

How to write children's fiction and non-fiction for Christian markets: FAQs

By Amy Scott Robinson

What sort of material are Christian publishers looking for?

It depends on the publisher, on their current list and on which way the wind (of the Spirit, hopefully) is blowing, but in general, publishers look for authors who know their audience and know how to aim a book at both the intended reader (the child) and the intended buyer (the parents).

Whether it's fiction or non-fiction, the potential audience is the thing that will hook a publisher in. Books that address values such as kindness, generosity or patience from a gently Christian point of view can be marketed to schools and used in collective worship. Stories that relate to real life changes and experiences, such as moving house, losing a pet or starting a new school are easier to advertise to parents with their clear message and purpose, and often these issues have ready-made platforms on social media in the form of groups and forums.

Publishers will be wary of picture books, which are more expensive to produce; books aimed at the 7+ age range, which can be illustrated with fewer, black and white pictures, might be more likely to spark an interest. Having said that, bright and original retellings of well-known Bible stories for very small children, while a competitive market to get into, will always have a place on the shelves because of their popularity as birth or baptism gifts.

Are there any holes in the market?

Yes, and this can be both good and bad news for authors.

Good news, because of course we want to reach children with the books they don't yet have: the less-told Bible stories, or books of the Bible that aren't stories; devotionals for every age group; prayer books that reach into every area of a child's life and explain how to listen, as well as talk, to God; and good, UK-based teen fiction, too often eclipsed by prolific American writers. I'm naming just a few 'holes' that I've spotted while looking for books for my own children over the years. And if nobody else is doing it, it may be of interest to a discerning and daring publisher.

Bad news, because often a hole in the market means exactly that: a gap in the interest of the buyers, a lack of parents looking for these things. The holes I've mentioned are all more for books aimed at practising Christians, which means there's no crossover to other markets, and the Christian children's market in the UK is very small. This makes it harder to persuade publishers that these books will sell, even when nothing like them already exists.

Should I not put overt Christian content in my book, then?

It depends on the aim, style and purpose of the book. For non-fiction, clear Christian content is often needed and works well, and of course for devotional content and prayer books, you can reasonably assume that your readers expect it!

In fiction, I would advise a gentler approach: avoid preaching or teaching directly, but let the Christianity in the book be experienced by your characters and filtered through their point of view. Sudden conversion scenes or lengthy explanations of the Gospel are unlikely to come across well in realistic dialogue.

Even when you are being more direct, the phrase 'Christians believe' is an extremely useful one. Unless you know that you are marketing directly at practising Christians (see comments about the market, above!) don't make assumptions about the faith or otherwise of your reader: instead, imagine the text being read aloud by a teacher to a class of children from all sorts of backgrounds. Your aim is for the teacher to feel happy to keep reading!

What's the best age group to aim at?

The one you know about! You are much more likely to pitch your story correctly if you have a specific child or group of children in mind as you write. If you don't see any children regularly, try volunteering for Sunday school, creche, your local playgroup or primary school - they are often on the lookout for people who can hear children read, assist in the classroom or supervise the playground.

As a general rule, the older the age group, the less variety of material seems to be available in Christian bookshops, although this has been improving recently. I would love to see more good fiction for Key Stage 2 and young teens, for example; but it's a fast-changing market, not easy to get a grasp on. A good tip is to wander around a mainstream bookshop and see the kind of material being aimed at your chosen age group, and to read plenty of it yourself.

What sorts of characters are popular?

Children love to see themselves in the books they read, and it should go without saying that not every child is white, middle class, healthy and living with both parents. Having said all of that, beware of using a more diverse character as a way to address an issue, rather than just letting them be a part of the story; and be sensitive about creating a character from a background outside your own knowledge and experience, especially if you are going to write from their point of view. It's a good idea to use sensitivity readers for main characters where their diversity is going to be prominent in the story.

Do I have to find my own illustrator/can I illustrate my own books?

In general, publishers like to match their authors with illustrators sourced by the publisher. This has to do with everything from cost to knowledge of design and how finished books should look on the shelves. This means that it's not a great idea to present a publisher with a fait accompli. On the other hand, including suggestions for the look of the book in your proposal may be helpful, so long as you are prepared to hold them with an open hand and accept that the publisher may have other ideas. (I'm not an illustrator or picture book writer myself, so for those

who are both I'd encourage looking for further advice. The SCBWI Facebook group is very helpful as a place to start.)

What's the checklist for the perfect children's book?

Adventure, humour, a plot that moves along quickly, recognisable characters, adult-free dialogue and an original, quirky concept that grabs the attention. And above all, have fun as you write. Children are the most discerning of readers. If you didn't enjoy writing it, they won't enjoy reading it!