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# Exploring Children's Literature through Writing

Kelly M. Carey

*Olivet Nazarene University*, [kcarey@olivet.edu](mailto:kcarey@olivet.edu)

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EXPLORING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE THROUGH WRITING

By

Kelly M. Carey

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for partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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Elizabeth A. Schurman Ex Dea A. Dehnen 4/3/13  
Scholarship Project Advisor (printed) Signature Date

CHARLES W. PARRISAN Charles W. Parrisan 4/26/13  
Honors Council Chair (printed) Signature Date

Rebecca Belcher Rankin Rebecca Belcher Rankin 4/26/13  
Honors Council Member (printed) Signature Date

To Nolan, my godson, who has been my best inspiration

&

To Miss Jane and the girls of the real Troop 557. There would be no story without you.

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## ABSTRACT

Children's literature is a unique genre of literature that can best be understood by examining its creation. In order to better understand this area of literature, an attempt was made to create an original work of children's literature. To begin, children's literature as a whole was researched, including the history, picture books, realistic fiction, writing process, history of publishing, and publishing process. This research was then used to produce a picture book entitled *Sophie's Long Weekend*, a story about a third grade girl who is spending the weekend away from home for the first time. Next, after several revisions, the book was read to an audience of 24 third grade students who were then given a survey. Data was collected from these surveys to illustrate the students' reaction to the creative work. Finally, these results were analyzed to verify the success of the process.



## INTRODUCTION

Any study of a literary genre is a complex process. Different genres appeal to many different readers for a variety of reasons, and works are often written with very different purposes in mind. This is just one reason why the genre of children's literature is incredibly unique. Children are obviously always the intended audience, and the purpose of these books written for young readers is to entertain while also offering some insight into the world these readers are just beginning to explore.

Understanding these differences is necessary before one can accurately craft a book for children. The subgenre of picture books presents many specific requirements, including length, vocabulary, and subject matter. The writing process then begins with first researching these requirements and the history of children's literature before examining today's market. With this knowledge, the writer can then begin to create a work for children. This work must be interesting to a child while still offering some kind of wisdom the child will benefit from learning. In the case of picture books, the writer must also understand that the story must be easily illustrated, and it must be unique in order to be published in a competing market. This project seeks to examine that process through the research of children's literature and the creation of a picture book.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Children's literature is a unique, complex genre. This specific area of literature holds a great importance because it is children's books that lead avid readers to fall in love with literature. To appreciate fully works of children's literature, it is necessary to understand the history of the genre, the genre itself, and the writing and publishing processes for children's books.

### **History of Children's Literature**

Children's literature in its written form first became popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; however, picture books have only appeared in the last century (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 153, Tunnel 46). Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, children were not treated like children; instead, from the time they were physically able, they were expected to perform the same work as adults. As a result, most children were exposed to the same literature as their parents (Ellis 1-2). Even fairy tales and Aesop's fables were not originally written for children, but were adopted by children after they heard the tales (Tunnel 41-42). Children's books were a privilege for those who were wealthy enough to hire laborers, allowing their children to read instead of working for the family. According to Tunnel, "As far back as the Middle Ages, books intended for youngsters existed in very limited numbers in the form of handwritten texts for the extremely wealthy" (41). However, children have always needed their own genre of literature. According to Rebecca J. Lukens, a professor at the University of Miami, "Children are not little adults. They are different from adults in experience, but not in species, or to put it differently, in degree but not kind." (9). Perry Nodelman, an English professor at the University of Winnipeg agrees, stating, "[I]t is obvious that children's literature exists simply because it has to. Children need books, surely, and they need books produced with their special interests limitations in mind" (69). Thus, literature meant for children was a necessity.

The first books intended for children were written to teach some kind of lesson. According to Tunnel, "The earliest realistic stories were didactic ones that were intended to teach morality and manners to young readers. The characters of the children's stories of the 1700s were usually wooden, lifeless boys and girls whose lives were spent in good works" (153). The focus of this literature was clearly to educate young children. An example of such didactic works is the books written by the Puritans for children. They believed children were as prone to a sinful nature as adults were, so they wrote books meant to encourage children to choose the correct path in life (Nodelman 71). This earliest literature differs greatly from children's literature of today, which aims to entertain children in addition to presenting a lesson or moral. Access to literature written for a younger audience also continued to be a privilege for the wealthy until 1744 when John Newberry began to exclusively publish children's literature after witnessing the attraction people had to chapbooks, crudely printed booklets that were sold for pennies (Tunnel 44). Books written for children became more readily available, and the genre began to grow.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a more understanding attitude towards childhood had been established. According to Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, it was during this time that "society began to accept the notion of childhood as a time for playing and learning. At the same time, the general economy began to be able to afford the average child the leisure time these activities require" (101). Children were finally given time to read, and, as a result, the need for children's literature grew. Printing techniques also began to improve during this century, and illustrations began to appear alongside the text in children's books (Tunnel 46). These were illustrated books, which included a few illustrations throughout the book, and they differed from the modern picture book, which includes an illustration on every page (Lukens 39). The modern picture book did not appear until less than 100 years ago, in the 1920s. Literary historians argue

about which book should be considered to be the first modern picture book. Some critics, including Tunnell, have labeled Beatrix Potter the “mother of the modern picture book” for her use of both illustrations and text in the children’s classic *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, first published in 1902 (46). Others, however, consider *Peter Rabbit* to be an illustrated book, with fewer illustrations than a true picture book. Those critics, such as Kathleen T. Horning, consider Wanda Gág’s *Millions of Cats*, published in 1928, to be the first modern picture book. She explored the effects of illustrations “by using negative space to indicate the passage of time; she varied page layouts, and some illustrations broke out of their frames to extend across two pages” (85). These new innovations in the genre led to the expansion of the picture book genre.

A financial boom occurred in the 1960s, allowing the government to offer grants to school libraries. Both library and public school systems were continuing to grow during this time, and reading had also come “to be recognized as one of the child’s best tools for learning and for gaining a worthy source of entertainment” (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 101). Consequently, this caused a growth to occur in the publishing of children’s books. As a result of this boom, “[m]ore books began to be published and sold, which is reflected by an increase in the number of books chosen as “Notables” each year by the American Library Association. There were 19 Notables in 1956 and 62 Notables in 1964” (Tunnel 48).

In addition, this financial boom and subsequent new demand for children’s literature led to an exploration of new themes. The genre of realistic fiction began to expand as authors started writing honest portrayals of reality, which, at times, included tough issues such as divorce, death, alcoholism, and child abuse (Tunnel 48).

### **Picture Books**

When one thinks of children’s literature, it is most likely the picture book that comes to mind. Known as the picture book or the storybook, it is the first form of literature a vast majority

of children are introduced to. Yet, the picture book itself is a vast genre within the realm of children's literature that is more complex than its short text implies.

Allyn Johnston and Marla Frazze, publisher and illustrator respectively, define the picture book stating, "In the most basic, classic, and very best sense, you could say it's a story for young children told in both words and pictures that unfolds over thirty-two or so printed pages that are sewn together at the spine and housed within hard cardboard covers. And this story, when read aloud, will cast a spell over all who are present to hear it and look at it; and, with luck, it will go straight into their hearts and never be forgotten" (10). While a picture book may or may not have this effect on its reader, most picture books do contain 32 pages.

According to Tracy Dils, author of several picture books, most picture books contain 24 to 32 pages; if there are more than 32 pages, there is still an even number of pages (12). Kevin Henkes agrees with this observation, saying "The art form of the picture book is, in fact, all thirty-two pages – pictures and words – working together" (quoted by Hancock 58). While all picture books cannot be reduced to a formula, they undeniably contain a formulaic format that spans the entire genre. And even if they do not "cast a spell over all who are present to hear it," picture books have certainly made a name for themselves. Today, they remain the "most plentiful and most popular variety" of books in the genre of children's literature (Tunnell 67).

In the above quote, Henkes touches upon the most unique quality of picture books: they are made up of both words and illustrations. In the best picture books, the two are inseparable because both the text and the illustrations contribute to the book's meaning (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 91). While the words should be able to stand on their own, the pictures should enhance the story being told. In the words of Marjorie Hancock, "The continuity between the language and the illustrations [in a picture book] takes on even more importance as pictures help tell the story, showing action, character expressions, well-defined settings, and plot

development" (68). The two should be intertwined, both adding to the overall content of the picture book. In addition to showing the action, setting, and characters of the story, the illustrations play an important role in a storybook. A picture book is the first piece of literature a child will encounter, and the book serves as "an entry-level introduction to literacy" because it contains the images to catch the child's attention (Hancock 88). These images also create context clues for the child to use before they are even capable of reading the text written on the page.

However, though picture books are often associated with very young readers, the intended audience of a picture book is not always a beginning reader. According to Hancock, "Although the picture book format has been linked to young children and emergent readers, some picture book titles are intended for older readers and even adults... these special creations are often lost to the very audience for whom they were intended" (69). Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson explain that "[p]icture books for older readers are generally more sophisticated, abstract, or complex in themes, stories, and illustrations and are suitable for children aged 10 and older" (104). They are still young enough to delight in the illustrations on the pages of the book, but they need more complex stories to hold their interest. In addition, in a world that is becoming increasingly visual, the use of picture books for older readers "is no longer shunned but encouraged because they provide a stimulus for older children to become more effective readers" (Hancock 69). Picture books are the format they are familiar with, and they offer illustrations to help children with difficult words or phrases.

### **Realistic Fiction**

Just like the overarching genre of children's literature, the subgenre of picture books is made up of many other smaller categories. One such subgenre is that of realistic fiction. Carol Lynch-Brown and Carl Tomlinson define realistic fiction as "stories that could indeed happen to

people and animals; that is, it is within the realm of possibility that such events could occur or could have occurred. The protagonists of these stories are fictitious characters created by the author, but their actions and reactions are quite like those of real people or real animals” (151). This genre focuses on everyday events, and all of the events must be possible, even if they are not probable (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 152). Hancock agrees that a great work of “realistic fiction strives for a balance between reality (realism) and make-believe (fiction)” (150). Therefore, a successful work of realistic fiction will focus on events most children will be able to relate to in some way.

Realistic fiction is the most popular genre of literature among children, and a work of realistic fiction was the recipient of most states’ children’s choice awards between 1985 and 1995 (Hancock 151). It is no surprise, though, when one thinks about what exactly a work of realistic fiction is capable of doing. Hancock has compiled a list of the benefits that are provided by works of realistic fiction for children. In addition to helping children gain insight about themselves and their peers through the use of realistic relationships, picture books in the realistic fiction genre employ familiar settings and situations that help foster reader engagement, thus installing an early love for literature. Equally important is the power of realistic fiction to provide the reader with “a model of confronting life experiences in which the reader serves as a spectator as characters cope with contemporary issues” (Hancock 163). This provides young readers the ability to explore and experience new situations and challenges from a safe distance. In this way, a picture book does become a window through which the youngest readers can view an aspect of life they have not yet experienced.

Hancock labels these books that provide a new challenge to the reader as addressing the theme of “Becoming One’s Own Person” (151). According to her, a book with this theme “covers the transition from being a child and growing into an adult” (Hancock 151). Even if the

child in the story is far from adulthood, this theme always encompasses the idea of maturation in some form. In these stories, the protagonists “face real-life problems... confront them, and mature from the life experience. Readers can gain insights into challenging situations they are facing or may face while learning about handling the problem with determination, forethought, and control” (150). An example of such a story would be Nancy Coffelt’s Monarch nominee *Fred Stays with Me!*, which depicts the challenges faced by a child whose parents have recently divorced. This book allows children to see how the protagonist’s life has been altered by her parents’ separation without having to feel that emotional pain themselves. Another less serious example would be Elizabeth Rusch’s *A Day with No Crayons*, where the protagonist loses her right to draw after she uses her crayons on the walls, leading her to discover the colors her world provides instead.

Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson agree that the ideas of maturation and facing challenges encompassed by this theme should be addressed in picture books. According to them, “Even stories that portray adverse and discouraging social situations should permit some cause for optimism. Children need to trust that problems can be overcome or ameliorated, and that the world can be a good place in which to live” (152). This trust can be established through children’s literature as readers watch characters defeat obstacles and grow as a result. Literature has the power to “inspire children to overcome obstacles, accept different perspectives, and formulate personal goals” (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 5). Therefore, it is important that children are given stories to read that help them to confront problems they are likely to face and watch characters close to their own age persevere.

This particular type of realistic fiction is especially appealing to older children, even in picture book format. At this age, children “begin to assert their growing abilities to meet their own needs. With these skills they can read or listen to and enjoy books about the lives of other



children of the past, present, and future in picture books for older readers” (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 14). Books for these older readers “are stories about their peers who are growing up, asserting themselves, using their new-found skills, moving toward independence, and experiencing growth through meeting challenges,” and they “often center on the adventures of young characters within their neighborhoods or communities” (Lynch-Brown 14). Though these children are not the audience usually associated with picture books, they are still just learning to read. With the right kind of complex story at its center, a picture book can still be the perfect book for an older reader.

### **Reading Level**

When writing for a specific group of children, the reading level of the book is of the utmost importance. A story that will be well-loved and cherished by a certain age group loses its importance if the child cannot read the book on his or her own or understand the story being told. Determining the grade-level of a book is a difficult task, especially in today’s world when the meaning of grade-level reading ability is not linked to books at all, but test scores instead. In addition, there are numerous formulas and systems that have been developed to help a writer determine the reading level of a text. According to Barbara Peterson, “[h]istorically, attempts to assign levels of difficulty to texts have been grouped together under the term ‘readability’” (120). Readability research has been done to examine characteristics that make a book easy or difficult to read, and it has resulted in the development of a series of formulas that can quickly predict the grade level of a book (Peterson 120). These formulas are defined as “statistical tools that can take into account...text features such as word difficulty, word frequency, word length, and sentence length” (Peterson 120). Following such a formula helps the writer to ensure that the readability level of the book is appropriate for the intended audience.

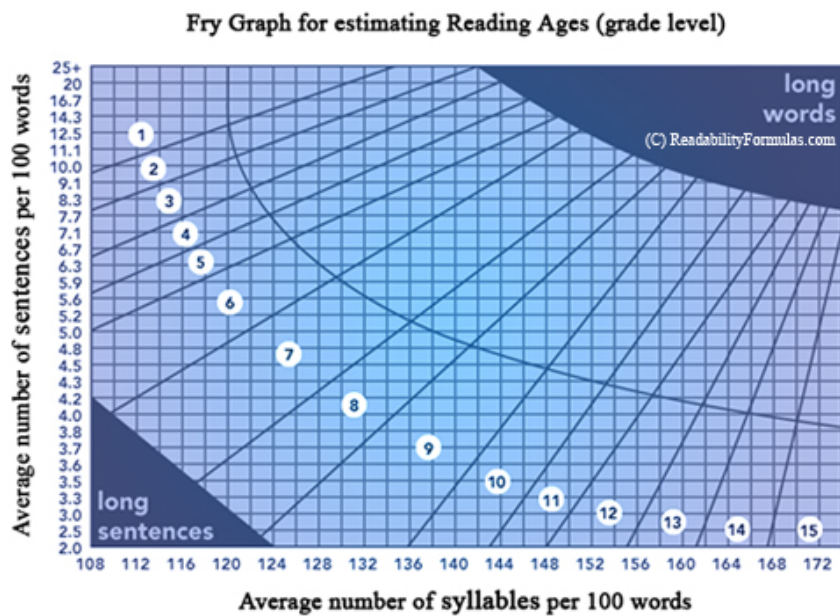
One such formula is the Fry Graph Readability Formula. According to Kathy Shrock, this formula is “the most widely used, and easy to use, readability” graphs (Shrock). Edward Fry began developing his readability test in 1963 while working as a Fulbright Scholar in Uganda. During this time, Fry was helping teachers to teach English as a Second Language and developed his readability test to assist these teachers in choosing reading materials for their students. The graph-based test was made available through the *Journal of Reading* in 1968 after being validated with materials from schools and with results from other readability formulas. Originally, the test could determine readability through high school, but the graph was extended in 1969 to include primary levels and in 1977 to include the college years (“The Fry Graph Readability Formula”). Because the test has proven to be accurate, it is widely used by writers and educators today.

In order to use this formula, a writer or educator must first select three random samples of 100-word passages from the work. These samples should come from three different places in the book, and numbers and pronouns should be excluded from the count. Next, the writer or educator counts the number of sentences contained in each passage, rounding to the closest one tenth of a sentence. The same is done for the number of syllables contained in these passages (“The Fry Graph Readability Formula”). These values are then recorded in a table, such as Table 1. If there is considerable variability between the values, new passages should be chosen in order to obtain a more accurate measure. The average of these values is then found (“The Fry Graph Readability Formula”).

**Table 1: The Fry Graph Readability Formula Table**

	Number of Sentences	Number of Syllables
First 100 words		
Second 100 words		
Third 100 words		
Total		
Average		

These values are then used to determine the readability of a book using the graph found in Figure 1. The number of sentences and number of syllables in the passage then serve as coordinates in an ordered pair. The place where the two numbers intersect on Fry’s graph shows the readability level of the book (“Fry Graph Readability Formula”). As can be seen in the graph, a third grade readability level would include a book with a number of sentences between 6.7 and 16.7, and a number of syllables between 108 and 144.



**Figure 1 : The Fry Readability Graph**

Viewing Fry's formula, it is clear that there is no correlation between the readability of a text and the actual words that make up the text. Of course, a writer must keep her audience in mind when choosing words for a picture book, but a writer must also remember that it is okay to incorporate words that a young reader is unfamiliar with. In fact, after the age of four, children are only able to learn more about language and its uses through the learning of new vocabulary and semantic structures (Tunnell 20-21). According to Tunnell, "Controlled vocabulary is based on the idea that children learn to read easy words first, then graduate slowly to more difficult ones to avoid frustration. However, so-called dumbed-down text, which overly controls vocabulary and arranges words in unnatural patterns... often [have] proven to be more difficult for children to read and understand than text with interesting words and language patterns" (27). Dils echoes this idea, saying, "There is no set vocabulary list, and every word does not need to be understood by the intended audience. However, every word should be able to be understood within the context of the story" (22). It is the flow of the language that matters most of all. Once again, a picture book is unique because "[t]he words in a picture book are written to be performed. They are meant to be read aloud" (Johnston and Ray (10). The writer must establish a balance between words that the reader will be familiar with and words that may be new.

### **Writing for Children**

Just as children require a special kind of literature, works of children's literature require a special style of writing. As Tracy Dils, a published children's author, states, "Because of the special nature of this audience and the competitive nature of the market, most writers find that writing for children is as challenging or more challenging than writing for other audiences" (2). The biggest challenge for authors who write for children is undoubtedly the gap between the age of the author and the intended audience. For that reason, it is imperative that an author

spend time with children who belong to the target audience of their writing. Critically observing their behavior in a variety of settings not only helps a writer to understand what her audience is interested in, but it also presents an accurate depiction of the way children act and the things they say (Dadey and Jones 90-91). This allows the author to create realistic, believable characters her audience will be able to relate to.

In addition to spending time with children, writers of children books are encouraged to pull inspiration from their own childhood. Debbie Dadey and Marcia Thornton Jones, authors of the *Bailey School Kids* series, believe that “writing about what you know does lend authority to your writing. More importantly, your personal experiences can be a treasure trove of story ideas” (64). Children’s author Penelope Lively also believes in pulling from memory while writing. She believes that “awareness of the past... is an achievement of the imagination” (14). However, it is a personal past that she concerns herself with rather than a historical one. She explains, “When I write fiction, I am concerned with memory; if I were concerned with the past, I would write history. What I am trying to do is translate into fictional terms that marvelous process of recollection interspersed with oblivion that goes on inside our own heads” (Lively 15). Lively also believes that “[t]he use of this experience in children’s fiction is our theme: how we translate something personal into something general, how – using the knowledge and language of an adult – to strike a chord in children so that they recognize, without ever having been there, the wider country into which we are inviting them” (15). Award-winning authors Eve Bunting and Jane Yolen have both used this idea of writing from memory: Eve Bunting’s book *The Butterfly House* was based on a childhood trip to a butterfly haven and Jane Yolen’s *Owl Moon* was inspired by a time when her husband took their daughters owling (Dadey and Jones 64). Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson agree that “[c]hildren’s books are about the experiences of childhood, both good and bad” (4). However, they caution that the most important requirement

is that these past memories “should still be relevant to children today” (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 4). Even though they are the memories of the author, the audience must be able to relate on some level.

Once a writer has conceived an idea, the actual writing in the writing process begins. Picture books present another unique challenge to the writer. James Cross Giblin, a published children’s author and the former Editor and Publisher at Clarion Books, explains that in order to write a picture book, an author must be able to think visually because the text and the illustrations are equally as important in a picture book (108). Dils agrees with this view, stating, “Although the story should succeed on its own, it must also gain visual support from the illustrations or it is not well suited to be a picture book” (19). Because the illustrations are so important, some authors choose to create a “dummy” book as they write. A dummy book is defined as “a sample book in which you actually place the text on the appropriate page, allowing for the front matter pages. This way you’ll be able to see how your story evolves through page spreads (two pages facing each other), and you’ll learn something about the success of your story’s pacing” ( Dils 13). This allows the writer to better visualize how the illustrations will fit with the text. A dummy book can also help to figure out the pacing of the story, and show the author ways to incorporate suspense (Giblin 111-12). However, dummy books are not used by every author, and it is not the correct way to send a work to a publisher. According to Kathleen T. Horning, a former librarian and professor, a manuscript is sent to a publisher without page breaks, and it is the editor and the designers who “will estimate the number of pages there will be in the printed book, specify the trim (size of page), and decide the type of binding” (8). The dummy book still proves to be beneficial for many during the writing process, though.

When writing for children, characters, plot, detail, and language are all important areas for a writer to consider. The most important element is the characters. Because the book is

being written for a child, a child should serve as a main character. According to Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, the ideal main character is “the age of the reader or slightly older” (25). Adult characters, on the other hand, should appear sparingly or, sometimes, not at all (Hancock 87). Roberts agrees, stating, “The parent is often a silent, perhaps unseen, figure in the background. There is a rehearsal for separation, allowing the main character to have adventures while the adult is still somewhere nearby to help” (qtd. in Rocklin 112). Even though adults may rarely appear in the text, it is important that all characters are as realistic as possible. Dils says, “An editor is going to look for characters in your story that are realistic, believable, and consistent throughout the entire book. Your main character, of course, should be your most developed and should also be the character who changes and grows most significantly from beginning to end” (59). Part of this change should surprise the reader or lead him or her to some kind of revelation. Tunnell explains, ““Like life, good stories contain occasional small surprises. We live with character as they work their way through problems, but may be delighted suddenly by an eye-opening insight about the human experience that comes from their struggles” (25). Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson support this view, saying, “The best children’s books offer readers enjoyment as well as memorable characters and situations and valuable insights into the human condition. These books have permanent value” (5). One way to help readers connect to the main character is by using a single character’s viewpoint to tell the story. This helps the reader to empathize and sympathize with the character whose story is being told (Dils 56-57). The main character and his or her trials and tribulations should occupy the center stage of any picture book.

Along with character, the plot must be one that children can relate to. According to Joanne Rocklin, a picture book should contain “a simple plot based on everyday situations in a child’s life” (112). This relates back to the idea that sometimes the best inspiration can come

from the life the writer has led. While these everyday situations help create a sense of realism and allow the reader to relate to the characters, they cannot be the story's main focus. A common misconception is that story for children needs only to present familiar everyday activities – the daily routines of life. Perhaps 2- and 3-year-olds will enjoy hearing narratives such as this, but by age 4, children want to find more excitement in books. A good plot produces conflict to build the excitement and suspense that are needed to keep the reader involved (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 34). The conflict must be solved by the conclusion of the story and, “[i]n a satisfying picture book, nothing is solved by coincidence or magic, a parent, or God. This allows for a bit of growth at the end of the book for both main character and reader, and thus, a sense of hope” (Rocklin 113). This action should also begin immediately to grab the reader's attention. Dils believes that the story's main conflict should be explained to the reader before he or she even truly gets to know the main character (21). While not quite that extreme, Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson do agree that a good picture book features a “[q]uick start to the story with action beginning on the first or second page to hook the reader” (25). While a child will be interested in the characters, the character must be presented in the midst of an exciting, sometimes unpredictable plot.

In order to be a successful story for children, many authors and critics alike believe that the plot must also contain a message. This is different from the didacticism used in the earliest forms of picture books, but a good book for children still contains some semblance of a moral lesson even today. For Tunnell, the best lessons in picture books are “those that are secrets to be discovered rather than sermons to be suffered” (26). Even the youngest children do not like books that feature a message that is superior to the plot. Nevertheless, the message lies at the heart of children's literature, and is yet another feature that makes this specific genre so unique. According to published children's author Erik Christian Haugaard, “The message, the knowledge,



which the author wants to bring to his audience cannot be separated from the style or the story. If a piece of fiction is to be successful as literature, the three must harmonize” (295-96). Though it cannot overpower the story being told, the message must have an impact on the young reader.

Because the reader of picture books is often so young, the detail used in the story must also be used sparingly. According to Rocklin, “[T]he words must be beautiful but spare at the same time. They must evoke visual imagery with few adjectives, gaining power mostly from strong verbs. In other words, the writer has to leave something for the illustrator to illustrate” (113-14). Giblin also expresses this idea, pointing out that “especially in stories for younger children, there are few if any passages of straight description. While the author concentrates on the essentials of action and dialogue, it is the illustrator’s responsibility to convey the color of a desert sky at night, the other passengers on a crowded bus, or the various flowers in a springtime garden” (109). Nevertheless, detail is necessary in some capacity in any written work. Tunnell, states, “Good writers know readers need specific information – details that enter through the senses – and take the trouble to provide it. Lesser writers generalize. The difference between providing sensory detail and generalizing is the difference between showing and telling” (19). According to him, the best writer is the writer who provides “enough sensory detail to allow the reader to make personal discoveries and come to personal conclusions” (19). These details help the child to relate to the story, and also help to create that sense of realism that is necessary in any work of realistic fiction.

Though the reader is young, the language used in a picture book is also incredibly important. In fact, because the reader is young, it may be more important. Rocklin believes that the language of picture books should be “rich, evocative, and sensuous,” and “worthy of being read aloud” (113). As a result, sentence structure must also be considered by the writer. Short

sentences are more reader friendly, according to Dils, and sentence fragments are also sometimes appropriate in children's literature. When there are longer sentences present, they should be able to be broken up into shorter phrases or clauses to allow for easy reading (24). Above all else, the language in a picture book must be easy for the child to read and understand.

In addition, the readers' reaction is of the utmost importance because it is through children's literature that children begin to love literature and become lifelong readers. It is the job of the writer to help instill this love of reading to all audiences. As Hancock states, "The ultimate evaluative criteria for a picture book is whether children will be engaged, entertained, and encouraged to continue their lifelong reading adventure" (87). A writer can be assured that she has done her job if her book is read and loved by the children it was meant for.

### **History of Publishing Children's Literature**

Once a work has been written, the obvious next step is to find a way to publish the story. The publishing market for children's books, however, is one that has increasingly changed over time. According to Harold D. Underdown, a children's book editor, "Publishers have been making books for children for about as long as printing presses have been printing. Right through the nineteenth century, however, these were sidelines to their main business of publishing books for adults" (54). Just like it took writers centuries to realize children required their own kind of literature, it was not until after World War I that publishers began to create separate divisions for children's books (Underdown 54). An increase was seen in the number of books being published for children at this time, but it was still small. While some companies created these separate publishing houses for children's literature, not every publishing company saw this division as an advantage. Research was conducted in the 1940s to better understand what children looked for in literature (Underdown 54). Because printing processes were also improved during this time, books became more colorful and inviting for children.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that true change began happening in the publishing industry regarding children's books. According to Underdown, "Federal money from Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs sparked a minor boom in children's publishing, and suddenly federal funds were available for schools and libraries to use to purchase books" (54). As a result of this money, more children were able to access picture books through public schools and libraries. However, this money was limited. Only a decade later, "[f]ederal monies for school libraries in the United States dwindled in the 1970s, and the market for children's books shifted toward a consumer, or bookstore, market" (Tunnell 50). Though it was a blow for library and school funding, this shift towards the consumer led to another important development in children's literature. Prior to the 1970s, picture books were only available in a hardcover form. Golden Books published cheaper hardcover books, but these were only sold in department stores, not to libraries, and they were still more expensive than a paperback (Underdown 55). When libraries were no longer the leading consumers of picture books, though, the publishing industry had to make changes to compensate. It was at this time that "picture books first became available in paperback, making them cheaper for young readers to own" (Tunnell 51). As a result, the publishing industry for children's books expanded greatly.

According to Dils, these changes to the publishing industry "turned a small and cozy corner of the book world into a billion-dollar business" (4). During this time, big name bookstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble began to appear, and publishing companies began to merge. Dils describes the industry during this time as "total chaos," but this state of confusion did not last for long (6). Eventually, the industry settled down again, and today, those same companies formed by those mergers are still at work. Now, "[w]hile there is still some "editor hopping" and there are still plenty of mergers and acquisitions, the industry seems to be getting its act together in terms of the business side of children's publishing. The result:

Children's publishers have learned how to publish books that make them more of a profit" (Dils 6). This profit also continues to come mostly from bookstores rather than libraries and schools. According to Tunnell, "retail sales command more than half the children's book market" (50). If a book will be attractive to parents and their children, it is likely to be viewed as a success by today's publishers.

Today's publishing industry is favorable for some writers looking to publish children's books. According to Harold at *The Purple Crayon Blog*, even though the current economic status is far from ideal, "2009 began with some reasonably good news about retail [children's] book sales in 2008." Even though the economy has suffered in recent years, there was only a slight decline in the sales of children's books (*The Purple Crayon Blog*). However, it is possible that this number could begin to decline again, especially because these economic changes also affect libraries. According to Harold at *The Purple Crayon Blog*, "book-buying budgets across the country are cut by an average of 20%, that works out to a 12% decline in sales, which would have severe consequences for some companies." If publishing houses are selling fewer books, they will be choosing fewer books to publish.

Even though fewer books are being published, eReaders are also currently changing the market for children's books. The advent of tablets and eReaders with color capabilities has created a market for picture books in an eBook format. eBooks are also cheaper, making it easier for consumers to continue to purchase books (*The Purple Crayon Blog*). Even though the economy has suffered in recent years, this industry continues to thrive, and there are still publishing opportunities for writers looking to share their work.

### **Publishing a Children's Book**

In order to be published, one must first complete a manuscript. A manuscript should be typed using double-space lines and sent with a cover letter and a self-addressed stamped

envelope for the publisher's response and the returned manuscript (Underdown 116). The book should also be sent to specific publishers. Dils states that it is important for writers to "refer to publishers' guidelines carefully and make sure that [the] story fits the type of titles they are currently publishing" (27). Sending it to publishing houses that will not be interested in the writer's manuscript is a waste of time for both the writer and the publisher alike. Ellen Shapiro, a published children's author, understands that authors of children's books are competing against many other authors, so it is important for new authors to stand out. Shapiro says that new writers "can get in the top five percent [of submitted works] by simply being appropriate" (Shapiro 6). This means that the font of the manuscript and cover letter is professional and both documents are free of mechanical errors.

Because it is the first impression a publisher is given, the cover letter is also of high importance. Shapiro explains, "Your letter is crucial. If it isn't top-notch, [the publisher] will never see the first paragraph of your carefully crafted manuscript" (7). The cover letter should be simple and businesslike with only the information the publisher needs to know, such as the writer's address, the title of the manuscript, a brief description of the work, and the writer's signature (Underdown 120-21). Shapiro breaks the letter down further by stating that a cover letter should begin with an introduction to the manuscript. Usually, the title, genre, and word count of the work is sufficient for the first paragraph. The next paragraph should then explain why the writer has chosen this particular publishing house. This shows that the writer has done her research and has chosen this specific publisher for a reason. The final paragraph should include information about the author (Shapiro 8). Shapiro agrees with Underdown that this paragraph should include "only what is pertinent to the project" (8). The publisher only needs to know about the author as a writer to know if the manuscript is worth reading.

Dils also believes that “an editor should know that a story has been read to children,” but this fact should not be stressed (27). This can be included in the cover letter if the writer chooses because this demonstrates that the work is appealing to children. However, the fact that children enjoy a story may not make a difference to the publisher. In the end, it is the publisher’s decision and not the reaction of the children who have already heard the story that determines whether or not a manuscript will be published.

Underdown cautions against simultaneous submissions because only one company can ever publish a work, and some publishers will only look at manuscripts that are exclusive to their publishing house (119). Once a manuscript has been sent, a writer must wait to hear back from the publisher. If a work is accepted by a publishing house, a contract will be written because the manuscript is the writer’s intellectual property. This establishes the copyright of the work (Underdown 207). According to Lloyd Rich, a written contract is important to the author for three distinct reasons: an oral agreement can be broken with no legal consequences, the Copyright Act requires there to be physical documentation of the agreement that has been signed by the author or her agent, and the state law commonly known as the Statute of Frauds states that there must be “an executed written document for any agreement that cannot be completed within one year” (quoted in Shapiro 78). A writer knows that her work will be respected when a legal contract has been signed. If a work has not been accepted, the writer is free to begin the process again with a different publishing house.

At this point, an illustrator is also often assigned to the work, but the author has little to no input on the illustrations that will appear in the picture book. Some illustrators choose to discuss the work with the author, but this is not required, and many illustrators choose not to consult the writer of the work. The illustrator is given the same creative license as the author, and the author is able to then see the final product (Horning 4). In fact, from this point forward,

the work is in the hands of the publisher. Eventually, the work will grace the shelves of bookstores, but this responsibility falls on the publishing house. The writer's work is done.

## METHODOLOGY

To begin my project, I took time to read many picture books. I specifically looked at past award winners and current nominees for awards such as the Monarch Award and the Newberry Medal. These are both awards whose winners are determined by the book as a whole, not just the text or the illustrations. I spent time reading these books to try to notice the things they had in common that made them award-winning picture books. I quickly noticed that all of these books had well-written, detailed stories about realistic characters children could relate to. Even if the story was set in a fantasy world, there was still an emotion or an event that children would be able to connect to. Nearly every book I read also had a subtle lesson interwoven through the fictional tale that young children would benefit from learning.

After seeing the finished product, I then began to do my research. I began by learning what I could about the history of the genre itself. Children's literature is a unique genre, and I felt that I could best learn how books are being written for children today by first examining the way the genre came about. The most important detail that came from this research was the fact that books written for children are meant to teach lessons. The sole purpose for children's literature was to teach young audiences moral lessons when children's books were first written. Over time, authors have worked to make this lesson more subtle, but nearly every book written for children is meant to teach young readers something about life.

I then researched the specific genre of picture books and the smaller subgenre of realistic fiction. This revealed that a vast majority of picture books are 32 pages long with an illustration to go along with each page of text. Though they are typically written for younger children, authors and educators alike recognize that older children who are beginning to read on their own still enjoy illustrations. Books written for this particular age group contain more complex stories with more words per page. Stories of realistic fiction are known for featuring a



main character that is close in age to the intended audience, allowing the reader to relate. Adults are featured very little in these stories, and sometimes, they do not appear at all. Though it is often associated with works of young adult fiction, picture books belonging to the category of realistic fiction are often concerned with a “rite of passage event,” or a life event that causes the child to mature in some way. Overall, it is most important that works of realistic fiction provide children with characters, themes, settings, and conflicts that they can easily relate to.

In addition to researching the genre itself, I looked at the writing process and the publishing process as well. Because children’s literature is a genre all its own, books within this genre must be written with children in mind. The vocabulary used in the book must be composed of mostly words that children reading at a third grade reading level would know, but some unfamiliar words can be incorporated if there are context clues to help the reader understand the meaning of the new word. Characters must be realistic, and the events in the story must be easily illustrated. This also means that some details can be left out. The illustrations and the text should work together to tell the story without one overpowering the other.

While the writing of children’s books differs from the writing of books for adults, the publishing process is nearly the same. Though I am unsure if I will attempt to publish the creative part of my project, I felt that it was necessary to understand the publishing process, as well as the state of the publishing market right now. This research proved useful. As a result, I learned that the market for children’s book is currently the largest it has ever been, and it is continuing to grow now that children’s books are not just marketed to libraries, and chain bookstores are now found nearly everywhere. Realistic fiction is also the most popular genre right now, meaning these books are the most likely to be published.

Once I had researched the genre and the process of writing for children, I began writing my own book. Sophie, my main character, is an eight year-old who is spending the weekend away from home for the first time with her Girl Scout troop. Though this weekend away from her mom is a challenge for her, Sophie manages to have fun with her friends, and she feels a sense of accomplishment at the end of the weekend when she is finally reunited with her mother. Sophie is eight years old because my target audience for this book is an older reader who would be reading at about a third grade reading level. Sophie's age would allow the target audience to connect with her. She also engages in a variety of activities, such as swinging and horseback riding, that would appeal to children her age.

The main conflict I created in the book is Sophie's anxiety caused by her night spent away from home. This is an anxiety that is experienced by a vast majority of children, and most likely, they would be right around Sophie's age when they spent the night away from home. Not only is this conflict one that is relatable to children, it provides the character of Sophie with an opportunity to grow and mature during this weekend away from home. This becomes a small "rite of passage" experience for her, and she gains a little independence as she makes it through two nights away from her parents. Her growth can be seen throughout the story as she struggles through the first night away from home, worries less about the second, and decides she wants to go on another trip as soon as possible in the story's conclusion.

There are a few adult characters in the story because it would be unrealistic to not have adults present at all in this specific plot, and Sophie's interactions with her mother help to develop the central conflict. However, after the first few pages, the adults are rarely seen in the story. The chaperones are never given names, and while it is known that they are there with Sophie and her Girl Scout troop, they are rarely mentioned. This also supports the research that

I did prior to writing the books because adults are supposed to make minimal appearances in books written for children.

The book is also just over 32 pages long with the illustrations, and I made the story longer and more detailed than I would have if I were writing for younger children. I used a list of vocabulary words for third graders to assist me in choosing words for my book, and I made sure to include context clues when I chose a word that I thought might be beyond the lexical level of a third grader. Using my previous research, I created a picture book suitable for an older reader with a third grade reading level that would also be enjoyable.

As I wrote, I also found that more research was necessary. For example, my main character is only eight years old, so when I had to figure out where she would ride in the car, I had to check the laws in Illinois. I also had to check for a copyright on the song I originally wanted to use for the story, and I made sure that the ranch my fictional ranch is modeled after is not only still in existence, but is still being visited by Girl Scouts today. I also continuously checked the vocabulary and the lexical level of the story while writing.

After completing my book, I used Fry's Graph Readability Formula to verify the readability of the book I had written. I took the first one hundred words, a second sample from the middle, and a third sample from the end of the book. I then put the values I obtained into Fry's table and found the total and the average as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: The Fry Readability Graph Formula for Creative Piece**

	Number of Sentences	Number of Syllables
First 100 words	9.5	126
Second 100 words	10.1	129
Third 100 words	10	126

Total	29.6	381
Average	9.9	127

Having obtained these values, I then used the average number of sentences and number of syllables as an ordered pair. I graphed the coordinate point on Fry's Graph to check the readability of my book. The result, shown in Figure 2, demonstrates that my book falls into the readability level of a third grader. This affirmed for me that the book was written at a third-grade reading level.

FRY GRAPH FOR ESTIMATING READING AGES (GRADE LEVEL) copyrighted material

**REDACTED**

### **Figure 2: The Fry Readability Graph for Creative Work**

I then passed the draft along to my illustrator and my reviewers. A children's librarian, a professor of a children's literature course, a third grade teacher, and a mother of two young children served as reviewers for my book. During the first review, my reviewers mostly focused on mechanical errors. For example, there were times when I would mix up the names of two of my characters, or I had missed a misspelled word while proofreading. My reviewers all agreed

that the story was one that would interest young children, and that it was a very relevant topic for my chosen audience, but a few of my reviewers felt that the story could be improved upon. Emma, the main character's best friend, was lacking a personality, and Sophie sometimes acted just a little too mature for an eight year-old girl. One of my reviewers also felt that I needed to give a more detailed description of the setting to allow my young readers to better understand where the characters are. The third grade teacher who reviewed the book felt that it was very appropriate for both a third grader's interests and a third grader's reading level.

Using this feedback, I then began to revise my draft. I fixed all of the mechanical errors that I had missed the first time, and I began to look more closely at the characters and the setting. I included Emma in a few more scenes in the book to reveal more of her personality, and I was more specific in the descriptions of the dude ranch where Sophie is spending the night. My story then went back to my reviewers. There were far less revisions recommended this time, but some of my reviewers still believed that it was lacking details, and that there needed to be dialogue present throughout because children are far more interested in reading actual conversations than a summary of what was said. One of my reviewers also recommended that I mention Sophie's separation anxiety during the day instead of only having that be a factor at night when she is trying to go to sleep. Again, I made changes and returned my draft to my reviewers. This time, they recommended very minimal, if any, changes, and my story was complete.

At this point, the book was ready for an audience. I read the book to a third grade class at Reed Custer Intermediate School in Braidwood, IL. The class contains 24 students, 14 of which are boys, and ten of which are girls. After listening to the story and viewing the illustrations, the students completed the survey found in Appendix A.

The results of this survey were then collected and analyzed. These results were then used to determine the effectiveness of the book when read to its intended audience.

## RESULTS

As previously stated, I read the creative work to 24 third graders at Reed Custer Intermediate School in Braidwood, IL. 14 of the students were boys and ten of the students were girls. The students were asked the 11 questions found on the survey located in Appendix A. Ten of the questions pertained to the story and one question asked for the students' gender.

Prior to responding to the surveys, students were given a chance to share their initial reaction to the story. Students commented on the appeal of the illustrations and the main character, Sophie. Students also expressed an approval of the amount of detail in the story and the "interesting words" that were used in the story. In addition, students were aware of the emotions being expressed in the story and acknowledged that it seemed like the story was attempting to teach them a lesson.

The first three questions on the survey dealt with the students' response to the story, the characters, and the setting. In this audience, 12 students responded to Question 1 regarding their interest in the story with "I really liked it," and two students responded with "It was okay." When responding to Question 2 regarding the characters, 17 students chose "I really liked them," and seven students chose "They were okay." This was the question that the most students responded less favorably to. When responding to Question 3 regarding the setting, 21 students chose "I really liked it," and three students chose "It was okay."

Questions four through six dealt with students' interest in the book and the illustrations and their understanding of the story. All 24 students responded to Question 4 with "Yes," saying they felt the story was interesting. In response to Question 5, all but one student responded with "Yes," saying that they liked the illustrations. Like Question 4, all 24 students responded to Question 6 with "Yes," affirming that they understood the story. Of the 24 students, 22

responded to Question 7 with “Just right,” and only two students chose “Too long” when asked about the length of the story.

Questions eight through ten focused on what students were able to take away from the book. Question 8 asked students whether or not the story was believable, and it received 18 “Yes” responses and six “No” responses. All six “No” responses were given by boys. All 24 students responded with “Yes” to Question 9, saying they would read this book again, and all but one student responded with “Yes” to Question 10, saying that they learned something from the book. .



## DISCUSSION

After reading the story and administering the survey to the intended audience, it is clear that the story was a good fit for the intended audience. All 24 students agreed that the story was interesting and understandable, and they would read the book again. This shows a definite interest in the book from the intended audience. The fact that all 24 students would choose to read the book again shows that they all enjoyed the story to a certain extent.

Before administering the survey, the length was a concern. Though the book fit Fry's requirements for a third grade readability level, some of the pages seemed too lengthy for a third grader's attention span. In addition, the amount of detail seemed to outweigh the plot at times. However, only two of the 24 students said that the book was too long. This majority affirms that the length of the book is suitable for this audience.

A vast majority of students also liked the book, the setting, and the pictures, and they felt that they learned something from the book. No more than three students responded less favorably to each of these questions. This proves that the book and the setting are interesting to this audience. The pictures are also appropriate for the story and interesting to the reader. The lesson was a key part of the book because it is such an important part of a picture book. All but one of the students was able to pick up on the lesson, proving that there was a piece of wisdom the audience was able to take away from the story. This also affirms the fact that the reader is engaged in the text if he or she is able to benefit from the reading of the book in this manner.

The two questions that received the most unfavorable responses were Question 2 and Question 7. Of the students surveyed, seven thought the characters were just okay. Character development was an area that needed improvement earlier on in the writing process, and this shows that it is an area that still requires revision. The research done on children's literature shows that students must be able to connect with the characters to enjoy the work. This lack of

connection to the characters may also account for other less favorable responses on the survey. In addition, six students said the story was not believable. However, these six students were boys rather than girls. Though the intended audience is third graders, the book is about a little girl and her friends. It is understandable that some young boys would find the story unbelievable. Though this response is less favorable, a majority of students still thought the story was believable, so a change does not seem necessary.

The process as a whole proved to be more difficult than I originally anticipated. I had to do much more research than I originally realized before I even began to write, and more research became necessary as I began writing and became aware of gaps that existed in my knowledge. Writing for children is also incredibly difficult. They require their own literature because they are not just small adults, but this also means that their age, interests, and reading ability must all be of high importance to the writer. This meant that after I wrote the story, I had to test the readability of the work, and then I had to read it to my intended audience. As stated in the review of literature, children are also tough critics. Though they responded favorably to this work, it was hard knowing that the measured success of the work rested in the hands of eight and nine-year-old readers.

Because students did not all enjoy the characters, character development is something that I will focus on in the future. Though Sophie seems to be well developed, Emma and Kirby are both important characters, yet they remain flat throughout. Making both of these characters a little more round may make them characters that children are more apt to like. Children might also be more engaged in the book as a whole if the characters are more inviting and realistic.

The next step for this project would also be to explore the avenue of publishing. The work will have to be sent without the illustrations in a normal document format with a cover letter. Possible publishing houses will have to be researched and then sent the work to review.

However, before publishing is possible, more revisions will have to be done to ensure that the work is worthy of being published. Revisions to the characters and the story as a whole will have to be done before publishing is possible.

CREATIVE WORK: *SOPHIE'S LONG WEEKEND*

Pp 36 - 69 Creative material: **REDACTED**

APPENDIX A: SURVEY

**Sophie's Long Weekend**

1. Did you like the story?  
I really liked it .      It was okay.      I didn't like it.
2. Did you like the characters?  
I really liked them.      They were okay.      I didn't like them.
3. Did you like the setting?  
I really liked it .      It was okay.      I didn't like it.
4. Was the story interesting?  
Yes      No
5. Did you like the pictures?  
Yes      No
6. Did you understand the story?  
Yes      No
7. How long was the book?  
Too short      Just right      Too long
8. Was the story believable?  
Yes      No
9. Would you read this book again?  
Yes      No
10. Did you learn something from the book?  
Yes      No
11. Are you a boy or a girl?  
Boy      Girl

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