

PART ONE

A Closer Look at Children's Books

A good book respects a child's intelligence, his pride, his dignity, and most of all his individuality and his capacity to become.

—JEAN KARL, *From Childhood to Childhood*

You, the Children's Book Writer . . . Maybe

Defining Your Goals

Can you define your goals as a children's writer? What do you want to achieve? Be honest. Do you want to make a lot of money? Tell wonderful stories? Explain the mysteries of the universe to children? Become a better writer? Do something with your ideas? Quit your job and write children's books for a living? Become famous? Communicate in some significant way with a younger generation?

Writers write because they have something to say, to feel a sense of permanence, to explore their own abilities in communicating, or just because writing is fun. Whatever the reason, it is usually compelling. Writing is addictive.

First, figure out what your goals are. Then, examine yourself squarely to see how near you are to those goals.

Are you ready and willing to work hard? Are you open to being taught? (Being eager to learn is not the same thing.) Are you flexible in your attitudes, able to accept suggestion and withstand criticism? Is your desire to write for children strong enough for you to cope with time pressures, struggles with words, and rejections? Are you strongly motivated to succeed so you will stick with writing no matter how tough it gets?

Are you a good writer? We usually know by the time we reach adolescence whether we can write well; significant observers such as family members, teachers, and friends tell us, and we can usually measure ourselves to some degree against our peers. Most writers succeed because of three things: they have fresh and

exciting ideas that they want to share; they have mastered the writing craft; and they have a good command of the English language.

Can you work alone? If you have never worked in isolation, you may be surprised. With no one around for input or feedback, no voices, and no bodies moving around, you can feel pretty lonely. When I first began freelancing after many years in an office environment, I thought I would go out of my mind because of the lack of human sounds and movement. I finally hung a full-length mirror at the other end of the room, where my reflection seemed like another person working.

Do you want to write for children because it's easier than writing for adults? Children's books are not watered-down adult books. They demand certain abilities of their authors, not the least of which is being able to tap into the minds and souls of young people without intruding, and to project the voice of those young people to the reader. You, as an experienced adult, have to recall feelings, attitudes, and viewpoints of your early years so that you can write about children convincingly and objectively. Charlotte Zolotow, a retired editorial director of Harper Collins's Young Readers Department and well-known author of children's books, called it "a kind of double exposure"—being aware of something as an adult and remembering what it was like as a child.

Not all of us can write for children; some cultivate the ability with effort. We must constantly step back and wriggle into the skin of the child and run around in her shoes before writing, yet we must craft our language with grown-up care, creating excitement and color, giving the young reader much to absorb and digest. I believe at the heart of writing for children is the author's own attachment, or emotional connection, to a certain period in her youth, although a rare few can write for several age groups and in various categories. Rosemary Wells is one of those people. With equal strength and appeal she writes picture books for young children and fiction for older readers.

It is our choice to write for children; we do not resign ourselves to a subordinate publishing group. Madeleine L'Engle, who won the coveted Newbery Medal, the highest honor for achievement in children's writing, for her book *A Wrinkle in Time*, was once asked why she wrote books for children. She

responded, "You have to write whatever book it is that wants to be written. And then, if it's going to be too difficult for grown-ups, you write it for children."

What have you read? When was the last time you read a children's book? You cannot be ready to write for children if you don't read what they read, or know what kind of books are being written for them these days. Who are the authors most popular with children and with the adults who buy and read books to children? Whose writing style do you like best? If you could spend a week with three children's book writers to learn all the tricks of the trade, whom would you choose?

GOBBLE UP BOOKS

If the answers to these questions do not come easily, or if your answers reflect that your reading of children's books stopped around twenty years ago, start reading. Gobble up all the books you can handle. It's okay to read books published when you were a child, but read those published recently, too. If you need help in choosing titles, there are some excellent book lists available in appendix IX.

Read old books and new ones, popular stories and literary classics, good books and bad ones. Choose stories from various genres: adventure stories, picture books, teen romances, mysteries, historical fiction, nonfiction, poetry, funny books, and contemporary stories. If the person next to you on the bus is reading a steamy adult bestseller while you are laughing over a funny story for middle graders about an eccentric couple who keeps penguins in their apartment, don't worry; you will get used to it. Soon you will be so absorbed in what you are reading that you will hardly notice anyone else on the bus (and you may even miss your stop). Besides, isn't it reassuring that a book like *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh, published in 1964, or *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* by Louis Sachar, published in 1987, is still in print and popular, while many adult bestsellers are forgotten in a year?

Sometimes you will like a book but feel that it is not right for children. Or you will find that you don't care for a book that others find funny or clever. Whose work represents most closely

the work that you admire? Are you repeatedly drawn to the books of one publisher? Your attraction to one or three or even six is significant; you clearly recognize something in the books published by those houses that is especially right for you, and this kinship will probably lead you, one day, to submit your own manuscripts to them.

Dig deeper and deeper as you read, and pose difficult questions to yourself. Start with picture books. When does a picture book seem too long? How important are the illustrations in picture books? What makes *Goodnight Moon* or *Curious George* remain popular over the years?

Move up a notch to books for children just beginning to read on their own. How does Barbara Park, author of the *Junie B. Jones* books, hold the attention of the six-year-old who grew up on a steady diet of TV?

When you get to books for the middle grades, note how the subject matter and style increases in sophistication. Jack Gantos wrote about a boy on medication for mood swings in *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, and Christopher Paul Curtis balanced serious subject matter with humor in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*.

Young adult (YA) books are more popular than ever. Why do you suppose teenagers who are reading on an adult level choose to read these books? Why are so many of them, like Caroline Coman's *What Jamie Saw*, or Walter Dean Myers's *Shooter*, or Norma Fox Mazer's *When She Was Good*, considered "edgy"?

Not all YA novels are dark. What drew so many teenage girls to Ann Brashares's *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, the story of four girls who shared a pair of pants while they were separated over the summer, or Janet McDonald's *Twists and Turns*, a hopeful story with lively dialogue and humor about two "project girls" who start their own hair-braiding business?

What about sensitive subject matter? How have the finest children's authors handled anger in a child? Loneliness? Fear? Guilt? In *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, how does Katherine Paterson write about a child who has been abandoned by the mother she adores, and who is angry at the world, with a fair amount of humor and great compassion?

Studies like these will help to sharpen your critical sense, which will later enable you to judge your own work more effectively. At the same time, you will become much more aware of good writing.

Incidentally, don't avoid reading books that you don't like, at least for now, while you're studying. In the past you might have just put down a book that did not interest you. Now, examine why you wanted to put it down. You can learn a great deal from this critical look. Why did the author fail to sustain your interest? What could she have done to keep you turning the pages? Perhaps you will uncover a weakness in your own work as you detect it in someone else's writing and will be able to avoid that weakness in the future.

Are you up to date technologically? If not, you may be left behind. Publishers continue to move toward easier and faster methods of production. Some accept queries and manuscripts electronically, and quick communication by e-mail is often necessary in the editorial process. The Internet is invaluable in research. If you do not have a computer in your home, you will probably find one at the public library, where it's free, or at an Internet café, where you can plug in for an hourly fee.

What have you already accomplished toward becoming a children's book writer? Consider your educational background and outside interests. What was your favorite subject in school—English? psychology? history? What are your hobbies—playing the guitar? collecting antiques? running? making jewelry? What jobs have you had—mom? firefighter? teacher? babysitter? dog breeder? pilot? speech therapist? cheese maker? crossing guard? popcorn vendor? Any background gives you a closer look at some special area, its people, atmosphere, and peculiarities. Some may be especially helpful because of their relation to children or books, but all will give you insights into human behavior.

Life experiences are your training ground for writing. Anything you see and absorb now may one day be recalled for a location, a character, development in a relationship, a motivation, or a supportive detail. Your perception and judgments, based on a lifetime of knowledge and practice, will have a direct bearing on what you choose to write about, and how you write it.

Do you have the patience to learn, the stomach for criticism, and the tolerance for difficult times? Are you willing to wait as long as it takes until you are ready to be published, to learn the skills you need, and to put in the necessary time in order to gain insight and experience? And then, do you have the stamina to persist, undaunted, through many rejections, before your work is accepted? These, perhaps, are the most crucial issues to confront, for if you come up positive in every other way but have not allowed for the patience and foresight to train yourself or to be trained well, you will lose heart at your first rejection and go down defeated before you have had a chance. It happens to many people because they are not realistic about the necessary hard work and persistence that it takes for the success they are seeking.

SUGGESTIONS—CHAPTER 1

1. Check the book lists in appendix I and the books listed in appendix VIII, and the titles that follow these suggestions. Select two or three books that sound interesting and start reading.
2. Think about what you read. What stands out? Is the subject matter appealing? Are the characters interesting? Can you easily distinguish one character from another? Is the plot clear? Does the ending satisfy? If it is a picture book, what do you suppose the editor saw in the text to know it would make a good picture book?
3. Think of a life experience you have had that could serve as background material for a children's book.

BOOKS MENTIONED IN THIS CHAPTER (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

From Childhood to Childhood, Jean Karl

A Wrinkle in Time, Madeleine L'Engle

Harriet the Spy, Louise Fitzhugh

There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom, Louis Sachar

Goodnight Moon, Margaret Wise Brown

Curious George, H. A. Rey

Junie B. Jones, Barbara Park

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key, Jack Gantos

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963, Christopher Paul Curtis

What Jamie Saw, Caroline Coman

Shooter, Walter Dean Myers

When She Was Good, Norma Fox Mazer

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, Ann Brashares

Twists and Turns, Janet McDonald

The Great Gilly Hopkins, Katherine Paterson