

The Written Word

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DEB FRONTIERA

Writing and Publishing for Children

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It was a pleasure for me to be able to give some very basic guidance to authors on the subject of writing for children at last May’s conference. For those of you who missed it, or other new people who are interested, here are the main points for reference.

It’s harder to write for children than it is for adults. Most adults will put up with two or three dull chapters of a book; they might even groan through the entire thing, but still read it. Kids are picky readers and will toss the book if it doesn’t grab them in the first couple of pages.

On the plus side, the children’s writing market has many more combinations and permutations than the adult market. There are all the genres of adult literature multiplied by all the different age groups, plus magazines for all those different reading levels! The biggest mistake most authors make is having a manuscript in which the reading level and subject/kid interest level do not match. (I’ve still got one manuscript in the drawer with this problem that I haven’t fixed satisfactorily.) Add to this the fact that there are second

graders who read on a fifth grade level and fifth graders who read at a second grade level—and a fifth grader wouldn’t be caught dead with a “baby” picture book, even though that may be all he/she is capable of reading. One high school librarian told me that kids she knows who read way below grade level would rather carry around a book they can’t read than have someone see them reading a book considered “middle school” material. And many high school students also read adult literature.

Writers of children’s books must know their target audience before they start a project. Children eagerly read stories about children a few years older than they are, but rarely stories about children younger than they. Junie B. Jones is a rare exception to this. Girls will read books with boy main characters, but boys don’t like girl main characters. *Diary of a Wimpy Girl Kid* would never have cut it.

The following length guidelines are from a pamphlet by the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).

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www.uppaa.org



What counts is not the number of hours you put in but how much you put in the hours.

INSPIRATION



As with any guidelines, there are always exceptions, and lots of overlap but this is a good place to start.

Board Books:

Infants to 2 or 3 years, ½ to 1 manuscript page.

Picture Books:

Ages 4-8, two to three manuscript pages, but this can stretch to 5.

Picture Story Books:

Ages 4-10, depending on the child's interests, 6-9 manuscript pages.

Easy Readers:

Ages 5-8, use mainly phonetic and sight words, some picture book length, some as "long" as 10-20 manuscript pages. The trick here is controlling the vocabulary while still making it interesting. Banish Sally, Dick and Jane, and find a great illustrator whose art work can tell the parts the beginning reader can't read.

Young Middle Grade:

Ages 7-9, "beginning chapter books", 40-60 manuscript pages with a lot

of variation.

Middle Grade:

Ages 9-12, novels from 100-150 manuscript pages.

Young Adult:

Ages 11-17, 175-200 manuscript pages with a lot of variation. It is generally the age of the main character that distinguishes a YA novel from middle grade or adult novels. YA romance, 140-160 manuscript pages.

Nonfiction:

Young non-fiction—10-20 manuscript pages; middle grade—60-100 manuscript pages; YA—100-150

Of course, there are always exceptions. The length of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books goes way beyond any of the above, but the first two were definitely "middle grade" length. She built her audience and her success before she "broke" the rules.

When considering picture books, it's important to think of scenes with art work in the early planning stages (even if it's only inside your head). Because of the way picture books are printed with the four-color process, the number of pages will be in multiples of eight, with 32 being the most common. Four pages will go to front/back matter, so you really have 28 to work with (book, not manuscript pages). Try to think in terms of 14 scenes since most illustrations (but not all) will be double spreads. Using a story board helps with this process. Unless you are author and illustrator, do not submit art work with a manuscript. If you plan to

Our Spring Conference
will be on
Saturday
May 15th, 2010
We will have 6 sessions on publishing, writing, and book marketing. Our April newsletter will have the full details.

publish independently, choose your artist carefully so the style of the art fits the mood of the story, because the art work tells half of the story.

Find critique partners who also write for children. (If you don't have any children's writers locally, there are lots of places to find on-line critique partners.) Make friends with your local children's librarian and read about 100 books on the level you think you want to write. Strongly consider joining SCBWI for lots of great information and support. (www.scbwi.org)

Marketing can be different, too. Parents are generally buying the books, so you must appeal to them, but kids still have to like it, or they won't read it. It's all a balancing act, a heck of a way to try to make a small amount of money, but very satisfying when you get it right.

Deborah Frontiera has published picture books, middle grade historical fiction, and YA fantasy. She's lousy at phonetic stuff and has yet to master early chapter books. Visit her web site at: www.authorsden.com/deborahkfrontiera



Interview



TYLER TICHELAAR

You recently published a new book. What's it about?

The Only Thing That Lasts is written as the autobiography of Robert O'Neill, the famous novelist I first introduced in my Marquette Trilogy. It's about Robert's life in Marquette during World War I through the Great Depression—growing up, his first boyhood crush, learning right from wrong, and figuring out what he wants to do with his life. Several of the characters have appeared in my other novels. I like to write “intertextual” connected books.

When was the moment you knew you were going to write this book?

June 4, 1987. That's the day I started it. I was in high school and it was the first day of summer break. It was my first attempt to write a novel. Of course, I rewrote it many times before publishing it 22 years later.

Why did you write it?

I set out to write a fictional story about my grandpa's childhood. It turned out to have nothing to do with that.

What problems did you have writing it?

I liked *Gone With the Wind* too much, so the main character ended up living in the South, so I had to kill off his mother and send his father off to fight in World War I so he had to travel north to Marquette to live with his grandmother and maiden aunt. Grandma was a Southerner by birth. The Civil War was alive and well in her

heart and that of the other characters her age.

Why did you set it in Marquette?

At that time, I'd never been to the South. I didn't know anything about it beyond the pages of *Gone With the Wind*. Later as I rewrote, I lived in South Carolina for a year, so that helped. But mainly, I wrote about Marquette because you should write about what you know. And Marquette fascinates me—a small city where everyone is just a couple of degrees apart in terms of knowing each other.

What is your writing schedule?

I wish I had one. It keeps changing. I try to write for one hour every evening. And then whenever I have a thought. My house is full of post-it notes with scribbles of ideas I later type up.

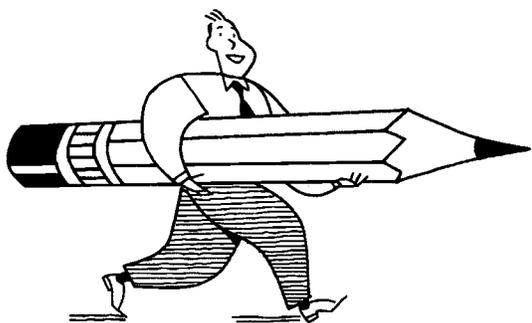
How do you support your writing habit?

I'm not sure what that means. I listen to the voices in my head and do what they tell me. They are less likely to harm me if I just obey them. Most of them are harmless, but there are one or two...

Who is the audience for your book?

Anyone who loves a good old-fashioned story. Since *The Only Thing That Lasts* is written from a thirteen year-old's perspective, it's a bit more juvenile than my other books.

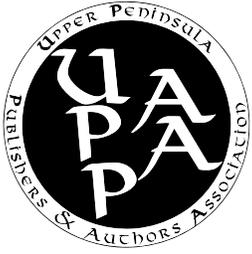
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INTERVIEW

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I tried to write in a tone similar to Carroll Watson Rankin, who wrote the famous local children's book *Dandelion Cottage*, published in 1904.

When did you know you were going to be a writer?

Third grade. My friend told me she had an aunt who wrote mystery novels. I never considered that writing books could be a job. I had no idea how hard a job it would be, but I've been writing since then. I can't stop. I have seven more books I want to write.



Writing Tips

How do you create characters that the reader will care about?

One method is to devise a chart that describes physical traits, personality, relationships, background, and roles. Daydream as you create. What does your heroine care about? Why? What are her flaws? She should have good qualities, as well as faults. Give her a conscience. In order to breathe life into her, she must reveal emotion.

If you begin by choosing your characters, not your story, the plot will take care of itself. Get to know the people you write about and build from there. The hero and heroine you create will tell you their story if you let them. More importantly, they will tell the reader through you, will make her care enough to keep right on reading as you bring their story to life.

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