

The Path to Publishing a Children's Book

By Maryann Cocca-Leffler (©2012)

So you want to write a children's book? Every day, it seems, your child or grandchild is flooding you with ideas like a fountain of inspiration. Or you realize that the hilarious childhood story that is told at every family gathering has to be a book! Perhaps you have a seed of a children's book in your head just waiting to sprout. But where do you begin? What about the artwork? Is it possible to get your book published?

The answer is yes, it is possible- but I will also tell you, it will not be easy. Competition is fierce. I know this first hand as I am a children's book author-illustrator, having been in the publishing field for over 25 yrs. If you have perseverance, a great idea, a willingness to work hard by writing and rewriting, and can take criticism and rejection, you may have what it takes to be a published children's author.

First things first- The Idea: A *good idea* is the main ingredient in a children's book. With over 5000 children's books published each year; many ideas have been done and redone, so your idea has to be unique. You'll need to find out what's out there by researching children's books. Visit your local bookstore and library and READ! Observe and read different genres. Notice page lengths, sizes, word count and themes. Google your topic on Amazon and read the descriptions. You will not only get a sense if your idea has been overdone but you'll also see what kind of books are being published. Where would your book fit? Is it an original idea?

Sometimes you don't have to look too far for ideas. Inspiration surrounds you. Many of my books started out with a seed of an idea from my two children or from a childhood memory of my own. My books, ***Bus Route to Boston*** and ***Clams All Year*** are both childhood stories of my memories growing up in a big Italian family in the Boston area. The idea for my book, ***Princess K.I.M and the Lie That Grew*** came from my memory of first grade when I told my classmates that my father owned the Coca-Cola Company. (He didn't). That little lie grew and grew, just like the lie in the book. Another book, ***Time to Say Bye Bye*** was inspired as I thought back at my children as toddlers and how transitioning from one activity to another always caused a melt down. All of my books have ties to my life or that of my children. Sometimes a book's idea may be written out of need. ***The Peanut Free Café*** was written by an elementary school librarian who noticed that there weren't many books on the topic of peanut allergies, so she wrote one. I was lucky enough to be asked to illustrate it.

Know your audience: Your subject matter must be appropriate to the age of your audience. Are you writing a picture book? An early-grade reader? A mid-grade novel? Become a "kid". You are writing from a kid's perspective. One of

the biggest mistake writers make is creating a “preachy” book, one in which an adult solves the problem. Another common error is picking a topic that is too mature. Someone actually showed me a picture book story about a 15 year old learning to drive. That story will never sell to an audience of 5-8 year olds.

Write! Take a writing course. Learn to minimize. (Easier said than done). The key to writing for children is to express your thoughts in a few words. Picture book manuscripts can be as little as 150 words up to 2000 words, but most are between 500 and 1000 words. Also remember that much is said through the pictures so you don’t always have to repeat it in the text. (Example: If the illustration will show a red coat, you don’t have to write “red coat”.)

Familiarize yourself with Publishers. Every publisher has a niche. Where would your book fit? As you look through books, notice the publisher. Write to the publisher and ask for a catalog (include a SASE), or view their catalogs online. Find out their submission policies and guidelines and follow them carefully. Many publishers do not accept ‘unsolicited manuscripts’, which means that you would need to have been published by them or have an agent connection to submit a manuscript. There are many publishers who still read everything. This research will save you a lot of time when submitting. (See resource list below)

Submitting your story: Once you have fine-tuned your manuscript and have researched publishers, it’s time to submit it. Mail your double spaced typed story with a SASE to the publisher, Atten: Manuscript Submissions. You DO NOT (I repeat- do not!) have to submit artwork with your story. If a publisher loves your story, they will find the perfect illustrator. You will actually decrease your chances that your manuscript will be read if you submit your story with inferior art. Unless you are a professional illustrator, leave the art direction to the publisher. Once you’ve submitted your story- you wait. More likely than not, a rejection letter will follow. (Note: Recently, some publishers have set a policy in which they will not respond unless they want your book, destroying your manuscript copy instead of returning it. If a publisher has this policy- and you have not heard from them in 5 months, move on. The Author’s Guild disagrees with this policy and there is much debate in the industry surrounding this issue.)

The path to publishing is paved with rejection and rejection is part of the game. Theodor Seuss Geisel’s, (better known as Dr. Seuss) first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, was rejected 27 times before the 28th publisher bought it. Even Beatrix Potter’s book, *Peter Rabbit* was rejected by six publishers; when she decided to self publish the book, printing 500 copies. Her book sold well. She then decided to resubmit her book to Frederick Warne & Co. and the rest is history. I, too, deal with rejection all the time. The first book I wrote and illustrated, *Wednesday is Spaghetti Day* was rejected by 8 publishers and was revised many times before Scholastic bought it in 1990. This book ended up being one of my best seller with over 250,000 copies sold. And recently, my previously mentioned book, *Princess K.I.M and the Lie That Grew*, (2009

Albert Whitman) went through 8 publishers over the course of 6 years with just as many revisions. This is where perseverance comes in. If your rejection letters have encouragement, as this quote from one editor, “*You’ve got something here but it needs more complications and a better climax and ending*”, then it may be worth continuing the search. ***Princess K.I.M. and the Lie that Grew*** ended up doing very well and a sequel ***Princess Kim and Too Much Truth*** was published in 2011. At present I am developing these books into a full length musical! www.princesskimthemusical.com

It is also important to know when to give up. If you have no encouraging words and you have submitted your story to many publishers, it may be time to file the story and start something new. Just because your Aunt Millie, the teacher, thinks it’s great, or your kids love it, does not mean it is publishable. I have a file filled with manuscripts that will never be published. To put it in perspective, for every 20 stories I write- *perhaps* one or two will get published, and remember, I have been doing this for 25 years!

SOLD! If you get that “YES- WE LOVE IT” phone call, be ready for more revisions, (after you jump up and down with joy!) Soon after, you will receive an offer and then a contract which will spell out the terms, including your advance, royalty and rights. (An advance is money you receive in advance of publication.) After the contracts are signed and you receive your advance you’ll wait at least a year for the art to be completed and for you book to hit the stores. Even after being in this business for so long, I still get a thrill when that first copy of my book comes in the mail!

So get inspired! Keep a journal and write down ideas when they hit you. Have several stories going at once. Expect rejection, but keep moving forward. If you are serious, you should join a local writers group and research the industry. You never know- you may just have the start of children’s book.

A word about SELF PUBLISHING: With today’s technology it is easy to self-publish your book. But do not confuse self publishers with mainstream, traditional publishers. The difference- a traditional publisher pays *you* an advance and royalty, gives editorial and art direction and promotes and sells your book. It will cost *you* money to self publish a book. You will received limited editorial direction and promotion and may be stuck with boxes of unsold books. If you go this route, ask yourself, why do you want to self publish? How am I going to sell my books? How am I going to promote my book? Do your research and think it through. I would suggest printing a limited quantity at first.

Summary:

1. **Research.** Read children's books. Spend time at a bookstore or the children's room of a library. Observe and read different genres. Notice page lengths, sizes, word count, topics. Is your book an original idea?
2. **Know your audience.** Your subject matter must be appropriate to your book. Are you writing a picture book? A mid-grade reader? A young adult novel? Become a "kid". You are writing from a kid's perspective. (Example: a picture book on learning to drive won't sell.)
3. **Write!** Take a writing course. Learn to minimize. (Easier said than done.)
4. **Join the SCBWI.org** (The Society of Children's Book Authors and Illustrators) Their newsletter for members and their website have valuable information. They have local chapters in every state. There may be a critique group near you. The SCBWI also holds regional conferences.
5. **Familiarize yourself with Publishers.** Every publisher has a niche. Where would your book fit? As you look through books, notice who published it. Call or write the publisher and ask for a catalog. (Or view their catalogs online). Find out their submission policies. This research will save you a lot of time when submitting.
6. **Agents:** Literary agents take 15%. Art Reps take 25%. It has been said that you have a foot up with literary agents if you can also illustrate, but I know plenty of authors who do not draw that have agents. Submission policies are different for every agency; some want a 90 day exclusive, others don't mind multiple submissions. A list of agents & resources: <http://www.phylliscahill.com/greatsites/agents.html>
7. **EBOOKS:** Publishing is changing and ebooks have arrived, with it many new businesses and revised contracts to include ebook clauses. For an introduction to the ebook business : www.eisforbook.com

More Resources:

LOTS OF INFORMATION: <http://www.phylliscahill.com/greatsites/sites.html>

www.scbwi.org (The Society of Children's Book Authors and Illustrators) *

www.nescbwi.org (New England Chapter of the SCBWI) *

*Newsletter, website, conferences have valuable information. Local critique groups. Membership fee.

Children's Book Council: www.cbcbooks.org (publishers listings & tips)

Publisher's Weekly online newsletters: <https://www.publishersweekly.com>

Sign up to receive PW daily and/or Children's Bookshelf (weekly). Free.

Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market by Alice Pope Writers Digest Books

Terms to know:

Trade: Books marketed to bookstores/ libraries (Usually hardcover, jacketed.)

Mass Market: Books sold to large chain stores, large printings, includes license characters.

Novelty: books that have a novelty; pop-up, flaps, shapes, book packaged with a toy etc.

Crossovers: Books that can crossover to bookstore/ school and mass market. In between a Trade and Mass market book. (Example: Hungry Caterpillar)

Advance: Monies given in advance of project, either flat fee or with a royalty.

Flat Fee: A fee for work with no royalty. Author retains the rights. (Original art is returned).

Work for Hire: A fee for the work, no royalty. Author gives up rights. (Many times original art is not returned).

Royalty: A percentage of sales that is paid to the author. The percentage could be on Net or Retail.

Net vs. Retail: Net is the amount received by publisher (usually 40% of retail). Retail is the price marked on the book. (*Royalty on retail is the best)

Multiple Submissions: Submitting a manuscript to more than one publisher at the same time.

Unsolicited Manuscripts: Manuscripts that are not requested or are submitted by an unknown author.

Bio

Maryann Cocca-Leffler is the author and illustrator of over 50 books for children. She has worked with most major publishers including Random House, HarperCollins and Scholastic. New Books include; *Let it Snow! & Let it Fall!* (Scholastic), *Time to Say Bye Bye* (Viking), *Rain Brings Frogs* (HC), and *Princess K.I.M. and Too Much Truth* (Albert Whitman & Co). Her book, *Mr. Tanen's Ties* (Albert Whitman & Co) was the winner of the Indiana Hoosier Book Award and the Florida Reading Award. Her childhood inspired book, *Bus Route to Boston* (Boyd's Mills Press) won the Parents Choice Award. She holds a BFA in Illustration from the Massachusetts College of Art. Please visit her website at: www.maryanncoccaleffler.com PLAY: www.princesskimthemusical.com