

Writing for Children

Specialties · By Simon Townsend · 6 min read

Kids: successfully writing for them

By JACKIE FRENCH

Okay, step one: why on earth do you want to do it?

If the answer is that you've dreamt of seeing a book with your name on the title page, and books for kids are such nice SHORT things, then consider writing a joke book instead, or maybe a guide to footie players of Canberra- football is always a best selling subject and you can pad it nicely with pics of mud hunks and muscles. But forget about writing for kids.

The shorter a book is the more finely crafted it has to be. Consider the many fine writers for adults who have written a book for kids that has dropped out of sight. No, writing for kids is not an easy option.

Be extraordinarily wary too if you've told your kids the story of the pixies who live in the washing machine who yell rumble rumble rumble whenever it's turned on. I'm sure you kids have just ADORED it- but to be honest, most kids would adore listening to the telephone book if you read it with love and cuddles.

Almost any story is wonderful if it's TOLD to kids, or read by it's creator with the expressions and gestures it needs to make it come alive. But most of these stories simply don't traslate well into anonymous print. Never assume your stories are publishable just because kids like listening to them. Humans love stories- and every adult has some story telling ability- storytelling is the way humans communicate history, morality and how to build an atom bomb. But very few storytelling adults can produce a professional story.

Do you really want to be a professional writer? I love playing the violin, but no audience will ever want to listen to me (except a possibly demented wombat, but that's another story.) I don't love playing the violin enough to practice. I get an enormous amount of pleasure though from being an amateur violinn player- and an amateur kid's writer will get an enormous amount of pleasure too, plus give pleasure to all the kids they try their stories out on.

But unless you realy love working at your story: planning it, plotting it for months or years, writing and rewriting, having the honesty to say 'this is crap' and throwing the whole lot away and doing it again- you don't want to be a professional kid's writer.

Excuse me rabbiting on like this. But in all honesty no story for kids I have been sent in the past few years has been of a professional standard; when I've suggested that they need radical revision nearly every would be kid's author has been angry that I might even suggest that their work needed changes (one even claimed I wanted to steal his extremely pedestrian idea).

There is a very strong belief that any nice little tale will do for kids- and that's true- but only as long as you are doing the telling in person.

There are two scenarios though when 'just okay' stuff will be published. The first is if you are the Duchess of Windsor, or have a similar public profile. The second is when a publisher decides that your story- mediocre as it is- can be married successfully with the work of a brilliant illustrator. This does happen- just don't count on it.

Step 2. Who do you want to write for? The under 3's? Kindergardeners? Will your book be read by adults to kids, or be designed so that early readers can read it themselves? Is it for adolescents or teenagers? If you haven't worked this out, and don't know what each group needs, find out. (Says she who just wrote her first book- Rainstones- without thinking or even knowing about ANY of these criteria. But I was lucky- and my second and third books would have been immeasurably better if I had done a bit of homework before writing them.

Step 3: No matter how brilliant your writing is, if the story is boring your book will be boring too.

While this is true for adult books, an adult may be seduced by your glorious prose. A kid won't be- and kids are the most honest audience you can get. (I love letters that begin: Der Jackie French, our teacher said we had to

writte to our faverate orthor and that had to be you the rest of the class likked your book but I fell aslip love Joel. Or even better: Our teacher said we had to write to our favourite author. my favourite author is Roal Dahl but he's dead so I'm writing to you)

And after that? Well, there's no way I can cover the plotting, background gathering character pondering and sheer amount of THINKING needed to write a book in a few hundred more words (Well, that's my excuse for not attempting it) Just three pleas though:

Don't- please- choose simple language when you write for kids. As long as your story is fascinating, and nine out of 10 words are intelligible, kids will work out what the tenth word is by its context, or just skip over it- but after a few such skippings over they'll know that word.

Kids gain vocabulary by using it- and reading it. (They learn very few words from tv, and part from interesting epithets and techical terms probably even fewer from normal speech with their peers). If you write a book with simple vocab you are robbing a child of words- and the mental stretch needed to use them. Don't talk down to kids. Kids understand adult speech- they can understand adult writing too, if- and admittedly this is a big proviso- the story is so fascinating it pulls them along.

Don't underestimate kids. Kids have a greater interest in moral issues than adults- kids are trying to make sense of the world, adults are mostly trying to pay the mortgage and survive the next traffic jam. Hilter's Daughter, for example, is a hit with kids because they need to think about it. The only physical action happens in the last three pages- but there is a heck of a lot of moral action.

A final plea: leave out the depression. Kids- happy kids- sometimes enjoy books that make them cry, like *Black Beauty*. But there is a real difference between a book with sad things in it, and a depressing book. Depression means hopelessness- and one of the greatest assaults you can make on a child is to teach them that life is depressing. Sad- and even horrendous- things happen - but life is never hopeless. (If it is, why let the poor kids suffer? Let them slit their wrists right now.)

It is very easy to affect the reader emotionally with depressing things. But to move them to tears because something is joyous, transcendent or just wonderfully silly- that is much more difficult.

I began writing for kids almost accidentally. But they are the most rewarding audience possible to write for, and the most honest. You can't make a kid read a book they find boring- they'll read the first page and the last and ask their mates what happens in between.

But if they do like something they'll tell you- a mail box stuffed full of envelopes with stickers of horses fairies and wombats on the back, glitter that gets dislodged in transit and gets ground into your carpet, poems written in seven colours of crayon, requests for signed pics of you, your wombats and your great aunt mary, demands to know what your favourite colour is, what sort of car you drive, and how can they stop their best friend pinching their story ideas. If you ever need an ego boost then write for kids, and for each book in a school library you'll probably get 500 letters....

..and then you then have to answer them all.

I've got numb fingers from mail, not novel writing, silver purple stars irrevocably ground into the carpet and chocolate stains on the sofa from the chocolate caramel wombat I was sent last summer that melted before I opened it. (The sender included two carrots for the wombats too). I wouldn't swap it all for quids.

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