

# Western Tale Spinner

Fall 2006 Volume One Number Two

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A newsletter published by the Western Canadian Chapter of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Information published in this newsletter does not constitute an endorsement by SCBWI and/or SCBWI-Western Canada.

## ***Note from the Editor:***

It's time to turn over a new leaf. Our wonderful summer vacations are a fond memory. Fall has arrived, along with a new schedule and a hectic change of pace. You might have noticed that the summer edition of the Western Tale Spinner has become the fall edition! "*The best laid plans...*" In this issue, there are seven articles full of good ideas and information to put you in a writing mood, if this time of the year hasn't already inspired you. Find a quiet spot and be inspired!

Till next time,  
Loretta Houben

**Next meeting of Western Canada's critique group:  
Saturday September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006.**

**Place: Fraserview Library, 1950 Argyle Dr, Vancouver BC. (Near Victoria Dr and 54<sup>th</sup> Ave)**

**Time: 12:00 – 3:00 pm**

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## QUERY LETTER MAGIC

by Joan W. Winter

Writers know that writing a good query letter often makes the difference between a sale and a rejection. No problem with that. But, we ask ourselves, how do we write a good query letter? What are the essential elements? Is there some formula, some magical, fool-proof way of grabbing an editor's attention to the point where s/he stays butt-in-chair and forgets to go for lunch? Well, yes there is. I happen to like writing them myself. Let me give you some examples:

### Sample 1.

"Dear Editor,

I have written this **fantastic** children's story. My family thinks its great. You will too. You **must** publish it in your magazine. Its about too kids who go to visit there Grammar and Grampar with there dog and have lots of fun. My husband thinks it's the best story hes ever read. "

After trying to read this, the editor is probably suffering a headache, eyestrain, and is too tired to go for lunch. It is a good example of all that a query letter should NOT be. With errors too numerous to mention, it would almost certainly find itself "magically" stuffed into its SASE and returned to sender. It is so bad, I doubt any editor would even bother to include a form rejection letter, let alone write any encouraging comments. An acceptance would be nothing short of a miracle. Why?

1. It does not address the editor by name (writer did not research the target magazine).
2. It is written in bold, messy, almost unreadable font.
3. It's chock-full of grammatical and spelling errors.
4. It fails to provide the editor with any working knowledge of the story plot.
6. The plot itself sounds as interesting as last week's leftovers (if it's proposing a fresh slant on the grandparent/grandchild theme, we haven't heard about it yet).
7. It dictates what the editor must do (tells him/her how to do their job).
8. The writer fails to provide any demonstrable writing skills. Not a good prospect for any editor.

### Sample 2.

'Dear Ms. Messina,

Who is it in the Magic Well?  
Who cries a curse, or weaves a  
spell?

A witch, a wizard, sorcerer, drone--  
Who turns all within to stone?

Many hundreds of years ago, in a small market town that rises in tiers on the steep slope of a river gorge in northeast England, townsfolk were quaking in their boots. They had discovered that a natural spring, where water cascades over a high shelf of rock and drops to a pool below,

had strange stone objects in it--birds, small animals, leaves and ferns. It was as if they had been carved or sculpted out of rock. People were puzzled and afraid. No one could explain it. They thought that strange portents occurred down by the river at night, witches or wizards casting their spells on the poor creatures of the forest. Rumours of magic and witchcraft spread. For centuries, the Dropping Well, as it was then known, remained shrouded in mystery and superstition....'

This opener is better. While not perfect, it is clean and easy to read. The stanza asks a question; the text introduces the subject matter, provides a sense of history and mystery, but does not give away the whole story. Hopefully, with this kind of query, an editor will say, "Hmmm. Kids love magic. Who is it in the Magic Well?" and ask to see the manuscript. (Actually, they did. Four editors responded favourably to this query).

But however "good" a query letter is, it will automatically fail if the writer has not done their homework and researched the market. Editors have specific needs when it comes

to selecting material for their magazines. It goes with the job.

"A good query is one that is relevant to the magazine and its readers," says "Seventeen" editorial assistant Zandile Blay. (Children's Writer. June, 2006). For Editor Rosalie Baker, *Calliope*, a good query "shows the person has read *Calliope's* guidelines, knows the upcoming themes, and is submitting a query directly related to a specific upcoming theme." Baker adds, "The query should also include a writing sample and bibliography that reflect a sense of what is appropriate and pertinent to the topic itself." (Children's Writer. February, 2006).

Know your market. For instance, don't send rhyming books to Lee Wade, President and Co-Director of Schwartz and Wade Books (new imprint of Random House Children's Books). She hates them. Wade says, "We're tired of rhyming texts that don't work." "I find bad rhyming and sing-songy language excruciating." (Children's Writer. June, 2006).

Quirky queries can be fun. My "ODDEY, THE OWL WHOO'S DIFFERENT" query letter went like this:

'Dear (correct name) Editor, Owls are fascinating creatures. Wise and nocturnal, their hooting, mystical cry is heard in tales of myth, mystery and magic, at Halloween, and in the eerie darkness of night. But not Oddey's. Ooh, no. Oddey is an owl whoo's different. He doesn't even like the

nightlife, and he's afraid of the dark.'

Editors are curious beings. After receiving this query, at least two editors emailed to say, "I don't think this piece is right for our magazine, but ... please ... I have to know ... why is Oddey different?" Of course, I emailed the manuscript for them to read. Keep quirky queries polite, in

good taste, and don't overdo the quirkiness. Writing query letters is as personal as writing articles or stories. Everyone has their own creative style. While there is no magic formula, writing clean, well organized queries, proposing interesting marketable material, does ensure a higher rate of success.

**Anybody can have ideas. The difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph. *Mark Twain***



## GRAMMATICALLY SPEAKING

### Red and Green Lines

by Diane Jones

Spell check and grammar check on the computer can be helpful, otherwise we would just switch them off. (There must be a way!) Possibly they might alert us to a typing error that we can correct right away—saving us time and trouble. Sometimes, though, they're just annoying.

Red lines, for example, pop up every time I write the name of a local community such as Coquitlam or Sechelt. Did I spell the name wrong or did the computer just not recognize the place? I don't know. So, how helpful is that? Not at all! If I allow the computer to correct it, I'll have my son living in Coquilles and I'll vacation in Schell. Huh?

For Canadians it's especially annoying, as the computer will not accept any extra "u" in colour or honour. Nor will it allow us to write cheques or buy programmes. I don't switch over to UK spelling, because my car does not have tyres and I don't fly in aeroplanes. I do find this type of correction handy, though, when I'm preparing a manuscript for an American publisher. I can spell their way without having to think about it. So it's not totally useless.

Of less use, to my way of thinking is the green line that highlights grammar "errors". I'll write a sentence that sounds correct. A sentence such as one I hear all the time, read in books, etc. But up pops the green line, and offers

something ridiculous as an option. Or it ignores one that it should have flagged: such as the underlined sentence above. What's wrong with it? Nothing wrong with this sentence? Well, my computer flagged that last one, ("Nothing wrong...") but not the underlined one—both are fragments, strictly speaking. In conversation, and in an article, I might write either of these sentence "fragments" and leave them as such because that's the way we speak. There's nothing wrong with them at all. What is wrong is the idea that a computer knows English grammar better than you do. If you are a native speaker of English, go with your instincts. If English is a second language for you or you are not totally confident, check it out. But with a real person, not a computer!

Sometimes the green line is just pointing out an extra space between words or between a word and a punctuation mark. Maybe the computer's suggestion is helpful. If it doesn't seem right to you, you have two choices: Ignore it and do it your way, or check it with someone else.

Bottom line: It is always a good idea to reread your work, read it aloud, read it to others, ask for critiques. But in the end, it's your work. Do your best. And never trust a machine!



## WRITING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

by Sally Rogow

Writing for young people is a challenge. We want to grab their attention and involve them in the story. History needs to be written in a way that reveals the facts and at the same time reveals the importance of the events. .

We live in a world of media, where stories must be no longer than a minute in the telling. There is no time to ponder or speculate on different interpretations. Propaganda of various types flourishes. It is important for young people to question, to be curious, and to

consider different interpretations. This can be accomplished in the way the story is told.

Dramatic stories that portray the truth of human conditions. Portrayals through the eyes of people who are experiencing the events encourage young adult readers to think, to feel empathy, to question and to think that they can influence events that are shaping the world. This is the challenge and it is an important one.



**Nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing.  
Sylvia Plath**

## THE REJECTION LETTER

by Gladys Swedak

When you receive the dreaded standard rejection letter, it's like all your hard work was useless. It's as if the care and patience and love you put into your manuscript has been for nothing. Maybe the editor or publisher didn't even read it and just took it out of the slush fund and returned it.

But what if there is hand writing on it? At least that means someone read it and took the time to tell you exactly what wasn't right. That doesn't feel quite so bad, or does it? It's a completely different feeling. Yes, your manuscript was rejected and you are finding out why. Maybe

the writing wasn't strong enough, or maybe it was too disjointed with a lack of quotes or something else the editor or publisher didn't like. This hurts just a little differently and more deeply. At least they took the time to tell you that your work wasn't good enough, not just a check mark beside one of a number of reasons they are returning your manuscript. What you now have to do because of a rejection letter like this is to fix what the editor or publisher says is wrong with the manuscript. Then maybe it will be accepted by the next publisher you send it to. It's worth a try!

## GOOD NEWS

Compiled by Joan Winter

### **Applause, bells and whistles sounding for:**

**Lois Harris** Her first book, "Mary Cassatt, Impressionist Painter" will be published by Pelican Publishing Co. in October 2007.

"The inspiring picture book biography of America's greatest Impressionist is for ages 5-8. Lois found choosing the photos and images of Cassatt's artwork to accompany her text a delightful experience." A book -- wow! Congratulations to you too, Lois

**Loretta Houben** had an article about the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of an elementary school printed in the

local neighbourhood newspaper in June 2006. The editor wishes to see more historical articles from her.

**Sally Rogow.** Her book "Faces of Courage: Young Heroes of World War II" is being translated into French and other languages by two women who have an interesting Paris website. Congratulations, Sally.

**Gloria Singendonk** sold a piece to Listen Magazine. "The Skater" is a story based on the experiences of a young friend of Gloria's, and will be published in November 2006. Way to go, Gloria! How exciting for the friend to know she was the inspiration for a story.

## EVENT HORIZON

by Ken Kilback

I went to see Robert Munsch back in May when he was in town for the Vancouver Children's Festival. It was a bit strange for me attending this event because I don't have any children, so I felt fairly conspicuous walking around without younger ones hanging on to me; in fact, I think I was the only one at the festival without a daughter, son, niece, nephew, godson, goddaughter...well, you get the picture. However, watching Robert Munsch was a lot of fun. Munsch told several of his well-known stories in a storytelling format. And I say "told" because he certainly didn't read or recite them as they now appear in print. Anyone who has listened to the CD versions of his stories knows that each of them differs in content from the printed versions from minor to major ways (in the printed version of *Up, Up, Down*, a young girl climbs a huge tree in her backyard, but in the CD version she climbs her house). At the festival, Munsch retold *Love You Forever* so that it took place in Vancouver and North Vancouver; he retold *Stephanie's Ponytail* so that the young girl was actually a girl from the audience who happened to have a ponytail. After the event, Robert Munsch very kindly signed his name for everyone who stood in line for his autograph; unfortunately for him, though, that line-up was two hours long (I was at the hour-and-a-half mark)...

Coming this fall is the annual Surrey International Writers' Conference, whose purpose is to inspire, educate, and motivate both aspiring and experienced writers. Authors, agents, and editors come from all over North America for this event, and Diana Gabaldon ("Outlander" series) and Jack Whyte ("A Dream of Eagles" sequence) are strong supporters of this conference. In fact, they created the Storyteller's Award a few years ago—a \$1000 prize for writing the best short piece of fiction submitted to the contest. Other contest awards include the Non-Fiction Award, the Poetry Award, and (new this year!) the Writing for Young People Award. The Writing for Young People Award does not accept picture book manuscripts for the contest, but it does accept chapter books, middle grade stories, and YA stories—all with a 1500 word limit and a deadline of September 8 (see <http://siwc.ca/contest/guidelines.php> for more details). The conference is being held October 20 through 22; people wanting to attend can register for the full conference or only part of it. As part of the registration fee, attendees can also register for Editor/Agent interviews, in which they can make proposals of their work; and they can register for the Blue Pencil Café, in which they can have their work critiqued by a professional. While this conference is broad-based, there are excellent workshops for everyone regardless

of what you may write; however, there are workshops that are specific for the children's market. In attendance this year are noted children's authors kc dyer ("Seeds of Time" trilogy) and Eric Wilson (mystery and suspense for younger readers). Other authors attending this year's conference include Carol Berg, Bernard Cornwell, Julie Ferguson, Anne Perry, Robert J. Sawyer, and Michael Slade.

The Vancouver Children's Literature Roundtable is sponsoring its annual Illustrator's Breakfast on Saturday October 14. Janet Wilson, illustrator of *In Flanders Fields*, will be the guest of honour. Tickets will become available closer to the event; you also do not have to be a member of VCLR in order to attend. If you'd like, you can check their website at <http://www.library.ubc.ca/edlib/table/>. To find a Roundtable group near you, check

[http://www.bookcentre.ca/general\\_interest/roundtables.shtml](http://www.bookcentre.ca/general_interest/roundtables.shtml).

Other events happening this fall in the Vancouver area include Word on the Street on Sunday September 24 and the Children's Book Festival Gala on Wednesday November 22. Also in November, look for children's author Carol Matas visiting Vancouver somewhere mid-month (details not yet available).

For those people living in or near Edmonton, InScribe Christian Writers' Fellowship is having its annual Fall Conference on September 22 and 23. For more information, check [www.inscribe.org/events-fallconf.htm](http://www.inscribe.org/events-fallconf.htm).

Also, if you know of other events happening in other parts of western Canada, please feel free to submit them to the newsletter; or you can send them to me for inclusion in this column at [kenkilback@shaw.ca](mailto:kenkilback@shaw.ca).

**This writing business. Pencils and whatnot. Overrated, if you ask me.  
Winnie the Pooh**



## AN AGENT FOR A DAY

by Mackenzie Reide

What's it like to have an agent? How about one for a day? It was the dead of winter, and my first trip to New York. I didn't know a soul, but I was determined. I was on a mission to meet as many people as possible. If it had the word writer on it, I went. But it was not there that I made the first contact. Here I was, at a Laughter Yoga class, talking to someone who could help shape my career. I told him of my middle-grade adventure novel, he told me he was an agent and invited me to lunch. Networking, oh yeah! I agreed.

At lunch, we talked about publishing. He reaffirmed it was important to do your research, know what the editors want, and be professional. He was looking to get back into the industry; I was looking to get my start. He made a proposal. How about pooling our resources and doing a trial run?

Hmmm, should I do this? I wondered. Well, you've got to start somewhere. So I agreed. The next day was a whirlwind. He gave me homework to do, organizing all my notes and preparing for a meeting

with an editor. That afternoon, I jumped on the computer, ready to share my exciting news. There were three emails from my trial-agent. I read them in order. The first was an update from him. The second was to set up a time for our next meeting. The third one was different. It was a note stating he had a family emergency. He was heading homeward, out of New York, and would be out of touch for a few months. He wished me the best of luck.

I was stumped. An agent for less than a day, was that a record? Welcome to New York. I had a feeling this wasn't the only quirky thing I would face, so I might as well get used to it. I emailed him back and thanked him for taking the time to work with me and wished him well. We still keep in touch. Our time was short, but I'm glad I did it. He showed what it was like to work with an agent, and got my feet wet with no strings attached. It was good to seize the opportunity, even for one day.

