

The 2019 #PBChat Mentorship

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Anne Lambelet graduated from The University of the Arts in 2014 with a bachelor's degree in illustration and immediately became a freelance illustrator fueled mostly by bread and cheese. During her freelance career, she's worked with several clients including but not limited to HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, The Boston Globe Magazine, The Progressive and Owlcrate. However, in the past couple years especially, she has been working hard to transition from being merely an illustrator to being an author-illustrator of children's picture books. Her first author-illustrated book, *Maria the Matador*, was published by Page Street Kids in February 2019 and is soon to be followed by a second author-illustrated book, *Dogs and their People*, coming this June. A book she illustrated but did not write, *The Traveler's Gift* by Danielle Davison, will come out this October, and her current project in the works, a third author-illustrated book called *The Poisoned Apple*, is slated to hit shelves Fall of 2020. She is represented by Stephanie Fretwell-Hill of Red Fox Literary and lives in Philadelphia with her husband Brice, her adorable dog, Eevee, and her obese (but equally adorable) cat, Fitzgerald.

Anne will be accepting applications for: author/illustrators of fiction 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?

I think the one word would be "Grit". Every author, illustrator and author/illustrator is going to face tons of doubt and insecurity and rejection and failure in their journey towards publication and beyond. You just have to keep that indomitable fire of determination burning inside you through it all. After every heartbreak, just sit down at your desk again, pick up your pencil and draw/write your way through it. You have to believe in yourself enough to know that one failure (or 20 failures!) can't keep you down. For me, that's what it means to have "grit".

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.

I'm hoping that this question is referring to any guests living OR dead, because apparently, all my choices would be dead people...so I guess I'll call my talk show "Dead Men Tell *Some* Tales". My first guest would definitely be Beatrix Potter. She is my greatest kid lit hero. She also excelled in so many other areas besides kid lit that most people don't even know about (mycology, sheep-herding, and environmental conservation to name a few). Her curiosity and intelligence, her entrepreneurial spirit, her attention to detail, her integrity and her perseverance are all sources of inspiration. My second guest would be Jim Henson for his creativity and his sense of humor, and because *Labyrinth* is my absolute favorite movie of all time. And my third guest would be Maurice Sendak because he's one of the most iconic kids book illustrators of all time and he achieved success while constantly flying in the face of convention and being unapologetically himself.

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

I think I would want to be an expert in whatever sort of engineering you need to know to be a Disney Imagineer. I love a good theme...themed party, themed restaurant, etc. and Disney theme parks seem

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like the ultimate themed experience. I would love for my job to be coming up with new rides and interactive experiences.

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

Oh my gosh, this is such a hard question. I really love *McElligot's Pool* by Dr. Seuss because it shows how imagination can transform the mediocre into the magical. I love *To The Sea* by Cale Atkinson because I think it's the perfect blend of random, quirky humor with poignant sentimentality. I love the *The Eleventh Hour* by Graeme Base because the illustrations are so mesmerizingly elaborate, as are the mysteries and puzzles embedded throughout the whole book. I've never seen anything else like it, and it's a picture book that a kid can really spend some time with. I love *Santa Calls* by William Joyce because it uses such an expansive, cinematic adventure to teach such a relatable, heart-warming lesson. Plus I love that there's a couple "real" letters to and from Santa at the end. And lastly, I love *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* by Judi and Ronald Barrett because eating is my favorite, and I still just really really want doughnuts to rain from the sky someday. There are so many great kids books though. I'm sure I could list 20 more and still not hit all my favorites.

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

Every manuscript rejection is tough to take in some way even if it's framed politely. Putting something you've spent *that* much time on in front of a stranger always feels like baring a part of your soul. I think the toughest feedback I've ever received though came when I was still a student at University of the Arts. I'd made a book cover for an assignment, and I'd hand-lettered the book's title and the author's name. The teacher told me that everyone thinks they can do hand-lettering, but some people just can't. After that, I worked really hard to take hand-lettering from being a weakness to being a strength, and I've been hired for a few jobs now specifically because of the hand-lettering included in my portfolio.

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

Just keep creating new art all the time and putting it out into the world. Send out postcards and targeted email blasts. Bring your portfolio to conferences. Post regularly on multiple social media platforms and keep a portfolio website of your own up to date. Try to always have a new manuscript in the works and get it in front of agents and/or editors as soon as it's ready. If art is made with honesty and passion, there is someone out there who is going to connect with it. You just have to make it as easy as possible for them to find it in the first place.

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

I'm the most proud of getting *Maria the Matador* published. I went through so many storyboards and manuscript drafts and sketch dummies on that one. It was literally two and a half years of re-working the same basic idea over and over again, and there were so many points where I just assumed it would never be published and all that work would be for nothing. Here we are though, almost 4 years from when I first had the idea, and it's on shelves in book stores around the country. That feels pretty amazing.

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

I would like to write something longer than a picture book someday...like an early-reader chapter book or a middle-grade novel. I don't know if I have the discipline now, but I'm hoping I can work up to that! I'd also like to foray into writing some non-fiction picture book biographies. I have a lot of ideas for which people I think could make good subjects, but my only published works so far are fictional stories. I love fiction to death, but it would be fun to try my hand at something a little different. Biographies introduce a whole new set of challenges that aren't really present with other subject matter. Other than that, my main dream is just to keep writing and illustrating for as long as I possibly can!

9. What are your strengths as a mentor?

My largest area of expertise is on the illustration end of author/illustrating. I teach sophomore illustration students at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia so I feel very confident in my ability to critique composition, color palette, visual pacing, character design, etc. I also think I'm decent at recognizing good plot and character development. If I'm not laughing out loud at the funny moments or crying at the poignant moments, I can usually figure out why and I'll try to let you know how to pack a better punch.

10. Who are you not the best mentor for?

In my own manuscripts, I'm notoriously wordy, and I often need help from others to pair down my word count. If that's a weakness for you too, I'll try and help you with it regardless, but you've been given fair warning! Also, your stories don't have to be directly about feminism and inclusion and diversity, but if I feel like if your work intentionally disregards or undermines those values, I might have a tough time working with you. I only ever want to help create art where I feel I can totally stand behind it's message, but whether that message is framed humorously or sentimentally or whimsically or whatever is up to you.

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

I want a mentee who is looking at kid lit as more than just a hobby and who is willing to put in the hard work it takes to make this a serious step forward in their career. I want someone who is open-minded and who takes criticism well, but who will also be willing to hold their own in a discussion if they disagree with me at any point. But most of all, I just want someone who is really enthusiastic and passionate about picture books. They're made for kids, but they still have the chance to be innovative and nuanced and interesting and to really change the world for the better, and that should be exciting to all of us!

12. What is your feedback/critique style like?

I will always try and point out both the strengths and the weaknesses in your work. Getting purely positive feedback doesn't help you grow and getting purely negative feedback is incredibly disheartening so I'll always try to include both. Also, if there is a problem in your work, I'll try to let you know that it's there without offering up any exact solutions. I think if solutions are handed to you

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directly, it'll just end up feeling like I wrote the story for you and that the ideas aren't yours anymore. Plus, then when you go to do something on your own, you won't have developed the skill set to solve problems independently. Also, if I give you feedback on something, and you feel like you can make a strong case not to change it, I'll always be ready to listen. It ultimately doesn't matter whether or not I love your work. You have to make something that's true to yourself.

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

I'll be willing to discuss various project ideas with you so that we can settle on working with your strongest, most meaningful ideas first. I'll give you editorial help on manuscripts, storyboards and dummies. I'll also try and give you all the insight I can into professional best-practices, what it's like to work with art directors, editors and agents, how to promote yourself, and whatever other industry-specific info I've learned along the way. And if it comes to it, I'll always be there to listen if you just want to vent about your author/illustrator insecurities or how long it takes prospective agents or whoever to get back to you. Ultimately, if there's something you were hoping to talk to me about, just ask! I'm all about open communication.

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

My first priority is to be a teacher, but it's also important to me that you end up seeing me as a friend. There aren't that many people out there who actually understand the struggles and challenges of this profession so having someone who does, who can empathize with you and relate to your experiences, is important. As well as getting my technical feedback, I hope you'll feel comfortable confiding in me or blowing off steam to me if you need to, and I'll always be honest with you in return. I also hope we can stay in touch after the mentorship is officially over. Who knows, maybe one day, I'll be wanting *your* feedback on *my* work!

15. What is your style of communication like?

I will try to be honest with you without being hurtful. Art and writing are very subjective so I tend to deliver my feedback in a way that denotes that. I'll start a lot of sentences with "I feel like" or "I think", but I don't want that to mean you dismiss all my feedback as "just opinion". I will always try to explain the logic behind my opinions and I hope that you'll do the same with yours. I'm sure I'll ask you a lot of questions along the way to try and understand you the best I can and to help you to better understand yourself. If, when we're working together, anything I say *does* rub you the wrong way, please please let me know. I'm willing to adjust my methods if you feel you could be better served in any way.

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

I love when I find a manuscript where I think "Dangit, I wish I had thought of this idea first!". If the initial ideas are there, all the technical skill to convey them will follow with practice, guidance, and hard work.

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

I'm hoping to see evidence of a strong, unique "voice" coming through. It would also be nice to see that this isn't your first step towards becoming a published author/illustrator, that you've done

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things like attending SCBWI conferences, setting up a portfolio website for yourself, searching for an agent, etc., anything that shows you're truly committed to understanding the picture book business and giving it a real shot. A sense of humor is always nice too!:)

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

I certainly wouldn't be where I am today without the more experienced, more successful author-illustrators that freely volunteered their time and wisdom along the way. What I'm most excited about is getting to pay that generosity forward to a new up-and-comer, and to see where it can take them!

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 people don't ask me more about finding agents and about what the agent-client relationship is like. The nature of agents was something that really mystified me early on in my career, and, as a result, my first experience with an agent ended up being sort of stressful and unhelpful. It put me through a lot of emotional turmoil trying to decide whether or not I should stick with them. It felt like having to go through a breakup. I now have an *amazing* agent who I feel truly understands my career objectives and how to achieve them. It's important to know going in how crucial it is that your agent gets your work and cares about it. You'll have to work with each other (ideally) for years to come, and if your goals aren't aligned, it'll just feel like beating your head against a wall.

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?

For my words of wisdom, I'm going to paraphrase a quote by Ira Glass of *This American Life* that has always stuck with me. He basically says that the reason you want to try and create stuff is because you have good taste. You see things you like and you want to emulate them, and when your own work doesn't turn out as good, the reason that frustration is there is because you have those discerning tastes that makes you notice the differences. You have the potential for your work to become amazing eventually, but it's not there yet, and you can tell. That feels really bad and hard in the moment, but it's actually a really good thing. Your good taste is why your work disappoints you at first. Every great artist has experienced this phase, and they're great now because they were able to push through it. You just have to hang in there and eventually, if you work hard and keep creating story after story, eventually you're going to start meeting the high standards of your own good taste.