

Children's Book Insider

At Presstime

Publisher Seeks Picture and Board Books

Ideals Children's Books publishes picture books and easy readers (fiction and nonfiction) for children up to age 8 on biblical and religious themes, holidays, animals, history, biography and nature. CandyCane Press, an imprint of Ideals, publishes board books on the same topics (plus early concepts for young children) for ages 2-5. Picture book texts average 1000 words; board books average 200 words. Sample titles include *A Snowman Named Just Bob* by Mark Kimball Moulton, illustrated by Karen Good (ages 4-8, rhyming picture book about friendship); *The ABCs of Halloween* by Patricia Reeder Eubank (ages 1-6); *Discover Abraham Lincoln: Storyteller, Lawyer, President* by Patricia Pingry (from the Discovery Readers easy reader series); *Today is Christmas!* by P.K. Hallinan (board book, ages 2-5). Send entire manuscript (with name/address/phone number on each page) with a brief cover letter listing any previous publishing credits, if applicable. Send with SASE to CandyCane Press, Attn: Submissions, 2636 Elm Hill Pike, Suite 120, Nashville, TN 37214. Exclusive submissions are preferred; replies in about 8 weeks. For more titles, go to www.idealsbooks.com.

Attention: New Perks for CBI Subscribers!

We're making some *big* changes at CBI, and you're all going to benefit. Coming early in 2009 we'll be adding lots of cool and very helpful how-to features to a subscriber-only web site. And the best part — it's free to all paid subscribers! We need your email address to allow you access. Electronic subscribers are already taken care of, but if you're a print subscriber, please go to www.write4kids.com/print.html and fill out the form with your name, address and email. You'll get full details in the January issue. Trust us, you're going to want to be a part of this!

2009 Highlights Fiction Contest Announced

The 2009 *Highlights for Children* Fiction Contest features contemporary stories featuring cultures from around the world for readers up to age 12. Stories can be up to 800 words; those geared to beginning readers should not exceed 500 words. Accepting entries from both published and unpublished writers, but all submissions should be previously unpublished. Three winners will be published by *Highlights* and each of the winners will also receive \$1000. All other submissions will be considered for purchase by *Highlights*. For details go to www.highlights.com, click on "Careers" and then "Contributor Guidelines" and "Fiction Contest," or send a SASE to Fiction Contest, *Highlights for Children*, 803 Church Street, Honesdale, PA 18431. **Entries must be postmarked between January 1 and January 31, 2009.** All envelopes must be clearly marked "Fiction Contest." Winners will be announced in June 2009.

SCBWI National Winter Conference

The 2009 Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators Winter Conference will be held January 31-February 1, 2009, at the Grand Hyatt in New York City. Faculty features top authors, illustrators, agents and editors, including Jay Asher, Tomie dePaola, Richard Peck, Julius Lester, Bruce Hale and Leo and Diane Dillon. Cost is \$315 for members/\$365 non-members (includes Saturday lunch; conference ends by lunchtime on Sunday). Part-time registration will be available, if room permits, after January 19. Author or illustrator full-day intensive workshops are available on January 30 for an additional \$175 for full-time registrants. Sleeping rooms are available at the Hyatt for \$225 per night. For more information, go to www.scbwi.org/events.htm

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December 2008

◆ At Presstime

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. For a free copy of our Special Report, [How to Determine If a New or Small Press is Legitimate](#), send a SASE to CBI at the address below. You can also download this report and others from our Web page: <http://www.write4kids.com>

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Magazine Seeks Profiles and Crafts for Middle Grade Girls

American Girl is a bimonthly magazine for girls ages 8 and up. The magazine is **not** taking any fiction submissions at this time. Nonfiction needs include features about individual girls or groups who are doing something other girls would love to read and learn about. Past pieces have featured girl entrepreneurs, girls who attend unusual schools, and girl bands. Look for new twists on familiar topics. Features average 800 words. No historical biographies about obvious female heroines.

Other departments include:

Girls Express — Short profiles of girls who are into sports, the arts, unique hobbies, cultural activities, or other areas of interest. Also looking for true stories about girls who have had unusual experiences. The girl must be the "star" and the story must be from her point of view. Other needs include easy crafts and recipes that can be explained in a few simple steps. All articles up to 175 words.

Craft and Cooking — Original craft and cooking ideas. Projects should require limited parental involvement and supplies should be inexpensive and readily available. Safety is a priority. Query with a short explanation of the project and an example, photograph, or sketch.

Writers are encouraged to read some recent issues before submitting. Send a query describing article, and mention any photo leads if available. Query with SASE to Submissions Editor, *American Girl*, 8400 Fairway Place, Middleton, WI 53562-0984. Buys first North American serial rights.

Two Agents Accepting Submissions from New Authors

Elana Roth of the Caren Johnson Literary Agency is looking for books that blend literary quality writing with commercial hooks, everything from funny to dark stories. Especially interested in picture books (character driven, quirky books by author/illustrators **only**), middle grade and young adult fiction (high concept, strong voices and strong plot necessary). Does not want to see straight fantasy, sci-fi, or historical. "I tend to shy away from vampire or dragon books. But I'm open to various blends of paranormal, fantasy elements or other fun hooks to make the book fresh."

Email her directly at elana@johnsonlitagency.com with a query letter and the first 3-5 pages of the manuscript pasted into the body of the email. No attachments will be opened. Response time is 1-2 weeks on queries, and 4-6 weeks on manuscripts. www.johnsonlitagency.com

Emily van Beek of Pippin Properties, Inc. represents authors who write for the youngest kids up through teenagers. Looking for exceptionally strong new voices in fiction: picture books with great characters and strong stories (i.e. a beginning, middle, and end), middle grade and young adult fiction with commercial appeal. No light verse or rhyming picture books. Authors are advised to check out Pippin Properties' web site at www.pippinproperties.com to get an idea of the types of authors and artists they represent, the "Pippin Philosophies", and submissions guidelines. Email queries are preferred (evanbeek@pippinproperties.com).

Publisher Seeking New Literary Talent in Books for All Ages

Henry Holt & Co. Books for Young Readers publishes fiction and nonfiction for all ages. Seeking high-quality, literary books from imaginative authors and illustrators. While Holt publishes many award-winners, they are always seeking new talent. Recent titles include *Charles and Emma: The Darwin's Leap of Faith* by Deborah Heiligman (young adult biography); *Detective Jermain: Volume 1* by Misako Rocks! (young adult graphic novel); *Ice Bears* by Brenda Z. Guiberson (nonfiction picture book, ages 5-8); *Emmy and the Home for Troubled Girls* by Lynne Jonell (fiction, ages 9 and up); *Doctor Meow's Big Emergency* by Sam Lloyd (picture book, ages 3-6); *Aurelie: A Faerie Tale* by Heather Tomlinson (young adult fantasy); *When I Grow Up: A Young Person's Guide to Interesting and Unusual Occupations* by Jessica Loy (ages 7-12); *Cinder Rabbit* by Lynn Hazen (beginning chapter book, ages 6-9). Send entire manuscript with a brief cover letter that contains a short synopsis of the manuscript and lists any relevant author information. **Do not** enclose a SASE; Holt will respond only to those submissions they're interested in publishing. Will consider **exclusive** submissions only. Responds in 4-6 months. If you have not heard back in six months, assume the publisher is not interested in your work. Send all submissions to Submissions Editor, Henry Holt books for Young Readers, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010. For more titles, go to <http://us.macmillan.com/holtyoungreaders.aspx>

Christy Ottaviano Books, an imprint of Henry Holt BFYR, publishes picture books, middle grade and young adult fiction. Imprint is accepting submissions only through agents.

◆ Between the Lines

Poet's Collections Stir Young Readers' Spirits

Want to be a poet?" asks David Harrison. "Do it, but don't rush. When I made that decision, I wrote nothing but poems for three years."

David's success is a product of the lessons he learned during that time. The author of over 70 books, David is best known for themed poetry collections like *Somebody Catch My Homework* (school poems); *Connecting Dots: Poems of My Journey* (memoir in verse and free verse); *Wild Country* (free verse about animals and nature); *Bugs, poems about creeping things*; and the new, non-fiction-based *Pirates*. Next year he'll publish two new collections; one featuring poems for two voices and the other short, humorous poems about a family vacation.

David's love of poetry is evident in a chapter he wrote for the IRA text *Invitation to Read*:

"Poets savor the taste and smell of words and love similes that bring together surprising comparisons to make a point. Every word carries in its genes – when used in the right way, the right time, the right place – the potential to stir the human spirit. A poem is proof that someone tried to get it right."

Must poetry collections be built around a central theme or idea?

Before attempting *Pirates*, I read a number of authoritative texts. Both the foreword and back matter in the book provide facts about real pirates. The poems grew from the research and portray pirates who prowled the seas from the late 17th century into the 18th. The effort was to create literature for young readers, but I hope that teachers and students will find it a ready supplement for classroom units about pirates.

Themes are attractive for leisure reading too. If a young person is into a particular subject, he or she probably will prefer poems that don't keep wandering off the path.

Is it essential that writers study and use classic poetry formats, or can they just go with what feels right for each poem?

It is important for a poet to know and understand the fundamentals of poetry. Unless one is going to teach poetry, it may not be necessary to become an authority on the subject, but a practicing poet certainly needs

to be familiar with the tools of the trade.

Some emerging writers attempt to bluff their way into print by writing without first putting in the time and energy to learn about their craft. The "write now, learn later" approach rarely produces much of value. The reader will respect the poem about as much as the poet does. There are plenty of books available that present and explain the basics of writing poetry.

Studies show that young readers prefer contemporary poetry. They like rhyme, rhythm, and metaphors. They choose poems about animals, people, and experiences they can relate to. They love humor. They don't care much for haikus and they really hate poems that preach to them. To reach today's children, poets don't have to wow them with classic formats. They do need to understand their audience. Whether a poet chooses verse or free verse, the most important ingredient is the young reader's voice whispering in the poet's ear.

Nonfiction and poetry is an unusual combination, and yet there seems to be a good market for your books.

Nonfiction books seem more important than ever for recreational reading as well as curricula-related assignments. Using poetry in the classroom is being discovered by a growing number of teachers not only for its value in developing reading and spelling skills but as a tool for teaching lessons across the curricula. Many teachers now ask students to write nonfiction poems to sum up what they have learned in science, math, music or other units they have been studying.

When you put these elements together, what you get is an opportunity to write more nonfiction, themed poetry, or at least poetry based on nonfiction information. Writers who have a particular skill or knowledge might find editors receptive to nonfiction poems that would catch the attention of teachers and librarians.

Having said all that, poets must still follow the cardinal rule of never letting their work become too didactic. Young people like to learn naturally. Spooning up information because it's "good" for them goes down like any other unwelcome medicine.



Pirates by David L. Harrison, illustrated by Dan Burr (Wordsong/Boyd's Mills Press, ages 8-12)

David Harrison's advice for aspiring writers:

Don't try to do everything at once. Teachers face the same dilemma. When they are required to have students write too many assignments too quickly, they run the risk of reinforcing bad habits along with the good.

I think it's better to write one thing well than ten poorly. Pick a genre that intrigues you and stick with that long enough to get the heft of it. If you like short stories, try picture books. If you want to reach older children, write a few chapter books. Still too young? Try one or two young adult books.

Find your level of highest interest and settle in to develop skill in that format.

To see more picture books, easy readers and poetry by David L. Harrison, go to mowrites4kids.drury.edu/authors/harrison/#links

Lively Writing and Author's Passion

Long, long ago (1960s-1970s) and far, far away, I grew up living on a steady diet of children's fiction. Why not nonfiction? Back then, it was written in encyclopedia dry as moon dust language, and would put any self-respecting kid out to ozone land.

Take a look at *today's* nonfiction. Had someone handed me Ellen Jackson's *The Mysterious Universe: Supernovae, Dark Energy, and Black Holes*, my childhood would have been very different. What a concept: nonfiction as accessible *and* exciting!

What's appealing about this book? Jackson's conversational writing style, fun "kid-like" comparisons, amazing information, and writing that jumps off the page with clarity and passion pulls the reader along on an amazing journey.

Remember how boring introductions used to be? Get a load of the beginning of *this* introduction:

You've probably heard the universe is big.

But do you have any idea just how big it is? Chances are you're reading this book somewhere in North America on the planet Earth. But Earth is not the largest object in the solar system. Our sun is a star, a blazing fireball much, much larger than Earth. In fact, the sun is so huge that if it were a gumball machine, one million gumball-size Earths could fit inside it.

Jackson grabs you with an intriguing question that propels you onward to search for the answer. Next, she gives a bit of humor, adds a vivid verb, and concludes with a perfect child-friendly comparison.

Exercise: Take some nonfiction you have written for children. Make a statement the child will already know. Then add a question. Can you create a clever "child-like" comparison within your writing? Not as easy as it looks, is it?

Here Jackson introduces the astronomer, Alex Filippenko:

"Wahoo!" he shouts. "We nailed it. We've got a Type Ia (One-A) supernova!"

He jumps up and gives everyone a high-five. Alex is a whirlwind, full of energy and always on the go. Maybe that's why he studies supernovae, some of the greatest explosions in the universe.

Note how she uses Alex's dialogue and action to show his passion and enthusiasm,

which makes this feeling contagious for readers. Her last sentence ties in to her science concept.

Exercise: Your turn! Who have you interviewed lately? Describe this person using his or her own words and actions without a laundry list of adjectives.

When Jackson and Filippenko visit Mauna Kea, the mountain where the world's largest telescopes are, follow how the author brings the reader into the moment:

Alex crunches his way across the broken lava of Mauna Kea. It's ice cold with an average temperature of 30 degrees Fahrenheit or -1 degree Celsius. There's no vegetation, just every possible color and shape of lava. Hawaiian lava comes in two varieties: one that's smooth and easy to walk on and another that's spiky, sharp, and dangerous, called 'a'a (pronounced "ah-ah"). If you fall on it, you'll know where it got its name.

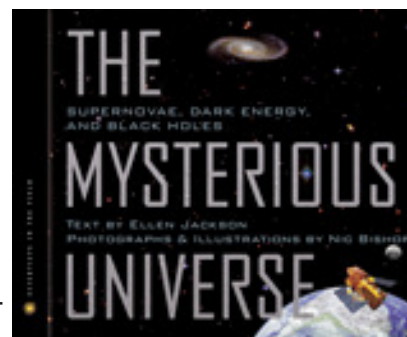
Notice the slow-down-the-moment technique, as though we are actually with the author and astronomer. This immediacy transforms nonfiction into an active experience for children. Jackson employs specific details of setting and more humor. And this:

A telescope is like a light bucket, designed to detect the tiniest trace of light.

Exercise: Incorporate setting details and slow down the moment. Create a WOW simile like Jackson.

If you apply these tips to your factual information, no reader—or editor—will ever call your nonfiction boring!

Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff's books include *The ABCs of Writing for Children*; *John Muir and Stickeen: An Alaskan Adventure*; *Louise the One and Only*; *Wish Magic*; *Help! My Life is Going to the Dogs*; *You're Kidding! Incredible Facts About the Presidents*; *Curtain Call*; and a nonfiction picture book to be released in 2009 by Millbrook/Lerner. She's had over 350 articles published in *Writer's Digest*, *Parents Magazine*, *Parenting*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The SCBWI Bulletin*, and *Children's Writer*.



The Mysterious Universe: Supernovae, Dark Energy, and Black Holes by Ellen Jackson (Houghton Mifflin, ages 9-12, 64 pages)

Make Science Exciting for Kids

by Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff

Ellen Jackson Talks About Writing The Mysterious Universe

You've written a wonderful book about the beginnings of the universe. What was the origin of this book?

It's amazing how certain books come to be. I can thank my dog for this one. She sometimes plays with a dog named Leo at the dog park. I happened to mention to Leo's "mom" that I'd recently written a book about an astronomer for Houghton Mifflin's Scientists in the Field series, and that I was looking for another scientist to feature. She said, "You know, you really should write about my son. He's an astronomer."

At first, I tried to discourage her. I was looking for someone who was a real star in his or her field, someone doing cutting edge work that would interest kids, and someone who was willing to be interviewed and photographed at length.

She told me that her son met all those qualifications. She was right—he did!

How did you organize everything? Any tips for us?

Organization has never been my strong suit. But basically, I had a number of accordion files, each devoted to a particular sub-topic: dark energy, black holes, Alex's life and work as an astronomer, telescopes (he works with three or four different telescopes), dark matter, the big bang, and supernovae.

Alex recommended a couple of books and articles, which I read before I watched him work. Then when we visited him at the Keck telescope, I tape recorded his dialogue with his grad students, so I could give kids a sense of actually being there. And I included my verbal descriptions of everything I saw on the tape, so I wouldn't have to rely on my memory.

I also recorded and transcribed several hours of interviews, both with Alex and his graduate students. One copy of the interviews was cut up and divided into the various folders. I kept the other copy by my desk as I worked.

How did you choose which information became side bars?

Anything that wasn't part of the main narrative went into the side bars. For example, I needed to explain that when astronomers look far out in space, they're also looking back in time. That material went into a side bar. The information about how supernovae are named and numbered also went into a side bar. I kept the main narrative as the main text, so that the reader can ignore each of the side bars and still follow the story.

It was hard to organize all the material into a cohesive whole. There was just so much to cover. I wanted to start with the excitement of supernovae. Who doesn't like fireworks? These are the biggest explosions you can possibly imagine—ones that can be seen across the universe!

But my editor felt there was something missing in the first chapter. She asked me to provide an introduction about the size of the universe. I had to rework the first chapter four or five times to get everything in.

How do you decide what material stayed in the book and what had to go?

That's always a problem, isn't it? I'm a big kid myself, and some of my off-the-wall humor got weeded out. Some of that is now in my Interview with the Universe (on my web site www.ellenjackson.net). Also, anything that couldn't be explained to a reader who didn't have a sophisticated knowledge of science and/or math had to go. And some really interesting stories about Alex had to go too.

What did you learn about writing through the process of this book?

I learned that if you want to write a nonfiction book that requires lots of research and field work, you'd better love the topic. You'll be working on it for a long time. If you're going to do a biography (and this book is partly a biography) choose a subject who's both cooperative and entertaining—Alex is both! Make sure that every detail in your book is accurate and check and recheck every fact.

One other thing—a book like this is the product of several people, but only one person gets her name on the cover. Keep your ego in check and remember that the book is not solely yours—it belongs partly to the editor, the featured subject (Alex), and the illustrator/photographer too. Be prepared to compromise and be sure to thank everyone involved.

And I do mean everyone. Even Leo gets a mention in the Acknowledgments.

You explain scientific concepts so clearly! How do you break something so complex down in a way that is so understandable, but without talking down to your reader?

Thank you. What Alex and other astronomers are doing is really very simple. The equipment they need is technical and sophisticated, but what they're doing isn't. Physics is physics, whether you're talking about gravity pulling on galaxies or gravity acting on a ball thrown up into the air. It was just a matter of finding some good metaphors or analogies that kids can understand. If I can explain a concept to myself, I can usually find the words to explain it to a child. And Alex is good at explaining what he's doing in simple terms.

Anything else you'd like to add? Other advice for writers interested in writing a science book for kids?

All children begin as little scientists. They ask questions such as: "Where did the universe come from?" "How big is it?" Children love to explore the unknown and their eyes light up when they're told about things like the big bang and black holes. At its best, science is a way to fire the imagination and experience a sense of connection with the universe. It's the greatest of all adventure stories. If you keep that spirit of adventure alive in your nonfiction books or articles for kids, you can't go wrong.

If You're Not Aiming for Excellence, You're Wasting Everyone's Time

by
Jon Bard

Know what I find offensive? I mean really, really offensive?
Mediocrity.

I'm really quite OK with bad books, or bad music, or bad movies—as long as I can observe that the people behind the work had the intention of making something great. There's no shame in trying to produce something beautiful and falling short. There's no shame in trying to reach beyond your level of talent and hitting a wall.

But mediocrity is another matter. Mediocrity says that you never intended to shoot for the stars. You just wanted to get something out there, make a few bucks and grab a little fame.

It used to be that mediocrity was obliterated by excellence. Think about the pop culture titans who strode the earth in days past: Mailer, Sinatra, Ali, Hepburn, Dylan, Bowie.... Sure there were hacks all over the place back then, but they were largely obscured by the shadows of the truly talented.

Now look at the culture around you and think about who our most famous people are. We're surrounded by a sea of reality TV stars, vapid mass-produced pop idols and ceaseless self-promoters. We have become a society that doesn't just tolerate mediocrity, we venerate it. We've mistaken heat for talent. And we've handed over the keys of our culture to the unbearably average.

So what's this have to do with you, dear children's writer? Just this:

We don't need more children's books. We need more *great* children's books. If you're not fully committed to trying to create something spectacular, and wonderful and utterly breathtaking, find another hobby.

Now, you may not have the chops to actually succeed at creating something beautiful, but you won't know that until you truly try. If you fail, at least you'll have gone down with a dignity of purpose. If you succeed, you may not sell as many books as the celebrity-author-of-the-day, but I guarantee that kids will know. And future generations will know.

And, for goodness sakes, is there another form of artistic expression that offers a greater chance for unbounded creativity, joy and inventiveness than a children's book? And is there another field that offers a better chance for the truly visionary to actually come out on top? J.K. Rowling, Mo Willems and Louis Sachar don't sell so many books because they were hyped to the heavens. They sell so many books because kids have a natural B.S. detector and can tell the truly great from the truly mediocre. They sell so many books because they dreamed of greatness, and it was greatness they so deservedly achieved.

Kids don't care about hype. They just want what's good. In that, they are the final firewall against mediocrity. And they deserve only the best as a result.

And here's the best part: If you set your sights not on fame and fortune, but rather on simply creating something beautiful, your chances of success become so much greater. When we've asked writers about the best moments of their careers, we've never heard anyone say "getting a big advance" or "making the bestseller list". What we've heard is "when a parent stopped and thanked me for writing a book that turned her child on to reading" or "when I got a letter from a young boy who told me that my book changed his life" or "when a writer I really admire complimented me." And these are from some folks who *have* gotten big advances and *have* made bestseller lists.

In March 1966, The Velvet Underground released their debut album. It was met with confused indifference and barely dented the charts. Today it's said that 5,000 people bought that record and every one of them started a band. The impact of that album is profound beyond words and, while most of the bands who bested the Velvet Underground in sales are now forgotten, young musicians still pull that record out and marvel. And then they start a band.

The point: create something special and beautiful and then give it to the world. Forget about sales, forget about acclaim. Just write a book that even a handful of kids will read. But make that book so special, so wonderful, that this handful will go forth and write their own wonderful books.

Right now:

1. Decide if you are truly committed to creating something absolutely, utterly transcendent. If not, walk away.
2. If you are up to the task, defend this decision with everything you've got. Don't let naysayers, shortsighted rejecters, and the voices of those who would drag you down to their level of mediocrity and compromise stop you. Forge ahead and find your path to excellence.

*Jon Bard is the Managing Editor of Children's Book Insider. He blogs at www.write4kids.com/blog
Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jonbard*

◆ Your Publishing Career

How to Become a Blogging Star

by Pam Coughlan

In last month's issue, we taught you how to start your own blog. Now it's time to start blogging—and to start building an audience of regular readers. With that in mind, we turn it over to Pam Coughlan, the lady behind the superb *MotherReader* blog (www.motherreader.com). We recently saw Pam give a wonderful and hilarious presentation on the subject at the *Kidlitosphere Conference*, and she was kind enough to give us permission to adapt her talk here. This is a lady who really knows her stuff, so pay heed!

Now, here are Pam's top 12 tips for building an essential blog:

1. **Quality Content:** Good content is like porn. No one can describe what constitutes it, but everyone knows it when they see it. Lots of people can write book reviews, so you need to find a way to offer something more—and something interesting. Basically, what you write about has to be worth reading by someone other than your mom.

2. **Daily Updates:** For higher Technorati rankings (a focal point for blog activity on the net), you need (daily or near-daily) updates. In the kidlitosphere, we'll cut some slack for not updating on weekends or skipping an occasional day, but if you want lots of readers you've got to offer lots to read.

3. **Personal Voice:** Sometimes voice is translated into humor, and I'll admit that it's easier to convey voice through humor, but it's not the only way. Readers need to see something of your personality in your posts.

4. **Links and Blogrolls:** An important part of blogging is being part of a community. Link to other bloggers when they write something interesting. Link and give credit when you find something on another blog that you want to write about too. Oh, and thank them when they write about your posts. Now, blogrolls (a list of links) are personal. Don't get hung up on blogrolls, but don't expect to be on another person's blogroll if they're not on yours.

5. **Comments:** If you want to be noticed, you have to comment on other blogs sometimes. It's best if your comment adds something to the post, but an occasional "hey, that's funny!" is good too. Personally, I'd suggest commenting under your blog name

for easier recognition.

6. **A Particular Niche:** Children's literature is already a tight topic area, but you'll stand out if you have a niche. Think about what unique perspective you have to bring to the table.

7. **Spelling and Grammar:** Spelling counts. An occasional mistake can pass, but if your writing is sloppy in a topic like literature, you're going to lose readers.

8. **Good Looks:** It doesn't need to be fancy, but an individualized header does set the tone for a more professional blog. Clean lines, good readability, and logical organization are necessary. Occasional pictures do help.

9. **Unique Branding:** Jen Robinson pulls together literacy news. Bookshelves of Doom is always on top of book challenges. It's more than niche reporting. When I see these issues come up other than at those sites, I think of these blogs. I've associated their blogs with those topics. That's branding.

10. **Self-Promotion:** You can start with putting your blog address on your email signature. Tell your actual, real-life friends about your blog. If you have something super-special that you want to get out in the blog world, you might humbly email a blogger and ask them to consider promoting it. Self-promotion also teeters on bragging, so you have to be careful, but my philosophy is that you don't get much in this world without asking for it.

11. **Active Participation:** Create content to share with other blogs, such as a useful list. Throw in a poem for Poetry Friday, a favorite post for a Blog Carnival (a regular wrap-up of top posts), or an article for *The Edge of the Forest*. Get yourself out there.

12. **Patience and Perseverance:** You won't get to be a known blogger overnight. You have to keep writing, keep linking, keep commenting, keep promoting, and keep improving for at least a year.

Follow your progress with a statistic tracking system (like StatCounter or Sitemeter) which will help you determine how you're doing readership-wise and where your readers come from and where they go.

To learn how to start your own blog—and why you should—see "Getting Started as a Blogger" by Jon Bard in the November 2008 issue of **CBI**. And don't forget to visit our blog, *The Children's Writing Web Journal*, at www.write4kids.com/blog

Pam Coughlan is a children's librarian who has been blogging at www.MotherReader.com since 2006. She sums up her philosophy thusly:

"One of the best-selling preschool books of recent times was *Walter the Farting Dog*. At the same time, the American Library Association named as one of its best books Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*, a book in which Mr. Rosen talks about his despair over the death of his son. I believe that, for most of us, what we want lies somewhere between a flatulent canine and overwhelming grief."

◆ The Basics

Revision: One Layer at a Time

by Nancy Kelly Allen

When you reach the last line of your manuscript, relief wraps you like a favorite blanket. But relief is only a memory when you read through your work and see it needs so much revision, you don't know where to begin. Revision can be more manageable if you tackle it one layer at a time.

Revise the entire manuscript focusing only on a specific fix-up. When you have made all the revisions, start another cycle focusing on a different fix-up.

Action vs. passive verbs

Does each verb in your manuscript show action? Some verbs—*is, are, was, were*—don't show action. Check the adverbs—those words that end in *-ly*, such as *slowly*. If you're writing, *Susie ran quickly*, change the sentence to a stronger verb. Maybe, *Susie rushed*, or even better, *Susie's shoes smoked over the sidewalk as she passed me in a blur*. Eliminate weak verbs that need an adverb to explain the action.

Abstract vs. concrete words

Abstract words, such as *loyalty*, don't have oomph, because the meaning of loyalty varies with each reader. Concrete words describe the action and paint a picture in the mind of the reader. Readers can't see or feel loyalty, but they can see a dog keeping guard all night over a lost and injured young boy, with both of their tummies growling. Give every scene in your story concrete images.

Pacing

Short sentences quicken the pace of your story and long sentences slow down the pace. Vary sentence length to give your manuscript an interesting feel. Several short sentences conveys urgency and excitement:

"Did you get it?" Bob asked.

"Get what?"

"What? The rattlesnake!"

Overuse of sentences, long or short, can be dry-as-dust reading. Develop a blend

of sentence lengths to keep readers hooked.

Tighten

Cut out unnecessary parts of the story. What is unnecessary? Any prose or dialog that doesn't carry the story forward. When you describe your protagonist, is it necessary to know that she was born in Walla Walla? If that information is key to the plot, leave it in the manuscript. If the place of the character's birth is not important to the plot, cut it out. Information that does not carry the story forward slows down the plot. In a word: BOOOORING!

For picture books, focus on one conflict with about 15 scenes for illustrations. Cut anything that goes beyond that conflict.

Read aloud

Read the manuscript aloud. You may notice mistakes that you didn't with silent reading. You'll also get a feel for the ease in which the story reads. Are some words or phrases almost tongue twisters that cause the reader to stumble? Rewrite those parts to make the words flow with a natural rhythm.

Hand it over

When your manuscript is as good as you can make it, hand it over to a few other writers for feedback. Select the comments you agree with and make those changes.

Move on

Before you send out your story to targeted publishers, move on to another project. Let the finished project hang out on a shelf for a month or so. Revisit the manuscript for one last review. After you've been away from the story for a while, aspects of pacing or dialog may jump out at you that you didn't notice when you worked on the manuscript daily. Tidy up those layers.

Your manuscript may need more revision focusing on other fix-ups. Don't sweat it! Layer it. Add sparkle, one layer at a time.

Nancy Kelly Allen's picture books include *Once Upon a Dime*; *On the Banks of the Amazon* (named Appalachian Book of the Year in Children's Literature); *Whose Noise Is This?*; *Whose Food Is This?*; *Whose House Is This?*; *Daniel Boone: Trail Blazer*; *The Munched-Up Garden*; *Ring the Silver Bell*; and for parents, *Read to Me! I Will Listen: Tips Mom and Dad Can Use to Help Me Become a Lifelong Reader* (Morning Glory Press). Visit her web site at www.nancykellyallen.com

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