

# Children's Book Insider

The Newsletter for Children's Writers

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## At Presstime: *Publisher Accepts Fiction, Nonfiction for ages 2-12*

Albert Whitman & Company publishes picture books for ages 2-8, novels for ages 8-12, and nonfiction for ages 3-12. For picture books, looking for shorter texts (under 1500 words) and **not** currently interested in bedtime stories or folk tales. Fiction subjects (picture books and novels) include adventure, multicultural, fantasy, historical, humor, mysteries, holidays, and stories that help children deal with specific problems. Nonfiction interests include animals, art, cooking, hobbies, nature, photography, religion, science, sports, social studies and math. Recent titles include *Love Lizzie: Letters to a Military Mon* by Lisa McElroy, illustrated by Diane Paterson (picture book for ages 6-10); *Apple Countdown* by Joan Holub, illustrated by Jan Smith (picture book for ages 4-7); *Autism and Me: Sibling Stories* by Ouisie Shapiro (nonfiction picture book, ages 7-12); *The Truth About Truman School* by Dori Butler (middle grade novel). Send complete manuscript for picture books, query with synopsis and sample chapters for longer works. Send with SASE to Kathleen Tucker, Editor-in-Chief, Albert Whitman & Company, 6340 Oakton Street, Morton Grove, IL 60053. For more information go to [www.albertwhitman.com](http://www.albertwhitman.com)

### Inside cbi:

At Presstime....1

The New Multimedia,  
Part 2....3

Special Report:  
Fantasy, Reality  
Combine for  
Riveting Young  
Adult Fiction....4

Between the Lines:  
Author Pamela  
Turner Tells a  
Captivating Life Story"  
by Sticking to the  
Facts....6

The CBI Challenge:  
Pull a Character  
and Plot from Your  
Idea....8

## *Scout Leaders Can Turn Work with Kids into Magazine Sales*

*Scouting* magazine is published by the Boy Scouts of America six times a year. Subscription is included as part of each Scouter's annual registration fee. Publishes articles about successful program activities conducted by or for Cub Scout packs, Boy Scout troops, and Venturing crews. Also looking for features on winning leadership techniques and styles, profiles of outstanding individual leaders, and inspirational accounts (usually first person) of Scouting's impact on an individual, either as a youth or while serving as a volunteer adult leader. Occasionally publishes a general-interest article geared to the adult audience on nature, families, social issues and trends, historical topics and humor.

The best opportunity for first-time freelancers is with inspirational or humorous accounts of Scouting experiences and successful Scouting program ideas. These run 50-150 words, and pay \$25. Regular columns *Way It Was* (Scouting history) and *Family Talk* (family and raising kids) run 600-750 words, and pay \$300-\$500. Buys first rights; pays on acceptance. Query with a synopsis of proposed article and send with SASE to *Scouting Magazine*, 1325 W. Walnut Hill Lane, PO Box 152079, Irving, TX 75015-2079. For more information, go to [www.scoutingmagazine.org](http://www.scoutingmagazine.org)

## *Visit Colorado in Autumn, and Learn to Write Fiction for Children!*

**Children's Authors' Bootcamp in the Mountains** will be held in beautiful Boulder, CO on October 10-11, 2009, at the Best Western Boulder Inn. CBI's Laura Backes and award-winning author Linda Arms White will teach you how to write fiction for children and young adults in two fun and info-packed days. We'll cover creating characters and plots that sell; writing dialogue, description and point of view; show don't tell; editing your own work; writing cover and query letters; finding a publisher and much more. Cost for the weekend (includes lunches, snacks and handouts) is \$269. Sleeping rooms at the Best Western are \$99 for a king bed, or \$109 for two queens, and includes a continental breakfast. For more information or to register, go to [www.WeMakeWriters.com](http://www.WeMakeWriters.com).

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## August 2009

## At Presstime: *Publisher Seeks Fiction, Historical Fiction for Ages 8 and Up*

Calkins Creek Books, an imprint of Boyds Mills Press, publishes nonfiction and historical fiction for ages 8 and up about the people, places and events that shaped our country's history. Books must combine original and extensive research with energetic writing. Authors are encouraged to submit a bibliography, including primary and secondary sources, along with expert reviews with their submissions. Recent titles include *Comfort* by Joyce Moyer Hostetter (ages 11-14, WW II historical fiction); *Voyages: Reminiscences of Young Abe Lincoln* by Neil Waldman (nonfiction picture book format, ages 11-14); *Three Across: The Great Transatlantic Air Race of 1927* by Norman H. Finkelstein (nonfiction, ages 9-11). For picture books, send entire manuscript. For novels and longer nonfiction, submit a synopsis and the first three chapters. If you intend for the book to be illustrated with photos or other graphic elements (charts, graphs, etc.), it is your responsibility to find or create those elements and to include with the submission a permissions budget, if applicable. Send with SASE to Carolyn P. Yoder, Editor, Calkins Creek Books, 815 Church Street, Honesdale, PA 18431. Mark package "Manuscript Submission." For more titles, go to [www.calkinscreekbooks.com](http://www.calkinscreekbooks.com)

### *Two Awards for Recently Published Books Accepting Entries*

Texas State University College of Education sponsors the **Tomas Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award** to honor authors and illustrators who create literature that depicts the Mexican American experience. The award was established in 1995 and was named in honor of Dr. Tomas Rivera, a distinguished alumnus of Texas State University. The award is given annually to the author or author and illustrator of the most distinguished book for children and young adults that authentically reflects the lives and experiences of Mexican Americans in the United States. The book must be written for children or young adults (0-16 years), the portrayal/representations of Mexican Americans must be accurate and engaging, avoid stereotypes, and reflect rich characterization; and the book may be fiction or non fiction. Nominations are accepted from authors, illustrators, publishers, and the public at large. Children's input will be solicited on the nominated books.

The deadline for nominations is November 1, 2009. Nominated books must be published in 2008 or 2009. For nominations, send a letter of nomination that lists the book's category (ages pre-K to fifth grade — awarded in even years, or grades 6-12 — awarded in odd years), the title, author, illustrator, ISBN#, and publisher of the book, along with four copies of the book to Dr. Jennifer Battle, Director of the Tomas Rivera Book Award, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666. The winner will be announced by February 15, 2010. The 2009 co-winners were *The Holy Tortilla and a Pot of Beans* by Carmen Tafolla and *He Forgot to Say Goodbye* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. For more information go to <http://riverabookaward.info>

The **Western Heritage Awards** are awarded each year to works of literature, film, television and music that accurately and artistically portray the historic or contemporary West, either in fiction or nonfiction formats. The juvenile category includes books for children up to age 12 that were published between December 1, 2008 and November 30, 2009. Entries consist of five copies of the published book, a completed entry form, and a \$50 entry fee. Winners will be recognized during an awards ceremony at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. For an entry form, go to [www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/files/whaentryform.pdf](http://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/files/whaentryform.pdf). For more information about the award, and to see lists of past winners in each category, go to [www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/events/wha](http://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/events/wha)

### *Children's Book Writing Conference in Nashville, TN*

The Kentucky/Tennessee region of SCBWI is holding its 2009 Midsouth Fall Conference on September 25-27 in Nashville, TN. Speakers include Kaylan Adair, Associate Editor, Candlewick Press; Patrick Collins, Creative Director, Henry Holt; award-winning author Caroline B. Cooney; Cheryl Klein, Senior Editor, Arthur A. Levine Books; and Michael Stearns, Agent, Firebrand Literary Agency. The weekend also includes optional manuscript critiques (extra charge), a fiction writing and an illustrating contest, and portfolio screenings. For more information or to register, go to [www.scbwi-midsouth.org](http://www.scbwi-midsouth.org)

**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. Go to [www.write4kids.com/html](http://www.write4kids.com/html) for a free copy of our Special Report, [How to Determine If a New or Small Press is Legitimate](#).

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## Book Publishing Today

# The New Multimedia, Part 2

by Jane McBride Choate

In last month's article on multimedia projects, we discussed the collaboration of novels and electronic media. This month we'll look at how to submit ideas to publishers.

Authors of these novels don't have to be multimedia experts — the publishers take care of the non-book elements, though often welcome ideas from authors. Some companies (such as Fourth Story Media, below) ask that authors contribute to the series website, writing as one of the characters. Because these multimedia projects are still finding their legs, most aren't directly open to unsolicited submissions, so authors must use other routes to get their foot in the door.

The Amanda Project is an interactive, collaborative fictional mystery series for girls age 13 and up. It revolves around Amanda Valentino, an elusive, charismatic, and alluring new girl at Evansville Township High School who arrives mid-year, leaves abruptly, and indelibly changes the lives of everyone around her in the process. Her story will be told across a variety of media in addition to the books — a social website where readers can interact with and become characters in the mystery, a related series of blogs chronicling the story as it unfolds, clues and seed posts on satellite sites, downloadable music and official and user-generated merchandise. The first book, *invisible i* by Stella Lennon, will be published this September. Lisa Holton, head of Fourth Story Media (which is creating the series for HarperCollins), said that while they are open to working with authors new to them, submissions for the series must be made through an agent. Either a detailed proposal or complete manuscript is acceptable. She says, "Although we are always looking for new talent to work with, we are a small, hands-on creative studio and so must limit the amount of new projects we take on. However we are always interested in great writing and compelling stories that lend themselves to multimedia narrative."

As is often the case with small companies like Fourth Story Media who create and produce series for publishers, the editors have very specific needs and want to find authors who can seamlessly blend into existing projects. So submitting through an agent is virtually mandatory. If you have an agent and

think you'd like to write for The Amanda Project, read the first book, watch the trailer at [www.amandaproject.com](http://www.amandaproject.com), and follow the online elements as they unfold to get a good sense of the tone of the series before writing a proposal for a new book. Or, have your agent submit a proposal for an original idea that lends itself well to a multimedia series fitting Fourth Story Media's philosophy ([www.fourthstorymedia.com](http://www.fourthstorymedia.com)).

Larger publishers often pull from their existing stable of authors when developing new multimedia ventures. For example, global romance giant Harlequin Books has teamed with Big Fish Games to create games based on the Harlequin Presents line. Michelle Renaud of Harlequin Public Relations said, "Generally, we tend to approach writers whose track record we know. We try to match the style and voice of the author to what is required of the projects. For that reason, we don't usually accept proposals from authors outside the parameters of the project, since the parameters are very specific and we know what we're looking for."

So what does this mean to you? In the case of a large company like Harlequin, see if you could write for one of the publisher's other imprints or series that's currently taking submissions. According to guidelines on [www.eharlequin.com](http://www.eharlequin.com) (click on Editorial Guidelines in the FAQ section at the bottom of the home page), the following imprints are open to new authors: Harlequin Teen, Kimani Press, Harlequin Historical Undone, and Nocturne Bites. Having your original manuscript published by one of the above imprints opens the door to your being tapped to write for new series as they're developed.

The bottom line is that publishers are risking a large financial investment on these multimedia projects, and will be wary of hiring unproven authors. So become a known quantity. If you're already published, great. Consider getting an agent to facilitate the submission process. If you're a novice author, beef up your resume with writing credits, especially from the company producing the project. Then your future book could be the centerpiece of the next multimedia sensation.

### *Is the Multimedia Brand Wagon Right for You?*

Multimedia series — which combine books, web sites, blogs, merchandise, downloadable music and more — are the hottest new fiction venues, especially for middle graders and young adults. Because of the interactive nature of the media, the series naturally create a buzz among readers, causing sales to skyrocket quickly. If you dream of writing for one of these series, ask yourself the following questions:

*Have you proven that you can deliver a quality manuscript on time, and develop a readership?* If you've never been published, work on acquiring some credits, ideally as books written for the same audience as the series (contemporary, tech-savvy readers ages 9-16).

*Can you write in the style of the series?* Read some of the books from series you'd like to contribute to. Does the tone and style match your natural writing voice?

*Can you write to order?* Series are generally conceived by the editors or the series' initial creator, with character sketches and plot outlines provided to each writer. While there may be some room for creativity, you'll probably have to stick pretty close to the plotline you're given.

*Does your series idea have "legs"?* If you're proposing a completely new series, does it have enough different elements to sustain readers over several books, and generate additional story material via web sites, blogs, chat rooms, etc.? For example, both The Amanda Project and Scholastic's The 39 Clues (a middle grade series of 10 books, an online game and trading cards) have a mystery component. In The 39 Clues ([www.the39clues.com](http://www.the39clues.com)), readers collect clues (10 from the books, 29 online) to solve the mystery presented in Book 1. Readers can win prizes along the way. But besides the mysteries, both series have complex central characters who continue to develop as the story unfolds.

## Fantasy, Reality Combine for

Maggie Stiefvater likes to hang out in that place where the supernatural and real worlds collide. It's there that she gets her inspiration for the young adult contemporary fantasies that are quickly making her a star among teen readers and landing her on best-book lists galore. Her first book, *Lament: The Faerie Queen's Deception* (Flux, 2008) tells the story of a shy but gifted harpist who falls in love with a soulless faerie assassin sent to kill her. The plot draws on Maggie's own passion for faerie folklore and experience as a Celtic musician. The sequel, *Ballad*, will be published in October 2009. Maggie's newest novel, *Shiver*, comes out this month from Scholastic Press, with the follow-up *Linger* slated for Fall 2010. *Shiver* follows the passionate, bittersweet romance of Grace, a girl fascinated with the wolves who live in the woods behind her house, and Sam, who becomes human during the summer but must revert to his wolf form once the temperature drops.

Maggie's interesting, ingenious plot lines are but an extension of her vast creative energies. She's an award-winning color pencil artist (check out her gorgeous cut-paper book trailer for *Shiver* at [www.maggiestiefvater.com](http://www.maggiestiefvater.com)), she plays the Celtic harp, piano and bagpipes (listen to original music inspired by *Lament* on her site), and claims to make great cocktail party conversation. She's also generous with her time, stepping away from her hectic promotional schedule to talk with **CBI** about her writing process.

*Your plots take place where normal contemporary teen life intersects with magic and folklore. When you combine genres like this, do you create rules for yourself that help you keep the world of your book believable?*

Oh, man, the rules. The logic that rules Sam's werewolfism in *Shiver* could be another book all by itself, with little thumb index things on the side like those huge medical manuals. Likewise, the faeries obey strict rules and have many, many taboos. The thing is that magic is so . . . magical . . . that you have to constrain it, or your story goes crazy. Because where are the limits? Can they disappear? If they disappear, can they levitate chairs? If they can levitate chairs, can they blow up the video rental store? Especially with *Shiver*, I needed the magic — the werewolves — to be very quiet, subtle, to be in keeping with the tone of the book.

Also, I want the magic to reflect something non-magical. I try to make the magic tell you something about the humans in the book. Because no matter how fun the supernatural elements are,

it's the people you have to fall in love with.

*I love how you created Sam's character in Shiver. There's so much wolf in him when he's human, and humanity in him when he's a wolf. Did you do a lot of wolf/werewolf research for this book? And did you ever worry that readers would expect Sam to be more of the traditional werewolf from horror movies?*

I did a fair amount of werewolf/ wolf research for this book, but I was helped by the fact that I was a big wolf/canine geek before I wrote it. So it was great fun to be able to incorporate canine behavior into a novel. I dove into some books on werewolves, especially in the beginning of the writing, but I figured out really quickly that werewolves in their usual form were not what this story needed. I wanted something that felt very organic and natural and less monstrous. I wanted the horror to be losing your identity, not looking down and realizing that overnight you'd eaten the clerk at the gas station. So a lot of the research was deciding what stayed and what didn't. And how to explain how myths came up — like changing at the full moon. Because my wolves change when the temperature drops, I explained that dropping temperatures overnight had led to that myth.

I did wonder how Sam would be received. Not only is he not a typical werewolf, but he's not a typical hero. He is not the macho alpha wolf, and he is very low-key. I think the wolves are the same way — not as Hollywood.

*In both Shiver and Lament you explore first love. And both are relationships built on less-than-ideal circumstances. Yet you so convincingly conjure up that all-consuming, burning passion of teen romance. Is making the love forbidden (or giving it an expiration date) an essential component for hooking teen readers? And how do you keep such a hot romance from completely overshadowing the rest of the plot?*

It's funny that you should ask if the forbidden love aspect is essential for hooking teen readers, because I had to grapple with a novel recently where I couldn't use falling in love as a plot element. I can't say much at all without being spoilery, but I didn't have my safety net of that first blush of love, that first sexual tension. I thought "I can't write this. I just can't do it. Where's the hook?" But . . . I could. I realized that, at its heart (pun so not intended), first love is about change. And as long as you're writing about change, it's still exciting.

As far as overshadowing the plot, I think every kiss, every touch, every traded glance, has

# Riveting Young Adult Fiction

to serve the plot in some way, and that's the way to get balance. There can't be nookie just for the sake of nookie. We have to learn something about the characters with every scene, and scenes involving romance are no different.

SHIVER's *sex scene is very tame by most standards. Did you struggle at all with that, wondering if you should go there or not?*

Oh, massively. I didn't plan on it being in there, and I knew it would limit the markets my agent could send it to. Also, I'm a practicing Catholic, and I thought — "Oh man, I'm going to write a premarital sex scene in my novel, and I will be excommunicated. Teens everywhere will use this as their manual for teen sex, and then my mom will read it, and it will all be over."

But . . . I had to. To not go there was such an absolute perversion of the characters' motivations and situation that it would have been an even worse shame. Ultimately, you have to write the story. You aren't your characters.

I'd do it again.

*What about the parents in Shiver? They're often absent, either uninvolved in their kids' lives or simply doing other things. Did you portray them like this so the teens have more freedom, or was this a deliberate choice you made in depicting these characters' families?*

I'm a big believer in the idea that you have to explain how your characters got to be the way they are. And in a YA novel, that means the parents have to have formed your protagonists. So I knew I wanted Grace to be strong, independent, and resourceful. Why would she be that way? Her parents' absentee parenting explains her character. And Sam. I knew I wanted him to be fiercely loyal to family, capable of deep love, and open to his own creativity. Why? Beck, his adoptive father, showed him just that, and Sam takes after him. I really wanted to have Beck in the story more, but the plot wouldn't allow for it — hence the frequent flashbacks. Oh, Beck, you know I love you — right?

*In Lament, you weave elements of Celtic folklore into the plot that go beyond a lot of other fantasies I've read. Is this an interest of yours, or did you start fresh with research for this book? When you have so much information, how do you decide what to leave in and what's too much?*

Oh, faerie lore is a longtime obsession for me. When I was very young, I used to curl up with Katharine Briggs' *Encyclopedia of Fairies* & listen to Enya or Battlefield Band. So the lore you

see in *Lament* is the tip of an obsessed iceberg. I did try to cut back on some of the more obscure taboos and details of some of the legends, and also I tried to stick with names that were pretty easy to pronounce. I wanted it to read like a contemporary novel, not like a high fantasy set in a fantasy world. So anything that would jerk the reader out of the novel ended up on the cutting room floor. Sometimes that meant showing a character or creature from folklore but not naming them or describing their significance. Sort of a cameo from the Other Side.

*Do you have any tips for writing in first person, especially when you have two narrative voices as in Shiver?*

It was very tricky to write two first person voices in *Shiver*, because it was a constant battle between keeping the voices distinct and keeping them from being jarring. I wanted the reader to pretty much be able to open the book and know who was speaking, but not prefer one voice over the other.

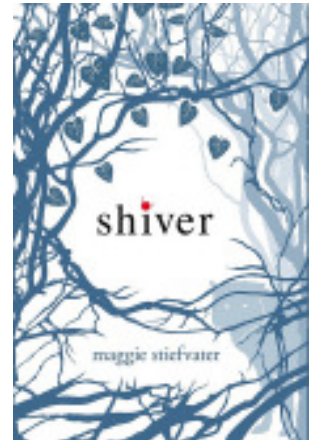
The thing I've found most useful to remember about first person is that we only see what that narrator sees. There might be an elephant decorated with rubies in the room, but unless that elephant is important to the narrator, we won't know about it. Every detail is seen through the filter of your first person narrator. It's fantastic for springing surprise on the reader, however.

*When writing a book that will have a sequel, how many loose ends can you leave without risking an unsatisfying ending?*

Heh. This is a good question, as I wrote both *Lament* and *Shiver* as stand-alone novels, initially. When folks pointed out there were loose ends, I said, "Well, you can't know everything!" I'm pretty happy with unresolved endings for side characters. I think the most important thing is to resolve the main conflict. The one that you've been working towards the entire time. You tackle that in some way, and then the side plots can dangle for a later time. Better than the other way around.

*As an award-winning artist, do you see a picture book in your future?*

Oh, yes (she said fervently). I very much hope to do a graphic novel or picture book for YAs. I got to play with art a little bit when I did a stop-motion paper cut-out trailer for *Shiver*, and I did an animated pencil art trailer for *Ballad*. But I want more, more!



*Shiver* by Maggie Stiefvater (Scholastic Press)



[www.CBIclubhouse.com](http://www.CBIclubhouse.com)

Subscribers: Listen to a podcast with Maggie Stiefvater talking about writing and marketing contemporary YA.

## Author Pamela Turner Tells a Captivating

**Editor's Note:** In this month's CBI challenge, we take the book idea you've been developing and brainstorm elements of your protagonist that will ultimately form your plot. This technique works just as well for nonfiction. Most nonfiction books also tell a story of some sort; the main difference being that this "story" actually happened. The best nonfiction entertains, enchants, and transports the reader in the manner of good fiction, and the most talented nonfiction writers use elements of storytelling to weave factual tales.

In the following article Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff examines Pamela S. Turner's middle grade biography, *A Life in the Wild: George Schaller's Struggle to Save the Last Great Beasts* (112 pages, illustrated with photos, published by Melanie Kroupa Books/FSG, 2008). Turner's "character" is a world-renowned scientist and conservationist who has worked for over 50 years to save the planet's great wild beasts. Her "plot" moves chronologically by chapter as she follows Schaller from the United States through Africa, India and China. Her underlying "theme" — Schaller's groundbreaking research, his passion and his commitment to preserving wild animals and places — is all the more inspiring because it's true.

Turner's book is a perfect example of how nonfiction still allows writers to delve into their characters and use the tools of their craft to create compelling books.

Pamela S. Turner's *A Life in the Wild: George Schaller's Struggle to Save the Last Great Beasts* received the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators KITE Award and the 2009 Northern California Book Award. What follows is an interview regarding her outstanding book that captures Schaller's passion for nature and wildlife.

While reading this book, I had trouble remembering that the author wasn't along on her subject's trips. Now that's the mark of excellent writing. No author intrusion here! The selection of photographs blends seamlessly with vivid descriptions of animal life and setting.

*The sky clouded over once more; mists swirled and snow drifted down. Snowflakes crowned the snow leopard's head and capped her shoulders. Embraced in her silent white*

*world, George felt suspended somewhere between human and animal, reality and dream. Then the snow leopard disappeared, fading away like a tendril of smoke.*

Note fiction writing techniques of active verbs, specific sensory images, and feelings of the protagonist.

Readers need to get a sense of who these animals are. Rather than telling the reader about them, Turner shows us with scenes:

*Doc and George watched in wonder as a female (gorilla) sat next to the giant male and rested against his side. In one arm she held a small black bundle. It kicked its spindly legs and waved its tiny arms. "It must have just been born," George whispered to Doc. "It's still wet."*

Here Turner takes an animal and puts it in George's own thoughts to create a figurative image.

*Zhen-Zhen rose and pushed her barrel-shaped body through the screen of bamboo. She gazed shyly at George. Her luminous round face reminded him of a full moon on a frosty night. She bobbed her head and snorted softly.*

The most difficult portion of the entire book for me would have been writing the ending, when his trips were over and the author had to come up with a summary. How to do this in a non-teachery-laundry-list way? Leave it to Turner to combine lyrical prose and her protagonist's thoughts and specific images.

*The ring of white mountains on the horizon seemed like the very edge of the world; in the pure, thin air the colors of the earth and sky had an almost unreal clarity. A pair of ravens played in the air overhead. George smiled. Ravens carried so many sweet memories: college in Alaska, days in the gorilla forest, the expansive skies of the Serengeti and the Himalayas. Scattered around his feet were silver-leafed edelweiss, mementos of his childhood in Germany.*

Here, Turner speaks about her writing techniques.

**Q:** Tell us how you discovered the fascinating information you included in your text.

**A:** George has written 16 books (some academic, some for a general audience) plus several hundred articles. I started by reading all his books, plus others (such as "The Snow Leopard" by Peter Mattheison) and a selection of articles. I asked George questions by email along the way. I wrote a rough draft, and then spent three days with

## Life "Story" by Sticking to the Facts

by Elizabeth  
Koehler-Pentacoff

George and his wife Kay at their home in Connecticut, reviewing George's comments on the first draft, interviewing both George and Kay, going through George's notes and photos, and hiking in the nearby woods. That was my 'field trip'!

*Research for a project like this could be daunting. His life spanned many trips. How did you "get your facts straight?"*

Both George and Kay looked over each of the three drafts of "A Life in the Wild" and made corrections and comments. And of course I had all those books and articles to use as references. My editor, Melanie Kroupa, read over every single draft, too. I've never had an editor be involved in every draft, and her input was invaluable.

*When you interviewed Schaller, how did you approach the session or sessions? How did you narrow down your questions? Any interview tips?*

Since I interviewed George with a first draft in hand, I had some very specific questions that filled in the "holes." But I also had some general questions, such as, "What was your favorite project?" "Biggest disappointment?" That sort of thing. Fishing questions. In terms of advice for other writers, I have two tips.

#1: Be super-prepared. Know a lot about your subject before you talk to them.

#2: Try to talk not just to your subject, but to their spouse, their children, a colleague, or close friend. You get different perspectives that way. Kay Schaller added some wonderful anecdotes about George that I put in the book.

*I loved how you used fictional techniques to make your writing suspenseful. For instance, the end of chapter four, "Lion Country," the last line makes the reader's heart plummet! (I'm NOT giving it away. Readers can read the book to find out.) Can you suggest a good writing exercise for nonfiction writers to make their writing become compelling?*

I'm generally immune to the effects of my own writing, but I honestly can't read the end of "Lion Country" without getting teary-eyed. I think the best writing exercise is to take a piece of non-fiction writing that you really admire and dissect it. How is the piece structured? What sensory details are included? What did the writer leave out? (This is as important as what the writer left in. Too often a beginner adds stage directions —

"She opened the door and stepped outside" — or overexplains a motivation or feeling that is already made clear in action or dialogue.) How is the piece paced? How does the writer weave backstory or factoids into the narrative? How is a certain effect or emotion created?

*Your descriptions of the tigress eating her kill, the cubs "tumbling together like a fuzzy black-and-orange basketball", and many other places, are great. What helped you create clearly defined animal characters in this book?*

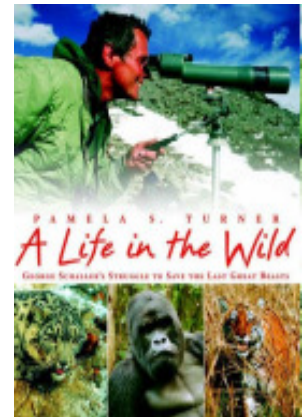
I'm an animal lover, to put it mildly. As I noted in the acknowledgments for "A Life in the Wild," I've been lucky enough to have visited a number of the places where George has worked, including East and Central Africa, Alaska, India, and the Himalayas, and I've had a number of close encounters with very large wild animals myself. I once woke up in the Serengeti with only a mosquito net between me and a hyena, for example, and I've crouched at the feet of a silverback mountain gorilla to assure him that he was the greater great ape. Those experiences influenced my writing, most definitely. I felt confident I could capture the flavor of certain moments between George and his study subjects.

*The inner thoughts and feelings of Schaller were smoothly inside the scenes. How did you successfully get inside you main character's head? Any specific ideas on how we writers can do this with our nonfiction books?*

I was hugely aided in this by George's own writings. He's a terrific writer, and has won the National Book Award for *The Serengeti Lion*. So I had George's own very eloquent words and descriptions as a starting point, plus my extensive interview with him from my Connecticut visit. Obviously with a living subject you can talk to them, but for otherwise you need to really immerse yourself in everything you can find on them to get inside your subject's head.

*Any last thoughts or words of advice for writers?*

Take on projects that you care passionately about, because that passion needs to sustain you through crappy first drafts, printing errors, etc, etc...!



*A Life in the Wild: George Schaller's Struggle to Save the Last Great Beasts* by Pamela S. Turner (Melanie Kroupa Books/FSG)

**Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff's** *The ABCs of Writing for Children* was a Writer's Digest Featured Book Club Selection.

## The CBI Challenge, Module 4

### Pull a Character and Plot from Your Idea

by Laura Backes

#### *This month's CBI Challenge exercise:*

Answer this article's four questions about your protagonist. Spend time brainstorming on each one, and let your imagination uncover new ideas. Work with different combinations, change small details, adjust your target audience. Nothing is set in stone at this point.

And what about non-fiction? Character-driven nonfiction (biographies, historical events and discoveries, etc.) have a protagonist at their core. If you uncover what that person wants and what stands in her way, you'll be able to frame that person's life in a much more compelling manner.

Have some fun, and next month we'll start bringing your protagonist to life.



[www.CBIclubhouse.com](http://www.CBIclubhouse.com)

Visit The Clubhouse to watch two related videos ("What's the difference between plot and theme" and "Does a story have to have a plot") and participate in a message board discussion. Also, Modules 1-3 are online so you can catch up if you need to!

So far in The CBI Challenge we've brainstormed ideas, tested those ideas to see if they were sound and what age group they might work for, and made time in our routine to write. We're still brainstorming this month, but now we'll focus on pulling some specific building blocks for your story from your idea, so that next month you can begin to develop your protagonist in earnest.

Let's say your general idea is "A story of an adopted boy who wants to find his birth mother." And you've decided you want this to be a middle grade or young adult novel. Now you need to ask yourself four questions:

#### *What does my main character want?*

This example is pretty straightforward: to find his birth mother. But maybe your idea isn't so obvious. Every book needs tension to keep the pages turning. Your character has to want to achieve a goal, or resolve a problem. The goal/problem needs to be believable and appropriate for the type of book you're writing. A picture books for ages 3-5 will have a much simpler problem than a young adult novel.

Remember that the book encompasses a brief period in your character's life. Get as specific as possible about what your character wants during this time, or in this particular situation. Pull your character out of his ordinary, everyday existence and brainstorm as many goals as you can come up with.

*Why does he/she want this?* You may assume that your readers will know your character's goal is important. But every character, just like every real person, has different motivations. Start listing why your character wants his goal, and let your mind make associations to new ideas. Just focus on broad strokes now, and worry about the details later.

Why does our boy want to find his birth mother? His adopted mother has just died. He's run away from home. He's sick. He wants to know about his ethnic heritage. He had a dream that triggered a memory of her.

He finds a document that says he'll inherit lots of money when he turns 21, and his adopted parents aren't wealthy. And so on.

Each of these "why" answers would take the story in a completely different direction. So don't settle too soon. You may uncover fascinating plot possibilities.

*What's standing in your character's way?* Depending on how complex your story is, many small obstacles may fall into your character's path as he works toward his goal. But for now, focus on the big ones. Some obstacles come from your character himself (he's too young to legally request info on his birth mother; he's scared to find out the truth; he doesn't have the money to travel to where she lives). Some will come from other characters (his adopted parents oppose his search) or even the setting (the book takes place before he'd have access to the Internet). Tweak some obstacles and see what happens. For example, what if you changed the boy's age from 12 to 16? Would that remove some obstacles? Create others?

*What are the consequences of your character getting what he wants?* Picture books need satisfying endings, so when your character gets what he wants, it should make a positive change in his life. But as your readers get older, the endings can be less perfect. In our story, we have several options: The boy finds his mother, or he doesn't. If he doesn't, then he has to come to terms with never knowing who she was. But if he does, his birth mother may or may not be happy to see him. And there's no guarantee that he'll like what he finds. Sure, she might be the manager of the boy's favorite rock band, or she might be serving a life sentence for killing his twin sister. Or something in between. Start thinking now if your entire book will be about your character achieving his goal, or if getting there is only part of the plot, and living with the results is the rest of the story.