

Write for Children

Andrew Melrose



London and New York

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Write for Children

Writing for children is not about writing little stories, it is about writing big stories shorter. Children's literature is an art form in its own right, and this book is for anyone who wants not just to write for children, but to write *well* for them. It looks at four main areas of the writing process:

- **Crafting and the Critically Creative:** a critical look at children's literature and the craft of writing.
- **Write the Rights/Know the Wrongs:** fundamental storytelling techniques such as storyline, characters and viewpoint.
- **Write the Height:** writing for different age groups, including sensory books, picture books, short fiction, teen and series fiction.
- **Write the Rest:** a guide to other areas of children's literature including biography, humour, poetry, film, new media and non-fiction.

This comprehensive and accessible book goes beyond the standard 'how to' format to help writers learn the finely balanced craft of writing for children. It will be an indispensable handbook for aspiring and practising children's authors.

Andrew Melrose is a principal lecturer at King Alfred's University College, Winchester, where he is Director of the MA in Writing for Children. He has written over 40 children's books and films.



Golden age for kid lit

After the disgraceful and somewhat dated, 'what is literature' debate that followed the Whitbread prize's Harry Potter versus Beowulf debacle, how refreshing it is to see that four out of the nation's top five favourite authors write for children (Dahl beats all competitors, March 10). Isn't it time we finally consigned the kid lit, poor cousin, low culture, slings and arrows, literary contempt back to the dark ages, from whence it came? A visit to any bookstore will confirm there has never been a better time for children's literature. We are living in the golden age. Let's at least take it seriously.

Dr Andrew Melrose
Brighton March 2000
Cartoon by Merrily Harpur
Guardian

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For Abbi and Daniel who like to read good writing

And shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up?

We cannot!

Plato, The Republic



Introduction

Writers for children have long been heralded as the poor relations in the literary family and it has to be said that there is a long historical reasoning behind this. But things are changing, and have been for some time now. Children's literature as an art form in its own right is starting to receive the recognition it richly deserves. This book is designed for anyone who has ever considered writing for children and cares enough to want to write well for them.

The learning is worth it. The reading life of a child is a short one, around ten years all in all before they are expected to grapple with Shakespeare, Dickens and the various examination-led authors who take them out of childhood into the dark forest of the grown-ups. How well is your writing leading children down the path of experience before they hit the trees? Are they entering the forest unprepared, inexperienced and bewildered or has your writing given them the confidence to go boldly? When writing for children these are the questions you must ask yourself. These are the questions this book addresses.

Then some more questions are addressed. Do you write *at* or *for* children? Are you giving children what you think they want without knowing what they need? Is your writing good enough for them to read? Each question has to be considered carefully.

The first issue the book addresses is 'Crafting and the critically creative'. Here I look objectively at writing for children and the craft issues involved in an effort to get you to take your creative task seriously. Try not to skip this first section because it crucially sets up the premise of the book by asking you to raise your critical awareness. Writing is not

just about sitting down and writing one word after another. It is about the craft of writing, and you need to know why this is important.

I then go on to address what I have called ‘Write the rights/know the wrongs’. The issues raised here become obvious because the craft of writing is addressed in more detail. By looking at story, characters, viewpoint, the pyramid plot structure, dialogue and prose, I highlight the most fundamental storytelling techniques, giving examples where appropriate, to help you to identify your own strengths and weaknesses. There is much necessary overlapping in these sections because they interact with each other but they will help you to understand the craft you are trying to master.

In ‘Write the height’ I address specifics in the area of writing for children. Age and experience are huge factors in writing for children, thus sections entitled ‘Understanding age groups’, ‘Sensory books’, ‘Picture books’, ‘Short fiction’, ‘Longer fiction’, ‘Teen fiction’ and ‘Series fiction’ are designed to assist you in developing your ideas and knowing for whom you are writing. This is crucial in writing for children because your audience is a variable one, governed by experience and cognitive ability. This chapter concludes with a section on submitting to publishers.

The final chapter of the book, ‘Write the rest’, addresses non-fiction, biography, humour, poetry, film and new media. Thus it is hoped that the book will serve as a guide to writing for children in all its myriad forms. My aim is to introduce you to the thrills and spills, footholds and faultlines in the craft of writing for children. Each section has critical commentary as well as hints and exercises.

It is important to remember that this is not a ‘how to write’ book. It is a handbook for the craft of writing for children which explains how to improve what you have already written. The book works on the same premise that you wouldn’t try to play a Mozart piano concerto, paint the *Mona Lisa* or produce a new stained-glass window for Winchester Cathedral without lessons in the craft. As I write, there are some 10,000 books for children being produced in the UK alone each year. In terms of quality, sometimes I wonder why the authors bothered. I urge you to try to address this. Don’t just write for children. Write well for them. Give them the literary experience they deserve; it behoves us to give them the best.

There are a number of people I wish to thank. My Writing for Children Master's Degree students, past and present, at King Alfred's, University College Winchester, have been kind enough to point out the rights and wrongs, the highs and lows and the successes and failures in teaching such material. Their conversations and contributions to tutorials have been invaluable. Anna Powell provided the illustrations, Diana Kimpton allowed me to reproduce material and her website, www.wordpool.co.uk, is well worth a visit. But most of all I thank my family for giving me the time and space needed to write and research. Without them it would have been a poorer book. Of course, all errors and failings are acknowledged as mine alone.

Andrew Melrose
Winchester, June 2001

1 Crafting and the critically creative

Usually the easiest way into any book is to start at the beginning, but when you are writing for children you have to know where the beginning is – and it is not always where you think. Let me make a start, then, by advising you of the very first thing you need to think about before you begin writing for children. It is very simple and straightforward: If you think writing for children is just practice for writing for grown-ups, think again. Remember this: it is important!

Writing for any audience is about respecting that audience.

Writing for a child can't begin from the premise that it demands less skill than writing for an adult because the truth is that it simply doesn't. Nor should it be used simply as practice while your adult magnum opus is germinating.

All readers, children included, should have the quality of writing they deserve. It is entirely appropriate that we give them the best we have. Added to which, writers cannot assume they are giving children what they want without knowing what they need. This is crucial.

The splendid Italian writer Italo Calvino (1986: 85) once wrote: 'Literature is not school. Literature must presuppose a public that is more cultured, and *more cultured than the writer himself*. Whether or not such a public exists is unimportant.' I fully endorse this and it applies to children too. Don't be fooled into thinking children are second-rate repositories for second-rate stories. Children *need* the best and it behoves you to give them it. Children are also very astute judges. They are just as critical of books as are their adult counterparts. They can

2 *Crafting and the critically creative*

spot a fraud a mile away. But ask yourself this: why would anyone want to give them less than their best, and perhaps just as crucially, do they know what that is? And to this we might add, is *your* best good enough and do you know what your best is? This book is designed to help you tease this out.

That's not to say you can't write for both adults and children. Anne Fine and Penelope Lively manage this very well, as do many others, but they do so with respect for *all* of their audiences. One is not subordinate to the other.

However,

**writing for children requires more skill than
writing for adults.**

Master the craft of writing for children and you will be able to write for anyone. This may seem a little contentious, and I know many, perhaps those working at the cutting edge of literature, might well disagree (although I suspect Salman Rushdie is very proud of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*). But I truly believe there is much more to this statement than just a pithy slogan. It is something that gets to the very core of writing. Throughout this book we will be considering the precision required when writing for children. If you pay attention to all of the issues I raise in this book and apply them to all your writing with vigilance, you will at least be setting yourself a good precedent. But this book is only an aid to help you write better, to help you to craft the critically creative. No one can write for you.

**Everyone who can write can be a writer, but the secret
to writing well is getting the right words in the
right order.**

I run a Masters programme in writing for children¹ and every year, in my introduction to new students, I tell them this secret. Imparting the secret isn't too hard. Indeed, it seems so perfectly obvious that you might think there is no point in reading on. But to expect anyone to get it right immediately would be a bit like asking me to play a Rachmaninov piano concerto after learning only the rudiments of that fine instrument (I could probably play all the notes, and even some extra ones, though not necessarily in the right order – and for those of you old enough to

remember, the Morecambe and Wise gag with André Previn immediately springs to mind). The writing has to be crafted skilfully into an intelligible narrative.

Writing is a craft!

In the same way that one has to learn to play and practise the piano before reaching any stage of competency, a writer has to learn the rudiments and practise their craft.

The purpose of this book, then, is to address the very issue of craft. As Seamus Heaney (1979: 47) once wrote, 'Craft is the skill of making . . . Learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well.' When T.S. Eliot dedicated *The Wasteland* to Ezra Pound, it was to *il miglior fabbro* – which can be loosely translated as 'the better craftsman'. Indeed the philosopher Walter Benjamin described the storyteller as the craftsman who stamps his own style on to the telling of the story. Even on the printed page the palimpsest trace of the craftsman comes through to reveal himself or herself.

Providing you have a story to tell (after all, what is the purpose of writing for anyone if not to tell a story?)² this book is about helping you to craft the right words in the right order, with the specific aim of being able to address children. Creative writing involves mastering the craft of writing, so that you learn the necessary skills to write *intentionally*.

Nevertheless, like all books, this one has to be more than a simple 'how to do it' if it is to be worth reading at all. It follows that if a book on myths is itself a kind of myth, as Claude Lévi-Strauss once said, likewise a book on craft is itself a craft. This book on the craft of writing for children is written in order to help us identify, observe and address the links between critic and author. It is to help us discern the difference between storytelling and telling stories; the difference between the authentic and inauthentic, where half a story can tell the bigger lie and a whole story is not necessarily wholesome. This means we also have to be able to address wider issues like understanding stereotypes, reading subtextual meaning, and becoming aware of the historical, aesthetic and cultural significance of what we write. Thus, each section will have a *critical perspective* based on research. And if you found this paragraph a little opaque, don't worry about that; everything will become clearer. Because while these issues are not easy, there is a simple way of telling

4 *Crafting and the critically creative*

them and you should not be fazed by highfalutin rhetoric that often masquerades as scholarship. There is no need to be afraid of erudition, but it should not come at the expense of clarity of thought and expression. This book is written for you and I will be addressing you directly.

To write well for children requires such a fine attention to detail that it's crucial to know for whom you are writing. I call it *writing the height*. Only adults write for children and this in itself is fraught with difficulties. Time and again I tell my students that when they are writing for children they have to try to gauge the height they are writing for, then aim to maintain it. If the average height of an eight-year-old child is a little more than a metre, then you have to write at that height. You have to try to see the world from that height.

But I don't mean physically. I mean write the height in terms of development and experience. You have to try to write the world from a POV (point of view) that an eight-year-old child will recognise. All the intellectualising in the world will not replace that basic need. But it is not easy. When trying to visualise the world from a metaphorically childlike, although not childish, view, you are presented with another problem. In her book on Peter Pan, Jacqueline Rose addressed this issue:

Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which rarely speaks. This is the impossible relation between adult and child . . . Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between.

(Rose 1994: 1–2)

This space is one of experience. The gap is between the child and the author or parent's experience, between the experience of authority and the child's inexperience. It is the writer's job to try to close the gap. How can this be achieved? Well, knowing about it helps, but there is more to it. Rightly, in my view, the children's psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observes that:

Children unavoidably treat their parents as though they were the experts on life . . . but children make demands on adults which adults don't know what to do with . . . once they [children] learn to talk they create, and suffer, a certain unease about what they can do with words. Paradoxically, it is the adult's own currency – words – that reveal to them the limit of adult authority . . . Adults can nurture children . . . but they do not have the answers . . . what they can do is tell children stories about the connections.

(Phillips 1995: 1–2)

This idea of *nurture* is a persuasive one which writers for children must be aware of. For example, an issue like age matters in terms of the reader's experience. A child who has not lived very long cannot have the same 'historical horizon' or the same developed sense of reflection and anticipation as someone older.

Nevertheless, just as height doesn't equate with experience and development, age and reading age are not necessarily the same. They are only benchmarks. An example I used recently still holds true:

a fourteen-year-old boy with the reading ability of, say, a nine-year-old [not all that uncommon] will not want a nine-year-old child's story, when what he is already interested in is football, computers and masturbation. Just as a thirteen-year-old girl who is interested in belly-button piercing is hardly going to be stimulated by a book targeted at nine- to thirteen-year-olds when she is already passionate about Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

(Melrose 2001: 14)

If you have little contact with children yourself, speak to those who have regular contact, teachers and parents, for example, and they will tell you this is not a fiction or a worst-case scenario. The biggest problem with literacy is keeping the reader (even the good reader³) interested in reading. Thus, you have to write for them.

Writing the height, then, is about awareness of child development. It is about knowing for whom you are writing. That's not to say your story should be shackled into a constraining straitjacket. The story has to be able to breathe its own life, but you have to be aware of who your