By Mark Haverstock

The Velveteen Rabbit, Pat the Bunny, The Runaway Bunny, and Knuffle Bunny. Bunny tales have multiplied over the years like, well, rabbits. Along with their buddies, the bears and the mice, they seem to have a firm hold on popularity in children’s books.

Creative twists on creature characters, and a tale that breaks the bunny mold, may be a better bet today. “Every writer and illustrator has a unique voice and set of experiences to draw upon, and I encourage creative folks to tap into that,” says Heidi Kilgras, Editorial Director of Random House Children’s Books.

As competitive as the picture book market is, says Zonderkidz Acquisitions Editor Barbara Herndon, “[U]nique and lovable characters with a strong voice tend to stand out. In the general market, Splat the Cat, Olivia, and Llama Llama do well, and also the Elephant and Piggie books by Mo Willems. In the Christian market, our line of Berenstain Bears books have been incredibly successful. Strong, relatable characters are the key.”

Today’s authors are developing more of these strong, relatable characters—ones with more pluck, sass, and edginess—and their editors love them.

Color Me Pink

The title character of Sylvie was born after author/illustrator Jennifer Sattler’s daughter asked why flamingos were pink. “We looked into it, and found that they were pink because of the pink shrimp they eat. That instantly brought some funny images to mind,” says Sattler. Sylvie decides to try out different colors by eating different things, with humorous results. The element of surprise and the game of predicting what is next is part of the appeal. “You know she just ate an orange- and white-striped towel, but can’t picture what that will look like!”

Sattler’s artwork initially grabbed Kilgras’s attention. “It was as though Sylvie were performing for me on the page. The mixed-media artwork is a warm blend of hand-painted and digital art in a gorgeous candy-colored palette. Soon after, the story hooked me,” says Kilgras. “It, too, is a mix: It begins with a factoid about what flamingoes eat to make their feathers pink, and then it spins off with the magical realism of Sylvie changing colors and patterns based on eating other food—and non-foods! It’s a very simple story line that encourages creativity and imagination, and being yourself.” Kilgras had not seen many flamingoes featured in children’s book. “We editors surely get our fill of bears and mice and pigs, over and over, so when a
Bunny well-drawn, well-wrought, and unique new character comes along, it’s refreshing. But Sylvie is also a perfect stand-in for any child; she’s relatable.”

Sattler sees being both illustrator and author as an advantage. “When I’m working on a book, I see the story play out in my head,” she says. “It comes to me first visually; then I’ll draw a character many, many times until he or she comes alive for me. I can hear what kind of voice they would have, how they move, etc. A lot of times I’ll get my very expressive daughter to pose for me, and I make a lot of faces in the mirror. Once I know the character and the basic story line, I can draw and write simultaneously.”

Sattler theorizes that everyone has an age with which they identify. “I get elementary school-age kids, especially kindergarten to grade three or so, and I’m comfortable with that age. I speak to them directly in a way many adults can’t. I guess what I’m saying is that I’m basically a kid disguised as an adult. I can build a box kite out of leaves and squirrel spit, do math on an abacus, and they finish Old Man Fookwire’s crossword puzzles. There’s an underlying intelligence and though they don’t speak or express themselves verbally, they’re probably the smartest characters in the book.”

Marcia Leonard, Editor of Clarion Books, says, “The squirrels’ appeal is that they manage to be naughty without being evil, intelligent without being infallible, and good-hearted without being sentimental. That’s a very fine line to walk! What’s also interesting is that they act and work as a team; they’re not individually named or characterized. That’s unusual in children’s books.”

What also attracted her to this book was a distinct narrative voice, a sly sense of humor, a plot she had not encountered before, and an economy of language. “Both adults and children definitely respond to the quirky humor, and many have shared their own stories about squirrels behaving badly,” she explains. “So Adam has tapped into a universal experience, but he’s given it his own twist.”

Rubin offers some advice to those who want to incorporate humor. “When I write, if it makes me laugh, I have to put faith in the fact that my sense of humor is relatable enough that it will be funny to kids and parents,” he says. “I don’t try to think ‘what does a kid find funny?’ or ‘is it universal enough that a kid would get it?’ Some people feel you need to dumb down the humor for them to understand. Instead, aim high. Kids are a lot smarter than people give them credit for.”

Creepy Cool

When you read the title Bats at the Ballgame, your thoughts might turn to home run kings or the Louisville Slugger. Author Brian Lies instead thought of flying mammals.

When Lies first started his series of Bats books, he worried that there would be a big “ick factor” about bats, and nobody would want to read them. “But I’ve found there’s an amazing number of people who either find bats charming, or kind of creepy-cool. I think there’s also something kids find appealing in the idea that animals have great adventures while people are sleeping.”

The bats’ nocturnal nature singles them out from the menagerie of other animal characters in children’s books. “Illustrations are going to be darker than you see in many children’s books,” Lies says. “But bats also have the benefit of being an odd mix of animal shapes, since they’re mammals with wings. Also, there’s always the dark side to bats in that many people are afraid of them, and that creates a unique push/pull.”

Lies notes that bears, pigs, mice, and rabbits are popular because in reality they can be appealing. “But just as the world we live in contains a very diverse mix of people, I think it’s good to see a diverse mix of animal characters in stories. For one thing, it becomes more visually interesting to see different creatures in books. But using a different animal in a book...
It’s a Dog’s Life

Kids love sassy, humorous, and unique creatures in fiction. There is also a market for non-fiction about real animals with a riveting tale.

The story behind Hooper Finds a Family began when author Jane Paley reached out for consolation after the loss of her dog to cancer. She corresponded with Labs4rescue and soon found her self adopting a Hurricane Katrina survivor in the form of a yellow lab she named Hooper. He transformed from a sick, fearful, severely traumatized dog to a robust one who excelled in obedience classes. Paley kept a journal and made hard copies of the various correspondence she had with the people at Labs4rescue. “I looked over the notes and I thought, this is such a natural for kids. What this dog has been through is kind of a metaphor for childhood—overcoming fears, large and small, imagined and real. I thought his story really speaks to children.”

Originally, Paley wrote Hooper’s first-person story as picture book and pitched it to HarperCollins. The editors wanted to see it as a middle-grade book. She revised it for that audience, but kept Hooper’s voice that of a four-year-old. “It’s his world view, much the way we remember the world at that age, with problems and mysteries to be solved.”

Getting background for Hooper’s story required solid research. “I worked with Louisiana Fish and Wildlife Services and got information from them about the impact of the storm on wildlife and domesticated animals,” Paley says. “I needed a sense of what happened so I could create the story from a puppy’s point of view.” She also read numerous local eyewitness accounts.

To provide dramatic tension, Paley took some license by creating the other animal characters Hooper encounters along the way, such as an otter that befriends him and a bobcat that threatens his life. “I did try to depict it as realistically as possible, but I wanted the animals to interact in some way.”

Today, as a certified therapy dog, Hooper visits hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices. He is in a reading buddy program that matches dogs with kids learning to read. “I’m looking at Hooper right now and there isn’t a happier dog on the planet,” says Paley.

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Shari Dash Greenspan says Noll’s opening line hooked her: “Tonight, when I looked under the bed for my monster, I found this note instead: ‘Gone fishing. Back in a week—Gabe.’” Greenspan says, “The whole idea of a boy needing a monster under his bed—and being unable to fall asleep without him—offered a unique twist on the old monster-under-the-bed theme.”

Each of the substitute monsters seem a bit scary at first, but turn out to be flawed and therefore funny. Their voices and one or two features were described by Amanda, leaving plenty of room for illustrator Howard McWilliam to develop their physical appearances,” says Greenspan. “They are vibrant and comical and look like characters from a full-length animated movie, which kids really love. The fact that the boy isn’t scared of them—and even rejects each one until his own monster returns—empowers kids.”

Many children’s stories don’t have a real monster. Often a chain of suspense leads to a mistaken identity; a sibling, a dog, or something else turns out to be the unknown monster.

“Mine are actually monsters—adult professional monsters who have a job to do and they do it,” says Noll.

She believes characters in current children’s books are more interesting and edgy. “I find that young readers are very discerning about what is scary. They’ve been exposed to so much it just keeps raising the ante. Today’s kids have a very high threshold for scariness. Also, as a parent having read books over and over, it’s so nice to have something a little different.” Being different also has some disadvantages. “In the beginning it made it harder to sell the manuscript,” says Noll. “You’ve just got to find that right pairing, and I finally found that in my editor, Shari.”

Zonderkidz’s Herndon believes unique animal characters are appealing to kids for several reasons. “The lines of age, gender, and race are blurred, which makes them accessible to a much broader audience. Also, animals are not limited by human rules. So, while they can exist in a world very much like the one we live in, they can also do outrageous things like fly to the moon, etc. The lack of human rules can also allow for broader behavior in general and more humor, which children love.”

Read widely in picture books and learn from the masters. Then discover your own voice and style. “Explore your ideas and story lines and try to create something memorable beyond trying to teach a lesson or deliver a message,” says Kilgras. Leonard agrees: “Be aware of what’s already in the market and find your own voice and style. In terms of animal stories, avoid basing characters too literally on your own pets and writing something that could be boiled down to: Here’s a cute thing my dog or cat did. These stories are best for your own family’s enjoyment.”

Penny Green
Themes of sexuality are so prevalent in young adult books today that many authors believe they cannot sell their novel unless they make it sexy. Before marketing your YA fiction, understand why sex and sexuality play such a large part in teen literature. Then you will have a better idea when and how to work these themes into your story and when to leave them out.

It is What It Is
YA literature is about being a teen. Not a tween. Not an adult. A teen. It is a stage that most writers have already been through and remember well. “It’s a transformative experience that, unlike other transformative experiences, they remember fully. It’s a process of discovery. There would be toddler literature if we could remember it!” says Andrew Karre, Carolrhoda Editorial Director. “It’s a genre that reflects a stage of life that is significantly about sex and it would be bizarre if it didn’t reflect that. It isn’t about what’s appropriate. Its about the shared experience.”

The shared experience of adolescence is about becoming an adult. The biology of that includes a variety of hormones, hair in new places, and acne galore, but also sexual maturity. “Teens are going through puberty, so things of a sexual nature are things they are being confronted with daily,” says Kristin Nelson, of the Nelson Literary Agency.

This day-to-day reckoning means that sexuality is something that is on their minds, overtly or as a backdrop. Teens also hate anything fake. If you want your fiction to appeal to teens, it needs to reflect the reality that they are living. “YA books, particularly on the Pulse list, are meant to appeal directly to our readers—teens! So we stay very true to the issues teens care most about, including friends, identity, and sex,” says Pulse Editorial Director Jennifer Klonsky. “The teen years are generally a time of great sexual upheaval. Whether you are actively exploring your sexuality or not, the idea of sex is on the minds of most teens. Reading about the experiences of fictional characters is one way of feeling like less of an out-of-control freak, as so many teens do at this volatile time in their lives. But mostly, not including sexuality in realistic teen fiction is like not discussing flour in a bakery. You really can’t paint the full picture without it.”

But literature is literature and you cannot just throw a topic, including sex, into the mix without a good reason and a firm place within the story. Ashland Creek Co-Editor and Founder Midge Raymond says, “If a novel tackles a topic such as rape or teen pregnancy, it’s hard to avoid sex. But even then, sex can and should be dealt with in a serious, thoughtful manner.”

Nelson agrees. “It can’t be included in a salacious manner. It has to be pertinent to the book at hand or it is just shock effect.” Nelson recommends Simone Elkeles and her novels Chain Reaction and Physical Chemistry as examples.

There may even be more sex in today’s teen literature than in years past, but not because it is a trend. “I fully expect sexuality to continue to be explored in literature. It’s relatable, it adds authenticity, and it feels more a part of the larger conversation. Like it or not, sexuality is a part of human nature and isn’t going away any time soon,” says Klonsky. That said, it isn’t the be-all and end-all of every teen story.

No the Whole Story
For writers who are not comfortable addressing sexual themes, there are still plenty of young adult stories to be told. “There is a tremendous opportunity—adolescents mature at different rates. There are the mature kids and the kids who are like, ‘Whoa, where did this come from?’” says Karre. “It shouldn’t be anxiety-producing in authors that they aren’t clearing any kind of sex bar,” like having a certain number of scenes with certain forms of sex.

Teen readers are individuals, and they do not all want to read the same books. “It’s great to have diversity available to teen readers,” says Klonsky. “One way that is achieved is through a focus on identity from a standpoint of ‘what kind of person am I or do I want to be? How do my choices in friends reflect that? What role do my parents play in my life?'”

Relationship is at the core of YA fiction. “It is hard to do a realistic young adult novel without relationships. Teenage relationships are tinged with sex. Even platonic friendships among straight boys. But it doesn’t have to be explicit,” says Karre.

No matter the topic, holding reader interest is the goal. “Young adult literature has to include something riveting. This could be accomplished by

No Heavy Breathing
Think you can’t sell a YA novel that isn’t all sex and steam? Look at some of these authors and titles.

~ Meg Cabot, Vanished series
~ Deb Caletti
~ Ally Carter, Gallagher Girls and Heist Society series
~ Elizabeth Chandler, Kissed by an Angel series
~ Eileen Cook
~ Lucienne Diver, Vamped and Revamped
~ Nancy Holder
~ Christine Johnson
~ Kelly Keaton
~ Terra Elan McVoy
~ Robert Muchamore, Cherub series
~ Kristin Wolden Nitz, Suspect
~ Mary Pearson
~ Dia Reeves
~ Leila Sales
~ Lisa Schroeder
~ Elizabeth Scott
~ Arlana Tipsensky
~ Robin Wasserman, Cold Awakening Trilogy and Hacking Harvard
~ Debbie Vigue
making the story very frightening, like R. L. Stine does with some of his series. There isn’t much sexuality at all; Stine hooks his readers with spine-chilling horror. He does well at it—he’s sold more than 400 million copies of his books,” says Lauren Ruth, an agent with BookEnds. “Sexuality is not present much, if at all, in The Hunger Games, but this series has been hugely successful. Suzanne Collins has used politics, murder, and violence to rivet her readers.”

Wanted...

Whether your theme involves sexual self-identity or environmental awareness, focus on your characters. “It’s about creating characters that kids can identify with,” says Nelson.

A big part of this involves voice. “Genuine is a good word to use. Authenticity of voice,” says Karre. “You don’t learn to write YA voice by going to the mall with a tape recorder. The basic craftsmanship of the writing is striking and it’s tuned to a teen frequency. It doesn’t sound like someone aping slang. The way the character talks needs to reflect how the character lives. It’s no different than any kind of writing that way. It comes down to quality of writing and the quality of characters. I’ve bought lots of YA that had great first-person characters, but plots in complete shambles. The plot is something one can find. An interesting plot doesn’t always find a good character.”

Klonsky agrees. “While we feel we can help an author tighten or ramp up the plot, we know we can’t really change the voice even if we sometimes wish we could. It’s always disappointing to come across a cool story, only to find the execution lacking the oomph we’re looking for,” she says. “Bottom line: If any of the Pulse editors is sucked into the read for any reason, we take a serious second look. I gravitate towards stories with a romance at the core regardless of whether it’s dystopian, paranormal, or contemporary. I don’t shy away from edgy content and am proud to have both Living Dead Girl, by Elizabeth Scott, and Forbidden, by Tabitha Suzuma, on my list. For both of those, I was blown away by the author’s voice, and how successfully both were able to keep me riveted even with difficult subject matter.”

Teens ask tough questions of themselves and adults; these concerns are reflected in their literature. “For me, YA needs to push the envelope. It has to include themes that are just a bit over the heads of middle-grade readers. For example, The Hunger Games is a series I loved to pieces. But I would not recommend it for a nine-year-old. There are children fighting to the death in this series, there are a lot of issues that are edgy, dangerous, and never-before-seen for teens. And that’s what I loved about it. It had that whoa factor,” says Ruth. “Different publishers and different agents are looking for different things in YA right now. While dystopian YA is hot, an editor told me just a few weeks ago she couldn’t stand to see another dystopian. She wanted real, emotional, serious YA for boys. The moral of the story is this: Write what your story is. Don’t write what you think might sell. Because when you’re done writing it, that fab will be out the window.”

YA writers need not fall prey to the message—no giving readers some lesson in the guise of story. “Writers have to be wary of doing that adult overlay, which almost never works,” says Nelson. Do not think, “‘Everyone will read my young adult novel and they’ll learn X, Y, and Z.’ The purpose should be that you have a good story to tell. It has to be honest. Teens are really smart. They can tell when someone is preaching or talking down or not taking them seriously.”

This is not to say that you cannot deliver some important thought or perspective, especially if it is in sync with the mission of a specific publisher. “Young readers need to be entertained, certainly, but as with all readers, it’s even better if they can learn something along the way. Specifically, we are looking for YA novels that raise awareness of the environment and how young adults can do their part to preserve it. The characters, the conflict, and the plot all ultimately serve this goal,” says Ashland Creek’s Raymond. “If a writer sets out to write a YA novel with this goal, sex won’t likely be a major component of the novel—though it’s great if love and romance are. If a novel does include sex, but fits all our other criteria, as long as it’s not gratuitous, we have no problem with it. Our only requirement is that it serves the story. Our forthcoming YA title Out of Breath deals with some dark themes—abuse, crime, death—but these issues are part of a whole. We like books that acknowledge that young adults are growing up in challenging times but that offer a little optimism even as they reflect that reality.”

After all, the reality of the teen experience is what good YA is all about. This does not mean that your readers are all vampires, Goths, or environmental crusaders. It does mean that as a young adult author, you need to create sympathetic characters with real teen voices who are involved in things that interest your readers. Tell these stories in a captivating way, and you will find your work attracting agents, editors, and teens as well even if your story is not super sexy. Unless, it needs to be.
SOMEONE TO LOOK UP TO: HEROES & ROLE MODELS

By Katherine Swarts

Everyone needs someone to look up to. Young people are particularly susceptible to hero worship—creating a world of opportunity for biography and profile writers to present heroes worth emulating.

Kids’ admiration for stars who offer little beyond wealth, glamour, and arrogance is a social concern. “When kids are pulling away from the safety of home but looking for safe harbor, they want to know that someone—anyone—has their backs,” says Sharon McKay, author of Thunder over Kandahar (Annick Press), a U.S. Next Generation Indie Book Award winner for YA. McKay is also the first children’s writer in the Canadian Forces Artist Program. “Try as one might, kids find their own heroes; the basketball player caught with his pants down may have more credibility than the baseball player who performed at the Olympic Games. What might be the difference? Someone with circuses while visiting the sick. Loyalty can be mindless.”

The Multifaceted Hero

However much adults push positive role models, kids themselves decide whom they consider worthy. The writer’s task is to make the good examples fascinating.

Elizabeth MacLeod, author of 18 biographies for Kids Can Press, including The Kids Book of Great Canadian Women, says, “Readers might not realize who was behind a particular accomplishment or what had to be overcome. Georgina Pope became a life-saving war nurse at a time nurses were considered servants who couldn’t find other work. Adelaide Hoodless founded the Women’s Institute after her baby died from bad milk. And while everyone has heard of Alexander Graham Bell, not many know he introduced Helen Keller to Annie Sullivan.”

Bell is a perfect example of how a person may be universally known and yet typecast so the majority of his achievements are forgotten. Millions instantly recognize Bell as inventor of the telephone; but how many know of his work with speech therapy, his role in making the National Geographic Society an American institution, or his 30 patents for inventions ranging from hydrofoils to alternative fuels? “The well-known stories about famous people are oversimplified,” says Nancy Gruver, CEO of New Moon Girl Media, “flattening out the complexity of the actual person, making them into one-dimensional examples.”

Seek out lesser-known aspects of a famous subject’s work. Says Joni Sussman, Publisher of Kar-Ben Publishing, which specializes in topics related to Judaism: “One of our fall 2011 titles is Marcel Marceau: Master of Mime [by Gloria Spielman], which focuses on Marceau’s working with the Resistance during World War II. Another hero is Zishe of Lodz [in Zishe the Strongman, by Robert Rubenstein], who traveled the world with circuses while visiting the sick. What makes Zishe a hero is not just his remarkable strength but also his kindness and compassion.”

The Qualities of a Hero

Children and teens often have not learned to value deep character strength above flash and daring. Nonetheless, says Jennifer Hooks, Managing Editor of Group Publishing’s Children’s Ministry Magazine, “Kids are drawn to honesty and intelligence.”

“Kids understand what is fair,” adds author-illustrator Janet Wilson. “As soon as kids become aware of someone like Craig Kielburger [founder of global youth-enabling organization Free the Children], they become devoted fans for all the right reasons.”

A subject with a bit of pizzazz and strength of character is a winner. “Seek out real life but offbeat role models,” says Hooks, “and get to the core. Don’t settle for cliché traits—help kids see a bit of hero in themselves.”

One trait kids admire, says McKay, is “fearlessness. That’s why the idiot doing wheelies in the parking lot gets the ooohhs,” but also why heroic professions such as firefighting get attention, as do social reformers who stand firm in the face of threats and violence. “A true hero is selfless and kind,” says Wilson, “and stands up for what is right rather than turning a blind eye. In some circumstances courage is required. In others, it is persistence—sticking at it until justice is served.”

“Integrity and courage are major heroic qualities, as are the desire and ability to protect or care about others,” says Sussman. Kar-Ben, in the Jewish tradition, “views heroes as those who speak up or stand up. Moral, not...
models are real people living their standards and values every day, not on stage for millions of dollars."

Your best heroic subjects may work in your child’s school or live in your apartment building. “Parents are amazing, and they often don’t get credit for being so,” says Hooks. “I was inspired to see CNN profile a dad who’s dying of cancer, because of the extraordinary lengths he’s going to to leave a video legacy for his toddler daughter. Another role model is Randy Pausch, the ‘last lecture’ professor at Carnegie Mellon; he maintained dignity and humor and a true passion for teaching in his darkest hours [with terminal cancer]. Teen Ryan Hrelijac [ryanswell.ca] heard about kids who didn’t have clean water to drink and decided to do something about it; he’s been funding and digging water wells for years. These people are true role models because they live with integrity and place others above themselves.”

Wilson says: “My favorite young heroes came from poor and disadvantaged communities but didn’t let that stop them from making a difference.” For instance, “14-year-old William Kamkwamba from Malawi made a windmill from scrap materials and brought electricity to his village.”

Again we come to the key point: A role model or hero is not simply noteworthy, but admirable. Strong principles and the courage to stand by them; perseverance in the face of challenge; a willingness to put others’ needs before one’s own; that something that keeps a person approachable and unspoiled by fame: These are the qualities that make role models worth writing about.

Heroes “can come from the most unusual places and surprise us when we least expect it,” says Loh. “Write from the heart and show us why we should love them too.”

Fictional Heroes

Fictional characters can also be role models — models a writer can shape to an individual ideal. Be careful, however: Real people’s flaws are easy to find, but fictional heroes may become so perfect they hardly seem human. Worse, the author has to let the hero call all visible shots. Nonfiction writers can get away with occasional editorial comment, but modern fiction readers rarely tolerate author intrusion, even if disguised as the hero’s thoughts. “Point of view gives insight,” says author Sharon McKay, “but if it gets to the brain-surgery level, the story will fail.”

Effective fictional characters are so real, so human, that even their creators find the characters have minds of their own. Fictional heroes “should be realistic characters who aren’t defined by circumstance,” says Sterling Publishing’s Cindy Loh. “Characters who can take their fate into their own hands, adapt, and think for themselves—and have fun while doing it—are the role models I want for my children.”

“Tap all your sources of inspiration and disappointment in creating characters,” says New Moon Girl Media’s Nancy Gruver. “Allow characters to evolve and grow the way real kids and adults do.”

“Create the characters, give them inner strength, and give them their freedom,” says McKay. Joni Sussman of Kar-Ben Publishing notes, “The most interesting stories feature fully developed characters, so children can see themselves [real people like the characters] as potential heroes. And all kids should strive to become heroes. But it’s important to develop the character beyond the single dimension of heroism.”
Give Readers Sensory Experiences

By Leslie J. Wyatt

It has been said that human beings learn about the world through the five senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing. We do not learn all that much from being *told* how things are, especially as children. But if we experience, we learn. We understand. We grow. It stands to reason, therefore, that writing that incorporates vivid sensory detail will naturally engage and affect the reader in much the same way.

Memory Enhancing

Research explains why use of the five senses is effective in turning the written word into more than letters on a page. According to scientists, our body’s adrenaline system starts pumping when we get emotional about something. Working together with a brain structure called the amygdala, our brain imprints memories. Thus, the sights, tastes, sounds, and feel of the moment are captured with clarity. That is why a smell can bring back a whole scene, happy or not. The more emotionally, physically, or spiritually intense an experience is, the more adrenaline our body produces, and the more sensory details our brains record.

As writers, we can harness this phenomenon to help readers live our stories. It is little short of amazing how the merely mechanical inclusion of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings characters experience can cause readers to feel as if they are almost in the scene, not just hearing about it secondhand.

Balancing

To engage readers, writers should work to stimulate all five senses. Interestingly, emotions lend themselves to taste and touch more than to sight. Since sounds and smells trigger emotional experiences in real life, they can be used to bring emotions to life in stories.

Here is an example from the Newbery Honor book, *Hattie Big Sky*. Author Kirby Larson does not label Hattie’s emotions. Rather, she uses the sense of touch to help readers figure it out for themselves:

“Here, under this big sky, someone like me—Hattie Here-and-There—could work hard and get a place of her own. A place to belong. Wasn’t that my deepest wish? A warmth wrapped over me, like I was being covered with a quilt . . .”

Strong writers know how to make readers gather their own impressions and draw their own conclusions—by revealing characters’ complexity of feelings, motivations, actions and reactions. Writers set scenes and build worlds based on the sense. In this example, Larson does not say directly that Hattie feels happy or inspired or contented, yet we understand. As authors arouse the five senses, readers discover and experience for themselves.

Consider this example from a desert scene in Frank Cottrell Boyce’s middle-grade book, *Cosmic*:

“[T]here was a moment when everyone stopped and thought about the same thing. It was the moment when we stepped out of the shadow. You didn’t need to wonder what had happened. It was like someone had pointed a flamethrower at us.”

Boyce never mentions the word *hot*. He doesn’t need to. We almost feel it. Here’s another example from later in the same book, this time using sound: “Then the countdown started: Twenty . . . nineteen. . . eighteen. . . There was a sound like mountains snoring. . .”

Tracking

Sight seems to be the sense that writers use most often. Taste is used the least. Yet we do not go through life only seeing, and readers need the whole range of senses to fully experience our stories. The easiest way to include all five senses in your writing is to place yourself solidly in your characters’ shoes. What would they see, smell, hear? What does their body start feeling? Write to describe the physical feelings of embarrassment. Whatever you are writing, it can be enhanced through judicious use of sensory details.

One of the best ways to determine if you are giving all the senses something equal exposure is to assign a different color of highlighting marker to each one. On a hard copy of your manuscript, highlight every time you use sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. If your whole page is pocked with blue, with only a couple of other-colored freckles, you know what you need to do! Although it may not be feasible to expect an even distribution (some incidents lend themselves more to certain senses) strive for balance without straining the parameters to the point of making your scene feel contrived.

When kids open a book or magazine, they are expecting to suspend disbelief and be transported into the story. Let them taste, touch, smell, hear, and see right along with your characters, and they will not be disappointed.
Penguin Tweaks Its Children’s Imprints

By Judy Bradbury

It has been a year since the Penguin Young Readers Group restructured its children’s book imprints, Dial Books for Young Readers and Dutton Children’s Books, and changes at Penguin have continued since.

Dutton has become a “boutique middle-grade and young adult imprint with a focus on titles of exceptional literary quality and strong commercial appeal.” Its list now comprises 10 to 15 titles a year. Moving up from Associate Publisher, Julie Strauss-Gabel became Vice President and Publisher.

Along with that promotion, a major change was made: Dutton would no longer publish picture books. Instead, they became part of a larger list at Dial Books for Young Readers. Under the leadership of President and Publisher Lauri Hornik, who joined Penguin in 1999 and has been at the helm of Dial and Dutton since 2008, Dial’s list expanded from 50 to 75 titles a year and includes a number of authors and illustrators previously published by Dutton.

In May, Jennifer Hunt became Vice President of Acquisitions and Development and Editor at Large for Dial. Formerly Editorial Director at Little, Brown, her mandate at Dial is to acquire and develop books across the spectrum, from picture books to YA. Hunt is based on the west coast and also coordinates projects with film, TV, and electronic games.

By late July, Penguin Group CEO John Makinson and Penguin Group USA CEO David Shanks were reporting that internationally the group’s children’s division was stronger than ever and taking on new kinds of projects.

And now, almost as a sign of its successful new direction, Dial’s Chime, by Franny Billingsley, has been named a finalist for the National Book Award.

Differentiate

Hornik explains the thinking behind the restructuring: “We had two goals. These were to clearly differentiate the two imprints, which were growing more and more similar, and to create a boutique imprint for Penguin that would publish a literary fiction list. Dutton has become that boutique fiction imprint under the leadership of Julie Strauss-Gabel, and Dial maintains its same spread of picture books, novels, and occasional nonfiction titles that all bridge the commercial and literary markets.”

Hornik offers further details on Dial. “Here we will continue to publish hardcover only for preschool through young adult in a wide variety of genres. Dial focuses on character-driven writing that speaks directly to the child or teen audience, and that straddles the retail and school and library markets.”

In reviewing manuscripts, Hornik says, “The voice is always the first thing to grab me—a piece of writing with a vivid, believable, moving point of view.” Hornik has published such well-respected and award-winning authors and illustrators as Richard Peck, Nancy Werlin, Jerry Pinkney, Kadir Nelson, Tedd Arnold, Ingrid Law, and Caralyn and Mark Buehner.

Fresh, Focused

Strauss-Gabel discusses the changes at Dutton as it focuses on hardcover middle-grade and YA fiction: “We’re a small and finely focused list that’s as much about fresh new voices as it is about longtime, established authors.” New authors, Strauss-Gabel says, should become the “established authors of tomorrow.”

She adds, “I want original, strong voices that will stand the test of time and have true reader appeal.” Strauss-Gabel, who has been at Dutton for nine years and published such stellar authors as John Green, Gayle Forman, Nina LaCour, and Adam Gidwitz, offers insight into her tastes. “I’m looking for books of exceptional literary quality with strong commercial appeal. Qualities that always pique my interest include a smart sense of humor; ambitious storytelling; smart details; and a strong, assured voice. I’d prefer to break new ground than revisit familiar territory. My taste runs somewhat more contemporary than genre, though I like storytelling with a twist.”

Dial accepts entire picture book manuscripts, and for longer works, up to 10 pages from the opening chapter. Dutton wants one-page queries only, with a brief synopsis and any publishing credits; include an SASE. Submission guidelines can be found on the website at http://us.penguin.com/static/pages/aboutus/pyrg-subguides.html.

Other News

~ In August, Penguin Young Readers Group announced it would be releasing enhanced ebooks regularly, and releasing apps based on bestselling picture books. Titles include Ladybug Girl and Skippyjon Jones.

~ Penguin launched Book Country, a writing and publishing community where writers of genre fiction can upload their work and have it critiqued, and engage in discussions with others. (http://bookcountry.com/)

~ Penguin Young Readers’ Grosset & Dunlap division is launching a licensed line of preschool books based on the animated TV show Small Potatoes.

~ Penguin co-launched the fourth annual Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award, one for general fiction and one for best YA Novel. The winner receives a contract and $15,000 advance.

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**Marketplace**

### 47North

www.amazon.com/47North

Referring to the latitude of Seattle, 47 North is a new imprint from Amazon Publishing announced in October. It will specialize in science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Its first list will include 15 titles in book, Kindle, and audio versions over the next year.

The imprint looks to balance the speculative fiction genres. It defines fantasy as fiction based in the impossible and science fiction as based in reality, even if it is an improbable reality. All the various subgenres are of interest, including epic and urban fantasy, military science fiction, space operas, and the darker fiction that is supernatural horror.

The first title to be published is *The Mongoliad: Book One*, part of The Foreworld Series. It is the work of the successful authors Neal Stephenson, Greg Bear, and Mark Teppo, as well as several new writers. Another author on the debut list is Aric Davis, author of the YA crime novel *Nickel Plated*.

Proposal submissions and questions may be directed to 47north-submissions@amazon.com.

### Hartlyn Kids

P.O. Box 1371, Hartford, CT 06143.
www.hartlynkids.com

Launched in September, Hartlyn Kids is a small independent press that is specializing in publishing children’s books about different places and cultures in the world. Its titles are intended to help children “travel the globe one book at a time.”

The founders are Aisha Greene, an attorney, and Christine Mills, an education specialist. Their goal is to create interactive books that expose readers to the diverse ways that children live. The books are targeted to ages six to nine, though the stories are appropriate to be read to younger children by parents. “We are always open to submissions, though at this present time we are specifically looking for submissions from African and Middle Eastern countries. We have several books in our queue for 2012 and would not start looking for more titles (other than those focused on African and Middle Eastern countries) until the end of 2012,” explain Greene and Mills.

“We are looking for stories about a day in the life of a child in a different country. We love stories that have a good moral, celebrate culture and family, and give an authentic sense of the day in the life of a child. The writer must have been born in or lived in or have some other significant tie to the country they are writing about in order to be considered.” Hartlyn’s first two titles are *The Bamboo Dance*, about the Philippines, and *Adventures that Lead to Home*, a story about India.

As for style, Greene and Mills say they have no specific preferences: “We want all of the books we publish to be unique writing styles and have their own personalities.”

Query first, with a summary of the story, to info@hartlynkids.com. “After that point we can move forward with a manuscript if we have interest.” Advance, and flat fee; books are works-for-hire.

### Jack and Jill

U.S. Kids Magazines, P.O. Box 567, Indianapolis, IN 46206.
www.uskidsmags.com

*Jack and Jill* won a Parents’ Choice award for 2011, and continues the mission of the U.S. Kids magazines to promote health and fitness. Geared to ages 6 to 12, the bimonthly with a circulation of 200,000 looks for solid fiction and nonfiction that is also “wholesome, positive, [and] lighthearted.” It also publishes pieces on more general themes. The editor is Terry Harshman.

Fiction and nonfiction, to 700 words. Send query or complete manuscript. Of special interest are profiles of regular kids doing unusual things. Poetry, to 30 lines. Recipes, puzzles, games, and activities are also welcome. Buys all rights. Stories and articles, to $0.25 a word. Poetry, $0.25–$0.50. Other material, $0.25–$0.35. Pays on publication. Responds in three months. Guidelines can be found at www.uskidsmags.com/writers-guidelines.
**Marketplace**

**National Geographic Kids**


Two magazines from the National Geographic Society target children, National Geographic Kids, for ages 6 to 14, and National Geographic Little Kids, for ages 3 to 6. Both aim to make learning about the world fun.

National Geographic Kids has a circulation of 1.3 million readers and is published 10 times a year. Its articles place a premium on accuracy and entertaining information. Its writing style is exciting, to reflect the experience of new discoveries. Articles cover archaeology, geography, history, nature, paleontology, and science. It also reports on news, and publishes puzzles, games, jokes, and fun facts.

National Geographic Little Kids is published 6 times a year and covers animals, nature, the environment, history, science, and world cultures. It also includes fiction in the form of rebus stories about other cultures or about animals. Simple experiments, crafts, recipes, activities, games and jokes are also in its issues.

Both magazines assign many articles. Mail queries with clips. Responds if interested. Buys all rights. Pays on acceptance; rates vary.

**Just 4 Kids**

P.O. Box 18962, Austin, TX 78760. www.just4kidsmagazine.com

Just 4 Kids is a Christian magazine for all ages of children and teens, but targets a reading level of ages 7 to 12. The Editor is Mauri Gandi. The mission of the monthly is to help children develop a relationship with God, learn about Jesus, and help them live like him. Just 4 Kids is particularly interested in true stories of children who have experienced miracles or demonstrate extraordinary virtue. It publishes profiles, personal experience, and Scripture-based fiction applicable in real life, as well as activities, games, quizzes, and poetry.

Mail submissions for the print magazine. If interested in donating material for the website, email to mauri@just4kidsmagazine.com. Articles, 200–1,000 words. Fiction, 400–1,400 words. Print magazine pays 5¢ a word, on publication.

**Tech & Learning**

1111 Bayhill Drive, Suite 125, San Bruno, CA 94066. www.techlearning.com

For 30 years Tech & Learning has championed technology in K–12 classrooms. The audience of 90,000 consists of educators and technology coordinators.

The monthly looks regularly for high-quality pieces, especially from people in the field about what they have implemented and how it is working in schools. Subjects include technology in the classroom, the school, and the school district; how to train teachers; technology as an instructional tool; innovative business ideas; grants and funding; product reviews.

Email a pitch to Managing Editor Christine Weister at cweiser@nbmedia.com. Describe your idea for an article in one or two paragraphs. Do not send complete articles.

**Holiday & Seasonal Markets**

The following magazines (and one anthology publisher) for young readers accept seasonal material appropriate to the winter holidays.


~ Dancing with Bear: www.dancingwithbearpublishing.com, Publishes seasonal or holiday-related anthologies of short pieces for readers of many ages, including some books directed specifically at kids.

~ Devozine: www.devozine.org, Christian teens.

~ Focus on the Family Clubhouse: www.clubhousemagazine.com, Christian, middle-grade.


~ Insight: www.insightmagazine.org, Christian teens.


~ The New Era: www.neweralds.org, Mormon teens.


~ Plays: www.playsmag.com, Plays for elementary, middle, and high school.


Beyond Words

20827 NW Cornell Road, Suite 500, Hillsboro, OR 97124. www.beyondword.com

Beyond Words recently reached a co-publishing agreement with the Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing imprints Simon Pulse and Aladdin. As of January, Simon & Schuster will distribute and sell Beyond Words’s 10 to 12 children’s books each year. The first is a new edition of Soul Searching: A Girl’s Guide to Finding Herself, by Sarah Stillman. Beyond Words has been co-publishing with Simon & Schuster’s adult imprint Atria Books for five years.

Beyond Words publishes titles on body, mind, and spirit, in the categories of health and wellness, inspiration, psychology, new science, spiritual lifestyles, global native wisdom, history, pop culture, the arts, animals and nature, relationships, families, and more. The company is accepting submissions for children and teens that foster well-being; on holistic health, the relationship between science and spirituality, in the modern world, and books on native wisdom traditions around the world. It also is open to parenting books with a focus on spirituality. No picture books or fiction.

Accepts submissions through literary agents. They should include a one- or two-page query letter; an author biography; five or more sample chapters; a synopsis and table of contents; market analysis, including competitive titles; the intended audience; and an SASE. Accepts simultaneous submissions, if indicated.

The Editor in Chief of Beyond Words is Cynthia Black, who said about the new arrangement, “We are looking forward to creating products together for a younger generation that is in keeping with our proud tradition of transforming lives.”

EDC Publishing/Kane Miller


Educational Development Corporation (EDC) is the U.S. branch of the British company Usborne Publishing. The focus of trade publisher Usborne has long been on nontext books, with more than 2,000 in print; it has recently added a fiction line. In the news recently, EDC is investing in Demibooks, a platform for authors and publishers to publish interactive titles on the iPad.

Kane/Miller is part of EDC and publishes board, concept, picture, chapter, and middle-grade books from around the world. Its goal is to expose children to foreign cultures. While that is still true, the company is now actively looking for nontext and picture book fiction that depict U.S. cultures and communities. Of interest are uniquely American angles and topics in categories such as sports, history, biography, and folktales. Kane/Miller is open to many fiction genres, as long as the characters are engaging and the stories well-told. Its books aim to show young readers how people may live true to their individuality, yet fit well within a culture or community.

Mail complete manuscript or query with synopsis and 2 sample chapters, or email to submissions@kanemiller.com. Include an SASE. Responds in 3 months. Royalty; advance.

Girls’ Life

4529 Harford Road, Baltimore, MD 21214. www.girlslife.com

Girls’ Life aims to be a friend to its 10- to 15-year-old readers by providing information and guidance on self-esteem, friends, family, relationships, school, health, and fashion. It also publishes profiles of girls, YA fiction, celebrity news, advice, recipes, crafts, quizzes, and media reviews.

Query first with a detailed description of the idea and clips if available. Email to Senior Editor Katie Abbondanza at katiea@girlslife.com. Article research must use primary sources, to be included with a requested manuscript.

Articles, 1,200–2,000 words. Fiction, to 3,500 words. Pays on publication. Articles, $350–$500; other rates vary.