

Children's Book Insider

At Presstime

Small Press Seeks Picture Book Submissions

Smallfellow Press is a new children's book imprint of Tallfellow Press, Inc. Looking for whimsical, humorous, inventive manuscripts suitable for the 32-page picture book format. Especially interested in stories that lend themselves to quality, fine art illustrations. Recently published *Rip Squeak and His Friends* by Susan Yost-Filgate, illustrated by Leonard Filgate; *Who Asked the Moon to Dinner?* by Joe Murray; and *It's Winter* by Jimmy Pickering. Send entire manuscript with SASE to Claudia Sloan, Editor, Smallfellow Press, 1180 S. Beverly Drive, Suite 320, Los Angeles, CA 90035. If you have not received a response in 8 weeks, you may follow up with a note including your email address for an update on your submission's status.

Submission Updates

It was announced in December that **The Millbrook Press** (2 Old New Milford Road, Brookfield, CT 06804) is selling its two library imprints, Millbrook Press and Twenty-First Century Books, to focus on its trade imprint, Roaring Brook Press. The reason given was because of because of "the continued decline in the school library market." Roaring Brook Press puts out about 40 titles a year.

It's been floating around some online message boards and email lists that *Cricket* magazine is no longer accepting submissions. A call to the magazine's editorial offices on December 22, 2003 confirmed that this is false. *Cricket*, along with the other Carus publications (*Babybug*, *Cicada*, *Ladybug*, *Muse*, *Spider*) are currently accepting unsolicited submissions.

YES Magazine Accepting Submissions from Canadian, US Authors

YES Magazine is a 32-page, bimonthly Canadian science publication for ages 8-14. Each issue contains feature articles (800-1200 words; past feature topics include Mayan math, tarantulas, phytochemicals and black holes), regular departmental pieces (250 words--Science and Technology Watch is the only department open to freelance submissions), and a section containing articles of 100-350 words based around the issue's theme (see below) and an article about a scientist or student working in a field related to the theme (800 words). Also includes hands-on theme-based projects. Canadian science and scientists are highlighted. Pays \$.20 Canadian per word upon publication for one-time print rights. Query with article synopsis and SASE to Shannon Hunt, Editor, *YES Magazine*, 3968 Long Gun Place, Victoria, BC V8N 3A9, or by email to editor@yesmag.ca. For sample articles, see: www.yesmag.ca

Upcoming editorial themes: May/June 04--Top 10 Natural Disasters of All Time (query deadline: Jan 19, 2004; article submission dl: Feb 16, 2004); Jul/Aug 04--Science of Sport: Summer Olympics tie-in (query deadline: Mar 22, 2004; article dl: Apr 19, 2004); Sep/Oct 04--Fire Safety Engineering (query deadline: May 17, 2004; article dl: June 21, 2004); Nov/Dec 04--Simple Machines (query deadline: July 19, 2004; article dl: Aug 19, 2004).

First Two Bootcamps of 2004 are Filling Up Fast!

Children's Authors' Bootcamp, the writing workshop led by **CBI** publisher Laura Backes and author Linda Arms White, provides two fun and information-packed days on creating fiction for all ages of children. We've got two popular upcoming locations: February 28-29, 2004, at the Hampton Inn and Suites in the Cherry Creek neighborhood of **Denver, CO**; March 20-21, 2004, at the Holiday Inn at the Beach, **Ft. Lauderdale, FL**. For more information and a registration form, go to www.wemakewriters.com or email Linda Arms White at CABootcamp@aol.com.

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January 2004

◆ At Presstime

Children's Book Insider makes every effort to verify the legitimacy of small and new presses before printing information in "At Presstime." However, authors and illustrators should always proceed with caution when approaching publishers with whom they are unfamiliar, and read contracts carefully. For a free copy of our Special Report, *How to Determine If a New or Small Press is Legitimate*, send a SASE to CBI at the address below. You can also download this report and others from our Web page: <http://www.write4kids.com>

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◆ *Parenting Press Seeks Educational Books for Children*

Parenting Press publishes books for parents and children (or those who work with children) on life skills (problem-solving, safety, dealing with feelings, social skills). Seeking nonfiction or informational books in a fiction format (no straight fiction that tells a story). Open to manuscripts for picture book through middle grade audiences; material must provide readers with options for solutions, rather than simply stating one way to handle a problem. Recent titles include *My Grandma Died: A Child's Story about Grief and Loss* by Lory Britain, illustrated by Carol Deach (picture book for ages 3-6); *I Want to Play* from the Children's Problem Solving Series by Elizabeth Crary, illustrated by Marina Megale (picture books for ages 3-8); *Bully on the Bus* by Carl W. Bosch from the Decision is Yours Series for ages 7-11. For more titles, see www.parentingpress.com. Subjects not appropriate for Parenting Press include books with animals as main characters, fairy tales, autobiographies, biographies, children's illustrated story books, religious books, parenting books based on an author's experience with one child or one family, academic or theoretical works, craft or activity books, workbooks, poetry, illness- or disability-based books.

Authors should send the entire manuscript, or an outline and two sample chapters, along with a cover letter detailing the following: what uniquely qualifies you to write on your subject (most authors are child guidance or child development specialists); what you would like to accomplish by having this material published; what experience you have writing other books or materials and their sales history; what kinds of book promotion you are ready to undertake; who is the primary audience for your material; in what ways will your material be helpful to the audiences you identified; how your idea different from other books on the market. Submit with SASE to Carolyn Threadgill, Acquisitions Editor, Parenting Press, Inc., P.O. Box 75267, Seattle, WA 98175-0267.

◆ *Nonfiction Publisher Seeking Writers for Two Series*

The Oliver Press publishes series nonfiction for middle grade and high school students. All submissions should fit into existing series, and authors are urged to review the company's web site (www.oliverpress.com) to familiarize themselves with book formats and topics already published. Currently accepting proposals for two series. **Business Builders** features people who sought success in the world of commerce. Each book includes 7 chapters on enterprising people in a particular field, detailing their lives and the company(ies) they created, plus an introduction that gives the reader a brief history of that industry. Focus on people who built business, not inventors. The companies chosen should be significant within the industry, but don't have to still be in business. Books are about 22,000 words, for grades 5-12. **Innovators** explores major scientific and technological breakthroughs by focusing on scientists or inventors who made them. Each title includes an introduction about the field, 7 chapters (each covering an inventor and his/her invention), and an afterword that brings the reader up to date and speculates about future developments in the field. Books are about 20,000 words, for grades 5-12.

Submit a proposal that describes the topic and includes 10 brief descriptions of people who will be included in the book. Emphasize the qualities that make these people good candidates for inclusion. Include a resume of published works and applicable experience, and a writing sample as close as possible to the reading level, style and subject matter of the book being proposed. Send with SASE to Jenna Anderson, Editor, The Oliver Press, Charlotte Square, 5707 W. 36th Street, Minneapolis, MN 55416-2510.

◆ *Upcoming Conferences*

SCBWI Mid-Year Conference, February 7-8, New York City. Speakers include authors Avi, James Howe, Barbara Joosse; author/illustrators Tomi dePaola, David Macaulay; editors Andrea Spooner (Little, Brown), Michael Stearns (Harcourt), Kate Waters (Scholastic), Tara Weikum (HarperCollins), Donna Bray (Hyperion), and more. Cost is \$280 for members, \$330 for nonmembers (hotel and airfare are extra). For more information, go to www.scbwi.org.

SCBWI Alaska Conference, March 26-28, Fairbanks, Alaska, will feature Tricia Brown, author and Acquisitions Editor, Alaska Northwest Books; Yolanda LeRoy, Acquisitions Editor, Charlesbridge Publishing; Linda Glaser, writing instructor/award-winning picture book author; Fiona Bayrock, magazine writer; Gail Giles, YA author; and author/illustrators Teri Sloat and Evon Zerbetz. \$275 for SCBWI members, \$325 for nonmembers. Lodging and airfare extra. See www.scbwialaska.org/conference.html for details.

◆ The Basics

Go Where the Opportunities Are! PART 1

by Laura Backes

So you want to write a novel for children. That's great, but it will take months (or years) to complete, and probably as long to sell. In the meantime, it would be nice to build your writing resumé and even make some money. In this first installment of an ongoing series, we'll introduce you to other markets for your writing, markets which are less competitive than general fiction, and open to new writers. This month, we'll look at short pieces you can create and submit between drafts of your longer works.

Poetry. For some people, poetry flows naturally from their fingertips, and they can't help writing picture books in rhyme. But creating a rhyming story that contains a dramatic plot, well-developed characters and believable dialogue takes a lot of work, and then you have to find editors who buy stories written in verse. So while you're perfecting your picture book, consider submitting individual poems to magazines. Magazines are also a good market for solid poems that don't have enough action or plot for a full-length book. The poems must be appropriate for the magazine's audience (younger children like humorous poems or those that convey a concrete visual image and can be illustrated, whereas older kids can handle more abstract concepts). Many poets get their start in magazines, and then go on to publish collections once they've established a name for themselves. Some good magazine markets for poems: *Calliope: Exploring World History* (www.cobblestonepub.com; ages 9-14, each issue has a theme, poems up to 100 lines); *Chickadee* (www.owlkids.com; nature magazine for ages 6-9, up to 25 lines); *Children's Playmate* (www.childrensplaymatemag.org; ages 6-8, up to 25 lines); *Hopscotch* (www.hopscotchmagazine.com; girls ages 6-12, up to 20 lines).

Rebuses. Rebuses are short stories for beginning readers in which some of the nouns are replaced by pictures (or the picture and word appear together). Most magazines want rebuses of 100-200 words, so the whole story can fit on one page. Though the editor will determine which nouns are replaced by pictures, when submitting you can underline your suggestions. Write stories where pictures can easily be substituted for 10-12 nouns spaced

throughout the text. Many authors got their start publishing rebuses with a magazine, and then went on to write short stories or articles for the same publication. Here are some markets: *Highlights for Children* (www.highlights.com); *Turtle Magazine, For Preschool Kids* (www.turtlemag.org); *Ladybug, The Magazine for Young Children* (www.cricketmag.com); *Wee Ones E-Magazine* (www.weeonesmag.com).

How-to Activities. Many magazines use crafts, recipes and activities as part of their regular content. The activities should be age-appropriate (for example, children of the magazine's target audience must be able to make recipes with minimal adult supervision), use materials found around the house or easily obtained, and fit with the magazine's monthly theme or overall focus. Write a brief introduction to the activity that provides interesting background information (the country the recipe came from; how the item being built can be used, etc.), and include clear, step-by-step instructions and photographs or drawings of each step (even if you don't plan on illustrating the piece). Be sure to kid-test the activity before submitting. Markets for how-to activities include *Girls' Life*, (www.girlslife.com; ages 10-15); *Boys' Quest* (www.boysquest.com; ages 6-13); *American Girl* (www.americangirl.com; ages 8-12); *Fun for Kidz* (www.funforkidz.com; ages 6-13, monthly themes); *Explore* (www.pearsoned.com.au/schools; ages 6-12, theme-based).

Puzzles, games, jokes. Magazines are always looking for short filler pieces that fit with the theme. Though these fillers don't bring in a lot of money, they're quick to write and seeing your name in print can give your ego a nice boost. Study back issues of each magazine to learn the types of puzzles and games needed, as well as the tone and age group. Some markets to consider: *DynaMath* (www.scholastic.com/dynamath; ages 8-12); *Jack and Jill* (www.jackandjillmag.org; ages 7-11); *Owl* (www.owlkids.com; science magazine, ages 8-12); *Fun for Kidz* (www.funforkidz.com; ages 6-13, monthly themes); *Read* (www.weeklyreader.com; ages 12-16).

While you're writing...

...enroll in some writing workshops to help you hone your craft. Attend a Children's Authors' Bootcamp. Check with local community colleges or search for online classes. One to check out: Barnes & Noble's Online University, which offers an Introduction to Writing for Children course on a regular basis for free (www.bn.com).

Though many magazines' guidelines can be found on their web sites, it's important to study several back issues before submitting. Be aware that some magazines accept query letters only, even for crafts and activities. To find more magazine markets, see the 2004 *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market* published by Writer's Digest Books. You can buy CWIM from CBI for \$22.95 plus \$3.75 shipping. Call 800/807-1916 to order.

Next month: Markets for short nonfiction.

Marisa Montes Builds a Career

Marisa Montes became a fulltime writer in 1994, and by 1996 had sold her first picture book text, *Juan Bobo Goes to Work*, to HarperCollins (*Juan Bobo* went on to win the 2002 ALA Pura Belpre Award). Since then, she's published another picture book with Harper (*Egg-Napped!*), two novels with Harcourt (*A Circle of Time* for middle graders, which won the 2003 WILLA Award, and *Something Wicked's in Those Woods* for young adults, which was originally rejected on the basis of a query by her Harcourt editor, who then bought it after *A Circle of Time*). *A Crazy, Mixed-Up Spanglish Day* and *Who's That Girl?* are the first two titles from her GET READY FOR GABÍ series from Scholastic for ages 7-10, with two more titles scheduled for 2004.

Like all overnight success stories, this one took years of hard work. The key to Montes' accomplishments is her ability to approach writing from a very businesslike, disciplined manner. Ten years working for a legal publisher had taught her to research, analyze, and write 10-12 pages a day. She treated her first children's book manuscript as a learning experience: "It was almost 200 pages, which was too long for the target audience, but it showed me that I could plot, create characters, and start and finish an entire book." She joined SCBWI, attended writing workshops and conferences, and realized "how little I knew and how much more I needed to learn about writing." When she quit her job to write fulltime, she made a Goals and Tracking Chart that she still uses today. Montes gave herself regular assignments and entered writing contests ("I began to think of myself as the best paid unpublished writer I knew. By the end of 1996, I had earned almost \$10,000 [from contest winnings], but I still wasn't published."). Despite contract cancellations, a publisher folding which delayed the publication of her first book for four years, and severe rheumatoid arthritis, Montes never wavered in her resolve to make a name for herself as a children's book author. In her words, the reasons for her success are "...hard work, luck, determination, tenacity, skill, and talent. In that order. There are many writers with a great deal more talent than many of us who are published, but they remain unpublished. Why? They didn't have enough of those first four elements."

When CBI spoke with Montes, she had so many valuable insights into writing and staying true to one's vision that we decided to devote three pages to her interview in this issue. Though she talks a lot about writing multicultural literature, the same principles for knowing your characters can be applied to writing any genre fiction.

Do you think writers should be from, or very closely acquainted with, the cultures they're writing about?

On the one hand, writers should not be cen-

sored in any respect. On the other hand, writers, especially writers for children, have a great responsibility to portray their characters in the correct light and as authentically as possible. It is having in-depth knowledge of a culture that helps avoid and dispel stereotypes. Conversely, it is having a cursory knowledge of a culture that creates and promotes such misconceptions.

In addition to having been born in Puerto Rico and having lived in the United States most of my life, I also lived in France from the ages of 7 to 10. At the time, I spoke French fluently. But it has been a long time and my French is now very rough. Someday, I want to write about my adventures in France. But I will write them from the point of view of an American in France. I would never create a French main character unless I returned to France and lived there for many, many more years. If I ever use French in my books, the words would be very simple and easy to check for accuracy.

When writing about a culture or about a character from a particular culture, especially in fiction, it is imperative either to be from the culture or, as you say, to be very closely acquainted with that culture. I left Puerto Rico when I was four years old, and I still speak Spanish with my parents. I have visited Puerto Rico several times, lived there during my first year of college, and my parents always tell me stories about Puerto Rico. But it is still difficult to get my facts just right because I only lived there for one year as an adult. I still pass all my rough drafts by my aunt who has a doctorate in Spanish literature and is from Puerto Rico. And I do a great deal of research before I write.

If I feel that I need to be so cautious despite the fact that I am very closely acquainted with my own culture, how can someone who is not from the Hispanic culture possibly portray Hispanics in the correct light? Hispanics come from so many different countries and backgrounds. If I'm going to write about a Mexican, or a Nicaraguan, or an Argentine, I need to do a great deal of research. Many non-Hispanic Americans have a tendency to lump all Hispanics together, despite their country of origin, race, or religion. But that's like saying that everyone who speaks English has the same cultural background. Can an American really sit down and write about an Australian or a Welsh person without doing research? And even after doing extensive research, will the tiny nuances and details of the characters' personality be accurate?

You have a very unique approach to writing multicultural books for kids.

My approach to writing multicultural books is the result of my goals as a writer. My primary goal is to bring diversity into the mainstream of children's literature. By that, I mean that I would like to see more books with protagonists and supporting characters who come from diverse backgrounds, even though that background may have

with Hard Work and Vision

nothing to do with the main plot of the story.

My second goal in writing for children and young adults is to share strong values through the themes in my books. Values such as self-confidence, love, loyalty, cultural pride, and a strong sense of family help give a child the inner strength needed to get through hardships and disappointments. These values also give a child the self-assurance needed to stand up against social pressures, such as peer pressure and the pressures of being judged, belittled, or discriminated against because of the child's differences.

My third goal as a children's writer is to give children strong characters that they can identify with and use as role models. I began to pattern my life after strong female role models that I found in books. I had a dream, and my dream was to be like those women I'd read about. And when my health deserted me at the age of 16, I still had my dreams.

So in writing "multicultural" books, I write books for all kids, books with universal themes, that happen to have Hispanic characters. That is why I write books like *Something Wicked's in Those Woods*, which is a supernatural mystery that happens to have a subplot about how two orphaned Puerto Rican brothers come to live with their maiden aunt in California and face a culture clash. In *A Circle of Time*, which is a time-travel mystery and romance, I chose to make the rich, powerful family who lives during the 1906 California earthquake be a family from Spain as opposed to an Anglo-Saxon family. And in my new third-grade series from Scholastic, *GET READY FOR GABÍ*, the main character, Gabí, who is a Latina third grader, deals with universal issues and themes. The main constant in my writing is that no matter what the plot, the genre, or the age level, there is always a human story. While not everyone will identify with every aspect of my stories, everyone will find at least one aspect with which to identify.

Please tell me about your new series.

GET READY FOR GABÍ is my dream come true. With this third-grade series from Scholastic, I have been able to accomplish all three of my goals as a writer in every one of these books.

In writing *GET READY FOR GABÍ*, I took great pains to avoid stereotypes that are often associated with Hispanics. This is a ground-breaking series about a funny, feisty, third-grade girl living in mainstream USA, who just happens to be Latina. None of the main plots in this series revolves around the fact that Gabí is a Latina--instead, the themes and silly situations are universal. Her being Latina is simply another facet of her spunky and multifaceted personality.

My editors at Scholastic wanted the first book in the series to have a subplot about Gabí getting her English and Spanish all mixed up and sometimes even speaking Spanglish, which is a mixture of Spanish and English. It sounded like a fun

storyline, and I was happy to do it, but I wanted to do it in such a way that it wouldn't come off as stereotypical. I didn't want to give my readers the idea that whenever a Hispanic or Latino gets angry or upset, he or she will break into a tirade in Spanish, like Ricky Ricardo does on *I Love Lucy*.

I felt that in order for Gabí to mix up her languages, she had to have a very good reason. So when I created the plot for the first book, I set it up so that a long series of rather emotion-filled events led to Gabí's crazy, mixed-up Spanglish day. But my editors and I agreed that it was best to limit this particular type of confusion to the first book, rather than to have her mix up her languages every time she got angry or upset. By doing this, we avoided the Ricky Ricardo stereotype.

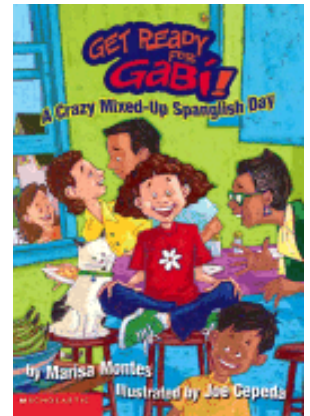
Gabí, herself, breaks the Hispanic and gender mold. She breaks the gender mold with her feistiness, love for adventure, desire to be a superhero and secret agent, and with her admiration and respect for famous women who broke the gender stereotype in their own time. And Gabí is not the typical Latina of children's literature who grows up in the barrio and has poverty, language, and assimilation issues. Gabí speaks Spanish and English fluently and is proud of it. She lives in mainstream USA (Northern California) and her Mami is a civil rights lawyer and her Papi has a PhD in chemistry and may be a "mad scientist." Her Abuelita, her grandmother, who is visiting from Puerto Rico, climbs trees, plays villain to Gabí's superhero, and has both a naughty and a stubborn streak, just like Gabí.

Do you feel the type of multicultural stories publishers are interested in has changed in the last 10 years or so?

I don't think publishers really know what to do with the multicultural issue. I think they're still searching for the answer. Because the bottom line is what drives publishing world, until publishers can be convinced that books with multicultural topics and or with diverse characters can make them money, they won't devote much of their list space to multicultural books.

Multicultural books were a fad in the late '80s and early '90s, and resulted in a glut of folktales. There aren't enough writers from diverse cultures writing good fiction for children, and because writers from outside the culture found it easy to research a folktale and retell it. The result was to flood the market with bad or mediocre folktales that didn't sell. It made publishers wary of buying more folktales. And even 10 years later, it has made it practically impossible for those of us who have well-written folktales to sell them. Several editors have wanted to buy more of my folktales, but by the time the marketing department gets involved, they're rejected.

Personally, I think most publishers are being shortsighted. Why should books with protagonists from different cultural backgrounds only deal with serious issues or issues specifically about their culture? I want kids to be able to find out about other kids



A Crazy, Mixed-Up Spanglish Day by Marisa Montes, illustrated by Joe Cepeda (Get Ready for Gabí series, Scholastic)

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From the Editor

Dear Reader:

A former workshop student of mine recently thanked me for reminding her that query letters are best when they're short and to the point. A published writer, she said she'd gotten away from the KISS method of querying (Keep It Simple, Stupid).

The more I thought about her acronym, the more I realized it applied to all aspects of writing for children. When dealing with kids one-on-one, we adults often give them information on a need-to-know basis. When asked, "Why do I have to change my underwear every day?" we could go into detail about germs or proper hygiene, but instead answer, "Because you're starting to stink." It gets the point across with minimal verbiage. And that age-old parental justification--"Because I said so"--sometimes is the only reason needed.

So why do we get so complicated when writing for children? Why do our picture book plots span several weeks and contain characters with large extended families and numerous friends? Why do our magazine articles attempt to cram a subject's entire life into 800 words? Kids are masters of cutting through the fog and getting right to the point. Here are some ways we can learn from our audience:

Eliminate adjectives and adverbs. If your nouns and verbs are strong, you won't need to add extra words to describe them. *He trudged up the hill* says the same thing as *He walked slowly and steadily up the hill, placing his feet heavily with each step*, only more succinctly. Instead of describing a house as huge, grand, or enormous, let your character do it with one word: *Jason gazed at Grandma's house. "It's a castle," he thought.* A single, well-chosen noun draws a picture in your reader's mind better than several general adjectives.

Write your plot direction in one sentence. In our Children's Authors' Bootcamp workshops, Linda Arms White and I teach writing a story line as a tool for plotting (This a story about _____, who wants more than anything to _____, but can't because _____.) This story line identifies the main character, his/her greatest goal, and what's standing in the way of the character achieving that goal. Regardless of the length of your story, the age group, or whether you have subplots and chapters, the story line works to keep the action of your plot on track. The key: Keep it to one sentence (there's no wiggle room on this one).

What if you're not writing about your character achieving his greatest goal, or its flip side, your character avoiding facing his greatest fear? A plot about something your character *sort of* wants isn't good enough. A conflict involving a minor annoyance isn't as compelling as a life-changing event. Maybe your character is up against so many obstacles that the reader can't figure out which one is the most important. As the author, you need to boil your story down to the one aspect of your character's life that's going to take center stage for the duration of the book. Remember, you're not writing about your character's entire existence, just the period of time encapsulated in your story. One goal shines above the rest. All subplots and secondary characters serve as stepping stones toward that goal. Some lead your character in the right direction, some take detours, but all ultimately end up in the same place.

Give your reader only the information he needs right now. Don't throw in details about a character unless it's directly related to the current action of the story. This often happens with secondary characters, who suddenly develop a phobia or acquire an annoying sibling in the middle of a scene. Such dangling attributes feel contrived and only raise distracting questions in the reader's mind. The same goes for a character's life before the story began. We generally don't need to know the past of every person who appears in the book. Reveal as much information as the reader must have to understand what's happening at each point of the plot, and cut the rest.

Use the "need-to-know" philosophy with query letters. When composing a query letter or cover letter to an editor, include only the information an editor needs to judge whether he or she may be interested in reading your manuscript. Your motivation for writing the story doesn't matter; your ability to summarize the plot in a few sentences does. Your experience as a parent or grandparent doesn't guarantee you'll write a strong article; your adherence to the magazine's word limit shows you've done your research. Editors are busy people who love short letters with lots of white space. Respect the simplicity of presenting your work with minimal buildup and letting your manuscript speak for itself.

Above all, keep your message clear and age-appropriate. A picture book about poverty is too broad and abstract for a six-year-old to understand, but a story about a child who is embarrassed because she gets free lunch at school is more specific. Whatever age you're writing for, use one well-defined character to represent the bigger issue. Smaller, intimate stories are more relevant to the reader. Nonfiction that shows the reader how the topic relates to his life, or focuses on one aspect of a subject, makes a greater impact. And remember, if you want your manuscript to sell, start with a KISS.

Sincerely,
Laura Backes

◆ Between the Lines

A Career Built on Vision, continued

Continued from page 5

and be able to discover facets of themselves in characters who aren't exactly like themselves within the pages of my books.

Nowadays, a publisher will only publish books that make money. If the publisher thinks there aren't enough consumers to sell a designated number of books on a particular topic, the book won't get published. Although things are slowly starting to change with respect to Hispanic topics, another editor told me only four years ago that her publisher wouldn't buy bilingual books because "Hispanics don't have any money."

By 2005, Hispanics will be the largest ethnic group in the United States. Hispanic parents have a desire for their children to succeed, and they do have money. The best way we can build a future audience for Latino authors, such as myself, and keep the tradition alive for future generations is to convince publishers now that today, there is a need and a market for books written by Latino authors for and/or about the Hispanic culture.

Your bilingual picture book, Gatos Black on Halloween, is coming out in 2005 from Henry Holt. Making the same story rhyme in two languages must have been quite a challenge.

What I call "bilingual" is really more of a Spanish-English book, with Spanish words woven into an English text and defined in context. It was inspired by the meter which screamed, "Halloween!"

Selling *Gatos Black* was a lesson in perseverance and believing in a book. It was also lesson in the importance of attending conferences and meeting editors. When I heard Reka Simonsen from Holt speak about what she liked in a book and how she loved the sound of words and interesting phrases, I knew she was the editor for this book. And I was right: She immediately fell in love with the text. The book is only 400 words long, but I worked very hard on choosing every single word and getting the meter and the imagery and the rhymes just right. But before I met Reka, this picture book had been a hard sell. From the beginning, *Gatos Black* had three strikes against it: First, it's written in rhyme, which many editors don't like. Second, it's a seasonal book, so it had to have a great hook in order to be attractive to editors, since seasonal books have a short marketing period--

usually 3 months per year. Third, it has Spanish words woven into the text. Believe it or not, there are still quite a number of publishers and imprints that do not have a spot on their lists for bilingual or Spanish-English books.

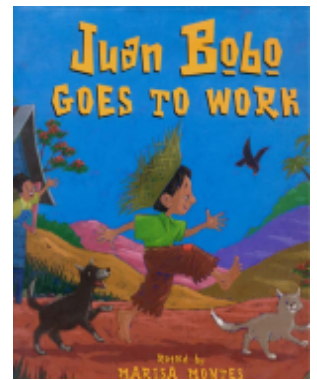
Is there anything you've learned in the last 16 years that you wish someone had told you when you first started out?

First, I wish classes and books on writing for children had been more clear about defining the elements of how to write a good short story, most of which also appear in a good picture book. The elements to which I refer are the elements of a "story:" "A character with a conflict, who resolves the conflict (on his or her own) and in so doing changes or grows in some way and learns a lesson." The words in this sentence are not difficult to comprehend, and if in doubt, each word can be easily looked up in the dictionary. But with respect to writing, what do they really mean?

Plotting a novel was instinctual for me. But whenever I wrote a short story or picture book, I invariably wrote a "slice of life" story. This was because I simply did not understand the elements of a story, and my characters were often passive with no conflict to resolve, no lesson to learn, and therefore didn't "grow."

Second, I wish I had known about plot patterns. Until I met my mentor, Barbara Steiner, at the Mills College workshop in 1996, I was truly stumbling about in the dark. Then she taught me plot patterns. There are five plot patterns that most published stories fit into. And plot patterns seem to be the best-kept secret in the business of writing. Most editors don't even realize they exist, and they don't consciously look for stories that fit into plot patterns. If a story fits into one of these plot patterns, it will at least be strong enough to get the editors attention, and it has a better than 50 percent chance of getting published. I now had a chance of writing a publishable short story. But it took me years to gain this knowledge.

Another piece of information I didn't have is the importance of reading books in the genre in which you wish to write. I hadn't read children's books since I was a child. I now have a goal of reading at least five children's novels per month, more if I have time. And I definitely need to read many more picture books. My advice to everyone is, if you want to be a published writer, read, read, read!



Juan Bobo Goes to Work by Marisa Montes, illustrated by Joe Cepeda (Harper)

*(Editor's note: The five plot patterns Montes mentions are explained in *How to Write for Children and Young Adults* by Jane Fitz-Randolph and Barbara Steiner. It's out of print, but can be found in most libraries.)*

◆ Writing Workshop

Eliminate Passive Writing

by Laura Backes

According to Strunk and White's classic *The Elements of Style*, "The habitual use of the active voice...makes for forcible writing." In its most basic sense, the active voice involves the subject of the sentence being the doer of the action, whereas in the passive voice the subject is being acted upon. Editors often take it a step further, admonishing authors to eliminate *passive writing* from their work. Editors look for tight sentences, concrete details and vivid action.

The difference between active and passive always starts with the verbs. Look at these two sentences:

The trunk was opened by Adam.

Adam opened the trunk.

The second sentence is stronger and more direct because we can see Adam carrying out the action. Flipping the sentence around also makes Adam the subject. If the reader is following Adam through the story, he should be the focus of the sentence.

Though the second sentence is now in the active voice, it's still not as powerful as it could be. Adjusting the verb can add further meaning to the text. *Adam pried open the trunk* (it's old with rusty hinges); *Adam unlocked the trunk* (he used a key); *Adam busted open the trunk* (he used a hammer); *Adam sawed apart the trunk* (the trunk is now in several pieces). Each sentence gives the reader a different visual image, and tells us something about Adam.

Don't distance the reader from the verb. *She would go to music lessons after school* can be rewritten as *She went to mu-*

sic lessons after school. "Began to" almost always makes a sentence fall flat: *It began to rain as she walked home, making her homework wet.* Instead, eliminate "began to" and highlight the important aspect of the sentence: *As she walked home, drizzle dampened her homework.*

Use positive, straightforward sentences whenever possible. Strunk and White say, "The reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; he wishes to be told what is." Look at the following examples; the second sentence in each pair eliminates the negative.

It was no longer raining. / The rain had stopped.

Amy did not pay any attention to her teacher when he gave instructions for the homework. / Amy ignored her teacher's homework instructions.

Sam did not like walking home by himself. / Sam hated walking home alone.

Don't overqualify statements. Words like *almost, always, some, very, many, somewhat, slightly, rather, quite* or *perhaps* make the text sound as if you're circling around the story, rather than getting directly to it. These terms signify uncertainty. If you're striving for an uncertain tone to your narrative, then use these words sparingly. In most cases, though, the reader wants the author to write with confidence.

Eliminating passive writing takes practice, but it's worth it. Once all those extra words and murky verbs drop away, your story will take center stage.

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