

Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

FALL 2024

Illustrator in the Spotlight:
Sarah Tobias



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Illustration by Sarah Tobias

In This Issue

by Sheila Path-McMahon

This month has been a difficult one for *Prairie Wind* leader Shirin Shamsi, so I will try to capture her usual charm in this introduction. I know that she is very proud of all of the columns and articles that we present to you this month. This issue marks a full year that I have been on the *Prairie Wind* team, and I am so thankful that I reached out to volunteer last year. Ever since discovering the magazine, I have read it cover-to-cover, always impressed with the wide range of insights that I have gained from reading. [Jamie Petras, our SCBWI-IL Freeport/Galena Rep has written a heartfelt Tribute to Leone Castille-Anderson.](#) We are grateful for the opportunity to remember, or in some of our cases, learn about for the first time, Leone, who went by Lee. Her work was foundational to the Illinois chapter growing into what it is today, and she will be missed.

GREETINGS!

[Jenny Wagh shares her highlights](#) from 5 years as Co-Regional Advisor, a role that she and her Co-Regional Advisor, Debbie Topolski, will pass on to Sheila Path-McMahon (hey! That's me!) and Pamela Morgan in December. We are so grateful to have had Jenny as the Advisor to the *Prairie Wind*. It takes a lot of planning and organizing to get this done, and Jenny has always been one to problem solve and lend a hand. We will miss you!

SPOTLIGHTS

We are delighted to feature the [illustration work of Sarah Tobias](#). In her spotlight article, she lets us know all about her journey into illustration. It's always informative and inspiring to learn of an illustrator's journey to success, and we can all take a cue from her work's current theme of "acceptance, self-acceptance, and being accepted."

In [Tales From the Front](#), author J. B. Frank explains insights that she gained as a first-time author. She shares how she is following a "marketing essentials" list, including building a website, posting, press releases, and more to build her brand. Be sure to read all the way to the end because she gives great advice throughout!

This issue's [Creative Sparks](#) issue, Sheila Path-McMahon takes a closer look at the lessons we might learn from one of the most famous author/illustrators of all time, Beatrix Potter.



FEATURES

In [Breaking Into the Children's Book Market](#), seasoned author Lisa Katzenberger shares insights into writing and pitching a successful chapter book series. She gives helpful details about what to consider and develop as you think about your idea(s) for character-driven stories that this unique group of readers is seeking.

Carol Fisher Saller shares [8 Hard Truths About Self-Publishing Children's Books](#), while also sharing solutions to each of the difficult truths that she presents. She also shares many positive aspects of self-publishing and why people may choose this path.

In [Dive, Jump, Leap: Notes From My First Year of Trying](#), Tracie Renee Amirante Padal shares her journey from dabbling with writing to taking it seriously and intentionally moving herself forward as a writer by taking on the challenge of writing reviews for *Publisher's Weekly*.

COLUMNS

In our [Voices of Change](#) column, author Mita Bordoloi relates her experiences of "Crossing Seas to Publish." Read to find out more about her journey to having her books published in the country where they were set, her successes there, and her hopes for the future.



In This Issue

The [Shop Around the Corner](#) column by Allison Baxter introduces a unique new model for a bookstore, New Book Joy. The interview explores how New Book Joy began, what their goals are, and what is unique about this novel-model bookstore.

In [Illustrator Tips](#), Molly Cranch explores the connections between authoring and illustrating, sharing some of her own journey to becoming an author-illustrator and providing strategies for using both writing and illustrating congruently in the process of developing a picture book.

This month's [Writer's Tips](#) is an exploration of the use of rhythm and sound in writing for young people. Patricia Hruby Powell provides exercises to help you explore rhythm and rhyme, and gives many examples of creative uses for both.

Aspiring children's book author and illustrator Rickie Le shares four books that can provide us with Fresh Perspectives when we are unsure of what to write about. This [Mentor Texts](#) column definitely presents us with some great resources to explore.

NEWS & NETWORKS

In [Season's Crop](#), you can keep up with new releases that our Illinois members have had a hand in. It's always inspiring to see how accomplished this group is! 🌟

Director [Shirin Shamsi](#): who joyfully plans and acquires content for each issue

Editor [Sheila Path-McMahon](#): who expertly tweaks and polishes all of our content

Designer [Brooke O'Neill](#) who creatively designs and lays out every page

Advisor [Jenny Wagh](#) who remains our faithful and supportive Regional Advisor

The Prairie Wind team! From left to right: Shirin Shamsi, Jenny Wagh, Brooke O'Neill, and Sheila Path-McMahon.



Greetings! *by Jenny Wagh*

Follow JENNY WAGH at
www.facebook.com/jennifer.wagh
or [@jennymariewagh](https://www.instagram.com/jennymariewagh)

I'm overwhelmed by the incredible journey I've had as Co-Regional Advisor over the past five years. It's been an honor to work alongside a dedicated group of individuals. As I retire from this role, I want to take a moment to express my heartfelt thanks and to highlight some of the remarkable achievements we've accomplished together.

MY TOP 10 HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PAST FIVE YEARS HAVE BEEN:

1. Inviting Astronaut John Herrington to Keynote our Illinois Interactive Online Conference

His inspiring address highlighted the limitless possibilities of imagination and exploration.

2. Learning Zoom

Embracing this platform allowed us to continue our mission of fostering learning and networking, even in challenging times.

3. Hosting Online Conferences

Transitioning to virtual events was no small feat, but together we successfully hosted a series of online programs that kept our community connected and engaged. Even as we begin to meet in person again, there has been a great reception to online programming. Thank you to the Words in the Woods Team for sharing their talents as a part of the 2024 Summer Series.

4. Hosting In-Person Conferences Pre-Pandemic

Before the world changed, we had the privilege of organizing and hosting dynamic in-person conferences that provided invaluable networking and learning opportunities for our members.

5. Hosting Conference/Events Post-Pandemic

As we navigated the return to in-person gatherings, our ability to safely and effectively host events once again showcased our dedication to providing meaningful experiences.

6. Building Friendships with Deborah Topolski and the Regional Team

The camaraderie and collaboration with the entire regional team has been a highlight. These friendships have made our achievements even more rewarding.

7. Meeting So Many Great Volunteers

The chance to meet and work with so many dedicated volunteers has been one of the greatest joys of my role. Each of you has brought unique talents and perspectives, contributing to the vibrancy of our community.

8. Presenting at AISLE and IL ASCD

Being able to represent our organization at AISLE and IL ASCD conferences allowed us to share the work of so many talented Illinois authors and illustrators.

9. Working the IRC Booth

Engaging with teachers, librarians and educators at the IRC booth all while providing opportunities to connect with fellow creators.

10. Crying, Laughing, and Every Emotion in Between

The range of emotions experienced throughout these years has been profound. From joyous successes to challenging moments, each experience has contributed to a deeply fulfilling journey.

As I step down from this role, I am filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment. The memories we've created, the milestones we've achieved, and the friendships we've forged will always hold a special place in my heart. I am excited to see where the future leads for our organization and have full confidence that the incredible team we have will continue to thrive and inspire. A special welcome to Sheila Path-McMahon and Pamela Morgan as incoming Co-Regional Advisors.

Thank you once again to Cathy Velasco and Denise Holmes for your continued contributions. I look forward to celebrating the future successes of this remarkable community.

With warmest wishes and deepest gratitude,
Jenny Wagh ✨

In Memory

REMEMBERING SCBWI-IL'S FIRST VOLUNTEER: A TRIBUTE TO LEONE CASTILLE-ANDERSON

by Jamie Petras (SBCWI-IL Freeport/Galena Rep)

Although many of you have only known SCBWI as an international organization of writers and illustrators, you may not know that this organization only came into existence just a little more than five decades ago. In fact, at its inception in 1971, The Society of Children's Book Writers consisted solely of its five founding members, and was abbreviated SCBW, as it did not yet include illustrators.

The phenomenal growth of SCBW into SCBWI, with 70 U.S. chapters and 27 International chapters, can be attributed to the dedicated work of volunteers willing to mentor, support and champion children's literature and those that create it. It is my distinct pleasure and honor to share and celebrate with you the life of SCBWI-IL's first volunteer, Lee(Leone) Castille- Anderson.

By the time Lee's first book was published in 1979, the SCBW Illinois chapter alone had about a hundred members, but they were scattered across the state. Lee stepped up to facilitate communication, encourage membership, advertise writing events, and mentor her fellow creatives. She created, mimeographed, and snail mailed newsletters. As former SCBWI-IL State Representative, Esther Hershenhorn, shared, "Remember, this was PRE-Internet! No email! No X! No Instagram! No TikTok! No iPhone! Lee did things the old-fashioned way: eyeball to eyeball, heart to heart."

When Lee moved from Elgin to Stockton, Illinois, in the 1980s, she answered an ad, written by Debbie Deutsche, in the Freeport Journal Standard looking for writers who were interested in joining a group of children's book authors. Children's author/illustrator, Sheila Kelley-Welch also answered this ad, and the ABC Writers Group was formed.

As SCBWI-IL membership continued to grow, Assistant Regional Advisor, Patricia Rae Wolff decided to create regional networks across Illinois to further support communication among our members. Once again Lee stepped up to the plate as she volunteered to serve as the first Network Representative, whose responsibilities included creating critique groups,



functioning as the local resource to connect members with each other and offer informal programs.

Lee worked tirelessly to support SCBWI's vision that there can never be too many quality children's books. She modeled and encouraged SCBWI's values of creativity, community, and professionalism. Lee served as an invaluable, respected, and cherished mentor to her fellow writers in this role for over four decades.

This is why the SCBWI-IL has chosen to name their annual volunteer luncheon The Lee Anderson Volunteer Luncheon to honor her. Lee's body of work included her books: *My Own Grandpa*, *Moving Day*, *Surprise at Muddy Creek*, *My Friend Next Door*, *How Come You're So Shy?*, *It's O.K. To Cry*, *The Wonderful Shrinking Shirt*, *A Christmas Handbook*, *Sean's War* and its sequel, *Sean's Quest*.



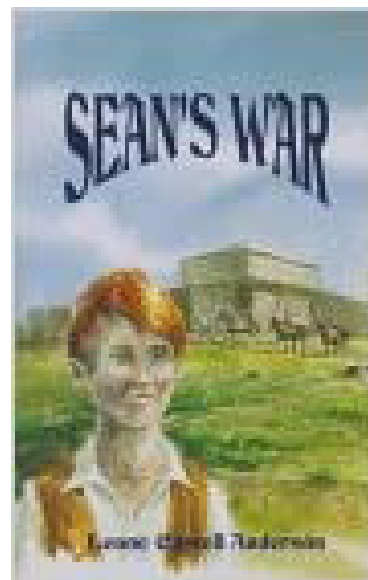
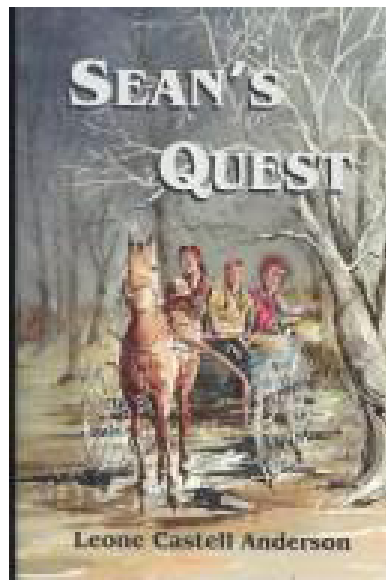
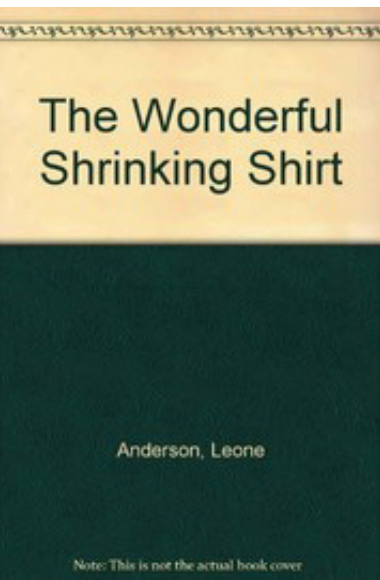
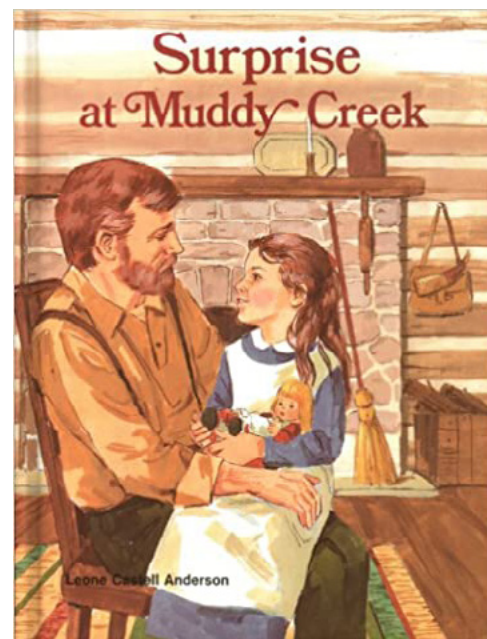
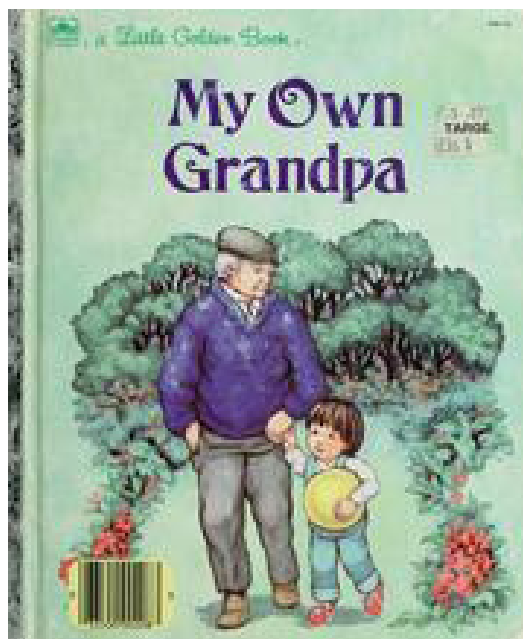
In Memory

Her stories were featured in numerous children's magazines. Her list of awards include: "Why LeRoy Smiled"—Highlights for Children—First Place 1989 and "What's That Sound?"; Florida Writers Picture Book Competition - First place 1993.

Lee NEVER stopped writing and submitting. Even as Lee approached her one hundredth birthday she continued to be published. In the July/August 2022 issue of *Humpty Dumpty Children's Magazine*, her story "Grumpy Grady" was their featured Build-A-Book section. This put yet another of her books into the hands of thousands of children. The July 2022 issue of *Cricket* magazine featured her story, "Jenny's Friends," and her story, "Artistic Cat" was published in the March 2023 Issue of *Jack & Jill*.

Lee was not only an accomplished children's author; she epitomized Einstein's quote, "Knowledge is something that can never be taken away, but it's worthless unless shared." Lee's stories not only reached, entertained, and taught millions of children, but she guided numerous aspiring authors to do the same. As Sheila Kelley-Welch shared, while paraphrasing the ending of *Charlotte's Web*; "She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a great writer. Lee was both."

Lee was proud of her Swedish heritage, so I will close with this phrase, "Jag skala livve I vara hjarten"...You shall live in our hearts. 🌟



Illustrator in the Spotlight

by Sarah Tobias

Are you an illustrator or an author/illustrator? And what is your preferred medium to work in?

I'm an author/illustrator. My preferred medium is mixed media. I love collage, paint, colored pencils and being able to translate the traditional media into digital art that I can finesse and modify more easily.

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

I always loved to write and draw. I painted on rocks, wood, fallen pieces of birch bark, and even paper. My friends and I created imaginary worlds and stories for our Barbies. We turned traditional folktales into plays that we put on in our backyards, and often told scary stories at sleepovers.

In college, after I realized I didn't want to be a teacher, I got my Bachelor's degree in Commercial Design. I gravitated to photography and worked in the field for a while. IT was fine, but I was drawn to sharing my love of books with children. I didn't fall in love with reading until the end of high school. I wanted to share this love so others wouldn't have to wait so long to discover the magic between book covers. I went back to school and got a Master of Library Science degree and spent my career as a librarian; half as a children's librarian and half as a library director. I loved putting together and presenting Storytimes for kids. I often remade books as felt board stories (I'm the OG), turned stories into plays we would act out for the kids, and I loved redrawing the art in picture books. I often said that someday, I would write and illustrate my own stories.

When I became a library director, I kept my hand in creative activities and worked with staff to design and build floats for our local parade. One year, I wrote and illustrated a story to go with the float. I also wrote a few slightly scary stories to tell at our annual *Scary Stories in the Cemetery* program. These creative pursuits countered the tedium of budgets and board packets.

When my life took an unexpected turn, I decided it was time to pursue that 'someday dream.' I finished writing a novel I had started and wrote a handful of picture book stories. Searching for the next steps to get my "brilliant" writing



Illustrator in the Spotlight

published, I discovered a class being taught at the Newberry Library. That's where I met and had the wonderful fortune to work with Esther Hershenhorn. A handful of my classmates and I became critique partners, and I would head into the city early to get together for a meal and writing conversation.

I participated in 12X12 for a few years. I took every class offered through Storyteller Academy. I made book dummies, I learned about illustration design, worked on color theory, and drew and drew and drew. I got an iPad and learned how to use Procreate. Somewhere along the way, a few stories took hold. My Storyteller Academy teachers, and my critique partners agreed that the stories were ready. I made a few submissions but didn't get any takers. I knew I was still missing a piece to my personal puzzle. I wanted to and continue to want to be the author and illustrator of my stories. There are many illustrators I would excitedly hand my story to, but that would be just half of my dream coming true. If you had asked me why this is so important to me a couple of years ago, I don't think I could have answered that.

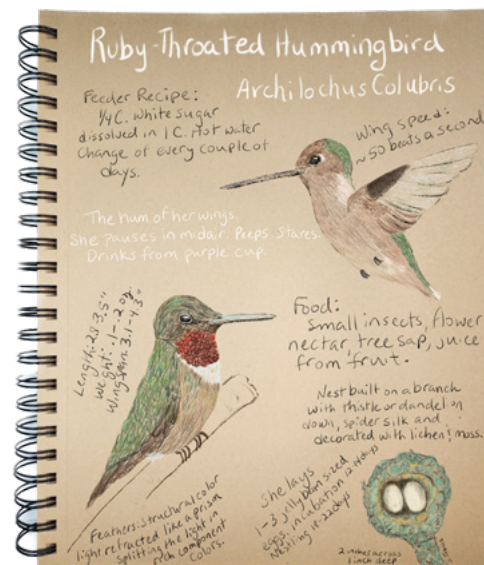
Then, about a year ago, I learned that I have aphantasia. This is the inability to visualize in the mind's eye. When someone says to visualize an apple, I see nothing. As a matter of fact, the aphantasia affects all of my senses. I can't bring the taste to my mind; I can't sense how an apple feels in my hand or imagine the sound it makes as you take a bite. And yet, I can describe all of that to you. If you blindfold me and give me an apple, I will know what it is, I will revel in the scent, and enjoy the sound of the crunch as I take a bite. It is kind of the same with my stories. Somewhere in the darkness of my mind's eye, I know the characters so well and know what they are going to do. I know the colors of their world, and I need to let them out on the page; I need to see them.

It's been quite a journey letting my art out of the darkness and on the page. Arree Chung read one of my stories and noticed that it seemed to be about a character who had limitations and that the other characters chose to befriend the character and make it family. As he said this in class, I admitted that I have a sister who is developmentally disabled. When I started the story, it came from a different place, but I think when you find your authentic voice, it just has to come out in your art. After many more revisions and dummies, I took this story to Arree's Production Ready class. Arree's encouragement, suggestions for playing and experimenting lead to me finally creating several pieces of final artwork and a submittable dummy.

Someday, hopefully in the not-so-distant future, my stories and I will connect with the right agent and/or editor and publishing company, and my art and writing will come out of the darkness and shine in the world for children and parents to enjoy.

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

My process is to use reference photos and make a lot of sketches to free the unseen character or scene from inside of me. It's kind of a "I'll know it when I see it" process. For *Waddles, Wheels, and Lucille*, I bought a pull-toy duck. I took walks around the pond and sketched a lot of ducks (Warning: Sitting under a Burr Oak tree in late summer and fall can be dangerous. Burr Oak acorns are big and hurt when they hit your head).



Illustrator in the Spotlight

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

I'm very drawn to animals. I always have been. As I watch the nature shenanigans in my yard and pay attention to life around me, the animals merge with ideas from life and characters and stories are born. My critique partners have said that the overarching theme of my current work is about acceptance, self-acceptance and being accepted.

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

I think all of my stories started that way. The story I'm currently working on illustrating came when a friend at Highlights Foundation gifted me an animal skull she found on a walk in the woods. We figured out what kind of skull it was using a Dichotomous Key. I thought the story was going to teach about using these keys, but it decided to be a mystery of Moose missing his antler. What if no one ever told you that you would lose your baby teeth and grow new ones? No one tells a Moose he will drop his antlers every year.

What three words best sum you up?

Not enough words.

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

Ezra Jack Keats, Leo Lionni, H. A. Rey, and Ed Emberly (I loved making characters out of fingerprints.)

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

Matthew Cordell, Cindy Derby, Steve Light, Vanessa Brantley Newton, and Lane Smith are a small handful of illustrators that I love—I could go on and on, I think that all illustrators are wonderful.

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

There are definitely homages. When I was growing up, my mother would always say "Happy face in the morning," when she said good night. I used that line in my graphic novel. The cover illustration is an homage to the apple tree and wildlife in our backyard.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

What's three things that may surprise people about you?

I'm a Master Naturalist, A Tai Chi instructor, and a certified coach in the Quantum Alignment System.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

Animals, nature, and learning about my and other people's Human Design.

What gets in the way of your creativity?

Noise and people talking, too many distractions, and allowing fear to rule my mind rather than being in flow and trusting that I can always make progress.

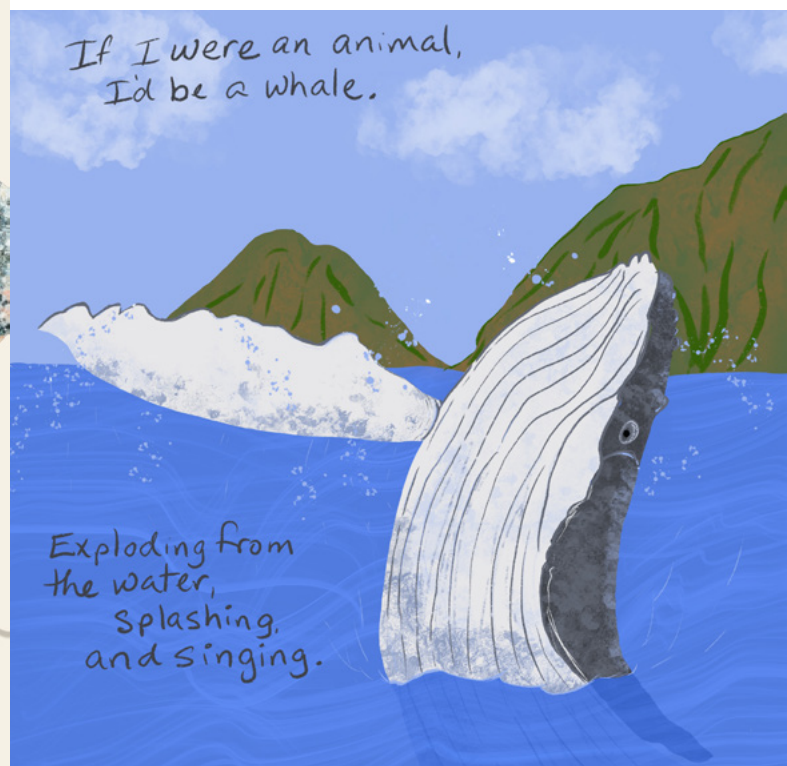
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SARAH TOBIAS was a librarian for many years. Now, when she isn't writing or making art, she can be found teaching Tai Chi, coaching people on rewriting old personal stories, hiking, biking, listening for frogs, or gardening, putting up food, or baking. Sarah strives to inspire children and adults to love and express their inner weirdo and let it shine.



Tales from the Front

INSIGHTS FROM A FIRST TIME CHILDREN'S AUTHOR

by Loretta Caravette (a.k.a. JB Frank)

One frustrating day I was searching through my files, looking for inspiration. I couldn't find a thing that moved me—or my pen. Needing a distraction, I went online and checked my emails. There was a message from my niece, who has three small children. She wrote: "Somewhere in the city, a little girl is singing when she should be sleeping."

I live in the city. I love the city, with all its energy and vibrancy. And the idea that somewhere in the city my little five-year old great-niece, Lucy, was singing, made me smile. And then I thought of the late author and my former teacher Jane Resh Thomas and what she would have said—"What is this child in want of?" And it occurred to me that this child is waiting for someone. She is wanting to be with them and feel their love and the joy of being together. And I thought of all the children waiting for a parent to come home. Sometimes a dad and sometimes a mom. I thought of my own history. As an adult, I could now answer the questions, "Where does Dad go every day? And what is it like to go from home to work and back?"

Somewhere in the City was born.

When I was satisfied with my manuscript, I started my research to find the best possible publisher. I sent it out time and again, only to receive rejection after rejection, with comments like, "Where's the mother?" "Topic doesn't grab me." "Love the writing but don't think it's quite right for us." One publisher did take an interest only to later reject it. "Just too hard a sell." Really?! Children all over the world wait every day for a parent to come home from work—it's a universal story.

After further research, I learned about Familius, a small publishing house with dozens of wonderful titles to their name. I discovered that this publisher was all about family. Would Familius want *Somewhere in the City*? I sent it that day. This time, I got a positive response—with thoughtful comments and the desire to talk further. And the rest is history.



But this is just the beginning of the story.

I sold my first picture book. Yay for me! But who was I? A new author whom no one had ever heard of. I had no social media footprint, let alone a website! The good news was that it would take almost two years before the book would come out, so I had some time to build my brand, which I learned is what I needed to do.

Fortunately, I knew a few people I could hire who could help with the overwhelming idea of promoting myself. One dear friend put together a "marketing essentials" list which included all the things that a start-up author needed to do.

First, I needed a name for my website. For me, it made sense to use my pen name, JB Frank. I love this pen name because it's short, sweet, and memorable. Registering the name for a website on GoDaddy was easy. (There are others such as [domain.com](https://www.domain.com), [register.com](https://www.register.com), or [squarespace.com](https://www.squarespace.com) that work as well.) I typed in the name I wanted, learned it was available, and licensed it right then and there. The cost was minimal.

Next came the actual website. The best advice I got was to find inspiration on the sites of authors I admire. Most, if not all, have websites—even authors who have passed away! I am admittedly technologically challenged. No matter how hard I try, I struggle to understand website technology. It's important to know your weaknesses and that you might have to fork out a little money to get started. It's money well spent if this is the life you're working toward. I asked my niece for help—she knew how to work the website maker



Tales from the Front

SquareSpace and was able to easily design and create a simple website. It was very affordable and effective.

If you're at this point in your journey as an author, the question to ask yourself is what you're trying to achieve with your website. I wasn't going to sell my books there, but I wanted to direct sales inquiries to the staff at Familius. Another goal was to have schools and bookstores learn about me and my children's book and then set up school visits or create bookstore-to-school connections.

When you're an unknown author, you need to include a lot of information on your website. It's important to list as much detail about yourself as possible—and to do it in a fun and concise way. I wrote all the copy and supplied photos, and my niece helped me along the way as we built the pages of my site together.

Getting the website up and running is just the start. You have to work on getting search results placed high in search engines like Google (a process known as search engine optimization, or SEO). To help with this, be sure to use keywords that people would likely use to search for content like yours. You can update and expand your SEO efforts as you go.

Next was the really interesting part—setting up social media. Back in 2018, I had no clue what this meant, but my niece did. She set me up on Facebook, which we then connected with X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. I was already on LinkedIn. Authors and anyone else striving to build their brand need to use social media. Whether through short snippets or photos, people using these tools to tell their stories connect with their audience.

When we first started, I had to post weekly. I didn't easily adapt to these formats, and sharing my thoughts daily just wasn't doable, despite the value. But if you're able to post at least once a week on the same day and at the same time, it slowly becomes a habit. As I posted every week, my list of followers started to grow. I recommend following other authors and writers so they'll follow you, as well. But be cautious when doing this. I didn't realize what happens when you follow people without really checking them out or if they're off message, and this has led to a veer in the road that I'm slowly correcting.

Here are some more ideas to help you create and build your brand as an author:

Marketing Plan: Although it doesn't need to be loaded with detail, a marketing plan and schedule of events and activities can help you stay on track. (Perhaps, more on that in another article.)

Blogger List: Search for bloggers who love to write about books, learning or any topic that relates to you and your work. These days, there are tons of bloggers who enjoy reviewing books and stories on their own websites. A mention or post from one of them can definitely boost your visibility. When my book first came out, a few bloggers, courtesy of Familius, interviewed me. I thought about some of the basic questions ahead of time, and this turned out to be very helpful. You can expect to be asked questions like, "Where did you get your ideas?" "What was the process of getting published like?" and "What was your message when you wrote this book?"

Press Release: Write and distribute a press release to media outlets. Send it to schools and libraries, too, if you have a children's book. It's challenging to build the list of outlets, but it's invaluable. Be sure to briefly summarize the plot and include your personal story or bio. Let the outlets know you're available for book signings, readings and other events.

Tip sheets: Publishers often request tip sheets, which are ideal for itemizing essential details about your book. They can include categories, like endorsements, sales hook, audience, publicity strategy, author bio and more – all designed to summarize you and your book in a glance.

Announcement Cards: About a month before my book launch, I sent an email blast to my friends and family, telling them about the book, the launch date and how to get a copy. I sent hundreds of these emails via Constant Contact or Mailchimp, which made them easy to organize and maintain.



Tales from the Front

Although all of this might seem overwhelming, it really isn't, especially after you've done it the first time and have people to help you along the way. My biggest piece of advice is to not be afraid to use social media to promote yourself. Yes, there can be pitfalls, but by and large, you'll slowly connect with the people who matter to you and will influence your sales. Get out there, have fun, and make the most of the opportunities in the life of an author. 🌟

LORETTA CARAVETTE earned her MFA in writing for children and young adults from Hamline University and has written articles for a number of children's magazines and journals. Spring of 2021, under the pen name J.B. FRANK, Loretta had two books published by Familius. *Somewhere in the City*, a picture book, inspired by her niece Annie. Her board book, *Count on Me 123*, which was inspired during these troubled times, was also published.

Spring of 2025, from Sky Pony Press, comes the hilarious joke book *Down on the Farm with Cow and Friends*.

She now lives in the country with her sweetheart and their dogs, Marco and Mia, along with cats, Katleen and Cruella and Maxie, plus chickens, ducks, and goats, Lucy and Ricki. When J.B./Loretta isn't writing, she's teaching yoga, walking her dogs, playing with her cats, reading, working on crafts, and enjoying a cup of tea.

For updates, check out her website at JBFrank.net and connect with her on Instagram, Facebook and X.



Creative Sparks



LESSONS LEARNED FROM A CLASSIC AUTHOR-ILLUSTRATOR by Sheila Path-McMahon

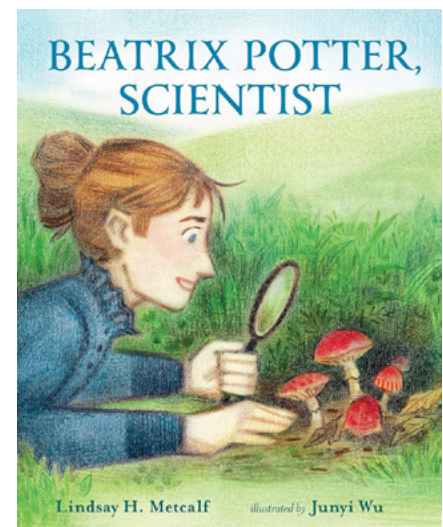
For this issue's *Creative Sparks*, a column meant to highlight the work of an author and an illustrator, I decided to revisit a classic - Beatrix Potter. I have loved her work since I was a child, and I remember hearing at a conference that she had been turned down by several publishers before she decided to self-publish. I didn't believe it and had to find out for myself - how could such a bedrock classic talent have been declined? I decided to take a closer look into this history to see what I could learn as an aspiring author/illustrator. In the process, I stumbled upon an article about a controversy around Potter I had never heard about. I believe it's important to acknowledge that there are questions raised, even, or perhaps especially, when the subject of the controversy is someone that I admire. I address the controversy briefly in Lesson 6 at the end of this article, and I provide a link so that you can look for yourself and draw your own conclusions.



I visited the Harold Washington Library in downtown Chicago to find a children's book about Beatrix Potter entitled *Saving the Countryside* (Little Bee Books, 2020). Of course, there were other books about Potter on the shelf; I was able to check out *Beatrix Potter, Scientist* (Albert Whitman & Co., 2020) and *Beatrix Potter and Her Paint Box* (Henry Holt & Co., 2015). I was also able to check out her original story, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Penguin Random House UK's 2002 authorized reproduction of the original 1902 text. Up in the section about illustration, I found a lovely book called *Beatrix Potter's Art: Paintings and drawings selected and introduced by Anne Stevenson Hobbs* (Penguin, 1989).

LESSON 1: PRACTICE A LOT

Potter had far too many artistic, and other, accomplishments to do them justice in this short article. I highly recommend reading Hobbs' book, because although the bulk of the material consists of plates depicting much of Potter's art that was not published or really displayed in her lifetime, there is also a fairly thorough introduction with sections on her background and influences, her technique and style, composition and design, and her subjects. It is clear from her body of work that she worked hard to develop her illustration skills. In her 20's she collected and painted fungi. Hobbs explains that Potter was instructed by Charles McIntosh, who showed her how to improve her botanical drawings. Through practice and self training, she became a skilled scientific illustrator. At the same time, she practiced illustrating her favorite books for fun.



LESSON 2: FOLLOW YOUR PASSIONS

What I found most intriguing and inspiring about Beatrix Potter's story is that she was many things - she was keenly interested in nature, eventually helping to conserve much of the English Lake District in which she lived after leaving her parents' home in her late 30's. Later in life, she was a farmer and conservationist but able to cause mushroom spoors to (root?) before many other scientists were able, she created a (catalog? Of mushrooms that was presented to ...) She was a seriously accomplished person who genuinely enjoyed her artistic pursuits. "She painted and drew to please herself, believing 'the more spontaneous the pleasure, the more happy the result.'"



Creative Sparks

LESSON 3: LISTEN TO YOUR GUT, BUT COMPROMISE WHEN NECESSARY

In her April 2022 *New Yorker* article, *The Secret Life of Beatrix Potter*, Anna Russell explains that Potter was turned down by a series of established publishers partly because Potter wanted to keep the price low. “Little rabbits cannot afford to spend 6 shillings on one book, and would never buy it.” Potter told a friend. She also wanted the book to be small, for small hands. A year after self-publishing, Frederick Warne & Co. put out an abridged version. The book itself was finally published in 1902, when Potter was 36. Coming to publication took a long time - it took 9 years for Peter to evolve from a letter into a professionally published book. A delightful detail that Russell includes is that Potter “compromised on the cover image, which she called the ‘idiotic prancing rabbit.’” That quote makes me laugh, as the image she deprecated is one of my all-time favorites.



LESSON 4: ENTERTAINING REAL CHILDREN IS A KEY TO FINDING AN AUDIENCE

Hobbs tells how Peter Rabbit evolved from “picture letters” - illustrated letters that she sent to children. She was writing for the joy and entertainment of a child, and the story evolved out of that. Some of her picture-letters had more sequences of pictures worked out than others, and were made into little booklets telling a story. The most famous example of this was *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, which Potter wrote for a child named Noel Moore in 1893.

LESSON 5: PAGINATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN KEY IN PICTURE BOOKS

In revisiting *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, I just love how intuitively she split up the longer sentences that were the style back then - there are two examples of longer sentences that are spread out over 3 pages, and several that are spread over 2 pages.

LESSON 6: OKAY, THIS ONE IS A DOOZY: RELY ON YOUR OWN IDEAS OR AT LEAST ACKNOWLEDGE “BORROWING” THAT YOU MAY ENGAGE IN.

As I was searching for an image of the cover of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* for this article, the link “What is the controversy surrounding Peter Rabbit” popped up. Of course, I had to take a look. To my chagrin, there is research by [Emily Zobel Marshall](#) about how Beatrix Potter’s children’s books owe an awful lot to the Uncle Remus tales, to the point of perhaps deceptively stealing storylines, characters, and some of the vernacular that originated with enslaved African people who lived in Georgia in the late 1900’s. [Here is a link to the article found on theconversation.com](#) 🌟

SHEILA PATH-MCMAHON is one of the incoming Co-Regional Advisors to the Illinois chapter of SCBWI. She has several self-published children’s picture books that she wrote, collaborating with artist Heather Bassler Zemien. Sheila is currently teaching English at an alternative charter high school in Chicago, working on a middle-grades novel, and working on illustrations for several picture books. She lives with her cat, Arun Dottie, her dog Nola, and her husband, Jay.

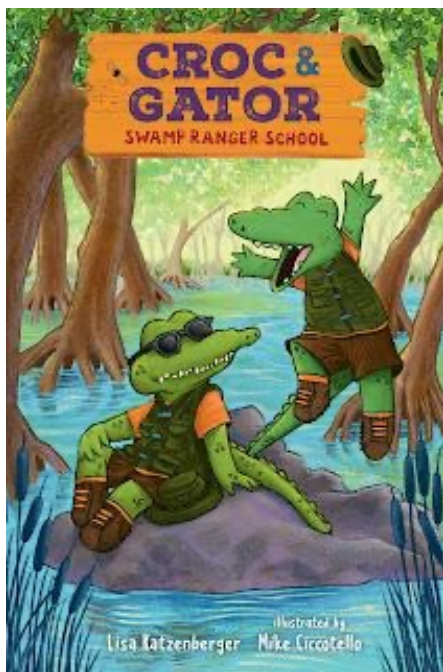
www.sheilapathmcmahon.com

Breaking into...

...THE CHILDREN'S BOOK MARKET

by Lisa Katzenberger

There are so many types of books in the KidLit market—Board books, picture books, easy readers, chapter books, middle grade, and young adult. One of the perhaps less-known areas is the chapter book market. I will share what I learned about this process during my experience writing the *Croc & Gator* chapter book series.



AGE GROUP

Chapter books are aimed at newly independent readers. These are kids who have graduated from having books read to them to reading books on their own. (Although a family read-along is always wonderful!). These readers are around ages 6-9. They are starting to feel independent and proud of their reading prowess. Finishing a single chapter might feel like a big accomplishment!

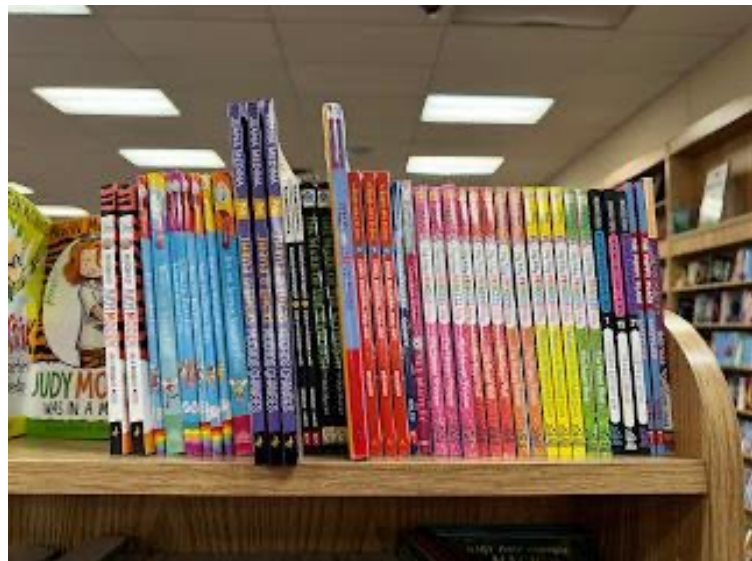
In a [blog post on the The Mixed-Up Files](#), Jennifer Torres, author of the *Catalina Incognito* series, said, “Chapter books meet kids when they are beginning to see themselves as *readers*. To me, there’s something so special about that moment.”

You want to write a riveting story that keeps them turning the pages and wanting to read the next book. Which brings me to my next point . . .



ALWAYS A SERIES

Chapter books are always sold in a series. One reason for this is the size of chapter books. Smaller than a picture book, their spines don’t take up much real estate on the bookshelf. But if you have a series, that is more likely to stand out to a consumer scanning a store.

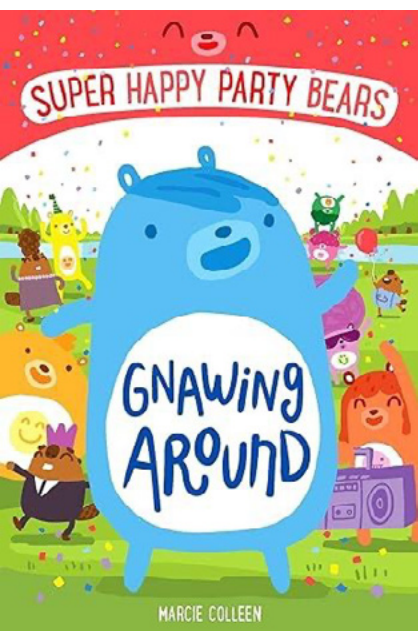


Susan Muaddi Darraj, author of the *Farah Rocks* series, recommends a cohesive theme for a chapter book series such as *The Baby-Sitter’s Club*. In an article for *Writer’s Digest*, she says, “The club the girls form becomes the ‘shape’ of the book—it’s like the container that holds all their adventures. We have the same core of girls, attached to this club, and we follow their growth and development.”

Author of the *Super Happy Party Bear* series, Marcie Colleen, says, “You need characters and/or a world that can offer many adventures across many books.”



Breaking into the Children's Book Market



The setting of Pearl Swamp along with the “job” of Croc and Gator being junior rangers is the central theme of my series. Their role as junior rangers gives them many problems to solve to protect their swamp.

CHARACTER-DRIVEN

You will often find that chapter books are more character-driven than plot-driven. The main character will be a protagonist who can hold readers’ attention over multiple storylines. Examples include Ivy and Bean written by Annie Barrows, Jada Jones written by Kelly Starling Lyons, and Jasmine Toguchi, written by Debbi Michiko Florence.

DETAILS

Chapter books run from 6,000-12,000 words and include spot art scattered throughout the book. Sentences are often short and punchy. Be sure to keep the story fun!

Marcie Colleen adds, “Chapter books are all about entertainment. We aren’t

looking for high literature here. Engage the reader through action, mystery, or humor to keep them turning the page and reading book after book.”

HOW TO PITCH A CHAPTER BOOK

When pitching a chapter book series, you will want to have a submission package ready. This is much simpler than it sounds! The core item of your package is a complete first draft of the first book in the series. Then you will want to have pitches for four to six additional books. The pitch will be just a paragraph or two long.



On her [Ask the Agent blog](#), Jennifer Laughran, Senior Agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency, provides this advice: “If I were selling a chapter book series, I’d have the first full book, and then a series proposal. That would consist of a paragraph or so introducing the overarching concept of the whole series, and then a brief description of the first four books or so. (And then, possibly, a list of potential further topics/titles).” She even includes a [brief mock series proposal](#).

CONCLUSION

As you develop your chapter book series, remember the importance of these stories in a child’s life. Marcie Colleen says, “Chapter books are the noblest of all formats to write in because they have the power to create lifelong readers. While kids are READ TO when they are younger, chapter books are the first time kids are reading independently. Create a series that they love, and you can make them fall in love with reading all together.” 🌟



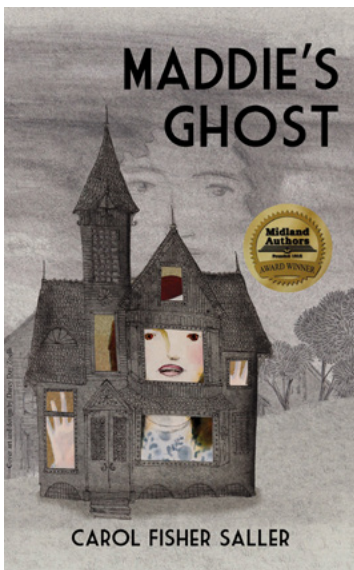
LISA KATZENBERGER is the author of *IT WILL BE OK: A Story of Empathy, Kindness, and Friendship*, *A LOVE LETTER TO MY LIBRARY*, *I CAN DO IT EVEN IF I'M SCARED*, *IT BELONGS TO THE WORLD: Frederick Banting and the Discovery of Insulin*, as well as the *CROC & GATOR* chapter book series. Lisa lives in LaGrange with her husband and twin children. She is an instructor for The Writing Barn and serves on the Board of Trustees of her local library.

8 Hard Truths...

...ABOUT SELF-PUBLISHING CHILDREN'S BOOKS by Carol Fisher Saller



When I decided to independently publish my children's books, I understood the challenges they would face after launch. I've worked in publishing my whole adult life, as writer, editor, and even for a while as a children's book editor.



But now, a year after the launch of my middle-grade mystery *Maddie's Ghost*, I have a sharper perspective. The limitations are definitely there—I slam up against them every day. To cope, I search online, watch tutorials and webinars, and actively participate in writer groups, both online and in person.

Here are eight challenges an indie writer of children's books must face. Any one of them could be expanded into an entire post. To learn more, follow the links at the end.

1. Many bookstores and libraries can't or won't buy indie children's books unless they have good reviews from the top journals or win a respected award. The problem is, many journals (School Library Journal, Horn Book, etc.) and awards are not open to self-published books.

SOLUTIONS: *Kirkus Reviews* and *Publishers Weekly Booklife* will review your indie book for a (hefty) fee. *Booklist* features self-published books once a month in a separate section provided by *BlueInk Review* (no fee, but also no guarantee you'll be chosen), and there are other reviewers librarians have come to respect (*Readers' Favorite, Foreword*).

As for awards for indie books, the [Alliance of Independent Authors](#) (ALLi) website posts a vetted list to help you avoid the many scammy schemes out there.

2. Physical bookstores and libraries buy books through wholesale distributors (not Amazon), where they get a deep discount (40-55%) and the privilege of returning a book almost indefinitely *at the publisher's (= author's) expense*. Self-publishers can publish through the IngramSpark service at almost no cost, but Ingram's huge discounts and returns policy force us to either price a book very high or accept extremely small royalties.

SOLUTIONS: Writers can turn off the discounts and the option to allow returns at Ingram, knowing that (a) many bookstores will order a book anyway if a customer requests it, and (b) libraries don't require books to be returnable, and they will generally pay a higher price if they want a book. Local bookstores will often stock an indie book on consignment if they have a relationship with the author as a customer.

These solutions require us to let go of the idea of our books being widely available on bookstore shelves. I don't mind. Even traditionally published books are not necessarily available in bookstores, at least not for long.

3. Self-publishing involves learning scary stuff. Like metadata, copyrights, and ISBNs.

SOLUTIONS: First, metadata isn't scary! It just means typing basic information like title, subtitle, author, and ISBN number into a form. It's easy. It's our friend because it makes our books searchable online.

And yay! We get to learn stuff! You can pay for services instead of DIY, but I enjoy figuring things out and saving money. In online forums and private Facebook groups you'll find plenty of comrades who have made mistakes so you don't have to. YouTube tutorials cover every kind of publishing software and marketing platform you want to investigate.



8 Hard Truths about Self-Publishing Children's Books

Authors Guild provides free legal advice to members as well as contract reviews. ALLi and IBPA ([Independent Book Publishers Association](#)) offer a huge amount of how-tos, checklists, and member forums where writers trade advice. And believe it or not, [Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing](#) (KDP) and [Amazon Author Central](#) both provide quick and professional support for self-publishers by phone, chat, and email.

4. Self-publishing costs money, and profits are iffy.

Expect to pay for a cover design, professional editing, a web page domain name, ISBNs, copyright registration, and the occasional irresistible service or software (Microsoft Word, [Atticus](#) formatting software, a “Doing Business As” certificate for your imprint, Publishers Rocket keyword analyzer, memberships in associations, paid webinars, book fairs and conference tables, award entry fees, advertising, etc.). Picture book illustration is a major expense, unless you can persuade an artist to share royalties instead.

Unfortunately, it's a hard truth that most books fail to earn back their expenses. Are you shocked? Even traditional publishers depend on their best sellers to finance their many other books that don't fly.

You absolutely can self-publish at near-zero expense. I've done it. But unless you have serious publishing skills, it costs money to make a good product and gain visibility for it.

SOLUTIONS: Luckily, with print-on-demand services like KDP, [Draft2Digital](#), and IngramSpark, you pay almost

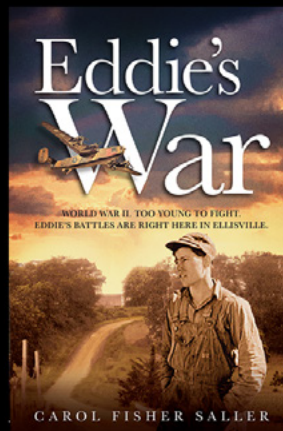
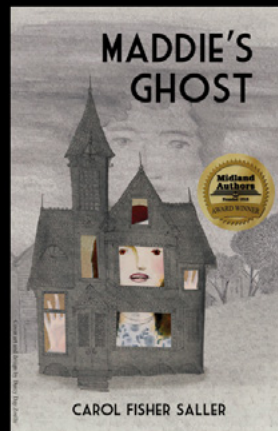
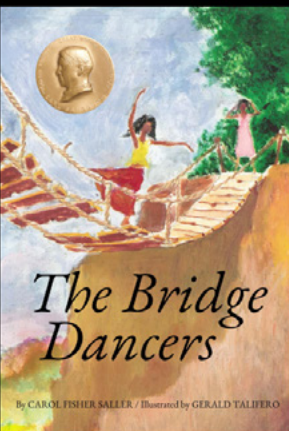
nothing up front. Instead, you get a royalty every time someone buys a book online. When you need physical books for a school visit or book fair, you can order any number of author copies at a discount.

Budget to spend only what you can afford. Spread out your expenses over time. There's no big rush: Self-publishing means you set your own deadlines! Membership in ALLi or IBPA pays for itself in discounts and benefits. Don't pay for anything without checking for your member discounts—and don't forget to investigate for scams.

5. Online marketing is a mystery. Strategies for marketing adult books don't really work for children's books. The main buyers for kids' books are schools and libraries, not online shoppers. It's also tricky to pin sales and royalties to any single marketing strategy because the various book distributors report sales with different lag times, from instantly to three months later.

SOLUTIONS: Get off-line as much as possible. Learn how to do school visits and let schools know of your availability. Sign up to sell at book fairs, street fairs, conferences, and other events. Carry bookmarks or cards or info sheets with you and get used to giving them to anyone you meet who is interested.

When you do try to promote online, avoid “shotgun” tactics in favor of one campaign at a time. Try an Amazon or Facebook ad. Guest post for a book blogger. Get podcast guest gigs at PodMatch. Run a giveaway or discount. Post your book at NetGalley for three months. Check out



8 Hard Truths about Self-Publishing Children's Books

LibraryThing. You could do all of those at once, but then you wouldn't know which one worked best.

6. There are way too many details to keep track of. The logistics of publishing can be overwhelming. Paying someone else to do it can run into thousands of dollars.

SOLUTION: If you're doing it yourself, accept that publishing is a business. Set up lists, spreadsheets, timetables, and a folder of notes. When you figure out a challenge, record your solution for next time. Budget time to update your files while your memory is fresh.

	A	B	C	D	E
101		10-Oct Approved new files			
102		2024			
103		1-May Tried to update Praise & Author pages - wouldn't accept IBPA code			free IBPA coupon
104		1-May Updated Praise & Author pages			free IBPA coupon
105		5-Jul updated cover w/ SMA seal			LSJUL24
106					
107					
108		Maddie pbk - KDP	Published! Aug 11		
109		2023			
110		26-May Uploaded pbk print cover at KDP - looked good			
111		27-May Uploaded new interior to fix TOC			
112		7-Jun Updated interior to match IS MS but didn't upload			
113		16-Jun Updated to match IS version. Uploaded final files to KDP and ordered 5 proof copies			\$27
114		17-Jun Proofed KDP digital; highlighted errors in yellow. Updated Word all 3 Word docs.			
115		10-Jul Uploaded 7.7.23 file and published!			
116		11-Jul Found the pbk available for sale. Gaah! Unpublished it at KDP and will pub on Aug 15			
117		11-Jul Ordered 5 ARCs (Darcy, Nancy Swinland, Beth, Paula, me) of 7.7.23 files			\$64
118		15-Jul Proofs arrived, look good			
119		17-Jul Pbk is back online "out of stock"; phoned KDP and they said they'd take it down. added Kate's blurb to Author Page			
120		20-Jul Uploaded 7.13.23 files - ordered the "last copy" of the old ISBN			\$13
121		25-Jul Approved 7.13.23 files and published for pre-order (again)			
122		10-Aug Published pbk at KDP but file was rejected for old ISBN; uploaded new file			
123		11-Aug Published pbk at KDP!	Published!		
124		8-Oct Updated and approved files at KDP to match audiobook			
125		24-Apr updated Praise & Author pages			Free
126					
127		Publish			
128					
129					
130		5795-8-9862353-3-2	Maddie ebook - KDP	Published! Aug 15	
131		2023			
132		2-Jul Uploaded cover and Word doc at KDP - didn't work well			
133		2-Jul Used Kindle Create to wrangle Word doc into a KPF file and uploaded			
134		10-Jul Uploaded 7.7.23 files and published!			
135		20-Jul Uploaded final KPF file			
136		11-Aug Uploaded corrected KPF (isbn)			

7. Disasters happen.

SOLUTION: You are not alone! I find friendly commiseration and advice in private Facebook groups like Ask a Book Editor, Self-Publishing Support Group, and Atticus Authors. Solutions abound in YouTube tutorials, browser searches, and association forums. One of the best things about self-publishing is that you're in control. *Almost anything can be changed or fixed*, even after publication.

8. No one is buying your book, even after great reviews and a nice award.

SOLUTION: Accept that indie publishing is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes a long time for people to learn of the latest drop in an ocean of millions of published books. For non-celebrity first-time children's book authors, self-publishing isn't about book launches, author tours, best-seller lists, and awards. It's about word of mouth and a slow accumulation of readers. It might not happen with the first book, or the second. Keep writing and publishing.

TAKEAWAY

In my professional life, I'd been indoctrinated to believe that self-publishing was sketchy and subpar, mainly for hack writers who couldn't get an agent. Then, after ten years away from writing for children, I couldn't get an agent.

Before I decided to go indie, it took a year of reflection, doubt, and fear. I wanted to self-publish with zero shame or embarrassment or apologies. I wanted to be proud and enthusiastic. I'm a good writer! My traditionally published books had starred reviews and honors.

It was a tough transition in attitude, but I did it. I'm a cheerleader for the indie life. It's true that self-published children's books are at a severe disadvantage in the market. A year after publication, even after winning the 2024 Midland Authors Award for Children's Fiction, *Maddie's Ghost* has earned back less than 1% (not a typo) of the money I spent producing it. (Although that includes \$2500 for star-power audiobook narration, probably a mistake.)

But it's out there! And I continue to find joy unrelated to sales:

- I love writing the books.
- I love not having to research agents or publishers and agonize over query letters.
- I love it when someone lets me know they read the book or bought it for a child or wants me to sign a copy.
- I feel good helping other writers and newbies online and in my monthly newsletter.
- I love emailing with beta readers and revising after their feedback.
- It's great to have complete control in deciding when my book is finished and when to publish it.
- I love working with my cover designer.
- I enjoy playing with interior formats, whether I'm designing myself or using a template.
- I enjoy designing a bookmark or info sheet or poster.



8 Hard Truths about Self-Publishing Children's Books

- I feel powerful(!) when I conquer a technical challenge.
- I love it when a good review appears.
- I love being able to fix a typo after publication simply by uploading a corrected file.
- I love it when a stranger is excited to meet me because I write children's books. I always give them one of my bookmarks.

CAROL FISHER SALLER is the author of the forthcoming middle-grade time-travel series *Ellie and Kat: Time-Jinx Twins* ([Duckweed Books](#), 2025-). Honors for her children's books include *Kirkus Best*, *Bank Street Best*, *Horn Book Recommended Verse*, *NCSS/CBC Notables*, the *Carl Sandburg Award for Children's Literature*, and the *Midland Authors Award for Children's fiction*. Carol is also author of the adult book and blog *The Subversive Copy Editor* and contributing editor to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Her free monthly newsletter for creative writers is [Writer, Editor, Helper](#). She lives in Chicago.

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Dive, Jump, Leap:

NOTES FROM MY FIRST YEAR OF TRYING

by Tracie Renee



Image: Pexels @Pixabay

THE DIVING BOARD

Today I round the corner of my first year of writing seriously and identifying as a writer. Although writing has always been my passion, before July 2023 I wrote only when inspiration struck (a.k.a. rarely) and when I had time (around a full-time job, side work and parenting duties, a.k.a. rarely). I sent work out even less frequently than I wrote. I lacked writing friends and critique groups; I knew SCBWI existed but I wasn't a member. I was afraid to write, to dream, to fail; I was afraid to believe in my stories.

For so long, Being a Writer felt impossible—like the diving board at the public pool near my childhood home. Kid-me thought about trying it. How I'd climb so high that the world would look small; how the diving board would wobble more with each step inching me toward the edge; how the water below would be cool and blue—and so very deep, so very far away. Too deep, maybe? Too far away? Every time I thought about diving, I talked myself straight home in a gut-twisting panic. I never once jumped, never even made it up the ladder.

Then came July 2023: I got hit by an SUV while walking my dog, and left the ER with multiple fractures and the miracle of both of us Still Being Alive. I realized that life doesn't wait for dreams to feel "ready." Sure, I was still afraid to believe in my stories—but I resolved to believe in trying, in diving into the work and taking chances. I'd leap, just to see where I'd land, and approach each effort as an opportunity to grow—often in ways that surprised me.

LEAPING WITH BOOKS (AND BOOK REVIEWS)

I leapt first as a reader and a technical writer. In July 2023, I checked off a bucket list career goal by signing on with Publishers Weekly to contribute two middle grade or teen fiction book reviews per month. In doing so, I learned to read beyond my comfort zone and draft quickly with tight parameters and deadlines that ultimately strengthened my fiction and poetry craft.



Image: karishea @Pixabay

A dedicated (and completely awesome) editor selects my Publishers Weekly assignments. She has a general sense of my preferences (poetry! contemporary fiction! strong voices!) but often assigns books that I would never choose for myself. For me, book reviews often begin with a moment of gut-twisting panic: I look at the cover and quirk an eyebrow at my laptop; I read the pitch and sigh dramatically; I complain (in vague, contract-compliant terms) to my dog. Sometimes the urge to avoid is personal: the book deals with a subject that I've spent years exploring in therapy.

But then I dive in and try. I open the actual books—and they surprise me. They teach me that I've changed—and am still changing. That book I worried might trigger me? It doesn't. The story that wasn't "my genre" becomes a favorite that I suggest for a "Best of the Year" list, and I find myself pitching all of these to strangers in elevators. By the time I close the covers, these unexpected favorites have grown my perception of the world and my place in it—and I leave them with a sense of, "Yes! *That's* what writing is about! *That's* why I want to write!"



Dive, Jump, Leap: Notes from My First Year of Trying

Publishers Weekly reviews also employ strict word counts (190 words to summarize plot, setting, style, themes, form, and author/character identities) which always feels impossible on the starting block. But it's my year of Dive In and Try—so I tell my fear to sit down and shut up. I put some words down and revise them. I turn away and let them breathe. I thumb through a thesaurus and tweak my tweaks, and (eventually) find a snappy phrase that eliminates several lines of subplot and the single, perfect adjective to encompass a character's entire backstory.

As a reader and a human being, finding myself in books I didn't expect to connect with has taught me that there are many ways to enter and experience a story—and that I don't know everything about myself yet.

As a writer, crafting book reviews has boosted my confidence by teaching me to articulate what works (and doesn't) in stories, how to edit my work more effectively, and how to talk back to self-doubt.

Image: Pixels @Pixabay



THE DEEP END

It seems fitting that during this year of Dive In and Try, I also took up swimming in the literal sense.

I am not at all athletic—but I like the way I feel when I connect with my body through (gentle) yoga, (light) weight-lifting, (slow) jogging, (dog) walking, and (casual) biking.

Fractures sustained in the 2023 car accident sidelined me from all of the above for a long time; when my injuries finally stabilized, I reluctantly became a 5AM lap swimmer.

Although there's no diving board at the pool I frequent, I've learned not to waste time dipping a tentative toe in the water; on pool mornings: I jump in. Sure, my swimming lacks grace and proper technique; I regularly get lapped by those in adjacent lanes. But I like the way swimming empties my head to make room for stories, and I like how I feel when I leave the pool. I've learned to welcome the water's first cold slap when I jump in: now, that shock of cold means I really am all in, trying.



Image: Squirrel_photos @Pixabay

LEAPING WITH CONTESTS

In January 2024, I leapt again—this time as a writer, by resolving to enter any contest (within reason) that came my way. I was mostly okay with that resolution until I stumbled upon <insert foreboding music here> an adult short story contest.

As a poet who aspires to publish kidlit, the idea of writing an adult short story put me right back at the bottom of that larger-than-life childhood diving board. Even worse? This contest employed a specific prompt (with a theme! and a keyword!) AND a limited timeframe: one (too-short) month. I looked at the theme and the keyword and felt gut-twistingly sure of failure. *Every contest within reason*, I reminded myself—maybe this one was simply too deep of a dive, too high of a jump?

But my review work had taught me that I was capable of surprising myself, of proving self-doubt wrong by drafting and editing under tight deadlines—of, in short, doing all the things I believed to be impossible.

So once again, I dove in and tried. I gave myself time to brainstorm, time to write, and time to edit—and somehow



Dive, Jump, Leap: Notes from My First Year of Trying

summoned three complete stories from the dubious depths of my deer-in-headlights soul. Will these stories change the landscape of fiction for perpetuity? If my bio still indicates that I have a day job, the answer to that one is “no.” But writing those stories felt good. I cannonballed into the challenge, swam in the possibility—and left the pool with three stories that I hadn’t known were inside me and wouldn’t exist now without that leap.

Better yet, ALL my writing grew that month. The rush of trying something new rejuvenated my kidlit and writing adult voices—which were so unlike my middle grade and picture book protagonists—helped me hear my kidlit voices more clearly. The more I wrote, the more I wanted to keep writing. I was not only all in; now, I was used to the water.



Image: Liz W @Pixabay

THE LEAF PILE

In the stories I write, endings tend to circle back to beginnings. But this one can’t—not exactly. Summer has surrendered its heat, and the pools are closed now for the season. Instead, my son and I rake leaves in the yard. He’s still young enough to believe that this is fun, to throw down his rake and crash through the leaf pile before we bag it. I’m not sure when the grass will lose its green, when he’ll convince himself that it’s safer to stand still than to leap, when his world will become sharp edges and hard things like mine once did.

Maybe never?

Because what I am sure of is this: today he’ll leap, land soft and come up laughing—and I will too. 🌟

TRY like TRACIE

- Ask someone else to choose your next book.
- Read a genre you don’t typically read.
- Write a book review (190 words max!).
- Enter a new contest.
- Make a new writing friend.

TRY like TRACIE

- Write for a different age group.
- Write in a different format.
- Write in a different genre.
- Learn new words.
- Jump all the way in.

TRACIE RENEE AMIRANTE PADAL is a librarian, a *Publishers Weekly* book reviewer, and a poet who lives and dreams in suburban Chicago and writes for all ages. In her first year of Really Trying, she completed a middle grade novel-in-verse that won SCBWI’s Becky Mabry Scholarship and became a finalist in Authored’s Rising Talent Competition; earned 5 honorable mentions in international contests; made the longlist of Renee Tulippe’s Free Verse Contest; placed in the adult short story contest that terrified her; and jumped in some leaf piles. (Other gifts from 2024 include a rain-predicting ankle, a lot of neglected housework, and a giant spreadsheet of passes—but she keeps trying.)

[Tracie Renee Amirante Padal](#) | [Linktree](#)

Voices of Change

CROSSING SEAS TO PUBLISH

by Mita Bordoloi

We live in a boundaryless information age. We can reach our readers anywhere in the world from an isolated perch from our bedroom, study room, back porch, or the favorite coffee shop. So why should we limit ourselves within the borders of one country to publish?

I have been an American most of my life, but I wrote my first picture book stories based in the location where I spent my first quarter of life. Some of them got printed as e-books temporarily from New York. But *Bulbuli's Bamboo* and *Bumoni's Banana Trees*, my two environmental books, were published by Tulika Books of Chennai, India. It's an independent publisher that brings out its children's books in many Indian languages as well as English.

Bulbuli's Bamboo, published in 2012, is still in print and popular. It is a recommended book for Indian schools and comes in nine Indian languages including English. Its pictures of bamboo groves and bamboo products have awed the children of the construction workers who make scaffolding with bamboo. Their children had no idea where the bamboo came from until they saw the pictures in the book. Like them, many urban children learned about the versatility of bamboo in the book.

Bumoni's Banana Trees, published in 2021, on the other hand, has received multiple awards and was shortlisted for a couple more awards and comes in ten Indian languages including English. I wrote it originally in Assamese, my mother tongue, one of twenty-two official languages of India.

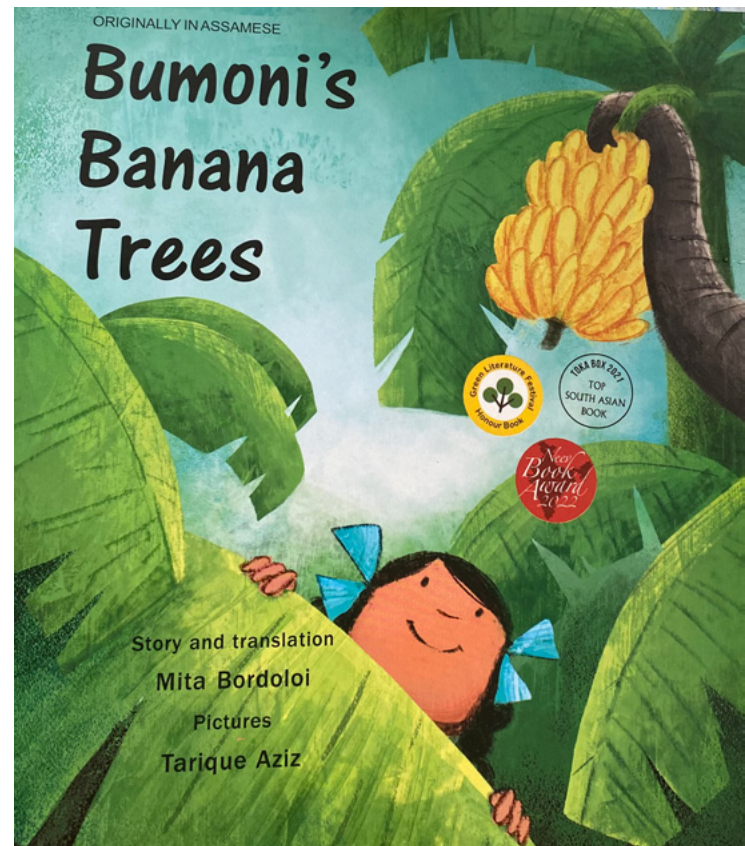
To my utter thrill and astonishment, *Bumoni's Banana Trees* was performed as a play by school children at Valley of Words International Literature & Arts Festival in Dehradun, India. It can be glimpsed at my website www.mitabordoloi.com.

When my book reached the children residing on the peripheries of the wild elephants' roaming corridors at the grassroots levels, through their distribution by the non-



government organizations, it was exhilarating to find it making a difference where it mattered. You see, *Bumoni's Banana Trees* is based on the human and elephant conflicts that occur on the borders of animal and human habitats, near the Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India, where I spent my early years.

It was humbling and eye-opening when an educational company included the story in the English textbook of their CBSE school curriculum alongside A.A. Milne, Arnold Lobel, Enid Blyton, and others. It was a privilege to be numbered six in the content page of eleven authors. Another educational company bought its Canadian rights.



Voices of Change

Yet being a non-resident Indian has its disadvantages in the awards arena. My American citizenship and Overseas Citizen of India statuses disqualify me from several major awards. My book was withdrawn twice from shortlisted status because of this anomaly.

Meanwhile, for the longest time I have been looking for a breakthrough for my memoir-like middle grade wildlife fiction manuscript. It is based on the peripheral setting of the Kaziranga National Park as well. I have been sending the manuscript draft to many publishers and agents in the U.S., Canada, U.K., and India. But the standard answers I had been getting were, I could not connect with it, it's subjective, we hope you find the right agent, etc. Many refrained from writing back as per the norm.

One time an agent from a prestigious U.S. literary agency requested the full manuscript. After more than one year

she sent me a letter of apology saying she liked it enough to request a full but did not love it enough to offer representation. I admired her honesty.

Not all my book projects are based in the country of my origin. For them I am seeking representation here in the U.S. But I sent my memoir-like manuscript again to India in the new year, and this time another distinguished agency has requested the manuscript in full. This time I am hopeful.

Many writers in the past have written about their country of birth from their country of domicile. James Joyce, William Trevor, and Mavis Gallant's names come to mind. It seems I am following in their footsteps for the time being.

Today I had the good fortune of meeting the best-selling author Helen Simonson at my local library. Her debut novel, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* in 2010 reportedly



Voices of Change

sold more than a million copies in twenty-one countries. She was on a book tour for her latest book, *The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club*. Ms. Simonson is a humorous English author who lives and publishes in the United States but writes about her own country. When asked what made her write she said she was writing because of America. It gave her permission to write. I wish my country was as generous to me and gave me permission to write and publish in my own country.

My children and adult stories have been published internationally. In the boundaryless digital world they have crossed boundaries and borders. It is my dream to see my stories reaching the nooks and corners of the world—from my porch table in my own city by the great Mississippi in the marvelous Midwest. 🌱

MITA BORDOLOI is an American author of *Bulbuli's Bamboo* and *Bumoni's Banana Trees* published by Tulika Books of India. Last September she crossed borders physically from southern Illinois to St. Louis, Missouri after 23 years. But digitally she is connected to all her friends all over the world.

greenlitfest
Presents
GLF-WWF Honour Book Award 2022
TO

Mita Bordoloi

Bumoni's Banana Trees
by and illustrated by Mita Bordoloi
Foreword by Tarique Aziz

Tarique Aziz

Benedict Paramanand
Founder Greenlitfest

Radhika Suri
Director, Environment Education, WWF-India

Printed on Cotton Rag Paper

Shop Around the Corner

NEW BOOK JOY: A BOOK CONCIERGE BRINGING JOY TO BOOK LOVERS OF ALL AGES by Allison Baxter

In Chicago's Edgebrook neighborhood, across from Caldwell Woods Forest Preserve and the Fox Lake Metra, three book-loving women run a bookstore unlike any other. New Book Joy is more a concept than a store, a book concierge service with projects, pairings, gift boxes, readings, clubs, and off-site events. They have curated selections of adult and children's books, and an especially strong selection of Young Adult Lit and children's picture books.

Connie Obrochta and Amanda Genge founded the store and recently welcomed Therese Tanski on board as a third owner. All three are educators and have a deep understanding of reading and children's literature. If you want to support a great small business, find the perfect book gift basket, meet a local author, or just hang out in the store and read a book, check out New Book Joy.



How did you start New Book Joy?

Mandy and I found ourselves chatting at family parties about the books that our students loved and the great conversations we were lucky enough to share, because good books bring out those conversations. We dreamed about helping parents to have those conversations with their kids, and created a subscription box service for a Family Book Club. Those boxes were curated with books and activities designed for the ages of children in the family. The boxes featured a common theme, such as "Community," "Empathy," or "Courage."

Then COVID hit and we decided to keep those boxes going and also pivot into providing adult book clubs on Zoom because we were all craving connection. Those clubs involved a virtual "blind tasting" process to choose a book, which we continue to offer today, both virtually and in person.

As COVID was easing, we started having "pop-up" sales with books and bookish goodies at our in-person book clubs. We thought we might open a brick-and-mortar space after about 3 years in business, but the perfect spot opened up for us in Edgebrook, so we made the leap a year earlier than we'd

planned. Since then, we've continued to evolve with new events, products, and collaborative partnerships with other small businesses.

New Book Joy is definitely more than a physical store in Edgebrook. Can you talk about your joint ventures and outside events and meetups?

We strongly believe in partnering with other local small businesses to foster building a community. Several of our book club discussions and paired events take place at other small businesses. More recently, we discussed the book, *Hello Beautiful*, and enjoyed a wine pairing at Patina's Wine Bar in Park Ridge—Carissa, the owner, paired wines and snacks with the four sisters! In another business partnership, we discussed the novel, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* and participated in a candle-making class at Edgewater Candles in Edgewater.

It brings us joy to go on-the-road and have pop-ups in the Chicagoland area. We have hosted a Boozy Book Fair Bash at Imperial Oak Brewing in Brookfield and have had a



Shop Around the Corner

couple of pop-ups at Une Année in Niles. If there is not an independent bookstore in a neighborhood, we try to bring one to them!

We started including meet-up events the past few months, as well. We have teamed up with Broadway in Chicago, Goodman Theatre, and Ravinia to receive discounted tickets to performances. Our book clubbers either purchase tickets through us or get their own and meet us on a specific date. After watching or listening to the performances, we go somewhere to discuss the book and make connections to what we saw or heard at the outing. It is such a JOY to bring a variety of bookish events to individuals, while collaborating with, supporting, and celebrating other businesses throughout Chicago!



With limited space, how do you decide which children's books to feature and sell in the store or at outside events?

Our store motto is “Building Great Conversations, One Book at a Time.” That motto is our guiding light as we weigh which books to offer and highlight in our store. We love books that make kids giggle and laugh, but we also love books that help kids notice and name their own spectrum of feelings and experiences. We seek out books that will help kids expand their knowledge of cultures and experiences that are multifaceted and might be unfamiliar to them. We hope that our books help children to understand that no one should be identified by simply one story.

Of course, we've also found that certain topics draw kids to the shelves: unicorns, dinosaurs, bugs, cuddly animals, robots, etc. We find that many kids are drawn to the Jerry Palotta books that are in the “Who Would Win?” series. That interactive feature where they read to find out if their predictions were right is so compelling!

What has your bookstore meant in both the geographic community and book loving community, including kidlit and adult?

We're happy to say that we hear daily from people who thank us for doing this brave, crazy thing: opening an indie bookstore in an area that didn't have one, and hosting events that bring people together. We love that our book clubbers (who were once strangers) are now connecting as friends with one another at our events! We're also thrilled that we've become a “destination shop” for book lovers through our social media presence, word of mouth, and being highlighted by *Time Out Chicago* and *Chicago Reader*.

Can you talk about your book-centric gift boxes and newborn book boxes?

We LOVE this part of our business! We know that many people love to give books as meaningful gifts for all occasions and ages. Sometimes it's hard to know which book to give, or how to make that gift extra special. We've got quite an online business featuring book boxes that are done for you! We match the books to small-business items that will enhance the enjoyment of the particular book, like candles, snacks, bookmarks, tea, alcohol infusion kits, jewelry, etc. You can buy a complete box, or you can ask us to curate one based on particular interests.



Shop Around the Corner

We've done boxes for retirements, new homes, birthdays, get well, graduation, wedding, and new babies. One of our best sellers (and a HUGE hit at baby showers) is a box that features an individually wrapped board book for each month of the first year of life. Those books are selected with the developmental milestones of those first months in mind, and it comes with a descriptive brochure about how we matched those milestones. You can add to the box with a onesie, teether, baby blanket, or parenting book to make it extra-deluxe!

Your author events help make New Book Joy even more amazing! How can local authors be involved in your booktique or events?

We love to invite authors to our book clubs, either virtually or in person. It's great to know if an author is open to that kind of interaction! One author reached out to us on Instagram, and sent a Google form for us to sign up on her calendar for a time when she was available for Zoom discussion. She had blocked several days to do this for book clubs, so our group ended up talking to her in London about her wonderful book!

We also love to invite authors to do readings that can be part of a celebration at the store for kids or adults. We are a regular vendor at the North Branch Farmers Market and have brought along a local author to read to the kids as often as possible.

If you are an author and you have a copy of a book available to send for us to review, that really helps us to consider if it's a good fit for our customers. Our space is currently not huge, so we have to be really mindful about choosing books that will spark interest in our customers.

What's coming up for New Book Joy?

We are in the process of designing more curated boxes that we will be launching in the very near future. We believe these one-of-a-kind boxes will bring extra JOY to anyone who receives them, since they are individualized for specific holidays and moments in people's lives. We will be including various goodies from many local small businesses too! Furthermore, we are planning on incorporating several more on-the-road events throughout the year, as well as host new bookish events at our booktique. Having all types of readers of all ages at these events will enhance our goal of engaging in conversations through books, no matter how big or small! We are hoping to keep growing as a destination shop, both in

person and online! It does not matter if you live in the area or in another state, we would love to spread the JOY of books and reading with everyone!

What is your social media?

FB - <https://www.facebook.com/NewBookJoy>

IG - <https://www.instagram.com/newbookjoy/>

TW - <https://twitter.com/newbookjoy>

TIKTOK - <https://www.tiktok.com/@newbookjoy> 🌟



ALLISON BAXTER has taught high school ESL for 28 years. She has a short mystery, "On Ice," in *Mystery Magazine* and flash fiction, "Faith," published in *Meaningful Conflicts: The Art of Friction*, an OCWW Anthology. She has a short story coming out in February in the *Guppies, Sisters in Crime* online anthology, *Gone Fishin': Crime Takes a Holiday*. She is the secretary of Sisters in Crime Chicagoland and lives with her family and Max, a basset doodle who is so cute that no one cares that he eats their slippers.

Illustrator's Tips

DRAWING AND WRITING by Molly Cranch

What makes SCBWI so unique is that it is made up of a diverse group of authors and illustrators, connected through a shared love of picture books. The world of publishing can be fraught with challenges such as never-ending revisions, rejections, and long wait times. SCBWI provides an invaluable network of support and education for anyone, at any stage in the creative journey. My first book was published in July of 2024, and I am excited to share a few tips that I have learned along the way.

Generally speaking, writers and illustrators are viewed as creatives who use different tools, techniques and processes. However, an author-illustrator has to balance the two disciplines. When I first started out, I lacked confidence as a writer. My background is in the visual arts, having studied art in college, taught art for many years, and exhibited paintings in galleries. At the time, I thought that there was only one way to develop a story - write first and illustrate later. I often found myself sitting in front of a blank computer screen, wondering where to begin.

At one point, I decided to apply my knowledge as an educator to the process of writing and illustrating picture books. Having taught art in early childhood classrooms for many years, I know that drawing is an integral part of writing development. One reason for this is that drawing helps to develop the motor skills necessary for writing. The shapes and lines utilized in drawing form the basis of letters later on. Another reason for this is that drawing supports communication and expression. Children may express feelings, reveal memories, and even construct narratives through the use of visual symbols in drawing. I have observed many times a child verbally narrate an action scene as they draw it, working out the story through drawing. For example, a child might draw a scene of a knight battling a dragon. They might draw the knight, and then show the movements of the knight battling the dragon in a series of layered lines or marks. There is a sense of total immersion in the action of the story through the process of drawing.

So, how does all of this apply to illustration? If drawing is the foundation for writing in young children, then why can't

that also be true for adults? What if I were to flip the process from writing to drawing, to drawing to writing? There are so many ways to arrive at a story. At the very least, it is a process worth exploring and perhaps adding to my toolbox.

Since I completed my first picture book dummy, I have written and illustrated several more, experimenting with combinations and approaches to illustrating and writing congruently. I am sharing some illustration tips that you can use to support the development of a narrative, either in the form of a narrative illustration, a wordless narrative, or a fully realized picture book dummy incorporating both writing and illustration. These strategies are presented sequentially in the order that I use them to construct a story, but certainly you can use any of these strategies in any manner.

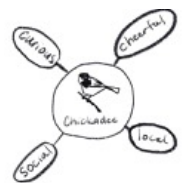
SKETCHBOOKING

The sketchbook is probably the illustrator's primary tool for inspiration and inquiry. Use a sketchbook to draw, diagram, label, record and write about objects, people or places in your everyday life. I love to take nature walks and I always bring a sketchbook along. Perhaps you love to cook, and want to sketch the ingredients you use in your favorite meal. Or, maybe you want to practice a skill such as drawing people. My advice is not to overthink the sketchbook practice, just draw and explore.



MIND MAPPING

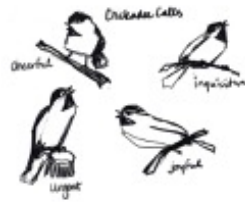
A mind map is a visual representation of information that centers around a central idea or image, with ideas branching out. It is a form of brainstorming that allows you to show relationships, organize information and expand on ideas. Look through your sketchbook to see if there is a common theme or a drawing that really stands out. Think of a descriptive word or image related to that drawing, and build a mind map around that.



Illustrator's Tips

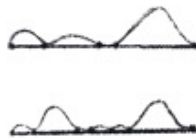
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Is there a character emerging from the mind map? Take some time to think about your character. Interview your character. Think about where your character lives, how your character spends their day, and who your character is surrounded by. Sketch the character in different viewpoints. Sketch the character showing a variety of emotions.



TIMELINE

By this time, you may have formulated a story around your character. Create a timeline of your story using text or image. Keep it simple. Work out a few different variations.



STORYBOARDING

A storyboard is a sequence of images that maps out the scenes in the story. I typically start with a loosely sketched version in my sketchbook, whereby I am drawing with simple shapes and lines. I might also add descriptive words, phrases or dialogue. Next, I create a storyboard with sticky notes. In this version, I might add more details to the drawings or refine the wording. This is a good time to consider where the text may go on the page. I may also move the sticky notes around or switch them out, considering sequencing and page breaks. Once I am confident with the sequencing, then I move to the final dummy.



DUMMY

While I am working on the storyboarding, I am also developing the manuscript with my critique group. Once this is complete, I combine the writing and illustration in a final picture book dummy.

The bulk of this process relates to generating ideas and working out details. On occasion, I find myself wanting to jump ahead, skipping important development steps such as sketchbook exploration or character development. Try to resist doing this! I know that when I fully engage in the process of developing a story, finding joy along the way, then the story benefits. In my experience, it can take a year or more to complete the process of moving from idea generation to completion of a picture book dummy. The methods you use to develop your story is a matter of personal choice, and hopefully you can find strategies that build upon your own strengths. Whether you consider yourself an illustrator, an author, or an author-illustrator, I hope that these strategies are helpful!

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MOLLY CRANCH is a children's picture book author-illustrator, artist and arts educator. She has a BFA in painting and a K-12 certification in Art Education, and is currently pursuing an MA in Illustration from Falmouth University. Her nature-inspired paintings have been exhibited in galleries and museums, and her first picture book titled *Hide-and-Seek* released in 2024.

Where can we find you?

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- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/mollycranch>
- Etsy: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/MollyCranch>

Writer's Tips

WRITER'S TIP #12: RHYTHM AND SOUND

by Patricia Hruby Powell

Being conscious of rhythm and sounds could take your writing to a higher level. I suggest you use verb-rich passages that evoke the subject you write about. Read aloud what you write, with awareness of the rhythm. Develop the rhythm to your satisfaction. This is particularly true when writing in verse, but also helpful for writing prose.

Here are a few exercises to help you to develop rhythm and sound awareness in your writing.

EXISTING POEMS AS TEMPLATES

Let's try something concrete. Nursery rhymes are the starting point of the literary canon—that elusive list of great Western literature which includes the Bible and Shakespeare. Hearing and reciting nursery rhymes introduces us to language and supports reading skills. (I hope you're reading nursery

rhymes to your children).

You might try using a nursery rhyme as a “template” to write a poem. Consider:

Jack be nimble. Jack be quick. Jack jumped over the candlestick.

Using the rhythm and the same vowel sounds I came up with this while walking my dog (which is a great place to let your mind run free; and then you might harness that free-thinking to serve your needs). Consider this:

Ode to Weight

Zack's not skinny. Zack is thick. Zack won't diet and won't get sick.

It's not a great poem, not as good as the nursery rhyme, but it gives you an idea of how you can write a little poem. Or verse. Keeping the stressed syllables of the original is important as is shown here:

*Jack nim Jack quick Jack ov can stick
Zack skin Zack thick Zack di won sick*

Lined up this way you can see the same sounds in each ditty. They either rhyme or use the same short a or the short i sound.

Try simply using the rhythm (and the one rhyme) of Jack Be Nimble to create a poem:

Night is fallen. The stars are bright. Make a wish and hold it tight.

Try *Hickory Dickory Dock* or *I've Been Working on the Railroad*, or *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. I'd love to know what you come up with.

Perhaps you'd like to use a higher-toned poem, such as Emily Dickinson's¹:

I'm nobody! Who are you?

Are you nobody, too?

*Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell.*

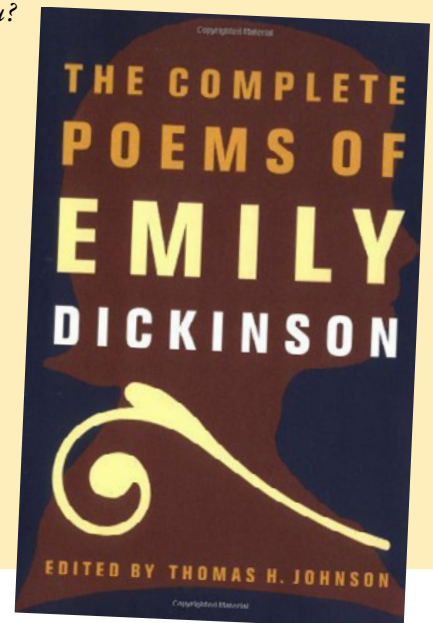
*They'd banish us, you
know!*

*How dreary to be
somebody!*

How public, like a frog

*To tell your name the
livelong day*

To an admiring bog!



¹Poem I.I (page 21) in: Higginson, T. W. & Todd, Mabel Loomis, ed. *Poems by Emily Dickinson: Second Series*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891.



Writer's Tips

I do that with a poem in *Duck Duck Goose* (Astra 2026). Here's an unedited version:

Pair o' Ducks, (Goose Speaking)

*I'm a duckling. Who are you?
Are you a duckling too?
Then we're a pair o' ducks—don't tell.
They'd be jealous if they knew.*

*How dreary are those goslings—
How common to be geese
To honk your name the livelong day,
And never be at peace.*



Many readers will identify the well-known Dickinson poem by reading my *Pair o' Ducks*. For those who might not, the original will be credited in the back matter of the book. The child reader might not get the sound joke of “pair o’ ducks” but the adult reader probably would. And it’s possible that my editor will nix this poem. We’ll see.

RHYTHM MUST SUIT THE SUBJECT

You want the rhythm to evoke the subject that you write about. I write about the great dancer/ choreographer in *Cave of the Heart: A Story of Martha Graham* (Chronicle 2026).



*Exhaling, she threw her head into her arms
while curving deeper,
dropped to her knees
hinged forward
dropped her head to the ground
twisted her body
clenched her fists
prostrate.
Overcome.*

Martha Graham’s choreography and dance technique is known for its deep anguish. Breathing is an important aspect of any movement, and all-important in Graham’s technique. As we know, verbs are all-important in writing, maybe especially when writing about dance, athletics, and action.

Threw, hinged, twisted, clenched show the percussiveness of the Graham movement. *Exhaling, curving, dropped* show the necessary release required after all that tension. To dance this passage you must breathe. You must exhale on the contracting muscles and inhale on the release. The line indents help the reader to read it as I want it read. So, the reader breathes or pauses in the “right” places, just as the



Writer's Tips

dancer must exhale, then inhale in the right places. I hope the passage breathes, as I intend it to.

The same verbs mentioned above suggest the action of their sounds, or are onomatopoeia: *threw, hinged, twisted, clenched; curving, dropped*. Try doing the action as you speak each word in the passage.

I'm a Graham trained dancer, so I execute the movement in order to compose the words. Furthermore, I concentrate on the emotions that the movement evokes in me. I hope you can feel the anguish of this woman, throwing her head into her arms, lowering to the ground, slowly, perilously, aching, until she finds release and comfort in the floor. My attempt is to make the movement come to life, showing the daring, courage, and determination of executing it.

Your expertise will feed the subjects you write about. Action is important. I've read that Charles Dickens kept a mirror at his writing desk to watch himself enact his characters. He'd find words to describe his facial contortions and body gestures, in order to show his character to his reader. It's a great practice. Take it one step further and you're up moving around your writing area. Isadora Duncan's movement is both lyrical and powerful like the ocean. When writing about her, I use the rhythm of waves:

*Isadora gazed upon a blooming flower,
the flight of a bee,
at California poppies waving in the breeze.*

*The child skipped under the clouds
to the rhythm
of ocean waves.
She'd awakened the dance in herself.*



Somehow the 'b' and 'p' sounds like waves bursting from the ocean, a pop of sprinkling salt water, that helps along my visual of being at the seaside. Each line, due to its rhythm, feels like a new wave dissolving into the next wave, as does each stanza.

I don't analyze these thoughts before writing. But I set myself at the seaside, (a virtual seaside), and feel the movement of a wave, and this informs my writing.

PROSE OR VERSE?

Some of us consider in what form we'll write a manuscript. It seemed clear to both Lesa Cline-Ransome and me how we would each write *One Sunday Before Sundown: The Day an Average Joe Met Ella Fitzgerald* (Bloomsbury 2026). Lesa would write the passages about Ella Fitzgerald, a worldly jazz singer—an artist—in verse. I would write about the rural young white man in prose.

*Ella floated
past the last of the crowd
and stepped
onto the quiet
of the waiting bus
heading to Kansas City*

*In a sleepy town hundreds of miles from Chicago, Joe
stepped out of the Arcola Presbyterian Church into the spring
sun.*



Writer's Tips

Ella's passages are divided into line breaks and stanzas. Joe's passages are divided into sentences and paragraphs and are punctuated with periods and commas. The difference of appearance on the page, as well as the sound of the read lines, give distinctive character to each voice.

Ella's lines seem to *float* as does her music. The lack of punctuation increases that floating sensation. The internal rhyme, past the last is a poetic device which enhances the musicality of the line. *The quiet of the waiting bus* calms us exactly as Ella is calming herself.

Joe's prose is smooth, and also quiets us, in a *sleepy town* far from raucous Chicago which Ella is leaving behind. Ella *stepped* and now Joe *stepped*, showing the similarity of being amidst their vastly different lives. Both forms are rhythmic. Both use sound to convey meaning.

MORE ABOUT RHYTHM

I don't generally analyze the rhythms I use, but some brainier writers do. We've probably all heard that Shakespeare used iambic pentameter because the iamb is like human speech:

da DUM da DUM da DUM

The pentameter means there are five metric feet. Here's the opening of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

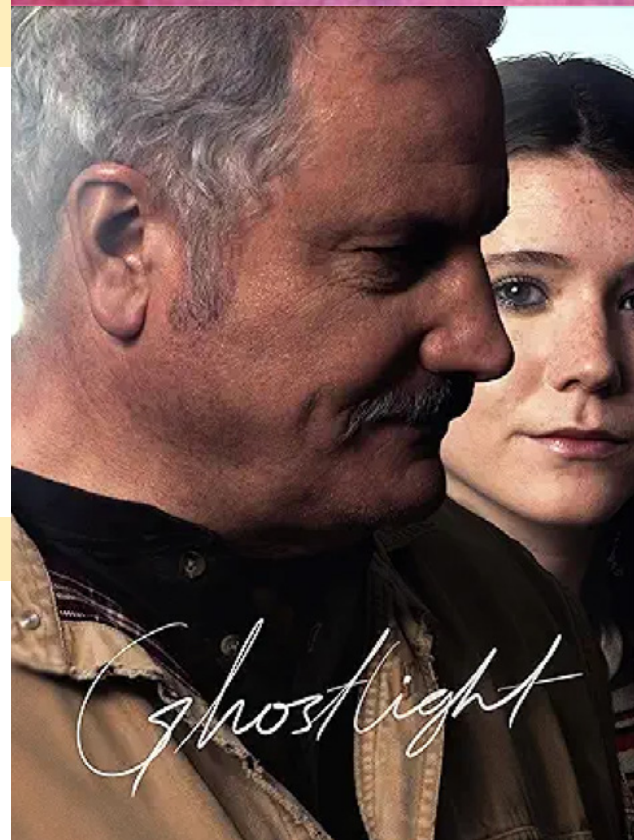
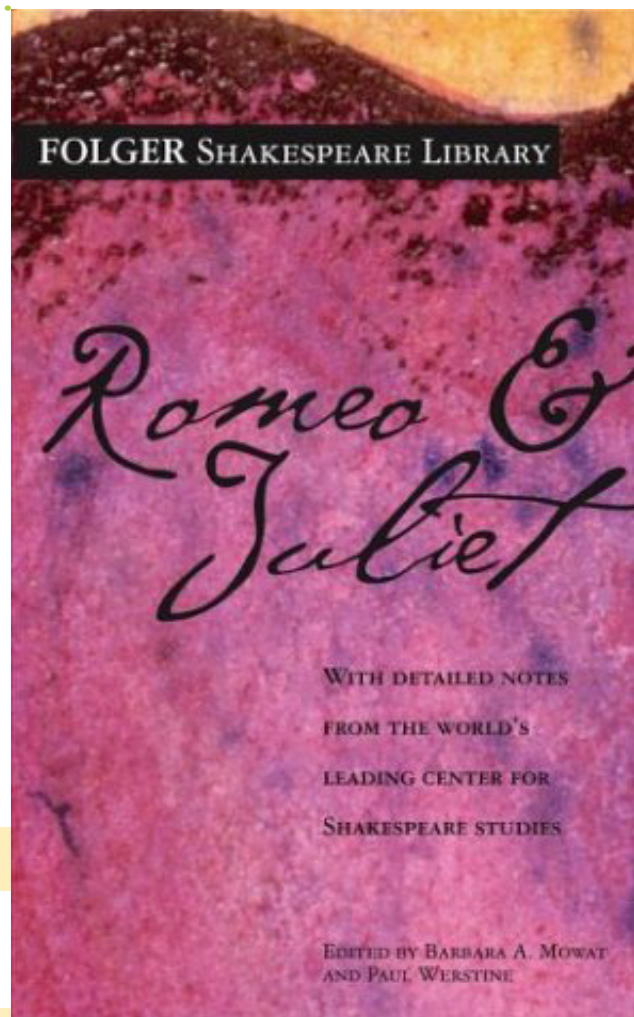
da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

TWO HOUSE -holds, BOTH a LIKE in DIGnity.
in FAIR verON -a, WHERE we LAY our SCENE.
from AN -cient GRUDGE BREAK to NEW MUtiny
where CI -vil BLOOD makes CI -vil HANDS unCLEAN.

That's how I parse the passage. Does it parallel human speech? Maybe. But there's another explanation in the Amazon Prime/AMC 2024 movie, *Ghostlight*, about a construction worker suffering a family trauma, who is lured into a community theater production of *Romeo and Juliet*. He comes to understand that the iambic foot imitates the human heart. Now, that speaks to me.

da DUM da DUM da DUM

Check out the movie—great writing, acting, directing and a wonderful teen actor. *Watching* a story is a way to learn story-making, as well as immersing yourself in rhythm and sound. Try writing in iambic pentameter.



Writer's Tips

Fine writing comes about, in part, by reading great writing now and then.

That's a quick attempt at writing in iambic pentameter. I used the opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet* as my template, rather than counting stressed and unstressed syllables. It seems a lot easier to me. A lot more intuitive.

READING GREAT LITERATURE

I don't always read great literature, but I happen to be reading *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson, which is indeed great literature. It's an adult book about a child and her grandmother living on a small island in the Gulf of Finland. It's a book to love and to learn writing from.

Here's a passage when Grandmother's false teeth have just fallen out into the peonies and the girl springs into action:

She dived beneath the flowering roof of the garden and crept among green stalks and stems. It was pretty and mysterious down in the soft black earth. And there were the teeth, white and pink, a whole mouthful of old teeth.

The rhythm is like waves, like a heartbeat, and actually begins in iambic pentameter.

She dived beneath the flowering roof of the garden

You can feel the action: *dived* and *crept*. It's not easy to differentiate the substance from the rhythm and sound when analyzing it. But we, the reader, have been where the child has been in the *soft black earth*. It brings us to our child self. It was *pretty and mysterious*. And then *the teeth, white and pink*, almost pretty until *a whole mouthful of old teeth*. A nightmare for an older person. False teeth, a complete set, that might sit in a glass at her bedside!

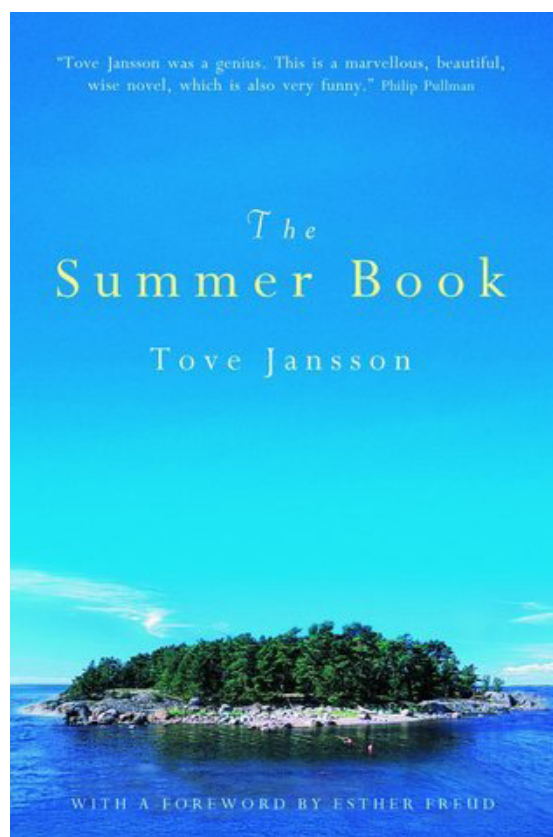
In another passage, Grandmother wakes early to look for the "long-tailed ducks."

...the whole island was covered with fog, and there was that special early May silence near the sea. The branches of the trees dripped water, clearly audible in the silence. Nothing was growing yet, and there were patches of snow in sheltered places, but the landscape was brimming expectation. They were called scolders, because their cry is a steady, chiding chatter, farther and farther away, farther and farther out.

The rhythm flows smoothly, until it begins to chop with the words: *steady, chiding, chatter*, and then the words drift away just like the sound *farther and farther away, farther and farther out*. The substance is in the sound.

You hear: *the trees dripped water, audible in the silence*. We see the patches of snow and nothing growing, and then Jansson hits us with the essence of early spring: *brimming expectation*.

If we read great writing, without even necessarily studying it, it grows inside of us, making us better writers. ✨



PATRICIA HRUBY POWELL, is the author of the award winning *Josephine: The Dazzling Life of Josephine Baker*, *Lift as You Climb*, *Loving vs. Virginia*, and *Struttin' With Some Barbecue*, all Junior Guild Selections. Her forthcoming books include *Cave of the Heart*, *Duck Duck Goose*, and *One Sunday Before Sundown*. Visit her at talesforallages.com or send your verse samples to phpowell@talesforallages.com

Mentor Texts

FRESH PERSPECTIVES by Rickie Le

It's all too often where I come to my desk, sit and look at the computer screen, hands on the keyboard, with no movement. I'm frozen in the sense where I have no clue on what I want to say or what I want to talk about! It can be difficult finding a subject you want to write about. Sometimes you need fresh perspective from others around you. Sometimes you may need to look within yourself.

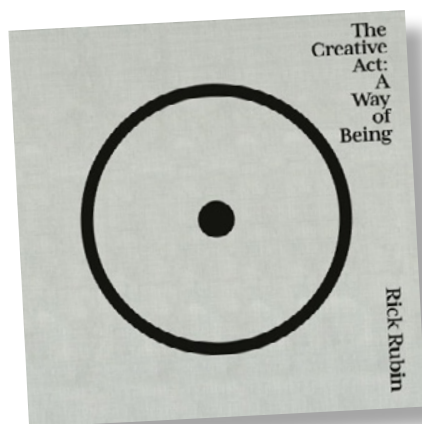
The following books have taught me to look at the world in different ways. They are a mix of picture books, alongside books whose main objective is to challenge us to think more creatively.

THE CREATIVE ACT: A WAY OF BEING

by Rick Rubin

This book gave me a different perspective and relationship with creativity. How it's everywhere, but you have to slow down and look. To find themes to write about in my work, I delve down deep and ask myself. *"What do I want to write about? What themes are important to me?"*

Rick Rubin's work has taught me to become more conscious of my feelings in the day to day and to be more present in what I am feeling. For example, I'm sitting at the TV, and the scenes that always make my eyes tear up are those of families uniting. There's something there that makes me cry. Happy tears, of course. It probably affects me so much because of old wounds I carry. Writing can be a means of a healing journey, and I tend to want to look into why these scenes cause such a reaction.



FIND YOUR ARTISTIC VOICE: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO WORKING YOUR CREATIVE MAGIC

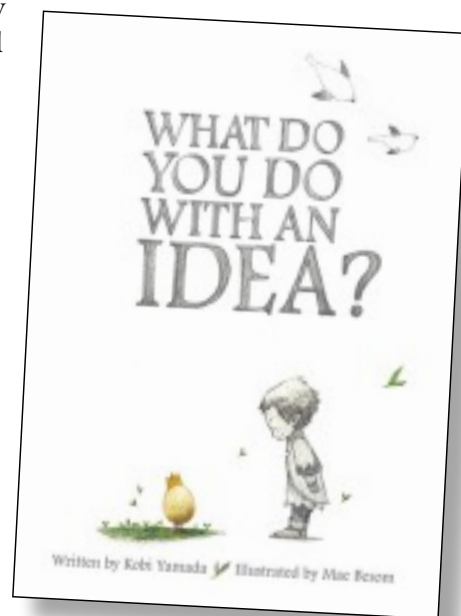
by Lisa Congdon

Each person has a collection of symbols and themes that are prevalent in their work. But how do they get there? In Lisa Congdon's *Find Your Artistic Voice*, you are working as an artist to convey your own version of the truth. Making work with deeply held ideas about the world around you. Each person has their own unique lens to offer to the world, which in turn makes the world a much more interesting place to be in. What symbols do you tend to use in your work, and why do you do so? You can find out so much about yourself.

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH AN IDEA?

by Kobi Yamada and Mae Besom

This book is so wonderfully illustrated, and what takes my breath away is how it leaves you feeling. That if you follow an idea, you can make it come to life. It doesn't matter how big or how small the idea is. It's the fact that you're doing a very human thing, which is to create. The illustrations are created with rich textures from pencil, with pops of watercolor to emphasize how bright and hopeful an idea can be. The expressive pencil drawings pair so perfectly with the narrative. This book leaves me feeling hopeful for my own ideas to come to life, and to nurture them no matter what form they come in.



Mentor Texts

POKKO AND THE DRUM

by Matthew Forsythe

From the lead designer of Adventure Time, Matthew Forsythe delivers a humorous story about a frog that embraces the beat of their own drum. In this story, Pokko the frog is given a drum from their parents. Their parents have given Pokko many things before, many were mistakes, but there is something different about the

drum. Pokko is actually very good at drumming, and even attracts a group of like-minded animals to make music together. Eventually their parents find out how good Pokko is with the drum, and learn to accept things as they are. Which is something I'm actively working on doing myself.



The illustrations in this book have gorgeous rainbow undertones, achieved by many

layers of colored pencils and watercolors.

It ends up emitting a luminosity that is hard to not stare at. My favorite part of the book are the zoom-ins of the characters. They make me laugh, and are a good break from the multiple spreads of the emerald forest. Overall, the book has just the right amount of humor without going overboard.

RICKIE LE a web developer, is an aspiring children's book author and illustrator. She is currently querying agents and a picture book. She loves crocheting, biking, and eating pastries. Rickie lives in Northern Chicago with her dog Bruno and partner Jake.

THE TEENY WEENY UNICORN

by Shawn Harris

The Teeny Weeny Unicorn follows the story of a tiny unicorn, who lives in an extra large house with their extra large siblings. Throughout the story, the tiny unicorn feels as if their size inhibits their ability to play with their siblings. In fact, the tiny unicorn is so small, their siblings use the tiny unicorn as a pawn while playing chess. Eventually, the unicorn encounters a gnome who tells them that they have stepped on their car. To the gnome the unicorn was no longer teeny, but gigantic in comparison. In the end, Harris leaves us with a message, that no matter how big or small you are, you are just the right size.

The book's illustrations are created with oil pastel. The pastel strokes are so loose, the illustrations can look abstract at times; however, they deliver the right amount of context to be recognizable. Using pastel as a medium can give the work an ethereal feel at times, and this works well as the main focus of the book are mythical creatures. ✨



Season's Crop

by Jenny Wagh

Board Books

FICTION

Chef's Kiss

By Jeffrey Burton
Illustrated by Denise Holmes
Little Simon, December 2024
ISBN: 9781665962070

Play Games With Me

By Kat Chen
Illustrated by Lorraine Nam
RISE (Penguin Random House),
November 2024
ISBN: 9780593887196

Picture Books

NONFICTION

Bats Beneath the Bridge

By Janet Nolan
Illustrated by Emily Cox
Albert Whitman & Company,
September 2024
ISBN: 9780807505625

How to Explain Robotics to a Grown-Up

By Ruth Spiro
Illustrated by Teresa Martinez
Charlesbridge, September 2024
ISBN: 9781623543198

It Belongs to World: Frederick Banting and the Discovery of Insulin

By Lisa Katzenberger
Illustrated by Miss Diabetes
(Janina Gaudin)
Clarion Books, October 2024
ISBN: 9780063236677

Semillas de Cambio

By Jen Cullerton Johnson
Illustrated by Sonia Lynn Sadler
Lee & Low, October 2024
ISBN: 9781643797410

Picture Books

FICTION

Ava the Monster Slayer:

Sleepover Superheroes
By Lisa Maggiore
Illustrated by Ross Felten
Sky Pony Press, August 2024
ISBN: 9781510780927

Cows Can't Be Clowns

By Debra Daugherty
Illustrated by 1000 Storybooks
Harbor Lane Books, September 2024
ISBN: 9781963705041

Get Ready for Halloween

By Janet Nolan
Illustrated by Amy Zhing
Albert Whitman & Company,
September 2024
ISBN: 9780807528297

A Little Like Magic

Written & Illustrated by Sarah Kurpiel
Rocky Pond Books, October 2024
ISBN: 9780593697658

Marvelous Mismatched Witches

By C.D. White
Illustrated by Adeline Titzel
Creative Creature Publishing,
October 2024
ISBN: 9781735308364

Painting the Sky with Love

By Mary E. Haque
Illustrated by Tatiana Gardel
Feiwel & Friends, November 2024
ISBN: 9781250828606

Please Be OK: A Story About Addiction

By Diane O'Neill
Illustrated by Anastasiya Kanavaliuk
Albert Whitman & Co, October 2024
ISBN: 9780807552575

Who Took My Lollipop?

By Doug Cenko
Illustrated by Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn
Feiwel & Friends, October 2024
ISBN: 9781250867582

Illustration by Sarah Tobias

FALL at the BIRDBATH



Season's Crop

Chapter Books

FICTION

Gone to the Dogs
(*Frankschool Mysteries* #3)
By Caryn Rivadeneira
Illustrated by Dani Jones
Red Chair Press, September 2024
ISBN: 9781643713601

Middle Grade

FICTION

Ellie & Kat, Time-Jinx Twins
By Carol Fisher Saller
Duckweed Books, September 2024
ISBN: 9781964301006

From Wonderland, With Love
By Jeffery Westhoff
Cover by Luisa Galstyan
Ringtale Publishing, November 2024
ISBN: 9798990455658

No Time To Waste
By Carolyn Armstrong
Carolyn Armstrong Books,
August 2024
ISBN: 9798218392376

The Oracle's Door
By Zetta Elliott
Illustrated by Purple Wong
Rosetta Press, September 2024
ISBN: 9781304362100

Stage Fright
By Wendy Parris
Delacorte Press, September 2024
ISBN: 9780593807996

Young Adult

FICTION

Kindling
By Sandra Macek
Snowy Wings Publishing,
October 2024
ISBN: 9781958051733 🌟

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Illustration by Sarah Tobias