

# Children's Book Insider

The Children's Writing Monthly



November 2020

**Pull Your Reader  
Into the Action!**



**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE  
SUBMISSION CODE:**

**REYCRAFT BOOKS**

# SUSAN B. KATZ

## KID LIT QUEEN OF MULTI-TASKING

interview by PJ McIlvaine

**A**ward-winning children's author and speaker Susan B. Katz is the epitome of prolific. Taking the pandemic in stride and adapting with social media, Katz juggles a multitude of projects that would leave most writers exhausted with a mind-boggling 19 books coming out in 2020-2021 (by the time you read this it may be more). Fiction, nonfiction picture books, chapter book biographies, rhyme, trade titles, YA—you name it, Katz has probably written it, or if not, she'll create it. Ideas come to her fast and furious: on airplanes, while traveling, even while sleeping. No writer's block here! A native of Michigan, Katz loves salsa dancing and lazy (or maybe not) days at the beach. Her website is <https://susankatzbooks.com/>

**PJ McILVAINE:** You're an extremely prolific writer. Was it always that way?

**SUSAN B. KATZ:** Yes! I've been writing since I was a kid and started submitting manuscripts in my mid-20s. After teaching for a few years in the US, I moved to Spain to teach at the American School of Valencia. There, I met several visiting authors, including Bruce Coville (whose animated presentation inspired me to want to be an author and bring books to life in-person) and Anne Miranda. I showed Anne my first manuscript, in 1996 and she said, "Send this to my agent." When I returned to California, I sent it out to a bunch of agents and editors and got an agent—not hers, but the agent I am with today. From there, it took ten years of submitting, growing a very thick skin from binders full of rejections, attending SCBWI conferences, receiving critiques in my bi-weekly San Francisco writer's group, until I finally got my first offer from Penguin Random House in 2008.



The book came out in 2010. Along that path, there has never been a shortage of ideas. They come to me while I'm sleeping (I woke up with the idea for the book my agent is currently subbing) and when I am driving (a line of *My Mama Earth*, which won the Moonbeam Gold for Best Picture Book in 2012, came to me in the car and I had to pull over to write it down). I have over 50 unpublished manuscripts on my laptop and, surprisingly, I wrote my first book in the notes of my phone. The day my twin nephews were born, while I was flying back to California from my home state of Michigan, I was struck with the concept of all the things people do for a baby—not to mention, two! *ABC, Baby Me*, was written during the five hour flight and became my first published book with Penguin Random House (2010).

**PM:** Did you aspire to be a writer as a kid?

**SK:** I wouldn't say aspire as much as felt inspired by words and language. I'm a word woman, first and foremost—I love rhyme, cognates (words that have similar Latin roots in English and Spanish like plural/plural or libro/book and library). I've been writing since I was in elementary school. I wrote my first book, about my dog Ginger refusing to sleep in her new house, in kindergarten. Then, in fourth grade, I had an incredible teacher, named Ms. Schultz, who made us all believe we were poets. I learned how to write haikus, tankas, and cinquains and fell in love with language. More than that, I began identifying as a writer at the early age of nine. In middle school, I entered a Mother's Day poem about my grandma in the *Detroit Free Press* writing contest and won! My high school speeches for student government and valedictorian were all written

*Susan B. Katz continued*

in rhyme. At my high school reunion, people said they weren't surprised at all that I became an author who writes in rhyme. It's been one of my signature qualities since I was a teenager.

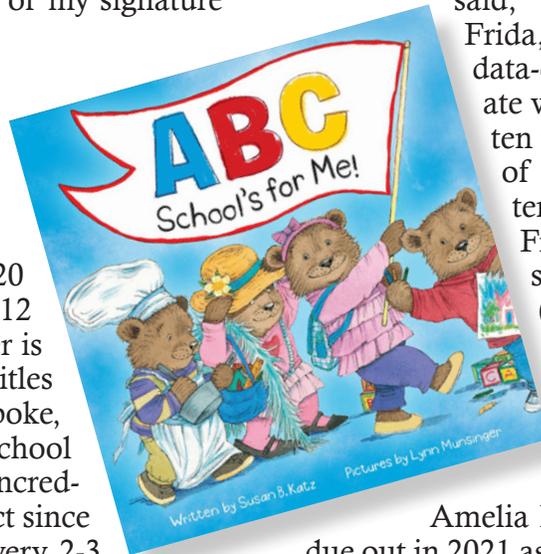
**PM:** You're having an incredible run. I've lost track of how many books you have coming out in 2020-2021.

**SK:** I have seven coming out in 2020 (12 titles total to date) and another 12 coming out in 2021, so that number is 19 for 2020-2021, and two dozen titles total (it went up since we first spoke, some are trade titles and others are school market). It's very surreal, and I'm incredibly grateful for every single contract since I used to have a book come out every 2-3 years (*ABC Baby Me*, PRH, 2010; *My Mama Earth*, Barefoot Books, 2012; *ABC School's For Me!*, Scholastic Press, 2015; *All Year Round*, Scholastic, 2016; *Un Año Redondo*, the Spanish translation which I wrote for Scholastic, 2017). One of my forthcoming titles is that first book I wrote while living in Spain, 25 years ago, and started submitting in 1998. I never gave up on it. I revised, did dummies, submitted it, and, finally, found a publisher who "got" the book. It comes out next year, with a major house, and has an amazingly talented illustrator working on it.

**PM:** How did the nonfiction biographical series come about? Did you pitch the series? What are the criteria for the subject matter in terms of who to write about? Do you envision this as an ongoing series?

**SK:** An editor I'd worked with in the past reached out to see if I'd be interested in writing an early chapter book biography. I struggled at first since I'd never written in that genre before. I was traveling throughout Europe last summer when I wrote the first title, *The Story of Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, and my editor was incredibly patient and supportive as I figured out how to write it like she and the team envisioned. The second book in the series, *The Story*

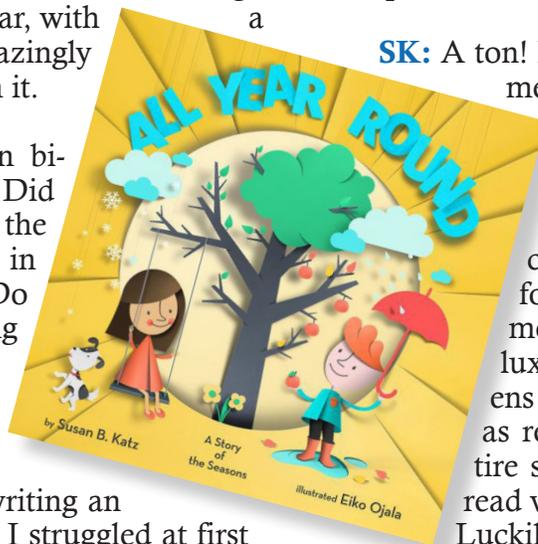
*of Frida Kahlo*, went so much smoother in terms of process and end product that she wrote to me and said, "That! Whatever you did with Frida, keep doing that!" Callisto is a data-driven company so they generate who they want biographies written about and it is very much a part of an on-going series. I have written seven titles in the series: RBG, Frida, Jane Goodall, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Fred Rogers (Nov 2020), Gandhi (Jan 2021), and other authors have written Hamilton, MLK, etc. I just finished another book for Callisto, aimed at a little higher age-level, about the mystery of



Amelia Earhart's disappearance. That's due out in 2021 as well. It is the longest, and most elaborately-researched, kids' book I've completed at 20k word count. My opinion on what happened to her radically changed after I completed the research. I, of course, I don't let on to that fact for the kids. I just provide clues about her disappearance and let them draw their own conclusion.

**PM:** How much research is involved in these early chapter book biographies?

**SK:** A ton! People have been asking me all summer, given how long we've been quarantined: "What are you reading now?" One full year after I started writing RBG on the Spanish island of Gran Canarias down near Africa, I finally have time to read a book for pleasure that my mom just sent me: *The Book of Lost Names*. It's a huge luxury since I've been reading dozens of biographies and autobiographies as research this past year. I have an entire shelf dedicated to all of the books I read while researching The Story of series. Luckily, after buying many of them, I finally caught onto checking them out from the library instead. The research for Amelia Earhart was very rooted in primary sources, like CIA reports and Navy logs. There are fact checkers, sensitivity readers, developmental and copy editors—aside from my primary editor—so all of my research is



*Susan B. Katz continued*

double, triple-checked. I learned to cite my sources proactively in the comments to make my life easier and help out the many people who comb through the manuscripts.

**PM:** Does writing about people who are still alive have its own set of challenges?

**SK:** It has truly been an honor to write about each and every one of the people featured in The Story of biography series. I actually find it easier to write about icons who are still alive. For example, I had the good fortune of seeing Dr. Jane Goodall speak in San Francisco last November which launched my research for her biography. Nothing like hearing it directly from the source! With RBG, I was able to watch videos of her speaking online and see her, frequently, on the news. For people like Frida and Amelia, I read their diaries and autobiographies, respectively. I listened to audiotapes of Gandhi speaking. I tried to take on each person's life story, in my mind walking a mile (or in Gandhi's case, many miles) in their shoes. It was slightly harder to research Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie since they are from a time when there wasn't YouTube or even, in Marie's case, very many audio recordings. Writing this series reminds me of how much I actually geek out on research. One thing I was challenged by, initially, was remembering how to format a bibliography. It had been years since I was asked to include one!

**PM:** Your first book was published in 2010. How has the kidlit market changed since then? Has it been for the better or worse?

**SK:** I taught elementary school from 1993-2013, so I've been immersed in children's books both as a creator and also as a consumer. I've been to Bologna, as an agent, twice. I think that the quality and palette have improved for the better, overall, with the advent of digital tools like layers in Photoshop, etc. I also see more foreign books being brought into the U.S. On that note, as a bilingual writer, the demand for books that are bilingual has increased along with the rising Latinx population. In the past five or 10 years,

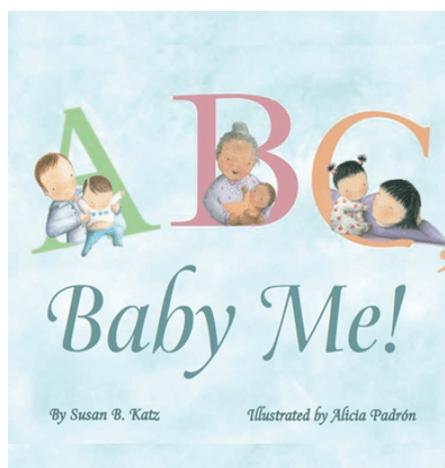
#Ownvoices and #WeNeedDiverseBooks took hold as publishers seek to make books that serve as both mirrors and windows for children. Overall, the quality and quantity have increased. I believe the variety of forms books now take—creatively engineered pop up books, graphic novels, wordless books—allow us to shine and think out-of-the-box. One thing I noticed is that, after I had a few books under my belt, I had more success in pitch meetings in NYC. Editors wanted to see what else I had up my sleeve. I've been an author, agent, and senior editor, so I've experienced the industry from all angles.

Sometimes, rigid rules like not accepting unsolicited and/or unagented manuscripts, feel restrictive. On the plus side, social media is much more crucial for connecting with agents, editors, and other authors: for example, #PitMad pitch wars on Twitter and #mswl (Manuscript Wish List). The best part is we all share a common goal of publishing the highest-quality books for children possible. That's most palpable in Bologna or at an SCBWI conference.

**PM:** Which genre do you prefer, fiction or nonfiction? Is one easier genre to write than the other?

**SK:** Fiction allows me to express my creativity more, while non-fiction lets me share my expertise. Specifically, I like “concept

books” the best, which can sometimes be a mix of F and NF. Teaching children, through literature, about the ocean, months or shapes fills my soul as an educator, using writing as the vehicle. I also love the STEAM-themed (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) books I'm writing now. I studied environmental science at the University of Michigan and spent my junior year abroad working in a Costa Rican rain forest, so topics like ecosystems, biomimicry, and predator/prey relationships are very much in my wheelhouse. The ideas that “come to me” are mostly fiction and concept books that lead to traditional, advance-against-royalty, trade deals. The pure nonfiction is usually more of an assigned, work-for-hire situation which is fulfilling in its own way.



*Susan B. Katz continued*

**PM:** Where do you get your inspiration?

**SK:** The short answer is: from kids! I probably taught hundreds of students over the span of my 25-year career (I still do some part-time work as an educational consultant) and my own nephews inspire me endlessly. In truth, I've upped the age level of my books as they grew almost lockstep.

That first book about them was a board book, then I grew into picture books when they were the target age for that and, now, I am writing chapter books. I also lean into my own experience. If I heard one thing at writer's conferences, almost predictably on cue, it was: "write what you know." My forthcoming book, *Meditation Station* which just won the 2020 International Book Award for Best Mind/Body/Spirit book for kids, is based on my experience meditating and listening to dharma talks. I came up with this book, about mindfulness and trains, to help kids (and let's be honest, adults too!) calm their minds and bodies in order to avoid getting whisked away by their train of thoughts. Little did I know this book would be so timely and in demand given the current prevalence of distance learning and Covid-restricted classrooms. I worked in the rain forest and have two books coming out next year about that, one is a bilingual concept book that teaches the animals names in Spanish and English, and the other is an autobiography for older kids about my work converting La Cangreja into a national park. I just got assigned a how-to book for the school market about a favorite art hobby of mine. My favorite thing to do, aside from dance salsa and samba, is snorkel, which is where the inspiration for my ocean book that is coming out next year (the first one I ever wrote in Spain and never gave up on) came from. See?

Never give up and, also, you can write off that trip to Maui—LOL!

**PM:** Do you write every day?

**SK:** Now I do. I have to. I've been on deadline for

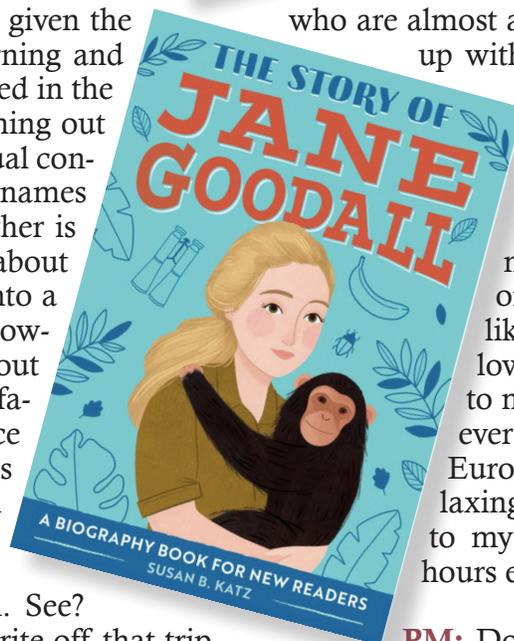
one book or another this past year so I have to write every day to keep up (that includes weekends!) Last Friday was the first day in over a year that I didn't have a deadline and, honestly, I didn't know what to do with myself. Then, I decided to develop a book I was inspired to write during my yoga Zoom class. Before this year, I was always balancing working another job full-time—teaching, running Connecting Authors, consulting in schools—so I sometimes didn't want to get on my computer at the end of a long day. I'd say I used to just write mostly on the weekends and some nights when I had another "day job." But, now that writing is my day job, I take it seriously and I do write every day. I feel like it's a treat when I get to work on a book based on my own idea since a lot of my work-for-hire is assigned now on specific, requested topics. I live in California, so my first task every day, without exception, is to answer all of the emails that come in from my editors who are almost all NYC/ET-based. Once I catch up with revision requests and any other new pitches they want to be sent, then I get to writing. It's a huge, rare luxury for me to go away and not bring my laptop. The longest I've been apart from my laptop in the past 10 years was one four-day trip to Maui. I felt like I was missing a limb but it allowed me to relax by the pool, listen to music, and snorkel! Last summer, every day of my six week trip around Europe, I'd read about RBG while relaxing on the beach and then go back to my Airbnb or hotel and write for hours each night.

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**PM:** Do you ever get writer's block and if so, how do you work around that?

**SK:** I get illustrator's block—is that possible? I haven't illustrated any of my books yet and that is definitely a bucket-list goal for me. I find it incredibly frustrating that I can envision what I want to see



on paper but, when I go to put that on paper, it often does not come out looking like I wanted. The few times I've had writer's block, per se, is when my editor or agent asked me to try rewriting a book in prose. I am very much a verse author. I know they say "Don't write in rhyme," but I loved reading Dr. Seuss as a kid, enjoyed reading rhyming books to my students, and allowing them to do the cloze—or guess what word ends the rhyme. Stories seem to come out of me in rhyme. Plus, kids love rhyme! So, when I'm asked to convert something into prose, I struggle. But, I do it. Actually, funny story, a book I have coming out next year had two columns originally. The left side told the story in verse and the right side had more details in prose. It's a style aimed at addressing multiple age and/or reading levels in one book. My editor wrote to me and said, "I hope you don't mind that I took out the illustration notes." I responded, confused, "What illustration notes? That left side was the book told in verse." We laughed it off but, in the end, that book is being published in prose. Suffice it to say, since this publisher has both a US and an EU division and publishes their books simultaneously in multiple languages (including German), rhyme isn't as easy to translate for them. You've got to be willing to "kill your darlings." I figure, if they want to publish this book and the subject matter really matters to me, I am not married to what format that it ends up in.

**PM:** Do you outline?

**SK:** As you may have guessed by now, I am not a linear thinker. But, I do appreciate that my publisher for The Story of series sends me a detailed outline which I follow as I research. I outline things like marketing plans and do keep a spreadsheet of manuscript submissions—which I highly recommend. In it, I keep track of which editors, at which houses, I've sent which manuscripts. That's as linear as I get. My ideas sort of flow and I try to get them down on paper (or into my laptop, phone, etc.) as quickly as I can so they don't escape. Because, another one will come soon or the phone will ring, or an email will

bing, and I may forget that idea.

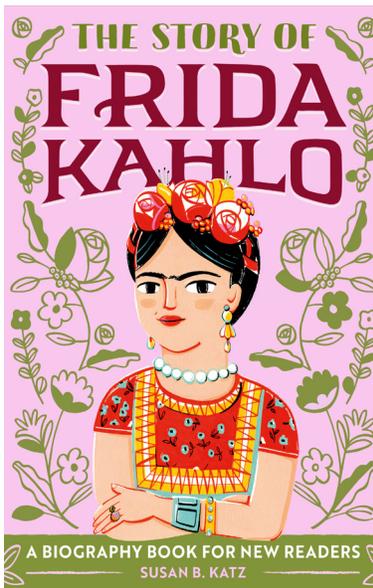
**PM:** How many drafts do you go through before you deem the work ready to be seen?

**SK:** This is an area where I've definitely grown (and learned the hard way) that it is better to polish and perfect before you pitch. For *Meditation Station*, I think I have Rev 20 on my computer, but that was with my editor. Now, I probably go through 2-4 rounds of revisions on my own, and with my amazing writer's group, before I send an ms to my agent or an editor. (I do all of my work-for-hire, NF pitches on my own and my agent pitches my traditional trade books, mostly fiction). That translates into a few weeks or a month before it's really ready to go. The caveat is that I wrote a book recently which I loved, pitched it out and got some feedback, revised it and now it's under consideration by one of my publishers. Sometimes I still jump the gun, but I try to avoid having any spelling or grammar errors, basic stuff, before it goes out. There are ideas I get so excited about, like the book my agent is pitching right now, which come out quicker and take less time to revise

because they are passion projects. Even that one, though, I ran past my writer's group a few times before it went to my agent.

**PM:** Do you juggle multiple projects?

**SK:** I am the queen of multi-tasking. I've always held multiple jobs at once and get a bit bored if I don't have several plates spinning at once. Last week, I was finishing the Amelia biography, retweeting Arianna Huffington's praise for *Meditation Station* (<https://twitter.com/ariannahuff/status/1290359786001895430>), marketing *The Story of Marie Curie* which came out on Tuesday 8/18, writing a new book that my publisher is now considering, and pitching new nonfiction projects to a different publisher. All that was happening while I was leading Zoom professional development training for teachers, globally, on how to get their students excited about writing. For the past two weeks, I got up at 4 am and trained anywhere from 18-78 teach-



*Susan B. Katz continued*

ers across the US or overseas on writer's workshop from 5am-9am, then answered the East Coast editor emails from like 9-11 am, took a quick cat nap, and then kept writing Amelia in the afternoon. Zoomba happens in the evenings before I crash and repeat. I'm busy now trying to drum up more books, both fiction and nonfiction. I'm happy to report that, just today, I got my first four-book deal for a series from a publisher I've never worked with before. And, another publisher I have been writing for liked one of my pitches and requested an outline (I do write to them when I'm asked to). As you know, the industry timeline is practically a snail's pace, mainly because books need to be illustrated and printed, so a book that I get an offer on now won't be published until later 2021 or early 2022.

**PM:** Do you have any advice for authors having problems adapting to the new virtual reality?

**SK:** In terms of writing and submitting, more editors and agents are working-from-home now so be mindful of not sending anything by mail to their office. Not that most of us send via snail mail anymore but, just in case. As far as virtual visits go, buy a green screen. They are very affordable and make your virtual background clearer without all the weird aura movement you get when you don't have one behind you. Finally, I think it's a good time to be bold. I've always had chutzpah but, now, we are experiencing first-hand that life is short. Write that story you've always had in your heart. Look up that editor or agent's email and sub the manuscript. Dr. Seuss, JK Rowling, and Laura Numeroff were all rejected myriad times before their books got accepted. It only takes one editor loving your book to bring it into the world. (See the four Ps below).

**PM:** What do you like best—or the least—about the publishing process?

**SK:** My favorite thing to do, without a doubt, is sign books and present to kids. I miss bringing my books to life with puppets, props, songs, and multimedia presentations in-person. Writing is such a solitary job (even more so now) and those events reminded

me why I am a children's book author. To see children's faces light up makes every rejection fade away and keeps you in sync with their boundless, positive energy. When I go out to schools, kids and teachers are surprised that authors and illustrators aren't usually allowed to communicate until the book is complete. I always ask them to guess why that's the case and then reveal that editors don't want authors to influence the artistic, creative process. That being said, I've learned to ask for a pdf before my books go to print. I don't care if my editor runs interference but I do want to see the book and flag any major mismatches between text and images before it goes to print. (Believe me, it has happened and I'm very glad I caught it!) I love connecting with my illustrator to promote the book once it's done. Recently, I had the pleasure of letting Anait Semirdzhyan (the illustrator of *Meditation Station* with Bala Kids/Shambhala) know that we'd won the 2020 International Book Award for Best Mind/Body/Spirit Kids' book. We hopped on Zoom. It was the first time we'd done anything but email and it was a fabulous, first face-to-face celebratory moment.

**PM:** What's the biggest lesson you learned?

**SK:** They say these three Ps are the pillars of publishing: Persistence, Patience, Perseverance. Clearly, I've had plenty of practice with each of those Ps. I've added a fourth P though: People. The relationships you make with editors, other writers, your agent, publicists, librarians, parents, kids, teachers, and influencers who can cross-promote your book, are crucial. I learned to keep my feet on the ground and stay humble. Booksellers, editors, agents, and conference coordinators much prefer to work with kind, humble, grateful authors. And, I do genuinely feel lucky. I don't think luck got me published—that was hard work, grit, determination, and a drop of talent in the rhyming department. But, I do feel fortunate every time I get an offer or a parent tells me how much their child enjoyed one of my books. I don't take for granted that editors and agents, in many ways, hold "the keys to the kingdom."

