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When the Plot Thickens:
Writing the Textured Children's Novel in an Era of Corporate Taste

Noah Weisz

Abstract

Amidst today's competitive children's publishing market, craft principles can be difficult to disentangle from well-intentioned tips on how to secure a literary agent or create a marketable book. Agents' own "corporate taste" (a term coined by scholar Laura B. McGrath) influences what gets written and published, bending children's literature toward stories with a fast-paced, straightforward, easily pitchable plot. Yet much of what makes a great novel for children lies in everything left out of the pitch – in the textural material that lends a novel not narrative energy but the layered richness of lived experience. This article explores this tension by examining Rebecca Stead's bestselling, Newbery Medal-winning middle-grade novel *When You Reach Me* (2009). Gripping, hooky and short, it satisfies key tenets of market-based craft advice yet actually spends over half its pages on subplots. By investigating how this book integrates suspense and quick pacing with the enriching qualities of texture, this article seeks to illuminate techniques writers can use to thicken their stories' textures and build more impactful novels without falling afoul of industry constraints.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, texture, middle-grade (MG) fiction, craft of writing, publishing industry*

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In a recent AMA (or "Ask Me Anything") session hosted on the online discussion platform Reddit, middle-grade author Kacy Ritter stated, "I think the best resource for learning how to write middle grade is […] reading middle grade from the past 2-3 years."[1]

This comment epitomizes a nearly invisible bias that permeates the contemporary conversation around writing for children. Since books published in the last 2-3 years are not inherently better or more instructive than those published four, twenty, or a hundred years ago, it's likely that what Kacy Ritter meant was not "the best resource for learning how to write middle grade" but "the best resource for learning how to write middle grade that can be sold to a large publishing company in today's marketplace." Her comment seems to miss this distinction.

"Good writing" and "writing that will sell" are often conflated in contemporary discourse around children's books, making business-driven considerations and craft advice difficult to distinguish and disentangle. This can readily be seen in the case of manuscript length. "Shorter is better"[2] is held up as an important middle-grade (MG) craft principle with arguments such as: shorter books are less intimidating for young readers;[3],[4] or kids have short attention spans;[5] or (to quote the website of the NY Book Editors collective, one of the top results of a Google search for "how to write middle-grade fiction") "they do not want to read lengthy paragraphs that describe the scenery. They do not want a thorough examination of the protagonist's psyche. They're just here for the action."[6] While the craft of MG fiction should certainly take into account the needs and preferences of young readers, these condescending generalizations about children are dubious. Lower word counts might indeed increase accessibility,[7] but we also know that agents and editors prefer shorter manuscripts – particularly from debut authors – for much more concrete economic reasons related to the cost of producing, shipping, and storing books,[8],[9],[10] and that these costs have skyrocketed due to factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and global supply-chain problems.[11],[12]

The business of publishing can seep into even the most well-intentioned craft advice, given by people and organizations dedicated to helping writers. The "#WriteMentor Craft Guide," a document containing 17 pages of tips by many authors and mentors affiliated with the organization WriteMentor (which supports writers for young people), is a good example.[13] Nearly half the craft guide is devoted to discussing the components of a typical agent query package: the query letter, synopsis, and opening pages. It points out the industry's interest in "high concept" stories that can be expressed within the query letter in a single-sentence pitch.[14] Query letters, it notes, need to stay sharply focused on the "main plot line";[15] synopses, likewise, are "all about plot" and need to avoid even mentioning subplots and minor characters.[16] This

business information morphs into craft advice when some of the contributors encourage writers to create this synopsis or query letter before even writing the book.[17]

This is not an uncommon recommendation. In various forms, it's encouraged by a number of publishing professionals, authors, and fiction instructors.[18],[19],[20],[21] While theoretically serving as a helpful way to establish and test the story's structural integrity, this "query first" approach stems from, and functions to reinforce, the industry preference for the "high-concept" novel built for efficient sales-pitching. In *Writing Irresistible Kidlit: The Ultimate Guide to Crafting Fiction for Young Adult and Middle Grade Readers*, Mary Kole (creator of kidlit.com) likewise emphasizes the importance of the premise-based, high-concept novel for commercial potential. She advocates writing "a one-sentence pitch, a querylength pitch, and a two- to four-page synopsis" during or in advance of the novel-writing process; this is "especially important to do as you're considering a new project, because here you can see how strong your hook is, what the major focal points are, and how people will react to your ideas."[22] It's worth noting that this approach is not equivalent to writing an outline before a first draft. The pitch, query letter, and synopsis are products designed to persuade an agent to request the full manuscript and ultimately take the writer on as a client; their stripped-down shape and focus are molded by the dynamics of business interactions. In effect, such advice recommends allowing business-driven preferences and procedures to serve as literal blueprints for one's art.

There is nothing nefarious about this. It is an understandably practical approach with obvious and important professional benefits for aspiring authors. And writing with an audience in mind is by no means incompatible with creating high-quality literature. Strikingly, however, such market-based craft advice (much like the NY Book Editors' patronizing commentary) seems at best weakly correlated with what kids actually look for in books. Kids are not a monolithic audience, and what they love in books is much more complex than nonstop action *or* a high-concept plot.

Since 2010, Scholastic has been surveying children about this and related questions and compiling the results in country-specific "Kids & Family Reading Reports." When kids aged 6-17 are asked what they look for when selecting "a book to read for fun," the most frequently cited criterion in the majority of surveys is actually humor (63% of responses in the UK,[23] 62% of responses in India,[24] 61% of responses in Australia,[25] 52% of responses in the most recent available US survey,[26] and 46% of responses in Canada[27]).[28] These percentages typically far surpass those for criteria relating to what might be considered primary indicators of plot: books that "have a mystery or problem to solve," as worded in the UK, Australia, and India surveys – 34%, 40%, and 43% respectively[29],[30],[31] – or books of any type that simply have "a good story," as worded in the Canada survey and the most recent available US survey (28% and 20% respectively[32],[33]).[34] The studies also report large percentages – often comparable to or higher than those for the plot-focused categories – for books with role-model characters, books that offer the opportunity to use one's imagination, and

books that teach children something new. And while many children, according to the reports, seek books that whisk them away from their lives, many also seek books that portray experiences they have themselves. Considering complex results like these, it would be a mistake to assume that the high-concept plot the industry tends to look for in a pitch or query is a perfect reflection of what young readers downstream actually want.

Yet perhaps it should be no surprise that the business-based query process nonetheless figures prominently in some craft advice. In one of the few academic studies of literary agenting, Laura B. McGrath conducted lengthy interviews with 28 agents and analyzed her findings. She posits that, by "calibrat[ing] their aesthetic judgments to anticipate and respond to the demands of publishers and the market"[35] – by synthesizing literary appreciation with an interest in sales – the agent "develops and hones not personal but *corporate taste*."[36] In McGrath's view, agents' positions as vocal advocates for, and lovers of, literature can result in an "obscuring [of] the degree of corporate influence on contemporary fiction from the earliest stages of literary production."[37]

Needless to say, corporate taste helps select the manuscripts that find agent representation. Assuming many of us follow advice like that of Kacy Ritter, WriteMentor, and Mary Kole, and considering how visible to aspiring authors (and to those who support them) the preferences of the industry have become – thanks to social media, the widespread use of "Manuscript Wish Lists,"[38] the many agency and publisher websites that offer helpful craft tips, and the frequent participation of agents in contest judging and writers' conferences – it's very likely that corporate taste influences the manuscripts that get written in the first place.

It is important, therefore, to step back and consider whether what we take for granted as good craft might sometimes be profit-driven logic reinventing itself as artistic wisdom. Market-based craft advice endorses what we might call the "novel as fleshed-out query letter": short, fast-paced, high-concept, and instantly hooky, rarely if ever swerving off its neatly structured plot rails. However practical and well-intentioned, this type of advice comes with hidden costs both to individual writers and to children's literature in general, because much of what gives a children's novel its unique magic glow and its lasting transformative power stems from everything left *out* of the query letter and synopsis. Here I'm referring, in part, to the idea of texture.

A slippery concept often overlooked and undervalued, texture reminds us of common metaphors for the novel as tapestry; it loosely indicates the composite content of a novel that neither is directly contained within its central plot, nor can be easily pinned down as characterization or voice. Vividly expressed by Gail Gaymer Martin as a way of "layering and deepening the color of the story,"[39] texture will be used here to refer to what *thickens* a novel: the small subplots; the peripheral events and people; the relationship intricacies; the moments of humor; and the snippets of observation or memory or sensation or insight that give a book not the narrative energy of story but the relatable, layered tapestry-like richness of lived experience.

This concept may seem inherently at odds with the tight, premise-based, character-meets-obstacles plot focus of the "novel as fleshed-out query letter." But perhaps it need not be. Rebecca Stead's bestselling, Newbery Medal-winning middle-grade novel *When You Reach Me* (2009) pulls off the acrobatic feat of excelling at both, and in so doing, offers valuable lessons to us middle-grade writers today. (Yes, even though it was published more than 2-3 years ago.) The plot, set in 1970s Manhattan, hinges on a series of notes that 12-year-old Miranda receives, suggesting that the mysterious sender knows the future and needs Miranda's help to prevent a friend's death.[40] This is a wonderfully hooky (perhaps even "high-concept") premise, and the central plot is ingenious – so much so that it can be easy to overlook the fact that much of the novel is spent on everything *but* the central plot.

Stead weaves an extraordinarily thick texture into the book, even more remarkable considering its length is only around 40,000 words. The novel feels palpably as though it were composed of tiny threads – often smaller than subplots, perhaps they're best referred to as *micro-plots*, to borrow a term used by author and editor Tara East.[41] To illustrate the sheer number of micro-plots that provide the 360-degree view of Miranda's outer and inner life, I will list some of them here: preparing Miranda's mom for participation in a game show; Miranda's friendship break-up with Sal and the mystery behind it; Miranda's growing consciousness of class and the resulting arguments with her mother; the evolution of Miranda's friendship with Annemarie; the mystery around Annemarie's health issues; the rivalry between Miranda and Annemarie's friend Julia; a long-term class project called Main Street; Miranda's first job at Jimmy's deli; the slow reveal of Jimmy's racism; Miranda's crush on her friend Colin; the mystery of the rose left outside Annemarie's door; and Miranda learning to be kind to her bullied classmate Alice.

This is not an exhaustive list, nor does it come close to naming all the minor yet significant characters populating the book. It also doesn't capture the many funny or poignant moments of narrative musing, like Miranda's ode to Annemarie's elevator[42] or Miranda wondering how much her own troubles matter in the grand scheme of the history of life on Earth.[43]

In an attempt to quantify all of this, I assigned each of the 55 chapters to one of three categories: chapters focused on the central plot; chapters indirectly related to it, and chapters largely or entirely unrelated to it (see Appendix). Less than half – only 24 out of 55 chapters – were focused on the central plot; 8 were indirectly related, and 23 were largely or entirely unrelated. A more precise metric takes into account the page count of each chapter. Using this measure, 47% of the novel is focused on the central plot; 53% is connected to it only indirectly or hardly at all.

These calculations, while inevitably somewhat rough and subjective, should be startling. How could the ostensible plot of a middle-grade novel account for less than half of its volume? How could so much of the book have so little to do with the premise and storyline that any jacket-copy or query letter would have surely chosen to feature?

To put it more concretely, how could a novel that is less than 50% focused on the central plot still be gripping and compelling, rather than rambling and indulgent?

There are, I believe, three main techniques Stead uses to pull this off. First: the very short chapters. The average chapter length is 3.6 pages (less, in fact, since partial pages of text count as full pages in this measure). This allows Stead to jump rapidly from one micro-plot thread to another, or to let Miranda muse for a short moment before cutting sharply to another event. The story thus advances not in a simple plot arc but in a kind of branching river shape, fanning out as the story moves forward, developing all parts of Miranda's world alongside each other and never letting the reader float along one single stream or tributary for long. Each of these streams contains its own questions, mysteries, or conflicts that provide little tugs of suspense, or at least interest. So, counterintuitively, the proliferation of micro-plots may actually *increase* the pace of the story, not slow it down. By fostering a narrative that dips briefly into one stream and then another, it increases the sense of motion and variation without losing the clear forward sweep of the current.

The second technique Stead relies on is a clever integration of plot and detail. While certain micro-plots, relationship dynamics, and narrative musings are indeed only distantly related to the central mystery (and could almost certainly have been cut or replaced without significantly damaging it), it's *also* true that in a novel as well-written as *When You Reach Me*, everything is ultimately connected to everything else via complex networks of cause and effect, juxtaposition, or association.[44] Most of the essential clues in the mystery relate to details plucked from the texture of Miranda's everyday life: her mother's boyfriend's shoe,[45] for instance, or bread rolls in her friend Colin's backpack which he swiped from Jimmy's deli.[46] By rooting the mystery deeply among the textural components of the novel, Stead is able not only to camouflage the clues but also to develop so many other dimensions of Miranda's life without their feeling remote from or dwarfed by the crux of the story.

Lastly, the textural material in the novel avoids feeling like needless or irritating fluff because much of it gives concrete shape to the thematic terrain implicit in the central plotline itself. Put differently, it helps construct and realize in an organic, complex, and fully dimensional way what is often somewhat formulaically referred to as the character arc, emotional arc, or internal story. At the heart of *When You Reach Me* is the idea that the world around us is deeper and more mysterious than it seems. This is exemplified by Miranda's mother's concept of the veil: "We walk around happily with these invisible veils hanging down over our faces. The world is kind of blurry, and we like it that way."[47] Veils act, essentially, to protect us from being dazzled by the overwhelming truth of the world as it really is. But Miranda thinks of the anonymous note-sender – the person behind the entire central mystery – as a person born without a veil, because this person is able to perceive "the big stuff all the time."[48] If this ability is the driving engine of the plot, the novel's textural components serve as echoes of it in Miranda's day-to-day life. Again and again, in stream after stream or thread after thread, Miranda grows into an understanding of the big truths she has been unable or

unwilling to see: the unsustainable kind of friendship she once had with Sal; her classmate Alice's suffering; her rival Julia's deep care and concern for Annemarie; Jimmy's racism; her mother's shame about their dilapidated apartment; the gentle harmlessness of the homeless man on her street. Miranda's maturation is an expanded awareness of the mysteries lying in plain sight, a capacity to look more clearly and empathetically at the people around her, to lift her veil. And this, I believe, more than anything, is why this novel will change young readers' lives for many years to come.

With these techniques in mind, writers might be encouraged to resist the pressure to thin their stories to their barest essentials. Instead, a writer might ask: who or what does my protagonist notice or think about on their walk to school? What relationships in their life have I overlooked? Then – where within the story could I fold those moments or micro-plots? How might I even construct the central plot *around* the smallest physical and psychological materials of my protagonist's life, locking down more layers into the cohesive weave of the story and the protagonist's growth? Could a scene or location be replaced with one that draws on more of these textural components? Could some of these layers even give shape and development to a theme buried deep within the plot?

To be clear, I'm not suggesting we discard plot or structure. Nor am I advocating some kind of naïve artistic purity in which writers create without taking into account the market at all. No writer should ever be critiqued for trying honestly to earn money from their work. Nor should agents – who are often authors' best and truest allies – be maligned for doing their jobs and aiming to make sales. But in spite of everything market-driven craft advice tells us, a novel is not distillable to its hook or pitch. The seductiveness of a query letter is not correlated with the novel's quality. As Carmen Maria Machado has warned, "confusing the creative work and the business can completely invert your priorities."[49] When we uncritically accept profit-motivated guidelines as the standards for good fiction – when we let corporate taste dictate our understanding of craft and our creative process – then we risk blinding ourselves to the very aspects of fiction that make it worth creating in the first place. And when we do prioritize what matters most in fiction, it turns out we *can* reach for those goals without sacrificing suspense or falling afoul of the industry's demands. Perhaps our novels might even end up more fully offering the rich array of qualities children love – and deserve – in books.

I'll conclude by turning back to *When You Reach Me.* One textural component brought up repeatedly is Miranda's class project, called Main Street, which is "a scale model of a city block."[50] It contains a building, fire escapes, a water tower, phone booths, a park, a swing-set, fire hydrants, and even a UFO that moves above the street on an invisible wire,[51] all made out of everyday materials like cardboard, tinfoil, fishing line, paper clips, and pebbles. This seemingly insignificant piece of the novel serves as a beautiful symbol for the book as a whole. After all, the novel presents an intricate replica-in-miniature of Miranda's complex urban life through a distinctive interest in its most mundane, quotidian, minute components, from the mailbox on the street to the

"strawberry-shaped objects" at the corner grocery.[52] And yet, just like the UFO that one of Miranda's classmates insists on including in their Main Street model, there is an extraordinary, seemingly-impossible secret right in the middle of Miranda's everyday life.

Every novel we write is a Main Street project. We are creating scale models of our existence that can fit between two small cardboard covers. And yes, these scale models each contain a central street or story, because clear and accessible stories help us navigate the scale model as surely as they help us navigate our actual lives. But we must not mistake the entire ecosystem of a city block for the simple paved route one takes through it – nor must we mistake the novel for its story. The city block is always bigger and fuller, reminding us that our story is not the only story, that life is endlessly multilayered and richly populated with moments and mysteries and snippets of meaning. It's anything but a straight shot from beginning to end.

Notes

[1] "[AMA] Middle Grade Trad-Published Author, Kacy Ritter," Reddit, last modified July 28, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/PubTips/comments/15bzpve/ama_middle_grade_tradpublished_author_kacy_ritter/.

[2] Stephanie Willing, "5 Tips for Writing Middle-Grade Fiction," Career Authors, accessed September 29, 2023, https://careerauthors.com/tips-to-write-middle-grade-fiction/.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Georgina Roy, "How to Write Middle Grade Fiction: A Beginner's Guide," Writing Tips Oasis, accessed September 29, 2023, https://writingtipsoasis.com/how-to-write-middle-grade-fiction/.

[5] Ibid.

[6] "How to Write a Middle-Grade Novel," NY Book Editors, last modified November 2019, https://nybookeditors.com/2019/11/how-to-write-a-middle-grade-novel/.

[7] Tia Fisher, "Well-Versed? If Novels in Verse Are So Accessible, Why Don't We Have More?" *Leaf Journal* 1, no. 2 (December, 2023), http://doi.org/10.58091/crzm-8b87.

[8] Stephanie Willing, "5 Tips for Writing Middle-Grade Fiction."

[9] Mary Kole, "Manuscript Length: How Long Should a Children's Book Be?", Kidlit.com, accessed September 29, 2023, https://kidlit.com/manuscript-length/.

[10] Krystle Appiah, "How Many Words in a Novel?", The Novelry, August 13, 2023, https://www.thenovelry.com/blog/how-many-words-in-a-novel.

[11] "Books Are Physically Changing Because of Inflation," *The Economist*, September 8, 2022, https://www.economist.com/britain/2022/09/08/books-are-physically-changing-because-of-inflation.

[12] "Independent Children's Book Publishers Turn to Innovative Fund Raising to Support Quality Publishing Efforts," SCBWI, accessed September 29, 2023, https://www.scbwi.org/independent-children-s-book-publishers-turn-to-innovative-fund-raising-to-support-quality-publishing-efforts.

[13] BB Swann et al, "#WriteMentor Craft Guide" (PDF download), Write-Mentor.com, 2019.

[14] Ibid., 4.

[15] Ibid., 4.

[16] Ibid., 5. Note that professional opinions do differ on how much should be included in the synopsis; the video included in Jessica Faust's blog post "Writing the Query Before the Book" (cited below), for example, mentions that the synopsis can include subplots.

[17] Ibid., 2-6.

[18] Jessica Faust, "Writing the Query Before the Book," BookEnds Literary, February 6, 2020, https://bookendsliterary.com/writing-the-query-before-the-book/.

[19] Janice Hardy, "Query First? The Query as a Plotting Tool," Fiction University, October 17, 2014, http://blog.janicehardy.com/2009/07/query-first.html.

[20] Scott Wilson, "Thinking Outside the Books: Writing Your Query Letter First," Writer's Digest, May 3, 2019, https://www.writersdigest.com/getting-published/thinking-outside-the-books-write-your-query-letter-first.

[21] Korina Moss, "Why You Should Pitch Your Book Before, During, and After You Write It," Writers and Publishers Network, December 1, 2023, https://writersandpublishersnetwork.com/why-you-should-pitch-your-book-before-during-and-after-you-write-it/.

[22] Mary Kole, *Writing Irresistible Kidlit: The Ultimate Guide to Crafting Fiction for Young Adult and Middle Grade Readers* (Blue Ash, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2012), Chapter 7 ("Advanced Kidlit"), Section "Theme, Big Ideas, and Big Questions", Subsection "Examining Your Work," Kobo.

[23] "Kids & Family Reading Report: United Kingdom," Scholastic, 2015, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/kfrruk.pdf.

[24] "Kids & Family Reading Report: India," Scholastic, 2016, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/KFRRINDIA.pdf.

[25] "Kids & Family Reading Report: Australia," Scholastic, 2016, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/KFRRAUS.pdf.

[26] "Kids & Family Reading Report, 7th Edition: Finding Their Story," Scholastic, 2019, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/scholastic/site/KFRR/KFRR_7th%20Edtidion.pdf. The most recent version of the US survey is in fact in the 8th edition, released in 2023, but its full, detailed results are not available online as of this writing, and the data that *is* available online does not address this specific survey question.

[27] "Kids & Family Reading Report: Canadian Edition," Scholastic, 2017, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/KFRR_CAN.pdf.

[28] Humor is also a highly-cited category in the report from China (38%), though it is not the top category (books that "explore places and worlds I've never been" and "include culturally or ethnically diverse storylines, settings or characters" rank higher).

[29] "Kids & Family Reading Report: United Kingdom," Scholastic, 2015, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/kfrruk.pdf.

[30] "Kids & Family Reading Report: Australia," Scholastic, 2016, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/KFRRAUS.pdf.

[31] "Kids & Family Reading Report: India," Scholastic, 2016, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/KFRRINDIA.pdf.

[32] "Kids & Family Reading Report: Canadian Edition," Scholastic, 2017, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/InternationalReports/KFRR_CAN.pdf.

[33] "Kids & Family Reading Report, 7th Edition: Finding Their Story," Scholastic, 2019, https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/scholastic/site/KFRR/KFRR_7th%20Edtidion.pdf.

[34] It is worth noting, however, that the Australia survey and an older edition of the US survey (2015) mention that children ages 9-11 (a large segment of the target age range for middle-grade fiction) *were* found to be "more likely than younger kids to want: books that have a mystery or problem to solve" (p79, Australia survey; p77, US survey).

[35] Laura B. McGrath, "Literary Agency," *American Literary History* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 351, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajab005.

[36] Ibid., 354. (Emphasis in original.)

[37] Ibid., 354.

[38] "Manuscript Wish List: The Most Human Database for the Most Efficient Querying," Manuscript Wish List, 2024, https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/.

[39] Gail Gaymer Martin, "Texture In Writing. What Is It?", Writing Fiction Right from Novelist Gail Gaymer Martin, last modified April 23, 2008, http://writingright-martin.blogspot.com/2008/04/texture-in-writing-what-is-it.html.

[40] Rebecca Stead, *When You Reach Me* (New York: Wendy Lamb Books, 2009).

[41] Tara East, "10 Things You Need to Know About Plot," TaraEast.com, last modified August 20, 2020, https://taraeast.com/2020/08/20/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-plot/. East refers to "micro-plots" as events taking place over at most two scenes in a novel, but in my usage each given micro-plot is generally a thread with a more sustained development across the novel.

[42] Stead, *When You Reach Me*, 139.

[43] Ibid., 132-133.

[44] Although it applies well to *When You Reach Me*, this idea about novels as networks of association draws on the work of John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

[45] Stead, *When You Reach Me*, 87.

[46] Ibid., 109.

[47] Ibid., 71.

[48] Ibid., 72.

[49] Carmen Maria Machado, "On Writing and the Business of Writing," last modified July 26, 2022, https://carmenmariamachado.substack.com/p/on-writing-and-the-business-of-writing.

[50] Stead, *When You Reach Me*, 43.

[51] Ibid., 43-44.

[52] Ibid., 9.

Appendix

Fig. 1: *Sorting the 55 Chapters of* When You Reach Me *Based on Relevance to the Central Plot* (Note: the central plot refers to the mystery of the anonymous notes Miranda receives and their implications for saving her friend's life.)

Chapters Primarily Relating to the Central Plot – *Total: 24*	Chapters Indirectly Connected to the Central Plot – *Total: 8*	Chapters Largely or Entirely Unrelated to the Central Plot – *Total: 23*
1 ("Things You Keep in a Box"), 3 ("Things You Hide"), 5 ("Things That Kick"), 6 ("Things That Get Tangled"), 7 ("Things That Stain"), 14 ("Things You Keep Secret"), 16 ("Things You Don't Forget"), 17 ("The First Note"), 20 ("The Second Note"), 21 ("Things You Push Away"), 26 ("Salty Things"), 28 ("Things That Crack"), 30 ("The Third Note"), 31 ("Things That Make No Sense"), 32 ("The First Proof"), 33 ("Things You Give Away"), 39 ("The Second Proof"), 45 ("The Last Note"), 46 ("Difficult Things"), 48 ("Things You Protect"), 49 ("Things You Line Up"), 51 ("Magic Thread"), 53 ("Things That Blow Away"), 55 ("Parting Gifts")	10 ("Things That Sneak Up on You"), 24 ("Invisible Things"), 27 ("Things You Pretend"), 36 ("Things That Turn Pink"), 37 ("Things That Fall Apart"), 43 ("Things That Turn Upside Down"), 47 ("Things That Heal"), 54 ("Sal and Miranda, Miranda and Sal")	2 ("Things That Go Missing"), 4 ("The Speed Round"), 8 ("Mom's Rules for Life in New York City"), 9 ("Things You Wish For"), 11 ("Things That Bounce"), 12 ("Things That Burn"), 13 ("The Winner's Circle"), 15 ("Things That Smell"), 18 ("Things on a Slant"), 19 ("White Things"), 22 ("Things You Count"), 23 ("Messy Things"), 25 ("Things You Hold Onto"), 29 ("Things Left Behind"), 34 ("Things That Get Stuck"), 35 ("Tied-Up Things"), 38 ("Christmas Vacation"), 40 ("Things in an Elevator"), 41 ("Things You Realize"), 42 ("Things You Beg For"), 44 ("Things That Are Sweet"), 50 ("The $20,000 Pyramid"), 52 ("Things That Open")

Fig. 2: *Page Count of Each Chapter (Color-Coded by Category) & Corresponding Percentages* (*Note:* for simplicity and consistency, a page is counted as 1 page even if words cover only part of the page, i.e. at the start and end of each chapter.)

1. 2	12. 2	23. 3	34. 3	45. 6
2. 4	13. 4	24. 2	35. 5	46. 3
3 5	14. 11	25. 3	36. 5	47. 5
4. 4	15. 3	26. 4	37. 4	48. 8
5. 3	16. 3	27. 4	38. 2	49. 3
6. 2	17. 2	28. 3	39. 3	50. 5
7. 4	18. 2	29. 2	40. 6	51. 3
8. 2	19. 3	30. 3	41. 3	52. 3
9. 3	20. 4	31. 7	42. 2	53. 3
10. 2	21. 2	32. 3	43. 6	54. 1
11. 5	22. 3	33. 5	44. 3	55. 1

Summary:

Primarily relating to central plot: 93 pages (47%)
Indirectly connected to central plot: 29 pages (15%)
Largely or entirely unrelated to central plot: 75 pages (38%)

Total = 197 pages (100%)

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Author Biography

Noah Weisz is a writer and teacher with an M.F.A. in Fiction from the New Writers Project at the University of Texas at Austin, where he received a fellowship from the Michener Center for Writers. He has won the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award, the *F(r)iction* Short Story Contest, the SCBWI Magazine Merit Award, and the middle-grade category of the Katherine Paterson Prize for Young Adult and Children's Writing, and has had three novels shortlisted for the Bath Children's Novel Award. His short stories for children and young adults can be found in *Highlights*, *AQUILA*, *Spider*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and elsewhere. Currently based in Paris, he teaches creative writing to a wide range of students, including middle-schoolers, undergraduates at the French university Sciences Po, American study-abroad students through CEA CAPA, and adult writers through the expat organization WICE. His website is https://noahweisz.wordpress.com.