

**Interview: Janet Lawler on How to Write in Rhyme**

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**LAURA:** Hi, this is Laura. And today, I'm speaking with author, Janet Lawler who writes wonderful rhyming picture books. Her newest book, *'Tyrannoclaus'* is illustrated by John Shroades and published by Harper-Collins just in time for Christmas. It's got really terrific reviews and is a holiday featured selection of Children's Book of the Month Club. You can find out more about this book and all of Janet's book on her website, which is [www.JanetLawler.com](http://www.JanetLawler.com) which we've linked to from the CBI Clubhouse.

Now, if you haven't read Janet's article on *'Writing in Rhyme'* in the December Children's Book Insider, I urge you to do so if you have any desire at all about writing stories. She has explained very clearly how to check your meter, how to avoid writing trite rhyming patterns and how to add action to your stories. I think it takes a real talent to write in rhyme and Janet clearly has this knack. So, you should definitely read her article and learn a lot from her.

So Janet, thanks for being here with me today.

**JANET:** Oh, thanks for having me! I'm looking forward to sharing. I really feel as if writing in rhyme I just about one of the most fun things that children's authors can do. So, I'd like to share what I know.

**LAURA:** Oh, great! Well, I think it's one of the most fun things to read out loud, as well. So, I'm glad that you love to do it and that you're going to help people create really great rhyming stories. Now, as you mentioned in your article, editors often tell writers that they don't want to see rhyming stories. And what they really mean -- at least in *my* opinion when I hear this -- is that they don't want to see *bad* rhyming stories. Why do you think it's so easy for a writer to write a *bad* rhyme.

**JANET:**

I think writers can write bad rhymes for really more than one reason, but the primary one is oftentimes, they're focusing on the words that are at the very end of a sentence that make the rhyme. They totally get lost in creating sentences where the ends of the sentences match.

They forget two main things. Number one, you need a really good story first no matter whether you're writing in rhyme or prose. And secondly, when you're writing in rhyme, it's really a lot more than the end of the sentence that needs to work. I explained a lot of some of the ways you can make mistakes trying to write in rhymes technically in the article. But really, the beginning point is truly that you need to have a story that has been thought out. You should be maybe writing it in some kind of a rough outline and developing beginning, middle and end unless you're dealing with really a concept. My very first book is *'Kisses with Colors'*. It's really a mother's love poem. It has a theme and it's more of a concept book than an actual story. Rhyme is suited to some of those kinds of books for the very young. But you really do want to be telling a story and if you're writing a full-length picture book, focusing on having tension, resolution or beginning, middle and ending.

**LAURA:**

Now, you talked about concept books. What other kinds of stories are best suited for rhyme? Can it be any kind of picture book story or are there certain types of stories that you find lend themselves better to this format?

**JANET:**

Well, if you focus on the concepts, you can have novelty books or concept books. *'Too Many Bunnies'* by Rick Walton is a delightful combination of alphabet and counting. You can also have just-for-fun stories. I think rhyme is particular suited for tickling funny bones of all ages, both with an over the top plot, as well as fun sounds, rhythms and rhymes. Older kids can laugh. Younger kids may have a different sensibility, but they'll get caught up in the fun and particularly when you have terrific illustrations to match. I think the hyperbole fantasy and silliness of picture books is really a terrific blend.

Non-fiction also can be written in rhyme. You also can have books that teach some complicated non-fiction with partial prose matter to support the rhyme. I think you need to think about serious topics really not being suited for rhymes. If you're writing about the loss of a pet or some serious emotion, it's better to craft a story in prose.

I tend to think in rhyme initially and when I visited the Grand Canyon about ten years ago, afterwards, I wrote a poem about in rhyme. I actually was moved to tears by the Grand Canyon itself. It was just such an incredible experience, to stand at the edge there. But I never did anything with that poem because I really felt like I was minimizing the grandeur of that incredible place by putting it in rhyme. So, it doesn't always work. So, but mostly, for fun and for the very young.

**LAURA:** And is it important to match the style or the meter of the rhyme with the story that you're telling? For example, like books that are geared for the really young kids, they might have a real short rhyming pattern, maybe something that's repetitive a lot, whereas stories for older kids that rhyme, the rhyming pattern might be a little bit more longer or looser?

**JANET:** Yes! It is absolutely! I do! I think for the very young, a simple pattern is often the best. You see young children are using these kinds of stories not only for a joyful shared moment probably with an adult they're closed to, but they're also learning -- it's early literacy; the sounds of the words are helping to develop their vocabulary. So, simple and predictable is okay with the very young. I try to do that with the rhymes and patterns that I develop for early books. As you get older, unpredictability and more complicated patterns are fun, too. You can stick in a refrain that doesn't rhyme in the middle of a series of rhyming couplets and have some fun that way. But you can pretty much create whatever you want.

I think the secret for all of this is to continually be reading it out loud; to read it out loud to yourself and others read it out loud so that you can hear it read by somebody who didn't know how you wanted those words come out, see if you've created any problems.

**LAURA:** And I've read rhyming manuscripts in my critique service that are really more for adults than kids. And maybe when you were talking about this Grand Canyon poem that you wrote, maybe in a lot of ways, that was part of the problem. It was more of an adult sensibility than a child's. I don't know, not having read the poem myself.

**JANET:** You know what? You're absolutely right! You're absolutely right! And I think that you need to be mindful of the audience and what you're trying to do. Not to say that you don't want to have some -- especially with the humorous rhyming books -- that you don't want to have something there for the adults because I think you can have humor that appeals to children of all ages, including adults and some puns and other fun that maybe a younger child might not get. I think '*Sailor Moo: Cow at Sea*' by Lisa Wheeler is a perfect example of that. It is just too funny from so many perspectives. Kids love it and so do adults!

**LAURA:** Are there other ways to test your rhymes or your subjects to make sure that they're not too adult to you. Do you, for example, find if someone's getting really abstract or they're talking more about feelings than about concrete things that can be illustrated, for me, that's a red flag. Do you have any tests like that you run your own work through?

**JANET:** I do! I pretty much try writing it out, the ideas or images that come to me. And sometimes, they do come. As to adults, I have, for example, a couple of lines from an early version of '*A Mother's Song*', which is coming out this spring taking a walk through nature and enjoying different fun activities. One of -- the couplets I had was '*Watch the wind blowing our hair through and fro, changing its mind about which way to go*' and I love -- I personally (obviously, I wrote the words, so I love them) -- I love the idea of the wind blowing the hair back and forth. I could see the illustrations. And I could see a kid understanding the idea that this changing -- '*the wind is changing its mind*', but the phrase '*to and fro*' is adult language.

Sometimes, I realize this myself. Sometimes, I go to my weekly writers' group where there's ten of us and we all write for children, all different genre. And someone will say, "I think that '*to and fro*' is too adult," which is actually what happened with this particular couplet. And I ultimately abandoned that even though the idea of the wind going back and forth was something fresh that kids might enjoy. Sometimes, you fall in love with half of your couplet. One line, you really like, but you can't switch it around and make a line work that isn't too adult or doesn't have some other problem. You end up -- you *should* end up abandoning it. Otherwise, you're really trying to push words to have an end rhyme and you are going to have a problem.

**LAURA:** This gets into the whole editing process. Once you sell your rhyming story, you have to get edited just like any other book. How does that work when you've written in rhyme where every word, every phrase has been so carefully chosen. And then, what if the editor wants you to revise something.

**LAURA:** Sometimes I've handled it better than others to be perfectly honest. And I think what authors need to remember when they go into the process, whether it's prose or rhyme, you always need to take a deep breath when you get editorial requests. I feel like my breath, sometimes, need to be deeper because the struggle of a rhyme to make it work just isn't quickly replaceable with something else. Oftentimes, there's a domino effect in terms of the whole story and the lines are really created piece by piece.

The thing, I think, authors need to think about is what kind of approach their editor is taking. Every editor has a different approach. I've experienced editorial revision where the editor had said, "I'd like this to be changed for this reason and then, leave it to me to figure out how to go about doing that and presenting some alternative." Any good author should be happy to do that. It's more difficult if you have an editorial experience where somebody rewrites your work. And I think that's true whether you write in prose or rhyme, but as I've said, I think it has some added issues if you write in rhyme because you may have an editor who really isn't as frequently writing and rhyming as you are and may be inadvertently messing with the meter and causing problems. You obviously need to figure out a diplomatic way to handle those kinds of situations.

What I would advise people to do is if you do have an editor who has written revisions for you and you really don't like it, you need to think long and hard about first of all, does it work (because ultimately, you may end up with that in your manuscript if you don't make some other hard choices about taking the whole story back and not many of us are going to do that). What I suggest you do is try to think of an alternative because then, if it's your words, then maybe it'll work better and maybe, most likely, you're willing to spend more time coming up with something that's going to maybe work a little bit better. And as long as the editor doesn't have his/her ego to invest in what they've suggested, you can take care of it that way.

**LAURA:** I think that's great advice. And I think that you can use that approach in any kind of editing situation. Even if it's in prose, it's coming up with an alternative and being able to say, "You know, I think this works better because..." I think that's a good approach,

rather than just getting defensive. A good editor will really be working towards the best manuscript possible, not what the editor wants to see in your manuscript.

**JANET:** That's absolutely true!

**LAURA:** It's very much a give-and-take relationship. So, I think that's great advice there.

**JANET:** I think you need to just not panic. *Tyrannoclause*, I wrote originally in the present tense. Near the end of the process, my editor requested that I change it to the past tense. And that did cause me panic because there was about a third of my couplets that no longer worked because, for example, 'fall' rhymes with 'wall', but 'wall' doesn't rhyme with 'fell', which is the past tense of 'fall'.

But you can do it. You just have to take your time and every time I've done revisions, I found that the ultimate result is a more satisfying manuscript. Editors know what they're doing. And you need to take the ego out a little bit.

The only other thing that I think is a little bit unique for rhyming authors that I would mention is you need to monitor the copyediting process. And that is the process -- once you've gone through the whole editorial process with your editor and you basically say, "Yep, this is the final manuscript," and you both agree and are happy, it goes to another person who is basically going to check for commas, periods, dashes, as well as grammatical accuracy. If copyediting is done to a rhyming manuscript, it can change your lines and alter your meter.

I've had that happen to me. I had a pop-up book called 'A Mama Bug's Love' by Little Simon and it's a cute little ditty. I ran out of human beings. I had a mother's love poem and a father's love poem. And then, I switched to how mother bugs might show their love. So, it's a little fantasy pop-up book. And I had two lines, "Mama flea announces loud, 'Come, children. Time to go. I've got a special treat today. Let's do a doggy show.'" What happened to me is I never saw the copyediting. Different publishers work differently and copyediting may just go back to the editor and they think, "This is it. We just move forward," but in those two lines, the way it was revised was, "Mama Flea announces loudly" because I really should have an adverb 'loudly' modifying

*'announces'*. So now, I have an extra beat on that line. *"Mama Flea announces loudly, 'Come, children. Time to go."* And it should be, *"Mama Flea announces loud, 'Come, children. Time to go."* I would have changed that and gotten rid of the *'come'* and read, *"Mama Flea announces loudly, 'Children, time to go!'"* So, I would've had the right number of beat. But I never saw it again. So, these two lines, I know, have this extra beat in that first line.

So, you really -- if you work in rhyme, what you should do near the end of your editing process is nicely request of your editor that you get to take a look at the copyedited manuscript. I suppose that applies to prose, as well. I didn't even really know about the copyediting process to understand how it works until I've done a couple of books. So now, I always try to take a peek at that.

**LAURA:** That's very good advice because like you said, every beat, every syllable is so important and the copyeditor might not even be aware of that. They're just looking at what's most grammatically correct.

**JANET:** Exactly! And this copyeditor was right! And not that we don't like to stick in incorrect grammar occasionally if it's fun, but I suppose we should be mindful of that. But I have something stuck in my brain from way back that you don't want a lot of adverbs in your manuscript.

**LAURA:** I know! There are so many balls in the air that you're juggling at once.

**JANET:** Yes, that's true.

**LAURA:** Great! Well, thank you so much for all these wonderful tips and for your terrific article.

**JANET:** Well, thank you. Thank you, Laura. It was my pleasure.

**LAURA:** Well, good! And I urge everyone to get *Tyrannoclause* and add it to their holiday reading list with their kids because it's a great book. And we're looking forward to all your future books, Janet.

**JANET:** Well, thank you so much, Laura!