

Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

WINTER 2022



illustrator in the spotlight:
Darcy Day Zoells

Contents

OPENING

<u>In This Issue</u>	3
<u>Greetings!</u>	4

SPOTLIGHTS

<u>Illustrator in the Spotlight</u>	6
<u>Tales from the Front</u>	12
<u>Art and Poetry</u>	14

FEATURES

<u>Magic and Mayhem—How to Prepare for the Joys and Terrors of School Visits</u> <i>by Carolyn Crimi</i>	18
<u>Made in the SCBWI <i>An interview with author Aaron Reynolds</i></u>	21
<u>Messing Up: Practical Steps for Facing the Fear of Being Cancelled</u> <i>by Katie Otey</i>	23

COLUMNS

<u>Shop Around the Corner</u>	25
<u>Illustrator's Tips</u>	27
<u>Writer's Tips</u>	30
<u>Writer's Bookshelf</u>	33
<u>Mentor Texts</u>	35

NEWS & NETWORKS

<u>Rockford Area Network</u>	37
<u>Chicagoland North Suburban Network</u>	38



Illustration by Darcy Day Zoells

In This Issue

by Amy Alznauer



It's a new year and Darcy Zoells has strewn the cover of our winter Prairie Wind with unlikely suns. Out of place and glorious, they seem to herald a coming return of light but also to suggest that we have a hand in creating that light. This issue is filled with examples of our SCBWI-IL members doing just that.

And in fact, [Jenny Wagh](#) starts us out with a celebration of local books discovered in the wild.

In her [Illustrator in the Spotlight](#) interview, Darcy Zoells offers a step-by-step for one of her magical illustrations, delves into her personal history as an illustrator, and offers all sorts of personal and artistic tidbits. Jarrett Dapier's humorous and insightful [Tale from the Front](#) takes us into the dreams (chicken dreams to be precise!) that gave rise to his wonderful debut picture book [Mr. Watson's Chickens](#). And [Creative Sparks](#) highlights a lovely pandemic poetry project by Eileen Meyer and the beautiful, riotous art of Krista Heij Barber.

In our [Features](#) section, [Carolyn Crimi](#) gives a fantastic mini-course on conducting successful school visits, [Katie Otey](#) thoughtfully explores the now ubiquitous and sometimes fraught term "cancel culture," and [Aaron Reynolds](#) tells the inspiring story of how SCBWI made his career.

Keir Graff offers a lively interview with [The Book Stall](#) owner Stephanie Hochschild. Karla Valenti joins our [Writer's Tips](#) team with a great discussion of the classic advice "show, don't tell." Shirin Shamsi takes us on her personal journey

through Matthew Salesses' [Craft in the Read World](#). Lily Frusciante explores [the female Latinx literary collective Las Musas](#), which powerfully influenced her own writing journey. And Sarah Tobias comes in as a pinch hitter (thank you, Sarah!) for [Illustrator's Tips](#) with some practical ideas for using collage to both inspire stories and bring them to completion.

And finally, we highlight the work of two of our amazing networks with personal takes from Karin Blaski of the [Rockford Area Network](#) and Anny Rusk of the [Chicagoland North Suburban Network](#).

I'd like to offer a special thank you this time to Sheila Path-McMahon, who did a final proofread. And as always, I am so grateful to our team:

Director [Amy Alznauer](#)

who joyfully plans and acquires content for each issue

Editor [Pamela Dell](#)

who expertly tweaks and polishes all of our content

Designer [Brooke O'Neill](#)

who creatively designs and lays out every page

Advisor [Jenny Wagh](#)

*who remains our faithful and supportive
Regional Advisor*

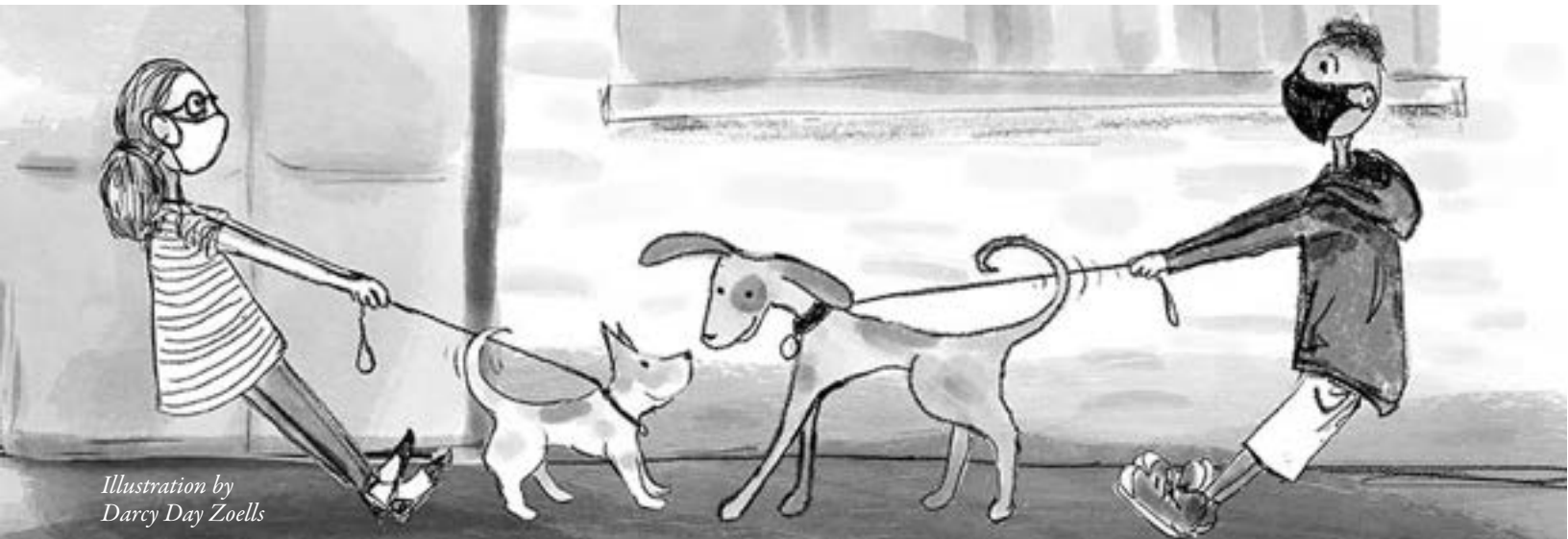
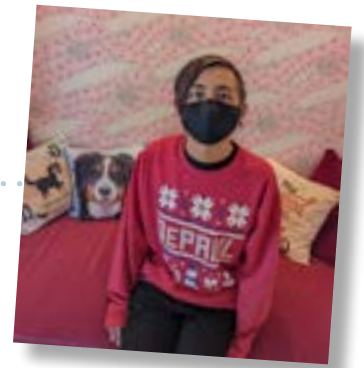


Illustration by
Darcy Day Zoells

Greetings!

GOING ON A BOOK HUNT

by Jenny Wagh, Co-RA SCBWI-IL



Every time I see an SCBWI Illinois book out in the wild, I get a thrill, like spotting a celebrity.



This winter break I ventured on a book hunt to see what I could see. I looked high and I looked low, knowing I would find Illinois storytellers if I tried. And I was amazed. Everywhere I looked, I did find books created by Illinois authors and illustrators. *Viking in Love*, by Doug Cenko, at the Barnes & Noble in Lincoln Park

near the DePaul Campus; *Rever the Speedway Squirrel*, by Sherri Duskey Rinker, at Town House Books in St. Charles, a bookstore and café that's a maze of rooms filled floor to ceiling with books old and new. The book and plush *Rosie Revere, Engineer*, by Andrea Beaty, was tucked



high on a shelf in the cheery children's room at Harvey's Tales, a yellow Victorian in Geneva, Illinois, that includes two stories of browsing and nooks to get lost in. During my search, I saw some books face-out for all to see and displaying a shiny sticker on their covers, like Cozbi Cabrera's award-winning *Me & Mama*. Other books had me swishing through the stacks for glimpses of their spines.

Going on a book hunt helped me feel a tangible connection to our creative community when so much in the past two years has been virtual. Leafing through the pages moved me over, under, and through time, especially Jasmine Warga's *The Shape of Thunder*.

This week, the book hunt came to me as I waded through numerous postcards, bookmarks, and buttons sent in by members to share at the [Anderson's Children's Literature Breakfast](#), happening virtually on Saturday, February 27.



Greetings!

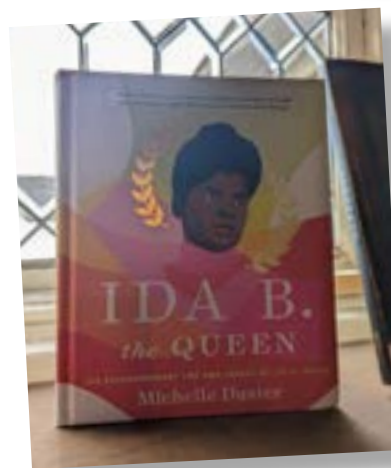


I am thrilled that over 300 educators will be able to join the book hunt there. To ready for this event, 10 storytellers gathered around my dining room table, plus a couple of folding tables, to bundle and bag a colorful assortment of literary swag. I am thrilled that over three hundred educators will be able to join the book hunt. Additionally, I will be starstruck at the annual [Illinois Reading Council \(IRC\) Conference](#), taking place March 10-11 in Springfield. SCBWI-IL will be inviting hundreds of teachers, reading specialists, and librarians to find terrific books for their classrooms and libraries.

My hunt is not over—there are more bookstores and libraries to explore. And together we can all discover the wealth of talent that exists among the membership of our SCBWI-IL chapter. In 2022 we will have so many opportunities to gain knowledge and insights through network programming, online critiques groups, and regional events offering a hybrid of virtual and in-person programming.

Thank you to all the volunteers who helped put together hundreds of swagbags for the Anderson's Children's Literature Breakfast and the IRC conference booth. Additionally, thank you to all those who will be in Springfield to help set up, staff, and tear down the IRC booth.

Let's go on a book hunt together! #ReadLocalILLINOIS. 🌟



JENNY WAGH is co-RA of SCBWI-IL. She is excitedly awaiting the release of her debut picture book, *Eggasaurus* (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, spring 2022). When not writing she is attempting to learn the ukulele. You can find out more about her at her unfinished website: www.jenniferwagh.com

Illustrator in the Spotlight

“I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY” — Emily Dickinson

by Darcy Day Zoells

Thank you to the *Prairie Wind* team for this opportunity. And thank you for these questions! They were very thought provoking.

Are you an illustrator or an author/illustrator?

I'm an author/illustrator.

What is your preferred medium to work in?

I usually start with traditional materials—watercolor, ink, pencil, and crayon. Those pieces are scanned into the computer and then I work with Photoshop, collaging them together. I have also been doing more and more work with Procreate in the last few years.

Tell us a little of your beginnings and journey as an illustrator.

Even though I've wanted to be an illustrator since I was a child, it took a very long time to find my voice.

I had been writing and drawing for years with this secret dream in mind, but I was very ignorant of the publishing industry. Then I happened to see an interview in the newspaper with a local children's book author, Lee Hill. I sent a letter to her through the newspaper, and she responded. We formed a writing critique group with others, and she introduced me to SCBWI. That was the beginning of my education about publishing.

I volunteered with SCBWI and became a network rep. Eventually, I started going to conferences, but as a writer only. I knew my art wasn't ready, and it was simpler to focus on one discipline.

Then I participated in the [Sketchbook Project](#) run by the Brooklyn Art Library. This somehow ignited something in my brain. I began with an ink drawing that was a bit of a disaster. To cover my crime, I collaged over it with cuttings from a magazine. This created a new narrative image that was a bit absurd but so much fun. I became obsessed. The whole book was completed in collages of this nature. When I'd finished, I was hungry for more.

My next project came as a challenge from a close friend. This time it was to illustrate one of my manuscripts and create an interactive picture book for the iPad. Again, I became

obsessed, and again, I worked in collage (using 19th century prints), only this time I worked completely digitally, with Photoshop (my first experience with this software).

Forcing myself to illustrate using cutouts, either physically or digitally, gave me permission to make interesting narrative connections and surprise myself.

Eventually, my friend and I, together with a software developer (also a friend), created a software program for author/illustrators to turn their books into interactive picture books on the iPad. We formed a company (Merripen Press) and in 2014 took our product to the Bologna Children's Book Fair in Italy. We did a presentation/demo and met the competition. I still believe in our software and what we were trying to do, but in the end we were too small, and it was too costly to take it to the next level.

In the meantime, I started combining my painting and drawing with Photoshop collage. I was having fun and it showed in the work. I seemed to have found my illustration voice.

Later that year, I was finally ready to put a portfolio together and get my first portfolio review. Afterward, I took every opportunity that came along to get professional feedback. Each time, I revised and reworked. In 2017, I received my first break. After the SCBWI Midyear Conference in New York, I received an offer to illustrate *When God Gave Us Words* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (2018, Flyaway Books). I had met the art director at the hotel elevator on the first day of the conference and gave her the postcard shown here.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

That same year, I was thrilled to sign on with agent Rachel Orr of Prospect Agency. Rachel's careful reading of my work has been invaluable. Furthermore, having a voice in my corner, someone who supports my work, has spurred me on and given me purpose.

Thanks also to SCBWI for providing an education and a community of colleagues. The connections I've made through volunteering and critique groups are some of my most valued friendships.

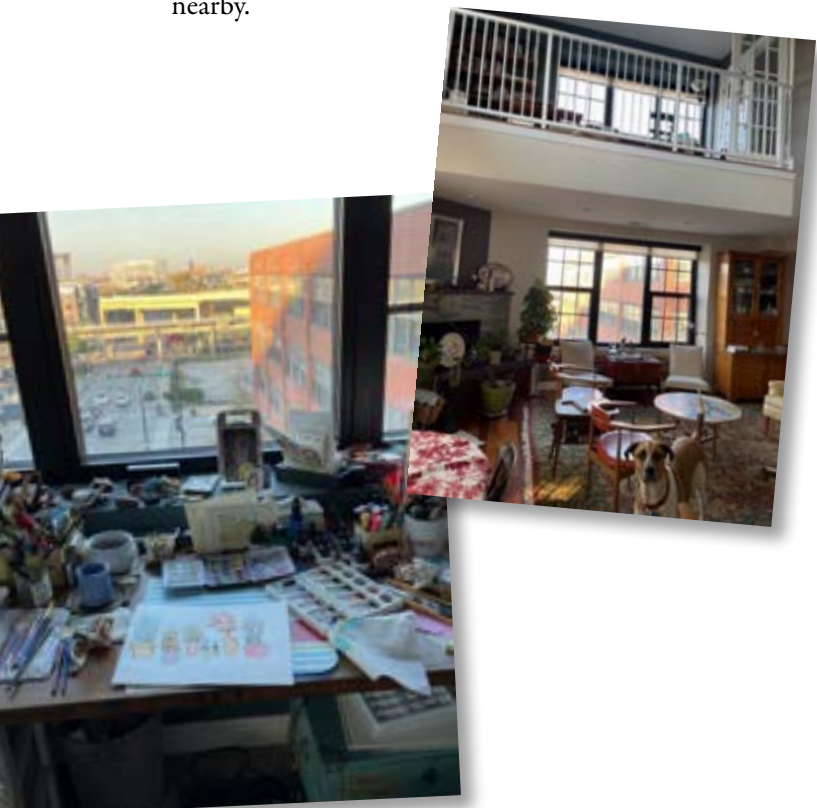
It has taken me a long time get to what I think of as the beginning of my career as an illustrator. Although I could wish to be further along, I've enjoyed the journey so far.

Do you have favorite themes or characters you return to in your art?

- Overcoming fear or shyness
- Illusions of grandeur

What does your workspace look like?

My studio is like a nest in a tree. We live in a loft apartment and I have a small balcony that overlooks our living area on one side and has a west-facing window on the other—beautiful sunsets. My desk is a closet door on four Ikea legs. For various reasons (pots of water, clutter, habit), my computer and scanner are not on this desk but nearby.



Please share an illustration and give us a brief "step-by-step" of your process.

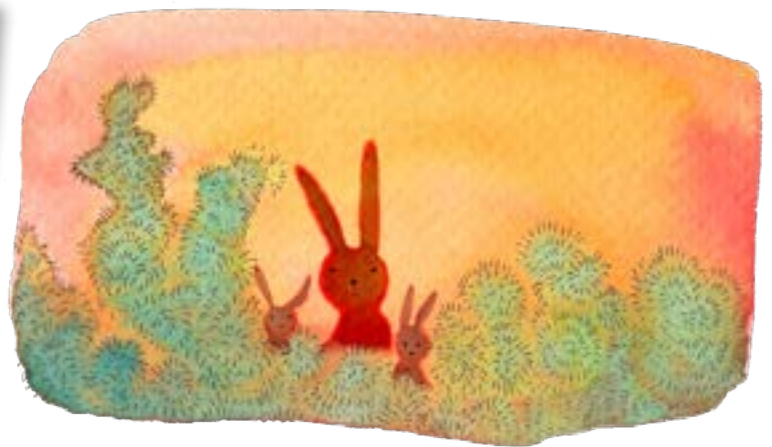
I don't have just one process. I do a lot of experimentation.

EXAMPLE 1

This was one of my first attempts with liquid watercolor. The line work is with .3mm pen. This page was scanned into the computer.



Then I cut the pieces out and played with them in Photoshop. The small bunnies are edited versions of the big rabbit.



EXAMPLE 2

In this project, I cannibalized bits and pieces from various places. This drawing of a window in an apartment we once lived in was used for a black and white portfolio piece. This time I wanted the window open and the character looking out so I sketched the new elements.

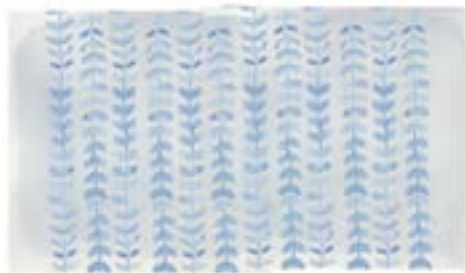


Illustrator in the Spotlight



The interior patterns were also made for another project. Eventually, I gray-scaled the wallpaper.

I wanted create a feeling of wonder or mystery outside the window.



The little girl was colorized with snippets of water-colored paper. I keep a digital folder of scanned colors and textures that I've created.



Illustrator in the Spotlight



It was either not interesting enough or too busy, so on a whim I again took some parts of another project.

This was the final.

Please share an instance in which the seed of an idea or experience (though small at the start) took root and grew to become one of your books or illustrations.

Our agency periodically invites its illustrators to participate in a promotional postcard mailing. For a fairytales theme, I sent in this image of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.



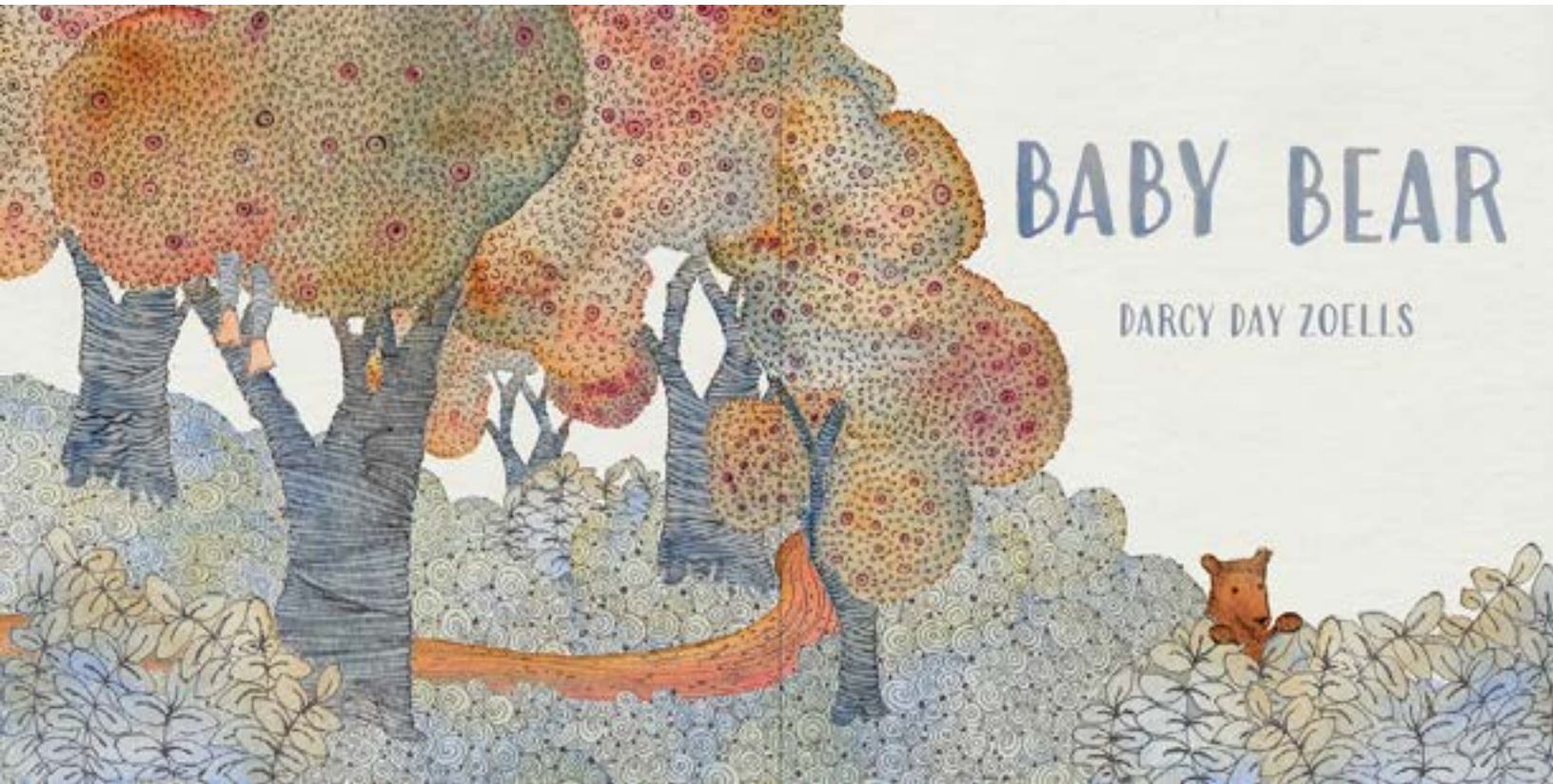
I liked the idea of nature gone wild overnight, like Jack and the Beanstalk. I also felt that the way the plants block out the sun created tension.



While researching different versions and the history, I kept wondering what I was supposed to take away from this story. So often the role of Goldilocks is the focus, but even as a child, my sympathies were with Baby Bear.



Illustrator in the Spotlight



Eventually, I sat down to write my own story. At first it was a humorous fractured fairytale, but I couldn't get it right (even with my long-suffering critique group's help). I love retellings but, I realize now, it was not the story I wanted to tell. It was what I thought would please others.

I started over with a completely different approach. This time the story flowed out of me. My critique group agreed that it was worth revising. However, when I started work on a dummy, the postcard palette and characters felt flat.

Before giving up on the manuscript completely, I decided to throw out the postcard and begin again from scratch. The dummy is now one I'm enormously proud of. I hope it will find a home.

What three words best sum you up?

Persistent, hopeful, curious

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

In our home, we had *My Book House*, edited by Olive Beaupré Miller in 1928. This was six volumes of illustrated children's literature from my mother's childhood. I loved the illustrations but always wished there were more of them.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

A bit later, still a preteen though, I was fascinated by Edward Gorey, Maxfield Parrish, M.C. Escher, Arthur Rackham, Aubrey Beardsley, and Erté.

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

Sydney Smith, Shaun Tan, Jean-Jacques Sempé, John Burningham, Isabelle Arsenault, Sophie Blackall, Michael Sowa, Lynda Barry, Beatrice Alemagna, Peter Sís, Benjamin Chaud ...

Do you ever tuck little personal homages or details in your illustrations?

My husband is a piano fanatic and we started our own business, a piano shop. I don't play, but I listen to a lot of piano music, so pianos often pop up in my work.

Please give us a peek at one of your favorites.

This was for a story written by Janna Mathies; however, I was also thinking of my husband.

What's one thing that may surprise people about you?

I'm writing a YA novel set in ancient Rome.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

- Visiting the Art Institute of Chicago
- Travel

What gets in the way of your creativity?

- Fear of failure
- Trying to fit myself into what I think is expected ☀

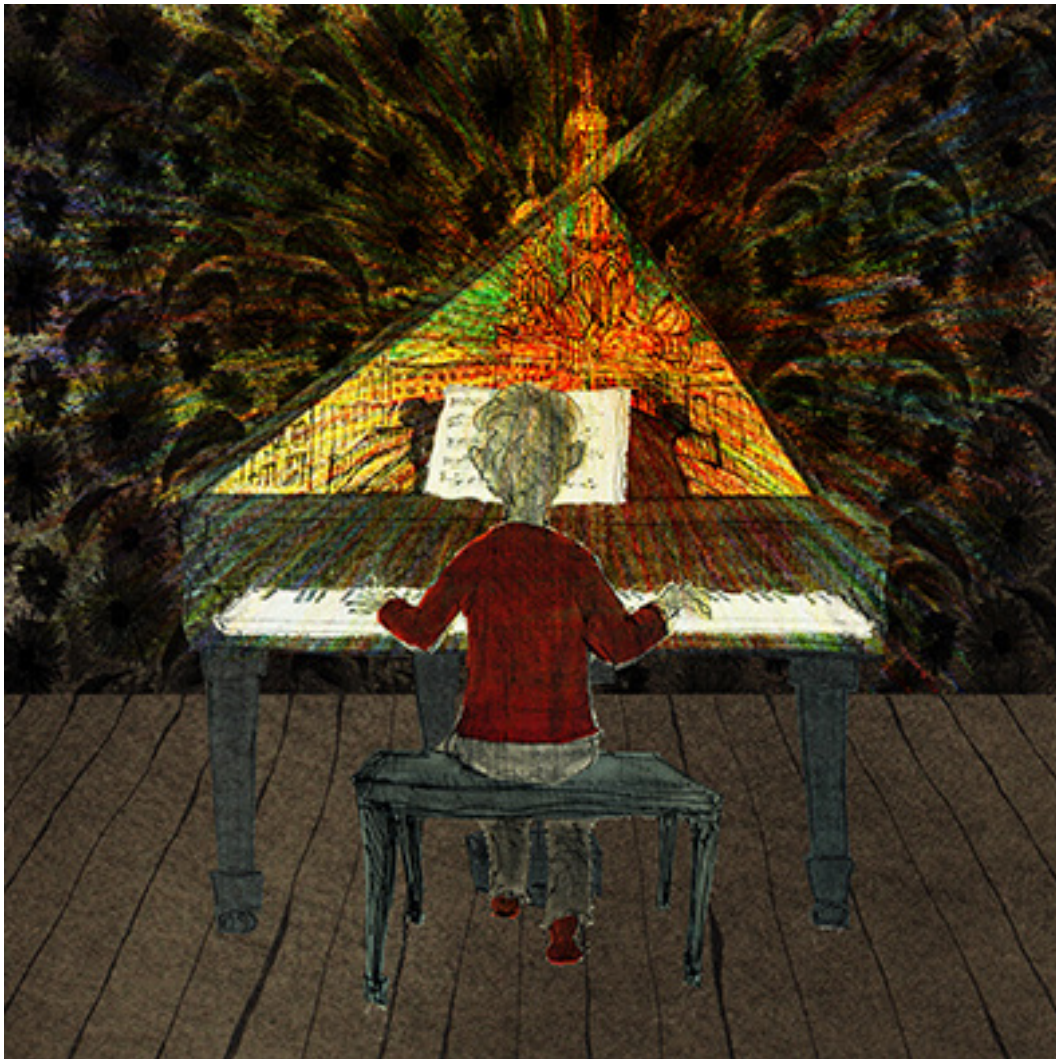
Where can we find you?

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Facebook: [Darcy Day Zoells](https://www.facebook.com/DarcyDayZoells)



Tales from the Front

by Jarrett Dapier

In the way a dream comes to us at night, feelings come to me, and then I must rush to put them down. But these fantasies have to be given physical form, so you build a house around them, and the house is what you call a story, and the painting of the house is the bookmaking. But essentially it's a dream, or it's a fantasy.

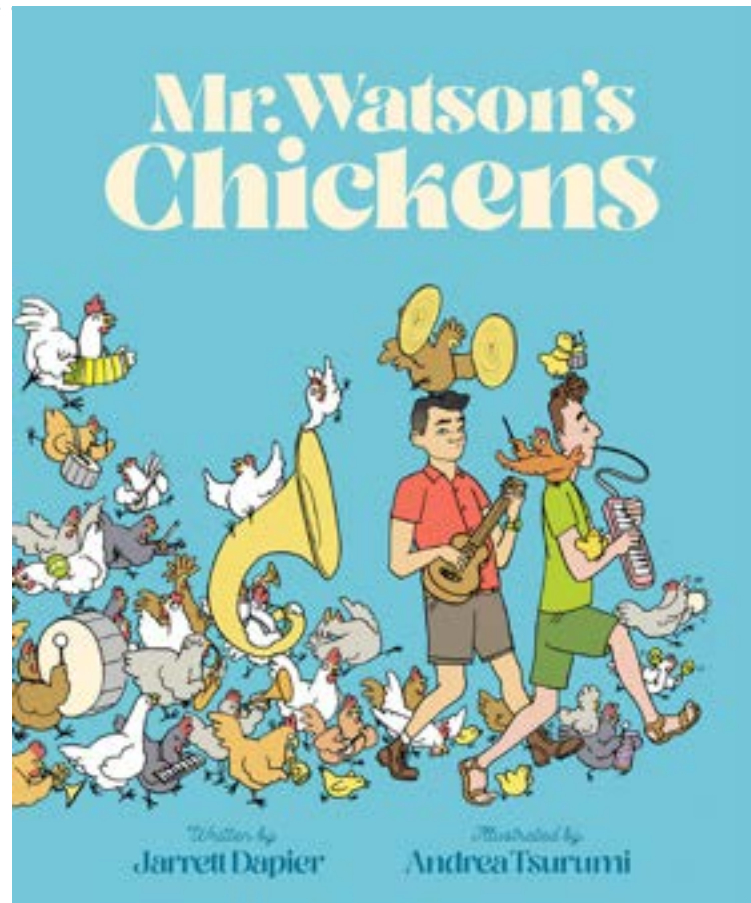
—Maurice Sendak, *Questions to an Artist Who Is Also an Author*

Since well before my kids were born, I've wanted to write for children and teens, to "build houses," as Sendak put it, in the form of stories. To me, reading books gets me closer to dreaming while awake than anything else, and dreams help me process my own experiences and understanding of the world. But, despite a few half-hearted attempts over the years and lots of ideas scrawled in notebooks, I couldn't pull a full manuscript together. It took an actual dream one night to make it happen.

In 2016, I dreamt that I read aloud a book called *Mr. Watson's Chickens*—which I had apparently written—to a class of first graders at my son's school. The story was about a man named Mr. Watson and a nameless man with him who together had apparently lost all their chickens in a busy city (like you do). They sprinted about searching for their runaway fowl but to no avail. One by one, the chickens were discovered by different folks, each peeved to find weird birds in their midst. "WHOSE CHICKENS ARE THESE?" they bellowed. And each time I would read, "That'll be me!" said Mr. Watson with a 1-2-3!"

The dream was happy. I felt a kind of thermal warmth in my chest like what I imagine chickens must feel underneath their feathers. The kids laughed. But it was all cut short. I startled awake as if someone had hip-checked me or bopped me on the nose with a hockey puck. It was near 4 a.m., but instead of plunging back to sleep, I was alert.

"I really liked that book!" I thought. Then I made a choice crucial to writers when a halfway decent idea flits across the mind like a darting swallow: I wrote it down.



I rolled out of bed, stood at my dresser in the dark (where I had tossed a pencil and some papers that day), and I wrote what I could remember—the scraps of dialogue, the title of the book, the indignant characters tripping over chickens. My wife woke up and asked, "Are you OK?" I whispered, "I'm great! I just had a dream about chickens."

This seemed to satisfy her, or maybe it was just par for the course in living with me. She fell back asleep. In the morning, I discovered the paper on my dresser covered with my (ahem) chicken scratch, and I realized I had a title, a character with a good name, and a scene—the beginnings of a book. I started exploring the story in my notebook later that same day.

This was the first time I'd ever been startled awake by a happy dream, but it wasn't the first time my dream life had assisted my creative work. I've always paid attention to my dreams, thought about them during the day, and as an adult feel they sometimes connect me to a vulnerable part of myself, a part that's still the boy I was. A recurring nightmare



Tales from the Front

I had when I was eight years old involved a purple-faced man that resembled a dapper Jeremy Irons in a tuxedo who would emerge from my closet and abduct me from my bed. He'd drag me into the closet and down to a kind of hollow underground where dim lights flickered and scary creatures lived (I'd recently seen *Labyrinth* and *Poltergeist*, which maybe made this all inevitable). The nightmares made me petrified of closets, especially closets with dark clothes hanging in them, and resistant to sleep. I felt helpless.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I hit on a solution. In fourth grade I started a club called the "Purple Feathered Friends" in which, as I explained it to friends, we would gather to draw purple birds doing purple bird things (somehow no one joined). After weeks of drawing, I told myself I could take down the purple-faced man. Ever dependable, he eventually showed up again, but this time I was ready. I slammed a door into his face and he staggered back like Buster Keaton into the closet and never visited me again.

BOOM! Take that, Violet Irons! You suck, Cocktail Party Eggplant! I'd transformed the frightening purple of my monster's face with the help of some friendly feathered pals I'd created who had my back.

By the time I was a lonesome freshman in theater school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I'd forgotten my purple bird buddies. I'd started college that fall with a heart eviscerated on what felt like a Shakespearean level by a late high school breakup. Then, at the end of my first month on campus, a close high school friend named Umaer died suddenly. Later that semester we were assigned to write and perform an original one-person scene that somehow conveyed our inner lives using the language of theater. I was lost. How could I describe the contours of my swollen, baffled heart in a 3-minute performance?

The week of my performance, desperate for a "house" from which I could project my story, I decided dreams were the thing. I integrated movement, props, live drumming, and a monologue to tell the story of my dreams that fall and how I'd developed a terrifying sleep paralysis state into which I'd repeatedly half-awaken, still dreaming of Umaer. My dreams had not only given me a subject, but confessing something of my unconscious life to peers taught me something about the importance of vulnerability onstage.

When we dream, just as sometimes when we read, we exist in two states at once: we're in one place physically but our minds are elsewhere—"outside over there," to quote Sendak again. By trusting my dreams and sometimes letting them guide me in my waking life, I've made creative work I never expected to but now cherish for having made. Even the purple feathered friends.

After conceiving of two men and their chicken problems in a dream, *Mr. Watson's Chickens*, illustrated by Andrea Tsurumi, is literally outside now, available on bookshelves in the physical world. The city scene I'd read years ago to a group of dream students while I slept now exists in the published book just as I wrote it down that night.

On the day *Mr. Watson's Chickens* was released, I was lucky enough to read the book outdoors to students at the elementary school my daughter had attended. The children laughed behind their masks, fidgeted in their seats, interrupted with wild predictions, and asked questions during the Q&A including, "Why didn't they just eat the chickens?" (Help.) Before I left, I told them the story of my dream, how in it I'd read a part of the book exactly as they'd just heard it for an audience that looked just like them. When I finished, I told them, "Thank you for making my dream come true." 🌞



JARRETT DAPIERE is the author of the picture books *Mr. Watson's Chickens* (Chronicle Books) which was named a Best Picture Book of the Year by *BookPage* and a Best Book of the Year by NPR, *Jazz for Lunch!* (Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books), and the forthcoming *The Most Haunted House in America*, (Abrams Kids). He lives in Evanston, Illinois, with his family and their many pets.

Creative Sparks

POETRY by Eileen Meyer

The Space Needle

Seattle, Washington

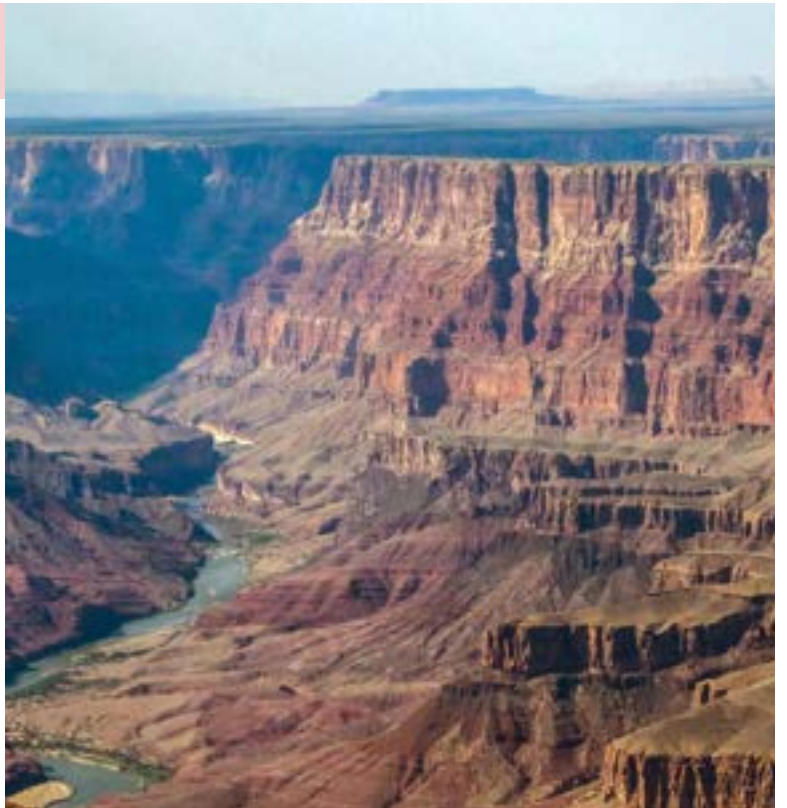
Some needles help you knit a scarf
or sew a fancy frock.
Some others are for stitching quilts
and darning holey socks.
Some help create embroidery—
could I be out of place?
Am I the only needle that is
strictly meant for space?



The Grand Canyon

Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

Yes,
I'm a large hole in the ground.
But . . . I'm a *wonder!*
Look around:
a billion years of history
and geologic mystery
are hidden in each ancient wall.
My splendid colors
dazzle all.
I'm stunning!
Gorgeous!
Heavenly!
(And popular as one can be.)
A river carved me from the land.
And did I mention?
I am *grand!*



Creative Sparks

POETRY by Eileen Meyer

Old Faithful Geyser

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Old Faithful is reliable.
It lives up to its name.
Most geyser gazers travel far
to greet it with acclaim.
Erupting twenty times each day
for years
 and years
 and years.
Its jets of steaming water shoot
into the atmosphere.
So splashy!
So spectacular!
A Yellowstone sensation!
The hardest-working VIP—
 it *never* takes vacation. ☀



During the early days of the COVID pandemic, EILEEN MEYER enjoyed researching fascinating places and things, then writing poems about them. A picture book author, Eileen's most recent book, *The Superlative A. Lincoln: Poems About Our 16th President*, was an Illinois READS selection and won the Silver Medal, Florida Book Awards-Older Children's Literature. Writing these travel poems gave Eileen an excuse to watch the Old Faithful geyser-cam for hours and provided a creative spark during an uncertain time. A year later, she enjoyed her first visit to the spectacular Grand Canyon!

Creative Sparks

ILLUSTRATIONS by Krista Heij-Barber



Creative Sparks

ILLUSTRATIONS by Krista Heij-Barber



KRISTA HEIJ-BARBER is an illustrator, designer, and independent business owner based in the suburbs of Chicago. Born and raised in Canada, Krista studied at Sheridan College and began her career in animation. Soon after college she was accepted into the prestigious Animation Internship Program at the Walt Disney Feature Animation Studio in Florida. Krista spent nine years there, where she had the joy of animating on classics such as *Mulan*, *Lilo and Stitch*, and *Brother Bear*. Soon after the Florida studio closed, she began her freelancing career. Since then, she has had the opportunity to work on various art projects as a character designer, a storyboard artist, and a magazine illustrator. Krista has her own line of rubber stamps for Whimsy Stamps and runs her own online store, where she sells her artwork in many forms, from stencils to art prints. Krista is definitely influenced by her spirited and comical children and dog, Buster. You will often see them pop up in many of her artworks!

You can find her at: IG - [@DRAWNbyKrista](#)
Portfolio - www.kristaheijbarber.com

Magic and Mayhem...

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE JOYS AND TERRORS OF SCHOOL VISITS

by Carolyn Crimi

I've been doing school visits since 1995. Back then I drove to them without a GPS, desperately clutching a piece of paper with directions on it like "take a left at the big rock." Technology has obviously made a huge difference. (Hello, PowerPoint!) But I've also learned a lot about managing my visits over the years. My motto? Hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

Sure, some school visits felt like walking onto a Disney set sprinkled with pixie dust. But other school visits—strange, unsettling school visits—have made me wonder if perhaps I wandered into an elaborate prank constructed by bitter ex-boyfriends. Preparation is key if you're looking for that pixie-dust feeling.

PIXIE DUST CONTRACT POINTERS

Preparation starts with that initial query from the school. They are mainly interested in what I charge, so I tell them upfront that my fee is \$1200 for three forty-five minute sessions if the school is local, and \$1500 if it's over two hours away. For the first few years of my career I charged \$400 for three sessions, and I still think that's a good price to start.

I also mention that the groups can be no larger than 200 students. Any bigger and things start to feel unwieldy, like letting a litter of puppies into a room when you have only one treat. If it's an out-of-town visit, I mention they'll need to pay a per diem of \$30 for every day of the visit, including travel days, as well as hotel and mileage. If I'm flying I'll ask them to cover hotel, airfare, cab fare, and baggage fees.

Sometimes I never hear from schools again, which is fine. My fees were probably too high, or they decided to book Mo Willems instead.

But if they decide to book me, I immediately email a contract with the agreed upon date and fees. I'll also email a headshot, a short bio, a list of classroom activities



My name in lights! Always fun!

related to my books, and all the information they'll need to order them, like my publisher's phone number and the books' ISBNs. I don't insist on a book sale (some authors do), but having one makes a huge difference on my royalty statements.

In my contract, I ask the organizer to send me a schedule two weeks before the visit. This is to make sure they've scheduled a fifteen-minute break before each session. Sometimes teachers don't realize how important these breaks are. I use them to set up for the next group and to sign books.

I also want to make sure they understand exactly how many sessions I'm doing. Some schools will add in a "quick visit to the kindergartners," thinking that just because it's only a few minutes it's no big deal. I understand that schools are trying to get the most for their money, but I am old, and after three full sessions I'm ready for a glass of chardonnay and the latest episode of *Project Runway*, not a room full of five-year-olds.

If the school is game, I will ask them to set up a lunch with eight to ten students. I know, I know, I just said three sessions is enough, but I enjoy these funny little lunches. I don't do a presentation. Instead, I basically listen to them



Magic and Mayhem...

babble about their teachers and friends. It's a great way to get story ideas! I stress to the organizer that this is a casual, 20-minute lunch, not a session, and that pizza in the library is fine. I love these lunches—mostly because I love pizza—but I know a lot of authors prefer eating with the teachers. Remember, this is your visit, and you should structure it in a way that suits *you*. There really are no rules.

PIXIE DUST PRESENTATION POINTERS

I recently started emailing my PowerPoint presentations before my visit, which makes me feel young and fancy. I try to do this about a week in advance. Of course, I also make sure I always have at least two jump drives in my purse. I am highly neurotic.

It's imperative to have a non-tech presentation at the ready. Tech is tech, and there will be days when Mercury is in retrograde and your PowerPoint just won't open. For those days I have story theater scripts made from one of my picture books. You can also simply read your book out loud, then ask a few students to come up front and act it out while you read it again. Give them easy stage directions, like "pretend you're steering the boat" or "climb that tree!" Be sure to drag a teacher up front, too. Kids love it when their teachers do embarrassing things, and, to be honest, so do I.

Two days before the visit I plug the address into the GPS in my car so that I'm sure the address actually exists in the GPS world. If there's anything weird, I still have time to call the school. On my contract I have already asked them to provide their phone number in case of emergencies.

School visit in Dubai!



Magic and Mayhem...

It's also good to ask about the parking situation before you get there, because there will always be a parking situation.

The night before, I pack my essentials: aspirin, lozenges, a protein bar, hand sanitizer, and, lately, a mask. I like bringing one of my books as a gift, so I'll wrap that and include a thank you note. I make overnight oats for breakfast that will be ready to eat in the morning. I'm always leaving the house at some ungodly hour, so every morning minute counts.

I like arriving at least 20 minutes before my first session starts, although I'm often there 40 minutes early. Remember, I'm that neurotic person who carries around two jump drives at all times. I can't relax until the tech is up and running, so having 40 minutes to set up and drink coffee is important to me.

(At this point I feel it's my duty to tell you that school coffee is often undrinkable—bring your own.)

In my contract I have specified that I'll need a mic. I don't care if I'm presenting to four kids in the janitor's closet, give me a mic! I may only use it to get their attention, but I still need one, even if the organizer insists I don't. "Your voice is your instrument" sounds pretentious, until you lose your voice and have to cancel a week's worth of visits.

It will take roughly a decade for all the kids to file into the gym, so I talk to the students who are already seated. I like having allies in my audience before I begin, especially with fifth graders, who are well-versed in torturing visiting authors.

I have perfected my presentations after years of doing them, and I happen to love being on stage. And yet I know many authors are introverts. You don't have to be funny or theatrical, but you do need to be engaging. Pepper your talk with weird and arresting facts and pictures that you discovered in your research. In the beginning, I didn't know what the heck I was doing and my presentations were exceedingly lame. But I was polite, prompt, and cheap, so schools hired me a lot. The more presentations I did, the better I got. I gained confidence, and I started having fun.

Here's my best tip: When in doubt, throw in a photograph of a dog in costume.

These days I'm seeing a slight uptick in school visits that are in person, but Zoom visits are still important. I've done a few 30-minute Zoom visits over the past two years, and for those I charge \$300. My Zoom presentation is pretty much the same as my in-person one, minus the fun of seeing kids laugh. Unfortunately, I think they're here to stay, so preparing one is crucial. What I like about them is that you can use your computer in all sorts of funny ways, like shaking it or moving the camera close to your face. Experiment!

School visits are fun, inspiring, and a great way to reach your readers. They're also lucrative. If you hated doing your first visit, give it another chance. We all hated our first visit because we had no idea what we were doing. It takes time to iron out the kinks, but if you're prepared you'll find it is so worth it!

Go for that pixie dust, writer friends! It's out there! ☀



Photographer:
Jerry Ortega

CAROLYN CRIMI enjoys snacking, pugs, Halloween, and writing, although not necessarily in that order. Over the years she has published 19 books for children, including *Weird Little Robots*, *Secondhand Dogs*, *Don't Need Friends*, *Henry and the Buccaneer Bunnies*, *Where's My Mummy?*, *There Might Be Lobsters*, and *I Am the Boss of This Chair*. When she's not snacking, Carolyn enjoys giving author talks to elementary schools all over the country. For more information, visit her website, carolyncrimi.com.

Made in the SCBWI

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR AARON REYNOLDS

We love origin stories and would love to hear your primary origin myth, the legend of Aaron Reynolds the writer. What/who/when made you?

SCBWI made me. I was an aspiring writer. I knew kids. I wanted to write children's books. I've always been big on research, always enjoyed "learning how it works." So I was excited to pick up books on getting published in children's books and these were helpful early on. But along the way, I discovered SCBWI and that changed everything.

I began attending every local event. I began going to one-day workshops when they were offered. Back then, Esther Hershenthorn was the Regional Advisor, SCBWI-Illinois chapter, and she (along with Carolyn Crimi, Andrea Beatty, and so many of the gang) were lovely and inclusive. It was a great place to meet people who shared this passion. It was a great way to learn and rub shoulders with others who also shared the dream of getting published. But it was the workshops themselves that made a huge difference. Hearing from legit editors and agents and published authors. That really opened my eyes.

I wrote and wrote. I submitted to publishers, following the guidelines I was taught at these workshops and mini-conferences. I got rejection after rejection. But I was getting BETTER. I could tell.

My first publication came from an SCBWI event. I had decided to take the plunge and go to the big annual SCBWI Winter Conference in New York. It was a stretch, cost-wise, but it felt like a key next step. During that conference, I attended a session led by a Bloomsbury editor. I had never submitted to Bloomsbury because they didn't accept unsolicited manuscripts. But the editor told us that if we were in this workshop, we could submit to her for the next three months (another perk of attending these conferences). I sent my then-current manuscript, *Chicks and Salsa*, to them. Nine months later, I heard back. A rejection. BUT...with notes! They wanted to see a revision, if I was open to it. And they gave me some specific feedback on changes they wanted to see. I did everything

they suggested and then some, and turned the manuscript back around in two weeks. *Twelve more months passed*. Then I got the phone call. My first acceptance!

(It's worth noting that Bloomsbury rejected my next seven manuscripts. This is the business. There is something far more necessary to succeed in this business than talent. It's perseverance.)



In 2020 you published your first chapter book *The Incredibly Dead Pets of Rex Dexter*. The title alone is a story (and laugh-out-loud funny) and the cover is as alive and beautiful as any picture book cover. When I saw it first on your website, I thought maybe it was a picture book. So how did being a picture book writer inform how you told a story in chapters, how you titled it, how you imagined its scenes?



In many ways, it didn't. They are very much different animals. I'd written dozens of picture books, and maybe four or five chapter books, but *Rex Dexter* was the first one I got published. The others never saw the light of day... just not ready yet. As with so many of my early picture books that never made it beyond the

bowels of my computer, it took practice to learn how to write a chapter book. I think we expect ourselves to succeed the first time...and we forget that all things take experience and learning and doing the hard work to figure it out.



Made in the SCBWI

I had thought about writing chapter books for a long while and, as I mentioned before, I'd written some manuscripts that weren't very good, so I kind of shelved the idea for a while. But then kids started asking me for chapter books. Kids that grew up with my picture books, now fourth and fifth graders, wanted books for their reading level that captured my weird, goofy sense of humor. And, thanks to my previous "practice" attempts at a longer form, this time I was ready—ready to sustain more developed characters through a longer story arc. What's more, I knew who I was as a writer by this time, so I felt very comfortable with the goofy, zany, somewhat dark world of *Rex Dexter*.

Three (at least) of your books have sequels (the *Joey Fly* books, the *Creepy* books, and the *Nerdy Bird* books). How does writing books in a series differ from writing a normal old standalone book?

In many ways, it's easier, because you know the characters and the format. But in other ways, it's a lot harder. I didn't plan to write a sequel to *Creepy Carrots*. So the idea of doing one terrified me. *Creepy Carrots* had been such a great hit. What if I couldn't do it again? What if it didn't live up? In the end, whether a sequel or an original, you have to treat each story as its own thing and just write a good story. Memorable characters. Funny (or dramatic) twists. A satisfying ending. These things are essential and a sequel doesn't get off the hook just because the audience already knows the characters. Each story deserves its own attention to good writing.

What is the best book-creating advice you've ever received and/or what is the best advice you've ever given someone else?

William Knott said, "Revision is like wrestling with a demon, for almost anyone can write; but only writers know how to rewrite. It is this ability alone that turns the amateur into the professional."

This and "Writers *write*. They don't talk about writing. They don't post about writing. They don't create YouTube videos and blogs and websites about writing. They *write*." Nothing wrong with those other things. But if you love to do those other things more than actually writing, then don't expect to get published. Because, in the end, it's only the *writing* that matters.

My best advice? Join SCBWI. Go to the events. Go to the annual New York or LA conference at least once, if you can. And if you're not sending out your manuscripts yet...well, it's time to start collecting your rejection letters. This too is part of the process.

What's coming up next for you?

Lots of new stuff! I'm pretty addicted to chapter books these days. *The Incredibly Dead Pets of Rex Dexter* has turned into an exciting series, and book 3 comes out this April. I also have an epic fantasy-adventure-comedy series out called *Fart Quest*. This has turned out to be one of my favorite things I've ever written. Book 3 launches in February and book 4 comes out in September.

But fear not! I'll never stop writing picture books! The third *Creepy* book, *Creepy Crayon*, comes out this fall. And lots more stuff brewing. As long as kids keep reading the goofiness I put to paper, I'll keep writing it! ☀



AARON REYNOLDS is a #1 New York Times bestselling author of many highly acclaimed books for kids including *Creepy Pair of Underwear*, *Dude!*, *The Incredibly Dead Pets of Rex Dexter*, the Caldecott Honor Medalist *Creepy Carrots!*, and the epic fantasy series *Fart Quest*. He has a passion for kids' books and seeing kids reading them. He regularly makes time to visit elementary schools, where his hilarious and hands-on presentations keep kids spellbound. He lives in Chicago with his wife, two kids, four cats, and anywhere between zero and ten goldfish, depending on the day. Visit Aaron at www.aaron-reynolds.com.

Messing Up...

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR FACING THE FEAR OF BEING CANCELLED *by Katie Otey*

Cancel culture. This is a phrase that has been thrown around by everyone from celebrities facing backlash from millions of followers to lesser-known individuals who've only been dissed or dismissed by a small circle of people. The term has grown in use and become widespread in implementation, almost taking on its own persona, and generating often unnecessary fear and a sense of conspiracy among us. But what is cancel culture exactly? And why are so many people worried about its impact?

One way to think of cancel culture is basically as a public outcry for justice against a person or group of persons who are perceived to have wronged another person or group of persons. In many cases, the person facing the backlash may have rightfully received negative attention for their words or actions and should maybe reflect on how they can improve. But there are times where the canceling of an individual can appear to be unfair and that often triggers fear—especially among those who are concerned it might happen to them next. And not surprisingly, that fear starts to spread.

Not everyone who has faced backlash behaved any differently than many of us have behaved. This is not to say, hey, no one's perfect so let's ignore all wrongdoings. No. Accountability is important for personal growth and to repair the harm you may have caused another person—even if that harm has been unintentionally inflicted. But the fact remains that fear of cancel culture can sometimes display itself simply as seeing ourselves in the targeted, or cancelled, person. We become afraid that if it happened to them it can happen to us and we panic.

Within the writing community, we have seen instances in which, after a creator displays certain behaviors, their books are pulled or banned, gatekeepers are reprimanded, agencies toppled, as well as other scary consequences. While these circumstances are indeed scary to face, sometimes the fact that we focus more on the consequences than on the problems leading to them is the reason why issues never seem to get resolved in our community.

Am I saying that bullying tactics are okay? Actually, no. But I find that, in many cases, when a person is initially called out, a lot of the people who express their displeasure do so in a fair and tactful manner. They state why a certain behavior is problematic and then make a demand of the offender, whether it be to apologize, step down, or correct the mistake in some other way.

On the other hand, there are people out there who don't mind picking a fight over any perceived slight. I am not here to address that. I'm talking about those who have legitimate complaints. In other words, they see a pattern of behavior that's hurtful or harmful and they want to bring it to your attention. Why is that wrong? What is it about us as humans that makes us fearful of any reprimand? I guess an argument can be made for the people calling out harmful behavior to show some grace. But people in pain can't always extend grace. At least not initially. So, what can you do if you ever face being called out? I have a few suggestions that can maybe help you get through a mess-up with dignity.

- 1. OWN YOUR MISTAKE.** Look, if you are living and breathing, you are going to mess up. No matter how hard you try, no matter how much you prepare, you will slip up in some way. Many times, that slip-up will result in an embarrassing but hopefully salvageable situation. Owning your mistake quickly is the best way to get there. Because if you double down and play the victim, then you make the problem worse and no one wants that.
- 2. APOLOGIZE.** Properly. Say you're sorry and mean it. Don't deflect or put any responsibility on those who've called you out or on their "perceptions." Hear them. Really listen. Then apologize. It really is that simple.
- 3. MAKE AMENDS.** Is there any way you can fix things? Not every person who feels wronged will be in a headspace to allow that. But if they do, that's



Messing Up...

great. Do what you can to make amends. Ask what you can do to rectify the problem you caused. That alone can diffuse a situation and you may grow from it.

4. **WALK AWAY.** Listen, even if you had the best of intentions and now you want to fix what you've done wrong, giving those hurt by you time to heal is ultimately best for everyone involved. I know I personally am horrified when I wrong someone. And because I feel bad, I want to fix it. But that's not always possible. At least not right in the moment. Sometimes you have to take a step back and give the wronged person some space. If they choose to reach out to you later then great. And if not, at least you have acknowledged your mistake and attempted to make amends.
5. **DO BETTER.** Yes, that's right. The best apology is in changed behavior. I know, for example, that I did not realize a certain word was considered a slur until I saw someone else called out for using that word. Sometimes, being so immersed in our own culture, we don't realize that the words we've co-opted mean something derogatory to another group. But just because we were ignorant about it doesn't mean harm wasn't done. Apologize, then do better. Next time don't use the word or partake in the activity that was harmful. Because if you don't do better, were you ever really sorry?
6. **LIVE YOUR LIFE.** Look, just because you made an error doesn't mean you should be okay with people trying to tear you down. But also remain aware that all of us have rights. We have the right to live life to the fullest, to support or not support whoever we want, and to demand or place boundaries that align with our own best interests and beliefs. If that means people don't want to engage with you, that's okay. Live your life. Being upset because your point of view isn't accepted by another person is counter-productive. They disagree. They have the right to. And so do you.

I realize this topic is a heavy one, but we all know that the issue at hand is a very real one just the same. So I hope these pointers may help when you need them. It's likely inevitable that we will all face a mess-up in our careers at some point so prepare yourself. If you do make a mistake, own it. Apologize. Do better. And, when the shoe is on the other foot and someone messes up with you, let them know how you feel, but try to extend them some grace in doing so. Because I believe the vast majority of us are trying our best. ☀



KATIE OTEY is an author and a poet who specializes mainly in writing humorous books featuring characters of color. Her debut picture book, *Every Other Christmas*, is due out this fall.

Shop Around the Corner

THE BOOK STALL *by Keir Graff*

I owe an unpayable debt to independent booksellers, and the amazing people at The Book Stall in Winnetka are at the top of that list. Back in 2011, Robert McDonald, then the children's book buyer and now the events manager, took a chance on a newbie middle grade author—me!—and hosted some of my very first school visits, showing me how to do them and setting a high bar for all school visits to follow. While I live too far away to be a regular customer, I love browsing their store just as much as I love working with them. Following is an edited transcript of my conversation with owner Stephanie Hochschild.



(From left: Mike Wysock, store manager; Stephanie Hochschild, owner; Robert McDonald, events manager)

How did you come to own a bookstore?

I'm a lawyer by training, but I've always been so bookish that it was a family joke: Mom should open a bookstore. I didn't take it seriously until a friend of mine called and said, "Did you know that The Book Stall is for sale?" I had coffee with Roberta Rubin, the owner, and then worked as a volunteer for six months, learning everything I could. Over time, it became clear that this was something I really, really wanted to do.

The Book Stall was founded in 1937, and you took over in 2013. Do you feel like the new kid on the block or a veteran bookseller?

Sometimes I still feel new, but sometimes I feel like I've been here forever. We have booksellers who've been here for over 20 years, and relative to them, I'm definitely new; there are a lot of experienced people who helped me when I started, which is part of the wonder of this place. Also, a bunch of us bought bookstores within months of each other—Eleanor [Thorn] at Lake Forest Book Store, Nina [Barrett] at Bookends & Beginnings, Teresa [Kirschbraun] at City Lit—and before COVID, we saw each other a lot. Suzy [Takacs] at The Book Cellar talked me through a lot of things and I'm eternally grateful to her. One of the things I most miss is that community.

Have you put your own stamp on things?

No. There are books I champion that I like to hand-sell, but it is very much an interactive, iterative process between the people who work in the store and the people who come into the store. When you walk in, you'll be greeted by our staff, all of them passionate readers who love to talk about books and are trying to find the right book for you.

What makes The Book Stall's offerings unique?

Our incredible manager, Mike Wysock, is a great champion of small presses. I think our customers read those books more because we put them front and center and highlight them with shelf talkers. We also sell a lot of hardcover history, including more academic titles.

How have you adapted to COVID?

In 2020, we had to shut down indoor shopping from mid-fall through the holidays, and the store was just full of plastic bags. Mike was out on the sidewalk and he would yell in to us and we would scramble around trying to grab the bags to pass out the front door. We launched a very popular service



Shop Around the Corner

called Blind Date with a Puzzle, with squads of booksellers delivering puzzles to people at home, and as the weather got warmer, we offered sidewalk shopping with books on tables. The holiday season in 2021 was much better. We were busy, and people were definitely buying books, but it was a never-ending game trying to score enough cartons of popular books like Hervé Le Tellier's *The Anomaly* and Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence*, which was one of my favorite books of last year.

Are you holding live events?

We're open for browsing, but we're missing all those in-store events that make this such a special part of the community. People meet here for coffee, and in addition to holding author events, we've always loved hosting things that really have nothing to do with books, like a monthly comedy night and a storytelling group called You're Being Ridiculous. We do maintain a robust calendar of book groups, and those are all currently virtual.

Are you still offering author visits to schools?

We are bringing a lot of authors virtually, and Robert is having schools join forces to give authors a bigger audience and hopefully generate more sales. Sometimes whole school districts will sign on to hear an author speak. We recently had Jarrett Dapier both virtually and in person for The Book Stall Foundation, where we bring authors to charter schools and Title 1 schools and every kid gets a book. We put a lot of effort into making sure it's a great experience for both the authors and the kids.

Please introduce your children's books staff!

Kari Patch is our amazing children's book buyer, and her knowledge of kids' books is just remarkable, especially in graphic novels and fantasy. Betsy Balyeat, a retired English teacher and librarian, does all the selection for the monthly children's book club, which is a monumental task. Amy Trogdon, a local school librarian, works on weekends and is great at matching kids and books, especially picture books. Pre-COVID, she performed regular Saturday morning story times as Miss Amy. And Robert is still active in the kids' department as well. Collectively, they have watched children grow from preschool all the way to college!

How should local authors ask you about doing school visits?

Please contact Robert McDonald via email (events@thebookstall.com) to make an appointment. We'll need a good pitch for the book, and you'll need to have a good presentation—because it's all about the presentation.

Do you stock books by self-published authors?

We do sometimes take books on consignment. They should be well edited and carefully proofed, appropriately priced, with the title clearly visible on the spine. It's helpful to be a friend or a customer of the store. We've had some wonderful events with self-published authors, and one of our bestsellers this past year was a self-published book whose author was always working to make sure that people knew he had a book available at our store.

What are some other ways people can connect with The Book Stall?

For a \$15 annual fee, people can join our [10% discount club](#) and receive a monthly newsletter via US Mail, or they can sign up for our [free weekly e-newsletter](#). We also have monthly and bimonthly book clubs for [children](#) and [adults](#) where our experts—Betsy Balyeat and Kathleen Crawford respectively—hand-select books for every age and interest, and wrap and mail them to the recipient. And anyone can join our book-discussion groups. Just call the store for more information. ☀

KEIR GRAFF is the author of funny and fantastical middle grade adventure novels including *The Tiny Mansion*, *The Phantom Tower* (a Chicago Tribune Best Children's Book), and *The Matchstick Castle* (an official Illinois Reads selection). He also writes books for grown-ups—some of them under fake names! A longtime resident of Chicago, he lives near the shore of Lake Michigan with his wife Marya, sons Felix and Cosmo, and cats Toothless and Totoro. Sign up for his monthly Graff Paper newsletter at www.keirgraff.com/newsletter.

Illustrator's Tips



TIPS FROM A COLLAGE MAKER'S DESK

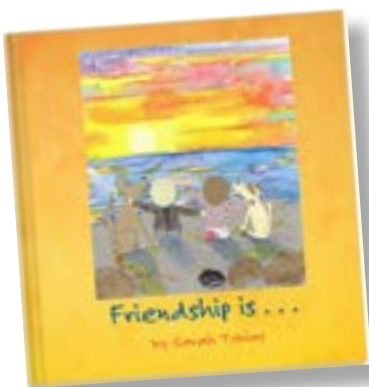
by Sarah Tobias

Note from the *Prairie Wind* team: Leading up to our Winter issue, we lost a couple columns last minute due to COVID and life craziness. We are so grateful to Rich Green for putting the word out and to Sarah Tobias for coming in as pinch hitter and writing up this lovely piece on collage. If this sparks your interest, you might go back and check out [Ruth Goring's previous column](#) on different aspects of this rich medium.

I have made art my whole life. It takes me to my happy place. I was a librarian for 30 years in and around Chicago, and throughout my career, even when I was a library director, I found ways to make art and share stories. Now I am at the early stage of calling myself an illustrator. I love this new life path as it allows my multi-passionate personality to test out new things and continue to grow. I am also a writer and have several stories created and ready to become books.

In particular, I love making collage art. So I thought I'd offer a few tips from my collage-making desk...

My creative process occurs in two ways. Sometimes I make a rough sketch of an idea and create a piece of art from that. Other times, I start cutting paper and just see what happens. After I have laid out a piece, I take a photo of it before I begin gluing so I have a reference to go back to. As you pick up one piece to glue it to your canvas, other pieces tend to move around. I have found that this movement often helps my piece as a whole feel more flowing and less static.



PUT YOUR WORK IN BOOK FORM

This past October, I created several pieces, working on consistency and on allowing a story to grow from the series of collages. In the end I created a little book, which I self-published using [Shutterfly](#). It's shorter than a traditional picture book and was made as a gift for my grandnieces. Beyond creating a gift for others, I gave myself the gift of bringing my work together as a complete book. In addition, I sold a few copies and still have it available on my website.

I highly recommend this practice to any illustrator or author who feels they are struggling and wonders if they will ever find an agent or editor to publish their work. This won't make you financially wealthy, but you'll feel the wealth of taking what you love to completion.

CREATE AN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEM

I know a lot of people do everything on their computer, and I do have my stories there too, but I am a visual and tactile person, so I really benefitted from an idea a former classmate of mine gave me a couple years ago. She mentioned that she put all her stories in 3-ring binders, sliding each page of her book dummy into protective sheets. This allowed her to move pages around and flip through the story like a book.

I decided to give it a try, and I love it. I keep these 3-ring notebooks handy on my bookshelf, where they are easy to access and keep all the moving parts together. Having a way to specifically organize my work has helped me feel much more organized in general. Folders in my desk drawer just didn't work for me.

Another question collage artists face is what to do with all their collage paper. I had a big box of random papers and scraps. Every time I went to make a collage, I spent more time searching for a paper that would work than I spent on making the art itself. Then I picked up illustrator and collage artist Clover Robin's [Cut Paper Pictures](#) (Rock Point, 2018). In that book she shares how she stores her papers—in a notebook with each color of paper in its own clear protective sleeve.



Illustrator's Tips

I had the notebooks (3-ring binders) and the protective sleeves. I had also purchased some Ziploc envelopes that fit in the 3-ring binders, which work great because you can zip them closed so nothing falls out. It took me a while to get everything sorted, but now the papers are arranged in ROYGBIV order with extras pockets for blacks, browns, and the wild mixed-up papers.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPLIES

[5-inch 3-Ring Binders](#) for a large collection of collage papers

Least expensive and only of average quality. They work fine, but the rings seem slightly off for the binder pockets and they also tend to pull apart, so you need to be careful when flipping through the pockets.

[Antner Binder Pockets](#)

I love these letter-sized pockets, which come 18 to a set. They keep all the scraps in place and I also use them with my writing projects to store my little dummies and notes.

[Antner Leather Notebook](#)

This little A-6 size, 6-ring notebook is great for carrying around in your bag or for when you want to put a travel kit together.

[Antner Binder Pockets](#)

These small Ziploc binder pockets fit the Antner notebook listed above, with zips in multiple colors, which can also be really useful.

COLLECT FROM ANYWHERE AND CREATE YOUR OWN

Almost any kind of paper might potentially work in a collage. That said, one of my favorite papers to collect are security envelopes that come in the mail. It takes a bit of the sting out of a bill when you get free art supplies. I have also found inspiration in shiny candy wrappers, wrapping paper, beaten up book pages, and paper bags.

Illustrator Vanessa Brantley Newton and Robin Clover both make many of their own collage papers. I have started doing this as well. I've used watercolor paintings that didn't quite work, and I play with paint on a variety of papers, including tracing paper and tissue paper. And sometimes I print my photos on plain white paper and cut out parts to use for collage. I find the best papers end up being the ones I make with no pre-determined plan for their use. They are spontaneous and make me smile.

This past summer, I finally got around to making my own paper. Papermaking is a messy endeavor but *So. Much. Fun.* So for now I will probably wait for warmer days when I can play outside. Meanwhile, I've been saving pages of stories I've printed up for review and feedback with my critique group, which I want to make into new paper that will be infused with the imagination of my friends. Also, Vanessa Brantley Newton mentioned that she and some friends exchange papers. I'd love to connect with others who'd like to start a collage paper exchange as well. Contact me if you are interested.

Illustration by Sarah Tobias



Illustrator's Tips



FOUR WORDS OF INSPIRATION

When you set out to begin a new project, having an idea journal can be a big help. That journal becomes a well to dip into when you sit down to create. It makes the empty white of your “canvas” exciting—just waiting for you to turn your idea into an image or a story. If you are feeling lackluster and need a boost, these four mostly uncommon words may give you even more help in turning your work into play and sparking very uncommon new ideas for stories and art.

Storystorm

Storystorm is Tara Lazar’s 30-day story brainstorming challenge—come up with 30 story ideas in 30 days! (Similar to NaNoRiMo.) It kicks off at the beginning of every January so even though it’s finished for 2022, you can still read the inspiring (almost daily) blog posts anytime. Her blog is geared to picture book writers and her archives go back many years, so pick out a few posts at random and come back for more when you need them. Also, you may find inspiration in Tara’s new book, *Absurd Words* (Sourcebooks Explore, 2022).

Pareidolia

Seeing funny faces in strange places. Shapes in clouds, smiles on trees or toast, or... Where do these things take your imagination? What can you create from what you observe in the world around you?

Ekphrastic

An ekphrastic poem is one that creates vivid imagery, so think about this word as being all about creating story from art. What does your art say? Does it have a poem to share? Who is that character you created? What’s their story?

Challenge

Search Pinterest for lists of thirty-day creative challenges. Choose words that raise the hair on your arms or spark an immediate idea. Make the list yours. Keep the list and work through the words. Choose your own timeline. You can add to the list anytime and you can skip words that don’t inspire. This is your list—no rules or boundaries.

WHY COLLAGE INSPIRES ME

I got started making collages for three reasons. One, I wanted to find ways to use scraps and “garbage” paper rather than just throwing the bits and bobs away. Two, when you make a collage, you break the image into parts. This helps simplify your idea into shapes. And three, I can get too caught up in details. Using simple shapes forces you out of the details and into seeing the bigger picture. For me, it’s a bit like writing a haiku or other piece of micro-poetry. You have to distill your idea to its essence and then allow the viewer to add in their imagination, creating a bigger story. 🌟

SARAH TOBIAS was a librarian for many years. She is a storyteller, writer, artist, photographer, creative chef, baker, and gardener. She can be found donating blood, rescuing worms, and protecting butterflies. Sarah is a Midwestern woman with one foot in the ocean who believes kindness rocks and all people are equal.

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Writer's Tips

LET ME SHOW YOU SOMETHING

by Karla Arenas Valenti

Editor's note: For many seasons this column has been blessed with the very valuable insights, experience, practical pointers, and right-on writers' advice Patricia Hruby Powell has shared with all of us. Now she has decided to step back a bit and contribute to only our annual Spring issue. In her place for the other two issues we have two new contributors to share their own best writing tips. With this winter column we introduce Karla Valenti. And the fall "Writer's Tips" will be written by Urania Smith. We welcome these new contributors and appreciate Patricia for her willingness to keep on keepin' on! Enjoy!

Hello, fellow writers! I'm delighted to be taking on the job of writing this column for each Winter issue of the *Prairie Wind* and will do my best to add to the great work Patricia does here.

My plan is to use this column to share some of the most common writing woes I've encountered from almost a decade of critiquing and editing children's literature (along with some advice on how to tackle them). To get us going, I'll start with the biggie: SHOWING vs. TELLING.

Or to frame it from the reader's perspective: SEEING...



Image credit: Amanda Dalbjörn

vs. HEARING...



Image credit: Ninell | Shutterstock

Start by imagining you're in a room full of people and sounds of happy chatter, clinking glasses, and lively music. This is your first time as a guest here, and you are directed to stand in a corner and face the wall while someone else is charged with describing to you everything that's happening.

Your experience will be entirely shaped by what that someone focuses on and how they describe things to you (which can be everything from the choice of words to the tone of their voice to the level of detail they are willing to provide). Fun party, right?

Well, you turned out to be a great guest so you get invited to a second party. This time, you're allowed to witness the party yourself. You can move around and focus on whatever you want, you can immerse yourself in conversation with others, you can experience all the sights and sounds directly, rather than relying on someone else to convey these details.

In the first example, you are *hearing* about the party (i.e., the narrator is *telling* you about each moment or event). You're not actually engaging in the party yourself. Rather, you're only engaging with the narrator. Your participation in the party is *second-hand*.



In the second example, you are *seeing* the party yourself. You're right there in the middle of it all, experiencing everything *first-hand*: *you* are "feeling the feels,"—hearing and seeing and smelling the event, honing in on interesting details, formulating your own opinions about the crowd.

This is showing vs. telling.

Now this is all well and good when we're at a party, but how do we do this when we can't physically transport a reader into a book and have them experience the story directly?

Ah! The key word is "physically."

TIP 1: ACTIVATE THE SENSES

You may not be able to take your reader into an actual place in space or time, but you can trick them into experiencing that space by activating their senses.

Close your eyes and imagine biting into an apple. What does it smell like? Can you taste the tangy sweetness, the crunchiness of the apple? Can you feel the juice on your tongue? Maybe your mouth started to water?

You didn't actually bite into the apple, but you were able to experience that apple as if you had. Your senses were activated. As an author, that's your goal. You want to make your reader experience what your viewpoint character is experiencing.

Compare:

Suzy bit into a slice of freshly-baked rye bread.

In this example you are facing the wall, and the narrator is telling you what *they* see. Not very interesting.

Suzy inhaled the warm scent of caraway and yeast as her teeth sank into the spongy bread. The soft butter, with a touch of salt, melted on her tongue.

In this case, if you know what caraway and yeast smell like, your senses will be triggered with that recollection. You know the taste and feel of melted butter, and your tongue will respond accordingly. Suddenly, you know exactly what Suzy is experiencing because you're at that table, tasting the freshly baked rye bread with her.



Sourdough rye bread from King Arthur Baking

TIP 2: ELICIT EMOTIONS

As with the apple and the rye bread, there's a difference between *telling* the reader that:

Oliver was angry!

versus making the reader feel that anger themselves.

How? By drawing on the physical manifestations of anger that the reader will recognize:

Oliver trembled; a ball of heat grew inside him, threatening to explode...A moment later, he hurled the glass of champagne against the wall.

As I read this, my body starts to piece things together: trembling + heat + desire to throw things = anger. I don't need the narrator to tell me Oliver is angry. I can draw on my own experiences for this.

A good tip here is to never name an emotion (beware of these words and variations: happy, sad, angry, jealous, scared, confident, etc.). Rather than telling the reader what the character is feeling, offer evidence of that emotion and let the reader draw on their own physical experience of those feelings so they can name the emotion for themselves.

TIP 3: ENCOURAGE READERS TO REACH THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS

Similar to the point above, readers don't just want to feel the feels or experience the emotion, they want to define the event directly. So provide them with facts (and only the facts), and let the reader formulate their own opinions, judgments, and conclusions about what's going on.



Writer's Tips

Compare:

Billy is a bully.

Here, the narrator is providing an opinion about Billy, and you, the reader, are simply expected to agree. But you don't know Billy or what's going on or why the narrator is saying this. All you have is a big white wall in front of you and the narrator's version of events. And how reliable is this narrator anyway?

Billy just knocked Oliver off the swing, pointed at Oliver, and laughed.

Now the narrator is providing straight-up facts, and you are given the chance to make up your own mind about that troublesome Billy.

Here's another example:

Life walked into town on a wave of heat. He looked quite dapper in his black suit and matching vest, with a crisp white shirt and the tiniest hint of red peeling out of his jacket pocket: a crimson handkerchief, monogrammed.

This is the first line of *Loteria*, my newly released middle grade novel (Knopf 2021) in which you meet Life (and, soon, his companion, Death). My goal in writing this line was to give the readers enough clues so that they could start to piece together a profile of who this Life character is. Every detail here says something about Life, but I'm not telling you what it says—I'm *showing* you how it manifests and letting you arrive at your own conclusion.



This is how Dana Sanmar chose to illustrate the characters of Life and Death.

This act of formulating our own opinion when reading a book allows us to feel like we are directly participating in the story rather than simply being led along by a trickster narrator.

So, for us as authors, it's important to focus on laying down clues (facts!) for our readers to uncover (like a detective) and interpret. That interpretation is one powerful way you get your readers engaged.

TIP 4: SOMETIMES TELLING IS BETTER THAN SHOWING

Just because showing is more engaging than telling that doesn't necessarily mean you should always be showing. There are times when telling—in other words, using exposition—is important, for example, when you just want to convey the passing of time or when it's not necessary to describe in detail a scene or some series of actions.

Telling (i.e., exposition) can also be a good way to prepare the reader for what you're about to show them. J.K. Rowling does this to great effect in all of her books. Take the very first line of the *Harry Potter* series:

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.

This is 100 percent telling. But in the very next paragraph Rowling offers proof about this statement (showing), and she goes on to drop clues throughout the chapter that reinforce her initial statement.

The key is to be mindful of when and how you tell vs. show, and to use these techniques strategically.

I hope you find these tips useful! Wishing you and yours a hope-ful, wonder-ful—and word-ful 2022. See you next year. 🌟

KARLA ARENAS VALENTI writes stories for and about kids, taking readers on journeys steeped in magical realism and philosophical questions. Her storytelling is heavily influenced by her Mexican heritage and layered with ideas and concepts she's picked up in her many travels around the world. She currently resides in the Chicagoland area with her husband and three kids, two cats, and hundreds of books. Karla writes picture books (she is the creator of the *My Super Science Heroes* series) and middle grade novels. Her debut MG novel is *Loteria*. Find her at karlavalenti.com.

Writer's Bookshelf

CRAFT IN THE REAL WORLD: RETHINKING FICTION WRITING AND WORKSHOPPING by Matthew Salesses

Reviewed by Shirin Shamsi

I have read numerous books on the craft of writing. Many of these vessels of wisdom sit neatly on my bookshelves. They reassure me that I'm on the right path in my writing journey, for I often return to them for reference, inspiration, and advice.

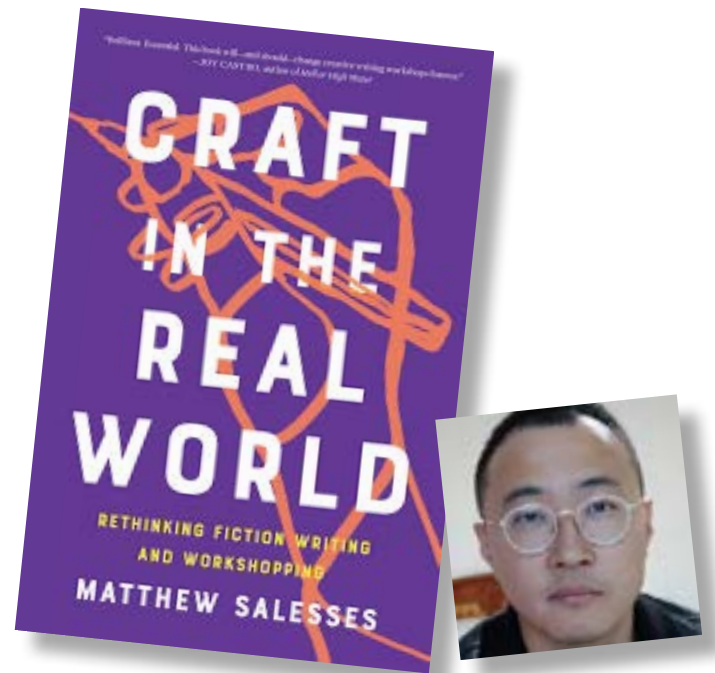
I thought I had read all the great books on craft. Indeed, I believed I owned all the ones I needed. Then I read *Craft in the Real World* (Catapult, 2021) by Matthew Salesses, which turned my well-ordered ideas on the craft of writing—and everything I had learned up until then—completely upside down. Salesses' book simply blew me away as it questions everything writers generally accept as indisputable truth regarding the rules of their craft.

As writers, we take edicts such as “Kill your darlings” and “Write what you know” as indisputable advice for writing well. But Salesses questions these very set-in-stone rules and demands that one rethink everything, claiming that doing so will ultimately challenge us all to be both better thinkers and better writers.

The book begins by stating that “pure craft is a lie.” Salesses points out that writing workshops have historically catered to the world of the white, straight, male, cis, affluent, and able writer.

“What we call craft is in fact nothing more or less than a set of expectations,” Salesses continues. “Craft is never neutral. Craft is the cure or injury that can be done in our shared world when it isn't acknowledged that there are different ways that the world is felt.” The author's words are powerful and really hit the mark. He has personally experienced—as he describes in his book—being “othered.” He writes powerfully, from a place of authenticity.

Salesses goes on to say that what has previously worked can do so no longer, and, again, the examples he provides are eye-opening. In short, he argues that the traditional approach is inadequate because it's too limiting in perspective and fails to



represent the world we now live in—a diverse and global community.

The author also points out that the western narrative comes from different traditions than, say, the narratives of eastern traditions. “Expectations belong to an audience,” he says. “To use craft is to engage with an audience's bias. Like freedom, craft is always craft *for someone*. Whose expectations does a writer prioritize? Craft says something about who deserves their story told. Who has agency and who does not. What is worthy of action and what description. . . whose world it is. Who holds meaning and who gives it.”

One has to look at things from differing viewpoints in order to get a truer picture. No matter how hard we try, biases are unavoidable. Though we may believe traditional craft workshops to be objective, we are deceived. Salesses states that in the traditional workshop everything has long been viewed from the bias of a western perspective. Furthermore, he posits that western literature has always catered to the “white gaze” and that “white is literature's default.”



Writer's Bookshelf

This point really hit home for me. It highlighted how I have always needed to explain myself. Memories of my childhood flooded back, recalling how I accepted as normal the need to always explain my culture, faith, and “other” perspective.

Salesses writes, “What people read and write affects how they act in the world. If writers believe that art is important to actual life, then the responsibilities of actual life are the responsibilities of art.”

He also talks about how the lack of author diversity in publishing, even today, feels like remnants of “colonization.” As writers we are aware that fiction has a critical role in our world, that it “makes us feel empathy,” which in turn makes the lack of diversity all the more worrisome. Salesses points out that this lack of diversity can be seen as “literary imperialism.”

Although this book is primarily directed at writing instructors, it should be helpful to all writers, whether beginner or experienced. Salesses demonstrates how that “set in stone” take on the craft of writing has repercussions whether it’s in the way we think, the way we teach, or even in the language we use. Thus, he advises, “To better understand one’s culture and audience is to better understand how to write.”

Another thing I really appreciate is that the second half of Salesses’ book includes practical exercises. He offers “Alternative Workshops,” which, in adopting a nontraditional style, are more inclusive of diversity. His approach in using what he calls the “Critical Response Process” for critiquing makes sense and is very constructive. He urges readers to continue to ask questions, challenging us as writers to be more thoughtful and aware of our own biases.

Salesses also offers Purpose-Oriented Writing Exercises in the appendix. Plus, his 34 revision exercises at the end are invaluable for deepening the writing process. They have even helped me get out of a rut with the middle grade novel I am currently working on.

All in all, this book is a valuable eye-opener to the inherent biases that exist in the writing craft workshop. It is also a step-by-step guide and tool for any writer wanting to learn how to overcome those biases, expand their writing to a deeper level, and become more aware of the nuances involved in teaching the craft of writing.

In an interview, Salesses stated regarding the exercises in his book, “I hope [this section] helps people who need a way of talking about things that, on some level, they already know to be true.”

I’m so very grateful that Matthew Salesses wrote this book. It not only highlights problems but also offers solutions. This is a much-needed addition to any writing workshop or any writer’s bookshelf. ☀



SHIRIN SHAMSI was born and raised in the UK. Having lived on three continents, she views herself as a global citizen and now spends her time sharing stories with children of the world. Shirin and her husband have raised six children—three human and three feline—and reside in the suburbs of Chicago. Her debut middle grade novel, *Laila and the Sands of Time*, was published in 2019. She was one of three authors who co-wrote the children’s book *Planting Friendship: Peace, Salaam, Shalom* (Clear Fork Publishing, 2021) and she has two upcoming picture books: *Zabra’s Blessing: A Ramadan Story* (Barefoot Books, March 2022) and *The Moon From Dehradun: A Story of Partition* (Atheneum, Fall 2022)

Mentor Texts

FIRST PAGES LESSONS FROM LAS MUSAS by Lily Frusciante

Back in 2015, some months before the qualifying exams for my graduate program, I got to work on my first middle grade novel. Part passion project, part procrastination from exam study, the novel ended up connecting me to various writing communities that I—and my craft—owe so much to. Writing for middle grade readers has since turned into one of the most important parts of my life. And as I've worked through subsequent projects, I've continued to explore the different craft and support groups the world of children's literature has to offer.

One of those groups is Las Musas. Given my family's multicultural heritage and Latinx roots, the group has played a particularly influential role in how I write, why I write, and how I see both the process and my finished works as ways to champion the cultures that form the very foundation of my identity. Las Musas is, more specifically, a literary collective that began in 2018, with the mission of supporting female Latinx writers. The group has defined itself as “the first collective of Latinx women and otherwise marginalized people whose gender identity aligns with femininity, writing and/or illustrating children's literature, who have come together in an effort to support and amplify each other's debut or sophomore novels in US children's literature” ([Las Musas website](#)). Since its inception, the group has welcomed over seventy members, run mentorship programs, supported online pitch events, and produced a podcast that explores all aspects of the publishing journey—from drafting to querying to marketing, and more. These resources have helped me better understand the complexities of contemporary Latinx cultural production and, as a result, better understand myself.

The diverse works of individual Musas underline what's at stake in the kind of help I've found from the group. Spanning various age ranges, genres, histories, and identities, they highlight the strengths and value of contemporary Latinx artists. They also speak to

the diversity of the Latinx community itself, which has, in turn, given me concrete tools for representing characters that draw from my own experiences growing up right next door to my Puerto Rican grandmother. In short, Las Musas has shown me how an individual person's art can grow from, belong to, and even help define a broader collective. The following middle grade novels are just a sampling of the stunning books created by the group's authors and illustrators—books that have offered me invaluable lessons on craft and the power of books for young readers.

FIRST PAGES LESSON: HOW TO USE TONE TO BUILD CHARACTER

GHOST SQUAD

by Claribel A. Ortega

Overview: A middle grade fantasy about Lucely and the ghosts she accidentally awakens while trying to save her family's business. These ghosts threaten the spirits of her own ancestors—spirits that can take the form of fireflies and appear before her.



In a few short sentences, the beginning of *Ghost Squad* establishes an eerie, dark mood, helping us feel for Lucely and her family as they navigate life. Through specific details from Lucely's Dominican heritage, the same lines remind us that her story belongs to a broader collective.

THE MOON WITHIN

by Aida Salazar

Overview: A novel in verse that focuses on Celi and the life questions that fill her mind, specifically surrounding the moon ceremony her mother hopes Celi will have after the arrival of her first period.



Mentor Texts

Here, beautifully crafted lines of verse instantly come together to present the novel's main character, her individual voice, and her relationship to larger life questions. The specific use of verse helps the emotionality of these questions come through, creating the sense of curiosity and exploration that is essential to this particular story.

FIRST PAGES LESSON: HOW TO INTRODUCE EMOTIONAL LIFE EVENTS

INTO THE TALL, TALL GRASS

by Lorie Ryon



Overview: A middle grade fantasy grounded in Yolanda's quest to save her abuela's life and come to terms with the magic tied to her family's history and the various losses she's experienced.

Through its focus on Yolanda, *Into the Tall, Tall Grass* considers what it can be like to face the loss of a familial elder. The potential death of her abuela is referenced on the first page of the book, ensuring that

the topic is neither taboo within the story nor avoided so as to protect young readers from the pain of it.

MIOSOTIS FLORES NEVER FORGETS

by Hilda Eunice Burgos

Overview: A contemporary middle grade novel about Miosotis and the lessons, questions, and doubts that stem from a deal she makes with her dad to get a dog of her very own.



The opening pages of *Miosotis Flores Never Forgets* instantly present the intricacies of multiple generations living under one roof. Tension isn't simply apparent in these initial pages; it's presented through the worldview of Miosotis, which allows readers to consider how universal moments of hope, disappointment, and even pain manifest in precise ways and with precise impacts.

FIRST PAGES LESSON: HOW TO CREATE A REALISTIC FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

LUPE WONG WON'T DANCE

by Donna Barba Higuera

Overview: A contemporary middle grade novel that explores Lupe's dream of becoming the first female major league baseball pitcher and that dream's relationship to other causes she takes up in her life.

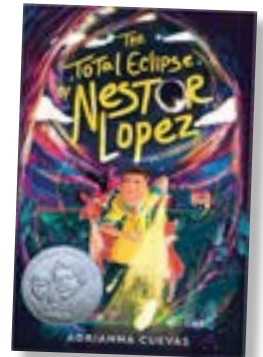


Lupe Wong Won't Dance opens with its titular character navigating the ups and downs of gym class, including the taunts of a school bully, the embarrassment of an ill-fitting pair of shorts, and the support of a best friend. Through her word choice, humor, and interiority, Lupe offers insight into that scenario as a young reader might experience it, not as an adult looking in.

THE TOTAL ECLIPSE OF NESTOR LOPEZ

by Adrianna Cuevas

Overview: A middle grade fantasy that represents Nestor as he grapples with his family's frequent moves, his dad's latest deployment, and the witch who's stealing the animals he can secretly talk to.



In *The Total Eclipse of Nestor Lopez*, specific details surrounding setting and familial relationships help the first-person narration stand out as unique. We are immediately placed in Nestor's world, as Nestor sees it, and through that specific point of view, we're drawn into the rest of his story. ✨

LILY FRUSCIANTE is a writer for young readers. Though born in the South Florida sun, she has called several places home over the years—including New York, Buenos Aires, Miami, and Los Angeles. She currently lives in Chicago, where she has worked as a freelance editor and a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Spanish & Portuguese at Northwestern University. You can find her online at www.lilyfrusciante.com and [@frusciante_lily](https://twitter.com/frusciante_lily).

Rockford Area Network

GROWING AND THRIVING DURING COVID by Karin Blaski

When COVID hit in March 2020 and lockdown and quarantines became our new normal, the Rockford area SCBWI-IL network quickly switched from in-person meetings to Zoom. As co-leader I had racked up expert Zoom skills through five-plus years of online teaching experiences at the college where I'm employed, so the transition was painless. But what to do over Zoom? The group decided that dissecting a writing craft book chapter by chapter each month while providing an opportunity to cheer each other on in our writing, or commiserate—we do both—would be a great way to use our regularly scheduled meeting times. We also could avoid getting slapped by the cold, sleet, and snow that escorts us to and from face-to-face meetings during the Midwest winter!

Our first dissection was of *The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface* by Donald Maass. Each month we read a predetermined chapter based on our schedule and do assigned exercises that we could share with the group. We would discuss such things as how the chapter influenced our writing that month or what evidence in our reading of other writers demonstrated the ideas within the chapter. However, our philosophy has always been that—even if you did not complete or start any of the month's exercises, or even if you hadn't read the chapter—all are free to join us for writerly camaraderie!

Then something remarkable happened. Word got out about what we were up to (thank you SCBWI regional leadership) and SCBWI writers outside of Rockford joined in our discussions. Our group grew to include folks from as far away as Oklahoma and Washington state. When one of our Rockfordians moved to North Carolina, he could still participate. Zooming—who would have thought that would be a real word?—has allowed our group to both retain and expand its membership. Our Zoom meetings have twice the number of people attending than in-person meetings. In fact, when meeting face to face we used to take the summer off. Now we meet year-round.

Not only have we had additional faces loading in rectangles across our meeting screens, but our group has a new co-leader: Gina Buckles! Gina lives in Rockton and teaches high school Spanish. She enjoys writing contemporary and fantasy middle grade novels as well as picture books. While she's not a published author yet, she looks forward



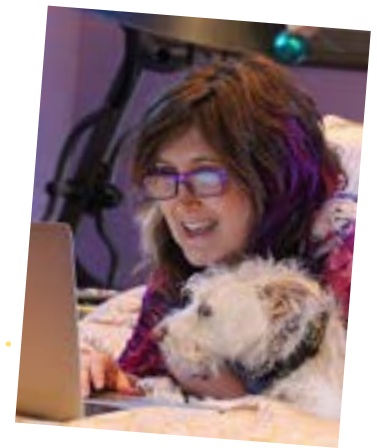
to achieving her goal of traditional publication someday. She has been a member of SCBWI for three years and loves connecting with other writers to discuss craft and share critiques.

Our current dissection is of *Story Genius* by Lisa Cron, and in January we just finished Chapter 9, "The Opening: Of Your Novel and of the Story Genius Blueprinting System." Our writing exercises included writing an Opening Scene Card and/or writing an Opening Scene.

Feel free to join us the first Monday of the month from 6-8PM by emailing me at keblaski@aol.com for the Zoom link and remaining reading schedule. Zooming is convenient, and we still get the benefit of visual and auditory communication. Plus, we can show off our cats! Sad to say they were not welcome at the library where we used to meet. ☀

K. E. BLASKI is an Associate Professor and Academic Chair of the Business Department at Rock Valley College, where she routinely incorporates storytelling into her classroom. She has been a member of SCBWI for over two decades with seven independently published middle grade and young adult books under three pen names. She has lived in nine states and traveled all over the world, currently residing in Rockford, Illinois.

Chicagoland North Suburban Network



by Anny Rusk

When we were offering only in-person events, the North Suburban Network (NSN) was not geographically desirable for my co-rep Ilana Ostrar or me. So you may wonder why we both traveled out of our way not only to attend but to run a network that required a commute. (And will again someday.) It's because our network's programming is consistently engaging and useful. And I'm convinced our events are so good because we plan each year's programming together as a group.

This approach allows us to offer diverse programs that do a deep dive into industry topics with speakers that can be hard for our members to access on their own. (Every network has their specialty; this is ours.)

Some of our most successful programs have included: Publishing 101 with publishing company exec John Shableski (this was the first time SCBWI-IL recorded a program and made it available to SCBWI networks across the country); a night with super-agent Sara Megibow from KT Literary; "Time Management and Coaxing the Muse out of Hiding" with Liesl Shurtliff; and "Using Libraries to Find Your Readers."

The latter was a national webinar presented by American Library Association movers and shakers Eti Berland (Newbery Committee and Odyssey Committee, among

others) and Ann Santori, both of Lincolnwood Library, and yours truly, formerly of the Winnetka Public Library.

So how does a bigger event like this happen? First off, once we have member ideas, some of which we drag out of them, we sit around and decide which events we think will appeal to the most folks.

Once we establish the programs we want to offer, we go about getting speakers. We are lucky in that our network includes many kidlit heavy hitters—such as our own co-rep Carolyn Crimi—who are always happy to let me "use" them for their connections. In addition, SCBWI-IL co-reps "The Debs" (AKA Debbie Topolski) and Jenny Wagh are *always* willing to jump into the abyss with us to handle the tech, some of the marketing, and other things that make us look good.

In the case of the library event, I was able to draw upon my own circle of friends. After working in children's services at Winnetka and teaming up with Eti Berland for several big author events presented by the library during 2020 (which included our own Jacqueline Alcántara as well as Alex Gino and Dan Santat) I realized the power of libraries to connect authors/illustrators to their readers.

Eti, Ann, and I set about creating a program that gave our members facts and resources that aren't always obvious to most.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Researching libraries as you would agents, i.e., finding their demographics to see if your book speaks to their community. Helpful link: <https://www.ims.gov/search-compare/>
- Librarians are often overwhelmed and, like all of us, lean toward working with those they have a connection to, especially if your work isn't well known yet. Instead of contacting them out of the blue, try to attend some of their events first. (A big plus being that these days virtual programs allow us to go nonlocal.) Be active



Chicagoland North Suburban Network

in commenting or asking questions so you might stand out to them. Help them bring awareness of their events by posting about those events on your social media, both before and after they occur. Go into the library if you can and get a feel for the place. Introduce yourself to a children's librarian or other staff.

- When you pitch your event, make it easy for them to say “yes.” First, give them links where they can find excerpts of your book, and/or reviews and so they can see how you interact on social media if you're on any platforms. Librarians who might invite you to present need to have a sense that you can put on a good show.
- How can you add value to your presentation? Librarians love curriculum tie-ins like printables and curriculum guides. (At the Winnetka Library, we created take-home kits with these kinds of materials prior to events to help create a buzz with patrons for author events.) Another good option is to include an interactive element in your presentation, such as a drawing activity, even if you're not an illustrator. Candace Fleming did a great “CSI whodunit” when presenting her latest book, on King Tut.
- See how you can plug yourself into existing programs. For instance, see if you can volunteer to read a book to young patrons at storytime—even, ideally, read your own book.

Above I've detailed just a smattering of the info we provided that night. One of the things that tickled us was that a few published writers told us they'd learned things they didn't know despite having presented at libraries for years. This is one of our greatest joys as NSN reps—being able to create programs that deepen our members' knowledge base no matter how long they've been in the game. Not always an easy feat!

THE TAKEAWAY:

JOIN US! We are open to members near and far. And *please* give us your program suggestions. We are always on the hunt for the next life-changing—or at least helpful—event! ☀

ANNY RUSK believes all of us are creative, but only some of us are wacky enough to be a creative. (adjective vs. noun) She's worn many hats, most recently as a Youth Services Librarian Assistant at Winnetka Public Library. Currently, as well as serving as a co-rep for the SCBWI-IL NSN, she is a corporate communications writer and a pre-published kidlit author. In her spare time she is a helicopter mom to Odin, her rescue dog.



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