

STATS

TRENDS

BASICS

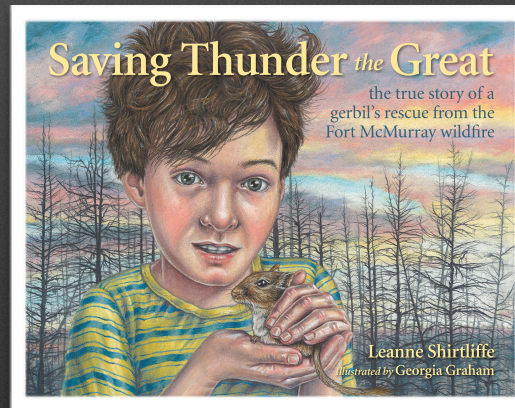
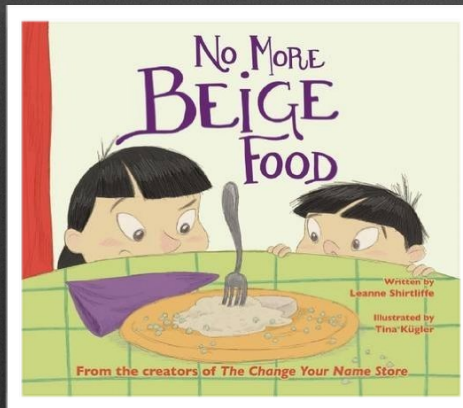
DON'Ts

DO's

# WRITING PICTURE BOOKS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



BY LEANNE SHIRTLIFFE, @LSHIRTLIFFE





# Picture Book Agenda

1. Introductions
2. Industry Stats
3. Eight Trends that Aren't Going Anywhere
4. Other Trends You've Noticed
5. Evidence of Trends (reading time!)
6. Picture Book Basics
7. Evidence of Basics (reading time!)
8. Picture Book Resources
9. Picture Book Pitch (reading time!)
10. Questions (and maybe answers)





# PICTURE BOOK STATS

JONATHAN NOWELL, PRESIDENT OF NIELSEN BOOKSCAN, CHILDREN'S BOOK SUMMIT,  
NYC, 15 SEPT 2015

- children's book sales were up 12.6% in USA (from Jan 2014-Sept 2015). UPDATED: Picture books sales up 2.9% in first 5 months of 2018
- 11/20 of bestselling books in USA are children's titles
- children's share of the the print market is 34%
- kids 5-8 are the most important part of the market share

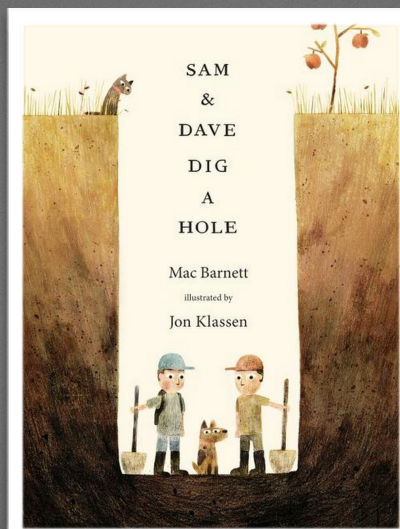




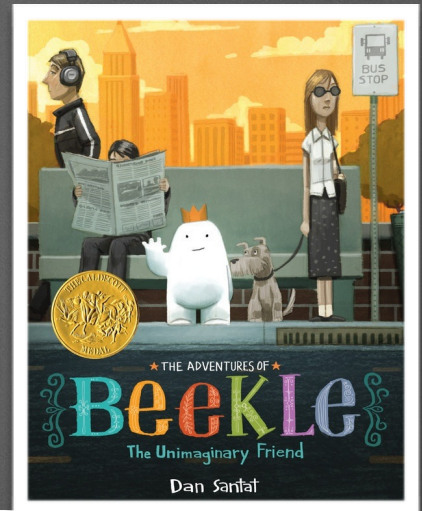
557 words



275 words



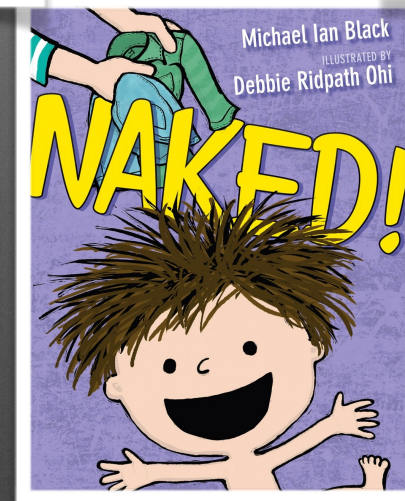
283 words



127 words



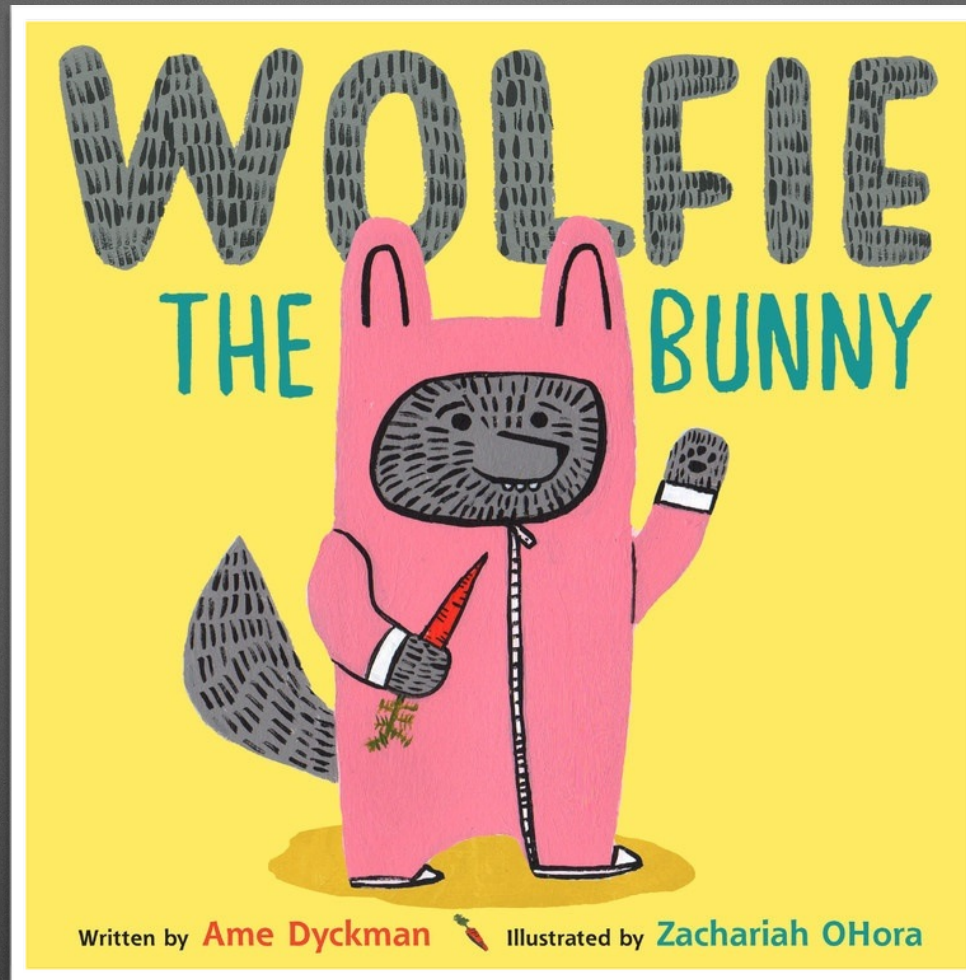
152 words



# TREND #1: **Be Concise**

most range from 200-600  
cut your first draft by one third

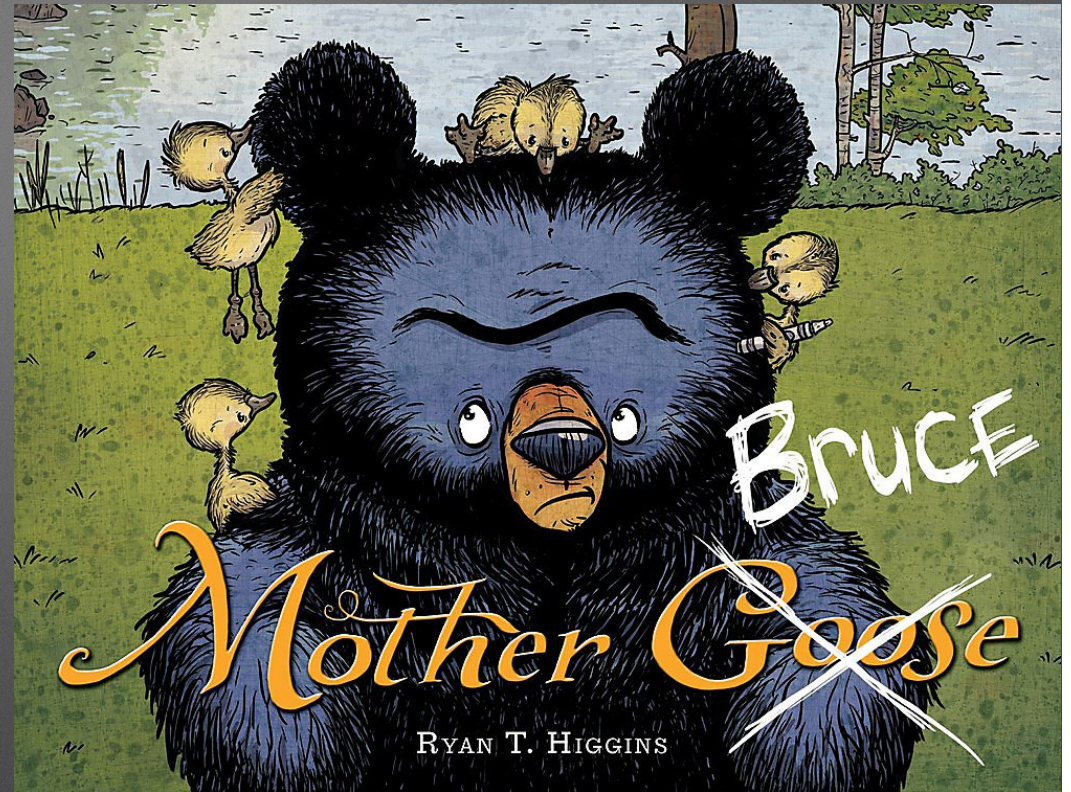
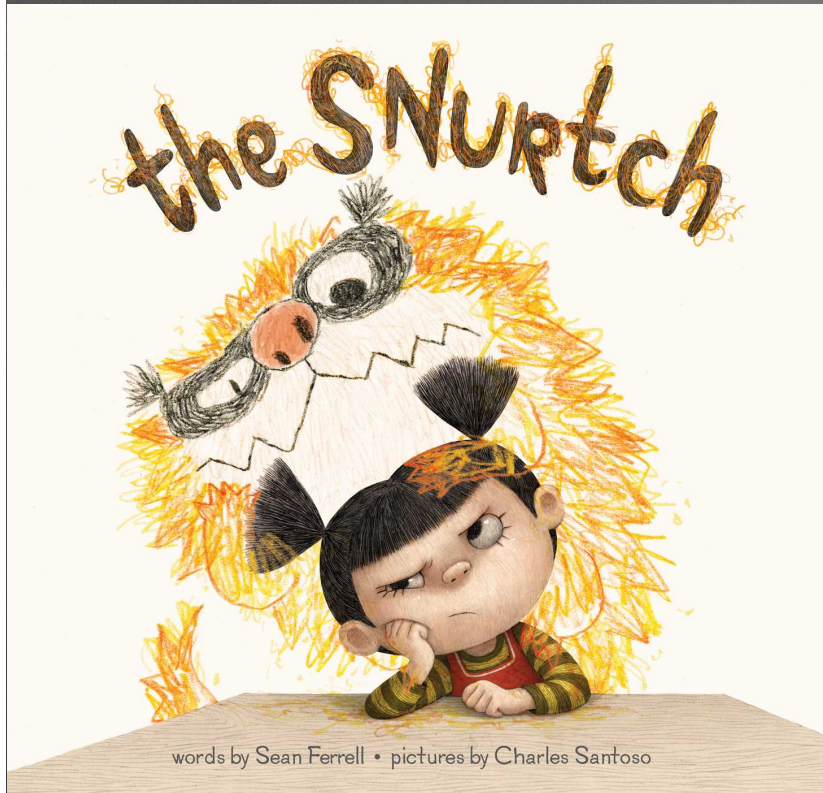




**TREND #2: the target audience  
Is skewing younger**

most target age 4-6 (though pitch 4-8)





# TREND #3: character-driven

MEMORABLE • QUIRKY IN A REAL WAY

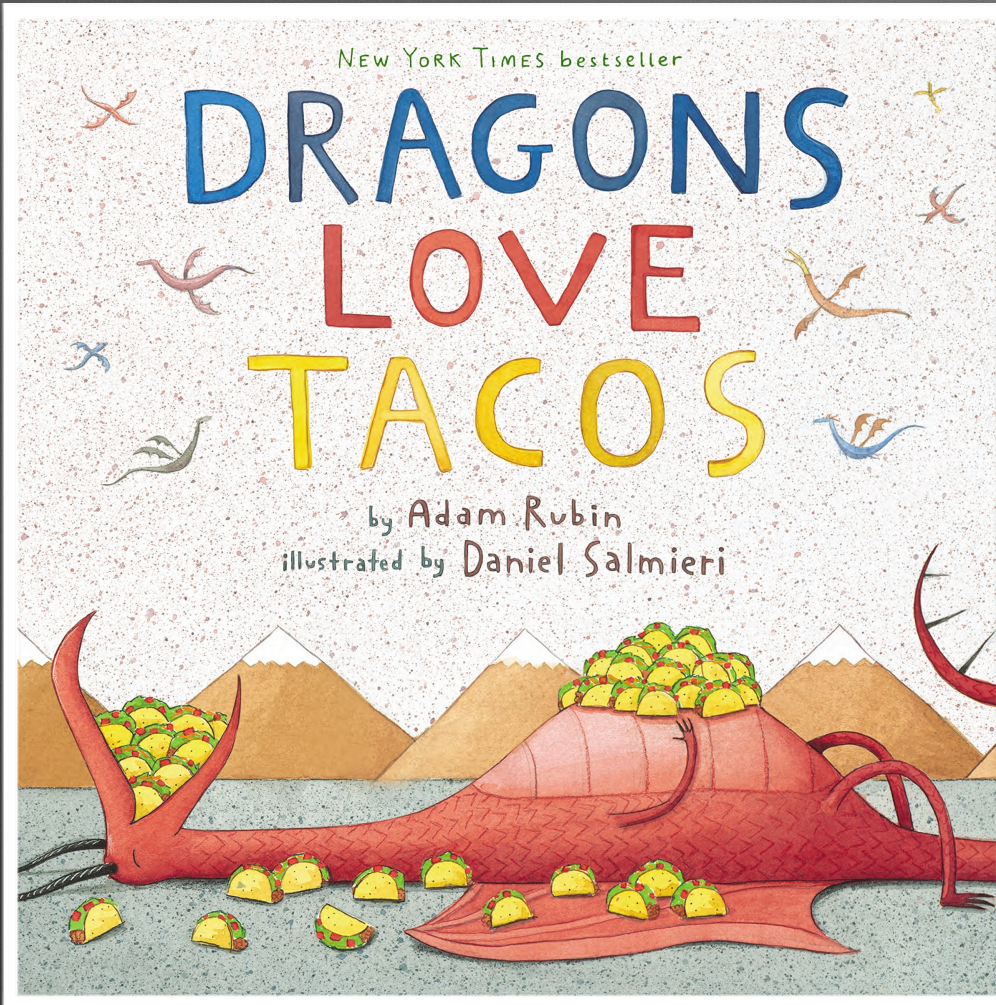


# Tips for writing character-driven picture books

- start with a character you care about
- take someone you like (who's not perfect) and get them into trouble
- the story begins when the character steps out of his/her comfort zone
- Justin Chanda: “You want to create a character that when done, people wonder why this character didn't exist before.”
- must have strong voice...







- **STARTS:** "Hey, Kid! Did you know that dragons love tacos?"
- **SPICY SALSA GIVES THEM "TUMMY TROUBLES."**

## **TREND #4: strong voice**

funny, fresh, smart, lyrical,  
voice is evident early



# NELLY MAY

Has Her Say



Cynthia DeFelice Pictures by Henry Cole

## TREND #4:

# strong voice



"First and foremost, you are not to call me 'sir.' You are to address me as *Most Excellent of All Masters*."

"*Most Excellent of All Masters*," repeated Nelly May. "That's a fancy title, to be sure."

"Be certain to use it," said Lord Pinkwinkle. "Now let us tour the premises. We'll begin upstairs."



The  
Book  
With  
No  
Pictures

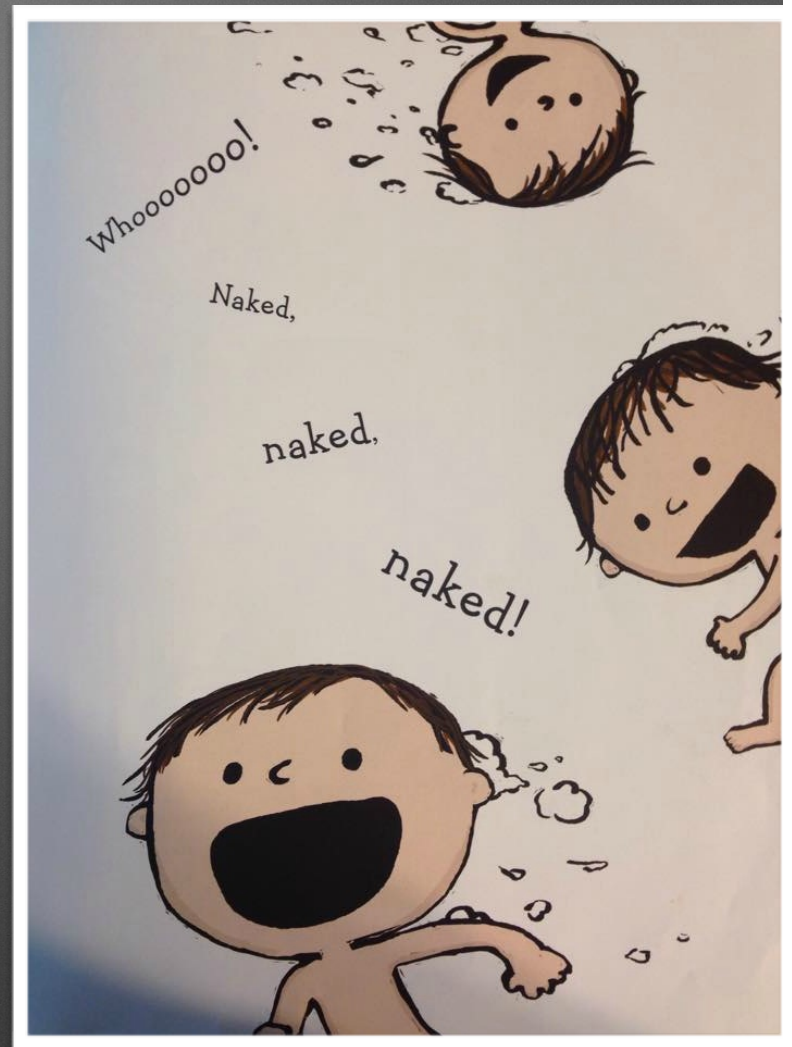
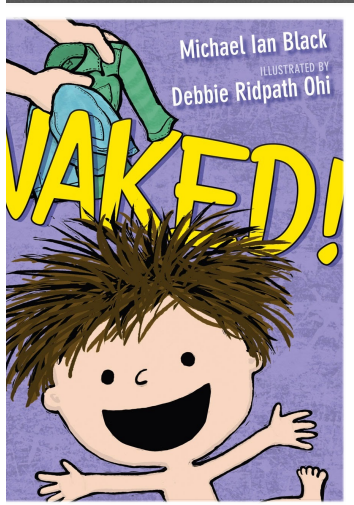
B.J. Novak

B.J. Novak reading aloud to school (YouTube)

## TREND #5: HUMOUR

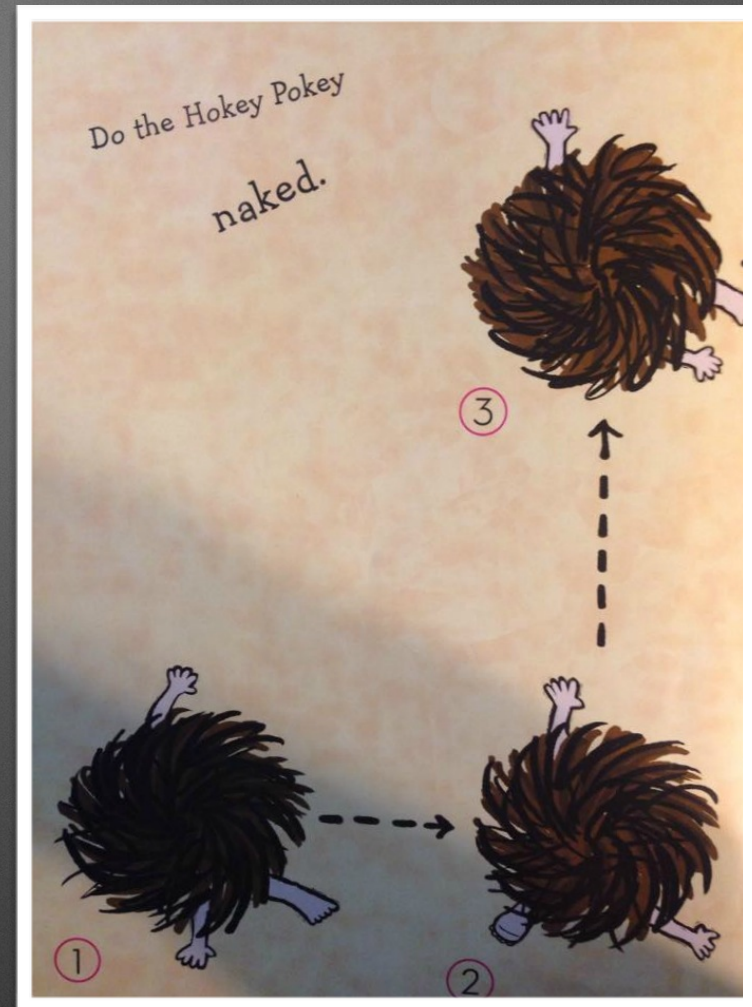
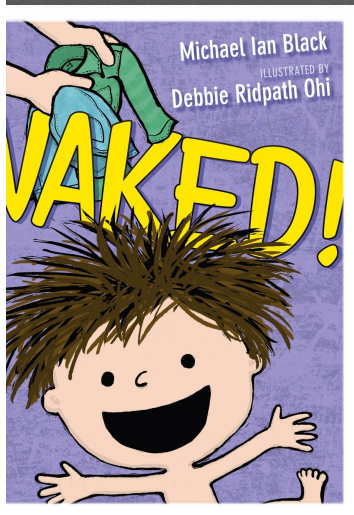
THE CHALLENGE: WRITE HUMOUR That appeals to **both**  
children and adults





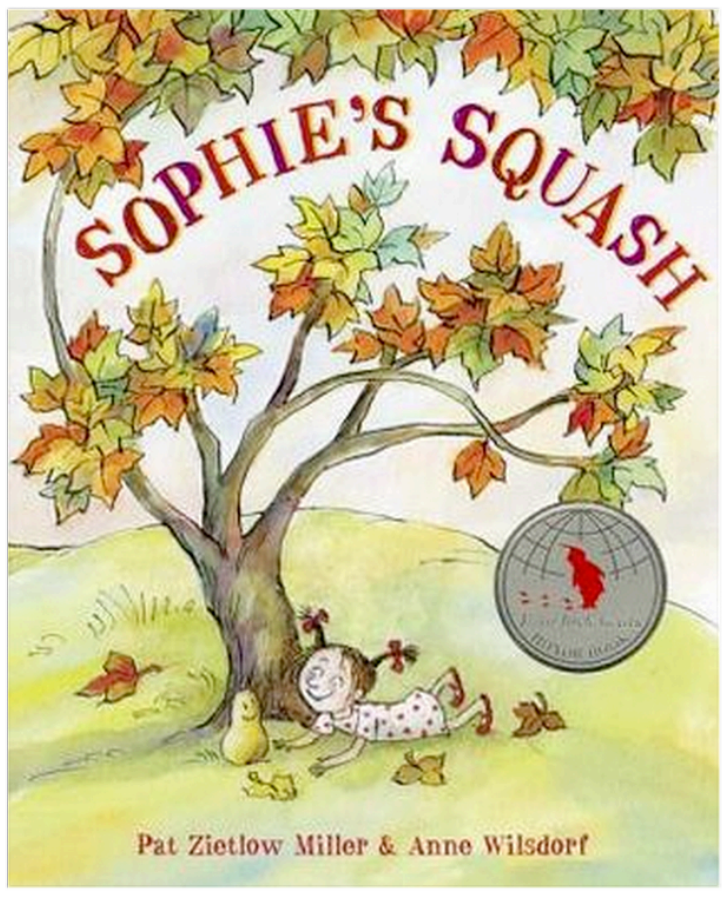
**HUMOUR** ENTERTAINS BOTH  
ADULTS AND CHILDREN...





**HUMOUR** ENTERTAINS BOTH  
ADULTS AND CHILDREN...





Sophie “adopts” a squash. Her parents say:

“Well, we did hope she’d love her vegetables.”

**HUMOUR ENTERTAINS  
BOTH  
ADULTS AND  
CHILDREN...**



## **McCleery Gets 'Lost' at Harper Kids**

In a six-figure deal, **Peter McCleery** sold his debut picture book, *Bob and Joss Get Lost*, to **Margaret Anastas** at HarperChildren's. The title will feature illustrations by **Vin Vogel**. Agent **Heather Alexander** at Pippin Properties, who brokered the North American rights sale, said the story follows two boys who are stranded on a desert island "in a classic comedy-duo style" that recalls Abbott and Costello. *Bob and Joss* is set for fall 2016.

**HUMOUR** sells...



# HUMOUR sells...

## June 22, 2018 - TERRIBLE TIMES TABLES, by Michelle Markel and Merrilee Liddiard

*Children's: Picture book*

PEN/Steven Kroll Award winner Michelle Markel's TERRIBLE TIMES TABLES, about a humorous and terrible school year that teaches children their multiplication tables in rhymes, illustrated by Merrilee Liddiard, to Nina Gruener at Cameron + Company, in a nice deal, for publication in fall 2019, by Anna Olswanger at Olswanger Literary for the author, and by Justin Rucker at Shannon Associates for the illustrator (world).

## December 1, 2017 - I AM A WOLF, by Kelly Leigh Miller

*Children's: Picture book*

Debut author/illustrator Kelly Leigh Miller's I AM A WOLF, a humorous story about a rescue pup who sees herself a tough lone wolf who doesn't need a pack, that is until she meets the little girl who will melt her icy heart, to Ellen Cormier at Dial, at auction, in a two-book deal, by Thao Le at the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency (World English).



# HUMOUR sells...

## **January 29, 2018 - NUGGET AND FANG, by Tammi Sauer and Michael Slack**

*Children's: Picture book*

Tammi Sauer's NUGGET AND FANG: In a School of Fish, illustrated by Michael Slack, in a first-day-of-school story that's full of heart and humor, to Lynne Polvino at Clarion, for publication in Spring 2019, by Laura Rennert at Andrea Brown Literary Agency for the author and Lori Nowicki at Painted Words for the illustrator (World).

## **June 20, 2017 - SLOTH TO THE RESCUE, by Leanne Shirtliffe and Rob McClurkan**

*Children's: Picture book*

Leanne Shirtliffe's SLOTH TO THE RESCUE, a humorous story about a kind sloth and his animal sanctuary friends who must save one girl's school project, illustrated by Rob McClurkan, to Julie Matysik at Running Press Kids, in a nice deal, for publication in Spring 2019, by Jill Marr at Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency for the author and Anne Moore Armstrong at The Bright Group for the illustrator (World).





old idea =  
imaginary  
friend

fresh approach =  
imaginary friend on  
quest to real world (his  
Point-of-view)

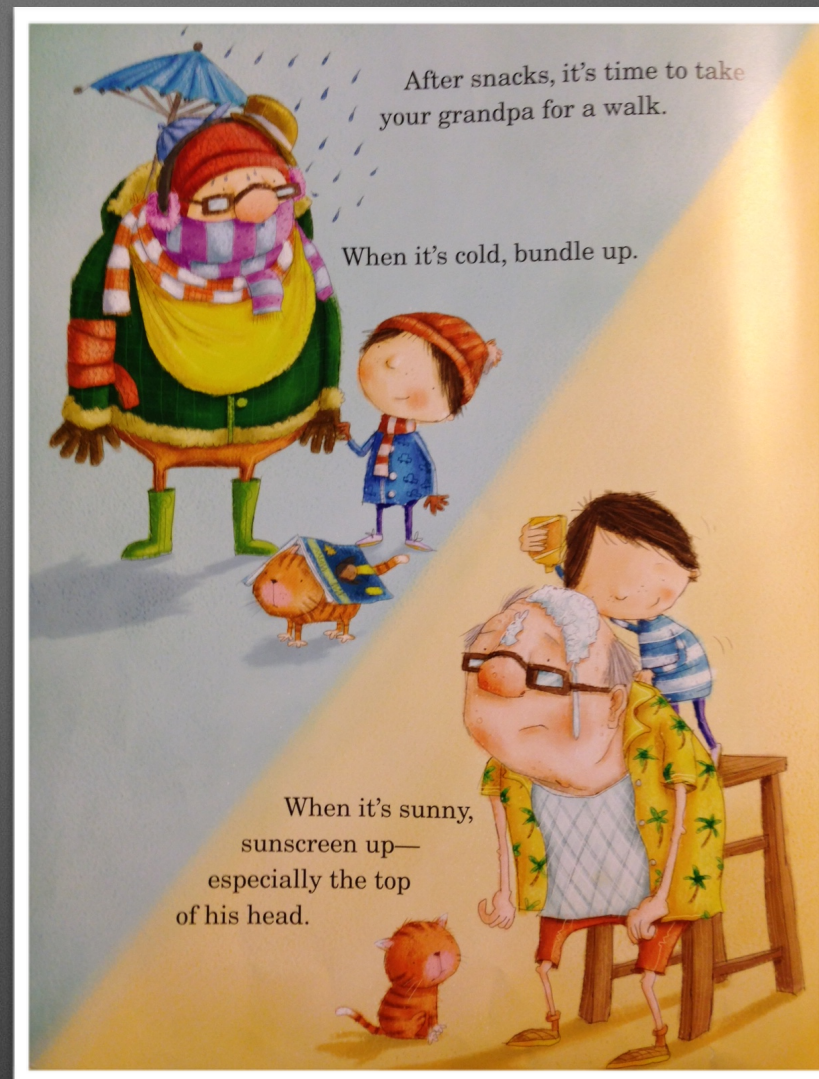
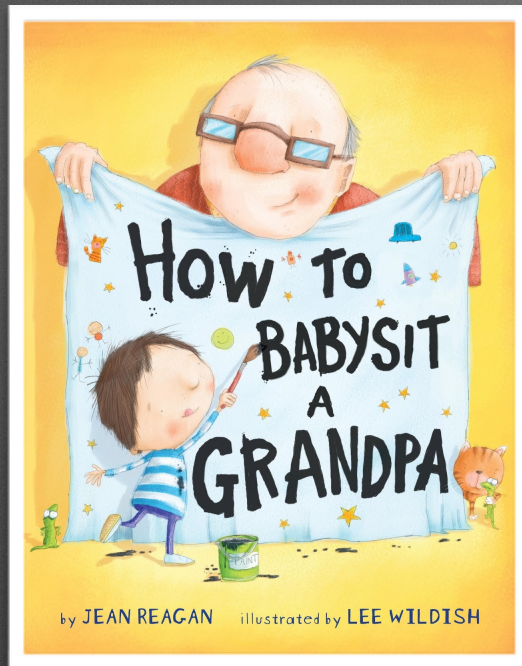


He was born on an island far away where imaginary friends were created. Here, they lived and played, each eagerly waiting to be imagined by a real child.

**TREND #6: take something established  
and twist it**

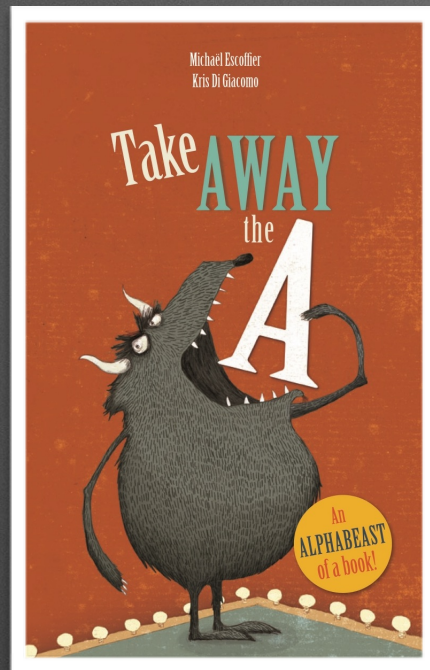
a FRESH APPROACH to an old idea





**TREND #6:** take something established  
and twist it





**TREND #6:** take something established  
and twist it



# evidence that a **fresh-approach-to-old-ideas** sells

**October 20, 2017 - THE KING OF KINDERGARTEN, by Derrick Barnes and Vanessa Brantley Newton**

*Children's: Picture book*

Derrick Barnes's THE KING OF KINDERGARTEN, illustrated by Vanessa Brantley Newton, a **humorous** celebration of a cool kindergartner who oozes self-confidence, positive energy, and pride as he deals with his first day of school, to [Nancy Paulsen](#) at [Nancy Paulsen Books](#), for publication in Summer 2019, by [Regina Brooks](#) of [Serendipity Literary Agency](#) for the author, and [Lori Nowicki](#) at [Painted Words](#) for the illustrator.

**September 9, 2015 - AMANDA PANDA QUILTS KINDERGARTEN by Candice Ransom and Christine Grove**

*Children's: Picture book*

Candice Ransom and illustrator Christine Grove's AMANDA PANDA QUILTS KINDERGARTEN, the humorous story of a sweet-yet-headstrong young panda who, when her first day of kindergarten doesn't go according to plan, decides to quit and join her brother's second grade class instead, to [Frances Gilbert](#) at [Doubleday Children's](#), for publication in summer 2017, by [Tracey Adams](#) at [Adams Literary](#) for the author and [Maggie Byer-Sprinzeles](#) at [Byer-Sprinzeles Agency](#) for the illustrator (World).



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# evidence that A fresh- approach-to-old-ideas sells

**September 16, 2015 - COOKIESAURUS REX by Nate Evans and Amy Fellner Dominy**

*Children's: Picture book*

NYT bestselling author Nate Evans and Amy Fellner Dominy's COOKIESAURUS REX, about a dinosaur cookie who demands to be the best and most delicious cookie ever, told from the cookie's point of view, to [Stephanie Lurie](#) at [Disney-Hyperion](#), in a very nice deal, in a two-book deal, for publication in April 2017, by [Caryn Wiseman](#) at the [Andrea Brown Literary Agency](#) (world).

**September 9, 2015 - DANDY by Ame Dyckman**

*Children's: Picture book*

NYT bestselling author Ame Dyckman's DANDY, illustrated by Bob Shea, a humorous celebration of the bond between fathers and daughters, in which a girl becomes "best friends" with Daddy's nemesis—the lone dandelion in his otherwise perfect lawn, to [Leila Sales](#) at [Viking Children's](#), for publication in Summer 2017, in a two-book deal, by [Scott Treimel](#) for the author and [Steven Malk](#) at [Writers House](#) for the illustrator (World).



# MORE evidence that A fresh-approach-to-old-ideas sells

**January 26, 2018 - ASK ME ANYTHING WITH DR. SUGARPAWS, by Jess Keating and Pete Oswald**

*Children's: Picture book*

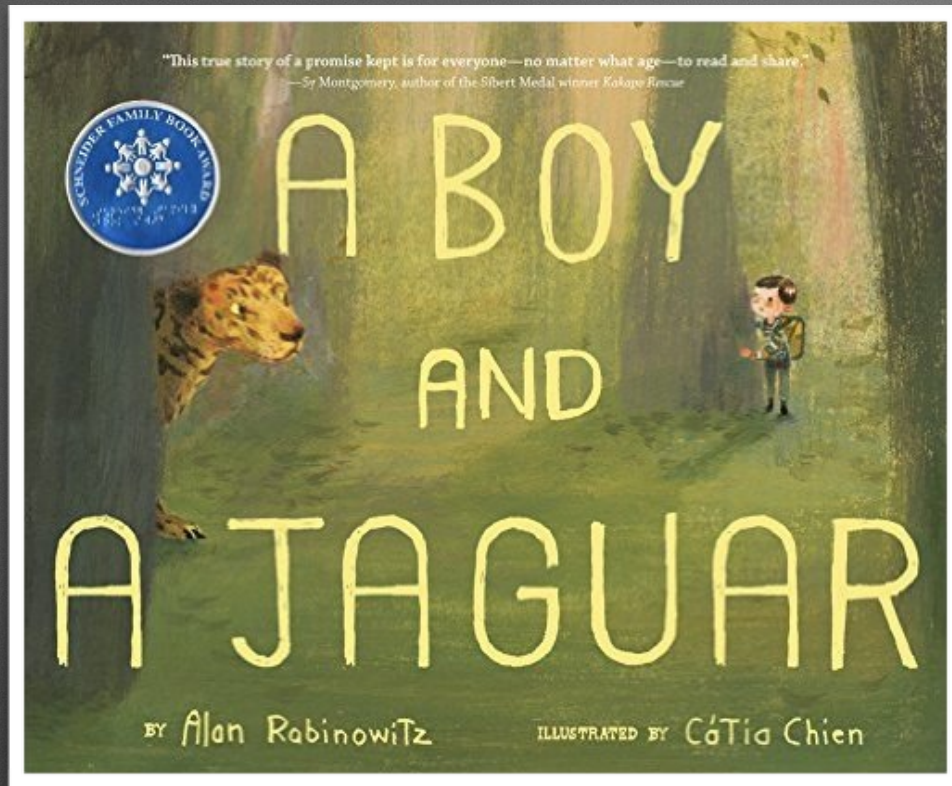
Author of [Pink is for Blobfish](#) [Jess Keating's](#) ASK ME ANYTHING WITH DR. SUGARPAWS, in which the world's only sugar glider with a PhD in zoology, the hilarious and wise Dr. Sugarpaws, answers questions from a medley of wild animals in her advice column, covering all aspects of science, illustrated by Pete Oswald, to [Orli Zuravicky](#) at [Scholastic](#), at auction, in a two-book deal, by [Kathleen Rushall](#) at [Andrea Brown Literary Agency](#) for the author and [Kirsten Hall](#) at [Catbird Productions](#) for the illustrator (World).

**August 6, 2015 - MOTOR GOOSE by Rebecca Colby**

*Children's: [Picture book](#)*

IT'S RAINING BATS AND FROGS! author Rebecca Colby's MOTOR GOOSE, to be illustrated by Jef Kaminsky, a collection of Mother Goose inspired poems featuring vehicles, to [Liz Szabla](#) at [Feiwel and Friends](#), for publication in 2017, by [Kathleen Rushall](#) at [Marsal Lyon Literary Agency](#) for the author and [Elena Giovinazzo](#) at [Pippin Properties](#) for the illustrator.



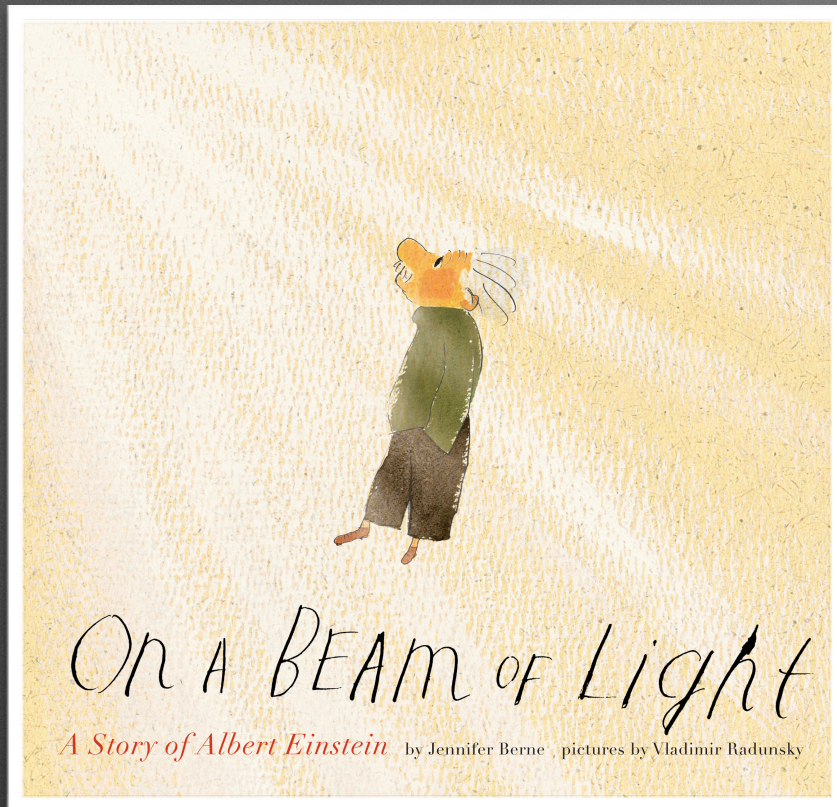


1. Autobiography about Alan Rabinowitz, who saves jaguars
2. About a boy who learns to overcome a stutter and be accepted

**TREND #7: nonfiction “RULES”**

**MUST WORK on two levels**





1. Biography about a young Albert Einstein's curiosity
2. About a boy who was different
3. About parents who worry

## TREND #1: **nonfiction** “RULES”

MUST WORK on two+ levels



Over 100 years ago, as the stars swirled in the sky, as the Earth circled the sun, as the March winds blew through a little town by a river, a baby boy was born. His parents named him Albert.

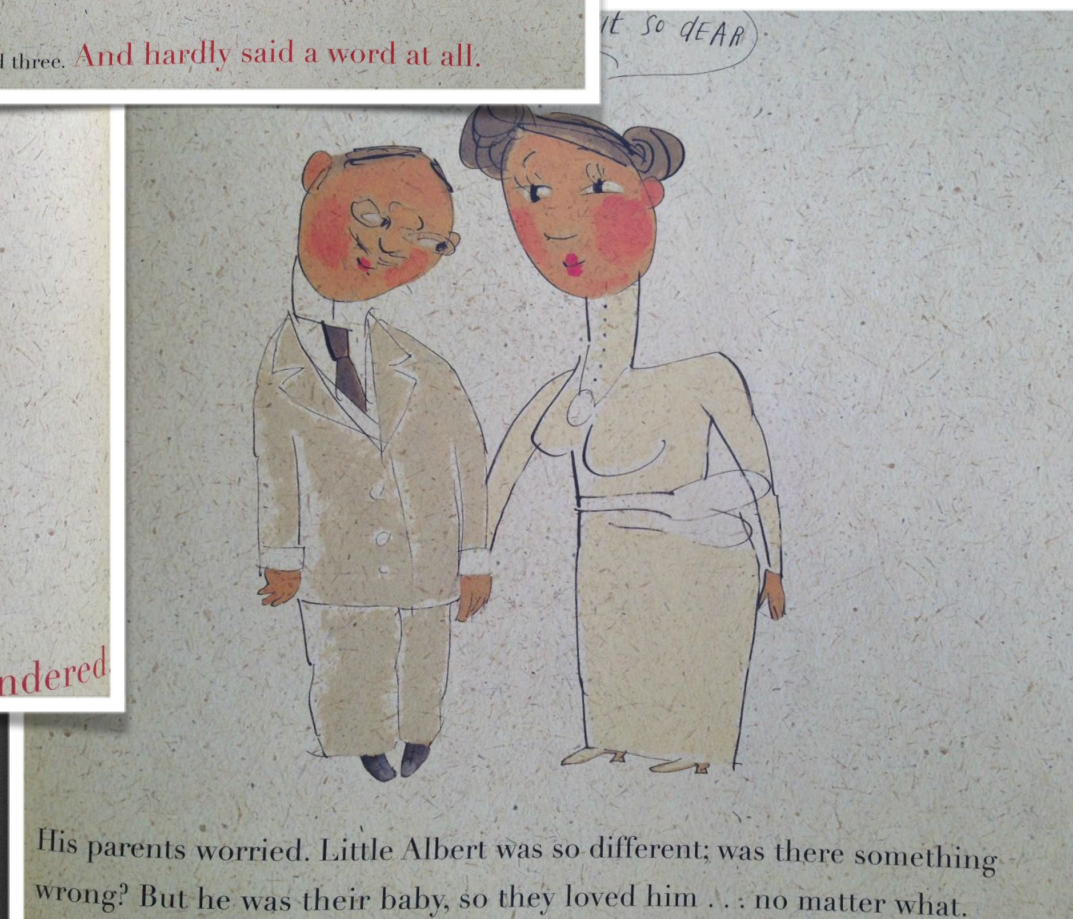
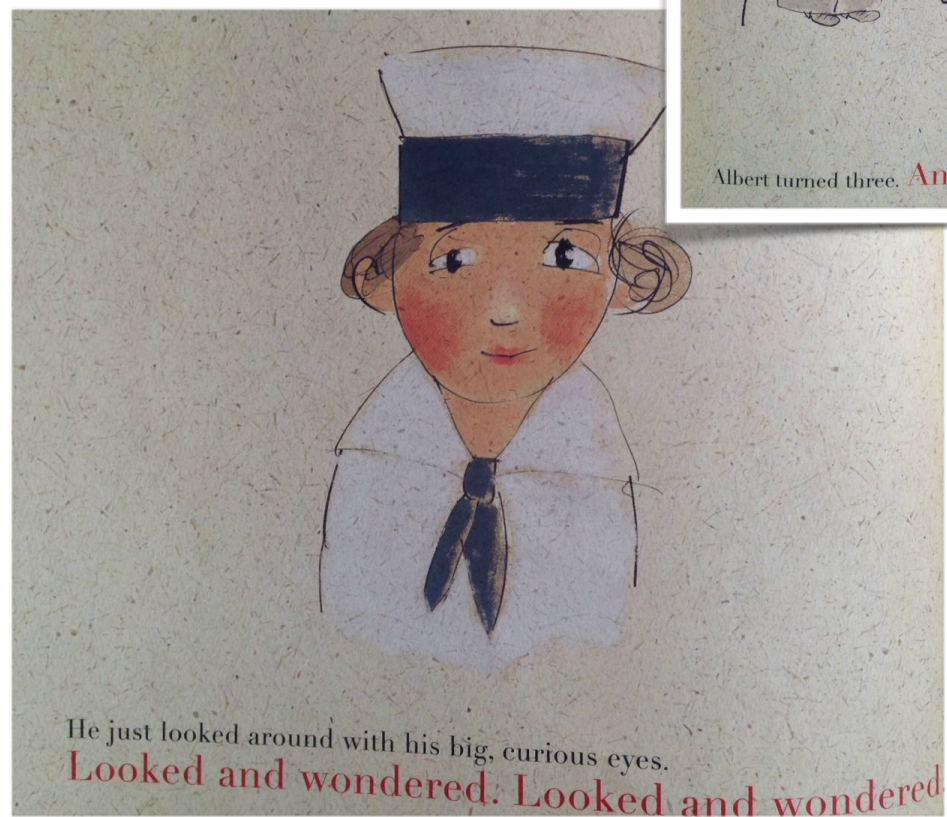
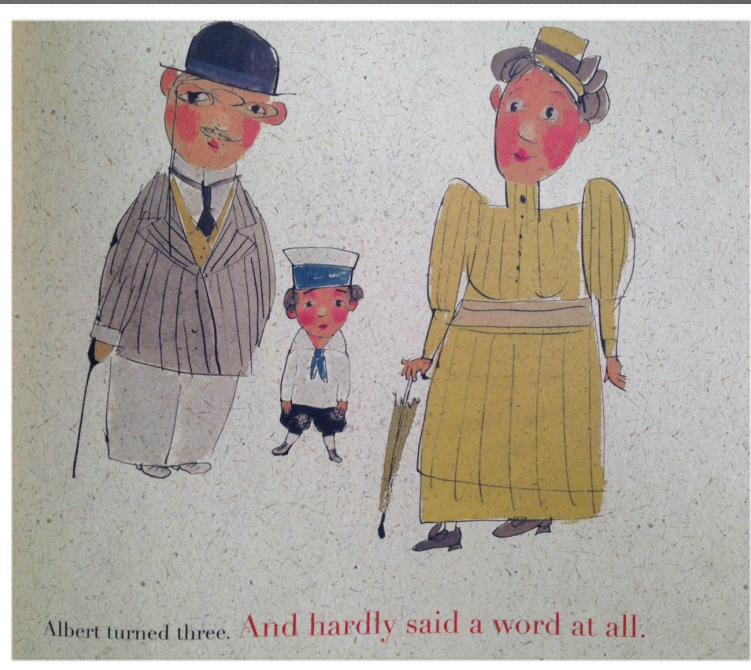


Albert turned one year old. And didn't say a word.

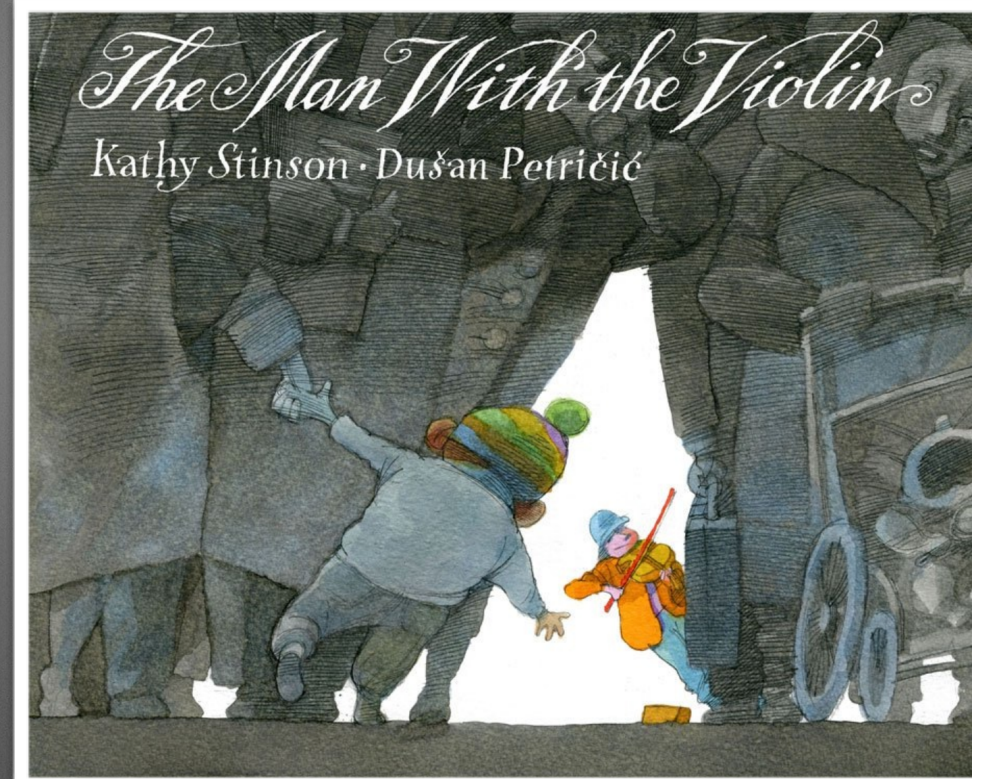
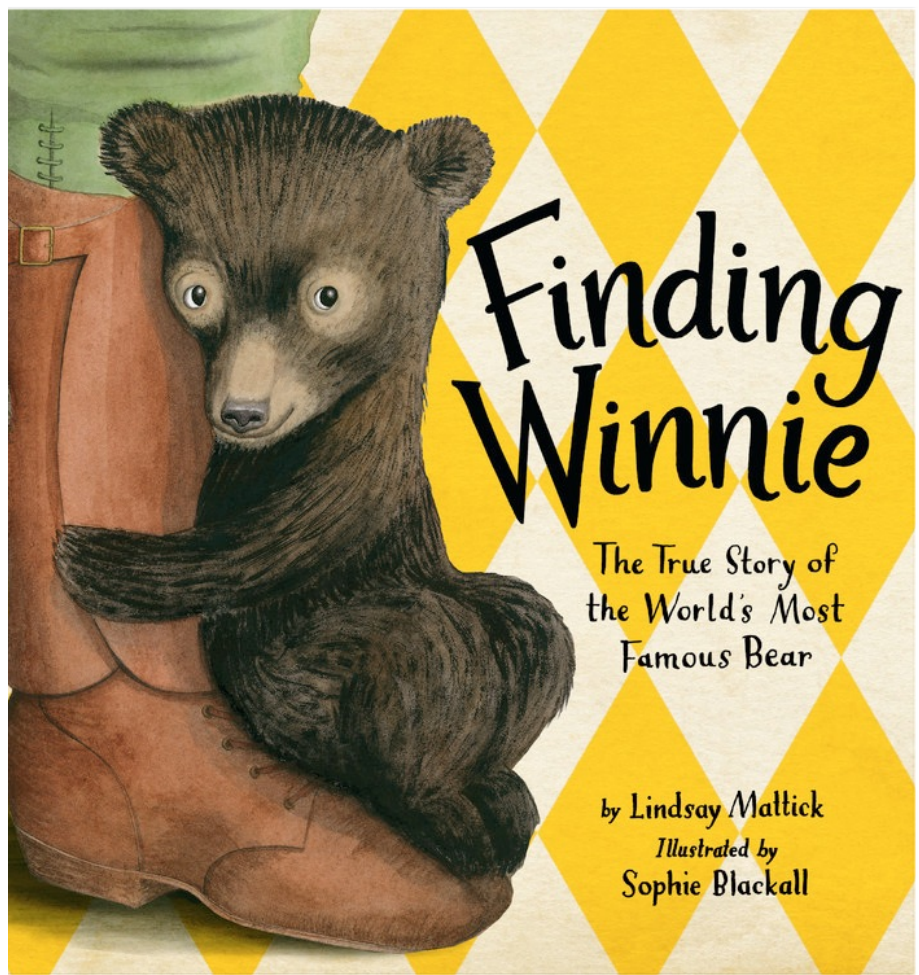
# TREND #1: nonfiction “RULES”

MUST WORK on two levels









**Canadian** nonfiction



and nonfiction/fiction hybrid



# Evidence that nonfiction sells

**November 10, 2017 - SUN! ONE IN A BILLION, by Stacy McAnulty and Stevie Lewis**

*Children's: Picture book*

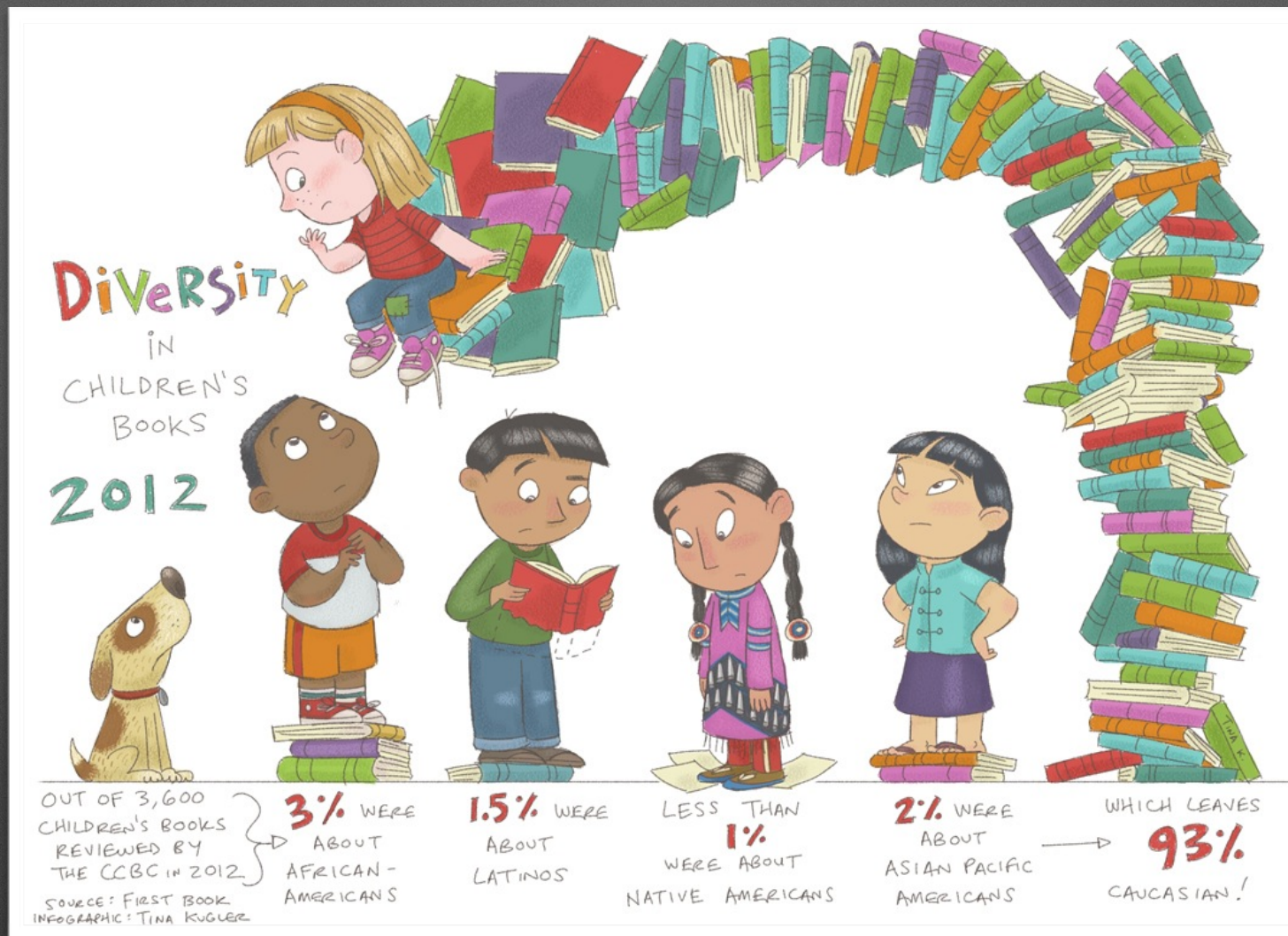
Author of [EARTH, MY FIRST 4.6 BILLION YEARS](#) Stacy McAnulty's next two books in the nonfiction picture book series, [SUN! ONE IN A BILLION](#), a history of the sun told from the pov of the sun himself, and an "autobiography" of the moon, with Stevie Lewis illustrating, to [Christian Trimmer](#) at [Holt Children's](#), in a very nice deal, for publication in Fall 2018 and Spring 2019, by [Lori Kilkelly](#) at [Rodeen Literary Management](#) for the author (World).

**January 16, 2018 - MARY WEARS WHAT SHE WANTS, by Keith Negley**

*Children's: Picture book*

Author/illustrator Keith Negley's [MARY WEARS WHAT SHE WANTS](#), based on the life of Mary Edwards Walker, one of the first American women known to wear pants, about what happens when a girl decides to fight the status quo and stand up for what she believes in, to [Donna Bray](#) at [Balzer & Bray](#), in a [good deal](#), at auction, in a two-book [deal](#), for publication in Spring 2019, by [Rebecca Sherman](#) at [Writers House](#) (World).





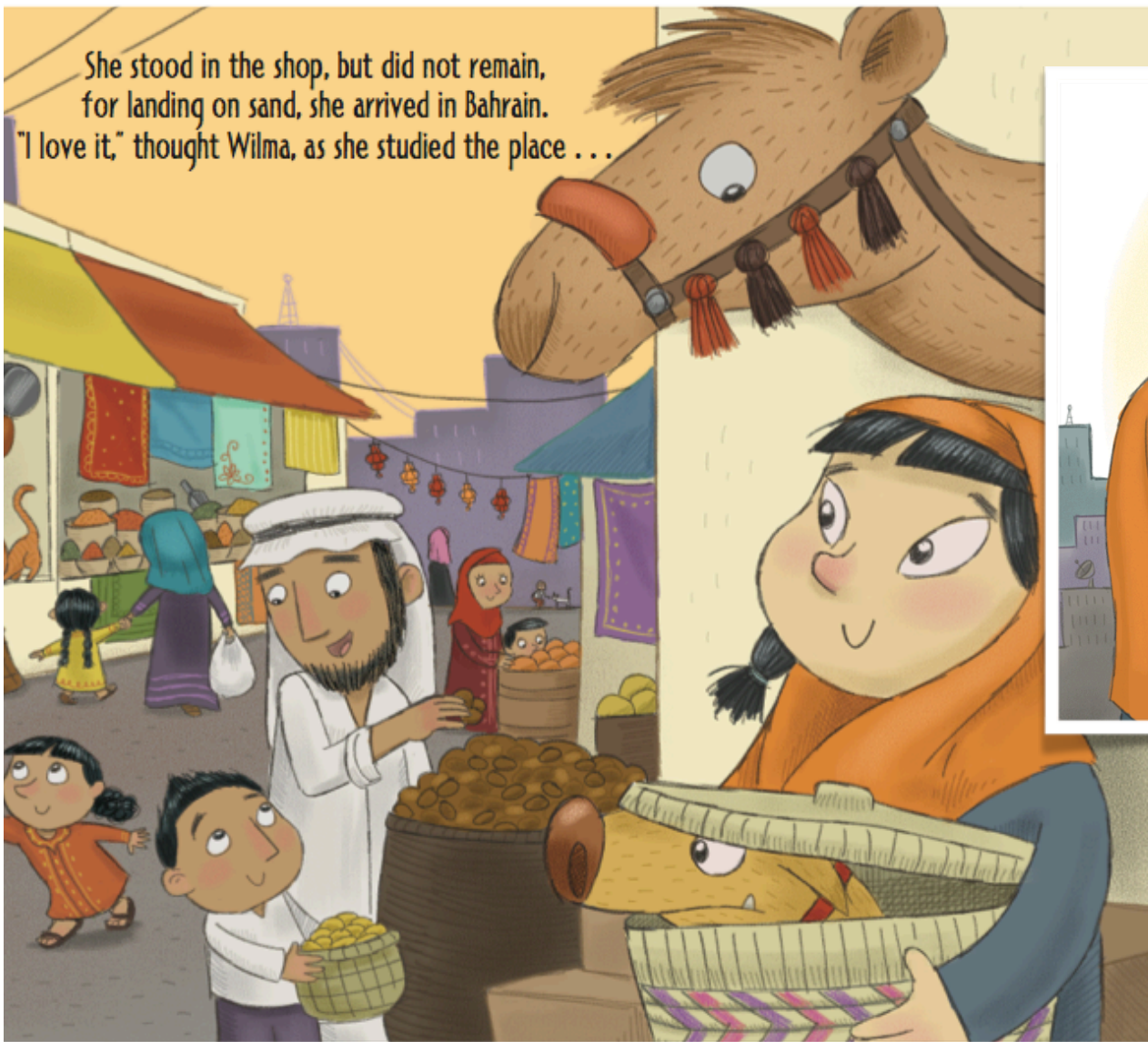
# “TREND” #8: DIVERSITY

hopefully not just a trend...

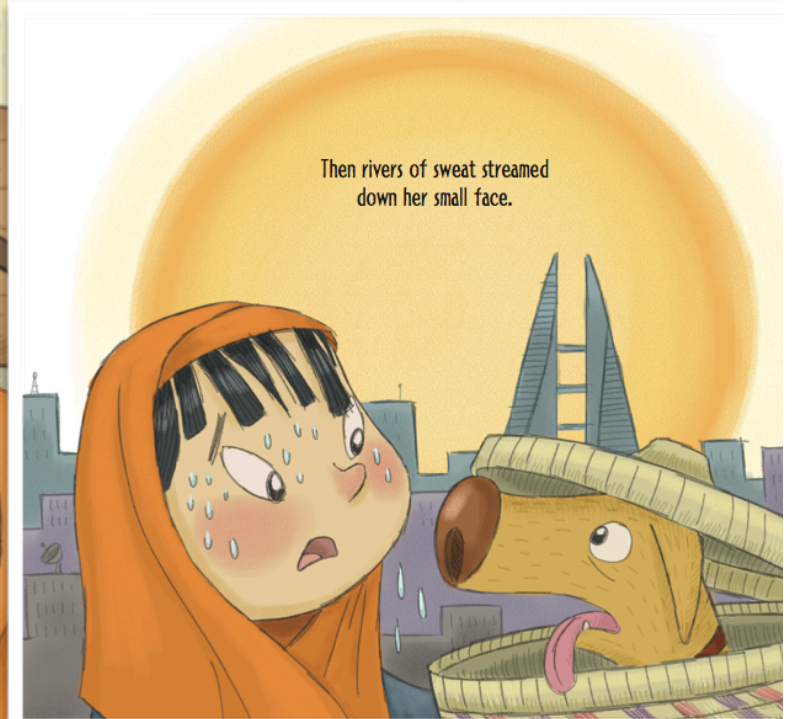
#WENEEDDIVERSEBOOKS #OWNVOICES



She stood in the shop, but did not remain,  
for landing on sand, she arrived in Bahrain.  
"I love it," thought Wilma, as she studied the place . . .



Then rivers of sweat streamed  
down her small face.



# “TREND” #8: DIVERSITY

The CHANGE YOUR NAME STORE (BAHRAIN)



# Other trends?

- |                      |                               |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Short word count  | 7. Nonfiction                 |
| 2. Younger audience  | 8. Diversity (not a trend...) |
| 3. Character driven  | 9.                            |
| 4. Strong voice      | 10.                           |
| 5. Humour            | 11.                           |
| 6. Twist an old idea | 12.                           |

**Reading time:** look for evidence of a trend



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# PICTURE BOOK **BASICS**

- typically 32 pages long
- a collaboration between the author and illustrator the words and pictures

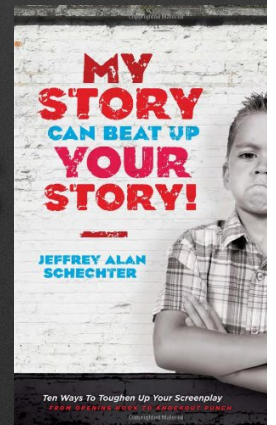




# PICTURE BOOK **BASICS**

It must do what any good story must do:  
“enable a **sympathetic character** to  
overcome a **series of increasingly difficult**  
**seemingly insurmountable obstacles** and  
**achieve a compelling desire.**”

~ Michael Hauge, quoted in:





# PICTURE BOOK **BASICS**

This is the story of \_\_\_\_\_ who  
wants /desires to \_\_\_\_\_ but  
must overcome \_\_\_\_\_.

## ESCALATION OF CONFLICT:

1.

2.

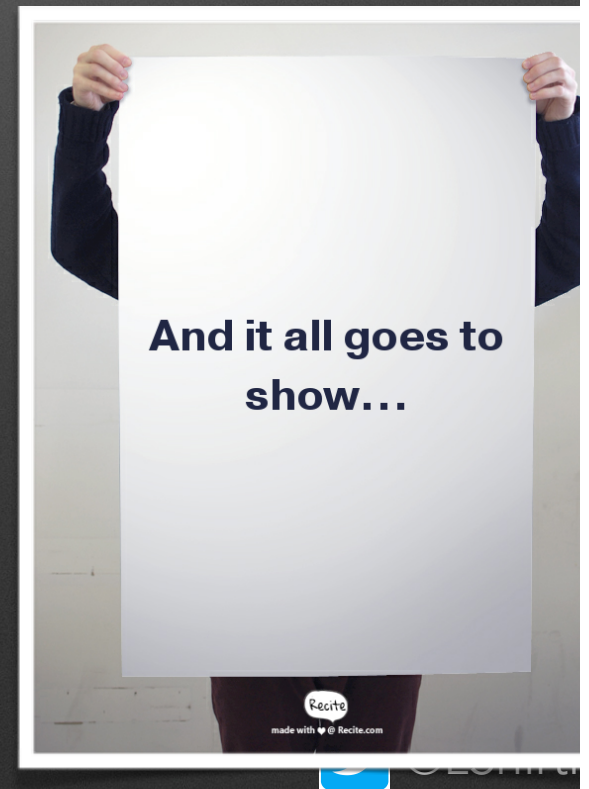
3.



# PICTURE BOOK manuscript

## Don't:

- illustrate it **X**
- submit it laid out like a picture book **X**
- submit it too soon **X**
- dumb it down **X**
- be moralistic or preachy or didactic **X**





# PICTURE BOOK manuscript

## Don'ts

- use rhyme...unless you're 100% confident that it works

### THE PROBLEM WITH RHYME:

- easy to mess up rhythm
- plot is often forced by rhyme
- sometimes too sing-song-y
- nearly impossible to sell foreign rights





# PICTURE BOOK DO's



- write awesome rhyme

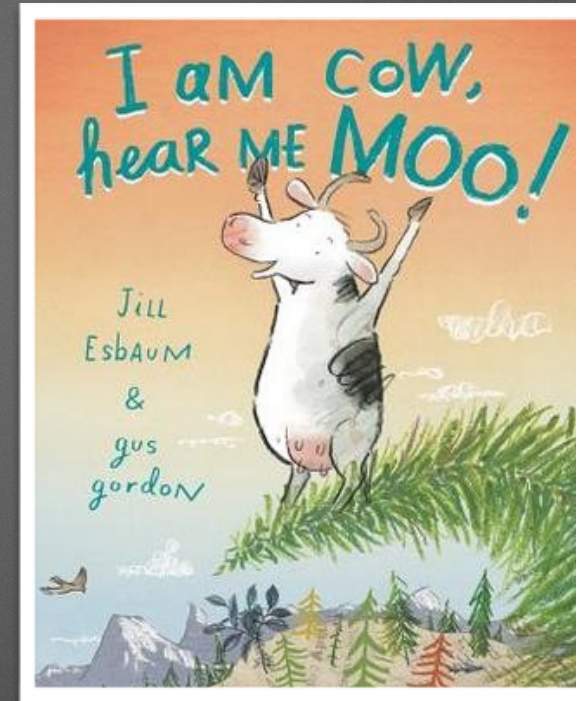
“Nadine was a truly remarkable cow.  
There was *nothing* she feared —  
so she claimed, anyhow.

“Not lightning?” asked Starla. “Loud noises? A rat?”

“I’m not scared,” Nadine boasted, “of any of that.”

“The woods?” asked Annette. “Cause that place scares me stiff.”

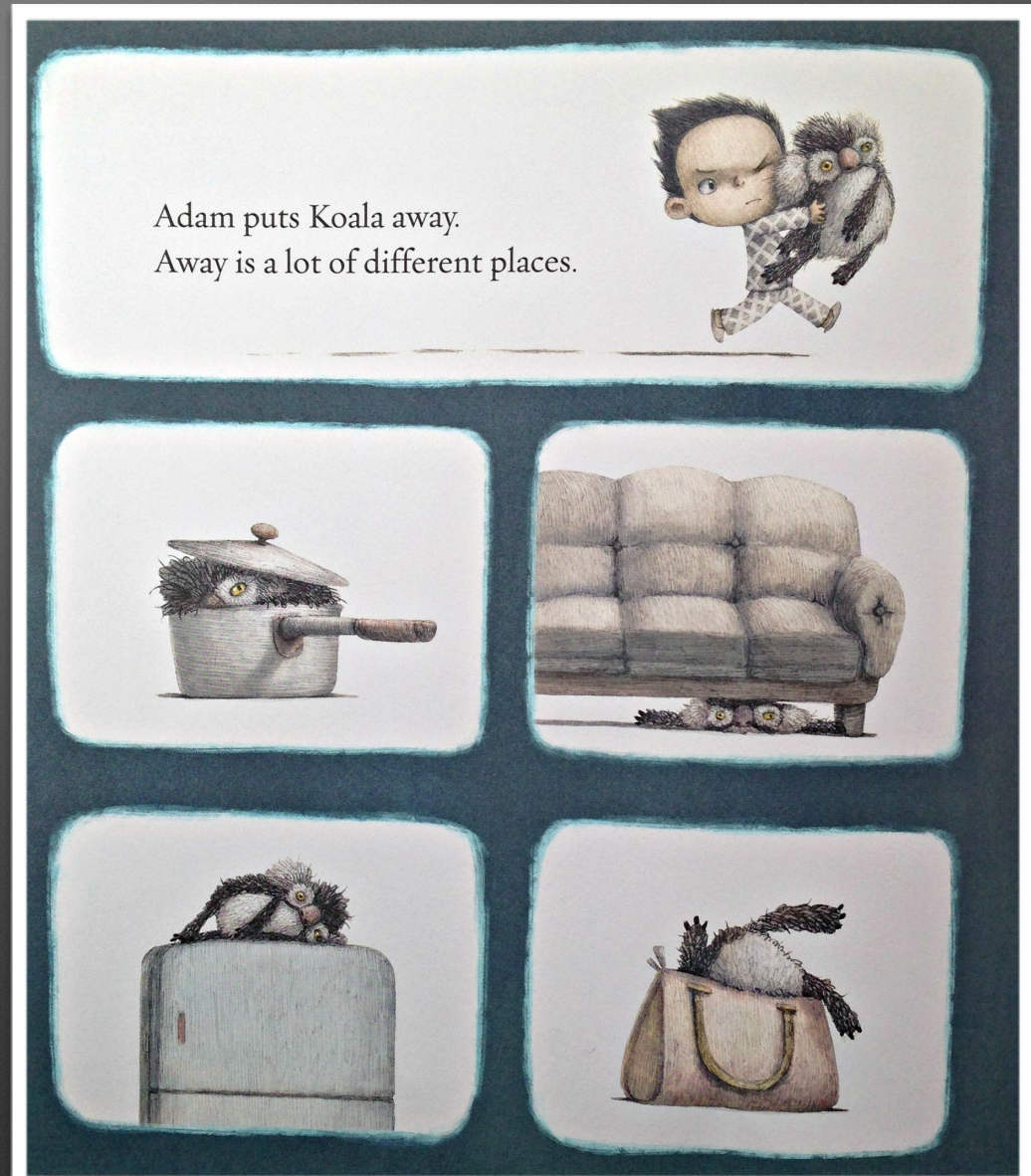
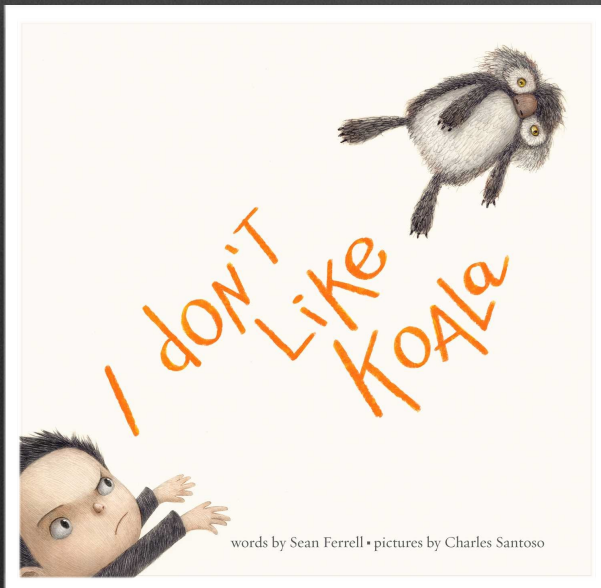
“Not me,” bragged Nadine with a proud little sniff.





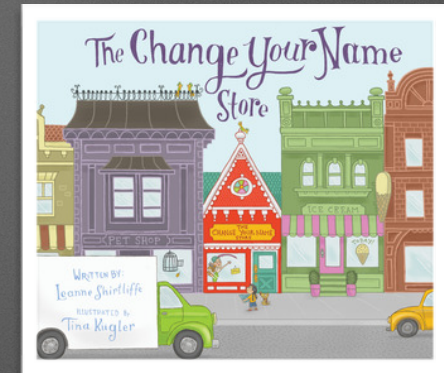
# PICTURE BOOK DO's

- leave “space” for the illustrator (e.g. omit colours, examples)





# PICTURE BOOK DO's



LEAVE SPACE FOR  
THE ILLUSTRATOR



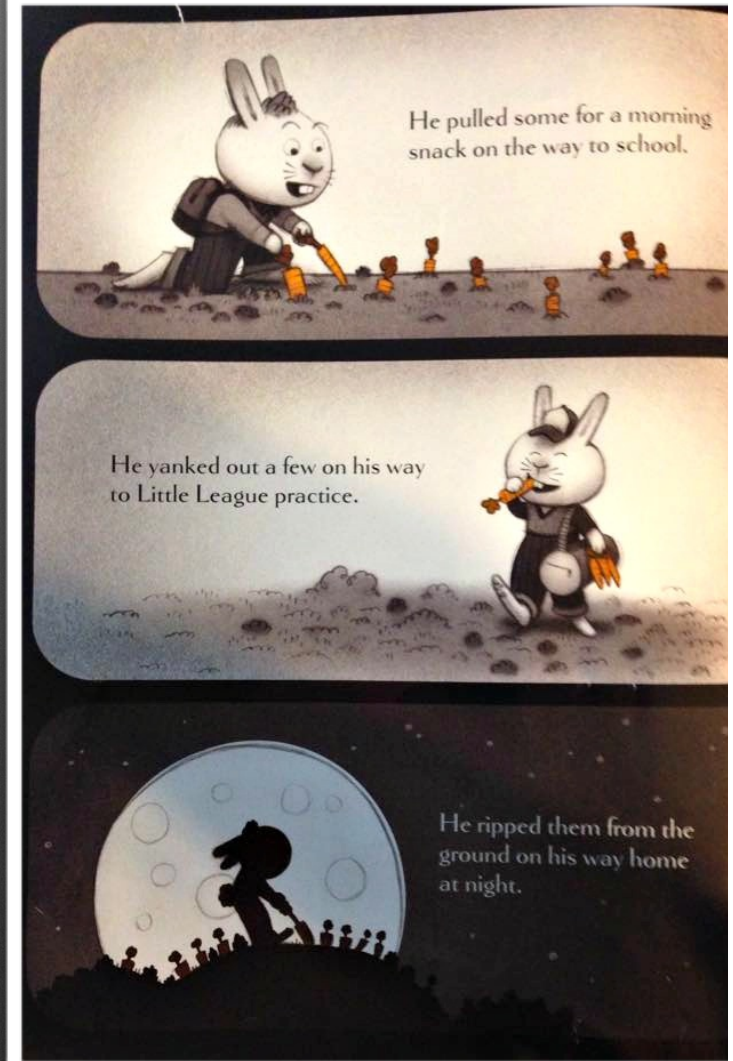
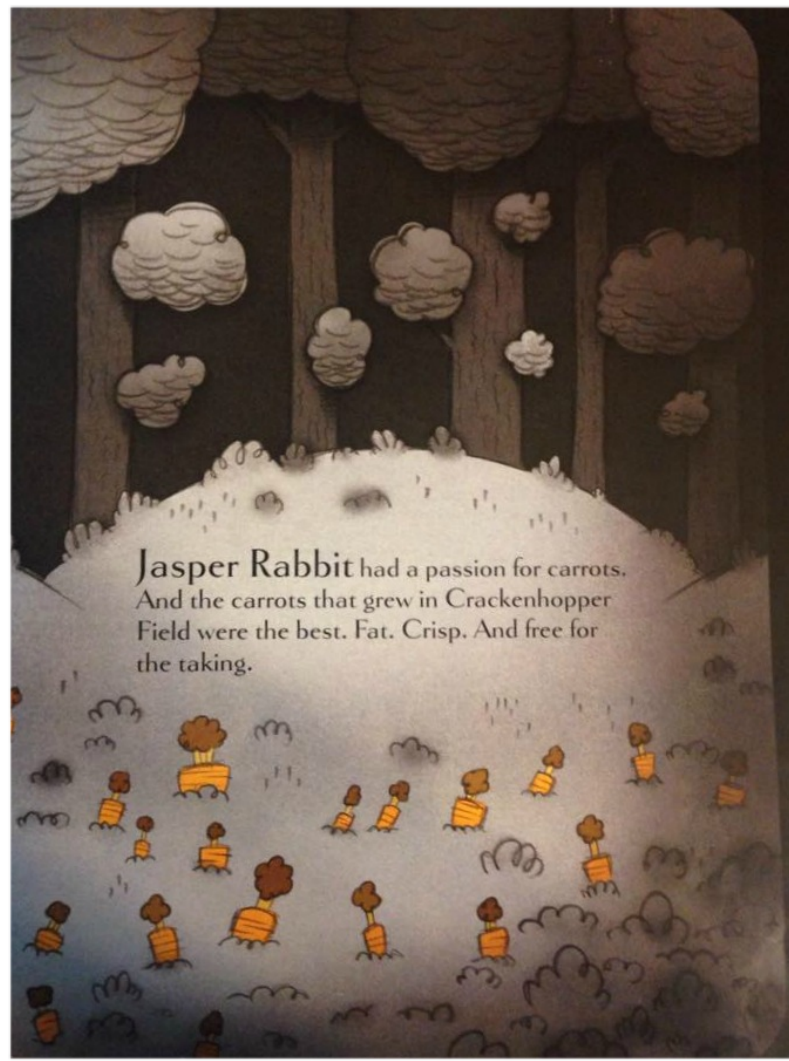
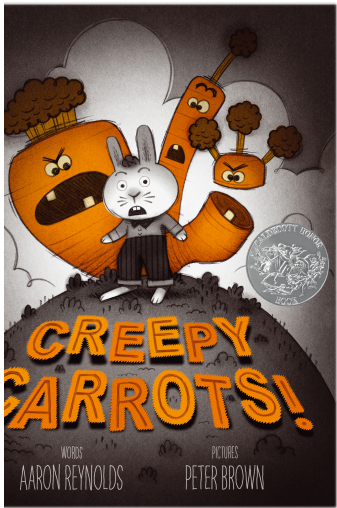
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# PICTURE BOOK DO's



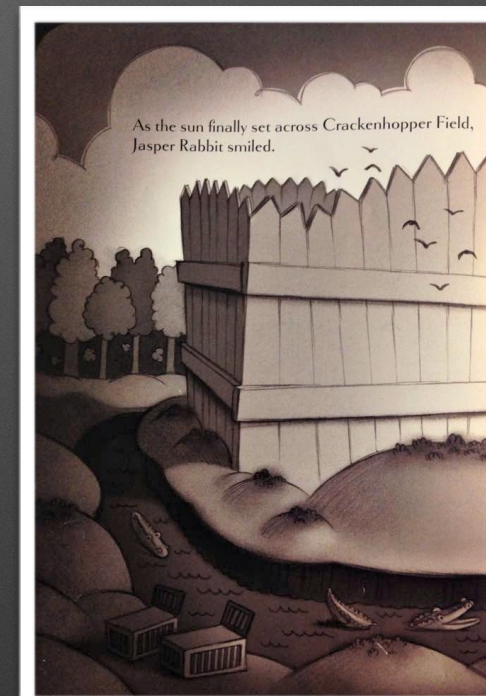
- ensure there are multiple settings for the illustrator



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# PICTURE BOOK DO's



- ensure your main character solves own problems



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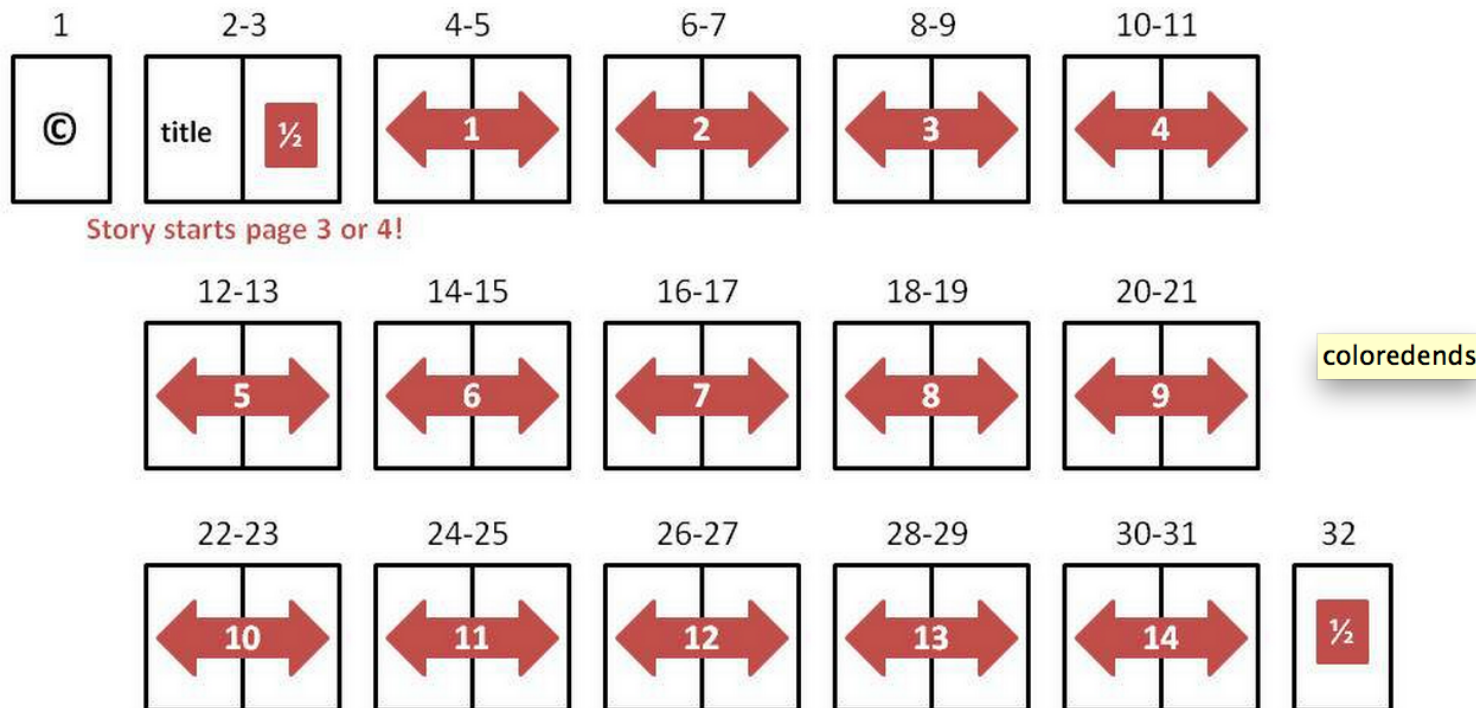
# PICTURE BOOK DO's



## Colored Ends Picture Book Layout



32-page book yields 30 pages for story  
30 pages is 14 spreads (plus 2 single-page illustrations)



TaraLazar.com

With colored ends, colored paper (not the printed story block) serve as the end pages.



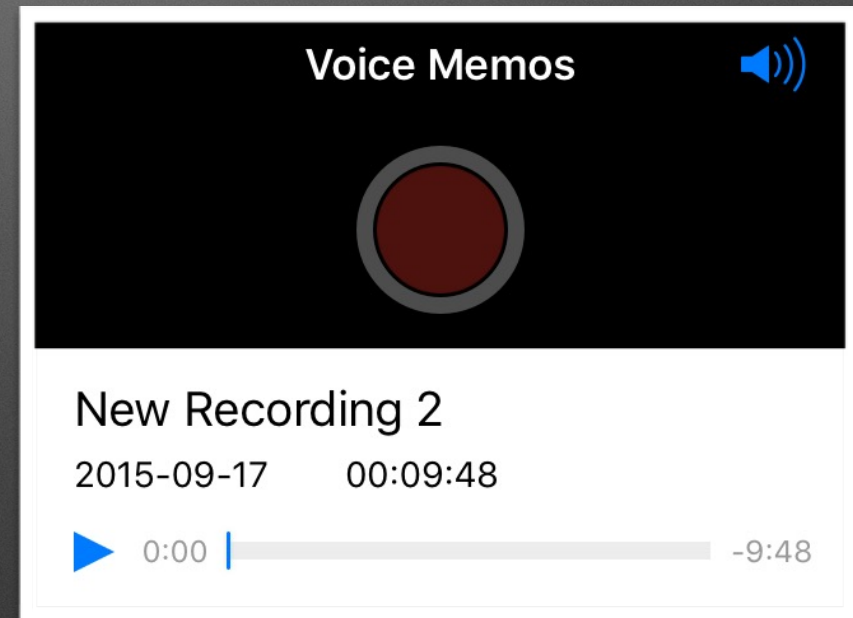
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# PICTURE BOOK DO's



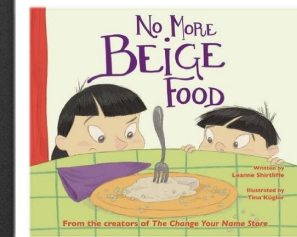
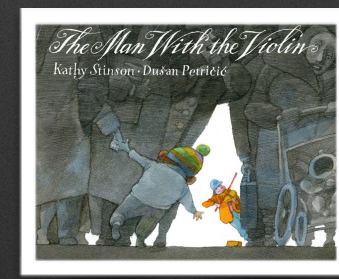
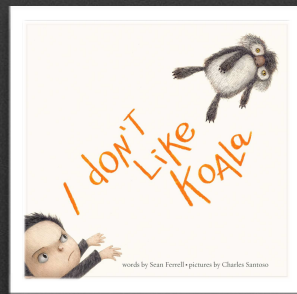
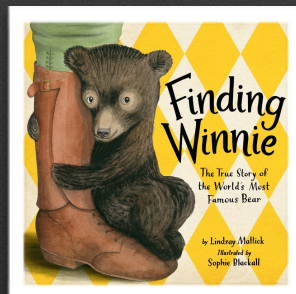
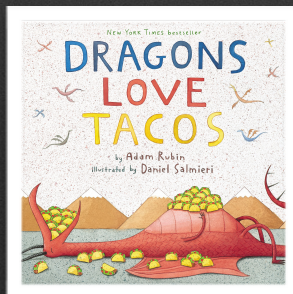
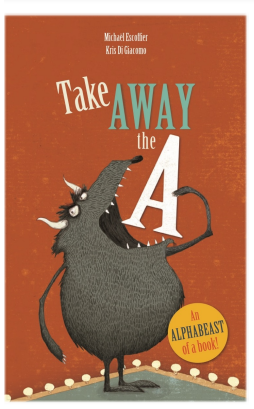
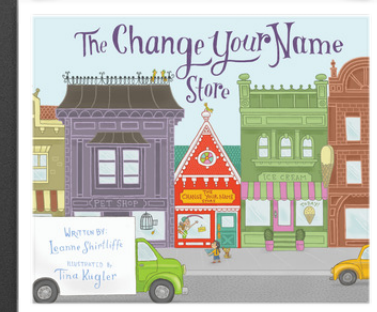
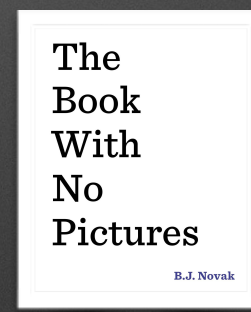
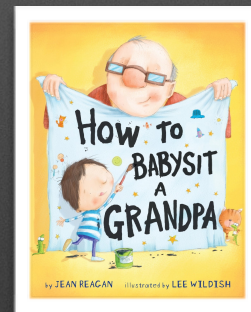
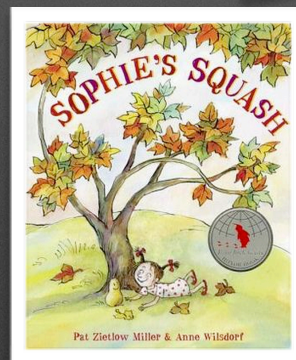
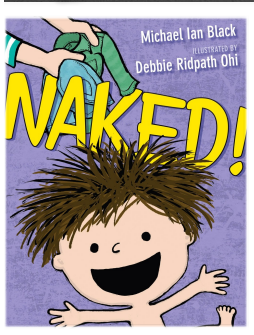
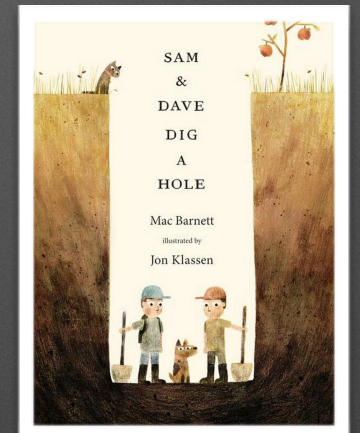
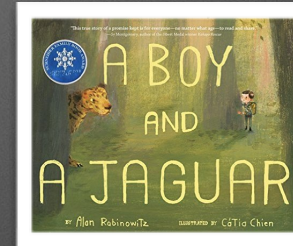
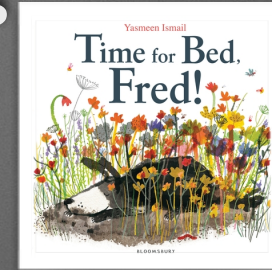
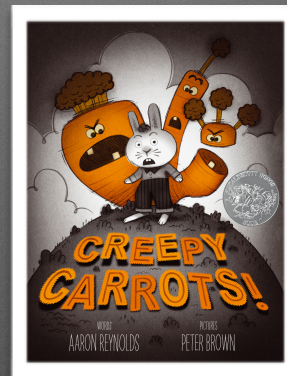
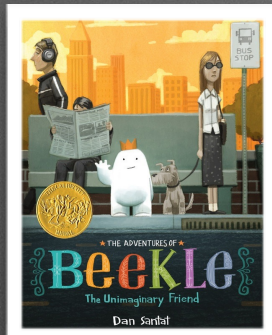
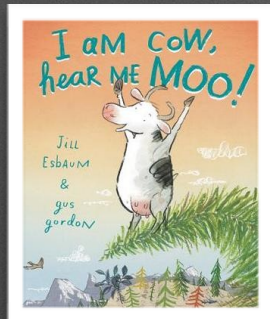
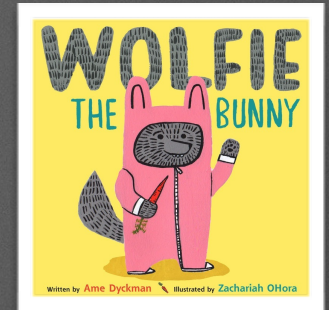
- ensure it can be read aloud a kazillion times





# PICTURE BOOK DO's

read lots of picture books, especially  
those published in the past five years





# PICTURE BOOK DO's



- know the industry (listen to podcasts; read blogs)



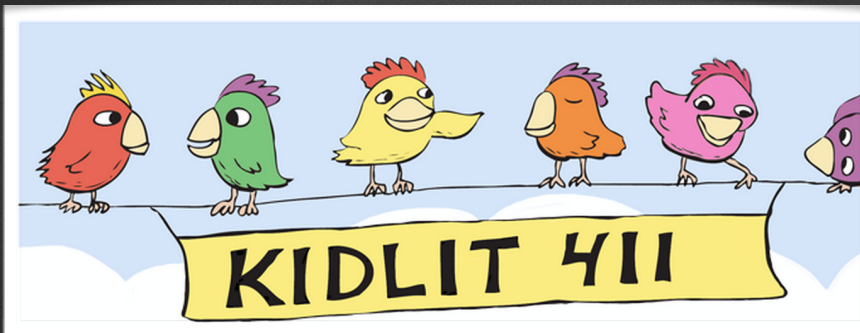
**Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators**

*The international professional organization for writers and illustrators of children's literature*

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Reading for Research



**Jess Keating**

Author - Zoologist - Artist

**DEBBIE RIDPATH OHI**



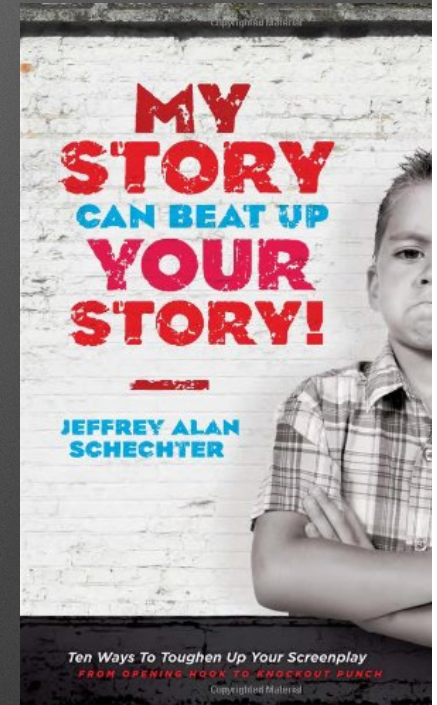
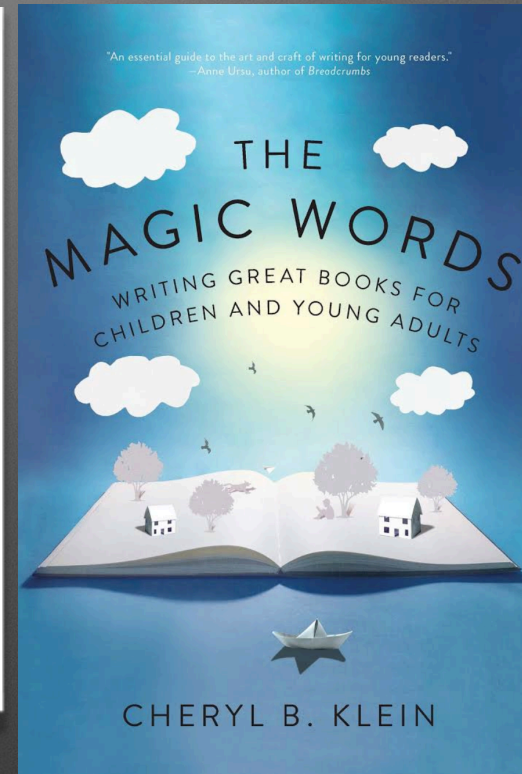
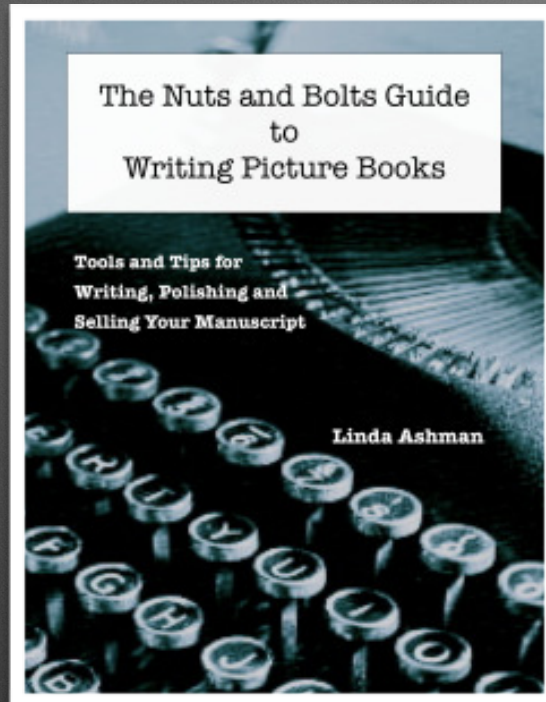
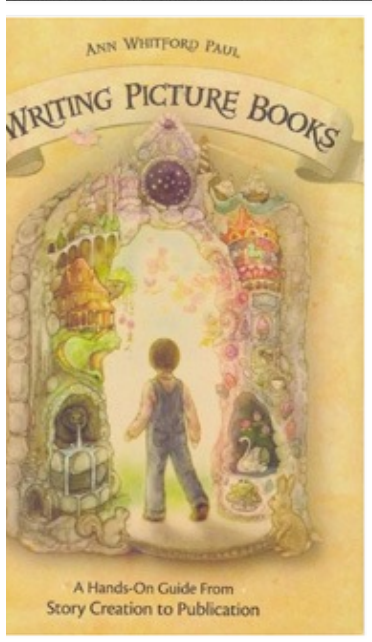
By Elizabeth Bird



@LShirtl



# PICTURE BOOK DO's



- read craft books (but write more than you read!)



@LShirtl



# PICTURE BOOK DO's



- have at least **three** submission-reading picture book manuscripts before seeking an agent
- find a picture book **critique group**







**Tea Pages/Tea Reader** @TeaPages · Oct 15

**#PBPitch** The Boy Who Saw Words: He looked at a blade of grass and smiled. He knew he was the only one who saw words...everywhere.



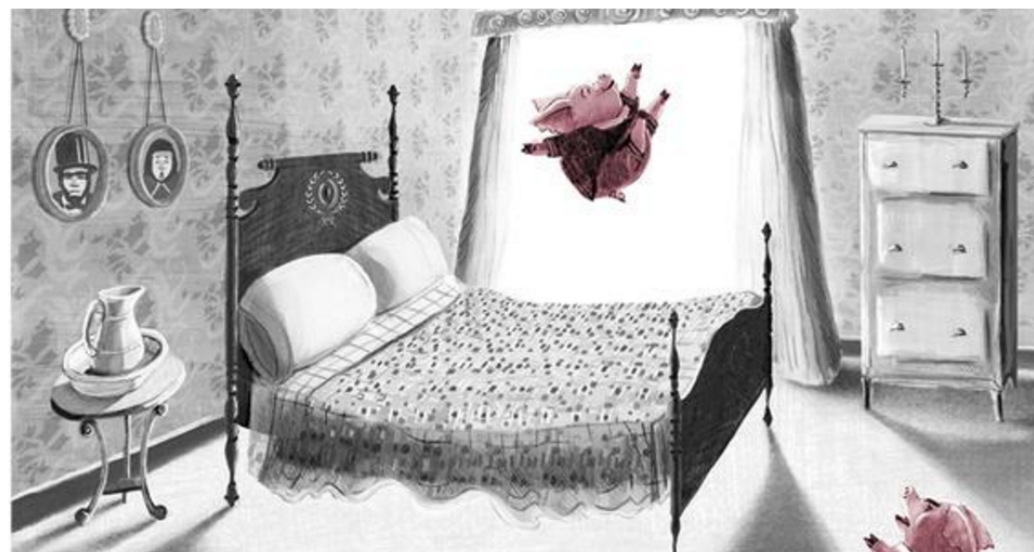
**Melanie Kyer** @fraudrk · Oct 15

**#PBPitch** Secret agent life: Save humanity. Fight spies. Run on your wheel. Meet Mr. Zippy, the most interesting hamster in the world.



**Kathryn Ault Noble** @katkankan · Oct 15

It started with the seesaw. Soon Jeffrey bounced on everything! But when he bounced on Lincoln's bed. . . **#PBPitch**



**Debra Shumaker**

@ShumakerDebra

Follow

ark your calendars PB writers, the next **#PBPitch** will be Thursday, October 25th, 2018!

PM - 2 Jul 2018



@LShirtl



# THE MOST IMPORTANT DO: ✓

A great idea,  
strong writing,  
and relentless revision  
matter more  
than any passing trend  
or  
do's and don'ts.





# QUESTIONS?

## (and possibly answers)

### My contact info:

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|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| AUTHOR                     |                                   |
| LeanneShirtliffe.com       |                                   |
| WEBSITE                    |                                   |
|                            |                                   |
| DATE OUT                   | BOOK TITLE                        |
| MAY 2013                   | <i>Don't Lick the Minivan</i>     |
| MAY 2014                   | <i>The Change Your Name Store</i> |
| NOV 2014                   | <i>Mommyfests</i>                 |
| JAN 2016                   | <i>No More Beige Food</i>         |
| OCT 2016                   | <i>Saving Thunder the Great</i>   |
| JUN 2017                   | <i>I Love Sharks, Too</i>         |
| LEANNESHIRTLIFFE@GMAIL.COM |                                   |

### Upcoming AWCS workshops (summer picture book series):

- **July 16:** Using Mentor Texts to Improve Your Craft
- **July 23:** Strategies for Revising Picture Books
- **July 30:** Writing in Rhyme