January 2, 2014

Dear Agent:

In *Backtalk,* a 53,000-word middle grade novel,thirteen-year-old Bria Marie Lockhead, i is determined to begin junior high with none of the “sick kid” stigma that branded her throughout elementary school. [Tried to pare down the language a bit and give it a little more potency.] The docs say she's cancer-free, and she's going to show everyone she's more than a mere survivor. [To what end? It might help if there’s something specific she has her eye on accomplishing, someone to tell the reader (agent/editor) toward what horizon she’s pointed herself here.]

Out for a walk in the neighborhood, she finds a boy fallen from his bicycle, dying. This tragedy shocks her into noticing suffering all around her. At the boy’s funeral she decides that by the end of seventh grade, she will learn all 431 names of the kids at her new school and write their stories for the newspaper. [Help us understand here WHY she feels driven to do this and what she hopes will come of it for her.]

Though driven to flee the painful past, Bria learns that she must share her own story in order to earn the trust of her new classmates and create the life she wants. Difficult as it is, she must revisit those years in the hospital and being bullied at school. She must face the memories of feeling stupid, ugly and rejected. [Moved this line to help avoid repetition between the two paragraphs.]

*Backtalk* can sit on the shelf next to *After Iris* by Natasha Farrant*, Counting by* 7s by Holly Goldberg Sloan, *After Ever After* by Jordan Sonnenblick*, Stranded* by Ben Michaelson, and books by Karen Hesse such as *Rifka* and *Out of the Dust*—coming-of-age stories that present a character struggling with loss and yearning to belong. [Nice]

I have published poetry and feature articles, earned an MFA, and recently studied intensively with Donald Maass. While teaching college English I coordinated a literary series for ten years and sat in on workshops by many visiting poets and writers. I’m a member of SCBWI. [Great, effective.]

Thank you for your time and consideration.

[Would suggest keeping this in business letter formatting and not adding an indent before each paragraph.]

Deborah Woehrmann

[Address removed for privacy purposes.]

Thanks so much for sharing your query, Deborah. It certainly suggests a rich and deeply felt story, and you’ve rendered it artfully here.

My one concern in reading the query has more to do with what comes across of the story content. It feels a bit as though you’re offering an episodic journey, where Bria goes from person to person, learning about his or her heartache or pain, finally having to reveal her own. While this can be effective, I’d love a stronger sense here of why it’s URGENT she do so, what larger, tangible goal makes her absolutely driven to do this. Is it only about being awakened to other people’s suffering or to take that suffering and make it real for others so that she is finally able to have something she so desperately wants?

It also feels to me that we could have a stronger feeling for the obstacles she faces here. Who wouldn’t want those stories to be told? What’s standing in her way? Some suggestion of that would also add potency to your query—and to the story if it’s not yet developed there as well.

Much to work with here! Thanks again, and best of luck!

Lorin O.