Ten Tips on Writing Picture Books

by DIANE MAYR

"If your story makes sense without visual clues, then it is not a picture book. . . ."

As a children's librarian, I do story hours for preschoolers ages 3 to 5. Children this age have developed language skills, but aren't yet able to read on their own. After more than 1,500 story hours, I know what these children like. By sharing this knowledge I hope to improve the chances of my wowing young patrons with some great picture book—yours.

Tip #1: Read. When wannabe writers tell me they have written a book for children, I ask them to compare their book to something already in print. I'm usually met with a blank stare, or "I haven't read many children's books." If you haven't read what's out there, how do you know if your book is better than—or as good as—the rest? How do you know your version of the "Three Little Pigs" is different enough from the traditional one to attract a child's (or publisher's) attention? [Suggestions of titles to "study" will be shown in brackets.]

Tip #2: Be Brief. Good books for preschoolers run 800 words or less—sometimes considerably less. Look at the word counts of some of the "classics": The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)—225; If You Give A Mouse A Cookie (Laura Joffe Numeroff)—291; The Snowy Day ( Ezra Jack Keats)—319; and Corduroy (Don Freeman)—708.

Don't use a lot of description; the illustrator will fill in the details. (You may, though, wish to provide notes, separate from the text, about illustrative elements crucial to your story.) A balance of dialogue and narration works best.

Tip #3: Tell a Good Story. If your forte is "mood" pieces, then you're not aiming for the preschool audience. For them, something has to happen, and the story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The ending must not be ambiguous; predictability is expected.

Have you heard of the "rule of three"? The main
“Don’t allow the talking animals in your stories to do things a child wouldn’t do. . . .”

character must complete three tasks, or face three foes, before winning the day. The rule has worked for generations of talespinners; try letting your heroine face the monster under the bed three times before she develops the courage to banish it. [Read: The Wolf’s Chicken Stew, by Keiko Kasza]

Tip #4: KNOW THE PRESCHOOL PSYCHE. Preschoolers are strongly tied to their homes and family. They enjoy hearing about situations they’re familiar with, such as the arrival of a new baby. It’s your task to develop a twist on a familiar theme, but make the twist believable. [Read: Julius, The Baby Of The World, by Kevin Henkes]

As adults, we have a tendency to dismiss a preschooler’s fears and “problems” as inconsequential, but they’re very real. They need to be addressed and dealt with reassuringly. [Read: Rosie’s Baby Tooth, by Maryann Macdonald]

The problems adults see as significant—death, divorce, abuse, etc.—are topics for bibliotherapy; such books have a place, but are not for the general audience. Nor are 3- to 5-year-olds the audience for a picture book that tries to explain the Holocaust. Childhood is short but critical in the development of character. Preschoolers deserve to feel secure.

Animals often appear as the characters in picture books, but don’t allow the talking animals in your stories to do things a child wouldn’t do. For example, don’t have Baby Monkey cross a busy street by herself. If you do, preschoolers will invariably ask, “Where’s the Mommy?” If Baby Monkey needs to cross the street without Mom in order to advance your plot, leave it in, but don’t arbitrarily dismiss a young monkey’s (child’s) need to depend on responsible adults. [Read: Baby Duck And the Bad Eyeglasses, by Amy Hest]

Tip #5: SUREFIRE PLEASERS. Preschoolers love humor! But, they’re not looking for subtlety. Think pratfalls without pain. Sophisticated punning is out, but nonsense words draw a laugh. [Read: Froggie Gets Dressed, by Jonathan London; Contrary Mary, by Anita Jeram; Tacky The Penguin, by Helen Lester; Mother Makes A Mistake, by Ann Dower]

Noises are always a hit. Preschoolers will “moo” and “quack” along with the reader—and love doing it! [Read: Is This A House For Hermit Crab?, by Amy McDonald; Peace At Last, by Jill Murphy; Small Green Snake, by Libba Moore Gray]

Allow the audience to discover a “secret” before the main character does. Little kids, so frequently put down by older siblings, more advanced peers, and even by adults, appreciate the opportunity to feel “smarter” than someone else. This device is often used by puppeteers who have the audience see the villain before the lead puppet does. If you’ve ever heard the gleeful screams, “Look behind you! He’s behind you!,” then you know how successful this can be with preschoolers. [Read: any of Frank Asch’s books about Bear. Two good examples: Mooncake and Bread And Honey]

Questions scattered throughout the story—for example, “Should he look under the bed?”—allow interaction between the child and the story. Kids love to interact! [Read: The Noisy Book, by Margaret Wise Brown]

Tip #6: PICTURES ARE ESSENTIAL. If your story makes sense without visual clues, then it is not a picture book. Text and pictures must contribute equally to telling the story. (One note of caution: Unless you are an accomplished artist/illustrator, do not attempt to illustrate your own work if you plan to submit it to a trade publisher. You need not seek out an illustrator, the illustrator will be selected by your publisher.) [Read: King Bidgood’s In The Bathtub, by Audrey Wood, illustrated by Don Wood]

Tip #7: WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE! Preschoolers tend to take what you say literally. If I read aloud—“Look, it’s snowing!” he cried.—without a doubt, a child will interrupt me to ask, “Why is he crying?” Use “he said” or “he shouted.”

Nothing destroys the flow of a story like having to stop to explain an unfamiliar term. Use language with which today’s children are comfortable. Don’t use “frock” for dress or “dungarees” for jeans.

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• The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation has announced the Barbara Mandigo Kelly Peace Poetry Awards to encourage poets to explore and illuminate peace and the human spirit. First prize of $500 will be awarded to an adult poet; $250 will be awarded to each of two youth winners. Unpublished poems, to 40 lines, written in English will be considered. For guidelines send SASE to: the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, 1187 Coast Village Rd., Suite 121, Santa Barbara, CA 93108. Entries must be postmarked by July 1, 1999. There is a $5 entry fee for adults.

• Greater Augusta Arts Council announces the 6th Annual Porter Fleming Writing Competition, offering $5,600 in prizes. There are four categories: drama, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry; contest is open to residents of GA, FL, AL, SC, and NC. Deadline for submissions is August 2, 1999. For guidelines and entry form, send SASE to: Greater Augusta Arts Council, Porter Fleming Writing Competition, P.O. Box 1776, Augusta, GA 30903. Entry fee is $10.

• Passager: A Journal of Remembrance and Discovery sponsors a poetry contest for writers over 50. First prize is $500 plus publication in Passager. Submit a brief bio, SASE, and five previously unpublished poems, to 30 lines each, to: Passager Poetry Contest, Dept. W, Univ. of Baltimore, 1420 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21201. Manuscripts will not be returned. Deadline is June 15, 1999. The entry fee is $10.

• Glimmer Train Press will award prizes of $1,200, $500, and $300 to winning short stories, to 2,000 words. Open to all writers. Entry fee is $10 per story and submissions must be postmarked by July 31, 1999. Stories will not be returned. For details, write Very Short Fiction Award, Glimmer Train Press, 710 S.W. Madison St., #504, Portland, OR 97205-2900. Web site: www.glimmertrain.com

• The Georgia Poetry Society announces its eighth annual Edward Davin Vickers Memorial Poetry Awards for an original poem, any subject, any form, up to 80 lines. Prizes are $250, $100, and $50; the entry fee is $5 for first poem, $1 for each additional. Send SASE for guidelines to: Carole Fessenden, Chairman, Vickers Poetry Awards, 3822 Clubhouse Place, Gainesville, GA 30501. The contest closes July 31, 1999.

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Tip #8: LEARN THE 3 “R’s.” Repetition, rhythm, and rhyme work well with the younger set. Traditional folktales like “The Little Red Hen” still appeal to them because of the repetition. Rhyme, unfortunately, can kill a story if it’s not done well. Rather than write a story entirely in rhyme, try a few repetitive rhyming sentences. [Read: Millions Of Cats, by Wanda Gag; A Cake For Barney, by Joyce Dunbar]

Tip #9: READ ALOUD. Read your story out loud and listen. If you stumble, nine times out of ten, there’s something wrong with the writing. When it finally sounds right to you, try reading it to someone else for continuity and clarity.

Tip #10: MAKE A DUMMY. Fold eight pieces of paper in half and staple at the fold. You now have a 32-page dummy. Cut and paste your words onto the pages, leaving the first three pages blank for front matter. You’ll need to make decisions on length. Is the story too short? Too long? Does it flow smoothly? You may want to make notes about the pictures you envision for each page or spread. The suspense in a story could be jeopardized by raising a problem in the text on a left-hand page and having a picture on the right-hand page provide the solution. Remember, preschoolers are “reading” the illustrations as you’re reading the words. It’s preferable to have a page turn before providing resolutions or answers.

Bonus Tip: MAKE FRIENDS WITH YOUR CHILDREN’S LIBRARIAN. She can introduce you to the classic picture books, as well as to the best of what’s currently being published. She’ll have review journals and publishers’ catalogues for you to look at, and she can double as a critical reader.

I’ve been waiting more than ten years for the perfect picture book to share with my story hour kids; I can wait a little longer for you to write it!

The WRITER