

Giving Voice to a Favorite Character

Writers of licensed children's books speak about their specialized slice of the industry

BY KAREN RAUGUST

Authors who write entertainment tie-ins sometimes see their work rise to the top of the bestseller lists, but their names and their profession are little known outside the licensed publishing sphere. *PW* speaks with Brandon T. Snider, Annie Auerbach, and the husband-and-wife team of Bobbi J.G. Weiss and David Cody Weiss about this unique portion of the publishing business.

More than Mimicry

Writing in a beloved character's voice requires immersing oneself into an existing world and creating something that is new, but also complementary and logical.

Licensed properties Annie Auerbach has worked with recently have included Peppa Pig and Ben and Holly for Scholastic; Elena of Avalor and Puppy Dog Pals for Disney Press; and Looney Tunes, Tom & Jerry, and Scooby Doo for a packager hired by Warner Bros. She notes that the responsibility of staying true to the characters is the #1 consideration in licensed publishing. "Your reader expects the characters to talk just like in the movie or TV show," she says. "You need to decide: Would the character do this, or say that? What sort of relationships would they have?"

Auerbach got her start in licensed publishing 20 years ago as an editor and writer at Universal Studios and then continued with now-defunct packager Bumpy Slide Books, which worked with properties such as Blue's Clues and Aladdin. "That's where I honed the craft," she says.

After Bumpy Slide shut down, Auerbach became a freelance editor and writer for Disney. Around the year 2000, she decided to focus on writing only, spe-

cializing mostly in 8 x 8s, board books, novelty formats, and novelizations for ages 10 and below. "It was a pretty easy segue," she says. "I knew what the editors were looking for."

David and Bobbi Weiss have been working on licensed comics, books, massively multiplayer online games, and other licensed products since the 1980s. "We came through the Disney machine," David says. Since then, he and Bobbi have written tie-ins for properties ranging from Sabrina the Teenage Witch and Star Trek in the 1990s and 2000s to a current quadrology based on the first season of the Nickelodeon TV series *Ride*, for Candlewick Press.

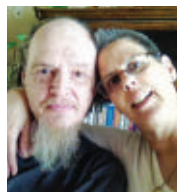
"We have our own style, but we've learned how to shift our style to match the style of the property," Bobbi explains. "We're also sticklers for detail."

"You have to match the tone and pace of the original property," David adds. "No lines of dialogue can come out of a character's mouth just for convenience."

Brandon T. Snider's acting career opened the door into licensed publishing for him. He was performing in a stage show in 2004 when he was



Annie Auerbach



David Cody Weiss and Bobbi J.G. Weiss



Brandon T. Snider

approached about writing a Fantastic Four electronic sound book for Meredith. That led to more books for Meredith, then DC Comics, and ultimately other publishers.

Snider quit his day job (in product development at Marc Jacobs) six years ago to focus on acting and writing licensed books, and he has more than 90 titles under his belt, featuring characters from DC Comics, Marvel, Cartoon Network, and other brands. Next up is *Avengers Infinity War: The Cosmic Quest*, a two-volume original story featuring Marvel characters the Grandmaster and the Collector, tied to the upcoming movie *Avengers Infinity War*.

Snider has penned chapter books, joke and doodle books, and more. He has become known for his guidebooks

written from a character's point of view, including *The Dark Knight Manual*, a coffee table book for Insight Editions. "As an actor, I absorb a world and get the character's voice in my head, and that same process allows me to give the characters [in the books] a genuine voice," Snider says. "But I bring my own voice too, and my humor plays a role. The goal is not just to mimic something, it's to inhabit it and create something new."

When it comes to adaptations, writers of licensed books must have a knack for what to eliminate or add to an existing



Bobbi and David Weiss have worked on brands such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Ride*, and *Star Trek*, including a book about Bobbi's favorite *Star Trek* character, *Data*.

story while keeping the narrative cohesive. “If you’re adapting an episode, you have to pick out what’s important,” Auerbach says. “You need to be able to take out certain sections and still have the story make sense. Sometimes you need to do that and also make it rhyme. That’s hard to do and stay true to the character.”

Conversely, when it comes to books for teens or adults, the author may need to expand the story. “A 22-minute show doesn’t really fill in a 50,000-word book,” Bobbi Weiss says.

Getting up to Speed

To capture the essence of a property, authors must delve into whatever background materials are available. “If it’s a property that’s new to me, the research is basically a crash course of cartoon watching until I get the voices and tone in my head,” Snider explains.

Of course, “sometimes there’s nothing to watch,” as Auerbach points out. A movie tie-in or a book based on a brand-new TV show, for example, is written far ahead of the completion of the entertainment, meaning the author has to rely on scripts, treatments, or writer’s bibles. But from a writer’s point of view, watching, if possible, is the best way to get a sense of the property, she says.

And viewing is not just limited to episodes on which the books are based. Bobbi Weiss says she spent three days watching 52 episodes of *SpongeBob SquarePants* before writing a single activity book. “Even the editor thought I was crazy,” she says. “But I would think it mattered in the final product.” Fans will notice if the games and activities do not match the show’s sensibility, and they expect details such as key phrases, repeated jokes, or sight gags to be reflected. Those are things the author might not be aware of unless fully immersed in the property.

Meeting short deadlines is key. Publication dates for licensed books are often timed to the release of a film or TV season, or parallel on-air content that moves forward at a fast pace. “They often

have to be done very quickly,” Snider says. “Once I was headed out of town for a bachelor party weekend, and I knew I had 50-something episodes of *My Little Pony* to watch in the next week. So between the events of the weekend I spent my time watching *My Little Pony* on my phone.”

“Everybody wants it yesterday,” Auerbach says. “I even turn in stuff early, which I did not do in school. I think that’s one of the reasons I get hired.” David Weiss agrees, saying, “This is definitely not a leisurely type of job.”

The fast pace is complicated by the fact that the on-screen entertainment on which the writing depends may still be evolving, which can lead to last-minute changes. Bobbi Weiss cites an example of a movie trading card set tied to the first



Author Brandon Snider’s 12-year-old self would have loved these titles, he says.

Star Trek: The Next Generation movie, the ending of which was altered at the last minute: “We had about 35 seconds to change the ending, and we had to make the new text match the original pictures rather than the reshoots, even though there was no relationship between the two.”

A True Collaboration

Licensed publishing tends to be a team effort between author, editor, brand owner, and entertainment creator. David and Bobbi Weiss say they once wrote a Red Cross comic book about disaster preparedness featuring Warner Bros.’ *Animaniacs*, pairing an anarchic property with a serious subject. The publishing staff’s goal was a quality book, Red Cross executives desired accurate

information, and the animation creators wanted the characters to stay true to themselves in an unusual context. “I don’t know how we got it done, but it turned out well,” Bobbi Weiss says.

Writers also stress the important role a good editor plays in a licensed collaboration. “An editor who’s well-versed in the license they’re handling is an invaluable asset,” Snider says. “I’ve worked on a lot of uniquely comedic worlds—*Adventure Time* and *Regular Show*, to name two—and nailing those voices can be challenging. There are often a lot of people who have to approve these projects, all of whom caretaker the characters in their own way. An editor who gets the humor and knows exactly how far to push in order to make it interesting makes my job easier. It allows me to bring my voice to these characters and inhabit them in a way that makes the process, and hopefully the final product, fresh.”

“When you have a good working relationship with the editor, that makes all the difference,” Auerbach says in agreement, adding that when the brand owner calls for changes to a manuscript, “you have to not take it personally. They’re the client and they own it.”

There are perks to the job. Through his writing, David Weiss has met some of his heroes in the comic book industry; Bobbi Weiss has watched admired voiceover actors at work. The two have even occasionally been invited to entertainment industry parties. “You get a little touch of Hollywood,” David says.

And many writers of tie-ins are fans. Snider was an avid reader of both comics and *Mad Libs* growing up. “If my 12-year-old self knew that I would be writing books about my favorite characters—and *Mad Libs*!—it would be a transcendent dream come true,” he says. “When I do signings at comic cons or book fairs and a kid comes up and says something is his favorite book, I know he just picked it up because it’s *Justice League*. But he’ll call out a line or a theme that I hid in there, and it’s very special. Telling these stories for kids is a huge deal for me because I was that kid.” ■