



Module 3 : Learn from the Best: Great Examples of What Other Children's Writers do Well

- How to use other children's books in order to write your own
- A look at some famous picture books aimed at younger readers
- Excellent examples of first chapter books
- Books aimed at teenagers and young adults

Luckily for aspiring children's book writers there are many existing books to read and gather ideas and inspiration from. Instead of looking at these books as competition you should read as many as you can to glean as many useful techniques and skills as possible.

This chapter will cover the following bullet points:

- How to use other children's books in order to write your own
- A look at some famous picture books aimed at younger readers
- Excellent examples of first chapter books
- Books aimed at teenagers and young adults

3.1 Read and Review Alone and With Children



So you march off to the library and take out as many children's books as you can.

It is not enough simply to read one after the other and then take them back again. In order to gain knowledge and information for your own books you need to study these books and analyse them, making notes about good points and bad points, and what you might have done differently. Look at what style the authors use and how this varies depending on the target age of the reader. Observe how much dialogue is used, how backstory is presented, and how quickly the action begins and the plot starts unfurling.

How is tension presented and is there a comedy element? How many characters are there and what ages are they? Are they human characters, animal characters or completely made up creatures? Can you see any patterns developing where authors writing for similar age groups use similar ideas, styles or techniques?

Analysing the books in such detail will allow you to see what works and what does not work, and you can compare the ideas to your own. After reading hundreds of children's books you need to consider whether your plot idea still seems unique and interesting enough to compete with everything else on the market. Seeing what different styles, viewpoints and motifs are used will also help you narrow down exactly how you want to write your book, and what style of writing and viewpoint you think will work best for your story.

Another important part of the research process is to see how children react to different books and to get their feedback.

You may have children of your own you can ask, or children of friends and family who you can get to help you out. There are often children's sessions at local libraries where books are read aloud to a group and this could be an ideal situation to ask for feedback from readers, to find out what kinds of books they like and why. Helping out in local schools is also a great way to get access to children's opinions, as often schools look for helpers to listen to their pupils reading. Finding out as much as possible about your target age range and what they like to read will put you in a great position to start writing your children's novel.

3.2 Picture Books for Children Beginning to Learn to Read



Picture books usually do not have many words so all the backstory, emotion, tension, conflict and plot detail need to be portrayed in just a few carefully selected words and paragraphs.

This can be extremely challenging but there are many authors that manage to create beautiful, flowing, interesting, and amusing stories in just this way.

Let's look at a specific example which is a very famous series of books which started in 1971 with Mr Tickle.

Roger Hargreaves created this first Mr. Men character after his son asked him what a tickle looked like. He invented the rotund orange creature with long wiggly arms and then went on to invent 48 further Mr. Men characters, as well as 42 Little Miss characters. These books, which are now well-known all over the world, are about 15 pages long, with pictures on every page along with a small amount of text.

Each character has a personality based on their name and each story is based on one character at a time. A simple and amusing story develops, based on their interactions with other Mr. Men and Little Miss characters. Usually there is some kind of moral revealed, based on what the character has learnt from an experience or another character. As mentioned before, basing your story on preaching the value of a particular moral does not usually work any more. However, because of the simplicity and cuteness of the stories, and the characters involved, this does work well with the Mr. Men and Little Miss series.

In the Mr. Men and Little Miss series the same format is used for each and every book, which gives the reader comfort in knowing what to expect. By making each character the main character of his or her own book it allows the reader to find out more about their specific personality, which they will get to experience again when they pop up as smaller roles in the other books. The simple marker pen illustrations are both colourful and unique, and each character is unique and easily recognisable.

Roger Hargreaves created a new world for his creatures to live in which he called Misterland. This fantasy world lets the readers see how the different personalities live together and cope with their problems. These are simple versions of many real-life problems, but are made light of by using fun made-up creatures. As an aspiring children's book writer you can see how the unique but relatable characters are both appealing and amusing to children and adults alike.

Another great series aimed at the same age range are the Biff, Chip and Kipper books. The Magic Key series is just one of many sets of books that take the reader on a magical adventure where the children and sometimes their dog Floppy visit strange lands, and have some kind of problem to solve

while they are there. The books are written by Roderick Hunt and are used in about 80 percent of schools in England as the main reading books that children are given to learn to read.

Again the characters face problems that are relatable to the readers in some way although they take place in fantasy settings. The three children, Chip, Biff and Kipper are siblings of various ages who have to deal with day to day life; such as arguments between themselves, disagreements with their parents, having to do their homework, etc. However, there is also another side of their life where they get to escape and experience new and exciting adventures.

Because The Magic Key books are used for educational reasons they are great books to use to gauge if you are targeting the right age range for your own book. Check the type of vocabulary used to see if you are on the right lines and look at the different grammar and punctuation used as well. Again these books appeal to both adults and children as the stories are light-hearted and fun, but they also address issues between siblings and parents that both parties can relate to.

3.3 Some Great First Chapter Books

These are usually the books that children start reading by themselves.

Perhaps they are sometimes still read to, but they are now at an age where they will start choosing the types of books themselves that they want to read.

There are fewer pictures and the books are longer in length with more structure. A prime example of books in this age range are Roald Dahl's children's books.

The literature of this author has been capturing the imagination of readers for decades. Take some time to read through some of his books and take note of the reasons you find them appealing; speak to children that you know have read his work (and if they haven't, encourage them to!), and find out what they like about them.

His warm narrative voice gives children the impression that they are being spoken to personally, and he seems to find the balance between being familiar and patronising with ease.

The books flow effortlessly, and we get no feeling that the author and narrator are separate people; when you write, you should try and give the reader the sense that you are simply recounting something that has happened. Although you may put a great deal of time and effort into planning your work, this should not be evident. It is much like when you get in a car and drive; you are aware that there are incredibly complex mechanics going on under the bonnet, but they should not ever come to your attention. If they do, it means that something has gone wrong.

This concealment of the mechanics of writing is what Roald Dahl achieves so successfully.

Added to this are the exciting and unusual plot lines that he creates, plunging the reader into a different world. He manages to dabble in the darker side of life without ever including material that the 'guardians' i.e. teachers, parents and librarians, would disapprove of, thus causing them to veto the book for children's consumption.

Example: Fantastic Mr. Fox

Take Fantastic Mr Fox: when Boggis, Bunce and Bean begin their campaign of destruction on the foxes, the animals are in real danger of death, and we, the readers, know it. We are swept up in the adventure and Mr. Fox's daredevil attitude, in the face of his wife and children being killed by the three farmers.

Dahl presents the story in such a way that younger readers will be aware of the danger as an abstract concept, but without feeling traumatised by the magnitude of it. He manages to take a very serious and pivotal topic yet depict it in such a way that he speaks to many generations.

In this Dahl teaches us a valuable lesson

At this age, children are perhaps more advanced than we sometimes give them credit for, and Dahl refuses to condescend. He takes real-life issues and portrays them in captivating fantasy worlds that are engaging and relevant without being sermonising. That does not mean that you should deal with issues that are not suitable for the age range you are writing for - indeed, inclusion of more adult themes like sex and realistic violence will cause your book to be refused by a publisher immediately - but make sure to take the time to get to know the mind set and capabilities of your target audience before judging what will engage them.

Example: Matilda

Now here is a great example of a successful children's book; we, the reader, cannot help but empathise strongly with this little girl's plight.

Dahl achieves this effect by making Matilda both ordinary and extraordinary. Most of us have been picked on by someone older, bigger and more powerful than us, and this little girl's life has a more-than-fair smattering of such characters in her parents and the awful Mrs. Trunchbull. We see that all Matilda really wants is to have a loving family, as a little girl deserves. Add to this familiarity the superhuman powers that she possesses, and Dahl has presented us with an irresistible character that children cannot help but feel for.

Roald Dahl has written many children's books, such as James and the Giant Peach, The Twits, The Magic Finger, The BFG, and many others, all of which are worth a read and study. There are numerous other books in this category that are worthy of praise and inspection, some of which are: Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne; Charlotte's Web by E.B. White; The Faraway Tree series by Enid Blyton (and many of her other works); Ballet Shoes by Noel Streatfield; and Swallows and Amazons by Arthur Ransome. These are all considered to be 'classics' to one extent or another, but you should research reputable best-selling lists to keep aware of the successful books.

3.4 Books for Older Children



This is a broad category - we will discuss more about the age brackets that publishers use later - and in some ways it is the most diverse.

Examples of excellent and successful literature in this group include His Dark Materials by Phillip Pullman, a series of three books which has hooked readers from age 12 and also many adults. The reason for this widespread popularity is down to the relatability of the main character, Lyra, who ages during the course of the novel but starts as a young adolescent. Her pluck, determination and perseverance in the face of serious danger endear her to the reader from the outset, as do her failings. In this Pullman demonstrates that the lead character in this age range must be 'human', which is to say that they must have foibles, weaknesses, and faults like any of us. It is no good presenting your main character as a solely virtuous being, incapable of fault, as we cannot empathise with this.

Harry Potter

Another example of literature for older children that has been wildly successful is the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling.

This series straddles the age categorisation somewhat, as the earlier books may be considered older middle grade, while the later books deal with more serious themes and sit firmly in the teen or young adult category.

In her depiction of the life of a boy who discovers he is a wizard, Rowling shows us the power of a magnetic situation; children and adults alike are swept in the possibility of actually being able to do magic and attend the fabulous Hogwarts. The world that Rowling creates is so attractive because of its simultaneous possibility and unattainability.

Other great books in this category include: the Artemis Fowl books by Eoin Colfer; the Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins; the Percy Jackson books by Rick Riordan; and Coraline by Neil Gaiman. Remember that each of these caters to a slightly different age range.

FACT



The seven Harry Potter books are estimated to have sold 450 million between them but precise figures for the individual titles are unknown.

Express.co.uk

In Summary

Reading widely is crucial for achieving an understanding of what makes a successful book.

Read actively, analysing what makes the book effective any why; look at plot, characterisation, backstory, tension, length, vocabulary, tone, and content.

You need to read within the age bracket that you will be targeting with your own writing. Read classic examples that have timeless attraction for young readers, as well as keeping abreast of new releases and books that have reached the top of bestselling lists, have the highest sales, and are the most popular at the local library.

Get feedback from children on their opinions of given books, and use everything you have learned to create a frame of reference for planning your own book.

[Tweet "I just completed Module 3 of the Children's Story Writing Diploma Course"]
