My Storybook Process (Part 3): creating the story

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http://greatstorybook.com/my-storybook-process-part-3-creating-the-story/

This entry is part 3 of 10 in the series My Storybook Process

My Storybook Process

Week Three on the first Bunny and Witch story. I've established my genre and demographic, I've researched the market, I've created my two main characters - and now? I am inching through the sort of visual style that I want to hit, as I'll be illustrating the story myself; and I have a first draft for the page-by-page outline of the story.

I decided to hash-out the outline for the second story of the series as well. I just felt it would help me delve into the characters more if I could get down the beats of how they interact with each other in two completely different situations.

The Magic Word will be the first in the series, so that is my focus. It isn't a finished story - I know that. It needs quite a bit refining and tweaking, but the real challenge for this book will be hitting the illustrations just right. At this point, I'm still not sure what kind of medium I want to use.

The story clearly *shows* (in this case literally, because the first page has no words) right away what the problem is about to be. We know before Bunny does what Witch is about to do: swipe one of her coveted toys. Without asking!

Story Jotting: the outline of a story

To get the story down, I quickly make numbers (each number is a page of the book-to-be) on the page and jot down what I want to see there. I'm using very few words at this point, because it's really about hitting the moments - not the text, not really the images. I'm putting down the most essential bits.

I will fill it up with details like the full text that should be on each page and explanations of what I want in the panels next. That part of the process doesn't really stop until all of the illustrations are done. I'm doing this myself, which makes the collaboration between words and art very tightly knit. But it also can create a vacuum if I'm not careful.

How this is different from collaborating with an artist

Collaborating with another artist is a very different dynamic, and it changes from one artist to the next. The art in an illustrated storybook really should not *enhance* the story, it should help show the untold layers of the story. This is hard to do, but some artists can take a story and really run with it.

I'm working with an artist on another book right now, and before I sent her the manuscript, I simply told her the story - to get her excited about it. She loved the idea and sent me a sketch that my story inspired her to do. The sketch was *an image that my manuscript didn't have*, but I realized immediately that it was needed. This part of the story the artist was showing me should be there. So I added a new page to the manuscript and re-arranged and edited around that. When I told her that I changed the story to include that image, she was thrilled. This is how a collaboration works (or should work) between a writer and artist.

Panel Ideas for Bunny & Witch

There will most likely be one panel per page through the whole book, but I might use a spread or two. I doubt I'll need more than one panel on any given page, but it's still early. I need to let this rest a day before getting into more detailed writing.

 This will not be used in the book. It's just a drawing, me trying to get my ideas about Bunny and who she is on paper.

The story will unfold in rising moments where Witch is really slow in getting what it is she has to do. It's a process. I read to different groups of kids very often, and can imagine how they will respond. They will be appalled about what Witch is doing. They will laugh when Bunny outsmarts her. They will have a lot to say about the right way to behave.

Not every storybook needs to be this way, but this is the type of response I want from kids for this particular series. All of the books about Bunny and Witch will inspire kids to talk about what is happening and to tell the reader what is wrong and what should happen. The series is about manners, good behavior. Social skills for little buggers.

Poetry is Coming!

I hope kids will like the poem that I'm writing to accompany the story. A stanza per page I think. If it

works with the kids (I'll be testing it out on them), the poem might be a good way to help them remember the whole story. Rhyming poetry supports language development and it strengthens memory skills, so I want to try that here.

I have a draft of the first few stanzas. No, I don't really want to share that right now. It's pretty raw and I might need to move things around as I progress. *Next week*. (Tacking that on my list of things to do.)

This is much closer to where I want to go with Bunny. I like that her ponytails are sticking straight out to the sides and that her bunny ears (attached to a hairband) go up.

Testing the Story Draft

If you want to know - I mean really know - how to write a book for kids, you need to know kids. If you have a child (or more) of your own, that's a good start. If you have 20 children, that's much better. The reason I say this is because - my daughter loves me. If I read one of my stories to her, she will love it.

If I read one of my stories to 19 kids who don't really know me, they will tell me what to fix… and not like an editor or another adult would.

> Kids will very clearly display an immediate and unrecoverable lack of interest in a flawed story that no cigarette-eating editor-in-chief could ever match. Not even in New York.

A child of 5 will flatten a writer with a simple, "This is boring. Do you have another story?"

This is how I test whether a story *draft* is any good. I test it (without pictures) to a group of kids. I explain what happens - simply, I tell them the story, in the oral tradition of story-telling.

When their interest starts to fade, I just come up with something. ANYTHING, to revive their interest. *Spontaneous, live-action story editing*.

It's nerve ruining (hot baths are very important to me now). You need thick skin and a taste for flying by your seat. But it has lead to better writing even when I'm at the drafting stage, and for that I would recommend it even to the shy writer.

You don't need to fear them. You just need to win them over. (Kids and editors.)

I have a couple of sketches of Bunny posted here. Last week, I felt my initial painting of her was just really generic. You can see how in these two sketches I've started with more detail and am pulling back from that. I really feel this story should look simple, because the message behind it is simple. It will be in

full color though.

Next week, I'm hoping to be another step forward with the drawings and the poem. If you want to track my progress through this project and would like some insider details to boot, sign up for my newsletter. I'll send that right to you.

What are you working on these days? What's your hick-up? Write below and let me know - or send me an email. I really love those.

This entry is part of the series
My Storybook Process
Be sure to check out the other posts:

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