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The Power of Persistence

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Suzanne Slade

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Sometimes “What’s Next” might be going after your dream, as a hobby or a full-time endeavor. Suzanne Slade left her engineering career to become a mom and later pursued her dream of writing books for children. But like many authors, her path to publication wasn’t easy. She received over eighty rejection letters and honed her craft for eight long years before finally getting her first book contract.

When I visit schools, the first thing I ask students is if they can keep a secret—a huge secret! After the children assure me they are trustworthy, I hold up an old piece of paper scrawled with pencil marks. I explain I wrote this story in first grade, and the kids are always amazed! It’s a mess—terrible

handwriting, backwards letters, and misspelled words (twenty-two to be exact).

I ask, “Is this neat or sloppy?”

“SLOPPY!” they shout with glee.

Then I have them right where I want them.

“I was an awful writer,” I say. “Now I’ve published over seventy books. I’m telling you this because you may not always be great at everything you try. But if you really love something and keep practicing, I promise you’ll get better.”

That’s my mantra and my story, because thirteen years ago I decided I wanted to try something I wasn’t particularly good at—writing children’s books.

I knew it was a long shot when I made the decision. A really loooong shot! I didn’t know anyone in publishing. I didn’t have a clue how the publishing process worked. I didn’t have a writing degree. In fact, I had the exact opposite—an engineering degree, which meant my college schedule was so full of science and math classes I’d done little writing. Fortunately, I didn’t know the tremendous odds I

was up against as I began my writing quest. Had I known that most children's houses publish less than 1 percent of the stories they receive, my brain's practical left side would certainly have overruled the creative right side and its crazy writing idea.

So I developed a plan: I would work at this writing gig for four years and see what happened. I'd spent four years in college getting my engineering degree, so it made sense to spend the same amount of time pursuing my dream of becoming an author. I reasoned if I couldn't write anything publishable in four years, it probably wasn't the career for me anyway.

When the four years were up, all I had was nice pile of rejection letters. But I wasn't ready to quit. In fact, I was hooked! I loved writing more than I'd ever imagined. I was obsessed with children's books. I carefully studied stacks of picture books every week, and I had more story ideas than I could write. So I revised my plan and anted up for another four years. After all, college was full-time, and I'd really been writing only part-time with my wife/mom duties.

And my writing process continued: get "brilliant" idea, write story, revise, read story to critique group, revise 647 more times, submit, wait several months, receive rejection letters, repeat.

During that time, I also focused on learning more about the craft of writing.

I attended several SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators) conferences.

I took another writing class.

I kept studying children's classic titles, as well as the new best sellers.

I carefully considered my critique groups' comments.

And slowly, very slowly, my writing began to improve.

Then one day, something my first writing teacher had said popped into my mind—write about what you know. This simple idea set my path on a new course.

But, what did I know and really want to write about?

Then it came to me—science. Of course! I'd been a geek my whole life—enthralled by creepy bugs, far-off planets, unusual animals, and finding out how things work. I had read dozens of nonfiction titles to my children every week. Why hadn't I thought of this before?

So I wrote up three sample manuscripts, each about different science topics aimed for various age groups, and sent them off to nonfiction publishers.

Then I waited—again.

Months later, an e-mail with the magical subject line "Writing Opportunity" arrived in my inbox. It was an offer from a New York publisher to write a six-book science series. SIX BOOKS! I scanned the e-mail, barely able to breathe.

"Would this writing assignment work with your schedule?" the editor asked.

You betcha! I'd waited eight years for this opportunity. I quickly accepted the assignment, even though they wanted the first manuscript in two weeks and each subsequent manuscript every two weeks thereafter.

After I submitted the first two manuscripts, the editor offered me another six books. I was on my way—finally. Persistence had triumphed!

And I'd realized something important. I needed to write about topics I found

incredibly interesting. So that's what I did. I wrote new stories about amazing animals, fascinating people in history, events that changed our nation, as well as cool science topics.

In time, I received more book contracts from other nonfiction publishers and eventually broke into picture books with my own stories. I was thrilled when my first two picture books, *Animals are Sleeping* (2008) and *What's New at the Zoo?* (2009), were released and am very grateful to have three more under contract.

Today I'm still doing what I love. I have a blast every time I get a new book idea and can hardly wait to dig into my research and start writing.

Can you keep a secret? I'm not the best writer in the world. But I've discovered when you love what you do, and you don't give up, your dreams can come true!

*With her mechanical engineering degree, **Suzanne Slade** worked on Delta IV rockets and automotive braking systems before beginning her writing career. She is now the award-winning author of over seventy children's books. Her works include picture books, biographies, and numerous nonfiction titles about science, nature, and sports. Her latest picture book *What's the Difference?* was released by Sylvan Dell early this spring. Upcoming books include *Climbing Lincoln's Steps* (Albert Whitman, Sept. 2010), *Multiply on the Fly* (Sylvan Dell, 2011) and *The House That George Built* (Charlesbridge, 2012). She visits dozens of schools each year sharing her story of persistence and encouraging children to pursue their dreams. She lives near Chicago with her husband and two children; she serves as the co-rep of her local SCBWI chapter. Find out more about her books and school visits (she's offering free virtual author visits via Skype through September!) at <www.suzanneslade.com>.*