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The Art, Business and Science of Editing Children's Books

By Olgy Gary

I love the written word, always have, and always will.

As a little girl growing up in Cuba, books were my window into the world of "what if." Regardless of what was happening around me in the turbulent years after Castro, my reading brought me a great measure of peace.

Over the years I have made my living as an editor and writer with a special focus on children's books. My experience, and that of my colleagues, confirms what I've known all along. Editing children's books is both an art and a science. It is also a business.

Weave
God's glorious
plan of
redemption within your
stories so they're
not delivered as
preaching points,
especially in
children's books.

The Art of Editing Children's Books

Editing
is an art,
the art
of
molding

words and concepts on a page into an understandable whole. When stories ring true, editors see their potential. They see beauty in the midst of what can be

a chaotic submission. The art of editing children's books in particular comes in as editors put themselves in the place of the children who will read their books; they see the manuscript from the child's eyes. They visualize children reading the published title and anticipate their reactions.

Editors know good writing when they see it. In [The Art of Editing](#), an August 15, 2000 radio interview on [The Connection](#), a radio program hosted by Dick Gordon for the University of Boston, [Betsy Lerner](#), a literary agent and past senior editor of [Doubleday](#), described how she knows a manuscript she's looking at is good writing. "It keeps my attention. It moves me. The experience of reading is deeply emotional. I like the world to fall away, that's how I know it's good. I'm lost in it. I'm transported by it."

Whether it is the voice, storyline, character, or plot, editors look for children stories where the author has woven together such a wondrous tale that it merits the effort, time, and money that it will take to navigate the manuscript from acquisition to publication. Editors want to find such stories and publish them.

Good children's editors love working with the printed page. They are avid readers and in touch with their target audience. But they do more than that. Editing is also an art when it comes to human relations. As editors find and discover authors, not just their stories, they need to be sensitive in how they ask them to rewrite, or even cut, words, paragraphs or entire sections. It is painful for authors to edit what they already consider to be a perfect story. As editors gain the author's trust they'll be able to get authors to do as many rewrites as needed. Editors become mentors, coaches, and even counselors to authors as they work together to bring the manuscript to publication standards.

Good editors are aware that the manuscript they are working on is not their creation. As important as it is for editors to shape the manuscript into a marketable book, the story is and

Author Information

Olgy Gary is an author, game designer, editor, ghostwriter and educational consultant. Her cross-cultural simulations, [The Luna and Kampei Game](#), have been extensively used by trainers worldwide. She holds an M.A. in Instructional Design, with an emphasis on experience-based learning resources and cross-cultural communication. She maintains several author and educational sites, including her own, [www.childrencomefirst.com](#) and serves as Children/YA judge for the [Paul Gillette Writing Contest](#), sponsored by the nationally recognized Pikes Peak Writers Conference.



About the Company

Children Come First seeks to cultivate a life-long love of learning among children and their families.

must remain true to the author's vision. The story belongs to the author. It is a team effort where editor and author work together for the benefit of the readers, the children.

After the editor finds a story and an author with potential, the business side of publishing comes into play.

The Business of Editing Children's Books

What a
wondrous thing
it is when
the book
the child
picks up
ends up
changing
their lives!

It's been said that writing is an art but publishing is a business. Finding a manuscript worthy of publication is just the beginning. As children's editors read manuscripts, they ask themselves whether the manuscript can be submitted to any national review or award programs. Although children are the ones who will end up enjoying the titles, it is parents, schools and libraries that will purchase them. A book with good reviews or awards is more likely to be purchased as a classroom set and incorporated into schools' curriculum, thus assuring ongoing sales for the

publisher.

When publishing children's titles, especially picture books, the illustrations are as important as the story. Therefore, choosing the right illustrator is a key business decision. Books by well-known illustrators sell, even if written by unknown authors. This is why it is up to editors to pick the illustrator for children stories they publish. They know which illustrator can best bring to life the story so that it will appeal to the widest target audience—not just to children, but to the adults who buy the books.

Editors know that they will be marketing the titles to parents while keeping the story for children. It is parents, especially mothers, who buy children's books. As a bookseller, that was one of the litmus tests I used when choosing titles for the book fairs I managed. Time and again I would see mothers pick up a title, hold it next to their hearts, and then lean over to their children to say how beautiful it would be for them to read it together.

And so children's editors publish for children while marketing the titles to adults. Editors must then sell the book idea to the sales and marketing departments of the publishing house. At a time when the publishing world is going through so many changes, where publishing houses are being bought by conglomerates, editors must champion their books while keeping an eye on the bottom line. Christian publishers may have more latitude on the business side due to their commitment to ministry first, but they must still pay attention to sales.

Spin-offs are a great tool children editors have at their disposal to increase revenue. They can suggest to the publisher character-based games, puzzles, stuffed animals, and more to go along with a well-written and illustrated story. Children love to read stories such as David and Goliath while playing with the [action figures](#) by the same name. They love play-acting and would delight in reading about [baby Jesus](#) while holding the Mary and Joseph [action figures](#) in their hands.

The business side of publishing may not be as simple as it used to be, but it is more exciting and energizing than ever. Technology has come along to enable and empower small publishers to, in a way, compete with the big houses. Smaller houses make greater use of print on demand or smaller print runs and, by so doing, have more capital at their disposal to publish more titles.

The Science of Editing Children's Books

If we know that editing is an art and also a business, where does the science part of editing come in? What is it that good editors look for in a manuscript?

An excellent overview of this topic is given by [Cheryl Klein](#), an editor at [Arthur A. Levine Books](#) (an imprint of [Scholastic](#)). In her eBook, *Rules of Engagement: How to Get (and Keep!) A Reader Involved in Your Novel*, Klein talks about five key ingredients for getting a reader hooked on a novel. The eBook is available as a free download from [Children Come First](#). Klein states that voice is the single most important ingredient, "the soul of the book." She's right. It is the voice in the story that captures your heart and won't let go even after the book is over. The voice will bring the character to life. Klein also feels the story should include elements of surprise, for the characters to come across as real and action driven and for mystery to flow through the storyline.

Christian publishers
are in the
enviable position
of personally
knowing the Bible
truths they want
their books
to convey.

When looking at the element of surprise, raising the stakes for the protagonist is of paramount importance. There are a limited number of storylines, but an author's unique

approach can separate their story from other stories already told. The author's take can add surprise plot twists and endings and make it a satisfying read. Children are not as patient as adults are when it comes to reading. Either the story grabs them from the first page or they drop the book and never finish it. Good editors will be on the lookout for predictability in the stories they edit. They will suggest rewrites to increase the element of surprise for the reader.

We cannot talk about raising the stakes without mentioning GMC (goal, motivation, conflict.). These are the building blocks of good fiction, as Debra Dixon writes in her book by the same title (*Goal, Motivation and Conflict*, Gryphon, 1999; 978-0965437103). There's no fiction without conflict. Tension and conflict are the life-blood of fiction. Editors look for novels with strong GMC woven throughout them, novels that will grab a reader's attention and not let go until the very last page. Editors know that children will look for what it is the protagonist wants (goal), why the protagonist wants it (motivation) and what is standing in the way of the protagonist reaching that goal (conflict). Children identify with the main character and travel along with him as they confront and defeat the antagonist. That's how kids internalize the very lessons the character is learning in the story. Children will only keep reading if the tension and conflict is high enough to keep their interest.

This method is perfectly matched to the type of stories Christian publishers want. What greater conflict could there be than ultimate good confronting and destroying ultimate evil? The trick here is to weave God's glorious plan of redemption within these stories so they're not delivered as preaching points, especially in children's books. C.S. Lewis masterfully accomplished this, and so did J.R.R. Tolkien, in their respective series of Narnia and the Lord of the Rings.

As editors we all encounter authors who write under the burden of an undelivered message. Find a way to coax them to give a powerful storyline, allowing their message to flow naturally as part of the story. Bruno Bettelheim's classic text, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Penguin, 1991, 978-0140137279) argues that storytelling is a very powerful means of conveying truths. It is most effective when the emphasis is on the storytelling and not on the message. When children pick up a book they are not looking for a message. They are looking for a story. And what a wondrous thing it is when the book the child picks up ends up changing their lives!

Katherine Paterson, two-time winner of the [National Book Award](#) and the [Newbery Medal](#) writes about this. In her book, *The Invisible Child* (Dutton, 2001; 978-0525464822), she says:

A book can give a child a way to learn to value herself, which is at the start of growing a great soul. It is why I struggle against the idea that characters in novels should be role models... They discouraged me. Whereas that awful, bad-tempered, selfish Mary Lennox—who could admire her? Who could love such an unlovable creature? Yet she was given the key to a secret garden. Not because she deserved it, but because she needed it. When I read *The Secret Garden*, I fell in love with Mary Lennox. She was my soul mate. And because I loved her, I was able to learn to love myself a bit.

Christian publishers must be especially careful with this matter. They may so sanitize a story and its characters prior to publication, that what is finally published bears no resemblance to normal everyday children's lives. But the Bible itself is not sanitized; the human beings it depicts—like *The Secret Garden's* Mary Lennox—need a key to reenter the Garden, need a Way in—Jesus Himself. The Bible must not be used as a mallet to pound truth into kids' hearts. When forced into the storyline, it can be counterproductive rather than being the life-giving message it ought to be. If children do not find answers to questions they are struggling with in everyday life within the pages of Christian publishers' titles, they will read what secular publishers are printing. This does not have to be the case.

Who better than Christian publishers to provide religious instruction? There is a great need for it. Secular publishers are aware of this need. They are increasingly establishing departments within their houses to acquire and publish titles to meet the market's felt need. Inspirational titles can and should carry a strong Christian message, without crossing the line into preaching. Gene Edwards' *The Divine Romance* (Tyndale, 1993, 978-0842310925) is a marvelous example. It tells the love story between God and his bride...you and I. Without compromising Biblical truth or its message of salvation, Edwards tells us a story, one that captivates our hearts and stays with us long after the last page is read.

The science of editing children books requires attention to details such as point of view, dialogue, over use of adverbs, lack of subplots, undeveloped characters and so forth. Klein's eBook covers these aspects of the editing process; another title I recommend is literary agent Donald Maass' *Writing the Breakout Novel* (Writer's Digest, 2002, 978-1582971827). Beyond these, which are of supreme importance in delivering a book worth reading, is the overall sense or message of the book itself. Christian publishers are in the enviable position of personally knowing the Bible truths they want their books to convey. They know how much our world needs to hear them. They have the ability to coach and mentor writers into weaving these truths into mesmerizing stories that children of all ages would love to read and recommend to others. My prayer is that they would do just that.

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