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On Writing for Children

Barbara Jean Hicks gave this wonderful speech at the 2007 Ventura/Santa Barbara Writers' Day conference. Now, she shares it with all the amigos of La Bloga. Visit Barbara at www.barbarajeanhicks.com

What's the Big Idea?

Tracking Down Your "So-What Factors"

I first heard the term "so-what factor" at a children's writing conference in Seattle when I was just beginning to write for children. Cecile Goyette, a senior editor for Dial at the time and now an editorial director for Random House, told us that for her, the "so-what factor" of a story was key. If the story didn't have one, no matter how well-written the manuscript, it didn't work for her.

What is the "so-what factor"? When a reader closes a book, Ms. Goyette said, he or she needs some kind of "take-away": a discovery, an insight, a feeling. Perhaps nothing more than a sense of wonder, or on the opposite end of the spectrum, a sense of discomfort. Something, ultimately, that makes the reader see the world in a different way. Whatever it is the reader takes away from the story is that story's "so-what factor." It bears a close relationship to the story's theme.

Of all the advice I've heard from editors and writers over the years, this is the one that has stuck with me and been most helpful to me, both as a beginning writer and a not-so-beginning writer who still struggles with every new project.

For me, it works best to ponder my story's "so-what factor" during the revision process, not before I start to write or even in the first few drafts. Why? I've discovered how easily a predetermined theme can trample a fragile story. And the story, after all, is the thing.

I'm not an efficient writer. I not only don't begin writing with a theme in mind, I don't even begin with a plan. Instead, I might jot down a curious bit of dialogue, or a vivid description, or a word or phrase that amuses me. It's only after I've plunged into a project that I begin to find out what it's really about.

I don't believe I ever truly choose the "so-what factor" in my stories. Instead, the theme reveals itself to me. It comes from that inarticulate place inside me that harbors my deepest feelings and beliefs; the creative process is the means of articulation. The act of writing teaches me what my story is, how it wants to be told, why it matters. Sometimes the deeper meaning of a story reveals itself to me clearly. Other times, I have to track it down.

Almost always when I've worked and worked on a story that won't come together no matter how

much effort I put into it, I find I'm having trouble because I don't understand its "so-what factor." At some point during the revision process I have to stop and ask myself three questions that help me track it down:

What is your story about?

Why does it matter?

What do you want your readers to take away?

These three basic questions clarify for me what my story means--or at least what I want it to mean! Until I can answer each of these questions in one simply stated sentence, I know my manuscript is less a story than it is an idea or merely an assemblage of scenes or information. I don't yet understand it. I still have work to do.

An added benefit to having crisp, concise answers to these questions on hand is that they help sell manuscripts! Nothing shows an editor how much I understand my story than my ability (or lack thereof) to describe it succinctly. With a three sentence description guided by my three questions, I'm giving editors a basis for a clear answer, whether "yes" or "no," when I ask, "Are you interested in seeing my manuscript?" If "no," the editor's time isn't wasted on a story she doesn't care about, and mine isn't wasted on an editor who doesn't care about my story. If "yes," I send it off with hope in my heart, keeping my fingers crossed that the editor loves the execution as much as the idea.

I knew before I set pen to paper what my first children's book was about. Stated in one sentence, *Jitterbug Jam* is the tale of a little monster who's afraid of the scary boy hiding under his bed.

In the first few drafts of the manuscript, there was nothing under the monster's bed at all but a few dust bunnies. In later drafts the dust bunnies metamorphosed into real bunnies, more afraid of the monster than the monster was afraid of them.

Not until after I started working at an urban elementary school in a multicultural, multilingual neighborhood did a boy appear under the bed—a boy who was neither frightful nor fearful, a boy who acted towards the monster in my story the way the kindergartners at school acted toward each other. Despite their many differences, they focused on their similarities. They worked together, ate together, played together. They were friends.

Only with the insight received from those kindergartners was I able to answer the second "so-what" question for *Jitterbug Jam*: "Why does it matter?" This question referred me to my deepest beliefs and values, and I was able to articulate in a single sentence my answer: my story mattered because it's important to me that people face their fears about those who are different from themselves and attempt to understand them.

With that question answered, I was ready to address the third "so-what" question, what I wanted my readers to take away from their reading. Having discovered why the story mattered to me, I could state this, once again, in a single sentence: I wanted my readers to say to themselves, whether on a conscious or subconscious level, "If I face my fears about people who are different from me and look for common ground between us, good things can happen."

Another of my books was inspired by an image of my tuxedo cat lounging on the rain-fed lawn of our Seattle home. I found the contrast of his black and white fur against the vivid green grass lovely and compelling. Again, the answer to the question “What is your story about?” was clear and easily stated from the start. *I Like Black and White* is a concept book celebrating all the wonderful things in the world that come in black and white.

I also knew immediately my answer to the question “Why does it matter?” I worked in an urban school with unusual neighbors: protected wetlands and a deciduous forest. We had partnerships with a number of environmental organizations, and our students received a hands-on education in the earth sciences as a result. I realized not all urban students were so lucky. This manuscript mattered because it’s important to me that children learn to appreciate and enjoy the diversity of the natural world.

After the initial idea came the gathering of images, the collecting of descriptive words, the search for relationships between the words, the composing of a poem: “Stinky, slinky, large and small...” But the poem didn’t satisfy until I included music, art and especially children in the mix. With my final stanza, “Music, dancing, feet...and hands,” I had the answer to the final “so-what” question: I wanted my readers to see that black and white, black OR white—all people are interesting and beautiful.

One last example: Over several years and through many revisions, I had no answers to any of my “so-what” questions for a manuscript I’d been working on about that same tuxedo cat. The story was variously titled “Me, Miguel,” “My Life As A Cat” and “Portrait of the Artist As A Young Cat.” After a number of attempts at writing Miguel’s story, I took a new approach. I realized from his scars, tattered ears and other telltale signs that he’d had many lifetimes of adventures before settling into life with us as a rather sedate house cat. I started to imagine the things he’d done and the things he must still dream of doing. The parallels to James Thurber’s *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* came to mind. Miguel became Walter and the story found itself.

What was my story about? I could finally answer. *The Secret Life of Walter Kitty*, my most recently published picture book, is the story of an ordinary housecat with a BIG imagination. Why did it matter? As a woman who has imagined herself into a career that itself springs from the imagination, this answer was easy. It’s important to me that children understand they have the power to choose their future, that what they can dream, they can do. What did I want my readers to take away from this story? I wanted them to recognize that with big enough dreams and a place to nurture them, they could be the hero of their own story.

I’ll leave you with that. The children’s writing community in Southern California, and particularly our local chapters of the SCBWI, is a safe, supportive place to nurture your writing dreams. Write what you need to write, go to conferences and workshops, find a critique group, and focus and clarify the intent of your work by asking yourself with every manuscript those three important questions:

What is your story about?

Why does it matter?

What do you want your readers to take away?

Above all—Dream Big! In the words of a very famous man who spent his long and satisfying career bringing stories for children to life, “If you dream it, you can do it. This whole thing started with a dream and a mouse!”

Barbara Jean Hicks has worked more jobs than a leopard has spots, but the most enduring of her occupations is writing. The author of thirteen "grown-up" books and four children's books, including the award-winning *Jitterbug Jam* (FSG 2005) and her most recent release, *The Secret Life of Walter Kitty* (Knopf 2007), she also presents visiting author programs for schools and libraries. An aspiring artist, Barbara dreams of one day illustrating a picture book of her own. www.barbarajeanhicks.com

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