



Society of
Children's Book Writers
and Illustrators

(<https://www.scbwi.org/>)

Illinois



Prairie Wind Newsletter

Winter 2020



Art by Jackie Alcántara, [Illustrator in the Spotlight](#)

From the Editor

It is 2020, a leap year, a year that ushers in not only a new trip around the sun but a new decade. I'm sure your resolutions are already full of writing and illustrating goals, but let me suggest one more: Read this year's first issue of the *Prairie Wind!* Set aside a little time to enter into the stories, insights, and happenings that make our Illinois chapter simultaneously so dynamic and kind.

Jenny Wagh's [Greeting](#) tells her inspiring SCBWI story from first conference to first contract: "The weekend was a combination of in-flight puking my guts out, hand expressing breastmilk between breakout sessions, and the exhilaration of knowing that this is where I belonged."

In this issue's [Tale from the Front](#), we hear **Natalie Lund's** riveting and lyrical story of the three storms that not only became part of her fabric and part of her debut YA novel *We Speak in Storms*, but ultimately offered up "stolen days, among the numbered that any of us—all of us—have."

Patricia Hruby Powell focuses her [Writing Tip](#) on the powerful question: "How do we emotionally get the reader into the world of our story?" Learn how loss, hardship, awe, and even humor can connect your story to your readers' hearts.

The celebrated graphic novelist **Jeff Weigel** offers the "wisdom of the thumbnail sketch" as his [Illustrator Tip](#). Discover how these "quick, tiny, homely little drawings" can be "a huge time saver" and help you map out a graphic novel that will tell the story in panels and pages (rather than in sentences and paragraphs) "as clearly and as engagingly as possible."

From her [Writer's Bookshelf](#), **Sarah Hoban** discusses **Jane Friedman's** *The Business of Being a Writer* and encourages us to take Friedman's approach to heart. "I don't think that business and art must be at odds," says Friedman. "I believe they can inform and push each other to flourish."

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"For many of us what happens behind a publisher's door is a mystery," writes **Anny Rusk** in her [interview](#) with publishing executive **John Shableski**. Together they give us a peek behind that publishing door, discussing acquisitions, submission mistakes, strategies for connecting with editors, marketing and publicity, and finally Shableski's personal specialty, graphic novels.

James Kennedy brings us the personal story behind his wildly popular [90 Second Newbery](#) Film Festival, which will screen this year in Chicago at the Harold Washington Library on March 8. And even better Kennedy shares some of the actual films from his festival!

Carol Coven Grannick's [Inside Story](#) offers a kinder, more uplifting approach to crafting those new year's resolutions. Rather than creating a list of unrealistic, unattainable goals, Grannick suggests a different way, one that will hopefully "enable you to experience frequent success" and "strengthen your resilience."

Kid Lit Nation scholarship winner **Donna Beasley** is our "pumped and eager to learn" [Fly on the Wall](#) for this issue, reporting on Prairie Writer and Illustrator's Day 2019. Beasley brings us her top take-aways, like this wonderful line from **Vashti Harrison's** keynote: "We all have 10,000 bad drawings in us. The sooner we get them out the better."

Patty Toht goes to her [Shop Around the Corner](#), Harvey's Tales in Geneva, to interview owners **Chuck** and **Roxanne Osborne**, who view their joyous little shop as "their post-retirement adventure." They tell us not only how they got their name, but how they participate in and connect with the larger book-making and reading world.

In our newest column, [A Librarian's Take](#), **Sarah Aronson** talks with Evanston librarian, fuse #8 blogger extraordinaire, and author (most recently of *The Great Santa Stakeout*) **Betsy Bird**. With characteristic humor, Bird shares her top five tips for writers and illustrators.

Equally humble and ambitious, our [Illustrator in the Spotlight](#), **Jacqueline Alcántara**, shares what she calls her very best illustration (a sketch from her childhood), her favorite characters ("little black and brown kids who...play, dance, and bounce across the page"), and a delightful glimpse into her workspace, step-by-step process, and personal inspirations.

In [Voices of Change](#), **Katie Otey** offers ten powerful tips for how to "Unpack. [O]ur. Box." Or rather, how to discover the preconceived notions that "cloud our understanding of people who are not like us." And with the kindness that seems to run through this whole issue of the *Prairie Wind*, Otey says that "since this is a sensitive subject, I will use myself as an example in most points."

Rounding out this first issue of 2020, **Jeanette Lee** focuses her [Mentor Texts](#) on artists from the 1920s, contemplating what we can learn in this new 20s decade from the innovations, creativity, and struggles of the jazz, art deco, and talking movie generation of 100 years ago.

I hope you will be as motivated, humbled, and amazed as I was by the voices, advice, and stories in this issue. May the *Prairie Wind* inspire you toward a beautiful, productive, and kind new trip around the sun!

A great, big thank you to **Kelly Darke** for [rounding up all our chapter's news](#). And as always, thank you to our hard-working team.

Amy Alznauer

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Pamela Dell, Editor
Amy Alznauer, Managing Editor
Jenny Wagh, Editorial Advisor
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Greeting

Making the Team

Jenny Wagh

Last year was a whirlwind. After fifteen-plus years of writing, I finally received a contract for my debut picture book. There was happy crying, complete with snot and an embarrassed teenaged son. Soon after, I took over for **Sara Shacter** as assistant regional advisor, and six months later I stepped into **Alice McGinty's** Co-RA shoes. Each momentous event had me feeling honored and full of looming self-doubt.

I stumbled into SCBWI in 2005. The previous couple of years I had attended general writing workshops at my local community college and neighboring arts center. I was the lone children's writer in a sea of writers producing mystery and romance novels for adults. Finally, a presenter took pity on me and told me to join SCBWI. My local network was only one mile from my house! And run by the beloved **Laura Crawford**.

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Laura immediately cheered me on to attend Prairie Writer's Day. I was pregnant with baby number three, and we sat all day in very uncomfortable chairs. Nevertheless, I was riveted and in awe to be surrounded by kindred spirits all wanting to write for children.

I attended as many Illinois network events, conferences, and workshops as possible. I was hooked. With three very little ones and a supportive spouse I took my first solo flight to SCBWI's annual Summer Conference in Los Angeles. The weekend was a combination of in-flight puking my guts out, hand-expressing breast milk between breakout sessions, and the exhilaration of knowing that this is where I belonged. Hearing authors share the basics of show, don't tell set my heart a flutter. And I was star-struck by the authors and illustrators willing to share play-by-play what it takes to get published.

I felt I'd do anything to "make the team." That meant between kids, scouts, PTA, and eventually back to teaching, I carved out time to write, improve my craft, and volunteer. Writing often occurred during quiet moments in the car with a napping toddler as I waited to pick up my older two children. (I still find myself writing in my minivan between activities.)

I tried to attend as many events as possible: Prairie Writer's and Illustrator's Day, Words in the Woods, the **Linda Sue Park** Novel Revision webinar, **Lisa Wheeler's** Picture Book Boot Camp, and the Spring Thaw conference. Eventually I was brought onto the Spring Thaw committee and thrilled when Deb Topolski let me run with the idea of round-table pitches.

My most joyful SCBWI moments come from volunteering. I love being a network representative, helping to create community, and seeing connections being made. My critique group keeps me on-task, expecting a new picture book every month. Some stories have been hits and many have been misses.

For some volunteer opportunities I've needed to beg and borrow my parents' shiny, goldfish-free car to shuttle faculty to and from the airport. On one such occasion I chauffeured the Words in the Woods editor from the Chicago suburbs to Lake Bloomington (IL). After a sketchy bathroom stop and having to break it to her that we would be staying at a camp lodge rather than a hotel, I did not have high hopes of her offering me a publishing contract on the spot...

My picture book manuscript, which I'd sent in beforehand so I could get feedback on it during the conference, was sweet and sappy. This editor, **Liz Kossnar**, was smart and edgy. During the two-and-a-half hour car ride we talked



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about books she had truly enjoyed editing—*Karma Khullar's Mustache*, a girl power middle grade novel by **Kristi Wientge**, and a young adult nonfiction book by activist **Nadya Okamoto**. When it came time for the editor to join our peer group and provide her own feedback on this very new picture book of mine I felt I had nothing to lose. She laughed. Yay for small wins!

On the ride home after the conference Liz and I chatted about college days, kayaking, and family. When she offered me the opportunity to email my manuscript to her, I tried to keep expectations realistic. It was probably a polite gesture. With little to lose, I sent my story in...and had a contract by October. I owe my success to SCBWI, and especially the Illinois SCBWI community.

I am so grateful to be a part of the regional team with **Debbie Topolski**, **Cedric Gliane**, and **Deb Aronson**. I hope to carry on all the great work that previous team members have started. And with numerous SCBWI-IL volunteers I know that together we can create opportunities for writers and illustrators to up their game and win. GAME ON!

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Jennifer Wagh is excitedly awaiting the release of her debut picture book *Eggasaurus* (Simon & Schuster Books For Young Readers, Fall 2021). When not writing she's wrangling a classroom of preschoolers. You can find out more about her at <https://www.facebook.com/jennifer.wagh> or Instagram @jennymariewagh.

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Don't Miss

Pitch Perfect: Spring Thaw 2020

Date: Saturday, April 18

Location: Barbara Belding Lodge at Brewster Creek, 6N921 IL Rte. 25, St. Charles, IL

Time: 9:00 am – 4:00 pm

Hashtag: #2020ST

Have you been writing or illustrating diligently the past several years? Submitting to publishing houses? Going to conferences? Do you feel like you're at the cusp of publication? If so, join us for our Spring Thaw event!

Pitch your work to an editor or agent at a roundtable and get feedback on your first page or your illustrations.

Enjoy a craft intensive, led by a talented book creator, on either novels or picture books. Want more?

Get a written manuscript critique from an editor or agent. And, of course, have a yummy nosh with your colleagues!

For more information on this upcoming event, including a faculty list, check out the SCBWI-IL website: illinois.scbwi.org.

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News Roundup

Winter 2020

Compiled by Kelly Darke

EVENTS

ANDERSON'S BOOKSHOP

Information is subject to change. Some events require tickets. For more information on these and other upcoming events, visit the [Anderson's website](#) or call 630-355-2665 for AB Naperville (123 W. Jefferson Ave., Naperville), 630-963-2665 for AB Downers Grove (5112 Main St., Downers Grove), or 708-582-6353 for AB La Grange (26 S. La Grange Rd., La Grange).

- February 4 – **Jason Tharp**, author of *It's OK to be a Unicorn*, 7:00 p.m. at AB Naperville. (PB)
- February 17 – **Jasmine Kaur**, author of *When You Ask Me Where I'm Going*, and **Jasmine Warga**, author of *Other Words for Home*, 7:00 p.m. at AB La Grange. (YA & MG)
- March 4 – Epic Reads Tour, 7:00 p.m. at a location to be determined. **Elana K. Arnold**, author of *Red Hood*, **Mindy McGinnis**, author of *Be Not Far from Me*, and **Evelyn Skye**, author of *Cloak of Night*. (YA)
- March 22 – **Nick Bruel**, author of *Bad Kitty Joins the Team*, 2:00 p.m. at AB Naperville. (MG)
- April 9 – **David Shannon**, author of *Roy Digs Dirt*, 7:00 p.m. at AB Naperville. (PB)

ANDERSON'S BOOKSHOP 18TH ANNUAL CHILDREN'S LITERARY BREAKFAST

What: Illinois authors and illustrators, full breakfast, door prizes, giveaways, book sales and more! CPDU credits

When: February 22, 2020, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Where: 6440 Double Eagle Dr., Woodridge, Illinois

Details: Advance registration and fee required, two of the keynote speakers include **Annie Barrows** (*Ivy & Bean*, *The Best of Iggy*) and **Raj Haldar** (better known as rapper **Lushlife**, co-author of *P is for Pterodactyl: The Worst Alphabet Book Ever*). Additional speaker information pending.

More information: Bobak's Signature Events. Tickets available at <https://www.eventcombo.com/e/andersons-18th-annual-childrens-literature-breakfast-36838>

Presented by Anderson's Bookshop, Naperville.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT WITH SUPERSTAR PUBLICIST, TRACY VAN STRAATEN

Food for Thought is an occasional program for published SCBWI members (both PAL and indie/self-published). Usually scheduled on Saturday mornings, the program moves from one venue to another around the Chicago area to try to give everyone a break on transportation.

What: **Tracy Van Straaten**, former Scholastic publicist and now president and CEO of TVS Media Group, LLC, discusses a publicist's role in modern book publishing. She'll talk about what publicists do, how they do it, and what she's learned along the course of her career. In addition, she'll answer questions about the logistics of hiring a publicist.

When: March 14, 2020, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Where: Open Books at 651 W. Lake Street, Chicago, IL 60661

More information: Watch the listserv and the [Illinois chapter of SCBWI's website](#) for future Food for Thought programs. Email **Becky Rissman** at beckyrissman@gmail.com or **Mandy Caverzasi** at mandy@acaverzasi.com with program ideas.

THE BOOK CELLAR 6TH ANNUAL CHICAGO YOUNG ADULT BOOK FESTIVAL

What: Young adult author panels and book signings

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When: April 18, 2020

Where: Hamilton Elementary School, 1650 West Cornelia Ave, Chicago, Illinois

Details: Authors and panel details pending

More information: <https://chiyabookfest.com>, <http://www.bookcellarinc.com>, or call (773) 293-2665 for details.

Sponsored by the Book Cellar.

SHOP AROUND THE CORNER: HARVEY'S TALES

Harvey's Tales is located at 216 James Street in Geneva, Illinois. The store is planning a few author events in February and March. For more information on upcoming events visit harveystales.com or call 630-232-2991.

AWARDS

NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS

The 2019 winner of the National Book Foundation's National Book Award for Young People's Literature is:

- **Martin W. Sandler**, *1919 The Year That Changed America* (Bloomsbury Children's Books)

The finalists are:

- **Akwaeke Emezi**, *Pet* (Penguin Random House)
- **Jason Reynolds**, *Look Both Ways: A Tale Told in Ten Blocks* (Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books)
- **Randy Ribay**, *Patron Saints of Nothing* (Penguin Random House)
- **Laura Ruby**, *Thirteen Doorways, Wolves Behind Them All* (Balzer + Bray, HarperCollins)

YALSA (YOUNG ADULT LIBRARY SERVICES ASSOCIATION) 2019 TOP TEN BEST FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

- **Elizabeth Acevedo**, *The Poet X* (HarperCollins/Harper Teen)
- **Becky Albertalli & Adam Silvera**, *What if It's Us* (HarperCollins/Harper Teen)
- **Holly Black**, *The Cruel Prince* (Little, Brown and Company)
- **Deb Caletti**, *A Heart in a Body in the World* (Simon & Schuster/Simon Pulse)
- **Justina Ireland**, *Dread Nation* (HarperCollins/Balzer + Bray)
- **Tiffany D. Jackson**, *Monday's Not Coming* (HarperCollins/Katherine Tegen Books)
- **Adib Khorram**, *Darius the Great is Not Okay* (Dial Books)
- **Emma Mills**, *Foolish Hearts* (Henry Holt & Co.)
- **Preston Norton**, *Neanderthal Opens the Door to the Universe* (Disney Hyperion)
- **Shivaun Plozza**, *Frankie* (Macmillan/Flatiron Books)

GRANTS

2020 SCBWI MEMBER GRANTS

Need financial help to complete your current project? Look no further.

Note: Applicants may only apply to one SCBWI grant per calendar year. For more information, visit the [SCBWI's awards webpage](#).

WORK-IN-PROGRESS GRANTS

These awards showcase outstanding manuscripts from SCBWI members. The selected works will receive a special platform to be showcased to the most prestigious publishing houses in the field. One winner in each of the following categories will be chosen: Picture Book Text, Chapter Books/Early Readers, Middle Grade, Young Adult Fiction, Nonfiction, Multicultural Fiction or Nonfiction.

- Applications must be submitted electronically only from March 1 – 31, 2020.

DON FREEMAN ILLUSTRATOR GRANTS

Established to enable picture book illustrators to further their understanding, training, and work in the picture book genre.

- Two grants of \$1,000 each are awarded annually, one grant to a published illustrator and one to a pre-published illustrator.
- Applications will be accepted March 1 – 31, 2020.

KAREN AND PHILIP CUSHMAN LATE BLOOMER AWARD

For authors/illustrators fifty years of age and older who have not been traditionally published in the children's literature field.

- Grant of \$500 and free tuition to any SCBWI conference anywhere in the world.

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- Applications will be accepted March 1 – 31, 2020.

LEE BENNETT HOPKINS POETRY AWARD FOR CHILDREN'S POETRY

This award is presented annually to an American poet or anthologist for the most outstanding new book of children's poetry published in the previous calendar year. The winning poet or anthologist receives an honorarium of \$1,000. Winning entries are selected by a panel of authors, librarians, teachers, and scholars.

For more information contact the [Pennsylvania Center for the Book](#) or call 814.863-5472.

KATHERINE PATERSON PRIZE FOR YOUNG ADULT & CHILDREN'S WRITING

This is an annual prize for children's literature awarded by *Hunger Mountain*, a journal published by the Vermont College of Fine Art. Contestants may submit in three categories:

Young Adult (YA), Middle Grade (MG), and Picture Book. One overall winner receives \$1,000 and one winner in each category will receive \$100. The winning entries will be published online at the [Hunger Mountain site](#). If an entry is a novel excerpt it must nevertheless stand alone.

- Entries must be unpublished works of 8,000 words or less and each must be accompanied by a \$20 entry fee. Multiple submissions are accepted but each must include the entry fee.
- Submit online using [Hunger Mountain's Submittable form](#).
- Deadline for submitting: March 1, 2020.

CONFERENCES

SCBWI 2020 WINTER CONFERENCE

When: Feb. 8-10, 2020

Where: Grand Hyatt, 109 East 42nd Street, New York City

Cost: \$575 SCBWI members; \$675 nonmembers

Note: Registration is currently full but you can still register for the waitlist, or follow the conference as it happens, on the official [SCBWI blog](#).

For more information visit the SCBWI website.

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***Kelly Darke** is a mathematics educator and aspiring picture book writer. She blogs at www.mathbookmagic.com about math picture books that inspire wonder and joy.*

{ [Edit](#) }



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Food for Thought

Programming for Our Professional Members

Led by *Mandy Caverzasi* and *Rebecca Siegel*

Food for Thought is member-generated programming for PAL and INDIE **published** members of SCBWI, designed to inspire and connect our community through bi-yearly events. Each event includes a social component, potluck-style snacks, and an enriching talk by a leader in our field. Previous FFT programs have included a presentation by **Rachel Ruiz** about how and why to create a book trailer, and a talk by **Angie Gaul** about Anderson's Bookstore's authors-in-schools program.

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Mandy Caverzasi (www.acaverzasi.com) is the author of *A Song for Robin* forthcoming from *Tiger Stripe Publishing*. When not writing for children, she tells stories about motherhood and marriage and was featured on *Matthew Dick's* podcast, *SpeakUp*.

{ Edit }



Rebecca Siegel is the author of *To Fly Among the Stars: The Hidden Story of the Fight for Women Astronauts* (*Scholastic 2020*), and *Mayflower: The Ship that Started a Nation* (*Quarto 2020*). Before becoming an author, Siegel worked for over a decade in *School Library Publishing*, first as an editor and then as a content creator. To learn more, visit www.RebeccaSiegel.org.

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Tales from the Front

We Speak in Storms

By Natalie Lund



In the seventh grade, I moved from a city to a small town in western Illinois. I fell in love immediately, drawn in by the town's rich ghost lore. The historical society museum—once a stop on the Underground Railroad—was believed to be haunted by a pair of sisters-in-law, who'd worked together to aid people escaping slavery but, reportedly, hated one another. In a cemetery, where Civil War soldiers were interred, blue orbs were said to float near the graves. In a restaurant that had once been a doctor's office, the ghosts of deceased patients broke teacups. (What they had against china, we'll never know.) And, of course, there was a bridge—as is common in many small towns—where you could put your car in neutral and the ghosts of the family who'd died there would push you across to safety. I spent a fair share of sleepovers bent over Ouija boards in old farmhouses, hoping to hear from the ghosts myself, yearning for a connection to the town and its stories.

The blue orbs, the sisters-in-law, the bridge, and the teacup-breakers all make an appearance in my debut YA novel, *We Speak in Storms*—along with many ghosts from my imagination. The "we" in the title is a sort of Greek chorus of ghosts—a whole generation of the town's teenagers who were killed in a tornado at a drive-in movie theater in 1961. In the present timeline, teens live with the legacy of that storm, lining up in hallways to duck and cover, learning silly rhymes about the drops in pressure that precede storms, and visiting the cornfields

with Ouija boards to see if the drive-in ghosts will whisper back to them. Spoiler: they do.

As I drafted the novel, I thought often about how collective trauma becomes part of the fabric of a place, part of its narrative and identity. And how people in the present who are facing their own grief and pain can find a path forward by leaning on the past.

So it seems only right that a novel titled *We Speak in Storms* and built on these themes would have its own story—one aligned with three storms in my life.

Hurricane Ike

Like so many writers, I've wanted to be an author since childhood, but after majoring in creative writing in college, my path led me to a teaching job at a middle school in Houston, Texas. I thought there would be plenty of time for writing. *School ends at 4:00*, I said. *You'll have summers off*, I said.

Ha.

I used my off-periods to create lesson plans, handouts, and PowerPoint presentations. I spent hours after work calling parents, coaching soccer, and grading. I even came into school every Sunday to make copies for the week. My students were brilliant and hilarious, but I felt like I couldn't breathe, couldn't imagine, couldn't be anything other than their teacher.

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I was in my second year of teaching when Hurricane Ike spun onto the weatherman's radar—a blue-gray swirl on every channel. I'd never been through a hurricane before, but I did what others were doing: I filled my bathtub with water, taped Xs on our windows, and bought too many cans of Pringles. The night it hit, I slept in our hallway, cringing every time our windows shuddered or something clattered outside. By morning, the power was out, streets were flooded, and cars were moored in underpasses. My roommate and I were lucky—safe and dry when so many were not.

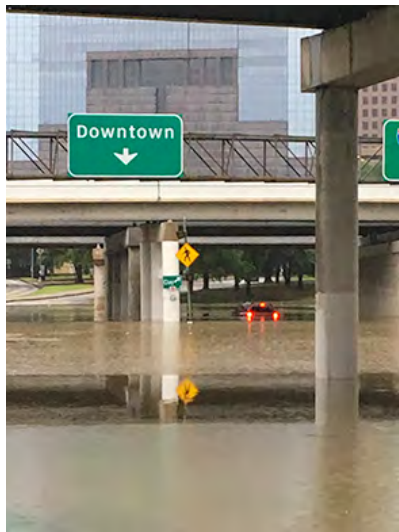
In the wake of Ike, the September heat flared back up, and, sitting in our airless apartment, I tried to write unit plans and enter grades. Eventually, my laptop died, and I was blessedly freed. I opened my notebook for the first time since college and began to write a short story about a boy named Joshua, who would—years later—become one of the protagonists of *We Speak in Storms*.

I don't remember much else about those sweltering days and nights waiting for the power to return and school to resume, but I do know the pressure in my chest lifted—that the storm released what had been trapped underneath. I understood that if I was going to be what my students needed—what I needed—I had to make space for writing.

So I did. Instead of making copies every Sunday, I wrote. It was slow and frustrating and often lonely, but by the spring semester of my fifth year teaching, I had a portfolio of short stories and was accepted into Purdue's MFA program.

Hurricane Harvey

I officially started *We Speak in Storms* during my final year of the MFA program, pulling several characters from short stories I'd written over the past several years. I finished about three-quarters of a draft by graduation and moved back to Houston for a communications job in the school district where I'd once taught.



This time, I knew I needed to make space for writing at the start, so I joined the ranks of dawn-breaking authors, writing for a few hours before I went to work. Not two weeks into this new schedule, my mom was diagnosed with stage four melanoma and came to stay with me so she could see doctors at the Texas Medical Center in Houston.

My mom had also fought breast cancer when I was younger, so I'd written a character in *We Speak in Storms*, Callie, whose mother was dying from cancer. In the early mornings, before I left for work and my parents for the hospital, I made myself write several of the final scenes with Callie's mother, including her death. I don't know that I would or could do that again, but at the time, it felt like the only way I could explore my fears about my own mother's illness.

I finished the novel in those dark hours before my mother's surgery to remove infected lymph nodes. Before her scans came back clear.

It took me another year of tinkering before I was ready to query agents. And another year after that until a revised, represented draft was in an editor's hands—just as Hurricane Harvey rolled across the Gulf and the weatherman's animated arrows pointed straight at Houston.

Overnight, our neighborhood became an island, our city a lake. Friends and colleagues were rescued off roofs. Stadiums filled with survivors. In the morning, our phones beeped with tornado warnings. Our school district scrambled to provide housing, mattresses, demolition volunteers, gift cards, and clothing for hundreds of families. I was in my bedroom, building a resource webpage for our employees and students' families when I got the call that Philomel wanted to offer me a two-book deal. I called my mother immediately and cried—my privilege and safety and luck stood in such stark relief with the destruction around me.

Hurricane Dorian

Six months before *We Speak in Storms* was scheduled to hit shelves, my mother's melanoma came back—spreading quickly across her skin. By then, I'd moved to Chicago and couldn't fly to Houston for all her appointments and treatments. I didn't have a support system in my new city and felt powerless to help her. I was also beginning to realize how difficult marketing would be—especially as a debut novelist without a writing community in my new city. I was feeling small and lost and alone. My agent put me in touch with one of her other authors, Sarah Aronson, who brought me into SCBWI's fold, for which I've been incredibly grateful.

My parents traveled to Chicago from their home in South Carolina to spend Labor Day weekend with me and celebrate the launch of *We Speak in Storms*. Not long after their arrival, Hurricane Dorian set its sights on the very coast they'd left behind. Given the approaching storm, Penguin posted about *We Speak in Storms* with appropriate delicacy the weekend leading up to its launch. On its "book birthday" that Tuesday, my parents and I drove through the city to see it on shelves. I signed a copy for my mom beneath the dedication For my mother, who has always believed.



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My parents had planned to leave the next day, but Dorian kept them in Chicago the rest of the week. We ate Chicago-style pizza, strolled the river walk, and explored my neighborhood together. I don't want to downplay the devastation of the storm—or any of the others in this essay—but Dorian gave me time I needed with my mother. Stolen days, among the numbered that any of us—all of us—have.

These three storms are part of my fabric now—the story I'll tell of this book, the past I'll lean on as I make my way forward.

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Natalie Lund is the author of the young adult novels *We Speak in Storms* and *The Sky Above Us* (forthcoming fall 2020). She lives in Chicago with her husband and a very talkative cat.

[{ Edit }](#)



Illinois



Voices of Change

Unpack Your Box

Recognizing and dismantling your own preconceived notions can create more equity in the publishing industry for both creators and readers.

By Katie Otey

Controversy in publishing is nothing new. An industry that is exclusive and sometimes cutthroat will always have its share of moments laced with toxicity. And although most of us involved dream of our opportunity to touch the lives of the world's readers with our work, for many of us, that opportunity may never happen. This is an especially unfortunate truth for creators of color, those who identify as LGBTQ, and those who are from varying non-Christian religious backgrounds. But why? Why when so much noise is being made about expanding opportunities for marginalized writers and illustrators? Why when the potential to expand representation for readers and other consumers can produce limitless gains? And why when allowing these consumers to enjoy a sense of self while reading books and enjoying illustrations would promote humane equity? Many in the community are hard at work trying to make a dent in this very white, very straight, very Christian industry by offering scholarships, mentorships, and Twitter pitch initiatives such as DVPIt. Also, there is always buzz about amazing books being published by marginalized creators. We are capable of so much more, if we are only given the chance.

But even with all the successes, problems still exist. I won't go into all the issues because there isn't enough room in a single article, but anyone who is a part of the very vocal writing community on Twitter is privy to the many scandals that have plagued our industry. There are so many snafus, arguments about who should be writing what, and explosive fragile egos, it's amazing we can produce great content at all. Take the #ownvoices argument. Because of the push for more diversity in publishing, many non-marginalized creators are slapping marginalized characters into their books without a clue about how to properly represent these characters. This is problematic on many levels but mainly because our focus is on children's books and misrepresentation can be harmful for a child who is searching for a sense of identity in the books they read.

So what can we do about it? I am not here to tell anyone what they should write about. Mainly because people are going to do what they want to do anyway. However, if you choose to undertake creating books and illustrations about marginalized characters that you do not identify as, I ask you to do one thing. *Unpack. Your. Box.*

You may be asking yourself "what box and how do I unpack it?" Well, the figurative box holds the preconceived notions we allow to cloud our understanding of individuals who are not like us. When people push back against being put into a box, this is what they are fighting against. As far as unpacking your box, I have a few tips that may help you effectively do this. And since this is a sensitive subject, I will use myself as an example in most points.

- 1. Acknowledge Your Biases.** So every one of us has biases. Every one of us. However, having the self-awareness to recognize that about yourself can take work. Few people want to admit they may have negative or inaccurate assumptions about others but most of us do. Acknowledge it. Even if just to yourself. Because blind ignorance is more than harmful. It blocks your ability to open up to the possibility that someone whose existence is different than yours is actually valid and important.
- 2. Expand Your Experiences.** How can you possibly recognize the ways you are biased if you do not expand your experiences? Do you only network with people who look like you? Do you shy away from following people of a different race or sexual orientation or religion than you? Are you afraid that their "influence" will negatively impact your outlook on life? If any of these things apply to you, please consider opening yourself up to new opportunities. No one is trying to take away your way of life. But learning how someone else lives can be refreshing and may also help normalize the way others live, even if it's different.
- 3. Take Painful Lessons Like a Champ.** Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we still get things wrong. I remember the backlash that came when I participated in a diversity contest that promised feedback from a literary agency. I submitted one of my stories but was rejected because the agent thought I wasn't a marginalized creator. She based this solely on my name and writing style. Now I'm sure it's not too far-fetched to recognize that there are, in fact, black women named Katie and also that black writers do not always want to write struggle stories. But she forgot to check her biases at the door before participating as a gatekeeper in the contest. This, understandably, made many people angry. I will admit I was hurt and angry as well. However, I too have made errors in judgment regarding sensitive matters. I did this not because I'm a "bad" person or

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because I don't care but because, in those situations, I was sincerely ignorant of the hardships or misconceptions that affect people from different marginalized backgrounds. Sometimes we learn lessons through difficulties and grow from pain. In a perfect world, these situations wouldn't happen. But the world isn't perfect and neither are we. Embracing that is a big step in learning how to be inclusive to people who are different than you.

As for that agent, I'm sure she learned a powerful lesson and, hopefully, will not make that mistake again. And, to be honest, I appreciated that she acknowledged it instead of doubling down or playing the victim. It was a missed opportunity for me but may open a door for the next writer. So if you find yourself on the receiving end of backlash because of something you did within the writing community, learn from it and do better the next time.

- 4. Be Okay with Not Understanding.** If you are not a part of the LGBTQ community, you will not get what it feels like to be a gay or lesbian person who has to live your life in secret. If you are a Christian in a country that accepts and practices Christianity, you will not know what it's like to be a Muslim living in the United States after the events of 9/11 or even during the current administration. There are countless ways you will not understand the path someone else is on. Acknowledge that and maybe that will help you understand why you may not be the best person to write a story centered around experiences you have not lived or have no connection to.
- 5. Recognize Your Privilege.** This may seem like the same as "acknowledging your biases" but there is a distinct difference. You see, we all have some type of privilege. I am a black, straight, Christian woman. Although I am marginalized, I still have privilege in the sense of being both straight and Christian. So, for example, when LGBTQ individuals are being persecuted for who they love, I don't have to face that persecution. It doesn't mean I am better. It doesn't mean I don't have my own mountain to climb. It means, in this instance, I have a privilege they don't have. I can bring home a man I love or be in public with that man and not have to face the obstacles many LGBTQ individuals face. So please stop taking the word "privilege" as an attack. It isn't. But if you don't recognize the ways you are privileged, you are missing the opportunity to acknowledge the struggles of those whose place in society isn't as fortunate as yours.
- 6. Use Your Privilege to Uplift Others.** Basically this means be supportive, even if you don't have to be. Yeah, it's wonderful when communities come together to support one another. But when someone outside that community, especially someone with a more privileged place in society, lends their support, it benefits us all. Yes, all. When it comes to publishing, if you step away from a project that would be better suited for a marginalized creator to tackle you'll no doubt find other opportunities. In fact, uplifting others actually creates more opportunities. As the publishing industry produces books that better reflect a wider range of readers, more people will buy these books. Not only because they see themselves within the pages, but because the stories are great, and relevant. And books for marginalized readers and written by marginalized creators can also be read by others outside that particular community. But these stories must contain proper representation that isn't harmful and the outcome will be better and more diverse stories for everyone. In short, when the demand increases, the opportunities increase. For all of us. Thinking that diversity is a trend or that publishing more diverse books may take away from your ability to thrive is not only selfish but inaccurate as well.
- 7. Stop Categorizing Marginalized Voices as All-Inclusive.** If you read a book, be it popular or not, by a marginalized creator, please understand that the next book written by a different author from the same marginalized group can and usually will vary greatly. Not all black people grew up poor. Not all gay people had families that didn't support them. There is no one-size-fits-all way to live life, even for marginalized folks. Don't do this. Publishing "one black book" does not encompass the breadth of experiences we have lived as a people. So if you pick up a book that didn't resonate with you, try another. If you sign one marginalized author, signing another shouldn't be scary or risky. If you feel it is, then try asking yourself why you feel this way and be honest with your answer.
- 8. Stop Fetishizing Marginalized Creators' Experiences.** I cannot count how many times someone has commented on my ability to speak in a way that they understand. I've had people ask me "How do I write a black character properly? I've listened to you talk and you don't talk any different than my white friends." Or they think that having a character of color in a story just having fun or living life is a missed opportunity to "learn about our cause." If you don't see marginalized people as more than just the struggles they endure, you are part of the problem. If marginalized people must live up to some code of conduct to be valued, you are part of the problem. We don't always have to be the hero in books. We don't always have to be the villain. We don't always have to struggle. We can just be. As a human. Just. Like. You.
- 9. Recognize It's Not All About You.** Every topic that trends, every book that hits the bestseller list, doesn't have to center around you or your own lived experience. If you think it does or you feel victimized when that happens, imagine how the thousands of marginalized people who live this experience year after year have felt and continue to feel. Yes, you and your work are valid, but so are the works and the lives of people who are not like you.
- 10. Care.** None of what is being said will mean anything if, at the end of the day, your biggest concern is yourself. Again, there is room for us all to tell great stories. And these opportunities will continue to grow as long as we care about the quality of the content being presented. We do not want to take away anything but, rather, to add. Add to the lives of those who have been traditionally neglected in publishing. Add to the opportunities for creators who can properly tell these stories. And add to the notion that one day we will just be out here publishing books without having to label them. Ideally, it will be a matter of just wonderful, quality, properly represented books. Care about that and you can be part of the solution to this very real problem, whether you are a reader, a writer, a blogger, an illustrator, or a gatekeeper. Care enough to Unpack Your Box.

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***Katie Otey** is an author and SCBWI network representative for the state of Illinois. She has completed several manuscripts from picture books to young adult and is currently seeking representation. She resides in southern Illinois with her family.*

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Writing Tips

Writing to Evoke Emotion

By Patricia Hruby Powell

Readers read to have an experience—to go on a journey. Ideally, as writers, we take them out of their own lives and bring them into another. Most frequently, this is done when the reader engages so completely with the protagonist that the boundaries of the reader and the protagonist blur. Readers tend to feel what the protagonist feels and want what the protagonist wants. It works with some sympathetic secondary characters as well, but primarily it's your main character the reader will identify with.

So, how do we emotionally get the reader into the world of our story? Showing rather than telling can be a great first step, because the reader can dive into the scene along with the protagonist and be there with them while the character is experiencing their own emotion. (See the Show-Don't-Tell writing tip on my [website](#).)

We want to hook our readers—whether it's our beta readers, agent, editor, or the general public. We must start at the onset and continue throughout the story. Here are some examples from books that do this job powerfully.

A Young Adult Example

In **Laura Ruby's** young adult novel *Thirteen Doorways, Wolves Behind Them All* (Balzer & Bray 2019), the thirteenth word on page one is "orphanage." Most of us are wired to care about the underdog. Injustice disturbs us. In the face of injustice, we might feel hurt, anger, despair, empathy, or all of those emotions. We immediately care about the unjustly orphaned character, Frankie.

Not every story is about an orphan, of course, but with the examples I've provided here and below you might think about how your own stories might hook your readers emotionally.

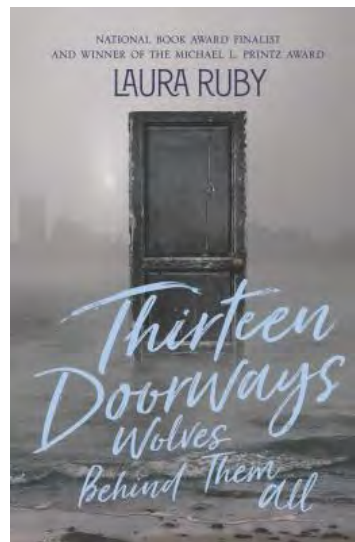
Back to Frankie. Not only is she orphaned, she can't talk. Why? What happened? I care. I'm curious. I desire to acquire information. That desire is an emotional connection to the story.

The story continues, "And then the shot from her parents' bedroom—so sharp, so loud, so wrong." Then screaming. I'm riveted now. An orphan who is unable to speak after she hears a shot in her parent's bedroom? That means Frankie wasn't always an orphan. Most all of us value our parents. That moment when one becomes orphaned? Despair. A nightmare. And the result is that our character becomes mute? I identify. I'm stricken. I'm with Frankie. I feel an emotional attachment to her. But what happened? Again, curiosity—I desire to know.

All these emotions I bring to the reading of this book. Some I consider more universal than others. Desire to know, desire for justice, despair. Some are more personal.

I read the word "gaslit" early in Ruby's book and think, ah, this is historic. I love historical fiction. That's a personal preference of mine. The author describes cribs like "gravestones" and that cements the tone. Injustice poured down on orphans. And the way the author uses words! "Crawling, hot tears on her face." I admire great use of language and image. That's another emotion: admiration. I have confidence in this writer. She knows what she's doing and I'm going on a well-guided journey into another world—I'm connected by emotion.

Of course, some aspects—arguably all aspects—are subjective to some degree. The reader brings his or her own experience to the story they're reading. I love history, great use of words, and feeling I'm in good hands. Maybe most of us do. But consider this. What if the editor reading this as an unpublished



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manuscript was brought up in an orphanage, or her sister was adopted from an orphanage? It brings that editor that much closer to the story. This helps explain why a manuscript may resonate with one (editor) and not with others—for instance, the twenty who have rejected your manuscript to date. The next editor might have been brought up as an orphan and be the one who connects emotionally to your story.

And yes, in *Thirteen Doorways*, Ruby does a lot of showing rather than telling. This is why the reader can be inside the action, the story, the world, right along with the characters.

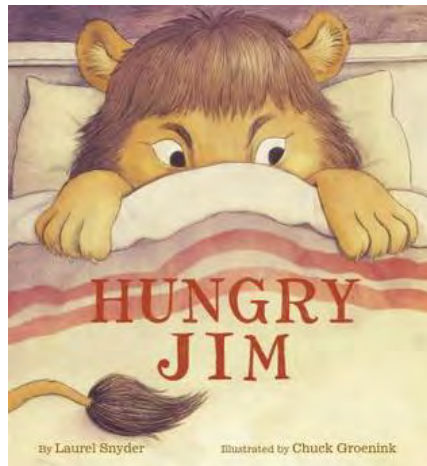
A Picture Book Example

Consider Laurel Snyder's picture book, *Hungry Jim* (Chronicle 2019). It begins:

"When Jim woke up on Tuesday,
his tail had fallen asleep.
This seemed odd.
Jim had never had a tail before."

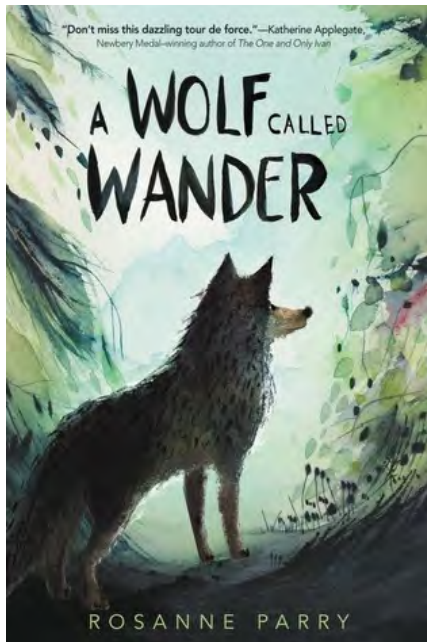
I'm laughing. "Jim had never had a tail before." **Chuck Groenink's** nostalgic illustrations show Jim as a lion in a child's bed—the illustrations are a huge part of connecting book to reader. Picture books have the advantage of dual-showing—both illustration and text. The author is telling in the above passage. But as the story continues, she *shows* Jim's activity.

Humor is a great emotional connector. And the humor here is sly. Jim feels "beastly" and he wants to eat everything—including his mother. He's in a mood. And he just can't control it, until he does. And yes, the book is an homage to the great **Maurice Sendak** and *Where the Wild Things Are* (Harper Collins 1991). Humor brings delight—a strong emotion.



A Middle Grade Example

A Wolf Called Wander (Greenwillow 2019) by **Rosanne Parry** is a middle grade novel. I'm a sucker for well-done animal stories—especially *wild* animals. These were my favorite stories when I was young. Endangered wolves are the underdog. I'm there. I identify with wolves. This novel is told in first person by a young wolf, so yeah, I guess it's anthropomorphized, but so gently. Our wolf *shows* his world from his experience.



The author has her wolf character use verbs that a wolf might understand by hyphenating English language verbs—because English can't cover the wolf culture. You've heard that in the Inuit language there are two hundred different words for snow. Most English speakers don't need two hundred words for snow because, thank heavens, we don't have a regular experience with so many types of snow—they're not part of our culture. Language reflects culture. Maybe we should consider Parry's book a translation from *wolf*.

Our wolf says, "I crouch-growl-sniff" when he encounters an unknown scent. When he smells a human, he "crouch-freezes." When he encounters a female wolf, his excitement causes him to "yip-spin like a pup." Our young wolf, who will eventually identify himself as "Wander," encounters an "almost-wolf" with "a deep voice...strange to my ear. Oof, oof." We the reader know that the creature is a dog because Parry *translates* from *wolf* so adeptly. But Wander knows the creature only through his wolf experience: as "almost-wolf," a meek creature who stays with his human rather than run wild with Wander.

So, part of the reader's emotional connection is the joy of understanding another species as depicted by the writer. Again, as a writer, I admire the writing. And we need to read as writers. We need to learn from what we read—whether consciously or unconsciously. Which means reading a lot!

And Wander is so lonely. He longs for his long-gone pack. Surely loneliness is a universal condition. We connect emotionally to the lonely wolf.

On top of the emotional draw that comes from "becoming" a wolf—the reader/writer admiring the writing, the feelings of loneliness and vulnerability—there's the huge emotional connection brought on by the life-or-death circumstances. Wander's very existence makes him vulnerable to starving or being shot and killed. We care so deeply for him. He must find food and hunt, or he will starve. Humans are his worst enemy. His mother told him early on that humans "can kill with a look and a loud noise." They carry black sticks that throw lightning. "A flash of fire, a clap of thunder, and the wolves go down." There is so much loss in his young life, you root for him with everything you've got. And again, you feel the injustice he faces—hurt, anger, despair, empathy.

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A Nonfiction Example

Nonfiction writers must also create this same kind of hook. Consider 2019 National Book Award winner for young people's literature, *1919: The Year That Changed America* (Bloomsbury 2019) by **Martin W. Sandler**. We do not identify with one protagonist—as we might in a biography. Instead, we're fascinated by stories that surround the facts. A desire to know and to discover the interconnectivity of historic events.

Sandler's opening chapter would be humorous if it weren't so horrific. A huge vat of molasses—2.3 million gallons—explodes in Boston's crowded North End in mid-January 1919, burying people and horses alive or blowing them clear into the bay. If the reader is anything like me, they're riveted.

But molasses? Yes, as Sandler shows, molasses connects us directly to many other issues of 1919—the year that changed America. Molasses had everything to do with the slave trade. Sugar cane was grown and processed into molasses by enslaved people from the 1600s through the 1800s, which led to the racial unrest and riots that would break out across the country in 1919. Explosives were made by mixing molasses and ammonium nitrate during World War I, which had ended a few months earlier, in November 1918. Soldiers were still arriving home from that war. The Prohibition Act had just been passed by Congress so manufacturers were frantically making rum (from molasses) before the law would be ratified and the nation would cease to drink (legally).

Women were largely behind the prohibition of drinking, in order to protect their families from drunken husbands. And they worked diligently for women's suffrage, which would become the 19th Amendment, passed in June 1919. Are you hooked? Are you curious? I hope so. There's so much information to attain in such a riveting emotional ride—racial injustice, gender injustice, immigrant injustice, worker injustice, and information about our history.

In reading this book we marvel at the fact that molasses can connect so many issues. I'm thinking of the awe or surprise emoji. Awe is a good emotional connector.

Finding Your Emotional Center

Look at your own manuscripts or books. Do they have the emotional hooks you need to pull your readers into the story? In my picture book *Josephine* (Chronicle 2014) I aimed to lure readers with Josephine Baker's exuberance and her response to racial injustice. We can all be inspired by her living her dream. The book is a dance and, as I have written, "Dancing makes you happy when nothing else will."

Loving vs. Virginia (Chronicle 2017) shows two people in love who can't be married and live where they want to live. Both romance and love are great emotional connectors, as is injustice.

Struttin' With Some Barbecue: Lil Hardin Armstrong Becomes the First Lady of Jazz (Charlesbridge 2018) shows a feisty piano-playing girl with an overbearing mother, who falls in love with the great jazz trumpet player **Louis Armstrong**. Injustice and love. It reads (or is meant to) like an early jazz tune. Music might be the ultimate emotional connector.

My upcoming *Lift As You Climb: The Story of Ella Baker* (McElderry/Simon & Schuster 2020) is about the African American woman who worked her entire life for African Americans' right to vote. Again, injustice. Next comes my book about women's suffrage (Chronicle). Unbelievable that only 100 years ago women couldn't vote! Injustice. Look at your work and learn what hooks you emotionally. I seem to be injured by injustice. I want justice!

But maybe I'm moving on now. The life of dancer **Martha Graham** was about finding and presenting truth over beauty. Even though I'm a Graham-trained dancer, did I know that before I began writing about her? Not really.

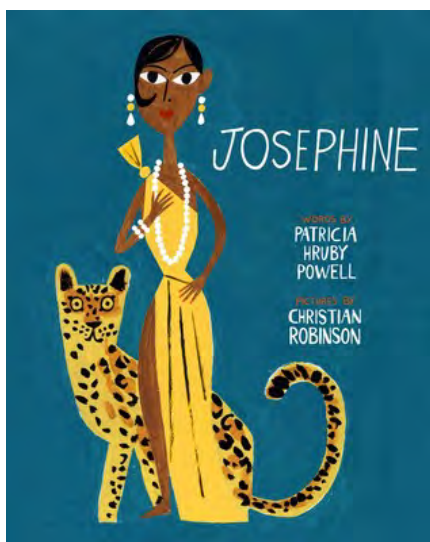
So, check out your work. Where is your emotional heart? If you don't see it in your writing, is it blocked in some way? Are you afraid to reveal it? I often think that I write to discover what I know. Or to discover what I don't yet know. If your work is not evoking emotion in others, maybe you need to journal to figure out why.

I'd love to know where your emotional heart lies.

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Patricia Hruby Powell, who writes in Champaign, Illinois, is comforted by her husband and her Tree Walking Coonhound. And really she's pretty happy, maybe in part because she feels she's connecting young people to their emotional hearts and helping them build empathy. At least she's trying to do that. You can reach Patricia at phpowell@talesforallages.com or at talesforallages.com

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Illustrator Tips

Writing and Illustrating Graphic Novels Starting Small—the wisdom of the thumbnail sketch

By Jeff Weigel



Writing a novel is a daunting task. Filling two-hundred-or-so blank pages with something that will entertain and reward a reader requires a huge chunk of time and effort from an author. Imagine, then, having to draw an illustration for every thought and action contained in that novel. Now you have a notion of the time and dedication involved in executing a *graphic* novel. Given the time you'll spend illustrating such a book, it's important to map out your storytelling carefully and efficiently before the work of doing finished art ever begins. For this reason I always extol the virtues of the humble thumbnail sketch to aspiring comics artists. The thumbnail sketch is the comics artist's best—though often least appreciated—friend.

Whether you're illustrating someone else's GN script or writing and illustrating your own tale, executing these small sketches of the whole story—beginning to end—is a huge time saver. I recommend doing sketches of every page in the book before you ever set pencil to paper for full-sized art. These quick, tiny, homely little drawings will save you hours of wasted time and angst (and will also extend the life of your eraser by years).

The primary responsibility of art in a graphic novel is to tell the story as clearly and engagingly as possible. Panels are the sentences, and pages are the paragraphs in the language of comics. Every micro-decision the artist and writer make about each illustration drives the story: What should you show and what should you leave out? Should you use a close-up, medium, or long shot? What viewing angle should you use? What details do you include? How many panels can fit on the page? Which panels should be larger (more dramatic) and which smaller (less consequential, but still necessary to drive the narrative)? How will they all fit together in a way that leads the reader through the panels in the right order?

These sorts of decisions are the real nuts and bolts of graphic storytelling. They get upstaged by the chrome and paint of the finished art, but the beautiful artwork isn't worth much if it doesn't tell the story clearly and dramatically. In comics, clear storytelling ALWAYS trumps beautiful draftsmanship (but it's nice to have both).

So finished artwork has to wait until you have a clear plan for how you'll depict the events of your story. And all the major storytelling mechanics of each page can be resolved in a few minutes of chicken scratches. Your layout isn't working? Throw out that thumbnail and start again. Maybe there's a better way to show these events? Take another few minutes to do an alternate sketch and then choose the better one. Artists who jump straight to full-size art, making their storytelling decisions as they go, are a lot more hesitant to abandon a layout that doesn't tell the story well than artists who realize their mistakes at the thumbnail stage. In other words, it's much less painful to alter or abandon a five-minute scribble than it is to ditch an hour of work on a nice piece of Bristol board.

Taking this important step before you start on finished art may seem like a no-brainer to most illustrators, but I find comics artists hesitate to thumbnail an entire story before starting full-sized pages. They hate delaying the gratification of doing what they see as the fun part. And it's a *long* delay if you're thumbnailing an entire novel before you ever start finished page. But it's definitely worth it! By thumbnailing the whole book you can make sure the early details you've planned out will work to reinforce the plot points you'll make later on. You know the story's big reveal will happen on a reader's page turn instead of being exposed too soon on a right-hand page of a spread.

Importantly, you'll also get a good grasp of how the story pacing works. Having planned ahead to pace the story well, you know you'll hit the publisher's required page count smoothly—avoiding the trap of rushing the ending because you were running out of room, or dragging out events to pad your way to the finale. These issues, and a thousand others, are resolved by having the patience and discipline to see your "micro-version" all the way through.

Thumbnails can be as simple or as detailed as you like, depending on how much planning you're comfortable with. Mine are very loose. Some are probably indecipherable to anyone but me. That's okay, because no one else needs to see them but me. Here's an example from my latest book, *Quantum Mechanics*:

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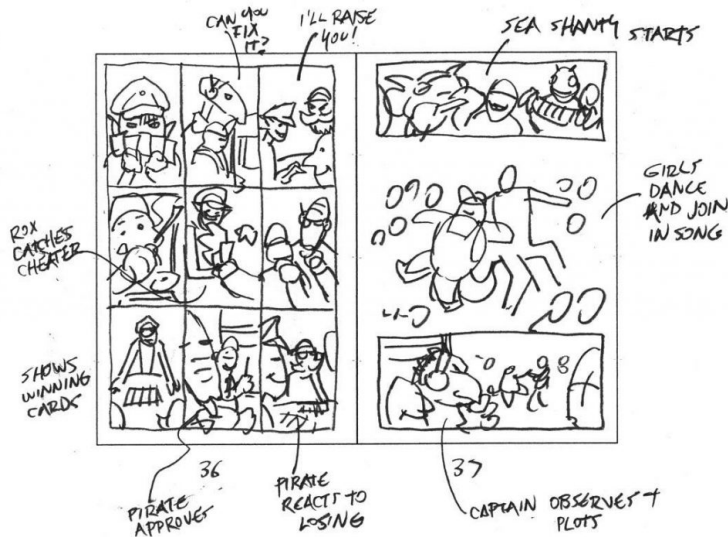
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The actual size of this is about 3.5" tall. I like to plan pages in facing pairs so I understand how left and right pages relate to each other, and so I can keep track of the reader's page turns to control flow and pacing. Notice the scribbled notes off to the side to remind me of details I need to include in the finished art. That's it—a few minutes of sloppy scribbling have now freed me from worrying about *what* to draw on finished pages, leaving me to concentrate on *how* to draw it well. Here's a look at the finished art on these pages.



A little background helps to explain how the tricky storytelling here unfolds: our two alien girls have been stranded aboard an intergalactic pirate spaceship, and in this scene they start to loosen up and get acquainted with the bizarre crew. The scene swings back and forth between the two girls as they impress the pirates with their unique skills and personalities. The scene culminates in the large unbordered panel that dominates the right-hand page as the relationship between the girls and the crew is cemented. It caps off on a less cheerful note as the captain of the ship hints at his sinister plans for the girls.

That's a lot of storytelling ground to cover in two pages: The scene switches back and forth between the two girls' situations in a steady staccato rhythm, joins them back together in a defining moment with the supporting characters, and ends in an aside from the main action. It's tough figuring out how to fit and stage all this activity, but it's a lot more

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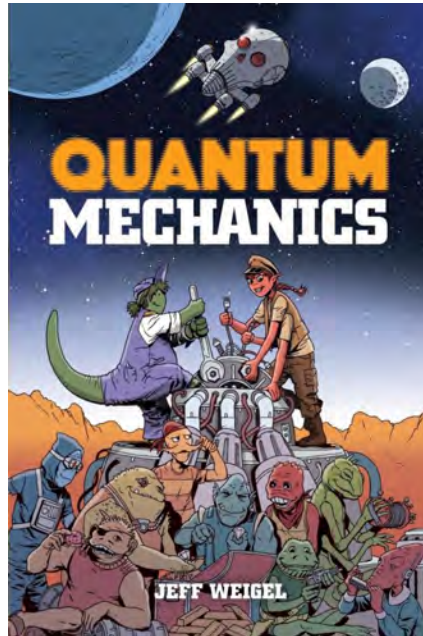
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efficient to work it out at 3.5" x 5" than at 17" x 22". And once I have figured it out in miniature, I can concentrate on drawing characters' faces and body language expressively at full size, confident I've got the storytelling mechanics nailed down.

I'm the writer and illustrator on most of my books, so my thumbnail process comes after I have a full story outline. After that, I draw pages and then script balloons afterward to fit the action. This forces me to design the pictures and layout to do the bulk of the storytelling; the balloons then provide support to the action and color to the characters' personalities. But even if an artist is illustrating from a full script, I still think thumbnailing the whole story first is a great way to make sure the narrative is working *visually*.

Thumbnails are even a good exercise for scriptwriters who will be handing off their story to an artist. (Remember, the tiny sketches don't have to be well drawn—stick figure will do.) This process will help a writer understand the problems of staging that long conversation between two characters in a coffee shop, or to understand why the scene of two huge armies battling, cannons firing and horses galloping, might not be suited to panel three of a eight-panel page.

No artist wants their graphic story jumping the rails. So a complete set of thumbnail sketches beforehand is the easiest way to prevent yourself from losing sight of the forest for the trees.



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Jeff Weigel is the author and illustrator of many children's picture books, comics, and graphic novels. He also illustrates the Sunday newspaper adventure of the long-running comics strip *The Phantom* for King Features Syndicate. His latest middle-grade graphic novel is *Quantum Mechanics*, published by Lion Forge. Jeff lives in Belleville, Illinois.

{ Edit }



Illinois



A Librarian's Take

Betsy Bird

By Sarah Aronson

Even before **Betsy Bird** moved to Evanston from New York City, I loved reading her posts about children's books, reading, and literacy on her widely acclaimed *School Library Journal* blog [A fuse #8 Production](#), all with a wry sense of humor and intuition that I totally appreciated.

Maybe that's because she can speak from so many points of view that matter to us.

She is a writer.

She is a librarian. (Now my librarian!)

She is a reader. A person who loves books. A person who has sat on awards committees.

Her blog is the one I read when I want to think about the industry.

Her lists are the ones I check when I need a great book.

And recently, it was fun being on a Read Local panel with her.

So all of that is to say, I was delighted (as well as a tad nervous) when I was given the opportunity to meet her at our local coffee shop for an SCBWI interview.

FYI: if you are going to take Betsy for treats, she likes chai. (*So of course*, they didn't have any. Luckily, they had hot chocolate.)

Now the conundrum: What to ask? Or rather, what to ask that she hadn't been asked a zillion times before? In the end, I decided to let Betsy call the shots. This is the season when she lists on fuse #8 what she considers the best books of the year. It's also the season of resolutions. So, with that in mind, I asked her to share five tips for us—as writers and illustrators.

TIP NUMBER ONE: Read everything.

(This is advice I give too. I first heard it from **Linda Sue Park**.)

Addendum: Where do you go to read everything?

Answer: THE LIBRARY.

Writers, let's face it, we can't buy every book we want to read. We have budgets. And there is only one place I can find all the books I need—for enjoyment. Or as mentor texts.

TIP NUMBER TWO: Please don't read your reviews on [Goodreads](#).

Also: don't worry about stars.

Do not obsess over rankings. Or over awards you can't submit to because they're only for authors living in other states. This hole is a deep one. And it is hard to emerge from—or to maintain your creativity and curiosity—if you visit it too often.

(Actually, I also give this advice. And sometimes I don't take it. So I can safely say, this is a very good rule and we all should learn to celebrate on a regular basis what we have accomplished instead of obsessing over stuff we can't control.)

TIP NUMBER THREE: Maintain an online presence.

You can do it.

There are librarians and educators who would love to know YOU—not just your book. (See Tip Number Five)

TIP NUMBER FOUR: Update your website.

This surprised me. But Betsy was quick to add: If you are a local writer or illustrator, how is she supposed to know if that information is *not on your website*?



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TIP NUMBER FIVE: When contacting a blogger, librarian, reviewer, or anyone else who might change your life by saying something nice about your book, be professional.

Address this professional personally.

Do your homework. Know who you are talking to.

Solid tips, right? And totally doable.

It was great fun talking to Betsy!

The Librarian and Her Books

Please check out Betsy's books, which include:

- *The Great Santa Stake-Out*
- *Funny Girl: Funniest. Stories. Ever.*
- *Wild Things: Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature*
- *Giant Dance Party*
- *Children's Literature Gems: Choosing and Using Them in Your Library Career*

You can also visit her [website](#)...and, of course, meet Betsy at the Evanston Public Library!

And additionally...Betsy's husband **Matt Bird** is an author as well and has written a great book on the craft of writing, titled *The Secrets of Story: Innovative Tools for Perfecting Your Fiction and Captivating Readers*.



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Sarah Aronson is the author of books for kids of all ages, including *The Wish List series* and *Just Like Rube Goldberg* (which was on some of Betsy's lists, and she didn't see that on Goodreads). She teaches at *The Highlights Foundation* and at [writers.com](#). She's the PAL coordinator and founder of *READ LOCAL* here in Illinois. Like tips? Sign up for Sarah's weekly newsletter on her [website](#).

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Shop Around the Corner

Harvey's Tales

By Patricia Toht

West suburban Geneva, Illinois, is known for its abundance of charming shops. The bookstore Harvey's Tales is high on that list. Located in the cream-colored house with a purple door at 216 James Street, the store is part of Geneva's famed Third Street shopping district.

Owners **Chuck** and **Roxanne Osborne** opened Harvey's Tales as their "post-retirement adventure," since visiting bookshops and reading were two of their passions. Chuck was the first to retire, bidding farewell to a middle school teaching career and opening the store in 2018. After years of commuting to New York for her job in real estate, Roxanne recently retired to join Chuck in the full-time operation of the store. Their children, **Erin** and **Zack**, also help out, making the business a true family affair.

Chuck and I recently sat down in the little bookstore café to talk about Harvey's Tales.

I'm sure this is a question that you are frequently asked – how did you choose the name for your store?

My wife and I love Bernese mountain dogs, especially our wonderful dog, Harvey, so we named the store after him. He recently passed away, but we have a new Bernese named Hazel, and our children's area is named Hazel's House. You'll discover touches of Bernese mountain dogs scattered throughout the store, too.

Your store carries a wide range of books and gift items, as well as providing coffees, teas, and foodstuffs in your café. What percentage of your store would you say is devoted specifically to children?



We probably have around 25% of books and sidelines aimed toward kids, babies to teens. We work with several local school districts and literacy initiatives with book fairs, author events, Title 1 purchases, and more. Most of this is geared toward kids' materials.

Our readers would be interested to know how you select the children's titles that you add to your collection. How do you make those choices?

When I curate and buy for the children's section, I'm always looking for a balance of things. We sell a lot of classic kids' stuff to parents and grandparents. Children's books with good messages (kindness, empathy, friendship, etc.) are also on my list. Books with great artwork, whether pretty or funny, pull me in sometimes. I try to use lots of sources for new titles. I get Edelweiss catalogs that are constantly full of kids' books. The American Booksellers Association publications – ABC children's group mainly – are useful. I also rely on Publishers Weekly and word-of-mouth from other booksellers.

With a Barnes & Noble Bookstore on the outskirts of Geneva, what do you see as Harvey's Tales' unique niche?



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A study conducted by the village of Geneva discovered that 75 percent of the people who shop in the Third Street district are not from the area, so in many ways, we are not competing for the same customers. I also think we offer a much more personalized service to our customers, and we make connections to the community through story times, book clubs, and a scholarship program. Also, we can order almost any book...apparently B&N either cannot or will not do this.

You are proud supporters of local authors. What are your guidelines for authors who would like to showcase their books at Harvey's Tales?



Our local author guidelines are pretty simple: The authors need to be relatively local or their books should have a local focus, and they need to submit a book for consideration. (We have not turned down anyone...with the exception of a stapled, Kinko's-copied, manifesto-type thing and one CreateSpace-published author.) We encourage all self-published authors to look into Ingram Spark or at least to have someone edit their books. (You will find detailed guidelines for local authors on the Harvey's Tales website.)

Congratulations on your first anniversary this past October! Any special plans for the new year?

This next year, we plan on expanding our book club offerings. We currently host two, and we provide a meeting space for five to six other groups. We'd like to have more author events...I'm finally figuring out how to navigate the event grids on Edelweiss. We'll soon be launching our Libro.fm campaign to give our customers audio options as well.

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Visit [Harvey's Tales](#) for more information, or contact them by phone at 630-232-2991. Or best of all, make the trek to Geneva and visit their lovely store!

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Patricia Toht is the author of the poetry collection *All Aboard the London Bus* (Frances Lincoln) and three picture books, *Dress Like a Girl* (HarperCollins), *Pick a Pumpkin*, and *Pick a Pine Tree* (both from Walker/Candlewick Press). She lives in Wheaton.

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Writer's Bookshelf

***The Business of Being a Writer* by Jane Friedman**

Reviewed by Sarah Hoban

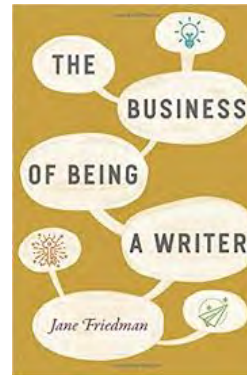
What does it take to be a writer?

You've pondered this, no doubt, as you've sat through seminar discussions on creating authentic characters. As you've pored over books on plot structure. As you've listened to your critique group analyze your style, your word choice, your grammar.

All useful. But not enough.



If you want to make writing your full-time profession, says **Jane Friedman**, you also must realize that it's a business, and a business you need to understand in order to find an audience, publish your work—in some form—and yes, make money. Unfortunately, it's an element of the writing life that many writers—kidlit writers included—often avoid or have never learned. But fortunately, Friedman is here to help. Her book, *The Business of Being a Writer*, gives writers a clear and realistic look at how the publishing industry works, what opportunities exist in both traditional and digital publishing, and how writers can use their skills to create satisfying careers. "I don't think that business and art must be at odds," Friedman says on her website janefriedman.com. "I believe they can inform and push each other to flourish."



A tour through Friedman's site, in fact, provides an ideal portrait of what she's talking about. The site includes her successful blog that covers topics ranging from self-publishing to MFA programs to using similes and metaphors. She teaches online classes in areas such as blogging and book proposals and does consulting work for authors. She's a speaker at writing conferences and industry events. She edits *The Hot Sheet*, a newsletter for authors, and produces *Electric Speed*, a weekly e-newsletter on digital topics. And she does write—books about publishing and editing, but also creative nonfiction.

If you make your living by writing for children, you already know it's not always a perfectly stable or linear career path. Manuscripts get rejected, editors change jobs, publications fold, the market changes. If you don't yet make a living from writing—but want to—you'll be wise to get your hands on this book. Not only does it offer that clear and realistic view of the publishing world; it also aims to disabuse aspiring writers of starry-eyed notions about their chosen profession. And it does so from the get-go—page 2, in fact. Book publishing, Friedman says, is "just one component of a full-time writing career." She points to the occasional personal essays from first-time authors who are shocked that their advance doesn't guarantee a full-time living for a year. "Such essays," Friedman notes, "reveal unrealistic expectations about the industry—or magical thinking: I will be the exception and earn my living from writing great books."

In fact, one audience Friedman especially wants to enlighten are creative writing students, and the book would be an ideal addition to any writing curriculum. (In her intro, she even includes "notes for instructors" on using the book as a teaching tool.) But you don't have to be a student or a newbie to benefit from Friedman's guidance. Even a seasoned freelancer or industry veteran can glean insights into facets of the trade with which they're unfamiliar.

Friedman starts big: She devotes individual chapters to overviews of the pillars of publishing: Books, magazines, digital/online, and literary. How do they work? What are their various business models? (And she hits the nitty-gritty; she includes royalty rates and charts that illustrate just how much royalty an author might collect on a single copy of a book. Spoiler: Not a lot.) Then she narrows it to what the reader really wants to know: How can I get published in each of these

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media? She dishes out solid how-to advice on researching and querying agents, writing a book proposal, self-publishing, freelance writing, and blogging.

Those are the tools. Friedman then dives into the decidedly nonliterary part of the writing trade—what she calls “creative entrepreneurship.” It’s what used to be called “marketing” and what many refer to today as “building your brand.” (Thankfully, Friedman refrains from overusing that particular phrase, since plenty of others have done so before her.) Instead, she focuses on “author platform,” a concept she admits has a variety of definitions. “My definition is this: an ability to secure paid writing opportunities—or sell books, products, and services—because of who you are or who you reach.” In other words, who is your audience, and how will you convince them to pay for what you produce?

It seems like common sense, but many writers shy away from this aspect of their careers. They believe their writing can stand on its own or they’re too busy or it seems like shameless self-promotion or frankly, they’ve just never thought about it. But whether your audience is an editor or agent, the book-buying public, or someone who’s paying to read your online content, you’ll go nowhere if you can’t get your message across. And it’s not the responsibility of publicists or marketing departments or career coaches (although Friedman says it’s fine to use their expertise when you need it). It’s the writer’s.

The term “platform” sounds slightly intimidating, as it carries an aura of digital wizardry—as if one needs to be a social media/blogging wonder. And that can be a part of it (we’ll get to that in a minute). But several of Friedman’s six components of platform are pretty old-fashioned: Writing that’s publicly available (i.e. what have you had published?); relationships (Who do you know? Who are your readers? Who have you worked with?); influence (How do you get people you don’t know to consider your work?)

And yes, there are digital elements as well, because this is, after all, 2020. You need a website. Social media can be helpful. Don’t be afraid to consider other channels or media to build an audience. But Friedman cheerfully emphasizes that there’s no one-size-fits-all solution to building your platform. It all depends on your skills, your interests, your background, and often, your gumption.

Platform isn’t about who yells the loudest or who markets the best. It’s about putting in consistent effort over the course of a career, and making incremental improvement in how you reach readers and extend your network. It’s about making waves that attract other people to you—not begging them to pay attention. Ultimately, your platform-building process will become as much a creative exercise as the work you produce.

So maybe you don’t love social media or haven’t found it to produce much of a payoff.

That’s fine. What are your strengths? Maybe you have expertise in a particular nonfiction subject. Or conversely, you’re a skilled generalist who happily tackles writing assignments of any kind, from poetry to short stories to puzzles for kids’ magazines. Perhaps you do knockout school visits. Friedman includes a little chart in her book that lists the nine different areas in which she earned money during her first two years as a full-time freelancer. They include writing and book sales, but they also include “affiliate marketing,” “speaking and events,” and “editing services.” She points out that any successful artist has multiple revenue streams, with the better-paying ones supporting the less-profitable ones. So if writing for younger audiences isn’t yet producing the income you think you need, you might consider different ways to supplement that work by using your skills for teaching, consulting, or nonprofit work. And to help stimulate your imagination, she includes additional chapters on ancillary areas: Writing contests and fellowships, crowdfunding, corporate media.

Friedman’s practical background information, realistic outlook, and encouraging tone make this book truly valuable for writers at all experience levels and working in all genres. But what she really wants you to take away are the basics you should already know as a writer: Be open to new ideas. Things take time. Most importantly, learn as much as you can—and then use what you’ve learned as much as you can.

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Sarah Hoban is a Barrington-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in magazines ranging from *Highlights to Commercial Investment Real Estate to Money to Rubberstampmadness*. She also manages communications and social media for several nonprofits, has published one middle-grade nonfiction book, and is hoping to publish a middle-grade novel. You can find her on Twitter at @sarwriter, but she has to admit that she doesn’t have a website. Yet.

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Researching the 1920s: Finding Inspiration in 2020

By Jeannette Lee

Procrastination has been my long-term companion. She held my hand in college while, in the middle of the night, I wrote a paper due the next day. She hovers over my shoulder while I watch my favorite TV show, meanwhile ignoring the dusty coffee table. She pokes me in the ribs as I scroll through social media instead of writing the next chapter of my manuscript.

But lately I've been tuning out the call of this so-called friend to really focus my attention on that manuscript. It's a work of historical fiction with the main character whose life spans the late 1800s to the 1970s. I've decided to research the 1920s, a time in this character's life when she was devoted to becoming a painter.

The 1920s. What an exciting time to read about! The Jazz Age. The Harlem Renaissance. Flappers! Artistic expression appeared to be everywhere—New York, Paris, Chicago, Berlin. Art seemed to be oozing out of the pores of these artistic communities.

Since my main character is an artist, I focused on reading books that featured creative people of the 1920s, with two main goals in my research. First was to get a feel for that era as the background of my book. My second goal was more personal, both to the character and to me. Reading fictional and biographical accounts, I hoped to get a feel for how other authors describe the elusive concept of inspiration. By understanding the facts of artists' lives, I hoped to gain insight into what motivated them to pursue their art.

As I devoured book after book, I realized I was delaying the actual writing of my manuscript, albeit in a thoroughly enjoyable manner. But I was doing it all in the name of research! That made procrastination, at least in this case, acceptable, right?

Well, **Ernest Hemingway** had his cafes. **Georgia O'Keefe** had her hikes in the desert. **Zora Neale Hurston** had her anthropological research trips. These amazing artists turned what might have been their procrastination into major works of art! Now, I am in no way comparing myself to any of them, but it did feel rejuvenating to think of my reading habit as time well spent, instead of procrastination poking at my ribs. This constant reading did take time away from my hard work at the keyboard, but it also came in handy, giving me a better understanding of the time period and of my main character's motivations. In other words, my "procrastination" was time well spent.

Thinking back to the 1920s and the artistic movements that exploded in that decade (jazz, art deco, talking movies), I wonder what innovations this new decade of the 2020s will bring. I am confident that reading about these artists of 100 years ago will help bring my character to life. And I've contemplated what I can learn, as an author in 2020, by reading about these famous artists of a past decade.

The following is a sampling of the books I read, keeping in mind some questions I had for my main character as a way to get some insight into how to frame her into a believable artist.

- Why did she start painting?
- Why did she keep painting, even when faced with adversity?
- What motivated her to create?
- What role did the artistic community around her play?

Picture Book Biography

Harlem's Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills by **Renee Watson**

Florence Mills grew up in poverty in Washington, D.C., but her talent as a singer and dancer took her to New York City at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Her fame allowed her to live a richer life. More importantly, she used fame as a tool for social justice and philanthropy, never forgetting her roots.

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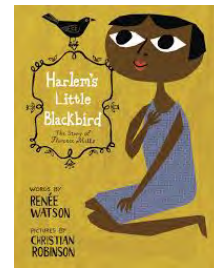
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Mills was part of an artistic movement of the 1920s that included **Langston Hughes** and **Duke Ellington**. The book highlights the excitement of this time as well as the racial discrimination that was so prevalent. At one point Mills gave up a lucrative job offer in order to stand up for what she believed was right, allowing the reader to understand the power of art and fame to affect social change.



Middle Grade Biography

Zora! The Life of Zora Neale Hurston by **Dennis Brindell Fradin & Judith Bloom Fradin**



Zora Neale Hurston lived from 1891-1960, moving frequently between Florida and New York City. While attending high school, she decided she would become a writer and her self-confidence in her abilities never wavered. Even though she faced many rejections of her writing as well as illnesses, poverty, and three failed marriages, Hurston continued to believe in herself and that her next great book was always just around the corner. I loved her indomitable spirit, and I hope to convey this sort of self-assurance in the character I'm creating in my manuscript.

Her early association with the Washington, D.C.-based "Saturday Nighters" writing group was integral to her becoming a writer. At the group's "salons," she met and associated with other writers and came to believe she could be one of them. Some Saturday Nighters became

friends for her entire lifetime as well as champions of Hurston's work.

Middle Grade Biography

Wideness & Wonder: The Life and Art of Georgia O'Keefe by **Susan Goldman Rubin**

The paintings of Georgia O'Keefe are unique, and not just because of their incomparable style. The fact that a woman became a successful artist in the 1920s, when women were not considered serious artists, set her apart as a trailblazer as well as an artist.

Even early on, many art teachers along O'Keefe's path of art education recognized her talent for art. And by eighth grade she realized she wanted to be an artist. But as she said later in life, it wasn't just talent that she relied upon to gain recognition and fame. She worked hard, took advantage of lucky breaks, and was willing to take risks. This trio of traits struck me as integral to an artist's life, and from them I've gained some ideas for conflict in my own story.

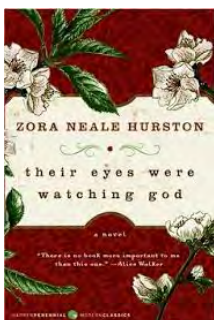
It is obvious that Georgia O'Keefe found inspiration in the natural world around her. Paintings of flowers, landscapes, fruit, and animal skeletons made her famous. Her travels through Texas, upstate New York, and New Mexico provided her with an endless supply of natural scenes that she captured in paint.



Beyond the subjects of her paintings, O'Keefe was also motivated by the artistic community around her. She married a photographer and art gallery owner who kept company with an ever-changing group of artists. Dinner conversations revolved around the nature of art. O'Keefe often found herself at the table with male artists who did not take her seriously because of her gender. But she knew she was as good, or better, than many of these men, and she was determined to prove to them that she deserved to be in on the conversation too.

Young Adult Fiction

Their Eyes Were Watching God by **Zora Neale Hurston**



Although now acclaimed as a masterpiece of the 1930s, Hurston's book was not widely acknowledged when it was published. The book follows the life and fortunes of African American **Janie Crawford** as she maneuvers through three marriages. During the first, she is silenced by a husband who wants her to work the farm with him. In the second, she is silenced by a husband who wants her to keep her mouth shut and act like the stately mayor's wife that she has become. But in her third marriage, she finds her voice, with a man who lets her be free to voice her opinions.

In reading the biography about Hurston, I found it interesting to see how she depicted a woman who had things to say but wasn't always allowed to say them. Janie kept chugging along, even through disappointments and roadblocks.

Hurston had worked as an anthropologist in the 1920s, using a research grant to collect stories from African Americans in the South. Her experience of living in Florida and her anthropological work helped make her characters come alive.

Young Adult Biography

The Many Faces of Josephine Baker: Dancer, Singer, Activist, Spy by **Peggy Caravantes**

Previous to reading this, I thought of **Josephine Baker** simply as a famous showgirl of the 1920s. But this biography provided insight into the poverty-stricken life she came from, her motivation to become a dancer and then a singer, and what she did with her fame once she achieved it.

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Baker's initial motivation for becoming a dancer was simple: It was a way to free herself from the poverty and abuse of her childhood. As she rose to fame for dancing, her motivation shifted. She left behind the hardships of her childhood, but she still yearned for the respect she had lacked while growing up in St. Louis and that drove her.

Baker fought against the image she had initially created for herself as a comic dancer and, with hard work, eventually became known for her singing and graceful showmanship. Her big personality clearly came through in this biography. When she met a famous female singer/dancer in Paris, Baker immediately identified the woman as a rival and became determined to "win" the rivalry she had forged between them.

As her fame solidified, Baker wanted more. She used her fame for social justice, first by helping the war effort during World War II and then by fighting racial discrimination. While her motivation had again changed, she was still searching for respect. I hope to infuse the main character in my manuscript with a similar hunger for respect throughout her journey as an artist. I was fascinated by how that drive manifested itself in different ways during Baker's career.

Unlike the artists in some of the other texts I've written about here, Baker didn't have a group to spur her on. When she was faced with a challenge, she relied on herself, her vibrant personality, her work ethic, and her determination to succeed and prove her detractors wrong. These traits allowed her to pull ahead and continue on.



Adult Historical Fiction

The Paris Wife by **Paula McLain**



This historical novel was written from the perspective of Ernest Hemingway's first wife, Hadley. The Hemingways lived in 1920s Paris, befriending other well-known expatriate artists who resided there at the same time, like **Ezra Pound**, **Gertrude Stein**, and **F. Scott Fitzgerald**. During the course of this first marriage, Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises* as well as various articles and short stories.

Throughout the novel we see the evolution of Hemingway's habits and his confidence in his writing. At first, he insisted on renting a second apartment so he could write without the distraction of Hadley and their domestic life. He escaped to this apartment at the start of each day and told Hadley he'd be happy if he could write "one true sentence" every day.

When they first moved to Paris, Hemingway thought this solitude and discipline were the only way to create art. He denounced artists who sat in cafes all day, flaunting their artistic lifestyle. But as the Hemingways became more entrenched in the social scene, he found

himself comfortable with being in cafes, available to talk with other writers and artists throughout the day. Hemingway soon discovered that associating with other artists was motivational: both as inspiration and for the competitive impulses it sparked in him to excel and outdo the others. He was at times inspired by advice that Pound and Stein gave him but later, wanting to prove he didn't need their help, he strove to be a better writer in spite of their advice.

Author Insights

Have you read any great mentor texts about artists that have informed your work as an author or an illustrator, or which have helped you develop any characters in your own books?

For me, reading all these great books provided many insights into the era I'm writing about and they've also gone a long way in helping me make my own main character come alive and appear more authentic on the page. Which is to say, all that reading and research could definitely not be called procrastination!

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Jeannette Lee is an aspiring children's book author. She belongs to a monthly critique group, found through the SCBWI-IL website, and is forever grateful for the inspiration and motivation she receives from the members of her group.

{ Edit }



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Illustrator in the Spotlight

Jacqueline Alcántara



Career/Technique Questions:

Are you an illustrator or an author/illustrator?

During my first school visit I was introduced as an illustrator and a little kid immediately raised his hand and said, "Well, we write *and* draw." So even though I was very excited to finally be a published illustrator I thought, "Right, okay, I still have a lot to work on!" So definitely a future author as well 😊

What is your preferred medium to work in?

Definitely depends on the project! I really love using everything from oil paints to the Procreate software program to collage, so for me it depends on the story, the timeline, the feeling of the project! For my first two books, I used combinations of pencil, marker, and gouache—but I usually always finish things in Photoshop. I love different media for different parts of the puzzle so I guess I'm your classic confused, afraid-of-commitment mixed-media artist.

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

Well, I'm including here my first—and to date I still think my best—illustration: a man with a balloon that I did when I was three. But as for illustration becoming a career—that started when I was laid off from teaching in 2010. I didn't really know what illustration was but I wanted to be a professional artist even though I didn't love the fine art / gallery scene so I searched for other outlets and stumbled upon a few illustration magazines and websites. I knew immediately that I wanted to be a part of that world. I worked for years on different projects, building a portfolio, expanding my network, and then finally quit my full-time job in 2015 to commit myself fully to getting a (great) agent. Nine months later I signed with Full Circle Literary and things started to happen fast! Of course I was questioning myself every step of the way,

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worked like an insane person (still do!), and was completely broke, but somehow I pieced it together and knew it would work out eventually.

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

I guess at this point it's little black and brown kids with great attitudes and personalities and who love to play, dance, and bounce across the page. I love drawing people, I love books that give me a chance to learn something during the process. I love books in which there are a lot of layers to play with and build from and create a rich visual narrative. And for some reasons all the books I've done or have contracts to do in the future have some connection to the Caribbean. So although I'm from Chicago, I'm half Honduran (Central American) and have always been very in tune with that part of myself. I travel to Honduras and the Caribbean often and love the culture, the music, the food, and the people. And I love that my Honduran/Caribbean connection has subconsciously seeped into my work, and that art directors and editors seem to realize that about me.

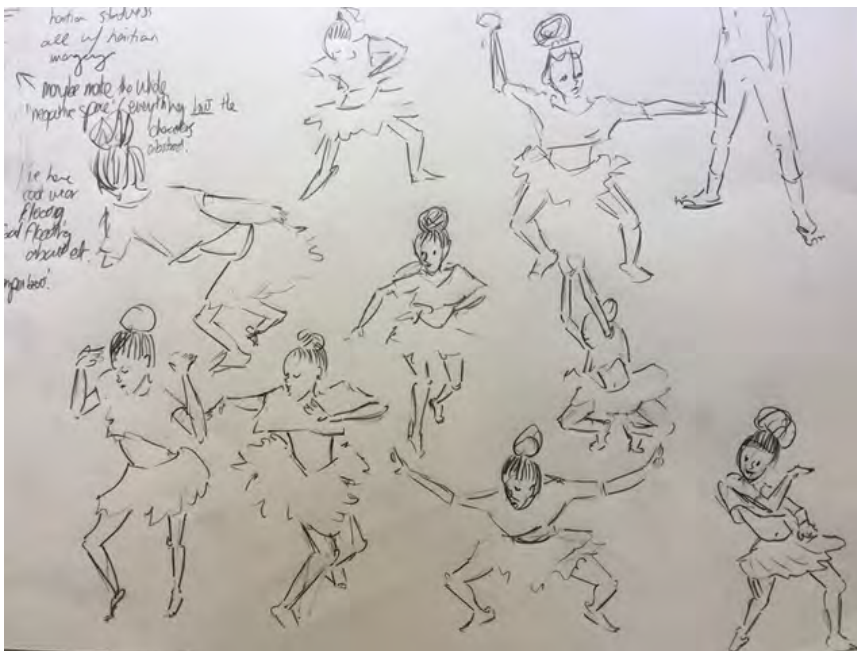
What does your workspace look like?

Oh, it's usually a disaster. I'm a chronic organizer but it just doesn't seem to really show. I want my workspace to feel like the mystery of a grandparent's attic or basement. Maps, tapestries, lots of National Geographics, tons of picture books, drawers and paper everywhere. Scraps of things I intended to use for something like a decade ago. I have a wall of quotes and portraits of people that I love to look at. Also, a wall with my current book project hanging so I can see the whole layout of the book. A wall with older projects to remind myself I love my work and I am productive (because it's too easy to think you don't do enough!), piles of ripped-out magazine pages to remember a hairstyle, a color scheme, a sweater—whatever! And I have two dogs so they are usually sleeping or just sitting staring at me, which becomes a little weird.

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

OK! I'm going to pick an easy one because some pieces end up so strange that showing the Photoshop file would be like someone peeking into your dirty closet and I'm totally embarrassed to share.

1. First I do tons of gesture drawings to get good fun positions. (Usually I watch videos and do screenshots of people.)



Gesture drawings

2. Find the poses I like and draw them, making them look more like my characters.
3. Scan the drawings into Photoshop and play around with the sketch composition.

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First sketch of Belle carrying in pumpkin and idea to have artwork in the house help tell the story.

4. Print out the final sketch (making it 10 percent bigger than page size) and use a lightbox to trace it onto my final art paper. (For this piece it was maker paper.)
5. Start with a pencil sketch of a whole page, then color it all in with marker —usually starting with the characters because if I mess up the characters really badly I'll usually start over; if I mess up some other details I can usually fix it.



Final illustration – starting on paper. This is just my pencil outline and starting to fill in with marker.

6. Scan pencil and marker drawings into the computer then use Photoshop to play around with things.
7. Usually I add a gouache layer to some parts to add more vibrant colors and textures.



8. Scan in again and finish up on Photoshop.



Final illustration – with marker, gouache and touched up in Photoshop.

The Person Behind the Pencil Questions:

What three words best sum you up?

Adventurous, stubborn, tall

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

Chris Van Allsburg, Patricia Pollaco, Quentin Blake

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

Chris Rashchka, Yuyi Morales, Olivier Tallec

Do you ever tuck little personal homages or details in your illustrations? Please give us a peek at one of your favorites.

Always! My dog Possum sneaks into most projects. Also for *The Field* I made the last page dedicated to my brother and my cousins: I put all our favorite stuffed animals from when we were growing up into the bunk bed with the characters.

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

Well, I practice martial arts (aikido)! That still usually surprises me when I say it out loud.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

Oh goodness—Music definitely inspires me a lot. Photography, people, fashion, hair, different art exhibits, dogs, lying on the beach, snowboarding or hiking in the mountains. But then sometimes inspiration strikes in the weirdest places, like at the vet or in line at the unemployment office or shoveling your car out of a snow bank.



What gets in the way of your creativity?

Worrying about things! So gotta keep that mental health under control 😊

Where can we find you?

instagram @ _jacqueline_alcantara

twitter @ _jacqueline_ill

website www.jacquelinealcantara.com

behance : <https://www.behance.net/jacquelinealcantara>

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Jacqueline Alcántara is a freelance illustrator and spends her days drawing, painting, writing and walking her dog. She is fueled by electronic and jazz music, carbs, and coffee. Jacqueline studied art education and taught high school art and photography before transitioning to illustration. Freedom Soup (Candlewick Press 2019), the second book Jacqueline has illustrated, has accumulated multiple starred reviews and won her the Sonia Lynn Sadler Award for Illustration.

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Inside Story

Unmet Resolutions? Give Yourself a Break!

By Carol Coven Grannick

It's 2020, and if you're doing a first draft—or revision—of resolutions, goals, or expectations for your writing life, I have a few suggestions.

If just looking at those goals overwhelms you, or they seem impossible to complete, think about revising them. One helpful technique is to make each goal tiny and absolutely achievable. This enables you to succeed, which creates positive feelings and tends to ready you for your next step, rather than giving up. In the writing life, we have plenty of opportunities to test our resilience in response to disappointments and perceived failures. We don't need to add to those opportunities when it comes to our resolutions.

I employ tiny steps all the time, more frequently than ever, in fact. As I get older, the less able I am to do twenty things at one time, even though nineteen of them are perpetually out there singing at me, "Don't forget us!"

But in terms of yearly goals, I make mine so broad and general that it's almost impossible to fail to achieve them. They've been similar for a number of years. This year I've added a couple because my book, *Reeni's Turn*, is due out in September of this year. Check them out, below, and you'll see what I mean:

I will do my best to:

- *be as persistent as possible with my writing*
- *submit as much as possible*
- *implement effective marketing choices for my upcoming book*
- *take risks, put myself "out there" by doing some things that are difficult for me*

Do these sound like cop-outs? Are these intentional objectives not specific and goal-oriented enough to "count"?

I think they do count. Why? Because they give me space and freedom to keep in mind the foundational aspects of my writing life without being harsh on myself. They enable me to move from day to day, making "small-steps" lists of specifics (say, manuscripts I want to submit to specific places). Because I've promised myself to "do my best," I'm able to move undone items to the next day's list without negative self-judgment. I've learned to assess myself in a neutral way. That enables me to search for the energy, and perhaps an undiscovered strength, that will rev up a lagging area.

And that creates an emotional state that feels like this:

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But I'm far from perfect. Recently, in my eagerness to work out a broad and deep promotional plan, my list became huge, with too much of it urgent. I'd forgotten that this backfires. I become overwhelmed, and all that happens then is... nothing. As I attempted to write a bio for my upcoming website, nothing I wrote seemed to be what I wanted. I wrote it over and over, and stress, agitation, and anxiety built up.

Eventually, with twenty copies of a bad bio crumpled over the floor, I realized that this was a clue: I was completely unproductive.

And that creates an emotional state that feels like this (imagine the screech):



Or worse, like this:

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So my advice is to think about crafting goals and expectations that allow you to do your best, rather than challenging you to meet potentially unrealistic goals. Think of this way of crafting goals as a gift that will actually enable you to experience frequent successes (and therefore positive emotions). And those gathered positive emotions will strengthen your resilience in the face of disappointments and discouragement that inevitably come.

Long ago, a bright and earnest child confronted me during violin practice in response to a comment I made that he did not seem to be doing his best on that day.

His profound response has been a lesson for my life: "My best is not the same every day."

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Carol Coven Grannick is an author, poet, and chronicler. Her MG novel in verse, *Reeni's Turn*, debuts from [Fitzroy Books](#) in September, 2020. Her short fiction and poetry for the very young has appeared and is forthcoming in *Highlights*, *Hello*, *Cricket*, *Ladybug*, and *Babybug*. In addition to her regular *Prairie Wind* column, Carol writes for the award-winning blog [Cynsations](#), and the group blog [GROG](#).

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A Fly on the Wall

Prairie Writer's & Illustrator's Day 2019: Game On!

By Donna Beasley

As a sports enthusiast I loved this year's PWID theme, "Game On!" It embodied a level of expectancy that we would take our creative pursuits to new levels of success. This was my first time attending the event and I was pumped and eager to learn.

Kick-Off

Deborah Topolski kicked the day off with her energetic "Game On" call-and-response with the attendees. Dressed in football gear complete with helmet our "quarterback" was ready for the game.

For me, the highlight of the day was author and illustrator **Vashti Harrison's** morning keynote presentation, "8 Lessons I Learned from SCBWI, Leonardo DaVinci, and Beyonce." The talk was about her creative journey from sketching in college to becoming a bestselling author. When she was just getting started, attending SCBWI events helped her improve her skills and meet industry people. Best of all, she met her agent at an SCBWI regional event. Vashti encouraged us to be willing to play the long game to success. It's worth waiting for and working toward. In the words of Beyonce, "Slay All Day."

My favorite quote from Vashti's slide presentation came from the late Disney animator **Walt Stanchfield**:

"We all have 10,000 bad drawings in us. The sooner we get them out the better."



Block and Tackle



One of my goals whenever I attend a writing conference is to learn something that can improve my writing skills immediately. "Block and tackle" is a sports reference I use to focus on the basics of my writing game. I chose dialog as my first workshop because I consider that skill one of the most important basics for writing a novel. It's also an area in which I want to improve my game while working on my current middle-grade project. Our instructor was author **Bill Konigsberg**. He shared with us "The Seven Deadly Sins of Dialog." His focus is on character-driven dialog, and one of his tips was to pick one or two words that are unique to your character(s) or their culture. My favorite quote from his presentation came from Bill himself:

"What does the character want in the scene and what is their strategy to get it?"

The faculty on the luncheon novel-writing panel featured editors **Christopher Hernandez** and **Connie Hsu** and agent **Laurel Symonds**. The moderator asked, "What is the number one thing you look for in a great novel?" The unanimous reply was "a character's distinctive voice."

As the Chicago Diversity Network rep I attended the Diversity Lunch Social hosted by **Urania Smith**, leader of the chapter's diversity committee. She shared with us the committee's accomplishments throughout 2019, which included offering scholarships, awards, and monthly meetings for diverse writers and illustrators. Congratulations to **Soton Rosanwo**, the 2019 winner of the Many Voices prize.

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The diversity committee's future plans to grow membership include continued outreach, collaborative efforts in communities, and a special event in spring 2020.



Carry The Ball

I was intrigued by the title of Christopher Hernandez's afternoon breakout session, "Netflix and Write." The session centered around what writers can learn from Netflix shows. What makes you binge-watch a show? "Imagine your chapters as being the episodes of a show," said Christopher. "You want to make them as compelling as possible." His suggestions, based on Netflix stories:

- Dialog – A person's way of speaking can enhance character. Don't use dated slang.
- Setting – A good setting can feel like its own character.
- Hook – Grab your readers' interest as early as possible.
- Pitch – This is an art form all its own. Create an "elevator pitch" for your book. Be able to explain the story in two or three sentences. And be aware of books that are comparable to yours in some way, such as theme, tone, or subject matter.

A good pitch can help you carry the ball to the finish line of a book deal.

My final breakout session was "The Perfect Pairing: How Picture Book Text and Art Come Together" with Connie Hsu, executive editor at Roaring Book Press. She allowed us to peek behind the curtain of her recent book project, *Wherever You Go*, written by **Pat Zietlow Miller** and illustrated by **Eliza Wheeler**. Connie took us from the original submission that Roaring Brook bought to the final manuscript, allowing us to see how it changed through the editing process. As writers we've often heard about the importance of rewriting. This story's transformation through editing and rewriting was one of the things that resonated with me at my core. The process helped this book's team carry the ball from its start as a good story to becoming a great story.

She also shared that Eliza was chosen to illustrate because the publisher felt she would be best able to deliver the book's vision. The lively and energetic illustrations do more than beautifully capture the text's message. The art makes you feel the joy of the great outdoors as you travel with the rabbit character over steep mountain peaks, through bustling cities, and along winding country roads.

"When it's time for a journey,
to learn and to grow,
roads guide your footsteps
wherever you go. Want an adventure?
Just open your door."

From *Wherever You Go* by Pat Zietlow Miller

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Touchdown

The conference ended with the Mix 'n' Mingle portfolio showcase. It was great to be able to talk with fellow attendees and discuss the highlights of the day. Plus, I got a chance to review the artwork of the numerous illustrators who shared their portfolios and was impressed with the variety of illustrated styles.

The entire conference scored a touchdown for the day. It has inspired me to continue working on my current project. I gained valuable knowledge I can infuse into my writing right now. And while sitting in one breakout session I got an idea for a new story. Game On!

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Donna Beasley is an author and publisher of multicultural children's books. She is also the SCBWI-IL Diversity Network rep. You can find her publishing company at KaZoomKidsBooks.com.

{ Edit }



Illinois



Publishing 101

An Interview with Publishing Executive John Shableski

By Anny Rusk

For many of us what happens behind a publisher's doors is a mystery. In this interview with **John Shableski**, VP of Sales and Director of Education Development at Udon Entertainment, I pull back the curtain to give you a peek at what happens to your query or manuscript after it lands at a publishing house.



What are the steps a book has to go through within the publishing house before it's acquired?

I just want to make it clear that a publisher's decision on what they will acquire involves a lot of considerations.

Once an editor decides they want to bring a book to the house, the process for this can vary greatly.

In a bigger publishing company, the editor has to "sell" the book to the rest of the staff. Often, the editor puts together a pitch package that includes the story summary, the author's bio, and sometimes the author's social media presence.

Many elements affect whether a book is bought, such as: the house may already have books too similar to your book; research on you, the author, yields challenges based on behaviors, (or, in other words, watch what you put on social media and how you interact with industry professionals); and how your book fits into market trends.

If you and your book "pass" in terms of the above criteria, then the next question is, does your book fit into the company's catalogue/branding profile?

If it's a smaller house, the decision on whether to acquire your book or not may be left entirely to the editors. It really all depends on how that house operates.

What are the biggest mistakes writers make when submitting directly to a publisher?

Not having a clear understanding of what kinds of books that publisher carries. The best thing to do is go to the publishers' websites and study the types of books each of them is known for.

Once you have a list of publishers that are right for your book, then you want to make it as easy as possible for them to say yes. Make sure your pitch is concise and clear. It's very important that you know your book's proper genre and the target demographic. Be prepared to discuss where your book fits into the market and why it's unique. For some editors this is part of the pitch package they'll use to sell your book to the rest of the house. (For example, Albert Whitman's submission guidelines ask you to provide titles for up to three comparative books published in the past five years. The submissions page further states, "These should be books that have a similar audience to your book and that you feel will compare with your book in the marketplace. Explain how your manuscript is different from these books.")

Where can one connect to editors and publishers?

Book Expo in NYC, the largest annual trade book fair, is a great place to start, but you can also try regional bookseller shows such as those held by the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association (NAIBA), the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Association, and others. Take a look at the American Bookseller Association's calendar for convention listings. Keep in mind that not all publishers will attend all of these shows. Many smaller publishers will exhibit at shows only within their region.

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When you do find a publisher or editor ready to listen, have your pitch prepared. What is your name, what is your book about, and who is it for? Do not expect to have more than two minutes to speak. They may ask for a manuscript but will more likely direct you to send an electronic version. If they give you a card, say thank you and do not ever share that card with anyone else.

Is it better to find an agent first or start submitting to editors at the same time you're querying agents?

How agents and editors select books and authors can depend on a wide variety of factors: How much material do you have? What range of topics and or genres have you written? How much of a writing history do you have? Have you published anything with trade journals, newspapers, magazines? The stronger the manuscript you present, the better your chances of consideration by either the agent or the editor. An agent may like your work and agree to represent you even if you haven't published anything at all before so it's a smart—and often easier—place to start. Few publishing houses these days accept unsolicited submissions, but if you do manage to get your manuscript in front of an editor and that editor wants to acquire it, it's a good idea to then find an agent who can help you through the process of negotiating a contract. Sometimes it does feel like a

chicken-or-the-egg scenario.

When you do approach an editor, be sure to have at least a few more story ideas in mind. Editors want to know what else you may be working on. The first story may have taken 18 years for you to write, but if they like you, they'll be asking for more. The more stories you have in development, the greater the value of what you bring.

What will a publisher do for an author (debut or midlist), and what do they expect the author to do?

This really depends on such a wide range of things and it depends on the house. Some will make sure the book is published and anticipate that you will do as much of your own marketing and promotion as possible. Most houses will schedule the shipment of review copies to industry publications and their review sources. Most often, those will go out well ahead of publication date to help drive interest. If the publisher discovers that your book could rate as a bestseller, then a campaign is developed to promote and market your book via industry publications, various trade shows, and library conventions. *But*—and this is a very big *but*—it really depends on your book's genre and how much the publishing house typically invests in publicity and marketing for a debut author. Advances are not a given in any circumstance.

What should authors be spending their advances on?

If you *do* secure an advance, invest in your marketing and publicity plan to ensure you have visibility. That said, let's define "marketing and publicity," which are two separate things.

Marketing is your message: who you are, what your book is about. Publicity is getting the message out to grow your profile. Publicity includes scheduling book signings and using social media to build awareness of your book. Social media is a must for any author these days.

And bear this thought in mind: Publicity and marketing are a *lot* of work. They require the same kind of effort you put into writing. It's not a "maybe" scenario, it's a must-do if you want to have any kind of success. If you are not good at these two things, there are experts out there who can do a great job for you.

Who do you market to? Study other authors who publish in your genre. Follow them on social media and you'll see the people you should be interacting with. Some of my favorite social media authors include **Amy Chu, Brad Meltzer, Jenni Holm,** and **Jim Zub**. They do a brilliant job of maintaining visibility and they are entertaining.

Is there a standard now for graphic novel submissions? (Should a writer finish a script or can they begin to submit with only a synopsis and a few chapters completed?)

A good starting point would be a finished script with some sample art to show the feel of the story. Graphic novels and prose books are subject to the same rules in terms of acquisition, but there's another major factor involved with any graphic literature and that's the art. The art style needs to match the storyteller's voice. It's not something you can simply farm out. You, as the writer, will know if the art isn't working. If you feel it's "off" then you need to find another artist, one who can hear your voice as they draw.

As for the submission process, you must follow the standard procedure of developing a query, or pitch letter.

Seems like publishers do prefer that a writer find an illustrator to do a few pages of finished art for graphic novel submissions. Is that true?

It all depends on who you are. If you're an established writer, you can just submit with a script.

If you're a debut author, get a comic artist and go in as a team. Research a ton of artists/books on graphic novel lists to get a sense of the art styles that are selling and also to find those whose style matches your vision. You are going to

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work very closely with this artist, and they need to almost hear your thoughts, even before you speak. They must also have the courage to challenge you when they feel it's important to do so.

Finding a comic artist can be hard. Where would you recommend we look for them?

The smaller comic festivals and even book fairs are a great place to start. At these events, you can see samples of various artists' work in person and have conversations that will allow you to determine if you could potentially have a partnership.

Another option is to look around websites such as [WebTOON](#) or [deviantART](#). Study the styles that appeal to you. Another key element to study is how each artist tells stories. You may discover some who are great at single images or "pin-up" art but they may not know how to show motion or carry the story from panel to panel or from page to page.

In order to get a sense of what is selling in the graphic novel world, both in terms of art and themes or topics, check out these lists created by librarians. Notice that each narrative has a very distinct art style that fits its particular story rather than conforming to what many folks might expect to see.

BTW: Pretty much all the titles included in these lists are either bestsellers or soon to be.

- [YALSA's Great Graphic Novels for Teens](#)
- [Texas Maverick's Graphic Novel List](#)
- [Texas Maverick's Little Mav's](#)
- [Excellence in Graphic Literature](#)
- [NoFlyingNoTights.com](#)



Many agents still don't take graphic novels. Are there any you can recommend who understand and love the format?

As more books hit the market, this has become a fast-growing field in publishing, so more agents are starting to realize the value in representing graphic novels. The best agents in this business are nearly impossible to find, and they intentionally stay under the radar as they may not have the capacity to take on new talent. The best way to find an agent is by improving your profile in the market. Create a solid social media profile, post regularly about your work, and only talk about the positives of your work and your efforts.

Anything else you want us to know?

Don't take rejections personally.

Publishers spend a lot of time creating editorial agendas that may not include the specific theme of your book. Or your book just hit at the wrong time on the schedule for a certain house. Do not pout about it on social media. Editors will see this, and then you have created an identity in the market that says you are difficult to work with. Many authors have received 100 rejection letters or more, but they kept submitting and finally broke through.

Be patient, keep writing, believe, and persevere.

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Anny Rusk is the Chicago North Suburban Network co-rep and a helicopter mom to four-legged son Odin. Currently, she's working on a MG Fantasy novel as well as a picture book about OCD.

{ Edit }



Illinois



The 90-Second Newbery

The 90-Second Newbery

By James Kennedy

Like many other SCBWI members, when I was a kid I wanted to be an author. Like other kids, I learned how to tell stories not only by writing homemade books, but also by hanging out with my friends in our backyards, pretending to make movies. I'll bet most of us in SCBWI are similar in that way too.

Nowadays, making those backyard movies is easy. Indeed, the young people who read our books create their own videos all the time for YouTube or TikTok or Instagram. At the same time, they love reading too. So instead of spurning the technology that comes naturally to them, why not meet our readers where they are?

Not long after my debut YA fantasy *The Order of Odd-Fish* came out, I noticed that a lot of fan art based on my book was showing up online. I got in touch with the artists, and organized a [fan art gallery show/costumed dance party](#) based on *Odd-Fish*. It showed me how resourceful and creative young readers can be about the books they love.

This got me thinking. Now, I did not win the Newbery Medal for *The Order of Odd-Fish*, [although some say I actually did](#). But I thought, what if I started a film festival in which kid filmmakers created short movies that told the entire stories of Newbery-winning books in about 90 seconds?

To test the idea, I gathered my niece and nephew and their friends together one autumn morning and shot a 90-second adaptation of **Madeleine L'Engle's** 1963 Newbery Medal winning *A Wrinkle in Time*. I had some rough ideas for the script, but those ideas changed as the kids added their own lines and interpretations. We shot it all on an old Flip camera, edited it in iMovie, and within a week we had our first 90-Second Newbery movie:



I posted our *A Wrinkle in Time* video on my blog and announced the film festival with Betsy Bird of the [School Library Journal's Fuse #8 blog](#), who at the time was a children's librarian at the New York Public Library (and now lives right here in the Chicago area). I also set up a website, www.90secondnewbery.com, and encouraged folks to submit their own videos. I figured we'd have a modest first year and a couple of so-so video submissions.

To my astonishment, the thing took off! Our amateur *Wrinkle in Time* quickly garnered well over 100,000 views. Newbery honorees like **Neil Gaiman** tweeted about it, tastemakers like Boing Boing's **Cory Doctorow** blogged about it, and the contest was featured in *Booklist*, *Wired*, BuzzFeed, Metafilter, the Onion's A.V. Club, *Time Out Chicago*, the sci-blog io9, the feminist blog **Jezebel**, and many others.

The attention paid off: For our first year, in 2011, we received about a hundred movies from across the United States and around the world, even as far as New Zealand and Australia. That year we did screenings of the best movies we received

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in New York City, Chicago, and Portland.

Nine years later, the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival screens annually in thirteen cities across the country—not only in big cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, and San Antonio, but also smaller towns like Tacoma, Washington; Rochester, New York; Oakland, California; Ogden, Utah; and Boulder, Colorado. Over the course of the film festival, we've had over 11,000 registered attendees at these screenings. I host the screenings with other best-selling and award-winning kid's authors like **M.T. Anderson, Kelly Barnhill, Rita Williams-Garcia, Linda Sue Park, Jon Scieszka, Katherine Applegate, Bruce Coville**, and more, including Chicago's own **Keir Graff**. These screenings are often sold-out affairs, with audiences of hundreds—not only the kids who made the movies, but also their friends and families and people who love to see weird movies!

Over the past nine years, we've received almost two thousand videos from all over the U.S and around the world. With so many movies, we can't show them all at the public screenings, but I write a detailed, encouraging review for every movie I receive, and feature each movie on the 90-Second Newbery website.

The most satisfying aspect of the 90-Second Newbery was seeing all the crazy, creative, sometimes subversive ways the young filmmakers have adapted the books. For example, the Schaumburg Public Library created a "Star Wars" version of *The Whipping Boy* (retitled "The Whipping Droid," naturally). Chicago's Elephant and Worm theater company created bonkers musicals of *The Twenty-One Balloons* and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. We've received from ambitious students stop-motion Claymation versions of *The Apple and the Arrow, My Father's Dragon*, and even the very first Newbery Medal winner, *The Story of Mankind*. Chicago's Burley Elementary made a subtitled, all-Japanese-language version of Margi Preus' 2011 Honor Book *Heart of a Samurai* in the style of an Akira Kurosawa samurai movie. We've gotten amazing Lego stop-motion of *Volcano: The Eruption and Healing of Mount St. Helens*, a rap version of Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover*, and even *Knee-Knock Rise* done in the style of "Twin Peaks"! And check out this horror version of *Charlotte's Web*:



Running the 90-Second Newbery has really helped me as an author. Many of those authors who have helped me co-host the film festival have become my friends. The film festival gives me an excuse to do a lot of school visits and book festival appearances all over the country, which leads to steady sales for *The Order of Odd-Fish*, even years after it came out. And over the past nine years, through this festival, I've met and worked with countless children's librarians, teachers, and homeschooling organizers. The 90-Second Newbery isn't just fun in itself; it's kept me relevant and engaged in the kidlit world even when I don't have a new book out (which I will soon, I promise! But this film festival also takes a lot of time!)

Now that my kids are old enough, it gives me an excuse to make movies with them too. (Adult help is totally okay with these movies.) The process of adapting a classic kids' book to a short movie forces you to take a hard look at the story to see how it ticks. As a writer, it provides a way to practice storytelling in a different form. And it's so much fun!

For instance, last summer my daughters and I gathered up the neighborhood kids and we made a 90-Second Newbery of **Kate DiCamillo's** *Tale of Despereaux*—but in the musical style of "Les Miserables":



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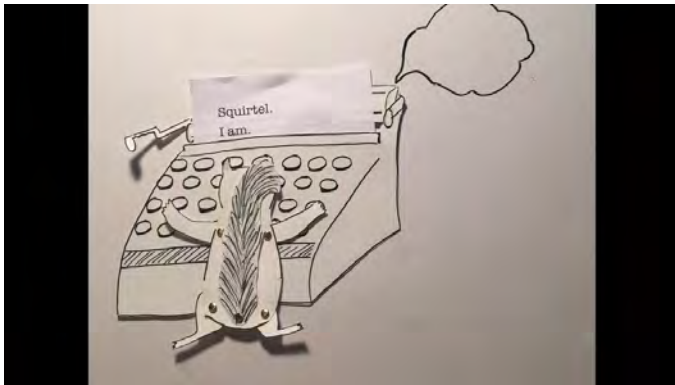
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It's been so gratifying to see how the families of SCBWI-IL members have made movies for the film festival too! For instance, for the past few years author (and *Prairie Wind* managing editor!) **Amy Alznauer's** family has made fantastic movies for the film festival, including this paper stop-motion video from last year for *Flora & Ulysses*:



Running this film festival has also helped me grow as a storyteller. I've run 90-Second Newbery filmmaking workshops at Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development summer camp, as well as similar workshops in Utah, San Francisco, Texas, and suburban Chicago. The prospect of teaching these classes was intimidating at first: After all, I never took a film class, and the only movies I've ever made have been movies I've made with my kids! So I had to quickly learn what makes for a good movie. I ended up writing up a bunch of posts on storytelling, screenwriting, cinematography, and more for my blog, and now they're used as resources for those who want to make their own 90-Second Newbery movies. [You can find them here.](#)

I encourage you to get together with a kid and make a 90-Second Newbery movie yourself! You can make a movie of any Newbery Medal winner or Newbery Honor winner, from 1922 to today. It's a great excuse to not only have fun with the books you love but also to seek out the older, lesser-known, weirder Newbery winners and make movies out of them too. I've seen a million adaptations of *The Giver* for the 90-Second Newbery, but what really gets my attention is an adaptation of *Winged Girl of Knossos* or *Millions of Cats*. And it's best of all when the filmmakers put a weird spin on the material . . . like when the kids from the Addison Library [made *Mr. Popper's Penguins* in the style of a zombie apocalypse](#), or when these kids [reimagined *Ramona and Her Father* in the style of a James Bond movie](#).

You can find all the rules, details, deadlines, and resources on the [90-Second Newbery website](#).

In any case, I really hope to see all my fellow Chicago-area authors at our 90-Second Newbery Film Festival screening at the Harold Washington Library on March 8, 2020! It'll be co-hosted by me and kids' author Keir Graff. These screenings often fill up, so make sure to [make your free reservation here](#).

One of the reasons it's fun to come to these screenings is that you get to see the young filmmakers enjoying themselves as we celebrate their creativity. The co-host and I do goofy banter in between the movies, and we always kick off the screening with a fun skit that culminates in a ridiculous song-and-dance number.

For instance, here's the opener to last year's screening in Boston, where co-host M.T. Anderson and I are confronted by the HIGH SUPREME NEWBERY COUNCIL of Newbery winners Kate DiCamillo, **Jacqueline Woodson**, **E.B. White**, and **Meindert de Jong**...which builds into a rousing rewritten version of "One Day More" from *Les Miserables*:



(As you have probably guessed, my real motivation for putting on this film festival year after year is to make everyone endure my singing. Guilty as charged.)

I hope you can round up some kids and make a movie for next year's 90-Second Newbery Film Festival...and I look forward to seeing you at the [March 8 screening!](#)

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James Kennedy is the author of the YA fantasy *The Order of Odd-Fish* and the founder of the 90-Second Newbery Film Festival. He lives with his wife and daughters in Chicago.

[{ Edit }](#)