

Motivation, Revelation, Inspiration

Thoughts on Writing for the Youth Market

By Mae Respicio

Do you remember your favorite picture book as a child? Or the novel in high school that made you look at the world differently for the first time? What made those books stick with you?

There is a variety of literature on the shelves for the youth market, everything from easy readers to magazine articles and middle-grade novels. Children and teens are a complex reading audience. So, is there a secret to writing for them—and getting published?

We asked writers who teach courses in the area of Writing for the Youth Market (formerly called Writing for Young People) to share their thoughts about their audience, as well as their own writing. There may not be a secret key to writing for kids and teens, but their answers do motivate, reveal, and inspire.

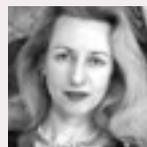
Instructor Bios



Caroline Arnold, author of over 100 books for children, including *Australian Animals*, *Giant Shark*, and *Easter Island*. Ms. Arnold is a frequent contributor to children's magazines, is a children's book illustrator, and has received numerous major awards for her work.

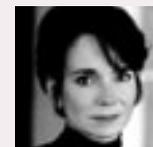
Ms. Arnold will be teaching Writing High-Interest Nonfiction for the School-Age Child this winter.

Rachel Cohn, author of the young adult novel *Gingerbread* (Simon & Schuster), a *Publisher's Weekly* Best Book of the Year selection, and an ALA Best Best for Young Adults selection, among other awards. Ms. Cohn's previous young adult novels include *The Steps*, *Pop Princess*, and *Sbrimp*. Her next young adult novel, *Two Steps Forward*, will be published in 2006 by Simon & Schuster.



Madeleine Comora, author of *George Washington's Teeth*, an NCTE Notable picture book, which received starred reviews in all the top review publications and won numerous awards; the picture book biography *Rembrandt and Titus*, illustrated by Thomas Locker; and the forthcoming historical fiction picture book *Taj Mahal*. Ms. Comora's poetry appears in numerous picture book collections and anthologies.

Ms. Comora will be teaching Writing for Children: Beginning Workshop, and Introduction to Children's Poetry (Online) this winter.



Jessica Harper, author and songwriter, whose numerous books for children include *I'm Not Going to Chase the Cat Today*, *Nora's Room*, *Lizzy's Do's and Don'ts*, and *Lizzy's Ups and Downs* (all from HarperCollins), and *I Forgot My Shoes*, *Four Boys Named Jordan*, and the forthcoming *A Place Called Kindergarten* (all from Penguin Putnam). Ms. Harper also has recorded seven award-winning CDs of music for children.

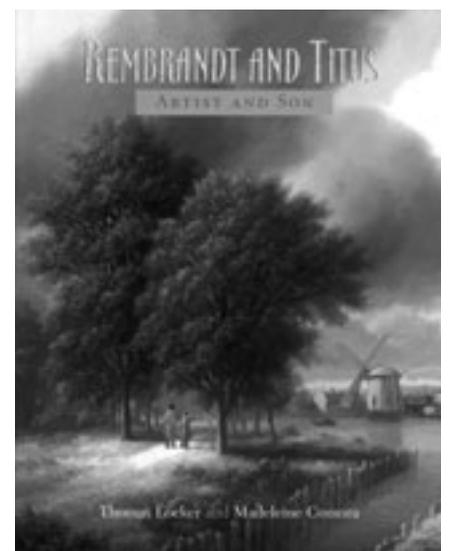
Ms. Harper will be teaching Writing Picture Books for Children: From Creative Spark to Publication this winter.

The Writing Process

Why do you write for your audience?

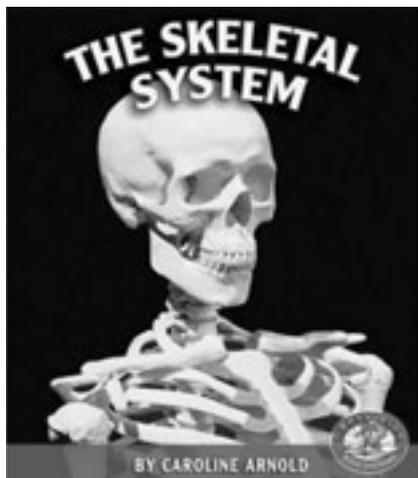
Caroline Arnold: I enjoy writing for children because, like me, children are curious about the world. I began writing when my own children were small and I became reacquainted with the children's book world through their eyes.

April Halprin Wayland: Although I don't illustrate them, my picture books and my novels in poems have pictures on every page. Illustrated books have always held me captive. There is something more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts about combining text and pictures that, even now, stops me in my tracks when I pass them in a store window. So, it was the story and the image together that stole my heart. I wanted to create the stories and then see what colors someone else pulled from them.



A picture book written by Madeleine Comora.

Dolores Johnson: I like children. I believe I have something to say to children. I believe children's literature is more significant, uplifting, and involving than most of what I have read directed at adults.



A nonfiction book written by Caroline Arnold.

Ann Whitford Paul: I was inspired to write for children after years of bedtime reading to my four children. Those quiet times, sitting so close our skins touched, and focusing together on a book, made me want to try to write books other grown-ups and children could share.

Lisa Yee: I just can't help myself. Maybe I never grew up. Or perhaps I still identify with young readers. I've never really analyzed it. It's just something I enjoy doing.

Deborah Nourse Lattimore: One thing that drew me to the field of children's books was art, illustrations I'd seen ever since I was a very young child; I loved the art and I wanted to know all the stories.

Betsy Haynes: Most juvenile and young adult writers say they write for the age they are stuck in. I will always be 13. Even though 13 is different today than it was then, I can still relate.

Virginia Frances Schwartz: The issues I address in my books evolve right out of my own childhood: the struggle for identity, feminism, male dominance, overcoming barriers, characters on the edge, spirituality, apprenticeship, abuse, and grandmotherly mentorship. It seems that

my own childhood is the source of my inspiration, a place I return to again and again to develop my novels. But it's whom I write for that is the biggest inspiration. I meet kids every day who are facing what I did. Today's audience needs the same mentoring I looked for, in a form they will enjoy and accept. That is an author's task.

Sherry Shahan: I write for kids because they're smarter than adults. More honest, too. They tend to say what they think. Besides, it's exciting to have the opportunity to communicate with our future.

Where do you draw inspiration from in your own writing?

Sonia Levitin: I draw inspiration mostly from humanity, from acts of courage or degradation, from people's encounters with one another, either from personal experience or the media or my imagination.

Madeleine Comora: Books inspire me, other people's experiences and ways of expressing their experiences. So, first and foremost, I read. I find that the courage other people have to share their thoughts and experiences gives me courage to explore my own life and get in touch with what I want to say.



A picture book written by Ann Whitford Paul.

Kerry Madden: My three kids inspire me, and they are also my toughest editors. My husband grew up one of 13 children, which endlessly intrigues me as I write about my own fictional Smoky Mountain family.

Gretchen Woelfle: I travel quite a bit now that my children are grown, and I look for stories wherever I go. I'm working on a chapter book that includes an incident in Shakespeare's life. On a recent trip to England I walked the streets of London to get a feel for the setting. But my major inspiration comes from sitting in front of the computer and hitting the keys, day after day.

Betsy Haynes: I draw upon my own childhood experiences and deep-seated beliefs, and translate them into stories that fit today's problems.

The Marketplace

What are some of the current trends in the youth market?

Kerry Madden: Every author has a website with a blog.

Sherry Shahan: I try not to pay attention to trends. Instead, I prefer to work on projects that speak to me in some meaningful way, that ask questions and explore answers. Here's the thing, once a trend hits the marketplace, it's too late to jump on the bandwagon. Besides, if you're writing for the market you're writing for the wrong reasons.

Jessica Harper: One trend that's obvious to all, and annoying to many, is the dominance in the marketplace of books by celebrities. I think a lot of us are frustrated when publishers put so many publicity dollars into high profile people and ignore wonderful books by lesser known authors.

Alexis O'Neill: There's a terrible trend to think that one can write to a trend in children's books. The only writing that lasts is the kind that is trendless.

How necessary is it for new, aspiring writers of children's and teen literature to have an agent?

Susan Goldman Rubin: When starting out, I think it's best to represent yourself. Most agents won't take on a writer who's never been published. And if they do, they certainly won't give that writer the time and attention necessary for breaking into the field. I think a new writer will do better by doing his or her homework and figuring out which houses to submit a manuscript to. The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) is a marvelous resource.

Lisa Yee: I was published without an agent for my first two novels. A miracle occurred and I was pulled out of the slush pile by Arthur Levine, editor of the *Harry Potter* series. So, I'd say no, you don't need an agent, but it sure would help. If you are seeking an agent, you need to do one thing: write well. I know that might sound glib, but it's truly the best advice I can give.



Medusa (HarperCollins, top) written and illustrated by Deborah Nourse Lattimore, and *Onward* (Random House), a photobiography written by Dolores Johnson.

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Betsy Haynes has written over 70 novels and series books for middle-grade and young adult readers, including *The Fabulous Five*, *Taffy Sinclair*, *Spies on the Devil's Belt*, and *The Great Mom Swap*. Ms. Haynes's middle-grade book series, *Bone Chillers* (HarperCollins), was turned into an ABC Saturday morning television series.



Dolores Johnson, writer and illustrator whose 17 published books include a number of picture books, such as *My Mom Is My Show-and-Tell* and *She Dared to Fly*; a biography of Bessie Coleman; and *The Children's Book of Kwanzaa*, a middle-grade nonfiction book.



Deborah Nourse Lattimore, author and illustrator of 25 books, including *The Winged Cat* and *Frida Maria: A Story of the Old Southwest*. Ms. Lattimore's other notable books include *The Lady with the Ship on Her Head*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Three Tales*, *The Dragon's Robe*, and *Medusa*. She is the winner of the 2004 Golden Dolphin Award for a body of work, awarded by the Southern California Booksellers Association.



Sonia Levitin, fiction writer whose more than 40 books have won numerous awards in the U.S. and abroad, including the National Jewish Book Award, PEN Award, Edgar Allan Poe Mystery Award, Western Writers of America Award, German Catholic Bishop's Award, and SCCLCYP Body of Work Award. Ms. Levitin's picture book, *Nine for California*, was a finalist for the California Young Reader Medal.



Kerry Madden, MFA, fiction and nonfiction writer and playwright whose latest book, *Gentle's Holler* (Viking), received starred Kirkus and PW reviews. Ms. Madden's companion books to *Gentle's Holler* are *Louise's Palette* (2007) and *Jessie's Mountain* (2008). Her novel, *Offsides*, was a New York Library pick for Mature Teens. Her book, *Writing Smarts*, was published by American Girl Library.

Ms. Madden will be teaching Finding Your Voice in Middle-Grade Fiction: A One-Day Workshop this winter.

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Caroline Arnold: As a writer of children's books, you do not need an agent, and unless you are already published, you may find it difficult to find one. I recommend doing your own market research to determine which publishers are the best bet for your particular story.

Madeleine Comora: In general, people writing for a young audience don't need agents to get their material read by editors of many publishing houses, but in the end it's a personal decision. Some authors like the control of submitting their own material. I personally like the control but hate knowing there are double standards in the contracts for agented and unagented authors.



A young adult novel by Rachel Cohn.



Middle-grade novels written by Kerry Madden and Lisa Yee.

How tough is it for new writers to get published?

Rachel Cohn: It's as tough as you would imagine. But I truly believe publishers are always looking for fresh voices and original ideas—that's why they're in business—so there's every reason to be hopeful at the same time.

Dolores Johnson: It is probably tougher now than when I first started. There are fewer publishing houses. Most publishers and imprints were consolidated into just a few publishing houses after being purchased by conglomerates years ago. Fewer publishing houses means fewer books being published. Most of these big corporations want instant bestsellers, therefore they are less likely to give an unknown writer too many opportunities. But I truly believe that if you can provide a quality product, particularly one that is unique and appeals to children, a new writer can forge a successful publishing career.

Ann Whitford Paul: I don't think it's any harder than it ever was. A good book will sell.

Sonia Levitin: It has always been tough getting published. There are more aspiring writers than needy editors. That's

what makes success in the field so wonderful. Not everybody has the grit and the patience to tough it out. I think that effort is the primary necessity—along with some talent and a huge amount of interest in and love for the human condition.

Madeleine Comora: I think it's difficult because there are fewer publishing companies willing to take risks on worthy projects. Many editors who love writing no longer have the authority to make the buying decisions. Their marketing departments have the final say, and since they like to try and repeat their successes, the variety and range of literature for children has grown limited.

On a Final Note

What's the weirdest or funniest thing that's happened to you as a writer?

Alexis O'Neill: When I was signing books in a library in Long Beach after school, a 4th grade boy fainted. When he revived he said, "Whew! You're the first real author I've ever met!"

Susan Goldman Rubin: The weirdest thing was appearing on the Today Show in 2001. I was interviewed by Katie Couric. The occasion was publication of my biography of Steven Spielberg titled *Crazy for Movies*. With Spielberg's permission I had interviewed members of his family as well as people he worked with, and two of his sisters made the TV appearance with me. Great fun and a high point in my career that I never expected to happen.

Ann Whitford Paul: One student at a school visit asked, "Do you have to be old to write for children?"

Deborah Nourse Lattimore: I was giving a talk at a Jewish Day School in California and the children I was speaking to that

day had just come in from a schetl in Russia. They were all very intense, incredibly brilliant, and a little bit afraid of the new surroundings. I told them how, when I was a little girl, my grandmother and I used to sketch in the Los Angeles County Museum. And one day, when we were drawing Greek statues, I asked my grandmother what kept that fig leaf on the Greek god. She replied "Tree sap." One of the little boys at the Day School scrutinized me and said, "That story is not true! We are in Amerriki now and is much moderne here. Not to use tree sap. Now use *velcro!*" A wonderfully smart kid! And this, dear writers, is why we should all speak to children.

Any parting thoughts or words of advice for aspiring authors of children's and teen literature?

Jessica Harper: Focus on writing something that's true to who you are, that's in your voice, that touches you or makes you laugh, and write it as well as you can. It's the unique, well-written piece that's going to catch an editor's eye. I wish



A picture book written by Sherry Shahan.



Alexis O'Neill, PhD, author, *Loud Emily* (Simon & Schuster). Dr. O'Neill's fiction and nonfiction are widely published in such children's magazines as *Cobblestone*, *Calliope*, *Faces*, *Spider*, and *Cricket*. Her book, *The Recess Queen* (Scholastic), was a *Los Angeles Times* bestseller.



Ann Whitford Paul, author of *The Seasons Sewn: A Year in Patchwork*, which received the Carl Sandburg Award for Children's Literature. Ms. Paul also has published rhymed picture books, including *Hello Toes! Hello Feet!*; an easy-reader, *Silly Sadie, Silly Samuel*; and a collection of poetry, *All by Herself*. Her latest publications are *Little Monkey Says Good Night*, *Mañana Iguana*, and *Hop! Hop! Hop!*



Susan Goldman Rubin, author of more than 35 books for young readers, including *Degas and the Dance*, an ALA Notable for 2003, and *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin*, winner of the SCBWI Golden Kite Honor Book for 2000. Ms. Rubin's most recent book is *Searching for Anne Frank: Letters from Amsterdam to Iowa* (Abrams).



Virginia Frances Schwartz, award-winning writer and author of numerous novels for middle-grade and young adult readers, including *Messenger*, *Initiation*, *Send One Angel Down*, *If I Just Had Two Wings*, and the forthcoming *Kidspeak: Kids Talk about Writing* (Holiday House)

I could get back all the hours I spent trying to write something that I thought would sell, in the days before I learned to focus on ideas that I loved that came from my heart and soul.

Gretchen Woelfle: The greatest pleasure should be in writing—sitting down and letting words flow. Clutching a book or a magazine that has your name on the cover is thrilling, but that may happen once a year—or once every five years. You should feel even greater joy every day, bringing stories to life, sentence by sentence.

Alexis O'Neill: Learn the craft of writing, but learn the business, too. You are going to be your own best advocate when it comes to contract negotiation. Long after you've fired your agents or left a publishing house, you'll be left with the deal, so know what you're signing.

Lisa Yee: Read, read, write, read, write, write, read, and keep writing. And go easy on the adjectives.

Virginia Frances Schwartz: I think that desire and intent are necessary to succeed as a writer; they carry you past the maya, the disappointments, and the lack of recognition. If you really want it, you do it. Examine why you write, where it comes from, and what it gives you. If the answer is that it clarifies and enhances your life, then you will return to it like an old friend.

Sonia Levitin: Work hard. Research hard. Don't be afraid to use your real self in your writing. It is always necessary to give a piece of yourself away to your readers.

Susan Goldman Rubin: Read, Read, Read. Read contemporary books as well as classics. Get a sense of what's being published today. Go to an independent book store that specializes in children's books. Become familiar with genres and age



A young adult novel by Sonia Levitin.

groups. Read *The Horn Book*, an important publication about children's books.

Caroline Arnold: The best writers are those who have developed a keen sense of observation. They notice details about the way things look, feel, sound, and smell. They learn how to use words to paint a picture of a scene or action. The other secret of becoming a good writer is practice. Writing letters or keeping a journal are two ways of practicing writing. Writing is something like baseball: you are not likely to hit a home run the first time you step up to the plate. Your first stories will not be perfect either, but with practice they will get better and better and soon you will be hitting the ball out of the park.

Rachel Cohn: Read. There's such a diverse range of great books being published in YA right now, and the best way to learn the market and develop your craft is, I believe, by studying the voices that have proven to connect with teen readers.

Dolores Johnson: I believe that every one of us trying to write for children needs to spend some time analyzing why we have undertaken this goal. Is it just a desire to get out of a miserable advertising job, or to make a chunk of *Harry Potter*-sized money, or because it's easier than writing for adults? I believe we have to spend some time deliberating on what it is that we as individuals have to offer to children. Some of us might say, "I've got a child's sense of wonder," or "I've got a great sense of humor," or "I had a miserable childhood, but I survived," or whatever the reason. Consequently, after determining what it is that you bring to the table, you have to use whatever it is inside of you that was meant to get your message across to that child.

Kerry Madden: Write because you have to, because nothing else will do, and then learn to do it well—and read, read, read. And listen. Learn to listen all over again.

April Halprin Wayland: I don't know you, you're reading this article, putting off going to work, or wishing there was more to your life, pouring yourself another bowlful of banana nut all natural granola with soymilk, maybe—and I was right there. That was me. I was working in downtown Los Angeles in the marketing department of a Fortune 100 Corporation when I took my first Writers' Program class. I was spectacularly well paid, had the beautiful briefcase, the suits, and was developing a taste for expensive jewelry—when I realized I didn't *want* a gold watch. I wanted out. Took that first UCLA Extension class and my life has never been the same. My writing and teaching life now? Absolutely delicious.

Sherry Shahan: Try not to think about replicating versions of existing books. Instead, strive to create books as distinct and individual as our readers. I encourage

everyone to think of his or her story as a stage where the reader is the performer. Every book a child opens carries the possibility of being a lifelong friend. How exciting is that?

Ann Whitford Paul: Children are the best audience. They're not jaded and the whole world is new and exciting for them. Writing picture books allows me to see the world through their eyes and always lifts my spirits. Enjoy the process!

Deborah Nourse Lattimore: Stay open to sound critiques. Try incorporating others' critique suggestions even when you violently disagree with them. Revise accordingly. Read a lot. Go for walks. But above all, honor your own voice. And what is "voice"? It's *you*. And you don't just find it one day; it's always there and it develops over time. And last, but not least, eat some good ice cream or sorbet: the artist must be fed.

Madeleine Comora: I consider myself a student. I'm always learning. I'm always looking for ways to improve. A teacher once said that his role was to make himself obsolete, but I think the best artists are really lifelong students.



If I Just Had Two Wings (top), a young adult novel by Virginia Frances Schwartz, and *Nora's Room*, a picture book by Jessica Harper.

Sherry Shahan, author of 30 fiction and nonfiction children's books, including the middle-grade adventure novels *Death Mountain* and *Frozen Stiff*; the bilingual picture books *Spicy Hot Colors* and *Cool Cats Counting*; and the photo-illustrated *Dashing through the Snow: The Story of the Iditarod*, an American Booksellers "Pick of the List." Ms. Shahan's work also has appeared in *Highlights for Children*, *Cricket*, and *Boy's Life*.

Ms. Shahan will be teaching Writing Picture Books for Children (Online) this winter.



April Halprin Wayland, whose *Girl Coming In for a Landing: A Novel in Poems* won the Myra Cohn Livingston Award

and the Lee Bennett Hopkins Honor Award. Ms. Wayland also has published three picture books (Scholastic and Knopf), has won three poetry awards from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and is a founding member of the Children's Authors' Network.



Gretchen Woelfle, MFA, writer whose books include *The Wind at Work* (Chicago Review Press), *Katje the Windmill Cat*

(Candlewick), and *Animal Families, Animal Friends* (NorthWord Books). Ms. Woelfle's work has appeared in numerous anthologies and publications, including *Cricket*, *Spider*, and *Cicada*. She has been a finalist for the Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Book Award and the Kate Greenway Medal in England.



Lisa Yee, fiction writer and screenwriter whose books include *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* and *Stanford Wong Flunks*

Big-Time. Ms. Yee is the winner of the prestigious Sid Fleischman Humor Award, and is under contract for two more novels with Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic.

Mae Respicio is the Program Representative for Creative Writing in the Writers' Program.