

The 2019 #PBChat Mentorship

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Alastair Heim is the author of the picture books LOVE YOU TOO, NO TOOTING AT TEA, THE GREAT PUPPY INVASION, which won the 2019 Oklahoma Redbud Read-Aloud Award and HELLO DOOR, which was chosen as one of The New York Public Library's Best Books of 2018 and named one of The 2019 Best Books for Family Literacy by The Pennsylvania Center for the Book. Laughter is his favorite sound, purple his favorite color and "other people cooking for him" is his favorite food. He lives in Kansas City with his awesome wife and three incredible children who inspire him every single day. Alastair is represented by Kelly Sonnack of the Andrea Brown Literary Agency.

ALASTAIR will be accepting applications for: PICTURE BOOKS.

1. If you had to wear the same t-shirt with one word on it for a year, what word would you choose?

"STAY CREATIVE" (Sorry...I picked two words.). It's what I always ask the kids at my school visits to promise me they'll do as they grow up.

2. If you had your own talk show, who would your first three guests be? Bonus points for sharing the name of your show and what it would be about.

THE ALL STAR ALASTAIR HOUR (try saying that five times fast.).

- I. Mr. Rogers
- II. Thom Yorke
- III. John Lennon

3. If you could instantly become an expert in something (non-writing-related), what would it be and why?

Playing guitar. My first "dream job" was to be a rock star and I've only been able to attain astounding level of mediocrity after years and years of trying to get better at it.

4. What are your five favorite picture books not written and/or illustrated by you?

- a. Barney Beagle Plays Baseball (one of my favorites from when I was a kid).
- b. Anything Berenstain Bears (I had a ton of these as a kid).
- c. Float by Daniel Miyares
- d. Little Owl's Orange Scarf by Tatyana Feeney
- e. Little Bird's Bad Word by Jacob Grant

5. What is the toughest feedback you've ever received?

Every rejection I have gotten, and still continue to get, turns out to be the toughest feedback I've ever received. It never gets easier to hear no, but understanding that you will...a lot...in the publishing world makes it a little more bearable.

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6. What are some of the most important lessons you've learned so far?

- a. In publishing...don't expect the first, second or tenth thing you've written to be the story that gets published first. My first book published was the 20th or 21st manuscript I had written.
- b. In life, success is about Luck, Timing and Talent (in that order). You can be the most talented person in your particular craft, but without luck and good timing...you're just Picasso without a paintbrush. So, if anyone tells you the secret to their success is "hard work," they aren't telling the full truth or giving due credit for all of the things beyond their control that just happened to go their way.

7. What writing-related accomplishment are you most proud of?

While I am super proud and honored to have even been published at all, THE GREAT PUPPY INVASION winning the 2019 Oklahoma Redbud Read-Aloud Award this year was amazing. Simply because the award was voted on by 40,000 KIDS...not critics or gatekeepers or influencers...KIDS. Which is exactly who I'm writing these books for.

8. What are your dreams and goals as an author?

I'm not writing books to win awards, I'm writing them to win BEDTIME. My main goal is for as many kids as possible to read my books so that I can keep writing new ones.

9. What are your strengths as a mentor?

It took me nine years (from the time I wrote my first picture book manuscript to the time my first book was released) to get published, so I do not take being an author for granted for a second. I understand the struggles and incredibly daunting work that is necessary to get published. I still struggle with rejection, self-doubt and am, and will always be, my own worst critic. I approach the privilege of getting to write children's picture books with a strong sense of humility and understand that a lot of what it takes to get published is beyond the writer's control (luck and timing play a huge part). I'm an Editorial Director by trade and understand the craft and nuance of making every word count. I'm also a pretty good rhymers...although, after just typing that out, my rhyming self-doubt is starting to set in ;-).

10. Who are you not the best mentor for?

Someone without a strong sense of humility or good sense of humor. I appreciate writers enjoy and infuses humor/cleverness into their stories and love a good story twist. I love rhyming books (when they're done well), but writers who don't understand that getting it just right is HARD and are not open to making changes to their verse are probably not the best ones for me. Speaking of that...if your story has near-rhyme in it, that's probably going to be the first thing I'm going to suggest you rewrite (most editors aren't fans of it at all).

11. What are the most important things you're seeking in a mentee?

I tend to gravitate toward clever stories with lots of humor and heart. In a mentee, I'm hoping to find someone who is like an open book (pun intended) when it comes to new thoughts, ideas and critique. I

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also want any potential mentee to know that I am just a normal dude and do not have any “magical success wisdom” to impart. What I do have is a lot of experience to draw from and I’m hoping folks will find value in that.

12. What is your feedback/critique style like?

I always give feedback with positive intent – meaning, I critique manuscripts with the success of the author in mind. I want them to see their work published and come at it from a place of honesty and care for the work. When it comes to giving manuscript feedback, I like to do so face-to-face. I really dislike the word “critique” and would rather call it “conversation.” Critique feels too “teacher/student” to me and, in all honesty, I’m a guy who is lucky enough to have been published. That in itself, by no means, makes me a better writer than anyone else.

13. During the mentorship, how will you help your mentee and their stories develop?

I will come at this partnership from a mentality of sharing everything I know and have learned about the publishing world. I’m a pretty open guy and have no problem talking about the good, the bad and the ugly I’ve experienced in my career. From a writing standpoint, I will offer ideas, suggestion and collaborative writing critique, but it is ultimately up to the mentee to make any final decisions on his or her work.

14. What type of relationship do you hope to establish with your mentee?

One that leads to me getting one of the first signed copies of their debut picture book when it publishes.

15. What is your style of communication like?

Email works just fine when it comes to weekly touch bases. I’m kind of a raging extrovert, so I have no problems carrying on conversation with just about anyone, so when it comes to manuscript critique, I prefer doing so face-to-face (through Skype/Facetime/etc.) after I’ve gone through with editing/story change suggestions.

16. While reading prospective mentee’s manuscripts, what do you hope to experience?

The feeling of, “Man...I wish I would have thought of that idea.”

17. What will you look for in the applications you receive?

I really want to see fun, funny and clever stories (prose and rhyming) that make me wish I would have written them instead. If your story is not a humorous tale, fear not...I love a good heartfelt narrative as well. I will also be looking to see if a potential mentee’s personality comes out in their application. First impressions are important, my friends.

18. What about the idea of mentoring excites you most?

I really enjoy the process of seeing someone’s work evolve in a way that he or she gets excited about. I’m signing up to be a mentor because I want to see my mentees work published in the

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very near future. I'm a big believer that authors and illustrators who are lucky enough to get published need to pay it forward to folks who are trying to do so and haven't had it happen yet. It always bothers me when big name authors and illustrators don't advocate for their peers' work in social media (no matter how unknown we may be) – especially when they have been advocated for by others and, as a result, have gone on to become very popular and even win big awards. I think the industry is better when you have people helping all ships rise.

19. Is there anything, author-related, you wish people would ask you about? If so, what, and how would you respond?

I'm always surprised by the questions I get asked – especially from kids. The one question I've never been asked is, "Which one of your books is your LEAST favorite." And, of course, I would never answer that question.

20. What advice or inspiring and/or motivational words would you like to offer up to anyone applying to be your mentee or simply reading this questionnaire?

Just know that every mentor you apply to was in your very shoes before they got published. And we know you are applying for this program because you want writing to be your job, not just your hobby. So, I take this process very seriously and hope you will, too.