



All it takes is seeing authors names like J.K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer and Sherman Alexie on *The New York Times* bestseller lists for weeks on end to make a writer think that it might be beneficial to give writing for children a try. After all, you already have a lot of the basic skills required—you can string together decent sentences and you know how to market your ideas. And who doesn't remember some of the books you loved when you were a kid? Why not be part of creating those memories for children yourself?

I've been a professional writer and editor for 27 years for magazines, newspapers, Web sites and books all aimed at an adult audience. I've also had the good fortune to have published 38 nonfiction children's books for kindergarten through young adult readers and to write for children's magazines. And these days I'm trying to market my first young adult—or YA as it's known in the business—novel. As much as I enjoy writing features about everything from parenting to aging, it's my work for children that has been the most satisfying. Unlike the adult readers from whom I rarely receive feedback, I do hear from my young readers with notes like, "You made me want to grow up to be a writer just like you" or "I really liked it when you wrote about..."

#### We have the passion

ASJA member Andrea Warren agrees that writing for children is gratifying. She has also written for major newspapers and magazines, and seven years ago successfully moved into the realm of children's nonfiction with her book *We Rode the Orphan Train*.

"I have the best job in the world because I get to meet my

readers during school visits," she says. "I get to talk to eager, open minds and get feedback from them as well."

But it's not all about little hands patting you on the back. It's also about the fact that young readers have voracious appetites for information and for really strong characters and plot lines. Why wouldn't a writer want to be a part of feeding that interest that can lead to a lifelong love of reading?

Another more practical bonus is that the shelf life of most children's books is healthy. "Publishers tend to backlist children's books, which means they can earn royalties for years to come, so it can be very lucrative to write for kids," says Jodi Reamer, an agent with Writers House, who represents Stephenie Meyer, among others.

"Sometimes authors think writing for children isn't as prestigious as writing for adults," says Leigh Feldman of Darhansoff, Verrill, Feldman, literary agent to YA novelist Sarah Dessen. "But your chances of success in YA are greater because there is more time a book stays on the shelf. Adult books stay on the shelves for three months and, unless sales have been strong, that's it until paperback one year later. Also, the chances of building a bigger audience for the author is better because when the new readers come of age and 'discover' a writer they often go back and read that author's backlist."

Warren, who is writing her seventh nonfiction children's book, says that over a quarter of her annual income comes from royalties. And, as she and I have both found, there's also good money to be made from school visits and other speaking engagements.

However, before anyone says, "Okay, you convinced me. I'll work on a picture book tomorrow," you should know that writing for children isn't just a matter of simplifying what you'd write for adults. In fact, it's a complex industry that produces some of the best writing you'll ever read. Fortunately, we professional writers have some of the skills necessary to at least attempt to negotiate the children's writing world.



**Liza N. Burby** is an ASJA member and author of *How to Publish Your Children's Book: A Complete Guide to Making the Right Publisher Say Yes* (Square One Publishers). Visit her Web site at [www.lizaburby.com](http://www.lizaburby.com).

## All Books Are Not Equal

Whether you want to write children's fiction or nonfiction, to succeed you need to be aware that there are several different categories. Each category fits a separate age group and has varying requirements—total word count, and topic and language complexity. There's no better way to learn the nuances of the categories than by reading published children's books. But here's a quick rundown from Chapter Two of my book to get you started.

**Baby books** are picture books for infants and toddlers from newborn to a year. They may have no words at all and rely on just photos or illustrations to tell the story, may have a word or two on each page or may provide larger amounts of text.

**Toddler books** are for the one to three-year-olds. Some tell a story or present concepts completely in pictures, without any words. Others include simple text.

**Early picture books**, also called storybooks, are geared toward children ages three to six, and are heavily illustrated.

**Picture books for the older reader** are for children six to 10. Stories are told largely through illustrations, although text is included as well, and they deal with more complex subject matters, like interracial friendships.

**Easy readers** are designed for children who are just starting to read on their own, generally from six to eight years old.

**Chapter books** are written for the seven- to 10-year-old independent reader. As the name implies, they're divided into separate chapters, rather than being one continuous narrative.

**Middle grade** readers are between ages eight and 12. The books have complicated plots and subplots. The text is more descriptive and there are numerous details included about the main characters, as well as secondary characters.

**Young adult (YA)** readers are preteens and teens, ages 12 and up. They're developmentally ready to tackle challenging text. They don't see themselves as kids anymore, so they're looking for sophisticated stories that relate to their lives and the world. Some books are so complex you'll find them in the adult sections as well.

Confused? Don't be. Just spend some time in your local book store or children's library where books are clearly organized in such a way that you'll soon see there's probably a category for which you'd most enjoy writing.

## We have the skills

First of all, says Warren, we're good at getting ideas. And we already know that before we can even propose a book or article topic, we have to find a hook, that one approach that sets our work apart from what's already out there. Further, as Reamer says, we already have experience taking topics and filtering information so it's accessible to our readers.

In addition, we know that our work has to be impeccably researched and thoroughly fact-checked against reliable sources. Works for children require the same set of research skills we already rely on.

According to children's book editor and book doctor Deborah Brodie, our backgrounds can help in that we're used to writing short pieces to someone else's specs and to meeting deadlines. We also have experience being edited, and have most likely worked for a variety of publishers and editors so we can be flexible in meeting their needs. Furthermore we know something about how we work best and the mechanics of our writing abilities.

And though no one likes to talk about it, most of us are used to receiving rejections and going on with our careers in spite of them. As successful children's book author Johanna Hurwitz once told me, you'll never meet a published writer who gave up.

## Don't talk down to kids

So, that's all the good news. But you should also be fully aware that writing for children can be far more challenging than writing for adults.

"A lot of people think it's easy to do. Even seasoned journalists think they can turn out a children's book overnight versus the months it takes for an adult book," says ASJA member Sheri Bell-Rehwooldt, author of both nonfiction and fiction for children, including *You Think It's Easy Being the Tooth Fairy?* "But writing a children's book is not something you don't put your best efforts into, because it has to inspire and entertain kids to sell. Bad reviews of children's books are just as much a death knell as for adult books."

Adds Reamer: "The children's market is very sophisticated. The biggest mistake I see writers make is that they assume they have to talk down to kids. But kids can spot that right away. They want books that appeal to them. Even nonfiction has to have a story arc, and fiction has to have engaging characters and a plot that keeps kids interested. Simple sentence structures will only bore them."

So much about writing for young people is the voice, which means you have to put yourself in the place of a child, according to Sarah Davies, who runs Greenhouse Literary. "So many writers can write competently, but fall down in not seeing through the eyes of a child. You have a head start if you write in other areas, especially if it's in fiction. But more has to be done if you want to capture the world of a young person."

Agent Stephen Barbara of Donald Maass Literary Agency, who represents debut YA author Lauren Oliver, among others, concurs. "There's an indefinable kid appeal. You can be a technically good writer, but if you don't understand the mindset of the age group you're writing for you won't have success. A lot of people think it's especially easy to write a picture book because it has so few words. But the reality is to write a good and enduring picture book like *Goodnight Moon*, there's no margin for error. It's a subtle skill, something you really have to study."

## Read what you want to write

To that end, just as you're not likely to land a magazine assignment unless you've studied the publication's content and tone, you have to

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scrutinize the children's market as well. This is my favorite part because it means I get to read a lot of really good books, all in the name of research. "Do so not to pinch someone else's ideas and style," says Davies, "but because you need to understand that the world of children is different than yours."

Feldman says that means familiarizing yourself with the genre you want to write, from baby books through young adults. Each one is geared to a different audience, with varying language levels and subjects. For instance, Reamer says, a middle grade novel can deal with tough topics, but how it does so will be different than a YA novel. The latter is very similar to an adult read, though it always ends on a hopeful note. (You can learn more about the genre differences in my book, *How to Publish Your Children's Book: A Complete Guide to Making the Right Publisher Say Yes*.) Not knowing which section of the market your work is intended for is another common reason to be rejected.

If you'd rather write nonfiction for children, Davies suggests researching the market to see what else has already been published on that topic, much like you would for an article or adult nonfiction book. What can you bring to the book that's new and what age group will it be for? Nonfiction can be easier to break into than fiction, in part because the library and school market is always in need of books to complement teachers' lessons. And don't forget children's magazines that need articles and short stories.

All the agents and editors mentioned here say there's always room for new, good writers with strong stories to tell. But if you want to write for children, says Davies, don't do it for the money, as only a few writers will ever be Rowling or Meyer. "You have to have a hunger to tell your story. Don't try to contrive a plot just to make money. Take the time to tell your story in a unique way. Some of the best writing for children and teens is quite sophisticated." [asja](#)

## Agents Roundup (continued from page C3)

### Elizabeth Pomada and Michael Larsen say:



What all editors and agents always will want are books:

- Based on brilliant new ideas that make people and the planet better and lend themselves to a series that will keep selling each other and become your brand
- So well written by authors who can enlighten, empower, inspire, and entertain their readers and have a voice so compelling that only a fire can stop you from reading them
- That have been test-marketed to prove how well they will sell
- By authors whose networks, platform—continuing visibility, online and off, with the audience for their book—and short- and long-term promotion plans prove that they will make their book succeed
- By authors with clear literary and financial goals who

are relentless about achieving them, yet a pleasure to work with

Write books like these, and it won't make any difference what you write about.

### John Ware says:



I would love to receive more (superb) literary fiction and (unique) current affairs non-fiction. I have two current affairs books: *Spies For Hire* by Tim Shorrock (Simon & Schuster), about outsourcing US intelligence gathering, and coming next year, *Why Kids Kill*, by Peter Langman, Ph.D. (Palgrave Macmillan). While people seem to think of me more for nonfiction, with books out by Stephen Ambrose and Jon Krakauer, I'm very very interested in literary fiction.

Our agents need your questions! Send them to [newsletter@asja.org](mailto:newsletter@asja.org)

## Got grievances? We can help. Or at least try.

ASJA has revived its grievance committee to assist members who have problems with publications, publishers or other clients that they have been unable to resolve on their own.

To request assistance, please send a description of the problem and the remedies you've already attempted to [grievance@asja.org](mailto:grievance@asja.org). A Grievance committee member will respond directly to address your grievance.