

What children really want

Award-winning children's writer and literary consultant **Vanessa Curtis** shares her advice on breaking into YA and children's fiction with **Tina Jackson**



Vanessa Curtis is an award-winning writer for children. Previously a literary consultant for Cornerstones, she recently launched Curtis Literary Consultancy as a specialist consultancy service for writers for children.

Vanessa Curtis' first novel, *Zelah Green* (Egmont), won the Manchester Children's Book Prize and was

shortlisted for the Waterstones Prize, the Young Minds awards and the NASEN/TLS awards.

She has published four other novels for children: *Zelah Green: One Little More Problem* (Egmont); *The Taming of Lilah May* (Frances Lincoln); *Lilah May's Manic Days* (Frances Lincoln) and *The Haunting of Tabitha Grey* (Egmont).

Her next novel, due to be published in 2015 by Usborne children's books, is historical fiction for young adults.

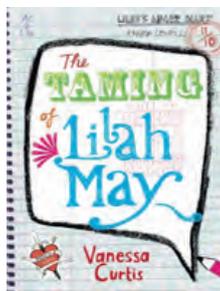
Vanessa has also had two books on Virginia Woolf published by Robert Hale, and her journalism has appeared in many national newspapers.

What makes a successful children's novel?

I've always enjoyed novels where the protagonist has a very strong, clear voice. If a novel makes me gasp, cry or long to turn the page, then I judge it to be successful. Novels in an unusual setting always get my attention too – a far-off land, a place made up entirely from the author's imagination, or set around a real-life historical period of turmoil and upheaval. Having said that, some of the debut authors who I've worked with have had enough visible potential for me to see that we could bring out that 'voice' and work on plot, dialogue and characterisation around it. It's such a subjective business, too – one agent might love a novel, whereas another may turn it down.

What does a literary consultant actually do?

My job as a literary consultant is to help somebody make their novel the absolute best it can be before they submit it to either an agent or a publisher. I use my own experience of becoming a published author to help me advise others. Literary consultants offer that extra step between the author finishing a draft and then submitting it to agents or publishers.



What would you advise debut writers for children to concentrate on?

I would suggest first of all that they read everything that they can get their hands on, particularly books in a similar genre to their own. It's important to know what's out there, what sells and what the competition might be. Look at what today's children are interested in – their hobbies, their musical tastes, what they are studying at school. And listen to what children are telling you! They are very vocal and honest about what they like and don't like in children's fiction.

And when someone's ready to start writing?

When you come to write the book, make sure you have a likeable and well-developed character, flaws and all. In fact, readers like a character to be a little bit less-than-perfect. It helps them to empathise with their protagonist and be able to imagine what their life is like. Don't be afraid of using humour. Kids love to be made to laugh. Equally, don't be afraid to write about darker, grittier issues, or to write a ghost story! Kids also enjoy a good, spooky read. But most importantly of all, write about something you have a genuine interest in or feeling for. If you've enjoyed the research, that spark will carry through into your writing and ensure that the reader enjoys your book too.

What are the most common mistakes people make in a children's manuscript?

Sometimes there are too many long paragraphs of descriptive prose. Children get bored easily, so it's important to keep them hooked with short, punchy sentences and three-dimensional characters. Another thing that new authors tend to do is write the books which would have appealed to them when they were young. Unfortunately times have changed and although many children do still read the classics, far more are gripped by the newer, contemporary authors on the scene today. Also some writers tend to make their characters rather stereotypical – so for instance, a wizard will always have a long silvery beard, a mother character will always wear an apron and get cross.

How could writers avoid making these rookie errors?

Writing is a craft, like other creative processes. Learn as much as you can from as many places as you can – work with a literary consultant, buy a reputable book on creative writing, join a local writer's group. Get used to critiquing your own work with an editorial eye, looking for sentences that run on just that little bit too long or paragraphs of description