

## HOW TO REVISE A PICTURE BOOK:

# Messy Middles

By Karen Krossing

In the previous issue of the CANSCAIP News, I wrote about how to revise picture book beginnings and endings. This included an analysis of three manuscripts from the [Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books](#) in Toronto: one for the concept book [Red is Best](#) by Kathy Stinson (illustrated by Robin Baird Lewis, published by Annick Press), about a girl who insists red is the best colour; the narrative nonfiction book [The Road to Afghanistan](#) by Linda Granfield (illustrated by Brian Deines, published by Scholastic Canada), about the memories of a young soldier who has returned from duty; and the classic story [Franklin in the Dark](#) by Paulette Bourgeois (illustrated by Brenda Clark, published by Kids Can Press), about a turtle who is afraid of the darkness inside his own shell.

In this follow-up article, I'll discuss how these authors revised the messy middles of their manuscripts including the through-line of each story and the story question that the final version is meant to answer. I'll also provide questions to ask when revising your own messy middles.

In Stinson's early draft of *Red is Best*, the middle is a series of eight interactions between Kelly and Mom. In them, Kelly states that she likes her red stockings, barrettes, jacket, boots, pyjamas, cup, paint and mittens best—in that order. Mom then states her opinion about each object and Kelly confirms that she likes red best. For example: "I like my red barrettes the best. My mom says, 'You wear

pink barrettes with a pink dress.' But I like my red barrettes the best." In the final, this becomes: "I like my red barrettes the best. My mom says, 'You wear pink barrettes with a pink dress.' But red barrettes make my hair laugh. I like my red barrettes the best."

In each interaction, Stinson revises to clarify *why* Kelly likes each red object best. These are important changes because, as Lisa Cron states in [Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel](#), stories are brought to life through "how the protagonist is making sense of what's happening, how she struggles with, evaluates, and weighs what matters most *to her*." In these revisions, we can see how, as Cron says, "understanding the *why* fundamentally changes our perception of the *what*." Kelly does not just prefer red barrettes; they make her hair laugh. This detail adds depth and offers a better illustration opportunity. In terms of the story question, the final version asks: Why does this girl prefer red? (Answer: Because red is best.) In the early draft, Kelly could be viewed as stubborn since we don't understand her motivations. In that case, the story question might be: How long can Kelly hold onto her opinions about red? (Answer: Forever.) A thorough answer to this question would create a different story.

In her revisions to the eight interactions, Stinson reordered them in this way: stockings, jacket, boots, mitts, pyjamas, cup, barrettes and then paint. This revised order takes Kelly through her day in a more natural way, getting dressed in the morning, putting on her jacket, boots and mitts, putting on her pyjamas and drinking from the red cup before bed. It continues with Kelly wearing red barrettes with her pink dress and painting with red paint. By imitating the arc of a child's day, Stinson adds another conceptual layer to the book.

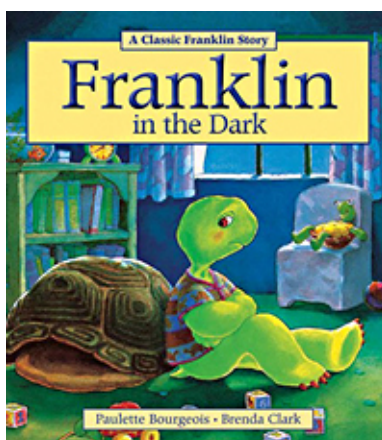
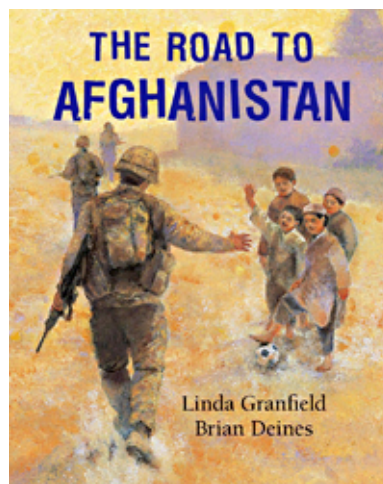
IN GRANFIELD'S EARLY DRAFT OF *AFGHANISTAN*, the middle shows the young soldier remembering. This begins with her childhood Remembrance Day visits

to her great-grandfather's grave, who fought in World War I. It covers his time in the trenches to his loss of an arm, just like the protagonist. She reflects on how he built a new life for himself once he returned home, giving up the family farm since he couldn't do the work with one arm, starting a general store instead, embracing his sweetheart with his one arm and holding his babies. The protagonist then reflects on the way certain sounds in Afghanistan would make her heart thump, and how some sounds today take her back to Afghanistan. She mentions the hot day when she took a step that "could have been my last."

In her revision, Granfield's story question remains the same: What memories does a soldier returning from Afghanistan have? With her focus clear, Granfield's revisions concentrate on fine-tuning in various ways. She tightens the great-grandfather's story by cutting one spread that dealt with his general store, writing instead about what he could do with one arm: "You can place orders and stock shelves in a store. You can ring up sales on the cash register."

She adds in a new spread about the Afghanistan mission: "We didn't go to Afghanistan just to fight. We removed explosives and made roads safer for travel. We helped build bridges and schools, dug wells, and brought security to places that for years had none. And we shared games, candy and laughter with the children of Afghanistan."

Throughout, Granfield cuts and expands as needed to stay true to her story's emotional through-line, comparing great-grandfather's war experiences to the protagonist's. She also compares how he built a new life in spite of his injury to how the protagonist is trying to do the same. Granfield also includes a connection to children whenever she can, bridging the gap between her adult protagonist and the child reader. Overall, Granfield's revision is a general reworking, rather than a big-picture rewrite.



IN BOURGEOIS'S EARLY DRAFT OF *FRANKLIN*, the middle begins with an extension of Franklin's problem. He's embarrassed when "everybody laughed at him" for pulling his shell behind him. They yell, "You yellow-bellied, chicken-livered, spineless excuse for a turtle." A major change to the final is that Bourgeois cut this embarrassment and name-calling. Instead, she narrows the focus to overcoming Franklin's fear of the dark. This change in the through-line sparked Bourgeois's title revision from *The Turtle They Called Chicken* to *Franklin in the Dark*. In the early draft, the story question could be: How can Franklin overcome his embarrassment? We know that Bourgeois's ending is that Franklin uses a night light to overcome his fear. The problem with her early draft is that her story doesn't answer the question it poses. In other words, Franklin doesn't resolve his embarrassment or the name-calling.

In both versions, Mom comforts Franklin each night before bed, but he remains afraid. So he looks for help elsewhere. On a walk, he meets various animals who each have a fear he or she overcomes. In her early draft, Bourgeois included six animals. In the final, Franklin meets only four—a duck who is afraid of deep water so she wears water wings, a lion who is afraid of loud noises so he wears earmuffs, a bird who is afraid of heights so she uses a parachute and a polar bear who is afraid of cold so he uses a snowsuit. This is an example of overwriting to try out options, and then successfully condensing to use only the best choices or essentials. In both versions, Franklin heads home and meets his mother, who was afraid he was lost, and he discovers mothers can be afraid too. In her final draft, Bourgeois adds in a sequence where Franklin recaps his encounters with his mother, who listens and validates his observations. This new section serves Bourgeois's revised through-line by giving Franklin time to realize "they were all afraid of something." Mom then gives "him a cold supper and a warm hug" and sends him to bed. Bourgeois's final draft asks the question: How can Franklin overcome his fear? Her answer: With a night light and a lot of courage. Bourgeois successfully revised the middle of her story to answer this story question and focus on Franklin's fear.

From these revised middles, we can apply these questions to our revisions:

- From all these revisions: What is the question my story asks? How does this draft answer it?
  - From Bourgeois's revision: How can I revise to stay true to my story question? What scenes need to be cut or added?
  - From Stinson's revision: Are my character's motivations for each action clear?
- Also, can I layer my manuscript with an additional structural concept for interest and shape, such as the cycle of a child's day? Finally,

have I revised with illustration opportunities in mind?

- From Granfield's revision: How does this draft move from the opening to the ending? Is this progression well structured? Tight? Focused? Appealing to kids?

I'VE DISCOVERED THAT THIS PROCESS of analyzing picture-book revisions from early drafts to final versions is a valuable way to gain insights about the creative process. Perhaps each of the questions I unearthed could become the basis for one pass through the manuscript during revisions. Each time I revise a manuscript, I seem to go through the same painful bumps in the road. My hope is that, by analyzing the revision process, I can find the beating heart of my story with fewer bumps. To digress for a moment, I suspect that many of these revision strategies were subconscious rather than conscious decisions on the part of these authors. By bringing these decisions to light through analysis, we can try to infuse our own intuitive process with some of this knowledge. Finally, I believe that, although I've been discussing picture-book revisions, many of these revision questions will also apply to other forms, such as the novel or short story, and I plan to give them a try with all the forms I write.

KAREN KROSSING is known for writing novels for kids and teens, such as [Bog](#) (Fitzhenry & Whiteside) and [Punch Like a Girl](#) (Orca). She's been exploring the picture-book genre as part of her [Masters in Writing for Children and Young Adults at the Vermont College of Fine Arts \(VCFA\)](#), where she's completed a [Picture Book Intensive](#) semester.

