

Highlights from CODE/CaribLit/Kingston Book Festival Workshop on Writing for Children and Young Adults

March 6 – 7

Spanish Court Hotel, Kingston



Workshop Outline

Facilitators: [Diane Browne](#), [Richard Scrimger](#)

Thursday, March 6

10:00am-12:00am: *Lying, Stealing, and Bad Parenting: How to Write Children's Fiction (Building Stories from Within)*
Richard Scrimger

12:00pm-1:00pm: Lunch

1:00pm-2:30pm: *Early Childhood: Roots, Rhythm and Reading Levels*
Diane Browne

2:30pm-4:00pm: *Writing Exercises*
Richard Scrimger and Diane Browne

Friday, March 7

10:00am-12:00am: *A Jamaican/Caribbean Twilight or Hunger Games Series? The Writing of YA Material, the Target Audience and the Gatekeepers*
Diane Browne

12:00pm-1:00pm: Lunch

1:00pm-3:00pm: *Writing Exercises*
Richard Scrimger and Diane Browne

3:00pm-4:00pm: *Review work/Q&A*

Lying, Stealing, and Bad Parenting: How to Write Children's Fiction (Building Stories from Within)

Richard Scrimger

- Children are interested in the same things adults are -- love, hate, friendship, anger.
- There are no rules in children's literature. Tell your own story. But the story has to be convincing.
- Your job as a kidlit author is to tell your story. But tell it in a way that will help a child to discover something new.
- Fiction is lying. The best lies are the ones people believe. Believable lies start with a little bit of truth.
- Stories are like pearls. Beautiful, but need a little grit, an irritant, to start their development.
- Feelings are great story builders, but stories only work when there's a problem. Something has to go wrong. Anger, fear, embarrassment, loss -- great building blocks for stories.
- Writing is a prayer. You are in communication with something bigger than you are. Ask, and then listen.
- Writing is also a striptease. You reveal yourself in both the truth and the lies you choose to tell.
- Like the striptease, the audience will not be surprised by the end result. "But you have to work the pole. Pacing is key."
- There are only three basic stories -- journey, loss, stranger comes to town.
- Go deep. Find moments that made you sad/scared. If you're not a little uncomfortable when writing you're probably doing it wrong.
- Stories build -- problem, solution, bigger problem, solution. Build in moments of pause to allow reader to breathe.
- The writer is a bad citizen. A liar. A terrible parent. Get the kids in your stories in trouble.
- Opening sentence must grab the readers' attention and shake them around. Don't stand there clearing your throat.
- Give your lead character something readers can connect to, want to get to know better. Humour, loyalty, competence.

- 3 key questions: What is the book about? What does the protagonist want most? Where is the main relationship?
- Follow the through-line of your story. What one thing does your protagonist want more than anything else?
- Do not ever write a story to teach children something. Do not ever talk down to them.
- Take out the boring old people and the swears in a grown-up book, and you have a credible story for kids.
- Important for children to be the problem solvers in kidlit. Don't bring in adults to solve the problem. Keep the grownups to a minimum in kidlit. Tell the story from the kids' point of view.
- The biggest lesson children learn in school is how to get along with different types of people, how to deal with problems. Important theme in children's literature.
- Other key questions to answer in kids' stories -- why now? why here? why this character? Set up the parameters.
- Remember to give your readers visuals. Give each scene an establishing shot.

On the process of writing:

- Your first draft is your truest. Say the things you need to say. Then remove/add to make story better.
- If you're uncomfortable with revealing yourself in public, writing might not be the career for you.
- Writing can function as therapy or fantasy. Work out your issues or create the character/world you want.
- As a writer you have the right to use your personal experiences. Don't be afraid of hurting family members or friends. Change names, genders to disguise people in fiction.
- On mental blocks: "Work through it." Just keep writing the scene in different ways.
- Want to be a better writer? Read more. The more you read, the better you write.
- Good writing is regular writing. Work on it every day

Early Childhood: Roots, Rhythm and Reading Levels
Diane Browne

- First R in early childhood -- relevance. We need to give children stories that speak to their world, not just the past.
- Local early childhood books critical for self-validation. "We need to show children the rightness of our culture. Our things matter.
- Children's book authors have awesome power and responsibility. Can shape and/or transform children's values and world-view.
- Children's writers must know themselves well. Your values, issues, prejudices will show in your work.
- Pay attention to children's cognitive level, reading level, interests, values and socio-economic background.
- At early childhood level, many children being read to. Sound, rhythm of story very important. Repetition, alliteration, humour are good tools
- Rhyme and repetition work. So does the ridiculous. Play to children's imagination, but you have to get around the gatekeepers.
- The Jamaican early childhood curriculum has a helpful list of topics children 0-8 are learning in school. See curriculum samples [1](#) and [2](#). Full curricula available online at http://www.ecc.gov.jm/l-public_manuls.htm
- Fry method useful for testing reading level: <http://bit.ly/1hQAea3> (See [Fry handout used in workshop](#))
- Sight words are useful guides, but don't get locked into that. Use the opportunity to introduce children to the beauty of words.
- Other issues to consider in writing for primary -- gender balance, role models, social issues, solutions/resolutions Few male role models at home and school. Important to highlight male role models in children's fiction.
- Don't stereotype boy characters. Don't always make them bad guys. (Girls tend to be shown as brainy/good, boys as troublesome)
- How to capture, maintain children's interest?
 1. A topic that reflects their interests
 2. A character with whom they can identify
 3. A situation with which they can empathise, which is funny or exciting.
 4. A beginning that grabs their attention
 5. An ending that is satisfying or leaves them thinking

A Jamaican/Caribbean Twilight or Hunger Games Series? The Writing of YA Material, the Target Audience and the Gatekeepers.

Diane Browne

- YA spans 12-18. Higher end overlaps with adult titles. Lower end overlaps with tween market.
- Jamaican folklore has rich pool to draw on for supernatural, dystopian fiction
- Where to start in writing YA? Find your hero/heroine. Know your audience. Know their interests.
- Need more books with positive male protagonists, catered to boys' interests.
- YA interests: universal needs -- love, acceptance, shelter, success.
- Popular themes: coming of age, romance, heroes. Rarely end happily.
- Strong Jamaican YA interests -- music, dance, athletics, football, "bettering my life"
- Children's authors have to be mindful of gatekeepers: schools, the Ministry of Education, faith-based groups and parents -- all control/weigh in on what kids get to read. All are typically conservative.
- Jamaican authors have to get past constraints of living in a small society, wanting to present idealized version of Jamaica to their readers.

Resources

Jamaica's early childhood curricula available from the Early Childhood Commission: ecc.gov.jm

Primary school curricula available from the Ministry of Education: moey.gov.jm

Caribbean children's book publishers - list available in the [CaribLit Directory](#)

Jamaican children's book publishers currently accepting submissions:

- [Blue Moon Books](#)
- [Carloug Publishers](#)
- [Jackmandora](#)
- [LMH Publishing](#)