Arts & Humanities

The Little Class that Could

How do you write a children’s book?

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Once upon a time, there was a children's-book author named Peter Catalanotto who taught adults how to write picture books for kids. He had soft, wavy hair, seventeen published children's books to his name, and a habit of calling adults "grown-ups." He also had a firm belief that to be a successful children's-book writer, you had to leave all your notions about the genre at the gingerbread door.

At the first meeting of his 2016 summer class — a six-week, twelve-session course that he's taught at Columbia's School of the Arts for three years — Catalanotto urged the aspiring authors in the room to push back against some of their instincts. Worried about using big words in a book for children? Don't be. Kids *love* learning new terms, and since they can deduce meaning from illustrations, they'd much rather read about the story's hero going "incognito" than wearing a boring old "disguise." Have an important life lesson you want to pass along to your young readers? Squeeze the brakes a little. A kid's daily life is nothing *but* lessons and rules and advice, so any moralistic takeaway should be subtly embedded in the fabric of the story.

Think that dinosaurs are too scary, that "Show, don't tell" is the golden axiom of creative writing, and that the universally cherished *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch and Sheila McGraw is among the greatest children's books of all time? Wrong, wrong, and wrong again. Dinosaurs fall into the "safe" kind of scary because they don't exist anymore; "showing" may sometimes not register, so embrace "telling" in straightforward exposition; and *Love You Forever* isn't the best children's book because, well, it isn't really a children's book.

"*Love You Forever* is a story written for parents," Catalanotto explained to his class. "Trust me: young kids aren't lying in bed pondering deep questions of mortality and legacy and how they'll feel when their parents are old and dying. It's a story of sentimentality, and sentiment comes from time and experience, which kids haven't had yet." And while Catalanotto conceded that it's adults, not children, who typically buy and review children's books, he nevertheless advised against writing with parents, editors, and reviewers in mind. "Don't try to connect with adults. Try to connect with their inner children."

Those inner children come in grown-ups of all ages, as Catalanotto's class shows. "One of the elements of the class I enjoy the most is the various age groups each year," he says. "It's mostly twentysomethings, but there's always a sprinkling of older folk. Everyone benefits from the different perspectives and life experiences."

Most of the class is made up of SOA students, and the rest are Columbia alumni or undergrads from other colleges — this year's class had students from Barnard, Princeton, and Vanderbilt.

One thing people tend to have in common, no matter their ages, is a fixed idea of how a children's book should look and feel, based on the massive success of titles like *Love You Forever, Goodnight Moon*, and *The Cat in the Hat*. It's not that one shouldn't aspire to follow in these footsteps ("I'm not here to stop you from making a million bucks," Catalanotto quipped). But being influenced by childhood favorites is an all-too-common trap for new children's-book writers.

"Write something honest that comes to you authentically," says Catalanotto. "The best stories don't come from an idea — they come from an emotion. And that emotion should come from your personal childhood."

Catalanotto credits his success as a children's-book author to being an outsider. The Long Island native received his BFA from the Pratt Institute, and in 1987 he was asked to illustrate the cover of Judy Blume's *Just as Long as We're Together*.

Writing soon followed the art gigs. And because Catalanotto didn't start out as an author, it was easier for him to buck tradition and formulas, and to come up with fresh stories like *Ivan the Terrier* and *Monkey & Robot*. Most importantly, though, he was unaware of stale conventions, which in turn made him unafraid of risk — and incognito dinosaurs.

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