

## **Keepin' it Caszh with Kirby and Kate** By Grant McKenzie

Kirby Kim and Kate Harrison decided to “keep it caszh” and turned their presentation on “Writing for Children and Young Adults” into more of an open discussion and question/answer session. They opened the session by reading excerpts from query letters and synopses they had received and explaining why each had been rejected or accepted. Some were more obvious than others. This led to flurries of questions which taught us a lot about submitting in today’s children’s and YA markets.

Kate summed up the central theme perfectly when she said, “Trends come and go, but good writing always rises to the top.” And as Kirby illustrated several times, good writing can be judged before the manuscript is ever seen simply by reading the query letter.

In one example, he pointed out that a manuscript had been rejected because of a typo in the second line of the query. If you don’t put the extra effort into your query, it’s assumed you didn’t put the extra effort into your manuscript.

Good writing is also concise, so a good query letter is brief. Kirby and Kate are busy people. If your letter makes them work to figure out your book, they will throw it aside and grab someone else’s. Write a good hook to get them interested and then tell them as briefly and concisely as possible the basics of your book. As Kirby read aloud a query which clearly stated the title, word count, and genre early on, his broad grin left no doubt that he had accepted the submission with enthusiasm.

In addition, good writing does not need help in order to impress. One query Kate read sounded more like an SAT study session. Most people in the room obviously had difficulty translating the erudite author’s epistle. Kate dismissed it immediately because this was a submission for a middle-grade book. Had the writer used the same voice for his query letter that he used in his manuscript, the outcome might have been much different.

Show a little personal humility and let your writing speak for itself. Don’t try to change it just to impress your agent or editor. Kate spent some time talking about picture book submissions. The big lesson from this was that, as an author, you are not an illustrator. Even if you think you are, you’re not. If you have a picture book to submit, send in the entire manuscript and leave the drawing to the professionals. Even in picture books, the writer’s focus is on the craft.

Finally, it was easy to see that Kate and Kirby strongly believe in the theme for this year’s conference. Queries and manuscripts that were rejected were contrived, convoluted, grammatically incorrect, and—in some cases—bewildering. Those that were accepted were clear, concise, grammatically correct, and—most of the time—enthraling.

The lesson is clear: if we “cut to the craft,” success will follow.

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