Karen Rostoker-Gruber became a serious writer at age 8. She drops this in casual conversation, as if going early decision to Writing U was a fait accompli. The truth is two unrelated events nudged her toward literary agencies and publishing houses while her contemporaries were running off to recess.

First, there was the move. Her family left Brooklyn ( "where 50 people were playing outside 24-7" ) and settled in Pompton Lakes ( "there really wasn't a lot of people to play with outside" ).

Second, there was the typewriter. Pops brought home an old-fashioned model, a machine that inspired childhood visions of bound manuscripts and bestseller lists.

The end result is a résumé that includes eight published works - four humor collections and four children's books. The most recent addition is "Bandit's Surprise," a 32-page sequel to 2008's "Bandit."

The point of her story? You don't write a children's book overnight. "It takes a really long time," Rostoker-Gruber said. "And people usually come up to me, 'I'm giving myself a year to write and publish a children's book.' I always say, 'Yeah, if you're Madonna.'"

"There's no way it's going to happen to you so quickly. I hate to be the [bearer] of realistic news, but that's the realistic news. You have to meet the editors. You have to work on your craft. Everybody wants to write a children's book and they all think it's very easy."

Her first published book ( "The Unofficial College Survival Guide" ) was a collection of one-liners. Most completed the sentence, "You really know you're in college when..."

...you play the lottery to win housing, not money.

...out of sheer desperation, you attempt to cook a grilled cheese sandwich with an iron.

She followed with three more stabs at comedy, but found the hum...