

# **Novels for Young Readers**

**(8-12 year olds)**

**Now the story really begins!**

**by Ian Bone**

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"Of the total creative effort represented in a finished work, 75% or more of the writer's labour goes into designing the story. Who are the characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How do they go about getting it? What stops them? What are the consequences? Finding the answers to these grand questions and shaping them into story is our overwhelming creative task." **Robert McKee, in 'Story', published by Methuen, 1999**

### **Now the story really begins!**

This age group are starting to really get their teeth into story. They want to make sense of the world around them, they're able now to expand their thinking beyond the boundaries of the everyday and the common-place. But more importantly, they have better skills for empathy (although they're still very attached to their egocentric state!) so they can engage deeply with characters and their plights. You can write with some subtlety for this age. You can embed your meaning, your message, your subtext, your theme and your character's motivations (and feelings) within the prose. You can *show* more for this age, using that wonderful play between plot, action, style and dialogue that makes writing fiction so rewarding. These readers are able to interpret more from text than the previous group of concrete, early childhood thinkers.

Here is a chance to write good, strong, gripping, funny, rollicking, epic, silly, adventurous, stories. Here is a chance to start to deepen the text, to introduce more characters, to introduce more twists and turns, to add other character's stories, to tell a back-story, to alternate views (within reason!) Your reader is better equipped to keep up. Here is a chance for you, as a writer, to start to explore ideas and themes in a more satisfying way. And if you're motivated to write by your own childhood, here is a chance to work out some of the residual emotions, entanglements and even memories from your past.

### **Diversity**

This is a very diverse age range (as are all of them!) Major changes take place in the years eight to twelve. Puberty starts to kick in for girls, and for some boys. Hormones race, emotions become overwhelming and powerful, especially up near the top end of the age bracket. For the younger members of this age bracket, they are starting to develop a tiny bit of independence from their parents and/or the adults around them. A ramble through the wetlands of a nearby river can be an enormous adventure. They still look up to the next age bracket for role models, still aspire to be bigger, better, stronger, older, than they are. They

still want to grow up too fast!

The diversity of this age range means there is a diversity of reading material available to them. Word lengths vary, subject matter varies, even novel style or construction varies greatly for this age group.

### ***Word Length***

From a shorter 3,000 - 5,000 word novels (with many illustrations) through to medium length 10,000 word novels (with an illustration per chapter) to a 40,000+ word novel, this age group reads them all. Typically, the shorter word lengths have been associated with the younger readers within the bracket. There is a huge variety available for readers, from stand-alone titles through to the series which is either written by the same author (as in *Max Remy*, or my *Vidz Series*) or by many authors (such as Penguin books *Aussie Chomps* series and *Aussie Bites*). These books are all designed to be good, gripping reads for this age.

Some younger children have been reading longer books for many years now. Tamora Pierce, Jacqueline Wilson, even Terry Pratchett have been writing longer texts that have appeal to 9 year olds through to 12 year olds. And then an author named Rowling came along and (supposedly) changed all the rules about longer books for this market. (Although the first HP book was of moderate length.)

There's a tremendous amount of scope within these word lengths. Obviously, a 10,000 word or so novel is going to be limited in terms of sub-plots and multiple characters. It doesn't have to be entirely linear in its construction, but the shorter word length does limit just how much fiddling around the writer can do. The publishers will determine what length is appropriate in the end.

Once again, a bit of research to see what is being published in this area will show quite a lot of difference in length. An average Morris Gleitzman book will generally be shorter than an Odo Hirsch book. Paul Jennings is generally short, with his short story collections being the longest in overall word length. Puffin publish works around the 20,000 to 30,000 word length. You could consider an Andy Griffiths style book, like his popular '*Just*' series or his longer novels. Emily Rodda has had enormous success with her *Deltora* and her *Rowan* series, and each title in these is not overly long. Neither are the *Teenager Inc* books. Award winning novels in this area range from shorter reads such as 'The Game of the Goose', and 'Hitler's Daughter' to Odo Hirsch's longer, more complex 'Hazel Green' books.

As books get longer, the writer can start to employ more sophisticated constructions. The writer also has more scope to develop characters and settings so that the reader is

immersed more into the fictional world. Readers of this age bracket still want you to tell them a story and stop describing the flowers, but they are a bit more patient. The best writers of this age produce entertaining text that on the surface tells a story, but is also pulling the reader further and further into the inner circle of the character's world.

### ***Subject Matter***

What subject is appropriate? The simple answer to this question is, 'Any subject', within reason. Obviously, the gate-keepers operate with vigour in this age bracket. You may wish to write about a ten year old protagonist who runs away from home and ends up in Kings Cross, just don't expect any reputable publisher for this age range to pick it up. That's an adult novel. Generally speaking, readers in this age bracket like to be taken to other worlds, or to be shown their world in an entertaining way. They don't necessarily want you to make them think, or to challenge them with too much philosophy, so you have to be clever and put the challenging stuff within the plot. They like stories about children going alone on adventures, about characters overcoming adversity, about kids making adults or authority figures look stupid, about kids (like them) going through the same stuff they do, about magicians, about witches, about squires who can beat knights, about knights who are silly, about goblins, about cheeky boys, about sport, about ballet, about Vikings, about blood and guts from days gone by, about birds that can think, about kids wanting a pet, about characters who don't always obey the rules...

Once again, the subject matter is important, but not as important as the emotional buttons you press with the reader. Are you going to make them laugh, make them afraid, make them cry, make them want to read on, make them dream? The subject matter you choose can fit into any of these aims. Just give them characters or a character that they *really* want to follow. A character that will have the *reader* also asking the questions that Robert McKee asks in the quote at the start of this paper. Because if the reader is asking those questions, then they care!

### ***Styles***

There are a host of Australian authors doing a nice trade with humour for this age range. Humour can be situational, absurd or silly. Generally speaking, wise-cracking characters have to use simpler humour for the reader to have a chance to catch the joke. Nothing kills humour quicker than when the reader has to think through the gag. Humour can be used as a vehicle

for more serious topics (Jacqueline Wilson does this beautifully, as does Morris Gleitzman). Humour can be 'larger than life', as per a Gretel Killeen or an Andy Griffiths. Adventure works for this age group too. Anything with danger, especially kids versus adult danger, has appeal. Problem solving/crime is also popular, but probably with the older end of the bracket. The Hazel Green books have a lot of problem solving, which is why they're so popular with adults.

### **Use the Novel Arts**

It might seem a bit obvious to suggest you use the novel arts when writing a novel, but you still have to operate within a few boundaries when writing for this age group.

#### ***Vocabulary***

Obviously vocabulary is a first parameter to take into account. Whilst older readers within this age bracket will have a greater understanding of words, they're not unlimited. A general rule of thumb is to unfetter yourself with the first draft, then check through to make sure you haven't thrown in too many obscure or difficult words. They might not know what 'detritus' is, but they will understand about junk left on the floor. Experiment with language. You *can* write with a bit more complexity, just don't overdo it. Always be guided by this principal: Is your language enhancing the telling of the story, or getting in the way? Beautiful prose can build so many layers of understanding about character and situation beyond what the author tells you, or is saying.

#### ***Show, Don't Tell***

Whilst this is a good principal to follow, some readers will need a bit of a nudge every now and then to point them in the right direction. Whether that be to guide them about what a character's real motivations are (as opposed to the brave face they're putting on) or to point out a connection to theme, you sometimes have to be obvious. By using plot, dialogue, action, images to show a point, you're relying on your reader to 'get it'. This age group won't always get it. Sometimes you have to be a bit up front with them. Be guided here by your story. Are you breaking the rhythm too much by stating what lies beneath, rather than allowing the story to breath? Give yourself some space, then reread your first draft. Do you think the child will get what you're on about? Or do you need to tweak, tighten and pull out some points along the way? Once again, you can still use tricks of prose writing to make points, just be careful

about some of the more over-used clichés.

Writing for this age is littered with well-meaning adults who act as moral, spiritual, or life guides to the child at *crucial* moments. Wouldn't it be fabulous if every time we needed that right piece of advice, or that right story to guide us, someone came along? It can be a bit contrived, no matter how quirky or interesting you make these characters, to have them pop in at just the right moment. By all means have characters who have that flash of wisdom and say the right thing, but perhaps separate them from the moment a bit, so that the reader can draw conclusions.

Another cliché is to have the child go through a series of logical thought processes to suddenly realise the truth they've been so blind to, or to come up with the right and just course of action. There are many books with these passages, where the child weighs up the evidence in his or her mind, then somehow comes to the right conclusion. If only our children could do that! Yes, they do have their moments, but not too often. A bit more stumbling might help here.

Finally, the token character, whose life, ethnicity, situation, looks or whatever are *perfect* for making a point within the text. The child who acts badly, then gets exactly the right comeuppance for their 'crimes'. The Italian, Greek, Vietnamese, Aboriginal kid who fits in nicely with the otherwise Anglo friendship group, and is always bringing in examples of their home (and differently ethnic) experience to make a point. 'My family always share everything.' 'My Papa visits his Mama every other day.' The cheerful, overweight girl who doesn't care what people think of her, because she knows that her light shines from within. These are adult constructs and adult thoughts.

### ***Subplot***

You can start to introduce contrasting storylines for this age group. You can add a subplot for humour, relief, intrigue, dramatic contrast... just don't overdo it for the younger end of the range! These young minds can juggle a bit, but not too much. If you want to write something as complex as Don DeLillo's '*Underworld*', with a brace of interconnecting stories, then once again, go to an adult publisher. Always go back to that guiding principal. Is the subplot adding to, or taking away from my story? Be ruthless. You wouldn't be the first writer who has developed an interesting or funny side-story to the main game that gradually wins over your heart and mind (to the neglect of your main character). Perhaps you could reserve this subplot for an entirely different story, and concentrate on the game! If it works, the beauty of subplot is that it adds that little bit of complexity and sophistication for the reader, allowing them to

expand their minds a bit.

### ***Different Voices***

This is a generation that has only ever known sophisticated screen-based entertainment. They have grown up on a steady diet of TV and video drama, where they see different points of view within scenes and episodes all the time. Consequently, prose for the modern age tends to include more 'point of view' shifting. I have only read a very few authors who can successfully do this within one chapter. That is, write from John's point of view (let's say it's third person) and then shift to Jenny's point of view seamlessly. VERY FEW! Mostly, when inexperienced authors try this, it becomes confusing.

This is why alternating chapters of different voices has become more prevalent and acceptable in literature today. John can write from his POV, then Jenny from hers. However, that is more a technique used for adult, or young adult readers. Once again, if you're considering using this technique, be moderate. And perhaps consider not using it if you are aiming to write for the younger end of the bracket. It can be confusing for younger kids to go from one voice to another. Always test your desire to use different voices against what's best for your story. If it's important to the telling to see what's happening from another point of view, then try to do it sparingly, so the reader isn't too tested.

### **Boys and Books**

This is the age where boys are traditionally seen as moving away from books and literature as a source of entertainment. So, this is the age bracket where the gate-keepers, educators and publishers are screaming out for texts that will appeal to boy readers. To a certain extent there's an assumption that girls will stay with books and will be happy to read books with male or female characters. There is also an assumption that boys will be attracted to lighter, more plot-driven fiction that doesn't tax them too greatly. I think all these assumptions are challengeable but the mood in the market-place does reflect this thinking. It's worthwhile keeping this in mind if you want to try to get published in this area. Like any trend, it can change and leave you behind, but it is the going concern at the moment.