

Writing for Children

Some Initial Thoughts

by Ian Bone

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"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut."

Stephen King, "On Writing", Hodder and Staughton, 2000.

A writer writes.

And writes, and writes and writes.

Ask yourself these questions:

- If you had to stop writing tomorrow, how much would you miss it?
- Do you ever have an idea for a story at the most inappropriate times?
- Have you ever found it hard to go to sleep because you have a plotline or idea running through your head?
- Do you feel excited by the thought of starting a new story?
- Do you enjoy talking about the craft of writing with other writers?

A writer writes because they love writing. Sure, there are times when it is difficult, when you stare at a blank screen or bash your head trying to work your way out of a dead-end in your plot, or find that everything has ground to a halt. No-one ever said it was easy. But, a writer writes because it's something they love doing.

Stephen King puts it another way. When asked by people why he's a writer, he says that he can't *not* write.

Why do you want to write for children?

Do any of these ring true for you?

- Artistic expression
- To give voice to inner feelings
- To tell a good story
- To create stories that no-one else is writing
- Because there are no good books for kids out there
- Because you just know you can do better than some of those idiots who get published
- To work out your childhood.

You may not relate to these reasons for being a writer. That doesn't mean you don't have a legitimate reason for wanting to be a writer. Sometimes a simple grunt is all the reason you need for the moment.

But, if you do have a notion of what it is that spurs you on to write, then it will help you see if any particular area of writing is for you. So will doing a course like this!

Why write for kids?

Ask 100 children's writers why they write for children and young adults and you *will* get 100 different answers. Here is a sample of possible answers, taken from real-life conversations.

- Because I can exercise my stupid sense of humour
- Because I love reading children's literature
- Because I love plots and characters and they're both essential to children's books
- Because I read to my kids and think most of the stories I read are crap
- Because adolescence (or childhood) was an important time for me
- Because I had an unhappy childhood
- Because I escaped into the world of books when I was young and want to recreate some of that
- Because I'm a story teller and kids love story

What makes a children's book?

The boundaries between children's books and adult books are blurring each day. Young adult fiction has many examples of 'cross-over' books, which appeal to teenagers and people in their mid-twenties. Most publishers in this field will acknowledge that Young Adult readers are also adult. In fact, they often break up the Young Adult field into teenage and YA. Picture books, with amazing artwork by illustrators such as Shaun Tan and Graeme Base, have equal appeal to adults and children.

Generally speaking, a children's book can be categorised as a book that:

- Has subject matter, characters, plot and style that appeals to children
- Deals with children or childhood from a child's perspective

These are obviously broad, and there's plenty of room for contradictions, but that's what makes writing for this field so exciting. There's lots of wide open spaces yet to be filled.

The Marketplace

Publishers

Children's publishers in Australia work in a tight, competitive field. They all know each other, and chances are they've worked alongside each other at one time or another.

Some of the major publishers of children's literature in Australia are:

Penguin Books

Random House

Scholastic Australia

Omnibus Books

Walker Books

Pan MacMillan

University of Queensland Press

Lothian Books

Allen and Unwin

Hodder (Hodder Headline)

Harper Collins

Angus and Robertson

Fremantle Arts Centre Press

Each of these publishers will put out a range of books per year, from picture books to junior novels to young adult novels. None of them will care if a 12 year old reads their picture books, or if an 8 year old loves their young adult series. They create books to be popular, to sell, to make profits for their shareholders, and MOST IMPOTANTLY, because they *love* working in the field of children's literature.

Categories of children's books

For each category created for kids books, an equal number of anomalies are also created. It is not an easy field to categorise. As already stated, Young Adult fiction has teenage books, appealing to readers around 12 - 16 years old, as well as older Young Adult fiction, appealing

to readers from 14 - 25 years old. Picture books can be created for pre-schoolers (2-5 years old), early childhood (3-7 years old), junior primary (5-7 years old) or everybody (0-99 years old).

For the sake of starting somewhere, this course breaks children's books up into four broad categories.

- Picture Books
- Story Books
- Junior Novels
- Young Adult Fiction

Each of these categories, as already stated, can have a wide range of books within it. For example, junior novels would cover Omnibus's *Solos* series, Puffin's *Nibbles* series, Puffin's *Bites* series as well as many other stand alone novels in the field.

The Writer meets the Marketplace.

A writer writes what is meaningful to them. A writer writes from the heart, or the gut, or the brain, or whatever organ happens to work for them! But whatever a writer writes, if it isn't hitting some truth within them, if it isn't creating some satisfaction for them, if it isn't making their heart rush just a little as they get it down, then it probably isn't going to be compelling writing. It might be technically slick and read well, but will it have depth? Will it move the reader? Will they never want to put it down?

Writing is an artistic endeavor which has to work within the economic and financial imperatives of the publishing marketplace. And that isn't always easy.

Whatever you write for children, you have to be aware of certain 'gatekeepers' who will make decisions about whether or not your writing:

- Has appeal to kids
- Is suitable for kids
- Is morally acceptable

Who are these gatekeepers?

Typically, they are:

- The publisher

- Librarians
- Parents

But you won't get to the librarians or the parents if you don't get past the publishers.

So, what appeals to publishers?

Another way of asking that might be:

What works in the marketplace?

Here's a starting point. A list of what publishers look for when considering a manuscript to be published in any category of children's literature.

- Originality
- Innovation
- Stories with grunt
- Characters that live (not stereotyped)
- Writing that moves the reader
- Writing that creates strong empathy
- Great language

Here's what publishers, and therefore the marketplace, are NOT looking for:

- Derivative stories and ideas
- Stories with a message
- Writing that preaches
- Writing that is didactic
- Stories that condescend
- Stories that are inappropriate for the age group/or children.

Remember, a writer writes. If you have no idea what category of kids literature interests you, then read, read, read, and write, write, write. Start stories, start novels, fiddle around with picture book texts, play with the genres. Have fun.