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The Children's Picture Book: How To Write It, How To Sell It



Synopsis

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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Who hasn't thought, on reading a child's book with about 50 words in it, "I could have written this"? For those who would like to try, Ellen E. M. Roberts provides a clear summary of the basics: the characteristics of the picture book; story creation; roles of author and illustrator; and steps in the journey towards publication. And, throughout, Ms. Roberts gives us an appreciative overview of the picture-book genre, describing and showing many of the best examples. There is one drawback. Though this is still an excellent introduction to its subject, it was written almost 30 years ago. The author's picture book overview stops then, of course. The fundamental principles of creating a picture book, however, still hold true. Today's books may look a bit different: more color, more innovations such as pop-ups, and a shift in the age range to include babies and toddlers. But the steps in a book's creation remain the same. Book publishing, however, has changed quite radically. Today, the old-style publishing house, where editors who loved good books nurtured, guided, and inspired authors, has largely been replaced by two extremes: publishing-as-big-business and do-it-yourself publishing. Ms. Roberts is one of the old-style author-mentoring editors, and she shares with us her experience and her natural enthusiasm and good sense. The Children's Picture Book encourages hopeful writers to aim high and helps them do it

Provided me with lots of great information on how to write and publish a children's book.

Those who can't afford the latest how-to-write-it publications on picture books will do well to purchase a used copy of Ellen Roberts book and absorb the practical information she shares. It's based on twelve years' experience as an editor and publisher. Some methods for producing stories that editors can't resist haven't changed any more than our methods for teaching a child to walk. This author names many cut-and-dried rules, regulations and formulas that have been successful in the past...and gives examples of authors who followed them. But she also is quick to state that there is more than one correct way to write for kids. Beginning writers have to start somewhere, with some direction, and I recommend the first half of Ellen's book as a guide for doing that. The second half deals with getting published and that's where the rules of the game have changed. But there's still worthwhile information to be found in these pages. The end matter has an excellent glossary of production terms which is followed by an extensive bibliography of the author's selection of the best children's picture books published beginning with THE TALE OF PETER RABBIT, 1902. Last week I pulled this book from my personal library to pass on to another writer. Since my next project is a picture book, I decided to reread it first. I am glad I did. Speaking as the author of a series of eight wildlife picture books that have sold 130,000 copies, I highlighted or flagged a number of passages that reminded me of things I never knew or had forgotten. One had to do with not being to move on in a story one is writing. This author says if you "are stuck and can't squeeze another pertinent word out of your head without changing the subject, retype your previous sentence. Do it five times if you have to. Boredom is a great spur to creating new action, introducing a new idea.) Here's another example that I was glad to read. It explains the sales points of What's in the Woods by June Goldsborough, an alphabet book that introduces the animals of the Northeast woods in a story book setting. It's an alphabet book (always in demand.) It contains authentic research to ensure accuracy. Its realistic illustrations are suitable to the nonfiction subject and setting. The plot is a low-key mystery that poses an unanswered question and draws the reader to the end to find the answer. Knowing I was passing the book along to a friend, I read with a highlighter in hand and added to those things I had already marked. When I read things that were outdated, I drew a big X through them...and sometimes added an up-to-date truth. All in all this book helped me move forward with my next creation and I have the satisfaction of helping another writer move forward to a first publication.

I ran across this listing and the one other review offered for it when I was checking to see if by any chance the book was still available. I was delighted to find it was. Yet the first reviewer was correct: the sections on selling your book are now in important ways dated. But back in 1953 when I was trying to enter a world about which I knew nothing and in which I had no friends yet, the "mentoring editor" voice of an experienced, wise, and plain-speaking editor like this work's author was exactly what I needed. I ignored the book's advice on how to write a picture book. (I was confident of my familiarity with the genre -- I must have read over a 1000 picture books aloud to my children by that time -- and sure I had a publishable text.) But I knew I needed to learn how to find this story a publishing home so I could share it with others. I was so naive I had thought it might help if I had a artist friend create illustrations for my tale. Fortunately, this friend went straight to the library, found this very book there, and showed me the passage in it that explained with crystal-clear logic why offering my text and another newcomer's pictures together would be a terrible idea, diminishing chances of acceptance. "You have a great story," she advised me, "and I don't need to be its illustrator. Just go for it!" So I read the whole book, learned how to research publishers and present my work, and sure enough, within a year I had found a publisher for my story, and signed my first book contract. Back then authors writing for adults had to use agents, but writers for children didn't really need one. They had little chance of getting an experienced children's agent until they already had a successful book or two out. (I never used one, yet I continued publishing children's books. Some of them are award winners, and that first one has now had 26 translations.) Yes, now things have changed, and the majority of desirable children's publishers no longer read unsolicited manuscripts, only submissions reaching them through agents. But choosing a good agent is perhaps harder than choosing the right publisher ever was; it's more difficult to make an informed choice. And it's maybe as hard for newcomers in the genre to be accepted by an experienced agent as it was for Dr. Seuss to find a publisher for his first (and still-popular) picture book. You can get some help in finding agents by joining The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. And if you are just starting, you can worry about many modern author-dilemmas later, once you have a contract offered! Meanwhile, the encouraging and helpful voice of someone who truly understands picture books is a useful and comforting thing to have as close as your bookshelf. This particular title can still be a solid introduction to the basics of the new world you are entering, to the parts that don't change. Newer ones -- focusing on trends, new sorts of books, and new forms of publishing -- may be unlikely to offer so firm a foundation in many unchanging concepts that new writers for kids need to understand. I'm grateful this user-friendly and helpful book was in my local library back when I first entered into the role of being a children's writer. That it is still in print is a measure of its value

not just to me decades ago, but to many other new writers through the years since then!

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