

Children's Book Insider

The Newsletter for Children's Writers

At Presstime:

Authors May Apply to Write for Several Series for New and Reluctant Readers

Capstone Publishers publishes innovative books for beginning, struggling and reluctant readers in grades K-8. Capstone has recently teamed up with *Sports Illustrated Kids* to create a line of leveled chapter books under the Capstone Press and Stone Arch Books imprints, to debut in January 2010. The books will feature high-interest fiction and nonfiction sports stories in three formats: hi-lo informational books, graphic novels, and illustrated chapter books. All will be targeted at elementary and middle school students, particularly reluctant readers. Authors interested in writing for the new series (called The Science of Sports, Graphic Sports, and Greatest Sports Stars) should submit a resume, cover letter stating areas of interest and expertise, and up to three writing samples to Editorial Director, (name of series or imprint), Capstone Publishers, 151 Good Counsel Drive, Mankato, MN 56001. Authors will be assigned books based on their familiarity with the topic, ability to effectively write at the appropriate reading level, publishing experience (particularly in nonfiction children's books), research experience, reliability and availability. Capstone will contact qualified authors and provide them with series guidelines, style information and sample Capstone books. Nearly all books are written on a work-for-hire basis and Capstone holds the copyright.

Other strictly nonfiction lines authors may apply to write for by sending a resume, cover letter and writing samples include these Capstone Press imprints: A+ Books (early read-aloud concept books for grades preK-3), Pebble (nonfiction for beginning emergent readers in grades preK-2), Pebble Plus (bigger nonfiction books for emergent readers in grades preK-2), First Facts (curriculum-oriented nonfiction for grades 1-3), Fact Finders (sources for science and social studies for grades 3-5), Graphic Library (nonfiction storytelling in a graphic novel format for grades 3-9), You Choose Books (reader-driven history books for grades 3-7), Blazers (high-interest titles with ultra-low 1-2 grade reading level), Snap Books (hip, high-interest topics empowering girls in grades 3-9), Edge Books (high-interest nonfiction on extreme topics for struggling and reluctant readers in grades 3-9). Also Compass Point Books publishes award-winning nonfiction for grades 5 and up. With rich design and quality content, Compass Point Books engage, inform, and inspire. Most Compass Point Books (curriculum-oriented nonfiction for middle school students) and Picture Window Books Nonfiction (illustrated nonfiction picture books for preK-grade 4). For sample titles, go to www.capstonepress.com and click on "Our Products".

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September 2009

Delacorte Press Prize for First Young Adult Novel

The 28th Annual Delacorte Press Prize is open to American and Canadian authors who have never published a young adult novel. Entries must be a book-length fiction manuscript (100-224 double-spaced, typed pages) with a contemporary setting for ages 12-18. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page listing the author's name, address and phone number, and a cover letter containing a brief plot synopsis. Include a business-sized, self-addressed stamped envelope for notification of contest results. Due to postal regulations, manuscripts will not be returned (they'll be recycled). Previously unpublished submissions only; manuscripts may not be submitted to other publishers while under consideration for the Prize. Manuscripts submitted previously to Delacorte Press are not eligible.

The winner will be awarded a \$1500 cash prize and \$7500 advance against royalties for world rights on a hardcover and paperback book contract with Delacorte Press. Entries must be postmarked between October 1, 2009 and December 31, 2009. Final contest results will be announced on the web site on or about April 30, 2010. For complete rules and guidelines, see www.randomhouse.com/kids/writingcontests/index.html#youngadult, or send a SASE to Delacorte Press Contest, Random House, Inc., 1745 Broadway, 9th floor, New York, NY 10019.

At Presstime: *Web Site for Kids Seeks Articles and Activities*

Imagination Cafe is a web site for kids and tweens that publishes articles with an emphasis on career exploration for kids, school, science, history, sports, recipes, animals and other general interest topics. Departments accepting submissions (all of 150-500 words) include **Career-O-Rama**, which includes Cool Careers (Firsthand interviews with individuals in a variety of careers. Check the website first to be sure you're submitting new material. Please follow the format of pieces previously published, as the interviews also include sidebars such as salary ranges.) and Before They Were Famous (Brief summaries of what well-known people did for a living, prior to their rise to fame or power. Each should include interesting trivia about the individual featured.); **Weekly Special** (Nonfiction features on sports, science, history, and health. Subjects should be kid-relevant: snappy writing, subheads, and sidebars are pluses.); **Embarrassing Moments** including Celebrity Screw Ups; **Quizzes**; **School Strategies**; **Creature Feature** (Nonfiction articles and trivia about animals. Also featuring tips on keeping pets of all kinds.); **What's Cooking**; and **Game Room**.

Imagination Cafe buys all electronic and nonexclusive print rights, and prefers material not previously published elsewhere. Pays up to \$75 on acceptance. Submissions should be sent via email to Rosanne Tolin at editor@imagination-cafe.com. Please include a cover letter, and cut and paste your manuscript into the body of the email. Query letters are also acceptable. Form more information, go to www.imagination-cafe.com.

Women Invited to Submit to Magazine for Girls

New Moon Girls is a bimonthly magazine for girls ages 8-12 that portrays girls and women as powerful, active and in charge of their own lives. Much of the content is girl-written, but women writers may submit to the following departments: **Herstory** (600 words) profiles girls, women, or events pertaining to them from history; **Women's Work** (600 words) profiles a woman in her chosen career; **Fiction** (900 - 1600 words): Short stories in which the main character is a girl ages 8 to 12 and includes subject matter and a plot that empowers girls of this age. All material has best chance of acceptance if it fits with an editorial theme. All submissions must focus on girls, women or female issues, and be emailed with the manuscript inserted into the body of the message. Email to submissions@newmoon.com. Simultaneous submissions are accepted. It's strongly advised that writers read a sample issue available on the website (theme list posted there as well): www.newmoon.com/magazine/

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 for a free copy of our Special Report, How to Determine If a New or Small Press is Legitimate.

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Last Chance for Bootcamp in the Rockies!

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 info or to register, go to www.WeMakeWriters.com.

Nominations Taken for the 2010 IRA Children's and Young Adults' Book Awards, and the Promising Poet Award

The International Reading Association awards \$1000 every year for an outstanding book in three age categories: Primary (preschool to age 8), Intermediate (ages 9-13), and Young Adult (ages 14-17). All winners must be the author's first or second book published. The book must be published in English in 2009 (and have a 2009 copyright) to be eligible for the 2010 award. Both fiction and nonfiction books are eligible; each will be rated according to characteristics that are specifically appropriate to the genre.

A book may be entered into the award competition by either its publisher or author. One copy of each book submitted must be sent to each of the designated IRA Children's and Young Adults' Book Award Subcommittee Members by **November 1, 2009**. Also, one copy of each book with the nomination form must be sent to the Executive Office, IRA Headquarters. Subcommittee members' addresses are listed on the Nomination Form, available at www.reading.org (click on "Awards and Grants" on left column of home page, and scroll down to appropriate award).

Also from the IRA, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award is given every three years to a promising new poet of children's poetry (for children and young adults up to grade 12) who has published no more than two books of children's poetry. A book-length single poem may be submitted. The award (\$500) is for published works only. Poetry in any language may be submitted; non-English poetry must be accompanied by an English translation. The next award will be for poetry copyrighted from 2007 to 2009. For more information, contact the Executive Division at exec@reading.org. An award application is on the IRA web site, under "Awards and Grants". Nominations must be received by **December 1, 2009**. Awards will be presented at the IRA's annual convention in Chicago, IL in 2010.

Writing Workshop

The Spine-tingling Appeal of YA Thrillers

by Jane McBride Choate

With the runaway success of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, *Breaking Dawn*), thrillers for young adults have come into their own. Meyer's series about teenager Bella Swan and her vampire boyfriend, Edward Cullen, is easily the most well known of the demonic thrillers for teens, tracing Bella's growth and the developing romance, but other young adult novelists have joined the throng as well.

Vamps, by Nancy A. Collins, features the vampire teens of Bathory Academy, a prestigious night school for the richest and most powerful members of the vampire race. Ellen Schreiber created a series about Raven Madison and her vampire boyfriend Alexander Sterling in *Vampire Kisses*. In Scott Westerfeld's *Peeps*, the protagonist carries a contagious parasite that causes vampire-like behavior.

Other authors of demonic thriller series for young adults include Claudia Gray (*Evernight*), Rachel Caine (*Morganville Vampires*), and Melissa De La Cruz (*Blue Bloods*).

Vampire-themed books easily cross gender lines, enticing boys as well as girls. Darren Shan's twelve book series stars a boy, (also called Darren Shan), who becomes a vampire's assistant, starting with *Cirque Du Freak* and ending with *Sons of Destiny*. In Brian Meehl's *Suck it Up*, the protagonist, a teenage boy, plans to reveal the existence of vampires to the general public. He meets with opposition from his fellow vampires.

What is the appeal of the thriller? Why does it continue to capture the attention and spending dollars of teen and adult readers alike? To answer those questions and more, I went to the experts.

"I think people love thrillers for the same reason they love roller coasters!" says Jeffrey Neuman, General Manager of a Colorado Borders bookstore. "There is something immensely appealing about being brought to the edge of a precipice, looking down over the steep edge, taking that first giddiness-inducing drop, flailing from side-to-side on a wild ride of twists, turns, and loop-de-loops, and then safely returning to solid ground at the end of the ride.

"Thrillers are more popular than ever and growing in leaps and bounds as a genre."

Let's start with a definition:

Neuman defines a thriller as "fiction that has a central character, usually a flawed, 'everyman' type of character that a reader can relate to, who is pitted against a formidable force or forces."

"Thrillers evoke a visceral response, frequently negative ones such as panic, horror, and terror in the reader," Margie Lawson, clinical psychologist, writer, and popular workshop presenter, weighs in. "They compel her to continue reading by increasing stakes and personal jeopardy until in the end, the protagonists' entire world is threatened and only he/she can save it."

To this Neuman adds, "One of the biggest things that I see in the future of writing thrillers is a penchant for blurring the lines of genre. Many writers incorporate elements of romance, fantasy, horror, mystery, historical fiction, and even graphic novels into their books.

"The books are still thrillers, but they are thrillers that almost defy being pigeon-holed into one genre. More and more I see 'thriller' authors creating dynamic and exciting books that continually push the boundaries of 'genre.' That, I believe, will continue and inform the future of thriller writing and readership."

Meyer adroitly blends romance with thriller elements in her *Twilight* series, as does Ellen Schreiber in *Vampire Kisses*, delivering an irresistible mix of action, gore, and some good, old-fashioned smooching. *Life Sucks*, by Jessica Abel, Gabe Soria, and Warren Pleece, takes an ironic look at the problems plaguing vampires, combining humor with horror.

Of course, those writing for younger audiences will temper their conflict and situations with age-appropriate plot, character, and language. It goes without saying that characters will solve their own problems. No acts of God or lucky breaks should allow the protagonists to achieve their goals.

The principles of suspenseful writing remain the same, however, whatever your targeted age group. Bring your characters to the breaking point, then do it all over again.

Successful thrillers require a high-concept, a short statement describing the protagonist, the conflict, and the consequences.

Exercise: Take a movie or television series and define its high concept.

Independence Day (movie): The president of the United States and military struggle to save the world from domination by aliens. If the protagonists fail to stop the invading enemy, the United States, indeed, the entire world will fall prey to the evil invading army.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (TV series):

A teenage girl and her single mother move to a small town where vampires roam freely. Her charge to battle the vampires and protect the townspeople is complicated when she falls in love with one of the vampires. If she fails in her charge, the world as she knows it will be destroyed.

Now do the same exercise with your own book. Do you have to use a great deal of explanatory material before getting to the high concept? If so, maybe you haven't defined your book sufficiently. Try to condense your book to a brief description which captures the essence of what is at stake if your characters fail to reach their goal.

Next month: We'll look at how writers build a convincing world for their thrillers.

Jane McBride Choate is an author and CBI Contributing Editor.

Beyond Traditional Publishing: Uncovering

Over the past year, I have been knee deep in chocolate – chocolate research that is! Last year, the Milton Hershey School, in Hershey, Pennsylvania, commissioned me to write two children’s books for its centennial celebration (1909-2009). Although Milton S. Hershey is perhaps best known for his chocolate creations, this year, students, faculty, and staff at the private school are celebrating him, his wife (Catherine Hershey), and their vision that has changed the lives of many students over the past 100 years.

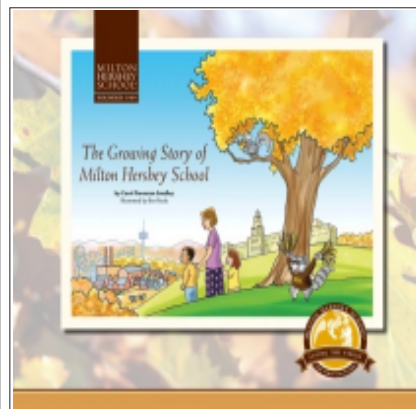
Children’s writers often limit their publishing opportunities to traditional publishing companies. We scour monthly writing newsletters and announcements. We read the latest *Children’s Writer’s and Illustrator’s Market* with a highlighter in our hand (and a little hope in our hearts). We attend conferences and workshops wishing to be discovered or invited to submit to an otherwise closed publishing house. We carefully select potential publishers, craft intriguing query letters, and compete with thousands of other writers doing the same thing. But there’s an untapped market out there waiting to be explored – and that market is private contracts.

A private contract is a creative agreement between a writer and a nontraditional publisher. The second party can be a school, organization, club, activity-based group, or business. In this chocolate case, I was the writer and Milton Hershey School was the nontraditional publisher. The school had a compelling story to tell.

In 1909, the Milton and Catherine Hershey started a private school and home, originally called the Hershey Industrial School, for orphaned boys. Today, the residential school is home to almost 2,000 boys and girls in need, from the age of 4 through high school graduation. Through a trust fund established by Milton and Catherine Hershey, all of the children’s needs are provided for by the school. They live in beautiful homes with about 10-12 other students. They attend classes on a college-like campus. For many, the school provides a healthy family environment that the child may otherwise not experience. Each year, thousands of alumni return to their “home” and celebrate the generosity of a man who loved chocolate and children. Many of the school’s graduates choose career paths that allow them to gift the generosity forward as well. It is similar to the oak tree. From one acorn, many trees may grow, if nourished well.

The idea of the acorn and the oak tree became the focus of my first book project for the

school. For elementary students, I wrote *The Growing Story of Milton Hershey School*, in which the life of a red oak tree, which overlooks the town, parallels that of the school. It’s a story within a story. As the tree grows, the town, chocolate plant, amusement park, and community grow too. Al-



though much of my research for this book took place on the school’s campus, I also spent time with town historians and former students. To make the

book scientifically accurate, I turned to field experts. I visited Paul Smith’s College, a leading forestry school in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, and trekked through the woods with a retired forester (envison a Jim Arnosky’s *Crinkleroot*-kind-of-character).

I wrote the second book, *Diary of a Milt*, for the school’s middle-grade students. Crafting this book required a journey back through my childhood, as the story takes place in 1977-78, the year I graduated from Hershey High School, the public school in the same community. During this year, Elvis dies, John Travolta takes disco fever into movie theaters and onto dance floors, gasoline prices begin to soar, the country faces an energy crisis, girls arrive on the Milton Hershey School campus for the first time as students, and Hersheypark unveils a new ride – The SooperDooperLooper, a metal roller coaster that takes riders upside down. This last item is significant, as it sets the stage for the main character, a 12-year-old boy who discovers that his passion for roller coasters can transfer into a career as an engineer. For this book, my research took me to museums, through community newspaper archives, and into student homes with students who



Private Contract Opportunities for Writers

by Carol Parenzan Smalley

lived on campus during that time period. I also solicited favorite school memories from current students, and as I wrote this book, I wove their memories into the journal-style book.

The two books are just a small part of the school's upcoming celebration. You can view the research and writing process of these two books on the school's centennial web site: <http://www.mhs-pa.org/100years/celebration/photo-gallery/>

Both books will be gifted to Milton Hershey School students in September as part of the school's yearlong centennial celebration, and I will be visiting with students in November during Founders Week.

How can you uncover private contract writing opportunities in your community?

One of the exercises I share with students in my classrooms is mind-mapping. You can use it to spin a web of possibilities for your own writing.

Start with the phrase – Private Contract Opportunities – in the center. From there, spin out your thoughts. The goal here is to capture those thoughts as they swirl through your mind. As you work on your web, consider your own community and your personal interests. Do not censor your thoughts. There are no bad ideas here, and oftentimes, an unlikely possibility may lead to a gem at the end of the thread. For example, from Private Contract Opportunities, you might draw a line to Schools (and list types, such as private, public, parochial, special needs, and boarding), Community Organizations (Scouts, 4-H, adult groups with child focus), Community Care (hospitals, humane societies, special-interest organizations), Sports (recreational, Little League, competitive leagues), Arts (theater, museums, music companies), Churches, and so on.

Now it's time to be a researcher! Do a little digging within your web. Look for significant milestones. Is the theater group performing its 100th production? Is the hospital about to deliver its 50,000th baby? Is the town celebrating an anniversary of its founding?

Then, before you approach these organizations, schools, or community interest groups, ask yourself the following:

- ◆ Who will hold and file for copyright on the book?
- ◆ How will you (or the organization) market and distribute this publication?
- ◆ Is an ISBN needed?
- ◆ Is a barcode needed for point of sale?

- ◆ Are illustrations necessary, and who will work with the illustrator?
- ◆ Who will work with the printer and guarantee press-ready materials?
- ◆ How will you get paid?

For these two projects, I served only as the writer. With a large communications department in place at the school, all other work was managed by professionals on staff. This allowed me to focus on my research, writing, and post-production related programs.

As an entrepreneurial writer, the book is just the beginning. As a writer, you can also be a teaching artist in classrooms, libraries, museums, and other educational venues. For these two books, I created two programs.

In *Create Living History Books*, I introduce the concept of a story within a story. Students use *The Growing Story of Milton Hershey School* as a starting point to write their own growing stories, where they parallel the growth of a plant with the history of their community, school, family, or self. For younger students, I select a fast-growing plant, such as the sunflower, and limit the time period to just a few months. For older students, we select a tree and work over a longer period of time.

For middle-grade students, we become engineers! In my workshop, *Discover the Past through the Present*, the past and present merge. Based on *Diary of a Milt*, students examine journal-style writing and design a structure using toothpicks and marshmallows. In the book, the main character is asked to do by his housefather as he experiments with structural design for a school report about the town's park and roller coasters.

For these two books, I plan to present to community groups and historical societies too. The only limitation I have is time! Just this past week, I sent promotional literature to over 400 schools in the Central Pennsylvania area to introduce these books and programs. Many writers discover quickly they can generate a substantial income from book-related programming.

It was an honor to write two books that are now part of a town's history. It's the school's history, and in many ways, it's my history too. More private-contract doors have opened for me as well. I am currently discussing similar projects with other private schools that have a history to tell.

What story can you help to share?

Carol Parenzan Smalley is a children's author, specializing in creative nonfiction for elementary and middle-grade students; a teaching artist, offering a series of programs in classrooms, libraries, and museums; and the instructor of an online course, *Writing for Children*, offered through an educational consortium of over 2,400 colleges and universities around the world. She was born and raised in Hershey (PA), where her mom was a nurse at Milton Hershey School, and she earned an environmental engineering degree from Penn State. (She would have studied amusement park engineering had it been an option!) Of course, she loves chocolate! Visit her at www.CarolSmalley.com to learn more.

Generating Cyberbuzz: How to

***Editor's Note:** In 2003, Terry Doherty founded The Reading Tub®, a nonprofit, volunteer-driven organization dedicated to promoting reading and literacy for children ages 0-13. Terry's idea was to build a website that would make it easy for families to choose good books for their kids and foster a positive reading environment at home. In the last six years, The Reading Tub (www.threadingtub.com) has grown to become a go-to online review source for adults choosing books for the children in their lives, and also includes resources for helping children develop reading skills. The Reading Tub takes a special interest in lesser-known books that aren't "hyped" by their publishers, foreign language books and books with adoption-related themes.*

In this article, Terry offers tips for getting your book reviewed online, whether you're published by a large house, a small press, or have published the book yourself.

I confess – I love children's books! Like you, I left children's books in my past, only to rediscover them when my daughter was born. Having reconnected with them, I can't imagine reading anything else.

In just the five (nearly six) years I've been reviewing books, the world of children's literature has changed dramatically. Recent economic conditions have helped propel huge shifts in the publishing and reviewers paradigm. Bigger houses are discovering what independent publishers and self-published authors have known for some time: there are exceptional opportunities for professional reviews available on the Worldwide Web! Technology and social networking platforms offer myriad venues to create, share stories, and reach new audiences.

The kidlitosphere (a general name for the online community of children's book enthusiasts) is filled with blogs and websites that chat about books. The key is finding the right reviewer for *your* book. Look for reviewers who already read books for your age group and genre. If they read books like yours, then they are already predisposed to what you want to offer. Read some of their reviews. Do you like how they write? Do you like their review format? Do they cover the elements important to you? What about spoilers: do they in-

clude them or warn readers about them?

You've found a potential match. Now what? Read their Book Review Policy then introduce yourself. Send an email. If you look at the process as though you're applying for a job, you increase your chances of success:

- ◆ Only seek out jobs for which you have the skills – don't send picture books to a reviewer who only reads YA.

- ◆ Follow the application instructions – don't offer galleys if the reviewer doesn't accept them.

- ◆ Give the company time – don't start asking "where's my review" before the end of the stated review cycle. If it helps, mark your calendar to contact them two weeks after their review cycle.

- ◆ Be prepared to move on – look at the book review policy. Most reviewers explain that they don't "guarantee" a review. Some write back to say they're not reviewing your book; most don't.

This may be a virtual introduction, but it is still the proverbial first impression. When someone asks me to review their book, their email says a lot. Screaming doesn't work for me, so I don't read messages IN ALL CAPS. A contact form filled with nothing but a press release says "Dear Sir/Madam, I haven't read your review policy." When I get lots of testimonials from other people, I wonder why you want me to read your book. To get my interest – not just my attention – address the email to me (not Dear Reading Tub). Show me you've read the Reading Tub Review Policy by offering a hard copy. Give me a summary (no more than 5 sentences) of your book. Tell me what the genre is. Describe your audience and tell me what makes your book stand apart from the other books in the genre for that age group (one sentence). If you have a website, great. I'll check it out.

Our purpose in The Reading Tub is to create a new generation of lifelong readers. Audience matters. When I finish reading a book, my first question is: *who is the audience?* I know what the jacket flap says, but who is this book *really* for? Setting aside genre, I see three kinds of children's books.

- ◆ Stories written for kids;

Get Your Book Reviewed Online

by Terry Doherty

- ◆ Titles adults like *for* their kids; and
- ◆ Books meant *for* adults.

Understanding the audience helps me connect your book with people who will enjoy it the most. From there, I start to look at voice, character development, story cohesiveness, and (as appropriate) illustration, but their weights shift with the audience.

With *stories written for kids*, the content is most important: in a rhyming book, does the meter work? What is the EQ (soft, cuddly, silly, laugh-out-loud funny, etc.)? What is the text/illustration ratio? Does this book let kids see themselves, physically or emotionally (e.g., “I know how Charley feels. That makes me mad, too.”)? This is the audience that judges a book by its cover. It is usually the pictures that grab their attention, but does the content keep their interest?

Message books – those that have a specific lesson – more often than not are the books *adults like for their kids*. In these reviews, I study content and illustration separately, but also together. As picture books, they can be text heavy, so I want to tell readers whether the graphics can keep the audience’s attention while they’re reading all those words. I look at the way the message is presented: is it so heavy-handed it overpowers the story? If humor is involved, is it too subtle/strong for the audience? I also look for the back matter. Parents select message books because they want to teach something; but not all parents are teachers. Some want help with asking the all-important open-ended questions. So I evaluate whether/not the story itself creates natural discussion points: is the story self-contained? Does it create opportunities for parents and kids to overlay the events or compare the characters with their own lives?

Then there is children’s coffee table literature. These are *children’s books meant for adult book collectors*. Alphabet books with oil illustrations and full-length poems are probably not meant for audiences with sticky fingers and applesauce on their clothes. I may love the museum-quality ABC book and the silly ABC board book equally. I would talk about the former as a great addition to a children’s literature library, and recommend the board book as a must-have for your playroom.

When I look at a book, I compare it with other books in its genre. Sometimes a book is nearly identical in style and text to another title. Libraries and bookstores are filled with books about friendship, bullying, and the first day of school; feelings, family, and growing up; and everything in between. Still, every year, I read lots of books with a fresh take on one of these familiar themes ... and I read lots of books that are repetitive imitations of each other. Original stories really stand out. Tightly woven plots that when published had a conclusion but left readers wanting more stand out. It is fairly easy to pick out the books that have been rushed to print so they could be part of the wave of popular titles about X. Ditto books created and marketed as a series before the first book has hit the shelves and created an audience.

Children’s writers stir together creativity, imagination, and artistic passion in the hopes of hooking a reader. You reach audiences of myriad attention spans. You connect families with stories that open their hearts and minds. In that way, we are kindred spirits. For that, I am forever grateful.

Reading Tub® Review Model

Our reviews go beyond a summary, the recommended age on the jacket flap, and an adult’s opinion. In every review, we identify reviews and feedback on bookseller websites, and we invite other reviewers to link their review to ours. We also answer these questions:

- ◆ What did the target audience think?
- ◆ How old are the kids who will like this book?
- ◆ When would you read this book (bedtime, playtime)?
- ◆ What is the Reading Level?
- ◆ Are there other books on this topic you’d recommend?
- ◆ Are there educational themes that aren’t stated in the book?
- ◆ If the book is more than five years old, is the content timeless? dated?

Want to volunteer with *The Reading Tub*? Click on “Contact Us” at www.thereadingtub.com

Looking to Submit to an Online Review Source?

Kidlitosphere Central (www.kidlitosphere.org) has the most comprehensive list of children’s and young adult book reviewers on the Web. By looking at the blog title you can sometimes tell which types of books they review.

For the Reading Tub review policy, go to: <http://childrens-literacy.com/book-review-policy/>



www.CBIclubhouse.com

Subscribers: Listen to a podcast with Terry Doherty at the CBI Clubhouse and learn more about what reviewers look for in a new book.

The CBI Challenge, Module 5

Getting to the core

To reach the key ingredients that go into your character, ask yourself a series of questions about the inner person:

1. What all-important goal, need, or want does he have at the story's beginning and why is it so important?
2. What hurdles stand in his way of reaching his goal? (Note: These first two are variations of three questions you answered for the Module 4 Challenge exercise in August.)
3. What is his most powerful dream?
4. What does he most regret? What is he most proud of?
5. What is his greatest fear? Greatest secret?
6. What is his most cherished belief? What is his value system?
7. What is the external conflict which he faces in achieving his dream?
8. What is the internal conflict he must overcome?
9. What is his greatest strength? Greatest weakness?
10. What is the worst thing that could happen to your character? Why?

Authors have different ways of getting this information. Some writers interview their characters, asking them questions. Other writers let the characters "talk" to them and record the conversations. Others make charts. Use what works for you.

Building Your Protagonist, One Layer at a Time

by Jane McBride Choate

Early in my writing career, a mentor suggested that I compare characterization to an onion. With each succeeding layer peeled away, more of the real character is revealed.

Peel back the first layer

Start with the outer layer. What is your protagonist's physical appearance? You may protest that outward appearances are of little importance, that what's on the inside is what will motivate your character to act in a certain way. You're right — up to a point. Physical characteristics and appearance are important, especially to children and young adults. Your job, as writer, is to find out how those characteristics shape his/her thoughts, feelings, and sense of self.

Your character's age: The age of the character will dictate the kind of story you will write, including the level of conflict and the type of problems he/she will face. Obviously a three-year-old girl in a picture book will confront different problems than an eleven year old girl just entering middle school. A teenage girl on the cusp of adulthood will encounter different problems still.

Physical build: Is she short and slight? Tall and thin? Is your teenage protagonist muscular and strong, perhaps an athlete? Or is he less solidly-built? A caveat here: don't stereotype. Interesting characters defy stereotypes.

Face and hair: A teenage girl who wants to show she is completely different from the rest of her family may dye her hair stark black, pierce her nose, and wear heavy eye makeup. Does the nine-year-old boy in your book need glasses and fears he won't be able to play Little League baseball with his friends?

Clothes: A character's choice of clothes says much about him. The boy who dresses preppie style will engender different feelings and expectations in the reader than

the boy who dresses in a black leather jacket and torn jeans.

Mannerisms and tics: Does your character have a unique way of using her hands when she speaks?

Voice and speech patterns: Does she speak with an accent? Does she have a favorite expression that she uses when excited?

Peel back the next layer

Name: How did your character get her name? Was she named for a great-grandmother? Perhaps her mother was reading a novel while pregnant and named her child after a favorite character in the book.

Place in the family: Is she the oldest child? The youngest? Or is she squarely in the middle? Maybe she's an only child. How does she feel about it?

Family: Does she live in a traditional family, or part of a blended family with a mother and a stepfather? Are there step-siblings she must adjust to? Are both her parents alive? Does her elderly grandmother live with the family?

Pets: Animals can place an important part in a child's life. How your character interacts with her pet says much about her.

Home: Where does your protagonist live? In a quiet suburbia street or in the midst of a bustling city? What part of the country? A girl who is raised in rural Tennessee will most likely have different expressions, habits, and expectations than one raised in south Los Angeles.

Okay. We've peeled back yet another layer. You know what your protagonist looks like, how old he is, where he goes to school, how many brothers and sisters he has. Your job's done, right? Wrong. The real work is just beginning. Read the sidebar to learn how to get to the core of your character.

