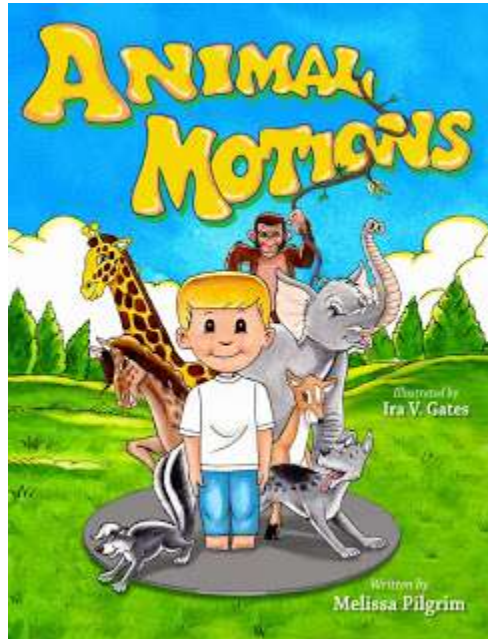


TheWriteChris.blogspot - On Writing

Read, study, research, write, rewrite, review, submit, submit... Publish! Then do it all over again.

The Joys of Writing with Children: Author Interview with Melissa Pilgrim



Melissa Pilgrim has been writing for various mediums for over 15 years. Her works have included film, TV, theatre, and book publishing. Currently she has four screenplays optioned, one TV series optioned, and has been hired to write for various film and TV production companies including Martin Sheen's ESP Productions (Warner Brothers Studios). She has had 16 plays for children and teens produced in theatres from Chicago to Fort Lauderdale (eight are published in the Chicago Alliance for Playwrights Directory). She has edited 12 books with authors from L.A. to N.Y.C. Now she has published her first children's book.

You've been directing and writing plays for years for both children and adults. Is there one age range that you find easier or harder to work with?

I enjoy writing and directing for all age groups, though you do have to treat writing for and working with each one (and their audiences) very differently, for each comes with its own strengths and challenges.

I also find each story I create tends to lend itself to a particular age group (and audience) overall, so when writing I specifically gear the actual writing of each script/project towards that demographic.

When you write and direct, you are dealing with your personal project. Can you think of any one time in directing when you had the "they finally get what I was trying to communicate"?

Oh yes, but not just one time—it always happens—for I always tell the children I work with they are creative and can use their imaginations to write their own stories, just like me. But, they don't always believe that. So to help them learn to do that I always bring in scenes from a play I am working on for them with a few places purposely written "poorly" (meaning a corny/bad line of dialogue where an obvious better/funnier one can be), and without fail every time we do a read through of the scenes a hand will shoot up and a budding wordsmith will say, "Miss M—that's not as good as the other lines, we can come up with something better than that!" It always makes me so proud when we then work on a new line as a group and the children *really* feel like they are playwrights then too!

How did you first get involved with playwriting and getting paid for it?

Right out of college I started working in different theatres in several states with both children and adult groups, and not always, but most of the time writing plays basically "came with the job," and so I was very fortunate to be able to be paid for my writing skills as well as my directing and producing skills all at once.

I then really got into playwriting when I spent five (great) years as the artistic director for The Sheil Park Players in the Wrigleyville area of Chicago where I wrote plays for the children and teen groups and also started writing workshops for adults to develop plays out of it for the adult group. Many of those plays went on to be produced in other theatres in Chicago, New York, and even London. I was very proud to help other playwrights get their work shown!

What type of plays do you like to write?

I love writing "family friendly" type of comedic plays for children's audiences, but I also enjoy working on musicals for all ages.

How do you go about getting your plays published in multiple theaters?

It's very similar to pitching any kind of writing in any medium really. I first research the kind of plays a theatre does and then if I feel I have a fit for it I pitch the show to the artistic director. (Making sure your project *really* fits the place you are pitching is important in all mediums whenever you pitch, for it makes you look unprofessional if your project doesn't seem relevant to their current needs or tastes.)

What is ESP Productions? How did you get involved with that?

"ESP" stands for Estevez-Sheen Productions, which is an independent production company in Los Angeles founded by Martin Sheen and his son Ramon Estevez. It is now run by Ramon and his brother Charlie Sheen. I worked for them as a writer when it was under Martin Sheen. They are a wonderful family and it was a fantastic experience when they hired me after reading one of my original TV series pilot scripts I had being pitched around Los Angeles at the time. It just shows you never know what is going to happen when you're showing your projects!

You say you also have several works optioned which is sort of like having a story on hold. Have you had any that have actually moved past that stage? I know screenwriters who

have written blockbusters have bidding wars for their works, but what is the going rate for the not-so-famous for a screenplay option?

Yes, I have had 4 screenplays optioned and 1 TV show series optioned in Los Angeles, which means a producer or production Company basically “rents” it for awhile while they see if they can get funding, actors or certain directors attached, or any number of things. You then cannot continue to pitch your project to other places until the agreed time is over, so it’s up to every writer to decide if the money being offered is worth taking their project off the market for awhile (and it can be a different amount in every situation).

It’s normally not a huge amount of money like it can be in a bidding war when two or more companies want the same project (where it can be millions in certain cases), but again, if it’s something you feel is worth it it’s good to do, for its normally the “stepping stone” to then getting the project sold, or it can even help create a sale of another project you have in the meantime. I still haven’t moved past the optioning stage in film or TV, but I’m not giving up on the goal of selling my scripts someday because I’ve been told optioning them is a sign they are “sellable;” they just have to find the right person/company to buy them!

With all your years of working with children actors, you have now moved on to writing your first children’s book, *Animal Motions*. How hard was it to make a transition to such a different style of writing?

Yes, I am so excited about *Animal Motions*, for I have always wanted to write children’s books as well as plays for children, and I am now thrilled to have my first children’s picture book in print! It was not a hard transition to write a children’s picture book for me either, for besides studying how to write for different age groups (I’m a graduate of both the University of New Hampshire and the Institute of Children’s Literature where I learned all the distinctions age by age), all my years of experience working in children’s theatre prepared me very well. (Before this book got published, I had 16 plays for children and teens produced all over the country, so I knew what children responded to.)

Can you tell me how that story came about?

I have always been concerned with helping children stay both active and creative, and as I saw childhood obesity in very young children as well as too much uncreative, idle time being spent on the couch only “watching” stories *both* becoming big issues with parents and teachers everywhere over the last few years, I wanted to try to create a book that could maybe help inspire children (and their families) to develop healthier life skills.

From my background working with children in theatres I saw how my youngest students always loved to use their imaginations to move like animals as I taught them to act on stage, and so I created *Animal Motions* based on those kinds of theatre-type of games.

Animal Motions is a fun, easy-to-do, interactive book that I hope will help inspire kids everywhere to learn how to be what I call “creatively fit.” Over time I hope doing this book regularly creates a healthy lifestyle habit for children and also gets them to learn how to use their imaginations more.

How long did it take you to write this book? How many rewrites did you do on it?

It took me a couple of days to come up with the final story/routine and get the pacing of the words just right. Since this is an interactive story, I kept reading it out loud as I acted it out, making sure the words and movements fit together and it all flowed easily and effortlessly. I never keep track of how many rewrites I do (on any project), for that doesn't matter to me. What does is the end result of what is left on the page when you feel it's done.

Who helped you with the editing?

Once I got my publishing deal with Indigo River Publishing everyone there each offered feedback on the story (which was very helpful), but both Adam Tillinghast and Donna Melillo were the two fantastic editors there who helped me do the final polish of the manuscript.

How many sources did you pitch? Did you pitch any agents?

I pitched a lot of publishing companies (both big ones and small ones) at first, but as most people know the world of publishing is changing drastically and quickly with bookstores closing, on-line sales growing, and big publishing companies merging together just to keep up with the changing times. This made me start to concentrate on smaller publishing companies towards the end of pitching it because I saw how some of them were also changing along with the industry and it seemed (to me at least) they were more willing to keep changing as the whole publishing industry changed, and that was an important factor to me.

I didn't pitch any literary agents, for I found most places (both big and small) accepted my query letter without one.

How did the contract come about with Indigo River Publishing?

I pitched the book to Indigo River Publishing just as I did to all the other companies, first with a query letter, and they instantly got the theme (and importance of it for today's children) right away and contacted me to set up a conference call to discuss the possibly of publishing it further. The first time we all spoke I could tell they (especially Adam Tillinghast, the founder), were all thinking "out of the box" in regards to how the whole publishing world was going and they also wanted to do children's stories that encouraged kids to read more (and use their imaginations more). They also wanted to keep evolving as needed in the changing publishing landscape, and because of all of these factors I was in! We did the publishing deal/contract together and now *Animal Motions* is in print!

What is the process like in working with them?

I just can't say enough about how wonderful they are to work with as well; Adam guided the whole project from start to finish. He found the most wonderful illustrator too, Ira V. Gates, and we all worked together on the phone and over Skype to create the visuals. It was awesome—I was able to "direct" the whole book just like a little play! I posed as both the boy and animals for Ira to sketch so the movements would be "just right," then we discussed the ideas I had for the backgrounds.

Since I wanted the illustrations to really “show” how the main character’s imagination could go anywhere—the forest, ocean, or jungle—and take over his bedroom, it was important to get the way the imagination came and went throughout the story correctly. Ira used his wonderful artistic talents to get it all perfectly and each page came together nicely over time. It was a real group effort really, for the pictures are just as important as the words in this particular project. I am very grateful to both Ira and Adam for all their hard work.

I understand there is an app being created for this book. Can you tell me how that will work?

Yes, the app is coming out this month! Again, it is just like doing a little play for me, for the wonderful company doing the app, Authorly.com, is letting me “direct” each page with regards to how it should appear/flow, make suggestions for the animation for it, and state the kinds of noises to be added.

I gave them notes to follow and they are using their technology know-how to create it just beautifully from the early drafts of it I’ve seen. (I’d like to thank David Hoover and the founder, Chris Whitman, especially for that!) They even had me do a voice over for it just in case kids want to have someone read it to them. I’m not a professional voice over actress, but I did my best and had a lot of fun doing that part. I hope kids will enjoy it too.

It’s very exciting to see the book “come to life” as an app! I know this is now going to be part of the overall direction of how children’s books are going to be produced in the future too—for kids now-a-days want to have a book they love both in their hands and on their mobile/technical devices. It’s great to be part of this evolution as it first starts out too!

Is this a stand-alone book or are you planning a sequel or prequel for any of your characters?

Animal Motions is perfectly fine as a stand-alone book, but I did write it with the hopes of it becoming a series (and even pitched it to be able to be that to publishers, which you should always let them know). So hopefully yes, one day you will see more *Animal Motions* story/routines available, for Indigo River Publishing also wants to do more of them in the future.

What type of publicity do you do to promote your book? What has worked best for you in generating sales?

I work with all forms of marketing to promote *Animal Motions*, including things like press releases, on-line outlets (such as blogs like this and websites like Goodreads), and pitching directly to schools (both preschool and elementary), libraries, kid organizations, and zoos through both e-mail and regular mail. With all forms being used it’s hard to target the “one” that is working best, but I know together they are all helping to keep spreading the word! As an author you really have to plan on spending time each week promoting your book in any way you can. It’s part of being a writer.

How do you write? Did you do an outline first? Did you do individual character development before doing the full plot?

To me, a story is based on a “what” (premise) happening to a “who” (the main character), so I always start by developing an idea for both of those two things together, not separately, then I make sure the situation and character are both something someone would want to witness or read about (to make sure there is an audience for it, and what kind of audience that is). I then come up with an outline for the full story before I start writing the first draft.

What do you know now about writing/publishing now that you wished you had known sooner?

How long things take to actually do in this whole “writing world,” both the actual writing part and the trying to get it sold (and then hopefully produced) part. Patience is a big lesson in this field!

What is the best advice you’ve been given about writing or that you’ve learned that you would like to pass along?

Advice: To always respect (and appreciate) other people’s time and only pitch them something you feel is truly relevant to their own needs or goals. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve worked for companies or people who say they only want to read romantic comedies at this particular time, yet get pitches for all genres anyway. Do your research before you pitch, always!

Learned: To also respect that if this is a career field someone does for a living, know their skills and experience is worth paying them for. I see many “free/spec jobs” listed for writers all the time and it saddens me, for all forms of writing takes time, focus, and skill to do, and if someone is going to put all of that into a project they should also be paid for their time, focus, and skills. But for some reason people try to talk them into doing it for free or very little money. But I, like other professional writers I know, normally work on their *own* projects for free until they’re ready to be pitched and sold. Working on other people’s projects is then an actual job.

Lastly, do you have any websites you would you like readers of this interview to be able to view?

Yes, my writing and editing business one www.YourWritingMuse.com (where you can get more free writing tips!) and the one for my children’s book www.AnimalMotions.com (where you can get 6 Free Lesson Plans for teachers and parents in the categories of Health & Fitness, Drama, and Biology & Geography and also a Free Mini-Poster to print out and color—so the kids can do an art project along with acting out the book!).

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview, Melissa.

Thank you very much for having me! It’s always a pleasure for me to talk about writing, especially if what I’ve learned from my past experiences can help any other fellow writers with their own writing journeys. I wish all of you reading this -- happy writing!