



Tales from the Front

Finding Focus

By Zakieh A. Mohammed

I can't take a selfie; there is something about framing the picture, finding the button, smiling, and pressing it in one unified action that eludes me. I don't look at the screen because I'm looking for the button; I don't have the dexterity to press a button and hold the camera steady. I have realized I don't smile while I am thinking, which is what I do when I am trying to figure out how to take a selfie. Why is this relevant? Because I will continuously try until I get it done in my own way.

Framing the Picture

When I think about what has transpired before this start to my public writing persona, I can say the world has changed. My typewriter has been replaced with a computer, my glue envelopes and stamps now have a sticker adhesive for simple use, and queries with enclosed self-addressed stamped envelopes have been replaced with queries via email. Despite all the evolution on the query letter, the pages my mom turned for me, and the pages I turn for the little people in my life, are a constant.

For as long as I can remember, I regularly made time to send out queries. Writing happened as inspiration popped its head into my day-to-day life. I work in the Chicago Public School system, where there are endless moments that inspire ideas. I have family and friends that are insightful and witty. The children in my life are always reintroducing the world to me in unexpected ways.

When my nephew was three, he looked up at the moon one night and said, "Oh, they fixed it."



Yes, indeed, that crescent moon he had looked up at earlier in the month was now a full moon, and the Starlight Construction Company mended that mozzarella moon so it was full and bright. (I did not share that it may need repair again.)

Finding inspiration has never been the problem. The discipline to have the perseverance and belief that my writing should be shared, and that the conversation and the reading of the

book will benefit others, is where I waver.

Looking for the Button

My debut picture book, *A Girl Named October*, was started over 20 years ago. The core idea was introduced when I walked into our living room one day. My little sister, who was battling leukemia, looked at her feet, then looked at me, and said, "I'm touching the world."



I asked what she meant, and she showed me how her feet touched a rug, that led to stairs, that led to the front door, that led to the sidewalk, that led to, well, everything.

She was not wrong. The statement stayed with me, even after she passed away. Understanding that we influence the world with merely our presence is a big concept for an adult, yet here was a nine-year-old touching the world and letting me know that I, too, was making that sort of impact as well.

That statement was the spark and is the heart of the book. Over time, as I finished college, went on to graduate school, started my teaching career, became a school administrator, and finished my doctorate, pieces of the story found their way to me. One line, one situation, one component at a time. It was far from disciplined, but each component was born from the world in which I was participating.

I knew when the story was done, and then I began to share it with agents and publishers. I workshopped the manuscript, and received positive feedback, but there were no concrete offers. Doubt crept in, and then it no longer snuck in, but owned the space that dreams of being a published author who can share powerful ideas with young people lived. The truth of the matter was that I was debating whether I needed to stop setting time aside to pursue publishers and agents. I was at that age where I was giving into the idea that maybe, despite how much I believed in my work, it was a personal effort - not a public one. I had stopped looking for that publisher to reach back.

Smiling

When a publisher did reach back, I no longer trusted there was an audience out there for my work. Truth be told, when the publisher called, I actually

almost screened the call. I did not recognize the number and assumed it was a telemarketer. When he asked if *October*, the original title, was my manuscript, I said, "Yes." When he asked if I had received his email, I said, "No."

In actuality, I had. The title of the email was "October," and, in my advertisement-inundated inbox, I thought it was a pitch for some great deal - possibly cable, possibly a gym membership - for the month of October and, therefore, did not open it. The opportunity I had waited for had been reduced to spam. I am fortunate that Ripple Grove Press felt the story resonated with them enough to pick up the phone.

The conversation the publisher and I had was about the relationship of the characters, the voice of the protagonist, and the arc of the story. The understanding of the publisher aligned with the words and ideas I had written. The publisher shared that he had briefly considered the characters as animals, but decided the book would not be served if the characters were turned into animals. It never dawned on me that my empathy story could look like two bears or two foxes; it was always my sister and I. The issue was not that bears or foxes could not have a story about empathy and impact, it was that when I wrote the story, or I talked about the book, it was about how powerful our presence can be in the world, not about two foxes that had a powerful presence.

Putting it all Together

I am immensely proud of the story, the wisdom that I can share on behalf of my sister, and, hopefully, the conversations that will be had with children and adults about why everything they do can make our world better. The excitement of having a publisher value the story and core ideas was

overwhelming, and, after the contract was signed, and I knew the story was in safe hands, I found myself inclined to visit my portfolio of completed manuscripts. The enthusiasm that had waned was cautiously returning. Was there a place for a picture book about hide-and-seek? A series about three little boys who continuously try to defy the "little brother" stigma? What about short stories that were not for little readers, but explored questions about disappointment and distress? How about the young adult novel inspired by my own students and my need to reframe classic literature? Could I revive my query routine, despite my fears and the long road I just traveled to my debut book? Time will tell, but I do know that I hope *A Girl Named October* will be shared so little people, and the adults who love them, know how they can touch the world, too.

So whether a finger sneaks into a picture, I crop out a head, or a grimace appears instead of a smile, I will continue to try and work to get that better selfie. There are too many pictures that I want to take, too many special people with whom I want to share a picture, and too many experiences that I want to remember.

Zakieh Mohammed was raised in Chicago and lives there still with her family. Working with children of all ages, she is an award-winning teacher, who has served in the Chicago public school system for over twenty years. The genuineness and humorous imagination of the young people she interacts with regularly are reflected in the stories she writes. Her debut picture book, *A Girl Named October*, was illustrated by **Andrea Tripke** and published by Ripple Grove Press. <http://www.ripplegrovepress.com/a-girl-named-october>