

BOOKS

Kids author finds hard-won success

By **MIKE KERWICK**
STAFF WRITER

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 hu-



Karen Rostoker-Gruber took up writing amid the peace and quiet of Pompton Lakes.

mor market swallowing up smaller names, leaning toward famous comedians who wrote books so they could cash another paycheck.

"Unless I wanted to go out on the road and be a comedian," Rostoker-Gruber said, "they weren't going to support me anymore."

At the same time, publishers began to take a closer look at her children's literature. "Food Fright" came out in 2003 and she has been focusing on this genre ever since.

Rostoker-Gruber said she tries to insert lessons into her work, "but not in a way they would ever understand I was doing it." It is the literary

equivalent of lacing your kid's pasta with broccoli shavings.

In this book, available at karenrostoker-gruber.com, the lesson is sibling rivalry. Bandit is a cat, the lord of the manor, until his owner, Michelle, returns home one day with a new kitten named Mitzy.

Bandit gets jealous, finds an open window, and makes a run for it. We won't spoil the ending here, but remember, it is a children's book.

Rostoker-Gruber has written four books about the same cat. Two are still unpublished, available should her publisher decide it wants to continue this series.

"It's more like an exercise," she said. "I just kind of keep going. I keep writing until they want me to stop."

WHO: Karen Rostoker-Gruber.

WHAT: Bandit's Surprise (Marshall Cavendish, 2010).

FOR MORE INFORMATION: karenrostoker-gruber.com.