Writing for Children

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ALMOST anything anybody says about writing for children is wrong. For that matter, almost anything anybody says about writing for anybody is wrong. Writing is still an art. There are few applicable facts. Most advice about writing is useless to harmful. You look around for the secrets of writing but you can't find them. You suspect they exist and that other people know them. They don't and there are no secrets. What there are, are as many opinions as there are writers and aspiring writers, and prejudices enough to go around—and around and around and around.

I have a few, or a few hundred myself. They come from experience and observation, from trial and error and, as with most writers, more from failure than from success. They are prejudices, but they are my prejudices, so I believe them. Being no more logical than anybody else, I accept my prejudices as convictions, but I expect no one else to. One of the freedoms guaranteed to the individual, less by constitutions and other political documents than by the very fact that he is an individual, is the right to form his own judgments, make his own mistakes, and learn from them how to go on and make even larger mistakes.

For what they are worth, here are some of my prejudices about writing for children.

Writing for children is little different from writing for adults. All children, aged two to aged seventy, like a story. People have always liked stories and listened to them. Probably they always will. Tell a story when you write. Children demand that even more than adults. Don't do a character sketch. Don't write an essay. Don't argue. Even if you do all these things, make it a story with beginning, middle, and end.

Write your story simply. Again, there is little difference between writing for children and adults. You cannot be too simple in either

case. If there is any possibility of anybody's misunderstanding what he reads, he will always misunderstand. That is one of the primary laws of human nature, a prerogative exercised by men, women, and children. Write simply.

Write clearly. Be as inventive as you like, as artful, as imaginative, but make clear both what your story is and what your attitude toward it is. Use your imagination as much as you can and will, but be logical within the framework of your invention.

Don't talk down to children. Don't condescend. Children are serious and have a dignity of their own. They dislike condescension as much as you do and react to it by avoidance.

Don't be cute. Baby-talk may please the mother and express her delight but it seldom pleases the child. When you write for children, talk straight.

Don't be "literary." The niceties of rhetoric are lost on children. They don't know that alliteration is alliteration and won't be impressed by learned allusions. Neither is anybody else, incidentally.

Don't gush when you write for children. They are not, in their own esteem, either little dears or little monsters. They are individuals, just as you are and I am. They are more individualist than we are. We, perforce, have had to learn to conform to the group, to round off the edges of our individuality, and to pretend we are like everybody else. The child, and it is one of the luxuries of childhood, can afford to be himself, and he insists on it.

Don't be moralistic. Children get lessons enough elsewhere. They are continually being drilled in morals and manners by their parents, teachers, older brothers and sisters, by their elders in general. Enough is too much. You don't necessarily have to have the villain win or the nasty little boy get the biggest piece of cake in the end, but it might be a relief if you did sometimes.

Don't teach. That is, don't teach something on purpose. If you can teach by indirection that life is pleasant or toads cure warts or that work can be fun, good; but don't be obvious about it.

Let me sum up some of these negatives. I'd sum them up this way—don't. Just don't.

I have a child psychology laboratory. It consists of one girl, aged six, and one boy, aged two, who live across the street from us. They come over almost every day. I stick pins in them and tabulate their reactions. I dangle candy before them, then snatch it away, to see if

the saliva drools at the corners of their mouths and for how long, and whether the incidence and flow can be controlled by substituting licorice for chocolate or lemon for peppermint. I tell them fantastic lies, then take their blood pressure and pulse to see where credibility stops and suspicion begins.

I'm careful about other things. I don't ask questions. I don't lunge at them with my arms out and make loud noises any more than I would approach a dog that way. I let them come to me. What they tell me seriously I listen to seriously, and I respond seriously. If David tells me that a worm down by the maple tree at the corner of the driveway stopped him and said he didn't have to take a nap that afternoon, I ask David to go back and ask the worm if I can't have a nap instead. If Janice brings over a doll for me to admire and I don't like the doll, I tell her so. I tell her to take that doll away, and Janice does. If Janice doesn't like my necktie, she tells me so, and I change it. We're fair.

Children—it's been said before—are people. Of course, it's not quite true. They are people, but they have not yet learned to be tactful, hypocritical, self-conscious, conniving, and a few other things. In fact, they have not learned most of the unpleasant things that make most of us the unpleasant people we are.

Children are egoists, complete egoists. A child sees himself as the center of the world. The sun rises on and for him; it sets on and for him. The moon comes up for his pleasure and when he drops his bread and jam, jam side down, on the road, it is something mean the universe did especially to him and on purpose. He gets angry with the universe. Children are egoists. So, if we want to risk disturbing dangerous truths again, are all of us. The sun sets and rises on me. I am the center of the world as far I can see from where I stand. When my bread and butter falls into the gutter, I scream and cry and leave it there. That's the difference. After his first few tears, David picks it up again and eats it anyway, reflecting curiously on the new taste that grit, dust, and part of a dead leaf have given his bread and jam. Children are egoists but curious. We are egoists but, a bit jaded, have lost some of our bright curiosity.

Children are literal. They take facts at face value. They've not learned chronic suspicion. To a child, one and one *is* two. There are no hesitations or modifications about it. Not long ago David discovered up and down. He stood on the back seat of my small car, strained all his muscles, pushed up the arm rest, beamed at me, and

triumphantly said, "Up!" He pushed it down, beamed at me again, and cried, "Down!" The discovery of up and down made him supremely happy. I got curious. Most of my more complicated friends are uncertain which way up is. I'm not always sure myself. "Which way is up?" I asked David. He patted himself on top of his summer crew-cut. "Head," he said happily. He'd solved that one to his satisfaction.

Boys are not girls, and girls are not boys. This is generally known but often forgotten. It is a point you might keep in mind when writing for children. Janice is feminine. She was feminine at age six months. Her mother used to tuck her snugly into warm blankets and put her out to air in her carriage in the winter sunlight. Janice looked at it and at the few people who passed on the quiet residential street that ends in the wooded campus of a small college. She listened to them. Before she could talk or knew what the sound meant she learned to mimic them exactly and say, "Hi!" She said it with cheeriness and that pleased air of discovery which is the essence of the disarming feminine approach. Intonation was perfect. Her accompanying smile was delightful. One day I saw the postman get about four steps beyond her carriage before Janice observed, "Hi!" He dropped six of his letters when he swung around to stare.

Janice listens gravely to any nonsense I choose to tell her. She knows it's nonsense, but she is too polite to say so. She likes me, therefore if I need to be silly, it's all right. If David suspects I am lying, he doesn't say anything either. He just gives me a good hard kick in the shins. If Janice is there, she exclaims, "Oh, David, you mustn't!" but she is really quite pleased. She has played her feminine part of keeping everything sweet and gracious, but she has also seen justice done without having to take the responsibility for its harshness.

That's the kind of spirit and intelligence you are writing for when you write for children. You are talking to simple egoism, decent trust, bright curiosity, and reactions that are often as complex in their own way as those of adults. Often the self-possession, honesty, and directness are beyond the fearful adult's range or have been dimmed by his experience.

The line between fact and fantasy has not been drawn in childhood. When the doorknob is a yard from the floor and you are only a foot and a half high, you live in a fantastic world anyway. Some day, you dream, you may be able to reach up and turn on the water tap for yourself and get a glass of water or flood the whole kitchen. Some

day you will be able to take a key and unlock the door and keep out those you want and keep in those you please. Some day you will be allowed to take the tin of talcum powder, turn the top, and sift the contents out all by yourself over everything in sight. Some day, though it seems impossible, you will be able to read and count, even the big words, even the numbers over 100. Meanwhile, everything is exciting. It is exciting to get up in the morning, to go to bed at night, to watch the shadows on the lawn, to hear the rain splash in the gutters, and to see your father turn the corner of the driveway in his car.

You do not need great drama and high suspense in stories for children. Life is full of both, every hour of every day. Can you remember sitting in your high chair during all the hubbub of breakfast, your mother fussing over the older children, getting them ready for school, your father searching wildly for whatever it is he thinks he has forgotten before he whips off to work, and watching the toast begin to burn? You could call out and warn someone, but the suspense grips you as the smoke curls up. You hold your breath waiting to see what will happen. You watch the smoking toaster, gloating secretly that no one else has seen it. More and blacker smoke writhes up, and you see the toast completely blackened. It's wonderful! As soon as you are sure the excitement is all over, you call out virtuously, "Mamma! The toast!"

Children are not surprised by much. If you don't know there are twenty-four hours in a day and sixty minutes in an hour, you are quite willing to accept "once upon a time." It is all discovery in childhood. Everything is new. Everything is possible. Children assume that elephants talk or trees. Why not? Perhaps it is only a convention born of our adult human conceit that the noises we make are intelligent and intelligible sounds while those of trees or the other animals are just sounds. I have never held with those who claim that children have vivid imaginations. If you don't know many factual truths, anything and any combination of things may be true. That is why children are often such notorious liars. They are not lying. They are just stating probabilities which, for all they know, may be true as any of the nonsensical actualities.

Incidentally, nothing I have said may be true. Some of it could be, but I'm not sure. It's all conjecture, imagination, fantasy. It had better be if you want to write effectively for children, just as it had better be simple and better be story.

Sometimes when Janice comes over, we talk of many things—of shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings, and life and death, and income taxes and bond yields, and whether the hawthorne tree is prettier than the lilies of the valley and why little fishes grow up to be big fishes instead of horses or dogs. How do they know? Wouldn't it be funny if a goldfish got mixed up and grew up to be a giraffe? We talked a long time about that one. Janice said she'd never get mixed up. She is always going to stay a girl and never grow up to be a camel or a schoolteacher or anything like that. David wasn't listening. He was over at the side of the house trying to turn the water on and pretending to turn the hose on us, waving the nozzle end around and saying, "S-sss! S-sss!"

You do not need complicated plot and dramatic climax in writing for children. One of the best children's stories in the juvenile magazine with which I was once briefly connected was called "Henrietta." It was the simple, straightforward story of a bantam hen who wandered across the fields to the farm recently occupied by a man and woman who had not intended to put stock on the place. Henrietta came and stayed. They took her back to her former owner. Henrietta escaped and returned. After several such episodes people were forced to give in to Henrietta's desires. She stayed on her adopted farm. Soon she wanted to set. A setting of brown eggs was got for her, and her brood of Wyandottes throve until they were far larger than Henrietta herself. The next time Henrietta hatched out a brood of ducks. A rat made off with one. The man and woman got a cat to protect their fowl. The cat had kittens. They needed milk for the cat and her offspring, so they bought a goat. In this way, little Henrietta populated the empty farm. A simple, logical, straightforward little story warm with the blood and heart beat of small animals—and children usually love stories about other little animals like themselves.

So do adults. Most people have been children at one time or another in their lives—not necessarily in their extreme youth.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that writing for children is easy. It's hard, just as any writing worth doing is hard. Children are a critical audience. They may not be critical of the same things that adults are, but they want truth and reason, even in fantasy. You can't blur off small readers with vaguenesses. They want to know. Why did the man talk that way to his horse? Why didn't the horse answer back? Then what did the man do? Do you think the horse is married and

has little girl horses and small boy horses at home? Why do horses eat oats? Do they taste like the oatmeal mama makes me eat? Can I have some oats for breakfast tomorrow—not just oatmeal, real oats?

You can fob off adults with vaguenesses and make muzzy atmosphere do for what you are too dull or lazy to be sure of yourself. It's not a good idea with children. Their wits have not yet been dulled. They don't have to pretend to understand just because they think it's "literary" and someone might think they were stupid if they admitted not understanding what is in a book. They don't read reviews of best sellers just to appear cultured at the woman's club. They read to understand and get satisfaction from the understanding as well as from the story. Too many children's books, it seems to me, simply lack sense and substance. Often, I suspect, it is not because that is what writers or editors think children want, but because there is no more in the author or in the editor. I would suggest that the writer try to be rich, at least not nakedly poor, in his own mind, emotions, and experience; then distill what sense he can from his own living into what he tries to write, then try to write it as well as he possibly can. It's what writers have always tried to do, isn't it? What is faked shows perhaps even more quickly and more clearly in writing for children than it does in writing of more pretentious kind.

Unfortunately you are writing not only for children, but also for editors who have their own prejudices, though some of them think of their knowledge as exact and their opinions as objective truths. They, in turn, know that what they publish is not purchased by children but by adults, librarians, teachers, parents, all of whom consider themselves experts in what children are, what children like, and what kind of reading is good for children. Most of them are wrong, but they move with serene confidence through a maze of unsubstantiated whims based on convictions of omniscience. Fortunately some editors have skill and courage. There may be ways of outwitting or outwaiting editors and the other arbiters of your commercial failure or success. There may even be ways of finding out what it is they think they want. I don't know what they are. I know that little good writing is produced that way.

I know what my prejudices about writing for children are. They begin with trying to know what a child is like and then trying to write what children and the best grown-ups I know can like and live with. I hope, using prejudices of your own, you will do just that. There's decency in that. Good luck with it.