

## **A FEW SUGGESTIONS ABOUT WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND GETTING PUBLISHED**

*from Laurence and Catherine Anholt*

[info@anholt.co.uk](mailto:info@anholt.co.uk)

[www.anholt.co.uk](http://www.anholt.co.uk)

*Here are a few suggestions and answers to 'frequently asked questions', which we hope will be helpful to anyone wanting to get involved with the fascinating, frustrating world of children's publishing.*

*For those with a serious interest in the subject, we run a number of in depth courses throughout the year from our studios in Lyme Regis in which we take students through the entire process, from Inspiration to Publication. Feel free to email for full details.*

*We wish you success!*

### **How do I find a publisher?**

The procedure is pretty straightforward. Go to a library or bookshop, find several children's books which seem to be in a similar realm to your own and note the name of the publisher.

Secondly, get hold of the current edition of an annual publishing directory such as 'The Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook' or the 'Writer's Handbook' (A+C Black) - in this you will find the address of your chosen publisher together with the name of a few senior commissioning editors, (best not to send your package to the Managing Director, for obvious reasons). Be wary of publishers who are not listed. You will also find lists of author's agents.

In most cases, send a letter; editors and agents do not appreciate telephone calls. I would recommend only approaching well known, established publishers – you should NEVER need to part with money to have your material published; the publisher should take that risk. If you are being asked to contribute towards costs, the chances are you are dealing with a Vanity Publisher – they will print your work but you will end up with 150,683,987 copies in your attic, which you will be giving away to your great great great grandchildren. The only exception to this rule is the latest form of digital 'print on demand' publishing which (I have heard) can be a cheap and effective way of getting in to print – the best known of these companies is at [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

### **Can I submit a story idea to a publisher without illustrations?**

Yes! In fact it is invariably preferable to send text without pictures unless you are a highly competent, (usually trained) artist yourself, or you know someone who is. A brilliant story with second-rate drawings is likely to deter an editor. Each publisher has a list of excellent professional illustrators and it is the editor's job to match your text to one of them.

However, it is perfectly acceptable to include visual ideas, printed in Italics or in brackets: e.g. [*Illustration shows boy being eaten by a bumblebee*]. If you are still convinced that you belong to that rare species of author/illustrators, then you may want to make up a 'dummy' – a complete mock book.

## **Can I submit illustrations to a publisher without a story?**

This may be slightly trickier because publishers generally have a sizeable collection of artists' portfolios on file. However, if your work is truly outstanding, it may be worth sending a few samples, although it might be some time before a suitable text comes along. If you can get onto the files of several publishers, then you may be lucky.

In the area of picture books, the truth is, you are in a far stronger position if you can write and illustrate really well. You will then be able to submit a complete package.

## **Hit me with the bad news...**

The harsh truth is that this is a particularly difficult time in children's publishing – probably the toughest in 20 years. The reasons are various but they include the end of the Net Book Agreement, so that books can now be sold very cheaply (a supermarket style 'pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap' ethos pervades), the influence of Amazon and other on-line stores which sell books at massive discounts, the unfavourable weakness of the Dollar since 9/11 and most recently, the take over of Waterstones and Ottakers by HMV. The main issue is that there were simply too many children's books published in the last twenty years and it was a bubble that was bound to burst. All of these factors mean that the current market overwhelmingly favours 'Top 100 Authors' at the expense of middle-range and especially new authors and publishers. This means that publishers are extremely cautious about what they publish and are taking on very few new writers indeed.

## **So will a publisher be interested in my manuscript?**

It is important to realise that publishers are almost overwhelmed by a deluge of unsolicited material, most of which is completely unpublishable. In order to protect themselves, they seem to erect a 'force field' – some will tell you that they 'never read unsolicited manuscripts', others employ astoundingly rude receptionists! Only the most determined authors eventually scramble through this obstacle course, although probably 90% is rejected.

## **Isn't there any good news?**

Yes! Publishing is a huge machine which needs to be constantly fed, so in spite of all the gloom and doom above, almost every publisher IS on the lookout for new material. Most editors dream of finding one envelope amidst the 'slush pile', which contains that brilliant, simple and extraordinary idea which will make all their stress-filled days worthwhile. If your idea is truly outstanding, then you have a real chance of being published – if it is just average, your chances are slim.

## **What should I send them?**

Restrict yourself to one or two ideas, which you have prepared very carefully. In almost every aspect of children's books, LESS IS MORE! Most children's writers spend more time whittling away words, than adding to text... a bit like writing a Japanese Haiku. If you are writing a picture book text for young children, it should be especially short and punchy but still have real substance.

Most picture books are 32 pages long with about one or two paragraphs per page. Obviously, books for older children have more text (and ultimately fewer pictures), but

contemporary books for children should all be pacy and immediate. Avoid lengthy description, especially in picture books, (You might experiment by striking out anything which could be represented visually).

If you feel inclined, you can divide your text into separate pages (pagination), but it is perfectly acceptable to send it as one continuous story – the pagination comes later as part of the editing process. Text should always be printed (not hand-written), double-spaced and well presented. Don't forget to include your name and address. Also put in a very brief covering letter with any relevant experience such as teaching or previously published work. It is polite to include return postage. Send good quality photocopies or scans, rather than original artwork and *always keep a copy of everything!*

### **What is unique about writing for children?**

This is very important: a particular skill you will need to acquire is a subtle feel for the particular age group you are writing for. There is a HUGE difference between a three year old and a six year old. Many amateurs present publishers with a manuscript as big as a tombstone claiming it is aimed at five year olds!

The length of text *must* be appropriate for the age and so must the content - young teenagers want to feel grown up – they are not interested in Dibble the Duck! There is a good reason why Jacquie Wilson is the most borrowed author from UK libraries – she explores the issues that her readers are interested in - for her age-group, these issues can be pretty tough.

The only way to really grasp this concept is to spend a lot of time with children and also to be very familiar with current children's books. You cannot be vague about the age you are writing for.

### **Is it acceptable to send out to more than one publisher simultaneously?**

I think two or three is ok. (But don't say I told you.)

### **How long will I wait for a reply?**

Between three weeks and three lifetimes. 6-8 weeks is usual.

### **What sort of answer will I get back?**

Sadly, it will probably be a standard rejection letter - (*Thank you for sending us your story, 'Billy's Talking Bellybutton' although we enjoyed reading it, our list is very full at present and blah blah...*). If the publisher has taken the trouble to give specific suggestions or comments about your idea, this is VERY ENCOURAGING! If they invite you to send more material or come in for a meeting, praise the Lord, drink vast quantities of champagne and kiss several people vigorously.

### **Supposing I keep getting rejected?**

Many people will tell you stories about masterpieces which have been rejected again and again, before finally being recognised as Harry Potter/Lord of the Flies/The Bible. One thing is certain – every published author will have received a stack of rejection letters over the years; (we could paper our house with them). Perhaps it's a little like selling vacuum cleaners door to door - if you give up the first time a door is shut, you will

never sell anything; but if everyone in the street slams the door, then you might want to re-examine the product. If, after numerous rejections, you remain convinced that you are an undiscovered genius in a world that is not ready, then self-publishing is a possible option. (See Dyson for a literal illustration of this metaphor!) But truthfully, if you find it impossible to get work accepted, be prepared to ask some very hard questions about what you are producing...is it really original? Is it too old-fashioned? Is it too tame? Is it too long?

### **So what makes a good story?**

You should aim for something child-friendly, original, confident, contemporary, international/universal, translatable, politically-correct, passionate, personal, poetic, inventive, theatrical, exciting, emotional, optimistic, inspiring...it's as easy as that.

MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL, there must be a CLEAR NARRATIVE. Something must HAPPEN in your story. The old classroom rule of a BEGINNING, MIDDLE and END is still valid.

### **What constitutes a bad story?**

Something that is didactic – the author wants to 'teach kids a lesson'. Something that is from a bygone era – the author is clearly not familiar with *contemporary* children's books. The story simply doesn't work. The book has a flat ending. The characters are weak. The text is lifeless. It is a re-hash of an established book. It is about flopsy bunnies having tea parties beneath dandelion leaves.

### **What's the best piece of advice you have ever heard?**

A famous children's author, (alright, it was Allan Ahlberg) once gave me this little pearl - learn to wear two 'hats' for two sides of the business and never get them confused...in other words, accept that there are two distinct sides to being an author: the Intuitive and the Commercial. It is necessary to foster the creative side of your personality but you also need to be prepared to 'box' a bit. Publishing is a Business and the financial rewards are arbitrary (very great or very small), so you have to be prepared to push and hustle without getting too emotional. BUT you also need to keep that essential softness which is your creative self.

### **What sort of 'style' is best for children?**

Language is everything – it is essential to find your own, personal, confident 'voice'. Write in an easy-going, natural style as if you are speaking confidently or telling an anecdote. Allow the ideas to come from a deep level - find the POETRY in words; enjoy their SOUNDS. Play with rhythm, alliteration and rhyme. Invent words. Dig out extraordinary, funny or unexpected words.

Quentin Blake says that he needed to draw 100 miles of line before he became confident as an artist; similarly, an author needs to write very regularly in order to build up momentum. It can be helpful to have several different ideas 'on the go' in order to avoid becoming too precious.

### **Is writing for children restrictive?**

Don't believe it! There are no limits whatsoever. Children have the same breadth of emotion as adults and probably a greater imaginative range. It is true that their

vocabulary might be slightly limited, but they are perfectly capable of understanding very subtle allegories.

For example, if you plan to write a story about a child planting a flower, you might think also about 'growth' in the greater sense. About the ways in which a child is like a seed...or about NURTURING. On the surface, it may be a story about a girl and her father growing seeds, but it would have LAYERS. Even if a reader doesn't fully comprehend the deeper message, they will absorb it by osmosis so that the story takes root and grows in their mind.

There is no more important job than planting these seeds in the fertile mind of a child at this formative stage of their life. If you think this is all too abstract, ask yourself why Dickens called his hero 'Pip' – a simple, young character who grew!

### **What about characters?**

Think about traditional fairy tales, or pantomime characters, look at Roald Dahl or Dickens again - the characters are always three dimensional; never flat - often REALLY bad or REALLY creepy or REALLY silly. Don't be afraid to 'Ham It Up' a bit when writing for children.

If your characters are going to be children, make them 'come alive' by observing real children - young kids are like little whirlwinds - they race about and charge through a whole cascade of emotions within a day. They cry, laugh, get scared. They are funny, slightly crazy, unpredictable. They have huge ambitions and aspirations. They lead lives that are charged with emotion as friendships twist and turn. Modern families are bubbling stews of emotion, as parents try to resolve all their complicated issues of gender, divorce, step families and so on; children soak all that up.

### **What should I avoid?**

Avoid being too clever. The aim is not to prove your abilities as a wordsmith or artist; the aim is to reach children. A good parent does not set out to prove something about themselves to their child – they simply try to foster a creative relationship. An idiosyncratic story about a walking vacuum-cleaner called 'Vortex', is not necessarily better than a delightfully funny story about a monkey or a bear. The author's first obligation is TO THE CHILD.

### **Where can I get support?**

Perhaps think about joining a writers' circle. Check out the Arts Council's mentoring scheme, Artsmatrix. Most importantly, anyone in the UK who has been published (or who has an offer of a contract) can apply to join The Society of Authors, an Author's Union, which gives excellent advice on contracts etc. There are similar organisations in most countries.

### **Are there any websites for aspiring writers?**

Here are a few, but I haven't vetted them all...

<http://www.achuka.co.uk> Michael Thorne's highly useful children's book news site

<http://www.wordpool.co.uk> has a good section about getting published

<http://www.getpub.com/index.htm>

<http://www.authorlink.com/index.html>

<http://www.writers.org.uk>

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/johnathonclifford>

<http://www.thefloatinggallery.com>

<http://www.adair@writersmarkets.com>

Wendy Butler at <http://www.about.com>

<http://www.fcbg.mcmail.com> The Federation Of Children's Book Groups

<http://www.booktrust.org.uk> The excellent UK Booktrust organisation

<http://www.scottishbooktrust.com> Scottish branch of the above

<http://www.nawe.co.uk> National Association of Writers In Education

<http://www.writers.org.uk/society/> The Society of Authors

<http://www.thebookseller.co.uk> The 'organ' of the UK Book Trade

<http://www.write4kids.com> US Children's Writers' Resource

<http://www.writersadvice.co.uk> UK version of above

<http://www.jbwb.co.uk> Jacqui Bennett's (fee charging) critique bureau

<http://www.ncbf.org.uk> The wonderful Northern Children's Book Fair

<http://www.forwriters.com> Lots of research links for writers

<http://www.bolognafiere.it> Site of the annual children's Book Fair in Italy (The world's biggest international rights fair for children's publishers)

<http://hosted.ukoln.ac.uk> Stories From The Web – brilliant interactive site for kids with lots of author info.

Most publishers have their own web pages and some contain tips for aspiring writers.

N.B. Don't forget to use the Internet to check that the title of your proposed book is original – a search on amazon.co.uk and amazon.com will establish this very quickly.

### **How do I know if I really am a children's writer?**

You will be totally passionate, persistent and dedicated to what you do - "My children / grandchildren / pupils / pets love it when I make up stories" is not enough, (it is YOU they love and they would be thrilled to hear you read the label on a bottle of Domestos!).

The challenge is to write something that will remain exciting when another person reads it aloud, or a child reads it alone. A book is a door into a magical world; can you encourage a child to step inside?

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**CATHERINE and LAURENCE ANHOLT**

[anholt@anholt.co.uk](mailto:anholt@anholt.co.uk) [www.anholt.co.uk](http://www.anholt.co.uk)

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