As the author of books for children, I get to think and act like a kid in a world I create. In my chapter book series, I have the honor and pleasure of placing myself in the company of 7- to 10-year-olds, children who are learning and growing as they begin to navigate beyond the family unit. Their outlook is uncomplicated; they don’t yet possess firm opinions or deep-seated viewpoints, nor have they become jaded. But I am intentional in not underestimating my readers. These kids are capable. They can make a difference as their engagement evolves and expands from neighborhood to community to wider world.

When I write for the chapter book audience, I strive to support and strengthen a love of books. I use my training and experience as a literacy specialist to address reading levels, comprehension skills, sentence complexity, vocabulary acquisition, needs and abilities, and common interests while also respecting the scope of individuality. As an author, I am energized by possibility as I endeavor to craft a compelling story that challenges my reader to reflect, consider, and grow.

In many respects, kids in this age range are inexperienced—or you might say, unencumbered. And so it is the ideal age to come to the realization that they can make a difference. When we connect with children at this juncture, we have the opportunity to nurture the emboldening concepts of empowerment and being agents of positive change. We can foster insight into what they are capable of accomplishing.

They can be game changers.

And yet, we know that’s not easy. We must guide children to understand—
ing socially and emotionally as well as conceptually what civic engagement entails. Hope coupled with determination make a formidable team. Optimism partners best with a plan. Patience and persistence require endurance and equal space. These are abstract concepts and developmental skills; yet through story young readers can intuit how to nurture these attributes and choose how to proceed when facing their own challenges.

Story makes learning dynamic by way of entertainment. When we present a world into which the reader can step, we offer a safe space and a bit of distance that affords objectivity. Alongside characters, the reader vicariously faces prospects, considers actions, samples perspectives, and experiences the power of choice in conflict resolution.

In the opening chapters of The Adventure of the Big Fish by the Small Creek, Book 2 in the Cayuga Island Kids chapter book series, the characters witness two events that catapult them into action. They come upon a mallard caught in the plastic loops from a six-pack of cans. Then they see someone tossing a plastic water bottle into the creek. The friends summon their resourcefulness and work together to free the duck and to fish the bottle out of the water. But these acts seem simple compared to the bigger goal they set for themselves. How can they mobilize their community to stop littering in the park and embrace recycling? As Mac points out, “We’re just kids.”

Nevertheless, they brainstorm; they consider one idea, then another, and another. They are stumped, but they are determined. They team up and show up. They look in a new direction, and in the end they triumph. They go from fishing a plastic bottle out of the creek to bringing the community together to build a recycling bin big enough to hold plenty of plastic. They come to realize that although we are each just one person, together we can make a big difference.

Understanding how we come to form the opinions and convictions that motivate actions is at the root of civic engagement. Cultivating the tools necessary to skillfully navigate the maze of information that bombards us is not beyond the scope of young independent readers. Through story, they can access, appreciate—and acquire—these skills.

In the third Cayuga Island Kids adventure, The Case of the Messy Message and the Missing Facts, civic engagement is an underlying theme reflected in how the kids approach and process information. I wrote this story at the height of the pandemic, at a time when our country—indeed, the planet—was grappling with loads of information coming at us daily about...
critical, unprecedented current events. Some of the information was factual, some of it was thought to be accurate but later deemed erroneous, and some of it was simply untrue or misrepresented.

Misinformation. Disinformation. Big words, big notions. But I was convinced that young readers could grasp these concepts. And I believe that raising awareness concerning truth-versus-half truths-versus-falsehoods is critical and ought to begin when kids are broadening their engagement with the world.

As I conceived the plot, I considered how to weave the importance of evaluating information we are presented with into an appealing story for 7- to 10-year-olds. From flour bugs in chocolate chip cookies to wonky websites and missing glitter pens, the Cayuga Island Kids encounter situations and information that lead to faulty assumptions. When they think critically and dig deeper, they land on the truth. The characters—and, I hope, readers—come to realize the importance of gathering all the facts instead of settling for a fraction of the truth before drawing conclusions or settling on a belief.

Books have always been my passion and my home. Readers have been the focus of my career as a literacy specialist and as an author. Children are my audience and at the heart of my work. On my website, visitors are greeted with my mission to “open minds and hearts, initiate conversations, and expand possibilities.” The stories I create reflect my core beliefs and my true center: each of us can make a difference. We have the power to impact immediate and broader communities. Our children are watching and learning, able and ready to be inspired, to be engaged, and to thrive as they make their way in the wider world.

Judy Bradbury <www.judybradbury.com> is an award-winning children’s author and literacy specialist whose books open minds and hearts, initiate conversations, and expand possibilities. Her current Cayuga Island Kids chapter book series for ages 7–10 includes the Ben Franklin Silver Award recipient The Adventure of the Big Fish by the Small Creek. Judy blogs about children’s books with social-emotional learning themes at Children’s Book Corner <www.judybradbury.com/blog>. An advocate for promoting reading through community initiatives, she has received awards from the New York State Reading Association and Niagara Frontier Reading Council. Instagram: judy_bradbury; Twitter: @JudyBwrites; LinkedIn: judy-bradbury-295017b