationship with her or will they be angry that she has tracked them down?

Make them universal. Though readers probably will not have gone through these exact circumstances, they can relate to the feelings that our characters are experiencing.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When you raise the stakes in fiction for any age, you raise the emotional intensity and appeal of it. Readers become more engaged and their commitment to keep reading grows. Remember: high stakes equal high rewards.

The Co-Founders and Executive Editors of Online Parenting Publication

Motherwell

by Sharon O. Blumberg

This month we're chatting with Lauren Apfel and Randi Olin. They are the co-founders and executive editors of *Motherwell*, an online publication that tells all sides of the parenting story, with original content on family life, culture, obstacles and the process of overcoming them. Additionally, Motherwell Books is a curated online platform of parenting books.

SHARON BLUMBERG: Could you please tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to hold your current positions as co-founders and executive editors of *Motherwell*?

MOTHERWELL: Lauren Apfel and Randi Olin began this online publication five years ago to create a virtual space to showcase the best—the most evocative and provocative—essays on parenting.

SB: How do readers find your magazine?

M: We are online only. But we have a robust social presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, in addition to a weekly newsletter that features pieces from our site, book picks, recipes, as well the top parenting stories from the week.

SB: What kind of audience reads your magazine?

M: We are for anybody and everybody who has an interest in parenting or family relationships. We tell all sides of the parenting story, from a diverse range of perspectives: parents, blended-families, adoption/fostering, grandparents, siblings, and caretakers/caregivers.

SB: What kind of background do your future writers need to have?

M: We welcome seasoned and new writers alike, from a variety of backgrounds. But we put a strong emphasis on the quality of writing. We like a strong voice and ask for your best, most polished work.

SB: What is the best way for writers to submit to your magazine?

M: Through our online submission, which can be found through this link, here: <https://motherwell-mag.com/submissions/>

SB: How do you respond to writers' submissions, and how long does it generally take for you to respond back?

M: We respond to submissions through our online portal, Submittable; we have a very quick turnaround time. If you haven't heard from us within two weeks, feel free to follow up.

SB: What kinds of rights do you buy from writers?

M: Our writers retain the rights to their work, but for paid pieces we have certain re-publication restrictions for 120 days. We pay for selected, featured essays via check or Zelle.

SB: Is there anything else that I have not asked you, that you would like to add regarding yourself or the magazine?

M: We have a new platform on the site that we are very excited about, [Motherwell Books](#), which features the best parenting reads and also children's books. If you are an author, publicist, or publisher, please get in touch with us via email (motherwell-mag@gmail.com) about our bespoke promotional opportunities.

Motherwell...continued

Motherwell is seeking posts related to reading and writing, as well as themed lists of recommended books for their Motherwell Books platform. For the ezine, seeking articles about siblings, women and work, parenting and food, as well as other topics related to parenting and family life. Recent articles include:

I Don't Like My Kids Sleeping Out:

<https://motherwellmag.com/2016/09/20/i-dont-like-my-kids-sleeping-out/>

How I Talk to My Sensitive Son About What He's Feeling:

<https://motherwellmag.com/2021/03/24/how-to-talk-to-a-sensitive-child-about-their-feelings/>

Why It's Hard to Be a Mom and a Military Spouse:

<https://motherwellmag.com/2020/02/13/why-its-hard-to-be-a-mom-and-a-military-spouse/>

How I Respond to the Adoption Questions Like, Are They Really Yours?:

<https://motherwellmag.com/2021/08/31/how-i-respond-to-adoption-questions-like-are-they-really-yours/>