

Tips for Aspiring (Nonfiction) Young Authors

by Julie K. Rubini, Author of *Virginia Hamilton: America's Storyteller*, and *Missing Millie Benson*

Find.

Secrets are discovered daily in Room 328 in the New York Public Library. This is the Brooke Russell Astor Reading room. Admittance is by application only. Those who enter come only bearing pencil, paper and laptops without covers. Phones are to be turned off when one walks into the hallowed space.

Tip 1. Make sure to do your homework before you just show up at a library to do research, especially if needing access to a special collections room. Find out if there are restrictions.

After filling out an online form, which included giving references, I was granted permission to access the Stratemeyer Syndicate records in writing my biography of Millie Benson, the original ghostwriter of the Nancy Drew series.

As soon as I opened the door to Room 328, I knew I was home.

I was directed to a wooden table, its surface shiny and lit by a small, gold shaded lamp.

The archivist (Tip 2. If you don't know what one is, look it up. They hold the keys to the secrets. Be nice to them.) started bringing boxes out to me. Filled with letters, agreements, and a whole lot of other information that was irrelevant. Or was it?

Tip 3. You never know what might be important for your story. Take copious notes. Once you are through with a folder, feel confident that you have done your best to sift through the information. Then place the folder back in its proper place in the box (there is an official way to do this. Ask that friendly archivist if you are not sure.) and move on.

Footnotes.

Tip 4. Record exactly where you found information. Check out the footnotes in my biographies as an example of what is necessary. My research work was highly praised for Millie. This from one reviewer:

Rubini's book is geared for younger readers, but the best part of the book is that Rubini slyly teaches children what scholarly historical research and writing looks like. She splendidly contextualizes changing gender roles, merges national and local history through such topics as the Great Depression, and explains the history of early to mid-twentieth century writing and publishing. Furthermore, she uses footnotes and a bibliography to showcase an interesting array of primary and secondary sources. ¹

Focus.

Research can be daunting. Take some breaks, head to that really cool coffee shop in the library, check in on your social media, then go back. Dig in some more. Repeat. The world is waiting for your discoveries!

Finish.

I had two-and-a-half days to do my research in New York. I also traveled to Iowa City to visit the University of Iowa Women's archives and Millie's home in Ladora, Iowa in my pursuit of her story.

I was given six months to research and write her biography, the first ever of this amazing woman.

Writing her life journey with a creative narrative was relatively easy, given the research and preparation I'd done before sitting down at my desk every day. For eight hours a day. For four months.

In the end, I'm proud of my biography of Millie, and all I learned through the process has served as a foundation for my next projects.

So, go out there. Find your subject and share their story with the world.

¹ Marino, Michelle M., "Missing Millie Benson: The Secret Case of the Nancy Drew Ghostwriter and Journalist," *The Annals of Iowa*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Volume 75/Number 4, Fall 2016, 456-57.