A BEST-SELLING PICTURE BOOK  
BY A BRAND NEW AUTHOR  
A Consideration of the Celebrity Factor  

Patricia Austin

Celebrity-penned picture books are a growing trend in the field of children’s literature, although this is not a new phenomenon. In the 1970s and 1980s, the American actor Fred Gwynne wrote three humorous books, *The King Who Rained* (1970), *A Chocolate Moose for Dinner* (1976), and *A Little Pigeon Toad* (1988), which were published by Simon and Schuster. Within the last decade, however, more and more celebrities have harnessed their fame to publish picture books. Some of the actors and entertainers who have written picture books include Debbie Allen, Julie Andrews, Bill Cosby, Jamie Lee Curtis, Whoopi Goldberg, John Lithgow, and Will Smith. American basketball star Shaquille O’Neal, and politicians including New York’s governor, Mario Cuomo, and former American president Jimmy Carter have also entered the fray. Sarah Ferguson, also known as Britain’s Duchess of York, wrote a series of books.

One picture book that has appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list since the inception of its list focusing on children’s books, *The Brand New Kid* by Katie Couric (New York: Bantam, Doubleday, Dell, 2000), has probably made it there for one reason only—the celebrity status of the author. Although not critically acclaimed, *The Brand New Kid* was among the top ten best-selling children’s books for seventeen weeks and has subsequently been translated.
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into Spanish, hence widening its potential readership internationally. To consider just how high profile the author is, one only needs to consult the Nielsen television ratings. As co-anchor of the American Today Show since 1991, Katie Couric averages more than six million viewers daily.2

While Couric long has had a passion for writing in rhymed verse, often creating poems to give friends,3 The Brand New Kid is her debut as a children's book author. The likelihood of a first-time author having a book rocket to best-selling status is unusual in the children's book market. However, the acquisition and editorial process for this particular book was significantly different because of the author's popularity.

Acquisition of the Book

In the lingo of the publishing world, when a publisher buys a book, the editors speak of acquiring it. Interested to know exactly how a celebrity author comes to write and sell a children's book, I called the marketing representative of the children's division of Random House for that information. I was referred to the adult division of Doubleday (a subsidiary of Random House) and directed to speak with Deb Futter, Couric's editor. It was an assistant to Futter who returned my call. When I asked how they acquired The Brand New Kid, the Doubleday assistant editor related that her company asked Couric if she would be interested in writing a book for children. "She's a very popular figure, and we knew that any book that she would write would sell well" (Personal communication, 15 May 2002). When Doubleday contacted Couric, they found that she had already written a book, and the deal was sealed.

Conducting interviews with several big-name authors, Shannon Maughan reports a slightly different version of how Doubleday acquired The Brand New Kid. "The move from idea to publication just sort of happened," Couric says. "I had been represented by ICM and knew [literary agent] Esther Newberg there. I told her that I had been writing this book in my spare time and that I didn't know if anyone would find it interesting or not. She told me to fax it over, and she really liked it. Esther then approached Doubleday with it."4

Although I tried to resolve the discrepancy between the two stories, the assistant editor with whom I spoke did not call me back. The scenario suggests that even if Couric had not yet written a book, Doubleday was willing to publish whatever she would write. Hence, the celebrity's status provides her a privilege not afforded to other first-time authors.

Since the proliferation of picture books written by celebrities might imply that anyone can write a picture book, I queried several versatile authors who participate in the Child_Lit listserv5 whether writing a picture book was easier than writing a novel. Jane Kurtz, an author of novels, picture books, and poetry (many with international settings), provides a particularly thoughtful, insightful take on the logistics of manuscript acquisition within the industry.

For a picture book, it's not at all unusual for one's editor to say, "This is wonderful and I don't have one thing to suggest, but I'm not going to publish it." A picture book manuscript can work magnificently and still not be something the editor is convinced will lure enough people to plunk down their $15 or $16 or $20 to justify the expense of the printing (which is considerable). That's where a well-known author and, yes, a celebrity, has an edge in that the author's reputation is likely to help sell a lot of books and therefore the picture book manuscript written by such a person doesn't have to be as fresh, as clever, as moving, as unusual, as gripping—in whatever way it grips—as the manuscript of an unknown writer. (Personal communication, 10 June 2002)
Indeed Couric’s manuscript is not as clever or fresh as it could be. The bottom line, however, is profit margin, which the editorial staff at Doubleday openly acknowledged.

The Story, and the Story behind, 
*The Brand New Kid*

Written in rhymed couplets, *The Brand New Kid* begins as Ellie and Carrie head off to their first day of second grade and meet a new boy in the class, Lazlo S. Gasky. (Interestingly, while Couric certainly could have focused on ethnic groups within America that might provoke teasing or ostracism, she elected to give a more global focus to her book. The new kid, Lazlo, is from Hungary.) He looks different—“His hair was so blond, why it looked almost white / It stuck out all over, it didn’t look right” (unpaged)—and the students stare at him, avoid picking him for a team, trip him in the lunchroom, and tease him. When Ellie sees Lazlo’s mother at school one day (“she had tears in her eyes and she seemed so forlorn”), the young girl realizes how mean everyone has been. “She thought about how things were going so far, / about Lazlo and how he felt different and strange / and wondered aloud just what she could arrange.” Ellie makes overtures to Lazlo, suggesting that they get together and play. “Stunned, he said, ‘Please come to my house and play.’ / So Ellie said, ‘Sure, I can, let’s pick a day.’” When Lazlo asks if Ellie knows how to play chess, “Ellie said, ‘Yes, but I’m not all that great.’ / That’s okay, he replied and he soon said ‘Checkmate!’” Once Ellie gets to know Lazlo, she realizes they’re more alike than different, a message she is quick to convey to her classmates the next day.

“I started to write this book in my spare time,” Couric recalls. “I would write bits and pieces on Saturday mornings before my children were awake…” Though Couric wasn’t exactly sure how her snippets of verse and her characters would evolve, she knew they were partly inspired by her responsibility as mother of young daughters Ellie and Carrie, as well as by her reaction to recent tragic incidents of school violence committed by alienated students.

When Couric reported on Columbine and other school shootings, she was concerned that several of the shooters may have been reacting, at least in part, to bullying by their peers. Couric says, too, that she was motivated by memories of her sister’s being cruelly teased by a group of girls in junior high.

Couric claims that since she has children, she is familiar with the market. “I knew there were books containing lessons and morals out there, but that many of them were preachy. There weren’t enough jazzy, contemporary books that could serve as a springboard for discussion. I saw that I could possibly fill a gap,” Couric said.

“I do think if we can heighten one child’s sensitivity, and maybe if he or she sees someone getting picked on, they have a greater awareness of that as a result of reading the book,” says Couric. She hopes that her book will send the message that “it’s hard to be an outcast, hard to be ostracized, hard not to be in the in-crowd… I’m hoping that kids will become more aware and that they may reach out to those who are different from them.”

The Reviewers’ Response

Despite Couric’s desire to “fill the gap” by creating a book that is not preachy, her own text is as didactic as myriad others that get published yearly. The overly moralistic tone is conveyed by such rhymes as: “Ellie paused and replied, ‘Now I know him, you see, / Lazlo isn’t that different from you and from me’” (unpaged). Perhaps the greater flaw exists, however, in Couric’s efforts to
make the book "jazzy and contemporary." Undoubtedly her use of verse was her attempt at jazziness, and it doesn't work. Two reviewers aptly point out the inadequacies in Couric's writing style. In *School Library Journal*, Martha Topol acknowledged that the rhyming text was "at times awkward as well as faulty in cadence." A *Publisher's Weekly* reviewer noted that the narrative's rhyming couplets format results in forced, sometimes ungrammatical phrasing (e.g., "They arrived at his door greeted by his French poodle / and Mrs. Gasky was there with a plate of warm strudel" and "He's terrific at chess, and his Mom's really sweet. / Playing soccer the guy doesn't have two left feet").

Verse written by novices often tends to control the writer rather than serving as "a means for controlling the use of language," which literary critics Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, state is a function of verse. Meter can create unity and can focus a reader's attention; metrical patterns set up "the unconscious expectation that the pattern will continue." Unfortunately, Couric not only denies the reader's expectation in terms of the metric pattern, but as evidenced by above-quoted passages, she also sacrifices sense for sound.

Besides the stylistic problems, reviewers also noted flaws in the plot. Topol wonders, "Where are the adults when Lazlo is being maligned? Why does 'the best teacher by far in the whole second grade' single out the new student by drawing attention to his 'different name'? Where's the gym teacher or the lunch monitor when Lazlo is being mistreated?" I suspect that Couric would rightly respond to such a critique by asking, Where are the educators in all the cases of mistreatment that occur in schools daily? However, Topol cites another plot flaw that cannot be defended so easily, apropos to the following scenario in Couric's text: When Ellie sees Lazlo's mother in the office, a fellow student tells Ellie, "Her son's having trouble, she might pull him out, / this school may be wrong for him, she's full of doubt." "How is it," Topol wonders, "that a student is privy to Mrs. Gasky's concerns?" The *Publisher's Weekly* review points out another hole in the plot. "Ellie's best friend, Carrie, from whom she is initially inseparable, all but disappears for much of the proceedings."

Reviewers are more positive about the book's theme. Jon Henshaw states that *The Brand New Kid* "is certain to entertain while it teaches...[It] offers a heart-felt plea for tolerance to children of all ages." *Publisher's Weekly* acknowledges Couric's "laudable message of inclusion." For all the praise of the theme, however, compliments come with a caveat. "The looseness of the drawings, the accomplished use of texture, and the white of the page enhance but don't entirely compensate for this flawed yet sincere title," according to Topol.

Getting reviewed in the *New York Times* is a coup for any author; however, more than likely, the *Times* reviewed Couric's book not because of its quality but rather because of the author's fame. The reviewer, in fact, acknowledged as much by pairing *The Brand New Kid* with a book by another celebrity, John Lithgow. There is a conspicuous absence of reviews, however, from significant journals in the field of children's literature such as *The Horn Book Magazine*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, and *Book List* (the latter publishes only positive reviews). *The Brand New Kid* also is not recognized as notable by any of the numerous best lists of the learned societies of the American Library Association,
National Council of Teachers of English, or International Reading Association.

The Editorial Process

So what happened between the time the manuscript was submitted and when it was published and reviewed? What is the editorial process? Although that stage lies hidden from the public, since interaction between author and editor is and should be private, it is the part of the process that leaves us, as readers, with questions, hard questions that, when articulated, sound like an attack. That is not my intent. I want, instead, to initiate a dialogue about responsibility. What kind of responsibility does the editor assume in working with an author to ensure a quality product?

While publishing is a business, and profit is the bottom line, I have found in my interactions with many people in the world of children's publishing, at international and national conferences, that their first and foremost desire seems to be to put good books in the hands of children. I am not sufficiently familiar with the world of adult publishing, although my gut sense tells me that it is more cutthroat, more about money than about altruistic goals and good books. And Couric's editor was, after all, in the adult division of Doubleday. As Jane Yolen states, the role of the editor is to have "a broad knowledge of the field" and to provide an author "a second eye, reading and reporting accurately and constructively his or her reactions to the book."22 Although skilled in editing adult manuscripts, Couric's editor may not be knowledgeable about what constitutes quality in a book for children. Perhaps she upholds the "tradition of didacticism...that children's books must be moral and educational," which Peter Hunt acknowledges may be "an inevitable consequence of adult dominance, when both the child characters and the child readers are subservient to the adult voice in the book."23 Many adults whose dealings with children's books hearken to their own childhood years have hazy memories and mistaken beliefs about the role of literature in a child's life. They may fail to realize that "a picture book should have substance," according to John Rowe Townsend. "There should be something in it that invites the child to return and make new discoveries. The book that is exhausted on a quick flip through is a poor picture book."24 Didn't the editor of Couric's manuscript identify the didactic nature of the plot, the forced, contrived rhymes, and the faulty meter? When Rosemary Wells, a prolific children's author, reads a book that is uneven, she wants to ask, "Where was the editor? A book that is guided and preened and patted to perfection by a good editor is seamless."25 There is little evidence that Couric's manuscript was preened and patted to perfection.

On the contrary, Couric's rhymes create awkward syntax and ungrammatical text, resulting in doggerel verse. To be sure, some critics distinguish verse from poetry. Indeed, T. S. Eliot describes verse as a "superior amusement" [claiming] that while feeling and imaginative power are found in real poetry, verse is merely a matter of structure, formal metrical order, and rhyme pattern. Its structure...may seem more important than its meaning."26 As pinpointed by reviewers, Couric does not adequately apply the principles of prosody and achieve metrical order. Almost any editor or author addressing aspiring writers will caution them against penning their picture book text in verse.27 It's hard to understand why Couric's editor would not have issued this caution.

Yolen identifies honesty as one of the key criteria of what makes a good editor. "The editor must tell me at all times what is right and wrong with my work, for we must both be ruthless with my writing."28 Was the editor afraid to make suggestions or to change the author's words because she is a celebrity? Or did the editor not bother to do serious editing since she knew the book would sell well regardless of whether or not it was good?
It is hard to believe that honesty marked the relationship between Couric and her editor.

The Consumer’s Response

Because of media coverage alone, Couric’s book has received much attention, the author’s status helping with publicity bookings. Couric appeared on the Rosie O’Donnell Show, Larry King Live, and interviewed herself on the Today Show, a clever marketing gimmick. She also was able to autograph books for admiring fans where the Today Show is broadcast. First-time writers, or even well-published writers, who lack name recognition, may depend on awards or starred reviews in key review journals for attention to their newly published titles. Stars don’t depend on starred reviews for publicity. Even negative critical reviews of their books probably don’t affect sales. Relatively few casual book buyers read review journals; even librarians who do follow reviews will be more inclined to ignore the critique in light of an author’s name-recognition factor. In fact, many librarians may buy books by celebrities because patrons come looking for them; they want to satisfy their clientele. It is a vicious circle that obfuscates what a quality book is.

Customer reviews posted on the website of one of the largest electronic bookstores, Amazon.com, provide an inkling of consumer response that shows the confusion regarding what constitutes a good book. While many books on the site are not reviewed at all by customers, the number of people (thirty-one) who responded to Couric’s book is significant, making a comment on America’s romance with fame. A human resources consultant and trainer wrote, “Katie Couric’s poetry is fun and engaging...It is in our best interests to spend some time teaching our kids about kindness and courage and tolerance. This book does that, and with a light hand, so that it’s still fun for kids and adults. I can’t wait for more books!” (1 Oct. 2000). A reader from Miami wrote, “While the rhyme may be ‘clunky’ and she may have only gotten her book published because of who she is, the book does wonderful service to the topic of diversity. If people buy it AND read it ONLY because it was written by Katie Couric, then its [sic] is still a win in my book” (1 Dec. 2000). A reader from Texas wrote, “Despite a few technical problems with a sometimes imperfect meter (it’s pretty close—give the woman a break!) I liked the writing. It was light and not overly didactic and heavy handed” (5 Dec. 2000). A reader from Virginia wrote, “Though her writing at times is awkward and her rhymes forced, the heartwarming and important message of this book far outweighs its flaws” (18 Jan. 2001).

For Couric’s book, the average of thirty-one reviews rated the book 3.5 out of 5 stars. Most of the customer reviewers noted the clunkiness of the rhymes, some excusing Couric for it and saying that the book was good anyway, others decrying that the book was “close but no cigar” (20 Nov. 2000), “well intentioned but not well written” (14 Dec. 2000), and “pathetic” (22 Mar. 2002).

When a book sells simply because its author is a celebrity, this muddies the distinction between quality and popularity. “As Ben Shahn has said, ‘The popular eye is not untrained, it is only wrongly trained.’” Because Couric is intelligent and sincere, and because she is a daily presence in people’s lives, the uninitiated gravitate toward the book for the author’s name alone. As consumers, people may equate the star’s popularity to the quality of her book and might generalize the didactic nature of children’s books as acceptable or perhaps even expected.

The Debate—The Pros and Cons of a Best-seller

Clearly, the debate about the quality of this celebrity-authored picture book is alive and well.
Because customers can read previously posted comments before they pen their own, a dialogue has emerged. Hence, an undercurrent of debate has surfaced about whether or not celebrities should be able to harness their fame to publish a book that almost assuredly would not have been accepted if it were sent to the publisher by an unknown author.

On the positive side, considering the above comments and reactions, people who would not normally buy books may be buying or reading a book because it is coupled with a person they know and love. Much like the phenomenon of Oprah’s Book Club, which raised the number of readers and created best-selling books, Couric’s book may bring books to the consciousness of TV watchers who have not read much and do not regularly read to their children. Also, the profit margin of Couric’s book probably enables a publisher to take a chance on a new, unknown author or a manuscript that may have literary merit but may not have widespread appeal.

On the negative side, taste is not inherent for children but something acquired. Children are quick to resist lecture, and if books that lecture are the fare offered to tempt the palette, children could be left with a sour taste in their mouths for good literature. They may not return for a second helping, seeing reading not as a pleasurable activity but as yet another forum from which adults preach. Any parent knows how quickly a child can turn a deaf ear to a litany of advice on how to behave or what to think. Similarly, Barbara Stoodt-Hill and Linda Amspaugh-Corson acknowledge that heavy-handed books alienate readers.31 One reader from Elgin, Illinois, appropriately tips the scale in the debate toward the negative side by taking the publishers to task: “Shame on Doubleday for publishing such a poorly written, didactic book” (Amazon.com, 22 Mar. 2002). Therein, the debate comes full circle, returning to the issue of responsibility. Since publishers supply what the market buys, gullible consumers who are willing to buy what a celebrity writes regardless of the book’s quality could be the link in the food chain that should be faulted if we want to place blame. Publishing is a business, and businesses survive and thrive because they answer to economics. The issue, however, is not about placing blame but on accepting responsibility, which suggests a course of action for publishers, parents, and educators.

Implications—For Publishers, Parents, and Educators

With the financial success of The Brand New Kid, Couric’s writing career is just beginning. “I’m doing two more books for Doubleday,” [Couric] notes. ‘I want to look at other difficult issues facing children, like peer pressure and different kinds of rejection.”32 Couric and her editor could learn from the critics. The next books could be better. If, however, the editors abdicate their responsibilities to produce a quality book, we, as significant adults in the lives of kids, have a heightened responsibility. We need to be vigilant about putting good books in children’s hands. Rather than introduce books that are overly didactic or poorly written, adults need to introduce quality books to children, picture books that combine “freshness in language, imagination in plot, and significance in theme.”33 Those are the books that “generally have more power to stir up interest where none is apparent and, over time, will catch more readers than will mediocre books.”34

I would love to stand on my literary high horse and proclaim that better books than The Brand New Kid exist on a similar theme. Yet in any group of readers—children or adults—some people will love Couric’s book; others will hate it. I would love to embrace Yolen’s claim that “children...do not lack judgment. They are excellent critics, often quite brutally outspoken since they have not been...
‘civilized’ out of twitches, boos, and yawns.” And yet, quite simply, tastes vary. I may cringe and think someone else’s taste unsophisticated. And I would love to advocate that discerning educators and parents invest their time in sharing books that have been critically acclaimed rather than those that have achieved popularity through a means that has nothing to do with the book itself, but all readers will never agree about any book.

I certainly witnessed varying tastes in my university children’s literature class. I shared the text of The Brand New Kid without letting my students know who had written the book. (Interestingly enough, none of them had heard of it.) In critiquing it, they echoed the comments of both professional reviewers and customer reviewers noted here. Only after they had evaluated the text did I divulge the author’s name. The response was telling. One woman who hadn’t liked the book because of the awkward wording commented, “That makes everything different. That makes me doubt myself.” Since Katie Couric wrote the book, she thought, it had to be good. The student was caught up in the phenomenon of assigning some kind of authority to Couric by virtue of her being a famous person. For another student, one who had liked the book because of the message, knowing the author also made everything different. Savvy and resistant to the appeal to fame, he was turned off by the celebrity factor.

The reaction of my college students, most of whom are, or will be, elementary school teachers, crystallized my thoughts on discussions we may want to have with children. We need to confront the issues raised here. When a first-time celebrity author’s book, which received mixed reviews, makes it to the best-seller list, what does that say about our culture? What does that say about what we value? While adults are the ones buying the books, children will more than likely be unimpressed by an author’s celebrity status. On the other hand, labels on fashion mean everything to young people. Relating the students’ own preoccupation with wearing name-brand clothes may be analogous to a publisher’s interest in a name-brand author. Discussing a society’s values and developing an awareness of what factors enable privilege could hone children’s critical consciousness, and investigating the international scope of this kind of star worship could be a worthwhile endeavor.

5. Child_Lit listserv is an online discussion group in which subscribers engage conversation about children’s literature. The URL is <CHILD_LIT@Email.Rutgers.edu>.
6. Maughan.
8. Maughan.
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32. Maughan.

33. Lukens, 213.


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