Children as Writers in Literature

By

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Kids, like the rest of us, find models in literature. Where is the child who wouldn’t like to live the adventurous life of a Boxcar child? It follows then that one way to motivate young people to write is to introduce them to children’s literature in which kids are writers. From my own broad background of reading as a child, surprisingly enough, I did not encounter many child writers. I do remember the title character in Rosa too Little by Sue Felt. Rosa practices diligently throughout the summer to learn to write her name to receive a library card of her own. As a children’s librarian, that portrayal is near and dear to my heart, but it’s about handwriting — something quite different from the creative process of writing. In fact, in children’s literature before the 1980s, children rarely appeared as writers.

Of course, there was Jo from Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, scribbling away creating melodramatic plays for her sisters to perform and later submitting them as romantic, exotic tales to the penny press.

There were some novels written in the style of a child’s diary or journal, to tell a historical story as a way of illustrating the customs and life-styles of a certain class or group in an earlier time. One such book is Joan W. Blos’ A Gathering of Days (1979). The book’s main character, Catherine, records in her diary entry of January 1, 1831:

‘Turn about and each in turn! Now you shall watch and I shall cook and here’s to the evening meal.’ Thus Father announced a holiday in the New Year honour!

How it regaled us, Matty and I, to watch his hands, so used to the plow, curve to women’s implements and awkwardly employ them.

Catherine’s writing seems stilted, stiff and formal, nothing like a real child’s diary. This may accurately imitate the language of the period, but it does little in helping today’s reader feel the hilarity Catherine and Matty probably enjoyed as they watched their father struggle to make dinner. This “diary,” which has been acclaimed by critics and adults, received the Newbery Award in 1980, but few children list it as a favorite, perhaps because of its lack of intimacy.

One of the few books from before the 1980s that does present children as writers in a positive view is the novel Up a Road Slowly (1966) by Irene Hunt. Julie is sent, after her mother’s death, to live with her Aunt Cordelia and Uncle Haskell. Julie, even at a very young age, is fascinated by books and words and her aunt and uncle foster this interest in different ways. Aunt Cordelia, a high school English teacher, stresses the importance of grammar, mechanics, and usage in Julie’s writing. Uncle Haskell, a slightly alcoholic ne’re-do-well, urges Julie to use her imagination freely. As Julie matures under their
supervision, so do her writing skills. As the novel ends, Julie is graduating from high school and intends to study journalism in college. The only odd note in this novel is that we never see a sample of Julie’s writing. The reader learns that she has written something, that her aunt and/or uncle have proofed it, and that it has been accepted for publication, but the actual piece is never in the story’s text.

But thankfully, over the last twenty years, the image of young writers in children’s literature has changed dramatically. Writing, with its value as a communication tool, its power to present emotions, its ability to observe closely, its mechanics of style, and its creative inspiration, has become relevant in children’s literature today and is portrayed more frequently.

While it is true that a generation ago children as writers appeared infrequently in books, this fact should be considered in the context of the times. Children’s literature was then a small portion of the publishing business. A select handful of authors and illustrators were acclaimed for their work, but children’s access to them was somewhat limited when compared to today. Paperbacks, an inexpensive way to reach a large audience, had not gained popularity in the classroom. Elementary schools often did not have a library for student use; instead, teachers maintained small classroom collections. On the whole, children’s literature proved too small a market for publishers to take much notice.

During the 1970s this began to change. Elementary school libraries received direct funding from the federal government to build and expand their collections. With an expanded market with increased purchasing power, the publishing companies planned to supply and hold these new customers. More authors and illustrators were encouraged to submit their work and so more children’s literature became available. Publishers wanted
to build on their success, so as certain topics, titles, and authors became popular, they were promoted and encouraged.

During this same time, education was changing too. Teachers were looking for more authentic literature rather than relying on the basals. They introduced writing as a process for learning rather than as a simple assignment. Encouraging children to write for a variety of reasons in a myriad of styles became more and more something teachers adopted in their classrooms. Various writing projects within the states provided teachers with a framework, techniques and support, and introduced them to the joy that writing can provide. Teachers brought this excitement to their classrooms, and students responded — as well as the publishing community. Over the past twenty years, more and more books have provided students with age-appropriate, realistic characters who write.

Writing is a way people communicate. Two picture books that show this importance but also demonstrate how differently authors have presented this concept through the years are Mr. Pine's Mixed-up Signs by Leonard Kessler (1961) and The Signmaker’s Assistant by Tedd Arnold (1992). Both books show the results that occur when a signmaker mixes up the placement of his signs. Kessler’s book has a controlled vocabulary and sketchy yellow and black line illustrations. Arnold’s book uses full color, detailed illustrations, and the text is not limited by reading level restrictions.

Another way to show the value of communication is to present children in books that feature correspondence — after all, everyone loves to get mail (although they aren’t always prompt to respond). The picture book, Stringbean’s Trip to the Shining Sea (1987) by Vera Williams, chronicles Stringbean's journey with his big brother from the Midwest to California. Each page is the postcard, canceled stamp attached, that Stringbean’s parents receive.

Sometimes the letter writing presents only one side of the correspondence. The book, The War Began at Supper: Letters to Miss Loria (1991) by Patricia Reilly Giff, compiles the letters of a second-grade class who write to their recently departed student teacher, Miss Loria, just as the Persian Gulf War begins. The novel presents a variety of reactions from the children to the confusing and upsetting changes and worries in their lives. The book does not include any written responses from Miss Loria, although they are implied in some of the children’s letters.

The picture book, Dear Mr. Blueberry (1991) by Simon James, does show both sides of a correspondence. Emily writes:

   Dear Mr. Blueberry,
   I love whales very much and I think I saw one in my pond today. Please send me some information on whales, as I think he might be hurt.
   Love, Emily

Mr. Blueberry, Emily’s teacher, responds:
Dear Emily,
Here are some details about whales. I don’t think you’ll find it was a whale you saw, because whales don’t live in ponds, but in salt water.
Yours sincerely, Your teacher, Mr. Blueberry

Emily replies with:

Dear Mr. Blueberry,
I am now putting salt into the pond every day before breakfast and last night I saw my whale smile. I think he is feeling better.
Do you think he might be lost?
Love, Emily

Through the questions and answers that Emily and her teacher exchange, a picture of the creature in Emily’s backyard pond emerges.

In the book, Dear Annie (1991) by Judith Casely, Annie is just an infant as the first letters arrive from her grandfather. As she matures, she becomes more involved in sending off each response. When she enters first grade, Annie proudly displays her eighty-six cards and letters as part of Show-N-Tell and inspires the rest of the class to become pen pals also.

An unusual correspondence takes place in a novel by Elvira Woodruff, Dear Napoleon, I Know You’re Dead, But... (1992). Marty’s class has been assigned to write to a famous person. Marty, although his teacher objects, writes to Napoleon. Everyone, including Marty, is astonished when he receives a reply via his grandfather’s old age home. Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, and Vincent Van Gogh are just some of the correspondents in this unusual novel.

Probably the most well known of all novels that feature children as letter writers is Dear Mr. Henshaw (1983) by Beverly Cleary. Leigh writes to author Henshaw simply to fulfill a classroom assignment:

September 20
Dear Mr. Henshaw,
This year I am in the sixth grade in a new school in a different town. Our teacher is making us do author reports to improve our writing skills, so of course I thought of you. Please answer the following questions.

1. How many books have you written?
2. Is Boyd Henshaw your real name or is it fake?
3. Why do you write books for children?
4. Where do you get your ideas?
5. Do you have any kids?
6. What is your favorite book that you wrote?
7. Do you like to write books?
8. What is the title of your next book?
9. What is your favorite animal?
10. Please give me some tips on how to write a book.
This is important to mime. I really want to know so I can get to be a famous
author and write books exactly like yours.
Please send me a list of your books that you wrote, an autographed picture and a
bookmark. I need your answer by next Friday. This is urgent!
Sincerely, Leigh Botts

The correspondence that begins provides Leigh with a chance to write about his emotions
and feelings during his parents’ recent divorce:

Saturday, January 20
Dear Mr. Pretend Henshaw,
Every time I try to think up a story, it turns out to be something someone else has
written, usually you. I want to do what you said in your tips and write like me, not
like somebody else. I’ll keep trying because I want to be a Young Author with my
story printed (mimeographed). Maybe I can’t think of a story because I am
waiting for Dad to call. I get so lonesome when I am home alone at night when
Mom is at her nursing class.

With Mr. Henshaw’s prompting and guidance, Leigh also begins to keep a journal.

December 13
Dear Mr. Henshaw,
I bought a composition book like you said. It is yellow with a spiral binding. On
the front I printed
DIARY OF LEIGH MARCUS BOTTS
PRIVATE - KEEP OUT
THIS MEANS YOU!!!!!

When I started to write in it, I didn’t know how to begin. I felt as if I should write,
“Dear Composition Book,” but that sounds dumb. So does “Dear Piece of
Paper.” The first page still looks the way I feel. Blank. I don’t think I can keep a
diary. I don’t want to be a nuisance to you, but I wish you could tell me how. I am
stuck.
Puzzled reader, Leigh Botts

Although Leigh has some problems at first recording his thoughts in his journal and
creating a submission for the Young Authors contest, he is ultimately successful.

March 31
Dear Mr. Henshaw,
I’ll keep this short to save you time reading if I had to tell you something. You
were right. I wasn’t ready to write an imaginary story. But guess what! I wrote a
true story which won Honorable Mention in the Yearbook. Maybe next year I’ll
write something that will win first or second place. Maybe by then I will be able to write an imaginary story. I just thought you would like to know. Thank you for your help.

If it hadn’t been for you, I might have handed in that dumb story about the melting wax trucker.
Your friend, the author, Leigh Botts
P.S. I still write in the diary you started me on.

Cleary continued Leigh’s story in a later book, Strider (1991), but here she has Leigh record his thoughts and emotions in a journal form throughout.

As we visit everyday life of a medieval English manor, the reader also learns of Catherine’s complaints about mealtime, the dreariness of chores, and the lack of understanding from her mother. These same emotions and thoughts are expressed in contemporary novels.

Journals and diaries are still invaluable for showing children in an historical context, but authors today, while keeping the language and setting historically correct, also allow the child writer to express feelings and thoughts that are universal throughout the ages. Karen Cushman’s Newbery honor book, Catherine, Called Birdy (1994), is the journal of a girl in 1290. As we visit everyday life of a medieval English manor, the reader also learns of Catherine’s complaints about mealtime, the dreariness of chores, and the lack of understanding from her mother. These same emotions and thoughts are expressed in contemporary novels like Dear Mom, You’re Ruining My Life (1989) by Jean Van Leeuwen and Memo: To Myself When I Have a Teenage Kid (1983) by Carol Snyder. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Diaries and journals are often thought of as opportunities for personal reflection, expression, and close observation through writing that will not be read by others. But classroom journals, styles of notetaking, writing to learn and writers’ workshop have all been embraced by the classroom. These styles of writing are now shown in children’s literature also. Characters in books now comfortably present themselves as writers, both within the plot and to the readers. Two characters that typify this trend are Anastasia Krupnik and Bingo Brown. Both are characterized by unique voices, humorous outlooks on life, realistic problems faced by many children, and the willingness to take some chances and experiment with different writing styles.
Throughout the series of Anastasia books by Lois Lowry, Anastasia experiments with writing lists, keeping notes of a science experiment, corresponding through an ad from the personals, writing a novel, preparing a resume, and serving as a junior journalist. Anastasia always has her green notebook ready.

‘Reasons for becoming a Catholic,’ wrote Anastasia in her green notebook.

1. There are fourteen Catholics in the fourth grade, and four Jews, and everybody else is something else—I don’t know what—but whatever it is is not very interesting. So I would make the fifteenth Catholic. And if ever they started a club or something, I would automatically be in it. That would be nice.

2. And I would get a new name. Maybe at about the same time I get a new brother.

Anastasia thought vaguely that probably there were other good reasons for becoming a Catholic. But she didn’t know what the other reasons might be; and the ones she had listed seemed good enough.”

Bingo Brown, created by Betsy Byars, prepares an advice column for his newborn brother, writes to several girlfriends, and during each English class records his thoughts in his journal. But, like many students, Bingo can have a problem getting started:
It was English again, and Bingo sat staring at his sheet of paper. This was one of the assignments he had been looking forward to. This was the day they were writing to their favorite authors.

Bingo had already decided he would write to Ray Bradbury and reveal to him that he had three science fiction novels underway. Even though he still had only one paragraph done on each one, he figured Ray Bradbury did not get many letters from twelve-year olds who have started three novels.

However, the fact that Billy Wentworth was going to move next door to him occupied his whole mind. So far, Billy didn’t know. Bingo could tell that from the way he said, “Hello, Worm Brain,” in his usual way, but when Billy Wentworth did find out, he was not going to like it.

The class had now been working on their letters for fifteen minutes. All Bingo had on his paper were two words.

Dear Ray,

Bingo sighed. He decided to do what he usually did in blank moments — sharpen his pencil and check out the other letters. He’d be very surprised if he saw any other Dear Rays.

He got up. He knew he would have to walk very briskly so it wouldn’t look suspicious. He passed one Lloyd Alexander, one Jean Fritz and one Dr. Seuss.

Many of the techniques of the up-to-date writing classroom are represented in children’s literature. Does this passage from Write On, Rosy! by Sheila Greenwald sound familiar?

“Your teacher, Mrs. Oliphant, is going to start a Young Authors’ Program. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday you will have an hour-long Writing Workshop beginning with a Mini-Lesson, ending with a Group-Share, and lots of time in between to write.”

Mrs. Oliphant pointed to a stack of folders. “You’ll each have a folder in which to put your work,” she said.

“What’s the topic?” Mary asked.

“You will choose your own topics,” Mrs. Oliphant said. “Fiction, nonfiction, science fiction, whatever you like. There will be tables set up at the back of the room for editing and revising and conferencing.”

Dr. Gormly beamed at us. “When your work is complete, you will publish by printing it neatly in real bound books. These will be displayed in the library and read by your classmates and teachers.”
Although writing is honored and encouraged within the classroom, some novels show how writing plays a larger part within a child's family or community. In Beans on the Roof (1988), Betsy Byars shows how everyone, from young to old, can become a writer. Anne Bean composes a poem to be included in the classroom anthology while on the roof of her apartment building. One by one the others of her family join her there and are also inspired to write.

In Save Halloween! (1993) by Stephanie Tolan, Johnna feels honored and proud when her teacher asks her to write a play for the sixth grade to perform at Halloween to raise money for UNICEF. But this project disrupts the community when Johnna's evangelist uncle arrives and denounces Halloween as the devil's holiday. This thoughtful novel presents no easy answers and shows how words can convince, inspire, and influence others.

Any teacher who has planned or participated in an author's visit, or is thinking about doing so, should read Daniel Manus Pinkwater's picture book, Author's Day (1993). Pinkwater shows the visitation tongue-in-cheek, from the author's perspective.

Contemporary books not only show kids writing, they sometimes allow children to study and observe published authors at work. Schools today often sponsor author visits and children's literature reflects this.

A kind and understanding author helps Mary Maroney cope with her stuttering (Mary Maroney Hides Out, 1993, by Suzy Kline); Truman (Squinty) Gritt is honored when the visiting author selects his name to feature in her next book (The Author and Squinty Gritt, 1990, by Barbara Williams); and Mariah learns the lesson that "just because a book is entertaining, it doesn't mean the author will be," when an author visits her monthly club (Mariah Delaney's Author-of-the-Month Club, 1990, by Sheila Greenwald).

Any teacher who has planned or participated in an author's visit, or is thinking about doing so, should read Daniel Manus Pinkwater's picture book, Author's Day (1993). Pinkwater shows the visitation tongue-in-cheek, from the author's perspective. Teachers should easily be able to identify faculty, staff, students, and circumstances similar to those they know. It may not be flattering, but it is a humorous story. This is what happens when author Bramwell Wink-Porter is taken to the gym to talk with the second and third grades:
The second and third graders had prepared questions to ask the famous author.

"Was it hard to write The Fuzzy Bunny?" they asked him.

"No, it was not very hard... I suppose," Bramwell Wink-Porter said.

"What is your favorite book?" another child asked.

"My favorite book is Moby Dick by Herman Melville," Bramwell Wink-Porter answered.

"No — I mean your favorite book that you wrote."

"Oh. Well, I’d have to say The Bunny Brothers," Bramwell Wink-Porter said.

The second and third graders looked at each other.

"You haven’t read that one, have you?" Bramwell Wink-Porter said. "Well, I hope you will."

"What is your favorite rodent?"

"That’s easy — a bunny," said Bramwell Wink-Porter.

"A bunny isn’t properly a rodent. Bunnies belong to the order of Lagomorpha."

"In that case, I’d say gerbils are my favorite rodents. Gerbils are rodents, aren’t they?"

"What is your favorite ladies’ shoe?"

"A light green high-heeled sandal, size eight."

"What is your own shoe size?"

"Ten."

"Do you have a favorite kind of toast?"

"Yes, raisin."

"What is the greatest number of hot dogs you have eaten at one sitting?"

"Eleven."
“Have you ever been to South America?”

“No.”

“Would you like to go there?”

“Yes.”

“Which is better, grape soda or ginger ale?”

“Grape soda.”

“Have you ever been bitten by a horse?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all the time we have, children,” Mrs. Feenbogen said. “Let’s give Mr. Bramwell Wink-Porter a big hand.”

Books today even provide students with settings and characters that combine to point out how writing can be improved. There are many nonfiction books that directly address children and their writing skills and abilities, but not as many that in story form show how an author works through putting a book together. Two new titles, What do Authors Do? (1995) by Eileen Christelow and From Pictures to Words (1995) by Janet Stevens follow two popular picture book authors as they think of an idea, prepare text and illustrations, revise and edit, and finally go to press. Both books have a wealth of information which is presented fictionally. As From Pictures to Words begins, Janet Stevens is pictured in sepia tones while surrounding her are such colorful characters as a buffalo in cowboy boots, a tabby cat wearing a parka and tasseled winter hat, a panda in ice skates, a walrus wearing a vivid Hawaiian shirt, a rhino in a blue pin-striped suit with red tie, and a koala in a teal chenille bathrobe wearing pink bunny slippers. Janet explains: “...I am an illustrator. Drawing pictures for books is my job. Authors write the words, then I do the artwork.”

This obviously doesn’t satisfy the others. They quickly interject, “We’re the characters in your imagination talking. We think it’s about time you wrote a story for us.”

Janet protests, “I draw pictures. I can’t write stories!”

But the characters are insistent and say,

You can if you try! Come on, we’re all dressed up with no place to go. We need to be in a book. We want something exciting to do. We need places to go, people to
meet. We’re like actors without a stage, burgers without buns, aliens without spaceships.

And with an appeal like that, what else can Janet do but give it a try? These characters support, collaborate, suggest, and sometimes bicker as they help Janet through the creative process of writing, illustrating, and publishing a book.

Although the story is not actually written within the text, it is only suggested by the sketches and props shown in the illustrations. Kate Duke’s Aunt Isabel Tells a Good One (1992) guides the reader through all the plot elements needed to keep an audience entertained and involved. Like most children little Penelope has a simple request.

“Tell me a story,” said Penelope one night after supper.

“What kind of story?” asked Aunt Isabel.

“A good story,” said Penelope.

“All right,” said Aunt Isabel. “A good story is the hardest kind to tell, though. We must put it together carefully, with just the right ingredients. Let’s start by giving it a When and a Where. When does the story begin?”

“Long, long ago,” said Penelope.

“And where does it begin?” asked Aunt Isabel.

“Think of a place where exciting things can happen.”

With Aunt Isabel’s prompting Penelope adds a prince and a princess, handsome, talented and charming; romance; a problem; villains, odious, nasty and bad; a little danger; a daring and ingenious rescue; and naturally a happy ending.
There are even a limited number of books that describe the editing process. This passage comes from Write on, Rosy!

In Writing Workshop I took my official Dr. Gormly story to the editing table. At the editing table were red and blue pencils. I marked the words I thought were spelled wrong and the punctuation I wasn’t sure about. Then I changed some paragraphs around so they sounded better. I thought up some new words that had more impact. I used the circle-and-expand strategy, circling sentences where I needed more information; and the circle-and-delete strategy, circling what seemed unnecessary.

Rosy obviously understands editing very well.

Although today’s authors present children who write more frequently, there is still one aspect of writing that is not often included. Writers seldom explain or show how someone gets the initial idea that finally becomes a written piece. Some non-fiction books directed at beginning writers are filled with prompts, recipes, tips, and general guidelines to encourage thinking, observing, and hopefully writing. But even with all these formulas, the nonfiction books don’t explain how that wisp of an idea, that fragment of a thought gets translated to pencil and paper and put down for others to read.

Some books do hint at the difficulties that await writers, both novice and accomplished. For one thing, writing is hard work. As Charlotte describes in Shakespeare and Annie the Great (1989) by Barbara W are Holmes, “To them (her father and the school librarian), it
might sound easy to write a work of art, but it wasn’t. So far, it was the hardest thing she’d ever done, and she hadn’t even done it yet.”

For another, it’s easy for a writer to get distracted. This obviously happens to Richard, in Lazy Lions, Lucky Lambs (1989) by Patricia Reilly Giff:

He thought about spiders. He wished he could write a story about them. Real ones. Giant size. He’d call his story ‘Richard the Spider Boy.’ This time Holly would be afraid. She’d be standing on top of the couch. She’d beg him to get rid of the spiders. He’d wait until they had crawled all over the place. Then he’d lasso them. They’d fall on the floor. They’d break into a zillion pieces. Just the way the blue statue had. Suddenly he remembered loose-leaf. He should have gotten some at the candy store. He thought about going back. It was too much trouble.

But when a writer finally “gets” just the right idea, then the writing begins to happen, as it does with Anastasia in Anastasia Krupnick (1984) by Lois Lowry:

Anastasia was listening to the words that were appearing in her own head, floating there and arranging themselves into groups, into lines, into poems. There were so many poems being born in her head that she ran all the way home from school to find a private place to write them down, the way her cat had once found a private place — the pile of ironing in the pantry — in which to create kittens.

There will always be children for whom writing comes naturally and easily, while others will struggle to put together a sentence. But at least for now, when a child needs to bring to mind a writer and what that person does, examples can be found in children’s literature. Little Rosa, who struggled to write her name on a library card, now has a place in a literary world with other child characters who write.

**Bibliography for Children as Writers in Literature**

Arnold, Tedd. (1992). The signmaker’s assistant. New York: Dial. The signmaker’s young apprentice, Norman, longs to be in charge, but creates problems throughout the town when he has a chance to run the shop. Grades K-2.

Bedard, Michael. (1992). Emily. New York: Doubleday. When a mother and child pay a visit to their reclusive neighbor Emily, who stays in her house writing poems, there is an exchange of special gifts. A n unusual portrait of a famous poet and her writing habits. A picture book that can be used with older students when showing how writers get their ideas. Grades 1-5.

The journal of a fourteen-year-old girl as she lives on a New Hampshire farm. She records the daily events, her father’s remarriage, and the death of her best friend. Although a Newbery Medal Award book, the plot is not especially moving. Grades 4-6.


An adaptation of the diary of six-year-old Opal Whiteley, in which she describes her life in an Oregon lumber camp in the early 1900s. Although the text has been adapted, Opal’s longing to have more free time to view nature and record her thoughts is clearly presented. The words and phrasing seem typical of a young child. Grades 1-3.


Arthur’s essay wins a contest and he has to read it to the President in a special ceremony at the White House. Any “Arthur” book has a ready-made audience. Although more emphasis is placed on Arthur’s delivery of the essay, rather than his composition of it, it does show that writing has a purpose. Grades K-2.


Each member of the Bean family is inspired by going to the roof of their apartment building to write a poem. Grades 2-4.


Bingo tries to sustain a long-distance romance with Melissa while fending off Cici. He also copes with the impending arrival of a newborn sibling while gracefully navigating puberty. Bingo’s letters to Melissa are interspersed with the chapters. Grades 5-7.


As his parents regress into childhood, Bingo Brown prepares for the biggest responsibility of his young life — being a big brother. Between the chapters Bingo writes letters of advice to his not-yet-born brother. Grades 5-7.


Bingo Brown reflects on the unanswerable questions of life — the confusing problems of youth, romance, growing up, and insights into adult conflicts — in his English class journal. Grades 5-7.


Warren creates horror movie scripts to compensate for his longing for the love of his long-absent mother. Portions of his many scripts, one of which features a goldfish grown immense in the sewer system, are throughout the book. Grades 4-6.


Cushman, Karen. *Catherine, called Birdy*. (1994). New York: Clarion. Birdy, the thirteen-year-old daughter of an English country knight, keeps a journal in which she records the events of her life, particularly her longing for adventures beyond the usual role of women and her efforts to avoid being married off. Although the language and events of the book set it in the Middle Ages, Birdy's feelings and emotions are universal to any era. Grades 6-8.


Felt, Sue. (1950). *Rosa-too-little*. New York: Doubleday. Rosa enjoys visiting the library during story hour but longs to sign out books on her own. After practicing throughout the summer, she is able to sign her name and receive her own library card. Grades K-2.

Giff, Patricia Reilly. (1985). *Lazy lions, lucky lambs*. New York: Dell. Richard "Beast" Best, who absolutely hates the month of March, must come up with a subject for a class essay assignment about a real person because, without a good grade, he may be left back again. Richard's steps, in selecting a subject and then preparing his report, are a great guide to any beginning writer. Grades 2-4.
The children in Mrs. Clark’s second grade class write letters to their former student teacher, Miss Loria, about events at school mixed with comments on the Persian Gulf Crisis. The letters vary in their reactions to the Gulf crisis. Some seem typical of a second grader, while others show an adult maturity and outlook. Grades 3-5.

Mariah invites authors to speak at her Author-of-the-Month Club with near disastrous results. When the club members begin to take a turn as the Authors-of-the-Month, the club becomes a success. Grades 4-6.

Having decided she might like a career as a writer, Rosy Cole chooses to write about her headmistress for the school’s Young Author’s Program, and the result is both revealing and disastrous. Rosie’s tactics for gathering her information and reporting her findings imitate the tabloid magazines, rather than serious journalists. A light hearted and humorous story. Grades 3-5.

Cairo holds a new appeal for Ahmed, a butagaz boy who makes deliveries throughout the city. Ahmed is being tutored in learning to read and write. Grades K-2.

Charlotte writes a play for the sixth grade and helps her friend, Annie, audition and become the lead in the play. Grades 4-6.

Julie goes to live with Aunt Cordelia in the country. Auntie is exact about everything, but after some adjustments, Julie elects to remain with Aunt Cordelia when her father remarries. Through the years Aunt Cordelia encourages Julie’s interest in becoming a writer. Grades 4-6.

A young girl and her teacher correspond about the creature she has discovered in her pond. Through the series of letters, the reader, along with the girl and her teacher, Mr. Blueberry, gradually begin to realize the creature is a whale. Grades K-2.

When Mr. Pine misplaces his glasses, the signs he makes are placed at unusual locations causing havoc in town. Finally Mr. Pine finds his glasses and straightens out the problems. Grades K-1.
Mary, a second grader, is so embarrassed about her stuttering that she almost misses a chance to have lunch with her favorite author. Mary’s speech disorder is portrayed realistically. The author’s sympathetic reaction to Mary and her suggestions about Mary’s writing, make any reader long for an author’s visit. Grades 1-3.

On her seventy-fifth birthday, Elzibah Swan decides she will learn to swim, and her new activity inspires her to develop other skills and gain self respect and independence. As she does, she recounts her accomplishments in letters to her two grandchildren. Grades 1-3.

Twelve-year-old Anastasia is not happy about her parents’ decision to move to a new home in the suburbs. Throughout the novel Anastasia writes a five chapter novel. Grades 4-6.

Anastasia Krupnik sets out to psychoanalyze herself as she attempts to cope with the problems of growing up, conflict with her mother, trouble with her little brother Sam, and the pressures of becoming thirteen. Anastasia’s diary entries separating the chapters reveal her attempts to copy Freud and Jung. Grades 5-7.

Anastasia, through correspondence with a number in a personal ad, presents herself as much older and mature. This becomes a problem when Anastasia agrees to meet her pen pal in person. Grades 5-7.

Thirteen-year-old Anastasia sets out to pursue her goal of becoming a journalist by probing for the reasons behind Daphne Bellingharn’s parents’ divorce; while, at the same time, trying to cope with her lack of coordination in gym class. Anastasia records her thoughts, feelings, and reactions in her diary. Grades 5-7.

Anastasia’s tenth year is filled with some wonderful happenings, like falling in love and really getting to know her grandmother; but other things, including a name that is too long and a new baby brother are awful. Anastasia’s diary entries are interspersed between the chapters of narration. Grades 5-7.

In her mother’s absence, resourceful Anastasia has to cope with her brother Sam’s chicken pox, an unexpected visit from her father’s old girlfriend, and her own first date. To run the household successfully, Anastasia writes lists of things to accomplish. Unfortunately things usually don’t go as planned. Grades 5-7.

Lowry, Lois. (1992). Attaboy, Sam! Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Sam is able to help his sister Anastasia with the poem she is writing for their mother’s birthday, but his own efforts to create a special perfume are disastrous. Sam’s contributions to the poetic process are given equal value as that of his older sister, Anastasia. Sam also explains how he learned to read. Grades 5-7.

Nixon, Joan Lowery. (1988). If you were a writer. New York: Four Winds. In an introduction to the craft of creative writing, Mother helps Melia search for ideas, discover descriptive vocabulary, and develop characters and plots in order for Melia to express herself through her stories. An excellent presentation in a picture book format aimed at a young audience. Grades 1-2.


Pfeffer, Susan Beth. (1989). Dear dad, love Laurie. New York: Scholastic. Laurie’s letters to her divorced father follow her year in sixth grade and her efforts to enter her school’s program for the gifted and talented. The novel is told entirely through Laurie’s letters. Grades 4-6.


Pinkwater, Daniel Manus. (1993). Author’s day. New York: Macmillan/Maxwell. A famous children’s author visits an elementary school and the description of his day is the perfect example of what shouldn’t occur. A very humorous book, especially from a teacher’s viewpoint. All grades.

Robertson, Keith. (1958). Henry Read, Inc. New York: Viking. Henry and his friend Midge, go into the “research business” during summer vacation. The results of their enterprises are recorded in Henry’s journal. Unfortunately, the journal entries are presented as a narrative and do not appear in the first person voice. Grades 4-6.
Reading the diary her mother wrote when she was thirteen helps Karen gain a better understanding of her mother and herself. Grades 4-6.

Janet Stevens, with the help of Koala Bear, Cat, and Rhino from her imagination, describes how she writes and illustrates a picture book. Grades K-2.

Eleven-year-old Johnna, who is involved in writing the sixth grade 1-Halloween pageant, faces conflict with her family who views the time as a un-Christian holiday. Grades 6-8.

A good-natured but overenthusiastic mother is just one of the problems eleven-year-old Samantha records in her diary. Grades 4-6.

When a famous children’s author visits Squinty’s school and offers a special prize, Squinty puts his imagination to work. He wins; and, as he lunches with the author, learns she will incorporate his name in a future book. Grades 2-4.

Stringbean describes his trip to the West Coast in a series of postcards. Every aspect of the postcard, from its illustration to the postmark relate to the text. Stringbean visits most of the U.S. states as he travels west. Grades 1-4.

Marty receives a surprising reply when he writes a letter describing his spirited but sick grandfather to Napoleon Bonaparte as a school assignment. Throughout the novel, Marty continues to receive replies to his letters to other historical figures. At the end, Marty and the reader are left with a sense of mystery about who replied. Grades 5-7.

Illustration on page 27 by Louis Jambor from Little Women (1947 edition).
Illustration on page 30 by Irene Haas from Dear Dragon (1962).
Illustration on page 33 by Sue Felt from Rosa Too Little (1950).

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