

which don't add anything to the impetus of your plot. Read your work out loud. Read books by current contemporary authors and look at the issues they cover in their novels, the language and dialogue that they use and the age-group that their books are aimed at. And above all, strive to write something unusual, noticeable and original that you feel only you could write.

How do you avoid using stereotypes in children's fiction?

It's very difficult to be 100% original in any book you write, but you should strive to be as original as you can. I'm a big fan of subverting character-types so that they have something unexpected about them. The apron-wearing mother could also be a world-champion darts player by night, or the wizard might have a silvery beard but be wearing leather trousers and play in a thrash metal group. These are extreme examples, but characters who have unexpected traits tend to stay in the minds of readers for a long time.

What do children like to see in stories?

Children have different tastes, of course, but many young adult readers like a strong, fresh, original teen voice narrating a story full of twists, turns and unexpected happenings. Younger children love to be made to laugh, perhaps by heroes or heroines who don't behave quite as children should. Others love to be gently spooked by monsters and crazy characters with wild and wacky habits. But all children like a good, strong, story with believable and interesting characters that are not necessarily perfect.

What do adult writers put in that doesn't go down well with young readers?

References to things that shouldn't be in children's novels, or those long descriptive paragraphs of prose again. Dialogue that doesn't ring true, or characters who are wooden and hard to identify with. Characters who aren't given enough time to develop. Novels which are too short, or too long. Child readers are very particular!

Do you have any advice on constructing a tight plot?

It's useful to have a rough outline of your plot before you start writing. That way you can plan where the tension will rise and fall and make sure that towards the end of the book you have a thrilling climax and then a short, neat resolution chapter which leaves nothing unsolved/unsaid. I often plan my books using a skeleton plot outline – so, for instance, chapters 1-3 are the 'what is the problem?' chapters. Then I have an 'expand the problem' set of chapters followed by 'filler' and then 'could things get any worse?' before a sort-of 'kill the baddies' chapter and then that nice neat 'tidy up' chapter at the end.

How would you advise writers to create characters that are three-dimensional?

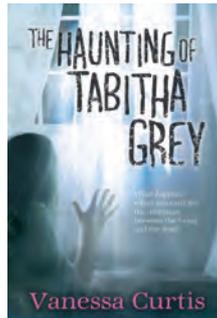
I'd suggest treating them almost as if they were real. Write down a list of their likes and dislikes. What clothes do they wear? How do they move when they walk down the street? What's their skin tone like? Do they have a catchphrase that they use when they are stressed? And of course it's that important thing, again, of making your characters have something contrasting and unexpected about them, so that they are not just flat like a cardboard cut-out but fleshed-out, real, deep and intriguing instead.

What are agents and publishers looking for in a finished manuscript?

In these competitive times (my own agent gets 500 unsolicited submissions a month!), agents are looking for something truly special and unique. They need to be wholeheartedly passionate about what they sign or else they cannot effectively pitch and sell it to a publisher. Agents will specify what they are looking for on their websites, or in the *Writer's & Artist's Yearbook*. So it's no good sending an entire novel of science fiction to an agent

whose speciality is historical fiction and who has asked for only the first three chapters of a novel. As well as a brilliantly written and appropriately targeted novel, the agent will expect a short, concise but informative cover letter which introduces the author, what they are submitting (a couple of lines on this will suffice) and why they think they are particularly qualified to write it. If the author has had other pieces of work published then it's a good idea to include a few published clippings. And no agent will ever return your work unless you put in a stamped addressed envelope. So in these very competitive times it helps to be able to put

together a superlative selling package and that's a service I offer at my literary consultancy for writers of both fiction and non-fiction. It's sometimes hard to predict exactly what publishers are looking for, as tastes and trends change so quickly. But one thing that is for sure is that they will be expecting any submission to be the very best you can make it. That's why most publishers now only accept submissions via literary agents.



Are you noticing any emerging trends in children's fiction?

I think that there are more novels than ever about gritty, personal issues, particularly in YA/teen fiction. Nothing is really taboo in fiction any longer and so long as they are explored sensitively, some quite controversial subjects can be covered.

Would you recommend writers to create a potential series? And if so, why?

I wouldn't recommend that a new writer tries to pitch a series to an agent/publisher at the moment, for the reason that it is very difficult for new writers to get a book deal for more than one book. A lot of writers make the mistake of leaving their first book open at the end, with characters left dangling and situations left unresolved, in the hope that some publisher will be left gasping for more and sign them up for an entire series. Actually, series books cost serious money and at the moment, agents and publishers would be far more interested in reading a brilliant book which has all loose ends tied up and is a complete story in itself. If a publisher signs it and then requests another in the series, that can be written later on.

What would be your most important piece of advice for would-be writers for children?

Write what you want to write, from the heart. Don't write with one eye on the market or this will be reflected in the quality of your writing. Read everything you can get your hands on. Learn to accept rejections as part of the submission process. Get your book the very best you can and consider hiring outside help to get it to that stage. And enjoy what you are doing – it's a very great privilege to write for children.

Website: www.curtisliterary.co.uk

