

# THE INSIDE STUFF



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DIRECT ADVICE FROM THE EDITORS OF  
*CHILDREN'S BOOK INSIDER, THE NEWSLETTER  
FOR CHILDREN'S WRITERS*

Transcribed from an audio seminar featuring  
Laura Backes and Jon Bard

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**Jon:** Hello, I'm Jon Bard, Managing Editor of Children's Book Insider, the newsletter for children's writers.

**Laura:** And I'm Laura Backes, publisher of CBI.

**Jon:** Welcome to Insider Secrets for Children's Writers. In this discussion we will offer our best advice on a wide range of topics related to writing and submitting works of fiction for children.

### *HOW TO DEVELOP STORY IDEAS.*

Let's begin at the beginning, coming up with great story ideas. To do that you need to understand that there are really three types of stories when we are dealing with fiction for children. They are:

1. A story created from scratch - a product of the author's imagination
2. A story that is based on a historical event or an event from the author's life
3. The retelling of a folk tale, fairy tale or myth

Now let's talk about some of the secrets to creating great stories from scratch, great stories that come directly from your imagination.

**Laura:** The most important element of any work of fiction are the characters because children are identifying with the characters in your book, so you must spend a lot of time developing these characters in your own mind before you start writing.

The plot stems from the characters, not the other way around.

### *THE HERO'S JOURNEY*

**Jon:** Another thing that is important, and a great secret to know, is something called the hero's journey. This is actually based on the work of Joseph Campbell, who wrote a book called *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

In his look over thousands of years of mythologies and folk tales and storytelling he saw a motif, a pattern that was created, that ran through almost every story. In fact, it runs through stories that are being told today in books, on television and in the movies.

So understanding this motif and understanding this pattern can help you create a sensible pattern for your own story. These are things that seem to happen again and again and again in stories.

First, of course, we meet the hero, we meet our protagonist. And then the hero receives a call to adventure, it could be a phone call, a knock on the door, a visit or perhaps a letter.

He refuses the call, he likes where he is and he is comfortable where he is and he doesn't really want to go out on any sort of adventure, so he is resistant.

Soon he meets a mentor, and it could be someone older, someone wiser or someone who offers a different perspective on life. And he receives a gift of some sort from this mentor; it could be a physical gift or a bit of knowledge.

A crisis occurs, and our hero is unwillingly drawn into the adventure that he initially resisted. He crosses into what is called an

extraordinary world. Now this extraordinary world isn't necessarily supernatural or spooky or weird. It could be everyday life, but things have changed dramatically for our hero.

Things get very bad for our hero, and he enters what is called the heart of darkness.

This is really when the story is at its true crisis point, when things are at their bleakest for the hero.

However, at this point he remembers that gift that he received from his mentor earlier on and he uses that gift to emerge from the heart of darkness. He is not quite done yet, there is one last crisis – one final test that our hero faces and passes and he returns home.

And that motif happens again and again, go see any movie and you will see, so this is

something that might be useful for you in  
putting together a story that you are creating  
from scratch.

*WRITING FROM YOUR OWN LIFE.*

The next type of story is a story that is based on a historical event or an event from the author's life.

**Laura:** If you are writing about something that actually happened to you, you don't want to recount the event literally as it happened because it might not be that interesting to a broad audience.

What you want to do is find the universal theme, and the timeless emotions that are embedded in that event and create a new, original plot using those tools that will reach a wide range of children.

Also ask yourself, "Is this interesting or relevant to children?" If it is something that

happened to you as an adult you have to find the child's perspective on the event. And if you are writing about an historical event you also want to look at it from the child's perspective and write it in a way that would be interesting to children in the age group that you are trying to reach.

*RETELLING FAIRY AND FOLK TALES.*

**Jon:** The final story that we are talking about is retelling a folk tale, fairy tale or myth. This is something that is very popular right now, Laura, what are some of the points that author's need to keep in mind?

**Laura:** Well first of all I suggest you look in children's books in print, which can be found in all libraries, and see if there have been a lot of versions of this same folk tale or myth retold recently.

You don't want to retell one that has been done before. Then you want to find the oldest possible version of this story, the most authentic telling you can find. Because these stories are in public domain you are free to

change the characters, the setting, the time period in which they happened and whatever you want to make it your story.

But I suggest that you keep the theme and the basic structure of the story intact.

**Jon:** Now what about copyright issues? How can an author know if a story is in public domain?

**Laura:** In general, anything that was published over seventy-five years ago is in public domain. As I said, if you can go back and find the oldest version of this story possible, chances are it is going to be much older than seventy-five years old.

Things like folk tales, which are part of an oral history of a culture, are always in public domain.

Jon:

By the way, if you are still stuck with coming up with a great story idea, you might take a look at one of our books, Brainstorming Workshop, by Katherine Ploeger, which is filled with all kinds of things that will jump start your creative process and get you going on the road to a great story.

### *RESEARCH.*

So you have come up with your story idea, and now the next step is research. I know you want to jump right to the writing part, but the fact is even though you are creating a work of fiction, it has to be accurate and credible, particularly when you are dealing with historic or scientific facts.

How can you do research? Fortunately, thanks to the Internet and some other things, doing research is much easier than it has ever been before. One place that you certainly want to start, if you are on the Internet, is our own Children's Writing Research Center that we have created.

From one place you can search the entire Internet and have links to just about any research facility imaginable. You can find out anything from our page. You can find it on the World Wide Web, [www.write4kids.com/research.html](http://www.write4kids.com/research.html), and it is free.

Another great free service is 1-800-profnet, that is the telephone number for it. This is something that universities have put together as a means of getting a bit of publicity for their researchers and professors so that they are quoted in books, magazines, newspapers and other publications.

You call 1-800-profnet and tell them what type of information you are looking for, and they will get back to you with some quotes

and some information as well as the name of the expert that you can use as your source.

It is a great, free resource for writers and a real neat secret to know about. Also, you can access experts directly. We have heard from a lot of authors who have had great success contacting professors, researchers and scientists directly, particularly through e-mail because it is a really non-intrusive way of approaching someone.

So you have gotten your great story idea, you have done your research and the next step is to create an outline.

*CREATING AN OUTLINE.*

**Laura:** For a picture book, you can write a brief plot synopsis which would be maybe two or three sentences long. If you can't sum up your plot in two or three sentences it is probably too complicated for a picture book and you have to rethink it before you start writing.

For longer works of fiction I suggest you actually write a chapter by chapter outline, and this can be just a couple of sentences about what happens in each chapter – the main plot point or event that you are going to cover in each chapter.

### *REVISING YOUR WORK.*

This will help keep you on track when you are actually writing your book. Then you write your first draft. At this point, don't worry about editing yourself. Just get the words down on paper, and then let it sit for a couple of days and go back and read the whole manuscript from start to finish.

At this point you are going to be working on your second draft. But before starting your second draft, go back and take a really hard look at your manuscript. The following points are things to look for, and these points apply to all levels of children's fiction.

Does your beginning grab the reader? Your story should start at the moment where

everyday life changes. If you are writing that hero's journey that Jon talked about, it is that call to adventure that the hero gets.

Are the main characters well developed, multidimensional characters that the reader will care about? As I said before, your characters are the building blocks of your story.

Is the conflict of the book believable and important enough for readers to keep reading? They must really believe in that conflict.

Are there leaps of logic and things that don't make sense? This is often the result of a lack of cause and effect in the events in your book.

Is the resolution of the conflict brought about by the main character and satisfying to the reader? Those are some things that affect the story as a whole. Now let's delve deeper into the story and diagnose some really tricky issues.

Are you using description only when absolutely necessary? Have you created strong visual images for your reader with your words? Did you show and not tell? Have you used dialogue to help build characters and move the plot along? Do you have unnecessary words, sentences or scenes?

You have to be ruthless and cut everything that is not truly vital to the story. Now you are going to create the second draft after you have answered all the above questions dealing with each of these potential

problems. Be sure to check your spelling and grammar.

**Jon:** Those two checklists that Laura just gave you maybe some of the most important information that we have on this tape, so we recommend that you go back and listen to it again and again and maybe even write it down and really use it as your final checklist when you are putting together your manuscript.

### *GETTING FEEDBACK.*

So you have done a second draft, but you are still not quite ready to submit it. It is important now to show your manuscript to somebody else. Who are those other people that can be useful in looking at it?

Well, there are, of course, other members of your writing group, if you get together with other writers on a periodic basis. Perhaps your local children's librarian, she probably looks at a lot of stories and can give you real interesting feedback. Maybe even a professional critique service, like the one we have.

Don't rely on the opinion of children or your family. That is because they will love

anything you show them, particularly children, they love to be read to and they are really not going to give an objective viewpoint to your work.

You need an adult who knows something about children's books and who won't be afraid to criticize your story. Finally, rewrite your story incorporating this criticism.

Rework it as many times as you need until you feel comfortable, but don't go nuts. It is easy to go through draft after draft correcting things that really never needed to be fixed.

*SHOW, DON'T TELL.*

Before we leave the writing process, one last thing, a couple of times already in this tape we talked about the concept of show don't tell. It is a piece of advice that even intermediate and advanced writers sometimes have trouble with. Laura, what are some tips that you can give our readers about how to avoid falling into the trap of telling rather than showing?

**Laura:** Well the first thing you should do is use very specific words when describing something. Avoid words like big, little, very and really. They are vague, abstract words. Secondly, use strong sensory descriptions when you are describing an emotion.

A really good writing exercise is to take an emotion, such as anger, and describe it using the five senses. What does anger look like, smell like, taste like, etc? That will get you in the habit of using sensory images in your descriptions and also get you in the habit of showing instead of telling.

*THE SUBMISSIONS PROCESS.*

**Jon:** Okay, your masterpiece has been written and now it is time to convince a publisher to view it the same way. Let's talk about the submission process. First off, before we get into what you, as a writer, have to do, let's turn the tables and think about the editors. Editors are the gatekeepers and the people you are going to approaching with your manuscript. Let's find out a little bit about them.

We deal with them here at CBI all the time so we get to know them pretty well. Laura, what kind of generalizations can you make about who editors are?

Laura:

Well in children's publishing, the majority of the editors are going to be female and they are going to be young – anywhere from about twenty-five to forty years old. They are in this business because they love it, not because they are making a lot of money at it.

A typical editor's day is really consumed with meetings and phone calls and correspondence with authors whose books they have under contract. They really read the submissions from the slush pile of those manuscripts that you are sending into them at home on their own time.

Many editors are needlessly swamped by manuscripts that never should have been sent out, that really are not ready. They really appreciate a writer who has taken the

time to learn his or her craft, and have polished their manuscript prior to submission.

**Jon:** Here is something we are asked all the time. Are editors looking for works that are great art or works that are purely commercial?

**Laura:** Well ideally a book will be great art that sells well. That is what editors are always looking for, but the great thing about children's publishing is that good literature, good art and authors who are innovative and who break new ground are accepted and do get published. So you can work on your craft and develop it, but also stay within the parameters of what editors are looking for these days.

**Jon:** Right, you can look at somebody like Chris Van Allsburg, who is highly creative and yet fits within commercial boundaries.

**Laura:** Right, exactly.

**Jon:** How about another one? This is one that we ask whenever we do our editor profiles and questionnaires; we ask editors what their pet peeves are about the way in which they are approached by authors. What are some of the most common pet peeves we hear about?

**Laura:** Well a couple of big ones that always pop up is inappropriate submissions, authors who send manuscripts to publishers in categories that they are not publishing, such as sending a fiction manuscript to a publisher that just does nonfiction.

Another pet peeve are authors who don't really understand the different categories of children's books and the length requirements for the manuscripts, the number of characters, etc, that are required for the different age groups.

**Jon:** And I guess when you think about the fact that editors, as Laura just mentioned, are reading manuscripts mostly on their free time, at home or over the weekends, you can imagine that they really have very little tolerance for inappropriate submissions or things that waste their time. So they probably have even higher standards of how to be approached.

**Laura:** That's right, and they learn real quick how to weed out the manuscripts that don't fit their

needs within a couple of paragraphs or a page at the most.

Jon:

So that is a little bit about the folks that you are going to be dealing with, the editors, now let's take a look at the submission process as an experienced author might approach it, some of the secrets that we have picked up along the way about how to actually present your manuscript to the right publisher at the right time.

*FINDING A PUBLISHER.*

Let's start off with that, the concept of the right publisher. Laura, what is your best advice about how our readers can find the right publisher for their manuscript?

Laura:

Well the first thing you need to do is go to a large bookstore and look at books that are similar to yours as far as the age group and the tone of the writing: humorous, fantasy, etc.

Start making a list of publishers. Also, you can look in Children's Writers and Illustrators Market, published by Writers Digest for other names and addresses of publishers who might be appropriate for your manuscript.

You want to start making a list, and then you send for writers guidelines. You send a self-addressed, stamped envelope addressed to the children's editorial department at the publishing house for writers guidelines. That will give you a more detailed account of what they are looking for.

So you want to really narrow the field to about twenty publishers who you feel might be appropriate for your manuscript.

**Jon:** And let's remind our readers that Children's Writers and Illustrators Market is available through Children's Book Insider and we are also the update source for CWIM, so you can keep that book up-to-date by reading Children's Book Insider.

### *COVER & QUERY LETTERS.*

Now one area of the submissions process that always causes a lot of confusion are cover and query letters. Laura, what kind of secrets can you share that might help avoid some of this confusion?

Laura:

Well first of all let me explain the difference between the two. A cover letter is attached to the entire manuscript, such as when you are submitting a picture book.

A query letter is attached to two or three sample chapters of a longer work of fiction. What you are doing in the query letter is asking the editor if they want to see the entire manuscript after reading the first couple of chapters.

Some points for both: first of all, they should be short, tightly written and straight to the point. One page or less is best. You want to include a tight and compelling plot synopsis, list the facts of your story, don't get into theme, the underlying message, but simply tell the reader what actually goes on in the story itself.

You want to feature information about yourself only that is relevant to writing children's books. Being a teacher, parent, grandparent, believe it or not those things do not qualify you to write for children. So only include information such as writer's organizations that you belong to, previous publishing credits and things like that.

Jon:

Recently in the pages of Children's Book Insider, the well known author and editor,

Jane Yolen, shared her best tips for cover and query letters. She said two things that make a lot of sense: first of all, she said that you shouldn't, in your letter, talk about how great your story is and use a lot of superlatives. You should let the editor judge that for his or her self.

It is really the classic example of show don't tell. Allow your story to show how strong it really is. The other thing that Jane said is fairly straight forward: don't tell your life story and how you need the money. Just keep it professional and, again, let the story speak for itself.

### *THE SUBMISSIONS PACKAGE.*

What about putting the submissions package together? People are always confused about how to actually present their manuscript to editors.

**Laura:** Well the first thing to remember is that it must always be typed double spaced. Make sure that your name and the title of the story is on the top upper left hand corner of each page. Make sure the pages are numbered consecutively. Use crisp, clean white paper with no typos. If you are working on a computer there is really no excuse for typographical errors.

Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope that is big enough and has enough postage

to return your entire manuscript. We also recommend you enclose a self-addressed, stamped post card that the editor can fill out on the back and return to you so you know the date that they received your manuscript. That helps you keep track of where your manuscript is and how long editors have had it.

Keep the envelope simple, clean and professional. No gimmicks, no pictures on the outside and no flashy colors. None of those things will get your manuscript read any quicker.

**Jon:** One of the things that is starting to happen quite a bit in publishing, particularly as it relates to small presses, is the opportunity for authors, in their cover letters or query letters, to actually get involved in the marketing of a

book – to show whether there is a market that is out there for the book and to talk about what they might do to support that book.

When you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. Many small presses don't have a lot of money for marketing and they don't have a lot of money or budgets for a really big list and so they have to be very selective about the books they choose and they have to think about the commercial possibilities.

This isn't something that you are going to hear from a Random House per se, but you very well might hear it from many of the smaller presses out there. When a small press asks you for some input about the potential market for your book and what you will do to promote it, it is really a great opportunity for you to show your stuff.

One of the first things you want to do is find out if there is indeed a market for your book and think about who in particular, what kind of people might be interested in your book. You can talk to librarians, bookstore managers, search newspaper and magazine databases for facts and figures and really do your homework and show that you delved into this.

If you can come back to the potential publisher of your book and show that there is in fact a large market of people out there who might be interested in the book, and you can quote the particular bookstore manager or librarian who thought this is something that a lot of people might be interested in because perhaps they have been asking for it. You can really take a big step up.

### *BOOK PROMOTION.*

Now in terms of promoting the book, there are a lot of things that you can do as an author to help sell your book. The more you know about these things in advance the better you will be when it comes time to write this cover letter that is going to a small press.

Things like school visits, in store signings, publicity or putting together promotional items like flyers, bookmarks and posters are all things that you will be able to talk about in your cover letter.

We have a book, and I am sure many of you are familiar with it, called How to Promote your Children's Book on a Shoestring. An hour spent reading that book will make you

sound like a promotional genius, and you are really going to be able to blow away a potential publisher.

*FOLLOWING UP ON YOUR SUBMISSION.*

Now you have sent out the manuscript, Laura, and you have waited, and it is the longest possible wait imaginable while you are waiting for word to come back about whether or not your manuscript is going to be purchased. How long should an author wait before following up on his or her manuscript?

**Laura:** Well if you send for those writers' guidelines that I talked about earlier, they usually state what the publisher's average reading time is. Most publishers are going to say anywhere from eight to twelve weeks on average. Some publishers take a little longer.

If you have waited that amount of time that the publisher originally stated, and you

haven't heard a word, I would drop them a note simply inquiring on the status of your manuscript.

After about another month has gone by, if you still haven't heard anything, then you can give a quick call to the children's editorial department and ask to speak to an editorial assistant and say that you are inquiring on the status of your manuscript. You don't want to ask them at that point what they think of it, if it has been read, etc. Just give them a little nudge.

That will often get them to actually read your manuscript or move it up the pile a little bit.

## SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS.

**Jon:** Here is something we hear all the time, Laura. Is it okay to send simultaneous submissions? Is it okay to send your manuscript to more than one publisher at a time?

**Laura:** If a publisher says in their guidelines that they accept simultaneous submissions, then it is absolutely fine to do that. If the publisher says that they accept only exclusive submissions, then you need to honor that and send the manuscript to them exclusively.

Now if they take exclusive submissions, I would wait about eight weeks if you haven't heard anything from them drop them a note saying they are welcome to keep your manuscript, but you are also going to send it

elsewhere since they have had it for that eight weeks exclusively I think it is fair at that point that you can also send it out to another publisher.

**Jon:** Now what about sending more than one story at a time in the same envelope to the same publisher?

**Laura:** Most editors don't like that. You really need to focus your cover letter or your query letter on one story at a time, and put one story in the package. You want the editor to focus completely on each story.

If, however, an editor writes you back and happens to reject that manuscript but says, "Send me anything else you have," then you are free to send them another story.

*DEALING WITH REJECTION.*

**Jon:** Finally, let's talk about rejection. This is something that is part of every writer's life, even from the greatest writers of all time. Everyone has experienced rejection. Laura, what are your thoughts about that?

**Laura:** There are two kinds of rejection. There is the form letter, which most of us get at some time or another. If you get about twenty form rejections on your manuscript, I would take a real hard look at it and have other people read it and maybe send it to a critique service and see if you can actually beef up the writing if there is something wrong with the story itself.

Personal rejections are really a good sign. That is a letter from an editor where they actually commented on your manuscript and signed their name. That means that your work shows promise and they felt that you were promising enough that they would take the time to give you some constructive criticism.

**Jon:** Is a personal rejection an open door to submitting stories again to the same editor?

**Laura:** I would. If you get a personal rejection from an editor, don't necessarily send back the same manuscript, even if you have revised it, unless they have asked for it specifically. But it means that they saw promise in your writing.

Jon:

We're glad to have had the opportunity to share some of these secrets with you and we hope it leads to publishing success for you.

Remember, becoming a children's writer isn't easy, but you can do it if you take the time to learn your craft, are diligent and professional in researching publishers and submitting your work and if you don't allow rejections to get you down.

Laura:

Good luck!

