



The Mindful Muse



FROM STORY IDEA TO PUBLISHED BOOK

LESSONS I LEARNED WRITING MY FIRST CHILDREN'S STORYBOOK

Sometimes the stories we're meant to tell find us when we least expect them.

Melissa Liedkie

FROM STORY IDEA TO PUBLISHED BOOK

Lessons I Learned Writing My First
Children's Storybook

Inspired by two grandchildren, a missing
fork, and the power of curiosity.

*“Sometimes the stories we’re meant to tell find us
when we least expect them.”*

WELCOME

A Note from Melissa

If you're reading this guide, there's a good chance you have a story. Perhaps it's a children's story you've been carrying around in your imagination for years.

Perhaps it's a spark of an idea that appeared unexpectedly and refuses to leave you alone. Or perhaps you're just curious about what it takes to transform an idea into a published book. Wherever you find yourself, welcome.

When I began writing Zane and Calli's Adventure in ThrowAwayLand, I had no idea where the journey would lead. I wasn't trying to become an author. I wasn't dreaming of bestseller lists. I was simply following a small spark of curiosity.

That spark eventually became a children's book.

Along the way, I learned lessons about storytelling, publishing, creativity, confidence, patience, and trust. Some lessons were exciting. Some were surprising. Some were expensive – all of them were valuable.

This guide is not intended to be a comprehensive publishing manual. Instead, it is a collection of lessons I learned while bringing my first children's storybook to life.

I hope these insights encourage you, inspire you, and help you avoid a few of the mistakes I made along the way.

Most importantly, I hope this guide reminds you that you don't have to know everything before you begin. Just be willing to follow the spark when it appears.

Thank you for being here. Now let's begin.

Melissa Liedkie

The Mindful Muse 🐝

ABOUT MELISSA



Melissa Liedkie is a marketing professional, storyteller, and founder of The Mindful Muse.

For more than 25 years, she has built a career helping organizations connect with people through thoughtful communication, strategy, and creativity. Yet one of the most unexpected chapters of her journey began with a missing fork and a spark of curiosity.

What started as an ordinary family moment inspired her first children's storybook, Zane and Calli's Adventure in ThrowAwayLand, and ultimately led her on a publishing journey filled with lessons about creativity, storytelling, publishing, and personal growth.

Melissa believes that some of life's greatest adventures begin when we pay attention to the ideas that refuse to leave us alone.

Through The Mindful Muse, she encourages others to embrace curiosity, trust their creativity, and remain open to the possibilities that emerge when they follow a spark of inspiration.

Today, she continues to write, create, and share stories that encourage people to see the world with fresh eyes and a curious heart.

"Sometimes the stories we're meant to tell find us when we least expect them."

*The best stories don't
always begin with a plan.
Sometimes they begin with
paying attention.*



THE STORY BEHIND MY STORY

How a Missing Fork Sparked an Adventure



The real-life inspiration behind ThrowAwayLand

"Stories don't always arrive fully formed. Sometimes they begin with a question."

Every story has a beginning. Mine began with a piece of silverware.

One day, my grandson Zane accidentally threw a fork away. It was one of those ordinary family moments that most people would quickly forget. But for some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

What if all the things we accidentally throw away ended up somewhere?

What if there were a place where discarded objects gathered?

What if two curious children found themselves swept into that world?

The questions kept coming.

Soon, I wasn't just thinking about a missing fork anymore. I was imagining a magical place called ThrowAwayLand, complete with spaghetti tornadoes, a Jilly-Jell-O Sea, a Mac-and-Cheese Maze, and a cast of unforgettable characters.

What began as a simple observation slowly became a story. And that's one of the biggest lessons I hope to share with aspiring authors: Stories don't always arrive fully formed.

Sometimes they begin with a question. A moment. A memory. A spark of curiosity.

The trick is to notice those moments when they appear and permit yourself to explore them.

I didn't set out to write a children's book. I followed an idea that refused to leave me alone. And eventually, that idea became Zane and Calli's Adventure in ThrowAwayLand.

Looking back, I'm grateful I paid attention.

Because that small spark led me on an adventure of my own.

START AT THE BEGINNING

When the idea for Zane and Calli's Adventure in ThrowAwayLand began to take shape, I faced a simple reality: I had never written a children's book.

Like many aspiring authors, I had an idea but no understanding of what it actually takes to transform an idea into a finished story.

Instead of guessing my way through the process, I decided to start at the beginning. I wanted to learn more about storytelling and develop skills to bring my idea to life. So I enrolled in a creative writing class and children's picture book workshop at my local university.

Looking back, that decision was one of the smartest investments I made during my publishing journey.

The course taught me something that applies far beyond writing: You don't have to know everything before you begin. You need the willingness to learn.

Many people assume authors are born knowing how to write books. The truth is that most authors spend years learning, practicing, revising, and improving their craft.

Writing is both an art and a skill. Like any skill, it grows with curiosity, patience, and practice.

The workshop gave me confidence, not because it provided all the answers, but because it helped me ask better questions. And sometimes, asking better questions is exactly what moves us forward.

If you're considering writing a children's book, don't let a lack of experience stop you. Every author starts somewhere — the important thing is to begin.

What I Learned 🐝

- 📖 Great stories begin with curiosity.
- 📖 Writing is a skill that can be learned.
- 📖 Confidence grows through action.
- 📖 You don't need to have all the answers before you start.
- 📖 Every author was once a beginner.



"Confidence didn't come from having all the answers. It came from being willing to learn."



Mindful Muse Reflection 🐝

One of the biggest myths about creativity is that talented people simply wake up knowing what to do.

In reality, creativity often begins with curiosity.

The willingness to learn is what transforms an idea into something real.

Sometimes the bravest thing we can do is give ourselves permission to be a beginner. 🐝

THE WORKSHOP THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

After completing the creative writing class, I signed up for the Children's Picture Book Workshop taught by children's author and educator Anastasia Suen.

At the time, I had an idea for a story, but I still had much to learn about the unique structure of children's picture books. That workshop became one of the most valuable investments I made during my publishing journey.

Like many aspiring authors, I assumed children's books would be simpler to write than books for adults. After all, they contain fewer words. What I quickly learned is that fewer words require greater intention. Every page matters. Every sentence matters. Every page turn matters.

Children's books are carefully crafted experiences designed to engage young readers while moving a story forward in a meaningful way.

The workshop introduced me to concepts I had never considered before, including pacing, page layout, word economy, emotional beats, and the rhythm of a picture book.

Most importantly, it taught me how children's stories are structured. That knowledge proved invaluable later in the publishing process. When reviewing layouts with my publisher, I understood how the story should flow from page to page. When pagination felt off, I was able to confidently discuss changes and collaborate on solutions.

For the first time, I didn't feel like someone simply handing over a manuscript. I felt like a contributor to the creative process. That confidence came directly from taking the time to learn the craft.

One of the greatest gifts the workshop gave me wasn't information. It was perspective. I began to understand that writing a children's book isn't simply about having a good idea. It's about shaping that idea into an experience young readers will enjoy and remember.

Illustrations Are Storytelling Partners

One of the most important lessons I learned is that illustrations are not an afterthought in a children's picture book. They are storytelling partners. Young readers often notice details in the artwork before they understand the words. The illustrations create emotion, establish setting, reveal personality, and help bring the story to life in ways words alone cannot. In a children's picture book, the illustrations are every bit as important as the text. Together, they create the complete reading experience.

What the Workshop Taught Me



-  Page pacing matters.
-  Every word should earn its place.
-  Page turns create anticipation.
-  Emotional moments help readers connect.
-  The illustrations are as important as the words.
-  Structure creates a better reading experience.
-  Knowledge builds confidence.



*"The workshop didn't teach me how to write my story.
It taught me how to shape it."*



Mindful Muse Reflection

Many people underestimate the value of learning the fundamentals.

We live in a world that celebrates talent, but often overlooks preparation.

The workshop reminded me that confidence doesn't come from knowing everything. It comes from understanding enough to participate fully in the process.

Learning the structure didn't limit my creativity. It strengthened it. 

***You don't have to
know everything
before you begin.***



WHAT SURPRISED ME THE MOST

One of my most meaningful aha moments during this journey was discovering how much I enjoyed writing. That may sound strange coming from someone who eventually published a book, but writing a children's storybook had never been part of my plan.

I spent more than twenty-five years working in marketing, where writing was often part of my job. But writing business copy and telling a children's story are very different experiences.

When I first began exploring the idea of writing a book, I felt intimidated. I didn't think of myself as an author.

In fact, part of the reason I enrolled in creative writing classes was to learn the craft before attempting something completely outside my comfort zone.

Looking back, I'm grateful for that mindset. It kept me curious. It kept me learning. And it helped me approach the process with humility rather than assumption.

What surprised me most wasn't publishing the book. It was discovering a genuine love for storytelling. Somewhere between the first idea and the finished manuscript, I realized I enjoyed creating characters, imagining adventures, and shaping ideas into stories.

That discovery was unexpected. And it reminded me that sometimes our greatest surprises aren't found in the outcomes we achieve. They're found in the gifts we discover within ourselves along the way.



What I Learned 🐝

- 📖 You don't have to think of yourself as a writer to tell a meaningful story.
- 📖 Creativity often reveals gifts we didn't know we had.
- 📖 New experiences can uncover unexpected passions.
- 📖 Curiosity is often the first step toward discovery.
- 📖 Sometimes we surprise ourselves.



The biggest surprise wasn't publishing a book. It was discovering I loved telling stories.



Mindful Muse Reflection 🐝

Many people spend their lives believing they know exactly who they are. Then a new opportunity appears. A new challenge. A new experience.

And suddenly they discover a part of themselves they never knew existed. Growth often works that way.

Sometimes the journey changes more than the outcome.

Sometimes it changes us. 🐝

WHAT WAS EASIER THAN EXPECTED

One of the biggest surprises during my publishing journey was discovering that writing the story itself was easier than I expected. That doesn't mean it was effortless. It simply means it wasn't the intimidating experience I imagined.

Before writing Zane and Calli's Adventure in ThrowAwayLand, I had spent years writing business copy as part of my marketing career. But storytelling felt different. More personal. More creative. More vulnerable. Because of that, I approached the process with a healthy respect for the craft.

Part of the reason I enrolled in creative writing classes and a children's picture book workshop was to learn before I attempted something completely new. Looking back, I believe that preparation made all the difference.

The classes gave me a foundation. The workshop gave me structure. Together, they gave me confidence. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the blank page, I felt equipped to begin.

Once I started writing, I found myself enjoying the process. The story unfolded naturally. The characters became familiar. The adventure became fun.

Rather than struggling to force the story onto the page, I found myself looking forward to discovering what would happen next.

That doesn't mean every page was perfect, far from it. But the experience reminded me that preparation often turns fear into confidence. And confidence makes it easier to begin.

One of the greatest lessons I learned is that many of the things we fear most become far less intimidating once we take the first step.

What I Learned

-  Preparation builds confidence.
-  Learning the fundamentals reduces fear.
-  Stories become easier when we stop chasing perfection.
-  Creativity thrives when curiosity leads the way.
-  Action creates momentum.



Sometimes the things we fear most turn out to be the things we enjoy most.



Mindful Muse Reflection

Sometimes we spend so much time worrying about what might be difficult that we never discover what might be enjoyable.

The anticipation of a challenge is often far greater than the challenge itself.

Many of life's most rewarding experiences begin on the other side of uncertainty.

The only way to find out is to begin. 

WHAT WAS HARDER THAN EXPECTED

If writing the book was easier than I expected, finding the right publishing partner was harder. Much harder.

When I first began exploring publishing options, I assumed finding a reputable publisher would be relatively straightforward. After all, there are countless companies offering publishing services to aspiring authors.

What I quickly discovered is that not all publishing companies are created equal. Some provide excellent service, guidance, and support. Others make promises they cannot or do not intend to keep.

At the time, I was focused on bringing my book to life.

I was excited. I was optimistic. And like many first-time authors, I didn't yet know all the questions I should be asking. Looking back, I realize that publishing requires the same curiosity and preparation as writing. Perhaps even more.

Finding the right publisher isn't simply about comparing prices or packages. It's about finding a partner you trust with your story. A partner who communicates clearly. A partner who values transparency. A partner who understands that your book represents years of ideas, effort, and hope.

One of the most important lessons I learned is that excitement should never replace research. The publishing process is too important. And your story deserves careful stewardship.

If I could offer one piece of advice to aspiring authors, it would be this: Take your time. Ask questions. Do your homework. And trust your instincts.

The right publishing partner will welcome your questions. The wrong one will often rush your decisions.

That lesson proved invaluable as I continued my publishing journey.

What I Learned

-  Finding the right publisher takes time.
-  Not all publishing companies are equal.
-  Research is one of the best investments an author can make.
-  Excitement should never replace due diligence.
-  The right partner makes a tremendous difference.



Excitement should never replace research



Mindful Muse Reflection

A little extra time spent asking questions today
can save a great deal of frustration tomorrow. 

MY MOST EXPENSIVE LESSON

One of the most valuable lessons I learned as an author came with publishing my second book. Unlike my children's storybook, this project required a different publishing partner.

When I began exploring options, I was approached by a company whose branding appeared professional, polished, and highly credible. The association with a nationally recognized name created a sense of confidence and familiarity.

At the time, I assumed the branding reflected legitimacy. I later learned that assumption was a mistake. What appeared trustworthy on the surface was not supported by the level of research and due diligence I should have performed before signing an agreement.

Looking back, I realize I spent more time evaluating the promise than I did evaluating the company behind it. That lesson proved costly. More importantly, it taught me something every aspiring author should understand: Strong branding is not the same thing as strong integrity.

Professional-looking websites, impressive marketing materials, and familiar names should never replace independent research.

Today, I ask more questions. I research more thoroughly. I look beyond appearances and focus on reputation, transparency, communication, and verifiable results.

Although the experience was difficult, it ultimately made me a wiser author and a stronger advocate for other writers. And for that, I am grateful.



What I Learned

-  Professional branding does not guarantee legitimacy.
-  Research matters.
-  Independent reviews are invaluable.
-  Trust your instincts.
-  Protecting your work is part of being an author.
-  Every difficult experience contains a lesson.



*The experience was expensive.
The lesson was invaluable.*



Mindful Muse Reflection

Wisdom rarely arrives in the form we expect. Sometimes it arrives disguised as a setback. A disappointment. A challenge.

Yet many of our most valuable lessons emerge from experiences we would never choose to repeat. The goal is not to avoid every mistake.

The goal is to learn from them when they happen. 

PUBLISHER VETTING CHECKLIST

A Practical Tool for Protecting Your Story

Before signing an agreement, making a payment, or sharing your manuscript, take a little time to investigate the company you're considering. Excitement is natural when you're ready to bring your story to life. But a few hours of research today can save months of frustration tomorrow. Use this checklist before choosing a publishing partner.

Company Verification

- Research the company online
- Carefully review their website.
- Read the "About Us" section.
- Verify the legitimate professional presence of key company contributors
- Confirm the company has a physical business address.
- Search the address online to verify it is a legitimate business location.

Reputation Check

- Search the Better Business Bureau website.
- Check Writer Beware for warnings or reports
- Search Reddit and author forums for independent feedback.
- Read positive and negative reviews.
- Look for patterns rather than isolated complaints.

Questions to Ask

- Who will be my primary contact?
- What services are included?
- What services cost extra?
- What is the project timeline?
- Who owns the rights to my work?
- How are revisions handled?
- What happens if I am dissatisfied with the work?

Trust Your Instincts

- Did the company answer questions clearly?
- Were they transparent about pricing?
- Did they pressure me to make a quick decision?
- Does anything feel rushed or unclear?
- Would I feel comfortable recommending this company to an author?

Mindful Muse Reminder 🐝

Excitement is wonderful.

Excitement should never replace research.

The right publishing partner will welcome your questions, respect your diligence, and understand that your story deserves careful stewardship.

Take your time.

Ask questions.

Trust your instincts.

Your future self will thank you.

WHAT I WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY

If I were beginning my publishing journey again today, there are a few things I would do differently. Not because I regret the journey. But experience has a wonderful way of sharpening our perspective.

First, I would spend more time researching publishing companies before making any commitments. Today, I understand that a beautiful website, polished marketing materials, and persuasive conversations are only the beginning of the evaluation process.

I would ask more questions. Read more reviews. Verify more information. And, above anything else, trust my instincts sooner.

Second, I would remain more involved throughout every stage of the publishing process. Although publishing partners bring valuable expertise, no one knows the heart of your story better than you do. Stay curious. Ask questions. Review every detail carefully.

Your voice matters throughout the entire process.

Finally, I would remind myself to enjoy the journey a little more. It's easy to become so focused on deadlines, edits, approvals, and publishing decisions that we forget something important—what we are doing is extraordinary.

We're creating a story that didn't exist before.

Looking back, I realize that every challenge taught me something valuable. Every success built confidence. Every setback offered perspective. And every step prepared me for the next chapter of my journey.

If I had the opportunity to begin again, I wouldn't try to avoid every mistake. I would choose to move through the experience with greater curiosity, greater patience, and greater confidence.

Because that's what growth looks like.

What I Learned

-  Curiosity is one of an author's greatest strengths.
-  Ask more questions than you think you need.
-  Stay involved throughout the publishing process.
-  Protect your story.
-  Enjoy the journey.
-  Growth often comes disguised as experience.



No one knows the heart of your story better than you.



Mindful Muse Reflection

One of the gifts of experience is perspective.

We rarely wish away the lessons that shaped us.

Instead, we carry them forward.

Every chapter prepares us for the next one.

And every experience, whether joyful or difficult,

Becomes part of the author we are becoming. 

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

When people ask why I wrote this guide, the answer is surprisingly simple. I wrote it because I remember what it felt like to stand at the beginning. Excited. Curious. Hopeful. And completely unsure of what I didn't know.

Every author begins there. Looking back, I realize how generous other writers were with their knowledge. Creative writing instructors shared their craft. Experienced authors shared their wisdom. Mentors helped me see things I couldn't yet see for myself.

This guide is my way of paying that generosity forward. I don't believe every aspiring author needs to learn every lesson the hard way. If something I experienced can save another writer time, frustration, or uncertainty, then sharing those lessons is worthwhile.

More than anything, I hope this guide encourages someone who has been carrying around an idea and wondering if they should begin. Maybe your story is still only a spark. Maybe it's been quietly waiting for your attention. Maybe you've convinced yourself you're not really a writer.

I understand those feelings. I've been there.

The wonderful thing about stories is that they don't ask us to be perfect. They ask us to begin.

If this guide helps even one aspiring author move forward with greater confidence, greater curiosity, and greater wisdom, then it has accomplished exactly what I hoped it would.

Because stories have a remarkable way of connecting people. And sometimes, the story that changes someone else's life begins by changing our own.

What I Learned

-  Sharing knowledge is one of the great gifts we can give.
-  Every author begins as a beginner.
-  Experience becomes more valuable when we share it.
-  Stories connect people across generations.
-  Encouragement can change someone's journey.
-  One story can inspire another.



I don't believe every aspiring author needs to learn every lesson the hard way.



Mindful Muse Reflection

Knowledge grows when we share it.

Experience becomes wisdom when we pass it forward.

Perhaps that's one of the hidden purposes of every creative journey.

Not simply to create something beautiful.

But to leave the path a little clearer for the person who walks behind us. 

WHY I CONSIDER MY BOOK A SUCCESS

People occasionally ask how many copies of my children's book I sold. It's a reasonable question. After all, success is often measured by numbers.

But long before Zane and Calli's Adventure in ThrowAwayLand was published, I had already decided how I would define success.

This book was never written to become a bestseller. It was written as a gift. A gift for my grandchildren.

A story inspired by a simple family moment that I hoped would make them laugh, imagine, and someday remember.

The moment I held the finished book in my hands, I realized something important. The goal had already been accomplished. The story existed.

It had moved from my imagination into the world. Everything beyond that felt like a bonus. Of course, every author hopes their work finds readers. I certainly do.

But I don't believe the value of a story is determined solely by the number of copies it sells. Sometimes success is measured by the courage to begin. Sometimes it's measured by finishing what we started. Sometimes it's measured by creating something that will outlive us.

For me, this book represents all of those things. It reminds me that ideas are worth pursuing. Stories are worth telling. And ordinary moments can become extraordinary adventures.

That's why I consider my first children's book a success. Not because of the number of books sold. But because the story exists. And because it continues to make people smile.

What I Learned

-  Define success before the world defines it for you.
-  Stories have value beyond sales.
-  Finishing is an accomplishment worth celebrating.
-  The people we write for matter.
-  A meaningful story is never wasted.
-  Success begins with creating something that didn't exist before.



My book became a success the moment the story existed.



Mindful Muse Reflection

The world often measures success with numbers.
But some of life's greatest accomplishments cannot be counted.
A story shared.
A child who smiles.
A dream brought to life.
Perhaps success isn't always about reaching millions.
Perhaps it's about reaching the people we were meant to reach. 

FOLLOW THE SPARK

Every book begins with something small. A question. A memory. A conversation. A moment most people would overlook.

Mine began with a missing fork.

At the time, I had no idea that one ordinary family moment would eventually become a children's storybook, a publishing journey, and this guide.

That's the wonderful thing about curiosity. It rarely announces where it's leading us. It simply invites us to take the next step.

Looking back, I realize I didn't build this journey all at once. I followed one small spark at a time. One class. One workshop. One page. One conversation. One lesson. One story.

None of those individual steps seemed extraordinary in the moment. Together, they changed the direction of my life.

Perhaps your spark looks different. Maybe it's a story you've been imagining. Maybe it's an idea you've been quietly carrying for years. Maybe it's something completely unrelated to writing.

Whatever it is, don't dismiss it simply because it seems small. The biggest adventures often begin with the smallest moments.

You don't need to know where the path leads. You only need enough courage to take the next step.

Curiosity has a remarkable way of revealing the path one step at a time.

Follow the spark.

You never know where it might lead.

What I Learned

-  Small beginnings often lead to extraordinary journeys.
-  Curiosity is worth following.
-  You don't have to see the entire path to take the first step.
-  Every small step matters.
-  One idea can change everything.
-  Trust the spark.



You don't need to know where the path leads. You only need enough courage to take the next step.



Mindful Muse Reflection

Most of us spend our lives waiting for certainty.

But creativity rarely begins with certainty.

It begins with curiosity.

Perhaps the life you're meant to create isn't hiding somewhere far away.

Perhaps it's already quietly waiting inside the idea you can't stop thinking about.

Pay attention.

That spark may be trying to lead you somewhere beautiful. 

READY TO BRING YOUR STORY TO LIFE?

If you've made it this far, perhaps you've been carrying around an idea of your own. Maybe it's a children's story. Maybe it's another kind of book. Maybe it's simply a quiet dream that has been waiting patiently for your attention.

Whatever it is, don't underestimate it. Every finished book was once just an idea. Every published author was once a beginner. Every remarkable journey started with someone deciding to take the first step.

You don't have to know everything before you begin. You don't need the perfect plan. You don't need permission. You simply need enough curiosity to take the next step.

If this guide has encouraged you, inspired you, or helped you feel a little more confident about your own journey, then it has accomplished exactly what I hoped.

Your story matters. Your perspective matters. Your experiences matter. And somewhere in the world, there may be someone who needs the story only you can tell.

So...

Take the class.

Ask the questions.

Write the first page.

Follow the spark.

One day, you may look back and realize that the smallest moment changed everything. I hope you do.

And when that day comes, I hope you'll remember to leave the path a little clearer for the next person who follows behind you.

Happy writing.

Melissa Liedkie

The Mindful Muse 

ONE LAST THOUGHT

Perhaps the story you've been waiting to write...
has been waiting for you, too.

Maybe it begins with a conversation. A memory. A child. A question. A missing fork.

Or perhaps it begins with something only you have noticed.
Whatever your spark may be, don't ignore it.

Pay attention. Stay curious. Ask questions. Take the next step.

One day, you may find yourself holding a finished book in your hands, wondering how something so small became something so meaningful.

And perhaps, somewhere along the way, your story will encourage someone else to begin. That's the beautiful thing about stories. They never truly end with the author. They continue through every reader whose life they touch.

May your curiosity remain alive.

May your courage grow with every step.

And may your story find its way into the world.

Happy writing.

Melissa Liedkie

The Mindful Muse 