

The 2019 #PBChat Mentorship

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Katey Howes is thrilled to be making beautiful books for children. She also makes bad song parodies, great apple crisp, and messy mistakes. Katey lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, three adventurous makers and a dog named Samwise. A former physical therapist specializing in brain injury, Katey now divides her time between writing award-winning stories and raising kids with a love of books. Katey is a team member at the children's literature site All the Wonders and contributes content to literacy, parenting and STEM websites.

Katey Howes will be accepting applications for: picture books in prose or verse. Katey is most experienced with fiction and poetry, including fiction that incorporates STEM concepts. Katey is willing/able to provide feedback on narrative nonfiction as well. She is not the best mentor to guide you through the nonfiction research process.

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

Shhhhhh!

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 am much more comfortable talking to kids than to adults, so I'd invite child guests to hang out on some comfy bean bag chairs and talk about their favorite books and all the things they like to draw, write, make and imagine. We'd probably make some kind of group project with lots of multi-colored duct tape and we'd eat gooey snacks and make up some song parodies. I would call it Just An Average Night and my first 3 guests would be my own kids. (After that I'd mix it up and find some guests who listen to and respect me.)

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

Fun question! I'm going to go with aerial yoga – because it looks like so much fun and such a good workout, but I think the learning process for me would involve a lot of getting inextricably tangled and almost falling on my head, so it would be lovely to just skip straight to expert without the embarrassing bits.

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

That question is impossible to answer without qualifiers – like which are my favorites to read aloud to young children, or my favorites to gift to new parents, or my favorites to read when I'm feeling sad and grey. I have conditional favorites, not absolutes. So having said that, 5 books I wouldn't want to live without are: Katy and The Big Snow by Virginia Lee Burton; Ookoo by Esme Shapiro; Hoot Owl,

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Master of Disguise by Sean Taylor; My Heart by Corinna Luyken, and Cloth Lullaby: The Woven Life of Louise Bourgeois by Amy Novesky and illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault.

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

Hmmmm. I guess the toughest feedback for me is generally the truest – because then I know I really have to dig in and make a change. I've consistently had to work on being more concise and letting go of convoluted construction or fancy phrasing – and every time my agent or a critique partner points out that I'm doing it again, I cringe. Because they are right. And I should have learned by now. But I really do love to use too many big, flowery words.

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

The journey to become a published author has taught me a lot - about myself, about business, about creativity, balance, and happiness. It's been a time of huge personal growth for me. The most important lesson I've learned may be this advice I gave a friend on Facebook the other day, but also really needed myself, because I have a history of expecting too much from myself, and of being loath to ask for help or extra time. "Ask for what you need and don't beat yourself up about it. You are human. Amazing, talented... and limited like every other human. You have finite time, energy, and creativity and there is nothing unprofessional or unexpected about saying so."

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

My most recent book, *Be A Maker*, ends with the phrase "In a day of making choices, are you proud of what you made?" When I talk to kids at schools about this, I tell them that it's been tough for me to decide if spending my days writing is the right choice for me to make – because in my former career as a physical therapist, I helped injured people get strong and well. I helped people relearn how to walk and work and dance and carry their children piggy-back. I tell them that I sometimes wonder if I should be proud of the choice I made to change careers and write books, or if it was a selfish choice. And then, I tell them, I started getting mail from kids. Mail with pictures they drew, books they wrote, and videos they made, telling me my books inspired them to create, to be an author someday, to explore science in a new way, to treat someone with kindness, to treat *themselves* with kindness. And that was when I realized that I was very proud of the choice to make writing my career, and that I should keep making that choice. Inspiring others to create: that's what I'm most proud of.

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

It's so easy to start playing the comparison game, or to set expectations for yourself that you can't control. Awards, sales numbers, TV rights? I can't control those. But I can control what I write. So my dream is to only work on books I feel passionate about – and to do so each time with a team of people who are also emotionally invested in what we are making together. My goal is to challenge myself with each new project – so that with each book I learn a new skill, try a new format, build my craft or push an envelope.

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9. What are your strengths as a mentor?

I probably should have asked my critique partners this question! They know me better than I know myself. I think, though, that my strengths include a strong knowledge of the market, an eye for detail, and an ability to identify the heart of a story and help peel away those things that don't contribute to the heart. I am honest and compassionate in my advice, and I know how to admit it – and to put in some research - when I'm out of my depth.

10. Who are you not the best mentor for?

I would not be the best mentor for someone primarily focused on nonfiction or someone who needs feedback on their illustrations as well as their manuscript. I also would make a rotten mentor for anyone with no sense of humor!

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

I'd like to work with someone who has taken the time to read plenty of recent (last 5-7 years) picture books and who feels strongly that their work helps fill a gap in currently available children's literature. I would be especially motivated to work with a mentee working on #ownvoices disability representation in picture books. Having worked as a PT in schools and brain injury rehab for years, having an anxiety disorder myself, and parenting a neurodiverse child has made it clear to me that children's literature lacks many perspectives – and I would be honored to contribute to correcting that problem.

12. What is your feedback/critique style like?

I can be fairly flexible, depending on the type of advice and feedback a mentee feels would be most valuable. I will help a mentee identify and strengthen the emotional resonance of a manuscript and analyze the structure, pacing, and character development, among other aspects. We will then fine tune language to reflect the theme/mood of a manuscript and showcase the writer's unique style. We can do this via email exchanges, phone calls, Voxer, or a combination of these methods. I tend to ask a lot of questions about the author's intent, and to provide my subjective opinion, as well as as much information as I can give objectively about mechanics, style, and market potential.

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

I'd like this mentorship to be about something more than manuscript critiques. I would ideally work with a mentee who has some ideas about what he/she needs most – whether that be development of a particular skill/craft, identifying and strengthening their strongest manuscripts, or creating a query or submission plan. I can assist a mentee in developing social media presence and networking, and I can absolutely provide buckets of emotional support and encouragement.

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

Helpful, I hope! I'd like to have a professional and friendly relationship based on mutual respect and a shared love of children's literature.

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15. What is your style of communication like?

Frank, friendly, parenthetical, reasonably prompt and occasionally interrupted by children.

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

I'd like to see that the writer can evoke an emotional response that is supported by the format, language choices, and plot. I'd like to feel that no one else could have written this particular manuscript – and that the writer is emotionally invested in the story.

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

Honestly, I'm not 100% sure. I'll start with professionalism, passion, honesty and a realistic understanding of the workings of today's publishing environment.

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

I would not be where I am as a writer or a person without the guidance, generosity, and encouragement of numerous children's book creators. I am excited to pay forward the gifts that were given to me.

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

Ha! I wish they'd STOP asking if I'll ever write a "longer" or "more grown up" book. Perhaps if they could ask, "why picture books?" and I could say to them "because they are a challenging art form with infinite potential, accessible to nearly all, life-changing for many, and because every rule for their writing was made to be broken."

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?

Bring your heart to your work. Bring your play to your work. Bring your dreams to your work. Then, even when others say "no," you will keep saying "yes" to your work.