

Understanding, Editing, and Publishing Children's Nonfiction

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Hannah VanVels: Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'm so excited to be chatting with you about the children's nonfiction space.

Probably needless to say, the children's nonfiction space is a very large space and encompasses nonfiction picture books which can range from books about animals and places and biographies to textbooks to chapter books and even more. So for the sake of time and simplicity and my own expertise, I'm going to be focusing mostly on the children's picture book space—those illustrated books that are for the four- to eight-year-old audience. So without further ado, let's dive in.

So for us to really understand picture books, we need to understand nonfiction. Nonfiction books are informational texts. With the adoptions of common core standards in many different states, many elementary-age school children are expected to spend about 50% of their reading time focused on nonfiction.

While some kids naturally gravitate towards informational writing, those who love a good story, often feel like reading nonfiction is a chore. And honestly, I can't say that I blame them.

Nonfiction picture books convey information not only in text, but they can also convey information through illustrations, fun sidebars, type faces, notes in the margin, caption photos and more.

Some nonfiction picture books can be viewed in any order and they don't necessarily have to be read from top to bottom, front to back.

The National Geographic spread that I have on your screen is a really great example of a book that has a variety of ways that it can be shared, and that flexibility is wonderful for reluctant readers.

For the four- to eight-year-old crowd, nonfiction can be intimidating. After all, storytime is the time to read for fun, and fiction seems better suited to this task than nonfiction. But early exposure to fact-centric books can really expand a child's understanding of the world.

Nonfiction presents a really great opportunity for kids to learn and understand things that aren't in their own neighborhood, their own time, or really part of their world—things like whales, or trains, or even heavier topics like war.

Librarian Miranda Rosbach suggests dividing your children's nonfiction reading into these five categories: animals, events, people, places, and things. Let's start with animals. Now there's a reason why I listed animals first. Animals are something that many children are familiar with from a very young age.

Kids are naturally drawn to animals. You might have your own pets of your own as part of your family. Make regular trips to the zoo. Perhaps you live in a community that has a lot of squirrels or rabbits or birds.

Animals are things that kids know already. There are a lot of really great animal books that have fascinating spins on different well-known topics—whether it's fun facts about birds or frogs, or even facts about dinosaurs.

Events is our second topic. Books focusing on events might often be a hard topic category. Topics like this might be suited for the higher end of that four- to eight-year-old audience.

Remember, with the four- to eight-year-old age ranges that picture books are geared towards, there is a wide variety of maturity levels and reading levels that this age range encompasses.

Picture books—nonfiction picture books—focused on events, are a good opportunity to discuss injustices, some tragedies with kids, and also a chance to learn about movements that spread peace and justice, and how they have shaped our worlds and our communities. Things like civil rights or even Bible stories have all had a profound effect on the way that we live life today.

Our third category is people. This is the category that gives you a chance to get creative. There are countless biographies about famous and even lesser-known individuals.

Times like Black History Month in February, or Women's History Month in March, are great times to guide reading towards nonfiction and these are also things that publishers think of, as well as different book stores and retailers think of, when they think of promoting nonfiction books.

When it comes to books about people, one thing to consider is that many of these have forgotten figures are women or people of color, whose stories have been marginalized by a culture that has historically favored a white male point of view.

The "We Need Diverse Books" community has done a really wonderful job of articulating the need for stories about diverse subjects by diverse authors.

Since the publishing business continues to make a concerted effort to address this, this is something that you might want to consider when you're looking for different subjects, if you have interest in writing biographies.

If you do not identify with a minority culture, that doesn't mean you shouldn't write about it. It does mean, however, that you need to be extra diligent in your research and even more extra sensitive to your subject matter.

Sensitivity readers are really good way to make sure that you are being culturally aware and that you're not inadvertently harming the community or providing a harmful representation of a community that you want to highlight and that you want to help.

For writers of picture book biographies, it is important to remember that if your goal is to be traditionally published—if your goal is to find an agent or to find a publisher—first of all, before you even get kids excited about your story, you have to convince that agent or that editor that you have a story that's worth telling.

For me as an agent, the author's note, is your chance to convince me, as your future agent potentially, that your story is in fact worth telling. What is an author's notes. Well, an author's note comes after the story. Your author's note shouldn't be a book length exploration of everything you had to leave out in your biography, because remember, you're limited here by word count, how much you can include.

But your author's notes should be long enough to clarify why the person that you've written about is historically significant. Since historical significance of something that can only be

explored with perspective and with distance, sometimes it's really hard to convey this in, directly in the flow of your narrative itself. This is where your author's note comes in.

It's especially important for subjects who are not household names. Remember what we talked about with the hidden figures of history—the figures that society and history have overlooked.

This is the opportunity where you can convince your reader that even though they don't know the story, that they don't know this name, it's one that they should know.

On a very basic level, you want to explain what your subject accomplished in their life, and why it is that they're important to us today. What is the impact that they have on our life today? If you've done your job right, your readers should be looking forward to your author's note, in the same way that you might look forward to the facts and the photos that follow a lot of movies that are based on true stories. A good story make readers want to know more.

Writing your author's note is also a chance to make sure that you've told the right story. Remember, with picture books, you don't have the space to tell their entire life story; you're just providing a snapshot. If your author's note is more compelling than the story that you've actually written, it might be time to revisit the subject, the focus of your picture book.

Don't forget that while the author's note tells your reader why someone is important, your story should be the thing that shows them.

Our fourth category is places. Spring break, summer vacation—these are the times when road trips, vacations, and traveling might be on the horizon.

Unfortunately, this past spring break and summer vacation might have looked a little different for a lot of people. Gone where the road trips; gone where the fun vacations; and more people were spending more time at home with their kids than they were probably expecting.

Fortunately, there are a lot of really wonderful books about different places in the world, places that are geared on specific cities or countries around the world.

So perhaps while that road trip across the, across some of the fifty states that you had planned for the summer with your family might have been canceled, fortunately, there's a really cool fifty states book that may help your kids stay hyped until you can reschedule it.

I found that these books are also excellent hype builders before a kid and a family takes a trip somewhere, or perhaps before a child goes on a field trip. It builds the excitement, gives them a little bit of context and information to the places that they might be visiting.

Our fifth category is things. Concept book for babies, such as shapes, opposites, colors, letters, first book of animals—these are probably pretty well-known books about things, things that you might have had for your own little one.

But these books about things can also include more complex topics, like space exploration. Books about things really run the gamut in children's nonfiction and I've listed some of my favorites on the screen here.

For example, we have the story behind the invention of the band aid, something that you and your child are hopefully not too familiar with, but probably inevitably are.

Or "Mistakes that Worked," inventions that kids might be familiar with, and this gives them the story behind them. Books about things are really amazing because they encourage children to delve into learning more about topics that interest them.

In theory, now that we understand children's nonfiction, you're probably thinking, but hey, this is a great idea.

You've got that charm and imagination of a work of fiction and the all-important educational value. So what could possibly go wrong? This brings us to editing and I'm here to tell you, as a picture book editor, a lot can go wrong.

The most common problems that arise when writing children's nonfiction are writing too much information and writing too little information (writing not enough information).

Oftentimes when it comes to something with too much information, I can usually tell that a writer really loves the topic and they want to be writing nonfiction, they're excited to be writing about this topic.

But I can usually tell that they're a little worried that the topic itself doesn't have enough charm or enough pizzazz. They're worried that kids won't find it interesting or cool to keep on reading.

So this author tries to spice it up a little bit. For example, say this nonfiction book is about a forest ecosystem, an exploration of a forest. Sometimes a writer might feel compelled to add an

extra character, to like a protagonist to their story. They call this, or I call this going the Dora-the-Explorer route.

But oftentimes, unfortunately their Dora is reduced to a bit of a glorified tour guide. She has a name, maybe a little bit of a personality, a backstory. But really, she's just there to have a learning experience.

Sometimes there's a fictional frame story where your Dora the Explorer guide has maybe a class project where she is supposed to learn about the different plants of the forest, but that's about it.

In this case, editing includes rewriting. It includes stripping the frame story away and rewriting this as a straight nonfiction picture book.

A fact-based book about forests is easier to categorize and easier to place with publishers and into retailers without that distracting character element. A straight, fact-based picture book, is the bread and butter of school and library nonfiction picture book programs.

Nonfiction picture books can be a tough category if you want to include any element of fictional storytelling in your book. A good example of this can see at work, and working really well, is one that we're probably all familiar with: "The Magic School Bus" series, by Joanna Cole.

"The Magic School Bus" series features a fictional character teacher, Miss Frizzle, and her class. And the story frame that wraps around the nonfiction content is the antics that her class gets into.

The characters interact with the lesson that she teaches, and there's dialogue, but that balance of information is mostly leaning towards that nonfiction information. The fiction frame is at a minimum. That is a really good thing to remember if you choose to use a frame narrative surrounding your nonfiction content.

Narrative nonfiction picture books should aim to be primarily nonfiction. without too much intrusion from fictional elements; otherwise you might risk entering into this weird gray area between fiction and nonfiction and publishers are looking for a strong emphasis on one or the other.

The other potential issue with nonfiction picture books is giving too little information. Lack of information can raise questions. For example, in our Dora the Explorer example, where a

character explores a forest, maybe she has some great adventures, but she only learns about one animal, maybe a plant and some moss.

Young readers are curious readers and they're going to be wondering "why?" Why those parts of the forest? Why that animal? Why that plant? Why that moss? If the goal is to teach about a forest ecosystem, why not do so in a more comprehensive way? Why only pick a few facts to span the course of an entire book? Your educational element should not be too thin. Pick a specific angle and do a deep dive.

I'm going to hearken back to "The Magic School Bus" franchise again, which is a great example of these, of this really specific angle. Some of the examples that I have listed on the slide illustrate this point really well. "The Magic School Bus Makes the Rainbow," which is an exploration of the rainbow phenomenon.

"The Magic School Bus on the Ocean Floor," they're not exploring the entire ocean; they're just exploring this one part of the ocean. And "The Magic School Bus Explores Human Evolution," only talking about humans here.

So this class is always up to something. Not only is this a great example of a fiction narrative, a fiction frame narrative that wraps around the nonfiction content that really works—there's action, problems to solve, mysteries. These books, give a fairly comprehensive look at a really specific topic.

This segues nicely into our next point. If you're expected to be giving a comprehensive look at any topic, how many words we talking about here? Well, you'll be happy to know that nonfiction affords you a little bit of a higher word count than traditional picture book fiction works.

How many words, you'll find in a nonfiction book—a nonfiction picture book, that is—depends on the amount of information that's being presented.

Books for slightly younger readers and grade levels are complete around a thousand words or so.

Remember, that four to eight age range encompasses a variety of reading levels. So some nonfiction picture books have a higher word count, clocking in at around 2000, sometimes even up to 3000 words, when you include an afterword, an author's note, glossary, bibliography. After all, you put a lot of research into this.

These are supplementary materials that are often included in nonfiction picture books, and these are helpful and makes them more attractive to the school and the library market, because it shows publishers that you have done your homework here; you are prepared for this.

So if you're curious about how to publish nonfiction picture books, you'll find that the process is largely the same as it is for fiction.

Publishers of nonfiction children's books are usually more willing to hear from content creators directly, as some of these houses are smaller or considered institutional publishers. That means they cater to the school and the library markets.

Many, many of the bigger publishers of children's nonfiction will only look at agented submissions, however. Think of Scholastic, Harper Collins—those ones you usually need an agent to submit to.

To attract the attention of a publisher or a literary agent for nonfiction picture books, you will need a complete manuscript, including any back matter that you plan to include, your author's note, your biography notes, any other of these extra things that show that you've done your research.

You'll also need your query letter, which is the pitch for your project. It establishes a market need, and a curriculum hook, and explains your credentials in writing the story. Why is it you? How are you qualified to tell the story? Any expertise that you have or marketing savvy that you can bring along to the table will be considered a big plus, of course.

In the crowded nonfiction picture book market, your idea is your biggest ally. Publishers and agents are especially looking for fresh takes on familiar topics.

Like we are chatting a little bit about earlier, in history books or biographies, for example, this means the perspective or focus on people that have been historically marginalized, stories that we might not have heard yet before, but might kind of be tangentially aware of.

Your topic has to appeal to kids surprising. No one, perhaps as well as yourself. For me, one of the great joys of reading nonfiction picture books, is discovering a topic that I might kind of have a passing familiarity with, and discovering that it's more interesting than I thought. And that definitely happens.

But in general, it's great if your topic has that obvious immediate appeal to kids. If it is directly related to their life; if it's about creepy bugs, their amazing animals or wacky inventions—these are examples of topics that kids relate to. They see them in real life, or on television; perhaps they're reading in them and some other books; they know what these things are, and they're drawn to them. They have an emotional reaction when it comes to this topic, whether that's excitement, or fear, or happiness, or reminds them of something else.

Topics that don't have that immediate kid appeal might still work. But here it's all about finding the right angle. That is the key, is finding that angle.

For example, taxes might interest some adults, not this adult, but maybe some adults, but picture book readers, not so much. But if it's something like wacky facts about weird taxes, you know, like in ancient or some ancient country that there was like a donkey tax or something, that might prove interesting to kids. I should say I have no idea if that's true or not. Perhaps we do need this book.

The next thing you have to consider is the timing. Why now? Why is now the time for this book? Is there an anniversary or an exhibition or a high profile event that can drive sales? These are things that a publisher is going to be thinking about.

One example of this at work is the anniversary of the moon landing here. We saw a rise in picture books about the moon landing, whether they had a fictional frame narrative, or were directly about the moon landing itself.

That is, it has a great promotional and publicity tie-in. So you need to ask yourself where do you see your book being sold and promoted. Could it be found at a zoo or some strange little specialty shop? Does a strong curriculum link make this a must-have teaching tool? But you also need to remember that when you're asking yourself why now, it takes a very long time for a picture book to go from a manuscript to the shelf in the store. We're talking about two years. So when you're asking yourself why now, you really need to be asking yourself, why two or three years from now.

You need to think about the competition. Topics such as dinosaurs, space, animals—these topics are always going to be in demand with young readers, so publishers are always hungry for creative new approaches.

One word of advice that I have for writers here is to read widely. Devour children's nonfiction books and compare your ideas to existing ideas. Where do you see overlap? Where's yours

fresh? What hasn't been done before? Take a look at the successful titles, the titles that have sold well. Take a look at the titles that are still in print, after many, many years. Why are they still selling? Explain why your approach will be different, and better yet, how you're approaching will be better than these.

On that caveat, your topic has to be fresh to stand out from all the competition. One really great way of researching competition and competitive titles without even leaving your house, is Amazon.

Go to Amazon into a search for a children's book in your topic. How many are there? Are there twenty? Are there three hundred? Are there just pages and pages? Are there not at all.

Some topics have been covered so much that it would be really difficult to sell another book on the topic because that market is really crowded.

For example, when I search Amazon for children's nonfiction books about animals. I may have 10,000 results. Ten. . .thousand.

Those are 10,000 competitive titles that people can choose over your book on animals. So you might narrow it down to books about cats and there are still several thousand results. So that's a little better than that 10,000 animal results. But that's still a lot of competition.

See you then try searching for on Amazon the duck, books about the duck-billed platypus and are maybe three results.

So while you might be able to sell a nonfiction picture book about cats, if you come up with a totally fresh approach, there's probably more, easier room for a book about the duck-billed platypus.

On that note, you need to show why you're the right person to write this book. Are you an expert on the duck-billed platypus? Do you already communicate with your target audience? Maybe you work at a zoo.

Publishing is also a partnership, so research your potential publisher as well. Perhaps you found a publisher that specializes in books about animals, or marsupials, or whatever species or genus that the duck-billed platypus might fall in.

Visit bookshops; look at publisher catalogue, find out what they're celebrating on social media. And then you can pitch them your idea and tell them why you think that your book, your idea is a good fit for their list.

I want to close this by telling you all a little bit about work-for-hire writers. Many times with nonfiction, books are written by non-royalty earning writers. We call these in the biz a work-for-hire writer.

So what is a work for hire reader, you might ask. This is when a publisher hires out a pre-developed book idea to a writer. The writer then takes the publisher-created book guidelines, develops a specific outline, writes the book, and revises it—all under the guidance of an editor from that publishing house.

Some publishers work with authors directly, while others use different editorial service or book packages as, book packagers as middlemen.

When I worked as an editor at Harper Collins in their children's department, we did this quite a bit. If we had a specific request from a retailer saying, "We really want. We really want this book about the duck-billed platypus. And here's what it's gotta, here's what it's gotta have," we might go to reach out to some of our agent contacts, reach out to a book packager saying, "Hey, do you have anyone who might have experience writing about these strange animals? We're looking for someone to write about the duck-billed platypus. Do you have anyone?" And here agents might send us some of their clients; they might, book packagers might send us writing samples and we would select a writer from there. In terms of how much creative control that work for a buyer has, really varies from project to project. Again when I was a manager with Harper Collins, and we kind of did it both ways, if I had a really specific idea for what this book should look like, I was happy to share it, but I was also happy on other projects to just let the writer go wild. If they had a lot of expertise in the subject, more so than I had, then that was great. It was really wonderful.

So if you're looking and you might be interested in this kind of work, which is a great opportunity to get your foot in the door of publishing, and also an opportunity to get some name credit on a book cover, the SCBWI discussion boards can be very helpful.

But remember, since work-for-hire companies are developing their own book projects in-house, they're not looking for you to pitch your book here.

They're not interested in you and your ideas quite yet. You have that time to prove them later on, but they're just looking for you to write and develop their ideas.

There's really a lot of good that can come from this that helps you develop a really great relationship with writers. Again, when I was an editor, I found myself returning to some of the same writers because they were truly wonderful to work with.

And it's also wonderful now as an agent to see the trajectory of their careers. Some of them have gone on to get agents and put out their own work. So, so really a work-for-hire writer for a publisher is a really wonderful way to go.

Thank you all so much for joining me. I had a wonderful time chatting with you. And I think that we have time for some questions now. And so again, thank you guys so much, and I look forward to chatting and sharing a bit more with you.