
BEHIND THE SCENES WITH

SARAH HAMMOND



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Q: There are so many genres when it comes to writing. What inspired you to pursue writing for children?

A: That’s an interesting question because, as I pondered my answer, I couldn’t remember ever sitting down and making that conscious decision. It is a passion that I always just felt. Ever since I was a child myself, I have told stories* and the things I want to write about are suited to children.

As Maurice Sendak (author of *Where the Wild Things Are*) once said: “I don’t write for children... I write — and somebody says, ‘That’s for children!’”

The kidlit world is amazing to me. Stories are an important means of communication and expression for all humans, but I think they have a special place in childhood. Perhaps it is because stories help us make sense of the world and ourselves, and children are just launching on that voyage of discovery. Perhaps it is because children are often so in tune with their imaginations. Perhaps it is because truths can often be told beautifully when they are told simply.

To me, the range and quality of kidlit is astonishing — from thrillers to mysteries to fantasies to classics, to poignant contemporary fiction, to historical stories, to emotional coming-of-age journeys, to downright silly tales that make you giggle. I love reading it all.

Also, a young audience makes for a good writing teacher. On the one hand, children read stories with fresh eyes, open to all genres. That sense of wonder is a joy. On the other hand, kids are tough, too; they will not tolerate a meandering story. When they no longer care ‘what happens next’, they will close the book. That’s a good discipline for any writer.

Q: Do you have a specific young reader in mind - real or imagined - when you start creating a book?

A: That question hits on a useful writing tip: writing can really soar when a writer addresses a particular person in her mind, ‘speaking’ to them directly. I love teaching creative writing to children who are the target audiences of my books, partly to check in with them, see what they are thinking, talking, writing about.

However, truth be told, I’ve found that the best way for me to write for young people is to rediscover the child in myself. That’s my primary ‘research’. When I’m about to write a picture book, for instance, I still myself and try to remember what it was like to be five years old. How did I see the world? What did I like to do? What was I frightened of? What were my strong memories? The writing, stories, perspective, subject matter often come naturally when I do that.

Q: Tell us about working with an illustrator. What's that process like?

A: People are often surprised to know that traditional publishers deal with authors and illustrators of picture books separately for much of the process. Once I have written the story, I have to let it go — now it’s the illustrator’s turn to interpret my words. It is a ‘picture’ book after all.

In *Mine!*, the publisher chose the illustrator and showed me her character studies of the two protagonists, and then a mock up of the illustrated story. I love Laura Hughes’ work and was thrilled with her illustrations. There is one spread in particular that mirrors the image I had in my head when I wrote the story. That amazed me.

Illustrators often say that they prefer to work on stories where the author has left plenty of ‘space’ for them to add their own visual interpretation. In general, authors are only encouraged to intervene with the illustrations if there is a technical issue. For instance, if it matters from a story perspective that your character wears a red hat, say so. But if it makes no difference, leave it.

Q: Is there a new project on your drafting table?

A: There are many projects! As I type the answer to this question, I have the papers of a young teen novel scattered around me. I’ve lived with the story for a while and the characters are starting to come to life. However, I’m one of those odd superstitious authors who like the story to grow a bit more before I talk about it out in the world. Check out the blog on my website for updates!

Q: You're coming to Shake Rag Alley to lead workshops at our Writing Retreat in May. What are some important things that writers will take away from the retreat?

A: I’m thrilled to join the Writing Retreat to run the class on Writing for Young People this year. My main aim is for students to learn more about the wonderful world of kidlit, hone their storytelling skills, and — in the spirit of the audience we are writing for — have fun.

There will be three main workshop sessions, and in each of them we’ll look at writing for a different age group: picture books, middle grade (8 - 12 yo), and young adult (teens). We will read excerpts, do writing exercises, dive into story craft issues along the way. Everyone should take away story beginnings to develop and I’ll share practical resources and tips about walking the path to publication in the kidlit world, too.

The retreat also has lots of extra treats for attendees including additional craft sessions with other faculty, open mics, manuscript critiques, and community building opportunities. [Click this link](#) to find out more about the Mining the Story writing retreat.

Q: And finally - what are you reading these days? Anything you'd recommend to our community of creatives?

A: I've always got several books on the go!

The adult fiction book on my nightstand is a masterpiece: *The Bronski House* by Philip Marsden. It was a Christmas gift from my oldest friend and is described as 'a *Polish Wild Swans* meets *Dr. Zhivago*.' My Polish grandfather grew up in that world and I find it fascinating.

Kidlit-wise, I've recently discovered Gary D. Schmidt. Oh my! What a talented middle grade writer. After devouring several of his titles (*Orbiting Jupiter* is a story I will carry in my heart forever), I'm now starting *Okay for Now*, a National Book Award finalist.

I've also discovered a few wonderful picture books recently. Here are some of my favorites:

- *I Talk Like A River* by Jordan Scott, illustrated by Sydney Smith, is a beautiful lyrical story about a boy coming to terms with his stutter.
- *Leave Me Alone!* by Vera Brosgol tells the humorous tale of a grandmother who just wants some peace and quiet to do her winter knitting for her many grandchildren.
- *If You Come to Earth* by Sophie Blackall is a 'glorious guide to Earth' and to cherishing the life we all share on the planet, inspired by the author's travels in support of UNICEF and Save the Children.

The list could go on and on, but I'll stop there.

* One of Sarah Hammond's earliest illustrated titles!

