

Jill Esbaum

Jill will be accepting applications for: A writer of fiction or nonfiction picture books. Rhyme is fine if it's good (otherwise, it'll earn you an insta-NO). Humor is always welcome, as is a strong voice.



Bio: Jill Esbaum is the author of more than 50 books for kids, including fiction and nonfiction picture books, a graphic early reader series (Thunder & Cluck), and many nonfiction series books for National Geographic Kids and other publishers. New in 2022 is *Jack Knight's Brave Flight* (Calkins Creek), illustrated by Stacey Innerst. The book was named a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection and earned a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*. More fiction and nonfiction picture books are forthcoming, including *Stinkbird Has a Superpower* and *Parrotfish Has a Superpower* (Putnam, 2023/2024, both illus by Bob Shea), and *Bird Girl—Gene Stratton Porter Shares Her Love of Nature with the World* (Calkins Creek, 2024, illus by Rebecca Gibbon).

1. You have two minutes to give a speech on anything! What would your topic be?

I'd open it up to the audience to ask me anything about writing picture books. One thing always leads to another, so I'd have no problem talking until they wrestled away my mic.

2. If you could live in any film, tv, or book universe, what would it be?

Maybe Hogwarts? Seems like an interesting place to hang out for a few days.

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

In no particular order, my favorites (today) are: *We Don't Eat Our Classmates* (Higgins), *Mel Fell* (Tabor), *The Purple Puffy Coat* (Boelts), *Dandy* (Dyckman), and *There Might Be Lobsters* (Crimi). Humor and heart get me every time.

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

Awards and starred reviews are heady stuff, but I think what I'm *most* proud of is simply that I didn't quit, back when I started out. I tend to learn best by doing (and making mistakes), so I endured 4 1/2 years of rejections *while* I was teaching myself how to write. Feels surreal that 25 years later I have more than 50 books published or in the pipeline.

5. What about mentoring excites you most?

Finding a manuscript that gives me goosebumps and makes me say, "Yes, this person has It." And I instantly want to work with that person and help them get over that final hurdle. (Had I known, as a teenager, there was such a job as Book Editor, I would have been all over it.)

6. What are your strengths as a mentor?

Pinpointing trouble spots. Big-picture revision suggestions and line editing. Cutting word counts. Finding ways to pump up characterization and add heart/humor.

7. What is your feedback/critique style like?

Honest, but kind, I hope. I use Track Changes to mark up a manuscript, but I also provide a letter to better explain any of my suggestions (the reasons for them or how you might implement them, for example).

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

Commitment to craft. Flexibility. An open mind. A basic knowledge of grammar. A sense of humor. The ability to see their manuscript with fresh eyes...this is the toughest thing to develop, because it only happens with time and experience. But I can help shorten that learning curve.

9. Who are you not the best mentor for?

Writing is ALL about revision. Anybody who believes their manuscripts cannot be made tighter or more engaging would not be happy as my mentee.

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

I'm willing to help my mentee however I can, but know these things: 1) I am not a conduit to agents. (I've mentored quite a bit but have only ONCE recommended a writer to my agent), 2) Just because I love a manuscript doesn't mean an editor will. (If that were true I'd have 150 of my own books published by now!) What I will do is be an enthusiastic cheerleader for you, motivate you, and help you improve your writing. I want your mentorship period to end with 3 manuscripts we both find irresistible.

11. What is your style of communication like?

I'm informal, more apt to treat you like a buddy than a business colleague. That's probably because I'M ON YOUR SIDE! I'd love to see you get published. There's room for everybody—at least everybody who's willing to work hard and never stop learning. You'd submit one manuscript per month. We'd Zoom three times during the mentorship period. But you'd be free to email me with a question anytime.

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

I do want to know how long you've been writing and submitting, about classes you've taken, etc. But those won't factor into my final decision (much). I'll give the most weight to the manuscript itself—to originality, good writing, and marketability/*potential*.

13. What kind of mentorship experience do you envision for you and your mentee?

A warm, honest, relationship in which we're both striving for the same goal (better manuscripts for you to submit) and in which we're both open to learning something new.

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

Just be yourself. I don't care about degrees and awards (my degree is from a community college— secretarial education). I only care about your writing and YOU as a pleasant human being.

15. 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?

Anybody who tells you they've mastered writing picture books is full of ... uh, it. There's always, *always* more to learn. Knowing that keeps me motivated. I'd hope for that same attitude in a mentee.