

Picture Perfect Writing: Creating a Memorable Picture Book

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Presenters Fiction Track: I'm Linda Bethers.

I'm Karen Ripley.

Hi, I'm Kevin Kline.

I have a disclaimer to begin with. I had a man once tell me he had written a book on how to become a millionaire and he couldn't figure out why nobody would purchase it-or so it can be published and I kind of have an idea that it might have been because he wasn't a millionaire.

So, but when we were asked to do this, I get nervous when I am asked to talk about writing and have to do it well because there are so many people, especially in this area to do well. But I love books and I've read to kids for 40 years and so I can talk about books and some of the things that have stood out to me. And a few years ago I was at the Salt Lake City library and there's a little gift shop there that has all things book.

And I went in and there was this deck of cards put out at the New York Public Library, and it was 52 best picture books in their opinion. And I loved that. That I could have-I didn't have to have a list of 10 good picture books or 15 but I could have 52 on my list.

And so I started making a list and a few years later I was taking a class from Rick Walden at-here at BYU and in the class at one point we were evaluating why we liked books. And when I had thought-I go to workshops and classes about writing books they'll tell you need to analyze your writing, you need to analyze books and that isn't something I really wanted to do when I read, I just want to enjoy the book. But in making this list of 52 and then looking at it after, I did learn some things about what makes a book work for me. And the big thing I took away from my class was I liked books with surprise endings.

And have fun side note, in that class someone wrote a book, a picture book, and she read the manuscript and I really liked it and it stayed with me and I kept thinking about it. And a few months later I saw her and I asked her what was happening with it. And she said, Oh, I turned it into my editor and they, they rejected it.

And as I'd been thinking about all those months I'd been thinking about a couple of other possible endings that were surprise endings. And so I asked her, I said-I mean this is being really bold, because this woman is an amazing author, But I said, You know, I thought about a couple of other endings for that story. And she's a really nice person and she said, well, tell me. So I told her the two endings I thought of and she took one of those endings back and changed her story, turned it in, and it ended up being accepted and published. And the ending I told her was a surprise ending. So that just kind of solidified for me that surprise endings just might be a key thing in a book.

But as I've been thinking about his presentation over the last few months, stressing, worrying about this presentation over the last few months, I found a few other things that I enjoy in picture books. And so just to give you an example of some of those. I like voice in a picture book and a few that I brought that have great voice. Are these as an example.

And another thing I like, I like them if they're heartwarming but more fun or funny that a kid would like. And so I have a couple of those. My Monster Mama Loves Me So illustrated by our Utah illustrator Mark Beuhner. Zombie in Love 2.1-2+1. By Kelly DiPucchio. And Time for Bed, by Mem Fox. I love this one because it's great for dialogue as you read to your child and they go to sleep that night.

OK then another that I like are books that teach character or values. I love the Cookie series that were Amy Kraus Rosenthal. And then Tacky The Penguin, just a couple of examples of those. And I like-But it's-But-and then some books with surprise endings. The Wednesday Surprise. Book Book Book. Put Me in the Zoo. I remember my aunt reading this book to me when I was about four years old, and I remember how perfect the ending was and I loved this book.

Falling Rapunzel. This is when I when I read it to my kids for Valentine's Day, they all laugh at the end. They love it. No Such Thing. I read this book when my niece was three. I love it so I took it home, read it to her. And I didn't know she'd get it 'cause she was pretty young, and we got to the end and she just burst out laughing and exclaiming about it. And so I took it and read it to my kindergartners, two years older than her and they didn't really get it. There were just

like, two or three in the class that did. So this is the little plug for reading to your children. I think that's why she understood it is because she'd been read to so much. And then My Garden. I love this one because of the imagination. And what it can spark in children, the discussion and conversations you can have with a child. Just gonna to read you a couple of pages on this one.

My mother has a garden. I'm her helper. I water. I weed. and I chase away the rabbits so that they don't eat all the lettuce. It's hard work, and my mother's garden is very nice, but if I had a garden, There would be no weeds, and the flowers would keep blooming and blooming and never die. In my garden the flowers could change color just by my thinking about it-pink, blue, green, purple. Even patterns. And if you picked a flower, another one would grow right back in its place. In my garden rabbits wouldn't eat the lettuce because the rabbits would be chocolate and I would eat them.

So fun book and it continues on with just things that a child would imagine it to be in their garden.

And then the last ones I'd just like to show you (inaudible) quickly. I just brought a couple of examples of books that kids love and-I'm an elementary school librarian so I read to kids all day long and books that I get the best reaction from year after year, when I read it. Like one book, I'll read this whenever you're to third grade, and every year they love the book.

Actual size is nonfiction, but this is one that you can't expect a quiet library while they're hearing this, 'cause they are so excited about the fact that they're learning. And then another one is Press Here and that one wasn't in my library. Press Here is another one that I actually it read it to my kindergarten through sixth graders.

When I read it to my older students I-they loved it and they reacted. And it-we talked about all the things that book teaches a child in such a fun way they don't even know they're learning.

And then the other one is Sam and Dave Dig a Hole. I love this one. The kids get so excited and lots of explaining when this book is going on and Karen's going to talk more about this and so I'm not gonna say anymore.

And that's it. (Inaudible) We're screen sharing. I think it's working. Think we're on? Yeah. Okay. All right. So to me, this is so exciting. It's talking about basic picture book, picture book flat structure. It's something I wished I'd learned when I began to write. It's something I completed a whole MFA without really having a tight handle on, it's something I still struggle with. It's something I have to write revise and rework and, and learn over and over and over again.

So, anyways, so yeah, this is, this is great. But in the picture books, the ones we love, the ones we read over and over again, the ones we were jealous that we didn't write, they all have a very similar storytelling structure. It's what gives your, your story gears, it pushes your reader along and keeps them reading.

It's also the same, the same structure is talked about on kidlit.com and the Plot Whisperer by Martha Alderson, and Kidlit by Mary Kole, and also in How to Write a Children's Picture Book, Volume 1 by Eve Heidi Bine-Stock.

This is the structure that was studied and developed by Gustaf Freytag and here-let's see, I can even do my-Okay, so this is this is our, this is our plot structure, you start with exposition beginning the initial incident, rising action, the climax, the falling action, resolution and the denouement.

So, this is, this is the structure. Let's see it in action in a picture book. We've got Sylvester and the Magic Pebble by William Steig.

Okay, very first page of Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, we've got this intro. Sylvester Duncan lived with his mother and father at Acorn road in Oatsdale. One of his hobbies was collecting pebbles of unusual shape and color, right? This is we're starting the story, first page. Also, especially in a picture book your, your, your exposition will be very short and your main-the main part of your story is going to be the, the conflict and the rising action.

Okay, the initial incident, right? Sylvester finds a pebble. It's raining-He says I wish it would stop raining and then to his great surprise the rain stopped. It didn't stop gradually as rains usually do. It ceased. So this is picking up the story. We know about Sylvester. Here we go. Right? Rising action. Here we are on the plot pyramid. So he tests the pebble and makes sure it really is magic.

He thinks about the things he could wish for. He starts home. He sees a mean hungry lion looking at him. He gets flustered and says, Oh, I wish I were a rock, right? And so now, poor Sylvester is a rock.

And we're, we're, we're, keep going with this rising action. Mr. and Mrs. Duncan worry. They asked the neighbors, they call the police, the dogs search for him and Steig does just such a great portrayal of we have fall and winter and spring. And so we get this sense of time that's passing by and poor Sylvester is still a rock.

Then, this will be our cli-climax.

Poor Mr. And Mrs. Duncan-they're trying to find some bit of happiness in their poor sad lives and they decide to go for a picnic and they picnic right on top of the rock that is Sylvester, right? And this is our moment of greatest emotion.

Mrs. Duncan says, suddenly I have the strangest feeling, feeling that dear Sylvester is alive and not far away. I am, I am! Sylvester wanted to shout, but he couldn't.

Oh, how I wish he were here with us on this lovely May day said Mrs. Duncan. Mr. Duncan looked sadly at the ground.

Don't you wish it to father? she said. And he looked at her, as if to say, how can you ask such a question? I wish I were myself again. I wish I were my real self again. thought Sylvester. Right? The moment of highest highest emotion.

And then, of course, sweet Sylvester turns back into himself. We have the falling action and in less than as-an instant he was himself, and we have the resolution. The denouement, right? And this is the, this is even like the, what Linda talked about. The, the twist at the end. Right? The surprise.

So they eventually calm down, they put the magic pebble away, and someday, they might want to use it. But really what for now, what, what could they wish for? They had all they wanted.

Right. Okay, and let's I'll just go really quickly. Because I wanted to do a recent picture book. And like Linda's favorite, one of Linda's favorites is Sam and Dave Dig a Hole, right? Let's see this same structure and in a picture book of much fewer words and see how it goes. Okay exposition, right? We're starting out. We've got characters and setting, setting.

This is so great. It's on a one page. One single page. On Monday Sam and Dave dug a hole. We've got the exposition. Okay, we've got the inciting event. Incident or event. We won't stop digging until we found something spectacular. Okay, this starts our whole story going. We've got our rising action. They dig until their heads are underground. They dig. They decide to dig in a different direction. They decided to dig, to split up and dig and of course, and the illustration, we get the tension and the suspense because they keep missing the diamonds. Ah, it's painful. Okay, so our rising action, right? And they keep missing, keep missing.

And we have to get to the climax. They dig until they can't do it any longer, until they finish their chocolate milk, until they've shared the last animal cookie and they're so exhausted they fall asleep. But then the little dog, the dog can smell the bone, so he can keep digging. And they're falling.

Falling action. And then this on the last page. I know you can't read it. I'm sorry. We have the falling action, the resolution and they fell down, down, down until they landed in the soft dirt. Wow, said, Dave. Wow, said Sam, That was spectacular. Right. So that's, again, the twist at the end, the resolution, the falling action, that all happens on the very last page. Most of our story is here in this rising action.

So this is my challenge to you. Take books that you love, take awesome books and and, and put them on this pyramid. See how the structure goes. Take your own book, make sure you can see the the make sure you can see See the plot structure in that. And this is me. I'm, I, I, I'm at pg13books.com where you can find great books. Anyway, tell me what books you love. Come and tell me, and let's talk. That's all.

Right. Thank you very much. Linda and Karen, for that introduction on how to analyze picture books. I'm going to be focusing specifically on writing picture books for the Latter Day Saint market. I'm Kevin Kline. Good to be with you.

And I've organized my presentation to answer this question. I'm just imagining someone emailing me, could be someone who's watching this I've written a church-themed picture-book manuscript. what are my chances of getting it published? My response would be Great! What's it about? And we could talk about the marketable topics and approaches that there are in the Latter, Latter Day Saint picture book space.

And I'd also ask, what publishing options are you willing to consider? We have traditional and as well as self publishing. And so in this presentation, I'm going to discuss both of these. And then finally, I'd like to ask you, How committed are you to picture book writing? If you're willing to go through all of the revisions, and the critiques, and the rejections, and the rejections, and the rejections that happen when you are writing anything, picture books as well. That, of course, increases your chance of getting your manuscript published. It may not look, in fact, it probably won't look like the same manuscript you started with. But it'll be something that publishers can work with and can reach an audience with and that is very rewarding. So at the end of this presentation, I've got some resources for your journey to publication. And they apply to all picture books, not just Latter Day Saint themed ones.

To introduce myself a little more and tell, talk about my journey-I began writing picture books about four years ago, and my journey was kind of a long and winding road as you see here. I was able to benefit from many different organizations, webinars, and conferences, both online and in person-really helped me to understand what the market for picture books is like now and what a current picture book looks like. And about five, six months ago, my first picture book was published by Covenant. It's called Oh How Lovely Was the Morning.

And my hope in this presentation is to help your journey, perhaps be a little bit shorter, and for you to take some strides today from what Linda and Karen and I have all shared with you towards your path of publication.

So let's start with marketable topics and approaches. Within the Latter Day Saint picture book market, you really have two types of books. There are history doctrine practice books that include books about scriptures, and gift and holiday books.

There are some right there. You see some of the classics and popular well loved titles. And then there are also ones built on the same-covering the same topics that have been done more recently, that got kind of a unique or a fresh take on these subjects, reverence for example.

You see this picture book down here on the bottom. A Dinosaur Goes to Church. What might have been 20 to 30 years ago just a picture book about reverence showing a child being reverent on the cover, is now a dinosaur going to church. So that's enjoyable. The gift holiday books, Perhaps a little less innovation with them, but they're generally commemorative books. They're beautiful. They're originally illustrated and they're for Christmas and Easter. You have those sorts of special occasions.

The bottom line though to publish picture book now is make it new. And you can understand that. In the classic bedtime scene where a child is talking to a parent, especially in the Latter Day Saint culture that the child will ask the dad this question, Dad will you please teach me the doctrines of salvation? Of course, no child says that, right? We as parents think that. We want our children to know and appreciate these truths that we love. And kids themselves, I think they definitely resonate with eternal truth.

But what the kid says is, Dad will you please tell me a story? Or, Dad will you please see me a song? So if you can take the doctrines of salvation and put them into an engaging, a memorable story or a song, rhyming picture book, that is really catchy and pleasing, publishers will know that, Okay. this book can reach the audience. And so you will increase your chances of publishing your picture book.

All right, let's talk about traditional and self publishing options. As you probably know, there are three main Latter Day Saint publishers and I've pictured here, or are presented these here alphabetically, starting with Cedar Fort.

Then you have Covenant. They own Seagull Bookstore and some people think that they're two separate companies, but they are the same organization. They're owned by the church as is Deseret Book and Deseret Book is the name of both the publisher and the actual brick and mortar bookstore.

So Cedar Fort doesn't have its own bookstores, as you see, but they do place their products in Seagull bookstores and Deseret bookstores. And they've been starting a kind of a trend to publish more international market type picture books. Ones that aren't necessarily a Latter Day Saint or even Christian in, in content.

And they publish these ones in, and they can place them in other bookstores as well as in Costcos. They're in a lot of regional Costcos. So something to keep in mind when you consider submitting to these different publishers.

Here's some guidelines for each ones. Cedar Fort, they accept about 15 manuscripts for picture books out of around 100 submissions per year. What they say they're looking for are customizable and personalizable books.

That's something they're just starting to do this fall. And I'll show you an example of those in just a minute. They do like books with some church themes and topics, but also as I said, books that can appeal to a national market. And they're always looking for books that have a happy or a heartfelt, nostalgic theme like Love You Forever. If that picture book doesn't ring a bell, the cover might. There it is, Love You Forever. It's, it's about 30, 40 years old. And according to Robert Munsch, the author, he sold over 10 million copies of this book. So, of course, any publisher would like to have that in the catalog.

Or on the right here you see an example of these personalize, personalizable picture books. What you do, there's about four or five companies right now that create these and you go online to the website, you pick one of the templates there. They have action picture books and fairy tale of Princess picture books. Ones for birthdays or major holidays, and then you input your child's name, gender, skin tone, and basically design the book there. They send it to you and it costs two or three times as much as a regular picture book. But the idea is that your child will enjoy it two or three times as much because it's about them.

Here's some other picture books published by Cedar Fort. The ones over here on the right, these are the classics. Sorry. These are the ones that are more national market oriented. So, No One is Quite Like You. This one is a delightful rhyming picture book about special skills that each child has and how each of us has something unique that we can do. And that's not a necessarily a scriptural theme. But yeah, one that could appeal to a broad audience. So you'd find this one in Costco. Same with this Apple Trees of Tschlin there.

Okay, moving on to Covenant. They accept one to two picture books out of about 150 submissions a year. They're looking for concise stories with church specific topics and how they, as they describe it, quality texts that can stand on its own. So, independent of illustration, are these memorable words. Here's a selection of some of the books that they've published in the past. And recently. You can see, it's kind of a mix of reverence and fun.

And moving on to Deseret Book. They accept two to five manuscripts out of about 300 per year. They do publish one specific to church culture and doctrine. And as their acquisitions editor says, if writers have a manuscript that is unique and is meeting an important need that hasn't been met by other titles, we want to see it! So that's a real plug for you doing your homework. If you have a manuscript idea, you definitely want to go and look at these publishers and see, all right, who else has done a picture book like the one I'm thinking of or I'm writing and how can I make mine different? A very important to do because they they can't publish more than one picture book that's pretty much exactly the same on the same topic.

All right, a couple examples of picture books from Deseret Book. This is Ming's Christmas Wishes. It's just barely come out, written by Susan Gong, who is Elder Gong's wife. Illustrated by Masahiro Tateishi. And it's very beautifully illustrated. This is a nice Christmas gift book.

And this one is called Standout Saints: Church History Heroes From Around The World by Sierra Wilson and illustrated by Emily Tueller It's not technically a picture book. It's for still young readers, though. What it does that I like so much, the reason why I'm featuring it, is it because it introduces, kind of like the Saints Volumes One and Two are doing, helping us reshape maybe our notion of church history by including stories from faithful Latter Day Saints that may not have been told before.

And so this will introduce young readers and old readers too, to many great members of the church around the world. You probably know that that's a trend that is happening in picture books, broadly speaking, nationally right now, is this celebration of diverse voices.

So as Effie Trinket from hunger games would say, may the odds be ever in your favor. And what are the odds? Well, total of about 21 manuscripts from the three publishers are accepted out of 550 submissions. That's about a 4% chance.

If you're an optimist like Lloyd Christmas from Dumb and Dumber, you would say, happily, so you're telling me there's a chance? Yes, there's always a chance, especially the more times you submit. But that can be very discouraging for some of us, getting that rejection after rejection. Of course, each one increases your odds theoretically, but you run the risk of making this mistake and that is equating the rejection from editors with my story's not good enough. It's just not true. Editors, they don't ask, is this story good? Their job is to—they're not paid to evaluate literary merit of any of the submissions they receive.

They're not the Nobel Prize for Literature committee, they're not the PTA Reflections committee. They're, they're paid to sell books. So what they do is they ask a question like, will our audience buy this story? And along those lines they ask, does this story align with our mission and values? Does it work or can we make it work? So if your story has got a great angle and it's marketable, It doesn't, even if it's not that quote, unquote great, well, that's what editors do. Their job is to make it great, and make it good. So, more importantly, is it unique, memorable? Is it a unique and memorable take on a popular topic? And did the author and illustrator have a wide influence? Obviously if you have followers who are more likely to buy your book, The publishers know that they can sell more copies.

So, don't ever get discouraged and think that a rejection is a, saying that your work or you yourself are not good at what you're doing. Fortunately we always can get better, but some books won't be published by publishers, just because they don't meet their particular needs.

All right, just a couple of examples of self publishing in the Latter Day Saints space. This is Norman the Latter Day Saint. As you can imagine, he used to be Norman The Mormon until some recent changes. And done by Danette Smith. She's got a great series out. You can buy these on Amazon and she uses the print on demand feature. I don't have time to go into what self publishing is like using Amazon, but definitely check it out. There are courses that are eight to ten hours about it. But basically, in a nutshell, you can get a higher profit margin per book if you are selling, self publishing versus doing it with traditional publishing with an actual publisher. Of course you're doing all the marketing and you may not sell as many that way. But if you, if you're good at marketing, that's definitely something to consider doing.

Another project, a self published project that I like. It's recently come out, Pillar of Light: Joseph Smith's First Vision by Andrew Knaupp and Sal Velluto. This is a graphic novel of the, of the first vision and as you can see it's on Amazon and it's very reasonably priced.

These guys have a real sense of mission in what they're doing and they're willing to sell it for a little bit, for a great price to reach a wide audience and just because of the satisfaction the reward that comes from sharing such an important message. And as I said, making it do, making it unique. This is something very important in church history. And people who really enjoy comic books or graphic novels, they're going to respond to this.

Okay. So finally, I've just got a few slides of resources for your journey to publication. I want to start with SCBWI, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. It's a great national organization. It has conferences.

It has regional chapters as well. Ours in this area is, if you are in Utah and Idaho, is probably Utah and Southern Idaho region, a great group with wonderful virtual and in person conferences and workshops and monthly writing critiques too. If you're interested in any of those, I'd be happy to answer questions or you can go to that website. One that we've recently started is the, there we go, Latter Day Saint Picture Book Community. It's a Facebook group now.

To, as it says, connect with, learn from, and encourage each other as creators of picture books for Latter Day Saints. And we did that just a few weeks ago at the first LDS picture book online mini conference. So that's an organization if you are interested in writing for an (inaudible) Latter Day Saint audience we strongly encourage you to look it up and join.

Finally, here are some picture book websites. I'm not going to be reading through these, but as you watch the recording later you can just stop and copy them down, look them up. And they have great resources and examples of successful picture books and analyses.

Really useful information on the sites. And some books about writing picture books. The bible of picture book writing is up at the top there, Writing Picture Books by Ann Whitford Paul. It's been around for many years.

Self, How to Self Publish A Children's Picture Book. There's a Eve Heidi Bine-Stock book. And then a Facebook group that I found really useful for self publishing picture books there at the bottom.

So that's the information that I hope helps you along your journey. And again, if yours can, instead of looking like mine, if yours can be a little bit straighter with not so many learning curves on the path to publication then I'll be very happy. And on behalf of Linda and Karen, we want to wish you well on this journey and say thank you very much for joining us, and good luck.