

Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

WINTER 2024



illustrator in the spotlight:
Laura Smetana

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Illustrations by Laura Smetana



In This Issue

by Shirin Shamsi

I hope 2024 has started well for all of you, and continues to be a year of peace, health, and creative success. I'm happy to say that this issue of *Prairie Wind* will do away with the winter doldrums. The beautiful cover art by Laura Smetana and uplifting content will certainly inspire and motivate. Here are some of the delectable delights in store for you:

In **"Greetings!"** Our ever-effervescent Jenny Wagh 'Swiftly' shares a history of the many ERAS of our Illinois SCBWI region. It was way back in 1995 that our wonderful Esther Hershenhorn took the initiative to organize more local networks for SCBWI Illinois. We have come a long way since then, with many generous volunteers giving so much of their time and effort in serving our region. Now it's time for a new 'Era'—we need volunteers to fill these very important positions. The bright and vibrant Taylor Swift art was created by *Prairie Wind*'s very own designer, [Brooke O'Neill](#)!

SPOTLIGHTS

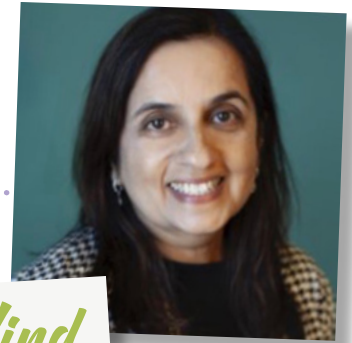
[Illustrator in the Spotlight](#) Laura Smetana shares her unique style using cut-paper, watercolor, and collage techniques in her work. Both as author and illustrator, Laura's love of nature comes through in her words and beautiful illustrations. Her creative journey is one which proves that inspiration comes in the most unexpected places.

In **[Tales from the Front](#)**, Janet Riehecky shares tips on *What to do When You Hit the Wall*. She identifies the causes of writer's block, details preventative measures, and offers sage advice, including some words of wisdom she heard from Madeleine L'Engle: Read at least one book on writing every month.

In **[Creative Sparks](#)**, Sarah Kurpiel gives us all hope by reminding us that anything is possible as she shares how a random doodle on her computer led to a forty-page published picture book! Pure inspiration.

FEATURES

In our Features, Debra Daugherty shares her first virtual author visit in **[My First #readaloud day Experience](#)**. Debra's carefully thought-out tips on planning, prepping, and practicing, ensure that things will run smoothly.



Kim Oclon's **[The Idea I \(Didn't Know I\) Carried](#)** highlights the impact a good teacher can have on a student. A powerful piece on how a book she read over twenty years earlier has impacted her writing style.

[Writing Through Grief](#) by Karin Blaski is profound and poignant as Karin shares her journey through loss, grieving and finding the strength to write again. A powerful and much appreciated article.

COLUMNS

Katie Otey shares her **[Voices of Change](#)** (*The More You Know: Why Learning About The Self-Publishing Industry Can Better Your Chances Of Becoming Traditionally Published*) journey through learning and navigating the tough business side of publishing and explains how the lack of diversity in children's literature led to the creation of her own publishing house, Phoenix Media & Books.

In **[Shop Around the Corner](#)**, Malayna Evans interviews Stephanie Kitchen, the owner of Logan Square's indie bookstore, City Lit Books. A former librarian, Stephanie dreamed of owning a bookstore—and her dream came true when she purchased City Lit after it closed down during the pandemic.



In This Issue

Learn all about this community-based bookstore with a poetry salon, multiple book clubs, its focus is on fun and inclusivity.

Our very own [Brooke O'Neill](#) provides [Illustrator Tips](#) through *Finding Artist Representation*. Her advice, “Draw, Learn, Repeat” is exactly what I’m hoping to focus on this year.

Karla Valenti offers us [Writer’s Tips](#), sharing creative ways to activate our storytelling by adding conflict.

Jamie Petras offers the invaluable advice to [Embrace Your Inner Child](#), citing Anne Whitford Paul’s book, *Writing Picture Books: A Hands-on Guide from Story Creation to Publication*.

In [Mentor Texts](#) *To Teach the Craft of Writing*, Susan Leopold stresses how important it is to read like a writer. She cites books by five Illinois writers as great examples of craft and technique.

As always, I’m so grateful to our inspiring, hardworking, and supportive *Prairie Wind* Team. I’m honored to be in your company. ✨

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*

Illustration by Laura Smetana



Greetings!

THE SCBWI ILLINOIS ERAS

by Jenny Wagh



“Dreaming about the day when you wake up and find that what you’re looking for has been here the whole time.” ~Taylor Swift



Greetings **FEARLESS** Creators,

SCBWI Illinois has gone through several **ERAS**.

In 1995 RA Emerita Esther Hershenhorn recognized that Illinois had an abundance of talented writers and illustrators that just needed to be connected. Esther helped found a unique collection of networks. Groups where new creators gathered with those more experienced to give and receive feedback, work on craft, and cheer one another on. Due to these 15+ Networks run by outstanding representatives, Illinois has a **REPUTATION** for great programming throughout the state. Additionally, remarkable teams help coordinate Prairie Writers and Illustrators Day, Spring Thaw, and Words in the Woods. These events provide craft, connections, and up-close opportunities with industry professionals. Each of these events have had ERAS of their own. Prairie Writer’s Day beginning at a Woodstock Retreat Center, to a single room at Dominican University, and now finding a home at the Wojcik Conference Center at Harper College. Spring Thaw has experienced several transformations as well, starting as a once-a-year gathering with a single speaker, evolving to the pitching perfection that it is today. And the Words in the Woods Team has created a truly magical program for 2024.

If you are a **LOVER** of SCBWI-IL programming, here are ways you can support us. Attend paid programs. They help keep us out of the **RED**. By supporting programs like our upcoming Words in the Woods, a ten-week online intensive April through July that culminates in an overnight retreat at Allerton Park and Retreat Center Saturday, July

13th to Sunday, July 14th. These larger paid programs help fund our offerings throughout the year. Second, purchase **Recordings by Request** for as little as \$10 per recording, these pay for the next season of speakers. Third, donations are always welcome, especially for our Diverse Mentorships and Initiatives. We are grateful for those who regularly contribute and help us provide amazing opportunities to attend conferences or build connections with industry professionals. Lastly, support us by volunteering for current programming or taking on something new and wonderful.

Deborah Topolski and I will be **EVERMORE** grateful for being a part of the SCBWI Illinois Regional Team. But in November of 2024, we will be retiring. I will be completing my fifth year of volunteering as Co-Regional Advisor and Deborah will be completing her tenth year. We would love to spend the next eight months passing on the **FOLKLORE** of the Illinois Region, and you can help create new **ERAS** for SCBWI-IL.

SPEAK NOW about how you want to be a part of the SCBWI Illinois Community. Shadow a current volunteer, start a new event, or share a position to lighten the load. Build friendships and exercise your creativity. [SURVEY HERE](#) will remain open until **MIDNIGHT** June 1st.

Prairie Wind designer, [Brooke O’Neill](#), inspired this Greeting. ✨



*“So, make the friendship bracelets, take the moment and taste it, you’ve got no reason to be afraid.”
~Taylor Swift*

Illustrations by Brooke O’Neill

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

Illustrator in the Spotlight

FINDING INSPIRATION AND JOY

by Laura Smetana

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

I am an author and an author/illustrator. I love working traditionally in cut-paper watercolor collage.

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

Ever since I was little, I loved drawing, painting, and making things. At school visits I always tell students that I have been creating books since I was a kid, then I took a break and used my creativity in different ways; first in a career in nonprofit communications and then as a preschool teacher. During the pandemic, my path circled back to writing for kids and I have to thank my son for that!

That first summer we spent a lot of time kayaking. One afternoon we went to a new lake—we marveled at birds, flowers, and fish, and explored an island, too. That night for bedtime stories I read my son a book I created in elementary school about a giraffe named Little Squiggle. Afterwards my son said, “Let’s bring Little Squiggle back!” I got a notebook, and we wrote the outline for *Little Squiggle’s Lake Adventure* based on our own adventure. The next day, we wrote the first draft together. Over the next year, I illustrated it with watercolor and digital ink. When the world opened up again, we had a masked launch event at our local indie bookstore, Frugal Muse Books.



To my surprise, more ideas kept flowing and I wrote *Ice Cream with Grandpa: A Loving Story for Kids About Alzheimer’s & Dementia* (beautifully illustrated by Elisabete B. P. de Moraes) which was inspired by the enduring relationship between my son and my dad, before and after he developed Alzheimer’s and vascular dementia. My dad died just a few weeks before the pandemic began, and I hope the book helps other families navigate dementia, aging, and loss. Then I started working on *My Love for You Is Like a Garden*, which was the first book I illustrated with cut-paper watercolor collage.

I always tell kids they have great ideas and that we all have stories to share—it doesn’t matter how young or old you are. Looking back, I would have never imagined my son’s suggestion to bring Little Squiggle back would bring me back to my childhood love of writing, illustrating, and making books. And for that I’m so grateful! I feel like I’m still at the beginning of my journey, and I’m so thankful to be part of this community and for all I’ve learned from SCBWI.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

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

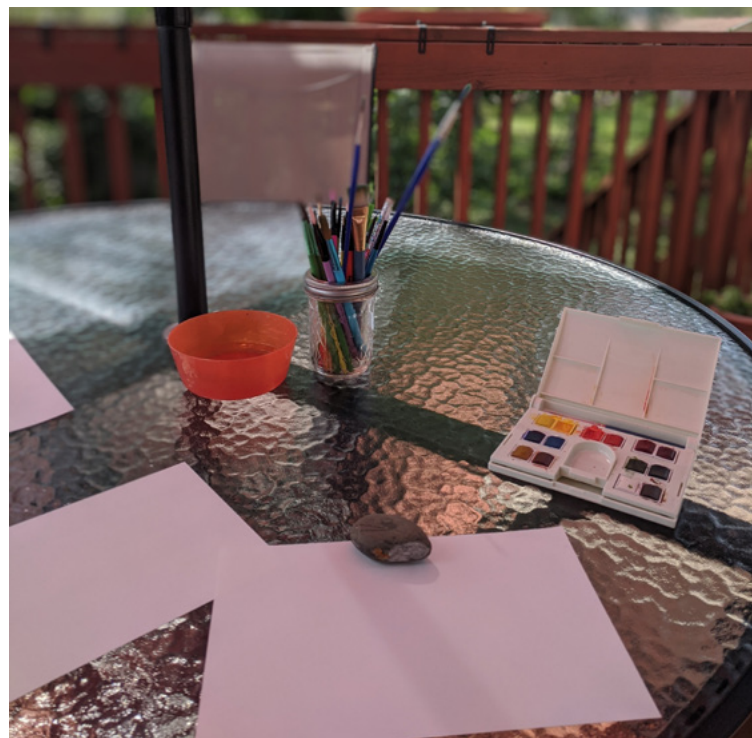
This cut-paper collage illustration of marigolds appeared in *My Love for You Is Like a Garden*.



My process starts with sketching the illustration on pieces of scrap paper, usually two sheets of my son's old homework taped together, so there is a clear front and back side.



Next I paint watercolor washes in the colors needed for each element in the illustration. The marigold collage has orange, green, and brown—so I paint one sheet of drawing paper in each of those colors. Once dry, I press them under a large book to keep them flat.



Then I carefully cut out each element in the sketch by color in the final collage.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

Next, I trace each element from the sketch onto the back of the corresponding watercolor wash. Each marigold bloom is traced onto the back of the orange paper, each leaf onto the back of the green paper, and so on.



Piece by piece, the elements are cut out of the sketch, traced onto the corresponding watercolor wash, and cut out again. This step can take several days to weeks to complete.



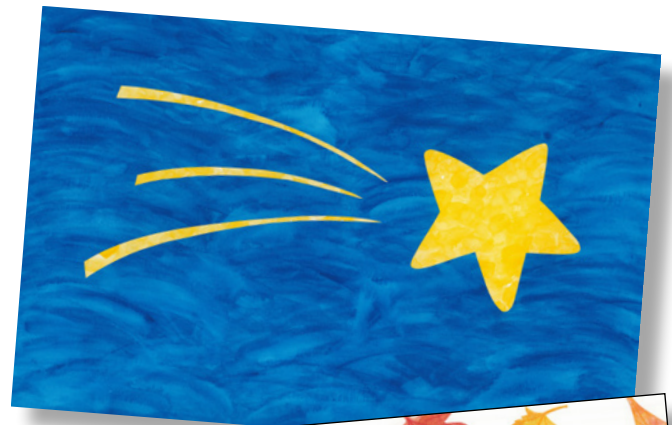
Then I place each element onto an 11" x 17" sheet of Bristol board and glue them into place with a glue stick. I recently discovered repositionable glue sticks that create an adhesive similar to a sticky note. This has been a game changer for me!



The final step is to scan the collage into the computer. Now that I use repositionable glue, I will often scan, reposition slightly, and re-scan to experiment with different compositions.

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

My cut-paper collage illustrations are whimsical with bright colors that evoke joy, and love. They also explore our connection with nature. I believe the more we understand and connect with the natural world, the greater our respect, appreciation, and care is for nature. Currently, I'm working on a book about the childhood joys of fall and another about the night sky that I hope will find a home.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

What does your workspace look like?

When it is warm outside, I love painting on the glass table on my deck surrounded by trees and flowers. Then I move inside to a little black children's desk that my son used for remote schooling. Here I sketch, cut, and collage (and paint on during the winter). I sit on a little stool and my knees reach the top of the desk—so it's not comfortable for long periods of time. But it's located in the heart of my home—between the living room and kitchen so I can create amongst all the action of family life.



I have another dedicated workspace filled with books, thank you notes from school visits, and family photos with a window that looks out into my backyard. It has a large desk and an adult size chair, but I use that space to focus on computer tasks. When it comes to creating book dummies, I like to sit on my bed to write, revise, and map out storyboards. In this picture, I'm collaging the final spread of *My Love for You Is Like a Garden* at my tiny desk!

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

Some of my favorites were written and/or illustrated by Else Holmelund Minarik, Arnold Lobel, Leo Lionni, James Marshall, Maurice Sendak, Marc Brown, and Tomie dePaola. I loved going to the library and it's still one of my favorite

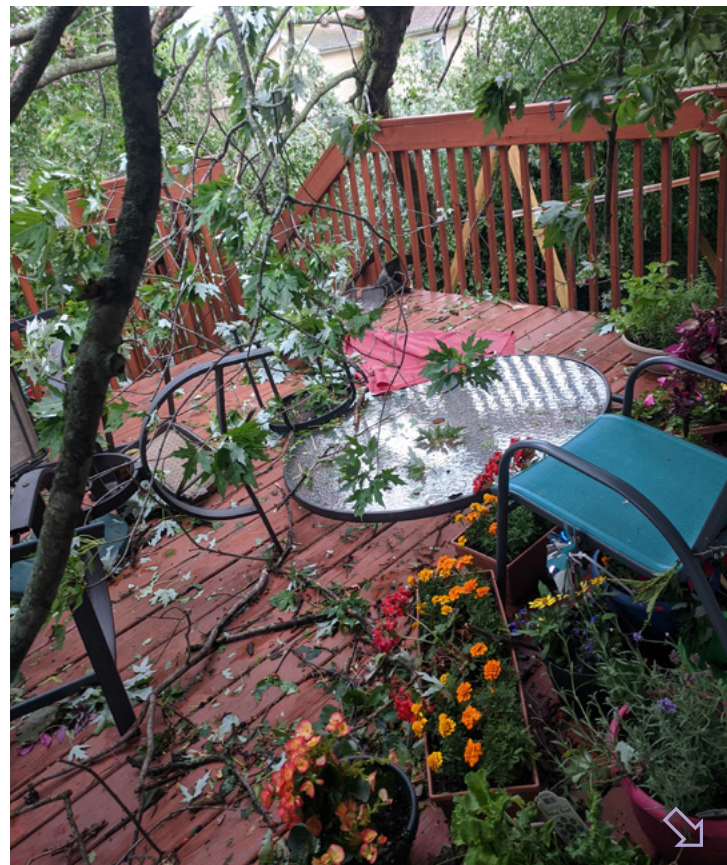
activities. Returning books on time was not my strong point, and I'm still working on that!

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

There are so many illustrators whose work I love and I'm always discovering new creators whose art fills me with awe and joy, so it's hard to choose! But some of the illustrators and picture book creators I admire are Oge Mora, Lois Ehlert, Andrea D'Aquino, Julie Flett, Eric Carle, Peter Sis, and Brian Pinkney.

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

The watering can in *My Love for You Is Like a Garden* is one of my favorites. On Father's Day in 2021, I began painting the watercolor washes for the book. Little did I know a tornado would rip through our community that night, sending a tree through our roof which resulted in a hole in our kitchen wall. The tornado caused severe damage to many of our neighbors' homes—leaving many uninhabitable. It also swept away a wall of trees in our backyard, a garden that was under them, and a green plastic watering can that my dad, who died the year prior, had given to me.



Illustrator in the Spotlight



After graduation, I saved up to study Mandarin Chinese at Tsinghua University in Beijing where I lived with a wonderful host family for a year. To pay it forward, my family hosted two high school exchange students—from Japan and Italy. It was a wonderful experience for us as a family and for my son to have “big sisters” that we have been fortunate to visit in the years since.

My dad used that watering can for years to water his garden and he gave it to me when he moved into assisted living. I inherited my love of gardening from him, so it was very special to me. A few days after the tornado, my husband got me a beautiful, blue-green metal watering can that became the inspiration for the watering can in the book. It was the first collage I finished after the tornado and to me it represents love, healing, and hope. Over the next year, while working on the book and repairing our home, friends, family, and strangers started bringing flowers and plants to help us replant our garden that was lost. Now whenever I water my garden I am reminded of their love, kindness, and generosity.

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

My dad was born in communist Czechoslovakia (present-day Slovakia) and fled to the U.S. after the Soviet Invasion in 1968. I spent my childhood surrounded by Slovak culture, language, and food. Some of my fondest childhood memories are summers I spent living in the 200-year-old farmhouse my dad grew up in. We slept on straw mattresses my grandmother made, gathered sticks to heat water for baths, and looked forward to daily adventures visiting with extended family and friends. Children’s books in English about Slovak culture, food, and history are few and far between, and I hope to help change that!

Another thing that may surprise people, is that I studied abroad in France and the Czech Republic during college.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

I find inspiration all around me—in nature, my childhood memories, my garden, daily walks, seeing the world through the eyes of my son, my Slovak heritage, and in everyday life experiences.

What three words best sum you up?

Curious, resilient, dreamer

Where can we find you?

Website: www.laurasmetana.com

Twitter: [@SmetanaLaura](https://twitter.com/SmetanaLaura) 🌟

LAURA SMETANA is an award-winning children’s book author and illustrator. She loves creating bright, joyful cut-paper watercolor collages inspired by nature. Her latest author-illustrated book, *My Love for You Is Like a Garden*, was recognized as a Kirkus Reviews’ Best Books of 2023. When she isn’t writing or painting, Laura can be found inspiring kids to create their own books at school visits. Laura lives with her husband and son in the Chicago suburbs. Visit her at www.laurasmetana.com.

Tales from the Front

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU HIT THE WALL

by Janet Riehecky

You're running along smoothly. The path is level, the trees smell like Christmas, and the sky is a feast of fluffy white clouds. The wind lifts your hair and cools the sweat on your face. You feel like you could run forever. Then you round a corner and SMACK. You collide with a wall. If this happened to runners over and over again, they'd get the message and quit. But we're writers. We don't care how many times we hit that wall. We keep trying again and again.

Anyone who has been a writer for over a week has experienced writer's block. Sometimes you only need to have been a writer for ten minutes. There are days I feel like I've spent more time blocked than writing. Over the years I've picked up a few tips on what to do when it strikes. I hope they will help you.

CAUSES

Sometimes it helps to know why you're blocked. These are some things that stop me:

- Procrastination. Writing is work and sometimes I don't want to put in the effort. I've found setting myself deadlines or rewarding myself for reaching a goal can help.
- Fear/insecurity. This hits me a lot. If this hits you, try reminding yourself of past success. Say something positive about your writing out loud. Don't compare yourself to others. Join a writers' group. Their support can mean all the difference in the world. I'm in two writers' groups, and those people are the BEST!
- Lack of planning/knowledge. Sometimes I need to do some research, whether it be setting, character motivation, how something works, background, etc. The research itself can be inspiring and get you writing again.
- Telling the wrong story. If your characters refuse to say the lines you give them, listen to them.

"There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong."
~H. L. Mencken

PREVENTION

- Write an outline and/or synopsis before you begin writing. This has never worked for me, but it does for some people. My mind can't seem to work out the details. I always know how a story ends. I'm just never sure how I'm going to get there.
- Create a writing habit. Write at the same time, in the same location every day. This sets up a conditioned response: when you sit down, you write.
- Stop writing in the middle of an interesting scene. When you come back to it, it should be easier to continue.

"There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed."

~Ernest Hemingway

ADD SETTING DETAILS

These can add life and depth to your writing—and keep you going. Ask:

- What is unique about the place?
- What do people do there?
- How does your main character feel about being there?
- What would be out of place there?
- What could go wrong there?

You can always take these details out, but putting them in gets you writing.

"How can there be so much difference between a day off and an off day?"

~Gary Larson

FIND INSPIRATION

- Look around. Look at the paintings or photographs on your walls. Thumb through a favorite book. Play some music. Go outside and take a walk. Look at the beauty of nature or the people on the street. Everything is pretty amazing, and maybe a word, a scene or a person will



Tales from the Front

fit in your story. I always eavesdrop on conversations in public. Sometimes people say just the thing I need.

- Talk to a friend or colleague about the story.
- Take a nap. I have had luck dreaming answers to plot problems. Sometimes I can put myself in an alpha state, that twilight when you are very relaxed but not quite asleep. In that state the left side of the brain quiets down and frees the creative right side. Make sure you keep your phone on the nightstand, so you can easily record your ideas right away. Try the Dictate app or a voice memo. For old school, keep a pad of paper and a pen close by.

“It has long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.”

~Elinor Smith

TRY A NEW ANGLE

This can mean a major rewrite, but sometimes it's worth it.

- Switch viewpoint. See what the story looks like from another character's point of view. For example, I've always thought *A League of Their Own* was told from the wrong viewpoint because Geena Davis' character didn't care enough about the success of the team.
- Switch the setting. New places can pop all kinds of ideas into your mind.
- Switch the focus. What would happen if you focused on a different element of your plot? What could happen if you focused on a new relationship for your main character?
- Do something unexpected. Have your main character do something out of character. Have a storm hit, especially a violent one. Have a package delivered. All kinds of things can be in packages, and a misdirected package can move a story along.
- Ask yourself, “What if . . . ?” and keep asking until you get something that works.

“Your intuition knows what to write, so get out of the way.”

~Ray Bradbury

WRITE ANYTHING

- Put down anything as long as it's words. Accept that the first draft is not going to be perfect. It doesn't even have to be anywhere close to perfect.
- Don't rewrite at all. (If you're really obsessive compulsive, you can fix typos.)
- Get to the end even if you leave huge holes in the story. They can be fixed.

“Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on.”

~Louis L'Amour

WRITE ANOTHER PART OF THE STORY

- Start in the middle or write the conclusion. Then ask yourself, how did my characters get here?
- Write your favorite part or the part you're most looking forward to.
- Write the cover letter/email you'll send when it's finished.

“When you face writer's block, just lower your standards and keep going.”

~Sandra Tsing Loh

EASE UP ON SELF-CRITICISM

- Notice when it appears. Talk out loud and listen to yourself. Would you speak that way to someone else?
- Use neutral or positive words when you talk about your writing.
- Remind yourself of past successes. Everything counts – I count winning an essay contest in 6th grade.

“A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing.”

~George Bernard Shaw



Tales from the Front

TALK ABOUT IT

- Tell the story to a friend. If that's too scary, tell it to your pet or a stuffed animal.
- Tell the story into a tape recorder or your phone. You don't have to play it back. Just talking can start the creative juices flowing.

"The scariest moment is always just before you start."

~Stephen King

RECHARGE YOUR ENERGY

- Get out and breathe some fresh air.
- Get some vigorous exercise.
- Eat chocolate.

"Jogging is very beneficial. It's good for your legs and your feet. It's also very good for the ground. It makes it feel needed."

~Charles M. Schultz

SPEND TIME WITH OTHER WRITERS

- Go to conferences. Dialoguing with experts helps with both identifying the problem and figuring out a solution. There are many wonderful people in SCBWI who know a lot about writing.
- Read a book about the craft of writing. I heard Madeleine L'Engle speak once, and she said she read at least one book on writing every month.
- Listen to people who have experienced and survived writer's block.
- Join a writers' group! This can't be said enough. They provide wonderful feedback. Also, sympathy helps!

"Writing means sharing. It's part of the human condition to want to share things—thoughts, ideas, opinions."

~Paulo Coelho

TRY ANYTHING

- Write a whole page of excuses why you can't write.
- Do housework. I hate housework so much that I'm glad to quit and start writing.
- Eat chocolate! (I know I already said this, but it really needs to be in here twice.)

Just make sure these things don't become procrastination.

"If it is stupid but it works, it isn't stupid."
(a Shin'a'in saying)

~Mercedes Lackey

I hope something in all of this has been helpful. I'll close with a story from Richard S. Prather:

"Years ago, I read (somewhere) the tale of the Stonecutter: An Observer watched the Stonecutter place his chisel atop a large granite boulder and strike the chisel with his hammer; nothing happened, and the Stonecutter hit the chisel again; and again. Finally, on the one-hundredth blow, the great stone cracked open. The Observer, realizing it was not the one-hundredth blow alone that cracked the stone, but that one plus the 99 previous smacks, drew some wonderful moral from this, I believe."

"What does it mean for writers? When the story won't budge, hit it again!"

~Richard S. Prather ✨

JANET RIEHECKY is the author of 132 books for children ranging from preschool picture books to junior high biography. She has been a network representative for SCBWI since 2007 and writes a dinosaur blog at dinosaurlady.com. For more information, please visit her web site at www.janetriehecky.com

Creative Sparks

by Sarah Kurpiel

In May 2023, my fourth author-illustrated picture book, *Snake's Big Mistake* (Greenwillow Books), slithered into the world. It's about a young snake determined to make a magnificent clay pot in art class. But when disaster befalls his clay creation, Snake makes a terrible decision that just might ruin his friendship with Turtle forever.

So where did this little story about big feelings get its start?

It all began with a random doodle. For as long as I can remember, I've loved drawing cute characters. As a kid, I filled countless sketchbooks and the margins of my school notebooks with expressive faces. In 6th grade, I turned mathematical symbols into a cast of silly characters. (I mean, who can forget my finest creations of that era: Multiplication Man and Decimal Dude?) So, it probably comes as no surprise that doodling for fun is a big part of my creative process today. That's how Snake came to be. One day, for no reason at all, I drew a "portrait" of a very serious snake sitting in a chair with perfect posture. It made me laugh. I knew I wanted to draw more snakes in the future and explore playful ways a snake might express emotions through body language—such as tangling into knots when upset. So, I included a sweater-sporting snake side-character in my picture book *Elephant's Big Solo* (Greenwillow Books, 2022). When it came time to make a follow-up book, who better to take the lead this time around than Snake, a character I already knew I loved to draw?

But a character is not a story. For that, I turned to a childhood memory. When I was in kindergarten, my class made little clay pots (nothing like the grand sculptures created by the kids in Snake's class!). I distinctly remember this project—how excited I felt to sculpt and paint my clay pot, how impatient I felt waiting for it to be fired in the kiln so I could take it home and show my parents, and how disappointed and embarrassed I felt when I saw my finished clay pot sitting alongside all the much better ones. At the end of the day, we each went up to the table at the front of the classroom to find our clay pot. I remember thinking: "Mine is so bad. Maybe I should take someone else's instead." Now, in the end, I did not. But what if I had? That's how the story got its start. This small event in my life was the source of so many big emotions



Creative Sparks

for me as a kid—both good and bad. The ups and downs of the experience felt like something plenty of kids could relate to, so I ran with the idea.

Once I had settled on the story concept, it was time for thumbnails. For *Snake's Big Mistake*, I started thumbnailing before writing the exact words. Pictures often lead me in new, unexpected directions. I thumbnail digitally in Photoshop using a Wacom tablet, so it's easy to make adjustments as I change my mind. Thumbnailing is the most important stage in my process because it's where the story first comes to life. I like to think about the book as a whole from the very start. In addition to the story pages, I thumbnail the jacket, case cover, copyright page, title page, and endpapers. That's what I did for *Snake's Big Mistake*. After the first round of thumbnails were done, I dropped them into a Word document template I use for all my stories. It has a 3-column table with a row for each spread. In the first column, I listed page numbers, in the second column I pasted a small screenshot of each thumbnail, and in the third column, I added the text. Then, I revised, revised, revised until it was ready to send to my agents for feedback.

Since *Snake's Big Mistake* was the second book in a two-book deal, my agents sent the thumbnailed draft to my editor. After she accepted the story, I created the full dummy and went through several rounds of revisions until I got the go-ahead to start the final art. About a year later, the book slithered into bookstores and libraries. What started as a random doodle on my computer had grown into a 40-page published book. ✨

SARAH KURPIEL is a librarian and self-taught picture book author/illustrator. Her stories are inspired by animals, nature, and moments of wonder in everyday life. Sarah is the creator of several picture books, including *Lone Wolf* and *Snake's Big Mistake* (Greenwillow Books). Her forthcoming book, *A Little Like Magic* (Rocky Pond Books), will be published in Fall 2024. Find her on Instagram ([@sarah.kurpiel](https://www.instagram.com/sarah.kurpiel)) or visit her website at sarahkurpiel.com.



My First...

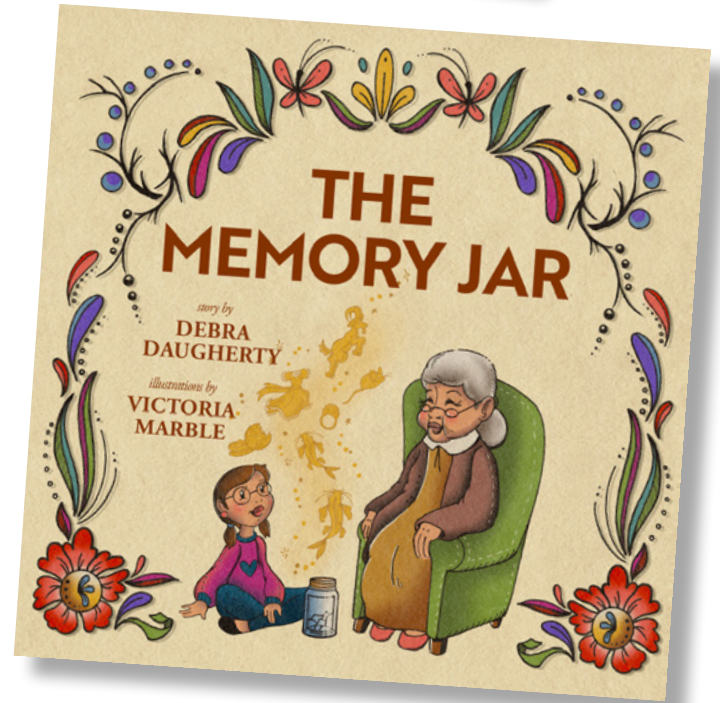
...#READALOUDDAY EXPERIENCE

by Debra Daugherty



I'm not superstitious, but when #ReadAloudDay fell on the thirteenth of October, a Friday, thoughts of everything that could go wrong haunted me. I've never done a school visit on Zoom. What if my Internet failed? What if my presentation couldn't be seen? What if I bored the children? My biggest concern was finding a school willing to have me as their guest author. Where do I start?

I contacted Melissa, the daughter of one of my high school friends. Melissa had messaged me on Facebook a photo of her daughter, Alexis, holding my picture book, *The Memory Jar*, with the caption LOOK WHAT CAME TODAY. I texted Melissa, asking, "Would Alexis' teacher consider a zoom session?"



Later that day, Melissa texted back. "Alexis' teacher loves the idea."

Caitlin Grootwassink, Alexis's third grade teacher at Ball Elementary in Chatham, IL, sent an email. "I am thrilled by your offer to read to our class! Is it possible for the other third grade classes to join our Zoom as well?"

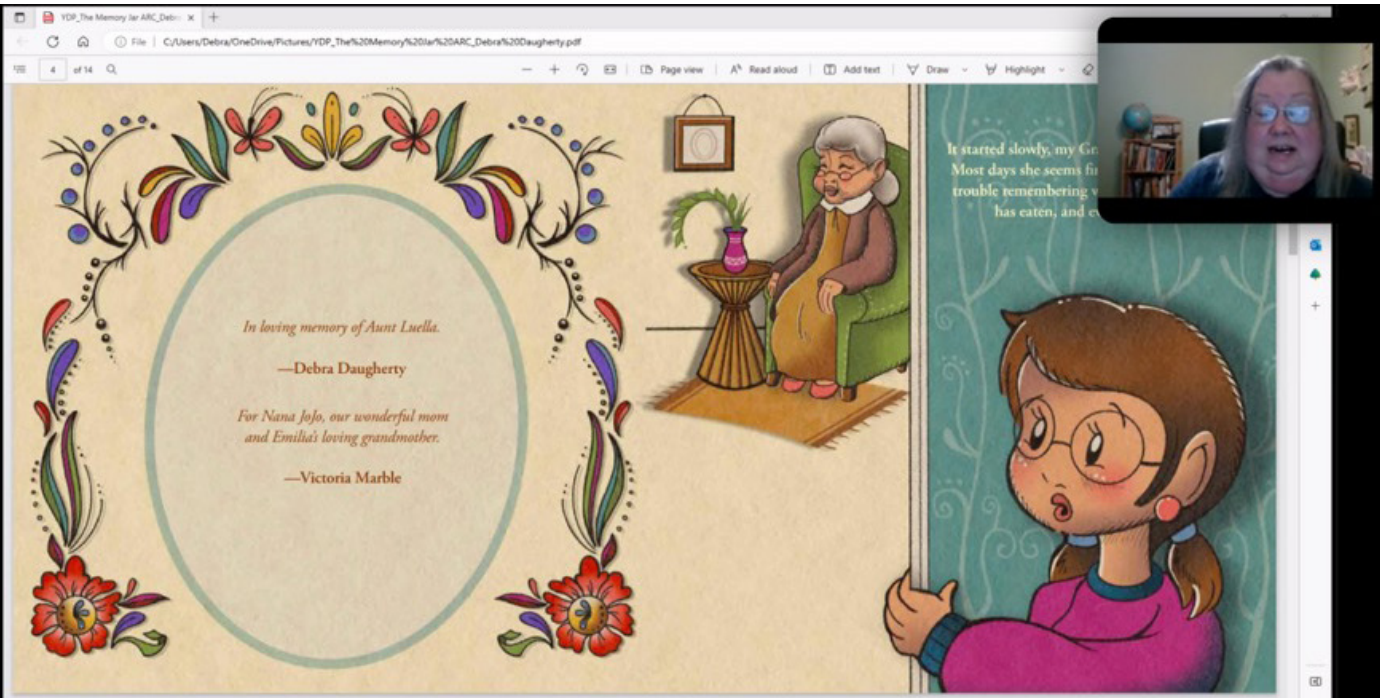
My reaction? Excited and nervous. How many third grade classes were there? I checked the school's website. Five! Trembling with trepidation, I agreed.

I mailed Ms. Grootwassink a copy of my book and two activity pages. One explained how to make a memory jar. The other suggested drawing a favorite memory of a grandparent or relative and then writing about that memory.

I made a PowerPoint presentation before my book was released in April, but had never used it. Will I be able to



My First #ReadAloudDay Experience



pull it up when needed? How will the slides look to those viewing them? I needed a practice run.

My niece, Tasha, offered to help. We scheduled a Zoom session and I gave my presentation.

What I learned—the screen shots of the pages in my book needed to be redone. Every one of them! My slides showed two book pages on one slide. I needed to show each book page separately.

My niece informed me that my image obstructed some of the slides. She snapped pics of the problem slides to explain what she meant.

Tasha helped me with my speech. She thought I should briefly explain what it means to have dementia and that I should talk more about myself and why I wrote this book. A teacher from another school reached out to me. Ms. Kelly Kaganich asked if I would read to her second grade class at Carlinville Primary School. My answer? “Yes!”

Like I did for Ms. Grootwassink, I sent Ms. Kaganich a copy of *The Memory Jar* and activity sheets.

I was to read to the third graders at Ball Elementary at 10:00 AM, and to the Carlinville Primary students at 12:45 PM.

I had sent the Zoom links to the teachers, but sent them again on October 12 as a reminder.

On #ReadAloudDay, I taped a note to my front door: ‘Zoom Meetings, Fri. Oct. 13. 10-11 AM, 12:30-1:30. I cannot come to the door or have visitors during those hours. Thank you.’

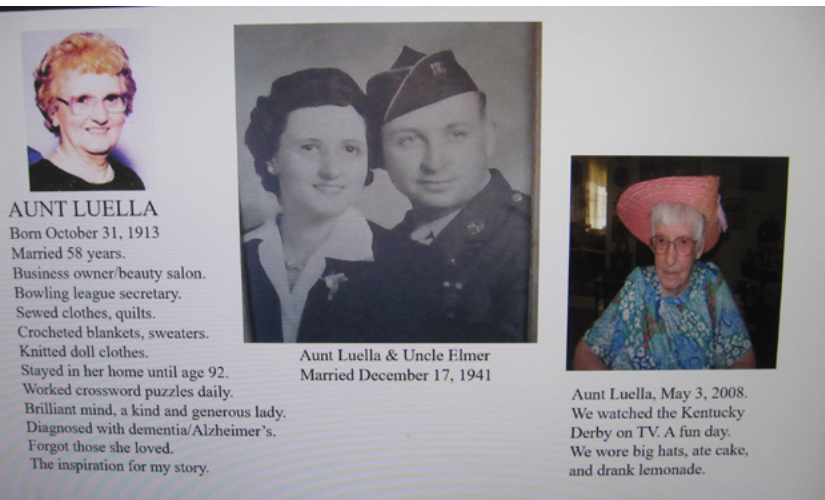
That took care of any interruptions at my door, but what if my phone rang while I was reading? I turned off the ringer. With cough drops and a glass of water on my desk, and fresh batteries in my hearing aids, I was ready. At ten, I started the first Zoom session. One by one, the Ball Elementary teachers joined in. I was disappointed that only one classroom was visible. The other classrooms logged in, but I couldn’t see the children or their teachers.

I heaved a huge sigh of relief when my PowerPoint opened. I began by thanking Alexis and her mother for introducing me to Ms. Grootwassink, and told the children that Alexis’ grandmother and I attended high school together. Since this school was in Chatham, I added some personal information. I mentioned that my writers’ group used to meet at the Chatham Library, and that my uncle and brother, both contractors, built many of the homes in Chatham. And then I read my book, hoping everyone could hear me and that I wasn’t speaking too fast.

My First #ReadAloudDay Experience

My slides included photos of my Aunt Luella, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I explained how she inspired my story.

My last two slides corresponded with the activity sheets I had sent. One was a photo of jars and ways to decorate them. The other showed how to draw and write about a favorite memory.



When I finished, the children applauded. I remember feeling relieved and happy. But my presentation wasn't over! Time for questions. What if I couldn't hear the children? What if I stumble over my words? What if I don't have an answer?

The teacher repeated each question, so hearing was not a problem. The children asked: "What is the hardest part about being a writer?" "What is your favorite book?" "When did you know you wanted to be a writer?" "Where do you find your ideas?"

I answered as best I could, then asked the children, "Where do you find your ideas when writing?"

One child said, "Video games," which brought laughter. Another said, "I look around and see something to write." I then asked, "How many of you plan to make a memory jar?" and "Who wants to be an author?" Everyone's hands shot up.

Had I inspired them to become authors?

Our time was up. I waved goodbye, sad that this session was ending.

Whew! One done. One to go.

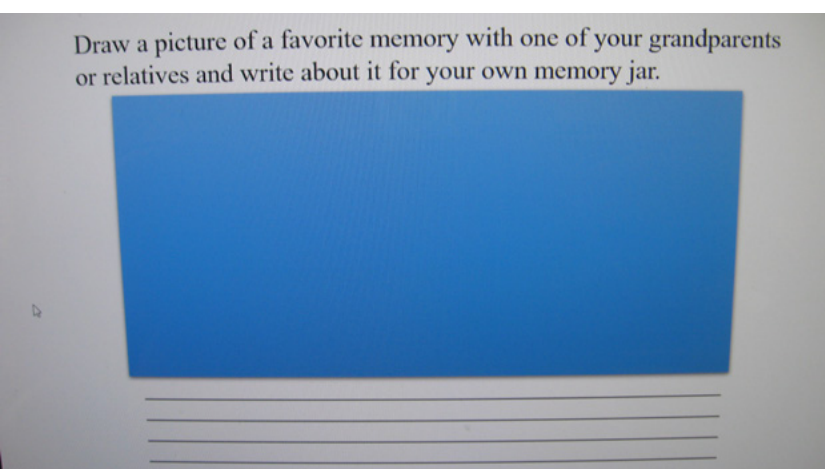
My session with Ms. Kaganich's second graders did not go as smoothly as my morning session. My PowerPoint took forever to load. My internet was spotty, probably due to a heavy downfall.

At last! My slides opened and I began. As before, I started with a small introduction, then read the story. When I finished, the children applauded, loud and long.

This group was small with only twelve students, but they were so enthusiastic. And they asked some great questions. "What is your favorite book that you wrote?" "How many books do you write a day?" "How did you know your aunt had dementia?" "When did you start writing?"

The question that caught me off guard and made me laugh was "How old are you?"

Before answering, I asked, "How old do you think I am?" "Fifty?"



My First #ReadAloudDay Experience

"No, but thank you," I replied.

When I told the children my age, they gasped, "Oooh!"
In my head, I heard, "Old."

Their final question: "Where do you get your ideas?"

After answering, I asked them the same question. Their hands shot up. I loved how excited they were to share.

Interacting with the children was the highlight of my day. Our time ended all too soon.

The next day, I emailed the teachers, thanking them for having me as their guest author. I added if the children had any more questions, to let me know.

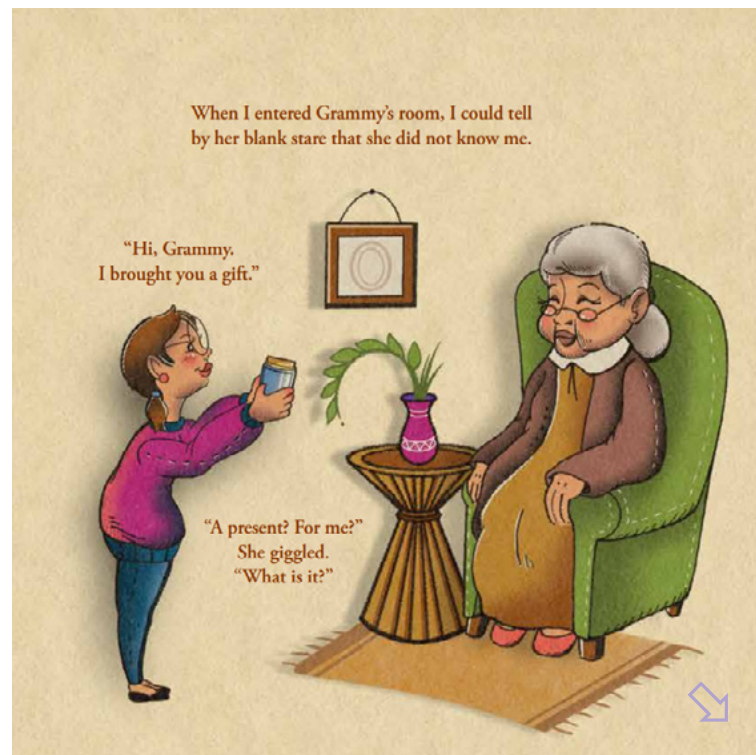
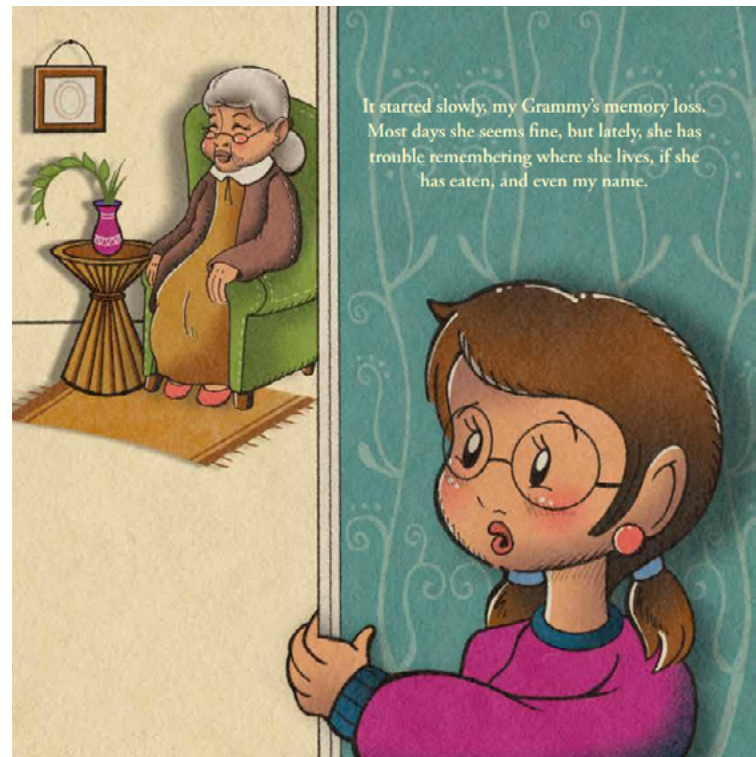
I also asked for feedback. "Could everyone hear, see, and understand me? Did I spend enough time on each slide? Did I answer the children's questions to their satisfaction? Is there anything I can do or change to make these presentations better?!"

Ms. Kaganich wrote back: "Thank you so much for sharing your book and your inspiration behind the story with us, as well as what it takes to become a published author. My class really enjoyed you being a part of our "Fun Friday" activities! Everyone could see and hear the story. I have a smart board that I was able to use to project you so that everyone could see and hear. I felt like you spent enough time on each slide and you answered everyone's questions well. I thought your presentation was terrific and I do not think there is anything that you need to change. Again, thank you so much for sharing your book. I personally enjoyed your stories about your aunt and love that you have dedicated *The Memory Jar* in her memory."

Ms. Grootwassink wrote: "The Zoom was not working in my room, but I think that was a problem on my end. The other classes were okay. The pace of reading and slides was great! I think you were able to answer all their questions. We loved how much you talked about editing. The kids are always resistant to doing that, and we talk about it a lot, but so much more powerful coming from you. It was a great presentation!"

(Since the Zoom wasn't working in Ms. Grootwassink's room, her students watched from another classroom.)

A few days later, I received a large envelope in the mail. Inside were letters from Ms. Kaganich's students. My first fan mail! I cherish these letters. The children's words touched my heart and made me laugh.



My First #ReadAloudDay Experience

One child wrote “Thank you for telling us about your ant. Was she born with that infection?”

Other favorite quotes from the children: “You are the best. I think your book is amazing.”

“It was fun for an author to read to us.” “Thank you very much for reading the memory jar. You are one of my favorite authors.” “I wish I was you! I really want to be a author like you!”

What did I learn from these Zoom visits?

Be prepared, but also be ready for surprises. Had I not been able to open my PowerPoint, I had my book nearby and would have read from it.

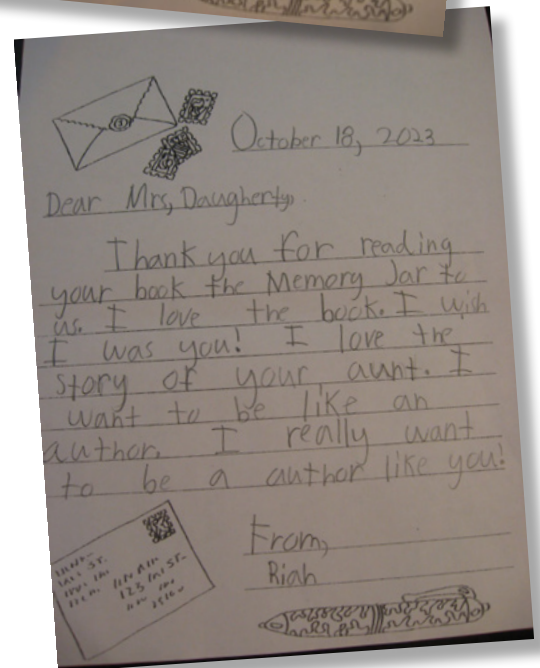
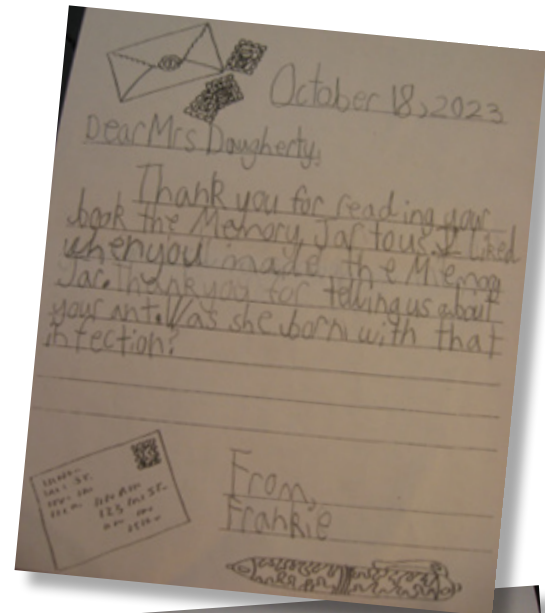
Expect the unexpected. There’s no way to predict what questions a child might ask.

When answering questions, don’t talk too long. Too windy speeches may bore and lose a child’s attention. Turn the tables. Ask the children questions. Get them involved. Engage with them. Interaction with the children was my favorite part of our virtual visits. Now that I’ve done Zoom school visits, I want to do more!

These twenty-six Illinois storytellers provided free virtual visits to Illinois schools for SCBWI-Illinois’ annual #ReadALOUDIllinois Day: Ruth Spiro, JS Puller, Diane O’Neill, Janice Harrington, Debra Daugherty, Srividhya Venkat, Sara Shacter, Diane Telgen, Sara Fujimura, Keir Graff, Carol Granick, Beth Kander, Lori Degman, Jenny Wagh, Fiona Cook, Barbara Binns, Fernanda Valentina, Karla Clark, Tiffany Washington, Janet Nolan, Arianna Brooks, JB Frank, Lisa Sukenic, Karen Su, Bibi Belford and Reese Eschmann!

Thanks to a SCBWI PAL grant, one of these authors will be paid to give a half-day school visit to a participating school.

The winner of the \$500 grant for an in person author visit is Carlinville Intermediate School, nominated by Diane Telgen. Congratulations, Diane! 🌟



DEBRA DAUGHERTY is a central Illinois author and the SCBWI-Illinois network representative for the Springfield area. Her publishing credits include two picture books and a YA novel. Currently, she has contracts for four additional picture books.

You can contact Debra at ddaugherty329@gmail.com, and follow her on X (Twitter) @dmddeb.

To sign up for Debra’s newsletter, visit her website at <https://writing-for-children.webnode.com>

The Idea...

I (DIDN'T KNOW I) CARRIED

by Kim Oclon

There are a few inevitable questions a writer gets about their work. I'm frequently asked "Where do you get your ideas?" or "Where did that idea come from?" I get that question even more often when talking about my young adult, historical fiction novel, *The War on All Fronts*, since the story focuses on Anthony and Sam, two recent high school graduates in 1967 who are in a hidden relationship. Anthony enlists in the Army and Sam heads to the University of Wisconsin (not yet the University of Wisconsin-Madison) and gets an education in the antiwar movement. They write coded letters to one another, trying to convey their feelings and how their current circumstances are changing them. As you probably know, I am outside of my lane in MANY ways when it comes to this story. Here's a list I came up with. Maybe there's more. I am NOT:

- a teenage boy
- a gay teenage boy
- a gay teenage boy in the 1960s
- a soldier
- a history buff
- a hippie
- a Vietnam War aficionado

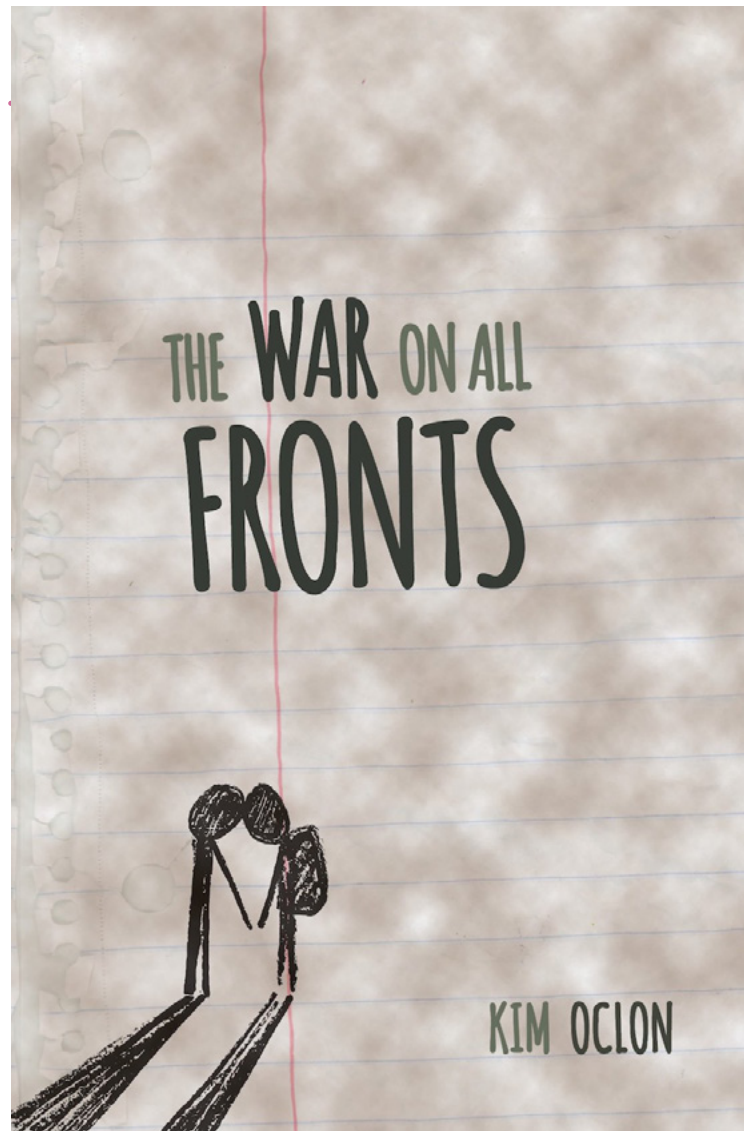
Also, I've never:

- been to an antiwar protest
- been to Vietnam

Plus, I never ever thought I'd dive into historical fiction. Given all that, it's an obvious question: where did this idea come from?

There's actually an easy answer: Mr. Mark Maxwell's creative writing class in the spring of 1998 at Wheeling High School in Wheeling, Illinois. Pretty specific, huh? Actually, the reason I'm a writer at all is because of Mr. Maxwell. Maybe I'll write about that another time.

Up until Mr. Maxwell's class, my reading assignments consisted of the classics: Shakespeare, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Tale of Two Cities*. You get the idea. I'll bet your reading list from school looked similar. Thankfully, after visiting about a dozen high schools the past couple years, I am excited to say many reading lists are vastly different now. Progress!



Anyway, with many aspects of my writer's journey, it started in Mr. Maxwell's creative writing class. We were supposed to pick a novel from the ones he suggested, get into groups, and teach a lesson using an excerpt from the book. My first choice was *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (because of the 90s film starring Johnny Depp and Leonardo DiCaprio) or *Girl, Interrupted* (not yet a movie but still...). When Mr. Maxwell asked who would like to read *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, a collection of short stories about a group of soldiers serving in the Vietnam War, no one raised their hands. I can still see the cover of this edition of the paperback: a realistic drawing of a soldier's back and the bulging pack he had to hump through the rice paddies of Vietnam.

I looked around the classroom, waiting for someone to volunteer as I remembered some details of the opening story we read a couple weeks before: Jimmy Cross and



The Idea I (Didn't Know I) Carried

the letters and photos from Martha, Henry Dobbins and the pantyhose wrapped around his neck, Kiowa and his bible, the immeasurable emotional baggage every character had, and the intricate details of the literal weight of the equipment the soldiers were required to carry. Reading that opening chapter, I felt that physical weight.

Standing at the front of the room with the paperback still raised, begging to be read, was a teacher who made me believe the year before that not only could I be a writer but that I was a writer, a *creative* writer.

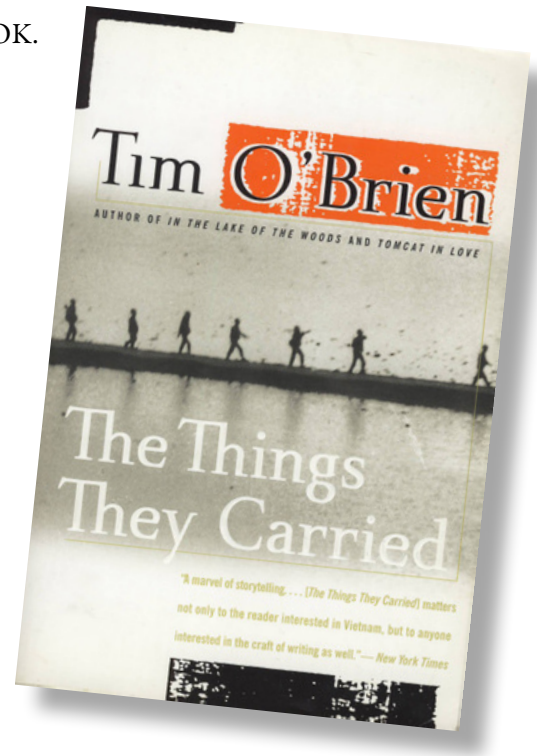
I both raised my hand and said it out loud, "I'll read it." A little bomb of dread exploded in my gut. I would read it, but I really didn't want to. I was a good student. There was no way I wasn't going to do an assignment, especially one for Mr. Maxwell. I got my copy and started reading, starting with the first chapter and again feeling the weight the soldiers carried. Then I went along with them on missions and we hung out during some R&R.

Certain images and quotes are still stuck in my head: Curt Lemon and the lemon tree, the buffalo's eye, Ted Lavender and his mellow war, Mary Anne and her necklace of tongues, Linda's bald head, little Timmy needing a story, how to tell a true war story, Norman Bowker circling the lake after making it home, on the Rainy River with Elroy... there's too many. One memory triggers another and I could go on for a while.

When I had the chance to read the novel again in a college class my freshman year, I was ready to revisit these characters. When I had to create lesson plans for my teaching certificate classes, it was always *The Things They Carried*. When I talked to colleagues about the books they were teaching and they said *The Things They Carried*, I would swoon. Seriously. My hand would go to my chest and I'd gasp a little. It was an involuntary motion. I even did it during an interview when the candidate mentioned the book. My former colleagues still remember it.

When I tell anyone my favorite book is a collection of short stories about a group of Vietnam War soldiers, I give them my list of disclaimers about how I'm not a history buff or especially interested in the Vietnam War. I don't read a lot of short story collections. I don't even read a great deal of adult fiction. But this book.

THIS BOOK.



It was the first book I read in school that made me realize I was reading something good, something special, something amazing. I spent my high school career analyzing symbols, giving examples of imagery, and explaining characterization, but I never said to myself, "This book is good." I didn't need a teacher to walk me through the figurative language and how effective it was. I just knew it. And, I somehow *felt* it.

When I read *The Things They Carried*, I was exercising my creative writing muscles for the first time. It came into my life at the right time as it taught me the effect of *good* writing, something I heard about but never experienced. It's interesting that I just wrote the word "experienced." I've never described reading the book for the first time that way.

So, what's the point? Is this just a long five-star review for a book in which I shout: READ THIS NOW, YOU MUST!

Kind of.

But, I took a chance on a book and I had no idea that it would prove to be a life altering event. I'm confident I would have never written *The War on All Fronts*, let alone published the story, if I didn't take a chance on a book that I thought I didn't want to read. It's fascinating to look back



The Idea I (Didn't Know I) Carried

and be able to trace the origins of *The War On All Fronts* to that day in Mr. Maxwell's classroom. That's where the idea was born but it wouldn't materialize until about twenty years later.

Can you trace the seed of an idea to a particular place, person, book, image? It's kind of a "sliding doors" moment where I wonder what my writing journey would have been if I ended up reading one of my first choices. I'm certain I would have encountered good writing in *Gilbert Grape* or *Girl, Interrupted* since we read excerpts from those novels as well. But, I wonder if it would have had the same impact. I wonder if it would have stayed in my subconscious for decades and manifested itself into a real book that I wrote. I doubt it.

I love hearing about how writers get their ideas. It proves that a good idea can come from anywhere, at any time, sometimes in a very unexpected way. And, it might sit in your back pocket for a while until making itself realized. A much belated thank you to a couple people: thank you, Tim O'Brien for writing *The Things They Carried* and thank you, Mr. Maxwell, for asking me to read it. The two of you definitely changed the course of a person's life. ✨



KIM OCLON is the author of two young adult novels, *Man Up* and *The War on All Fronts*. She is the co-representative for the Far Northern Suburbs Network and lives in East Dundee.



Writing Through Grief

by K. E. Blaski

Let me preface by saying that your grief journey is your own, as unique to you as your fingerprint. But if you're anything like me, you'll want as many tips, tools, tricks and hacks to develop an arsenal to draw upon. Especially when it feels as if your grief is an impenetrable barrier, blocking you from accessing any of your creative reserves. This is why I decided to share my story with you. Take what you can, leave what you don't need, and feel safe in the knowledge that you are not alone, even when you are at your loneliest.

When I was at my loneliest, friends and family, in their efforts to be helpful, reminded me of all the benefits of writing. I could process my grief, tap into my darkest moments, and find an outlet for my emotions by journaling, perhaps writing a therapeutic memoir. I could improve my self-esteem by continuing to share my writing with readers and earning their kudos. I could provide myself something on which to focus, something to look forward to, and a reason to get up and out of my bed in the morning. Stephen King told us in his book *On Writing*, "*Writing* is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life." Writing could be my life preserver.

As one friend told me, there were authors who created their best work in their worst moments. Ann Rice's 5-year-old daughter, nicknamed *Mouse*, tragically died from leukemia in 1972. Mouse was the inspiration for the child-vampire character Claudia in Ann's first novel: *Interview with the Vampire*. The loss of a child seems an insurmountable tragedy. My well-intentioned friend pointed out that my loss wasn't as crushing as losing a child, I could at least write a few words a day and make some progress on my work-in-progress, right?

Wrong. The well-wishers inadvertently added pressure to my already pressurized mental and emotional capacity. "I will never write again." That was the statement emblazoned in my brain every time I sat with pen and paper, or opened a New Document in Word. Grief was my ultimate writer's block. Instead of writing, I cried. Instead of writing, I cleaned. Instead of writing, I went to the movies. Instead of writing, I went through the motions of my "new normal" life after my husband Darren lost his horrific battle with

stage 4 liver cancer. One day in November, abdominal pains sent him to the ER and 5 months later he died. 27 years of marriage abruptly over without either of us choosing to separate from one another and three children ages 21, 15, and 13 left behind without a father. He was 58. I was 52.

I used to write my YA and middle grade stories a little every day and a lot on Saturdays. Darren would entertain the kids with Saturday excursions so the house would be quiet for me. I was busy with my full-time teaching job at the local community college, church choir rehearsals, and kids' extracurriculars, but writing time was sacred and could occur anywhere from a YMCA parking lot to a Culver's restaurant booth. What better way to evoke teen angst than with the smell of greasy fries? My writer's life was intricately entwined with my life as wife and mother.

That life changed with Darren's last breath and hasn't been the same since. An unexpected trauma, like the death of a spouse, is mind numbing. And a brain filled with fog makes finding ideas futile. I could barely carry on a conversation in my very real life, how was I supposed to write dialog for my characters in their imaginary world?

For that first year, on top of my grief and resentment, I felt an overwhelming survivor's guilt if I found pleasure in pleasurable things. How could I be happy when my husband wasn't with me to share in that happiness? Why should I be happy when he had suffered so? I should suffer too. As a result, I avoided all those things that once brought me joy because I wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't allow myself to feel joyous. Therapy with an emphasis on grief counseling was my way out from continuing to beat myself up.

The real turning point and one of the best things I did for myself was when I signed up for a grieving support group class that purposefully used creative outlets for grief. Many of us were widowed, but there were also parents who'd lost children, and those who'd lost siblings. All of us were seeking relief from the weight of our loss. We were searching for a way back to feeling relevant on our own, without our special person.



Writing Through Grief

As writers, I believe we experience a sense of connection when we perceive relevance. This connection has a meaningful impact on both ourselves and those around us. Together, my fellow grief survivors and I found this connection with each other. We shared prayers, camaraderie, tears, and hugs, and each week we were tasked by our facilitator with a creative project that we worked on individually at home or as a group in the class. I assembled a collage of magazine clippings that represented what made Darren special. I curated online photos of the emotions I was feeling: anger, pain, fear, depression, and sorrow. I painted a self-portrait while channeling my own psychedelic version of Picasso. I crafted a Christmas ornament. I built a shelf for mementos. Surprisingly, it was the non-writing creation that eventually led me back to writing.

I finally felt able to tap into my heart-center. I was able to rejoin my church choir, eventually performing solos again. I auditioned and was cast in community theater musicals. I'm working on a t-shirt quilt for my daughter's graduation from UW-Green Bay this coming spring. And although I still don't write as regularly as I used to, I have found new creative outlets that bring me joy, fill me with hope, and give me purpose. Ultimately isn't that what we seek when we write? It wasn't easy. It took me almost five years after my husband's death to be able to write new words and not just edit words I'd already written. However long it takes is okay. There is no timetable to follow, no if-then flow chart. Even if you decide that drawing or quilting or baking or photography or paint-by-numbers are your new creative outlets and you choose to put writing on the backburner of your joy-filled life, that's okay. Once you give yourself permission to live joyfully, little by little, you too may manage to regain a writing foothold. ✨



K. E. BLASKI is a soon to be retired Associate Professor of the Business Department at Rock Valley College where she routinely incorporates storytelling into her classroom. Ms. Blaski has had an eclectic mix of employment, including working as a disk jockey, pharmaceutical sales rep, vocalist, marketing manager and entrepreneur. She received her BS in marketing and communications from Millikin University in Illinois and an MBA in marketing and finance from Indiana University, Bloomington. She has been a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators for over two decades and is currently the co-leader of the SCBWI-IL Rockford Network. She has seven independently published middle grade and young adult books under three pen names, and she occasionally blogs at keblaski.com. A consummate storyteller, as a child she had twelve imaginary friends instead of the typical one, and she won her first writing award at the age of twelve. She has lived in nine states and traveled all over the world, and currently resides in Rockford, Illinois.

Voices of Change

THE MORE YOU KNOW: WHY LEARNING ABOUT THE SELF-PUBLISHING INDUSTRY CAN BETTER YOUR CHANCES OF BECOMING TRADITIONALLY PUBLISHED

by Katie Otey



The year was 2012. I had been writing and telling stories and scribbling poems for decades. My love of the written word was infused into every fiber of my being. However, it wasn't until 2012 that I decided to pursue my dream of having my words traditionally published. That year, I joined the SCBWI and immediately enrolled in my first writers conference. I was on my way!

The shock of how much I had to learn about becoming a traditionally published author was daunting. Story ideas that I thought were genius weren't viable options for the intended age group, such as my story about a cute little bunny who didn't want to be sold due to fears of being boiled. Think *The Littlest Pet Shop* meets *Fatal Attraction*. (I promise it's okay to laugh at this.)

In addition to learning how to write non-trauma-inducing stories for toddlers, I learned about expected word count and proper word usage, which meant rewriting my long-winded picture books into middle grade stories as older kids were a more appropriate target audience.

I also learned that many industry professionals didn't seem to understand or "connect" with my brand. Now, some of that was due to their preconceived notion of what and how a Black author should write, but that's another story for another day.

I spent years growing my knowledge about everything from plotting and character development to how to query agents and working with editors. I entered many contests and lost most of them. But when I did win some, such as winning the inaugural Many Voices competition and a few Becky Mabry awards as well, I was thrilled. These moments kept me going when I thought about quitting this pursuit.

In 2020, a full eight years after starting this journey, I decided to start my own independent press, Phoenix Media & Books. Knowing what I knew about writing was invaluable. That much was evident in the fact that my company's very first publication received a starred review from Kirkus, a feat that only 2 percent of independently published books receive. However, much like when I started on my writing journey, there was so much about publishing that I needed to learn and I quickly realized that this newfound knowledge was an important piece of what I'd missed while on my path to traditional publication.

Publishing is a business. Shocker, right? Most of us involved in this industry have a deep love of books, art, or both. We ache to tell stories but, especially for people of color, those stories can sometimes fizzle and die before ever seeing the light of day. Some people get frustrated and decide to just self-publish, which is a valid, viable option for seeing your work in print. But once on that path, many discover that self-publishing is a different beast and there is much more to learn to be successful in that arena.

In self-publishing, in addition to needing to know all of the rules and best practices of what makes a great story, you also need to know how to reach your target audience and sell that story. You need to complete a market analysis, research keywords, figure out distribution, decide on whether to use Amazon or stick with direct sales on your own website, or both. You need to manage your inventory, assess printing costs and choose whether print on demand or offset printing would make more sense. You need to decide what size your book should be, not just because of how you want it to look but because different size options cost different prices to produce. You need to be able to adequately vet artists and editors that know the industry



and won't use AI art to damage your book and your reputation. You have to learn SEO if you want a chance at being seen and build and curate your email list. The list of tasks goes on and on and can seem daunting but, just like with the SCBWI, there are agencies and groups out there that can help you learn what you need to know to self-publish successfully.

So what does any of this have to do with becoming a traditionally published author? Well, it's simple. Learning about publishing will help inform your decisions. You will think harder about what you are writing and why. You will learn the market and be able to speak about it to a potential agent or editor. You will be able to speak to comp titles better because you will understand just how important it is to be able to position your book within the market properly. You will understand that the appropriate trim size could increase profit margins which would mean more money for you and your publisher. You will know your target audience and how to reach them and be able to put that in your query. You will simply know more and that knowledge alone will make you a much better risk for someone deciding on whether or not to take a chance on you.

You may think that none of this will matter if you get a traditional contract because you will have a big company behind you to do all of those things. Well, maybe. But for many traditionally published authors, you still have to manage all or most of your own publicity. Learning how to do that on the front end will allow you to make better informed decisions on what manuscripts you want to enter the market with. Can you build your career on this story? Can you stand out? Will your target audience invest in you as an author? Or is this a pet project that you have nostalgic feelings about and just want to see in print?

Learning more about the business side of publishing will make you a great choice for a traditional publisher to work with. Thinking as a publisher, even if you never want to self-publish, will only increase your ability to make a name for yourself as an author. Write several manuscripts, learn the industry, gather appropriate data for your audience, and position yourself like the business powerhouse that you are. Because we all know that knowledge is most definitely power.

Let's also not forget that, if you are considered a "diverse author" then your chances of breaking into traditional publishing are even slimmer than your white, straight counterparts. This is not conjecture but a known and proven fact. Just take a look at the Lee and Low reports on diversity in publishing and let the numbers absolve you of any notions that this industry is based entirely on merit. It is not. Doing more work to set yourself apart from the competition will benefit you in more ways than one. Let's be grounded in reality while pursuing our dreams if you actually want to reach them.

If you are seriously considering attempting any of this, I recommend starting with the IBPA (Independent Book Publishers Association), the 20 Books to 50K Facebook group, and Jay Miletsky's IAPC and Indie Publishing Summits. Any or all of these avenues will give you the knowledge and support you need to learn this side of the business.

This may seem like a lot of preparation and it absolutely is. However, learning more about the business side of publishing will only help your career in the long run. Publishing is a game of chess. There are a lot of moving parts all going in different directions to reach a common goal. The more you know about how all of those parts work, the better your chances of reaching the other side of the board. ✨



KATIE OTEY is an author of the children's picture book, *Every Other Christmas*, and the upcoming middle grade comedy series, *Izzy McKeithen Has Arrived*. You can learn more about Katie by visiting her website www.KatieOteyWrites.com.

Shop Around the Corner

CITY LIT BOOKS by Malayna Evans

When the lovely people at the *Prairie Wind* invited me to contribute a “Shop Around the Corner” article, I was thrilled to have another opportunity to talk up one of Chicago’s many amazing small indie bookstores. Our lovely city boasts many gems, but one of my favorites is Logan Square’s City Lit Books. I appreciate how this bookstore goes beyond selling books to engage with their community on many levels, so I was happy when the owner, Stephanie Kitchen, agreed to answer a few questions. Here’s what she told me...

Tell me a bit about the history of City Lit Books. What’s the backstory? And where did you come in?

City Lit Books opened in 2012. The original owner created an amazing bookstore with deep ties to the community. I was a librarian at the time, dreaming about owning a bookstore like City Lit Books one day. In 2020, because of Covid, the owner decided to close the doors. Like many in the community, I was heartbroken that this neighborhood pillar was coming to an end. But I also saw it as an opportunity. I didn’t want to compete with City Lit Books, but I was happy to buy it. We reopened in June of 2021 and although there have been ups and downs, the store is thriving again. We’ve brought back the programming we’re known for and things have settled into a new normal.

What makes City Lit Books special?

Our programming and our amazing staff.

We’re community oriented and pride ourselves on our welcoming atmosphere and the many ways we engage with our diverse community. That starts with our book sellers. They are, of course, all passionate readers. But creating an interactive bookstore experience for customers is not just about reading and loving books. It’s also about being willing and able to talk about all the great reads that populate our shelves. Our team loves helping readers find the perfect right-fit read. Customers value our staff picks, which are curated with our community in mind.



We also aim to engage readers beyond book buying. We’ve done community work such as book fairs, we host a poetry salon, and we offer multiple book clubs designed to give readers space to delve deep into books that touch people’s lives. Our book clubs are run by staff and community members, and they focus on everything from self-improvement books to horror reads. We host book clubs entitled *Weird and Wonderful*, *Pretty in Paperback*, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gay*, *Blood and Guts*, and *Better Together*.

What about your kid lit selection? Your store isn’t big, so how do you sift through all the great kids’ books to stock the shelves?

We aim for fun and inclusivity. We believe it’s essential that all kids see themselves in books. We’re proud to serve a diverse community and we want our selection of books to reflect that, whether that means a board book about pronouns or a middle grade read that happens to feature a protagonist with two moms. Representation matters. But we’re always mindful that fun matters, too. We love picture books and graphic novels and anything with humor. It is challenging to curate the collection given the many terrific children’s books in the world, but we try to highlight those we think will speak to our customers.



Shop Around the Corner

Tell me a bit about your relationships with authors, both traditionally published and indie. What should authors know about City Lit Books and how to best work with you?

We value our relationships with authors. We do some author events, when opportunities arise that fit our store and have a good chance of appealing to our buyers. We've done everything from cookbook to kid lit to self-help events. And we're always open to ideas, even though we can't do it all. We get some help curating those opportunities from our sales reps. For traditionally published authors, we work with some great sales reps that inform our buying. Good reps understand stores like ours and they know what will and won't work, so those relationships are key. For non-traditionally published authors, it is a bit harder. Like all small indies, shelf and floor space is a premium, but we stay open minded. We take a fair amount of poetry on consignment, for example.

On a personal level, what do you love most about your job?

I've always been a bookie—I worked at bookstores through college and beyond, then got a library degree and worked in the public library system for fifteen years. One thing I always enjoy is seeing all the new books and different ideas and innovative trends. I've been challenged by the learning curve, but I've also appreciated all the new things I've learned. I didn't know so much about the publishing side or the creative side or marketing and buyers. Even the tempo of bookstores differs from libraries, who tend to keep books on shelves longer than we can. So I can't say it's always been easy, but I can say it's been educational and worthwhile.

Do you have any advice for authors?

Spend time in your local independent bookstore. Walk around, talk to people, learn what's popular. Network with the vibrant community of writers and booksellers we have in Chicago. Most people will share some of their time but do keep in mind that they're busy so don't take it personal when they can't accommodate requests. And remember, there is a right place for your book. Finding that place might take time and effort, but it's likely to be worth it in the end.

Last question - Anything you're looking forward to? Changes on the horizon and such?

Better weather. Also, we're looking forward to some great programming in 2024. We expect to keep the good vibes flowing and continue growing the bonds we have built within the community. We appreciate our loyal customers and hope to keep giving them loads of reasons to keep spending time here. 🌸

MALAYNA EVANS was raised in Utah and spent her childhood climbing mountains and reading Sci-Fi. She moved to Chicago in her early twenties where she earned M.A.s in the ancient history of the Mediterranean and the Near East and a Ph.D. in ancient Egyptian history. She enjoys sharing her passion for the ancient world with readers, adores travel, and plays a mean game of cards. Her debut adult historical fiction novel, *NEFERURA*, comes out in February of 2024. A single mom, Malayna lives in Oak Park, IL, with her two children and two very spoiled Frenchies. You can learn more about her at malaynaevans.com.



Illustrator's Tips

FINDING ARTIST REPRESENTATION

by Brooke O'Neill



“How do I get an agent?” is a question frequently asked by artists who want to illustrate children’s books. I was one of those artists longing for the day I would get paid to do my favorite thing—draw!

The last time I wrote an article for *Prairie Wind* was the [Fall 2021 issue](#). Back then, I had just gained artist representation with [Astound US Inc.](#) A few years later, I’ve sold greeting card designs and illustrated 20 books; worked with big names like [Wisdom House](#), [Sourcebooks](#), and [Scholastic](#); and I’m currently illustrating three more books!

I’m here to give advice, inspiration, and tell the story about how I finally landed artist representation. So, let’s dive in and talk about how YOU are going to get an agent!

WHY GET AN AGENT?

My agent knows what’s marketable. She is there to give feedback, support, and is always an immense help. Big companies like to go through agencies to find their artists. So, unless you are EXTREMELY lucky, it’s difficult to get your foot in the door.

I realize having an agent isn’t for everyone. I mean, they DO take a cut of your earnings. But personally, I don’t know where to begin when it comes to marketing myself. If you find that you can market yourself and don’t need an agent, that’s awesome—you got this!

LEARN, DRAW, REPEAT

Before I gained representation was such a free and fun time (if this is where you’re at right now—enjoy it!) Drawing anything I liked and making art for ME. Taking course after course and soaking it all in. Meeting online artist friends that were friendly, helpful, and learning right along with me. I became obsessed with illustrating and would draw every day. I posted a lot on [my Instagram](#) back then too, trying to gain followers with hopes that someone out there would notice me.

If you read my [PW article from Fall 2021](#), you will find more in-depth details about wonderful courses I’ve taken over the years. [Make Art That Sells](#), [Victoria Johnson Create Explore](#), and [Bardot Brush](#) are my absolute favorites. There are amazing classes on [Skillshare](#), and inspirational artists to follow on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#). I still take art classes today so I can learn new skills and add to my portfolio. Speaking of portfolio...

BUILD YOUR PORTFOLIO

What do I mean when I say this? For instance, it’s great you know how to draw, say, landscapes, but...is that all you know how to draw? The more you know, the better. It makes you marketable. Here is what you should know how to draw so you have a nice, well-rounded portfolio:

PEOPLE: Knowing how to draw people is a must. All kinds of people. Make character sheets. Give your character something unique about them. Give them accessories.

ANIMALS: Again, all kinds! Show them in action; running, jumping, sleeping, walking, sitting... anything you can think of. You can also turn your animal into a character. Give them clothes and accessories too! Think [Richard Scarry](#).

OBJECTS: Take little things around your house and draw them. For instance, don’t just draw one button, draw 20 different buttons. Make them lavish and fun! Draw brooches and sewing supplies to go with them. Keep thinking outside the box.

SCENES: Probably one of the hardest things to draw, but important. This can show your ability to create backgrounds and characters in action.

FLORALS: Drawing flowers and plants is great to know, especially if you want to get into the greeting card industry. They are also nice to add to your backgrounds.

LETTERING: Don’t just write letters—draw them!

PATTERNS: Can be sold as wrapping paper, gift bags, and fabric! Think of the places you see patterns in everyday life.



Illustrator's Tips



YOU NEED A WEBSITE

Another question frequently asked by artists that want to illustrate children's books is, "What is the best way to lay out my website?" (Sidenote: I'm not a website building expert. I can tell you that I use [Squarespace](#) and I love it. It took many hours and determination to get the hang of how it all worked, but [I DID IT](#), and you can too.)

Know this—agents are BUSY. They do not want to click multiple pages to find your art. The best thing to do is put all your BEST art on the homepage. That way they go to your site, and immediately scroll. I can't stress this enough.

Originally, I had categories on my homepage. I thought it looked nice and organized, but when I looked at my site statistics, I found no one ventured into those pages. They clicked on the homepage and left. Now, all my portfolio art is on the homepage, then I have a few subcategories like "publications" and "sketchbook" at the top.

The two most looked at pages on my website are the homepage, and the contact page. Your contact page should include a paragraph or two about yourself, links to find you on social media, people you have worked with before, and ways to connect with you.

FIND AGENCIES

Your website is done. Now comes the hard part...finding agencies! To make things easier for you (I wish someone had done this for me!), I've provided a list of agencies I found during my search. Other resources include [SCBWT's *The Essential Guide to Publishing for Children*](#), and [Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market](#).

Each agency has different requirements. Be sure to look at their website before you send your portfolio pieces. I've hyperlinked the list below, so feel free to check them out!

- [Adams Literary](#)
- [Alp Arts Company](#)
- [Astound US Inc](#)
- [Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises](#)
- [The Bright Agency](#)
- [The Cat Agency Inc](#)
- [Catbird Agency](#)
- [Cornell & Company](#)
- [Curtis Brown, LTD](#)
- [Deborah Wolfe, LTD](#)
- [Dunham Literary Inc](#)
- [East/West Agency](#)
- [Herman Agency](#)
- [Lemonade Illustration Agency](#)
- [Lilla Rogers Studio](#)
- [Lindgren & Smith](#)
- [MB Artists](#)
- [McIntosh and Otis](#)
- [Melissa Turk & the Artist Network](#)
- [Painted Words](#)
- [Plum Pudding](#)
- [Prospect Agency](#)
- [Red Fox Literary](#)
- [Salzman International](#)
- [Sanford J. Greenburger & Associates](#)
- [Sean McCarthy Literary Agency](#)
- [Shannon Associates](#)
- [Sheldon Fogelman Agency](#)
- [Tugeau 2](#)
- [Wernick & Pratt Agency, LLC](#)
- [Wilkinson Studios, INC](#)
- [Writers House](#)



Illustrator's Tips

CONTACT AGENCIES

Here it comes, the moment of truth... writing that email and putting yourself out there. Tell a little bit about yourself and why you'd love to be a part of that agency. Maybe it goes something like the letter shown here.

For my own sanity, I decided I would reach out to 2 agencies per day. That way I wasn't overwhelming myself. It took a few months to get a response, but when I did, I was so excited!

PLAN AND ORGANIZE

I know this can all seem overwhelming. My advice is, block out time to concentrate on certain things. Pick three big things you want to accomplish for the year. Maybe you are taking art courses. Maybe you want to

Dear <name of agency here>:

My name is <your name here>, and I am an illustrator looking for representation. I am such a fan of <agency name here>, and it would be a dream to be represented by you!

I have worked with companies such as <company name here> and <client name here>. You can view my portfolio here <link to website>. I have also attached a few images to this email for your review.

Please feel free to reach out if you would like to see more work.

Thank you for your time!
<your name here>



brooke oneill

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Illustrator's Tips

work on your portfolio. Maybe you want to start reaching out to agencies. Here is an example schedule that I would put together:

January–April: Research/take art courses and develop my portfolio.

May–August: Make my website and start social media art accounts.

September–December: Research agencies to apply to and contact them.

Once you have your three main focuses, you can then fine tune. For example:

January: Create two character-sheets for portfolio.

February: Draw animals.

March: Draw florals & objects.

April: Draw two scenes.

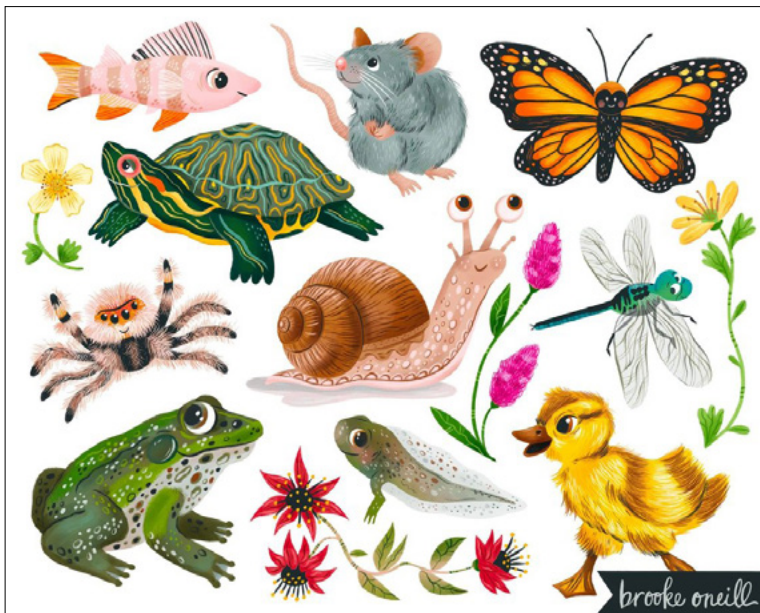
Now let's break down January a little:

Week one: Create a character and draw them.

Week two: Draw their face giving different emotional expressions.

Week three: Draw your character doing different things. Running, walking, jumping, etc.

Week four: Give your character accessories.



I highly recommend looking into [Make Art That Sells MBA \(Money Bad Ass\)](#), and [Portfolio Review](#) courses. Discover what works best for you!

In the end I was contacted by [ITSME](#). They are sort of a middleman that agencies go through to find artists—and that's how I was ultimately represented by [Astound US Inc.](#)

I truly hope this was helpful! Getting paid to draw is a dream come true for me. If it's your dream too, I'll be here manifesting for you! Good luck! ✨

BROOKE O'NEILL is a graphic designer and illustrator living in the southwest suburbs near Chicago. She is represented by [Astound US Inc](#) and has illustrated over 20 children's books. Some titles include [Joan of Art](#), [Sadie Shark](#), and [It's Her Story: Mae Jemison](#). When she's not working; she loves spending time with her two children, husband, dog named Donut—and listening to Taylor Swift, of course! You can visit her website at www.brookeoneilldesign.com.



Writer's Tips

HOW TO ACTIVATE YOUR STORYTELLING

by Karla Arenas Valenti

Hello and welcome to a new year!

Today's column offers some tips on how to use conflict to activate your storytelling. Hope you find them helpful.

THE ACTIVATING AGENT

I have been an avid bread maker for many years. One of my favorite types of bread to make (and eat!) is sourdough.



The complexity of the textures, colors, and flavors of a sourdough loaf can make it feel more like an invitation to adventure than a simple invitation to lunch. Okay, maybe not *adventure*, but there's no denying that when you bite into a good slice of sourdough bread, your senses are instantly activated, and you can't help but feel engaged.

What gives a sourdough this magic is the starter: an activating agent (yeast) that leads to a transformation. Specifically, an ordinary mix of flour and water is changed into something far more complex, exciting, and engaging.

Here's my pitch to you: that same magic can happen in stories when an ordinary character is transformed into someone more complex, exciting, and engaging. In storytelling, that activating agent that leads to transformation is conflict; specifically, the conflict that arises from resisting change.

THE RESISTANCE

Let's talk about conflict for a minute.

Characters (and by the way, this applies to people just as well) are generally motivated by one of two forces: pleasure or pain. Simply put: we all try to avoid pain and we all seek out pleasure.



By the way, "pleasure" doesn't necessarily mean something that will make us happy. This can also include wanting to maintain the current status quo or a desire to engage in a *familiar* (though toxic) behavior.

For example, a young protagonist might prefer to sit with their worry (that's the familiar "pleasure" part) instead of actually facing their fear of going down a slide (that's the "pain" part).

Now, the conflict arises when your character's status quo (their normal world) is somehow disrupted. Maybe they lose something they had, or they want something they were previously lacking. In either case, your character is now in a place of "pain" and will be attempting to return to a place of "pleasure."

And they're going to want to get there as quickly and easily as possible.

In a story without an activating agent, the character does just that. It costs them very little effort to solve their problem or acquire their desire. Their time spent in "pain" was a mere blip and they are now in their happily-ever-after.



This is plain old flour and water. Bland bread.

In a story with an activating agent, the character is going to have to earn their “pleasure” through hard work, time, effort, and no small amount of blood, sweat, and tears. Their story will be activated precisely because there is a conflict between what they want and their refusal to do what they need to do to get it, which is to transform.

The character’s very resistance to change is the drama that leads to complex, exciting, and engaging storytelling. Sourdough bread.

“But why must our characters suffer?” you ask. “I love them so much. I don’t want to hurt them.”

Because in reality, the things that make our life meaningful are never handed to us on a happily-ever-after platter. To really get what we want, we have to draw on knowledge and skills we don’t typically have at that time. Instead, we need to suffer through the effort of acquiring that knowledge and building the skills needed to reach our goal.

Changing from who we are now to who we need to be to solve our problem is really hard. It’s not unlike this little flower breaking through concrete to get some sun.



So, if you really love your characters, you’re going to want to give them a meaningful life in your story. The only way to do that is by forcing them to transform.

And this is exactly what we find in some of the most compelling stories out there. Let’s look at the role of conflict in the three different character arcs.

TRANSFORMATION IN STORYTELLING

Positive Character Arc

A character will start off wanting something (even if what they want is for nothing to change), but they won’t be able to get it easily.

In this scenario, they will have two options: accept that they need to change (and transform) or pretend that everything is fine (and not change).

For most of the story, the character will actually do the latter (because this is a simple human tendency). Not surprisingly, they will not get what they want. What’s more, things will actually get worse and worse and worse. All of the conflict here is driven by the fact that the character is resisting the inevitable change.

Eventually, the character will have no choice but to accept the fact that they’re not getting what they want (and indeed, things are going so poorly for them) because they’re refusing to do the hard work of transforming.

This moment of reckoning is typically the story climax, and it is where your character has to choose change. But note, even this isn’t easy. Change always comes at a high cost (a metaphorical or even real death). However, it is the only way forward if your character is to evolve into the next meaningful phase of their life.

Some of the best examples of this are the *Harry Potter* books or any superhero movie. One of my favorite stories with a Positive Character Arc is Jason Reynolds’ *Long Way Down* (which is not only a transformative experience for the character but the reader as well).

Note – the conflict in a story doesn’t have to be very dramatic. Sometimes, a character will recognize the need for change and lean into that transformation early on, especially when



Writer's Tips



the stakes are high enough. *Esperanza Caramelo* is a good example of that - a Christmas disaster can only be averted if the characters all accept that things have irrevocably changed, and they must act quickly to create a new normal.

Negative Character Arc

As with the Positive Character Arc, in the Negative Character Arc, the character will start off wanting something, and they won't be able to have it. They will spend most of the story resisting the requisite change and will arrive at a similar point of reckoning as in the Positive Character Arc.

Here, however, the character will know they have to change, but they will choose to ignore that truth and double down on their futile efforts. For this character, the change is too hard. Unfortunately, this character will remain in conflict and will end up in a worse state than how they began the story.

One of the most iconic examples of this is Anakin's fall in *Star Wars*.

Flat Character Arc

In the Flat Character Arc, the character is not actually going to transform. Instead, they are going to be a catalyst for the transformation of someone else (another character or even the reader).



A good example of this is the *Hunger Games*. Katniss undergoes tremendous external challenges, but she does not transform internally. Her role is to transform everyone else (i.e., the pain and suffering she endures forces everyone else to stop pretending that everything is fine, something she already knows).

Another example is *Loteria*, where the reader starts off with one understanding of agency and free will. Then, the story challenges that position, advocating instead for

predeterminism (all of which plays out as challenges in the young protagonist's life). The story concludes once again with a challenge of both free will and determinism, forcing the reader to transform the way they think about themselves and the world around them, even if the protagonist hasn't changed her views on life.

As always, I hope you find these writing tips helpful. I'd love to hear from you, so feel free to drop me a line at karla.p.valenti@gmail.com. For now, wishing you all a prosperous and productive 2024. ✨



KARLA ARENAS VALENTI is the author of many books for children, including the highly acclaimed and best-selling middle grade novel *Loteria*, the new holiday classic *Esperanza Caramelo*, and the upcoming chapter book series *Legendarios*, for fans of getting lost in adventures and Mexican mythology. Learn more about Karla, her books, educational resources, and school visits at KarlaValenti.com.

Writer's Bookshelf

EMBRACE YOUR INNER CHILD by Jamie Petras

It is a fact universally known that writing a children's book is a simple task that will garner you instant fame and fortune. With apologies to Jane Austen, this is an assumption that too many of us encounter in our friends, family, and more often than we might care to admit, ourselves.

The easy/simple task part of this myth is something that beginning writers most often fall victim to. It is that "my kids, grandkids, students, fill-in-the-blank, all love my stories...I got this, belief," that makes the almost inevitable sting of defeat so powerful when we fail to get published.

Many of us started out without a clue as to how little we understood about the process and business of publishing a children's book. Nor did we fully grasp that our story must be written from the point of view of how a child would experience it. Bottom line, it is a fact not universally known (well at least initially) that if the POV is not authentic, a child will not connect with your story.

Despite our familiarity with the expression, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," when it comes to authoring books for children, we often find ourselves doing just that. That is why I was so grateful to run across Ann Whitford Paul's *Writing Picture Books*. Her admission that she initially made all the mistakes that I did made me feel like I was reading a letter from an understanding friend.

This is one of the few reference books that I keep on my desktop. It serves as a constant reminder that we must always remember to think like a child. We need to close our eyes and recall what mattered to us when we were children. We need to put ourselves into the same situation that we put our characters in so we can feel emotions, react, and behave the way a child does. We need to make sense of a situation or learn the way a child learns.

Learning how to write for children is not a one and done. Neither is getting published. There is no guarantee that getting one book published means your next book will be automatically accepted for publication. Each book will always be considered on its own merits and the needs of the



publishers. To this end, Ms. Whitford strives to teach the critical skill of becoming your own best critic.

Writing can be a lonely process, but it is much more joyful when we share our experiences both positive and negative. Thanks to Zoom and literary websites such as [Literary Rambles](#), [Storyteller Academy](#), [Kidlit](#), and the [Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators \(SCBWI\)](#), we have more opportunities than ever to learn how to improve our skills, connect with other writers, and keep current with the children's publishing market. As our country continues to



Writer's Bookself

deal with the economic fallout of a worldwide pandemic, we are fortunate that a good portion of these resources are available without cost.

I cannot emphasize enough how grateful I am to be part of a literary community. Community being the key word in this sentence. We share writing, conference, and publishing opportunities, as well as mentor texts and website links. We critique each other's writings in a positive atmosphere of mutual growth and understanding. We provide and gain insight into our revision process. When one of us succeeds, we all do. We celebrate each other's successes and embrace our defeats as the learning experiences and opportunities they offer us to grow in our profession. We alert each other to scams involving both agents and publishing companies. If you have not yet joined a writing group, there are numerous SCBWI writing communities throughout Illinois and everywhere that the *Prairie Wind* reaches.

Another benefit of belonging to a writing group is the opportunity to provide or gain knowledge that our members pick up along the way. These tips or "pearls of knowledge" can provide insight into something specific

we are struggling with or just help with the writing process in general. For instance, think of the theme music for one of your favorite shows. When you hear that music your mind will tell you, "It's time for Jeopardy." We can use this trick when we write. If you always play a particular song or soundtrack when you sit down to write, your brain will soon interpret that signal as, "It's time to write."

Many of you already know to click Review then Editor to check for spelling and grammar mistakes in your stories. Another tip, which is particularly helpful for those who write in rhyme, is to put your cursor at the beginning of your story, click on Review and then click on Read Aloud. Where the audio reader stumbles will help highlight the areas that need to be revised in your text. Writing does not have to be a lonely process. Joining a writing/critique group in whatever genre of writing that you enjoy offers the benefit of spending time in a community of like-minded individuals who understand and share knowledge of the process. ✨

JAMIE PETRAS

SCBWI Freeport/Galena Representative

Illustration by Laura Smetanaz



Mentor Texts

MENTOR TEXTS TO TEACH THE CRAFT OF WRITING

by Susan K. Leopold

The best writers are the best readers. Writers who read grow as writers. Readers write better stories. It's reciprocal.

Many writers refer to mentor texts as excellent examples to support their writing. Mentor texts are often referred to as children's literature studies, inspiration texts, touchstone texts, models, guides, and research.

Time to explore the value of mentor texts with picture books.

WHO CAN USE MENTOR TEXTS?

Everyone. Without realizing it, you probably refer to mentor texts all the time.

Think about it: Perhaps you read an online article to support an idea for a blog post or a newsletter. Did a magazine or newspaper give you some facts and information for a story? When completing a job application, many reach out to family to seek some examples. Did you recently search for an informative sample to fill out a form?

Every time you refer to an example of good writing you are using mentor texts.

This article will focus on picture book creators who study the work of mentors. However, all writers and all genres can benefit from these thoughts.

Writers understand the power of reading mentor texts and the benefits of studying published books. Mentor texts are excellent models to support a writer. These models are great lessons to learn from the best. Analyzing mentor texts provides you with a unique voice and fresh ideas. When a writer reads various books, it is reflected in their writing. Writers who are fulfilled in their reading life often bring joy to the page.

If you want to write, read. Read a hundred mentor texts or more. It is one of the first steps to becoming a writer.

WHAT IS A MENTOR TEXT?

Mentor texts are pieces of literature a writer can refer to and reread for various purposes. They are texts to study, analyze, deconstruct, and imitate. Mentor texts encourage a writer to try something new to make a manuscript the best it can be.

HOW TO STUDY MENTOR TEXTS

There are numerous ways to study and analyze a mentor text.

Begin by immersing yourself in a stack of picture books. Visit a local indie bookstore to peruse picture books on displays and shelves. Request library books from a library to read and study. Consider the books on your bookshelves at home to study.

Learn to read like a writer. Absorb the basics of good storytelling. Read for a better understanding of what works. Read the stories aloud. "Experienced writers are in the habit of noticing what other writers do, a special kind of reading we call reading like a writer (Smith, 1983; Ray, 1999)."

Deconstruct a published picture book by typing out the complete text of a book to analyze various elements of a picture book. Then study striking word choices, sentences, repetition of key phrases, figurative language, word count, and the pacing for page turns in published books. Focus on dialogue. Discover book titles to percolate ideas. Doing so gives a writer insight into the various elements and techniques the author used.

Writers can read like a writer to study specific craft techniques. Take notes. Jot down information about what works and thoughts of what resonates with you to match your voice and vision for a picture book project.

Study something specific to spark ideas. Read to notice what stands out. Analyze the strong elements employed.

Mentor texts can be more than books. Consider movies, comics, television, or cartoons.



Mentor Texts

WHAT TO STUDY IN MENTOR TEXTS

Writers can read like a writer to study specific craft techniques and picture book elements.

Read how these five authors from Illinois wrote books that kids love to read in the following stellar examples.

Is the main character in your story flat? Read how the main character of a little-known inventor grows and overcomes challenges in this nonfiction biography. The narration is interspersed with quotes. A reader will also acquire excellent use of back matter—an author's note and timeline.

Josephine and her Dishwashing Machine: Josephine Cochrane's Bright Invention Makes a Splash

Written by Kate Hannigan
Illustrated by Sarah Green
Calkins Creek, 2023

Perhaps you need some ideas for how to use figurative language for your picture book manuscript. This playful picture book shares powerful metaphors and well-crafted stanzas.

You Are A Story
Written by Bob Rackza
Illustrated by Kristen and Kevin Howdeshell
Neal Porter Books, 2023

The poetic sounds of lyrical picture books make for an excellent read-aloud in this character-driven picture book. To discover an excellent example read and study:

The New Bicycle
Created by Darcy Day Zoells
Clavis, 2023

Are you revising a picture book manuscript about a sensitive topic and need a new direction to make your story shine? Read and study how a children's picture book can address the topic of dementia in a compassionate way for children to have a better understanding of this disease.

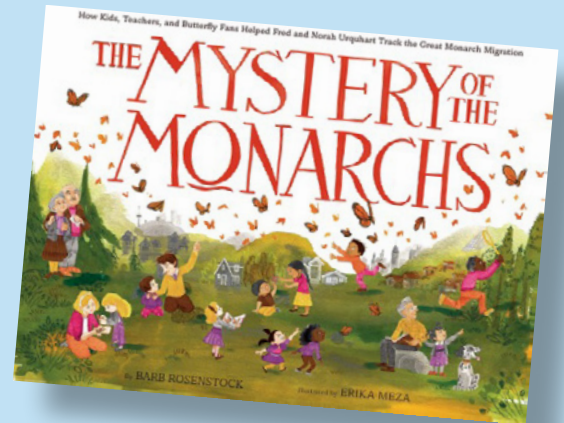
The Memory Jar
Written by
Debra Daugherty
Illustrated by
Victoria Marble
Young Dragons, 2023



When back matter is included in picture books it adds additional layers to support a classroom curriculum. The following nonfiction title includes extensive back matter. Readers will discover photographs, a graphic of the life cycle of the butterfly, maps, monarch migration, environmental efforts for monarch conservation, and more.

The Mystery of the Monarchs: How Kids, Teachers, and Butterfly Fans Helped Fred and Norah Urquhart Track the Great Monarch Migration

Written by Barb Rosenstock
Illustrated by Erika Meza
Knoph Books for Young Readers, 2022



Mentor Texts

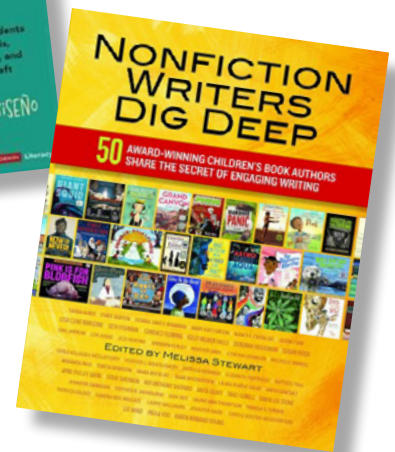
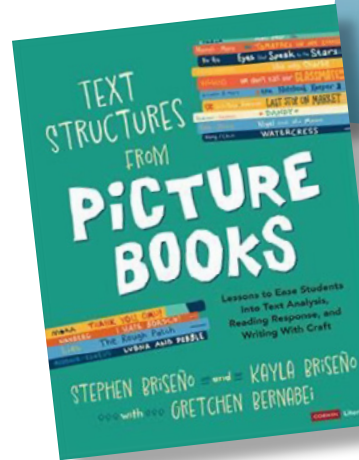
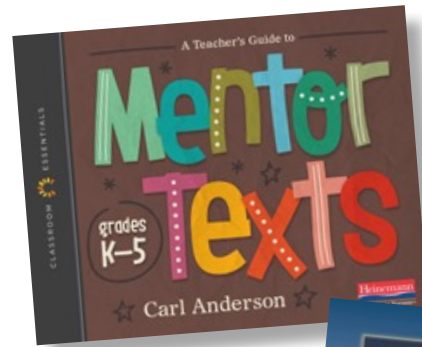
WHY STUDY AND ANALYZE

Whether you write picture books, middle-grade, young adult, graphic novels, or chapter books, and no matter the genre—fiction, nonfiction, prose, or verse, read across all genres including adult literature.

Mentor texts provide models for new ideas and perspectives for the beginning, experienced, and published writer. A mentor text is the best teacher. A writer's brain begins to absorb and recognize important patterns and elements of how to write better stories. Mentor texts are a valuable resource for a writer's journey. A stack of mentor texts is sure to help a story take shape to equal successful writing.

If you find yourself stuck, need ideas and inspiration, or are experiencing writer's block, just read. Read for joy and inspiration. Read mentor texts to write a better story. Good writing is everywhere. Studying mentor texts helps a writer to envision how to use new craft techniques—an artistic skill or technique. See writing through the eyes of a writer to discover possibilities for your writing. ✨

- A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts
By Carl Anderson
Heinemann, 2022
- The Writing Thief: Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing
Written by Ruth Culham
International Reading Association, 2004
- Text Structures from Picture Books: Lessons to Ease Students Into Text Analysis, Reading Response, and Writing with Craft
Written by Stephen Birseño and Kayla Birseño with Gretchen Bernabei
Corwin Press, 2023
- Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep:
50 Award-Winning Children's Book Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing
Edited by Melissa Stewart
National Council of Teachers of English, 2020 ✨



SUSAN LEOPOLD enjoys reading and writing children's books—both fiction and nonfiction. Reading stacks of mentor texts supports her stories. Susan writes stories to water the seeds of literacy by expanding the minds and hearts of readers to wonder, investigate, and discover the importance of making a difference in our world.

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