

Puberty is Not Enough: What You Need to Write Middle-Grade and YA Fiction

With Joni Sensel, www.jonisensel.com

Fallacies:

1. "I have kids or once was a kid (or teach or provide daycare or...), therefore I can write kids' stories."
 - If you can't write for adults, you're not ready to write for kids.
2. "But it's easier than writing for adults, isn't it?"
 - Only significant distinction: age of protagonist
 - If anything, harder: two distinct markets (gatekeepers AND readers)
 - Pace is often faster, even in literary work
 - Constraints of theme, syntax, length
3. "YA is hot, therefore I'll write YA."
 - You cannot write to a market, only an audience.
 - By the time it's published, the trend may have passed.
 - The story, not the author, should dictate the audience.
 - Write what you *must* write.

What you need:

1. Honed writing skills, or at least skills you will hone as you go
 - This may mean years and several books in a drawer
2. A young main character (MC) who (mostly) controls his or her own story
 - Adults can be allies but not the prime actors
 - Stories can be dark, but hope must have a role
 - The "morale," if any, must be integral, not overt
 - 19 is typically the upper limit for the MC's age
3. Understanding of the age categories (reader age, not MC age)
 - Roughly: Middle-grade, 8-12; Tween, 10-12; YA, 12 and up; mature YA, 14 and up
 - Also: chapter books (7-10), hi/lo books (high interest, low reading level)
 - Impacts theme, syntax, language, maturity of content, age of the MC, and to some degree, genre, length, and POV
 - Chapter books: 7,500-12K; Middle-grade fiction: 25K – 60 K (upper MG fantasies may go longer); YA: 35 K – 85 K
4. STRONG familiarity with current books (and some sense of history)
 - If you don't enjoy reading it, why would you write it?
 - Understand relationships between genre/topics/themes and age categories
 - Bestsellers & award-winners (often not the same)

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5. To hang out with (and enjoy) your audience. Understand what they think about, worry about, fear, adore.
 - Understand but watch out for slang and trendy/techno references
6. Everything you can learn about developing voice authenticity and originality
7. Access to your own feelings, problems, memories
 - Many writers find a comfortable age of “arrested development”
 - Although the trappings of youth culture change, most of the feelings & fundamental problems do not
8. Critique partner(s) familiar with the field (probably)
 - There are significant drawbacks in getting feedback from random teachers & librarians – or kids

Issues to grapple with

- What to do with the parents (and how stupid/evil to make other adults)
- Beware of being too influenced by favorites of your youth
- Maturity of content & language (impacts on authenticity, marketability, controversy)
- Glamourizing risky behavior, judgments, & authorial responsibility

Resources:

Verla Kay's Children's Writers & Illustrators Message Board (aka the Blue Board)
www.verlakay.com/boards/index.php

Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators (de rigueur resources & events)
www.scbwi.org Regional chapter: www.scbwi-washington.org

Children's Book Insider (website and newsletter): www.write4kids.com

Institute of Children's Literature (online classes): www.institutechildrenslit.com

Great blogs (among many):

Editorial Anonymous: <http://editorialanonymous.blogspot.com>

The Chinook Update: <http://chinookupdate.blogspot.com>

Low-Residency MFAs

Whidbey: www.writeonwhidbey.com/mfa

Vermont: www.vermontcollege.edu/low-residency-mfa/writing-children-young-adults

Hamline: www.hamline.edu/gls/academics/degree_programs/mfa_cl/index.html