

◆ Between the Lines

Author Turns Writing Know-How into a Book

When Carol Baldwin transformed a volunteer teaching gig into *Teaching the Story: Fiction Writing in Middle School* (Maupin House), she created a book valuable to authors and teachers alike. By breaking the fiction-writing process into a series of mini-lessons—each with its own goal—writers of all ages can practice different skills in a limited amount of time. Teachers will appreciate the reproducibles included on the Resource CD accompanying the book. Adult writers will find fresh approaches to topics such as writing dialogue, show don't tell, and creating a setting, that can be applied to short stories and novels alike.

What inspired you to write this book?

When my stepchildren were in high school I volunteered to teach a one-week class that eventually became known as “WOW: A Week of Outstanding Writing.” We spent one day on creating a character, one day on setting, one day on giving the character a problem, and then during the last two days the students wrote their story. Ten years later I volunteered again in my children's school and dug out the WOW notes. After expanding it to include pre-writing, revising, peer-critiquing, and different genres, I decided to write it out so that I wasn't the only one teaching it. This time I used the teacher's input as I developed the text.

In the most atypical query and acceptance story of my life, I queried one publisher who quickly expressed interest in the project.

How did you break down the creative-writing process for middle-school students?

It's just an expansion of that simple character-setting-problem outline I first taught 16 years ago. As I read *Writer's Digest*, *Children's Book Insider*, and *ByLine*, I found other fiction-writing nuggets that I added to my manuscript. Under the guidance of a patient editor at Maupin House, I broke apart long lessons into mini-lessons that are user-friendly for middle-school teachers and students.

As I wrote I thought of my children and their friends and that helped me think of problems that middle-school students would relate to—like trying out for the cheerleading squad or being pushed during a basketball game. Teaching middle-school students as I wrote the book also showed me areas I needed to address, such as how to create transitions, write titles, and edit. Before I even got a contract, Maupin House assigned one of their writers to help me shape the manuscript. Under

her guidance I learned to write a book for teachers that simplified the writing process and showed how to teach fiction writing.

Do middle-school students learn creative writing the same way adults do?

The process of brainstorming a character, putting him into a setting that the reader can clearly visualize, and giving him a realistic problem that he resolves (not God, a rich uncle, or best friend) is the same if you are 12, 42, or 72.

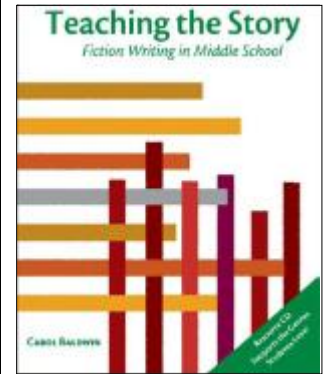
I think adults can learn from the no-holds-barred-imagination of middle-school students. Have you ever been in a classroom of seventh-grade students as they're brainstorming a science fiction or fantasy character? It is fantastic! Their brainstorming tends to be freer than adults who censor their ideas before their fingers hit the keyboard. On the other hand, by the time you're an adult and you're serious about writing you probably realize that revision is a HUGE part of the process and not something you can skip at the end—like middle-school students think they can do.

Did you learn anything in the process of writing this book that will help you with your own creative writing?

In terms of fiction writing, one of the concepts I included which I think is central to any good story is one that I read in an issue of *Children's Book Insider*. In my book I refer to it as the *plot sentence*: “My story is about ____, who more than anything wants to ____ but can't because ____.”

I have played with that sentence in a story that I am writing. The process of having to narrow down my character's main goal and the obstacles he meets trying to fulfill that goal has been extremely helpful.

On a broader scale, the ease with which I found a publisher has reinforced what I frequently read. When a book fits a certain area of publishing interest, it is more likely to be accepted. Although I only queried one publisher, Maupin House was a perfect fit since they publish practical, research-based professional resources for K-12 teachers—and they wanted to strengthen their middle-school line. Always review a publisher's web site and catalog before querying to make sure your book would be a good match. Good writing skills, persistence, and willingness to rewrite the manuscript several times also helps.



Teaching the Story: Fiction Writing in Middle School by Carol Baldwin (Maupin House)

Carol Baldwin's recommended reading for plot, setting and character development:

I am truly in awe of Cornelia Funke's books *Inkheart* and *Inkspell*. I rarely have time to sit down and read, but I listen to them as audio books instead.

As I listen to Funke's books I look for ways in which she shows distinguishing details about her characters that consistently paint a picture of these people. Their actions, words, and thoughts are entirely constant throughout two lengthy novels. The same goes for her settings. Although countries are never specifically named in *Inkheart*, the flavor of European mountains and villages are expertly portrayed throughout. The mythical Inkworld is similarly full of color, smells, noise, and texture.

One of Funke's main ideas is that characters can be read into life and become real; this is a brilliant presupposition. What child hasn't read a book and wanted a character to come to life? On top of that, the elaborate worlds Funke creates based on this premise are totally believable. If that wasn't enough, there are layers of inside jokes for readers and writers. I can't commend these books enough.

Visit Carol Baldwin's blog at www.carolbaldwinblog.blogspot.com.