

Interview with Christy Webster of Random House
by Jennifer Bertman



Christy Webster, an Assistant Editor, has been at Random House since April 2005. There she works on a variety of formats from baby to young adult, both trade and licensed. This includes both the Step into Reading and Stepping Stones product lines. Before graduating from NYU, she had editorial internships at Dial Books for Young Readers and Aladdin/Simon Pulse. Christy is originally from Maine.

Did you always want to work in children’s publishing? Describe for us the path that led to your current role with Random House.

Now that I’m in the business, my mother reminds me of my childhood interest in bookmaking. Making up stories and drawing pictures wasn’t enough—I always wanted to make my projects look like books. But there was a time in between that I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do for a living. Some of my biggest interests and strengths have always had to do with reading and writing, so I majored in English Lit and Creative Writing in college. By my junior year it became clear to me that I should narrow down how I planned to use my degree, so I decided an internship was in order. I suppose the decision to try for a children’s book editorial internship, as opposed to any other type of department or medium, came from the gut. It simply seemed natural to me. Turns out I was right—I loved it, and I think I was pretty good at it. After graduating, finding an entry-level job was more challenging than finding my internships. It involved a lot of interviews, a lot of waitressing, and a ton of help from the amazing mentors that I met through my internships. Eventually I landed my gig here at Random House, and I couldn’t have dreamed of a better fit.

What is your favorite part about being an editor?

I love the weird and wacky paths I find myself following in pursuit of what I’m doing. My work could involve anything from browsing photos of adorable puppies online, to watching clips of *Elmo’s World*, to trying to figure out if the dumbwaiters at Monticello are big enough for a child to climb into. Sometimes I stop and think, “Wow, this is my job.” I also love working with passionate people who love books and stories.

What is your least favorite part?

Paperwork. I hate paperwork.

Could you name for us some of the authors and illustrators you've worked with and/or book titles you've worked on?

I have awesome authors, but their books haven't released yet! My released books include Barbie Step into Reading titles, some original Sesame Street titles, and a whole bunch of reissues, bind-ups, and box sets. That's what you work on when you're starting out, and it can really be a lot of fun in its own right.

What editorial projects are you working on right now that you're excited about?

There is a beautiful historical fiction chapter book, *Anna Maria's Gift* by Janice Shefelman releasing in Spring 2010. Then I have an adorable wintry picture book for Fall 2010 and a rollicking early reader for Spring 2011. I've also just started working with chapter book legend Ron Roy on his new series, *Calendar Mysteries* (to release at the beginning of 2010), and his ongoing *A to Z Mysteries Super Editions*.

What types of books are you interested in acquiring (or not acquiring)? Is there anything in particular that you would love to see turn up in your submission pile?

I don't limit myself much. I don't feel qualified to critique poetry, which is just as well because I can't acquire it, and I'm not so keen on very traditional fantasy novels, generally speaking.

Other than that, I look at most things and I like things that are truly kid-friendly. When I dive into my submission pile, I'm hoping to find:

- A beginning reader that's different from anything we already have in our backlist.
- An early chapter book with multiple hooks, strong characters, and a good mix of dialogue and action in each chapter.
- A picture book that's really for kids, not just their parents or teachers, with lots of illustration potential.
- A middle grade or YA novel with characters and setting so real I feel like I'm there.

Do you work with unagented authors and illustrators?

As a company we don't accept unsolicited submissions, but some of the authors I work with have been unagented. I have acquired books by authors I met through conferences and similar events.

How many submissions do you receive in a week on average? What qualities make a submission stand out in a positive way? In a negative way?

I really don't know how many submissions I receive. I'd guess that I've gotten more than 100 in the past year. For me, the only thing that makes a submission stand out in a positive way is the writing itself. If I can't stop reading it, if it strikes me as unusually

well written, or if I can really see what I would do to make it into one of our books, I'll seriously consider bringing it to the next step. If not, that doesn't necessarily mean anything other than that it's not right for me to edit. What stands out in a negative way is anything unprofessional. If it shows that the author hasn't done their research before submitting—either in terms of how to present their submission or their potential audience and competitive works—that reflects poorly.

You work on a wide range of book formats. Is it difficult to shift gears? Does each format demand a different editorial approach?

I find it easier to switch gears than to work too long on a single task, though I suppose it is challenging to learn and remember the procedures for a lot of different formats. The order in which you do things, the role each colleague takes in the process, whose OK you need to move forward, and so on, changes from format to format. From a truly editorial point of view, the more stringent the guidelines are for a given format, the more editing one is like working out a puzzle. I learn new things with every book, though, even if it's a format I've edited many times before.

The economy is on everyone's mind these days. What changes have you observed in the industry since last fall? How is the economic recession affecting you in your role as editor?

Clearly most people are cutting costs wherever they can, and that's usually not so bad. I guess the hardest part of the recession is just keeping a positive attitude. It's difficult to see friends and colleagues in this industry and others lose their jobs, or even just worry about losing their jobs.

What are some of your all-time favorite books (excluding those you've worked on)?

In roughly age order...

The Spooky Old Tree by the Berenstains

The Color Kittens by Margaret Wise Brown

Houndsley and Catina by James Howe

The Monster at the End of this Book and the old 8x8 picturebacks that starred Grover, like *Grover and the Everything in the Whole Wide World Museum*

The Junie B. Jones books by Barbara Park

The Witch of Blackbird Pond by Elizabeth George Speare

Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy by Gary Schmidt

I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

If you could live in a fictional world from children's literature, which would you pick and why?

Sesame Street. I consider it a world from children's literature. People often discuss The

One, that one book that turned you into a reader for life. But my love of reading was fostered by the preschool line-up on PBS. I learned to read by watching it. The books I found that way—whether they starred the Sesame Street characters, or were introduced to me on Reading Rainbow—became the books that stuck with me, that I read again and again. I could live on Sesame Street. Sometimes I feel like I already do.

What do you like to do in your free time?

My deep dark secret that everyone knows about me—I love TV! I always have a few (often several) shows that I'm excited about watching. I guess that's not the most common trait among book people, but I love a good story, in whatever medium it's told. I also spend my time dining out, seeing plays, playing video games, traveling, drawing, singing, and reading for pleasure—books, comics, the occasional magazine, and a metric ton of blogs.

Are you open to accepting submissions from attendees of our upcoming fall conference?

Yes, but no more than one per person.

Jennifer Bertman volunteers for the RMC-SCBWI as the Managing Editor of Kite Tales newsletter. She has an MFA in creative writing and works as a freelance copyeditor and proofreader for a variety of publishers. She is currently revising a middle grade mystery and keeps a blog at <http://writerjenn.blogspot.com>.