

## **The Mindset of the Successful Author** By Laura Backes, Publisher of [Children's Book Insider](#)

It's a great time to be a children's book author or illustrator. Last month, the industry was abuzz with the news that Brian Selznick won the Caldecott for his 544-page *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, published by Scholastic for ages 9-12. Selznick, who wrote and illustrated the tome, described his work like this on Amazon.com: "My new book ... is a 550 page novel in words and pictures. But unlike most novels, the images in my new book don't just illustrate the story; they help tell it. I've used the lessons I learned from ... masters of the picture book to create something that is not exactly a novel, not quite a picture book, not really a graphic novel, or a flip book or a movie, but a combination of all these things."

Not to be outdone, the Newbery committee awarded this year's medal to *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* by Laura Amy Schlitz, illustrated by Robert Byrd (96 pages, Candlewick Press, ages 10 and up). This book is a series of 22 portraits of medieval characters between the ages of 10 and 15, written in prose and different verse forms, designed to be either performed out loud or read silently. Historical notes appear in the margins, and occasional two-page spreads feature short essays on historic topics related to the narratives. Illustrated with Byrd's pen-and-ink drawings, it's not quite a novel, not quite a play, not exactly nonfiction, but rather a wonderful melding of all three.

For an industry that's always admonishing aspiring authors to learn the "rules," it's surprising that its two highest awards went to books that defy categorization. Could this be the beginning of a revolution? Will Barnes & Noble have to rethink its shelving system? If more books are published like *Hugo Cabret*, will they be placed with the graphic novels? The picture books? Middle grade fiction?

With the growing "anything's possible" attitude of the children's book industry, it's tempting to stop trying to whittle your 2500-word picture book down to 1000 words, and just submit the darn thing as it is. After all, next to *Hugo Cabret*, your text looks minuscule. But that would be a mistake. If you're like 98% of all picture book writers, your story doesn't have to be 2500 words. Only 1000 of those words are really good enough to get published. The industry's definition of a book's form—its length, whether or not it should be illustrated, if the text must be uniform or can be a mixture of techniques—is expanding. But the definition of quality—the heart and soul of a manuscript that makes it worth turning into a book—remains the same.

In the 22 years I've worked in publishing, virtually all the successful authors and illustrators I've met have a few things in common. They proved themselves by writing many 1000-word picture books for ages 4-8 before pitching one of 2500 words for ages 8-12 to their editors. They earned solid reviews for their conventional novels before experimenting with other storytelling formats such as verse, email transcripts, or a mixture of newspaper clippings, letters and

dialogue. They were willing to illustrate book covers and other people's words before finally getting the go-ahead to illustrate their own manuscripts. They ignored the success stories of first-timers making six figure incomes or winning prestigious awards right out of the gate, knowing that those people were the exceptions to the rule. Instead, they steadily earned the trust of editors, book buyers, and readers. And only after their reputation was such that libraries would automatically buy any book with their name on it did these authors hear from their editors: "You want to write sort of a historical readers' theater/character study/nonfiction/narrative to be used in history and literature classes? Go for it!".

So how do you earn the trust of editors and readers to the point where you'll be free to experiment with a book's form? It all boils down to another common denominator of successful writers: humility.

Humble writers hear editors say, "It's extremely difficult to create a protagonist from an inanimate object that children will care about," and don't think, "Well, she's not talking to me. My story about Erin the Eraser is different." Instead, these writers scrutinize their work in the light of advice they get from experts, and try to judge their writing as objectively as possible. They're constantly putting their work to the test, asking if their characters are interesting and believable enough, if their plot is truly original, if their voice has yet to emerge. If you only follow one piece of advice toward your dream of some day creating a book that sports a gold medal on the cover, it's this:

Be humble. Every time you hear a writing "do" or "don't" from an editor, published author or respected teacher, assume they're talking about you.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't have confidence in your work. But it does mean that your work has to pass a strict test before it's ready to send to an editor. And the only way you'll get objective parameters for that test is to listen to what other qualified people say about writing a children's book. Use those lessons to judge your work, bring it up to par with what's being published, and then exceed it. Don't assume your work is already good enough—prove it.

If an editor mentions at a conference that picture books should average 1000 words or less, don't send her your 2000-word manuscript with a cover letter saying you've been called "the next Dr. Seuss." Instead, determine why you need so many words to tell your story. Is it too complex for a picture book? Are you describing things that are best left up to the illustrator? Have you used too many characters? If you can't answer these questions, give your manuscript to someone who can. Then consider every bit of constructive criticism they've got. Apply it, see if it makes the work better, and if it doesn't, discard it. Be open to suggestions, be flexible, be humble.

I've been critiquing manuscripts for 18 years, and the writers who evolved from fledgling wannabes to published authors were the ones most aware of how much

they had to learn. They started with very conventional stories, but each manuscript became more unique. They only dared to break out of the box once they'd proved they'd mastered the heart and soul of writing. Every project was a fresh start, posing new challenges. Not once did they say, "I don't have to keep improving. I'm different." These are the writers who will eventually win awards, and help take children's books in yet another direction. And you can be among them, if you, like Selznick, are open to what the masters have to teach.

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