


# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  April 2023



## ChatGPT & AI: What Writers Need to Know

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION LINK:**



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*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. All “At Presstime” listings are current at the time of initial publication. Members are urged to verify listings past the month of publication.

# At Presstime:

## Independent Press Seeks Fiction, Nonfiction and Activity Books to Inspire Readers

Innovation Press is an acclaimed independent publisher that strives to publish memorable children's books that inspire learning, enliven creative thinking, and spark imaginations. At this time the press is open to submission for Pre-K through fifth grade (ages 3-10) in the form of fiction or nonfiction picture books, chapter books, middle grade books and graphic novels. Particularly interested in hybrid texts that blend fiction elements with nonfiction elements, though also open to traditional fiction and nonfiction submissions. Especially loves humor and original approaches or subjects, as well as #Own-Voices submissions. Study all current titles at [theinnovationpress.com/our-books](https://theinnovationpress.com/our-books)

To submit a book proposal, query with a synopsis of the book and brief author biography along with the first 10 pages (or entire manuscript for a picture book) pasted into the body of an email. Send to [submissions@theinnovationpress.com](mailto:submissions@theinnovationpress.com).

Also seeking **activity books** that inspire children's creativity and/or learning. Particularly interested in activity books that strengthen STEM skills, promote child-led learning, and/or promote open-ended play. Submissions should be written by a single author; prefers authors that have a strong blogging platform (a general rule of thumb is at least 300,000 pageviews a month and 10,000 followers on Facebook or Instagram and Pinterest). Potential authors should have advanced degrees and/or several years of experience in their field. To submit an activity book proposal, query with a detailed outline of your book (note which material has previously appeared on your blog in some way); the full introduction and one full chapter, a brief biography detailing your experience and any degrees you have; any statistics on your blog platform (pageviews, social media numbers, etc). If you are planning a full-color book, at least one set of photos to accompany part or all of the full chapter you are submitting. Paste all the written content into the body of an email, and attach illustrations. Send to [submissions@theinnovationpress.com](mailto:submissions@theinnovationpress.com).

Innovation Press will replay to any submissions of interest within 10 weeks. If you haven't heard back after that time, consider it a pass.

## Traditional Jewish Publisher Accepting Submissions

Hachai Publishing produces fiction and nonfiction with traditional Jewish themes for babies through middle grade, with the primary focus on picture books for the very young (2-4) and slightly older children (3-6). Looking for stories that convey:

- The traditional Jewish experience in modern times or long ago.
- Traditional Jewish observance such as holidays and year-round mitzvos such as mezuzah, tzitzis, honoring parents etc.
- Positive character traits (middos) such as honesty, charity, respect, sharing etc.

Also interested historical fiction adventure chapter books for readers ages 7-10 that highlight devotion to faith and the relevance of Torah in making important choices. Does not publish animal stories, romance, violence, preachy sermonizing, or elements that violate Jewish Law. Before submitting, study current titles at [hachai.com/](https://hachai.com/)

Email submissions should be sent to Devorah Leah Rosenfeld, Acquisitions Editor, at [editor@hachai.com](mailto:editor@hachai.com) and must be contained within the body of the email. Send a query with synopsis and first two chapters for longer work, or entire manuscript for picture books. Full manuscripts may also be mailed. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address on the title page of your manuscript. Mailed submissions must include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) or an email address in order to receive a response. If you'd like your manuscript returned, please make sure the SASE has extra postage to cover the cost. If SASE is for response only, manuscripts will be disposed of with recycled office paper. Submissions should be mailed to Devorah Leah Rosenfeld: Acquisitions Editor, Hachai Publishing, 527 Empire Boulevard, Brooklyn, NY 11225.

Hachai Publishing is always looking for new artists with skill in children's book illustration. Send color photocopies, tear sheets, or email links to website portfolios (do not send original art). Make sure your samples include a human character. Mail with SASE or email address for a response to the address above, or email with bio and online portfolio.

**Award-winning Publisher Seeks Submissions for All Ages**

Chronicle Books is an award-winning, independent publisher that produces an eclectic mixture of traditional and innovative children's books. Looking for fiction and nonfiction books for children of all ages, as well as board books, decks, activity kits, and other unusual or novelty formats. Seeking projects that have a unique bent in subject matter, writing style, or illustrative technique. Before submitting, study current titles at [chroniclebooks.com](http://chroniclebooks.com)

Books for younger children may be submitted in their entirety without querying first (email a cover letter and attach the entire manuscript). Projects for older children—such as chapter books or YA novels—should be submitted by query letter, with an attached synopsis, and three sample chapters. For manuscripts that are part of a series, submit the first installment only. Information about the rest of the series may be included in the cover letter. All attachments should be Word files or PDFs. All submissions should be addressed to [childrenssubmissions@chroniclebooks.com](mailto:childrenssubmissions@chroniclebooks.com).

If your proposal is a simultaneous submission, indicate this in your email. An automated reply email will serve as confirmation of receipt. If you do not receive one, your submission may not have been received and you should resend. Responds to submissions of interest within six months. If you haven't heard back after that time, consider it a pass.

**Publisher Accepting Submissions in a Variety of Categories**

Eerdmans Books for Young Readers is an independent publisher of picture books, middle grade and young adult fiction and nonfiction in a variety of categories (adventure, art, biographies, social issues, culture, family, friendship, loss, environment, history, religion). Stories that celebrate diversity, stories of historical significance, and stories that relate to contemporary social issues are of special interest. View all current titles here: [eerdmans.com/youngreaders/](http://eerdmans.com/youngreaders/)

Eerdmans Books for Young Readers accepts unsolicited hardcopy submissions, but responds only to submissions interested in publishing. While Eerdmans does not require submissions to be exclusive, the publisher does ask to be informed if you are simultaneously submitting it elsewhere, and if another publisher has expressed interest in your manuscript. If you have not heard back after four months, you may assume that your submission does not fit the needs of their list.

For picture book submissions, include the full manuscript. Except in the case of author-illustrators, prefers that submissions not include artwork. For novel submissions, you may submit the full manuscript, or a query that includes a synopsis and at least three chapters of the manuscript.

Do not submit an SASE; materials will not be returned under any circumstances. Be sure to include your contact information (including address, email, and phone number) on your cover letter. If you would like confirmation that your materials have been received, please include a self-addressed, stamped postcard with your submission. Mail manuscript submissions to: Acquisitions Editor, Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 4035 Park East Court SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546.

**Agent Seeks Middle Grade, YA Submissions**

Nina Leon is a junior agent at High Spot Literary ([highspotlit.com/](http://highspotlit.com/)) and is building her list of adult, new adult, young adult, and middle grade fiction across all genres with a particular interest in fantasy. For YA she's looking for a murder/crime/mystery in an unusual or unexpected setting with an unexpected twist all wrapped up in a gripping and fast-paced package; a story set in alternate Victorian/modern England that has elements of secret societies, magical realism, occult, and dark academia; anything with a Tim Burton aesthetic; rom-coms with a lot of heart, humor, and perhaps a reminder that not everyone has their love life figured out; a regular teenager suddenly caught up in a world they didn't know existed and falling for someone they shouldn't have feelings for; anything humorous and/or magical. For middle grade she's drawn to darker plots, adventures to whimsical worlds, and characters who discover their bravery along the way. She also enjoys stories with humor, quirky characters, and magical creatures.

Submit your query letter, synopsis and the first 10 pages of your manuscript through Query Manager here: [querymanager.com/query/NinaLeon](http://querymanager.com/query/NinaLeon)

# Marketing Group Helps Writers

## COLLABORATE for SUCCESS

by Leslie Eva Tayloe

**H**i, my name is Leslie Eva Tayloe. Thank you to HCBI for allowing me to talk about the [Kidlit At Heart Marketing Group](#). We are very excited to share our journey.

### Our Beginning

After college, I began a long career in the Federal government in an analyst position. And then, I became a substitute teacher for elementary school children. When COVID hit and I couldn't go back into the classroom, I started a new career in writing children's picture books. I have one book published, *I'm Fishing with Pop-Pop Today* by Austin Macauley Publishers, and my second book, *Save the Trees*, will be out the summer of 2023 by BrandyLane Publisher/Belle Isle Books, illustrated by Lintang Pandu Pratiwi.

When I signed both contracts, both publishers emphasized that I'd have to help market my books. What did I know about marketing? Nothing! I needed help. There are so many wonderful organizations that have helped me in my author journey: *Children's Book Insider*, *Women in Publishing*, the *Society of Children's Book Writer's and Illustrators*, and *12x12 Picture Book Challenge*. In January, 2021, I began to look for a marketing group within the 12x12 community. Within their forum, I asked if anyone was interested in forming a marketing group.

Mona Voelkel was the first to respond. Then Renee Bolla and Tarja Nevala responded. Mona invited Dianne Koebel-Pede from her critique group to join us. We maintain our group with five members.

We are five women from Alberta, Canada and the United States. From the United States we live in the

Eastern, Western and Central Region. All of us have taken a different route in publishing: three self-published, one traditional/hybrid, and one work-for-hire.

### Our Process

In the initial stages of forming our marketing group, we learned a lot about each other. We discussed our goals for our own writing careers, as well as what we expected the marketing group to achieve. We all wanted a marketing group to do more than just post on social media. We wanted to last longer than a year, to promote each other, and to have the same goals and values.

#### Zoom Meetings Date and Time

First, we set up meeting times and dates. Because of our locations and time zones, we settled on a Zoom meeting twice a month, on Tuesday afternoons at 1:00 p.m. EST. We meet for one hour. The dates of the meetings are scheduled up to a year in advance for planning purposes.

#### Agenda

Mona or I usually write an agenda for each meeting, and a summary of what we discussed is noted, and stored on our Google Drive. (We needed a place to store all of our working documents, so Mona set up a Google Drive for the group. Each group member has access and it's a great way to share information.) Our meeting agendas have covered topics like business strategy, website design, mood boards, business plans, goals on how to support each other, and proposals for an event, to only name a few. We've never had an issue of not having enough topics to discuss. At one meeting, Mona invited an experienced librarian who talked about school visits.



Kidlit At Heart's meeting topics include everything marketing. We are not a critique group.

There are usually action items that need to be assigned and completed after each meeting. Action items are assigned to a group member if they volunteer, or if a member brought up the topic, or if a member has expertise in that area. So, the word accountability comes to mind. I believe we all hold ourselves accountable because we want the group to succeed. We've covered and worked on a lot of material in just one year we've been together and that is because we've all worked very hard.

### Branding

Next, we worked on our branding. With Renee's marketing experience, she guided us through creating our logo, brand kit, and mission statement. We collaborated on a values statement too. We thoroughly researched and brainstormed each of these areas. For instance, we ensured the name Kidlit At Heart was not being used by other groups. In addition, since we were interested in a Kidlit At Heart website, we ensured the domain name was available. Creating our own logo was fun. We looked at other companies' logos and tried out various fonts and colors. We decided on two logos. And when we wrote our mission statement, we read other companies' mission statements. This entire process took some time.

### **It Takes a Team**

We continually collaborate, exchange ideas and opportunities to promote individually as authors, as well as for our marketing group. We all belong to various writing organizations. In addition, we have two international perspectives in the group. Dianne is from Canada and she belongs to the Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers, which is a member-supported community for creators for kids and teens. Tarja is originally from Finland. Both group members' expertise and knowledge are instrumental in our successes. In addition, Renee is from the private marketing sector. Mona is a reading specialist. I came from the government sector and later worked as a substitute teacher. I believe our strengths as a marketing group come from our different backgrounds, our achieve-

ments, and our goals. We always communicate, collaborate, and listen to each other, and we accomplish tasks. That makes us successful.

In the past year, we have shared the below topics. Collectively, one or more group members accomplish these items and provide their experience and knowledge to the group at meetings or over email.

- Sharing ideas on SWAG: promotional items that help the author and publisher promote a book.
- Sharing information on writing organizations' classes,
- Sharing and participating as a vendor at festivals,
- Sharing information on how to conduct book talks at libraries,
- Sharing and participating in a school visit,
- Conducting other author/illustrator interviews,
- Creating teacher guides for group members,
- Writing a monthly/weekly blog,
- Writing a monthly newsletter,
- Hosting a monthly book giveaway,
- Learning how to star in our own video for social media,
- Sharing information on how to seek endorsements for our books,
- Classroom Pen-Pals.
- Social Media: Each of the group members is on social media, whether it be Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or TikTok. We are all comfortable with the social media avenues and do post regularly regarding our books, events, book giveaways, and Kidlit At Heart.

### **Our Successes**

#### Website

In the past year, Tarja created a website for Kidlit At Heart. She has maintained the website so far, and group members submit content. The website is connected to each of our own author websites. A bonus to the website is the ability to capture subscribers' email addresses. The benefit of subscribing to the website is a community and connection to other writers, the opportunity to learn what has worked for other writers, the ability to expand your network, and to receive all kinds of tips about marketing. We all have access to the subscribers' emails and can use them for individual content as well that is more

## Collaborate for Success...continued

geared to each of our books.

We want to share what we've learned with our readers, so if a person subscribes to the website, they will receive a *How to Form a Book Marketing Group Checklist* that will help them start their own Collaborative Marketing Group. Also, there is a survey we'd like people to take so that we know what our readers would like to see from us in the future. After the survey is completed, a subscriber will receive *30 Days To Build Your Brand Guide*. As our marketing group grows and learns, so will the benefits of subscribing to our website.

### Conference Presenters

I attended the Women in Publishing (WIP) Summit last year, and I was amazed at the amount of information given to attendees for a price of a ticket. A four-day conference, presentations running in four zoom rooms every hour, all day long. So, last October, not really believing that we would be accepted, I filled out the speaker application. And we were accepted. Kidlit At Heart (as a panel) gave a presentation at the Women in Publishing Virtual Summit on March 3rd. This online conference ran from March 1st to the 4th. Our topic was *Forming a Collaborative Children's Book Marketing Group*. We provided an in-depth look at our process and vision. It was an incredible experience. And each group member attended the Summit for free. We are now reviewing surveys from people that attended our presentation to learn what else they would like to see from Kidlit At Heart (some topics include: critiques, classes on writing, and marketing). As a group, we want to keep our focus on marketing but also give our subscribers what they want.

### Learning From Each Other

We came together as strangers, everyday ordinary women pursuing our writing dreams. Collectively, we all have grown in confidence through connection and listening. The marketing group makes the good times and celebrations sweeter, and the tough times less painful.

One person couldn't have done what we've done in the past year. There are many examples of how we've helped each other (the above list of sharing

ideas is a good example), but below are a few specific examples of group members helping each other:

Mona is a wiz at computers. She has shared her knowledge and has created for each of us teacher guides for our books, and showed us how to create book trailers. Renee's experience in marketing and knowledge of social media brings fun and excitement to her posts. Her energy overflows onto the group. Tarja created a website from scratch and designed the site and organized information into the hub of the Kidlit At Heart experience. Dianne shares her international experiences and contributes greatly to all the action items and projects. She reimagined presentation slides by conducting research on the best slide design to maximize learning. I interviewed each Kitlit At Heart marketing group member and posted their interview on my blog. And promoted their books by doing book giveaways.

In addition, I can't wait to share with the marketing group my experiences with the 'classroom pen-pals'. I've signed up for a classroom in Australia. Renee found and provided the information to the group. I'm very excited to start pen-paling with a new group of friends.

## **Our Vision**

The past year, we've been very busy. And what does our future hold? Kidlit At Heart's vision for the future brings making time for writing, nurturing our creativity, and developing our craft. We all have writing projects we are working on and hope to launch in the coming year. One way the group is considering making time to write while connecting with our readers is through writer's workshops where we invite other writers to write and dream alongside of us. We thought of Zoom writing classes and in-person events. Our biggest dream is to expand and improve our connection with readers and our writing community. We will continue to connect through social media, our author and Kidlit At Heart websites, newsletters, interviews, book reviews, and in-person events as we plan new initiatives.

One initiative we are all very excited about is our Video of the Month project. Together, we will collaborate and create a video around a theme. So far, we have created "Pass the Book" which is an intro-

Collaborate for Success...continued

duction to our group and our books; “What Reading Means to Me”; “Books to Celebrate Black History Month”; and “Sneak Peeks into our Work-in-Process.” You can see these videos at [kidlitatheart.com](https://www.kidlitatheart.com). They are also posted on YouTube so people can find us organically.

Our greatest resource is each other. We hope to continue to learn and grow together. We cherish the friendships we have made and look forward to deepening our connection in the year ahead.

## Kidlit At Heart Children's Book Marketing Group Members:

**Renee Bolla** The author of *Finding Bunny* and *Imagine That*. Follow Renee at [reneebollaauthor.com](https://www.reneebollaauthor.com).

**Dianne Koebel-Pede** The author of *My Soccer Season*, releases in 2023. Follow Dianne at [pdplace.online](https://www.pdplace.online).

**Tarja Nevala** The author of *Baking Day at Belles*, and *Fellip Woke Up on Christmas Day*. Follow Tarja at [tarjanevala.com](https://www.tarjanevala.com).

**Leslie Eva Tayloe** The author of *I'm Fishing with Pop-Pop Today*, published by Austin Macauley Publishers 2022, and *Save the Trees*, published by Brandylane/Belle Isle Books, releases summer 2023. Follow Leslie at [leslieevatayloe.com](https://www.leslieevatayloe.com).

**Mona Voelkel** The author of *Stanley and the Wild Words*. Follow Mona at [monavoelkel.com](https://www.monavoelkel.com).

Find the **Kidlit At Heart Marketing Group** at [kidlitatheart.com](https://www.kidlitatheart.com)



First Row: Tarja, Mona  
Second Row: Leslie, Dianne  
Third Row: Renee



# KELLY DELANEY

Editor, Crown Books for Young Readers



interview by Lynne Marie

**K**elly Delaney is an editor at Crown Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Penguin Random House, where she acquires and edits books for young readers of all ages. She has a master's degree in Publishing: Digital and Print Media from NYU and has been at Random House Children's Books for twelve years.

**LYNNE MARIE:** Formerly, you were an editor at Knopf. Congratulations on your new position! Please tell us a little bit about this shift and what it means for you as far as job description and acquisitions.

**KELLY DELANEY:** Thank you! After over eleven years at Knopf, I moved internally to the Crown imprint last summer. Knopf is a big, storied imprint, and I loved working with the talented editors there. Crown is much smaller, and has recently redefined its mission to focus exclusively on books from historically marginalized creators, and featuring historically marginalized characters and stories. It's exciting to be a part of a tight-knit team focused on building something that is so central to my goal as an editor—providing a platform for stories that haven't been told before. I was even able to bring several of my upcoming books from Knopf's list over with me to Crown, for which I'm very grateful! Editors get so attached to their authors and it's one of the things that makes moving to a new publisher hard.

As far as acquisitions go, my wish list remains the same in a lot of ways—I still acquire books for all ages of kids and my taste, which we'll talk more about below, remains the same. The only difference

is that **I'm now exclusively looking for books by and about historically marginalized characters and communities.** (See definition on page 12).

**LM:** What does the submission review to acquisitions process look like over at Crown Books for Young Readers? What would be a typical time frame from offer to publication? If you acquired a book in the next month or so, when would the publication date be?

**KD:** When I find a submission I like, I share it with Crown co-publisher Sonali Fry, who is my direct boss. If she likes it as well, we share it with Mallory Loehr, who oversees Crown and several other imprints. My conversation with Sonali is usually pretty casual, but before talking to Mallory I gather all the information I can to position the book: comp titles, selling points, planned editorial feedback, and deal points for an offer. I want to make sure my vision for the book is clear, and that I know exactly who its readers are. If Mallory agrees the book is a good fit for Crown, then I make an offer.

As far as the time frame goes from there, it varies from book to book! I generally sign up novels 18 months in advance of publication and picture books 24 months in advance. But it can change along the way for so many reasons.

For novels, I usually have a sense of how much revision will be needed at acquisition, but if a book is going to require big changes, it's often hard to know ahead of time how many rounds of revision that will take, and each writer varies in how much time



*Kelly Delaney...continued*

they need to edit. I'm always in favor of giving writers more time to work instead of rushing to make a deadline that is, in many ways, arbitrary. That's one reason I try to sign up books that feel timeless—so there's no rush to get them out as part of a passing fad before it fades.

For picture books, the manuscript revision process is much quicker, but artwork can take quite a while. If I'm working on a manuscript from a writer who is not illustrating it themselves, we often don't really know when we'll publish until we sign up an illustrator. Depending on how they work, illustrators may take 3 to 6 months for sketches, and 6 months to a year for final art—and if they already have one or two books under contract, they may not be able to start on our book until those deadlines are met.

So, there are a lot of things that can determine the timeline, and most of them are not totally clear at the time of acquisition. And that's OK. Right now I have books signed up through the end of 2025, many of which I signed up several years ago already. It's important to keep an open mind about publication date and go into it knowing that publishing is a slow process. It's worth it to take your time as a writer and get it right.

**LM:** How many books do you divide your time between on a years' spring, summer, and fall lists?

**KD:** I usually have 10-12 books over the course of the year, sometimes more, sometimes less. That doesn't include books that already came out in hardcover but are now coming out in paperback or board. And I'm usually working on books for the current year and the next two years all at once at any one given time. So they're in various stages from first revisions to finished books nearly ready for publication, and for the finished books, we're spending those last few months talking about marketing, publicity, etc.

**LM:** What percentage of your list is fiction vs. nonfiction, and picture book vs. middle grade vs. young

adult? Does this shift each publishing calendar year?

**KD:** Right now my list is about 50/50 fiction and nonfiction, and 70% picture books, 20% middle grade, and 10% young adult. There is no rhyme or reason to it; I'm lucky that I've never been pressured to acquire more or less of any category, and so it always fluctuates based purely on what submissions I've gotten that have worked for my list. The one exception right now is that when I moved over to Crown, I inherited a handful of books from an editor who had previously left, all of which were picture books, so that's contributing to the over-representation there. I love working on all three categories and ideally like to keep it closer to even!

**LM:** You work on all age groups of children's books, from picture books to YA novels. And a board of your published books can be found on pinterest: [pinterest.com/kellydelaney/books-ive-published/](https://pinterest.com/kellydelaney/books-ive-published/) Of those categories, which do you have the most need for?

**KD:** I'm hungrier for novels since my picture book list is a bit heavier right now! But no matter what part of my list is the fullest, there's always room for one more good one.

**LM:** Please tell us about a picture book that you have recently acquired and what drew you to it?

**KD:** I'm really excited about a picture book biography that's coming out this summer called *Door By Door: How Sarah McBride Became America's First Openly Transgender Senator*. The author, Meeg Pincus, is a really talented nonfiction writer and I'd seen a few of her stories before which I liked, but felt they weren't quite right for our list. Because Crown (like Knopf) doesn't do a lot of nonfiction, the nonfiction we do has to have very clear trade market appeal in addition to the assumed educational market appeal—meaning it will sell in bookstores, not just in libraries and schools. So I'd had several close calls with Meeg, but we'd hadn't found the right story to work on together yet.



*Kelly Delaney...continued*

The first time I saw the *Door By Door* manuscript was in 2019, when Sarah was a rising political star, but she hadn't held elected office. I felt she was an amazing person who wasn't quite well known enough for a picture book biography about her to break through. A year later, Sarah won her election to Delaware's State Senate and became the highest-ranking trans political official in the country. I immediately reconnected with Meeg's agent, and the rest is history! Sarah's story is so inspiring, and Meeg does a great job of describing what it's like to be a trans kid—to know something about yourself in such a simple, straightforward way, even as the adults around you consider it to be too complicated a concept for a young person to grasp. We were able to work with an awesome nonbinary illustrator, Meredith McKean Gimbel, who added so much to Sarah's story with her work. And Meeg is friendly with Sarah herself, so Sarah contributed a letter to readers for the back of the book, and has vetted the story.

Sadly, as we watch Republican officials target trans people across the country, this book feels even more vital now than it did when I signed it up—which I naively wouldn't have thought possible at the time. I'm hopeful that this book will be meaningful to trans kids looking for connection, and to grownups who need more education on trans lives as well.

**LM:** Likewise, please tell us about a middle grade or young adult book you have recently acquired and what drew you to it?

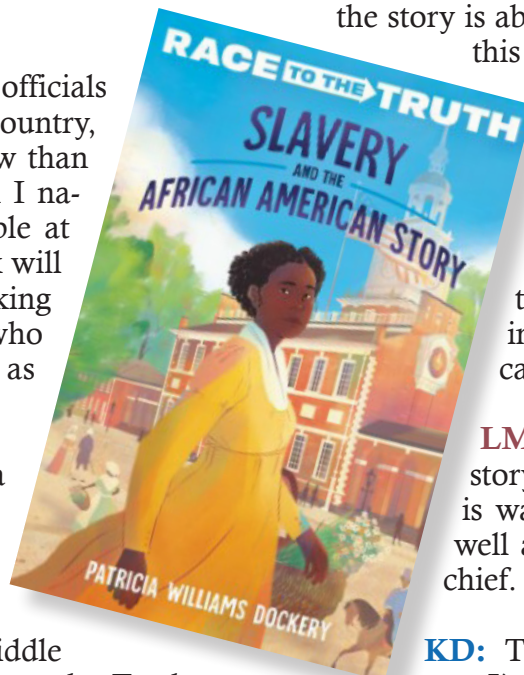
**KD:** Right now I'm working on a middle grade nonfiction series called *Race to the Truth*. Each book in the series tells the story of America from the perspective of a historically marginalized community. These perspectives are often relegated to sidebars in most history books, as if these communities pop up once a generation and then disappear,

when in reality, they've been present for every major historical event that we see communicated through the white/European lens—and often experience those events in a vastly different way than our white narrators do. Even as an adult, there is so much about these histories I don't know, and learning that you've been taught a history that is at best incomplete and, more often, intentionally misleading causes a lot of emotional whiplash. I'm hoping that if kids can learn the whole story the first time around, this next generation can grow up with a stronger understanding of what makes our country great, what we've done wrong, and how we can do better.

This series is a little unusual in that I started envisioning it on my own, and then partnered with the amazing organization Race2Dinner, who I've known for a while and came to me through their agent with a similar concept. We worked together to create this series and to hire writers, each from the community that the story is about. The first two books are out this September: *Colonization and the Wampanoag Story* and *Slavery and the African American Story*. Next year we'll follow up with the Chinese American Story and the Mexican American Story, and more to come after that. I've learned so much working on these first few books and can't wait for others to read them.

**LM:** Please share an example of a story you have acquired or read that is warm, upbeat and has humor, as well as a little bit of magic and mischief.

**KD:** That's my sweet spot! For this one, I've gotta go with *Time Travel for Love and Profit* by Sarah Lariviere. This story is about Nephele, who is ghosted by her only friend on the first day of freshman year. She responds the only way a math prodigy like herself could: by inventing a time travel app that will allow her to re-do



*Kelly Delaney...continued*

the year, but this time she'll be too cool to ditch. Of course, things don't go as planned—she does invent time travel, but she gets stuck in a time loop, reliving freshman year over and over as everyone around her moves on. The read is thought-provoking and earnest and charming and fun, and reviews compared it to *A Wrinkle In Time* and *Dr. Who*. Sarah does such a great job of creating a believable time travel mechanism (an app that Nephele names after a romance novel hero, Dirk Angus) that is more science than magic, but the story just has a magical feel about it. It will always be one of my personal favorites.

**LM:** We are pleased that you will be accepting pitches from our members. What do you look for in a pitch?

**KD:** The only thing that matters in the pitch is that it makes me want to read more! Tell me about your story in a way that shows how it's different from anything I've read before.

**LM:** How important are hooks in the books you read? Do you have any advice for pulling more hooks out of a book? How many do you like to see in a project?

**KD:** The hooks, or selling points, are vital. Great writing is also vital—but great writing is not a selling point, because it's presumed that every book we sign up has great writing. That's the baseline. The hooks are what we use to help us get our books into the hands of the readers who are most likely to value them (and buy them!). When trying to figure out what your hooks are, think about how someone would find your book when searching online. Would they search “books about sharing”? “Books about the first day of school”? Think about what problem parents might be trying to solve when they find your book and decide that's the one they want to buy. What other books are out there that solve that problem, and how is yours different? What gap is your book filling in the market?

The more you can think of, the better. I don't expect to see all these points spelled out for me in the query

itself, but they should be evident between the query and the manuscript. If I start filling out acquisitions paperwork and can't list at least three selling points, that's a red flag. So writers should be able to list at least three about their own book, and if they can't, it's probably not ready to be submitted yet.

**LM:** When reviewing queries, what is your process? How much weight does the pitch have? The bio? The manuscript?

**KD:** The manuscript is the most important thing! As I mentioned, a great voice is the baseline—so your voice is what will tell me in the first few pages whether this is a book I'd like to keep reading. Of course, a great pitch will make me more excited to start reading in the first place, and will give me an idea of whether the book works for Crown's list. The bio I often skim and come back to later—it's important in many ways, but secondary to the read. The one thing I do look for in a bio is what connection the writer has to the perspective of the narrator and/or main character of the story.

**LM:** What do you believe the writer should include in their bio? Should it be first person or third person, like book jacket copy?

**KD:** Include anything that you consider relevant! It doesn't matter if you're a debut and don't have other books to mention; I always like to know what your day job is, or what inspired you to write the book. If you have a website or social media, include that. If I like the manuscript I'll Google you anyway, and it's better for you to direct me to the site you want me to see first.

As far as tense goes, if the writer is sending a query in first person, I think it makes sense to keep the bio in first person as well. But to be honest, this is a question I get at almost every conference, and it really couldn't matter less to me. It makes me think of people in college who went out of their way to ask what font the professor wanted a paper to be in.



Kelly Delaney...continued

Don't get caught up on these technicalities. A bio will never convince me *not* to read a manuscript. Focus on the manuscript itself; that's what matters.

**LM:** Name three things that make a manuscript stand out for you. Why are these things most important to you?

**KD:** Voice, comic timing, and worldbuilding. As I've already mentioned, a strong voice is the thing that says to me: "keep reading." And if you can make me laugh, that's a huge bonus as well—it's very hard for me to put down a manuscript that makes me laugh. And I also love a manuscript that makes me feel I've got my feet firmly planted in the world of the story. If the voice is strong but the worldbuilding is unclear, it can be hard to follow the thread of the story. When the writer knows the world their characters live in backwards and forwards, it shows.

**LM:** What is one question that you wish I had asked you that you might ask yourself?

**KD:** Well, I mentioned comp (comparative/competitive) titles a few times, and I think it's worth spending a bit more time on those. The number one piece of advice I have for people who want to write children's books is to read them. Not only will that help you hone your craft, but it will help you understand the market that your book is hoping to join. When you mention comp titles in your query, they should be aspirational (something I've likely heard of) but realistic (not Dr. Seuss). They should be published in the last few years, to reflect the market as it is now. And they should show that you know who your readers are and what they're reading now. The first step to being a children's book writer is to be a children's book reader.

Here's how Kelly defines historically marginalized communities: "I like this definition from Oregon.gov: 'Groups who have been relegated to the lower or peripheral edge of society. Many groups were (and some continue to be) denied full participation in mainstream cultural, social, political, and economic activities.' Basically, this means I'm trying to center writers and characters who have traditionally been underrepresented in children's books. I'm looking for all kinds of diversity: different races, body sizes, LGBTQ, neurodiverse...." There's also a Definition of Diversity from We Need Diverse Books ([diversebooks.org/about-wndb/](https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/)).

Kelly Delaney is offering a special **Above the Slushpile** submission opportunity for CBI subscribers who are from historically marginalized communities. Until April 30, 2023, you can submit a 350-character pitch/synopsis of a **fiction or nonfiction manuscript for any age from picture book through young adult, by and about historically marginalized characters and communities**, via the online form at [bit.ly/ATSApril23Crown](https://bit.ly/ATSApril23Crown). Kelly will read all pitches and respond to those she's interested in by July 31, 2023. If you haven't heard back by the end of July, consider it a pass.

### ---Please Read Before You Proceed---

For a detailed explanation of the Above the Slushpile submission form, as well as tips for writing your pitch, see [cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/slushpile-new/](https://cbiclubhouse.com/clubhouse/slushpile-new/)

To watch Laura's Kidlit Social interview about how to know when your manuscript is ready to submit, go to [writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancing-social70/](https://writeforkids.org/blog/kidlitdistancing-social70/)

Before you submit your manuscript please run the following checklist. This will ensure that editors will continue to offer us Above the Slushpile codes:

- You've chosen one manuscript to pitch for each Above the Slushpile opportunity. If the editor or agent shows interest in that submission, you'll have the opportunity to mention your other work.
- You've studied the submission guidelines and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript so it is ready to submit should the editor ask to see the entire work.

# SHARPEN YOUR DIALOGUE

## USING SCREENWRITING TECHNIQUES

by Jane McBride

Unless you are hard-core against watching television or movies, you have heard countless conversations—dialogue—between various characters. Some of the dialogue rings true. Other exchanges fall flat. Just as it does in novels.

Screenwriters, whether for television or movies, know the importance of penning fast-moving, authentic dialogue. You can use the techniques of writing screenplays for writing dialogue in your novel.

Writing always happens from two perspectives, that of the writer and that of the reader. We'll start with the writer.

### BEING THE WRITER

Let's take a look at what screenwriters do:

- They know that at least 70 percent of communication occurs nonverbally. What does this mean for you? Don't rely solely on words to convey feelings and unspoken thoughts. Bring in facial expressions, body language, and action. Screenwriters don't have the luxury of novel writers to give space to thoughts or feelings. Instead, they must rely on expressions, body language, and action to convey feelings and thoughts.
- They are aware of context. Have you heard the phrase "on the nose writing?" On the nose means characters say exactly what they are thinking. While most of us want to believe that our words faithfully reflect our thoughts, it is rarely true. Our thoughts often have a hidden agenda or subtext that our spoken words do not reflect.
- They skip the boring stuff. A thirty-minute television show has about eighteen minutes of actual screen time. (Advertisements often account for a whopping twelve minutes of a thirty minute show.) There is not enough time for writers to devote even a second to pleasantries be-

tween characters, exchanges about weather, or to rehash things they each already know. Aren't certain what constitutes "things the characters should already know?" Be on the look-out for such phrases as "As you know," "We've been over this before," "You remember how great-uncle Seamus divided his fortune between me and my twin brother Alphonso." Screenwriters start dialogue at the most interesting part of the conversation, getting the most bang for their buck.

- They know that dialogue is all about wanting something. One character wants something from the other. It may be to get information. It may be to impart information, which will cause the second character to perform an action or to have a reaction. It may be to ask for a favor.
- They speak their dialogue out loud. Have you ever given voice to your characters' words? I have, and I admit that I feel pretty foolish when the dialogue I've written sounds stilted. I listen to the words and ask myself, "Would that character really talk like that?" If the answer is, "No." I delete it and try again.
- They appreciate the value of silence. Of course, silence cannot be prolonged in a television show or a movie, but there are places where it can bring across a point when dialogue cannot.

### SWITCH HATS AND BE THE READER

Okay. You've written the dialogue and made it the best it can be from your, the writer's, perspective. But what about the reader's perspective? Screenwriters know to make their audience work. Writers should do the same with their readers. So how do you make readers work to get the most from dialogue?

- Keep it accessible. Make your readers use their imagination. Don't hit them over the head with dialogue. Let them figure out what a character

*Sharpen Your Dialogue...continued*

means. Make them invest in it by bringing their own thoughts and feelings to it.

- Keep it short. Screenwriters know the importance of making every word count. Because they have limited time, they choose their words with care. Novel writers need to do the same.
- Keep it simple. Don't have your characters tell why they are saying something. Let your readers draw their own conclusions.
- Keep secrets. Don't give away the answers. This goes back to avoiding backstory and information dumps. Readers love to figure out the whys of a character's words and actions. If you reveal everything, you take away much of the satisfaction from your readers.
- Keep it real. Let your characters talk how they talk, not how you think they should talk. What if you are writing a passage of dialogue between two thirteen-year-old girls? Let them talk like young teenage girls talk. Though teenagers have a reputation for being overly dramatic, this isn't always true. Know your characters and understand how they talk.
- Keep tags to a minimum. Screenwriters don't have the luxury of telling how a character says something. They can't write, "she said softly," "he yelled," "she screamed." The actors must convey emotion through the words and their voices. As a writer, you have a voice. Use it. Make sure the dialogue itself implies the tone as much as possible. Of course, you'll need to use speech tags occasionally, so the reader can keep track of who is speaking in a longer conversation. But think of other ways we can identify the speaker without a tag (speech patterns, body language while speaking, content of dialogue, etc.)

Let's practice writing some dialogue. The set-up is a 14-year-old girl confiding in her best friend, also 14-years-old, that her parents are getting divorced.

*Gemma was upset. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I love my dad, but he walked out on us. Why would he do that? He didn't even kiss me good-bye. I don't know if I'll ever see him again." She twisted a strand of hair, then, with a vicious tug, pulled it out.*

*Rachel wanted to help her friend, but she didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry. That must hurt so bad."*

*"Yeah, me, too. It hurts really bad. All my mom does is cry. She doesn't even know I'm alive."*

*"Why did my dad have to do that?" she asked bitterly. "Why did he have to leave us? Why does it have to hurt so much?"*

*"Maybe he stopped loving your mom."*

*Gemma wondered if he'd stopped loving her, too.*

Let's try this again with some trimming:

*"I don't know what I'm going to do. I love my dad, but he walked out on us. I don't know if I'll ever see him again." Gemma twisted a strand of hair, then, with a vicious tug, pulled it out.*

*Rachel wanted to help her friend, but she didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."*

*"Yeah, me, too. Why did my dad have to do that?"*

*"Maybe he stopped loving your mom."*

*Gemma wondered if he'd stopped loving her, too.*

Could you feel the difference in the two passages? The first passage has 139 words, with the second coming in at only 81 words. In the first, we are told that Gemma was really upset. In the second, we leave it to the reader to understand that the character is in great pain. The sentence stating that she twisted a strand of hair and then pulled it out shows us that. Another difference occurs when Gemma asks "why" questions over and over in the first passage. The second passage shows one question, with the others implied.

**WRAPPING UP**

Writing dialogue is easy. Writing good dialogue is much harder. Experiment with these screenwriting techniques to find those that will enhance and strengthen your story.

You can read actual movie scripts and study how professional screenwriters craft their dialogue at The Internet Movie Script Database, [imsdb.com/](https://www.imsdb.com/)

# WHAT WRITERS NEED TO KNOW TO BE BETTER THAN AI

by Todd Mitchell

I spent weeks exploring ChatGPT with my creative writing students. Here's why understanding the limitations and uses of AI (Artificial Intelligence) is crucial to succeeding as a fiction writer.

First, the bad news. AI text generators like [OpenAI's ChatGPT](#) can develop clear, straightforward prose in almost any genre (nonfiction, creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, song lyrics, etc...) faster than you can. It's a powerful tool, and like it or not, it's already changing the writing landscape.

Still, when it comes to creative writing, AI has serious limitations. The more writers understand these limitations, the more they can enhance the human aspects of writing that AI can't do.

## AI's biggest limitations for writing fiction

The crucial thing to remember is that AI has no understanding of human emotions or experiences. It only creates the illusion of meaningful prose by replicating patterns it "learns" from other texts. As ChatGPT told me when I asked how it works, "I process natural language input and generate natural language responses using algorithms and vast amounts of data I was trained on."

In regards to writing fiction, the derivative nature of AI, and the lack of authentic understanding, lead to several limitations. Here are the main ones my students and I noticed:

It's painfully literal. Ask it to write a scene where "John cracks jokes like Eddie Murphy, while Jenny is more thoughtful and quotes philosophers," and

it will write lines like this: "John suddenly starts cracking jokes like Eddie Murphy. Jenny is deep in thought, quoting philosophers and talking about the fragility of life."

It's extremely formulaic and cliché. Ask it to write a love poem, and it will churn out a master class on what *not* to do if you're interested in fresh, memorable, insightful poetry.

It has a predictable sense of story structure. AI develops blunt conflicts, quickly resolves them, and ends scenes with contrived hooks. Three times ChatGPT ended a scene with the following sentence: "For now." (As in, "John and Jenny were happy. For now.")

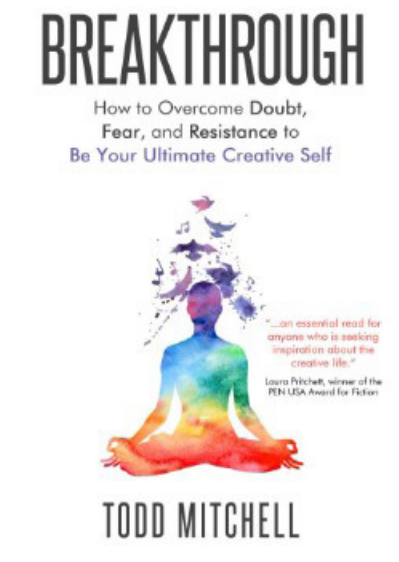
It develops zero subtext. Real people use language to imply, avoid, and deflect, but AI usually creates dialogues where characters say exactly what they're thinking.

It only creates flat characters. AI has no understanding of the desires and internal conflicts that make characters interesting, complex, surprising, and round.

It's hard to get it to develop an interesting voice or style. At best, AI can churn out superficial imitations of another writer's style. For example,

when asked to revise a passage in the style of Cormac McCarthy, it added in words like "traversed" and "ominous," but changed little else.

The longer the passage, the less things hold together. AI tends to be better at short passages, and can't generate longer stories with complex character arcs and deep narrative drives.





*What Writers Need to Know...continued*

Overall, its sentences are clear and grammatically correct, while being mind-numbingly one-dimensional with very little depth, nuance, insight, style, emotion, or innovation. Consequently, the fiction AI creates often feels soulless and hollow.

**Seven helpful ways to use AI when writing fiction**

My students and I found AI text generators have the greatest utility when engaged as tools for checking and modifying passages we'd already created. Here are the seven uses that worked best for us:

**1) Providing suggestions for improving a passage you've written.**

Feed in a passage and ask ChatGPT for suggestions and it will rattle off standard pieces of writing advice connected to specific lines (show don't tell, include more sensory details, use active verbs, vary sentence structure, etc...). Although the suggestions might be good, we found it's better to apply them on one's own as AI tends to make passages duller when it revises them.

**2) Shortening a passage.** Need to cut 1,000 words from a story? AI excels at summarizing and will "kill your darlings" with impressive efficiency. One tip: if you want to keep dialogue (or something else), tell it not to cut that. Also, using the "Regenerate response" option a few times can lead to better responses.

**3) Catching tense inconsistencies.** Not only will AI catch tense inconsistencies, it's pretty good at changing tense in a passage. It can also change the point of view in a passage (for instance, from third to first), but it does so without understanding how changing point of view often involves more than changing pronouns.

**4) Formatting dialogue and grammar conventions.** If you don't like formatting dialogue, or if you struggle with commas, ask it to format a passage for you (although it might not get everything right), or help you with grammar (although it might suck the voice out of a piece).

**5) Integrating research.** Say you're writing a piece of historical fiction. AI can rapidly offer suggestions for integrating historical and geographic details. However, since it's extremely literal, if you ask it to set a passage in a 14th Century French Village, it will translate the passage to French (touché ChatGPT).

Rather than having AI add in details, we got better results by asking it to list items, occupations, and buildings that would be part of a specific setting, then adding in details we liked ourselves. Note: AI is an infamous liar, so it's a good idea to double-check the veracity of any information it provides.



**6) Complex world building.** Not only can AI quickly generate a list of rooms you might find in a vampire space castle, it remembers everything it generates and can add things to them (such as adding items and characters to each room). Folks are just beginning to explore how AI can serve as a powerful world building tool for fiction and games, especially when used in combination with AI image generators.

**7) Getting unstuck.** If you run into a roadblock in your writing, feeding the passage into an AI text generator might help you see other possibilities. Personally, I didn't like the versions ChatGPT generated, but seeing bad drafts helped me come up with better ways to approach things.

**For best results...**

My students and I almost always got more effective results when we wrote original drafts on our own and only used AI as a tool to help us develop ideas, rather than having AI generate a passage that we then attempted to spruce up.

Sci-fi author Ted Chiang has a great take on why this might be. As he put it in a recent *New Yorker* article: "Your first draft isn't an unoriginal idea expressed clearly; it's an original idea expressed poorly, and it is accompanied by your amorphous dissatisfaction, your awareness of the distance between what it says

What Writers Need to Know...continued

and what you want it to say. That's what directs you during rewriting, and that's one of the things lacking when you start with text generated by an A.I."

**To be better than AI**

Consider, for a moment, the difference between hearing a computer read a passage aloud, and hearing a great voice actor perform it. The first might adequately convey information, but it rapidly becomes tedious and isn't going to replace voice acting anytime soon.

Likewise, I don't think creative writers are at risk of being replaced by AI text generators, especially if writers focus on doing what AI can't. In other words:

- Develop a unique voice & style. Strive to say what only you can say, in the way only you can say it.
- See subtext as your super-power. Think about the story *beneath* the story. Rather than having characters speak what they're thinking, have them use dialogue to imply, avoid, challenge, and jest with each other.
- Surprise readers with the unexpected. AI is perpetually derivative. To create sentences AI can't, eliminate clichés and constantly look for new ways to express things.
- Develop character thoughts and perceptions. AI is pretty terrible at this, since it has no understanding of human consciousness.
- Explore the psychological complexity of characters. Constantly strive to provide insights into the desires, fears, and conflicts of being human.
- Structure stories to have deep narrative drives with psychological, personal, and social resonance.



To get a sense of the importance of those last few points, consider that writing isn't just about creating a *product* that conveys information. It's about a *process* of asking questions, exploring possibilities, and finding new ways to understand and communicate experiences.

Human writers work by reflecting on lived experiences and thinking, "How do I represent this in words?" AI works by gleaning patterns from other's texts. It has no lived experiences to draw upon, so rather than a description of the real, it's a simulation of a simulation — a funhouse mirror with no actual connection to what's being described.

If AI texts flood our noosphere, the long-term impact may be to lead us further from reality, rather than deepening our awareness of what it means to be alive.

But it doesn't have to be this way. AI prose quickly becomes tiresome. The advent of AI text generation gives us a vital opportunity to embrace, accentuate, and support what makes human writing wonderful.

Todd Mitchell directs the Beginning Creative Writing Teaching Program at Colorado State University. He's the award-winning author of six books for middle grade and YA readers, and the instructor for two WriteForKids on-demand workshops: **No Conflict, No Story: A Masterclass at Getting Your Characters Into—and Out Of—Trouble** ([writingblueprints.com/p/no-conflict-no-story](https://writingblueprints.com/p/no-conflict-no-story)) and **Breakthrough! Following the Hero's Journey to the Creative Transformation You Deserve** ([bit.ly/BreakthroughCreativeTransformation](https://bit.ly/BreakthroughCreativeTransformation)) You can see all of Todd's books at [toddmitchellbooks.com/](https://toddmitchellbooks.com/)

# Author's Collective Biography Highlights Black Scientists

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

**B**ryan Patrick Avery is an award-winning poet and author of fifteen books for children. His middle grade collective biography, *Black Men in Science*, illustrated by Nikita Leanne, was released in 2022. His other work includes *The Freeman Field Photograph*, illustrated by Jerome White (historical fiction picture book), the early chapter book series *Mr. Grizley's Class*, illustrated by Arief Putra and the picture books *Earl Learns a Lesson* and *Max's Magic Change*, both illustrated by Roman Diaz. Bryan is also the author of the middle grade story, "The Magic Day Mystery", which appears in *Super Puzzletastic Mysteries: Short Stories for Young Sleuths* from Mystery Writers of America.

Bryan serves on the board of directors of the Northern California Chapter of Mystery Writers of America and is an Amplify Black Stories Fellow, a joint program presented by the Brown Bookshelf and the Highlights Foundation. Bryan lives in Northern California with his family. You can see all of Bryan's work at [bryanpatrickavery.com/](http://bryanpatrickavery.com/)



**SHARON BLUMBERG:** Please tell us about yourself, and what kind of journey brought you to become a writer, renowned author, and biographer?

**BRYAN PATRICK AVERY:** I started out, believe it or not, writing mysteries for adults. I had a bit of success selling short stories to various magazines right after I got out of college. Then, when my daughter was born, I spent a lot of time reading with her. I couldn't always find books with the stories I wanted to share with her so I started making up my own.

A friend suggested I look into writing children's books. I wrote my first children's book in 2015 and haven't looked back. Since then, I've published 15

books with five more on the way.

In 2021, I was approached about writing a book highlighting Black scientists in the United States. As a training scientist myself, the project was too good to pass up. That book became *Black Men in Science*, which was released from Rockridge Press during Black History Month in 2022. It was one of my favorite projects because it gave me a chance to highlight some Black scientists who might not ever get a book of their own.

**SB:** Could you please define for us, what is a "collective" biography?

**BPA:** A collective biography is simply a book that collects biographies of multiple individuals. Typically, the biographies are connected to one another by a topic and a theme. The topic is what the book is about. In the case of my book, the topic is Black scientists. The theme ties the biographies together so that each biography resonates with the others. In *Black Men in Science*, the theme is resilience

in the face of obstacles. Each biography in the book highlights the obstacles each scientist faced and how he overcame them.

**SB:** Are collective biographies something educational publishers are more interested in, or do trade publishers also publish these books?

**BPA:** I've seen collective biographies from both educational publishers and trade publishers. Like all books, the key here is creating a compelling book with stories that will captivate readers.

**SB:** Could you please give us the word count for the chapters of middle grade collective biographies?

*Bryan Patrick Avery...continued*

How many personalities would you include in a middle grade biography?

**BPA:** Like with all children's books, there are no absolute rules but there are some pretty common characteristics. That being said, most middle grade collective biographies run between 10,000 and 25,000 words and feature anywhere from 10 to 25 biographies. Almost always, a middle grade collective biography will feature a single biography per chapter.

**SB:** Could you please give us the word count for children's picture book collective biographies per spread? What would be the word count per personality on a page spread of children's picture book biography? How many personalities would you include, as a range for a children's collective biography?

**BPA:** Picture book collective biographies are, of course, much shorter than the middle grade word counts we talked about. Usually, we see somewhere between 500 and 2,000 words though there are a number of books that are significantly longer. Because collective biography picture books typically feature a single biography per spread, we usually see 20 to 30 biographies in them.

**SB:** What type of research writers may utilize in order to research personalities for consideration? Should writers obtain permission from live authors to write about them, or if their subjects are deceased, from their estate?

**BPA:** I always tell people that research is my favorite part of writing. As someone who started out writing mysteries (and I still do, by the way), I really enjoy investigating.

I have a few go to sources when I do my research that are great for anyone looking to write a biography. I usually start with old newspapers.

Reading articles about specific events or people really helps put their life stories in context. Plus, newspapers are excellent sources of obituaries which can help summarize the lives of your subjects.

I also make use of records and information from the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Library of Congress. Both have seemingly endless artifacts and publications on nearly every topic.

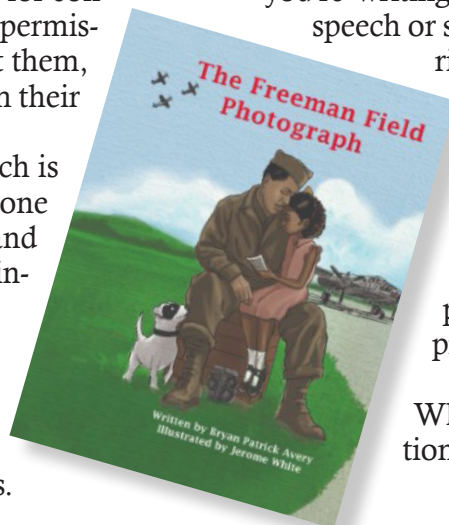
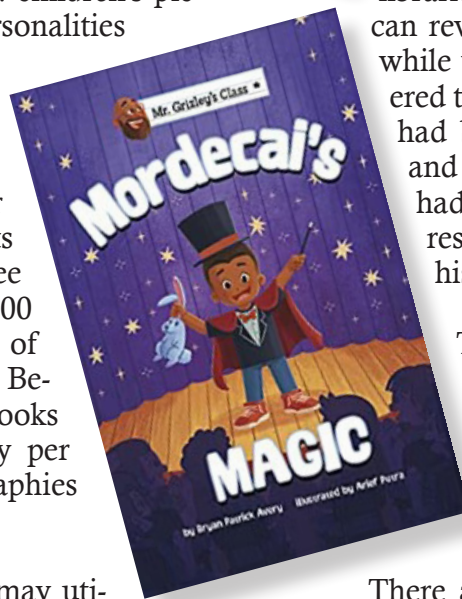
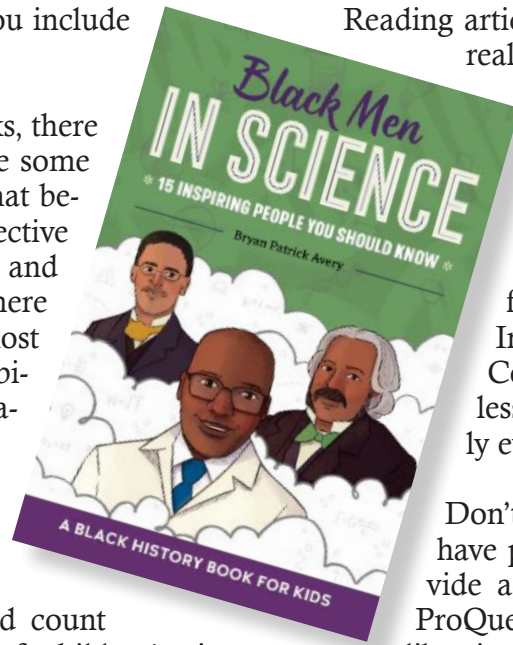
Don't forget libraries. Most libraries have partnerships with services that provide access to research information like ProQuest and even Ancestry.com! Many libraries have special collections that you can review on specific topics. For example, while writing *Black Men in Science*, I discovered that all of Dr. Leonidas Berry's papers had been donated to a university library and digitized. I was able to read letters he had written and even found a copy of a resume he submitted when applying for his first job at the local hospital!

The short answer with permissions, is you don't have to get permission from a biography subject or their estate before writing a biography about them or including them in a collective biography.

There are, of course, exceptions to this. If you're writing about something very specific, like a speech or song or work of art, there may be copyright issues that might require permission.

Another thing to keep in mind is related to privacy. This is particularly important when writing about someone who is still living. Publishing personal details about them could be problematic.

When in doubt, err on the side of caution.



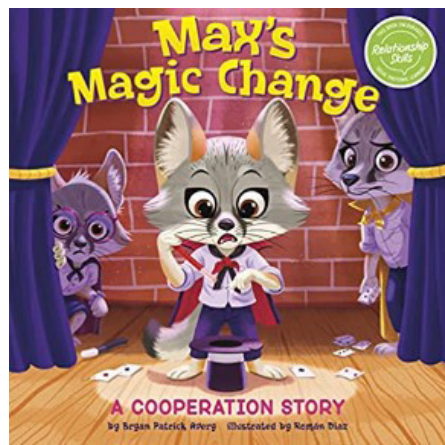
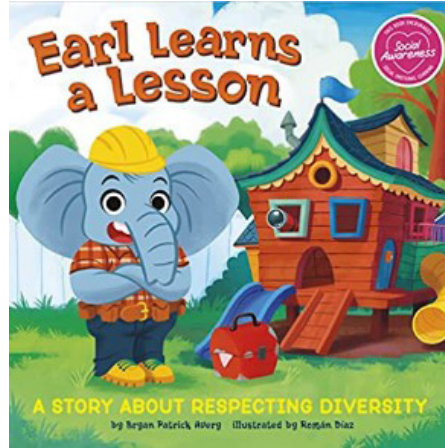
*Bryan Patrick Avery...continued*

**SB:** In writing collective biographies for children, would you recommend writers seek out agents first, or can they be successful without an agent?

**BPA:** I think the important thing is to find something you are passionate about and find the best way to get it in front of a publisher that publishes the kind of book (and topic) you want to send out in the world. There are many educational publishers who work with, and even seek out, authors who are just getting started. Don't let not having an agent stand in the way of telling your story.

**SB:** Do you have any upcoming books that are soon to be published?

**BPA:** This year is shaping up to be an exciting one for me. I had two picture books released in January,



*Earl Learns a Lesson* and *Max's Magic Change*. They both focus on SEL (Social Emotional Learning) and are great for classroom reading and discussion.

This summer, the next four books in my chapter book series Mr. Grizley's Class come out. That will make 12 total books in that series which is really exciting.

**SB:** Any last advice you'd like to add for writers who aspire to write collective biographies for children?

**BPA:** The one piece of advice I give to writers, whatever they're writing, is especially true for collective biographies: There are far too many stories that haven't been told. Our job as writers is to create books for kids that shine a light on everyone. The only bad books are the ones that don't get written.

## Select Collective Biographies for Children

*Women Who Dared: 52 Stories of Fearless Daredevils, Adventurers, and Rebels*, (Biography Books for Kids, Feminist Books for Girls), 2017, by Linda Skeers, Illustrator, Livi Gosling, Publisher: Sourcebooks

*Little Dreamers: Visionary Women Around the World* by Vashti Harrison, 2018, Publisher: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers

*101 Awesome Women Who Changed Our World* by Julia Adams, Illustrated by Louise Wright, 2018 Publisher: Arturus, Illustrated edition. (Part of the Awesome Women series)

*Born Curious: 20 Girls Who Grew Up to Be Awesome Scientists*, by Martha Freeman, Illustrated by Katy Wu, 2020, Publisher: Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books.

*First Generation: 36 Trailblazing Immigrants and Refugees Who Make America Great*, by Sandra Neil Wallace and Rich Wallace, Illustrated by Agata Nowicka, 2018, Publisher: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

*Gutsy Girls Go For Science: Astronauts, Stem Projects For Kids*, by Alicia Klepeis, Illustrated by Hui Li, 2019, Publisher: Nomad Press. (Part of the Gutsy Girls series)

*Black Men in Science, 15 Inspiring People You Should Know*, by Bryan Patrick Avery, 2022, Publisher: Rockridge Press. (Part of the A Black History Book for Kids series)

# After the Contract:

## Tackling Your Editor's Revision Letter

by Jane McBride

**H**aving just finished revisions for a book to come out next year, I was reminded how overwhelming revisions can be, whether for a new writer or for an experienced one. This is my 42nd book, and still I struggled to do the revisions to my satisfaction, and, I hope, to that of the editor. I questioned myself, my talent, and just about everything else.

Getting a detailed revision letter from your editor is always a bit of an emotional roller coaster. On the plus side, you've got a book under contract. Hooray! But you've still got work to do. Your editor's job is to help you make the book the best it can be, and they put a lot of thought into the content of the revision letter. But getting such a letter can feel overwhelming and chip away at your confidence (*Am I really ready to be a published author if my work needs all these changes?*) Fear not! You're in good company (read: every author who has ever been published). Here are some steps you can take to make the process easier.

- *Meet the deadline.* When you receive a revision letter, the editor will typically give you a date that he would like the revised manuscript returned. There is usually a sentence saying something to the effect that, “If you can’t complete the revisions by this date, please let me know at your earliest opportunity.” Editors are people. They know that life happens. Children get sick. You get sick. An elderly parent needs help. Still, they are much happier with you if you can get the revisions back to them by the specified date. I’ve heard some writer friends “brag” that they have never turned in a revised manuscript on time. That will not endear you to editors. In fact, it may keep them from purchasing another book from you. If you cannot meet this deadline, do

yourself and the editor a favor and tell her as soon as possible and give an estimate on when she can expect the manuscript.

- *Capture your editor’s vision of the revisions.* This can be tricky, particularly if you are working with an editor for the first time. That was the case of my recent revisions. My former editor had left her position, and I had a new one, a young woman I didn’t know and who didn’t know me. I approached her revision letter with no small amount of trepidation. However, I found her comments on target and her suggestions fairly easy to implement. I read through the revisions and made notes to myself.

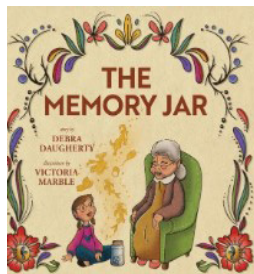
My notes told me what areas she had zeroed in on. She wanted more description of the characters' (there are generally two POV characters in romances, which I write) thoughts and feelings. I went through the manuscript and found places where more emotion could logically be added. From there, it was an easy matter to elaborate on the characters' feelings, bringing more depth to the story and the developing romance. Your revision letter will likely contain different things. Maybe your editor wants more action and less narrative. Do as I did, re-read the manuscript and find places where you can implement the suggestions. In this case, that would be to beef up the action and cut down on the narrative. The important thing is that you show that you are paying attention to the editor's suggestions. You will probably not only improve your writing, but you will also forge a stronger bond with your editor.

*After the Contract...continued*

- *Keep to (some kind of) a schedule.* I had two weeks and two days to complete the revisions on a 220 page manuscript. Twenty pages a day would make the deadline with a few days to spare to review the changes I'd made. Notice the words "some kind of." That was my wiggle room. Somedays, I did thirty or even more pages. Other days, when I encountered pages where it seemed every other word needed to be revised or deleted, I managed only ten or even less pages. The important thing was that I was moving forward.
  - *Understand the structure of revisions.* If your editor wants major changes, like taking out a character from the book and combining him with another character, as my editor did, that causes ripples throughout the story. I removed the major scenes where the character appeared, re-wrote those scenes without him, and then went back to remove any and all references to him. I even went so far as to use the "search" key on my computer to make certain I hadn't left any reference to him. It was probably the biggest part of the revisions. Should I have started by deleting all the references to him in the first place? That would certainly be one way to do it, but I felt I needed to get a handle on how I could rewrite the scenes minus that character. You may have handled similar revisions differently, but this worked for me.
- Of course, you'll want to spend the bulk of your revision time on your editor's comments. However, it doesn't hurt to look for other places in the book that need a tweak. For instance, I noticed that I had a tendency to use several words over and over. (Why hadn't I noticed that before I'd handed in the book?) I spent time changing those words to others or just taking them out altogether. Do you have any pet words? One of my favorites is "focus." Characters were focusing their attention, focusing their thoughts, focusing their concentration. In short, they were focusing all over the place without a lot of action occurring. I'm sure the copy editor would have caught those repetitions if I hadn't caught them, but it makes me look good to have caught them myself. Your thesaurus function works well here if you want to change a word, but don't rely solely on that. Sometimes, changing the structure of a sentence will allow you to remove a too-oft repeated word.
- *In capturing your editor's vision of your book, be sure not to lose your own.* Just as important, don't lose your voice. Your voice is a big reason why the editor bought the book in the first place. If your voice is gentle and soft, keep that. If it is a bit snarky, keep that.
  - *Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself if the editor wants you to make a change that you feel strongly isn't right.* In a previous book, a copy editor wanted me to take out specific references to kinds of weapons. As the book had an ex-Navy SEAL as the hero and the plot centered around him protecting the heroine, it seemed not only plausible but necessary that he refer to weapons by their correct names. I stuck to my guns, and the editor went along with it. On the other hand, don't arbitrarily refuse to make changes. Editors want what is best for the book and for you, the author. After all, if an editor has spent time reading your manuscript, going through the contract stage, and then making revisions, she has invested a substantial amount of time in you and wants to see you succeed. When you look good, she looks good.
  - *Take breaks.* Revising can be a long and arduous process. Don't try to do all the revisions at once. Your break may involve working on another project or it may be to leave your computer, to get up, and to do something else, such as eat chocolate. (This is good advice no matter if you are doing "regular" writing or doing revisions.) You will come back to your manuscript revitalized and ready to start again.
  - *Lastly, don't be discouraged when you look at what appears to be a depressing number of revisions.* These used to be made in red ink. Now they are typically done with a tracking method. Remember, the editor wouldn't have spent the time working with you if she didn't like your book in the first place.
- Revisions are not for the faint of heart. They are for a writer who has determined to make writing a career. Treat revisions as the professional you are.

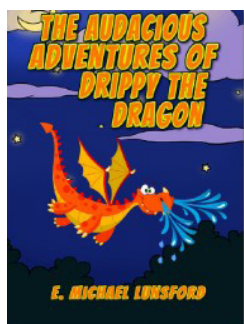
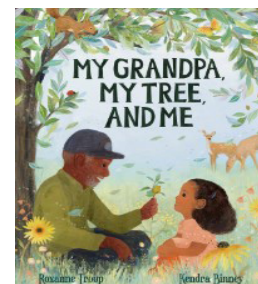
# Let's Celebrate!

## CBI MEMBER PUBLICATIONS



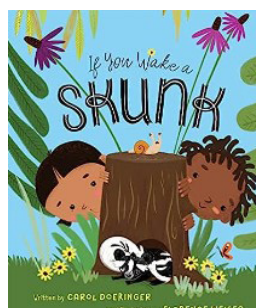
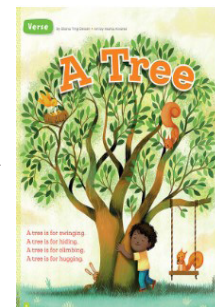
**Debra Daugherty** announces the publication of her multigenerational picture book on April 11 for ages 4-8 about dementia, *The Memory Jar*, from Roan & Weatherford Publishing, LLC/Young Dragons, illustrated by Victoria Marble. Amelia's Grammy has dementia. She's forgotten the special moments and people in her life, including Amelia. Amelia is determined to find a way to give Grammy back her memories. She has an idea, but will it work? Available on [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).

**Roxanne Troup** ([www.roxannetroup.com](http://www.roxannetroup.com)) is thrilled to announce the release of *My Grandpa, My Tree, and Me*, illustrated by Kendra Binney and published with Yeehoo Press. This informational fiction picture book for 4- to 8-year olds is a lyrical look at the life-and-harvest cycle of pecans as told through the relational lens of a grandfather and child. It's available from [Yeehoo Press](#) and everywhere books are sold.



**E. Michael Lunsford** announces the publication of *The Audacious Adventures of Drippy the Dragon*, a novel for age 8-14 from Pen It Publications. Drippy the Dragon can't shoot fire, only water—gallons and gallons of it. Allergy or curse, he must find a cure, or he and Leena the Girl Knight can't save his dragon clan from villagers headed their way—with pitchforks and torches. Available on [Amazon](#).

**Diana Ting Delosh** ([dianadelosh.com](http://dianadelosh.com)) is happy that her verse, "A Tree", with art by Marta Alvarez is published in the April 2023 issue of *Highlights High Five Magazine* on page 4.

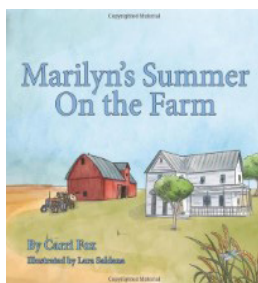
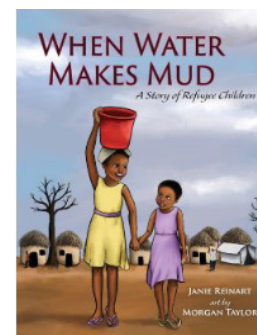


**Carol Doeringer** ([www.caroldoeringer.com](http://www.caroldoeringer.com)) announces the publication of her debut informational fiction picture book, *If You Wake a Skunk*, for ages 4-7. The book will be released by Sleeping Bear Press on April 15. Two campers disturb a sleeping skunk, then creep closer, tempting fate as they dismiss his warning signs. But skunks can be fakers... will this one follow through and launch his stench defense? Available on [Amazon](#).



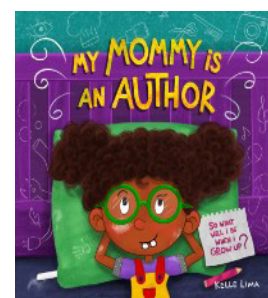
Celebrate!...continued

**Janie Reinart** ([janiereinart.com](http://janiereinart.com)) is celebrating the publication of her debut picture book, *When Water Makes Mud: A Story of Refugee Children*, from Blue Whale Press. When war forces two sisters to flee their home in South Sudan with nothing but the clothes they are wearing, Big Sister strives to help Little Sister smile again at the refugee settlement. But as quickly as Little Sister's smile appears, it disappears: that is until water makes mud. This title is dedicated to the 200,000 refugee children living at the Bidibidi settlement in Uganda. Publisher's profits are being donated to UNICEF Uganda. Find it on [Amazon](#).



**Carri Fox** has self-published her picture book *Marilyn's Summer on the Farm*, illustrated by Lara Saldana, for ages 7 and up. It's a true story about when Carrie worked on her aunt and uncle's farm for the summer. Find it on [Amazon](#).

**Kelle Lima**'s newest book, *My Mommy Is An Author*, is coming out on April 5th. It will be available as an ebook, paperback, and hardcover. You can see the trailer and launch info at [bit.ly/momauthor](http://bit.ly/momauthor). Check out Kelle's other books at [writerversejourney.com/](http://writerversejourney.com/)

**OTHER GOOD NEWS**

**Marylou Morano Kjelle** announces the creation of Crazy for Comprehension ([crazyforcomprehension.com](http://crazyforcomprehension.com)), a website offering activities that enrich reading and writing skills of students from elementary school to college. All materials have been student tested, and answer keys are included. Marylou is a former college writing instructor and the author of dozens of nonfiction books for the educational market.

**Cathy Stenquist** is thrilled to share that her picture book *Forever Home*, a true story of pet rescue and adoption, has won Best Children's Book of 2022 in the IPNE-Independent Publishers of New England Book Awards program. Each year IPNE recognizes the best of the best in recent independent publishing. They commented, "The rhyme is nicely done; the story arc strong and satisfyingly resolved; the perspective fresh, unique, and engaging." Cathy's daughter Erica ([ericaleighart.com](http://ericaleighart.com)), a professional illustrator and designer, illustrated the book. (Forever Home is available on Cathy's website: [www.cathystenquist.com/shop](http://www.cathystenquist.com/shop))



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