

Big Deals for Little Books

Write blockbuster middle-grade and young-adult fiction.

By Laura Rennert

The success of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels has made this an exciting time for YA and middle-grade fiction—two of the hottest categories in today's publishing market. YA and middle-grade novels are now commanding unprecedented advances and shaping both the publishing and the film industry.

My career as an agent has spanned this change. Eight years ago, middle-grade and YA fiction was garnering advances in the \$5,000 to \$6,000 range. Now I'm getting advances for clients that are upwards of six-figures.

Books that command these kinds of advances are different in many ways, but what they all have in common is a strong story narrative structure. Yours should have one, too – and here's how to do it.

Good beginnings

A good beginning tells *Who*, *What* and *Where*. (1) *Who* is the character or characters. (2) *Where* is the setting—geographic and temporal. (3) *What* sets the plot in motion.

At the same time it grounds the story in a specific time and place, a good beginning introduces the characters in the story and starts to give us an idea of what they're like. This is important because, just as in life, the story will have a real impact on us only if we care about the characters involved. If we're not interested in the characters, the plot probably isn't going to capture our interest.

The *What* is a bit more tricky. *What* is the thing that sets the story in motion, that drives the narrative engine. This will vary from story to story. Sometimes it's a problem, a specific incident or an act, or it can also be knowledge or a discovery.

To figure out the *What*, it's helpful to have a sense both of your character's superficial desires and of her deepest desires. That deepest desire is the frequently unacknowledged or possibly even unconscious hunger that motivates the character. This deep desire will be teased out by the journey she's about to take, and it's frequently the desire that's acted upon in the beginning—the one that sets the protagonist on the path of the story trajectory.

Jeff Stone's *Tiger*, the first book in The Five Ancestors series, dramatically provides the *Who*, *What* and *Where* in the first pages of the novel. The story opens in the middle of the action, in the midst of a fierce attack upon the secret Shaolin Temple where five young brother monks reside, and we immediately discover that the five brothers are crammed into a large terra cotta urn.

As Fu (Tiger) argues with his brothers, he reveals himself as hot-headed, impatient and quick to act:

"I know what Grandmaster said," Fu replied. "But we can't stay crammed in here forever. I say we get out right now. I say we stop hiding and fight!"

We see Fu is at the bottom of the barrel. We surmise this is intentional on Grandmaster's part not only because Fu is physically bigger than the other boys but also because Grandmaster has probably anticipated that Fu will want to get out and fight.

The *What* here sets in motion Fu's desire to fight back and to avenge himself on those who have destroyed the Temple. This desire shapes Fu's course in *Tiger*.

One of the most effective ways to find the *What* of your story is to consider what it is your character wants or thinks she wants. In those first few pages, the best stories frequently conjure the thing that will rouse the main character to action by playing or working on this desire. And, of course, whatever it is that the character wants or desires, you can be sure there will be obstacles on the way to it.

Hook your reader

A reality of the review process—whether you're dealing with an agent, editor or reader—is that you won't have a lot of time to hook your audience.

Manuscripts don't have to open in a dramatic way, with the life of the protagonist at stake (although it's fine if they do, of course). There's room for somewhat more leisurely beginnings. The point is, we do have to feel that something is at stake or is going to be at stake. This can be risk of real bodily harm or even loss of life, or it can be other important things people care about—reputation; self-respect; hurt feelings; friendships; an academic, athletic or job record; social standing; the fate of the universe—it can be moral, social or metaphysical. But something real must be on the line for the character.

Throw a party

A helpful metaphor for a good beginning is to think of the beginning of your book as a party you're throwing; one to which the reader needs to arrive fashionably late. The door opens, and

things are already in full swing. Something exciting or important is already happening—something that will catch our eye.

Your job as the author is to be a good host. Although many things may be transpiring, a strong beginning shows the reader where to focus attention. It's as if, as our eyes traverse the scene, some of the background blurs into the inconsequential, while other things stand out in sharp relief. This sense that we're being shown where to look is part of what drives the story.

Take off

The best beginnings move the action forward at the same time that they provide clues to the past or some larger context.

In *Becoming Chloe* by Catherine Ryan Hyde, a powerful opening sets the story in motion and indirectly gives background information at the same time. We learn, by reading between the lines, that the protagonist, Jordy, is a young guy on his own in New York. He's homeless and living in an empty cellar in a back alley between two buildings. He's had some experience with sex, and there are subtle hints that he might be gay. He's done some things he regrets.

Despite his difficult circumstances, however, Jordy is still compassionate and has empathy—enough so that he feels compelled to act, even if it's going to be at his own expense:

The girl is on her back on the hard concrete of that filthy alley, and I entertain the thought that maybe this was never her idea. That this is not a voluntary gig on her part ... And I know I have to do something.

The beginning conveys a wealth of information and, at the same time, raises questions in our mind. Who is this kid, and how did he wind up here? How long has he been on his own? Will he be able to rescue the girl who's being raped? Who is she, and how did she end up here? Will his efforts cause him to be attacked by the guys involved in the rape? What will happen next? These questions compel us to read on.

So how do you hold our attention once you've captured it in this way, especially in this age of distractions? So much has been said about the limited attention spans of young readers in this age of Game Boys and podcasts that keeping the reader's attention would seem to be particularly important for authors of middle-grade and YA fiction.

The answer: Ratchet up the suspense as the story moves forward.

Raise the stakes

In *The Gift of Fear*, Gavin de Becker notes that fear is about what hasn't happened yet. When the thing you fear happens, you're no longer afraid of it. Instead, you're afraid of what might happen next. De Becker's point, intended to illuminate an aspect of the human survival instinct, is also relevant for fiction.

Once we know what will happen, the suspense is over, and our compulsion to read on is diminished. For this reason, each obstacle needs to lead to the next. Things get worse and worse for the protagonist. The ante is continually upped. It may look like a corner has been turned and the pressure is off, but it then becomes clear that, in fact, the situation has worsened and appears even more insoluble. This compulsion to know if what we're afraid of will happen motivates us to read on.

The fear dynamic reveals another important truth about story: It's born of conflict. Conflict is an essential element of middle-grade and YA fiction. A satisfying story involves a progression of increasing obstacles and risk.

As the character acts and reacts to accumulating obstacles, the superficial is stripped away, and we see what lies underneath. It's through this process that authors create multidimensional and dynamic characters—what E.M. Forster refers to as round characters versus flat characters.

There's more of an art to strong storytelling, however, than just multiplying obstacles. If you pile up only external obstacles, there's a risk the story will feel merely episodic. Such stories are generally not as satisfying to young readers in the age of Harry Potter who've come to expect a sophisticated reading experience.

In the most successful middle-grade and YA novels, there's a system to the proliferation of obstacles. The protagonist confronts obstacles of ever-greater difficulty, and the confrontation increases both the external and the internal pressure she experiences.

The joys of vicious cycles

The goal is, in fact, a vicious cycle. As more external pressures are brought to bear on the protagonist, the stress points in her personality start to come to the surface. Surfacing stress creates internal pressures on the protagonist. These internal pressures then cause the protagonist to act or to make choices in ways that ultimately worsen her situation. The worsening situation then leads to more internal tension or conflict, bringing out even deeper character flaws or quirks, and so the cycle goes. The dynamic makes us feel we've witnessed the character's transformation.

An edge-of-the seat scene in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* is illustrative.

Harry and Dumbledore have gotten past hair-raising dangers in a magically guarded cavern and have discovered a basin filled with liquid. They believe the basin contains a powerful magical object (a Horcrux) essential to Voldemort's survival. Having gotten this far, however, they discover the liquid can't be removed by normal or magical means.

To Harry's horror, Dumbledore decides that he'll drink the potion. This is particularly dreadful because Harry was permitted to accompany Dumbledore only on the condition that he unequivocally obey Dumbledore's instructions:

"Why can't I drink the potion instead?" asked Harry desperately.

"Because I am much older, much cleverer, and much less valuable," said Dumbledore.

"Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking?"

What makes the scene so devastating is that Harry struggles against the role imposed on him by fate and Voldemort and, ironically, by Dumbledore, too. Harry must cope with the dangers that are present *and* with his fear of doing the wrong thing, his resistance to the promise he has reluctantly given, his suspicion that Dumbledore might miscalculate and his horror at inflicting pain on—even possibly killing—Dumbledore.

Rowling calibrates each turn in the scene to bring Harry almost past endurance. The self-doubt that has plagued Harry not just in this book but since the first book in the series, and his conflicted relation to the role in which he has been cast are most profoundly played on by the external pressures of this scene.

The external and internal pressures the author brings to bear on her protagonist aren't always so dramatically rendered. They're used to particularly flashy effect in fantasies, mysteries or thrillers because in these categories, bodily harm or loss of life is frequently at stake. The larger principle holds true, however, even in contemporary or humorous middle-grade or YA fiction. The more duress your character is under, the more the actions he takes while under that pressure, will reveal character.

Remember the big picture

It's important to write with an awareness of these principles. Narrative structure is one of the essential elements that agents and editors assess. The good news is that, in contrast to the intangible of voice, narrative structure is also the most amenable to being worked on. Once you've completed your first draft, you should go back and read the manuscript to make sure your narrative structure is satisfying and well conceived.

A sound narrative structure is the backbone of the best middle-grade and YA fiction and the basis for publishing success. [endstop]

Laura Rennert is the Senior Agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency. She's been with the agency for almost ten years and specializes in all categories of children's books, from picture books to young adult. She also specializes in literary fiction, mysteries and thrillers, and narrative nonfiction. She represents award-winning and bestselling authors, as well as brand new first-time authors. Some of her deals include a middle-grade series she sold to Random House for over half a million dollars; two six-figure deals for works of literary fiction to Doubleday; six-figure YA deals to Razorbill, Knopf, Feiwel & Friends, and Simon & Schuster; and a film deal to

Nickelodeon/Paramount. Laura is also the author of a picture book, *Buying, Training, and Caring for Your Dinosaur*, forthcoming with Knopf, and two books for young readers, *Emma*, *the Extra-Ordinary Princess* and an as yet untitled sequel, forthcoming with Dutton.

[Sidebar 1]

To Be or Who Not To Be?

Bestselling author Michael Connelly quotes advice he received a long time ago: “The best crime novels aren’t about how a detective works the case; they’re about how a case works on a detective.” Though Connelly is talking about mysteries, his point applies to all fiction: External pressures leading to internal ones inherently make for a fascinating read. In middle-grade and YA fiction, these pressures typically center on the experience of young readers who are its target audience.

The defining conflict in these stories revolves around the issue of identity because kids this age are trying to figure out their place in their peer group, in their families, in society and in the world. Some important categories of conflict are:

- conflict with self
- conflict with peers
- conflict with family or familial structure (including lack of family)
- conflict with authority, belief systems or society
- conflict with the natural world

The escalating pressures on the protagonist usually center around one type of conflict that is the driving force of the story.

[Sidebar 2]

Principles of Strong Narrative Structure

1. Craft beginnings that reveal *Who*, *What* and *Where*.
2. Show character through action.
3. Throw a party and make sure your readers arrive fashionably late.
4. Make your story take off in the very first pages.
5. Hook your readers by raising questions in their minds.
6. Take control of the story and show us where to focus our attention.
7. Sustain the forward momentum of the narrative throughout.
8. Raise the stakes and compel us to read on.
9. Throw obstacles in the path of your protagonist and create conflict.
10. Use a vicious cycle of external and internal pressures on your protagonist.
11. Focus on the adolescent conflicts of “To Be or Who Not To Be?” (see sidebar, pg. TK)
12. Plot with a consciousness of the character’s dramatic arc (your characters should change by the end).
13. Make the escalating pressures on your protagonist the agent for the character’s change.
14. Use the fear dynamic—keep the pressure on and keep us wondering what will happen next.
15. Push your characters to their limits so we can see what lies below the surface.