



Jacob Sager Weinstein's [He/Him] picture books include LYRIC MCKERRIGAN, SECRET LIBRARIAN (Clarion, 2018), PRINCESS UNLIMITED (Clarion, 2021) and WHAT ROSA BROUGHT (HarperCollins/Tegen, 2023). He's also written for HBO, the BBC, and The New Yorker. His most recent book is HOW TO REMEMBER EVERYTHING: TIPS AND TRICKS TO BECOME A MEMORY MASTER. He lives in London, where his hobbies include writing about himself in the third person.

Jacob is accepting applications for: any picture book, fiction or non-fiction (but see below for my strong and weak suits)

Jacob is accepting applications from: unagented, agented, unpublished, and published creators.

1. What's one non-publishing-related career that you wish you could have?

I'd love to be a theme park designer. What a fascinating and inventive way to tell stories!

2. If you could have dinner with one person, dead or alive, who would it be and why?

Ron Howard. He seems like a charming, thoughtful guy who would increase the odds of any dinner party going well. And if did go badly... Well, at least he could narrate it in an entertaining manner.

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

This changes from day to day. Here's today's list, in reverse-alphabetical order by last name of author:

- *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub*, by Audrey Wood and Don Wood. Some of the best art in the history of picture books, but don't let that distract you from the perfectly pitched text.

- *Watercress* by Andrea Wang and Jason Chin. A very recent favorite, but I think it's going to stand the test of time.
- *Caps for Sale*, by Esphyr Slobodkina. I loved it when my parents read it to me a kid, and I loved it when I read it to my kids as a parent.
- *The Cat In The Hat*, by Doctor Seuss. Often imitated, but never equaled.
- *Moo Baa La La La*, by Sandra Boynton. I am in awe of Boynton's ability to create so much humor out of so few words.

4. What writing and/or publishing-related accomplishment are you most proud of?

A picture book called *What Rosa Brought*, which is the true story of my mom's experiences as a young Jewish girl in Nazi-occupied Vienna. It's the most personal story I've ever written, and figuring out how to be honest about her experiences without traumatizing young readers was a fascinating creative challenge. It will come out in 2023, with art by Eliza Wheeler.

5. What about mentoring excites you most?

I've had fantastic teachers and mentors throughout my career. I'd like to pay that forward. Also, helping somebody else with a manuscript is fascinating and fun, and teaches me a lot about my own craft.

6. What are your strengths as a mentor?

My single biggest strength: I'm good at giving feedback. I've been with the same picture book critique group for ten years now, and it turns out that being in a critique group doesn't just improve your writing – it improves your critique skills as well.

Also, I've had experience with many different kinds of writing. My first two published PBs are lighthearted, fantastical adventures— one about a secret-agent librarian, and another about a wily princess. As I mentioned above, my third book *What Rosa Brought* will be very different. I've got another MS on sub that's a funny non-fiction PB about an eccentric artist. I'm happy to read and give feedback on just about any genre of story-driven PB.

7. What is your feedback/critique style like?

I will never push you into writing a story you don't want to write. Instead, I'll try to figure out what story you want to write, and push you to write the best version of it.

My critiques tend to be fairly detailed. Depending on what I think a particular MS needs, I might write an overview of what changes I'd advise, or dive into line-by-line notes.

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

There's an art to receiving feedback. You need a vision of what you want to achieve with a manuscript and the confidence to reject suggestions that take you away from that vision. You

also need a sense of your own human fallibility, and an openness to suggestions that will bring you closer to your vision. This is a hard balance to achieve, and I have to work hard at it myself! But I'd like to see some indication that a potential mentee is working at it, too. Membership in a critique group, for example, would be one way of demonstrating it (although definitely it isn't a requirement!)

9. Who are you not the best mentor for?

I am in awe of authors who write beautiful, lyrical texts without a traditional plot or protagonist, but I have no idea how they do it, and I doubt I could offer them useful feedback! I also don't know much about chapter books.

10. How will you help your mentee and their stories develop?

My main focus will be on helping you make your manuscripts the best they can be. I'm also happy to offer feedback on query letters and answer any questions about the industry that I'm able to answer. But I think the most important thing for a career as a writer is producing good manuscripts, so that's what I'd like to focus on.

11. What is your style of communication like?

I'm a bit of an introvert and I think better on the page than in spoken conversation, so I will mostly focus on written communication. Ideally, you'd send me your MS in some electronic format. I'd mark it up electronically and return it to you (or write a feedback letter if that seems like a better approach for a specific MS.)

But I'll be available for occasional phone or video consultations if that seems like the best way forward in any given moment.

12. What are you looking for in the applications you receive?

The single biggest thing I'm looking for is the feeling that I can be useful to my mentee. If your sensibilities are totally different than mine, my advice probably won't resonate with you. I'm looking for stories that make me think, "I know what this author is trying to do, and I know how to help them do it."

To help me get a sense of where you are as a writer, I would love to see at least one polished MS that represents the best you feel you're capable of, and at least one that you know needs work. Let me know which is which. (And remember, "polished" doesn't have to mean "perfect." If you're writing perfect manuscripts, *you* should be mentoring *me*!)

You know your needs better than anybody else, and if you think there's specific reason that I would be the right mentor for you, please let me know that, too.

13. Any tips/advice for applicants to make their applications and/or manuscripts shine?

William Goldman would sometimes ask two questions about a story:

1. What is it about?
2. OK, but what is it *really* about?

Where the Wild Things Are is about a boy who journeys to a land of monsters. But it's *really* about how our emotions can carry us away, and how comforting it is to be loved and accepted even when we've gone wild.

I'm not claiming this is a particularly original insight into Sendak's work! But I like the simple and direct way Goldman's questions get at the distinction between story and theme.

To me, the best picture books have clear answers to both questions. They tell a clear story. And no matter how fantastical that story may be, they're about an emotion or problem or experience that kids can relate to.

14. 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?

There are so many aspects of a writing career that are out of your hands. It can get very demoralizing.

One thing that helps me stay sane is to distinguish between *goals* (which are in my control) and *dreams* (which aren't.)* "Write a bestseller" is one of my dreams. "Write 500 words a day" is one of my goals. I wouldn't be a writer if I didn't have dreams! But if I judge myself on whether I've accomplished my dreams, I'm putting my happiness in other people's hands. I try to stay focused on my goals, instead. ("Try" is a key word! Dreams can be awfully seductive.)

*I'm not sure this is a dictionary-approved distinction between "dreams" and "goals." It's just how I think of them.