

Breaking Into the Children's Publishing Market

Dr. Frank Serafini

Breaking into the children's publishing market is a daunting task. Trying to get a contract with a major, or even minor, publishing house is probably not for the faint of heart. I am sure that I could cover the walls of my oversized office with the rejection letters I have received in the past ten years. The children's market is volatile and highly selective. In the current economy, many publishing houses are refusing to even look at unsolicited manuscripts. In fact, most don't accept queries or proposals from anyone except established literary agents.

With these encouraging opening words (ha ha), let me share with you some lessons I have learned on my journey as a writer and illustrator of children's books and as a Professor of Children's Literature and Literacy Education. Here are thirteen things I have learned so far as an author / illustrator:

1. Know the Field: I can't tell you how many times a year I hear people tell me they have a children's book they want to submit. They have read a few books to their children and suddenly they are experts in children's literature? To this I say, "Good Luck!" In order to break into the field of children's literature, like any field or endeavor, you have to know the field. Read the trade publications and the guides to the children's market. Familiarize yourself with review publications like the Horn Book (www.hbook.com) and Booklinks (<http://ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/publishing/booklinks/index.cfm>) and take time to read the websites of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (<http://www.scbwi.org/>), American Library Association (www.ala.org), Children's Literature Association (<http://chla.wikispaces.com/>) and National Council Teachers of English (www.ncte.org) and other professional organizations.
2. Read Publisher's Catalogs: Submitting a good book idea to the wrong publisher is as worthless as submitting a bad idea to the right publisher. Every publishing house has a catalog, and most are available free or online. Get to know what a publisher is looking for, what they publish and most importantly, what they won't even consider. The better the match between your work and their catalog, the better the chance you have of catching an editor's eye.
3. Understand the Submission Requirements for Each Publisher: The last thing you want to have happen is to have your submission get rejected before anyone even reads it because you didn't follow their submission process. If it says they only accept query letters, don't send a full manuscript. If their guidelines say they are only looking for young adult fiction, no use sending primary non-fiction. If they don't accept email submissions, be sure to send it via mail. Ending up in the "slush pile" is bad enough, but not even making the slush pile is worse.

4. Study Writing for Children: Just because you have read stories to your children does not mean you know how to write for them. Non-fiction, poetry, original stories, magazine articles and ABC books all require different writing skills. A writing course or conference can be very helpful.
5. Non-Fiction Series catch Editor's Eyes: Editors like non-fiction series more than single books. An added bonus is you often get a contract for multiple books. Hooray! Being able to envision what a series may look like will get you noticed more than submitting a single book at times. My first series, Looking Closely now has six books in it with as many as four more that I would have published if given a chance.
6. Court an Editor: I don't mean flowers and such, but get to know them, learn what they like and what they are interested and not interested in. Realize their time is valuable and make every effort to respect their schedule. Once you get to know one, figure out a way to work together on projects. Listen to them! The good ones will make your books and your writing better. I suggest making contact with local and smaller publishing houses that focus on the types of publications you are interested in. It is hard to initially break into a major house. Besides, you may have a better chance if you can meet with someone face to face that enjoys living where you live.
7. Be Open and Flexible with Your Ideas: My first ideas for an ABC book about Earth's Natural Features was rejected by my publisher, but they liked my photography enough to sit down with me and listen to other ideas. Eventually we worked together to find a way to use my photography to help children see the world differently.
8. Develop a Presence: Websites, on-line galleries, podcasts, blogs, photography magazine articles, workshops, camera clubs can all add to ourselves getting noticed. Always have business cards or a flyer of your work in your photo bag and backpack. You never know when someone will want to see what you are working on.
9. Understand How Images are Presented in Book Formats: Not only do you have to worry about light, composition, exposure and focus, now you have to understand where the gutter (the crease in between two pages in a double page spread) falls in an image, but also whether the book will be a horizontal (landscape) or a vertical (portrait) format. There are generally 32 pages in a picture book. How many images per page, how much writing, and whether the images will have borders or be full bleeds are now things that must be considered.
10. Keep Your Images Simple: This is the hallmark of great photography in general, but it is essential for book images. If the image is of a box turtle, then readers don't want to focus on the grass or the reflection in the pond.
11. Color Catches the Eye: My publisher and editor love when I submit bright eye-catching colors in my images. They are always thinking about what

- will make a great cover image that will catch the buyer's eye. Bold, simple, well-focused images seem to work best for publishers.
12. Require Gallies and the Right to Review Images: If you are lucky enough to land a contract, be sure you have some right to review the final images before production. The biggest mistake I made with my first picture book, *Desert Seasons: A Year in the Mojave*, was being so excited about getting published that I trusted my publisher to do justice to my images. Big mistake. When the final books were released, I was deeply pained by how bad my beautiful images were presented in the book. My new publisher is just the opposite. They go to great lengths to ensure my images look great. I have it right in my contract to be able to review final galleys of the books before production.
 13. Learn from Rejection: As hard as this may be to actually do sometimes, don't get discouraged by rejection letters. Every great children's author and illustrator, even Dr. Seuss, has had many book ideas and manuscripts rejected. If you get a personal response with some feedback, really listen to what they are saying. It's hard to hear sometimes, but we can learn from editors how to match our images with their needs.

Well, there you have it. Thirteen things I have learned so far. As of 2021, I have six books published with Kids Can Press in the "Looking Closely" series. Two of these books were selected to be featured as Happy Meal books at select McDonalds restaurants across Canada. Great free publicity.

I am currently working on a few projects and creating some proposals for both fiction and non-fiction titles. I keep a shot list of potential images I might need for future projects in my camera bag, and am always looking for some ideas to explore. Patience, persistence and a thick skin are all helpful virtues in the children's publishing market.

For More Information:

www.frankserafini.com

www.backcountryimages.com