

Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

FALL 2023



illustrator in the spotlight:
Denise Holmes

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Illustration by Denise Holmes

In This Issue

by Jenny Wagh

Illustration by Denise Holmes

In this issue we are pleased to introduce two new regional team members: Assistant Regional Advisor Catherine Velasco and Illustrator Coordinator Denise Holmes. In Cathy's [Greetings](#) she shares her SCBWI writing journey, costumes and all. Denise Holmes playfully brightens this issue with her [Illustrator Spotlight](#).

In [Tales from the Front](#), Rebecca Siegel takes readers on an utterly mesmerizing search for Loch Ness that is awe inspiring and has given me wanderlust, while Clothilde Ewing's [Creative Sparks](#) reminds us that pushing through the hard times can get us to the reward on the other side. Even if it is just a rough draft.

Jiton Davidson's feature article takes on the tough topic of [Artificial Intelligence vs. Creators of Worlds](#), helping to answer the question—what can children's book creators do to survive and thrive as cyborgs come for our livelihood? Grounding us back in the real world, Alison Marcotte and Dana Morgan share [How to Create Engaging Story Times with Multisensory Picture Books](#). Perfect for little hands to touch and feel their way through a story.

Carolyn Armstrong reminds us [Real Authors Do Self Publish](#), with her heartfelt eco-adventure *Book One of Eco Warriors: At The Edge Of The Ice*. Nathan Lyon inspires with [Voices of Change: The Power of Allyship in Kidlit](#), reminding us that we have an extraordinary opportunity to create incredible characters acting as allies and advocates.

The *Prairie Wind* always leaves me with a long list of must reads. And thanks to Lori Degman I'll be making a stop at the picturesque Woodstock, Illinois [Shop Around the Corner READ BETWEEN THE LYNES](#), owned and operated by Arlene Lynes.

If you are looking for writing and illustrating tips this issue is for you. DJ Corchin reminds us [You Are What You Do](#). If you make art, you are an artist. So don't stop drawing. And if you are a writer, Patricia Hruby Powell encourages you to [Read Like a Writer](#). She challenges writers to read across genres, noting point of view, what we like and don't like,



and most importantly, taking time to read for pleasure. Chasity Gunn shares what is on her "Writer's Bookshelf" and uses her teaching expertise to inspire [Creativity: A 10 Letter, 5-Syllable Word](#).

In Amy Potts' "Mentor Texts," she shares [Favorites From a Habitual Overwriter](#). Her eclectic list ranges from middle grade and young adult to non-fiction. And if your library card hasn't reached its limit yet, check out the SCBWI-IL new releases in [Season's Crop](#).

A huge thank you to all our contributors and the *Prairie Wind* Team for giving us thought provoking articles and recommendations to carry us through the Fall. 🌻

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

Greetings!

by Catherine Ann Velasco



Left to right: SCBWI members Kym Brunner, Sarah Lewandowski-Barthel, Cathy Velasco, Cookie Owens See and Kory Gott at SCBWI Summer Conference Costume Pool Party Spectacular.

If a picture can say 1,000 words, then my photos from SCBWI years past will shout a million reasons why I volunteered for the SCBWI-IL Assistant Regional position last month.

Smiles. Hugs. Wins. Joy. Happy Dances. Book Birthday Parties. SCBWI Costume Contests.

Family.

My SCBWI life started in 2004 when stories poured out of me while washing dishes, and I needed guidance beyond my newspaper editors 'who, what, when, where, why and how' know-how. My first brush with SCBWI was when I traveled to the Summer SCBWI conference in Los Angeles. (I didn't know that there were Illinois networks—a lot closer!)

When I made the leap to LA—I luckily found my hotel roomie—Kym Brunner, through a listserv chat for SCBWI summer conference attendees. Having an Illinois mate by my side gave me a lot of courage as I landed in LA.

Thanks to Abe, Illinois members decided to wear Lincoln pennies in our name badges to identify each other. Instant connection. We immediately bonded over Starbucks, saving



seats, sharing notes, practicing our pitches in glitzy elevators, sunning by the pool, and talking to famous authors like Sonya Sones!

I was asked a million times why I had a penny in my name badge, which was a great conversation starter. I met dozens of people from all over the world, creating lifelong friendships, especially my Idaho kindred spirit Kory Gott.

CONFESSION: I followed the glitter ball. My goals might have gone a bit askew after I attended the SCBWI costume contest always held on Saturday nights at the hotel's pool. Authors and Illustrators – make their own costumes? Move over, Broadway!

TRUTH: I worried more about my costumes than my manuscripts. I won twice.

One year, I dressed as a teal-clad fairy. When I danced in the costume contest promenade, I sprinkled pixie dust on all and wished that everyone's publishing wishes would come true. (Mo Willems said I was the most Gracious Fairy.)

Then, one year, I wore a 5-pound hat on my head with a rat on it. (A creative rat's nest for a slumber party theme). Lin Oliver spotted us in the elevator and she gave us a delighted wink—and Kory and I got a special fourth place that did not really exist!



Left to right: Kory Gott and Cathy Velasco fourth-place winners at SCBWI Summer Conference Slumber Pool Party.



Greetings!



Left to right: Mary Sandford and Rosie, Mary Jane Biskupic, Cathy Velasco, Dana Easley, Patricia Karwatowicz, and Eileen Meyer. The Ma'amuscripts critique group holiday party and goal setting for the new year.



Left to right: Writing Warriors Critique Group celebrating Becky's book signing for *TO FLY AMONG THE STARS*. Jeremy Simmons, Karen Moffett, Kerri Martin, Traci Dant Johnson, Cathy Velasco and Kathleen Reitmann.

Eventually, I shook off the glamour, and settled down on my craft thanks to my two critique groups—Ma'amuscripts and Writing Warriors. We encouraged each other and attended each other's events, cheering each other on.

Thanks to my critique partner, Becky Siegel, who connected me to her editor, I published two nonfiction books—*Behind the Scenes of Pro Baseball* and *Behind the Scenes of Pro Basketball* with Capstone.

Seven years ago, I also became a network rep for the Bolingbrook-Naperville region, and now ARA for you, helping organize Network programs across the state! (Have you thanked your Network rep today? They are awesome!!!)

Now, I will try my hardest to explain how special the Illinois Chapter is. We are a unique community that supports each other from critique groups, conferences, book birthdays, book signings, mini-retreats and most especially the costume contests. Why are we different? The sparkle in the eyes of our current and past Regional Advisers is the answer. They made us a family that bonds together no matter where we land.

Since my first summer conference, I have grown as a writer empowering myself with knowledge of the publishing world, reading thousands of children's books to hone my craft (like Linda Sue Park suggested at two Illinois SCBWI

events) and by becoming a book cheerleader in a supercalifragilisticexpialidocious way.

I put on 20s flapper dress, boa, feathers and pearls for Kym Brunner's book signing for *Wanted—Dead or In Love*.

I passed out astronaut ice cream during Rebecca Siegel's book signing at Anderson's Bookshop for *To Fly Among the Stars: The Hidden Story of the Flight for Women Astronauts*.

I brought balloons that would match Eileen Meyer's life-sized Abe Lincoln during her book signing of *The Superlative A. Lincoln: Poems about our 16th President*.

I served on my first author panel at Printer's Row—moderated by my honorary Jewish grandmother Esther Hershenhorn, who is the absolute book cheerleader and has taught me how to sparkle brighter.

I have also attended over 25 conferences in-person and via Zoom where I received critiques from the greatest.

Newberry winner Meg Medina told me she loved Hector's voice in my middle grade novel.



Greetings!

CATHERINE ANN VELASCO is SCBWI ARA and Bolingbrook-Naperville Network Rep. who loves to write, volunteer in the children's department at the library, and cheer on authors.



Getting into Bonnie and Clyde vibes at Kym Brunner's book signing for Wanted—Dead or in Love. Left to right: Cherie Colyer, Kym Brunner and Cathy Velasco

Award-winning Author Candace Fleming cheered me on as I revised my goat book in front of a toasty fire at Sara Latta's historic home in Champaign-Urbana.

And, in 2008, Holly Black critiqued my work at Words in the Woods. Goosebumps! HOLLY BLACK!!!!!!!!!!

And, the entire Illinois chapter celebrated me when I won the SCBWI Work-in-Progress award. Literally, the celebration was the best part!

Since 2004, I have grown as a writer, mentee, mentor and critique partner.

Thanks to our special family.

That's why I believe no one should feel alone in his or her publishing dreams.

Keep believing. Keep creating. Keep shining.

I'm going to meet the newbies at Esther's welcome meeting at

Prairie Writer's & Illustrator's Day on Nov. 11th so they see a friendly face. I'll be there! "Say purple"—my favorite color or "hi!"

So now I need a fairy wish.

Can you pretty please reach out to one person and ask them if they plan to attend the Prairie Writer's & Illustrator's Day?

Can you ask them if they have questions about our event which has not met in four years?

Can you offer to ride together to Harper College in Palatine? (Road trip!)

Or, just save them a seat at the conference?

If you do any of the above, you will be providing the secret sauce that is part of our Illinois Chapter.

And, as Mo Willems said—gracious! 🌟

Illustrator in the Spotlight

PLAYFUL ILLUSTRATIONS, BRIGHT COLORS AND HAPPINESS *by Denise Holmes*

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

I am an illustrator who really loves to create work for baby board books. I am working on getting my first author/illustrator book ready for submission. I said it out loud, so I really have to focus on it! My work is created using a combination of pencils, pens, Procreate, Photoshop and/or Illustrator.

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

Like many illustrators, I began drawing as soon as I could hold a pencil. There is photographic evidence of my first drawing: a portrait of my aunt that I created when I was two years old. I have always been passionate about art and immersed myself in various mediums, including painting, ceramics, metals, weaving, photography, and graphic design. Eventually, I enrolled at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, where I earned a BFA in Photography. However, after graduating, I never pursued professional photography; instead, I worked a desk job, spending most of my day doodling and concealing my drawings. I was determined to work for myself, so I saved up enough to live a year without earning money and started illustrating every day, taking on as much work as possible to gain experience and build my portfolio.

Sharing my work on Pinterest caught the attention of an art director who emailed me, inquiring if I would be interested in working with her on a children's picture book. Since 2012, I have been actively involved in the publishing industry.

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

This illustration was inspired by the popular drawing challenge called 'Folktale Week.' The drawing prompt was moon, so I began by creating a word list. My process starts with writing in my sketchbooks, where I jot down any word that comes to mind, even if it's unrelated because you never know where it might lead. Words like 'night,' 'light,' 'dancing,' and 'moonlight' appeared, and then I started singing 'Dancin' in the Moonlight,' which helped shape the image in my mind.



Following the word list, I start sketching out character ideas. Since I have a fondness for gnomes, I envisioned a gnome playing the ukulele on a mushroom. As I sketched, a family of gnomes began to take shape, loosely drawn on the page. Once my characters are sketched out, I create at least a dozen thumbnails. Each scene begins to develop, and I quickly draw different compositions and perspectives to determine what works best for this dancing gnome family. When I think I have the perfect one, I take a photo of the thumbnail using my iPad and import it into Procreate.

In Procreate, I refine the drawing, making sure the composition looks good and the proportions of the characters feel right. Then, I move on to adding color. I typically use the same color palette for most of my illustration work, so I don't have to spend too much time trying to create a new color palette for each project. I will swap out colors or switch it up depending on the project. However, much of my work is created using my signature colors.

After coloring, I experiment with textures, shading, lighting, and adding all the little details. Then, I transfer the file to Photoshop, where I clean it up and save it for sharing on Instagram, my website, and with my agent.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

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

My work centers around the theme of friendship, including friendship with oneself, friends, family, pets, or even imaginary friends. I love drawing characters interacting and combining them with elements of curiosity or problem solving. While I do have a soft spot for gnomes, my true passion lies in drawing cute characters, babies, animals, or mythical creatures. Playful characters, bright colors, and a sense of happiness are recurring themes that I explore in my illustrations.

What does your workspace look like?

I am fortunate to have a dedicated workspace in my tiny Chicago condo. My studio is located off the kitchen and is just spacious enough to accommodate two desks and a bookshelf. On one desk, you'll find my iMac, iPad, two lamps, and a basket filled with drawing tools. The other desk is home to my sewing machine and serger. The bookshelf spans an entire wall and is filled with books, picture books, and all my sketchbooks. I have one window that overlooks a courtyard and is filled with plants. The

walls are covered in my daughter's artwork, some of my own work, and a framed quilt from my husband's grandmother, which has been passed down through her family.

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

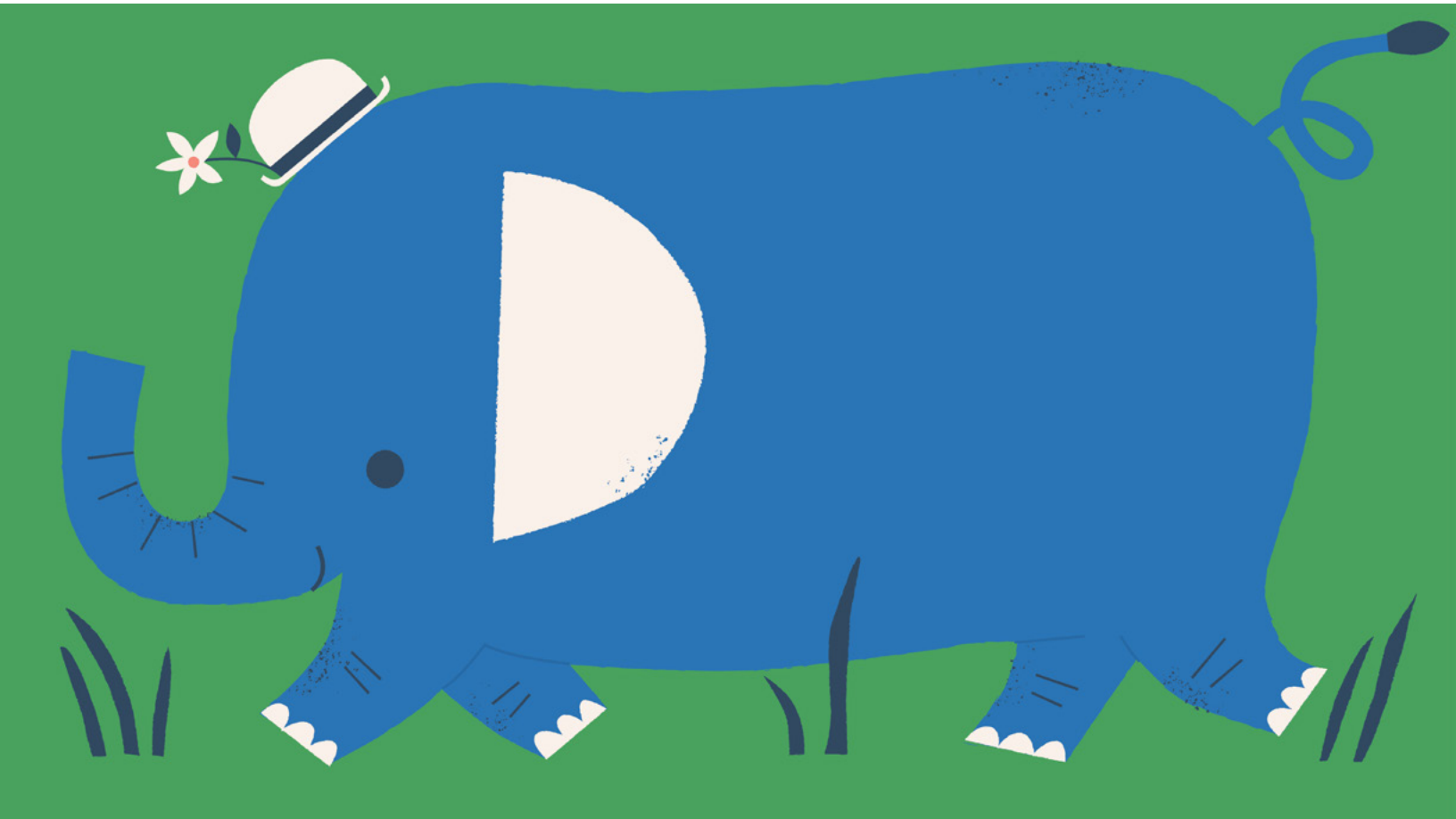
My favorites books when I was little were illustrated by James Marshall, Ellen Raskin, Arnold Lobel, and James Stevenson.

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

I admire so many illustrators, it's so hard to narrow it down. Some of the artists, creatives, writers, and picture book makers that I love include Lynda Barry, Austen Kleon, Christian Robinson, Abby Hanlon, Greg Pizzoli, Julie Morstad, and Rainbow Rowell.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

I find inspiration in the small details of my everyday life, reliving childhood through my daughters' eyes, teaching my students and seeing the work they create, reading, sketching, and my daily walks.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

What gets in the way of your creativity?

Overbooking and taking on too many commitments gets in the way of my creativity. I've been actively working on slowing down and being more selective about the projects I take on. I tend to be someone who's inclined to say 'yes' to everything, even when I know it's not in my best interest. While I absolutely love what I do and find joy in collaborating with so many different people, this can sometimes stifle my personal creativity. My goal this year is to create more space in my life for working on my own projects. 🌸

DENISE HOLMES (she/her) is an award-winning freelance illustrator. She creates illustrations for children's books and teaches part time at Columbia College Chicago. She loves to create playful and bright illustrations, drawing inspiration from her own childhood, the magic of everyday life, and her peculiar love of drawing cute characters. Denise lives in the heart of Chicago, IL with her husband, daughter, and their charming canine companion, Mochi. You can visit her at niseemade.com.



Tales from the Front

CLIMBING TREES AND HUNTING FOR THE LOCH NESS MONSTER: AN UNLIKELY NONFICTION STORY

by Rebecca Siegel

I'll never forget the first time I laid eyes on Loch Ness. It was a fleeting glimpse, snatched through a taxi window after a late-night flight, and utterly mesmerizing. Darkness lay like a heavy blanket on the surrounding hillsides. But the loch was something else altogether. It was alive. Moonlight danced across its glittering surface, and it sprawled, hungrily, across the horizon. The water pulled on my attention, as though it had its own unique gravity. I leaned forward in my seat and pressed my hands to the window. My heart pounded wildly.

I had come to the Scottish Highlands on some old and rather odd writing advice. Way back in 2016, I attended a lecture at the Chicago Writers Conference where an agent talked about the importance of hands-on research. During her talk, she said something along the lines of, *if your characters climb trees, then you should go outside and climb some trees, too*. Her point was that hands-on research gives writers an insight into the sights and sounds and smells that their characters would notice. Climbing a tree tells an author to include details about things like tree bark and bugs, warm sunshine and blistered palms. At the time, I remember thinking that it was a good lecture, filled with good advice...for other people.

I write narrative nonfiction. I don't conjure scenes from my imagination. I unearth them in the library. However, as time passed and my career progressed, I found myself recalling that agent's advice over and over again. It rattled around in my head: *Go outside and climb some trees*. I wrestled with it, realizing its appeal. Surely hands-on research would help my writing. But what trees could I possibly climb?

My first big book, *To Fly Among the Stars* (Scholastic, 2020) told the story of the male and female pilots who tested to become NASA's first astronauts. It was an objectively tree-free topic and I struggled to think of how I could incorporate hands-on research into my writing process. I certainly couldn't undergo astronaut testing. Nor could I ride a rocket into space. I remember feeling flummoxed. Uneasy. I wanted to try something. Then it hit me. All of the subjects in my book were aviators. I could learn to fly an airplane.



Flight lessons in a Cessna 172 weren't as fun as I'd imagined. They were technical and hot, and I was such a lousy pilot that I gave myself terrible airsickness. However, the benefits from this experience were incalculable. Spending just a couple of hours behind the controls of a single engine aircraft showed me how important it was to mention details like cockpit size, engine noise, and temperature. I learned how physical it felt to fly, how aviation exhaust smelled, and how the runway looked on approach. Learning to fly entirely changed the way I wrote about aviation, for the better. And it taught me something important: There are always, always trees to climb.

I've climbed a lot of trees since then. Some were adventurous and wild, like the time I researched dog sledding by learning to mush my own team through the subarctic forests along Lake Superior. Others were simple, quiet affairs. When writing about 1970s espionage, I taught myself to use Cold War cyphers by studying spycraft manuals I found on interlibrary loan. When researching life in Gold Rush Alaska, I poured over digital archives of a newspaper called the Nome Nugget. No matter what I'm researching, I always make a point to interview experts in the subject. Those interactions are trees to climb, too, because they provide unique insights that invigorate my work.



Tales from the Front

Writing my forthcoming book, *Loch Ness Uncovered: Media, Misinformation, and the Greatest Monster Hoax of All Time* (Astra Young Readers, 2024), required me to climb a variety of trees. There were interviews, of course. I questioned monster hunters about their work, a visual science professor about the mechanics of monster sightings, and a former CIA analyst about the logistics of fake news and misinformation. There were countless newspaper archives to pour over, too. And there was also one, very big, very important tree that remained: I needed to get to the UK.



I began my research trip in London, where I spent days holed up in the British Library's archives and conducting important interviews. After that, I made my way to Scotland. There, I accessed yet more archival documents in the Inverness library, and conducted yet more interviews. I stayed in a tiny hotel on Loch Ness, ate fish and chips and haggis, and perused the area's two monster museums. And then, on an overcast summer day, I boarded a sonar-

guided boat and hunted for the Loch Ness Monster. I spent the majority of my time on the hunt alternating between squinting at the tiny sonar screen perched at the helm, and staring down into the mysterious water. Nessie made no appearance. It was the time of my life.

My book isn't about whether a fictional lake monster might exist. Rather, it's about human mythmaking, fake news, and how the intersection of 1930s culture, science, and movies created the perfect breeding ground for a beloved Scottish cryptid. Visiting the loch informed the way I presented this story in countless ways. For one thing, I hadn't realized how stunning Loch Ness would be. I'd spent so many months thinking of it as a simple geographic site—a place where something odd happened—that I'd entirely neglected

to consider its beauty. I also hadn't realized how remote it would feel. Just getting to my loch-side hotel from the nearest airport was a 40-minute taxi ride through quiet, darkened forests. Yet the most important thing I learned during my visit to Loch Ness was also the simplest: its water is black. Eons of peat, washed down the surrounding hillsides, have made the water practically impossible to see through. Staring down at it is like looking at a pool of midnight ink. This helped me understand how so many people had come to believe that a monster lurked below. Gazing down into its depths, I half believed it, too.

As I type, I'm thrilled to share that my agent is completing negotiations on my next book deal. Though I'm not quite sure yet where my research will take me for this one, I do know one thing: I've got some climbing to do.

How about you? 🌟



REBECCA SIEGEL has worked in children's publishing for 17 years, first as an editor and then as an author. Three of her books have received Starred Reviews in Booklist. Check out her website at www.rebeccasiegel.org.

Creative Sparks

by Clothilde Ewing

For inspiration, I try to fill my office space with images and items that bring me joy. I've got a picture from my wedding, of my kids, cows (because they always make me smile), and of me standing next to aspiring-actor-turned-triathlete-turned-motivational speaker, Jim MacLaren; one of the most remarkable men I have ever had the chance to meet.

It's hard to sum up all that he experienced in 47 short years, but I'll give it a try. Jim was a handsome, charismatic, soon-to-be Ivy League graduate when he was struck by a bus. Pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital, he came out on the other side as an amputee. He eventually recovered and trained to become a record-breaking triathlete. Eight years later, while competing in a triathlon, he was struck by a truck, rendering him a quadriplegic. By the time I met him, he was able to see both accidents as a gift, as they forced him to realize he was more than his body and that his spirit was unbreakable.

I keep a photo of Jim up for inspiration because he personified what it means to be resilient. In his lifetime, he dealt with challenges that would have broken most people, but he dug deep and proved to himself that he was more than his accidents and that his physical circumstances did not need to define who he was nor his future.

As a mom to two young children, I think about the importance of grit and resilience a lot. How will these two little people react when they are struggling to keep up in school or when they don't get picked for a team or when the image they draw doesn't match the masterpiece in their head? Do they get mad? Do they give up? Or do they find a way to push through? And, as important, do they have some awareness that this is the road bump of the moment and there are more to come on this journey of life?

As writers and illustrators, we face some of these same challenges every time we choose to share our work. A well-intentioned critique can send us spiraling in a tunnel of self-doubt. A rejection can affirm the negative voice in the back of our head telling us we got lucky with that first project. A case of writer's block can leave us convinced the words or images will never come.



Creative Sparks

We have to decide we are more than that moment and challenge ourselves to keep trying, to never give up, like Jim.

The idea of pushing through hard times has inspired my latest picture book, which in a twist of irony, I am struggling with, but I am putting myself out there with the belief that I will get to the other side.

The seedlings for my story are below:

Pulling Through

When you were born I promised you that I would do everything I could to help you prepare for the world.

*Before you had words, you needed me for everything.
I figured out when you needed to eat...
You showed me when you needed to sleep.
And, together, we made it through.*

*Soon, you could tell me what you liked.
More...more...you showed me with your hands.
No....no...you showed me with your face.
And, together, we made it through.*

*Looking back, you seemed to run before you walked.
The first time you hurt yourself, I held my breath.
You looked at me, checking to see if you were ok.
You were. We were. And, together, we made it through.*

*At your first recital, you were so quiet.
Your stomach felt funny and you thought you were sick.
You had practiced so much, but you didn't want to go on stage.
But you did and you made it through.*

*You tried and you learned that you don't love the stage.
You prefer to rock out at home.
I am proud of you either way.*

Each time you try, you make it through. This is possible because of you.

I hope you stick with me on this journey as I work to figure it out, one word at a time. 🌸



CLOTHILDE EWING has spent her career communicating through journalism as an assignment editor and producer at CBS News, in entertainment as a producer at The Oprah Winfrey Show, through politics as a member of the press team for President Obama's 2012 reelection campaign, and with nonprofits, where she currently serves as Vice President of Strategic Communications at The Chicago Community Trust. She never had any intention of becoming an author, but was inspired to do so, after reading a New York Times [opinion piece](#) by her now-editor, Denene Millner, titled: "Black Kids Don't Want to Read About Harriet Tubman All the Time." Her goal is for people to see more children of color in books that are not defined primarily by race or struggle, but belonging and joy. Making sure this happened became her calling. A graduate of Syracuse University's SI Newhouse School of Communications, she currently lives in Chicago with her husband and two young children. Check out her website at clothildeewing.com.

Artificial Intelligence...

...VS. CREATORS OF WORLDS, THE EARLY YEARS: CHATGPT, LIKE THE BORG¹, BUT LESS HUMAN

by Jiton Sharmayne Davidson

1: WARNING: CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHORS, ILLUSTRATORS AND READERS

Like many of you, I began writing stories in high school. As I got older, my commitment and dedication grew. Eventually, writing became essential to me. I recall more than one of my favorite authors declaring, "I write because I have to." Even with dyslexia and other cognitive challenges, I also write because I have to. I was such a purist that when word processors became accessible, back in the dawn of time, I resisted. That's not how my literary ancestors worked.

But I came around once I accepted that spellcheck alone would be invaluable to me. My fear of the new tech was that it would make me less authentic. I grew up in a time and place with no testing or accommodations. So, for decades I persevered and currently I have a middle grade novel manuscript under consideration by major publishers. It wouldn't have happened without advances like MSWord.

Now, suddenly my fear of tech has been realized in the form of ChatGPT and other generative AI. That is Artificial ... Intelligence ... with the ability to write fiction, anything in the style of any writer published before 2021, and soon even current publications. The Hollywood writers' strike is also about me and all those who care about genuine authentic stories. Unlike Hollywood writers, however, book authors cannot strike. So how do we survive this attack and protect our literary past and future?

Currently the online publishing market is being flooded by non-writers creating children's books using AI for "passive income." Not only do these AI-generated stories out-price traditional books, but in order to learn, AI consumes all writing that has been published, like *Star Trek's* Borg assimilating and simulating our stories. While AI-generated stories are inferior in terms of the human touch, they also



degrade the quality of the literature young minds consume. And since programs like ChatGPT have been available only since late 2021, the battle is just beginning. We need to be clear about the dangers of AI to children's book creators and readers, then share that knowledge with the public.

ChatGPT is great at telling on itself as Roxanne Farwick Owens demonstrated in her *Prairie Wind* article entitled, "Oh, the Places ... We'll Go with ChatGPT... But Do We Want to Go There?" Owens interviews ChatGPT to learn its "potential benefits and important cautions." In response, ChatGPT compiled technical information about generative AI. This article is a follow-up to Owens', exploring the human side of her insightful question. Below are questions and answers I gathered after investigating AI myself.

WHAT IS GENERATIVE AI, SUCH AS CHATGPT?

I am not a tech-head. My four-year-old iPhone still surprises me. So, I'll begin with what I know: ChatGPT is a free AI app that draws (steals) knowledge from everything

¹*Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Season 2, episode 16. The Borg are cybernetic aliens that seek to conquer and assimilate whole civilizations by consuming knowledge and turning a select few into unthinking cyborgs that plug into one collective hive-mind.



Artificial Intelligence vs. Creators of Worlds

online (without permission of the authors) in order to write soulless, derivative, inauthentic text or stories based on the specific prompts. ChatGPT describes itself to Owens this way:

I've been trained on a vast corpus of text data and can generate human-like responses to a wide range of prompts and questions. As a language model, I don't have emotions or feelings, but I'm designed to help people by answering their questions, assisting with a variety of tasks, and generating creative writing.

WHO USES CHATGPT?

Lots of people use ChatGPT for legitimate reasons, however, I'm interested in those who use it to create stories in minutes, use programs like Midjourney to illustrate them, publish on Amazon and make thousands of dollars of "passive income" from a few hours' worth of so-called work. This guy thought it was cute that he could make a storybook for his friend's children: ["This Man Used AI To Write and Illustrate a Children's Book in One Weekend. He Wasn't Prepared for the Backlash"](#). And then there's Tim Boucher, who writes in *Newsweek* ["I'm Making Thousands Using AI to Write Books"](#). Read it, I dare you. He's published a popular series of over 100 SF novellas written by ChatGPT.

Don't ignore videos like this: [Easy PASSIVE Income with ChatGPT & Midjourney Creating Children's Books](#) and this: [EASY AI MONEY: Make \\$100k+ Writing Children's Books With ChatGPT & Midjourney | Make Money Online](#). Videos like these get their point across: Learn to produce this commodity in your spare time and make some extra cash.

HOW DOES CHATGPT THREATEN CHILDREN'S BOOK CREATORS?

As a real, live children's book author, I've spent nearly half a century pouring myself, my love for children, and the rest of that crazy beautiful mojo that makes me the messy, sensitive, empath that I am... into my stories. Almost 50 years of honing. I have practiced my craft, creating a great number of stories of varying lengths and genres, learning and evolving as a writer with each one, from those that end up in the "shit file" to those that I think are "the shit." I've spent time and money earning an MFA in writing. I have sacrificed and struggled because sharing truth for the

edification of children is my purpose. Even after decades of rejections, I still feel blessed by this gift. I fear that ChatGPT is going to make the author's journey harder for me and all the other authors who do the work.

When Owens asked ChatGPT about the cons of using it to write stories, it listed the disappointing quality and formulaic or predictable storylines. It explains that AI cannot "*understand... cultural contexts.*" That's part of it; I like how AI cannot lie. But it neglected to present the real-world implications. [The Authors Guild's advocacy statement](#) laments that ChatGPT and other programs like it "lack the essential human faculties that move the arts forward."

Next Owens asked directly: Is ChatGPT a threat to children's authors and illustrators? This time it answered: "*ChatGPT is not inherently a threat to children's authors or illustrators.*" Then it stated the obvious: "*... it does not possess the same level of creativity, imagination, and life experiences that human authors and illustrators bring to their work.*" That hasn't been a problem so far. After defending itself by stating how it can be a benefit to writers (more on that later) it continued to praise humans: "*[H]umans have the ability to connect with children in a way that machines cannot ... humans have the ability to create new and original stories that have never been told before, which is something that ChatGPT cannot do on its own.*" This response continues to ignore the human perspective, the very real cost to children's book writers and readers.

Further, while ChatGPT is a threat to all, it disproportionately affects writers of color. In an article titled ["AI IS COMING FOR YOUR CHILDREN: Con-Men Are Flooding Kindle with AI Children's Books,"](#) Robert Evans argues that "They Could Do Permanent Damage to Childhood Literacy." He worries parents are getting duped with affordable, unvetted junk. Evans also worries that, "charities that provide poor kids with free books might do bulk orders of this junk because the price looks right. In our glorious AI future, rich kids get to color in proper dinosaurs while poor kids grow up thinking Stegosaurus had no tail and the Earth used to have a second moon that looked like a human nipple," he writes, critiquing one AI-generated coloring book.



Artificial Intelligence vs. Creators of Worlds

What angers me is that parents will see characters of color on AI-generated book covers and believe they're giving children reflections of themselves. However, in reality an algorithm learned "we need diverse books," and fed that info into ChatGPT and Midjourney to mass-produce books derived from past attitudes and biases.

Owens asked ChatGPT what society should be worried about in terms of AI. It responds, *"As an AI language model, I do not have intentions or desires of my own and I only function within the constraints of my programming."* That sounds like something Lieutenant Commander Data's evil twin, Lore, would say with a wink². But we've been warned. So, what can children's book creators do to survive and thrive as the cyborgs come for our livelihood, as well as the hearts and minds of our children?

I believe we have to learn how to compete against non-creative writing AI operators and their helpers while it's still early enough to make a difference. But that's another article³ for another time. Right now, let's begin by exposing and critiquing AI generated books for sale on Amazon. Who writes reviews better than we do? 🌸



JITON SHARMAYNE DAVIDSON is a children's book author, a literary historian, and an educator. She holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and an MA in African American literature from Howard University. Her first middle-grade novel is under consideration by major publishers, and she is currently working on a chapter book series as well as an Afrofuturist YA novel. Jiton is also a consultant on "special project" at Serendipity Literary Agency.

²*Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Season 1, episode 13. Data is an android that longs to be human. Lore is his evil twin who stole the upgrade giving him erratic emotions. He wants to destroy and assume power.

³Look for the sequel article, subtitled "ENGAGE: Meeting the Threat to Children's Book Creators & Readers Head-On" in a publication yet to be announced.

How to Create Engaging...

STORYTIMES WITH MULTISENSORY PICTURE BOOKS

by Alison Marcotte and Dana Morgan, M.S., CCC-SLP

When my debut picture book *Seeking Best Friend* came out in 2022, Dana Morgan, M.S., CCC-SLP, had just completed an incredible project for Elmhurst Public Library. She created and donated 28 multisensory books for the library's children's section, making 28 books more accessible to all readers.

I reached out to Dana and she taught me how to create my own multisensory picture book kit for *Seeking Best Friend*. I brought the kit to storytimes, and it was a hit. Kids interacted with the book, easily moving from page to page with the popsicle sticks and touching the pom poms, fake grass, and other textures on the pages.

I reached so many more readers—tactile learners, children who might have trouble seeing the book from far away, children who might find storytimes boring, all kinds of readers—than if I had just read aloud.

WHAT ARE MULTISENSORY BOOKS?

Multisensory books are books with additional features that allow children to interact with a story using all some or all of their senses. This leads to better engagement with young children or those who may not have the attention span for a typical flat-page book. By engaging children in a variety of formats, we take a story and make it interactive.

WHY DO WE NEED MULTISENSORY BOOKS?

Multisensory books promote inclusivity and equity in literacy. A book that incorporates multiple senses makes it so that children can interact with a story with reduced assistance. These books essentially promote the concept of inclusion so all children can independently enjoy literacy regardless of their ability level. The books promote increased learning

and language development through the use of multisensory experiences and play with books. Research has found that engaging in learning experiences that use all of your five senses not only engages individuals of all ages but helps them increase their memory and learning of new concepts, especially language. They help individuals with disabilities feel welcome and accepted while normalizing disability within our society. It promotes equity not just in literacy but the concept that everyone, regardless of their ability level, deserves to be part of and have comfortable access in our communities. It's a small step in building a less ableist world where we all feel accepted.

For authors and illustrators, providing a sensory-engaging experience may boost sales. We are tactile learners and we learn language and concepts best when all our senses are involved. Most books with tactile and sensory output (touch-and-feel books and lift-the-flap books) are board books for children 0-3 years old.

Older children still need books with multisensory components. But there aren't many multisensory picture books out there, likely because they can be expensive to publish. Authors and illustrators can fill this gap by adding adaptations to their picture books for storytimes. When you provide multisensory books, you are letting all readers feel included during storytimes.

HOW DO YOU MAKE MULTISENSORY BOOKS?

There currently isn't a clear pathway for how authors, parents, and educators can make multisensory books for children. Dana and I are trying to help change that with our resource <https://multisensorystorytime.com>.

Just like there's no cookie-cutter plan for telling a story, there's no wrong way to make a multisensory book. The beauty of a multisensory book is that it can be created to serve a single individual's needs or to meet a wider audience. There's no wrong or perfect way to go about it, and there truly are endless possibilities of how to add these interactive features.



How to Create Engaging Storytimes...



Great features to explore when you create a multisensory book:

- **Page turners—popsicle sticks, raised foam, pipe cleaners, or a cut-up sponge**
 - Helps individuals turn the pages by separating them in some way. You can't interact with a book if you can't turn the page.
- **Tactile input highlighting key characters/illustrations — placing pieces of textured paper, pipe cleaners, fabric, or any other texture on pages of story**
 - Helps children who are visually impaired or tactile learners engage in the story. It's a recurring detail that is consistent throughout the book. (Be careful to make tactile input components large enough to avoid choking hazards.)
- **Physical toys/objects**
 - Promotes engagement and imaginary play. Try to think of items that would help a child really act out the story. Who are the important characters? Are there any recurring items that should be included?
 - When possible, providing real-life plastic objects would be ideal as they are easy to clean!
 - An affordable option is making items yourself by copying pictures from the story or using Word to make your own. Laminating and placing these on popsicle sticks makes easy-to-clean puppets.
- **QR code to a recording of the story**
 - Reading along and listening boosts language and phonemic awareness. This helps children hear a story without depending on their caregiver to read to them.



How to Create Engaging Storytimes...



- **Communication vocabulary board (important to have a version that is adapted for CVI)**
 - Create a board similar to Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) board using symbols related to the book.
 - This helps children with complex communication needs talk about the story using vocabulary in the book by pointing to a visual representation of key terms.
 - It helps children both hear and see vocabulary which helps them semantically map it to promote increased learning.
- **Talk tile/button — button or tile that allows for parents or children make pre-recorded phrases to be played by touch**
 - Helps children, especially those who struggle to communicate verbally, develop expressive and receptive language.
 - Short recordings of words or even sounds (e.g. woof, roar) that go along with the book allows a child to engage in a fun way.
 - Talking about what is important to record helps children and their caregivers have a natural discussion on the overall theme or main point of the books, which, of course, is great for learning.
- **Book stabilizers — cookie sheet with Velcro on sheet and on cover of the book to secure it, Dycem anti-slip material on cover of book, book holder**
 - Keeps books from moving around so they don't go flying!

Interested in learning more about multisensory books? Visit our website <https://multisensorystorytime.com>. 🌟

ALISON MARCOTTE is a picture book writer. Her debut picture book, *Seeking Best Friend*, illustrated by award-winning illustrator Diane Ewen and published by Beaming Books, came out in 2022. She's a member of the *12 x 12 Picture Book Writing Challenge*, SCBWI, Chicago Writers Association, and she is a freelance writer for American Library Association's *American Libraries* magazine.

DANA MORGAN is a speech language pathologist with a special interest in literacy and its impact on language development. She has spent a majority of her career serving complex communicators who utilize augmentative alternative communication as their primary means of expression. As a parent of an AAC user with complex physical and cognitive needs, Dana is a fierce advocate for promoting inclusive practices within her community. She is the creator of the inclusive library section at the Elmhurst Public Library and an annual guest lecturer at Elmhurst University on the topic of the importance of empathy in clinical practice. Dana currently works as an independent contractor working with children of all ages.

Real Authors...

...DO SELF-PUBLISH

by Carolyn Armstrong



The idea of indie publishing, also known as self-publishing, stirs people up. Some snub their noses at self-published authors. I know because I used to do the same thing. Committing to indie publishing didn't happen for me overnight. It was more of a series of decisions, one built upon the other, that allowed me to take control of my writing career.

In 2018, my debut novel *Because Of Khalid* was published by Tiger Stripe Publishing. In the following months, I designed a website, sold books at festivals, and visited local schools. While doing all that, the first book of my Eco Warriors series went from a WIP to a completed manuscript.

When my SCBWI critique partner, Jeannette Lee, announced that there was a Twitter contest called RevPit, I entered. My pitch caught the eye of editor Bethany Hensel. I hired her for a manuscript critique. Once I completed my revisions, I set my sights on agents and small presses and submitted to whomever was open. While I was waiting to hear back from them, I decided to do a brand refresh, beginning with my website. It's now called *Earth-Friendly Fiction: Fact-Based, Middle-Grade, Climate-Focused*.

While patiently (or impatiently at times) waiting, I educated myself about environmental issues which are at the core of my series. I participated in Plastic Free July, a global movement to increase awareness about plastic pollution, and I joined Go Green Winnetka, a local offshoot of a greater organization that encourages people to be more sustainable. These things inspired me to create a monthly newsletter called *The Earth-Friendly Edition For People Who Love The Planet*. It features eco-friendly fun things to read, learn, and do. I invite you to sign up on my website! www.ckabooks.com

Still no word from those small presses. Not even a single rejection. I chose to believe that I was so far down in the slush pile that they just hadn't read mine yet. So, I began writing Book Two of my series. My critique group went

through it a couple of times. There was this nagging feeling that Book Two's existence wouldn't matter if Book One never saw the light of day.

On days when I should have been writing but instead was procrastinating, I took screenshots of every book cover I liked, printed them out, and taped them to my vision wall. Soon, I had a clear direction of how I'd like this book to look. If only I'd hear back from one of those small presses!

I went back to Bethany Hensel and hired her to do a complete manuscript revision. During one of our sessions, she brought up indie publishing. An annoying little voice kept telling me that "real authors don't self-publish." I ignored that voice and instead did some research. It turns out SCBWI has extensive information about self-publishing. What they don't provide is a list of their own members who have taken this route. Could I do this thing without a community of support? I had so many questions and no one to ask.

More investigating led me to Ingram Spark, Ingram's self-publishing branch. I discovered that they have the same global distribution opportunities as traditional publishing houses. I checked out Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP). Neither of them charge a set-up fee. Casting a wide net by using both Ingram Spark and KDP meant my book would be available for purchase everywhere: in bookstores, gift shops, other countries, and on Amazon. It was up to the individual bookstore or library to put it on their shelves, but all that would take was a simple request.

I was ready to commit, and then I announced my decision to family and friends. I had answers for everyone's questions. I



Real Authors DO Self-Publish

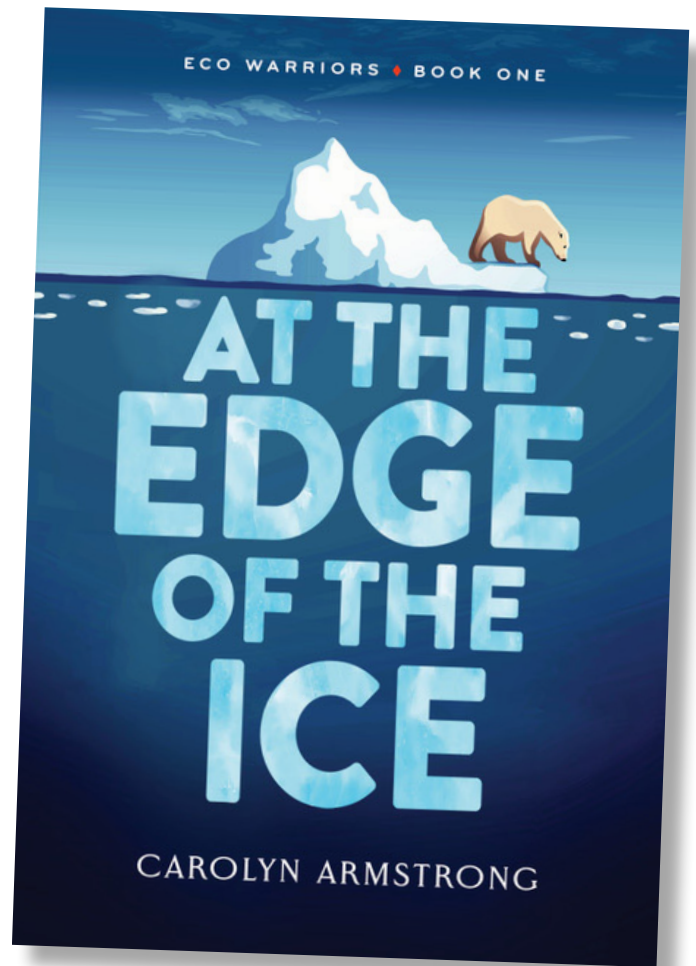
ignored their eye rolling and kept moving toward my goal. Indie publishing is more sustainable because it's print on demand. So, no, I don't have 10,000 copies stored in my garage. A few people said, "There are a lot of poorly written self-pub books out there." That's true. I whole-heartedly agree with them. My response, "There are also poorly written bestsellers published by the big houses. What's your point?"

After making that vision board of cover art, I was ready to move quickly on this part of the process. I hired Christine Kettner on Reedsy. I discovered she had done the cover design for *A Long Walk To Water* by Linda Sue Park, one of my all-time favorite middle grade books. Christine has a long career as a book designer/art director working for publishing houses such as Disney, Harper Collins, Little Brown, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. I was absolutely thrilled when this very talented and famous designer agreed to take on my project. I am her first Reedsy client, and we're already collaborating on the next book in the series.

Does this sound like the road to self-publishing was smooth sailing? It wasn't. I made a bunch of mistakes in the set-up process on Ingram Spark, forcing me to back track. I would have given anything to have had an experienced "me" leaning over my shoulder saying, "Don't click that link! Do this instead. Take a deep breath. Don't sprint toward the finish line." I've learned so many valuable tips and tricks that I could teach a class on indie publishing. Let me know if you're interested.

Indie publishing was a conscious commitment to pivot. It was a choice, not born out of rejection, but because of my intense desire to see this story out in the world. It was a test of patience and perseverance. Sometimes I was panicking. Other times, praying. But I'd like to believe that the tide is turning on indie publishing. More authors like me are unwilling to wait, are raising the bar, and are creating quality content that can stand on its own.

Book One of Eco Warriors: *At The Edge Of The Ice* is a heartfelt eco-adventure that takes place in Svalbard, a small group of islands near the North Pole. When intuitive eleven-year-old Sydney Cabella gains the ability to talk with animals, she is alarmed by what they have to say. She enlists the help of her brainiac twin sister Sierra, hoping beyond hope that their activism will make a difference. 🌟



CAROLYN ARMSTRONG is the author of Earth-friendly middle grade fiction. A former educator and now an imperfect environmentalist, she blends her love of travel and animal well-being into her stories. She encourages everyone to become advocates for Planet Earth. It's as easy as picking up trash and refusing a plastic drinking straw! Head to www.ckabooks.com for free activities, monthly newsletters, blogs about writing, books, and sustainability.

Voices of Change

THE POWER OF ALLYSHIP IN KIDLIT by Nathan Lyon

I've written the Voices of Change column a few times now. Each time, I've focused on kidlit that shines a light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ kids and teens. In my first article, I spent time recommending middle grade and young adult books that highlight the diversity of the queer community, including gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, nonbinary and queer characters. The point I wanted to drive home is that queer kids exist in our world and deserve to see themselves in the books they read.

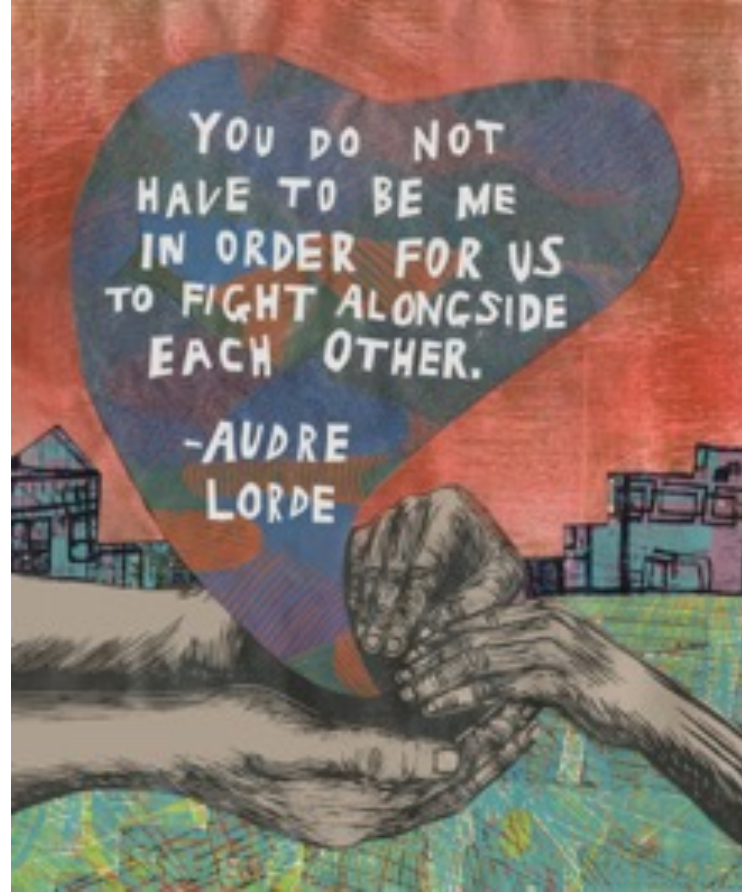
Ten or fifteen years ago, representation was the goal. LGBTQ+ writers simply wanted to see more of our books on bookstore and library shelves. In the spring 2022 issue of *Prairie Wind*, I wrote about how queer representation is no longer enough. Too many middle grade and young adult books focus on the bullying, pain and trauma of being a kid who is part of the rainbow community. My thinking about LGBTQ+ representation had evolved. Queer kids deserve more than simply seeing themselves in books. Queer kids deserve books that celebrate unabashed queer joy.

As we all know, books are more than mirrors. They also serve as windows and sliding glass doors. Books allow readers to understand experiences that are different from their own. Books are empathy builders. Kids who are not a part of the LGBTQ+ community benefit immensely from reading stories about queer kids.

For this issue, I turn my attention to allyship.

ALLYSHIP IN ACTION

In addition to being a writer, I also teach fourth grade. I absolutely love my job and spending my day with curious, kind, hardworking and silly nine and ten-year-olds. One of the most rewarding parts of my job is seeing students realize they have the power to make change in their world. I try to help students understand that when they see injustice around them, they don't have to accept it. It's not only adults who can improve our world. They can use their own voice to stand up for others and create change.



Every year we take our students on a field trip to a charity organization and help sort donated books, shoes, toys, clothing and more for families in need. More than once, students have noticed the only clothing categories designated were for boys and girls. Some quickly picked up on the fact that some kids were being left out. I've heard students ask things like, "What about nonbinary people? Why aren't we sorting clothes for them too?" This is allyship in action. Kids have an innate sense of fairness and justice. They care about the world they live in. And, above all, they are very capable of standing up for others when they see their voices are needed.

ALLYSHIP IN KIDLIT

So, what does all of this have to do with writing and illustrating books for young people? I think there's an extraordinary opportunity here for creators to fill their



Voices of Change

books with characters acting as allies and advocates. LGBTQ+ issues are close to my heart, so I'd love to see more stories featuring non-queer kids who care about these issues and stand up for their queer peers. Queer kids need to know that if they face hard times, they aren't alone. So, let's make sure there are not only books that highlight LGBTQ+ kids experiencing joy, but let's also surround them with allies.

As we create these stories and characters, we can remember that there are many ways to be an ally. Sometimes being an ally means marching and protesting and shouting through a bullhorn. Sometimes it means picking up a pen to write to a legislator or governor. Sometimes allies organize clubs that create a safe space for LGBTQ+ kids. And sometimes allies use one or two words to defend someone else or distract a bully. I dream of bookshelves being filled with characters who model all the ways to be an ally.

Unfortunately, this world isn't always kind to LGBTQ+ kids and teens. LGBTQ+ issues are often used by politicians to rally their base and garner votes. But queer kids don't deserve to be political fodder. They deserve to be happy and live their best lives. If our books can help other kids stand up for and with queer kids, we'd be filling the world with just a little bit more happiness and joy.

NOT JUST AN LGBTQ+ ISSUE

I hope it goes without saying that it's not just queer people who need allies. Let's fill our books with characters who stand up for Black and brown kids too. Readers need stories about allies who stand with indigenous people, disabled people, immigrants, girls and women, unhoused people. We need books about allies to Muslim, Jewish and Hindu people and any other group of people who are denied full equality and, thus, are vulnerable.

When I think about what it means to act as an ally, I often go back to a quote from Audre Lorde, a Black feminist writer who also identified as a lesbian. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre wrote, "You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other." We don't need to have a ton in common with someone before we stand with them. In fact, it's when we step into the shoes of someone different from us that we truly start to understand empathy and allyship.

BOOKS RECOMMENDATIONS

Luckily, there are authors who have already created some books that feature characters who learn about marginalized communities and take action to support their friends or siblings.

- *Boy Bites Bug* by Rebecca Petruck - The main character has to decide if will stand up to his friend who is using racial slurs.
- *You Don't Know Everything, Jilly P!* by Alex Gino - The main character befriends a child who is deaf and learns about hearing loss and the deaf community.
- *Too Bright to See* by Kyle Lukoff - The main character is supported by her best friend as she questions her gender identity.
- *The Civil War of Amos Abernathy* by Michael Leali - Queer and non-queer kids stand together.
- *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps - Minor characters stand with the main character against fatphobia.
- *Small Town Pride* by Phil Stamper - Friends and family help the main character plan a Pride celebration.

For the book creators out reading, I encourage you to think about your current work in progress. Are there characters who need allies fighting alongside them? This doesn't have to be a major plot point, but even a small dose of allyship can inspire readers. It's one of the most powerful things we can do with the books we create. 🌟



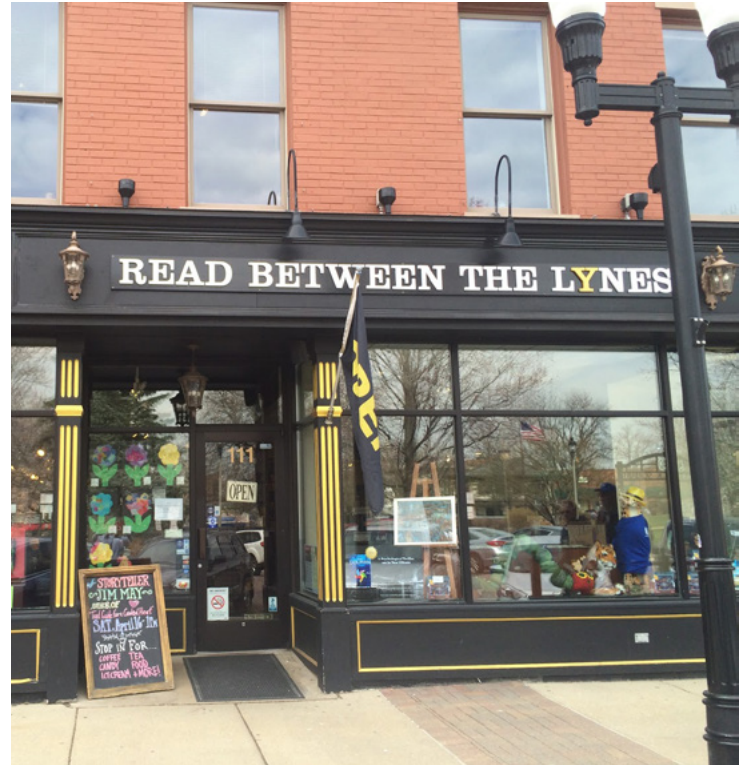
NATHAN LYON is a teacher, advocate and pre-published middle grade writer. He believes in the power of kidlit to make our world a more equitable place. He serves as a member of the SCBWI-IL Equity and Inclusion Team. You can find him on Instagram [@mr_lyon_4th](#) and X [@nathanwlyon](#).

Shop Around the Corner

READ BETWEEN THE LYNES by Lori Degman

If you've ever seen the 1993 movie, *Groundhog Day*, then you've seen Woodstock, Illinois. This picturesque town is located about 50 miles northwest of downtown Chicago in McHenry County. Located on the historic square is Read Between the Lynes, a charming bookstore owned by Arlene Lynes. This unique store carries adult and children's books, as well as local gifts and games. While you're there, make sure to stop at their old-fashioned candy counter for some yummy goodies!

I had the pleasure of doing an author visit at Read Between the Lynes this past July to help them celebrate their 18th birthday. Arlene arranged for me to read my book, *Cock-a-Doodle Oops*, to a large group at the farmer's market story time and then I read *Travel Guide for Monsters Part Deux: A Canadian Adventure* in the bookstore. Arlene was a pleasure to work with and she made it a fun event. I interviewed Arlene about the store and here's what she had to say.



Thanks so much for having me at your store and for doing this interview! I'm curious—how and when did you come to own a bookstore?

I opened Read Between the Lynes (RBTL) in July of 2005. When I moved to Woodstock, Il in 1997 there were three bookstores located directly on our historic Square. By 2000, all of them were gone. After years of not having an Indie close by to shop at, I began to research how to start an Independent Bookstore.

It's great that you could fill that niche! What do you think Between the Lynes brings to the Woodstock community?

We bring exactly that, community. We provide a safe space for all to gather and share through a genuine interest in making our community a better place through reading.

There was a strong community feeling at your wonderful Farmer's Market! When did you start doing story time there?

I believe it was their 2020 season when everyone was working to create outdoor opportunities.

What makes Read Between the Lynes' offerings unique?

I think it's our personal touch. We try the best we can to truly get to know our customers. We develop relationships and earn their trust. I have a unique quality of connecting people - whether it is to each other or to a book. I think I do that rather well in terms of bookselling.

That was very apparent by the large number of people who came to celebrate the store's 18th birthday! You have a nice children's section. What does Read Between the Lynes offer to kids and parents that you think is unique?

Thank you. I'm not sure we offer anything unique, but a love of children, reaching out to them with books and generally having fun.

I think your author events help make it fun for kids! How should local authors ask you about doing book launch events?

Present their book and a "pitch" for an event via email. We



Shop Around the Corner

like to get creative and if the author already has an idea that would help.

Do you stock books by self-published authors? If so, how can they get them on your shelves?

Self-published authors are welcome to submit an email request to me at rbl.arlene@gmail.com with information about their book.

Are there any changes you're looking forward to?

I am looking forward to increasing our events calendar, expanding our hours as our budget permits and expanding our role throughout our county.

Well, if you continue doing what you're doing, I have no doubt all these things will happen! Thanks so much for taking the time to answer these questions! I hope to see you again soon!

You can follow Read Between the Lynes at:

Website: readbetweenthelynes.com

Facebook: [@ReadBetweenTheLynes](https://www.facebook.com/ReadBetweenTheLynes)

Twitter/X: [@ReadBtwnLynes](https://twitter.com/ReadBtwnLynes)

Instagram: [@readbetweenthelynes](https://www.instagram.com/readbetweenthelynes) 🌟

LORI DEGMAN is the author of the award-winning picture books, *Just Read* (illus. by Victoria Tentler-Krylov), 2020-2021 Illinois Reads Book List; *Cock-a-Doodle Oops!* (illus. by Deborah Zemke), 2014 International Literacy Association Honor Book; and *I Zany Zoo* (illus. by Colin Jack), 2010 Winner of the Cheerios New Author Contest and 2013 Illinois Reads Book List. Lori's other titles are *Travel Guide For Monsters* (illus. by Dave Szalay), *Travel Guide For Monsters Part Deux: A Canadian Adventure* (co-written with Jocelyn Watkinson and illus. by Marcus Cutler), *Like a Girl* (illus. by Mara Penny), and *Norbert's Big Dream* (illus. by Marco Bucci). Lori was a teacher of the deaf and has a master's degree in early childhood education. She now writes full time and loves doing school visits and presenting at writing conferences. She lives with her family in Vernon Hills, IL.



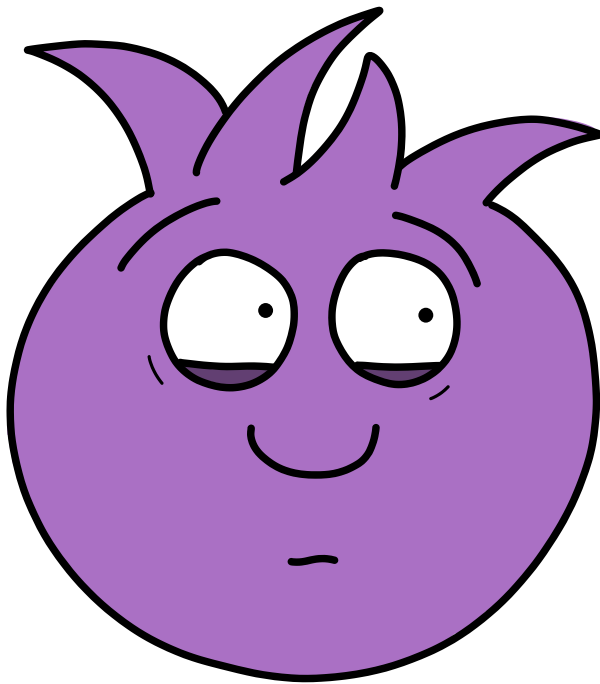
Illustrator's Tips

YOU ARE WHAT YOU DO by DJ Corchin

"The illustrations are just perfect!"
"I love the artwork!"
"You're so talented!"

These are comments I've heard when people read the *I Feel...* Children's Series.

Also, here's a sample illustration from it:



As you can see it's a masterpiece that took years of art school, studying abroad in a remote forest where you can become one with nature's hues and sculptured lines while breathing in inspirational, artistic pollen from the life flowers that give the world its soul.

In actuality, I did it on a free iPad app with a \$3.00 stylus I picked up at a convenience store, along with a G2 and some skittles. This is something a child could draw. But what a child usually can't do is find the perfect moment to draw it. That comes with experience.

I started my journey as an author, writing humorously inspiring poems about band (I was a high school band

director at the time). Inspired by the fact that my grandmother went to school with Shel Silverstein, I wanted to explore more. I thought there was great wisdom in children's books. Little did I know that the wisdom I would find years later wasn't just in reading children's books, it was also in making them.

Long story medium length, I met John Hughes while working retail (You can read about it [here](#)). The basic lesson was if you write something, you're a writer. You don't need permission to be called an author, a singer, an artist, etc. Beyond just the profoundness of the statement he shared, I also found it gave me courage and helped eliminate imposter syndrome. Someone wrote a book, why not me?

I would put that newfound courage into action when I decided to write a book about feelings. I knew the drawings had to be simple enough to strip all the noise to not detract from the pages' messages, but also nuanced enough to emote feelings beyond just happy or sad.

Could I do this? Do I need to pay an illustrator instead? I wasn't sure. So armed with John's words of wisdom, I became an artist.

I chose to draw on an iPad first to "sketch" ideas. I loved it. The comfort of the "undo" button was delightful, like a warm blanket wrapped around you while you drink hot chocolate from a color-changing Transformer cup and your kindergarten teacher is there saying, "That's ok. Try it again. You almost got it."

It was so forgiving that my confidence grew to the point where my fingerprint eventually dissipated from over that undo button. I discovered I'm incredibly talented at drawing shapes and one-lined eyebrows. Perfect for the nuanced and simplistic faces I needed for this book.

As simple as the drawings were, they were the perfect drawings for THAT book with THAT audience. Professionals who work with children who are autistic praised the simple faces that helped with facial recognition.



Illustrator's Tips

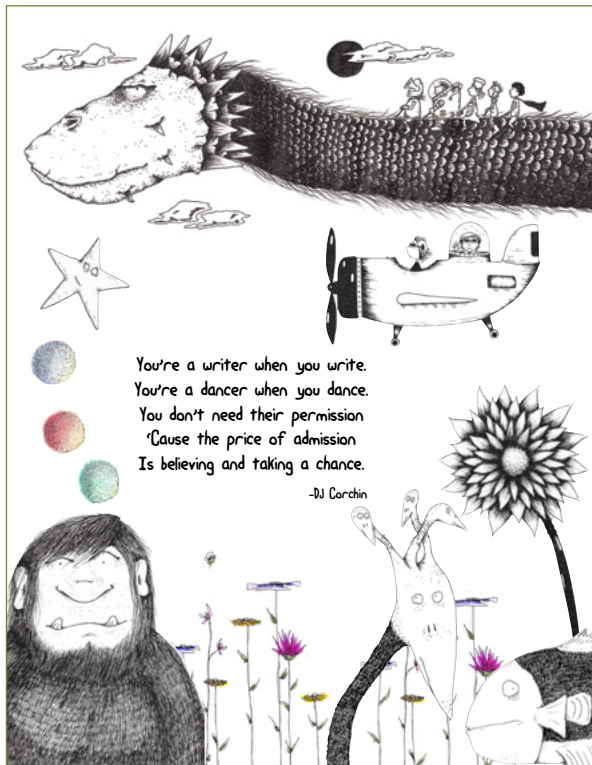


The teachers who worked with children who are ADHD praised the contrast of the colors to the white backgrounds and the lack of busyness for the sake of making it look cool. The series has won awards and praise. All because I had the courage to try to save money on producing the book by becoming an artist.

The experience emboldened me to finally put actual pen to paper and draw. I was bad. But I got better, because I was now an artist. I drew creatures and plants and whatever felt like a fit for me. I gave myself permission to be good at one type of drawing, but not others. I can't draw realistic people, but I don't need to. Some of my favorite illustrators don't either.

My art has been described as “whimsical” or “nostalgic.” People buy my art. That's not a humble brag, that's a statement that people see different things different ways. Some people see my artwork as untrained; others see it as fantastical and playful. They're probably both right.

But the big takeaway here is John's lesson: You are what you do. If you make art, you're an artist. So don't stop drawing if you want to be an illustrator, because you already are. You'll find where it matches up to the right words. Like Shel would say, you may be looking for your missing piece, but the adventure is the point.



Here's some of the things I've learned and would like to share:

1. Play. Play with different mediums, different technology, etc. The worst that can happen is that you mess up and throw away a piece of paper. But we have recycling, so you're good.
2. Don't assume that because artists draw things that look like a child drew it, it's because they purposely chose to and secretly, they can draw anything. Sometimes that's just how they draw. I find that helps with imposter syndrome. But also, don't assume the crayon-using extraordinaire isn't capable of communicating nuanced emotion. I know I'm in there somewhere.
3. Getting an offer to draw a book isn't about your ability to draw “professionally.” It's about if the drawings communicate what is needed. Sometimes that's an intricate watercolor piece and sometimes it's crayon-scratched robot hippos with wheels instead of feet. You're lucky if you're good at both.
4. Boring zoom meetings are a great time to draw (while listening of course). You don't need hours of dedicated time to create something.
5. Get really good at one style and then try out others. I recently was inspired to try dip pens. They are really hard to control. But just yesterday I was able to draw a dragon without a big dot of ink ruining it. But don't worry Peter Reynolds...I signed the ones that did. Having my “signature style” in a good place allows me to focus on learning and not earning.
6. Listen to people talking about your art. How others see your art is so interesting, informative, and dare I say, fun. 🌟

DJ CORCHIN is an award-winning author and illustrator of over 24 books including *A Thousand NO's* (Sourcebooks, 2020) and *Do You Speak Fish?* (Sourcebooks, 2021) both illustrated by Dan Dougherty, the *I Feel* Children's Series (Sourcebooks, 2020-21) and *If You Find A Unicorn It Is Not Yours To Keep* (Sourcebooks, 2022) illustrated by DJ, and additional projects such as *HALF-CAT* (The phazelFOZ Company, 2018) illustrated by Tyler Hawx and *Shut Up and Feel: An Adult Picture Book on Emotions* (The phazelFOZ Company, 2023) also illustrated by Dan Dougherty.

Writer's Tips

READ LIKE A WRITER by Patricia Hruby Powell

READ YOUR GENRE AND ACROSS GENRES

Reading widely increases your vocabulary, models how to write mind-blowing sentences (or verse), teaches about structure, and sparks ideas of what you might write about. Be sure to read for fun. It's what we tell our kids. Just read.



Reading is the most major component of your education as a writer. Being a well-versed reader will give you confidence, and in fact, the authority to write.

Whether you write (or aspire to write) picture books, first chapter books, middle-grade, or young adult, whether it's fiction, non-fiction, verse, prose, or graphic novels, read across all these genres. And read adult literature. Reading widely will help tamp down those annoying thoughts of impostor syndrome.

Here's one practical micro-consideration: what if you decide to, or are advised to, try reworking your picture book as an easy-to-read or first chapter book? Oftentimes, another age level is more suitable to your subject or your approach to a subject. If you've read the literature, this venture is not daunting.

READ THE BEST

Award committees make somewhat subjective choices, and you can miss some very good books if you just stick to reading award winners - still, it's a good place to start if you want to read the best. Check out Caldecotts, Newberys, National Book Award, Siberts, Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpré, Printz, Theodor Geisel, and the Society of Midland Authors, to name a few. Lists such as ALA Notable, NPR, Chicago Public Library, BCCB Blue Ribbon, Hornbook Fanfare, and so many others are also fantastic resources.



Or go to your library or bookstore and browse. Read the books of your friends and colleagues. Before you attend a book event, read the books of the presenters, whether they're authors, illustrators, editors, or agents. This is common courtesy, as well as imperative to your education as a book creator. You'll learn much more from the presenter if you know the books they discuss.

WHAT TO ANALYZE - POV

First and most basic step: Analyze point of view—the person and the tense.

Present tense

1st person: "I am reading this."

3rd person: "She is reading that."

The rare 2nd person: "Reader, what are you reading right now?"

Past tense

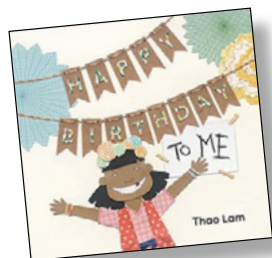
1st person: "I wrote a manuscript."

3rd person: "He wrote a book."



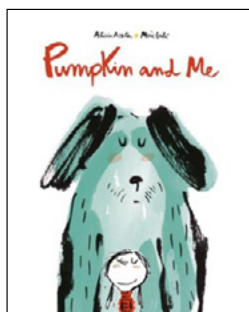
Writer's Tips

Most picture books are written in 3rd person because the author can probably use more sophisticated language than say a three-year-old voice could. But not all.

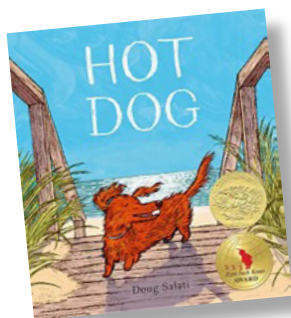


Take *Happy Birthday to Me* (Groundwood 2023) by Thao Lam, which begins, “Today is my birthday.” (POV: 1st person present tense)

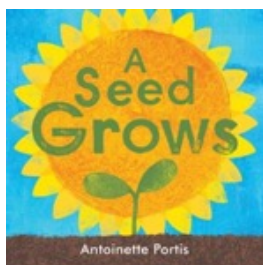
Or *Pumpkin and Me* (NubeOcho 2021) in which author Alicia Acosta writes “...an octopus wrapped itself around my heart.” (POV: 1st person past tense)



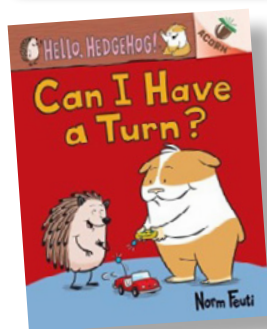
Note that these books came out with small publishers. Note those publishers, they might accept un-agented manuscripts. In fact, read all back matter; particularly for middle grade and young adult books, because editors or agents might be acknowledged. These are leads to follow toward your own publication.



Or this year's Caldecott winner, the remarkable *Hot Dog* (Knopf 2022) by Doug Salati, who tells a heart-warming story without pronoun or tense, which gives it a universal appeal. Study it.

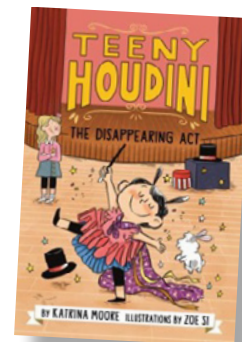


Nonfiction is usually told in 3rd person past tense. But not all. See the wonderful *A Seed Grows* (Holiday House/Neal Porter 2022) in which author Antoinette Portis writes, “A seed falls and settles into the soil.” It's told in the 3rd person, but present tense. Study it. Might this POV work for your story?



Easy Readers tend to be written in 3rd person for the same reasons—an author can use more sophisticated language. But not *Can I Have a Turn?* (Scholastic Acorn 2022) by Norm Feuti. And it's a graphic novel. (POV: 1st person present).

First Chapter Books can break the same rule/tendency. “Teeny Houdini” series (Katherine Tegen 2022). (POV: 1st person present)



Now that I've shown you six exceptions to the norm, analyze whatever is on your nightstand right now. What is the POV? Once POV is noted, ask, does it draw you in? Would that work for your story? Or does it keep you at arm's length? Would that be better for your particular story?

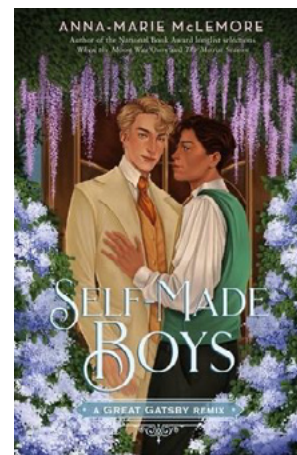
Lots of YA is written in first person. A sixteen-year-old has a growing command of language. But all variations are available to you if you write young adult fiction.

Exercise: Write your story (or a chapter or a passage from your story) in all the above POV variations. Analyze how it changes what you can say, how you can get the idea across most effectively. It might surprise you. How can you best evoke the emotion of your reader? Because that's ultimately what we're doing, engaging our reader to feel emotion.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE? WHAT DO YOU NOT LOVE? BE DISCERNING.

I love other cultures and history. I love language that's used wisely and appropriately. Here are a couple of recent YA reads. BTW, you can read my reviews of a lot of YA books at <https://talesforallages.com/reviews-and-book-news/>

Self-Made Boys: A Great Gatsby Remix (Feiwel and Friends 2022) by Anna-Marie McLemore
(POV: Nic: 1st person past)



Nicolás Caraveo is the narrator of this remix:

I would have sworn to a priest that Gatsby's smile pulled light in through the windows.

I like that. It's an image that strikes me as true and *illuminating*. As well as inventive. The narrator shows something of Nic's religious beliefs, and how they see the

Writer's Tips

character of Gatsby in a most visual way and shows us that the narrating character is bright, creative, and sophisticated. That's a lot of mileage for one line to cover.

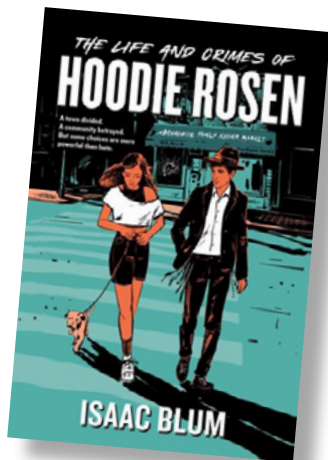
It seems fitting that a story such as this, set in the Roaring Twenties, be written in dazzling prose, but the constant florid images verge on purple prose, for this reader, especially since the author describes her narrator, Nic, as an empirical man.

"Don't you love me anymore, Tom?" [Daisy] asked in a voice as airy as her green chiffon.

Lines like that and too many others like them are too much for this reader. Overwritten. I make note of what I like and what I don't. Of course, it's subjective. You might love that line. So take note. Use similes that address the clothes your characters wear.

HUMOR

I'm grateful to authors who make me laugh. I'd like to be able to do that. I laughed on most every page of the YA *The Life and Crimes of Hoodie Rosen* (Philomel 2022) by Isaac Blum. That is, when I wasn't crying. (POV: Hoodie: 1st person past).



Hoodie sees a girl, wearing not a white gown, but a white T-shirt, out the window of his orthodox Jewish boy's school. And shorts that show a lot of skin. He's allowed to go on walks to think about Talmud, but he's not allowed to talk to girls. Hoodie leaves school to take a walk.

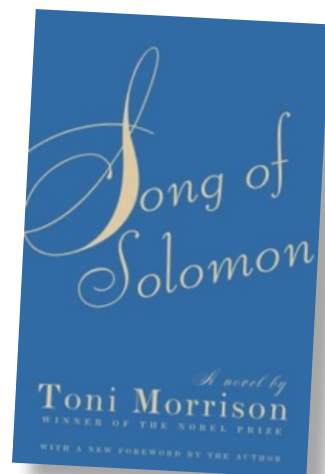
Unable to stop himself, he asks her name. "Anna-Marie," she says. "Crap," says Hoodie. I'd been holding out hope she'd be a Chaya or an Esther. But no. She was an Anna-Marie. Just Anna would have provided a sliver of hope. I knew from the shorts that she wasn't super observant, definitely not frum, like me. But unhyphenated Anna could have been a Jew at least, if a secular one . . . But Anna-Marie? There literally wasn't a more goyishe name.

(And her last name is Diaz-O'Leary). I laugh aloud. How does Blum do that? I try to analyze what the author does. How does the character view his world? Hoodie hopes. Hoodie is disappointed. It all springs from teen hormones and angst, without having to say that. So a lot happens in what's not said. Timing? You hear her name, Anna-Marie, the narrator says "crap." Succinct. Then with a tiny bit of syntax: "But, no." We hear it. It establishes a rhythm, it's colloquial, we can hear the melody of the speaker/narrator. Understatement: "not super observant." Throw in a Yiddish word: goyishe. The colorful Yiddish caps off the passage.

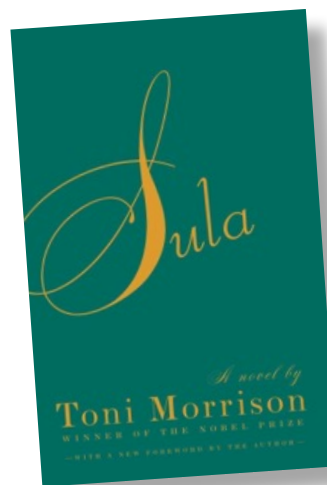
READ FOR PLEASURE...AND...ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

Read for fun. You can't help but educate yourself. Think about how you want to write? And then read what you admire. Toni Morrison evokes profound emotion such that I think, whoah, that was perfect, I never saw it like that before.

In *Song of Solomon* (Vintage International 2014, 1977) Morrison says, "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." It applies to dance, too. Give in to gravity and it will carry you.



In *Sula* (Vintage International 2004), Morrison says, "Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it."



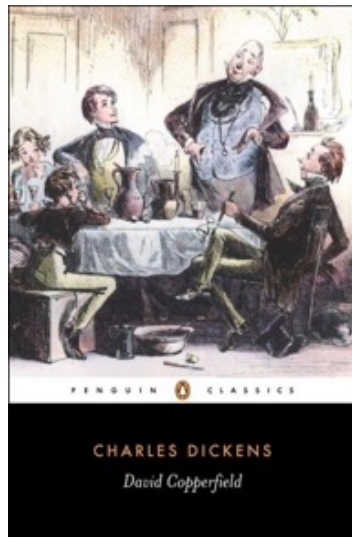
So, yeah, it's important to read adult books, too. Not just children's literature.

I read Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* (Harper 2022).

Turns out it's a remix of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, so, of course I had to read that.



Writer's Tips



But it's 1,000 pages long, so I alternated between the paperback (Penguin Classics 1995, 2002) and an audio book version read by the fabulous Simon Vance (Tantor Media 2009) (until it came due at my library). It seems that every book club in America is reading both these books (maybe you have, too), so all versions of both Kingsolver's and Dickens' book are in high demand, but worth the wait.

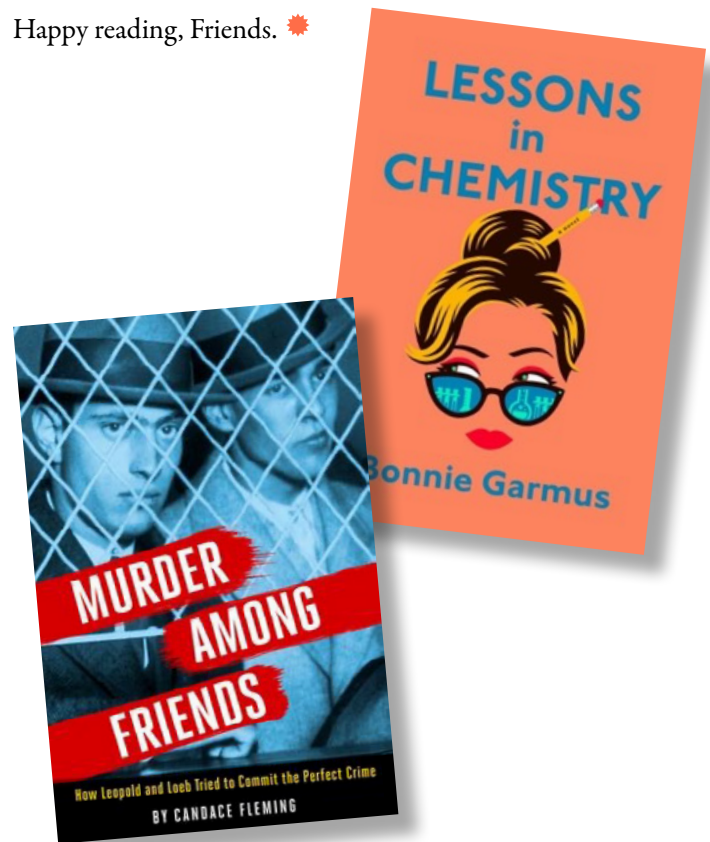
Whereas Dickens' story is set in Victorian London and deals with the ills of society and social justice (institutionalized poverty, orphans, conditions of prostitutes, corruption in government), Kingsolver's is set in contemporary Appalachia and deals with the ills of society (drugs, orphans, corruption in foster care). Kingsolver's book follows the first half of Dickens' book to a surprising degree, before she ends her story. David Copperfield carries on for eons longer. Still, both are laugh-out-loud funny and remarkably clever. And serendipity: Dickens' nineteenth century language was a boon to my writing a picture book about Emily Dickinson, who lived in that same era. Specifically, I got the word 'churchyard,' which I find to be a remarkable word. It's simple, doesn't need a definition and is so 19th century. Bingo. Gaining one word out of 1,000 pages? Not that great. But, there's more. Dickens' sentence construction is, well, an education. And fascinating. OK, I admit that there are passages—long passages—that I found tedious. Still, having read *David Copperfield* feels like a feather in my cap. And who doesn't like feathers?

BTW, listening to audio books is not cheating and great if you take long drives or exercise alone. I love Libby and my library.

I recently read *Lessons in Chemistry* (Doubleday 2022) by Bonnie Garmus. And our own Candace Fleming's thrilling *Murder Among Friends*.

What are you reading? Really, I'd love to know.

Happy reading, Friends. ✨



PATRICIA HRUBY POWELL, besides writing a picture book about Emily Dickinson, is writing a YA novel-in-verse (POV: 1st person present) and is the author of the award-winning books: *Lift As You Climb*; *Josephine*; *Loving vs Virginia*; and *Struttin' With Some Barbecue*, all Junior Library Guild Selections. Books forthcoming about women's suffrage, Martha Graham and Ella Fitzgerald, and her first book for the very young, *Duck Duck Goose*. Her work can be found at www.talesforallages.com

Writer's Bookshelf

CREATIVITY: A 10-LETTER, FIVE-SYLLABLE WORD

by Chasity Gunn

Merriam-Webster's website reports that it was born in 1875. And supposedly, you can create 189 words from it based on the findings at workmaker.info.

Creativity: a gift: we, as writers and illustrators, treasure and would love to have more of it.

But how does one grow her creativity? Are we genetically predisposed to have a certain amount? If we don't use our creativity, do we lose it?

We can cultivate and retain our creativity by maintaining a childlike approach to play. Seeing writing and illustrating as a form of play and not just work can help us tap into deeper wells of creativity.

Over the years, I have taught writing to students of various ages, ranging from second graders to senior citizens. One common trait I have seen in learners who are middle school-aged and above is untapped creativity. When I create opportunities for play, many of my students struggle to let go and jump in.

Many are worried about making a mistake. A few are trying to determine the meaning or the purpose of the exercise. And some are so consumed in trying to figure out what I will have them do next that they are unable to be present in the moment. A couple are so distraught that I am having them do exercises that they are unaccustomed to doing that they become verbally resistant.

My purpose for using play to tap into creativity is always the same. I want learners to have fun. Creating art should be fun. Otherwise, we have to force ourselves to create and that makes consistency difficult.

I also want learners to allow their imaginations to roam and wander. See where it takes them. It usually brings them to unexpected, yet delightful, territory that is connected to the art they have already been creating.



Lastly, I want them to stretch their mindsets to see connections, possibilities, and ideas that they haven't ever seen or considered.

Let me give you an example. I recently did a writing workshop in a community garden. The participants walked around the garden and made a catalog of what they saw. Then, I told them to rename a vegetable. I picked a tomato and renamed it, a heirloom tomato. I shared the definition of heirloom tomato and a short poem based on that definition.

Here comes the play.

I asked participants to rename a tomato and to create some uncommon names, such as a morsel of hot lava. Then, I gave them a prompt: write a poem that starts with some literal elements of a tomato and then takes the poem to a figurative or imaginative place. The goal was for them to use play - tapping into their imagination - to find an unlikely, yet poignant, analogy for a tomato.

This group of writers was all in, and they let their imaginations go to all the places. They created beautiful, creative poems. Play was their access point.

So, how can you as a writer or illustrator use play to tap into your well of creativity? The short answer: regularly



Writer's Bookself

incorporate moments of play into your everyday life. These everyday moments will spill over into your art life.

Here are a few suggestions for how you can do this:

1. Experiment with something you do often. Your experimentation must derive from your own imagination not what you have seen someone else do.
2. Take a different route to places you normally visit. While on the route, be more observant.
3. Engage in another art form. Create for the sake of creating. Don't worry about rules or directions.
4. Wear a style of clothing that you don't normally wear.
5. Attend a play or a concert. Notice the creativity in the production.

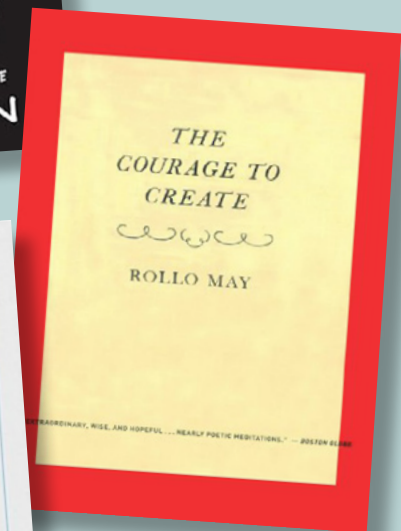
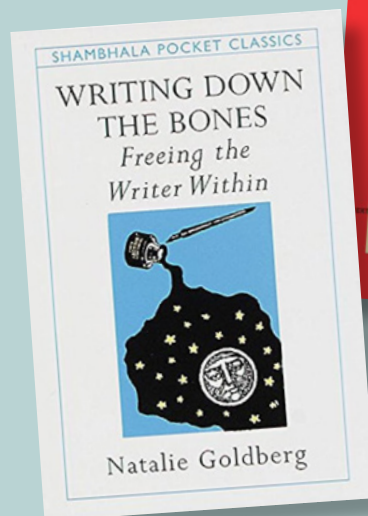
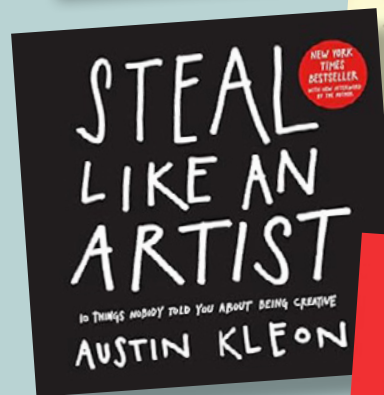
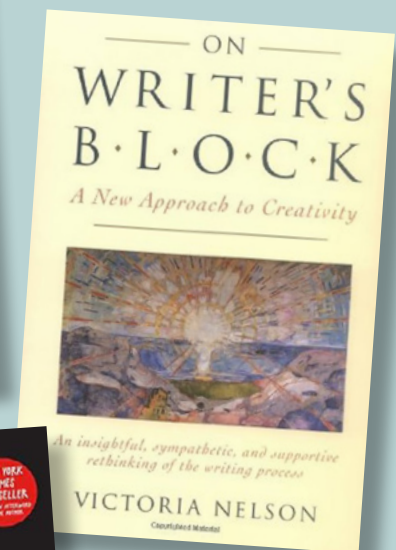
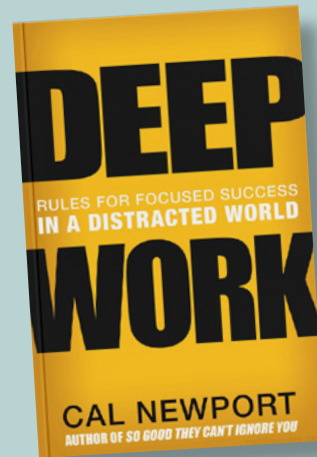
Rather than solely being creative when you are creating art, try to be creative throughout the day. Creativity can be simple and can occur in small doses. Aim to live a creative life. This means that you are always open to creativity, so when you sit down to create art, you are already open to the possibilities that creativity will bring you.

We are all born with a well of creativity. Commit to drinking from that well often and not letting it run dry. 🌟

CHASITY GUNN is a 2023 Watering Hole alumna, a 2022 Wild Seeds Fellow, and a 2021 Academy of American Poet Laureate Fellow. She serves as a Poetry Teaching Resident with Prison+Neighborhood Arts Project. Gunn is also a Poet-in-Residence with the Chicago Poetry Center. She is the Poet Laureate Emeritus of Elgin, IL. Gunn is an alumna of Voices of Our Nations Art Foundation and the Anaphora Arts Writing Residency. She is the author of *How to Create World*. Her work has been published in *Bitterzoet Magazine*, *BRAVO* and *Electric Moon*. Her spoken word has been featured in the Bedlam Theatre's 10X10 Fest and the Elgin Fringe Festival. She is an English professor at Elgin Community College.

CHASITY'S BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Deep Work* by Cal Newport
- *On Writer's Block* by Victoria Nelson
- *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon
- *The Courage to Create* by Rollo May
- *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg



Mentor Texts

FAVORITES FROM A HABITUAL OVERWRITER by Amy Potts

SO MANY WORDS, SO LITTLE SPACE

My first manuscript was 179,000 words. It was not fantasy or science fiction with fantastical world building and rules of society finessed into paragraphs and pages. It was a YA contemporary. And it was terrible. I was a baby writer, a greenhorn. I didn't know what a word count guideline was, let alone how to avoid unnecessary word vomit. But today when I look at the five inch binder housing my first attempt at a novel, it doesn't make me break into a sweat. Because double-digit-years later, I've curbed most of my overwriting habits. When I find myself five pages into a fun scene with absolutely no point, I stop. I highlight. I delete (without crying!). I rethink. And often, I head to my bookshelf for inspiration.

When I tried to cull a short stack of favorite mentor texts, my list reminded me a bit of that 179,000 word draft. So I did what any reasonable person would do: I pretended my house was on fire. After my humans, dogs, and goldfish were safe from the fictitious flames, which books would I rescue from incineration?

I fled the pretend fire with sixteen—I have long arms—then painfully narrowed it down to one middle grade, one YA, and one nonfiction.

#1 THE PEOPLE FACTOR

Middle Grade: *Three Times Lucky* by Sheila Turnage

If the world of *Three Times Lucky* existed, I would have packed for Tupelo Landing as soon as I turned the last page. But it wasn't the scenery, the weather, or the downtown's charm that drew me in—it was the people. All the people. I cared about each and every one of the residents in that small North Carolina town, even the mean ones...and the dead one!

Why was I so drawn into the lives of the main character, Mo, her found family, and their community? Well, because I'm not a cold hearted monster. But more so because Turnage gave me no choice but to care. With a crisp line of dialogue, a snippet of memory, a quick (usually hilarious) turn of events, or a simple nickname, her characters peeled from the pages into my life. I wanted a job in Miss Lana's cafe. I wanted to ride with Mo and her BFF, Dale, in the Colonel's "Underbird". I



wanted to bring Mr. Jesse warm biscuits as an apology for "borrowing" his boat. I wanted to be the 149th resident of Tupelo Landing. If I started to lean toward disliking a character, Turnage would throw in a moment that gave me a bit more insight, a bit more uncertainty about my feelings, a bit more compassion. And she did it with the right words at the right time in the right amount—and that amount was (spoiler!) small from this overwriter's perspective.

Also on my shelf for the People Factor:

- *The Marvellers* by Dhonielle Clayton (MG)
- *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson (YA)
- *A Cuban Girl's Guide to Tea and Tomorrow* by Laura Taylor Namey (YA)
- *Milo Imagines the World* by Matt de la Peña (Author) and Christian Robinson (Illustrator) (PB)



Mentor Texts

#2 THE GREAT AND POWERFUL VOICE

Young Adult: *Frankly In Love* by David Yoon

I could write a novella on the elements that make *Frankly In Love* mentor-text-worthy, and that's not just because I'm an overwriter! (What's the onomatopoeia for a rimshot? *Bab-dum-tss?*) But the aspect that stands out to me most is voice. Oh my gosh, voice. Seriously, voice. Out of all the YA I've read—and I do mean in my entire life—Frank Li's voice stands out as the most distinct. The most hilarious. At times, the most heartbreaking. And always with just the right number of words.

Yes, this opinion is subjective, but a character who reacts to an unexpected flirt with, “Dear lord Flying Spaghetti Monster in Pastafarian heaven. I think Brit Means is flirting with me,” is someone I understand in just two sentences. (By the way, the Flying Spaghetti Monster and Pastafarianism are real things. Google to learn more.) In only sixteen words, a specific, silly, and satirical reference to a common high school feeling—someone likes me!—keeps Frank relatable while highlighting his Frank-nesses:

1. Frank knows culture references, even those that are off-beat.
2. Frank is well-versed in words and wordplay.
3. Frank doesn't have a big ego.
4. Frank does have a sense of humor.

How about this one? “I try to eat my lower lip. Then I remember the first Rule of Being a Person: no auto-cannibalism.” There's a culture reference (first Rule of Fight Club, anyone?), Frank's word mastery (auto-cannibalism), lack of ego (he needs some very basic rules about being human...don't we all?), and sense of humor (no need to explain).

While David Yoon cracked me up on a regular basis, he didn't let Frank's voice wane in the serious or gut punch scenes. Frank may not be funny in these moments, but he's still *him*. It was difficult to find an example without big spoilers, but this paragraph does the trick.

I tell Mom-n-Dad all about it, and they can tell I'm getting excited. It makes them sappy (sad plus happy). Because just when they thought their son was all done growing, here I go changing on them all over again.

No culture reference (there is such a thing as too much) or humor this time, but there's the wordplay and the slight self-deprecation in the idea his parents thought he had no room to grow. Whether a belly laugh or a gut punch moment, Yoon doesn't let Frank's voice falter. And it's not overdone. It's not overwritten. It's just right.

Also on my shelf for voice:

- *All That I Can Fix* by Crystal Chan (YA)
- *When We Collided* by Emery Lord (YA)
- *Fighting Words* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley (MG)
- Novels in verse! My go-to authors are Jason Reynolds (*Long Way Down*), Elizabeth Acevedo (*The Poet X*), and K.A. Holt (*House Arrest*).



#3 PICKING UP THE PACE

Nonfiction: *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater

Nonfiction is MUCH more engaging than when I was a kid. It reads like a story these days, which makes sense because nonfiction usually tells a story. (Feel free to shake your head at my thirty-year journey to that conclusion.) So why *The 57 Bus*? Because Dashka Slater's use of point of view and format made it impossible to put down this YA nonfiction.



Mentor Texts

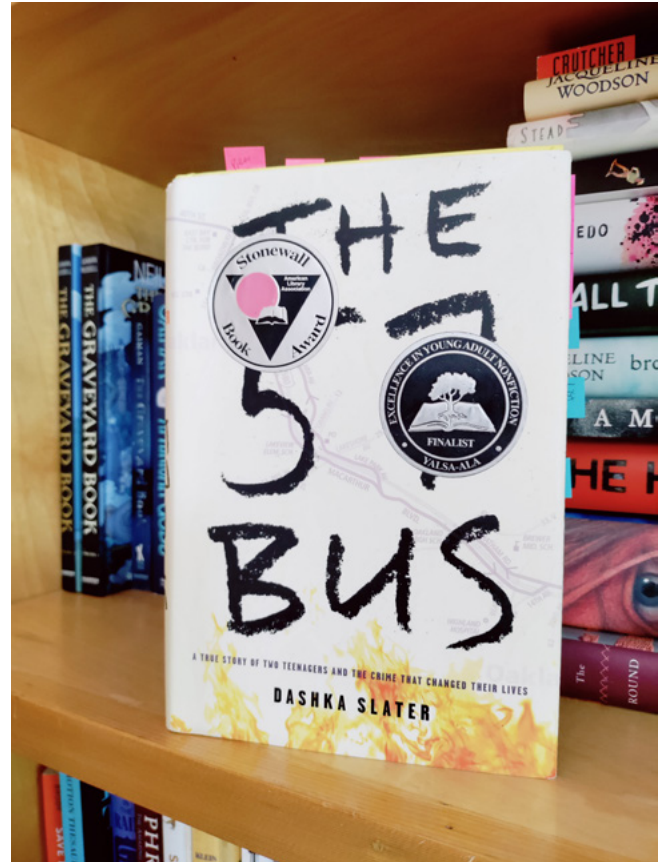
The 57 Bus is the story of two teens, Richard and Sasha, their families, and their friends before and after one teen impulsively lights the other's clothing on fire. There is so much to unpack and understand in this book: economic class, gender, identity, race, family dynamics, equity in education, equity in the justice system, morality, and, what I didn't expect going in: forgiveness, grace, and love in the midst of unimaginable circumstances. Slater uses consistent inconsistency to tell this complex story in a way that keeps the YA audience (and this adult!) engaged.

- Chapters vary in length, but all are short. It's easy to read one more chapter when it's a few pages or a few paragraphs.
- While the book is predominantly written in third person, chapters access many points of view. Hopping from one mind to another kept me wondering what each perspective would add to the whole picture, and how that addition would change my own assumptions and predictions.
- Chapters vary in format. Slater uses paragraphs, verse, interviews, lists, statistics, poems, text messages, timelines, definitions...each change kept my brain fresh. Plus, many of these formats left open space on the page, making the reading more accessible for teens (or anyone!) who might find the task daunting.

While I don't often venture into writing nonfiction, I do use *The 57 Bus* as a model for keeping my fiction concise. Can I sum up a scene with a text message exchange? Instead of writing a play-by-play of a character at the grocery store with twenty dollars to buy her family food for the week, can I use a list to show the essentials she wasn't able to buy? Should a different character tell a particular part of the story? Even if I try a format and it doesn't work, at the very least I take away an idea or two that will help keep my words to a minimum.

Fiction titles on my shelf with unique formats:

- *What Happened to Rachel Riley* by Claire Swinarski (MG)
- *Hollow Fires* by Samira Ahmed (YA)
- *Timmy Failure: Mistakes Were Made* by Stephan Pastis (Author, Illustrator) (MG)



SNIP, SNIP, SNIP

Overwriters, I feel you. Underwriters, I am jealous of you. Regardless of which side we plant our flag, we all share in the joy of revision—trimming (or completely excavating) our chapters, pages, and lines until they are as tight as they can be. And let us not forget the pruning of the query pitch and the demonic synopsis! I hope when you hit a wall (or realize you just finished page twenty-six of backstory) you check out a few of the titles above. Or better yet, go to your own shelf, pretend your house is on fire, and save those books you cannot live without. ✨

AMY POTTS grew up in the suburbs of Chicago in a tiny house overflowing with animals and kids. When she needed a break, she'd often bunker down in her room and dream up stories. Today she lives two towns away from that childhood home with her husband, two kids, and a squad of mischievous hound dogs. Amy still dreams up stories, but now she writes them down, usually in the wee hours of the morning before heading off to her job as a middle school language arts teacher.

Season's Crop

CLICK TO BE ADDED
TO A FUTURE
SEASON'S CROP

by Jenny Wagh

Picture Books

FICTION

An Above Par Day

By Lindsay Connell Farley
Illus. Anglika Dewi
India Street Press, June 2023
ISBN: 9798987596302

Clara's Magic Garden:

Experience a Friendship that Transcends Time

By Scott & Florin Kolbaba
Illus. Dina Leuchovius
Onlinepublishers.net
September 2023
ISBN: 9798988401605

Esperanza Caramelo, the Star of Nochebuena

By Karla Arenas Valenti
Illus. Elisa Chavarri
Knopf, September 2023
ISBN: 9780593488676

Esperanza Caramelo, la Estrella de Nochebuena

By Karla Arenas Valenti
Illus. Elisa Chavarri
Knopf, September 2023
ISBN: 9780593705018

Ethan and the Strays

By John Sullivan
Illus. Hatem Aly
Simon & Schuster
October 2023
ISBN: 9781534471320

Get Ready for School

By Janet Nolan
Illus. Maria Neradova
Albert Whitman & Co.
August 2023
ISBN: 9780807528334

Girls on Wheels

By Srividhya Venkat
Illus. Kate Wadsworth
Kokila Books, August 2023
ISBN: 9780593529287

Hello, Sweet Baby: An Adoption Journey

By Janeen Jackson
Illus. Brittanie Gaja
Paw Prints Publishing
August 2023
ISBN: 9781223186535

La Bicicleta Nueva (Spanish Edition)

Written & Illus. by
Darcy Day Zoells
Clavis Publishing
November 2023
ISBN: 9781605379869

Love Grows

By Ruth Spiro
Illus. Lucy Ruth Cummins
HarperCollins, December 2023
ISBN: 9780063237742

The New Bicycle

Written & Illus. by
Darcy Day Zoells
Clavis Publishing
November 2023
ISBN: 9781605379647

The Place Where I Belong

By Candice Klopfenstein
Illus. Antonia Ruppert
Candice Klopfenstein
June 2023
ISBN: 9798987528709

What If I Can't Explain God?

By Jennifer Grant
Illus. Hsulynn Pang
Beaming Books
October 2023
ISBN: 9781506483047

Willow and Bunny

By Anita Rowe Schulte
Illus. Christopher Denise
Two Lions, October 2023
ISBN: 9781542025690



NONFICTION

Do Not Eat This Book!

Fun with Jewish Foods
By Beth Kander
Illus. Mike Moran
Sleeping Bear, August 2023
ISBN: 9781534111882

How to Explain Coding to a Grown-Up

By Ruth Spiro
Illus. Teresa Martínez
Charlesbridge, October 2023
ISBN: 9781623543181

Rooting for Plants

By Janice N. Harrington
Illus. Theodore Taylor III
Calkins Creek, August 2023
ISBN: 9781662680199

Illustration by Denise Holmes



Season's Crop

CLICK TO BE ADDED
TO A FUTURE
SEASON'S CROP

Middle Grade

FICTION

LOTERIA (Spanish version)

By Karla Arenas Valenti

Illus. Dana SanMar

Knopf, October 2023

ISBN: 9781644738573

NONFICTION

The Ghostly Tales of Michigan's Upper Peninsula

By Diane Telgen

Arcadia Children's, August 2023

ISBN: 9781467197458

Board Books

FICTION

Happy Baby

By Roger Priddy

Illus. Denise Holmes

Priddy Books, October 2023

ISBN: 9781684493432

Graphic Novel

NONFICTION

History Comics: World War II:

Fight on the Homefront

By Kate Hannigan

Illus. Josh Rosen

First Second, October 2023

ISBN: 9781250793348

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Illustration by Denise Holmes