

Rajani LaRocca [she/her]

Rajani will be accepting applications for: fiction, non-fiction, and STEM. I would love to see applications from writers from traditionally underrepresented groups in publishing.



Bio: Rajani LaRocca was born in India, raised in Kentucky, and now lives in the Boston area, where she practices medicine and writes award-winning books for young readers, including the Newbery Honor winning middle grade novel in verse, *Red, White, and Whole*. She's always been an omnivorous reader, and now she is an omnivorous writer of fiction and nonfiction, novels and picture books, prose and poetry. She finds inspiration in her family, her childhood, the natural world, math, science, and just about everywhere she looks. Learn more about Rajani and her books at www.RajaniLaRocca.com. She also cohosts the STEM Women in KidLit Podcast.

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

How our brains are absolutely miraculous.

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

I'd love to hang out in *The Office* for a while.

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

- *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales
- *What Miss Mitchell Saw* by Hayley Barrett, ill. Diana Sudyka
- *One Grain of Rice* by Demi
- *Your Mama* by NoNieqa Ramos, ill. Jacqueline Alcántara
- *Watercress* by Andrea Wang, ill. Jason Chin

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

I'm proud of writing lots of things, in different genres, using different formats: I write lyrical books and funny books, middle grade and picture books, poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction.

I'm proud to center characters in my stories who reflect my own experiences and create stories that I wish I'd had when I was a kid.

And I'm proud and honored humbled that a book of my heart, *Red, White, and Whole*, has won the 2022 Walter Dean Myers Award and a Newbery Honor!

5. What about mentoring excites you most?

I've benefited from and engaged in mentoring in both my careers — medicine and writing.

I'm excited to work with a writer at a different stage in publishing and give them help in terms of manuscript critiques, querying advice, and tips on navigating publishing in general.

6. What are your strengths as a mentor?

I'm good at giving constructive critiques. I have publishing experience, but I still remember what querying is like. I can help craft a good query letter and give advice on a writer's career. I've mentored a lot: in Pitch Wars, as a WNDB mentor, and in my profession as a doctor. And once I've mentored someone, I consider them my friend forever. There's no getting rid of me! ☺

7. What is your feedback/critique style like?

I can always find something positive in a manuscript and will lead with that. I will also be honest about what I think might need work. I often ask a lot of questions about what the writer is trying to accomplish, rather than telling them how to fix things.

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

I'm looking for someone who is open to accepting feedback and who is willing to work hard to achieve their publishing dreams. I would like to work with someone who has already spent some time developing their craft, who is a member of a critique group, and who enjoys working collaboratively. I welcome writers from traditionally underrepresented groups in publishing.

9. Who are you not the best mentor for?

Even in funny manuscripts, I like a picture book to have some heart at its core — so I'm probably not the best fit for 100% silly manuscripts.

I enjoy rhyming manuscripts, but only if the author has worked to make sure the rhyme is in service to the story and not the other way around.

And while I love reading nonfiction biographies, I'm not the best mentor for those.

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

I will help my mentee work on their manuscript(s), help identify their weaknesses and strengths, help them think about other ideas and develop them, help them polish their query letter and develop a querying strategy, as well as offering overall publishing insight and information.

11. What is your style of communication like?

Email/phone calls/Zoom as well as written feedback on a manuscript. I imagine "formal" meetings will take place about once a month, with more casual exchanges more frequently. My inbox has been overflowing lately, but I will be the best mentor I can!

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

I'm looking for an open, optimistic writer who is clearly committed to improving their craft. I hope your manuscript makes me laugh or makes me cry (in a good way); bonus points if it makes me do both!

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

First, I'll ask my mentee about their goals, and then we'll discuss how I can best help them move toward those goals. I'll share my thoughts on revision with them, and then we'll work on polishing at least one, and possibly more than one, manuscript. We'll strategize about querying agents, and I'm happy to answer any other publishing questions they might have. I hope to develop a long-term friendship.

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

In your applications: Mention how long you've been writing, and what workshops, courses, and critiques groups you've participated in to improve your craft. What are your hopes and dreams for this mentorship and for publishing in general?

In your manuscripts: Be yourself, and don't be afraid to be vulnerable on the page.

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?

Writing is an act of courage — bravo for doing it! It's not easy to put yourself and your work out there to be "judged," but it's a necessary step if you want to move forward in traditional publishing. Whether or not you are selected for this mentorship, you have accomplished something by applying! Whatever happens, your work and your stories matter . . . so keep going!