

Children's Book Insider

The Newsletter for Children's Writers

At Presstime:

New Story Competition for Animated Films (deadline approaching)

Marza Animation Planet Inc., the new film production arm of Sega Sammy group and 100 Meter Films, has launched the Marza Story Circus competition. Marza aims to produce feature-length CGI animated films for global distribution. Looking for original and entertaining stories for children and families with contemporary themes and positive messages, set in any culture or period.

The competition is open to both professional and unpublished writers. Writers may submit as many stories as they want. To submit a story, send a synopsis of the plot along with the application form, which can be downloaded at www.100meterfilms.com/en/story_competition/ All submissions must be made by email. The synopsis format should be in Microsoft Word, 12 point font, and a maximum of 3 pages. Send submissions to info@100meterfilms.com, and write "Story Circus Submission" in the subject line. All entries must be received between **July 1 and July 30, 2010**.

All entrants should read the terms of the agreement before submitting work. The winners of the first round of submissions will be notified by email on September 15th. Twenty winners from the first round will be awarded an option fee of 50,000 yen (about \$552) for a six-month option. These writers will then be asked to submit a longer treatment (5-6 pages) for Round 2. Ten winners will be chosen and awarded an option of 100,000 yen for an additional six months. These winners will receive feedback on their treatment and be asked to submit a 10-page revision. Five works will be given a 200,000 yen option for six more months. These stories will be developed into film adaptations, though this does not guarantee that the films will be made.

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Magazine for Young Children Accepting Submissions

Humpty Dumpty's Magazine is published six times a year for children ages 5-7. Looking for poems (4-12) lines; crafts; recipes; activities; rebuses; and simple, picture-oriented fiction and nonfiction of no more than 450 words. All material submitted should reflect good values and healthy living. The magazine's health and fitness focus includes kids' emotional lives, interests and educational needs. Avoid reference to sugary foods, such as candy, cakes, cookies, and soft drinks. Send seasonal material at least eight months in advance. It's advised that writers study several back issues of the magazine before submitting. Pays up to 35 cents/word for fiction and nonfiction; \$25-\$50 for poetry; a minimum of \$25 for puzzles and games. Buys all rights, including Web, and pays upon publication. One-time book rights will be returned to the author when an interested publisher is found.

Submit entire manuscript with SASE to Phyllis Lybarger, Editor, *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, US Kids, PO Box 567, Indianapolis, IN 46206.

Upcoming Ohio Conference

The Northern Ohio SCBWI Annual Conference will be held on September 10-12 at the Sheraton Airport Hotel in Cleveland. Headliners include Mark McVeigh, Owner/Agent, The McVeigh Agency; Jennifer Rees, Senior Editor, Scholastic; Martha Mihalick, Associate Editor, Greenwillow Books; Anne Moore, Art Director, Candlewick Press. Breakout speakers include several fiction and nonfiction authors and author/illustrators. Please contact Vicki Selvaggio, N. Ohio SCBWI Regional Advisor, for further information at vselvaggio@windstream.net or go to the SCBWI web site at www.nohschbwi.org.

July 2010

At Presstime: *Agent Accepting Submissions for All Ages*

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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Folio Literary Management has expanded into representing authors of children's and young adult work. Agent Emily van Beek is acquiring projects for young and teen readers, from picture books by authors and author/artists, to authentic and fresh middle-grade fiction, to lyrical and daring YA. She's looking for a strong voice, and "fiction that has an impact—whether it packs a punch or effects change with a more subtle hand, but something that can't be put down, a manuscript that begs me to turn the page, work that changes me with the reading. I'm really, really looking for something that feels new, that I haven't read before. I am not the best agent for fangs, claws, and wings. These topics have been very successfully published already. I'm looking for what comes after vampires and werewolves. I would love to be surprised!" Accepting email submissions only. Send queries to Emily@foliolit.com. If you are an author/illustrator, mention if you have a web site or online portfolio. For novels, include a synopsis, the first 10 pages of the manuscript, and any relevant publishing history in the body of the email. Picture books can be emailed in their entirety within the body of the email. Responds to all queries within four to six weeks.

Small Publisher Seeks Chapter Books and Novels

OnStage Publishing publishes chapter books (3000-9000 words), middle grade novels (10,000-40,000 words) and young adult novels (40,000-60,000 words). They also publish a small amount of nonfiction for grades 3 and up (query first with any nonfiction book ideas). OnStage does not do picture books or poetry. Current interests include adventure novels for boys ages 9-15 (avoid vampires, wizards and time portals), and submissions from illustrators (see below). Recent titles include *The Secret of Crybaby Hollow* by Darren J. Butler (middle grade mystery); *Fat Tuesday* by Susan Vaught (young adult); *Will Paris Burn?* by Annie Laura Smith (young adult historical fiction).

All submissions should include a cover letter with the author's name, address, date of submission, brief synopsis of the story, the book's intended audience and word/chapter count. For fiction under 100 pages, submit the complete manuscript. For over 100 pages, send the first three chapters and a more detailed plot summary. Simultaneous submissions are accepted if noted as such. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope with enough postage to return the entire manuscript for manuscripts under 13 oz. For manuscripts over that weight, include a business-sized SASE for the editor's reply, and note that the manuscript will be recycled (postal regulations require that anything over 13 oz. be hand-delivered to the post office). Or, submit by email, pasting all of the above into the body of the email (no attachments please). Submit to Dianne Hamilton, Publisher, OnStage Publishing, 190 Lime Quarry Road, Suite 106 J, Madison, AL 35758. Email: onstage123@knology.net. Mark envelopes and subject lines of emails "Manuscript Submission".

Artist Guidelines: Send art that portrays children in various situations. Samples should contain both color and black-and-white illustrations. No seasonal material (holidays, etc.) Suitable samples will be placed in the publisher's illustrator file for future book projects. Artists may update their samples on a regular basis. Include a cover letter with nonreturnable samples. Please send hard copies only. Address to Art Director at the above address.

Nominations Accepted for Award for Outstanding Nonfiction

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has established the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children, presented at the NCTE Annual Convention each year.

Nominees for the 2011 award must be published in the United States during the 2010 calendar year, and be received by the committee chair by December 31, 2010. Nominations of individual titles may come from members of NCTE or the educational community at large. Any nonfiction title of information literature which has as its central purpose the sharing of information may be nominated. This includes biography but excludes textbooks, historical fiction, folklore or poetry. Each nomination will be judged on accuracy, organization, design and style. To nominate a book published in 2010 for the 2011 Orbis Pictus Award, send a letter to Kim Ford, Orbis Pictus Committee Chair, 6617 Westminster Road, Memphis, TN 38120-3446. The letter should include the author's name, book title, publisher, copyright date, and a short description of what you liked about the book. The 2010 winner is *The Secret World of Walter Anderson* by Hester Bass, illustrated by E.B. Lewis (Candlewick Press). Five honor books and eight recommended books were also recognized.

The CBI Challenge: Module 15

Find Your Strengths as a Writer

by Laura Backes

Does your critique group laugh in all the right places when you read your humorous picture book out loud? Do they ask for more at the end of a pivotal chapter in your middle grade mystery? As you continue to work on your manuscript and get feedback, you'll learn where your strengths lie as an author. Every writer has qualities that flow naturally from his or her keyboard. Once you learn what you're best at, use it to your advantage. If devising creative plot twists is your forte, don't write a quiet, introspective novel. If you're passionate about research and love science, devote your energies to nonfiction instead of rhyming picture books. Many beginning writers make the mistake of thinking all children's books fall into the same category (they must feature talking animals and have a wholesome message, etc.) They try to force their writing into a preconceived mold. But you'll have a much easier time selling your work (and more fun creating it) if you capitalize on your talents.

That doesn't mean you can ignore your weaknesses. While it's a smart choice to write a funny chapter book if you instinctively understand a third grader's sense of humor, you can't coast with weak dialogue or a plot that sags in the middle. If you get consistent feedback on specific areas that aren't working, take the time now to improve your technique. All writing gets better with practice, and your efforts now will pay off with fewer rejections down the road. Look for writing classes in your area. Do an online search for books on writing using keywords that fit your needs. Check out books filled with writing exercises that you can use on your work-in-progress, or practice with other material that will never end up in your manuscript (Katherine Ploeger's popular Workshop series, *Plot*, *Character*, and *Brainstorming*, has just been revised as reorganized eBooks with links to loads of helpful research material. Check out cbiclubhouse.com for more details.)

Below and to the right are some fixes for the most common manuscript flaws:

No "hook": Every book these days needs a hook; a clear, specific concept that allows the author (and editor, publicist and bookseller) to sum up the book's unique slant in one or two sentences. The hook makes it immediately clear how this book will be dif-

ferent from everything else on the shelves. "A nonfiction picture book about how animals protect themselves" is too general to be a hook. "A nonfiction picture book about how seemingly benign creatures (such as the platypus, cone shell and tang fish) have developed unusual ways of protecting themselves that can be harmful to humans," is more precise. And, as author/illustrator Steve Jenkins demonstrates with *Never Smile at a Monkey*, and *17 Other Important Things to Remember*, a catchy title helps too.

If you need five minutes to describe the overall plot of your book to a friend, or if you find yourself using very general terms (*It's a quiet bedtime story/ It's a fun look at a day in the life of the average 5-year-old/ It's a novel that explores issues all adolescents face, such as pimples and popularity contests/ I'm writing a nonfiction book that gives an overview of sea creatures*) you probably don't have a hook. You should know your hook before you begin writing your story, but it's never too late to revise your plot. If you're still unclear about what a hook is and why it's important, take a look at the children's books that have been made into movies: *Shrek*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *The Tale of Despereaux*, *Coraline*, *The Lightning Thief*. All have clearly-defined hooks that can be conveyed through one image and a tag line on a movie poster.

Pacing that's too even: Often authors have their characters in a good place and are afraid to shake things up, so the story develops a very even tone, devoid of any tension or surprise. If a scene lasts more than two pages in a picture book, or longer than about a third of a chapter in a novel, insert a phrase that requires you to change course. Sentences beginning with *However...* or *But then...* force a radical plot shift. *One day...* means the character's ordinary routine is about to be interrupted. *Suddenly...* ramps up the action. *Meanwhile...* means we're leaving this scene and checking in on the action elsewhere. If you're worried about the pacing in a novel or book of longer narrative nonfiction, write out a detailed plot synopsis for yourself, then drop these phrases into the synopsis and see how the action changes.

Telling instead of showing: If you've been informed that your writing is too "telling," then you need to learn how to "show" plot and character development to the reader via the action of the story. One trick is to do a word search in your manuscript for any form of the "to be" verb (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) and replace it with a single, strong verb. *Jake was afraid of the snake* becomes *Jake feared the snake*, or, even better, *Jake gulped when the snake slithered toward him* (which gives the reader additional information). Also do a search for adjectives and adverbs, using grammar software or manually highlighting those words on your printed manuscript. Replace the adjective/noun or adverb/verb combinations with a stronger nouns or verbs that don't need modifying.

Check your humor IQ: If you think the humor in your manuscript might not mesh with your audience, take a look at this great round-up of what kids find funny at different ages: <http://www.clownforum.com/clowning-articles/9348-humour-development-children.html> What works for professional clowns can work for writers!


www.CBIclubhouse.com

Subscribers: Visit the CBI Challenge, Module15 section to find more writing exercises and ways to learn how to fix your flaws.

Promoting Your Book

With more and more writers taking the self-publishing route, signing with ebook publishers, and/or working with small presses, the need for self-promotion and marketing grows. We all know of the large bookstore chains. Perhaps you have worked with them. How many of us, though, take advantage of working with small independent bookstores?

Why should you go the route of working with independent bookstores? Economics. Independent bookstores are often more open to working with self-published authors than are the national chains. In addition, you will probably receive more of the owner's attention, which means your book will receive more attention, than you would in working with a large chain.

How do you get the attention of these booksellers?

- Attend regional book shows. Depending upon your budget, you can rent a booth or you can simply pass out your postcard to everyone you meet (you do have postcards, don't you?). Some authors also take a small trinket or novelty to pass out at these shows. Try to go beyond the usual key ring, pencils, and mugs and find something that ties in with your book. Have you written a book about a child dealing with the arrival of a new baby in the family? Consider an inexpensive rattle featuring the name of your book. Did you pen a 'tween (ages 8-12) novel about a young girl hovering between childhood and the teenage years. What about including a tiny lipstick?

- Join your local regional independent bookstore association. These organizations exist in all parts of the country and are frequently less intimidating than the national organization because of their smaller size. For a nominal membership fee, authors can join the association, attend the trade shows, and receive the newsletters. Go to www.bookweb.org to find a group near you.

- Consider joining the American Booksellers Association (ABA). The ABA, founded in 1900, is a nonprofit industry association that promotes independent bookstores in the United States and Canada. The fee is steep (annual dues of \$350), but membership can have big benefits. What can the ABA do for you, the writer?

The ABA launched *Book Sense* in 1999 to bring publishers, authors, bookstores, and readers together. In June of 2008, *Book Sense* evolved into *IndieBound*, a new program and web site.

After a period of beta testing, a social network-style community feature was launched on the web site in September of 2008. *IndieBound* took the original concept of preserving a connection between readers, writers, and bookstores to the next level in celebrating the enthusiasm and energy of book lovers and spreading the latest news about books. Check it out at www.bookweb.org/indiebound.html

Every year, the ABA sponsors BookExpo America (BEA). During the Expo, the ABA offers a full day of targeted free educational programming. It also features two sessions for children's booksellers developed by the Association of Booksellers for Children. Recent offerings include classes on serving the 'tween reader and the nuts and bolts of children's bookselling.

Whether or not you decide to join the ABA, subscribe to their free online newsletter, *Bookselling This Week*. This weekly newsletter is a must for keeping up on all the national news concerning independent bookstores. Sign up at the ABA site, www.bookweb.org.

- Have something interesting to say concerning your book, the publishing process, your experiences as a writer or your reception by independent bookstores. Write a short editorial and submit it to *Bookselling This Week*. It's good exposure for both you and your work. Another bonus: you can post this on your web site with a link to *Bookselling This Week*.

- If the newsletter turns down your article, try submitting to a local or regional independent organization. Each of these organizations publishes a newsletter, some monthly, some quarterly. Of course you will include the information on your book at the end of the article. A nice touch is to include a thank you to the independent bookstores, giving names of anyone who was particularly helpful. Just as in all business and personal interactions, gratitude and graciousness go a long way in the publishing and bookselling industry.

- If your book has a Christian or spiritual slant, you may want to join the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) at www.cbaonline.org.

- Subscribe to *Publishers Advocate* (www.PublishersAdvocate.com). There, you can present the perspective of writers. Again, you will want to mention your newest book and give the pertinent information.

So how can you convince the indie bookstore owner to work with you? First, treat the owner as you would the manager of a large chain. Ap-

Through Indie Bookstores

by Jane McBride Choate

proach her at a time convenient for her. Good etiquette dictates that you call first and make an appointment. Then show up on time. Be respectful of her time.

Come with your book, press release, and other related materials. Include in your press packet a fact sheet about yourself. Show her that you are a professional, eager to work to promote not just your book but her store as well. Be open to her suggestions. Independent bookstore owners have to be savvy just to stay in business. They know what works, what doesn't.

Just as in working with major bookstores, show that you are a professional when arranging a book signing or other event:

- Partner with the store. Your success is their success.
- Be grateful and show your gratitude. Make certain to send a thank-you note to the owner.
- Send your contacts a signed copy of the book as well. Gestures like that make you stand out from the crowd.
- Send postcards to all your friends, business acquaintances, parents of your children's friends, church members, etc. telling them about your new book. Create a buzz about your book.
- If you have news concerning your book, such as it's been picked up by a book club or it's won an award, share the news with the bookstore owner. Send out a press release, via email or fax concerning your success. It's news!
- Offer to sign books prior to the event. Put "autographed by author" stickers on the covers.
- Appear open and accessible; customers are frequently daunted by talking to an author.
- Put a book in their hands—people are tactile and like to feel the texture of a book.
- Understand that hosting an event is costly: workload, inventory, salaries, publicity all require funding. Be sensitive to the budget of the owner. Small bookstores typically don't have the budget that the large chains do.
- You want to make sure the event is a success for both the store and you, the author.
- Remember, successful events beget more successful events.
- Decide on the best venue for your signing: a meet-and-greet is often best for new authors, rather than a formal talk.
- Enlist friends and associates from any writers' groups or other organizations to which you belong. Be aware of the power of group advocacy.
- Remember, people want to buy books

from people they know.

- Booksellers can list you on the newsletter and online, calendar listing, advocacy.
- Make sure your book has an ISBN (International Standard Book Number).
- Books should be properly bound (no spirals, staples, or three ring bindings).
- Books should be fully returnable within 90 days of the event.
- Books should be recently published, (usually within the last six months).

As in all matters concerning your writing, you will want to carefully consider the costs and time involved in joining ABA or organizations before making a decision. Choose what is right for you and your career. Below is some contact information for various groups in the independent bookstore community:

The Association of American Publishers (AAP) has some 260 members located throughout the United States. Contact them at www.publishers.org

IBPA, The Independent Book Publishers Association: This group offers marketing programs, seminars, summaries and reviews for publishers of books, audiotapes, books on tape, ebooks and videos. Contact them at www.ibpa-online.org

SPANnet—Self Publishing Information: SPAN provides support for self-publishing authors and independent publishing companies as a non-profit trade association. Contact them at www.spannet.org

Independent Publishers and University Presses: An online guide found at www.newpages.com/book-publishers

Top 101 Independent Book Publishers: Book publishing's top independent book publishers as selected by America's top book marketing expert. Contact them at www.bookmarket.com/101publishers.htm

Center for Independent Publishing (Formerly The Small Press Center): This literary community can help you start building a network of valuable professional contacts. Contact them at www.nycip.org

Find Your Publisher (FYP), powered by Author Solutions, Inc, is a web site dedicated to help both first-time and experienced authors identify the most suitable indie book publishing company for their book. Contact them at www.FindYourPublisher.com

Going Electronic

With more and more ebooks being published, independent bookstore owners are navigating their way through new waters to work with ebook authors. Many owners are experimenting with different venues and electronic devices.

"I'm very open to ebooks, but we don't have the vehicle yet," says Becky Anderson, co-owner of Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville and Downer's Grove, Illinois. Anderson would like to be able to market an electronic device, like the Kindle, and sell accompanying ebooks. "We want to make sure that we don't get out of that content. We want to be able to have staff picks, and you can buy the print book or download it from our web site."

Like other booksellers, Meghan Dietsche Goel, buyer at BookPeople in Austin, Texas, is struggling to find the best way for a brick-and-mortar store to monetize e-content. "We're talking about how the retail store fits in, whether it's best to have a sign in the store or just to sell them online." So far, Goel hasn't seen a trickle-down effect from publishers' efforts to seed the potential e-market with free digital downloads of teasers or full books. "We haven't had anyone come in and mention it."

Jane McBride Choate is a CBI Contributing Editor and author whose newest book is *Bride Price*, just out from Avalon Romance.

Writing Books

One of the biggest thrills young children experience is learning to read. Easy reader books are designed to nurture this excitement and gently lead kids from very simple texts to longer, more complex stories. Most publishers have graduated easy reader programs that contain three to five levels, starting in kindergarten and ending with short chapter books. The levels aren't so much connected to age as they are to skill; one six-year-old might be reading chapters, while her classmate is still mastering simple sentences. However, most easy readers have certain qualities that make them perfect for kids just starting to read on their own. Let's look at a few examples:

Characters with a "hook". Easy reader characters need to have one or two overriding characteristics that sum up their personalities. This helps the reader anticipate how a character will react in different situations. Since the reader is working on the actual act of deciphering the text, characters and plots need to be fairly straightforward so as not to be overwhelming. However, avoid writing down to your readers. Your audience will be an average of five to eight years old, and prides itself on graduating from "read to me" to "I can read to myself". The problems the characters face need to be relevant to a first or second grader. Don't confuse a simple text with a simplistic story.

In Mo Willem's *Elephant and Piggie* easy reader series (60 pages, with one to 10 words per page, for Level 1 readers), this description appears on the back of each book:

Gerald is careful. Piggie is not.

Piggie cannot help smiling. Gerald can.

Gerald worries so that Piggie does not have to.

Gerald and Piggie are best friends.

In every book the two characters face common childhood situations in ways that are consistent with their personalities, and help each other find the happy ending. Willem's illustrations depict expressions and body language that give a sophisticated sub-text to the simple words as a nod to readers' growing comprehension.

In the *Nate the Great* series by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat (48 pages hardcover, short chapters, about 70 words per page, similar to Level 4 reader), Nate is a boy detective who fancies himself Sam Spade. The first person narration reveals Nate's powers of deduction and dry delivery as he solves cases. The same support-

ing characters appear over and over to give a familiar feel to the series. Here's an excerpt from *Nate the Great on the Owl Express*:

I got up and walked to her cage.

Willie had told me to keep it covered.

He had told me to let Hoot sleep.

*But I, Nate the Great,
had a job to do.*

I lifted the cover.

Hoot wasn't asleep or hungry or happy.

She was gone!

Straightforward sentence structure. Easy readers are primarily written in declarative sentences and dialogue. The color illustrations on each page take care of the description. In the lower levels, arrange the words so that each line has one clear thought or phrase. Rhyme isn't necessary, but it can help readers recognize similar sounds. Here's an example from *Doodle Dog* by Eric Seltzer (32 pages, 6-10 words per page, Level 1):

Time for art.

My tail wags.

*Rushing, I forget
some bags.*

Another technique for the earliest levels is to repeat the same basic sentence for several pages, changing only one or two words each time. P.D. Eastman's *Go, Dog. Go!* is a classic example.

As the levels increase, the sentences get longer, but the plots still rely on action and dialogue. Keep sentences confined to one or two distinct ideas, and paragraphs short, as in this excerpt from *Henry and Mudge and the Big Sleepover* by Cynthia Rylant (40 pages, 4 chapters, 10-30 words per page, Level 2):

When the movies were over, the boys had a popcorn contest for the dogs.

The dog who was the best popcorn catcher would win.

Henry was sure Mudge would be the winner.

Some easy reader series published by educational publishers have a controlled vocabulary (as described in the publisher's writers' guidelines found on their web sites or by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the editorial department). Most trade publishers, however, don't have such stringent requirements. In general, for the lower levels use one-syllable words or simple two-syllable words (such as *backpack* or *forget*, which are made up of two smaller words) and shorter sentences. Once you get beyond the first level,

for Budding Readers

by Laura Backes

one or two harder words can be introduced per chapter (or every few pages) as long as the reader can understand the word from the context of the sentence. For example, in Jane O'Connor's *The Show Must Go On* from the Fancy Nancy series (32 pages, about 25 words per page), Nancy narrates:

*I pick up a little glass lion.
"This is adorable," I say.
I tell him I like fancy words.
And adorable is fancy for cute.*

Accessible plots. The situations depicted in these stories should be accessible to readers and simple to follow. Sub-plots, mysteries with red herrings, characters who aren't what they seem and abstract themes make the books too difficult to read. The whole experience must be fun, giving readers a sense of accomplishment and inspiring them to pick up another book.

Familiar events (a traditional slumber party in *Henry and Mudge and the Big Sleepover*; performing in a talent show with an assigned partner in *The Show Must Go On*) help readers see themselves in the stories.

Easy readers that allow kids to exercise their maturing sense of humor are instant hits. Readers in first and second grade can hold two different ideas in their head at the same time. So a discrepancy between what a character thinks is happening and what's really happening (as depicted in the illustrations or through the reaction of another character) is funny. Denys Cazet's *Minnie and Moo* series (48 pages, 15-20 words per page, 6-7 chapters, unlevelled) feature two clueless cows who think they are going on great adventures when they're routinely destroying their farm. Peggy Parish's classic *Amelia Bedelia* series (64 pages, 20-30 words per page, Level 2), stars Amelia the housekeeper who takes everything literally. When her employers give her instructions (*Draw the drapes when the sun comes in.*) she carries them out faithfully, if not accurately. In both series, the reader gets to be smarter than the protagonists, which makes the experience even more satisfying.

High-interest nonfiction. Children in kindergarten through third grade are intensely fascinated with the world around them. Animals, machines, their bodies, dinosaurs, historical figures, the weather... the list of nonfiction topics for beginning readers is endless. Easy reader nonfiction uses all the same writing techniques as for fiction, and these series are broken into similar levels. At the beginning levels, the text describes

what is shown in the illustrations (often photographs). Here's an example from *Police Cars* by Kay Manolis, part of the Mighty Machines series (24 pages, 10-15 words per page, Level 1):

*Police cars
have two-way radios.
This officer
can talk
with officers
in other places.*

When choosing a nonfiction topic, be aware of what kids are studying in school in different grades. The Viking Math Easy-to-Read series incorporates math concepts into a rhyming easy reader format. This is from *Bears Odd, Bears Even* by Harriet Ziefert (32 pages, 5-15 words per page, Level 2):

*Two, four, six, eight, ten—
even numbers.
Four polar bears playing—
an even number.*

As the reading level increases, the information can become more complex. Early elementary students love facts, so be sure to work in interesting details to your topic. But don't just list information. Create a scene that draws the reader into the text. Look at this example from *Polar Bear Alert!* by Debora Pearson (48 pages, 10 chapters plus glossary, about 30-80 words per page, Level 3):

*The ice is slippery but the big bear moves
across it without sliding. The pads of his feet
have small bumps and hairs that help him grip
the ice. Indentations on the bear's footpads act
like suction cups and keep him from slipping.*

Understanding Easy Reader Series

It's vital that writers read several easy readers to really understand the structure of these books. Go to a large bookstore and camp out in the section for beginning readers. The books are arranged by publisher, so all levels of a series should be shelved together. On the back or inside the front cover of each book will be an explanation of that publisher's reader levels. Study several titles, dissect them to learn how many words fall on each page, how the characters are developed, how the sentences are structured. Find a particular level that seems to fit with your writing style, then go home and work on your manuscript. Writing easy readers is an art; if you can master it, you'll be sought after by editors and readers alike.

Some Easy Readers to Study

My Friend is Sad by Mo Willems (Elephant and Piggie series, Hyperion, unlevelled)

Doodle Dog by Eric Seltzer (Viking Ready-to-Read, Level 1)

The Show Must Go On by Jane O'Connor (Fancy Nancy series, HarperCollins I Can Read!, Level 1)

Henry and Mudge and the Big Sleepover by Cynthia Rylant (Simon & Schuster Ready-to-Read, Level 2)

Nate the Great on the Owl Express by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat (Delacorte Press, unlevelled)

Minnie and Moo Go to Paris by Denys Cazet (DK Ink, unlevelled)

Police Cars by Kay Manolis (Mighty Machines series, Scholastic Blastoff! Readers, Level 1)

Bears Odd, Bears Even by Harriet Ziefert (Viking Math Easy-to-Read, Level 2)

My Skin by Dana Meachen Rau (What's Inside Me? series, Benchmark Books Bookworms, Level Fluent)

Polar Bear Alert! by Debora Pearson (DK Readers, Level 3)

Dactyls! Dragons of the Air by Dr. Robert T. Bakker (Random House Step into Reading, Level 4)

The Basics

Breathing Life into Characters

by Nancy Kelly Allen

Books with memorable characters

Books for babies:

Swimmy by Le Lionni
Max series by Rosemary Wells
No, David by David Shannon

Books for preschoolers:

Corduroy by Don Freeman
Harry the Dirty Dog by Gene Zion
Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear? by Nancy White Carlstrom

Books for 6-8 year olds:

Junie B. Jones by Barbara Park
Trouble in Troublesome Creek by Nancy Kelly Allen
Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey

Books for 9-12 year olds:

Ramona by Beverly Cleary
Love that Dog by Sharon Creech
A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck

Books for young adults

Bucking the Sarge by Christopher Paul Curtis
The Usual Rules by Joyce Maynard
Wolf Rider by Avi

Nancy Kelly Allen is the author of 14 children's books, including *Trouble in Troublesome Creek* (Red Rock Press), *A Little Ditty* (Pelican Press), and *On the Banks of the Amazon*, which was named the 2004 Appalachian Book of the Year.

Believable characters make the world of fiction come alive. A character that does not seem real will not be interesting. So how do writers breathe life into characters? The best way to develop a three-dimensional character is to get to know the character as well as you know yourself.

On paper create a character profile. List the character's physical traits, including hair color, height, and other features. List the character's likes and dislikes, family members, and unusual mannerisms, such as winking as he smiles or rubbing his hand through his hair when he is stressed. Ask your character questions about favorite foods, sports activities, and friends. Write the character's answer in a first person voice as though he is talking with you. What are the character's strengths and weaknesses? What does the character want and why does the character want it? What drives the character? This helps the writer know why the character makes certain choices throughout the plot.

Characters are more interesting if they are not perfect, but they need to be likeable. Developing character traits does not mean that everything you know about the character should go into the story. Give the reader only enough information about the character's physical description to "see" the character. Remember, the reader doesn't need to know as much about the character as the writer knows. Provide only the parts of the character that are relevant to the story. Glimpses often work better than all-out descriptions. *The scar on his cheek was a constant reminder of how his hot temper could lead to danger.* Maybe a scar is the only physical trait the reader needs to know about his face. Feed the reader small bits of character information at a time.

Allowing the reader to "see" the character through feelings, thoughts, and reactions to situations is a way to build empathy for the protagonist. Readers need to know

the character's motivation, what makes the character think and act in a particular way. Readers don't need to know the eye or hair color unless the physical appearance plays a role in the plot. If you're writing picture books, the illustrations reflect the physical appearance of the characters so the focus should be on the action in each scene.

Another way to breathe life into a character is dialogue. Does the character have an unusual way of speaking? Is the character serious or funny, sad or happy, lively or subdued? Good dialogue makes the characters practically step off the pages and become real. Give each character a different way of talking, with different speech patterns, so the reader can distinguish between them in a conversation. One could chat in short, snappy sentences and the other could speak in a longer, more detailed manner.

Begin the story at the moment the main character faces change or conflict. At this point ask the character what would happen if he failed to succeed. What consequences would the character suffer? What is the character willing to give up or sacrifice? By the end of the story the character should undergo change. The change may be internal or external or both.

Conflict drives the actions of the character. Don't be afraid to give the character flaws. Flaws provide conflict, and readers empathize and identify with imperfect characters. Allow the character to develop gradually as the plot develops.

Characters are the forces that tell the story. The more believable the character, the more believable the story becomes. Spend time learning the characters before writing the story and you will develop a better understanding of how they will react in the tension-filled situations in which you place them. Your character will become more interesting and lifelike and will linger in the minds of the reader long after the book is closed.