

KICK START YOUR WRITING FOR KIDS

Dr Suess (Theodore Geisel) was at a party when a prominent neurosurgeon approached him. 'I write children's books as a hobby,' said the neurosurgeon. 'I, too, have a hobby,' replied Geisel. 'Brain surgery.'

Most children's writers think of starting their writing career with picture books. They're bright and colourful and wonderful to read. Unfortunately, because of the enormous cost of the full colour plates for the pictures, publishers don't take too many risks in this genre and generally commission only well known authors and illustrators to create such books.

An easier option for starting out is to submit material to the more accessible 'reader' market aimed at students in Prep to Grade 2 in schools. Many educational publishers put out a new series of readers every couple of years and they take on new writers (and provide a steady supply of regular work for many experienced authors and illustrators as well.) Educational publishers also put out chapter books (for 7-9 year olds) and sometimes novels and are often the best way to break into the children's book market. Try approaching Addison Wesley Longman, Macmillan Education, Nelson and Rigby Heinemann to check out their needs.

If you are into kids' games you might like to submit material to publishers of the many puzzle books that abound or perhaps become a contributor for children's activity books. Non-fiction is a huge market for children - the local library has vast shelves of books on everything from acrobats to zebras. Could you write any of them? Magazines such as *Jetsetter*, *Pursuit*, *Explore*, *Starfish* sometimes publish freelance material, wander down to your local school and get copies and see what you could contribute.

What's hot and what's not? For a start any anthropomorphism - talking bears, dancing dogs and cute canaries are out, along with fairies down the garden path. In the eighties, many teenage novels became very worthy and serious, perhaps a little too serious. Death, drugs and divorce were the mainstay of these novels, but now happy endings are back in. Kids these days are TV and video literate and they are used to fast scene changes and snappy dialogue. Go to libraries and read, read and read - you'll soon see what sells.

What's the money like? Well, a teenage novel that could take you nine months to write will generally have a print run of about 3,000 books and sell for \$15. As an author, you'll get 10% (sometimes 7.5%) of that. That's \$4,500 for your book. The rest of the money goes to pay the editor, the copy editor, the book designer, the front cover artist, the publisher, the printer and the distributor. Unless your book goes into many reprints or gets short-listed for the CBC awards, any or all of these people will get paid better than you.

So how do authors survive? Most of them hold down a nine to five job and write in their spare time. Other 'full time' writers teach writing courses, visit schools, give talks, write newspaper articles - they are flexible, entrepreneurial and they spend at least half their time doing everything else but actually writing. Full time writers need to be prolific, often they do shorter books so that they can build a back list and get lots of small royalty checks coming in rather than gamble on one big novel. It's all very precarious. It's also frustrating and exhilarating, worrying and wonderful - often on the same day.

So you still want to write for children! Great! Take some short cuts. Join organizations such as the Writer's Centre, the FAW, the SCBWI and tap into the writing world. Enrol in some courses, at universities, the CAE, a local TAFE or the Writer's Centre. And write. Write lots. If you want to get

ahead in your golf or tennis game, you have to practise, practise, practise. Writing is the same, only better. Much better.

Jen McVeity is the author of 23 books and the Australian head of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. The SCBWI is the largest writing organization in the world with over 20,000 members in 17 countries. In 2004, Jen was elected Board Chair of the international SCBWI.

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