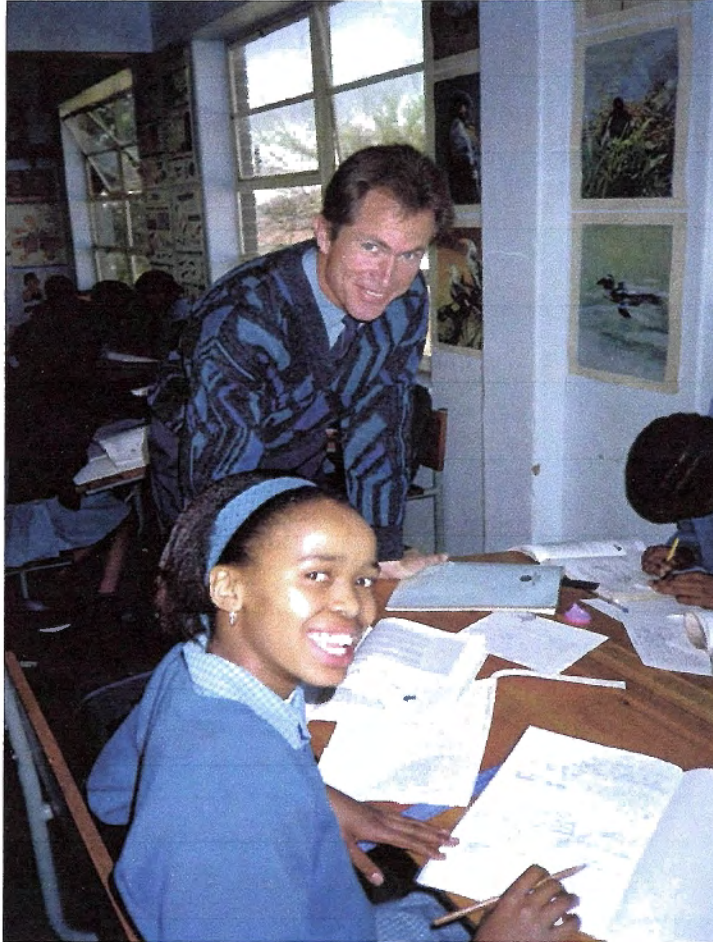


**CHAPTER 5**

**LET THE AUTHORS SPEAK – TIPS ON WRITING FOR CHILDREN**



<b>READER</b>	<b>READING</b>	<b>TEXT</b>	<b>RESPONSE</b>	<b><i>AUTHOR</i></b>
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## 5.1 Introduction

Last but not least in the communication network is the role of the author writing for the readers. The need having been identified, the whole process calls for authorship and authors to take up the pens to provide in the needs of the learners in question. Life-long readers are submitted to the written books of other lifelong readers who have ventured their hands at the art of writing for readers. Creating a lifelong reader at the youngest possible age will strengthen the reader's love of reading and understanding of the world around us. It is probably arguable that the author should have been an avid reader himself/herself, since in order to be able to write books for children, the author should have honed a certain linguistic skill to handle the art of creating with words. Avid readers and bookworms grow up to become authors one day – in fact one could possibly maintain with a certain amount of certainty that today's readers are tomorrow's writers. In this chapter, a few authors open up their writers' treasure-chest and share their very personal reflections, speaking from the heart on the art of writing and some more specifically on the writing of children's books. It should be noted that this chapter is not intended as a discussion of the various authors' works, but an intimate moment of sharing tips on writing for children and writing reading books in general.

## 5.2 Andrew Davies

When reading about authors on writing and their involvement in writing books, it becomes apparent that the focus on the reader is meant as a piece of advice to the authors who have in many cases a social and educative purpose to fulfil apart from their effort to entertain. The reader is provided with reading material that was painstakingly prepared by an **author who was most probably also an avid reader** before embarking on the undertaking of becoming a writer. Compare Andrew Davies, a well-known and popular classical author of, among others, children's reading books – a man who admits to having read many books as a child:

I was a secretive, voracious, passionate reader. It was like my other life. I was an only child until I was eight, and with that sort of age gap you never really get close. I was pretty gregarious at school, and although I was clever, I found it stressful and exhausting, having to prove myself all the time, not so much intellectually as emotionally and physically: fighting, swearing, cheeking the teachers, keeping my position in the gang pecking order, all that. It was a relief to get home and be alone. I wasn't alone in the house, of course: my parents were there, but they left me alone if I was safely reading in my room" (Davies, 1997:3-4).

### 5.3 Nadine Gordimer

Well-known South African author Nadine Gordimer (1997:36) reflects on the perception among authors involved in writing, claiming that the **writing process is part of an aesthetic exploration of the writer with words, patterns and language and the endless arrangement and disarrangement thereof**. She also asserts that a definition of literature embraces the transforming of the world by esoteric literary styles which was hardly possible during the apartheid regime of the previous government. Whatever the writer is aiming at, whether it be a political piece of protest or a love story, it can only reach the level of truthful writing if the author is capable of handling the splendour of language in his/her service. She hails the freedom of the word from the distortion of literary values after the abolition of apartheid and she urges writers to invest vigorously in our new South Africa. She also stresses the point made in the discussion of Davies that writers need to be readers too (Gordimer, 1997:37).

Gordimer reveals bits and pieces about being an author in her book *Writing and Being*. Among others there are the following useful hints authors may make use of. She admits (1995:18) that the writer 's creative authority is often questioned when the reader starts producing the text, a fact that makes the writing process a very difficult one. She also admits studying other authors in order to find mentors for herself as she was trying to make an artificial construct of herself (Gordimer, 1995:122). She is also of the opinion

that what is written and turns to art cannot be ignored and forms part of the transformation of society (Gordimer, 1995:131).

#### 5.4 Elsabe Steenberg

Steenberg (1988b:167), a well-known Afrikaans author of children's books, is of the opinion that no author who is genuinely writing meaningful books will ever engage in writing books for teenagers just for the sake of it. If the author does exactly that, he is reverting to days past when didactic writing for young readers was the order of the day.

Steenberg (1988b:169) identifies a tri-tripartite division of aspects to consider when writing for teenagers. They are the self, those who are pertinently exerting an influence on the self and the investigation of other non-realistic dimensions. She posits that the teenager is extremely concerned with himself and seems to be very egotistical. Personal identity is foregrounded by the teenager who is critically experiencing his changed body and displays a sense of awareness of criticism aimed at him. Value systems and philosophical issues are of great interest to him. Alcohol abuse and drug addiction are also not seen in such a serious light until they read about the destructive effect and the impact they have on the individual. Peers and other forces he is socialising with will have an effect on him. The child from a divorced or broken home will also be attracted to characters struggling with the same issues. Concerning peer groups, Steenberg (1988b:169) asserts that interpersonal relationships are also more eagerly opened up than in the past. Sexual relationships are also of great interest to teenagers and nowadays books dealing with early premarital sex and even homosexuality are not totally avoided in the library. Steenberg (1988b:70) reflects on the **need for books on racial conflict** and says that there is a definite need for this type of book. These issues point out the intense need for realistic dimensions. Concerning non-realistic fiction the following remarks are illuminating: Escapist reading, where the reader just reads for sheer enjoyment, like detective stories, love stories, and even adventure is reading where the

reader needs advice from parents to guide him towards reading other types of literature too of a less pointless nature.

Steenberg (1988c:266-270) gives the following hints with regard to stimulating reader interests: **Teachers should encourage learners to read extensively and should do so by starting with a positive attitude to reading themselves.** They should try and be enthusiastic about reading without lying to the learners. They should therefore start working on their own attitudes to learning first. Books should also be dramatised in class in order to elicit greater enthusiasm for reading. Teachers should try and encourage learners to participate in discussion and to offer the learners to experience their own points of view. They should also try not to be sarcastic and to involve also the slower learner in class. Supplementary reading is of crucial importance and readers should be given tasks to be encouraged to visit the library. The teacher should also read to the learners her/himself and supply an appetiser. They should also be encouraged by small favours to carry out certain reading tasks, for example by being rewarded with a book prize. The teacher must differentiate and assign various tasks to the various types of learners, for example, the slow reader should be helped in such a way as to still encourage him/her to read by having special sessions during which the simpler but still attractive book is dealt with. Gifted readers must be involved in a readers' club and by reference to book reviews (Steenberg 1988c:269).

## **5.5 Rona Rupert**

Author Rona Rupert (1988:225) maintains that an author of children's literature writes primarily because he/she wants to write for children simply for the sake of writing for children. It is like a goal pursued She is of the opinion that **to write for children demands** an almost **superhuman discipline.**

In order to grab and hold the child's attention, the story should be vivid and clear, flowing from beginning to end. The author of children's literature must be tremendously frugal with the use of words. Children still persist with their own fantasies and they do know the truth between the truth and lies. The book must be ethical without moralising. Every book carries with it that mystical moment inexplicable and secretive which makes a book immortal.

## 5.6 Alba Bouwer

As author of children's literature, Alba Bouwer (1988:218-222) is of the opinion that a writer should determine whether he/she wants to be a realistic or a fantasy writer and stick to his/her domain if he/she wants to write persuasively. **Two crucial elements of a good book are the good story and a good imagination.** She asserts that she walks with an idea for months and only then will she go and sit down and start writing. According to her it is a painful and lonely process but extremely rewarding if the author knows that he/she has created a piece of art for a child to enjoy. Imagination forms an inseparable part of writing books. It is a special insight into man, his driving force and reality. **The author must be able to think in the world of the child.** The author must be able not to peep over shoulder height but to eye from the level of the child. The author must be careful of diminutives and mealy-mouthed insipidity. Repetition, onomatopoeia and images attract the child. The author must also take heed of the rhythm of the language, a hint that she as the author had the privilege of realising when having read stories for children on the radio. When making use of animals as characters, the author must also be careful of using and selecting the most appropriate idiom. The animals must still be true to their animal nature. The reason why she is writing? She enjoys writing as part of a compulsive need and enjoys children's stories, for the good children's book is also enjoyed by adults although in a different way.

**"Have a good story to tell and tell it as clearly as possible"** (Bouwer, 1988:222).

## 5.7 Jenny Seed

Seed (1988:223) supplies the following hints with regard to writing for children. Firstly the aspirant writer must study the market and visit the town library. Seed admits to taking out books of other authors to keep abreast of the latest trends and to learn from masters of the art. The author must also determine which publishers are interested in picture books and which publishers are interested in publishing for the target age group. **The writer should aim for a specific market fulfilling the requirement of the publisher.** The most popular tales are those that are exciting and fast-moving and filled with plenty of action to hold the attention of the reader. The story must have form, shape, and purpose and a satisfying conclusion. The plot must be properly considered and even the title of a book is of far more relevance than is anticipated. The book is characterised by the title on the back and if it does not attract the reader, the reader will not even open the book. As of equal importance are the first opening paragraph, and the very first sentence. Seed (1988:224) also emphasises the aspect of stimulating curiosity which she describes in terms of **the book being the bait** - in this instance the book is metaphorically speaking the reader that has to be caught. Another very important thing is to write with the greatest economy of words, and text that is relieved by dialogue to combat monotony. Smattering of dialogue helps making the, longer pieces of writing digestible and helps in carrying the story forward. There should be a build-up to a climax and then the unravelling and conclusion are as vital as the very first lines of the story. A sting in the tail or surprising end is always very striking and the very last sentence should carry that extra message that the story is concluded (Seed, 1988;224).

## 5.8 Es'kia Mphahlele

Literature remains a form of art in which the reader develops his/her ability to appreciate how he/she feels about experiences. Own cultural equipment must be brought to the texts.

Mphahlele (1997:40) encourages escaping the captivity of the culturally restricted English literary canon:

... literary discourse is like chewing sawdust if it ignores the cultural vantage point from which we feel compelled to speak, even while we learn from the culture that gave birth to the work of art under scrutiny. If writers, dreamers, town criers, singers of praise, epic and other tales from the past, here and in other cultures can engage our attention, let us also read and study contemporary novelists, poets playwrights, reportage from various parts of the world.

Mphahlele (1997:42) encourages writers to concentrate on their craft and to transform human experience into art in order to move their readers and bigger audiences. He recognises the need for simple, contemporary and futuristic texts. **Authors should bang on the iron gates of academic strongholds to let in the living writers.** He also requests teachers to become inspired and to try their hand at the art of writing even rewriting folktales, myths and heroic songs in order to supply in the literary need.

## 5.9 Alida Bothma

According to Bothma (1988:231-234), an illustrator finds himself in the midst of the world of the child as illustrator of children's literature. She makes the valid point that a **reading child** is a child who can cope better with problems; is never completely alone, for he/she has many friends for he/she **befriends the characters of the books** he reads. The avid reader's characters are also always in his thoughts to stimulate his/her imagination and a book can even help to contribute to a healthier society. According to her a book is actually a concoction of a number of factors illustrations, typography, quality of paper, colour distinctions, construction and even type-setting. All these ingredients are the recipe for the book, while the cook, the publisher has to see that the food does not get burnt.

According to Bothma (1988:231), an illustrator of children's books, a book starts with the story. The author has to provide a story for the illustrator to work on. She asserts that the illustrator must then try to leave the imprint of her own individuality on something. **The most important aspect to bear in mind for the illustrator is the atmosphere.** She/he must ascertain whether it is a mystical imaginative story or whether it is a humorous message that has to be put across. The atmosphere determines the style of the illustrations. She illuminates these statements by means of her illustrations for Pieter. W. Grobbelaar's *Doer in Dierlandy* en Rona Rupert's *En wat van my?* She did more humorous illustrations on Grobbelaar's book because of the style.

Bothma (1988:233) tackles the issue of illustrating as a very fine distinction of understanding the atmosphere even before the books is read. When paging through a book, one is struck by the illustrations and they determine whether you will read further or not. On the cover it is the tendency to make use of one of the illustrations inside the book. The cover according to her should actually be a picture summarising the content of the entire book. And it should not let the cat out of the bag before even having read the story. She uses the following as part of her illustration medium: pencil, graphite, ink, collage and crayons for black and white and water colours, wax crayons, ink and collage for and acrylic paint for coloured sketches (Bothma, 1988:233). The illustrator must then study the story meticulously in order to use the same physical description in the illustrations as mentioned in the book, for example, the colour of the hair. The space for the written text must constantly be borne in mind when illustrating. They must supplement each other and form a coherent whole. The illustrator must also respect the age of the readers and the theme appropriate for the specific age group, which is to a great extent determined by the author. To avoid disappointment illustrators must ask for samples before the final book is published. The illustrator must also try to be a child for a while or at least for the stage that he is working on the illustrations in order to succeed and satisfy his target readers.

### **5.10 Paddy Bouma**

Paddy Bouma (1988:227), another illustrator of children books, gives the following practical and very encouraging advice to prospective authors. First, one must take the manuscript to the publishers so that they can agree on the illustrations they have in mind for the book. She also asserts that once the publishers have accepted the manuscript they may decide to make extensive changes to the book. The editors would also prefer to work into close contact with the illustrator of the book. A good idea is to submit a sample illustration with the book. She recommends that the prospective author should look around in the bookshop to find the publisher that he/she might feel comfortable to fit in with. She recommends that South African authors should also first try the South African publishers as to avoid too much competition on the overseas market. The typical children's book's format will possibly be a thirty-two page book, front and back pages included. In short, design your own book by cutting sheets of paper to fit the size you have in mind and then use this dummy format book to experiment with front and blank pages in the front and the make basic decisions about the layout of the book. Write your text in pencil and leave spaces for the pictures you have in mind. After this one makes an appointment to see the editor. A good book designer can give your book that touch of professionalism. A contract is signed by you and the editor. Always work on two facing pages together as it will help you to get a picture of what the book is really going to look like once it is opened. The reward will hopefully be pleasurable (Bouma, 1988:230).

### **5.11 Marjorie Van Heerden**

Marjorie Van Heerden (1988:235), author and illustrator of children's books, gives the following hints:

1. Always create with the child audience clearly in mind.
2. Choose your medium and graphic technique very carefully.
3. Explore every possible source of inspiration.
4. Keep a fine balance between the text and the illustrations.
5. Know yourself; an adult writing for children

An aspiring author must read extensively on the books and genre he is interested to write for. He should Van Heerden also warns against critics who are guided by other critics to judge according to norms that have become ossified and then to stultify. **Young children** who have not yet learnt to suppress their free flights of fantasy, who still have honest and uncluttered minds **are often the best advisers** for what they want to read. In short, the author should read with his audience. Criticism often tends to inhibit us and therefore the following piece of advice seems to be quite valuable:

The biggest single danger to the aspiring author / illustrator of picture books for children, is to work with the adult critic in mind. Forget the adults, and concentrate solely on your target audience. Never, ever underestimate the intellectual power of the young mind; after all, they are equipped to learn, in about half a dozen years, quantitatively as much as adults may learn in ten times that long, if we're lucky (Van Heerden, 1988:236-237)

Van Heerden warns against illustrations that seem to be artistically and aesthetically appealing but that are not necessarily the best choice for the written text. A specific technique suitable to the story is also important. The illustrator must decide whether he wants to be subtle or shout out loudly. **Pictures can also whisper or shout and it is the illustrator's task to put across the suitable impression.** The illustrator can also add as source of inspiration and add her/his own powers of observation. Van Heerden also speaks of the rhythm of the picture book. This element must subtly surface if one does not want the magical moment to be destroyed. The illustrator must be able to recognise the inherent musicality and pace of the written text for it is regarded as the success of a picture book (Van Heerden, 1988:238).

Every book is said to start with a picture in mind and the picture may never swamp the seminal idea but only strengthen it. The text and illustrations must balance each other. Do not verbalise what is better done visually and vice versa. Van Heerden is very honest and inspiring even when she says:

... to even start a picture book one must have guts, perseverance and also a goodly measure of stubbornness. You are faced with an idea, an inspiration, that must grow into a text that will have to be revised and reworked again and again until it is right. Once this is achieved you must tackle, on average, thirty-two pages which have to be illustrated with meticulous care. To do this, you will normally need about six months to one year of hard labour (Van Heerden, 1988:240).

## 5.12 Joanne Rowling

Another author of children's literature who has been extremely successful, Joanne Rowling, has sold 30 million books, earning herself a bank balance of 15 million American dollars. She has been on the front pages of newspapers and television screens for being accused of plagiarism, a sign according to Treneman (2000:34) that the author has arrived. She has become known for her four *Harry Potter* books (to date), and for the moment it is striking that her lifestyle still lacks the burnished sleekness of the rich and famous. She is a woman who **works obsessively**, up to ten hours a day before entering recovery mode and allowing time for interviews. She reports in an interview that she has also experienced the fear of not being able to perform after a period of success. She is also considering merchandising her characters more or less along the lines of the plastic McDonald's happy meals concept.

Rowling admits to having experienced depression and describes it as "the absence of ever being able to envisage that you'll be happy again". She incorporates depression in her books in the form of characters such as wizard wheezes and dementors that can attack people and suck out all positive thoughts. Authors also do have fears such as whether people will still be interested in them after many books and then a period of silence. Rowling poignantly and honestly admits that she wonders whether people will still think of her if nothing comes after her four *Harry Potter* books (Treneman, 2000:37).

Rowling also admits that **her first book took her almost five years to write** and that more than one draft of the story is done and changes made constantly to let words sound better (Lockman, 2000).

### **5.13 Barbara Taylor Bradford**

Many a prospective author should be inspired by Barbara Taylor Bradford who is a well-known author of not only books on interior decoration and children's literature, but also novels such as *A woman of substance*, a best-selling novel that has seen the light of twenty-six publications and has sold nineteen million copies. More than sixty million of her fifteen books are sold all over the globe, which makes her the most successful living author in England. She admits to having reached the list of the *London Sunday Times's* ten richest people in Britain and admits that she knows that she will never have to work again (Lines, 2000:24).

**Bradford also tells about her failures and about persevering and that her best selling novel was only accepted after many attempts and many failures.** About the art of writing she says that she struggles a lot when writing and worries a lot about basic domestic things like whether the dogs will fall ill. She is an avid reader and is also involved in a project on literacy and writes virtually every moment at her disposal (Lines, 2000:26).

### **5.14 Sue Grafton**

She is better-known for her detective thrillers inspired by her divorce, following which she turned her homicidal anger into fantasy by starting to write novels rather than children's literature, but those who venture to take up the pens may learn from her as a successful author. She is a refreshing new voice in a male-dominated crime genre. She writes six and sometimes even seven days a week from early in the morning until late in

the evenings. She says she needs serenity and order when writing and claims that writing requires a fearful focus. She has the following to say about the art of writing creatively. She says it is **"stressful and chaotic, at times a sheer torment. I whine, I agonise, I have migraines. I'm sure every book is going to kill me, but when I'm going there's nothing better"** (Van Kuik, 1996:114).

### 5.15 Patricia Cornwell

Another inspiring author is Patricia Cornwell who is also a phenomenally successful and wealthy author. She is said to be the world's highest-paid and most widely-read mystery writer with a disarmingly simple message to her success. Her scalpel-sharp precision causes her plots to become chillingly believable (Thompson, 1997:48).

Cornwell is also said to be so authentic and strikingly successful because of the perfect atmosphere she is able to create through her knowledge as medical examiner and technical analyst in a morgue. She owns a film production company in New York is a multi-millionaire who should serve as source of inspiration to any writer who still has doubts about whether to be or not to be and to sit riveted to his/her computer for those many hours successful authors are speaking of (Thompson, 1997:48).

### 5.16 Susan Goldman Rubin

Rubin has written more than twenty books for children, including highly-acclaimed books of non-fiction such as *Toilets, Toasters and Telephones*. She is a prolific author and well-known for books such as *Fireflies in the dark* and *There goes the neighbourhood*. She is a teacher in the UCLA Extension writer's programme.

Rubin is a proponent of non-fiction for children and advocates the writing of non-fiction for the younger generation. She claims, according to Steve Mooser, President of the

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), that the ratio of all children's books published is about 60% fiction and 40% non-fiction. There is thus a demand for non-fiction and competition will thus also not be strong in this particular field.

She gives valuable hints with regard to the writing of non-fiction such as to **do thorough research, to read extensively on the topic of interest, to watch videos and even to listen to CD's**. Libraries can also provide help and. She claims that the introduction to the book is also more important than one thinks. **She warns that writing a book can be very exhausting** as the editor may send you back home with hundreds of notes to wade through, but admits that it can be very exciting and satisfactory to become involved in writing non-fiction for children (Rubin, 2000).

#### 5.17 Madeleine L'Engle

L'Engle is a well-known author of many children's books such as *A wrinkle in time*, *A swift tilting planet* and *A wind in the door*. She is also a long-time member of a writer's editorial board. L' Engle (2000) is of the opinion that the general assumption is that writing for children is not as good as writing for adults. She warns against the prevalent conviction that if you're good enough you would write for adults and not for children. This assumption is completely incorrect. She wrote a book *Camilla*, which was later re-issued as an adult novel. She admits having read and being influenced by Maud Montgomery and **read many myths and fairytales herself**. She says that the only standard against which to test whether a book is good enough for a child is to ask yourself whether a book is good enough for you.

## 5.18 Julie Anne Peters

She is the author of four children's books that have been published: *How do you spell*, *B.J.'s billion dollar bet*, *The stinky sneakers contest* and *Risky friends*. Peters (1998) advocates the writing of humorous books and claims that humour is relegated to "serfdom". She asserts that humorous stories offer a mirror to young people to come to terms with life's inequities.

**She says that rhyme, rhythm and sound will carry the story forward.** She also says that if you're a poet and you know it, you should even try literal translation in an effort to encourage prospective authors to start writing.

Peters seems to be quite successful a writer if one considers what she is also achieving by being interested in her readers. She is using her books to put across a moral lesson e.g. to warn adolescents against the dangers of gambling she created the character B.J. In *B.J.'s billion-dollar bet*.

She recommends prospective authors to read some of the masters of the middle grade such as Ellen Conford, Barbara Park, Beverly Cleary and Betsy Byars, among others (Peters, 1998).

## 5.19 Summary

Authors are humans too! They need money to earn a living, despite the fact that one cannot only write to be popular, playing to the gallery. Most authors admit to writing as an urge to create and give vent to artistic urges. Nevertheless, authors have to take stock of the market and the need that exists. The above mentioned authors each gives a striking hint with regard to writing:

- Andrew Davies: Be a reader to write for a reader.
- Nadine Gordimer: Write truthfully and freely and do venture to write.
- Elsabe Steenberg: Do not write for children because of false motives but for contact and sincere motivation. Remember that children are involved in relationships - that is a topic of interest to them. Write on issues that need to be addressed without forcing anything.
- Rona Rupert: A writer must paint vivid pictures but must adhere to the rule of economy of words and refrain from moralising.
- Alba Bouwer: Imagination is the key word. Have a good story to tell.
- Jenny Seed: Learn from other authors and study the market.
- Alida Bothma: Atmosphere is of paramount importance when illustrating.
- Paddy Bouma: Take your manuscript to the publisher before having it illustrated.
- Marjorie Van Heerden: Do not forget to keep your target group in mind: children. Persevere and be inspired and refuse to give up easily.
- Barbara Taylor Bradford, Sue Grafton and Patricia Cornwell are all examples of authors who have proven that writing books can be very rewarding not only spiritually but also financially.
- Rubin advocates the writing of non-fiction as there is a need for this particular book.
- L'Engle focuses attention on the fact that writing for children is not an inferior activity
- Peters advocates writing of humorous stories.
- All the above-mentioned authors are testimony to the fact that writing books can be a tormenting process, but in the long run nothing compares to it. Like the South African author Chanette Paul puts it: There's nothing to be compared to holding your book in your hands while the wet ink can still be smelled on the paper (Paul, 2000:28).

Having provided background on the reader, the author, the book and the processes of reading and writing, the empirical investigation will tie down the realities of the situation that prompted this study.