How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON TWO

by

Scott Thornton

You do not need any previous writing experience!

Use these professional techniques and insider secrets and tips to easily write page-turning stories with the WOW factor, and join the growing legion of millionaire authors.

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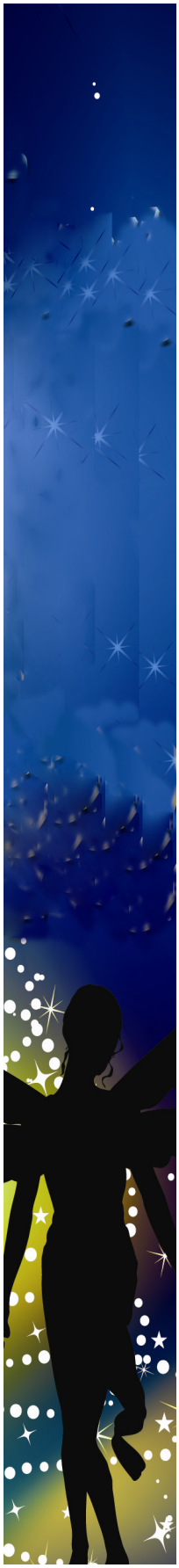


Welcome and a huge ‘Thank You’ for purchasing ‘Lesson Two’ of the twelve part course, ‘How to Become a Millionaire Children’s Author’.

Let’s continue with the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing for children.

Choosing the Right Type of Book

What I mean here is 'the right sort of book for you'.

In this lesson, I will be discussing the different **age-groups** of children, and the different **types of story** you could write.

In no other area of publishing are there as many categories as there are in children's publishing. The good news is …

Publishers are actively seeking new writers in all the categories.

And publishers will be especially happy to welcome you if you can handle more than one sort of book. Like all new skills, it is best to master one at a time, so **start by choosing the book which appeals to you most.**

Here’s the easiest way to do this…
You will probably feel drawn to children of a particular age group, so start by considering what types of book are published for them.

Most publishers split their lists into age categories, giving these categories a name that corresponds roughly with the school the target readers will attend, for instance **'Nursery'**, **'Infant'** or '**Junior**'.

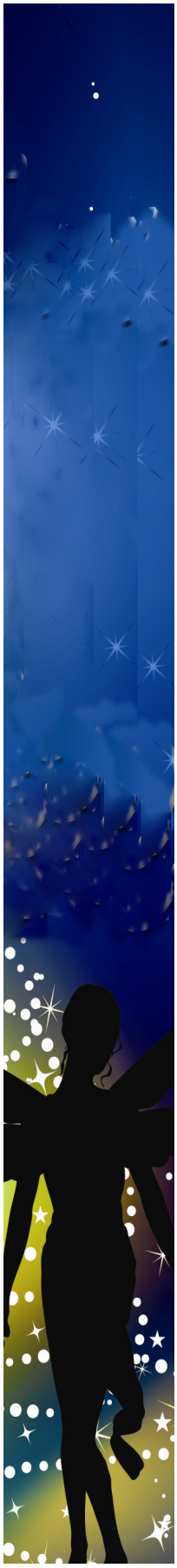
Each category has a typical range of subject matter and style of presentation, and you will need to gear your writing to match these. **If you want to be published, you must conform to what publishers want and accept that they arrive at their conclusions after careful and constant market research.** They know their business, and it IS a business!

Golden Tip…

Always remember that publishers exist to make money, and NOT charitably to assist aspiring authors to get their first book published nor even to educate and entertain children with the ‘best’ literature!

Choosing an Age Group

A word of warning at this stage:
Choose the age group with which you feel most comfortable. **Do not select an age group because you think it would be 'easier'.** For example, writing



for very young children might seem easy to you (only a few BIG words on each page) but it is acknowledged that this age group is fiendishly hard to write for - and get it right!

The days of: 'See Spot, See The Ball, See Spot With The Ball', have passed.

To a large extent, where writing for older children is concerned, the style you choose will reflect your personal bent and ability in each of the three elements discussed last month: **setting**, **characterisation** and **plotting**.

If setting the scene and providing authentic backgrounds is your preference, then you should think of writing for one of the following genres:
Historic fiction.
Science fiction or fantasy.
In non-fiction, the type of books which deal in hard facts.

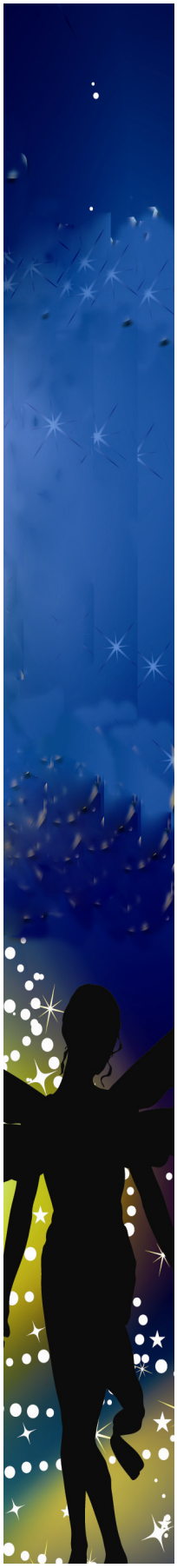
If you **enjoy developing your characters**, think of writing for one of the following genres:
Romance for teenagers.
School stories.
In non-fiction, biographies.

If **plotting and building suspense is your delight**, you will be happiest writing for one of the following genres:
Adventure stories.
Mysteries.
Psychological thrillers.
'Twist' ending short stories.

There are a number of extremely popular series imported from America, which are written to standard formulae. Each volume in these series bears a **number** as well as a title. So keen are sub-teenagers to read them all that they will ask for them by number instead of title.

Several publishers produce them, but the majority are produced by Hippo, (an imprint of Scholastic). Look for their **'Mystery Thriller', 'Hauntings', 'Point Horror'** or **'Green Watch'** series; or Lion's **'Nightmare'** or **'Sweet Goodbyes'** series.

If, after reading as many as you can get hold of, you think you could write similar books, then send a sample of your work to the publishers and ask if they would be interested. Although they are almost exclusively written in America at the moment, there is no actual bar to any writer producing such books.



If you are serious about writing for children, then **you must read the books they read.** You should devour at least five children's books a week, preferably more. Don't think you can write for children without reading almost everything that is currently on the market - you won't be able to. Yet it's totally amazing how many would-be authors launch into writing their first book when the last children's book they read was thirty years ago.

Now let's have a look at the major genres of children's writing.

We'll start with an over-view of the age categories, as we will be looking at them in more detail later in the course.

Writing for Children under Seven

Publishers split books for this age band into **Nursery** and **Infant**.

Nursery Books

These consist of more illustration than words, often no more than ten words to a page. They are intended to be read to children rather than by children, and the pictures will also be fairly simple, so that the reader can say: "This is a story about a teddy bear. Look, there's teddy is in his house."

The stories for the youngest children will feature situations with which a young child will be familiar, such as getting dressed, going for a walk, or going to bed.

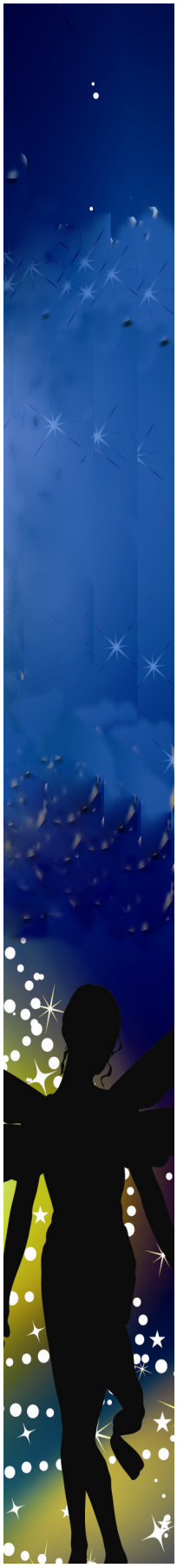
An example of these books is the wonderful **'Little Bear'**, series written by **Martin Waddell** (Walker).

When children get a little older and are able to remember what they have heard before, they love books with appropriate noises. This explains the popularity of 'Old Macdonald had a farm' with its repeated animal noises.

A couple of good examples are 'Mr Little's Noisy Truck' by Richard Fowler (Mammoth) and 'Tasty Poems' collected by Jill Bennett (Oxford). This series includes Noisy Poems, People Poems, and Machine Poems.

Then there are books which help children to learn to count, such as **'One Pink Pig'** by **Sandy Nightingale** (Picture Puffin) with its pictures of a delightful pig; or books which help children to learn the alphabet, such as **'The Minister's Cat'** by **Lynley Dodd** (Picture Puffin).

Lynley Dodd specialises in books which feature cats, and in this one, the cat is **A**irborne, **B**usy, **C**razy, **D**izzy, etc. This is a simple version of that wonderful game of alliteration which can be used to enliven older children's car journeys: "The Minister's cat is an Angora cat named Albert. He anxiously awaits any amount of aggravation after he accidentally ate Angelica's Angel-fish."



Animals are always popular with both children and the adults who read to them, and many books for this age group feature animal characters.

In **'Mr Henry and the Sea Serpent'** by **Andy Ellis** (Hippo), various animals shelter from a stormy sea and discover they are sharing their hideout with a sea serpent; while in **'The Elephant Tree'** by **Penny Dale** (Walker Books), Elephant wants to climb a tree. Not just any tree, it has to be a special one, so he and his friends set out on a quest to find the right tree.

The ever-popular mouse appears in **'The Mice on the Moon'** by **Rodney Peppe** (Picture Puffin), where the mice find an unused firework and decide to go to see if the moon really is made of cheese. In **'Little Mouse Twitchy Whiskers'** by **Margaret Mayo** (Orchard), a mouse turns a cardboard box into a house, then shares it with other animals until a big bear sits on it and squashes it.

Infant Books

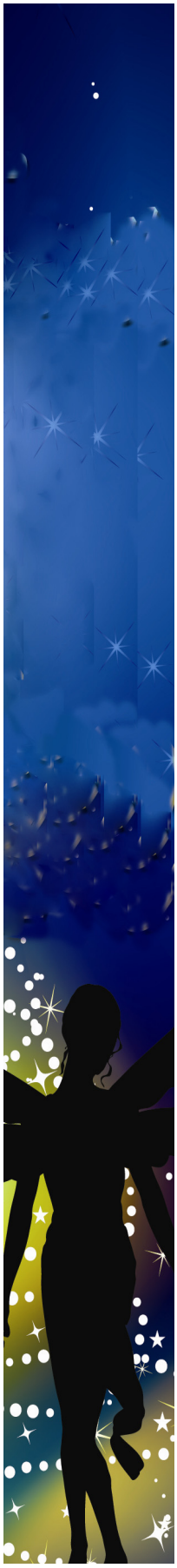
Moving on to the next category, Infant books are intended to be read by the children as well as read to them. Some publishers call these 'first readers' or 'beginning readers' or 'read along books'.

These books are also heavily illustrated, but there is more text. The word-teaching aspect is still represented, as in **'Herds of Words'** by **Patricia McCarthy** (Picturemac). This illustrated book of collective nouns (a wisp of snipe, a leap of leopards), is designed to appeal to children who love the sound of words.

For children whose parents want them to make an early start on learning another language, there are bi-lingual books such as **'Where's Our Mama? /Ou est Maman?'** by **Diana Goode** (Red Fox) which tells the story of two children lost in Paris.

As the age of the targeted reader increases, an element of **anarchic humour** is often introduced.

Some examples of this type of book are **'The Witches of Creaky Cranky Castle'** by **Victoria Whitehead** (Orchard), an hilarious story of incompetent witches trying to raise money for repairs to their castle; **'Another Custard Pie'** by **Roger McGough** (Picture Lions), a story of a house taken over by the circus, with a fire-eater in the fire-place, a custard pie in every doorway and a seal in the bath; **'Billy and Belle'** by **Sarah Garland** (Walker Books), which tells of a chaotic day at school when a new baby brother is born and Belle, who doesn't have a pet to take to school for Pet's Day decides to adopt a pet spider.



'Dr Xargle's Book of Earth Weather' by **Jeanne Willis** and **Tony Ross** (Red Fox) are books in an hilarious series, where Dr Xargle lectures a class on the oddities of Earth, in this one he tells them about the weather and how earthlings behave at different seasons.

In addition to humour, an element of **social responsibility** is often introduced, as in **'Featherbrains'** by **John Yeoman & Quentin Blake** (Young Puffin), which, as an amusing and ironic tale of factory farming, tells of the adventures of two chickens released from their battery cages by a jackdaw. In **'Jump!'** by **Michelle Magorian** (Walker), Steven wants to go to ballet classes and his mother is horrified - she thinks *real* boys don't do that sort of thing.

Other books are intended to encourage young children to think more deeply about the world around them.

A good example of this type of book is **'In the Middle of the Night'** by **Kathy Henderson** and **Jennifer Eachus** (Walker), which describes what happens at night in sleeping cities; cats prowl the streets while people work away on night shift in a world which few children ever see.

Writing for Seven to Eleven Year Olds

This is the age group where fiction and non-fiction are firmly separated. I will be devoting a whole lesson to writing non-fiction, so for now I am concentrating on fiction.

In this age band the categories can become rather confused. They can be for:

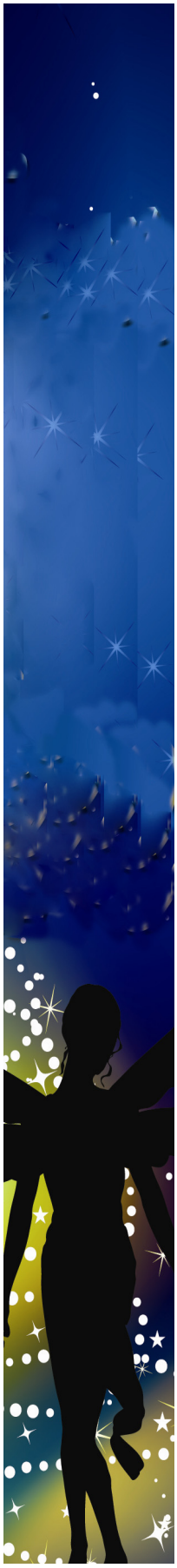
- 'Confident readers' aged seven to ten.
- 'Middle' or 'junior' school children of eight to eleven.
- 'Older' children of over nine.
- 'Sub-teens' for ten and eleven year olds.

To confuse the issue even more, different publishers call their categories different things! The main reason for the confusion is the vastly different 'reading ages' of children who are the same biological age.

Of course, just because a child is classified by his or her age, this doesn't mean that all children of that age will be at the same stage of development, either physically or academically.

From your point of view, it doesn't matter too much at the beginning of your writing career. When you have had several books published, you will find that your publishers will **ask you for a book to fit a particular category.**

Until that happens, all you need do is write your story and leave it to the publisher to decide into which age category it fits.



Matching Vocabulary and Plot

The only thing you have to be careful about is to match the level of sophistication of the vocabulary you use with the complexity of the plot - and this requires some skill.

For example, **a book aimed at beginner readers** will have a comparatively simple plot and a story-line that will tackle a situation that a seven or eight year old can accept as being possible from their own experience. It should be written using words that are also acceptable to a reader of that age, which **usually means avoiding words of more than three syllables**.

In **Tony Bradman's** book **'Gerbil Crazy'** (Viking 'Read Alone' series) the heroine Sarah persuades her parents to let her have a gerbil which she calls Georgie. He keeps escaping, both at home and at school, but all ends happily when he is found again. The story ends with Sarah suggesting that Georgie wouldn't want to escape if he had a companion.

Here is an analysis of the vocabulary in this story:
The whole story is about 3,500 words long.
Only 75 of these words are three syllables, 34 of which end in -ly, -ing, or -ed.
There are 7 words of four syllables: definitely, actually, everything, unusual, and disappeared (three times).
Only one word with 5 syllables: eventually.

Despite this, **the book does not 'talk down' to the readers,** and it is a perfectly acceptable little story for an adult to read to while away half an hour.

This is the great skill of writing for this age group - to use words with few syllables and yet make it so interesting that an adult reader would not necessarily realise that there were few polysyllabic words.

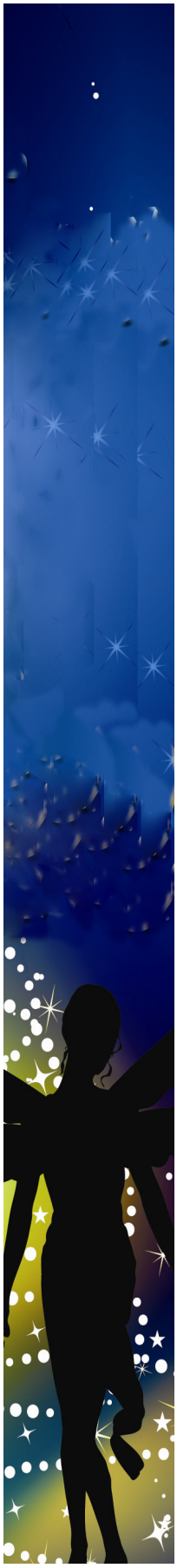
The other side of the equation is that neither this level of vocabulary or plotting will do for older readers.

Consider **Robert Swindells' 'Inside the Worm'** (Doubleday). About 50,000 words long, it tells the story of a class who re-create the legendary dragon called the Elsworth Worm for a local festival.

The vocabulary is at adult level, with words such as hooliganism and apprehensive, and the plot moves through several stages as the suspense builds to a chilling climax. Such a book would be far too difficult for most readers under ten.

Book Length

Another point that arises from these two examples is the length of book required for different age bands.



The rule is simple…

- Young readers need short books.
- Older readers need longer books.

And that means (usually, because there is always the exception to the rule)…
'Read alone' books for seven year olds run to about 3,500 words.
For competent readers of eight to ten, books are 10,000 to 20,000 words.
For sub-teens, length is 30,000 to 50,000 words.

Sub-teens can also cope with trilogies, as long as each book is complete in itself.

This is all about the **attention span** of each age group, allied to the level of plot sophistication they can cope with. Even a beginner reader can cope with 3,500 words in the hour between finishing supper and bed-time, but it takes a lot more effort, even for a keen reader, to get through 50,000 words of complex plot.

Writing for Teenagers and Young Adults

As with the other categories, the division between these two is, if it exists at all, an arbitrary division made by some publishers as a marketing guide.

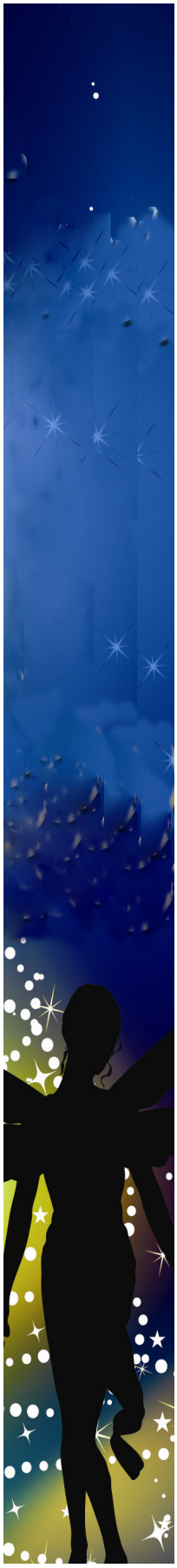
It is in this age band that the interest in fantasy and science fiction becomes fanatical. This is probably because many of these stories involve some sort of **rite of passage** which can be associated with the transition from childhood to adult status.

Stories set in the present time often include an element of the difficulties of coping with this transition - some are about an adolescent upheaval, others have it running as a sub-plot, while others just cope with it as part of the background.

Jacqueline Wilson springs immediately to mind – she has a huge loyal following of girls in their young teens eager for her next novel. Her stories deal with modern family and social issues that every growing girl can relate to. So popular is this author, that she was the Children's Laureate for 2005 - 7.

UK sales of her books total more than twenty million and several of her books have been adapted for television, radio and stage.

It is in this age band that girls become keen on reading romances, and this has turned into a huge market for both one-off stories and series such as Lions **'Sweet Goodbye'** series. It also provides the main market for short stories, in the many magazines published for teenagers.



Now let's look at some more specific types of book, classified by **plot type** rather than age band.

Animal Stories

Stories where the main characters are animals will always be popular with children under ten, and they fall into two main types:

The first is where the animals behave naturally. Where the story is about events which could believably happen to real animals and where any human characters are almost incidental.

A good example of this sort of story, and an enjoyable read, is **Dick King-Smith's 'Magnus Powermouse'** (Gollancz). It tells the story of a pair of mice whose child turns out to be a giant because his mother ate some pig-fattening pills. The mice, a threatening cat, and a friendly rabbit, all behave like real animals. Although they do interact with humans, there is no meaningful animal to human communication.

The second type of animal story is where the animals are really no more than humans in furry skins, with the species chosen to fill the stereotyped roles that political correctness will no longer allow writers to assign to groups of humans! **Watership Down** is a good example.

Another example of this type of story is **Brian Jaques** Redwall trilogy: **'Redwall', 'Mossflower',** and **'Mattimeo'** (Red Fox). These books read like adult fantasy, but the good characters are represented by mice and badgers, while the bad characters are stoats, weasels, and a particularly villainous fox.

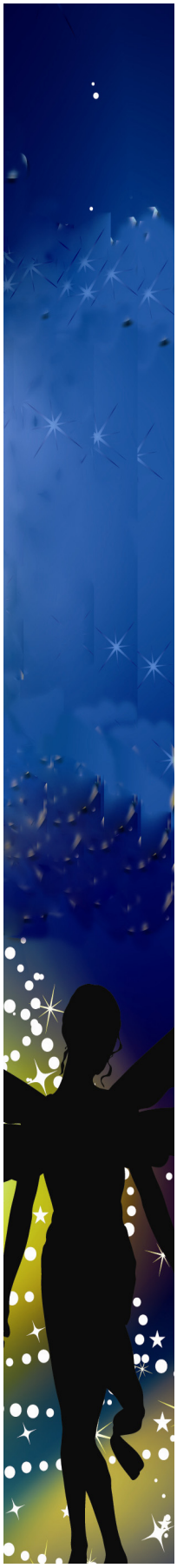
There are, of course, many other books which fall between these two main types, and there are also certain animals that are more popular than others. Mice, cats, dogs, horses and elephants are probably the most popular, followed by frogs, ducks, bears, hamsters and hedgehogs.

If you want to use the perennial 'bad-guy' animals such as snakes, crocodiles or rats as heroes, you will need to make a specific case for them, such as **'Hector the Rat'** by **Tony Wilkinson** (Walker) or **'Smiley Tiger'** by **Barbara Willard** (Walker).

School Stories

This style is dominated by series: Bantam's **'Sweet Valley High',** Armada's **'Chalet School',** BBC Books' **'Grange Hill'** from the TV series.

However, there are many non-series school stories published, for example: **'The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler'** by **Gene Kemp** (Puffin). Tyke Tiler is a practical joker, and he and his dim friend Danny get into trouble during their last term at Cricklepit School.



'Miranda at War' by **Tessa Krailing** (Hamish Hamilton) in which Miranda hates her new teacher and decides he's got to go. **'The Demon Headmaster'** by **Gillian Cross** (Lythway) in which Dinah realises that the headmaster in her new school is not as he should be, and the pupils are too well behaved.

'Metalmiss' by **Linda Pitt** (Red Fox) is for younger children, telling of the robot teacher who is created to replace a teacher who leaves.

If you teach, or have some other on-going connection with a school, you will have exposure to modern school idiom and plenty of material on which to build your plots. Without this type of on-going connection, you should choose another style, for you will be unable to write convincingly if it's been more than three years since you were there yourself!

Hot Insider Tip…

Beware of using too many 'latest' phrases, as these tend to date the story rapidly; this is a mistake made by many novice authors.

No child could relate to a school story in which the heroes all walked around saying 'magic', 'man' or even 'mega', so don't imagine that the habit of thumping the air with your fist and shouting 'YES!!', or the use of 'well good', 'well heavy', 'well rich,' 'cool', 'wicked' etc. will last any longer!

When an eleven year old boy asked me about one of my characters, during one of the Richard and Judy Road Shows, his outburst was, 'Cool!' And a recent comment by a fourteen year old female reader was, 'Wicked' but I suspect that as a few years roll past these will sound the same as 'Ace' does now. Saying 'ace' in polite company would raise some eyebrows. If that doesn't work for you, try 'swell'! You get the idea.

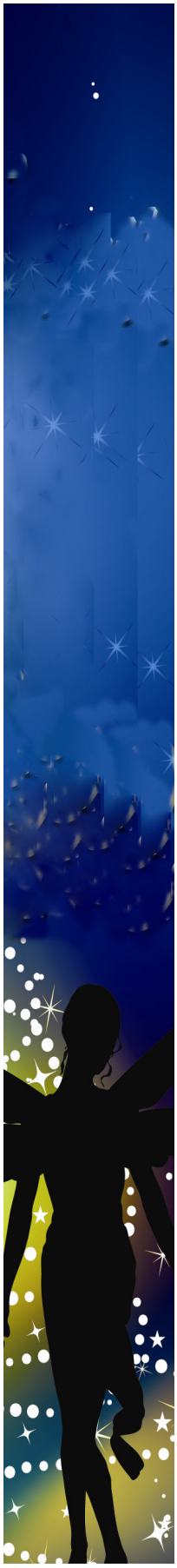
And I have to admit I was even more amazed to hear an eleven year old boy (this was in 2006) in a library, say, 'Fiddlesticks!' I thought that went out years ago, so the rule really is to keep your ears peeled. Listen to and talk with children at every opportunity.

Let's face it how hard can that be? If you're writing for children you obviously like them.

Sports Stories

This style includes that perennial favourite of sub-teen girls, the pony story.

Although there is one major series imported from America (Bantam's **'Saddle Club'**) there is always room for another good pony story - **and 'good' is the operative word.** Not only must the story line and plot be convincing, so must the technicalities.



If you don't know the difference between a running martingale and a standing martingale, or the reason for using one rather than the other, leave this style to writers who do. You can be certain that readers will soon tell the publishers if you get the slightest thing wrong!

If writing pony stories appeals to you, Usborne publish a series called **Sandy Lane Stables.** Some of the books are written by **Michelle Bates** and others are by **Susannah Leigh**. Reading the series will show you what publishers and readers expect these days – obviously it's not National Velvet anymore.

The same applies to stories built round any other sport. Children and teenagers who are keen enough on any sport to read about it, are usually sufficiently fanatical to know all the technical details and you won't get anything past them. That said, if you do know your stuff, sports stories will always be in demand and you will be welcomed by any of the publishers who produce them.

If you desire to write sports stories, but only know a little about your chosen sport, then you can always ask an expert to read your material for factual correctness before submission to a publisher.

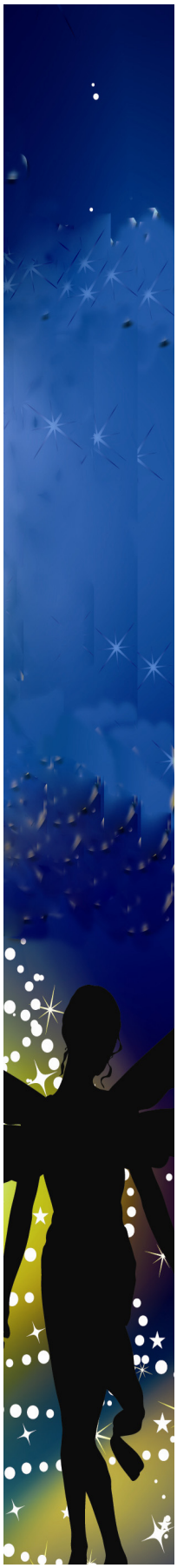
Here are some examples of sports stories: **'The Gigantic Hit'** by **Michael Hardcastle** (Pelham). This is a story of rivalry between cricket clubs, by an author who writes fiction on many types of sport, including soccer (**'Soccer Special'**), net ball (**'The Shooter'**) and athletics (**'The Rival Games'**). **'The Jimmy Zest All-Stars'** by **Sam McBratney** (Hamish Hamilton) is about a team of young football players.

'Making Waves' by **Graeme Kent** (Blackie) tells the story of Angela, who is a talented swimmer, but her old coach hasn't the ability to teach her as she deserves. The pool attendant, who turns out to be an Olympic medal winner, takes over her training.

Historical Stories

Historical stories went through a fashion slump for several years. However, in the last couple of years they have become increasingly popular, with the increase of historical TV dramas and films.

Some recent fiction novels published by Usborne in this genre for children are: **'In the Line of Fire'**, written by **Tony Allan**, which introduces the character, Daniel Wolfe, who in 1811 enlists in Wellington's army; **'Snatched'** by **Graham Marks**, is a rip-roaring historical adventure set against the backdrop of life under the big top and in malodorous 19th century London; **'Under a War-Torn Sky'** by **L.M. Elliott** (female author), is a searing emotional and action-packed account of a WWII pilot's dangerous journey through enemy territory.



'Danger at Dark Hows' by **Patricia Sibley** (Lion Publishing), this story is set in the 1780's, and tells the story of an orphaned boy sent to work in a cotton mill. **'Journey to a Dream'** by **Thurley Fowler** (Puffin) - set just after the Great War, this is the story of a family emigrating to Australia to run a fruit farm. **'The Wall'** by **Elizabeth Lutzeier** (Canongate). This story is about a girl whose mother was shot as she tried to escape from East to West Germany, across the Berlin Wall.

Many historical stories have an underlying 'hidden agenda' message of social comment - how dreadful working conditions were in the eighteenth century; how awful the Berlin wall was and so on.

If you are drawn to writing historical fiction for children, and you want to have it published you will have to keep this fact in mind. Go gently though and don't put uncharacteristically modern thoughts into your characters' heads.

For instance, our Roman hero Marcus, whom we introduced in Lesson One, would be unlikely to see anything wrong in gladiatorial combat, so don't have him tut-tutting at the senseless slaughter and waste of human life!

But you might introduce some ecological thoughts. He could see some trees being felled to make way for farmland and think what a shame it was that the forests were getting smaller, or hear an old soldier reminisce about hunting wolves in his youth and think it is a shame that there are now so few wolves in Britain that he has never seen one.

Mystery and Adventure Stories

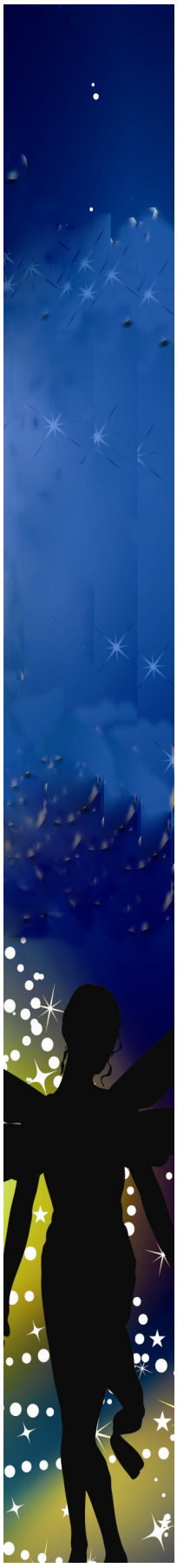
What used to be thought of as adventure stories no longer exist as such. The old 'group of children who have a jolly adventure in the summer hols' type of story which Enid Blyton popularised has been overtaken by the more structured modern mystery thriller.

There is one exception, though, and that is the growing market of the environmental adventure. Ecology, animal welfare and conservation are prominent in children's awareness today, and publishers are keen to encourage this with both non-fiction and fiction.

Some examples are: **'Weathereye'** by **Lesley Howard** (Walker) which tells the story of thirteen year old Telly, who lives on a wind-farm and works with a youth movement which shares information about global climactic conditions. **'Penelope's Protest'** by **Douglas Hill** (Piper) in which the heroine defeats both diamond thieves and environmental spoilers.

Anthony Masters' 'Greenwatch' series (Hippo) features a group of young people working for an environmental organisation called Greenwatch, battling to save the natural world against exploitation.

Pollution, badgers, dolphins, whales and gorillas all feature in separate stories.



It is unlikely that Hippo, or another publisher, would accept another series about a similar organisation, but individual stories with a conservation theme will be welcomed.

Mystery Stories

There are other series in the mystery style, including the American imports **'Point Crime'** (Scholastic) and **'Nancy Drew'** and **'The Hardy Boys Case File'** (Armada). Although these series are popular, they certainly do not dominate the market as they do with school stories.

Here are some examples of mystery thrillers taken at random from the book shop shelves: **'The Wheatstone Pond'** by **Robert Westall** (Viking). Secrets are found lurking in the mud when the pond is drained. **'Stone Cold'** by **Robert Swindells** (Hamish Hamilton) tells of the pavement dwellers who suspect the authorities have adopted a policy of poisoning them.

'Crossfire' by **Peter Beere** (Hippo) is the story of Maggie, who runs away from home in Southern Ireland to live on the streets of London. She doesn't realise she is at risk from the enemies of her step-father, who is a prominent member of the IRA (already a dated story line!). **'Eighteen Desperate Hours'** by **Roderic Jeffries** (Hodder and Stoughton). An armed gang takes Jim and his mother hostage while his father is forced to go with them.

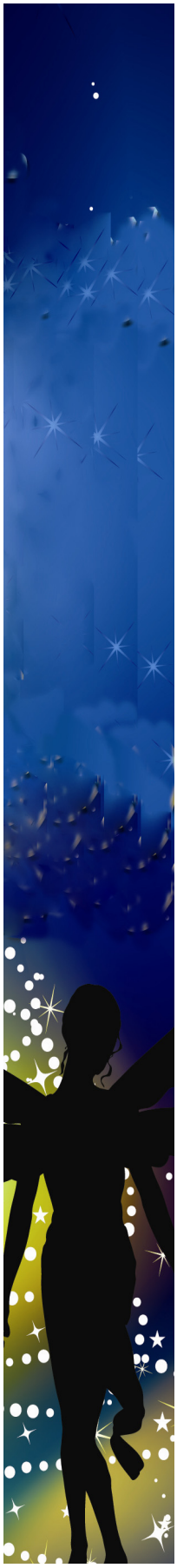
As you will see from this small selection and your own trawl through the bookshops and library shelves, the possibilities are endless. While you are conducting this trawl, make a note of the titles. **In this style, more than any other, an inviting title is essential to draw the reader into the pages.**

They no longer need to contain words like 'case' or secret' or 'riddle'. Indeed, most editors feel that they should not do so. They prefer titles like **'The Song of the Dead'** by **Anthony Masters** (Hippo), **'Blue Murder'** by **Jay Kelso** (Hippo), or **'Twice Times Danger'** by **Enid Richemont** (Walker).

Note the compromise between making your storyline topical, and giving it a long shelf life. For example, an IRA story might have been topical, but after the peace talks a story could become redundant or politically unacceptable. Don't put yourself in the position of having a warehouse full of **'Free The Guildford Four'** T-shirts! (And in case you have forgotten who the Guildford Four are – that just proves my point!)

Top Insider Tip…

Apart from choosing an inviting title, the most important part of writing mystery stories is **pre-planning** before you start to write. It is important to map out the events in any piece of fiction, but **with mysteries it is essential.**



The solution to the mystery has to be a logical conclusion reached after consideration of all the clues and evidence.

Your readers should be able to work it out for themselves, **but you don't want them to get there too soon,** and this is the skill of writing this type of fiction.

Here are the important elements of a great mystery story:

The clues must be spread throughout the book but a seemingly unimportant item or piece of information near the beginning of the book, should turn out to be the all-important problem-solving clue.

This all-important clue completes the puzzle quite close to the end.
You will need at least one red herring, to lead your main characters off the track for a while.

All of this should be worked out in advance, or you will get to the end and find you have left unexplained loose ends, or worse still, your main characters will have made 'one mighty bound' in solving the mystery.

This expression, in case you have not heard it before, comes from the days of Saturday morning cinema clubs for children, where the programme always included a serial. At the end of each episode, the hero would be trapped in an impossible situation, such as a deep pit, or dangling from a cliff edge but by the beginning of the next episode he would have escaped, against all logic.

This was explained with the caption *"With one mighty bound, Buck freed himself...."* It is the modern equivalent of an old theatrical device know as 'Deus ex machina' (God from the machine).

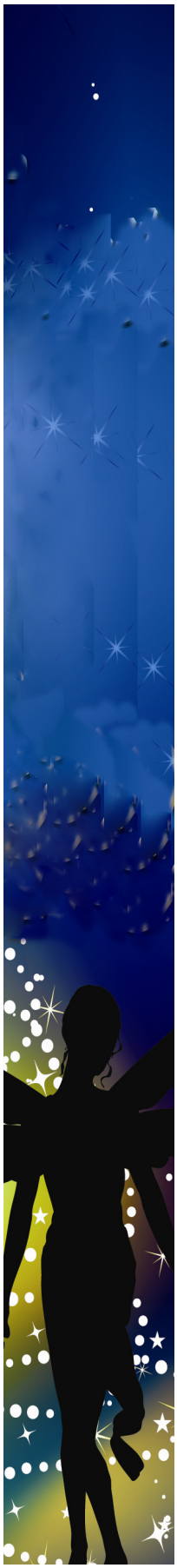
In these old plays, the characters would get themselves into a ludicrously tangled and impossible position from which no script writer could possibly extricate them. **So at the end of the play, 'God' (the devil, a wizard etc) would leap onto the stage and say something like:**

"Foolish mortals to have got yourselves into this state. Lo! With my wand of power I make everything as it was. Learn from these mistakes and never more transgress the laws of God!"

It was a thin device, even in those unsophisticated days, try and use it today and it will spell death for your story!

So the rules for today's writers of mysteries are:

No last minute revelations of something the hero has known all along, like the blood on the kitchen floor really being tomato juice.



No misunderstandings which are suddenly cleared up when two people finally sit down and talk things over.

Absolutely no Agatha Christie-like last chapters where the 'detective' gets everyone in a room and laboriously explains how each clue led him to realise who was the culprit.

Modern youngsters will not tolerate such old-fashioned devices.

3-Dimensional Villains and Heros

The last chapter should be the climax to which you have been building throughout the story. This means you have to draw together all the strands, which means that these strands have to be laid out well in advance.

For example, the evil aunt mustn't pull a gun if all she has previously done is snigger into her knitting, but she could attack with a pair of scissors if she has been using them to snip off her wool earlier on. She could even produce a pruning knife that she has been using in the garden in an earlier scene.

If she isn't going to attack anyone with the knife, there is no need to introduce it at all, unless your motive is to show what a nasty person she is by having her stab a slug or slash the heads off a row of flowers. Even this exercise must be performed in front of the heroine, or another major character who tells the heroine about it.

Remember that the purpose of a red herring is to confuse the characters, not the readers.

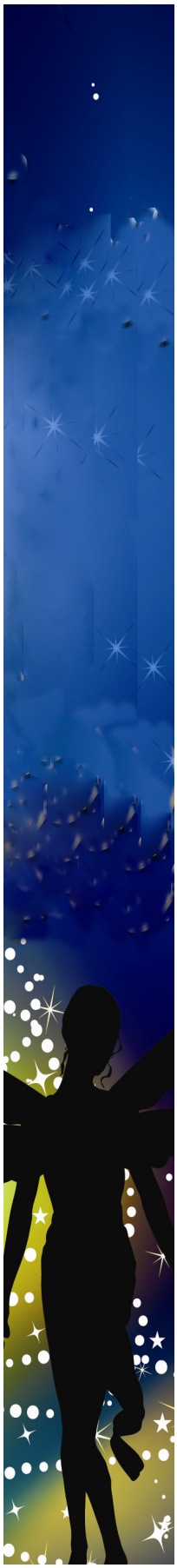
This sort of characterisation helps to emphasise the nastiness of your villains, but it doesn't tell your readers ***why*** they are that way.

Only younger readers will accept unexplained nastiness of character. But when you are writing for readers over eight years old, **your villains must be plausible**. Your main characters will themselves want to know why the opposition acts as it does, for otherwise how can they anticipate and frustrate the villain's plans?

For instance, an elderly man who has recently moved into the village and who lives on his own behaves rather oddly at times, but no-one thinks he might be connected with the near-fatal accidents that keep happening to Tony.

Then one night he is seen hurrying away from the scene of another accident and Tony's sister Jean begins to wonder about him. Their suspicions are deepened when a nurse friend of their mother comes to tea and mentions that she's seen someone who she thinks she knows.

"He looked just like old Tom Saunders. He was discharged from the psychiatric wing last year and we haven't heard of him since. I wonder if it



was him? It was a sad story - his twin brother was drowned in the river, oh, must have been nearly fifty years ago - and Tom swore it was another boy who'd pushed him in. He had a couple of tries at killing him and finally got locked up."

The sister goes to the library and searches through old copies of the local newspaper until she finds the report of the drowning accident. There is a photograph of the dead boy with a friend who looks like her brother, and the caption says "Jimmy Saunders, seen here with his friend John Smith, who tried to save him from the river." She realises that the old man thinks her brother is John Smith and is still trying to exact revenge for the loss of his twin.

However, do keep in mind that everyone, no matter how bad, has **some streak of good in them.** Equally, your heroes and heroines must have **some minor faults.** Without these signs of real humanity, you are creating a melodrama rather than a story of plausible characters with whom your readers can identify.

So let your villains be kind to their mothers, or cherish a pet cat, and let your heroine sneak upstairs to her room to eat a packet of sweets rather than share them with her younger brother.

Just as your characters should not be the stuff of melodrama, neither should your settings be tired clichés. Mysterious events don't need to be set in remote castles or sinister graveyard surroundings after dark.

Great mystery stories can take place just as well in brightly lit everyday surroundings such as classrooms, shopping precincts or suburban houses. In fact this can make them even more mysterious. You may think nothing untoward ever happens in such places, but it is part of your job as a writer of mysteries to suggest to your readers that it might.

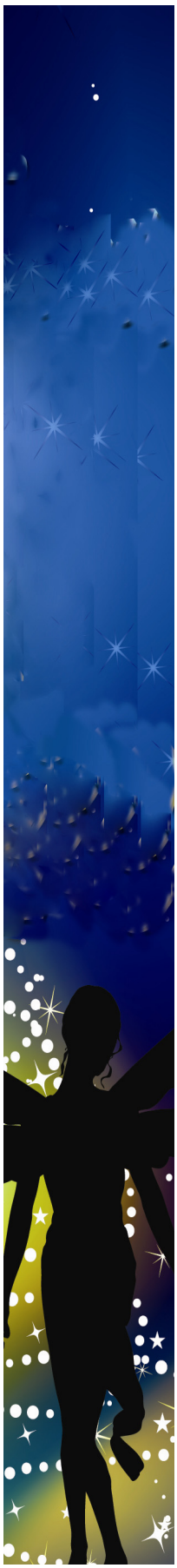
This leads us to another genre.

Ghost Stories and Horror Stories

This style is closely allied to mysteries, as many of the criteria are the same. It is usually some sort of mystery that draws the main characters into danger, but here the mystery tends to have a supernatural rather than a human cause. In a non-horror ghost story, the ghosts don't necessarily have to be malevolent.

In **'Ghost in Waiting'** by **Hugh Scott** (Walker) the ghost of an elder brother remains on earth to protect his siblings from evil; and in **'The Devil's Cauldron'** by **David Wiseman** (Hippo 'Hauntings' series) when Clare gets lost in a labyrinth of caves, it is a ghost that guides her to safety.

As well as the 'Hauntings' series, there are many others in these genres, including Lion's **'Under the Bedclothes'** and **'Nightmares'** series, Fantail's



'Cold Blood' series, and Hippo's **'Point Horror'.** These series do tend to dominate the market, but there is plenty of room for non-series books, and publishers are keen to have them.

With the human-originated horror, the villains are usually psychologically flawed, but there must still be a logical reason for their persecution of your heroine (or hero, although these books do tend to feature girls as main characters), even if the logic is not based on normal morality.

In **'My Secret Admirer'** by **Carol Ellis** (Hippo) the heroine receives a number of mysterious telephone calls and is nearly run over by a motorcyclist before being lured onto a deserted mountain-side by what she believes is an admirer, only to find that he wants to kill her because she knows too much about a previous 'accident' at the same spot.

With stories involving the supernatural, don't assume that you can make up the rules as you go along. There are a number of established conventions surrounding the 'other' world.

One of these is the idea that the air gets cold when there are ghosts present. This doesn't necessarily mean that you **must** provide cold air with ghosts, but it does mean that you should not make the room go hot when the ghost is present. Unless, of course, you explain the reason, such as a ghost whose death was due to fire, and/or your characters comment on it.

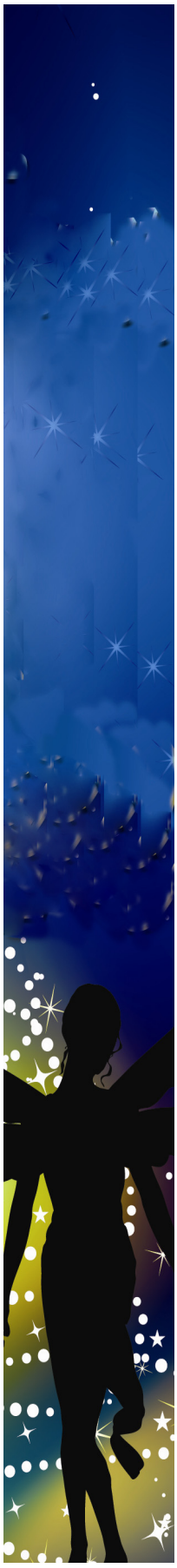
For example:

"I thought it was meant to go cold in haunted rooms," said Pip, pulling off his sweater.
Jane thought for a moment before replying.
"I've read that it does. But if this really is the ghost of Mrs Danvers, don't forget she burnt to death."

This trick of reversing normal expectations is a good way to put people off balance. The whole thing about the supernatural is that **it relates to the senses**. Say that there is a ghost in your house, and you will be told "Go on - you're just seeing or hearing things!"

The point is that what you have seen or heard is something which common sense tells you cannot be possible. It is this impossibility that makes you uneasy. So if you present your characters with the unexpected, such as the smell of a bonfire indoors on a rainy day, it will worry them and consequently your readers.

Young readers like to be frightened. These two titles show this: **'Midnight Ghosts'** by **Phil Roxbee Cox, Sue Hellard** and **'Mystery Mansions'** by **Emma Fischel, Adrienne Kern**. Both books are for 6+ readers.



Testing your courage is an essential part of growing up, and this explains why this style always has been, and always will be so popular.

Writing Humour

Anyone who has been exposed to children under twelve years old will be aware that their sense of humour is very basic. Word-play jokes that were around before the war get brought home from school and told with delight as though they were newly minted. (When is a door not a door? When it is a-jar!)

What they like best is slap-stick humour. The 'slip on a banana skin and fall down a man-hole' joke is as popular as it ever was, and it is best of all when the victim is a teacher or some other figure of authority.

Children find it even funnier when the cause of the misfortune is a child character with whom they can identify, and they don't mind if things go wrong because the perpetrator is incompetent.

One range of characters often used in stories like this is a modern variant of the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice'. Young trainee, or newly qualified, witches and wizards try their hand at spells that go wrong, to the discomfiture of all concerned.

For seven to eight year olds, **Ralph Wright's 'The Witch's Funnybone'** (Methuen) features a junior witch who creates havoc round the village with such incidents as the vicar losing his trousers in public. On the same level, **Jill Murphy** has written a series of stories about **'The Worst Witch'** (Viking).

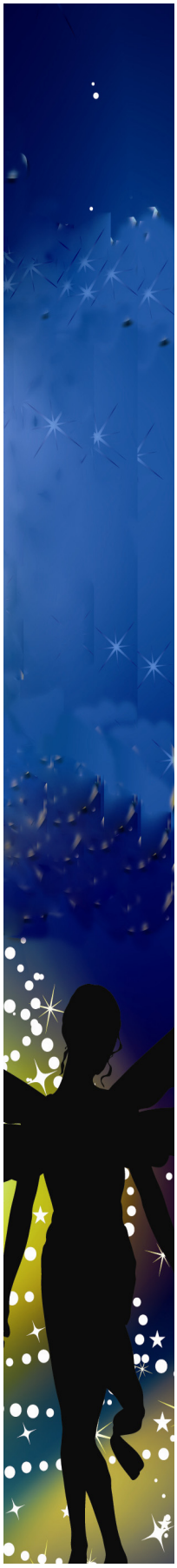
Weird and Wonderful Characters

For slightly older readers **Jean Ure** has a series about Junior Wizard Ben-Muzzy. In **'Wizard in Wonderland'** (Walker), Ben-Muzzy and two ordinary children go to Wonderland and lose the broomstick that took them there.

In the process of tracking the broomstick down, they encounter the delightful Great Furry Wallopers (rather like dim-witted kangaroos) and some convincing baddies, including the Great Nurdle Bore (tall and skinny with a dripping nose) and a band of Paddiwack gnomes (bad tempered and living on a diet of crushed beetle stew).

Such grotesque villains are a feature of humour for the under tens. The more disgusting they are, the better, as far as the readers are concerned. Giants, in particular, are often depicted as gross in their habits, dirty, smelly, with uncut toe-nails, snotty noses and a tendency to spit. Think of Shrek.

They don't appear like this in stories meant to frighten, but only in humour, as a delicious caricature of how the reader might become if he dared to defy his parents and give up washing.



The Edge Chronicles by **Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell**, have ten to sixteen year olds (mostly boys but some girls) queuing up to buy their latest adventure stories which have bizarre creatures, some villainous, other heroic. The writer and illustrator team of these books, aimed them for the ten to thirteen year olds, but as you can see, the readership age range far extends that.

Here's some of the blurb on the back cover of their book, **Muddle Earth**: "Muddle Earth is in danger, its three moons, its perfumed boy, its pink stinky bogs and exploding gas frogs are threatened by the schemes of a sinister villain, Dr. Cuddles."

The front cover is a montage of weird and wonderful creatures with the hero, Joe Jefferson, occupation listed as Schoolboy, the only ordinary-looking character.

You don't have to use characters like this if they don't appeal to you. The characters themselves don't even need to be inherently funny, as long as funny things happen to them. Writing prose humour is not easy, but if you have a keen sense of the ridiculous and a talent for word play (How many rats should you put in ratatouille?) you could find this is the style for you.

Also immensely popular, and easy enough to write, if your gift for the ridiculous is joined by a gift for rhyme, is humorous verse. It was Roald Dahl whose anarchic poetry brought this style to prominence, but he has been followed by many other poets like **Colin West,** whose **'The Best of West'** (Hutchinson) is full of short poems which are just as funny and just as recitable without being quite so sinister.

Children enjoy Dahl's black humour, but many libraries, or the adults who buy books for presents, find Dahl's work disturbingly sadistic and refuse to buy it. Keep this in mind when writing humorous verse and you will find publishers very keen to consider your work.

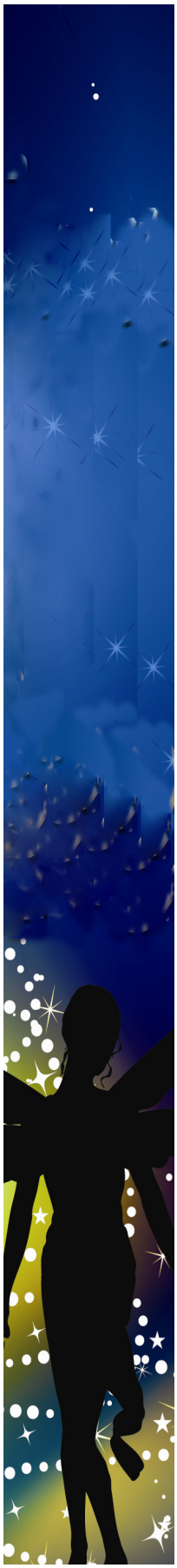
Science Fiction and Fantasy

This is probably the most popular style in children's books, and so I am covering it in detail in a future lesson.

To give you a brief taste now, I will just say that it covers a range from talking animals to interplanetary travel, from 'sword and sorcery' to computer games, and from what used to be thought of as fairy stories to 'dungeons and dragons'.

Children of all ages love it, so you can enter at whatever level suits you, from 10,000 words for eight or nine year olds to a major trilogy of 200,000 words for young adults.

You need to have a taste for it yourself to consider writing it. If you have this taste already, you will know that there are certain conventions on how



spaceships and magic work. You can invent and populate your worlds to your heart's content, but don't ignore these conventions or you will offend your potential readership. You should be very well read in this genre before attempting it yourself.

You can really let your imagination rip with this type of writing, as almost anything goes.

Key Point: Totally forget about writing anything even remotely similar to Harry Potter, no matter how brilliant. Publishers the world over are still having 20-tonne trucks back up to their premises each day and offload the latest 23,431 unsolicited manuscripts from hopeful writers who want to emulate J K Rowling's success. Don't go there.

Really… I mean it!

On that topic…

Big Insider Tip: Don't merely copy what everyone else has done.

Yes, there is a market for the 'Zandar the sword-bearer from the plains of Thwacjokz' type of thing, but there are hundreds of yet undiscovered worlds and possibilities which await the truly creative and imaginative writer.

If this appeals to you, then have a go. **Terry Pratchett** makes a tidy living from his **'Discworld'** series, and although these are not really classed as children's fiction, one of the reasons for their exceptional sales figures is that they have an **extremely low reading age**. Don't forget that millions of adults can either not read at all (approximately three million in the U.K. are illiterate) or have a reading age of about ten years old. The market for 'adult' books with a very low reading age is a greatly under exploited one. Perhaps you would like to exploit it?

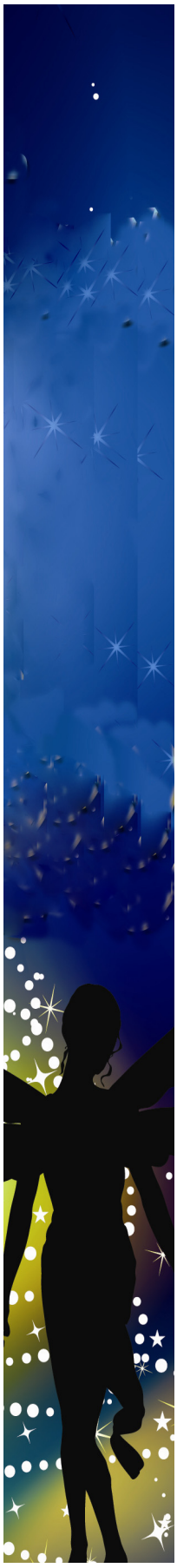
The popularity of fantasy films is growing. The filming of Terry Pratchett stories is on the increase.

It's exciting when any genre of books becomes popular with film makers - it can generate huge income for authors.

Phillip Pullman's trilogy, 'Northern Lights', 'The Subtle Knife' and 'The Amber Spyglass' is being filmed, the first story with the title, 'The Golden Compass' was released in December 2007.

Short Stories

There is a better market for short stories in children's fiction than adult fiction (where it is almost non-existent), but it is still quite restricted.



As a new writer you will find it very difficult, if not totally impossible, to get a collection of short stories published. When you are an established and well-known author, it will be a different matter, but at the beginning it is better to stick to one-off short stories for magazines and 'annuals'.

The stories need to be from 1,000 to 2,500 words long, depending on the outlet. There is a small market for adventure or mystery stories in boys' comics and annuals.

Remember the long lead-time involved in producing these annuals. They are in the shops by November, and take at least six months in production, so if you want to have a story in any given Christmas annual, you must submit it by January of that year.

The main market for short stories is in magazines for girls, and what the publishers want, almost exclusively, is stories of romance.

Length varies according to the magazine, but it is usually around 1000 words. Here are some guidelines:

- Settings should be modern.
- Characters should be of the target age of the readership.
- Story-lines should be variations on the classic themes: girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl gets boy; girl fancies boy but thinks he prefers someone else until he lets her know she is the one he really likes; or girl's parents hate boy because he is a bad lot and forbid her to see him, then he does something that makes her parents realise he really is a good guy; all of which lead to happy endings.

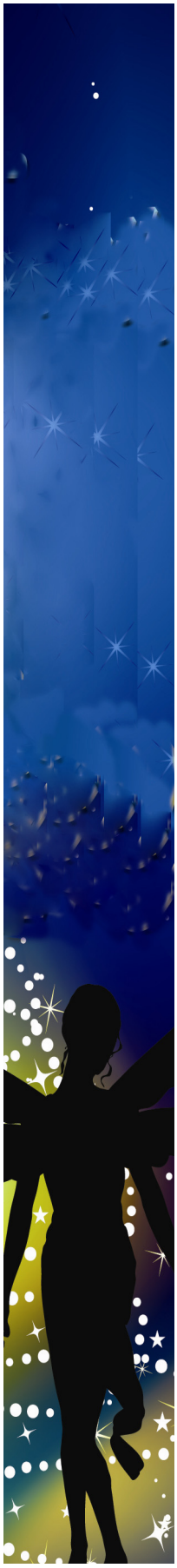
Think ‘Mills and Boo’ for youngsters and you won’t go far wrong.

A word on this genre. It must (repeat MUST) be written with sincerity and from the heart. You have to *really care* about the emotional journey of these young girls and be passionate about the genre. **This, above all, is the one genre you cannot write if you don’t believe in it.**

Submission Guidelines

All the magazines that publish this type of story will send you a fact and style sheet detailing their requirements. This is known as their submission guidelines.

You can write and ask for one or check their website to see if you can download their submission guidelines. These sheets describe in considerable detail, the twenty or so plots which they will accept. They merely rotate through these plots (by different writers) one after another. When they reach the end, they start again at the beginning with plot one!



The good news about writing for magazines is that you can use the latest expressions in your dialogue. The shelf-life of magazines is so short that the slang doesn't have time to get dated.

Magazine publishers cannot get enough good romantic fiction, so if this is your bent, get writing and see what a welcome they will give you.

Researching Your Market

There is one main difference between a professional writer and an amateur writer. **The professional writer researches** to see what is wanted in each potential market, chooses one, and writes a book tailored specifically to that market.

The amateur has an idea for a story, writes it, and then proceeds to send it off to a series of (usually inappropriate) publishers in the hope that one of them will see its merit.

Even if your story has merit, it will be rejected if it is:

- The wrong length (remember, this was one of the reasons so many publishers turned down Harry Potter – too long).
- In the wrong tone.
- In a style not handled by that publisher: The Jewish Chronicle will not accept recipes for bacon sandwiches, no matter how tasty they may be!

So your first task, before you do any more than make some basic notes on your brilliant idea, is to research the market for children's books and find out who the main publishers are.

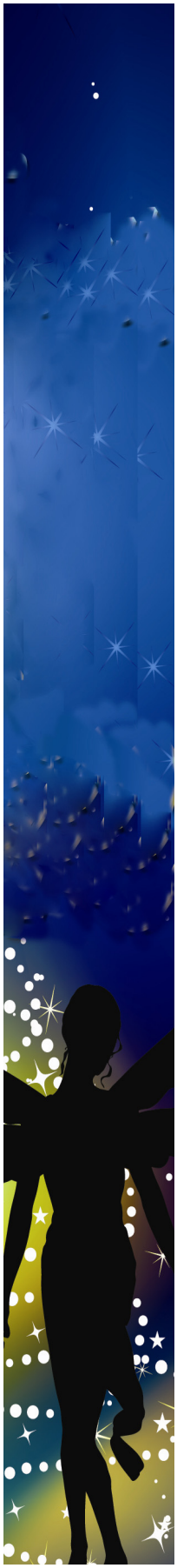
Find out:

- What sort of books do they publish?
- How are these books structured?
- What tone and voice are they written in?

Obviously, the same applies to magazines and annuals.

Start your research by going to a big bookshop and working your way through the shelves of children's books. Every time you find a book which appeals to you, check inside on the page with the copyright information, to see when it was first published.

Many popular children's books, which still sell well, were written many years ago, but while it is interesting to see that they are still in print, what you need to know is what **new books are being published now.**



If the book has been published in the last couple of years, make a note of the publisher. You should ignore the books that were originally published outside the UK, as it is unnecessarily difficult to deal with publishers in other countries if you don't have to.

At this stage you are not too concerned with the titles and authors of the books.

What you need to know is **who is still publishing the sort of books you want to write.** If you like the look of any of the books enough to buy them, then do so, but don't feel you have to buy lots as you can do the detailed stages of your research in the library.

Next, armed with your list of publishers, go to **'The Writers and Artist's Yearbook'** (A & C Black) or **'The Writer's Handbook'** (Pan Macmillan) and make a note of the telephone numbers of your chosen publishers. Make sure it is the latest now.

Then you go to the library and see which of the books published in the last two years are popular with junior borrowers. The librarian will almost certainly be able to tell you. Librarians know everything there is to know! Make use of their knowledge.

What children want to read may not always match the optimistic expectations of the publishers, but it is easy to tell by looking at the number of date stamps in the front.

Summary of research:

Establish which books are the most popular in the style that appeals to you. Start skim-reading them to see how they are structured, who the characters are, what the story is about and the level of vocabulary used.

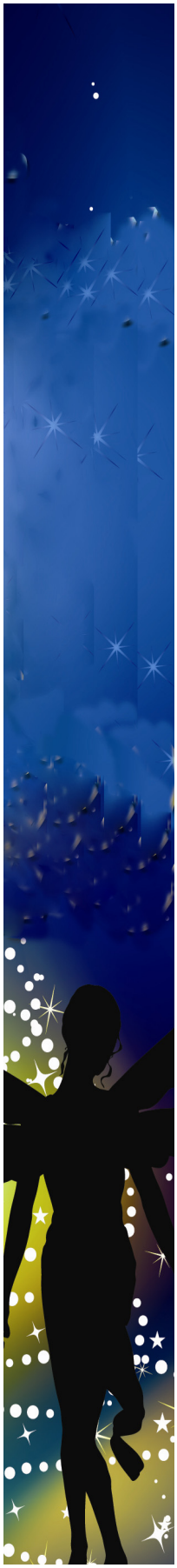
The same basic considerations apply to non-fiction.

Structure, in this context, means the total wordage and number of chapters.

Work out the wordage by counting the number of words in a randomly selected sample of ten lines then multiply the average number of words per line by the number of lines per page and finally the number of pages. Once you have done this a few times, you will find that you can make a reasonably accurate guess just by the look of the pages.

What you are looking for with the characters and the storyline is whether there is an obvious **pattern** in the type of book produced by any given publisher.

For instance:



- Are the children working class or middle class?
- Is the story about a single character, a number of siblings, or a group of friends?
- Is the story about an everyday situation, such as bullying at school, or something more exotic, such as hidden treasure on a holiday island?
- Do the characters have a happy or a miserable home life?
- Are both parents present, or is it a post-divorce family?
- Are the characters from a single ethnic group, or are they a politically correct mix? Are there animals involved, and if so, are they treated as part of the family or as incidental furniture?

To sum up, **is this the right publisher for you, or should you choose another to write for?**

In practice you will find there are half a dozen publishers who produce your kind of book. Choose your favourite publisher, write your story in their preferred style and then contact them.

Common Mistakes

Many new writers assume that short stories are easier to write than books.

Wrong!

An amazingly high proportion of would-be writers, when asked what they want to write, will reply, "Short stories." This causes professional writers and editors to smile politely and turn away. They know not only is there virtually no market for short stories outside women's and girl's magazines, but also that **short stories are the most difficult of all the writing media.**

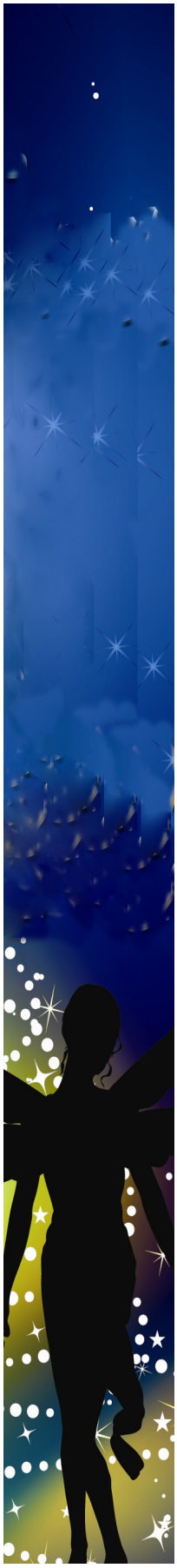
It's a perfectly understandable mistake for beginner writers to make. Daunted by the idea of having to produce a 'whole book', they feel that it must be easier to write one or two thousand words.

They also think that writing such short pieces will be good practice and that once they have had a few published it will be easy to move on to books. They also think that having had short stories published will persuade publishers that they know their craft.

This is all fallacy.

Here's the truth…

Learning to write a short piece of fiction, or several short pieces, will not make it any easier to write long pieces. If anything, it will make it more difficult, as you will have trained yourself to start and finish a story in a short piece of writing.



Newspaper journalists are notoriously unable to sustain pieces more than a few hundred words long, for they have trained themselves to deal with the essence of their subject succinctly.

It is rather like asking an athlete who specialises in hundred metre sprints to run a marathon, on the basis that both involve running - publishers know this, so they do not make the false assumption.

Secondly, because a short story has so few words, every word must count and this means that it must be very tightly written. There is no room for leisurely descriptions of the setting, or even for careful character building. Often, a few words of dialogue will have to do both jobs, expressing a character's opinion of her surroundings in a way that lets the reader know what she is as well as where she is.

For instance, "God, I hate this stinking rotten dump! Look at it, it's foul!" and "Oh dear, this isn't very nice. Doesn't anyone ever sweep the floor?" are very different ways of commenting on the same place that lets the reader know that the first speaker is forthright and forceful while the second is rather prissy.

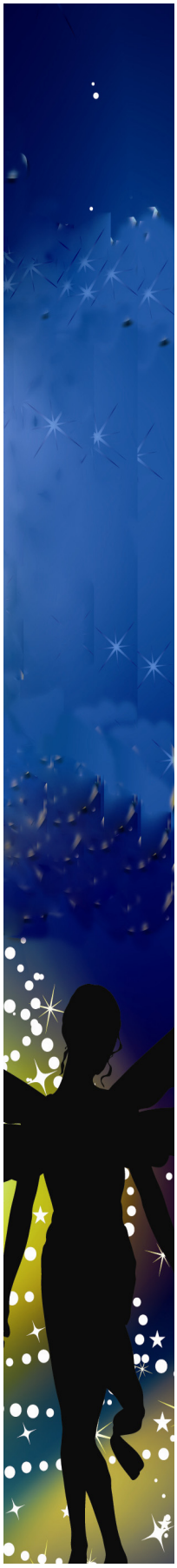
Both bits of dialogue serve the purpose in twelve words, where in a full-length book you could take half a page to describe an un-swept floor, dirty windows and grimy surfaces. A further half page might describe the character and the way she walks round the grubby room, either kicking at the rubbish or running a dainty finger along a dusty shelf. Charles Dickens is a master of such description and will sometimes take three or more pages to describe a scene.

Just as you don't have room for lengthy descriptions of people or places in short stories, neither do you have room for complicated plots. So, you have to think your plots out carefully, pruning them down to the essentials.

A good short story is rather like a three act play, with an **introduction, a problem, and a resolution.** Because of the need to grab the reader's attention straight away, many writers start with the drama of the problem, then explain how it came about, before moving on to the solution.

This process is often handled with a change of verb tense. The story starts in the immediate past: "I saw John this afternoon and he told me we were through," then changes to the pluperfect for the flash-back: "I realised that he had lied to me when he said he would love me for ever." It reverts to the simple past tense for the 'third act' or resolution.

The misconception about the ease of writing short stories stems from the beginner writer's inexperience. When you are an experienced writer, you will automatically consider the quality of everything you read and analyse the skilful use of technique.



If you are good at your craft, you will know the truth of the old saying, "Easy reading comes from difficult writing". You will realise that the short stories which read so easily have been written with much planning and much thought as each sentence is constructed and polished.

A superb example of really short story writing is the book ‘fifty-fifty’ which contains fifty stories of exactly 50 words each! You can obtain a copy by sending your name and address and £5 to: FMS, 12 Tilbury Close, Caversham, Reading, RG4 5JF. Cheques made out to ‘Alithea Limited’. Price includes P&P.

Short Stories with a Twist Ending

The most difficult of all short stories to write are the ones with a twist ending. You have to be careful not to signal the twist earlier in the story, while at the same time laying enough ground-work to make it reasonable when you get to it.

If you are drawn to this sort of story, it is a good idea to get a couple of friends to read it through before you send it off, to let you know if they guessed what was coming.

Unless you really want to devote your writing career to romantic pieces for girls' magazines, you would do better to shelve the idea of short stories until you have learned your craft in the *easier* field of full-length books. These need not be that long, as many books for younger readers are less than 10,000 words, with each chapter just under 1000 words.

If you pre-plan carefully, and map out the events that have to take place in each chapter, writing each of those chapters will be considerably easier than writing a short story, and you will soon find that you have written the whole book.

And before you know it, you will be a paid children’s writer and have taken your first steps towards making your fortune.

Your homework this month is to really sit down and think which age group and type of story you want to write – then to read several in that genre.

Enjoy your writing and I’ll see you next month with more information on how to become a millionaire children’s author.

Scott Thornton