



Writing for children

There are many potential authors out there with a great idea for a story. **Eleanor Norford** investigates what makes a children's book successful.

Despite the recession, self-published children's books are becoming increasingly popular. During the past ten years this sector has increased substantially, from £193m to £325m. These figures not only represent established authors, but also include writers who have self-published. Great news for anyone thinking about writing for this market, but how do you take that first step?

Getting Started

Julie Bertagna, critically acclaimed author of numerous children's books, believes you need to start with the story. Her journey into children's fiction began in childhood. "Sometimes, as a child, I didn't know which world I was really living in – the dream story world in my head or the real one. Often, I preferred the dream world. I never wrote my stories down, just enjoyed 'living them' in

my head, or playing them out with my friends."

Unable to shake the daydream habit Julie decided to turn her fantasy world into fiction. "I tried to ignore the nagging voice inside that told me I didn't stand a chance. Instead I waited until I felt a daydream grow strong into a story then I began to write."

The idea for her first book developed after talking to the 12-year-old children she was teaching. "They wanted to read stories about people like themselves, who were living in Scotland, now. Almost no stories of that kind existed so I decided to write my story for these children."

Her self-belief paid off. Not only is Julie now a best-selling author, she has also won awards for her work

including the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year, the Lancashire Children's Book of the Year Award and the Angus Award. *The Opposite Of Chocolate* was shortlisted for the Book Trust Teenage Prize in 2004.

Her niche is writing for the pre-teen market. Although Julie has written books for children as

young as six, she admits finding it hard to write for the very young. "You have so few words to work with – both in terms of space on the page and vocabulary. I have

huge admiration for those who do it well. I prefer writing for older children because I can explore quite complex stories and characters. I don't know if it's easier as there are different challenges for every age group, but my imagination seems to cope best

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with writing for older readers.”

So how do you make sure your work is suitable for the age group it is aimed at? Many agents and publishers advise using a young focus group to test your work. For Julie there are some potential flaws with relying solely on this method. “Children can tell you what they like and don’t like, but they can’t tell you why in critical terms that would help you as a writer.

“As with readers of any age, different children like and dislike different things,” she explains – speaking as an ex-teacher, mother and writer. A lack of critical ability in young readers means you could try out a story with one group then get completely different reactions from others. Therefore the result is likely to be unclear. Julie advises writers to be their most demanding critic. “Study how other good books for your intended age group work and try to get constructive criticism from experienced editors, agents or trusted readers.”

She also says that it is essential to understand your market. “Read what’s out there, but don’t copy what’s already published. You want

an original twist. That’s why you need to know what has already been done, and how,” says Julie, adding that her debut book, *The Spark Gap*, was taken on by the first agent she contacted who also happened to be Judy Blume’s agent.

“I told her I’d written it to fill a gap – I couldn’t find contemporary Scottish novels for the children I was teaching. She liked that. My most successful book, *Exodus*, was published when young adult books about the future were supposedly out of fashion – now they are all the rage. Harry Potter became a massive success when ‘gritty realism’ was in vogue. There are so many other examples. A good book with an original twist or ‘voice’ is what publishers and readers enjoy, so don’t be afraid to go against the grain.”

An Author’s Experience

Self-published author, Barbara Spencer became a writer because she loved telling stories. “Once I had written a story down – I was smitten. Rather like eating chocolate – one piece and that’s it – hooked! It’s very hard work,

never gets easier, but reaching the end of a story is such an unbelievable high – for me it is far more precious than seeing the book in print.”

Her first book, *Scruffy*, was illustrated by schoolchildren and attracted a publisher and Tesco in Somerset. Tesco mounted exhibitions of all the drawings in their stores and sold the book for two months, giving the proceeds to the RSPCA. However, despite *Scruffy* securing a publishing deal, Barbara has since chosen to self-publish because she had several near misses getting her work published.

“Liz Maude at Andersen always regretted not taking *A Dangerous Game of Football*. And that’s been the pattern for all my books – read and approved by a literary consultancy, picked up by editors, only to fall at the final fence.” Barbara discovered self-publishing after years of scouring the web for new ways to publish. She researched many options before deciding on Matador, which she describes as professional, patient and understanding. “Self-publishing is very active, there are literally dozens of companies to



“A twitchy young audience who lose interest could indicate which parts of your story need to be worked on. An enthralled young audience should give confidence that you’ve nailed it”

Julie Bertagna



choose from out there, including a few scoundrels."

Her favourite part of the process is seeing the covers of her book for the first time. "I have the most brilliant illustrators and the covers are absolutely great. Proof reading is her least favoured part as it is quite expensive and "it takes at least four to five runs through to get it right."

When it comes to making a profit on your work, she admits it can be difficult. Authors should be prepared to invest in a large print run if their priority is to make money. "With *Running* I was unaware of how popular it was going to be and only had a print run of 500 each time. With Amazon taking 60 per cent of the cover price, each copy has actually cost me. You need a 1,000 or 2,000 print run to stand any chance."

So why does Barbara self-publish if not to make money? Because she believes in her work: "You also know that it is going to give the

reader great pleasure – and you are hoping that one day a mainstream publisher will take up one of your books."

From the Publisher's Perspective

For Jeremy Thompson, publisher at Matador, the success of a children's book depends on getting the age range right. "Too many authors write children's books at the wrong level, either too childlike for older kids or too advanced for younger ones."

Key questions to ask yourself when you have an idea are: What is the age range of my target audience, and will my idea suit this age group? "A book must also have a 'hook' and a

strong central character; and write about what kids like, not what you think they should like – or what you liked 40 years ago!" explains Jeremy.

Editing is also crucial. "Write, read, edit, read and leave. Then read, edit and write again. Next, get

feedback from readers in your target audience. Edit and edit again."

Mostly he advises authors to include illustrations in books aimed at the under eights. "Books for eight upwards don't need them, but for younger readers some illustrations won't hurt. Don't illustrate teens' books."

If finding an illustrator seems a daunting task, ask your publisher. Matador, for example, sources illustrators every week for authors, using a wide range of illustrators depending on illustration style and the content of the book.

However, despite ebooks being a growth area, Jeremy advises caution when it comes to publishing on multimedia platforms. "Formats are currently limited. Kids' novels are great as ebooks, but when illustrated these are very limited in how they can be laid out – they don't look good on most ereaders. The cost of creating an 'app' for a tablet computer is currently prohibitive, and an audio book is also very costly. A website is good as it provides a focus for

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Ben Cameron's Top Tips

1. Take your time. There is no need to get the book out tomorrow. Publishing is a long process so get it right first.
2. Have your book thoroughly edited. People often worry that editing will take their personality out of the book. It won't and it is absolutely necessary.
3. Get the cover right. Even if it is for an ebook a good cover is not an afterthought, it is vital.
4. Publicity – your book absolutely will not be seen without someone shouting about it.
5. Enjoy writing and enjoy the fact that you are a published author. Take pride in the fact that you did something important.

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readers where the author can interact with their audience, give things away, or attract new readers."

So what does the future hold for children's books? Jeremy predicts that there will be a lot more things created for ereaders and computers. "Physical books won't change much, though perhaps there will be a trend towards making books more beautiful as objects."

Making it a Bestseller

Ben Cameron, sales director (UK and Europe) for Smith Publicity, is a publisher, consultant and publicist. He also publishes a small children's book imprint, in between running campaigns, tours, marketing and media management for many well-known publishers. Having worked with well-known and new authors he is an expert.

According to Ben the most difficult part of writing for children is sticking to one idea and seeing it through to the end. "Children appreciate books with a singularity of purpose, but it is easy for writers to get lost along the way. I think

that authors find it easier to write for older children because they are much more free to say what they want to say. Picture books can be great fun to write, but they are much harder than people think. They are like poetry – every word has to be exactly right."

So what in his opinion makes a book a bestseller? "There is a magic that happens when a child reads a book. When you can see that, it really works," explains Ben. "Books like that usually, eventually, find their way on to the bestseller lists.

To get there you need great characters, a compelling plot, attractive production and bang-on marketing and publicity." He acknowledges that the marketing side is perhaps the hardest part of the process. "The space given to the coverage of children's books is tiny compared to adult books. Just look at the *Guardian* or any of the major press. The same goes for marketing spend and the energy put into the innovative marketing and publicity that can make or break a book. "The good news is that the huge upsurge in blogs and online networking puts power into the

author's hands. School author talks and festivals are fantastic ways of connecting with young readers and getting them into your books, but travelling around the country to do these events is exhausting and can take a lot of time out of writing your next book."

Getting the book into the hands of young readers is a challenge. Like Barbara, Ben also advises would-be authors to "do it because you love it – not to get rich."

"Maybe you will write a bestseller, but even if you don't it is great fun trying. To achieve fame and fortune it has to be in you. You have to push the book constantly on social media, with publicity and marketing and sales. The hard part isn't writing the book, but getting it noticed. . ."

