

Ten Things I've Learned about Trade Publishing for Young Readers

by

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1. Most writers start out in Slushville.

Slushville is that side of the tracks where most writers reside before being published or represented by a reputable agent. It is populated by all the writers whose manuscripts end up in what is called the “slush pile.”

The slush pile is the unending stream of un-requested manuscripts sent in by hopeful writers without agents. To give you some idea of the size of Slushville—Random House recently reported that they get approximately 10,000 unsolicited manuscripts a year. That's 10, 000 at only one of the five large publishers. Of course, smaller firms get less, but still in the thousands.

Agents, too, have slush piles—manuscripts by authors who desire representation. In the March, 2005, issue of *Writer's Digest* it was reported that the average literary agency gets about 5,000 un-requested manuscripts a year. The point is, that in this vast and densely populated world of tens of thousands of manuscripts, it is very easy for you and your precious manuscript to get overlooked.

Why have slush piles? Many great writers, including Newbery winners, Booker Award winners, and Caldecott winners have been plucked from these piles of un-requested mail. These are writers such as E. L. Konigsburg, Cynthia Voigt, James Marshall, Chris Van Allsburg, Robert Pirsig who wrote the best-selling book, *ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE*, and Pulitzer Prize winner, John Kennedy Toole who wrote *A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES*. These writers are the very reason that many firms still accept unsolicited manuscripts. Some companies still hope to sluice-out that one gem that will be a bestseller, or that will bring to their firm a writer with a long career of books ahead of him or her.

2. Editors hate dealing with slush.

Why? Well, according to most reports, a great deal of it is pure junk. And it never stops coming in.

3. Generally, slush pile readers read only the first couple of sentences.

Readers of the slush pile report that within a very few lines they know whether the rest of the manuscript is worth reading. Imagine that! All your hard work and for the most part just the first two sentences will be read. Why? Because *they are looking for an excuse NOT to read the whole manuscript*—they have a huge pile to get through, after all, and it never stops replenishing itself! So . . . the very approach to the slush pile is not one of acceptance, but rejection.

And who do you think is doing the initial slush pile reading? You can bet it's not the company's top-paid editors . . . the readers are usually junior editors, assistants and hired readers.

What does this mean to writers? This means that if one truly wishes to be published by a mainstream trade publisher, one **MUST have \$100 dollars words in those first sentences**—and a hook. You can no longer beat around the bush to get to the action. Sure, some of our most beloved children’s classics start with pages of description. But remember . . . the fashion in reading changes just as quickly, if not more so, than the fashion we wear. Today you cannot afford to take pages or even paragraphs before you snag your reader. Steven King has said something to the effect that “You have to grab your reader by the lapels and throw him across the room by the end of the first page.”

Is this approach to the slush pile a bad thing? Not really. Think about children as readers—their attention spans are short. If you’re lucky, you’ve got about 30 seconds to engage the child reader to the point where he/she will be willing to stick with the story. Certainly, it’s a challenge to us, as writers. So it is imperative that you study great first lines. After all, if you can’t hook the slush pile reader you won’t be able to hook the child reader.

4. You need to do your homework.

You need to study this odd combination of art and product—the book. You need to know how it is used by your audience. You need to know the latest bestsellers, as well as the steady-as-it-goes mid-list titles that are around forever. You should be aware of where your writing fits. You should study publisher catalogs, literary journals and read *Publisher’s Weekly* and other reviewing journals as well as writing journals. You should see what’s face-out on the shelves in the bookstores, and know for whom you are writing.

Editors complain that a great deal of the slush is from people who have no idea about the state of children’s publishing *today*. Many hopefuls simply have a family story to tell, or think fondly of the books they read as children—years ago.

You must put yourself in the shoes of a contemporary child reader. A major problem for many beginning writers for kids is nostalgia. People remember warm family stories or incidents from their childhood and want to write about them. There is nothing wrong with that. My book, *MY MOUNTAIN SONG* is based on summers I spent going to Kentucky to visit my grandparents.

But if you want to do this kind of writing, remember that today’s audience is made up of the *millennial generation*. You need to write with an immediacy that is not saccharine. Think of your reader! You, as an adult, may long for the days when you were a child, but . . . children are NEVER nostalgic. Only adults are nostalgic.

Have you ever met a 9-year-old who longed for the return of the time when he was 7. No! ALL KIDS want to grow up fast—and the faster the better—in their minds. (Didn’t we? Didn’t we all want to be old enough to go to a sleep-over, wear make-up, and camp out in the back yard?)

5. You are going to get rejected.

Unfortunately it may seem like no matter how much we study our audience, our product, the market, and hone our craft, when we try to escape Slushville, we get turned back at the border—we get rejected. It’s not easy—believe me, I know. Before my first book was accepted I had 20 manuscripts circulating to several editors. Those 20 manuscripts garnered over 300 rejections! Every time, it hurt. However, *all it takes is just one acceptance to sweep all that pain away.*

My advice about rejection is to develop a hard shell, and keep doing what you love doing—write. Persist. What else are you going to do? You’ll still be doing all the other things that require your time and energy—going to work, raising a family. (Keep the day job until you’re secure in this new field!) But, here’s a secret: *no one needs to know that you’re getting all those rejections!* Don’t advertise each one—just quietly go about writing and submitting. One day you’ll get that first acceptance.

Also, know that even prolific writers get rejected. One well-known writer posted to a listserv I’m on that she got 12 rejections in one week. So there! Isn’t that freeing? Rejection is simply part of the process.

If you can learn from the rejection letters you’re getting, by all means use them to revise. In the meantime, get upset in the privacy of your home, get over it, and keep plugging away. It may make you feel better to know that H. G. Wells, Walt Whitman, Dr. Seuss, Edgar Allan Poe, Any Rand, Upton Sinclair, Ursula LeGuin, Irving Stone, and Beatrix Potter—to name just a few—had their words rejected time and time again. Of John Le Carre, a letter from one publisher to another said “You’re welcome to Le Carre—he hasn’t got any future.” Tony Hillerman was told to “get rid of all that Indian stuff.” Even the first Harry Potter was rejected several times.

6. Genres are morphing and blending—and new ones are cropping up all the time.

It is a zany and often inexplicable time in the history of publishing—but will it ever be any different? Who knows what new formats or combinations of styles and genres await us around the corner? Right now, in addition to books authored by the likes of Dean Koontz’ dog, Trixie, we’ve got graphic novels of all shape, size, and reading level, novels in verse, meta-fiction for four-year-olds, and door-stopper books that require releases from OSHA standards before they can be lifted. We have pop-up books, toy books, mega block-buster books being written by authors in their teens, books written by song writers, cross-over adult authors, and teams of authors. Our genres and formats are morphing and melding at such a rate that it’s almost mind-boggling.

But it is exciting! Which brings me to . . .

7. Originality is the key to being noticed these days—don’t be afraid to experiment.

Don’t feel you must write exactly as so and so does—with all the wild things happening in publishing today, esp. in kids’ books, this is one sure-fire way to get rejected. Publishers want fresh, new, and different. For example; *DON’T LET THE PIGEON DRIVE THE BUS* by Mo Willems, Caldecott winner *THE THREE PIGS* by David Wiesner; *THE INVENTION OF HUGO CABRET* by Brian Selznick, *THE STINKY CHEESE MAN* by Jon Scieszka, and *THE ASTONISHING LIFE OF OCTAVIAN NOTHING, TRAITOR TO THE NATION* by M. T. Anderson are all eccentric, intriguing, fresh—and made big waves in the publishing world.

So mesh those genres—do something different. Why not write a science fiction mystery graphic novel pop-up book?

8. It’s a small world.

People in the publishing field know each other. They lunch together, they party together, they move between publishing houses as though playing musical chairs. Keep all your cards face-up

on the table, and play things straight. If you're submitting something as an exclusive for so many months, stand by that. Don't change your mind the next week and send a manuscript out to several places at once. If you're going to do that, do it from the get-go and let the editors know that it has been submitted to multiple houses.

In addition, technology makes for a smaller world. Of my eight picture books I have two Canadian illustrators, a British illustrator, and a Ukrainian-born illustrator now living in the U.S. My latest book is illustrated by Niki Daly of Cape Town, South Africa. This is amazing to me! It is one of the more pleasurable aspects of writing children's books—working with talented illustrators from all over the world. I'm always surprised and pleased to see what they've made of my words.

9. Picture book authors do not select or secure their own illustrators.

This sometimes surprises beginning writers, but it makes sense. The publishers select and contract with the illustrators in order to make a match based on how they see the resulting book, and how they want to promote it. It may be that a new author will be paired with a tried and true illustrator to help sales, or it may be that a manuscript is perfect for a new illustrator the company wants to work with. And always, the publishing firms want to make new books that will have the same high quality of their other books. Therefore, most authors have no say as to who will illustrate, or how the book will be printed. In fact, editors generally do not like the author and illustrator to talk to each other during the process. In most cases, all communications go through the editor.

10. Most writers for young readers are not rich.

In this day and age, unless you're J. K. Rowling, your bank account won't get fat writing for kids. When you get 10% for a standard contract, it is hard to live on \$1.50 per \$15 novel sold—or on 5% on a picture book because you have to share that standard 10% with the illustrator! That comes to 80 cents on each \$16 book. (We won't even go into the small pittances received when there are deep discounts on your books, or when there are "deals" made for book clubs and fairs.) This is why you should keep your day job for a while.

However, no one truly goes into this field just to make money. Believe me, there are about a gazillion easier ways to do that!

11. But . . . your life will become richer. (I cheated and had to add one more.)

If you're a published author a wonderful thing happens—*kids write to you!* They are open and honest and so desirous of your attention. They will amaze, and move, you. For example, one young girl on the west coast designed postcards based on my novel, *SPITTING IMAGE*. She sold those postcards for one dollar each to raise money for the Blind Babies Foundation in San Francisco. Her goal was to raise \$60. She raised \$525! When her family wrote to me about it, I was astounded to think that my book inspired a child to go out and do this good thing.

To sum up: there is a lot to learn about writing and publishing for young readers, but at the same time a lot of fun can be had! Enjoy yourself.