

Keys to Writing Middle Grade & Young Adult Books



**Edited by Laura Backes,
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Introduction:

While great attention is paid to the creative possibilities of writing for very young children, it's in the realm of tweens and teens where writers can truly stretch their creative wings.

As readers approach adulthood, they seek stories that are as complex, challenging and unique as they are. The kid gloves have come off, and writers have the opportunity to speak to their readers not as part of an adult-child paradigm, but rather as (almost) peers.

In the brief eBook, I've selected some of my favorite pieces from the pages of *Children's Book Insider* that speak to this. Inside, you'll find advice and insight about many of the elements that make the middle grade and young adult categories so remarkable. We'll look at core writing concepts such as plot and dialogue, and we'll examine the latest trends in MG and YA. You'll also hear direct advice from some authors who are flourishing writing for these age groups.

Ready? Let's get started!



Laura

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Middle Grade: Where We Are, Where We're Going

by Kirby Larson

I am delighted to guide you through your discovery of middle grade fiction, with emphasis on the word *guide*. In fact, let's call ourselves fellow *flaneurs*, strolling about in children's literature.

As we are fellow pilgrims, it seems only fair to clarify my bias that a good story will always find its way to readers. So I encourage you to focus, first and foremost, on producing your finest work. Next, find a first reader who cares enough to shoot straight from the hip. (Author Erik Larson's is his wife who draws zzzs in the margins if she finds her attention wandering while reading.)

Now that you know where I'm coming from, let's talk about where we're all going. This is an exciting time to be writing middle grade as the young adult market may have hit the high water mark, leaving editors and agents - and readers! - eager for new middle grade material.

Here are a few other thoughts about the current state of the middle grade genre from people far savvier than me:

Librarian **Mary Ann Scheuer** (<http://www.greatkidbooks.blogspot.com>) shared this: The thing that pops immediately to mind is illustrated novels, whether it's line drawings spread throughout the novel or blended graphic/ traditional novels. My students really respond to those visual aspects in a text. Having said this, I find that many of my students still respond to traditional genres, ranging from fantasy to realistic fiction to historical fiction.

Multiple Newbery Honor winner **Jennifer Holm** echoed Mary Ann's observation,

reporting, "The trend that sticks out to me in the middle-grade category is graphic and hybrid-style graphic novels. I would include *SMILE* by Raina Telgemeier and *The Strange Case of Origami Yoda* by Tom Angleberger and *The Popularity Papers* by Amy Ignatow as leading the pack in this format."

Speaking of the Origami Yoda books, author **Tom Angleberger** offered this succinct take on trends in middle grade: *Nerdy*.

Barbara O'Connor, the diva of school visits, clocks dozens of presentations in a year. The word that came to mind for her in terms of middle grade reading was eclectic. She sees kids devouring fantasy, humor, classics, mysteries and series. I love knowing that young readers have so many reading options and are taking advantage of them

Newbery medalist and former librarian, **Susan Patron**, offers this: "If I ever spot a trend, I run in the other direction. . . because the best writing is fresh and original and cannot be easily categorized. . . Writers should look for their own hard-won, unassailable truth, and leave the trend-spotting to critics."

So here's to fresh and original writing, writing that is not easily categorized. Perhaps you have a passion for history that leads you to create a docu-novel somewhat like Deborah Wiles' *Countdown*, or a scrapbook like Candace Fleming's *Our Eleanor*. Perhaps baking with a beloved relative leads you to explore storytelling through recipes, ala Sarah Weeks' *Pie* or Sharon Creech's *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup*. It could be that there's room yet for a middle grade novel in the form of a libretto or ship's log or the game plan from a football playbook.

Perhaps your passion is not for a fresh format, but a fresh take on a familiar story. For example, how writing a janitorial handbook helps a shy girl makes a friend (*Hound Dog True*/Linda Urban), or how a geeky guy finds acceptance through paper folding (*The Strange Case of Origami Yoda*/Tom Angleberger), or how an unloved child finds family in an unconventional way (*Icefall*/Matthew Kirby).

Whatever your writing dream, count on me to help. And the best way I can help is for you to let me know which of the dark lanes of Writing Alley you'd most like to explore. You provide the questions; I'll provide the flashlight. Together, we will muddle through somehow.

In the meantime, curl up with a handful of new middle grade fiction and nonfiction titles.

The last word belongs to Joseph Heller: “Every writer I know has trouble writing.”

Here's to lots of trouble for each of us!

Kirby Larson is the acclaimed author of the 2007 Newbery Honor Book, *Hattie Big Sky*, a young adult historical novel inspired by her great-grandmother, Hattie Inez Brooks Wright, who homesteaded by herself in eastern Montana as a young woman. Kirby's passion for historical fiction is reflected in *The Fences Between Us* (Scholastic, Dear America series), *The Friendship Doll* (Delacorte), and *Hattie Ever After* (Delacorte). Visit her website at <http://www.kirbylarson.com>

What's Hot in Young Adult Literature Right Now

by Helen Landalf

It's a great time to be a writer of books for Young Adults. According to a podcast on the YA book market by Michael Cader of Publisher's Marketplace and Publisher's Lunch (<http://www.wnyc.org/story/92490-book-futures-young-adult-market/>), YA is the "bright spot in book publishing." Not only are teens reading more than ever, but crossover titles have hooked many adults on reading books for teens, and the forecast for sales of YA hardcovers continues to be strong.

Walk into the YA section of most bookstores, and you'll be able to spot the current trends. Fantasy, paranormal, and dystopian novels are everywhere, riding the wave of the groundbreaking success of the Harry Potter series and the Twilight and Hunger Games trilogies. A huge number of the most popular novels are populated by vampires, werewolves, ghosts, angels and zombies. An article in *Publisher's Weekly* noted that today's YA books "overwhelmingly feature menacing creatures, forbidden romances, and apocalyptic visions of this and future Earth." You'll also note the rising popularity of steampunk (an interesting hybrid of science fiction and Victorian steam-powered technology) and story lines involving shape-shifting and time travel.

While it's tempting to jump on the bandwagon and write to latest trend, that approach may end up backfiring. Publishers are swamped with paranormal and dystopian submissions right now, and unless your manuscript offers something truly different, it's likely to be overlooked. It's also important to remember that it often takes years from the time a manuscript is sold to the day the book finally hits the shelves, during which time the trend may have given way to something new. So by the time you

finish your novel about shape-shifting werewolves, realistic urban fiction, which is on the rise, may have outstripped paranormal as the hottest-selling YA category.

Perhaps a better strategy for breaking into bookstores is to look at what the trends say about the universal concerns of teens. Vampires, for example, are the quintessential outsiders. Could you find a way to speak to the core fear of not belonging without resorting to the currently overdone vampire theme? Dystopian novels reflect apprehension about an uncertain future. How could you address this anxiety in a new way, one that's not just a copycat of *The Hunger Games*?

In the end, it's always best – and most fulfilling – to write the story that you need to tell rather than try to chase after the latest hot trend. Notice what types of books speak to you. Then mine your memories, follow your imagination, and write from your heart. Perhaps you'll end up starting a new trend.

Try this:

- Visit the YA section of several bookstores, taking note of the current trends. In a notebook, list some of the underlying teen concerns being addressed by these books. Then, using the list you've created, brainstorm ideas for stories that would touch on these same concerns in new ways.
- Take a category in YA that's currently hot and think of a way you could turn the genre on its head or combine two genres to create something new. Urban dystopian zombie romance, anyone?

Helen Landalf's debut young adult novel, *Flyaway*, was released by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. She is also author of two picture books, including *The Secret Night World Of Cats* (Smith & Kraus, 1998), which was illustrated by her autistic brother, Mark Rimland, and received a 1998 Parent Publishing Association Honor award, as well as five nonfiction books for teachers on integrating dance and drama into the curriculum. Visit her website at <http://helenlandalf.com>

Give Your Character a Problem That Makes Sense

by Jane McBride Choate

How a character faces a problem and how that problem changes a character are key to story development.

In crafting a story, a writer must first know her protagonist. How does the main character act and react? What are her strengths and weaknesses? What will cause her to change her present behavior?

Answering three questions will set you on the right track:

Why does a character have the problem he/she does?

Is there something about your character's personality that causes her problem? Does your 11-year-old middle schooler, Tami, fake illness to avoid gym because she is ashamed of the bruises on her body given to her by her (single) father? Does she forge his name on notes to avoid gym class? Is she afraid to come forward about the abuse because she fears her father will be put in jail? Does she love him despite his abuse of her? If that is the case, love and loyalty cause her to remain silent and go to any length to keep her secret.

If the problem the character faces comes from the outside—for example, he is caught in a tornado—what prompted him to place himself in danger? Does your 17-year-old protagonist, Rob, discover that his little brother Sammy wandered off during a family outing? Do his parents blame him for not keeping a better watch over Sammy? Had Sammy run away from the camp because his father is drinking and yelling at the family? Does Rob follow Sammy, even knowing that a tornado is approaching?

What do you, the writer, know about your main character that will determine how he/she reacts to the problem?

In our first case above, we know that the girl, Tami, is intensely loyal to her father, even when he doesn't deserve it. We know she will go to great lengths to avoid having his abuse discovered, including writing notes to have herself excused from gym classes. Her desire to protect her father leads her to lying to her teacher, who eventually catches her in the lies. Eventually, the teacher and guidance counselor discover the truth and confront the father. He breaks down and cries. Tami comforts him.

In the second example, we know that Rob will do anything, even jeopardize his own life, to save his younger brother. What causes him to act this way? Could it be that years earlier Sammy fell in to an irrigation ditch and almost drowned? Did his parents blame Rob and never let him forget how his negligence almost cost Sammy his life? Now we understand why Rob follows Sammy into danger.

Will facing the problem change the character in a significant way?

Does Tami find new strength within herself once she and her father must deal with their problem together? Does she gain insight into her father's past when he confesses that his father abused him? Does this new knowledge give her greater patience with him? Will she find the courage to stand up to her father, even to leave him and go live with her aunt, if he continues his abuse?

As he tries to save his brother, Rob realizes that he was not at fault years ago when Sammy nearly drowned in the irrigation ditch. He faces the truth that his father, who was drunk at the time, was supposed to be watching both boys while their mother was at work. The knowledge is freeing, removing a great burden from his heart. He understands that his father's drinking is at the root of many of the family's problems, just as it is now.

With this new insight, Rob redoubles his efforts to find Sammy and to save them both.

Hint: If facing the problem does not change the character in any meaningful way, chances are you have not fully thought through your character's personality and/or the story problem. Go back and review the character sketch you have drawn. Interview the character. Ask him or her questions about why he feels and acts as he does.

These three questions are only a start, but answering them will help you develop your story and allow your character to act in a manner logical to him.

Jane McBride Choate has written 33 novels, numerous magazine articles, and has had 14 essays appear in the Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies. She is a *Children's Book Insider* contributing editor.

The Ingredients of Strong Middle Grade Fiction

by Laura Backes, Publisher, Children's Book Insider

Middle grade fiction is in demand right now from agents and publishers alike. Readers ages eight to twelve represent a big chunk of the market, and when middle graders find a book they like, they devour it and then tell all their friends. Characters in middle grade books very much represent their real-life counterparts: they're generally nine to thirteen years old and focus on issues that affect their daily lives, such as friends, family and school. Let's take a look at how two middle grade authors gave original twists to a common theme: moving to a new home.

Moving Day is the first title in the Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls series by Meg Cabot (also author of The Princess Diaries series). At nine years old, Allie appeals to the younger end of the middle grade audience. Allie is devastated when her parents announce they'll be leaving their modern suburban development and moving into a Victorian-era fixer-upper in town, forcing Allie to switch schools. One of the plot points that makes this story unique is that Allie had been thinking she needed a new best friend (Mary Kay's bossy and cries a lot, but she's the only girl in Allie's neighborhood), and the new house has a girl Allie's age right next door. But because Allie was never consulted on this move, she doesn't like it.

All Shook Up by Shelley Pearsall, featuring 13-year-old Josh Greenwood, falls at the opposite end of the middle grade spectrum. When Josh's grandmother breaks her hip, his mother has to go to Florida for three months to take care of her, forcing Josh to temporarily leave Boston and live with his dad in Chicago at the beginning of seventh grade. Unbeknownst to Josh (and his mom), Dad has been working as an Elvis

impersonator. And to make matters worse, Dad loves his new job and isn't about to go back to being a normal, invisible shoe salesman.

While very different in plot, both books share classic middle grade features:

Voice: It's absolutely essential that the characters act and sound like they're real kids of this age group, and this is especially true if you're writing in first person. The trick is to give your narrator the general speech patterns and attitude of a kid their age, but with a slightly better vocabulary. Allie Finkle may sound a bit precocious, but she needs to be in order to express herself in a readable way:

So the obvious thing to do was keep our one good house from being sold. Then Mom and Dad would have no choice but to sell the new house.

I realize this might sound unfair. But you know what's really unfair?

Buying a haunted house with a disembodied hand in the attic without even consulting your children about it.

Though the sentence structure may be too grammatically correct for the average fourth grader (*would have no choice but to*), the sentiment is pure nine-year-old.

Obstacles: Though middle graders are looking inward and reacting to situations by how their lives are affected, their stories can't get mired down with too much naval-gazing. Keep the action moving, and make your characters squirm. Just when Allie is thinking she might like moving, her new neighbor's brother tells her there's a zombie hand in the attic over her bedroom. On the day Josh finally gets invited to sit at the popular kids' lunch table after hitting a home run in PE, his dad announces that he's going to be performing at Josh's school. Don't let your characters get too comfortable, or you'll run out of story.

Growth: Middle grade characters start out thinking about themselves, and finish the book with a broader worldview. They've learned to turn their gaze outward and consider other people. It's important that authors accomplish this shift without preaching to the reader. In *All Shook Up*, Pearsall created Ivory, a hippie classmate of Josh's whose mother is dating Josh's dad. Ivory not only thinks Elvis is cool, but she's unconcerned that the popular kids look down on her and her friends. She's able to tell Josh he's being selfish in a way that the author (or an adult character) can't.

In *Moving Day*, Allie learns, little by little, to let go of her old life and not be afraid of change. She makes the final leap on her last day at her old school, when she realizes that her former best friend (with whom she's been fighting) and the most popular girl in fourth grade (who also turned against Allie) want to be her friends again only because she's become a local celebrity (it's a long story involving a turtle). Allie sees that maybe she was holding on to the wrong things all along.

The Middle Grade Worldview: One of the things that distinguishes middle grade from young adult fiction is the way in which the characters react to the world. As kids near and enter adolescence, everything revolves around them: how they look, how they're perceived by their peers, who has the balance of power in any relationship, how much control they have over their lives. Events that might be merely inconvenient or silly to an adult are intensely dramatic for middle graders. These are normal concerns for this age group, and an author must juggle acknowledging these concerns without making the characters into whining brats or unsympathetic victims. It helps to balance self-absorption with a sense of humor, a kind heart, or the justifiable embarrassment that your dad will dress up as Elvis and come sing at your school.

In order to progress from middle grader to young adult, characters must eventually learn to look beyond themselves and understand that they're part of a larger community. Sometimes the happiness of the whole family takes precedence over the happiness of

one member. Sometimes you can't control who your family is, but that's OK as long as they're content.

As in real life, middle grade characters might not embrace these lessons completely, but a shift does occur that indicates the first steps toward growing up.

Laura Backes has been teaching aspiring writers how to craft books for children and young adults for over 25 years. She is the publisher of *Children's Book Insider: The Newsletter for Children's Writers*, and co-owner of the CBI Children's Writing Knowledge Base (<http://www.childrensbookinsider.com>)

Cause + Effect = Plot

by Jane McBride Choate

When I started writing, I believed that a story was one incident followed by another and then another until I ran out of things to happen to the character. (And I wondered why those books were rejected.)

With more experience and a number of books under my belt, I've learned that a string of incidents, whether related or not, does not constitute a plot. Plot is defined as the events that make a story, how they relate to another to in a pattern, in a sequence, in cause and effect.

We know about cause-and-effect in our daily lives. If we eat too much and exercise too little, we will likely gain weight. If we eat the right foods in the right portions and exercise moderately, we will probably lose weight.

Let's make up a character named Lily. Lily is 11 years old. Lily has studied gymnastics for three years. Lily likes to compete and to challenge herself. Lily meets another girl also studying gymnastics. Lily makes a new friend.

We have a story. Right?

Wrong.

Lily had a goal: to take gymnastics. She did things, but the story lacks cause-and-effect.

Let's add a few twists to the story. What if the girl Lily meets at class is better than she is at gymnastics? What if she and the other girl try to outdo each other? What if their competition leads them to disobey the coach about safety rules, and Lily is injured? What if she is unable to compete in a big exhibition that she has looked forward to for

many months? What if she questions her choices? What if she begins to understand that she has lost much of the pleasure she first felt in taking gymnastics because of her intense competition with the other girl?

Are you beginning to see the differences between the first version and the second? In the first, we have a string of events that, while they may be interesting in themselves, are not truly connected. Any of them could be taken out without altering the outcome. The second story connects the events, with each new step building upon the last.

Every part of a story should be an absolutely essential step along the way to the outcome. If a scene can be removed without altering that outcome, then it doesn't belong in your story. If you have done your job well, that outcome will be inevitable. Upon finishing the book, the reader should be left nodding and thinking, "Yes. It couldn't have ended any other way." Even if the ending is not happy, it is satisfactory. Leaving a reader with an unsatisfactory ending will likely make her feel cheated.

Each attempt your protagonist makes to solve her problem or reach her goal should change something vital for her. If your sixteen-year-old main character, Cara, lies to her friends about her relationship with her boyfriend, that lie should cause her more trouble. As she struggles to cover the first lie, she lies again, once more creating additional problems for her. Only when she realizes that she is digging herself in deeper with every lie she tells does she find the courage to tell the truth.

One way to keep the cause-and-effect development in your book is to look at each event through your main character's eyes. Continually ask yourself, "How does this make my character feel? How will she react?" And, finally, "How will she act in the future because of this? Will that action make it better or worse?" (Some writing teachers call this sequence action and reaction. Others refer to it as scene and sequel.)

Apply these questions to each scene in your story. If you can't answer the questions with a logical answer, it is probably because a scene is either out of order or doesn't belong in the story in the first place.

Be ruthless in cutting scenes that don't advance the action. This self-editing will save your editor having to slash the scene and minimize your rewrites.

Jane McBride Choate has written 33 novels, numerous magazine articles, and has had 14 essays appear in the Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies. She is a *Children's Book Insider* contributing editor.

Make Them Laugh: Writing Humor for Children

by Kathryn Lay

One of the main things I've found when doing school visits is that kids love to laugh. I know that I do. At the 2005 SCBWI midwinter conference, many editors mentioned how much they were drawn to humor in a manuscript, whether in picture books, novels, and even within serious works of fiction.

Humor is important.

Bruce Coville says, "I actually didn't think of myself as a particularly humorous writer when I got started. I would be writing a very scary scene and my characters would wisecrack, because that's what I do myself when I'm under pressure. After awhile, I figured out that humor was one of my strengths, so I might as well go with it!"

When I began writing my middle-grade novel, *Crown Me!*, I knew right away that I wanted it to be a funny book. Although it deals with leadership and friendship, my intent was to make it fun.

But writing humor for children involves more than sitting down at the computer and telling jokes. Humor in books and short stories comes in many forms.

Slapstick

What happens when a kid who has been crowned king for two weeks in a medieval history class project is challenged by the class bully for right to rule? A bicycle joust, of course. As I began plotting *Crown Me!* I made a list of medieval-type scenes and events to include in the book that I could twist and turn in a modern way.

The bicycle joust scene had to be physical comedy. Two boys on a bicycle, dressed

in armor made of pillows and foil and football helmets, wielding bathroom plungers instead of lances as their classmates surrounded them and cheered them on in battle. They missed one another. They fell. The main character's plunger got stuck on his adversary's bottom. The Three Stooges doesn't appeal to everyone, but slapstick is a popular form of humor for kid readers.

In *Made You Look* by Diane Roberts, her own humorous approach to life comes through in her story and the silly situations that she gets her characters into. "Slapstick is definitely a part of my real life and it spills over into my writing."

Humor in Characterization and Voice

Kids love quirky characters and a voice that looks at life slightly askew. Junie B. Jones, Chet Gecko, and Amber Brown are characters whose very existence and insights make you smile or laugh out loud.

Even when the story idea isn't one you normally think of as funny, a strong and quirky voice can change the impact of that story. In Lynn E. Hazen's novel, *Mermaid Mary Margaret*, about a girl who goes on vacation with her grandmother after her grandfather died, "Mary Margaret is obsessed with mermaids, so she has a quirky viewpoint on life from the opening pages on."

Lisa Yee, author of *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* and winner of SCBWI's Sid Fleischman Humor Award explains that, "What is funny out of the mouth of one character would not work if a different character said the same thing."

In *Crown Me!* Whiny Willy just popped up as a very minor character, but quickly became my main character's weird sidekick. Willy became the perfect follower, annoying at times but always ready to get Justin more attention...and into more trouble.

In *Storky: How I Lost My Nickname and Won the Girl* by Debra Garfinkle, voice plays a major role in the humor of her YA novel. "My sweet, naïve character has a take

on a world that is somewhat skewed by his unique voice, yet in a believable way.”

Fantastical Humor

Humor in fantasy and science fiction combines the popularity of both genres. Bruce Coville has made a solid career from his humorous fantasy and science fiction novels. Alien teachers, a strange magical shop that sells talking toads and truthful skulls, and a hunchbacked hero who lives in a castle and carries a teddy bear.

When you can laugh at your own writing, you’ve found success as a humor writer. Bruce says, “A particular funny scene where I staged a food fight in *Monster of the Year* made me laugh every time I read it, even through all the stages of editing and proofing.” Consider the burly and sometimes funny character of Hagrid in the Harry Potter books, such as his dialogue of “I shouldn’t have said that” when mentioning Fluffy, the three-headed guard dog.

Word Play

I had fun coming up with ‘medieval’ type words for my fifth grade boy characters to insult one another. My whiny knight was referred to as ‘Knight of the Living Dead,’ and when clanking along in his armor of a metal trash can, ‘Sir Trash-a-Lot.’

Comparison

Another way to insert humor is by comparing something average to something totally different. When my main character and bully prepared for their bicycle joust, I had described Justin’s pillowed-outfit as being like a marshmallow. As his knight produced two bathroom plungers to be used as lances, Justin’s thoughts were, “Just what Badger needed, a stick for marshmallow roasting.”

Potty Humor

Bruce Coville tells writers that if we use the word underwear in a story, it'll be a hit. Young kids love humor that uses forbidden or tacky-sounding words or ideas.

One of my favorite short stories I ever sold was “Underwear on Parade.” What does a kid do when everyone in class will be bringing their collections to share at school? What if you collect jockey shorts? How will you display it? With more than 20 pair worn over his shorts and hidden by a raincoat, the title and idea lent itself to little boy humor as the main character ‘dropped his shorts’ one by one.

Humor & Serious Topics

Does humor have a place in novels with serious topics about tough issues?

Cynthia Kadohata, winner of the Newbery Award for *Kira Kira*, includes some humor in her serious novel. “The novel is serious, but a bit of humor in a serious book can help the rhythm. In *Kira Kira*, it is character driven. My main character’s uncle teaches her to spit and to drive. I wanted to show a close family and felt that humor is a big part of that.”

Alex Flinn, author of *Breathing Underwater* says that, “I learned that juxtaposing a certain amount of humor against an intense plot makes it more effective. Humor and levity cause the reader to let their guard down so that the intense moments of the book hit the reader like a punch in the face.”

Humor in Revision

When I began plotting *Crown Me!* I intended it to be funny from the beginning, yet I found that making specific scenes laugh-out-loud funny were done mostly during

revision time. In my first revision letter, my editor suggested that I look at some of the humorous situations my characters “talked about doing” and showed them doing it. My character mentioned that the class’ dungeon had grown in size, with more kids and desks inside than outside the dungeon.

But I had not shown how those kids got there. I went back during revision and showed in scene some of the absurd situations where my king and queen sent their classmates to the dungeon. For Debra Garfinkle, a lot of her humor comes naturally, but she adds jokes and exaggerations at the revision stage. One disastrous date scene went through four drafts. “What was originally an amusing situation got progressively funnier with each draft.”

Writing humor, even when it comes naturally, often needs to be rethought as you work to find the true laughter of the piece. Dotti Enderle says that, “When writing *The Cotton Candy Disaster at the Texas State Fair*, I looked at the ‘big’ picture. What possible havoc could an out-of-control cotton candy machine cause at a highly populated state fair ground?”

Lynn E. Hazen adds, “In revisions, I looked at some of the details that came to my story naturally, and tried expanding the potential for great humor and poignancy. I looked for ways to play up humor.”

Some say that humor writing for children isn’t taken seriously. I hope not. I want my readers to laugh.

Kathryn Lay is the author of the middle grade novel *Crown Me!*, as well as several picture books and chapter books. She has had over 1000 short stories and articles published in *Cricket*, *Spider*, *Pockets*, *U.S. Kids*, *Woman’s Day*, *Family Circle*, and hundreds more. You can reach her through her website at <http://www.kathrynlav.com>

When Good Dialogue Goes Bad

by Jane McBride Choate

We all know the importance of dialogue. Good dialogue moves the story forward and reveals characterization. Bad dialogue stalls the reader, perhaps even taking her out of the story. Once that happens, chances are unlikely that she will return to the book...or buy another book from you.

Now that we know the pitfalls of bad dialogue, how do we recognize it?

Cliches. “I don’t use clichés,” you may protest. Are you sure? I thought the same, until I went through a manuscript with an eye trained for just that. What did I find? I cringe when I discovered phrases such as “white as bone,” “dry as dust,” and other hackneyed phrases.

Euphemisms. I’m not suggesting that we resort to crude, offensive language to replace euphemisms. I am suggesting, though, that we write with honesty and freedom. Children rarely use euphemisms. Be true to the age and background of your young characters.

Stereotypes. Stereotypes show up in dialogue as well as characters. What about the teenage boy who peppers his conversation with “Whaddsup?” Or the African American woman who addresses all her friends as “Girlfriend?” Find what is individual and unique to your characters. Let their dialogue reflect that rather than what you believe an age or ethnic group or race is supposed to say.

Explanations. Dialogue should never be used to explain things which a character already knows. Consider this:

“Jenny, you remember the time we all went skinny-dipping down at old man

Withers' creek and you were caught and you couldn't find your clothes? Do you remember how hard we laughed? We couldn't stop. You almost had to go home wearing nothing but a blanket from the trunk of my car? Do you remember how scared we were that your parents would find out?"

If this were such a memorable time, Jenny obviously remembers it. If that information is important to the plot, find a different way to impart it.

Information dump. This is related to the above. Have you ever read a book where the point-of-view character wants to relate the history of an area? The author, not wanting to be accused of boring the reader with a lengthy narrative, instead uses dialogue to tell everything that ever happened in a town or city.

"This was where a great Civil War battle occurred. Do you see that cannon over there? It was the first to be fired in the war. It was so heavy that it took fifty men to pull it up the hill. They say that one man died of a heart attack before they got the cannon all the way up the hill. The cannon balls were fired in a furnace right here in town..." Do you feel a yawn coming on as this history lesson continues?

Colloquialisms and slang. A few colloquialisms to give the flavor of an area, the background of the protagonist are fine. Notice that I said "a few." When every other word is a colloquialism, however, it's time to pull out the red pen and start slashing. Slang is tricky in that words flow in and out of style with overwhelming frequency. Nothing dates a book more quickly than slang. Do you remember when teenagers called everything "bogus?" Also, Los Angeles slang may will be indecipherable to a reader in New York. If you must use slang, use it sparingly and judiciously.

Purple prose. I have a background in romance writing. Romance writers are occasionally accused of purple prose. In reality, purple prose is not the sole province of romance writers. Anytime you tend to wax poetic over a beautiful sunset, you are dipping your pen in the purple ink. Purple prose can also result from exaggeration. Exaggeration can be used to good effect, but apply it as you would a sprinkle of chili

powder. A little goes a long way.

I'm sure you can think of other elements of poor dialogue. When you've completed a scene, go back and read the dialogue aloud. Does it sound stilted and overly formal? Does overdone dialect take you out of the story?

Be ruthless in your editing. Your editor and your readers will thank you.

Jane McBride Choate has written 33 novels, numerous magazine articles, and has had 14 essays appear in the Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies. She is a *Children's Book Insider* contributing editor.

How to Deal with S-E-X

by Ellen Leroe

Sex. That simple three-letter word stopped me in my tracks and prevented me from working on my young adult novel, *Dear Big V*. But my story of a 16-year-old abstinence club president who questions her beliefs about waiting when she falls for the school's biggest player was basically all about lust and love.

How could I take a clear, hard look at my main character's first blush of sexual awakening without sounding crude or exploitative? Luckily, I broke through my paralysis by devising the following strategies. They helped me find a happy medium in writing about sexual situations without sounding either too puritanical or too coarse.

Be funny. Nothing appeals to teen readers better than humor. Think you have to call a spade a spade (or organ by its correct name)? Think again. Here's how my girl, Courtney, worries about the first time: "We'd be right in the romanticized middle of 'doing it,' when I'd roughly push aside That-Appendage-Which-Should-Be-Nameless-Except-in-Sex-Ed-Class to run to the bathroom and turn on faucets to drown out embarrassing sounds." And her sarcastic comment to the player, Lance, when he first asks her out: "Take note, there will be no exchange of bodily fluids during the evening."

Be serious. There's a time and place for comedy, but make room for what I call "small beats of dramatic honesty." Have your main character sit quietly and talk, think, or write about her or his innermost feelings about sex. In my case, Courtney thrashes out her confused emotions about making love—or not making love—with her best friend, Mollie, and then in a heart-to-heart with her older brother.

Be creative. Not sure how to handle those tricky, oh-so-sticky issues that deal with teen hormones and hooking up? You can avoid being too graphic by using your

imagination. I invented a personality called Big V which represented Court's virginity. Big V quickly turned into a major character in the story when Courtney found herself confiding in this trusted confidante about intimate things she couldn't share with another living soul. After Court experiences what she calls the break between B.C. (Being Chaste) and A.D. (After Desire), she asks Big V: "Am I a bad girl for feeling this way? I don't get it, Big V. How can kissing and touching and wanting to be close to a guy be a sin, especially when it feels so natural and wonderful?"

Be poetic. I'm not talking rhyme or verse, but a way of capturing a sexually charged encounter through using imagery. I struggled with describing Court's first-ever physical attraction to a boy until I came up with this: "Deep in my stomach and lower, right in the center of my body, aka Female Central, a flock of startled birds seemed to rise and take flight, their wings beating and pulsing in a sensual way." Later, when Court replays making out with Lance, all the longings come surging back: "My entire body feels as if it's been pulled inside out, so that every square inch of my skin is alive and tingling. I feel exposed and laid bare, as red-hot as the hollow of a volcano."

If applying imagery doesn't come naturally to you, leaf through various works of current poets (Sandra Cisneros is a good start) to give you ideas.

Be two-faced. By that I mean, find ways to express opposing viewpoints of your main characters' desires, actions, and thoughts about sex. Teens can sniff out—and dismiss—a preachy, one-sided tone in seconds and they'll put your book down.

My main character called herself the Queen of Abstinence, but by the end of the story she could finally relate to her best friend's decision to sleep with her boyfriend. And remember: it's not just their peers who influence teens. It's their parents, the health and sex education programs at school, faith-based youth groups at church, and messages from the media and society, in general.

Pick up popular magazines like *CosmoGirl* or *Seventeen*, or Google Teens/Abstinence, to discover the variety of perspectives on teen relationships, dating,

and sexuality. Then weave them into your plot.

When it comes to young adults today, there is no bigger issue than sex—and all its complications. Before throwing in the towel on tackling this hot topic, try using one or more of these strategies. You may discover your own voice and style can add a spark of authenticity, and infuse your story with writing passion.

Be confident. Take heart. No matter how old you are, you can access your inner teen to write authentically about this delicate topic. Flip through the pages of your high school yearbook, read old diary passages, play CDs of the music that was popular during your adolescence.

Think back to the time when you first fell for that special someone, and let those emotions guide you. Times and fashions and culture may change, but the exhilarating, confusing, joyous, and painful feelings about first crushes, kisses, and attractions are universal.

Here are some young adult books that deal with sex in different ways in a variety of situations:

Loose Girl by Kerry Cohen (memoir)

Annie on My Mind by Nancy Garden (lesbian)

The Upper Class series by Hobson Brown, Taylor Materne, Caroline Says

Good Girls by Laura Ruby

The Rainbow Party by Paul Ruditis (oral sex)

Love & Sex, Michael Cart, Editor (collection of stories depicting a variety of sexual relationships)

Doing It by Melvin Burgess

Ellen Leroe is the author of over 30 books for children from toddlers to young adults. See all her titles at **<http://www.ellenleroe.com>**

Two Authors Give Clues for Writing YA Mysteries

by Jane McBride Choate

Those who write for the young adult market frequently see it as a calling and treat it as such. When I wanted to find out about writing mysteries for young adults, I went to the experts, J.D. Shaw and Joanne Dahme.

J.D. Shaw is the author of six adult mysteries, including the Ask Emma series. *The Secrets of Loon Lake* was her first mystery for teenagers. Her latest book is *Leave No Footprints*, about a girl running away from a terrible situation only to stumble into a whole new set of problems. Coming out May 2013 is *Miss Millie's Murder*. All her YA books are published by Tiny Satchel Press. Visit JD Shaw's website at <http://www.jdshawmysteries.com>.



Joanne Dahme has four YA novels published by Running Press: *Creepers*, *Tombstone Tea*, *The Plague*, and *Contagion*. She is currently working on a YA novel with Tiny Satchel Press. See her Amazon page at <http://www.amazon.com/Joanne-Dahme/e/B0034Q1JIO>.

How did you start writing mysteries for young adults? Did you start off with that in mind, or did you fall into it?

J.D. Shaw (JS): I came in through the side door. A man who had agented/published erotica suddenly wanted to represent something his grandchildren could read and wanted a modern Nancy Drew. An editor I had worked with recommended me. And I got paid an advance just to try. It turned out I really enjoyed it and it wasn't really much of a

Nancy Drew, but he liked it. However, he didn't sell it and a small publishing company (Tiny Satchel Press) bought the rights and did publish it.

Joanne Dahme (JD): When I began writing, I wasn't thinking about writing for young adults. But one of my first short stories featured two 14-year-old boys in a coming of age story with supernatural elements. My friend and writing mentor encouraged me to continue writing for young adults, as I better captured their voice and sentiments. I like to think of it as a "youthful perspective" no matter how old I am.

What do you see as the parameters of writing mystery/suspense for young adults in regard to language, subject matter, dialogue, etc.? Do you feel any constraints in writing for this market? Do you feel a greater responsibility in writing for young adults than if you were writing for adults?

JS: After I had been given the assignment of writing a YA, I read a great many of them. I was shocked. So many dealt with drugs, sex, etc. – not as part of the story, but as everyday activities, as common as brushing your teeth. In other words – totally unnecessary. I am careful about that. I have romance but not sex. I have misbehavior but not drugs. These things don't have to be part of everyday life.

Language presented another problem. It must sound true to a teenager, not dated. But too much current slang sounds ridiculous. My favorite thing is to get a teenager to read through it. (Author's note: if you don't have a teenager of your own, ask family or friends if you can "rent" one of theirs. Some authors go to a local school to find readers.)

JD: It has to be real and it has to reflect the world that young people live in. Some young adult novels are edgy and can be just as harsh in their reflection of hurtful sex or wrong choices like drugs or illegal behavior as those for adults. I don't go there as I feel that I can't adequately reflect those worlds. But I do want my protagonists to have the

more traditional challenges in their lives – loss, loneliness, lack of confidence – or sometimes a real sense of themselves. They are tested by the unusual thing that suddenly interferes with their lives.

What do you find as the greatest reward in writing for youth?

JS: It has taken me back to those years. After all, we all went through them. And I have rediscovered some of the emotions I had forgotten I ever had. It's like getting together with old high school friends. I meet with a group every couple of years and within minutes we revert to our old silly selves. I love getting back into that mind-set when I'm writing. You hear so much about terrible adolescences. Mine was wonderful and I want to share some of that.

JD: I find that I am much braver about the level of creativity that I can add to the story (in writing for young people), characters and events that take place in the novel. Young people are generally not jaded or prejudiced (as adults can sometimes be) and are willing to go along on the journey that you create for them – open to all of the possibilities.

How do you start your mysteries? Do you begin with character or plot? Do you feel that one is more important than the other?

JS: I usually start with a place or a situation, add a character, and see what happens. So often the characters take over. As they react to each other, the plot changes.

JD: I usually start with a clear sense of my character and the idea of the events that will change his or her life. My first few chapters are outlined but the remaining chapters evolve as I write, sometimes taking me in a complete change of direction from what I originally envisioned.

Are you a pantser (writing "by the seat of your pants" and letting the story evolve on its own) or a plotter?

JS: From my last answer, you've already figured out that I'm a pantser. I love not knowing what will happen next. It gets me back to the computer. It takes many rewrites when you do it that way, but I even like the rewriting. I keep thinking of new things.

JD: I'm a little of both. The plotter in the beginning, but one that is happy to let my character and story tell me where I need to go.

Is the crime the first concern, or do you create a character first and then figure out what type of mystery that person would be drawn to? As for characters, are there certain characteristics of protagonists who get involved in mysteries that would be different in a non-mystery story?

JD: I always start with my character and the setting. What type of person is he/she and what is the world like at this time (e.g., England during the Black Death, Philly in the late 19th century, local cemetery today, etc.). The time and place help me determine what "mysteries" or events will be impacting my character. I let them evolve from there. In regard to if there are certain characteristics of protagonists who get involved in mysteries, the answer is "definitely". The protagonist needs to be curious and brave in a nontraditional sense and have a strong sense of a moral obligation, although they wouldn't verbalize this or intellectually recognize this per se. Also, the story sets them up in a way that they feel impelled to move forward.

JS: I think the relationships between the characters is what drives the plot. And because my characters are young, they do have to deal with their own problems and discoveries which can make them approach situations in a very interesting way. My characters are curious and idealistic, as so many young people are. That makes them think they can do things that perhaps an older person wouldn't want to get involved in.

They charge forward and think later, which can put them in danger (always interesting). And the teen problems can be addressed as more background than main event when they have a crime to solve.

Do you have to balance the “mystery” plot threads with other more typical YA threads about relationships, coming of age, discovering ones self, etc.? And finally, are there certain types of mysteries or crimes to solve that are more believable for a YA protagonist than others?

JS: My murders are off screen. They already happened. And it’s a sense of justice that drives the protagonist to solve the crime. Their involvement comes through their sense of righting some wrong. Again, I use the wonderful idealism of youth to advance the plot. So the type of murder isn’t as important as the solving. The crime is not my first concern. The characters tend to drive the plot and the crime is the focus point around which everything happens. I don’t write a series and therefore the protagonist is involved to some extent in a personal way that makes her want and need to solve the crime.

JD: Wow. Not sure if I should be doing this but I don’t. I generally do some research around the topic/time that the story takes place and chose the elements that I think are best for mining the story. Then I just write without worrying about how other YA novelists are tackling topics. I don’t think there is a difference in the nature of the crime and mystery, but I think that a young protagonist often has the advantage in that “perpetrators” do not take the threat of a young person unraveling the deed as seriously they would if an adult were investigating.

Finally, what advice do you have for someone wanting to write mysteries for the YA market? Do you have hints for breaking into this market?

JS: Do it. It's fun. Everyone writes so differently that I'm not about to tell anyone how, but getting those words on paper is what it's all about. One piece of advice I have found true for me: You can tell it or you can write it. If you keep telling people about your book, the excitement goes out of it. When you get that excitement – keep quiet and write it down. There is a freedom in writing for the YA market. Your characters are young and adventuresome and prone to make mistakes. What more could you want?

JD: Read what is being published for YA – both the classics and current work. This will give you a good sense of what never changes and what today's youth are engaged in. But most importantly, if you have a good story in your head – or even an inkling of one – write it down.

Jane McBride Choate has written 33 novels, numerous magazine articles, and has had 14 essays appear in the Chicken Soup for the Soul anthologies. She is a *Children's Book Insider* contributing editor.

Four Successful Novelists: Their Struggles and Sage Advice

by Nancy Sondel

Anxiety. Insecurity. Despair. Rare is the individual who escapes these emotions during the writing and submission process. Rarer still are writers who persist despite every stumbling block, using each as a stepping stone—in brief, writers for whom Gumption Trumps All.

In the following pages, four novelists share what you'll never find between the covers of their award-winning books. Our interviewees include **Bobbie Pyron, Dandi Daley Mackall, Jay Asher, and Jerry Spinelli**. (See their bios below.) Whether they've published one solo novel or hundreds, whether they're up-and-coming or wildly acclaimed, their polished pages show no signs of behind-the-scenes angst. No insert tells readers, "Here I cut the most evocative scene I've ever written—because it belonged in some other story." No scrawl in the margin confesses, "After these words, I quit writing for nine months because rejections swallowed me up."

Yet each of these talented authors—among countless others, published and aspiring—have wrestled with monumental hurdles. How did our interviewees reach the finish line? Read on, to see if their words ring true for you.

What has been the single most challenging aspect of your writing?

BP: Learning to trust my instinct. It's so easy to question yourself, particularly when you're "pre-published." You question whether you should try to write to the market, whether you should use character sketch sheets, whether you should outline your plot before you write even one word. I had to learn to trust my ability to write, to tell the

story given to me by whatever magic and grace is out there. To quote author Sonya Hartnett: “I write whatever comes to me, whatever the book requires. My first responsibility is to the work.”

DDM: Middles!... We can't view the middle as marking time until we get to our great ending. Making scenes is part of the answer—having something at stake in each scene, even if it's small. I try to start every chapter, every scene with: “Will she/he, or won't she/he?” I don't write that, but I think it. Will Hope find the photos she needs? Will she convince the lawyer to let Jeremy plead “Not Guilty”? Each question needs a concrete answer that will lead toward that wonderful ending—but keep the reader reading in the meantime.

JA: My biggest challenge, which deals more with personality than craftwork, remains keeping myself from feeling discouraged. If I were to look at a previous page in a manuscript I'm working on and it reads poorly, I often won't write any more that day. To avoid that, I take as long as I need to tweak the words in each paragraph until they feel exactly how I want them to feel, and then I move on. When it comes time to edit the full manuscript, I'm already fairly happy with what I've done. At conferences, most writers and editors will tell you to not worry about how horrible your first draft is. Just write it! Get the story down! But that's never worked for me. If I did that, I'd probably reread the first few paragraphs, and then delete the entire file.

JS: I had long since graduated from college, yet was still writing as if hoping for an A in my creative writing class. My eye was on posterity instead of the sidewalk. It was a revealing moment when I discovered that “popularity” is not necessarily a dirty word and that it's possible for writing to be both popular and good. I climbed down from the ivory tower and have kept my feet planted on the sidewalk ever since... Reading *The Exorcist* helped me. That title, and most other bestsellers, never made it up the ivory tower; and I, until then, had never lowered myself down. I not only read it—I loved it. Maybe it wasn't Dickens or Dostoyevsky, but it induced me to suspend my disbelief. I

kept turning the pages. I remember thinking: He's doing a lot of things right. It was, simply, a good yarn. So I began to write not for the ages but for today, not for textbook critics but for myself. I simplified my job down to three words: Tell a story.

What challenges did you overcome in getting your debut or subsequent works published?

BP: The biggest challenge in getting *A Dog's Way Home* into the world was finding an editor or agent who believed in the way the book was written: in alternating points of view between a dog and his girl. It was clear to me when I first started hearing and seeing the story that this was the way the book wanted to be told. So I wrote the first draft with Abby's chapters in first person and Tam, the dog's, chapters in third "person." But when I workshopped the manuscript and sent it to editors and agents, I was told over and over that I "couldn't" tell the story that way. Kids wouldn't get it, they said. I tried rewriting it with different POVs, but it just didn't work for me. Finally, after many rejections, I found an agent who loved the book the way it was written.

DDM: Seriously, I begin every book with the fear that I can't really write this book; and that if I do manage to write it, nobody will want to read it. Yep—even after close to 500 books, I hear that naysaying voice in my head. For me, the answer is trusting God and trusting the writing process. Not all of my books have a strong faith element, but they're all written from a strong faith that I have something that needs to be said. My favorite part of the process is rewriting. I know I can make any manuscript better, so I try to convince myself that I just have to get through that first ("vomit") draft—get words on paper. Then I'll come back and make it work.

I wrote the first chapter of *The Silence of Murder* nine years before I realized it was a mystery. I wrote the rest in five months, then rewrote another five to six months. I only had four months between novels in the Starlight Animal Rescue and Backyard Horses series (Tyndale 2009 and 2011-2012). But the process was the same—an awful first

draft, followed by more than a dozen rewrites.

JA: When it was time to get moving on my second novel, I became paralyzed by the success of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. That book was such an extreme for the types of stories I like to tell, anything else would be quite different. What if the new book didn't sell as well? What if readers were hoping to have the same experience as with the first book? For two years, I didn't write a single word of fiction. I almost completely gave up on writing, even convincing myself that I was okay with giving up.

It took one of my favorite authors, Carolyn Mackler, asking if I'd be interested in co-writing a book with her to feel excited about writing again. Brainstorming with her was so much fun, and I kept telling myself that this project wouldn't be considered a follow-up because it was written with someone else. But now that *The Future of Us* is done, I feel just as proud of it as of my first book. Not only was brainstorming with Carolyn fun, but the constant give-and-take of creative energy kept me inspired. Since finishing our collaboration, we've had wonderful discussions about future solo works, which has also been inspiring.

JS: A quarter of a century passed between the time I decided to become "a writer" and the day I signed a contract for my first published book. I say my first *published* book because that novel (*Space Station Seventh Grade*) was in fact the fifth that I had written. Nobody wanted the first four. I sent them everywhere. Collected enough rejection slips to paper a house. Was I devastated? Sure. Every time I sliced open an envelope to find a rejection slip, I felt like sticking my head in the oven. I fancied even the cemetery would reject me with the words "...does not meet our needs."

But a funny thing happened the day after each rejection: the sun came up. Life was going on with or without me. I packed up my manuscript, used up a couple more stamps and sent it somewhere else. Short stories. Novels. Years and years of that. But through it all something was happening of which I was not aware. Looking back, I can see now that those four flops that nobody wanted were in fact exercises, exercises by which I

was, however fitfully, learning to write. So that when I came down to the kitchen one day and discovered only bones in the bag of fried chicken I had intended to take to work, I found myself not just at the remains of uncontrolled juvenile appetite, but at a story. And finally, after those four exercises, I knew how to write it.

Can you offer any inspiring words to writers? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

BP: I would have been a bit more careful about how much I workshopped/critiqued the book in its infancy. Stephen King, in his indispensable book, *On Writing*, advises to “write with the door closed” when you’re working on that first draft. Resist the urge to show it to anyone during that vulnerable time. Also, I would have concentrated strictly on finding an agent rather than focusing so much on editors. Great agents are worth their weight in gold! They will get your work out of the slush pile and into an editor’s hands. And as trite and shopworn as it sounds, it really, really only takes one yes! I *know* it’s hard, I know how frustrating it is. But that one yes will change your world.

DDM: Don't compete with other writers. Own your voice. Realize nobody can write the book you will. Nobody except you! Involve others—get into a critique group. Take joy in writing! You're a writer—enjoy every word. (And that spells Do It!)

JA: I wouldn't have done anything differently. I can look back and see how every twist and turn moved me toward where I needed to be. Regarding all of my earlier manuscripts, even though I loved them, I'm glad they weren't published. Maybe one day I'll rework them and resubmit them, but I really couldn't have asked for a better intro to the literary world. Still, it was tremendously important for me to work on each one of those unpublished manuscripts. Each one taught me something I needed to learn about the craft before I could begin *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

Not that those rejections were ever easy. When you work so hard on a manuscript,

and truly believe in it, rejection is both confusing and painful. But being published was my dream. And while it's probably not healthy to have a dream that leans so heavily on the subjective opinions of others, I didn't choose my dream. It was there almost my entire life, and I wasn't going to stop until it became reality.

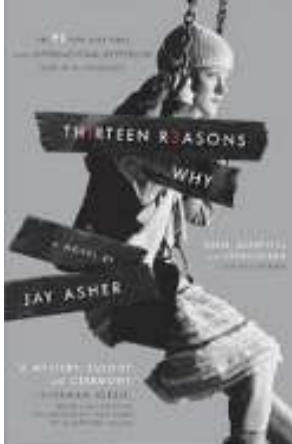
JS: I would read more. I think one reason why it took me so long to get the hang of this storytelling business is that I read so little as a kid, thus depriving myself of models to learn from and emulate. I really didn't begin to read and enjoy fiction on my own until after college. I sometimes think that's why I had Maniac Magee carry a book everywhere he goes. I couldn't go back in time and do it right myself, but at least I could make my character a reader. I tell kids, "Follow Maniac, not me."

My golden rule for aspiring writers: Write what you care about. I always underline the word "care." If you write what you truly care about, you are more likely to pour the best of yourself onto the page. And if you do so, you maximize your chances of touching the reader. And if all you get for your trouble is a rejection slip, stay away from the oven, go to sleep, look out the window next morning, and I'm betting the sun will be up. That's your job as a writer, an artist: try, fail, try, fail. You keep going. You hang in there. The longer you do so, the more likely it is that two things will happen: you will become better and better at writing, and others will drop out of the race. And if after four books and years of rejections they still keep coming—hey—it's 2012 and you've got something I didn't. Publish yourself!

Regardless of how your book is born, its fate lies largely in your hands. Our generous interviewees have touched on some hard-won tips to steer you:

Dream freely. Write with the conviction that your story must be told, and that *capable you* are the one to tell it. Honor your own working style—meaning, perhaps, you'll strive to perfect each paragraph the first time around instead of rushing to complete a first draft. Further, write as many drafts as it takes. In your quest to publish a

glorious story, view setbacks as guidebooks and tools. Let no one, especially capable you, crush your dreams.



Jay Asher's debut teen novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, was been on the New York Times bestsellers list for more than two years and has sold to 31 foreign markets. His second teen novel, *The Future of Us* (co-written with Carolyn Mackler), has sold to 15 foreign markets. Both have been optioned by major film studios.

<http://www.jayasher.blogspot.com/>,

<http://www.thirteenreasonswhy.com>.

Jerry Spinelli has published more than 30 books, printed in more than 35 languages. His novels include *Maniac Magee* (Newbery Medal), *Wringer* (Newbery Honor), *Stargirl*, *Loser*, *Milkweed*, and *Jake and Lily*, as well as picture books *My Daddy and Me* and *I Can Be Anything!* <http://www.jerryspinelli.com>

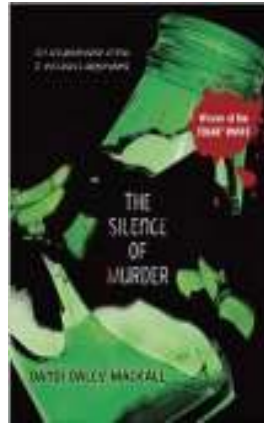


Bobbie Pyron authored the teen novel *The Ring*, the award-winning middle grade novel, *A Dog's Way Home*, and the middle grade novel *The Dogs of Winter*. Visit her website at

<http://www.bobbiepyron.com>, and her blog at

<http://www.bobbiepyron.blogspot.com>

Dandi Daley Mackall has written for every age group and in every genre, publishing over 450 books with Knopf/Random House and most other major publishers. *The Silence of Murder* won the Edgar Award for Best YA Mystery 2012; *My Boyfriends' Dogs* is in development as a Hallmark movie; *Winnie the Horse Gentler* has sold around 800,000 copies. *Larger than Life Lara* and other titles won state awards, ALA Best Book nominations, Mom's Choice awards, and more. See her work at <http://www.dandibooks.com>, <http://dandimackall.wordpress.com>



Nancy Sondel is founding director of the Pacific Coast Children's Writers Workshop, a seminar for intermediate to published novelists that takes place in Santa Cruz, CA every October. For more information, go to <http://www.childrenswritersworkshop.com/>

For much more about writing middle grade, young adult and other types of kidlit, visit <http://writeforkids.org>.

And to preview the [World's Largest Library of Children's Writing Information](http://childrensbookinsider.com), stop by the CBI Knowledge Base at <http://childrensbookinsider.com>