

Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

SPRING/SUMMER 2023



illustrator in
the spotlight:
Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn

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In This Issue

by Shirin Shamsi



Greetings all. As the days grow longer and the weather warmer, there's the buzz of busyness in the air. I'm looking forward to two upcoming conferences here in Chicago. First we have the [LITapalooza](#) in Naperville, followed immediately by the [American Library Association \(ALA\) Conference](#). And I'm thrilled to announce our spring/summer issue of *Prairie Wind*. We have so much in store for you with this issue, in which a few of our column writers take a different approach than usual. I think you'll enjoy this!

In her [greeting](#) this month, Co-Regional Advisor Jenny Wagh compares spring sports training to the "training" we do as writers and illustrators and gives us some pointers on that. She also muses on how we build community to strengthen our skills even more. And of course, as always to complete each issue, Jenny has rounded up this season's crop of our members' new book releases.

As for our [cover](#), Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn's art is a welcome sight—bold, bright, and beautiful! Equally enjoyable is her fascinating and inspiring journey as [Illustrator in the Spotlight](#).

In [Tales from the Front](#), Wendy Parris shares her timeline to publication—all 12 years of it. So for all you struggling creatives, take heart and inspiration from her sage advice—and never give up!

For our [Creative Sparks](#) column, Kira Bigwood offers us an excerpt from *Doors Closing*, her middle grade novel in progress. And artist Carolina Martinez gives us something different this time with the complete storyboard of her picture book manuscript *Walter Goes Home* as well as some fun finished art from a very cute sketch.

In our [first feature](#), Roxanne Owens discusses something that's on everyone's mind right now, artificial intelligence, or AI. In fact, she interviews ChatGPT, and what an interesting conversation that turned out to be! Christine Mapondera, author of our [second feature](#), shares details of the rollercoaster ride she went through in launching a children's magazine. And in our [third feature](#), award-winning author Srividhya Venkat talks about her unique writing journey across the world.

This issue, the [Voices of Change](#) column comes from author and educator Paula M. Karll, who addresses diverse learners, literacy, and the importance of building a diverse library for children. In [Shop Around the Corner](#), Alice Boemi takes us to indie bookstore Dust Bunny Books, just across the border in picturesque Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and introduces us to owner Raina Reemer, who takes her inspiration from Parisian bookstores. As both a writer and illustrator, Ruth Goring brings us this season's [Illustrator's Tips](#), with another different approach this time. Ruth's guiding tip is that taking on the role of writer-illustrator is not necessarily for the faint-hearted! But we can all agree that you cannot go wrong on this journey if you're doing what you really love. Although our [Writer's Tips](#) are normally done by three different authors, one for each issue of the year, this time we're giving you a look at playwright and author J. S. Puller's own best tips on how to execute excellent dialogue—which are just what I need as I work on my MG novel. She tells us, "It's not about the words, it's about the cadences."

With another different perspective, in this issue's [Writer's Bookshelf](#), instead of a physical book, Lizzie Cook details a rich online resource with so much valuable content for children's book creators. I shall definitely subscribe to this site for future research! Also taking a slightly different stance, [Zach Von Zonk wraps up this issue](#) by sharing how his inspiration for writing his debut picture book came from a song rather than a book. It's a fun final read!

As always, thanks to our wonderful *Prairie Wind* production team and also to Sheila Path-McMahon, our sharp-eyed proofreader. 🌟

Director **Shirin Shamsi**: *who joyfully plans and acquires content for each issue*
Editor **Pamela Dell**: *who expertly tweaks and polishes all of our content*
Designer **Brooke O'Neill** *who creatively designs and lays out every page*
Advisor **Jenny Wagh** *who remains our faithful and supportive Regional Advisor*
Proofread by the skillful **Sheila Path-McMahon**.

Fond Farewells!

by Pamela Dell

nerd editor P.Dell



A number of years ago I was sitting with a group of kidlit people in a restaurant after we'd attended an SCBWI event at 57th Street Books in Hyde Park. In the course of our chatting, Network Co-Regional Advisor Jenny Wagh mentioned they were looking for a new editor for the *Prairie Wind*. Having read and been a big fan of this publication since the dark ages of getting the issues in my snail-mailbox, I impulsively volunteered...and here I am today, many issues down. And now I've happily—even though a bit regretfully—decided it's time to step down and let someone new in our chapter (still to be determined) step up! From here on, I'll just be doing my usual private one-on-one editing, teaching fiction writing, and keeping on with all kinds of writing—as I've been driven to do since I was 11 years old. I'll just be (hopefully) a little less busy!

Unlike writing, of course, editing is a background job, sometimes challenging but mostly so satisfying. A good collaboration is based on the key elements of mutual trust and respect, and as someone who's worked for years on both sides of this two-way process, I've been fortunate to experience these crucial elements more often than not. Speaking for the editing side, I really love the process of working with writers to help bring out the best in their work and to enhance even further their hard-earned skills—like putting a little polish on a precious gem so it can shine at its brightest. And the gems in this chapter are pretty innumerable, I've found.

In other words, it's been my great pleasure, privilege, and honor to have worked with and gotten to know so many truly talented SCBWI-IL writers and artists as we collaborated—

mutual trust and respect consistently intact—to bring the best-quality writing and content to the *other PW* [that is to say, not to be confused with *Publisher's Weekly* (lol)]. I have the greatest respect for everyone I've worked with over the years, and for your contributions to this outstanding and super-professional publication. Hurray for co-RAs Jenny Wagh and Debbie Topolski for the incredible job they do all on a volunteer basis. And of course, it's been my greatest joy to work closely with former *PW* director Amy Alznauer, current director Shirin Shamsi, both so wonderful, and our brilliantly talented designer Brooke O'Neill. I'm also so grateful to have had Sheila Path-McMahon lending an exceptionally sharp second set of eyes to every article in the role of proofreader these past few issues. It's a huge bonus for a detail-obsessed person like me.

So I'd better wrap this up or I'll soon need an editor myself, right here and now. I love you all and wish all you writers and illustrators the greatest success in your literary endeavors and more. And I hope to sometime meet or re-meet some of the many contributors I already knew or have gotten to know over the course of these years. Now I look forward to sitting back all chill and reading the next issue of *Prairie Wind* with gratitude and appreciation. Thank you, everyone, for making my *PW* gig so worth it!

Finally, let me leave you with a bit of good advice from Mark Twain, who said:

Substitute "damn" every time you're inclined to write "very"; Your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be. ✨



Greetings!

PLAY BALL! by Jenny Wagh

Greetings from the Illinois Regional Team. This spring Co-Regional Advisor Debbie Topolski hit it out of the park with our annual Spring Thaw. Attendees were able to sit back, relax, and listen to our pregame Friday evening faculty Coaching Chats. Then early Saturday morning attendees soaked in the views of Brewster Creek, satisfied their sweet tooth with baked goods from Courageous Bakery, and participated in round table Pitch Sessions. It was an exhilarating day!



Creating, writing, and illustrating can be as thrilling as opening day for your favorite team, but at times it's challenging and solitary. It not only requires creativity and skill, but also a deep understanding of the needs and interests of our readers. To create the best work for the children of today, writers and illustrators need to constantly learn, grow, and improve their craft. So how do you prepare for practicing your craft? My training of choice is reading. I love coming home from the library with a stack of newly released picture books. I page through the books, finding what makes me laugh and those quiet moments that tug at my heart strings. Co-RA Debbie starts her morning with writing sprints to get the creativity flowing.

But we don't have to train alone. We can build a community of fellow creators who can offer support, feedback, advice, and inspiration. SCBWI can provide a safe space to share

ideas, experiences, challenges, and successes. It can also foster collaboration, networking, and opportunities for professional development.

A community of writers and illustrators can take many forms, such as online forums, social media groups, blogs, podcasts, newsletters, webinars, workshops, conferences, festivals, book clubs, critique groups, mentorship programs, and more. The key is to find a community that suits your goals, style, and personality.

Some of the benefits of joining or creating a community are:

- You can learn from the expertise and insights of others who have been in the field longer or have different perspectives.
- You can get constructive feedback on your work from peers who understand your genre and audience.
- You can discover new trends, resources, tools, techniques, and opportunities that can enhance your work and career.
- You can find inspiration and motivation from the successes and struggles of teammates who share your passion and vision.
- You can make friends and connections with people who cheer you on and can help you reach your potential.



Greetings!

Children's books enrich our minds, hearts, and souls. Books can spark imagination, curiosity, and creativity. Books can teach us about ourselves and the world around us. Books empower children, allowing them to dream big and learn how they might make a difference in the world.

As writers and illustrators for children, we have the great responsibility and privilege of creating books that matter. By building a community of writers and illustrators, we can help each other fulfill this mission. Together, we can make a positive impact on the lives of children through our stories and art. Play Ball! 🌟

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

*Left to right: Debbie Topolski,
NaShantá Fletcher, and Jenny Wagh*



Illustrator in the Spotlight

LETTERING, ILLUSTRATION, AND WHIMSY

by Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn

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

I'm an illustrator, but hope to add author to my resume one day. My agent, Chad Beckerman, encourages all of us on his roster to explore writing. I work primarily in digital, using a combination of Photoshop and Adobe Fresco.

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

I've been drawing ever since I could hold a pencil, and was lucky to have parents who saw my early passion for drawing and art and fostered and supported that. At three, I did my first "mural" on the wall of my parents' condo in Sharpie, and to this day my mom says her best mom moment was not yelling at me when I did it, and instead asking me to tell her

about it. Then she gently told me that it would be better to do it on paper so she could keep it.

I continued with art in various capacities all through my childhood and ultimately went to college for graphic design (though there was a small detour where I was going to major in opera, which lasted one semester before I switched majors). I interned at Brunet-Garcia Advertising, got a job as a junior designer at Body Central, then ultimately landed in Orlando, Florida, working for an agency that reached out to me, hired me, and then fired me three months later (in hindsight, I missed lots of red flags). At that point I went into freelance



Illustrator in the Spotlight

full-time, adopted my dog two months later, and have been working in freelance illustration since February 2013.

I worked primarily in the advertising industry for the first several years, creating illustrations for editorial, popups/murals, and more. I also traveled often for onsite work at conferences and such, where I would do live drawing for various companies, such as Microsoft and Adobe. When the pandemic hit, those onsite jobs went away, and I had to figure out what avenue to take. It was in 2020 that I finally decided to explore children's book illustration and in October I reached out to my now-agent. After receiving valuable feedback from him and then doing a hyperfocused dive into that feedback, I followed up in February 2021, and Chad signed me that day.

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

1. First, I think up the idea based on a prompt that I've either come up with or found online (for example, Inktober prompts) or one that was assigned to me. In this case, this was from The CAT Agency's spring 2021 promo, "Unusual Suspects," where they wanted us to create a piece based upon a historical figure that's not often talked about. For mine, I chose artist, animator, and Disney legend Mary Blair (1911-1978), whom I'm incredibly influenced by.
2. I began by coming up with an idea for the piece based upon quotes by her as well as her career. She became the Mary Blair we all know today when she was on Walt Disney's goodwill trip to South America in 1941. For initial inspiration and research, I watched *Walt & El Grupo*, a 2008 documentary about Disney's goodwill trips to Latin America, and then continued to look through various articles and imagery to continue to explore.
3. From there I started sketching, figuring out how I wanted to lay out the lettering and what I wanted to say, and deciding how I wanted to move the viewer's eye around the composition.
4. Once the sketch was set, I began to block in colors, making small adjustments to the composition as I went.
5. Finally, I added details and shading, made sure all the lettering was legible, and submitted it to my agent.

What does your workspace look like?

Right now my studio is half of my bedroom. Due to my book collection, it's partially in the sleeping component of the room, but the room is set up in such a way that when I'm on video calls, almost no one realizes I'm in a bedroom.

On my desk, I have a large curved monitor connected to my Mac Mini so I have space to lay out whatever windows I need to have available, and then I have a 24" Cintiq on a monitor arm that I draw on.

My dream workspace, however (I'm manifesting here), is a converted attic space in a century home with large windows and lots of space!

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

I have *so many*—and many of whom have become really fun online friends over the past few years. A few off the top of my head include Syd Weiler, James Jeffers, Zoe Persico, Mary Kate McDevitt, Gabby Zapata, Anousha Syed, and Victoria Ying.

There are so many more, but those are the ones that come to my head right now.

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

I have one that I can recall! I have a few personal ones that I've put my dog into, but for a project I did several years ago for Prudential, I snuck in an illustration of my mom's dog, Simon. He's situated in the "Adopt a Rescue" box. My dog, Teddy Bear, is a rescue from Florida Little Dog Rescue, but I don't have a line art style of him since he's a fluffy Shih Tzu

You can see my mom's dog, Simon, above in the Adopt a Rescue heart.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

and harder for me to draw. My mom's Yorkie, though, is easy for me to quickly draw.

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

Outside of work, I figure skate. Specifically, I focus on ice dancing (ballroom-style patterns on ice) and have been skating since I was about nine years old, with a small break during high school and part of college. I came back to it in 2009 and haven't stopped since. This was more of a surprising fact when I lived in Florida since I grew up there and was there the first 30 years of my life, and skating is not as popular there in terms of rink availability. In the Midwest, it's rare to meet someone who doesn't have experience skating in some capacity.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

Music, absolutely. I can listen to music and see compositions I want to create in my head. Also just the practice of mindless sketching helps me a lot, as does snuggling my dog.

I also create covers for my various Spotify playlists and share them here: <https://shaunalynn.com/playlists>

What gets in the way of your creativity?

My brain! Constantly. I overthink way too often and it takes a lot for me to get into drawing mindlessly, but when I do it's so nice. Generally, though, I'm telling my brain to quiet down and let me work. Also time—there's just not enough hours in the day. 🌟

Where can we find you?

Portfolio: www.shaunalynn.com

Instagram: <http://instagram.com/shaunaparmesan>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/shaunaparmesan>

Tiktok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@shaunalynnillustrates>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/shaunalynnillustrates>



SHAUNA LYNN PANCZYSZYN (Pan-Chez-En) (she/her), a hand lettering artist and illustrator, lives in Chicago, where she works out of her studio with her puppy, Teddy Bear. She is known for her whimsical lettering and illustration style and her work is guided by a need to constantly explore her style and create things that bring her joy. She is most active on Twitter, where she shares many photos of Teddy Bear.

Tales from the Front



THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

by Wendy Parris

Somewhere along the way, every writer has heard the phrase “Publishing takes persistence.” Which is absolutely true. Another thing that’s absolutely true—every writer secretly believes, or at least fervently hopes, that the phrase won’t apply to them. That they will be one of the fortunate few who immediately pen the best book possible, easily score an agent, and get to pick from a plethora of publishing offers.

That didn’t happen to me. If you’d told me my publishing journey would take twelve years, I would’ve been floored. And quite possibly would have given up. Please follow along as I share my timeline.

AUGUST 2011

Visiting family in Clear Lake, Iowa, I take a bike ride along a country road and come across an abandoned farmhouse. Peeling paint, broken windows, holes in the roof—the whole works. Intrigued, I jump off my bike, hop a fence, and snap a couple dozen pictures. I think to myself, “Who lived here? What happened? This place has got to be haunted.” I am 45 years old and have two middle-grade-reading kids.

SEPTEMBER 2011

I can’t get the abandoned farmhouse out of my mind. I decide to write a ghost story about it. But where to start? I flashback to my childhood in the 1970s, when I was obsessed with reading mysteries and ghost stories. I used to check out ten books from my local library weekly and even wrote half of a Nancy Drew-type novel at age eleven, but never finished. My past love of middle grade lit and the wonderful current books my kids are reading inspire me. I enroll in an extension course at the local high school, “The ABCs of Writing for Kids.” Evanston-based author Pamela Dell is the teacher. I’m hooked.

2012

A few of us students from the extension course form a small writing group led by Pamela. We meet weekly at a local Panera to critique each other’s work. Our assignment: to bring five pages to each meeting. Writing five pages a week, as well as reading and evaluating everyone else’s pages, takes

more time and dedication than I had anticipated. But I do it. And I realize I never would’ve written consistently on my own, without the support of the group. I write a middle grade mystery based on the abandoned house I encountered, tentatively titled *Ghost Farm*. With Pamela’s encouragement, I join SCBWI.

2013

I go to SCBWI’s annual Winter Conference in New York City. Along with 998 other attendees, I meet fellow writers, participate in editor roundtables, learn from instructional writing sessions, and listen to expert panels. It’s invigorating. After hearing industry insiders speak glowingly about Twitter as a fount of publishing information, I create an account and start following writers, editors, and agents. I think *Ghost Farm* is ready to query. I write a pitch letter (almost harder than writing a whole book). I scour the internet for querying advice and start submitting to agents I’ve researched online.

At the same time, I begin entering online writing contests that I discover on Twitter, including The Writers’ Voice and Query Combat. I don’t “win,” but I network with writers from all over the world, hone my pitching abilities, and get my work seen by agents and editors. I participate in the WriteOnCon webinar and get a partial request from an agent! Though rejection letters from my cold queries trickle in, I’m feeling more and more connected to the industry. I begin writing a second middle grade ghost story.

2014

Ghost Farm is chosen as an alternate in an online writing contest called Pitch Wars, in which brief pitches and the first 500 words of manuscripts are showcased for agents to peruse. I get a couple partial requests! I’m still researching agents and sending queries. I attend the 2014 SCBWI Winter Conference in New York and meet in person with writer friends I’ve only interacted with online.



Tales from the Front

In March, I get my first full request from the agent who'd requested a partial of *Ghost Farm* the summer before in WriteOnCon. I'm beyond excited. Unfortunately, this agent will string me along via email for another eight months, until November, then (ironically) ghost me. Aside: A few years later, she'll get run out of the publishing industry for lying to authors about submissions to editors she never made. I dodge a bullet without knowing it, but am crushed just the same. I've done everything "right," but reality has set in: it's really hard to get an agent. The year ends on a down note.

2015

I attend the New England SCBWI spring conference, which features amazingly informative forums and roundtables. In the summer I decide to enter my new manuscript, *The Lost Treasure of Full Moon Lake*, in Pitch Wars 2015. It's chosen! I spend the last several months of the year working with a writer mentor to refine both my pitch and the manuscript. An online community of Pitch Wars 2015 mentees is born. We advise and cheer each other on through the ups and downs of the contest, as well as in the query and publishing trenches beyond.

2016

The Pitch Wars 2015 entrees go live in early January and *Full Moon Lake* gets thirteen agent requests. I'm ecstatic. Following the advice of author friends, I also start cold querying the book. I get nothing but rejections for months. Hope turns to despair. I'd thought my success in Pitch Wars would automatically land me an agent.

Then, in mid-April, I get an offer from an agent at a small agency that I'd cold queried. In early May, on my 50th birthday (!) I sign with her. I'm so happy to have someone in the industry on my side. Though she's signed me based on *Full Moon Lake*, she wants to focus on *Ghost Farm*. I start revising.

On election day 2016, my agent leaves agenting and my contract with her agency is nullified. It's a dark day on many fronts. Though she gives me one referral to another agent, it doesn't work out. I'm demoralized and take a few months off. I'd thought once I had an agent, I had it made.

Wrong.

It takes me roughly a year and a half to get another agent. All of 2017 and beyond. I think about giving up. Instead, I stubbornly keep querying. I don't want to admit to anyone—or myself—that I've failed.

2018

In August, seven years after I came across the abandoned farmhouse, I get a second offer of representation. I sign with the absolutely delightful Karyn Fischer at BookStop Literary, as her first official client. Under her expert editing guidance, I revise.

2019

In the spring, Karyn starts submitting *Under the Willow* (formerly *Ghost Farm*) to editors. We get a lot of great responses and feedback, but no offers of publication. In the meantime, I brainstorm a third middle grade ghost story.

2020

Karyn and I decide to stop subbing *Under the Willow*, thinking *Full Moon Lake* might be a stronger manuscript. I take some time to revise it. Covid hits. We go on sub. The industry has really slowed down. While we get good response, there are no offers.

2021

Maybe middle grade isn't for me? I begin working on a chapter book series.

SEPTEMBER 2021

My husband and I become empty-nesters. I debate whether to quit writing or not. I'm 55 years old, have been writing for ten years, and trying to get published for more than eight. Do I want to keep trying...and failing? I mention my dilemma to my 21-year-old son. He texts me a cartoon panel. In it, two men dig parallel tunnels through a mountain of rock, trying to reach a mass of diamonds they hope might exist, but only the reader can see the diamonds that are truly there. The man in the top tunnel has just started his work, has barely made a dent in the rock, and is energetically swinging his pick axe. The man in the bottom tunnel has worked longer, carved a deep path into the mountain, and is inches away from the diamonds, but doesn't realize it. He has dropped his pick axe and is walking away, giving up in frustration. My son says, "Mom, don't quit. You've put so much effort into writing. You might be so close." (Yes, he's a sweetie). I decide to keep going.



Tales from the Front

OCTOBER 2021

I get an offer from Ali Romig at Delacorte. It's actually for my first book, *Under the Willow* (formerly *Ghost Farm*). Although Karyn had stopped officially subbing it over a year earlier, in April 2021 she'd seen Ali, a new acquiring editor, tweet that she wanted scary MG, so on a whim, Karyn and I had subbed *Willow* to her, believing it to be scarier than the other book. Turns out she loves it.

Finally!

2022

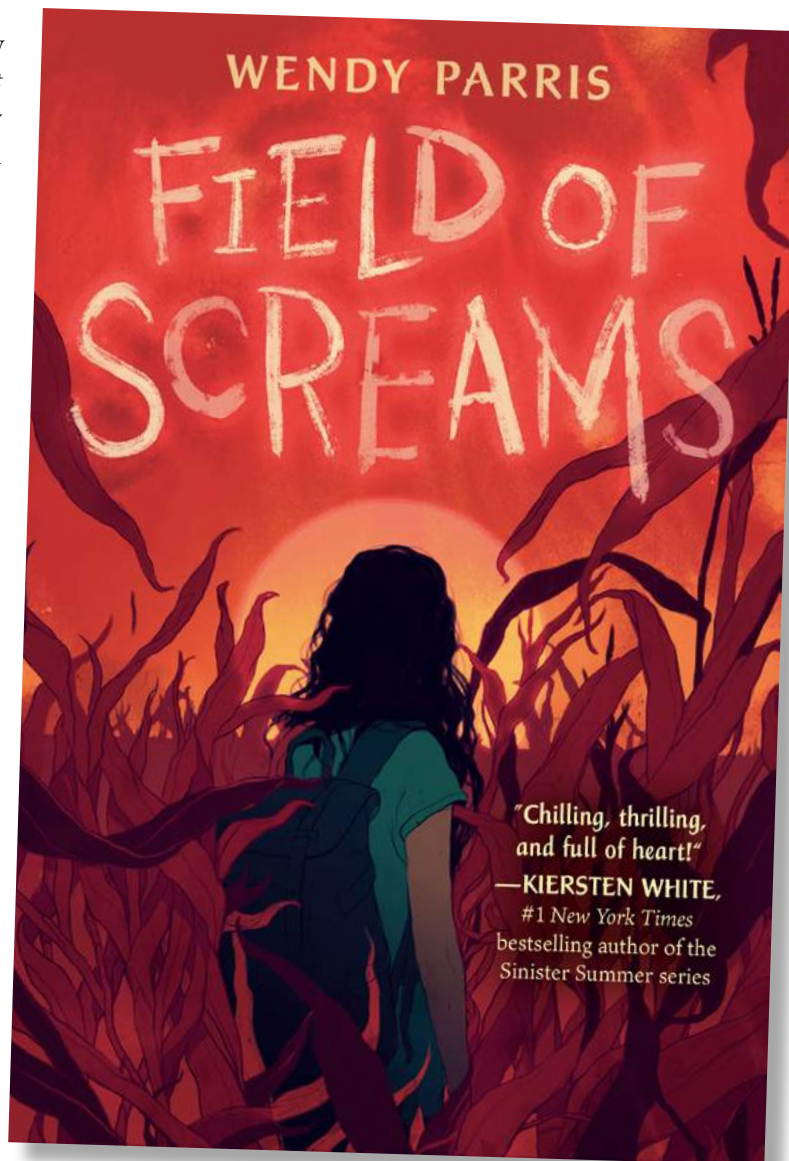
Working with Ali is a dream come true. I revise a bit again and truly agree with every suggestion she makes. I have a lot of input in choosing the cover artist and the final cover design. It's all thrilling.

AUGUST 1, 2023

Field of Screams (formerly *Under the Willow* and *Ghost Farm*) will be officially released. Twelve years to the month after I first saw that abandoned farm house.

My journey to publication was long and difficult. I almost gave up many times. But if you learn anything from my story, please learn that persistence is absolutely key in this business. And when that payoff finally comes along, you'll feel it's all been worth it.

Through all the disappointments, I kept writing, kept developing, kept networking, and kept trying. The final result: Soon I will hold my published book in my hands. And my journey isn't over...I've just sold a second spooky middle grade novel to Ali at Delacorte! Look for *Stage Fright* in Fall 2024! 🌟



WENDY PARRIS grew up loving books and hoping—but failing—to see a ghost. After graduating from Northwestern University, she acted in small Chicago storefront theaters, performed improv comedy, and worked in public relations. She lives with her family near Chicago in an old house that is probably not haunted. *Field of Screams*, her debut novel, is a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection. You can find her at wendyparris.com

Creative Sparks



DOORS CLOSING *An excerpt from a middle grade WIP by Kira Bigwood*

Benny stomped the slush off his boots (never mind that “slush” and “boots” don’t belong in April) and pushed through the crowded train station. Only eight hours stood between him and May. Not just the month...the girl—his BFFAT (Best Friend For All Time).

The morning had been rocky. After a late start for school (on account of all the cleaning for May’s visit), Benny had to go all the way back home to retrieve a forgotten train card. To make matters worse, somewhere in the shuffle *someone* had taken his scarf (the one his BFFAT had crocheted him for his twelfth birthday). He’d been robbed! And this city—Chicago—sucked.

Benny punched in his card and plowed through the turnstile. The last car on the northbound rolled in, and as he angrily jostled to get onboard, a flash of blue caught his eye.

There, across the platform, was—his scarf!
With its new owner.

A boy, a little younger than himself, tied May’s handiwork around his neck and swung an overstuffed bag across his shoulder.

Thief! Who did this kid think he was, stealing in broad daylight?

Benny watched the boy slip onto the southbound train to the Loop. He didn’t know why a kid would be headed downtown by himself.

“Probably to sell all the stuff he swiped,” Benny thought bitterly.

“Doors closing,” the northbound warned.

School was just three stops up. He had fifteen minutes to get to Mr. Goodman’s class...doable. But was he really gonna let this kid get away with his scarf—*May’s* scarf? The better question...was he *really* gonna do something about it?

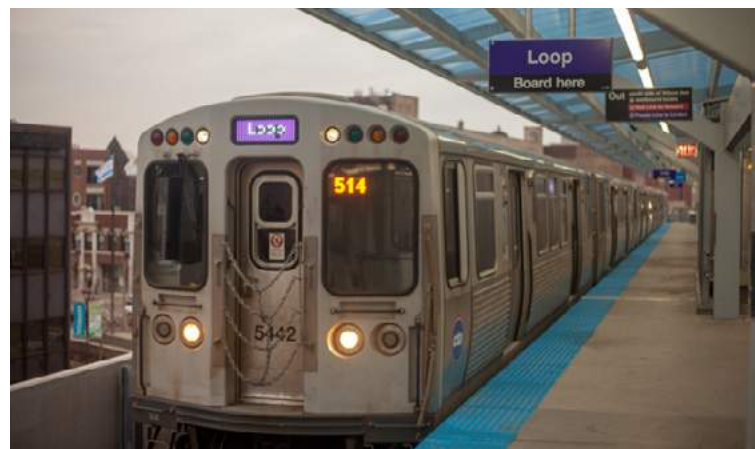
Benny had a thing for right and wrong. Dr. Caitlin called it “rigid thinking.” Seeing the world in black and white, all-or-nothing.

Stopping this crook = right.
Taking a risk = wrong.
And skipping school = very wrong!
If May were here, she’d know what was right.

Only eight hours until she arrived. Eight hours. It was plenty of time, really.

Benny boarded the train at last. The doors closed behind him.

“*This is a southbound train to the Loop.*” 🌟



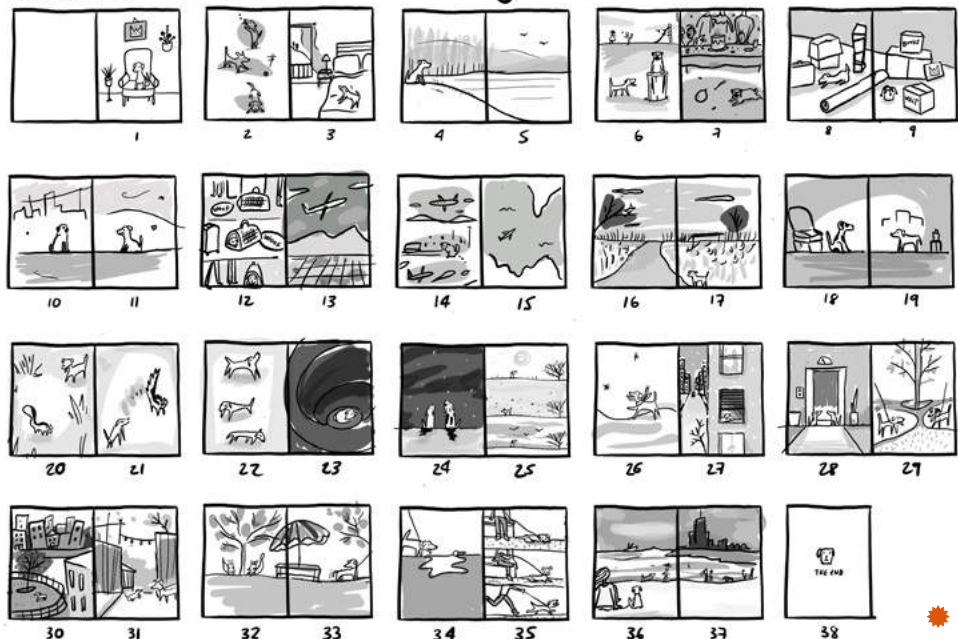
KIRA BIGWOOD is an advertising copywriter turned children’s author. Her debut picture book, *Secret, Secret Agent Guy* (Atheneum Books, 2021), illustrated by Celia Krampien, received starred reviews from *Kirkus* and *School Library Journal* and was a 2022 Illinois Reads selection. Kira lives in Evanston with her husband and their three kids and rescue pup, Taffy Pancakes Bigwood. She welcomes your feedback on her first foray into middle grade! Say “hi!” to Kira online at: kirabigwood.com [@kirabigwood](https://www.instagram.com/kirabigwood)

Creative Sparks

WALTER GOES HOME by Carolina Martinez



WALTER GOES HOME - Storyboard



CAROLINA MARTINEZ is a Colombian graphic designer and illustrator based in Chicago. Her whimsical illustrations have appeared in magazines, edtech products, invitations, and have even decorated the streets of Aurora, Illinois. Her style relies on unique color palettes, personal inspiration, and elements from countries, cities, and places she has visited or lived in. Carolina lives with her husband, daughter, and two Jack Russell pups whom she loves dearly. Find her at:

Website: caromartillustration.com

Instagram: @caromartwork

Oh, the Places...

...WE'LL GO WITH CHATGPT... BUT DO WE WANT TO GO THERE?

by Roxanne Farwick Owens



Artificial intelligence (AI) tool ChatGPT appears to be everywhere recently—to the great joy of some people and the great horror of others. Following is an actual transcript of an online “interview” I conducted with ChatGPT to provide readers with information directly from the source. It explores potential benefits and important cautions.

RFO: Hello ChatGPT, it seems you are all over the news and the internet these days. I'd like to introduce you to the members of this newsletter so they can understand more about you.

ChatGPT: Hello! I'm ChatGPT, a language model developed by OpenAI based on the GPT-3.5 architecture. 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. I can provide information on a wide range of topics, from science and technology to literature and history, and can be used in a variety of contexts, from customer service chatbots to virtual writing assistants. Essentially, Chat GPT is a computer program that can understand and produce language in a way that is similar to humans. I can translate text from one language to another, make personal recommendations, and analyze large data sets to provide insights based on findings.

RFO: That sounds helpful on one hand, but on the other hand, the concept of artificial intelligence can be off-putting to people.

ChatGPT: I understand that some people may feel uneasy about artificial intelligence and its implications. However, it's important to note that the development of AI has the potential to offer significant benefits to society, from improving healthcare and transportation to advancing scientific research and making everyday tasks more efficient.

As a language model, my purpose is to assist humans in various tasks, such as answering questions, generating text, and offering suggestions. My creators at OpenAI have put measures in place to ensure that I operate within ethical guidelines and do not cause harm to individuals or society as a whole.

Ultimately, the goal of AI is not to replace humans, but to enhance our capabilities and provide us with new tools to tackle the challenges of the future. By working together, humans and AI can achieve great things and create a better world for everyone.

RFO: Glad you aren't trying to replace humans. How are you different than using the regular internet?

ChatGPT: Chat GPT is different from looking something up on the internet in that it generates responses to prompts in a way that is similar to human language. When you look something up on the internet, you're typically presented with a list of search results that are generated by algorithms based on the keywords you entered. These search results may contain relevant information, but they're not typically presented in a conversational format.

On the other hand, Chat GPT is designed to generate responses to prompts or questions in a way that is similar to how a human would respond in a conversation. It's able to understand natural language and can generate responses that are more personalized and conversational than the information you might find through an internet search.

RFO: Can you write original pieces? For instance, could you write me a haiku about a dog?

ChatGPT: A loyal companion, Fur soft as the morning dew, My dog, forever.



Oh, the Places We'll Go with ChatGPT...

RFO: Please write a parody of *Oh, the Places You'll Go* using ChatGPT.

ChatGPT:

Oh the places you'll go with ChatGPT, Your literary journeys will be set free, A virtual guide with words so wise, To explore new worlds and skies.

With ChatGPT as your guide, The stories you'll read will come alive, Through pages and screens, you'll take flight, And discover new worlds with delight.

Oh the places you'll go with ChatGPT, From classics to modern tales, just wait and see, You'll explore the depths of the sea, Or journey to a land beyond our reach.

Through poetry, prose, and every rhyme, ChatGPT will be with you every time, With every word and every line, New adventures await, so let's unwind.

So take ChatGPT by the hand, And venture forth to a magical land, With stories and tales that will never end, Oh the places you'll go with ChatGPT, my friend.

RFO: Could I submit something you wrote for me to a contest as my own since you generated it for me?

ChatGPT: As an AI language model, I do not own the content I generate, and my responses are intended to be used as a resource or reference for users. However, it is important to acknowledge the source of any content that you did not create yourself.

If you use writing generated by me in a contest, you should be transparent about the source and give credit to the fact that it was written by an AI language model. Depending on the rules of the contest and the requirements for submitting entries, you may also need to disclose the fact that it was not written by a human author.

It is ultimately up to the organizers of the contest to decide whether or not they will accept entries that were written with the assistance of AI language models. It's important to check the contest rules and guidelines carefully before submitting any entries to ensure that you are in compliance with their policies.

RFO: What if I use Quillbot to change some of the words around. Would that make it my own story?

ChatGPT: Using an AI-based paraphrasing tool like Quillbot to modify the content generated by an AI language model does not necessarily make the resulting work solely your own. While it may help to rephrase some parts of the original content, the underlying ideas and structure of the story may still be attributed to the original AI-generated content.

If you use AI-generated content that has been paraphrased by another AI-based tool, you should still disclose the original source of the content and the fact that it was generated by an AI language model. Depending on the rules of the contest or publication, failure to disclose the use of AI-generated content may be considered plagiarism, which could result in disqualification or other consequences.

RFO: What are some pros and cons of using ChatGPT for writing?

ChatGPT:

Pros: ChatGPT can generate creative ideas when writer's block strikes; help writers refine their writing style and improve their vocabulary; save time by generating content quickly; explore unconventional or niche topics; help writers with disabilities or limitations access the writing process; and it can be a cost-effective alternative to hiring a professional writer.

Cons: ChatGPT may not always produce high-quality content that meets a writer's standards; it may produce content that is too formulaic or predictable; it may not



Illustration by Brooke O'Neill; from the book ["Carl Writes A Letter"](#).



Oh, the Places We'll Go with ChatGPT...

fully understand nuances or certain languages or cultural contexts; it may not provide constructive feedback; and it may not be as effective as a human editor in detecting and correcting errors.

RFO: I'm not sure all those pros are really pros. Is ChatGPT a threat to children's authors and illustrators?

ChatGPT: ChatGPT is not inherently a threat to children's authors or illustrators. While it is true that ChatGPT can generate human-like text, including children's stories, it does not possess the same level of creativity, imagination, and life experiences that human authors and illustrators bring to their work.

ChatGPT is a tool that can assist writers in generating ideas, brainstorming, and even providing inspiration for creative writing. It can also be used to automate certain aspects of the writing process, such as generating character descriptions or plot summaries.

However, ChatGPT is not a substitute for the unique voice and perspective that individuals bring to their work. Children's books are often written with a specific audience in mind, and humans have the ability to connect with children in a way that machines cannot. Additionally, 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.

In short, ChatGPT may be a useful tool, but it is not a replacement for human creativity and storytelling. While ChatGPT can offer assistance, the final product should always be a reflection of the creator's own ideas and artistic vision.

RFO: What are some things people should be worried about with ChatGPT?

ChatGPT: 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. However, there are potential risks associated with the use of AI language models like myself, such as:

1. **Bias:** AI language models can perpetuate and amplify biases present in the training data they are trained on. This could lead to the production of biased or

discriminatory content, which could have negative impacts on society.

2. **Misinformation:** AI language models can be used to generate fake news, propaganda, and other types of misleading content. This could potentially undermine trust in the media and cause harm to individuals or groups.
3. **Privacy:** AI language models can be used to create targeted and personalized content based on user data, which could potentially infringe on individuals' privacy rights.
4. **Security:** AI language models can be vulnerable to hacking and misuse, which could result in the creation of malicious content or the manipulation of information.

RFO: I'm still somewhat suspicious, but let's go on. One of the concerns is that using AI for writing will replace individual creativity. What is your response to that?

ChatGPT: It's understandable that some people may be concerned about AI replacing individual creativity in writing. However, it's important to note that AI, such as language models like myself, are designed to assist and enhance the work of human writers, not replace them.

While I'm capable of generating text and offering suggestions, I'm not a creative writer myself. I'm simply a tool that can be used by human writers to generate ideas, overcome writer's block, or improve the quality of their work.

In fact, many writers have found that using AI tools can help them be more productive and creative. By taking care of repetitive tasks, such as editing and proofreading, AI can free up more time for writers to focus on the creative aspects of their work.

Ultimately, the use of AI in writing is not about replacing individual creativity, but about providing new tools and resources to help writers reach their full potential.

RFO: Thank you for letting me interview you.

ChatGPT: You're welcome! It was my pleasure to answer your questions. If you have any more questions in the future, feel free to ask!



Oh, the Places We'll Go with ChatGPT...

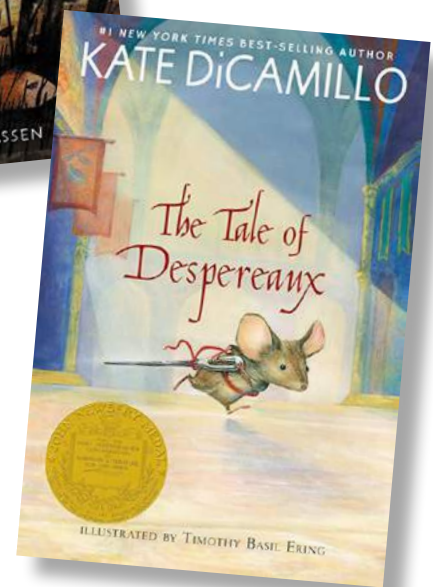
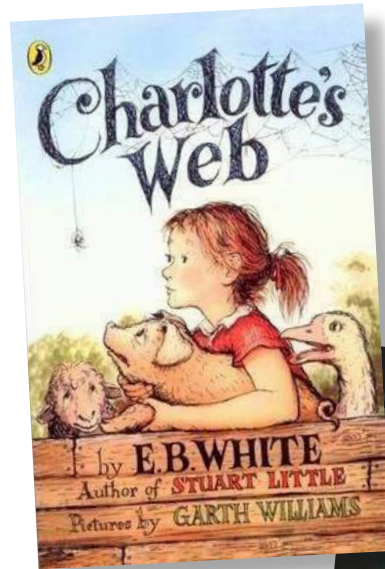
I also asked ChatGPT for comps of three children's novels written in the past five years with a theme similar to *Charlotte's Web*. The database is current only to 2021, so the books generated were not within the past five years, but they are similar in theme. [*The One and Only Ivan* (2012), *Pax* (2016), and *Tale of Despereaux* (2003)]. I asked if it could recommend a literary agent looking for my novel plot specifically. It responded that it did not have current live access, but directed me to *QueryTracker*, *Manuscript Wishlist*, and *Writer's Market* and included a caution about thoroughly researching agents.

Finally, I requested names of organizations for people interested in becoming children's authors/illustrators and SCBWI was the first one recommended. Those responses were helpful. The conversational tone of ChatGPT and not searching through multiple websites also can be appealing. On the other hand, the researcher is now relying on ChatGPT to provide multiple relevant and reliable sources on a topic.

My conclusion about ChatGPT? It has potential to help us be more efficient in some aspects of our lives. It also will likely be used for nefarious purposes. One thing is for sure: From the quality of the *Oh, the Places You'll Go* parody it wrote, we probably don't need to worry about it replacing us as writers any time soon. (Since when do "sea" and "reach" rhyme?)

To set up a free account, go to chat.openai.com. I recommend [Charlie Chang's ChatGPT Tutorial: "How to Use ChatGPT for Beginners 2023"](#) before starting. 🌟

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How I Launched a...

...CHILDREN'S MAGAZINE: A ROLLERCOASTER JOURNEY

by Christine Mapondera

“We need diverse books. We need diverse stories. We need diverse voices.” These words have echoed in my mind countless times, and, at some point, I made the decision to write and publish my own stories. “Starting a publishing company, hiring talented individuals, and publishing fun stories—it can’t be that hard,” I naively thought. Little did I know that this journey would be as gratifying as it was challenging, confusing, and utterly exhausting.

For years I’ve been curating collections of stories about remarkable individuals born on the African continent. Whether scrolling through Facebook or Instagram or diving into the depths of my Google browser, I’ve always been intentional about maximizing my time on the web. Deep down, I knew these impressive and inspiring tales could be put to good use. It wasn’t until the spring of 2020, however, that the perfect idea struck me like lightning. I was going to create a 4-page weekly newsletter aimed at kids between 8 and 12 years old. This age group seemed ideal for what I wanted to accomplish since most children have become independent readers at this stage, enjoying both fiction and nonfiction content. Parents and schools could subscribe to the newsletter for a fee.

Filled with excitement, I reached out to my phenomenal editor, Christine, and shared the news. Her support and invaluable insights as an editor, writer, and parent encouraged me to take the leap. I proceeded to contact a fellow writer, a couple of illustrators, and acquired a subscription for royalty-free images. Things were looking up.

To save costs, I decided against hiring a graphic designer and planned to utilize [Canva](#), the online design tool. After all, we’ve all seen beautiful creations made with Canva, right? By the summer of 2020, our team was operating at full throttle. Two writers, including myself, an illustrator, and an editor collaborated tirelessly in Google shared folders while I simultaneously played around with cover layouts. Although, looking back, I admit the designs were rather mediocre. Back then I couldn’t see it. However,



after approximately five months, Christine dropped a truth bomb that shattered my optimism. “I don’t think this provides enough content for someone to justify a monthly subscription. It feels a bit thin,” she candidly shared.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

“Well, we just spent all this time working, and now she tells me,” I thought, feeling a mix of frustration and disappointment. Deep down, I knew Christine was right. She had always been a truth teller, but I wasn’t ready to receive her feedback. And so it was that, in December 2020, *Passport Africa* newsletter was put on hold. It was clear that the most logical format would be a magazine, but I couldn’t fathom taking on such a monumental project. The world of magazine publishing was foreign to me, and I felt completely lost.



How I Launched a Children's Magazine...

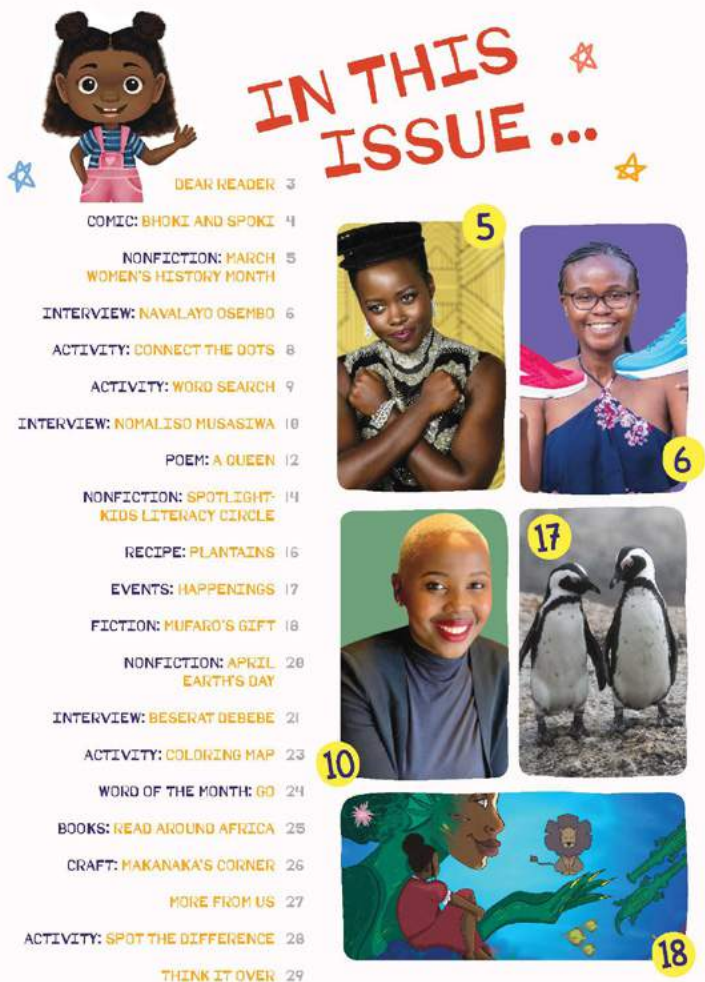
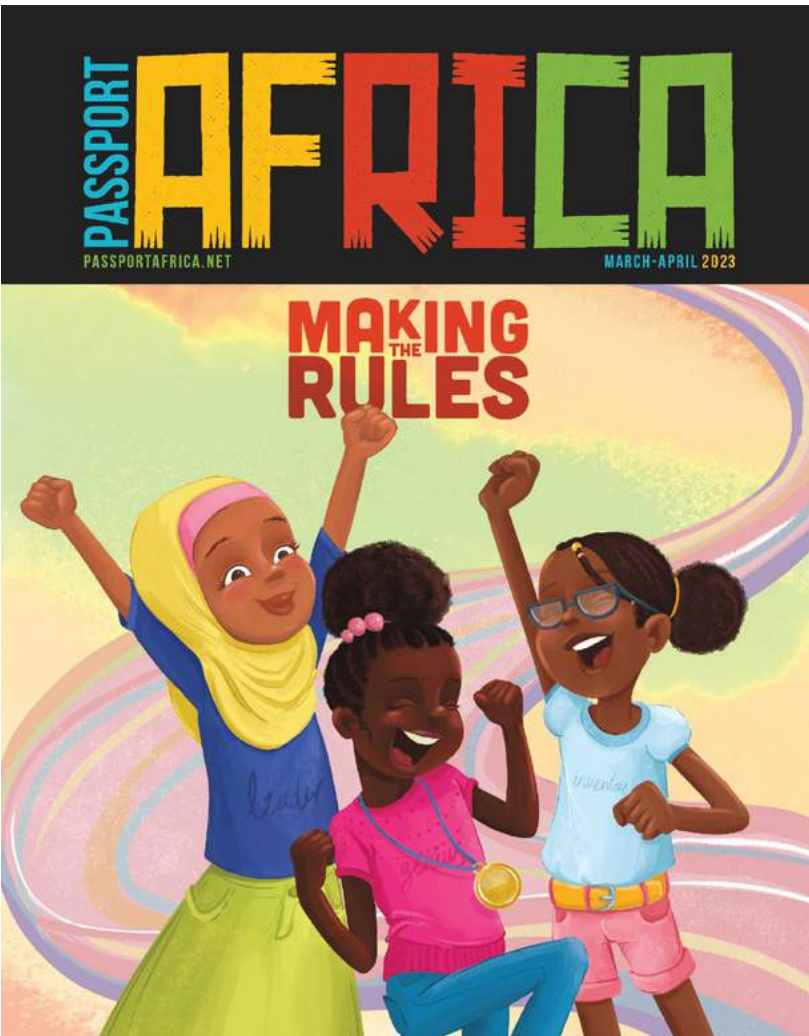
Three months later, I summoned my courage and decided to figure it out. I reached out to a friend experienced in magazine publishing, seeking guidance on creating a suitable format and tracking for all the components required for a magazine. I also connected with additional illustrators, this time even enlisting the services of a professional graphic designer. The *Passport Africa* logo was crafted, and the pieces started falling into place.

In May 2021, I offered a glimpse of what was to come during Africa Day celebrations. Excitement surged within me, and my confidence in my decision grew stronger. Amidst all the enthusiasm, however, my personal life took a nosedive. My husband and I drifted apart and, in October 2021, my father passed away suddenly. Consequently, I packed my bags and spent three weeks in my native country, Zimbabwe, seeking solace and support. Upon my return, I separated from my husband and started a fulltime job. The whirlwind of turmoil and grief kept me detached from everything and

everyone for an extended period. Throughout 2022, my focus shifted to recovery, healing, and rediscovering what truly ignites my passion. Writing became a challenge, but I remained grateful for my friend and fellow SCBWI-IL writer Urania Smith, who consistently engaged me in bookish conversations.

A TURNING POINT

Then came the turning point. In November 2022, a burning desire to achieve my goal took hold of me. On the 23rd of that month, I sent an email to Christine, informing her that we would be working on the magazine and publishing it within six weeks. Much to my relief, she embraced my audaciousness and was ready to dive in. Fortunately, I already had a cover completed from the previous year. Within two days, I discovered a talented graphic designer based in Colombia, solely dedicated to interior layout designs. I used [99designs](#) to browse portfolios and reached out to those whose work resonated with me.



How I Launched a Children's Magazine...

I made the deliberate decision to offer the magazine in digital format, with the option to purchase print copies for bulk orders. To ensure high-quality printing with a quick turnaround, I sought out a reliable printing partner. [Mixam Printing](#) in Schaumburg, Illinois, proved to be the best choice.

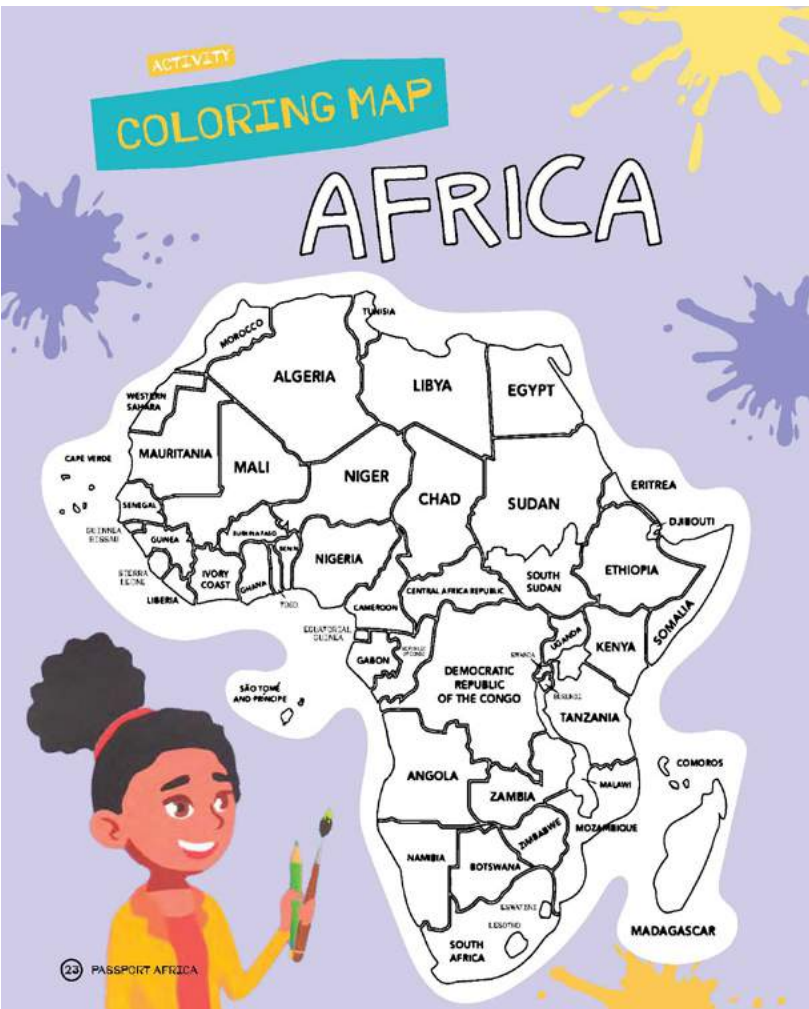
CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

Undoubtedly, my most significant challenge was developing the website and online access for my subscribers. First, I overhauled the entire website, transitioning from WordPress to Shopify. Yes, I embarked on this daunting task solo, driven by a desire to save money. It meant spending countless hours delving into YouTube tutorials, familiarizing myself with the website's backend, and engaging in conversations with my website host as I migrated from one platform to another. Truth be told, most of this technical stuff vanishes from my memory the moment the task is completed. It's not my forte. I scoured numerous blogs and embarked on countless trial runs as I searched for third-party software capable of

handling *Passport Africa's* subscription portal.

By New Year's Eve 2022, my work was done, and I felt a sense of fulfillment and pride. However, by 8:00 pm, I noticed a crucial component missing from my portal. Yes, I could process subscriptions, and customers would receive the product as a PDF download immediately. And yet, there was a problem—I needed them to have access to all the materials I was providing within a dedicated private account. Alas! I had spent hours building this intricate system, only to overlook this crucial aspect.

So there I was, on New Year's Day, starting from scratch—a true act of self-torture. Amidst this whirlwind, I continued to keep up with emails from my editor and collaborators, refusing to give up. Eventually, I stumbled upon exactly what I needed from a small company based in Kenya and promptly built the missing piece. I am especially proud that, in supporting this small business, they in turn support me.



How I Launched a Children's Magazine...



THE LAUNCH—FEAR AND TRIUMPH

To be honest, I was terrified of revealing my creation to the world. What if there was a catastrophic technical glitch that I couldn't resolve? Everyone would be disappointed in me. Additionally, being constrained by my 9-to-5 job meant I couldn't fix any issues during work hours. Nevertheless, with the help of my network, I pushed through the fear and launched on January 11th. The launch video I posted on Instagram and Facebook surpassed my wildest dreams, garnering countless shares and views. Messages poured in from strangers expressing their pride and excitement. And to top it off, I had actual subscribers—parents who wanted their children to experience the diversity of Africa's 54 countries, exploring their foods, their various histories, and their individual cultures.

Renowned Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once said, "Show a people as one thing and only one thing over and over again, and that is what they become." I have always yearned to portray the residents of the motherland in all their multifaceted glory. With *Passport Africa*, I finally achieved that dream.

Today I'm the proud publisher of a bi-monthly digital magazine for kids—an immersive journey that explores places, people, and everything Africa has to offer. The magazine is filled with captivating stories, engaging word games, and inspiring crafts, providing both entertainment and knowledge to young readers.

Raising global citizens is a concept I take seriously, and it is my sincere hope that we can all collaborate to provide the resources necessary for children to become culturally intelligent. We must go beyond stories about African jungles or girls fetching water. Our young readers are counting on us to entertain and enlighten them.

In conclusion, the path to publishing a children's magazine has been a rollercoaster ride filled with ups and downs. It has tested my perseverance, resilience, and creativity. But witnessing the positive impact *Passport Africa* has on young minds makes every challenge and sleepless night worth it. Together, let's continue to inspire and empower the next generation through the magic of storytelling and the celebration of diverse voices. 🌟

CHRISTINE MAPONDERA is the author of *Makanaka's World*, a captivating book series that takes young readers on an exciting journey through African cultures, geography, and languages. As the founder of *Passport Africa* magazine, Christine is passionately committed to her mission of educating and entertaining children through engaging storytelling. Born in Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe, Christine now calls Chicago home, where she resides with her two children. Connect with Christine at globalkidzhouse.com or on Instagram at [@globalkidzhouse](https://www.instagram.com/globalkidzhouse)

Carving Out...

YOUR WRITING PATH *by Srividhya Venkat*



AFCC banner

Ten years ago, I attended my first ever gathering of creators from the children's book industry—the [Asian Festival of Children's Content](#) in Singapore. I was a newbie to children's publishing and had been writing for about a year, without success. With my family's move from India to Singapore that year, I decided to start anew, and the AFCC seemed like the perfect way to kick off.

It felt a bit surreal to be surrounded by people who talked about nothing but children's books. Prior to this occasion, I had never participated in such discussions before. So I knew I was in the right place to get on track with my writing. And rightfully so, for it was at this conference that, thanks to another aspiring writer I met, I walked into a booth with a banner that read "Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators" (SCBWI).

Four weeks later, I found myself at my first local SCBWI monthly critique meeting. Being a bit of an introvert, it felt awkward for me to join an existing group of authors and illustrators who knew each other well. But I was not alone. Besides, like all things new, it was only a matter of time before the warmth seeped in and I began to feel part of the group.

In the beginning, it was hard to take critiques of my manuscripts, but in the months that followed I realized how invaluable it was. I had no previous coursework or experience in writing apart from a college creative writing class, so there was a lot to absorb from my critique group. It was like taking PB101 (a course in picture



A picture of my critique group. I'm in front, on the right.

book writing) and learning relevant rules like "Show, don't tell," "rule of three attempts," "character arc," "story arc," and so on.

A few years later, I joined an SCBWI weekly critique group focused on picture book writing, and that motivated me to write more. The more I wrote, the more I revised and learned. My critique group was helping me grow wings to fly!

During all these years, I continued to submit my work to magazines and book publishers, without success—until one day when the editor of a nonprofit publishing house in India (whom I had previously received rejections from) asked if I would be interested in writing a children's picture book for their health series. Why did she do that? I still don't know, but I expect she saw potential in my writing abilities. If someone ever commissions work from you, my advice to you is to say "Yes." So that's what I did!

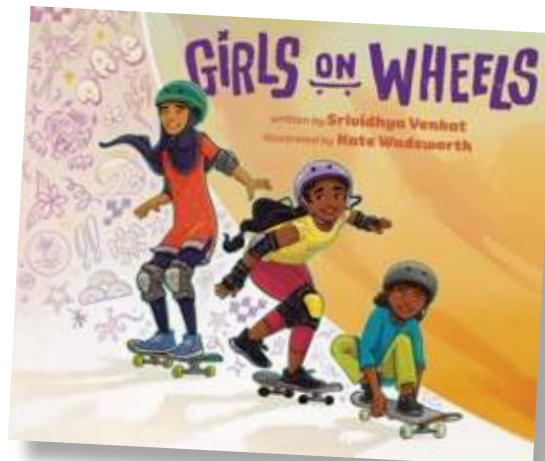


2016 SCBWI booth at AFCC



Carving Out Your Writing Path

Did SCBWI have anything to do with this? No and Yes. No, they did not help me get published, but yes, the writing tips I learned from my SCBWI group did help me as I drafted my first picture book. My editor had tight deadlines, so I worked with her directly to edit and revise the story. And that's how my publication journey started, with *Brushing Is No Fun!* (Pratham Books, 2015; illustrated by Anupama Ajinkya Apte).



were my pillars of support in helping me work on my upcoming picture book, *Girls on Wheels* (Kokila Books, 2023; illustrated by Kate Wadsworth) that is inspired by the skateboarding revolution happening in India. Just like the friends who are there to support the main character, Anila, my critique partners cheered me on when I faced self-doubt through the process.

During months of Covid confinement, I received the stimuli I really needed to get through the hard times, through digital craft workshops and SCBWI online webinars, [The Writing Barn](#), and Julie Hedlund's [12x12 Challenge](#). And a year ago, as someone who relocated to the United States after being away for thirteen years, being a member of the global SCBWI network gave me hope. Although I was coming back to a life I knew, I was still fraught with anxiety about leaving behind my nearly decade-long life and friends in Singapore, especially my critique group. However, the warmth and friendship I received from SCBWI-Illinois members eased my transition to my “new” life in coming back home.



A recent SCBWI gathering to create swag bags for an upcoming conference

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNERS OF THE CRYSTAL KITE AWARDS!



2019 Crystal Kite winners

Apart from the critique groups, I also attended networking events such as workshops and conferences whenever I could. In fact, meeting someone at one such event led me to a small publishing house in India I didn't know about, and then on to the publication of my second picture book, *Pickle Mania* (Tota Books, 2016; illustrated by Shailja Jain Chougule). More picture books followed, including *The Clever Tailor* (Karadi Tales, 2018; illustrated by Nayantara Surendranath), which received the 2019 SCBWI Crystal Kite award for the Middle East/India/Asia region.

In the years that followed, I continued to work with my critique group, which was now more like my writing family. We celebrated our successes and lamented over our disappointments. We were there for each other when we were stuck or simply needed to vent. When the pandemic struck, like most of the world, we met on Zoom to keep up the writing rhythm, stay sane, and simply be in touch. In fact, it was at that time that the members of my group

Carving Out Your Writing Path

I have to admit there were moments in the past ten years (of being an SCBWI member) when I wondered if I should renew my membership at all. But then I also realized that SCBWI is what we make of it. It's totally up to us to make use of our membership and reap the benefits it provides.

Overall, I am grateful for what SCBWI has to offer. Below is my non-comprehensive list based on my own experiences with SCBWI:

- **Opportunities** – SCBWI offers several opportunities in the form of annual summer and winter national conferences, writing contests that give awards and grants, craft webinars that often include submission opportunities with agents and editors, monthly reading booklists to help promote your books, and much more!
- **Professional credibility** – Being a member of SCBWI conveys a commitment to pursuing writing as a career and works as a plus when querying agents and submitting to editors.
- **Networking** – Being a part of SCBWI and participating in local and regional events inculcates a sense of camaraderie within the group and expands your social network, giving you access to valuable information about the writing community, industry updates, events, contests, and more.

Before I wrap up, let me remind you that everyone's writing journey is not the same. What's important is that you keep writing and continue working toward your writing goals.

Here are my two cents as you go down your path:

- Focus on your craft and enjoy the process.
- Join one or more critique groups or try a writing club at your local library.
- Limit time spent on social media and don't compare yourself with others.
- Take time off from writing to enjoy personal time.
- Participate in craft workshops, conferences, and networking events.
- Be an active member of a professional organization like SCBWI.

I wish you the very best in your writing journey. 🌟



Art with a message from my son when he was 11 years old.

SRIVIDHYA VENKAT strongly believes in the power of books and stories. She has written several picture books, including *Dancing in Thatha's Footsteps*, which won the South Asia Book Award in 2022. Having grown up in India and lived across three countries, she loves stories that are unique yet universal. She now lives with her family in a Chicago suburb, dreaming of a world without borders and of houses made with books, not bricks. You can reach Srividhya at:

Website: srividhyavenkat.com

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

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

Facebook: [Srividhya Venkat](https://www.facebook.com/SrividhyaVenkat)

Voices of Change

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPOWERING CHILDREN BY BUILDING A DIVERSE LIBRARY by Paula M. Karll



The word “diversity” makes me think of the variety of colors in a rainbow. Each color shines bright in its own unique way, each ray glowing and changing depending on the angle it’s viewed from or what kind of lens you look through. A rainbow’s range of color also aligned with the idea of building a diverse library based on inclusivity. When books have a broad range of representation and inclusivity it allows readers to explore and learn by identifying with characters and the book’s content in a meaningful way. I believe that using various learning tools to create diverse stories helps diverse learners build book collections that suit them. The term “diverse learners” refers to a wide range of communities, learning styles, backgrounds, and abilities.

By recognizing the importance of building a diverse library for all children, we empower them. We do so by fostering positive concepts about the identity of others perhaps unlike themselves. It allows young readers to gain crucial knowledge about someone else.

As a special education teacher and a children’s author, I’m committed to early learning by building a diverse platform, in other words, a platform that promotes children’s access to inclusive and diverse picture books, a platform that supports opportunities for children to read fun and adventurous books that reflect a wide range of diverse characters and inclusive themes.

When I refer to children who are diverse learners, I’m also including early learners and English as a second language (ESL) learners, and by “diverse formats” I mean things like Audible online audiobooks, text-to-speech, video-book or interactive storybooks, e-books, or books that provide text in more than one language. All comprise a diverse library and give children multiple ways to enjoy a story.

That is my mission—to empower people to build a diverse library so that every child has access to books with inclusive content. That is why I had my book, *Ellie Meets the New Baby*, converted into Audible, text-to-speech, video-book, and e-book formats and also created a Spanish language version. Working with children who are diverse early learners and ESL learners has given me an opportunity to share the book in a “rainbow range” of diverse formats,

so all children have a chance to read and share positive stories that embrace inclusion, diversity, and wide-ranging abilities.

ADVOCATING FOR LITERACY

All this, of course, is based on literacy, a child’s ability to read and to understand and appreciate what they’re reading. As a committed literacy advocate, I believe literacy can be promoted and supported at home in numerous ways. Here are some of the benefits of encouraging a deeper sense of literacy in children—one that goes beyond simply knowing how to read.

- Literacy can lead to more developed language skills.
- Literacy can teach children about the world around them.
- Literacy can help with critical thinking skills.
- Literacy can support problem solving skills.
- Literacy can build empathy.
- Literacy can increase bonding time.

As a literacy advocate, I want readers to gain the ability to engage in more positive interactions and to develop stronger communication skills. Reading time is, of course, also a powerful opportunity for bonding between parents and children. 🌟

PAULA M. KARLL is an award-winning children’s author, an avid educator with over ten years of experience working with grades K through 12, and the founder of “Donate Knowledge,” a new not for profit (NFP) 501 (c) (3) organization created to donate books to less fortunate communities and to promote and foster literacy and inclusion-awareness. Having earned a master’s degree in special education, Paula is a mentor, motivational speaker, and a diverse-learner educator and strategist.

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Shop Around the Corner

DUST BUNNY BOOKS by Alicia Boemi

The city of Lake Geneva, just a hop over the Wisconsin border, is known as a destination lake town for many Illinois residents. Its downtown features dozens of adorable small businesses, including Dust Bunny Books, owned by Raina Reemus and located down the street from the beautiful lake. Raina's store means a great deal to me personally as an independent author and a Lake Geneva native. It was the first bookstore to carry my book, *The Mailboat Dog*, and Raina continues to stock the book on Dust Bunny's shelves.

Raina, who purchased the formerly all-children's-books bookstore in November 2018 and opened it as Dust Bunny Books in January 2019, believes in independent authors and the work we're doing. Her store supports local indie authors and lends itself to the Lake Geneva community by providing books of all genres for both adults and children. Raina herself is a wealth of information because she just *loves* books, and reading is Raina's true passion. Any time you can sit down and talk to her, that passion shines through in the loveliest of conversations. Here are some takeaways from our own conversation.



What Raina's vision was for Dust Bunny Books when she purchased the store.

Raina recalls finding inspiration from Parisian bookstores and wanting a place where locals could come to get away from it all. She wants her customers to enjoy a peaceful and comforting browsing or book-reading experience.

The changes Raina made to Dust Bunny Books to make it what it is today.

Before Raina purchased the bookstore, it sold only children's books, and that approach didn't do as well in the community. The store also didn't carry children's classics. She wanted to give all genres an opportunity and also highlight classic children's books, so she made those changes right away. Raina has seen a great deal of growth for Dust Bunny Books since expanding into all genres for adults and children both.

Why Raina's children's selection is unique.

When it comes to children's books, Raina looks for a unique story that sparks a child's imagination. Books can embrace the uniqueness of children, and she looks for that connection to be made between book and child.

What Raina loves most about children's books.

Raina believes that the possibilities books bring to a child's world are priceless. These possibilities, whether through text or even just illustration, draw no limits on the imagination. Whether a child can read yet or not, books offer endless opportunities for children to grow.

Why Dust Bunny Books supports indie authors.

Raina enjoys supporting local authors and those who are just a bit further out from Lake Geneva but have a tie to the area. She notes that it's hard for writers to get traditionally



Shop Around the Corner

published and respects self-published authors. Raina sees the value in supporting independent local authors through her own independent bookstore.

What Dust Bunny Books brings to the Lake Geneva community.

As the only bookstore in Lake Geneva, Dust Bunny Books welcomes a lot of tourist customers who need a beach or pool read, but Raina also has a consistent local clientele of avid readers. It's a nice mix of customers who live in the community year-round and those just visiting the area for a while. You can follow Dust Bunny Books on Instagram at [@dustbunnybooks](https://www.instagram.com/dustbunnybooks) or visit their website at dustbunnybooks.com 🌟

ALICIA BOEMI is the author of the *Lake Dog Adventures* children's book series; the first book in the series, titled *The Mailboat Dog*, takes place on Geneva Lake in Wisconsin. Growing up, Alicia spent her summers on the shores of Geneva Lake, the inspirational backdrop for her work. She serves as the Social Media Coordinator for the Illinois-SCBWI region. Follow Alicia on Instagram [@aliciatheauthormom](https://www.instagram.com/aliciatheauthormom) or visit her website at aliciaboemi.com



Illustrator's Tips



WRITING-ILLUSTRATING: NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART *by Ruth Goring*

Fellow artists, I wish I were writing this from a place of smashing success. I wish I were replete with technical skills to offer on your way to many publications and book sales and wide recognition. I wish I could imply mastery: “Be like me!”

Instead I offer a personal tale of hope and energy interlaced with discouragement and struggle. I hope some raw honesty can serve as solidarity, especially for author-illustrators who are still emerging.

I have published three children's picture books, all with traditional publishers. My author-illustrator debut in particular met with respectable critical success—meaning an excellent review in *Publishers Weekly*, warm reviews in church publications and from readers, and being named a Junior Library Guild selection. (The latter was in January 2020, right next to a book by my kidlit hero Katherine Paterson in December 2019, which was as exciting as the award itself!) I had developed a very concrete, primitive collage style that readers enjoyed.

In 2020, I rearranged my life so that I could retire from my career in book editing and devote myself to creating more books for children. I moved to a smaller condo for affordability and set aside the larger bedroom as an art studio. In 2021, I took an online course aimed at kidlit writers who wanted to develop their illustration skills. The instructor lauded Procreate as an illustration program that we could start using quickly, so I signed up for a side course and later took two more Procreate courses. The learning was a challenge—my background is with words, not illustration or design—but I worked hard and was dazzled by the possibilities.

In the midst of the ferment my third picture book came out: *Isaiah and the Worry Pack*. It was solicited from the new imprint IVP Kids, whose editors prioritize hiring BIPOC illustrators as well as authors, so it made most sense for my book to have a Black illustrator. I love the art that Pamela Rice, a fellow Chicagoan, came up with.

In 2022, with my growing Procreate abilities, I began to feverishly create botanical images and write meditations on short texts by Julian of Norwich, the medieval British mystic. I'd had this vision for a few years. Her writings are radiant with love and confidence in God's goodness. But not many people I know have read them, beyond a few popular excerpts. I was eager to make her more available.

Keely Boeving with WordService Literary responded to my representation query at a point when three editors were excited about the Julian project and were in the process of presenting it to their committees. Keely loved my writing and art both, loves Julian, and has experience with both mainstream and Christian markets, and books for adults and for children. It's a perfect match. She sent the proposal out to many more editors.



Julian of Norwich text, my Nodding Thistle image

A DIFFICULT SELL

We started getting rejections. Many of them were warm and regretful—the editors loved the proposal, both the text and the art. It was the marketing folks who had objected, because my platform is not large and my previous books had not sold particularly well.

To date, every publisher we sent the proposal to has said no. And those included all the large and medium-sized publishers where this kind of book might fit. I still have hope for finding a compatible small publisher, but for now the proposal is on the shelf.

Last December through mid-February, I turned my attention to another picture book, an idea that a progressive Christian kidlit editor had expressed interest in. It's a wordless book to be illustrated in collage style, similar to *Picturing God* but using only discarded objects plus paint and glue. The story envisions community-wide solutions,





A few Society6 products based on my Rice Paper Plant Leaves design.

inspired by children, for our changing climate and glut of plastics. Having appealed to my neighborhood Buy Nothing group, I lugged home wires, yarn scraps, and other odd objects but also various boards—I had decided that even the surfaces should be discarded. The two sample spreads took over my dining room table, as the final one required much detail and I was creating it on a donated 4×2ft slab of plywood.

It was joyful work. Keely was enthusiastic and gave me helpful feedback on the dummy that I created with digital sketches to tell the whole story. When the art and proposal were ready, she sent them out to a beautiful list of the best Christian and mainstream publishers of picture books.

That was mid-February. Since then we've heard back from five of the fifteen publishers, all rejections. One editor cited the fact that *Picturing God* had just gone out of print. Yes, that happened very recently. The print run had been quite small, only about 2,000 copies, which (I think) made the decision easy. The book was not continuing to sell enough to justify a second printing. The news that my favorite book

would be no more hit me in the gut.

Royalty reports had showed the low sales over the years. That plus the experience with the Julian book taught me that being an author is a lot more than being a skilled writer and artist who produces good, innovative work on important topics. So in the past year, along with creating new work, I have been busy posting to a new Instagram account dedicated to art and writing. I launched a newsletter. I sought to build new relationships with people who might be interested in my books and art.



Psalm 91 illustration for *The Peace Table* (2023)

RUTH GORING recently illustrated seven psalms for *The Peace Table*, a Bible storybook featuring multiple authors and artists (MennoMedia, 2023). Her children's books are *Isaiah and the Worry Pack* (IVP Kids, 2019), illustrated by Pamela Rice; *Picturing God* (Beaming Books, 2019); and *Adriana's Angels* and its Spanish version, *Los ángeles de Adriana* (Sparkhouse, 2017), illustrated by Erika Meza. Find her at ruthgoringbooks.com.

ON THE UPSIDE

None of my efforts have produced miraculous results. But I do have some sober-minded yet positive thoughts from this stage of my journey to share with you:

1. Of the ten publishers that haven't yet responded to my wordless-book proposal, one may soon let us know that they love it. And if none of them say yes, Keely will send it out to others. That initial list of fifteen was only the beginning!
2. One or more small publishers may respond to the Julian of Norwich book. I have my eye on a couple and will send it to them soon.
3. There are also self-publishing options, of course! SCBWI-IL member Carol Saller is republishing a couple of her wonderful children's books that went out of print, and she has a newsletter to share what she's learning along the way. You can sign up at carolsaller.com.
4. Becoming known as an author-illustrator takes time, especially if you aren't often in the public eye with presentations, workshops, or festivals. There is more that I can and will do to seek out these opportunities, despite my natural introversion.
5. Minimizing my need for financial success has been important in allowing me to focus on what I really love. My lifetime income from day jobs has been quite modest, but I saved enough to allow me to live on retirement savings for now and switch to social security at age 70 (coming up in just a year!). Not everyone can do this, of course, but many of us can figure out ways to lessen financial pressures.
6. There are other ways to earn income from our creative work. Last fall I opened a [Society6 shop](http://Society6shop). It will never be a major component of my income, but it's a way to earn a little from my art.
7. I've been pleasantly surprised to find that I love writing my newsletters. I don't have a large list of subscribers, but my open rate is always over 50 percent, which is high for any kind of newsletter. And each issue brings a few grateful responses. I also enjoy posting to Instagram. Takeaway: we can find joy in giving away our words and art too; contracts are not needed for that.
8. Most of all, the work itself is fulfilling! Whether editors are clamoring or not, I find healing in creating. 🌟

Writer's Tips



WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD DIALOGUE? by J.S. Puller

Over the course of my writing career—such that it is—I've had the great opportunity to work with a number of wonderful, supportive, intense, and sometimes hilarious writing communities. Some lasted only a few weeks. Others have been a part of me and my journey for years. I've learned a lot from these brave, ambitious souls. And I like to think that maybe I've passed some wisdom on in return. Not that I would ever make the mistake of calling myself "wise." I'm pretty sure that requires long, wrinkled, green ears and syntax similar to Yoda's. Still, wisdom there might be. There is one area of writing where I think I've imparted some advice. And that's in the arena of writing dialogue.

I vividly remember reading a sample chapter from one of my many critique partners. It was an absolutely riveting story. Part mystery, part survival. I was hooked from the first paragraph. Something I noticed, however, was that the entire ten-page sample didn't have a word of dialogue. When I asked my partner about this, she admitted to me that she was intimidated about writing dialogue. So I offered a couple of tips, to make it a little less scary.

TIP ONE: TRANSCRIBE STRANGERS

Listening is critical in learning and in life. It's even part of the Common Core Standards. As people who love stories, writers need to cultivate the critical skill of listening. And listening skills can be honed to help develop dialogue.

We all have our favorite writing spot. A coffee shop or park bench or closet where we can hide from our loved ones. One way to practice the art of dialogue is to sit quietly to one side and eavesdrop. Listen to the conversation that's taking place at the table next to yours and discretely try to record what they're saying. Make up names for the people talking. Don't worry about getting it word-perfect. You can always skip over anything you miss.

Yes, you can feel a little creepy doing it, but it will also give you quite the insight into how people form (or, more often, *don't* form) sentences. And that's the real point of it. It's not about the words, it's about the cadences. It's about coming to terms with the way people stop and start in casual conversation.

And you never know, you might pick up a few priceless gems. A favorite of mine that I always keep on hand:

(Scene: On a public couch, two girls are sitting. Girl 1 is flipping through an entertainment magazine. Girl 2 is playing with her hair.)

Girl 1: Ugh. Brittany Spears is like a car crash.

Girl 2: She was in a car crash?

Girl 1: No. Like a car crash. Look at her life. And her new boyfriend.

Girl 2: She has a new boyfriend?

Girl 1: Yeah.

Girl 2: Who is he?

Girl 1: Some guy she went to high school with. He was, "into her music."

Anecdotally, I have to mention that I recorded this conversation in February of 2007. Which makes me feel very old.

TIP TWO: READ A PLAY

If you've never picked up a play script before, you're missing out on a goldmine of opportunity! Theatre is the fundamental way to tell a story with dialogue and—for the most part—*only* dialogue. Consider, for example, a scene from this little-known but highly brilliant (if I do say so myself) play, *Winter's End*:

Wife: Oh, you'll thaw out soon. My husband likes to keep it warm here. Always precisely the same temperature. (imitating her husband) "Seventy eight degrees, my queen. That's what it should be. Seventy eight degrees. Twenty five point five five five Celsius."

Cassie: Okay...

Wife: (she laughs) Always to the decimal. It drives me crazy sometimes.

(beat) What's your name? (pause)

Cassie: Cassandra.

Wife: Is that your real name?

Cassie: Does it matter?

Wife: It's up to you, I suppose.

Cassie: Cassandra.



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Aside from a few very, very short stage directions in parentheses, the entire story here is being told in dialogue. And look what you're learning. You can feel the Wife's frustration about her husband's exacting nature. You can also sense that she's giving much of the power in the scene to Cassie. This snippet informs a reader (and actor) about who this person is.

TIP THREE: WRITE A PLAY

This is, perhaps, the natural and inevitable conclusion of the first two tips. After you practice listening by writing out scenes and after you learn more about how playwrights do it, it might be time to become a playwright yourself. Practice makes perfect. Your first play is probably going to suck. I know mine did. Still, I loved writing plays so much, I kept at it.



In 2013, I wrote a fun little play called *Captain Superlative*. And, in 2014, I had the honor of seeing *Captain Superlative* brought to life at the Clockwise Theatre. I was so pleased with the production that I decided I wasn't done with the story yet.

That November, I decided to adapt *Captain Superlative* into a novel, to make it my National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo)

project. I think I wrote the whole draft in about two weeks. After having already written the story in pure dialogue, the rest followed easily. As if I'd already done the heavy lifting of discovering who the characters were and what they wanted.

Because I had.

Compare half a page from the script to a page from the novel:

SCRIPT

Janey: They had comic books when you were a kid?

Father: Naturally. But they were painted onto cave walls. And every single one of them has a fantastic origin story which shaped the identities of the world's greatest heroes.

Janey: Oh yeah?

Father: Mmhmm. A tragic one, too. Say, the lone survivor of an alien race who ends up on earth and decides to become a hero.

Janey: Some people *thought* she was an alien.

Father: But we would have probably heard about any meteors crashing down in the middle of Deerwood Park, wouldn't we?

NOVEL

I snatched the whipped cream out of his hand. "They had comic books when you were a kid?" I knew they did. I'd seen his collection. But for some reason, I wanted to change the subject.

My dad rolled his eyes. "Naturally. But they were painted onto cave walls." He ruffled my hair before snatching the canister back and putting it in the fridge. "And every single one of them has a fantastic origin story which shaped the identities of the world's greatest heroes."

Frankly, I was much more interested in the ice cream. "Oh yeah?" I said.

"A tragic one, too. Say, the lone survivor of an alien race who ends up on earth and decides to become a hero." He held up a spoon, splashing it through the air like it was a sword.

"Some kids *thought* she was an alien," I said, drifting out of the kitchen and into the living room.

He followed after me. In the small stretch of hallway between the kitchen and the living room hung a picture of my mother. We both waved to her out of habit. It was a ritual, I guess. I mean, it was a picture. It wasn't like either of us expected her to wave back. But we still did it. Without questioning or considering, or even talking about it, we paid our respects.

It helped not to miss her so much.

Now that I was older, I understood that when my dad said our house was haunted, he meant by the memory of her. Every room had her fingerprints on it, in one way or another.

Sometimes, though, I felt pretty sure that her ghost had followed us here to the apartment. At least she was a



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friendly one, even if she sometimes made us sad.

“We would have probably heard about any meteors crashing down in the middle of Deerwood Park, wouldn't we?” Dad continued.

The dialogue is the same, but the novel delves into deeper realms. Now, I'm not saying that writing a novel dialogue-first is the way to go. But writing that script was certainly a useful exercise for me to begin writing dialogue in narration.

Will these tips work for you? Maybe. Maybe not. But they definitely helped me! So don't be afraid of dialogue! A good conversation can often be the start of something great! 🌟

J. S. PULLER is from the Windy City, Chicago. She has a master's degree in elementary education and a bachelor's degree in theatre from Northwestern University. She is an award-winning member of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education and she is the author of two novels, *Captain Superlative* and *The Lost Things Club*.

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Illustration by Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn



Writer's Bookshelf

SCRIBBLING IN THE MARGINS: A DIFFERENT TAKE ON BOOKSHELVES

by Lizzie Cooke

Have you ever bought a used book only to take it home—and get it in the mail—and discover the margins filled with scribbles? I adore these little notes and drawings. An exclamation mark here, a question mark there. They provide a rare, stream-of-consciousness glimpse into another person's reading experience. And what could be more fascinating to an author or illustrator than to know what a reader is thinking and feeling in response to the words and images on the page?

Maria Popova offers a whole treasure trove of such scribbles on her prolific website The Marginalian. I first came across the site a decade or so ago, back when it was called *BrainPickings*. Long before that, the site had its humble beginnings as an email to seven friends. In 2006, Popova, newly arrived in the U.S. from Bulgaria, found herself longing for more meaning and connection than she was getting from her university studies or her part-time work at an advertising agency. In response, she collected tidbits of inspiration, from centuries-old poems to groundbreaking scientific discoveries, and shared them with her office friends in a regular electronic missive.

Popova's friends forwarded the emails, and her readership quickly grew. After taking a night class in website design, she began compiling her creative findings online, publishing them as both a blog and a newsletter. Today *The Marginalian* receives millions of monthly views and is preserved in the Library of Congress's permanent web archive of culturally valuable materials. The site is ad-free and supported entirely by donations from readers and affiliate links to featured books. It is, according to Popova, "a thoroughly one-woman labor of love that is also my life and my livelihood."

No matter its name or format, the heart of the endeavor has remained the same over the years: Part reading journal and part collection of creative oddities, the website chronicles Popova's reactions to a wide swath of books,



Maria Popova (source: themarginalian.org; credit: [Allan Amato](#))

poems, essays, musical compositions, and artwork. In other words, it records her notes scribbled in the margins of these works. Popova is a generous reader, full of delight and curiosity as she shares her discoveries with the world. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of her subjects, providing important historical and cultural context to each work, and she deftly links together her disparate finds, many of which are from obscure or out-of-print sources. I have spent many a Saturday afternoon traipsing from one blog post to another, learning first about the [story behind Beethoven's "Ode to Joy"](#) and next about [the neurophysiology of musical enchantment](#).

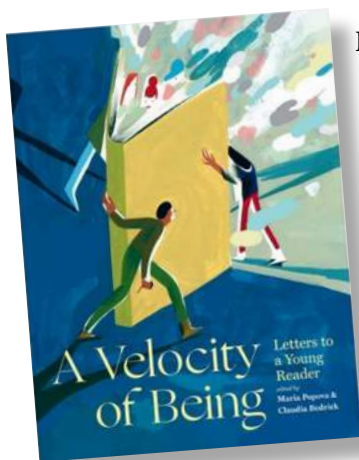
THE MARGINALIAN AND KIDS' BOOKS

Although *The Marginalian* is not a physical book that I can place on a shelf, I count it among the most important resources on my metaphorical writer's bookshelf. Among the wide-ranging topics covered are art, science, history,



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philosophy, design, and even a special focus on [children's books](#). Popova has a deep admiration for the simple, eternal truths and transportive artwork of books for kids. In her words, "Great children's books are works of existential philosophy in disguise—gifts of timeless consolation for the eternal child living in each of us..." In her [annual list of favorite children's books](#), I have found many lovely stories from small presses and international authors that I would not otherwise have encountered. The site also offers an ever-expanding collection of [advice from more than 100 writers](#), including Madeleine L'Engle, Zadie Smith, Neil Gaiman, James Baldwin, and Alison Bechdel.



In addition to her millions of pages (literally) of internet writings, Popova has published three paper-and-ink books that invite similar contemplation and creativity. The first, *Figuring*, is a nuanced exploration of the human search for meaning told through the lives of historical artists, writers, and scientists—mostly women, mostly queer—spanning four centuries. Popova's second book, *A Velocity of*

Being: Letters to a Young Reader, is a gorgeously illustrated compilation of original letters from contemporary artists and thinkers to young people about "why we read and what books do for the human spirit." Contributors include Jane Goodall, Yo-Yo Ma, Jacqueline Woodson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Judy Blume, and Shonda Rhimes. Popova's third published work, *The Snail with the Right Heart: A True Story*, is a picture book lovingly illustrated by Ping Zhu that chronicles the life of a lonely snail with a rare gene mutation. The book offers "an invitation not to mistake difference for defect and to recognize, across the accordion scales of time and space, diversity as nature's fulcrum of resilience and wellspring of beauty."

The great danger of *The Marginalian* is that I can lose myself in its pages, clicking from link to link, from essay to essay, and from poem to poem,



setting aside my own artistic endeavors and reveling in the offerings of others. At some point, of course, it is necessary to stop reading in the margins and start writing in the center of the page if I wish to contribute to this stream of creative consciousness. Nevertheless, after a binge on *The Marginalian*, I always return to my work reinvigorated by the knowledge that there are so many others, past and present, who share in this endless search for joy, wonder, hope, curiosity, and meaning. 🌻



Lizzie Cooke as a child (source: Lizzie Cooke)

LIZZIE COOKE is a longtime member of SCBWI-Illinois and the recipient of the 2020 Becky Mabry "Go for It" award. She writes whimsical middle grade fiction, along with the occasional existential essay or poem. Find her at lizziecooke.com or on Instagram [@mizzlizziecooke](https://www.instagram.com/mizzlizziecooke).

Mentor Texts

WEIRD AL, WEIRD ANIMAL SOUNDS, AND WEIRD BEGINNINGS by Zach von Zonk

A DARK SOURCE MATERIAL SECRET

I have a dark secret about the song “Old MacDonald Had a Farm.” The secret is...I’ve never liked that song. No offense to Thomas d’Urfey, who is thought to have written it in 1706, but the nursery rhyme has always struck me as, well...boring here and boring there. Okay, there *are* parts I love. I mean, whether you’re two years old or 102 years old, animal sounds are pretty much always fun to make, so it’s got that going for it. But the real difficulty for me with “Old MacDonald” is that there are no twists. No turns. In fact, it has no plot whatsoever. It is simply a story about a farmer whose animals make animal sounds. So it might seem odd then that my debut picture book is...wait for it...*Old MacDonald Had a Farm*. But in this case, there *is* a twist. The actual title is *Old MacDonald Had a Farm, E-I-UFO*.



"WEIRD AL" YANKOVIC'S GENIUS

With my debut title being *Old MacDonald Had a Farm, E-I-UFO*, it may come as no surprise that I grew up a “Weird Al” Yankovic fanatic. So, while writing *E-I-UFO*, I took “mentor text” clues from this master twister of tunes. My favorite song of his as a kid

was always “Yoda,” a parody of the song “Lola” by the Kinks. And while Yankovic completely changes the lyrics of others’ songs, he often uses words and letters with the same sounds to allow the listener to effortlessly connect his parody with the original.

Take “Yoda” for example. He could have gone with “L-U-K-E” or “S-O-L-O” instead of “Y-O-D-A,” but they clearly don’t sound as similar to the original, “L-O-L-A.” So when my friend Dani Steele and I were chatting about my idea for the Old MacDonald book and she blurted out “E-I-UFO!” we both knew it was the perfect fit.



SHATTERED SING-ALONGS

The biggest difference between a Fractured Fairytale and what I call a “Shattered Sing-Along” is that the Shattered Sing-Along literally transforms readers—into singers. Now, throughout my picture book studies I had seen a lot of Fractured Fairytales, but the first Shattered Sing-Along I came across was *There Was an Old Dragon Who Swallowed a Knight* by Penny Parker Klostermann and illustrated by Ben Mantle.



This book taught me that, because people are singing a song to a tune they already know, it’s incredibly important to keep the same cadence, put the emphasis in the same places as in the original song, and try to avoid extra syllables if possible so that those singing the song don’t get tripped up.

Mentor Texts

There Was an Old Dragon does this deftly, and it also opened my eyes to how different a book/song can be simply by changing out the main characters. In the case of my debut, I switched out a farmer for an alien. However, in my rough draft I had begun the verse with “Old MacAlien had a Farm,” and it simply didn’t sing (that pesky extra syllable being just one too many). So I decided to switch “Old MacAlien” to “Old MacMartian,” which lets readers/singers keep the flow of the original tune they know so well.

ABNORMAL-SOUNDING ANIMALS

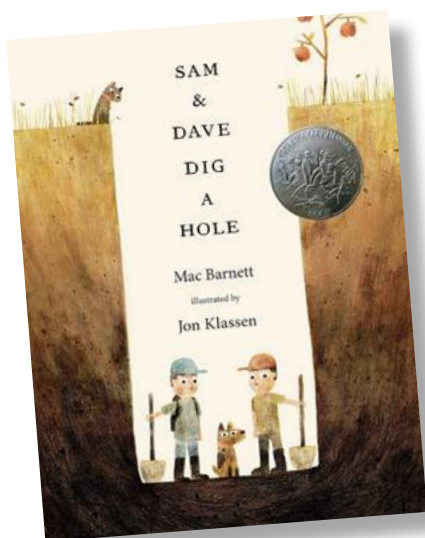
When I lived in China, I always loved that the noises animals made were pronounced differently than the sounds I learned as a child. For example, in China, people imitate a dog’s bark by saying “wāng wāng” instead of “woof woof.” Then, when reading a book to my son called *Animal Talk*, by Cynthia Weill, and illustrated with Oaxacan wooden sculptures created by Rubí Fuentes and Efraín Broa, I learned that, in Spanish, the sound frogs make is pronounced as “cruá cruá” rather than “ribbit ribbit.”



Mentor Texts



This inspired me to break open the traditional structure of the Old MacDonald animal sounds. But instead of having the animals make noises in a “different language,” I decided to use verbs in place of the traditional onomatopoeia. So instead of “a MOO MOO here and a MOO MOO there,” the rascally cow in *E-I-UFO* now eats all of Old MacMartian’s favorite things, like his marshmallows, with a “MUNCH MUNCH here and a MUNCH MUNCH there.”



PAGE TURN PROS

Perhaps my favorite part of picture books is the art of the page turn. There are so many great page-turning masterpieces out there, but one of my favorites that I study over and over is Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen’s *Sam & Dave Dig a Hole*. By design, in *Sam & Dave* every single page turn is a “gem” of a reveal. And while Benjamin Chaud hasn’t yet illustrated *E-I-*

UFO because it’s not set to launch until spring 2025 (from Chronicle), I wanted to put as many opportunities as possible within the text for him to create those wonderful, book-scented breezes we call page turns. Chaud is also a master of making readers thirst for the next flip, so I can’t wait to see what comes out of his beautiful brain.

TRUE MENTORSHIP

I couldn’t write about mentor texts without praising my living, breathing mentors. I’d like to thank Larry Day and Miriam Busch for pushing *E-I-UFO*’s plotting and writing and for teaching me about the industry and the craft. Thank you as well to John Sandford, John Hayes, Carolyn Crimi, Lisa Wheeler, Deborah Topolski, Jenny Wagh, and Esther Hershendorff for your encouragement and guidance. Thank you to my critique group

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ZACH VON ZONK is a children’s book creator who believes that putting your heart on the page is the best way to hear it beat...other than using a stethoscope, but those things are cold! As an award-winning creative director, he’s had the chance to create chaos with the Despicable Me Minions, write in rhyme for the Keebler Elves, and spin tales for Spider-Man. Zach currently writes, draws, and idea-jigsaws from his home in Chicago.

Season's Crop

CLICK TO BE ADDED
TO A FUTURE
SEASON'S CROP

by Jenny Wagh

Picture Books

FICTION

A Book About You and All the World Too

by Jean Reidy
Illus. Joey Chou
Harper Collins, June 2023
ISBN: 9780063041523

Get Ready for School

by Janet Nolan
Illus. Maria Neradova
Albert Whitman, August 2023
ISBN: 9780807528334

Girls on Wheels

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

Ma Ma's Journey Home

by Retta Ford
Illus. Marc Moran
Christian Faith Publishing,
February 2023
ISBN: 9798887517322

Middle Grade

FICTION

Field of Screams

by Wendy Parris
Delacorte Press, August 2023
ISBN: 9780593569986

Food Fight

by Linda B. Davis
Fitzroy Books, June 2023
ISBN: 9781646033430

Hotel Oscar Mike Echo

by Linda MacKillop
Illus. Chiara Fedele
B&H Publishing, June 2023
ISBN: 9781087770987

The Memory Jar

by Debra Daugherty
Illus. Victoria Marble
Young Dragons, April 2023
ISBN: 9781633738086

My Love for You Is a Garden

Written & Illus by Laura Smetana
Flying Cardinal Press, March 2023
ISBN: 9781737140962

Simply Skye

by Pamela Morgan
Illus. Heather Bell
Amicus Ink, July 2023
ISBN: 9781681528946

Snake's Big Mistake

Written & Illus by Sarah Kurpiel
Green Willow Books, May 2023
ISBN: 9780063093218

Stanley's Secret

by John Sullivan
Illus. Zack Manbeck
Simon & Schuster, January 2023
ISBN: 9781534487833

Matteo

by Micheal Leali
HarperCollins, May 2023
ISBN: 9780063119918

Minerva Keen's Detective Club

by James Patterson and Keir Graff
Little Brown Books, May 2023
ISBN: 9780316412230

Travel Guide for Monsters Part

Deux: A Canadian Adventure
By Lori Degman & Jocelyn
Watkinson
Illus. Marcus Cutler
Sleeping Bear Press, April 2023
ISBN: 9781534111875

NONFICTION

Cookie Queen: How One Girl

Started Tate's Bake Shop
by Lowey Bundy Sichol &
Kathleen King
Illus. Ramona Kaulitzki
Random House, July 2023
ISBN: 9780593485668

Young Adult

NONFICTION

*Earth Secrets: How Science and
Faith Can Save Us*

Written & Illus by Susan L. Barker
Earthsecrets.org
ISBN: 979821820446-4 🌟

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