

## Breaking the Rules for Picture Book Manuscripts

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Harold Underdown, a successful writer and children's book editor gets asked a lot of questions. This time he addresses the value of breaking the rules for Picture Book Manuscripts. Should you follow the rules, or can you do something unusual or unique and still get published?

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This question came from a visitor to Harold Underdown's site: [www.underdown.org](http://www.underdown.org). She/he said that she's experimenting with a structural device that bends or breaks "the rules." When writing a Picture Book, there are certain "rules" used by authors, including having a single protagonist.

Rather than having a single protagonist, the story has two parallel protagonists that are connected by an inanimate object. It's a bit like the film "The Red Violin" in that the narrative thread is maintained by an object that various characters encounter...but the conflicts are definitely for the two protagonists. [The questioner is a screenwriter and draws the analogy of certain films that tended to break the rules, such as "Adaptation" and "Momento".

The precise question: Do you think that most publishers would dismiss out of hand a story that bends the rules in this way? Many production companies pedantically dismiss otherwise well-crafted manuscripts that don't follow an extremely narrow set of rules.

Harold responds:

"What you describe reminds me of David Macaulay's Black and White, which you should read if you haven't already--and which, incidentally, won a Caldecott."

Children's books that bend or break the rules DO get published, as that book demonstrates (there are others). but it certainly helps to have the resume of a David Macaulay when submitting one.

Harold adds: "To carry your film analogy a bit further, a screenwriter with a name is far more likely to get a green light for an unconventional approach than an unknown is, or so I would assume (I vaguely remember reading the story behind the screenplay for 'Adaptation,' which I think was written by a very well-known screenwriter.)"

Finally, Harold recommends: "I won't say that you shouldn't do it, but you may find that you've made your chances of interest in your manuscript even slimmer than usual."

The bottom line is this: book editors are very busy people. If you want to be seen as a first-time author or unknown author, then you'd be better off following the rules for Picture Books and Children's Books, rather than taking the chance that your "unusual" approach to writing a children's book or picture book will be published.

For more great articles and information from Harold Underdown, visit his site at: [www.underdown.org](http://www.underdown.org)

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