

Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly  February 2025

AVOIDING THE CLICHÉ TRAP.



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITY:**

Great River Literary

Mary Cummings

Agent & Founder

Great River Literary



interview by Lynne Marie

After fourteen years as an agent for kids' books with Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises, in 2021 Mary Cummings opened her own agency, Great River Literary (www.greatriverliterary.com/). She is very passionate about books for young readers and finds it gratifying to help writers achieve their dreams

are publishers seeking them: sometimes as single titles, though mini-series are often more likely to meet with success. I encourage authors who have a single title to think of a related second title, and right now am in the process of selling a "second" title as the one that the editor really jumped on. We may circle back to the first! I do love board books. –

LYNNE MARIE: Welcome back, Mary! A lot has evolved in the kidlit publishing world since we last spoke with you in 2021. What do you feel has changed most? And how has your agency changed since then?

MARY CUMMINGS: Of course, COVID rocked the world. There was a big jump in kidlit sales when families were more or less confined to home and kids needed both aids to school lessons and books for fun and to expand their horizons. There's been a downturn since then in several areas of the market, though there are bright spots. Pressures on editors have really increased, especially with mergers and "downsizing," which is the polite corporate term for cutting the number of personnel without proportionately cutting back on workload. This has resulted in editors taking longer to respond to queries, too. In terms of my agency, though: it just keeps growing, with wonderful clients and books!

LM: You continue to represent fiction, literary nonfiction and poetry for children, from board books to middle grade (including chapter books) and young adults. Of those, which would you love to see pitches for most?

MC: Board books are a tough sell, though there

Picture books remain my top love. Reviewing the "BOOKS" section of my website (greatriverliterary.com) will give authors and author-illustrators a good sense for my tastes. In general, though, I'm particularly looking for humor, as well as texts that are truly stories with plots (beginning-middle-end) rather than a "slice of life" or "mood" piece. I get a lot of submissions that have an unnamed narrator, a generic kid, which sometimes works nicely – but character-based storytelling where the reader knows the name of a particular child and follows that child through an adventure or dilemma to a resolution, tends to be most engaging. Character-based storytelling is more likely to have heart and immediacy for the child reader, too. I welcome both fiction and literary nonfiction in the picture book space. I love lyrical texts, though not collec-

tions of poetry.

As for **novels**, when I'm "not an adult," I'm a three year old (handy for board and early picture books) or I'm ten years old (great for middle-grade novels). My taste in YA isn't an ideal match for the marketplace, though, so I'm generally not the best agent for YA projects. I do truly love MG fantasy (sometimes high fantasy) and magical realism, and sometimes contemporary realism (but not pop-culture realism. I don't live there).



LM: With Tara Lazar's [Storystorm](#) having been just last month (January), perhaps you can help our readers in sifting through potential ideas. What do you feel makes an idea one to pursue? How many aspects of an idea might one consider before moving forward with it?

MC: Oh, wow. That depends so much on the individual. Where's the passion? Passion is the energy source, the driving power. However intellectually interesting an idea may be, or how timely for the zeitgeist, unless the writer feels a deep emotional connection to the "idea," what is written is likely to lack soul or texture or be engaging and memorable to a reader.

LM: Sometimes, for known or unknown reason, there is a flux of similar stories. Is there any topic or theme that you have seen too much of in your inbox lately? Too little?

MC: I see too many "He's different and different is good" manuscripts. Ditto on picture book biographies, much as I love them. I also see too many grandparent stories where the grandparent has either died or has dementia (annoying both to me and to some editors who have remarked that most kids have fully functioning, fun grandparents, so enough with the gnarled hands, memory boxes, bread baking, coffins, etc.). I get lots of dog and other animal stories with anthropomorphism that really throws me out of the story (like one dog "shouting" to another to keep up, for example). I do love animal fantasy, but I want to feel the essential nature of the animal mingled with the anthropomorphism: establish the "doggy-ness" of your dog character at the get-go. Finally, many picture book manuscripts have the parent too dominant in the story, usually showing the child the right way to do things.

I don't get enough submissions of historical stories, either picture book or novel (though I would not take on a WWII topic, unless it was a storyline

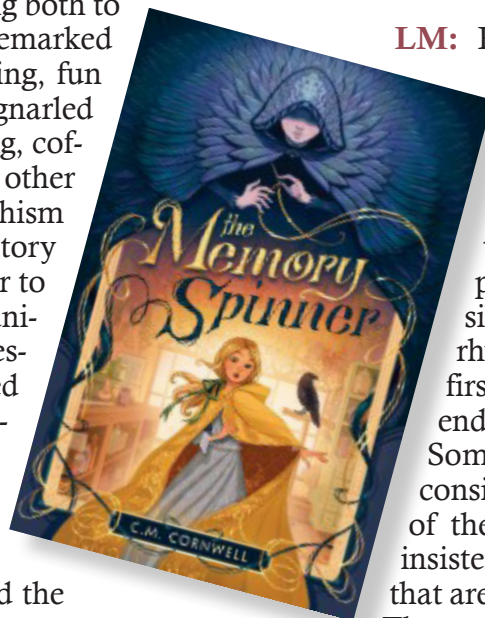
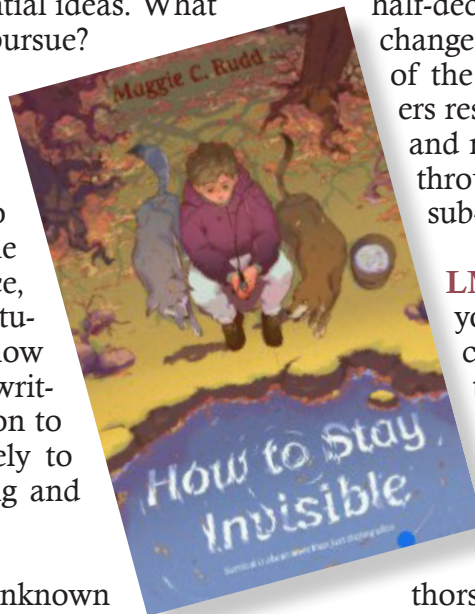
different from what is out there now). Whatever one's politics, I think we can agree that the next half-decade or so will involve enormous change in the U.S. and in many other parts of the world. I am eager to see how writers respond, whether in specific storylines and nonfiction topics, or more indirectly through emotional undercurrents and sub-themes.

LM: Please share the story of a role you may have played in a book that came from an idea you loved, but had to be overhauled to make a sale?

MC: It doesn't feel appropriate to be too specific here, but I will say that some projects I've edited very lightly in working with authors – and others have been extensively overhauled before being ready for submission to editors. Sometimes it takes one round of edits, while other times it's quite a few rounds. I can't frequently take projects that will require a great deal of my time to help the author shape, but sometimes I am so captivated by an essence, a "germ" of what is there that I will do that – and it can really pay off by a sale and a lovely book in the end!

LM: Regarding poetry - what are you looking for? Are you interested in rhyming picture book stories? Chap books? Please explain.

MC: In general, I find quatrains the most satisfying poetry form for picture book writing (and it's accessible for kids). That can have various rhyme schemes, though having the first and third or second and fourth line end-rhyme is probably most familiar. Sometimes rhyming couplets work (I am considering one right now), though most of the time they don't (the rhyme is too insistent, and often there are combinations that are forced or not "kid-friendly" terms). There are loads of haiku books out for kids (and I'm not seeking one) but I'd sure like to see the tanka form used in telling an extended story, though not necessarily referencing Japanese poetry. Rhyme has to be sparkling, flowing, surprising –



with fabulous word choices. But when it is, I love it. It is a handicap that quite a few editors simply will not consider rhyming picture book texts (which I feel is shortsighted and misguided, but I understand that this bias comes from seeing hundreds or thousands of poorly written rhyming manuscripts). (No, I'm not seeking chap books).

LM: What do you think writers should consider about themselves and/or their work before they submit a rhyming text?

MC: It better be REALLY GOOD.

LM: Where did you get your background in poetry?

MC: Formally, it began in college. Also, I took classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, and studied on my own, reading a huge range of global poetry and books on poetry craft, mostly for adults but also on children's poetry. I've had many poems published in literary journals (and won some awards).

LM: What resources do you recommend for a writer to get a better understanding of the craft of poetry?

MC: Do lots of reading of poetry and read books on craft. Listen to poetry on recordings or by going to readings. Write a lot, too.

LM: What is your general procedure, should you like a pitch and want to see a full (embedded in the email, entire picture books or first three pages of longer works)? Once you see the full, would you make a decision based upon that one manuscript, or request to read more?

MC: Board and picture books are sent in their entirety. For novels, I'll typically request a synopsis and the first and last twenty-five pages. If I am excited and intrigued after reading them, I'll request the full. The reason why I want a substantive portion of the

first and the last is that many writers do not maintain the quality of their language and their characterizations in the last portion. They are eager to get the adventure concluded and the texture is lost; plot takes over and characters feel "thinner," remote. But when the quality is consistent in both portions of the sample, the writer has "passed a test."

LM: There is always some debate among writers as to what bio information they should include. What would you like to see from an author or illustrator in their bio? What if the submitter is new to the business. What kinds of things would you like to see then?

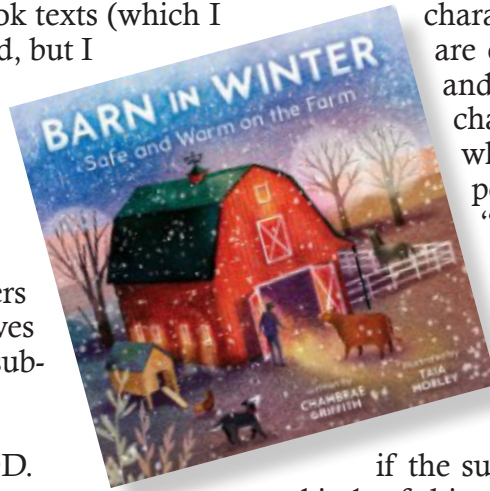
MC: This is noted on my website, but briefly: besides the obvious and standard, I like to know a bit about the creator's experience with children (as this is kidlit) and I also like to know where they live, which gives me a bit of a sense of their environment.

LM: As far as related writing relevant experience, please share the type of things you look for. Does being a mother or grandmother make the cut, or are you looking for more public experience with kids like Children's Librarian or Day Care Aide?

MC: Whatever fits. But expand on what you have. If you're a mother and grandmother, what experiences from raising your children, with their specific temperaments and quirks, enrich your writing? Make it succinct, but make it useful and interesting info.

LM: You generally offer contracts to work on one book at a time. As an author, I didn't fully understand the reasoning behind this until I interned at a literary agency and worked at a publishing house. Please share the thought process behind this decision.

MC: This was common practice at my first agency, Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises, and I've continued it, particularly as I like to give a maximal number of new authors opportunity to work with me to get



a book out. Except for manuscripts that need a fair amount of editorial guidance before they are ready to go to editors, single projects are less time consuming than work with term clients, where I'm looking at their vision and output as a whole and pondering their best next steps in their development and career. The single project basis, which I structure as a six-month agreement, is also a good period for both the client and for me to get a sense for working with one another, if there are other books in the offing. Six months forces me to very quickly get work out on submission – which I want to do anyway, because I'm only accepting projects I'm truly excited by and I'm full of energy. (Some agents will sign authors then essentially keep their manuscripts "in a drawer" for months before doing anything with them. That, to me, is unprofessional and unethical).

LM: What is your process if the book doesn't sell in six month's time?

MC: If there are still prospects for it, we'll extend the agreement. If not, it dissolves and the client is free to do whatever they wish with the project.

LM: Looking through your clients, there are some great authors and illustrators and some wonderful books. How/why do you think it is important for prospective clients to get their hands on these books and be familiar with them?

MC: It certainly isn't necessary. But an agent is a person, right? Can we agree on that? So it is to an author's advantage to know a little bit about the agent they are submitting to – and to reference that in their queries. If you got ahold of a book or two they've agented, you or your kids liked it, or you feel your work has something in common with those books, it's good to mention. If you have something else in common with them: you met at a conference, or you know one of the authors of a book they've represented, or you live

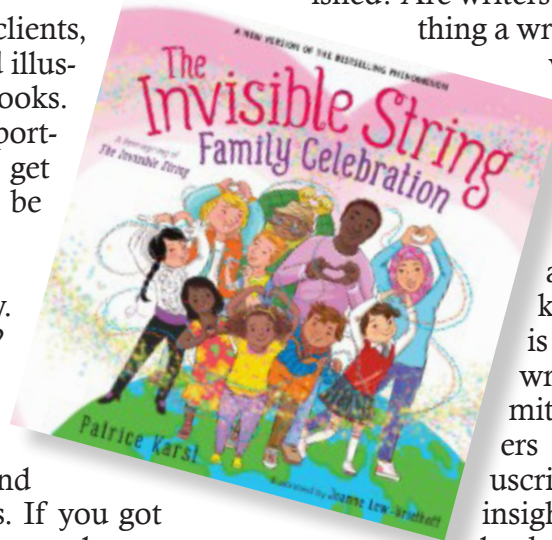
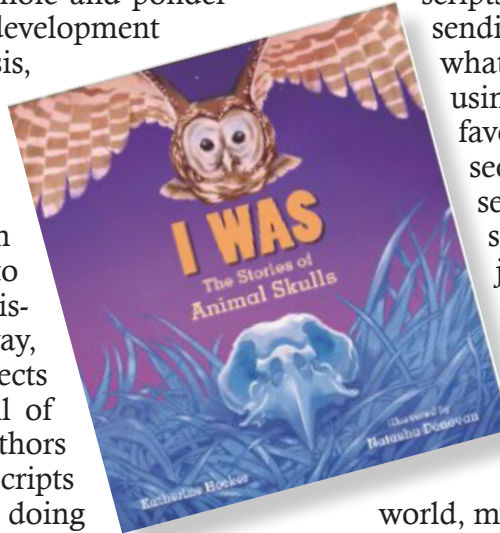
in the same part of the country, or whatever, that shows you've taken time and care before you've made your approach. It's certainly apparent that many writers are caught up in getting their manuscripts ready for submission, and they are sending out to pretty much every agent in whatever database or directory they are using. "Dear Agent" or "Hello" or (my favorite) "Dear Sirs" is like spreading seeds in a vast field, calculating that a seed or two will germinate. (It's also self-protective against the fear of rejection). But these anonymous, scatter-shot queries entirely ignore the achievements, tastes and even the humanity of the recipient. And that's implicit and very evident.

So: "if you can't take the time to know something about me, my world, my tastes – why would I take the time to pay attention to you?" is basically how an agent responds. Those queries usually don't get read. It takes time to follow the somewhat different guidelines/submission requirements of each agent, and even more time to learn a little about them – but it will pay off.

LM: In general, what do you feel about the current level of submissions in your in-box? Is the work polished? Are writers submitting too early? Share something a writer might do to make certain their work is submission-ready.

MC: It's very mixed. Some queries are professional and inviting; a great many are not. Some work is in excellent shape and a good match to today's marketplace. Much of what comes in is far from publishable, even if the writer spent more time before submitting. Ask critique partners, teachers or mentors to review your manuscripts and your queries to get their insights. Don't work a manuscript to death, but don't submit immediately after your first draft, either.

LM: Please share a recent acquisition and/or client to give our readers a feel for what attracts you to a certain writer or manuscript.



MC: My taste is really pretty broad, as is evident looking on my agency website (under BOOKS), or by following my deal announcements. The voice has to captivate me. Beyond that, I'm looking for engaging characters, beautiful writing, an intriguing subject.

LM: Coming off the heels of January and resolutions, what do you feel a children's writer / author should resolve to do?

MC: Oh, I'm not one to dictate what creators of children's stories should do. I am going to *suggest*: read as much as you can in kidlit to soak up what this rich and wild and immensely varied field offers because it will help you get better at what you aspire to yourself.

LM: Please ask/answer a question that you wish I had asked you.

MC: What are some things that annoy you in queries and manuscripts or manuscript samples?

Some of this I've touched upon already, but it might be helpful to expand upon common mistakes that writers make. These include blanket queries ("Dear Agent" or "Hello"); excessive informality ("Hey, Great Literary!"); incorrect spelling of my name or my agency's (sometimes wildly wrong, like "Dear Mandy Cutler" where obviously someone's spreadsheet has missed some lines); and emails sent with attachments (they are deleted without being read, as noted in my submission guidelines). Professionalism matters. If you are sloppy at this stage and moment, no matter how good your manuscript is (not that I would be reading it), I wouldn't subject the editors I hold in high regard to working with someone lacking in basic courtesy and professionalism.

LM: This is a revived question that I just had to share because the answer was so good and touched upon so much important advice. What is the advice that you have given to prospective writers the most?

MC: Be ready. Wait to submit until you are sure your work is refined, revised, polished to be your very best effort. I know this isn't easy! Writers are passionate and often impatient. But patience pays off. Get the perspectives of peers from writing groups, classes,

conferences, etc. Be professional. Take yourself and your work seriously. For example, NEVER say: "I have a little picture book project to tell you about," or "now that I'm retired, I'm turning my hand to writing."

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- You've chosen one manuscript to pitch for each Above the Slushpile opportunity. If the editor or agent shows interest in that submission, you'll have the opportunity to mention your other work.
- You've studied the submission guidelines and verified that your manuscript falls within those guidelines.
- Your work has been critiqued by a beta reader, critique partner/group, or a freelance editor.
- You have thoroughly revised and polished your manuscript so it is ready to submit should the editor ask to see the entire work.