

### **A Conversation with a Children's Book Editor**

Below is a transcript of a conversation I had with Carol Malnor, the editor-in-chief of Dawn Publications (<https://dawnpub.com>) - a children's book publisher that has been "connecting children and nature since 1979." As a children's author herself, Carol has a unique perspective on the industry...from both sides of the desk. In the business for many years, she has garnered a plethora of insights and reflections about children's books and the authors who write them. I sincerely hope her "words of wisdom" offer you some perspectives and instruction on your own unique journey to publication.

TONY: What are some of your everyday responsibilities?

CAROL: Every day is different because I'm simultaneously working on books that are at different stages of the development process. On a weekly basis, I'm reading manuscripts, looking for that "special one" that perfectly fits our niche; working with authors to revise their text; fact checking information to prepare manuscripts for vetting; and working with illustrators and our book designer. Writing for the business is also a part of my regular responsibilities—creating promotional materials, press releases, catalog information, online lesson plans and activities, a weekly blog, and a quarterly article for our website. And, of course, there is the continuous stream of emails to respond to!

TONY: What's the biggest misconception people have about children's book editors?

CAROL: (laughs) It's such an easy job that anybody can do it. Most people think, "There are so few words, it can't be hard to edit a kids' book."

TONY: What do you wish all authors knew about your job?

CAROL: I wish authors knew that publishing a book is a huge financial investment for publishers, and also a big risk. Publishers have tremendous upfront costs, and we depend on successful sales to recoup those costs and continue in business. No matter how much I may personally like a manuscript, we're only able to publish it if our team believes that it has wide appeal in the marketplace—the bottom line is that we have to have confidence that the book will be a good seller. Unfortunately, that means we're not able to publish all of the worthy manuscripts that come across my desk. I would also like authors to know that every submission I receive is handled with respect. I honor and appreciate the author's creative expression even if we can't publish their work.

TONY: What's one of the biggest misconceptions new authors have about children's books?

CAROL: A big misconception is that writing a children's book is easier than writing a book for adults. Many new children's book authors think, "Children's books are just simple stories. It will be easy to write one." That's just not the case. It's a real challenge to communicate an interesting story or meaningful concept using just a few words, in short sentences, with simple vocabulary. I've written for adults, and I know first-hand that it's much harder writing for children.

TONY: What would you like to tell every potential author?

CAROL: Before submitting a manuscript, it's imperative that you find out as much as you can about the publisher. Check out their website and peruse their catalog. Get to know the kinds of books they publish—understand the scope and variety of their books. You'll save yourself a lot of rejections if you put in the time to get to know the publisher *before* you submit. Once you determine that your work is a good match with the publisher, carefully read their submission guidelines, and follow them to the letter.

TONY: What do you look for in a submission?

CAROL: First of all, I'm looking for manuscripts that fit the parameters stated in our Submission Guidelines. We clearly spell out what we want, and also what we don't want. Because our niche is creative nonfiction, the manuscript must connect with the school curriculum, usually meeting one or more elementary science standards. Beyond that, I'm looking for an emotional hook that grabs me and pulls me in. Something that has a special spark—maybe it's an endearing character or an unusual plot twist that makes me want to know “what's next.” I often receive a manuscript that's well-written and meets our guidelines, but it just doesn't have a special quality that will delight the reader. It's difficult to describe, but I recognize it when I see it.

TONY: What makes a manuscript stand out (from the slush pile)?

CAROL: A manuscript that touches my heart and tickles my funny bone always stands out from the pile! An endearing main character is also a big factor. Manuscripts that make their way out of the slush pile and into the “potential manuscripts pile” must have a creative element, address a unique topic, or take a really fresh or unusual look at a topic. And a catchy title gets my attention, too. A clever title in the subject line of a submission email entices me to open it right away.

TONY: What's missing from most manuscripts?

CAROL: An engaging element that surprises and delights the reader.

TONY: What's one of the biggest mistakes writers make when writing picture books?

CAROL: Writing nonfiction that is creative and entertaining is a real art. Not many people can do it. I often receive manuscripts that are well-written, but that wouldn't be exciting for children. And many authors make the mistake of being didactic or preachy. They tell children what to think and how to feel rather than weaving the message into a story for children to discover on their own. I also receive beautiful, heartfelt manuscripts that I can't publish because they're written for an adult's sensibilities rather than for a child's—the vocabulary is too complex or the concept is too abstract. While we should never underestimate what children are capable of understanding and feeling, the writing needs to reflect the language realities of young children.

TONY: And, how do you tune into that child's energy at the appropriate age with the right words?

CAROL: Spend time getting to know the age-group you're writing for—discover what they find interesting and fun. Talk to teachers. I had an “Aha moment” when I received this comment from a first-grade teacher: “This is a question that my students often ask me when I'm going to read a new book to them, ‘Is this a story or just talking?’ They strongly prefer a story! If a book is mostly information, it must have a main character they can connect with.”

TONY: What single piece of advice would you give all authors (new and experienced)?

CAROL: I don't have any advice. But I will quote Maurice Sendak, who has excellent advice for authors: “You cannot write for children. They're much too complicated. You can only write books that are of interest to them.”

TONY: What should writers do (that they don't) before submitting a manuscript?

CAROL: Get feedback from children *not* related to you. Ideally, become a fly on the wall while someone else reads your manuscript to children so you can see how kids react to it. Then keep editing until kids love it.

TONY: What do you see as the future of picture books?

CAROL: Changes in technology are going to continue to influence the future of picture books, and it's hard to know where tech will take us. Books about diversity with diverse characters, including female main characters, is a trend that I think will be continuing. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) remains a hot topic in education, and picture books have a huge potential to fill that niche. On a personal level, I'm hopeful that there will be an increasing demand for books that focus on social-emotional skills, as well as mindfulness skills.