

Children's Book Insider

March 2020



**WRITING
YOUNG
ADULT
ROMANCE**

**ABOVE THE SLUSHPILE
SUBMISSION CODE:**



**beaming
books**

Super Kid Lit Writer



interview by PJ McIlvaine

Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith to end up exactly where you belong. Karla Valenti delayed pursuing her dreams of being a children's author until destiny took her overseas. She took another leap when she answered a writer call from a science association and came up with a proposal for a novel take on historic scientific figures. The proposal was accepted and subsequently a global fundraising campaign was launched which resulted in a publishing deal, thanks to—you'll never guess—a tweet! (*Marie Curie and the Power of Persistence*, illustrations by Annalisa Beghelli, Sourcebooks, April 2020, available for pre-order at Amazon and the first in a planned *My Super Science Heroes* book series). And because she persisted and persevered despite despair and rejection, Valenti now has a fantastic agent, three picture book deals (announcements pending) plus her passion project sold in a two-book deal at auction.



Now making her home in Chicago, Valenti keeps herself busy with lots of words, big ideas, and even bigger dreams. Active on social media, you can learn more about Valenti at www.karlavalenti.com, on Twitter (@KV_Writes), and Facebook (www.facebook.com/KarlaValentiAuthor).

PJ McILVAINE: Did you always aspire to be a

writer?

KARLA VALENTI: I have always been a writer, which is to say I have always dabbled in words. This has taken many shapes and forms, leading me to pursue a degree in philosophy, learn five languages, and work in a variety of careers (from English teacher to media assistant to debt finance attorney and, of course, kidlit writer!).

That said, I wasn't able to commit to being a children's book writer until after the birth of my third child when we embarked on a family adventure and moved to Germany. The terms of my visa didn't allow me to work in Germany, so I focused my energies on the dream I had not had the time or opportunity to pursue. What initially started as a six-month opportunity turned into a six-year journey that personally transformed us and helped me launch my career as an author.

PM: Where did the inspiration for your picture book series about scientific historical figures and their amazing stories come from?

KV: I was invited to submit a book proposal in response to an RFP launched by a wonderful science association in Europe. The Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) was looking for authors with whom to partner on a book project. The theme was

Marie Curie. At first, I was hesitant to submit anything since my writing is firmly planted in fiction and I had never written a nonfiction piece. However, it was an opportunity I didn't want to pass up. So I submitted a somewhat unconventional proposal: a series of books featuring scientists, but instead of focusing on their accomplishments, we would focus on the traits that helped them reach those accomplishments. These traits were, in a sense, their superpowers. Which made the scientists superheroes! The rest unfolded naturally from there.

By the way, the reason I wanted to focus on the traits (as opposed to the accomplishments) was two-fold: (1) there are already plenty of excellent books that highlight these scientists and their accomplishments and (2) many children are intimidated by science (and STEM more broadly). They think that one needs to be born a genius or brilliant at math/science/technology/engineering in order to succeed. By re-framing these success stories in terms of traits that all children embody I hoped to make STEM more accessible to young readers.

Back to the story about the story... I was delighted to know that my proposal was accepted, and began working with the MCAA folks to identify the right illustrator and launch the campaign. Initially, the book was going to be published as part of a global fundraising initiative. By the end of the month, not only had we exceeded our goal by 20%, but Sourcebooks had made us an offer for world rights.

Sourcebooks got wind of the project through a tweet about the fundraising campaign that was forwarded to one of their editors. I wish I knew who sent that tweet so I could thank them for connecting us! This has been an incredibly rewarding experience, and a true collaboration between the scientists, the writer, the illustrator, and a great publisher. I couldn't be more proud of the results of our work!

PM: Did you always envision it as a series?

KV: Yes. It was clear from the beginning that this had tremendous potential as a series. Not only did we have a vast line up of phenomenal scientists to cover, but dozens of superpowers/traits to showcase!

PM: Was your approach tackling a series different, then, let's say, a standalone book?

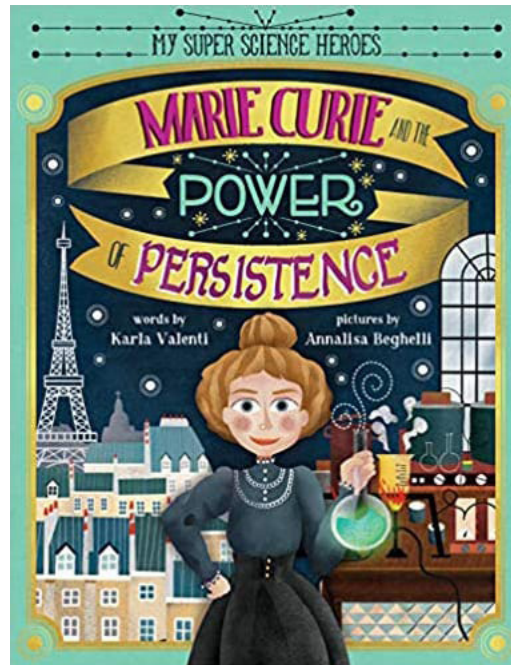
KV: My goal was for every story to stand on its own, but for all of them to share a cohesive thematic element—the superhero narrative. I started by doing a lot of research on superhero tropes and storytelling techniques. Then, I created a larger framework that would encompass the full series.

For example, Super Evil Nemesis is the big baddie that features in every story. However, each scientist battles their own minion based on their particular superpower and storyline. Also, Super Evil Nemesis has a single and one-dimensional goal (to take over the world). Each minion, however, has their own agenda providing a more robust antagonist for each scientist to battle.

Finally, I am incorporating “Easter eggs” and references to other *My Super Science Hero* stories in the books (for the astute readers to pick up).

PM: How did you market the book? Did you have one written out entirely and then just outline the others?

KV: The first scientist was selected by MCAA who wanted to launch the series with a book about Marie Curie. For the second book, we discussed a number of potential scientists, and I chose a handful that seemed interesting (again, not so much because of their accomplishments, but their defining traits). I spent some time researching their lives and trying to identify a common theme that hinted at what their superpower might be. Once I identified a trait that seemed particularly interesting, I began writing that story. The next book will be about Alan Turing, and



it promises to be a very enigmatic adventure.

PM: How is your series different than other books featuring noted figures?

KV: There are a lot of books that feature scientists and share the wonderful achievements of these great women and men. This goes to the what (what did they do?). However, my series sets out to define the how (how did those scientists accomplish what they did?). The how is equally relevant as the what. More importantly, it is something to which we can all relate (i.e., we may not all be Nobel-prize recipients, but we can all be persistent!)

PM: What do you like best, research or the actual nuts and bolts of writing?

KV: Definitely the writing and world building!

PM: How long does a first draft take you?

KV: The first draft is usually pretty quick. The revisions are what take a long time! For example, I recently sold a picture book that I had been revising for five years. And I have a novel I wrote in 6 weeks which I have been revising for almost ten years.

PM: Do you edit as you go along?

KV: I do, but not massively. Just small tweaks here and there. The big revisions happen after the first draft is down.

PM: Do you have beta readers or belong to a writer's group?

KV: YES! And if I had to give one piece of advice it would be to join a good critique group. Which is to say—a group of committed writers who are willing to give you candid and thorough feedback. I have learned a tremendous amount from my critique partners! They are a group of brilliant, creative, inspiring writers to whom I owe a great deal. Moreover, they have become a huge support network for me as I have struggled and evolved in my career as an author.

PM: Do you have an agent?

KV: I am represented by my dream agent Ammi-Joan Paquette at EMLA.

PM: Any tips or tricks for those in the querying stage? How do you deal with rejection?

KV: This is a very subjective business. Rejections are the norm. We need to build a tough skin and get used to staying in the game. Many times after many heartbreaks, I thought of throwing in the towel and just walking away. Fortunately, my amazing critique group kept me in the game each time (which is why it really helps to have a solid critique group to bolster you!).

Here's the thing, as writers, we put our heart on the line every time we send out our work. To be rejected can feel like a personal rebuke. It really isn't (though it still hurts). It's hard to talk about being rejected, but I think it's important to know that we're all in the same situation, feeling the same dismay. I have received more than 500 rejections, but at some point I stopped counting because it stopped mattering. Ironically, that's exactly when things started to pick up in my career.

I currently have five books in the pipeline: three picture books (April 2020, Jan 2021, and 2022); and two novels (my debut MG novel was recently acquired at auction resulting in a two-book deal). I never saw this coming, and I still can't believe that it's happened.

I had written a novel about ten years ago that I was completely in love with. The character in this story felt like my own child, and I had been trying for years to find a way to bring his story to life. But it's a tricky story to tell, fragile and subtle. And I was too close to the story to be able to do it justice. I knew I needed to let him go, to free him so I could see him better. But to do that, I needed to fall in love with another character.

Around this time, I went back home (to Mexico) for my brother's wedding. We had been living in Europe for many years and I hadn't been able to make it back to Mexico for ages. Being home was very emotional, and I was so completely swept away by the magic of this wonderful country. When we returned to Germany, I brought back a new cast of characters eager to tell a story based in Mexico.

I have a background in philosophy and all of my stories tend to explore philosophical concepts. This novel was to become a discourse on free will vs. de-

terminism packaged in a MG story format. I wrote the novel in about 4 months and then spent the rest of the year revising it. I had succeeded in releasing my first character, giving that story the room it needs to flourish, and I was now smitten with a new story.

Unfortunately, I was also in the dreaded "pit of despair" writers experience when we feel our career is going nowhere. I had been working for so long, writing, writing, writing, trying to sell my work. I had amassed hundreds of rejections, and I began to think that perhaps it was time to focus all that energy elsewhere. I ended up parting ways with my agent (which was a very difficult decision) and confessed to my critique partners that I was thinking of moving on to other endeavors.

"Not so fast!" one of my critique partners said (Becky Shillington, to be precise). "What about that new novel? It's incredible. You can't leave without giving it a shot." I can honestly say that if it weren't for Becky, I probably wouldn't have taken the next steps. However, Becky refused to let me walk away without trying to find a home for this new story. [PSA for all writers—get yourself a good critique partner. It can save your career!].

So, I used this novel to query, and I reached out to all of my dream agents. To my immense surprise, I received interest from eight agents and offers from five. It was such a privilege to be in this position, and such an incredibly difficult decision to make. I ended up signing with Ammi-Joan Paquette at EMLA.

Within months, Joan had sent the novel on submission. We received interest from four publishers and the novel went to auction. It was an unbelievable experience. Less than six months prior I had been ready to walk away from being a writer, and now my MG debut was being sought out by the top players in the kid lit space. Not only that, they wanted two books (a gesture of confidence for which I am immensely grateful). I think what surprised me the most was the depth of enthusiasm and genuine love the editors felt for this novel. After receiving so many rejections over the course of my career, I simply didn't believe it was possible.

The first novel is now scheduled for publication in 2021. The second book is due out in 2022.

There are a few takeaways or "morals of the story" that I would love to share:

- (1) Critique Partners are amazing and so important. Don't write anything without them.
- (2) This industry is incredibly subjective. Unlike other fields of work where we have clear metrics and parameters that help us define our progress, success in this industry is dependent on a number of entirely subjective factors, many of which are out of the control of the writer, the agent, or even the editor.
- (3) It's so easy to get discouraged and lose hope in this line of work. Know that you're not alone in feeling that way. And see (1) above.
- (4) I didn't get here on my own. The success of this book and where we hope it will end up, is the labor of many who edited, reviewed, revised, and advocated for the manuscript. My editor is brilliant and pushing me to take this story even further. I am deeply proud to be one part of this group.
- (5) Give your stories to breathe and learn to fall in love with new characters!

PM: What's the most surprising thing you've learned on your writing and publication journey?

KV: To expect the unexpected (both good and bad).