Writing Young Chapter Books

Here’s what you need to know about this often overlooked genre.

BY LYNN E. HAZEN

Here was my situation—I had two books published, a picture book and a middle grade novel. My unfinished YA novel was taking up all my time and creative writing energy. So I didn’t need the distraction of yet another story idea in a new genre—but it can be hard to ignore your muse when inspiration comes calling.

I was returning from a field trip to our neighborhood library with my preschool class when a young girl’s shoe fell off right in the middle of the crosswalk. The teacher holding her hand didn’t notice, so the girl hopped, leaving her shoe behind, all the way across the busy intersection. Without missing a beat, a boy behind her deftly scooped up her shoe, carried it to the curb, and knelt to help her put it back on. The event was quick, completely unexpected, and had a key moment of tension and an emotionally satisfying “aha” feeling at the end. All good elements for a story. It reminded me of the glass slipper scene in Cinderella, only better because this scene was funnier and more spontaneous. Inspired to try to capture the spunk of the hopping shoeless girl and her charming friend, I thought of the title—Cinder Rabbit—even before we arrived back at preschool.

That evening I sat down to write. But write what? I had a title, a quick scene followed by an “aha” moment, and … and … nothing else.

I did have lots of questions. Were my characters bunnies? We’ve all heard “No more talking bunnies!” OK, humans then in a school-related story? But with Cinder Rabbit as my title, how would I accomplish that? And would this be a picture book or a book with chapters? What genre would best suit my story? Forget about genre—what story? I only had a title and an idea, but I hadn’t captured a single word on paper!

Fingers poised, no words written, self-doubt rising, I thought, I can’t write! But my fingers finally started moving and several hours later I had a creative, fun and messy first draft.

Many revisions later I had several characters, a story problem (or two
or three) and unfolding events on paper. My critique group knows all too well how many times my characters flip-flopped from bunnies to humans to bunnies as I wrote and rewrote my story. Not only did my characters’ mammal species change, so did my genre. At first I aimed for a picture book, happy with the colorful language options available to me because picture books are meant to be read aloud by adults. But my story was getting longer—too long for a picture book, and I found myself writing Chapter One, Chapter Two … . Maybe it would be a beginning reader, but my Cinder Rabbit story seemed beyond the limited word count, and simple repetitive language and structure found in typical beginning readers.

I still wasn’t sure of my genre, but in my creative process, I discovered that my characters were bunnies attending Grand Rabbits Elementary School, putting on the play of Cinder Rabbit. The star of the play must lead her class in the Bunny Hop, but when a classmate laughs at her, she forgets how to hop! Her tagline is, I can’t hop! Hmm, does her performance anxiety sound familiar? You guessed it—at the heart of my bunny character was me—fingers poised over the keyboard that first evening trying to capture the story and thinking, I can’t write!

When an editor asked me if I’d be interested in revising another picture book manuscript, The Amazing Trail of Seymour Snail, into a possible young chapter book, I of course said yes. In the meantime, I sent her my too-long-to-be-a-picture-book and too-complex-to-be-an-early-reader version of Cinder Rabbit. Fast forward, imagine more revisions, and hooray; Henry Holt published both Cinder Rabbit and The Amazing Trail of Seymour Snail.

What did my book turn out to be? A young chapter book. So, is there a clear distinction between beginning readers and young chapter books? Who are the readers of these books? Is the young chapter books genre your genre, too? Read on.

**Young Chapter Books vs. Beginning Readers**

Anastasia Suen, author of 106 children’s books, says the question she’s asked most is this: When does a beginning reader become a young chapter book? This happens, she says, when the art no longer supports all of the text. “Look at an easy reader like Frog and Toad, by Arnold Lobel. The writer doesn’t describe everything in the scene because the child can see it in the art. The text is mainly action and dialogue. All of this changes in a chapter book. In Knights of the Kitchen Table, a chapter book by Jon Scieszka, there isn’t art on every page. Words describe the scenes. Adding description to the action and dialogue makes the stories
San Francisco children’s librarian Kathleen Keeler says there are really no hard and fast rules for determining whether a title is a beginning reader or a young chapter book. “Many beginning readers have chapters so that is not a deciding factor. I estimate that beginning readers are usually 2,000 words or less (usually less) and that the sentences in beginning readers stand alone rather than being organized into paragraphs (which results in a lot of white space on the page, which is less intimidating to new readers than paragraphs),” she says. “In addition the plots are simpler in beginning readers, with the protagonist grappling with a single problem per book (or per chapter when each chapter is a stand-alone story). Chapter books may have multi-layered plots and problems, and even subplots.”

Still, it can be hard to tell the difference since both easy readers and chapter books have chapters. “You can see the difference between an easy reader with chapters and a chapter book by putting two book pages side by side,” says Suen. “The easy reader page has color art and a large font. A chapter book page has black-and-white (or grayscale) art and a smaller font.”

A knowledgeable children’s bookseller notes that a big difference between beginning readers and chapter books is that the art in beginning readers is essential for the young reader—that it is usually a literal visual translation of the text in order to help the beginning reader decode the words. The art in chapter books, on the other hand, is more decorative or entertaining and is not meant to help the reader decode the words. And most young chapter books’ illustrations are in black and white, such as in the popular Ivy and Bean and Junie B. Jones series (though there are exceptions, such as the colorful illustrations in the Mercy Watson young chapter book series by Kate di Camillo).

Who Reads Young Chapter Books?
Just who makes up the audience for young chapter books? How old are they? What are their grade levels? “When, as a children’s librarian, I introduce children and their caregivers to our beginning readers, I explain that readers are for children Kindergarten to third grade roughly and that the young chapter books (we call them younger reading titles) are from second through fourth grade,” says Keeler. “Working in the public library, I want to list a broad range of ages since I don’t want to insult an older child reading at a younger reader level. For average to good readers, though, I would estimate that most children outgrow beginning readers in first or second grade, and that solid readers like reading chapter books
in second, third and sometimes fourth grade.”

Chapter book series are something young readers love. “Children learning to read (which applies to beginning readers and chapter books both) gravitate toward series,” Keeler says. “Reading a new title in a series that they have already succeeded with gives them extra confidence and pleasure in the reading experience. Because of this, I think providing series to children as they learn and solidify their reading skills is even more important than with older children reading longer middle-grade juvenile fiction.”

“One of the things that I hear most often from teachers and librarians is that they want more early chapter books, not only to help them teach children the basic skills but also to get children excited about reading,” says Henry Holt Senior Editor Reka Simonsen. “And the ALA’s recent creation of the Geisel Award certainly supports this. On the other hand, there still doesn’t seem to be a very big market for hardcover chapter books. Perhaps that’s why the larger houses with established easy-reader programs tend to publish those books in paperback first, and tend to do series.”

My bookseller friend notes that children at this stage love series such as A-Z Mysteries, Cam Jansen, Junie B. Jones, Mercy Watson, The Magic Treehouse and more.

And there are many other examples of great young chapter books and chapter book series out there. “I love the Good Knight books by Shelley Moore Thomas, which are on the younger, just-beginning-to-read end of the spectrum,” Simonsen says. “And of course Arnold Lobel’s Frog and Toad books set the gold standard. For more experienced readers, I think the Ivy and Bean books by Annie Barrows and the Clementine books by Sara Pennypacker are terrific.”

If you’re curious about reading levels, word count and page ranges of various books, Amazon.com offers a useful feature—“Text Stats.” Listed under the “Inside This Book” section on a book’s Amazon page (following “Product Details”), “Text Stats” reveals not only how many pages the finished book has, but also the number of words, sentences and words per sentence, along with various readability indexes.

At RenLearn.com there is a nifty search tool outlining the interest level, book level, word count and number of pages in many children’s books, as well as various awards, booklists and groupings. (From RenLearn.com, click on “store,” then “quiz search,” then search for a particular title or author.)

While it might be useful and fun to see these text stats and reading levels on Amazon or RenLearn, my advice is that once you click around
a bit, once you’ve immersed yourself in reading favorite titles, just forget about specific word counts and reading levels. Instead stay focused on the heart of your story. Aim for accessibility by creating a strong story with interesting, fun and emotionally real characters.

“When I’m writing a first draft, I try not to get too hung up on word length or classifications like ‘chapter book’ or ‘reader,’ ” says Deborah Underwood, author of 12 children’s books including the popular Pirate Mom. “Once the story is in place, if it feels more like an easy reader, I can simplify the vocabulary and sentence structure. If it feels more like a chapter book, I can add subplots. It seems to me that editors are primarily concerned with finding strong stories.”

Lynn E. Hazen (lynnhazen.com) writes books filled with humor, heart and hope. She is the author of the young adult novel Shifty, which was chosen for VOYA’s Top Shelf Fiction, as a CCBC Choice and a Smithsonian Notable. Her younger books include Mermaid Mary Margaret, Cinder Rabbit, The Amazing Trail of Seymour Snail, and Buzz Bumble to the Rescue. She teaches courses in writing for children and young adults at Stanford Continuing Studies.