

# Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

SPRING/SUMMER 2024



**Illustrator in the  
Spotlight:  
Brooke O'Neill**

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*Illustrations by Brooke O'Neill*



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# In This Issue

by Shirin Shamsi

As children's book creatives, we ALL agree that children are the most important people in the world. The unbearable fact that, at the time of publication, over 15,000 Palestinian children have been killed has me reeling in horror. I feel our global soul has been diminished by the silent witnessing of such unconscionable actions.

Each day, I hope there will be a ceasefire, and each day there are more casualties.

Each day, I feel more heartbroken at the voices that have been forever silenced.

Children are our reason—our answer to the question “Why?” Everything we do is for children.

We create books in the hope for a better world for ALL children.

In the HOPE for a more compassionate world.

In the HOPE for a more empathetic world.

I'm grateful for all of you. We are creating books that I hope will heal our world. All we have is hope—hope that tomorrow will bring brighter days; hope that we can build a world where every child's voice matters.

## GREETINGS!

Debbie's [greeting takes us on a nostalgic journey](#) of her ten years as SCBWI-IL's third Regional Advisor. Though there have been many challenges, the wisdom in knowing when to pivot has been the key to growth and success of SCBWI-IL. Although Debbie will pass on the baton in the fall, my heart is full of gratitude for everything she has given to us all. I shall cherish her sage advice:

*Take a step back so you can jump forward.* —French proverb

## SPOTLIGHTS

Our very own designer, Brooke O'Neill, is our featured [Illustrator in the Spotlight](#). The cover she designed is absolutely gorgeous, uplifting and filled with possibilities. Brooke's illustrator journey is packed with adventure and advice—especially for someone like me, who is struggling to navigate the world of Procreate.

In [Tales from the Front](#), Liz Searle shares the “Top 5 Things” she's glad she did before she was published, and readers will



learn how her journey to becoming a children's book author came about in a more circuitous way.

Karla Clark takes a different approach to [Creative Sparks](#) by sharing her query letter. In [Asking an Agent to the Dance](#), she delves deep into the ins and outs of writing the ‘nearly-perfect’ query letter.

## FEATURES

In our Features, Mary Monsell [writes of a very persistent penguin](#), and offers sage advice: Listen to your characters. They will tell you what you need to know.

Ann Rusk [shares the advantages of subscribing to Substack](#), while Diane O'Neill speaks of the welcoming community she found by connecting virtually with other writers in [Joys of Writing Groups](#).

## COLUMNS

In [Voices of Change](#), Valerie Miller, known as author V. B. Miller, takes us on an inspiring journey, sharing how she takes “comfort and motivation in the realms of art and science fiction, where imagination reigns supreme and diversity is embraced.”



# In This Issue

In [Shop Around the Corner](#), our very own editor, Sheila Path-McMahon, visits the Three Avenues Bookshop. Tim and Jordan's bookstore promotes community events such as Saturday Storytimes. Their compassion and community spirit comes through as they state:

*"We are focused on highlighting marginalized voices— Black and brown voices, Palestinian voices, disabled voices, and more."*

In [Illustrator Tips](#), Darcy Zoells shares an important announcement about the Key Colors Competition, which she won in 2022. Congratulations Darcy! She generously shares details of her experience in submitting and winning Gold. I feel this is an opportunity none should let pass.

Urania Smith offers us [Writer's Tips](#) for those working on graphic novels who may not be artists. Her creative tips make it appear far less of a daunting task.

In [Writer's Bookshelf](#), Ronni Davis focuses on character development and shares a curated selection of books on creating and crafting authentic characters.

In [Mentor Texts](#), Andi Wowor focuses on the Rich Tapestry of Diversity, citing books that highlight the varied richness of diverse experience, different cultures, and also books that support social and emotional learning.

## NEWS & NETWORKS

[Season's Crop](#) is full of new and exciting reads. Thank you Jenny for compiling them.

As always, I'm so grateful to our inspiring, hardworking and supportive *Prairie Wind* team. I'm honored to be in your company. 🌟

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

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

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

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

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





# Greetings!

## ALLERTON AGAIN by Deborah Topolski



Each year, before the Sangamon overflows, I usually head out with my best friend on a road trip. The place is always the same—[Allerton Park and Retreat Center](#), in Monticello, Illinois... Allerton is our destination to refill the well and a literal point on the map of our life's journey.—Grounded, *The Prairie Wind*, Spring 2019.



This July, I'll be revisiting Allerton from a different point in life's journey, one more time, and for the last time as Co-Regional Advisor. So much has happened since I wrote 2019's, *Grounded*, using Allerton as a metaphor.

In the five years hence, our human family has endured a pandemic with socio-political and economic change in its wake. Across SCBWI regions, volunteer servants like me have

witnessed a major shift in the preferences of our creative audience because of this change. Online programming offers professional development from libraries, kidlit organizations and other global SCBWI regions, creating a plethora of opportunities on any schedule. Where once we would have hosted all our events in-person, convenience and value have dictated a welcome change and significant shift in how we plan and execute our regional events like *WORDS IN THE WOODS: Allerton*.

Despite our best efforts over the last five years, the Region hasn't successfully hosted the downstate program since Regional Advisor Emerita, **Alice McGinty** retired! In 2020, we jettisoned the in-person retreat for *Words on the Web*, moving all the planned programming to a virtual format to accommodate social distancing and maintain



community. Co-RA **Jennifer Wagh** mailed dozens of frozen s'mores kits—one traveled all the way to Hawai'i—to help online attendees feel connected. Former Assistant Regional Advisor, **Deb Aronson**, did a *wired walk*, encouraging the community to imagine Allerton's

surroundings in meditation. In 2022, our *Words in the Woods* became *Riverside Writing Retreat* and again, pandemic concerns impacted registration. In 2023, the home office turned down our request to host a downstate retreat due to a scheduling conflict with the virtual SCBWI Summer Conference. In 2024, with approval in hand, the WITW Committee, which includes veteran planners **Louann Brown** and **John Bowen**, reimagined the event as a hybrid, offering attendees a 10-week online intensive + retreat. Yet, conferees couldn't embrace the new format or higher fees incurred by rising catering and lodging costs and some well-deserved pay increases for the featured faculty. So, one



# Greetings!

more pivot brought us *SCBWI-IL Summer Series*, a 10-week online program + critique that better serves the needs of our post-pandemic community while helping us to maintain our commitment to the paid faculty we had already contracted.

*Guardians of all our best days.*



*Longtime volunteer and Illinois' regional co-founder, Leone Anderson.*

Pivoting seems like the name of the game, these days! So instead of hosting *WORDS IN THE WOODS: Allerton*, we return for the newly named *Leone Anderson Volunteer Celebration* this July 13. It's an opportunity to honor the work of our region's 50+ current volunteers, past leadership and the legacy of regional co-founder and long-time Network Representative, **Leone Anderson**, who died in April after 100 years of storytelling. (Are you a current volunteer or past Regional Team member who didn't get an invitation? [Email Jen Wagh.](#))

When I do enter Allerton's gates and drive up the familiar road for the event, past the Fu Dog Garden and up to the mansion, it will have been a very long road indeed. I'm not only referring to my 10 years as a volunteer servant, but I'll be arriving from my new home of 6 months—Atlanta.

*...I wondered if Allerton waits each year for me. Do her trees look down on our car as it enters the gates? Do the formal gardens whisper 'hello' on the wind? Do the Fu Dogs bark about my glorious decay or revel in our return? I like to think that they are the guardians of all our best days and those road trips yet to come—Grounded, *The Prairie Wind*, Spring 2019.*

Like the Fu Dogs, SCBWI-IL Illinois has been the guardian of all my best days. It has been a privilege and an honor to serve you. Why did I volunteer for more than 10 years—because it mattered to me. It always will. It made such a profound and loving impact on my life. Plus, kidlit creators are the kindest, best and most interesting people in this world. I have made many happy, unexpected friendships to last a lifetime and have learned so much about myself, the craft and business of kidlit, non-profit event planning and our wider world of global creators. I hope to continue to advise a new generation of volunteers as Illinois' *third* Regional Advisor Emerita! Yet,

no matter where I go or how I create my path forward, I will be, always, SCBWI-Illinois.

*Reculer pour mieux sauter: Take a step back so you can jump forward.* —French proverb

Last fall, my husband Brad and I found out we would be relocating for his work to Atlanta, achieving our longtime goal to move to the southeast. I had hoped this would be in conjunction with a permanent move for my folks to their sometimes Florida retreat, putting them in closer proximity as they aged. However, my mom's Alzheimer's diagnosis a year ago necessitated a change in plans. As we excitedly packed up our home of 29 years of happiness last November, we struggled too. In a whirlwind of house showings and goodbyes, holidays and healthcare, we were able to secure Mom a place in a quality memory care facility just days before our move in January. Since then, we've endured a lot of physical and emotional adjustment, big strides forward and a few setbacks, too. I've tried to reframe these setbacks as taking a step back, the Universe forcing us to reevaluate. Watching *EMILY IN PARIS*, I learned the French Proverb, *reculer pour mieux sauter*. Maybe these setbacks are just the thing we need to prepare for our next move, to jump forward on the road ahead?

Returning to *Allerton* again will be a time to step back, to reevaluate regional programming pivots, to reflect on how far we've come, both personally and professionally, and to prepare ourselves to jump forward to reach our full potential as a community of kidlit storytellers. As outgoing Regional Advisors, Jen and I hope to take this time at Allerton and in the coming months, to not only celebrate with you, but to inspire a new generation of leaders as we prepare for our big jump into retirement on November 30. [We hope you will jump forward with us as we leave a legacy of leadership in Illinois.](#) *Thank you, always, Illinois.* ✨

DEBORAH TOPOLSKI dedicates this article to SCBWI-Illinois' volunteers past, present and future. She writes and illustrates picture books, chapter books and middle grade mysteries. She still lives the pre-published dream, but literally in a sunnier state. Regardless, she is always SCBWI-Illinois.



# Illustrator in the Spotlight

by Brooke O'Neill

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

I am an illustrator, although I would love to write my own children's book someday! I am represented by the wonderful agents at [Astound US Inc.](#)

I love digital illustration, so typically I draw on my iPad using [Procreate](#). For sketchbook work—I love using Crayola, Copic, and Prismacolor Markers, Posca Paint Markers, Prismacolor colored pencils, various pens, and watercolor paint.

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

From a very early age I loved to draw. Throughout my school years, art was always my favorite subject. During high school and college, I took as many art courses as I could—drawing, printmaking, photography, ceramics, etc. I remember my printmaking teacher saying my art looked like advertisements, and that's when I decided to study graphic design.

In 2008 I graduated from Illinois State University with a BFA (with a focus in Graphic Design). I worked for many years as a full-time graphic designer and stopped drawing for several years. After our daughter was born, my husband and I began reading children's books to her every night. While reading these wonderful and beautiful picture books, I longed to draw again and illustrate. I started drawing again in my sketchbook, but wondered how people made such beautiful digital illustrations.

In 2018, I was gifted an iPad from my mother and father for my birthday. I immediately downloaded [Procreate](#). I was drawing like a mad woman and couldn't stop. For the next four years I took numerous online art classes from [Make Art That Sells](#), [Bardot Brush](#), [Skillshare](#), and [Victoria Johnson](#). I illustrated books for self-published authors, drew portraits, made invitations, and did commissioned artwork on the side while working from home as a graphic designer.

I built up a portfolio, created a website, and soon had the confidence to apply to agencies. After several months of applying, I landed an agent with [Astound US Inc.](#) Now, I have illustrated over 20 books. I am currently in the middle of four exciting projects!



Illustrations created for Scholastic by Brooke O'Neill.



# Illustrator in the Spotlight

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

Usually, when I begin to draw, I go straight to [Procreate](#) and sketch. Today, I’m going to start with a drawing from my sketchbook, and show you a step-by-step process of how I color using Procreate.

When I first sketch something it’s usually very rough and sloppy. I take that “sloppy sketch” in Procreate, add a new layer, lower the opacity on my “sloppy sketch” layer, and go over that sketch again. I do this over and over, until my pencil sketch looks very refined. My favorite brush for sketching and fine details is the “Bardot Freshly Sharpened” brush from [Bardot Brush’s Pencil Box](#) set.

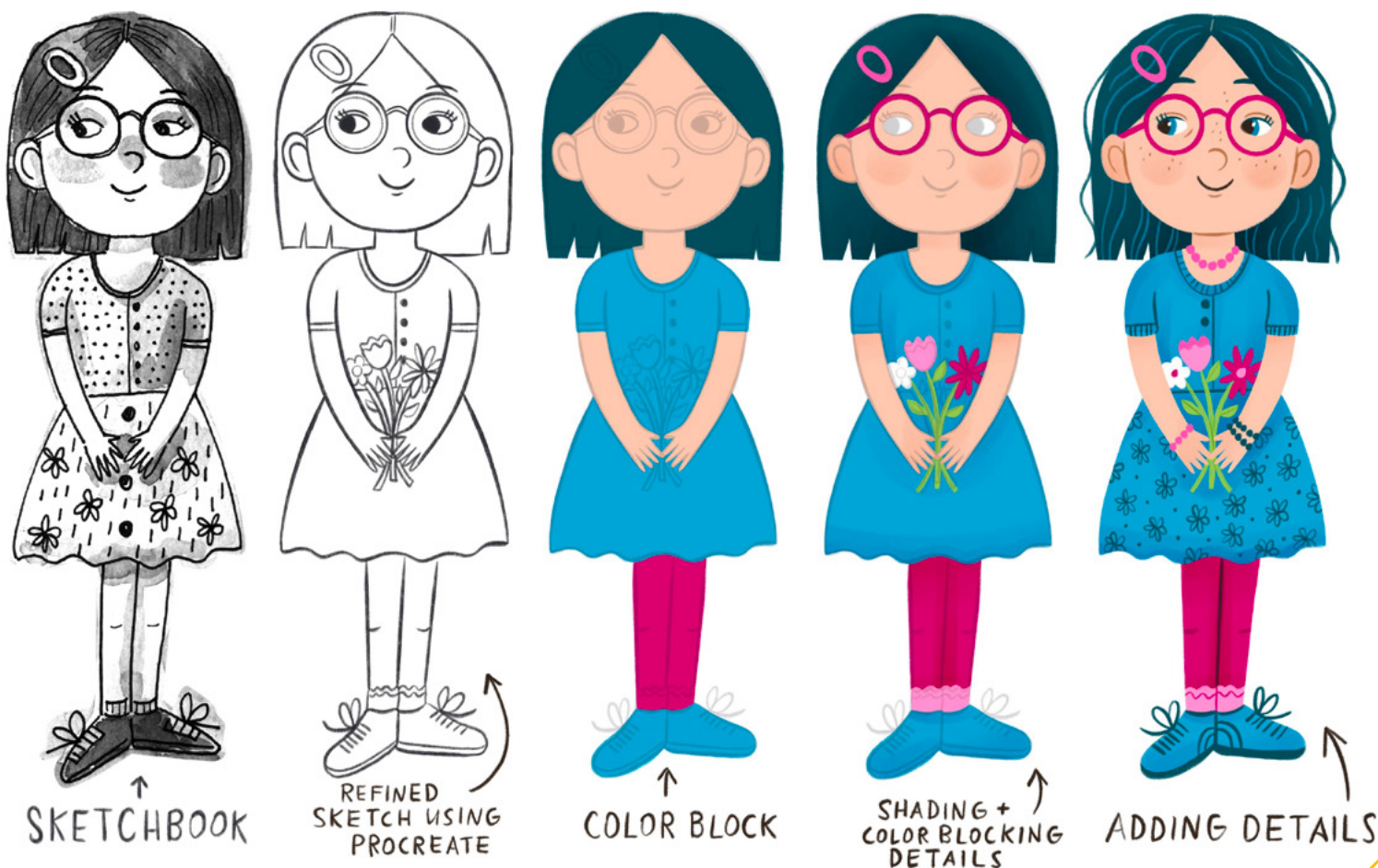
Once I am happy with my pencil sketch, I begin to add blocks of color. Today I am using a “Bright Florals” color palette for my character. I love to find and purchase Procreate color palettes on [Etsy](#).

I then shade those color blocks. I enable “alpha lock” on that specific color layer, and use a “gouache wash” brush to shade. My favorite digital gouache brushes are from [Bardot Brush Gouache Paintbox](#). After the large areas are colored, I add color blocks to the smaller sections.

Finally—my favorite part—adding the little details! The “alpha lock” and “clipping mask” tools are my friends here, and make things so easy! I may also add more shading in this stage too.

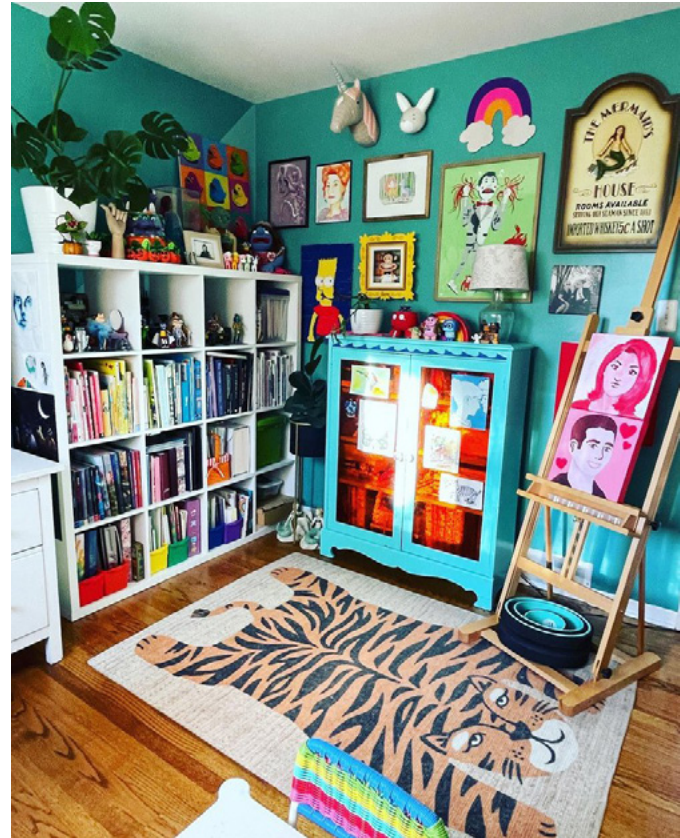
## What does your workspace look like?

My workspace is filled with my favorite books, artwork, old toys, loads of art supplies, and anything that inspires me. I’m a bit of a hoarder when it comes to collecting books and fun little knick-knacks, but I do try and declutter every now and then (I recently spent four days decluttering my office)! There is a space for my kids to create, and a closet full of craft supplies and games at their fingertips, so they like to spend a lot of time in here with me.





# Illustrator in the Spotlight



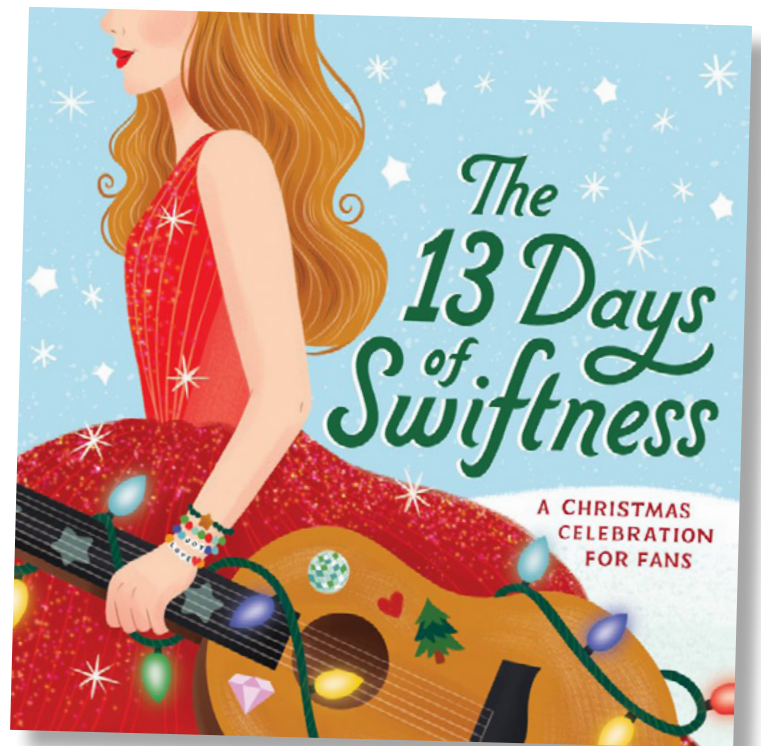
Inside my office/studio.

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

A project I'm currently working on comes to mind. I'm a huge fan of Taylor Swift—I created fan art and sent the artwork to my agency. Soon jobs began popping up. Publishers were looking for artists to illustrate Taylor Swift inspired books. My agent began to put my name in, and (fourth time's a charm) I was finally chosen! *The 13 Days of Swiftness* (Little, Brown) will be out this fall!

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

As a child, I remember staring at the art in *The Monster at the End of this Book: starring Loveable, Furry, Old Grover* (illustrated by Michael Smollin), and it's still one of my favorites. I was in love with everything [Lisa Frank](#)—what girl in the 90s wasn't? The cover art on the [Goosebumps book series](#) (illustrated by [Tim Jacobus](#)) made me yearn to collect every book. Disney movies like *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King* really inspired me as well. As a teenager I loved the Japanese manga and anime art style.





# Illustrator in the Spotlight

## What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

I belong to a small Discord art group. There are seven of us (we met online through [Make Art That Sells](#) courses and became friends). This group is so talented, helpful, and amazing—they inspire me daily.

I love looking at fellow artists' work on Instagram, and seeing what art my children and husband are creating. Looking through my art books, listening to my favorite music, and being in nature is also very inspiring.

## What gets in the way of your creativity?

Everyday life. There are always a million things to do... chores, work, helping kids with homework, volunteering, cleaning, running errands, etc. Right now, in my life, I'm forced to be creative for work...so I have no choice! To stay

sane, I bought a ukulele. This is my way of having a creative outlet—something that's just for me and not work related. So, when I need a mental break, I play my [ukulele](#).

## Where can we find you?

Website: [www.brookeoneilldesign.com](http://www.brookeoneilldesign.com)

Instagram: [@brookeoneill.illustration](#) ✨

BROOKE O'NEILL is a graphic designer and illustrator living in the southwest suburbs near Chicago. She is represented by [Astound US Inc](#) and has illustrated over 20 children's books. Some titles include *Joan of Art*, and *Sadie Shark and the Special Shellebration*. Upcoming titles include *It's Her Story: Mae Jemison*, and *13 Days of Swiftness: A Christmas Celebration for Fans*. When she's not working; she loves spending time with her two children, husband, dog named Donut—and listening to Taylor Swift, of course! You can visit her website at [www.brookeoneilldesign.com](http://www.brookeoneilldesign.com).





# Tales from the Front

## LESSONS LEARNED TAKING THE LONG ROAD TO PUBLISHING

by Liz Masterson Searle

The release of my first book *Knit Fast Die Warm* was a long time coming—over ten years from the time I started writing to when my book came out last February. I think I can safely say that's longer than it takes most people. And while part of me wishes I would have published sooner, I think I have learned a lot of valuable lessons in not rushing to publish.

The top five things I'm glad I did before I published:

### I FOUND A COMMUNITY

Actually, I found two. The first is my local SCBWI critique group. I've attended almost every month for more than ten years. Over the years, our meetings have been as large as twenty-two attendees and as few as three. But through it all, I've received invaluable feedback, especially from a small core group of amazing diehards. My pages are always so much better after each meeting.

The second community is a "Zoom Office" through the Better-Faster Academy, where I write with other authors and connect with them during hourly scheduled breaks. This particular group doesn't do sprints or keep track of word counts, which I prefer, but there are other groups that do. Many authors in the Office are experienced indie authors and discussions during break periods are often about the latest trends in the indie publishing world. The current hot topics are Kickstarter campaigns and Direct Sales. Hearing what they are experiencing, successes and failures, in real-time is a tremendous education.

### I HONED MY CRAFT

Looking back at some of my early writings is like looking at the writing of another person. I'm glad that I took the time to read craft books and take classes that made me aware of the "behind the scenes" aspects of writing that aren't apparent to the average reader. One of the most informative books was *Secrets of Story* by Matt Bird. The most valuable conference I attended was Story Masters, an intense long weekend with James Scott Bell, Donald Maass, and Christopher Vogler—



you'll come out of it a better writer, but possibly one with carpal tunnel and brain sprain.

### I DIDN'T QUERY

I have been lucky to have author friends who are both traditional and indie, so I've been able to get a thorough look behind the scenes of both kinds of publishing. They both have their advantages and disadvantages, but I decided that what was most important to me was having full control over my book. That meant that I've been on my own to find a cover artist and editor, and that ads and marketing are also my responsibility. But I loved being able to bring my vision to life on my schedule.

### I FOUND A FANTASTIC EDITOR

I took my time on this as well, doing research and just asking around. I found Hanna through another author friend on Facebook, got to know her better there, and then arranged for a sample edit of a few pages to see if we were a good fit. Before I found her, I had requested test edits from a few other people and, though they were professional and thorough, they didn't really seem to have enough experience with my genre and jibe with my humor. Hanna at Ocelot Trail Editing had some thoughtful feedback that assured me she would help my book be its very best.

### I FORMATTED MY BOOK MYSELF

This is another topic that I needed to figure out for myself, since I didn't have a traditional publisher to do it for me. However, I discovered there are great, reasonably priced software packages that make this a breeze. Using Atticus, I had my entire book formatted in an hour.



# Tales from the Front

One thing I wasn't prepared for:

## I ACCIDENTALLY WROTE A CHILDREN'S BOOK

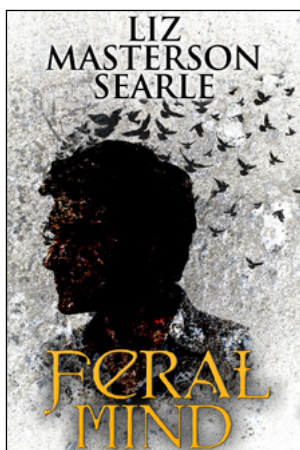
*Knit Fast Die Warm* wasn't intended for a younger audience, but that didn't stop many younger readers, including an entire class of sixth graders, from finding and enjoying it. It's a good reminder that you don't always get to decide the audience of your book. In retrospect, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. Everything else I had written (but not yet published) had been Young Adult or Middle-Grade. And early on I considered making it a Young Adult book, but I needed a protagonist in her early twenties to accomplish everything that I wanted for the plot. Luckily, the book is reasonably clean, with no sex and minimal language, but it does have a romance component. I'm happy to have readers of all ages, but it has given me pause. Should I be more careful to keep any sequels in this series clean, knowing it appeals to readers as young as eleven? Is that something I should feel responsible for, even if I clearly steer my marketing towards adults?

It's kind of a relief that my two upcoming releases—*Feral Mind* and *Mind Scythe*—are solidly Young Adult with protagonists who are fourteen and sixteen years old.

And finally, one thing I'm planning for the future:

## I'M PUTTING OUT MORE BOOKS BEFORE I INVEST SIGNIFICANT AD MONEY

A common adage in the indie author world is: 'Your next book sells your backlist.' Essentially, the more books you have out, the more you will sell, because a reader who loves your new book will go looking for other books you've written. ✨



*Knit Fast Die Warm* is a light-hearted, action-packed portal fantasy about a feisty granny who travels to a magical land and has great adventures, while dragging along her unadventurous grandchildren.

LIZ MASTERSON SEARLE is crazy about cryptids and tries to fit at least one in every story, even if it's just a passing shadow shaped like Bigfoot. She was born in Warsaw, Indiana, not far from the home of the infamous Beast of Busco. She currently lives in the suburbs of Chicago with her husband, kids, and cats, where there have been reports of flying Mothmen and phantom kangaroos. She considered becoming a Bigfoot hunter, except she's more "back to the hotel" than "back to nature." So she writes about them instead, along with other crazy characters like cigar-smoking grannies and people with superpowers (but no spandex).



# Creative Sparks

## ASKING AN AGENT TO THE DANCE by *Karla Clark*

It's the Sadie Hawkins dance at your high school. You found the nerve to ask the boy you've been crushing on. He gets two other invitations after yours, so he makes you and the other two girls wait and wait and wait while he mulls over his options. You feel like you're walking the halls of school wearing a sign that says, "Pick me, pick me!" Oh, the agony!

It's the same kind of agony writers can feel when querying literary agents and editors. You prepare, build up courage, pop the question, and wait... knowing there's a good chance the answer will be no. And no. And no. This is why most writers find the querying process to be their least favorite part of the publishing journey. It's scary. It's hard. It makes you feel so vulnerable. And you have to write the dreaded query letter!

Yes, my friend, the dreaded query letter. But, come closer... I'm going to help you create one, and I'm even going to show you my own winning query letter. But first, let's review what the heck a query letter is for our newest writers. A query letter is a one-page (no exceptions!) introduction of you and your manuscript to a literary agent or editor. It's your book's resume, in a sense, and its primary purpose is to catch an agent's attention and interest.

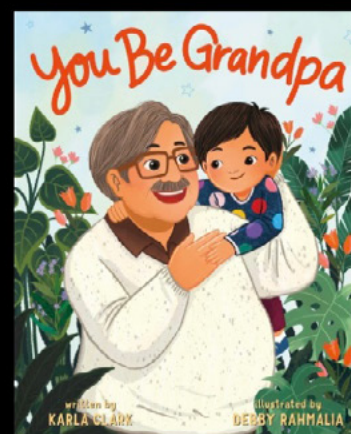
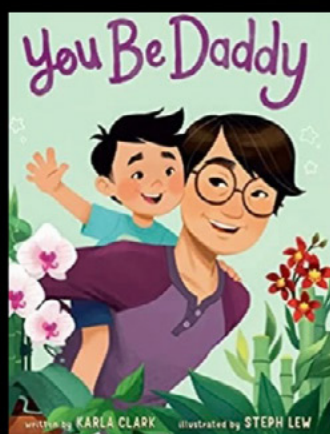
Writers often say that writing the query letter is more difficult than writing the actual book. Part of the problem is that there are no hard and fast rules. Wouldn't it be easier if there was a fill-in-the-blank form to complete?



## The YOU BE Series!



Karla Clark



# Creative Sparks

I think I found a way to make creating query letters a bit easier! I swear by the HOOK-BOOK-COOK method introduced by literary agent Michael Larsen, at the 2010 San Francisco Writers Conference. I'm convinced this is the best formula! Remember, agents are flooded with "Pick Me!" queries in their in-boxes, and if your letter doesn't hit them in the face in the first paragraph...they're going scrolling.

## HOOK

Your hook should grab an agent's attention with something pithy, surprising, or unexpected. A playful and skillful hook compels the agent to read on. It's the most important part of the entire letter because miss here and the agent won't accept your invitation to the dance.

## BOOK

Now that you have the agent's attention, you have to keep it. They could still abandon ship. In this section, you tell about your story, introducing characters and plot. There's not a consensus among agents as to whether or not you should reveal the ending. (Sorry!) This section is where you share "comps"—books that are comparable to yours to show that you understand the market, your target reader, and where your book fits in. I only shared one in my query letter, but two is customary.

Finding comps for picture books is a pain-point for many authors. A comp can be similar to your book in theme, style, or tone, in addition to subject matter. Most agents prefer recent comps—traditionally published books released within the last two years.

I have researched the topics of comps more than I care to admit because it took me a while to "get it"! Hopefully, I can simplify it for you by breaking comps down into two types. I call them the "Sit On" comp and the "Stand Out" comp. I've used both. The "Sit On" comp is a picture book that would sit on the same shelf at a library or bookstore as your book and share the same target reader ("If you like This you'll like That"). The "Stand Out" comp may share your book's topic but is different enough to point out the contrast ("My book is like This, but it has That").

In a minute, we'll look at my query letter for my picture book *You Be Mommy*. I took a big chance and used a "Stand

Out" comp. There were many picture books about moms at bedtime that I could have selected as "Sit On" comps, but for this particular pitch, I thought standing out would have more impact, and it did!

How do you find great comps? It can take days of searches! I can't tell you how many times I thought I had just the right one, only to find it was either self-published or was released ten years ago. Here are some tips:

- Google "picture books about (add your story subject)."
- Search Amazon for books containing some of the words in your title. For example, if your book is titled *Say Goodnight to the Martians*, you might search "goodnight stories," or "picture books about Martians."
- Look at Amazon's "Customers who viewed items in your browsing history also viewed," "Products related to this item," and "Similar items that deliver to you quickly" results, which lists books similar to the one you have searched for.
- Many social media influencers group their book recommendations by theme. Maybe you have a Valentine's themed book—look back to last February's posts to see if they recommended a book similar to yours.
- Ask a person in your writing community. I often see authors asking for comp recommendations in Facebook groups. Authors love to help authors!
- You can ask parents, teachers, and librarians if they can think of a book similar to yours.

## COOK

The last part of your letter is where you sell yourself. You offer your credentials, other published works (if any), what you do and what qualifies you to write this story. Finish with your niceties and get the heck out of there, leaving the agent with goosebumps and saying to himself, "Now this is really something!"

My agent told me that my query letter was "nearly perfect." Now, he's biased because we are pals. The letter is far from perfect. But it spoke to him and that's what's important. It's said in the industry that only 1 in 1,000 queries lands an agent. Yikes! Just write the best story you can and the best query letter you can and hope for a miracle, because they do happen!





# Creative Sparks

One insider tip—don't submit query letters from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day. The entire publishing industry either takes time off during the holidays or they use that time to catch up on piles of work. Give yourself the best chance to showcase your manuscript. Okay, here's my query letter and no matter what my lovely agent says, it is far from nearly perfect. Let's not go for perfect; let's go for "blow them away" and "knock them dead." (Please don't use any cliches in your query letter!)

Did the agent take me on? Yes, he did, and he has gone on to sell five more picture books. Did the boy I liked pick me for his Sadie Hawkins date? Yes, he did. But we never danced one dance! Oh, the agony! 🌟

Dear Mr. Eck,

One of life's great ironies is that children fight sleep while their parents ache for it. I think that's why author Adam Manbash's 2011 adult-only bedtime story *Go the F\*\*k to Sleep* was such a huge success—it touched on a universal nerve with sleep-deprived parents.

My 309-word picture book *You Be Mommy* touches on the same theme but is a story a mom can actually read to her three-to-seven-year-old daughter! It's bedtime and the mommy of a little girl who never gets sleepy is so tired she asks her daughter to reverse roles—to be the mommy and read her a story and kiss her goodnight. After the mom explains why she is so worn-out, the little girl realizes it's more tiring to be a mommy than a little girl and asks her mom if she will be the mommy again. The idea for this story came from a game I played with my own children years ago when I was a young (and exhausted!) mother.

I am the author of six self-published books: three novels, a short story collection, and two children's picture books. All are available on Amazon. I am a proactive author—I do a lot of public speaking, I visit book clubs, teach community college writing classes, and do readings/signings at bookstores. I am an active SCBWI member. I am also an artist and host an annual art show featuring thirty local artists/artisans.

## SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS

- *Between Courses: A Culinary Love Story*, 1st Books Library, 2003
- *Knotted Pearls and Other Stories*, AuthorHouse, 2004
- *Annie's Heaven*, AuthorHouse, 2008
- *Everybody and Their Brother*, AuthorHouse, 2017
- *Now I Lay Me Down to Dream*, CreateSpace, 2017
- *Once Upon a Camping Dream*, CreateSpace, 2018

Thank you for your consideration and commitment to children's literature!

This is a simultaneous submission.

Best regards,  
Karla J. Clark

KARLA CLARK writes fiction for adults and children, but picture books are her passion. She has published four books in the *You Be* series (Macmillan), with a fifth one—*You Be Teacher*—coming out in 2025. Believe it or not, she loves to write query letters. Several of the query letters she drafted for aspiring authors landed them agents. When she is not writing, you can find her in her studio creating paper collages and digital art designs. She lives in Rockford, Illinois, with her husband and son. Visit her website: [karlaclarkauthor.com](http://karlaclarkauthor.com) or Instagram [@karlaclark123](https://www.instagram.com/karlaclark123).

# More Chocolate:

## ...OUT OF PRINT, NOT OUT OF OPTIONS!

by Mary Elise Monsell

When a rockhopper penguin tells you he has more cases to solve, you listen. Out of print doesn't mean out of options.

“The sky was dark. The air was cold. It had been days since Mr. Pin left his home at the South Pole to be a detective in Chicago.”

*The Mysterious Cases of Mr. Pin*, by Mary Elise Monsell

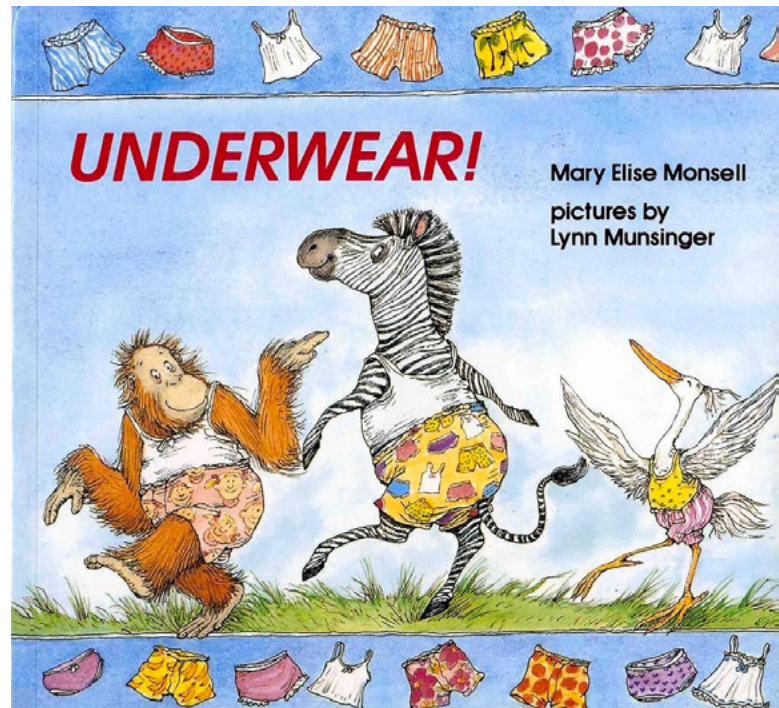
That's how it all started so many years ago. I imagined chocolate-loving *Mr. Pin* (short for penguin) when my sons were small. Now they have children of their own.

*Mr. Pin* came into the book world through a wonderful editor at Atheneum and enjoyed much success. Initially a four-book series, the well-reviewed mysteries were best sellers in school book clubs and were translated into Finnish (honestly, no pun intended). A Chicago theater company brought *Mr. Pin's* adventures to musical life in the Windy City. *Mr. Pin's* success helped launch three additional Atheneum books. I was fortunate to be invited to many schools, and I created a mystery-writing presentation as an educational experience.

As happens, there were changes in the publishing industry. All of my books eventually went out of print, with one exception. *Underwear* (Albert Whitman), my first published book, happily remains in print. Illustrated by Lynn Munsinger, *Underwear* was released in German, French and Korean. It was sold in several formats, including electronic, hardcover, paper, board, and book club editions. It seems funny to say *Underwear* is a classic, but it has been around for decades.

### BACK IN PRINT

But back to *Mr. Pin*. I just kept thinking about ads I had seen that *Mr. Pin* was a bestseller in school book clubs. The number of copies sold under a book club imprint is not usually shared with the author. The author gets an advance. After that, there is such little amount that goes to the author per copy, it's just not significant. It can take forever to earn back a book club advance. However, with a bit of my own



sleuthing, I discovered that sales for this imprint were well over 100,000 copies. Wait a minute. There was still a healthy market for the series! To me, it wasn't the money, it was the popularity that got my attention. A lot of children enjoyed reading *Mr. Pin*. Time to get my rights back!

Ultimately, a literary attorney secured rights to my seven Atheneum books. *Mr. Pin's* illustrator, Eileen Christelow, gave permission to use her interior art for Authors Guild *Back in Print* editions. I can't thank Authors Guild enough for their generous advice and support. Today, *Mr. Pin* books still enjoy an audience and are available in electronic and print formats.

Meanwhile, I had another career in teaching, first in preschool, then in junior college and finally in public school, working with gifted students in reading and mathematics. It was a happy, but lengthy interlude.





# More Chocolate: Out of Print, Not Out of Options!

## SELF -PUBLISHING

But wait.... There's more to this saga.

Much later, recent retirement brought a familiar knock on my door. That penguin had his own ideas. It seemed that not all of *Mr. Pin's* stories had been told. And there was an extraordinary artist in my family, Christina Cornier. Christina's art, along with the technical assistance of several dear friends, helped the penguin detective make a new appearance. There were just more mysteries to solve.

Inspired by locked rooms, a magic shop and vintage tale, *The Moving Toyshop* by Edmund Crispin, *Mr. Pin* was back in the game.

I self-published *Mr. Pin and the Locked Diner Mystery* through Amazon's publishing arm, [Kindle Direct Publishing](#). Following a suggestion by Authors Guild, I published *Mr. Pin and the Disappearing Diner* through [BookBaby.com](#).

You can pay for as much or as little help as needed from both companies. I used [Legal Zoom](#) for copyrights and [bowker.com](#) for ISBNs. Friends in various professions helped with technical elements, graphic design, art photography and editing. Christina Cornier created art for both books.

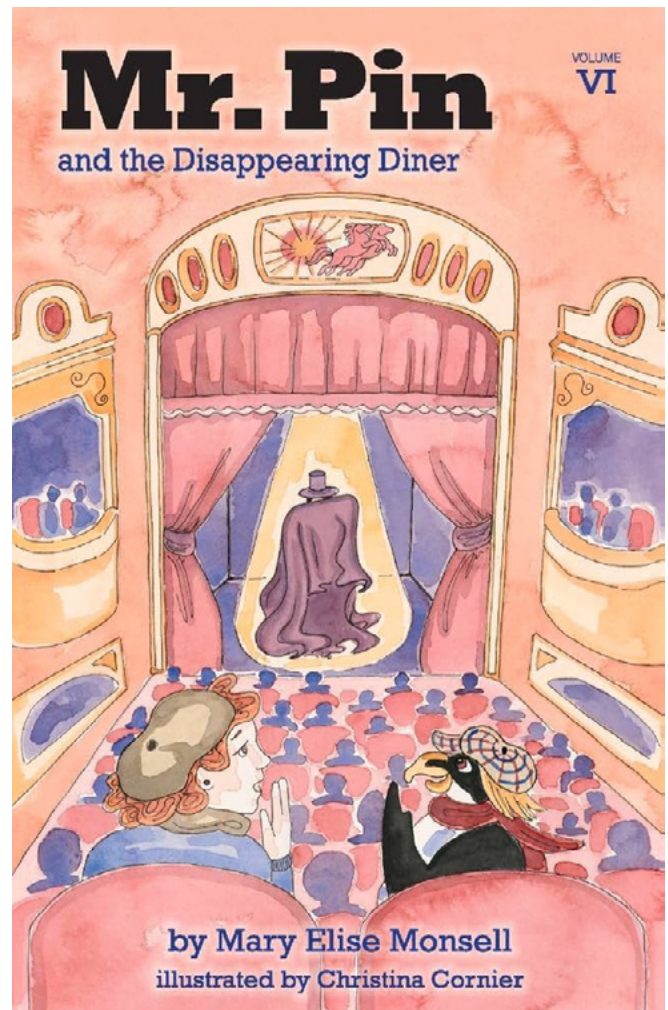
All of these moving parts are in addition to my own numerous rewrites and research, as well as marketing. We'll save that for another day, but I do suggest an entertainingly helpful self-publishing reference: *Dog Eared*, by W. Nikola-Lisa.

*Mr. Pin* has a persistent voice. Persistence in this process is key, along with the support of friends and family.

**"No reason why big cities can't have big hearts. Just call me Sally or Smiling Sally. This is my place, so I do what I want. Food's good and you meet interesting people. Where did you say you're from?"**

*The Mysterious Cases of Mr. Pin*, by Mary Elise Monsell

It's interesting how themes in our lives find niches in our writing. I am grateful for the ongoing journey. Listen to your characters. They will tell you what you need to know.



*From Mr. Pin and the Disappearing Diner by Mary Elise Monsell, illustration by Christina Cornier*

**"I travel a lot, but I'm from the South Pole," said Mr. Pin, resting his beak on the counter."**

*The Mysterious Case of Mr. Pin*, by Mary Elise Monsell 🌟

MARY ELISE MONSELL is the author of ten books for children. More are in the works. In addition to the *Mr. Pin* series, her published books include *Underwear*, *Crackle Creek*, *Toohy and Wood*, and *Armadillo*. *Mr. Pin* was an International Reading Association Children's Book Council Children's Choice. "Lively plotting, staccato, deadpan delivery in whimsical parody of Dashiell Hammett...an engaging hero." —Kirkus Reviews [maryelisemonsell.com](#)

# Why I Write...



## ...ON SUBSTACK. SHOULD YOU JOIN ME?

by Anny Rusk

### WHY I DO IT

Substack is the love child of 'X', Patreon, and a blog. Meaning that it celebrates long-form writing on a platform that allows you to charge for your work, and helps you build your community of readers through social media elements already embedded within the program. (Founded in 2017, Substack's initial mission was to provide writers with a platform to publish their work and earn money directly from their readers.)

Many of us already send out newsletters, or used to blog for free, so why not get a shot at getting paid for what you already do?

Plus, Stack's (I like to call it 'Stack' instead of Substack for no good reason) community is made up of writers and readers who appreciate commentary that takes a deeper or more emotional dive into topics.

Many writers I read say they got onto Stack to share opinions, stories, and feelings that they wouldn't feel safe divulging on other platforms like Instagram or Facebook.

This makes Stack a treasure trove of resources and uncommon facts. And helps you get to know your favorite writers, journalists, artists, etcetera, on a level you wouldn't otherwise.

In addition, you can enhance your posts by using images, videos, and audio tracks.

Finally, there aren't many kidlit writers on Stack yet. ([See Debbie Ridpath Ohi's post](#) listing the middle grade authors on Stack as of 2/2024.) Now is the time if you want to get in on the ground floor, so to speak. [Here is my Substack home page.](#)

I hope you'll check it out! Don't forget to go to the 'about' page to see what a subscription, free or paid, gets you.


### WHY YOU MAY NOT WANT TO DO IT

Like any other platform, gaining subscribers, let alone paid subscribers, isn't easy unless you already have a big following IRL (in real life) or on another platform. (Though a big following on a more visual platform like Instagram doesn't guarantee that all your followers will join you on Stack.)

My Stack currently has about 102 subscribers. (2 paid.) I haven't done a big push to get friends and family to subscribe yet, I am planning to do that soon, but even when I do, I may only gain a few subscribers.

Patience and perseverance prevail in Stack as they do in every other facet of our business. And though I'd be thrilled to support myself through my writing on Stack, it may never happen.

Thus, Stack only makes sense if you love writing and appreciate connecting to your readers, even if it's a small number.

Another thing to consider: many feel that Stack is better for nonfiction writers than fiction writers. I don't know if I agree with that, but I will say that it's tough to figure out your niche if you're writing fiction. And you do want to stake out your territory. Being too broad in what you offer, trying to be all things to all people, doesn't work on Stack. 





# Why I Write on Substack...

## substack

Someone who's been extremely successful on Stack is *New York Times* columnist Melinda Wenner Moyer, who I think makes six figures off her Stack. As a nonfiction writer who's already known for writing about parenting and the science behind it, it's easy for Melinda to know who her readers are and write for them. (It also helps that she's in the NYT all the time, and as such, has access to lots of top shelf experts in parenting and science.)

She even pinned her "Why I Write This Newsletter" article to the top of her main page in case you don't want to explore her 'About' page. It says, "Only 16 percent of parents said that what they saw on social media helped them worry less about their parenting." In her post she says she uses science to help parents feel better about their parenting choices.

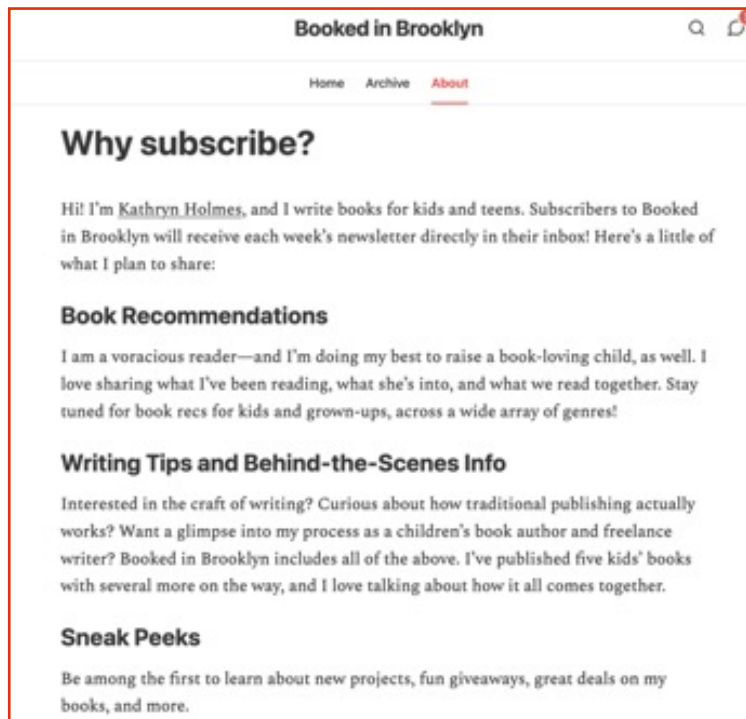
As a fiction writer, imagining your ideal reader/gatekeeper can be tougher. And then figuring out what speaks to them AND ties them to you and your books is even harder. It takes some trial and error to hit on this sweet spot.

For example, I realized that my books always include the theme of 'change' and how to deal with it. Thus my Stack provides a new angle on change every month that includes book recs and activities for adults and the kids in their lives. Most of the book recs are picture books or middle grade novels because that's what Christina, my co-writer, and I read and write. Our aim is to give the gatekeepers, or connectors, information they want and can use for themselves and/or kids.

But doing it this way is hard. And probably lends itself to a slower build in subscription numbers.

Maybe that's why most kidlit writers on Stack don't do it. Instead they write about their process and the industry. It can ramp your Stack up quicker, but it attracts mostly other writers, not necessarily the connectors like parents and teachers.

For example Kathryn Holmes' about page:



The screenshot shows the 'About' page for the Substack 'Booked in Brooklyn'. The page has a white background with a red border. At the top, the title 'Booked in Brooklyn' is centered, with a search icon and a share icon to the right. Below the title, there are three navigation links: 'Home', 'Archive', and 'About', with 'About' being the active link. The main content is organized into sections with bold headings: 'Why subscribe?', 'Book Recommendations', 'Writing Tips and Behind-the-Scenes Info', and 'Sneak Peeks'. Each section contains a short paragraph of text. The 'Why subscribe?' section starts with 'Hi! I'm Kathryn Holmes, and I write books for kids and teens. Subscribers to Booked in Brooklyn will receive each week's newsletter directly in their inbox! Here's a little of what I plan to share:'. The 'Book Recommendations' section starts with 'I am a voracious reader—and I'm doing my best to raise a book-loving child, as well. I love sharing what I've been reading, what she's into, and what we read together. Stay tuned for book recs for kids and grown-ups, across a wide array of genres!'. The 'Writing Tips and Behind-the-Scenes Info' section starts with 'Interested in the craft of writing? Curious about how traditional publishing actually works? Want a glimpse into my process as a children's book author and freelance writer? Booked in Brooklyn includes all of the above. I've published five kids' books with several more on the way, and I love talking about how it all comes together.'. The 'Sneak Peeks' section starts with 'Be among the first to learn about new projects, fun giveaways, great deals on my books, and more.'.

Look at the headings: Book Recommendations, Writing Tips, Behind the Scenes etc. (The book recs are useful to gatekeepers.)

Dan Blank, a "human-centered" book marketing dude, who I recommend, talks about how most writers make the mistake of writing for other writers instead of readers. But he admits it's more difficult to write for readers if you're writing fiction. And tougher for us kidlit humans because we can't write directly to our readers at all. He has lots of tips and tricks in his Substack recommended newsletter. [Take a peek.](#)

By contrast, Refe Tuma, who came to fame by inventing Dinovember, where dinosaurs come to life at night, a la *Toy Story*, writes on themes that echo in his books. Themes like misadventures, literary and cinematic monsters, and the wonders and terrors of childhood. (His latest MG series is about monsters in various forms.)



# Why I Write on Substack...

## Welcome to Refe Tuma's Head in a Birdcage

I'm glad you're here.

This is the place for monsters, marvels, and misadventures with me, Refe Tuma, author of *Frances and the Monster* and the *What the Dinosaurs Did* picture book series.

Come for the news, behind the scenes scoops, and exclusive giveaways, and stay for the in-depth discussions of storytelling, literary and cinematic monsters, the wonders and terrors childhood, and a whole bunch more.

Ready?

Unfortunately, unless he (or any author) makes it public, we can't know how many followers Refe has, but seeing as he went viral for years with Dinovember, I bet it's a decent number. The point is, he writes for his readers and their parents.

Ultimately, Stack gives you the flexibility of creating and writing what you want when you want.

I hope this article provides some clarity on the pros and cons of Stack for those of us in the kidlit arena. If you have more questions about Stack, ask me: [anny@annyrusk.com](mailto:anny@annyrusk.com) I can't promise I'll have the answers, but I'll try.

And as they say on Stack, if you want to support Christina and me each month for about the same price as one coffee, please go to [TALES IN THE KEY OF CHANGE](#) and subscribe.

### HERE ARE A FEW MORE STACK FACTS

- You decide if you want to have a paid tier for subscribers. You don't have to if you're uncomfortable doing it. Christina and I ask for paid subscriptions right now to help support our writing, but we don't put anything we do behind a paywall. Even Stack recommends you give most of your writing away for free at least until you have a big presence on the platform.

There are several tiers for subscribers. (Monthly, usually starting at \$5 a month, or Annually, starting at \$50 a year, or Founding, which allows you to pay whatever you want, but often starts at \$100 a year.) Some folks put their comment threads and podcasts behind paywalls but leave their weekly posts free. Some only allow free access to one post a month. There's no formula. If you want to see how to set up paid subscriptions, go [here](#).

- Substack is not a nonprofit with no ads, so how do they make money? They charge you 10 percent of any revenue you get from your newsletter, plus Stripe charges you another 3 percent for using their payment software, which is already built into Stack. 13 percent total. So your paid subscriber list has to be sizeable to make real money off your writing. But that's true as a creative regardless.
- You can post as often or as little as you like. You can take time off.
- You own your stuff. Substack doesn't have the copyright on your posts.
- But back up your posts onto your hard drive, Dropbox, or whatever you use, just in case, God forbid, Stack suddenly disappears.

If you're thinking you want to get started now, [go here](#) for a step-by-step "how to start on Substack" tutorial from the Substack help center. 🌟

ANNY RUSK has spent most of her life learning to be comfortable in the discomfort of change. Along the way, she's managed a GYN office, had three songs on the *Billboard* charts, and co-founded two record labels (with a few Grammy nominations for her artists). Recently she's spent time as an assistant youth librarian, is currently a co-rep for the Society of Children's Writers and Illustrators of IL, is affiliated with the Center for Teaching Through Children's Books, and writes books for children.



# The Joys of...

## ...ONLINE WRITING GROUPS by Diane O'Neill

Does writing ever feel isolating? Do you find it hard to schedule creative time? You love to write, but find yourself doing bills or dishes? Would you love some moral support, a cheering section when you sit down to write? Applause when you succeed? Commiseration when you don't? Would you like to write with people from all over the world?

Why not try online writing groups?

The sessions go by different names: virtual write-ins, co-writes, online events, or writers' hours. But the mission, should you choose to accept it, is the same: to write alone but together. The vast majority are absolutely free. To me, these sessions are playdates with faraway friends. Group sizes range from a handful of people to over 200 writers. Most sessions are on Zoom, and they tend to follow a similar pattern.

At the beginning, we state, aloud or in the chat, where we are in the world (we're writers, we're nosy). Sometimes greetings include weather reports: "Good morning from cloudy Chicago!" Of course, in the very same session, it's morning for some, evening for others. We're global!

Then we state our intentions: What do we plan to work on? All kinds of writers, all levels of experiences, attend: from someone saying, "I've never written before, but last week I had an idea," to someone with numerous published books. People work on picture books, chapter books, novels, poems, screenplays, memoirs, doctoral dissertations, comic strips, journal entries, essays, fan fiction, and more. Then we turn our mics off and write, cameras on or off. Session times range from thirty minutes to multiple hours, depending on the group.

At the end of the session, we report our progress. No judgment! Hosts remind us, "You showed up!" There's an understanding that some days overflow with inspiration, while others feature epic battles with writers' block. That's OK: "You showed up!"

If you're in the flow, you're encouraged to keep writing and skip checkout. If you need to leave early, that's cool, too.



That's the routine. That's it. That's all. Except for the magic.

Slowly but surely, novels are written. Dissertations completed. Poems submitted. Writers, celebrating publication, say, "I couldn't have done this without this group!"

You'll see many of the same faces, session after session. People offer encouragement with thumbs up, applause, or "You've got this!" The groups become communities. Friendships form. If a regular stops coming, members ask in the chat: "Do you know if so-and-so is OK?" and there's relief to hear the person has been spotted elsewhere in the universe.

Let's not forget pets! Sightings of fur babies are always a source of joy. In one group, people proclaim that my cat Ronny should be the mascot, as his orange tail frequently makes an appearance.

Many online groups sprang into existence during the pandemic. But in-person writing groups have been around a while. I've enjoyed some, especially ones linked to National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). I've written in coffee shops, too, especially my neighborhood Dunkin' Donuts—alone, but with people around for inspiration. But that kind of in-person writing crashed to a halt in March 2020.



# The Joys of Online Writing Groups

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Spring 2020, the height of the pandemic, was rough for all of us. I missed seeing my son and his wife, and my friends, and even “third spaces,” like the pizza slice place where the cashier knew my order. And I was desperately unhappy at my job.

I don’t remember how I heard about the Office of Modern Composition (OMC); maybe I did an online search. But I signed up for a virtual co-write in late April 2020. I was nervous; I’m shy. I became apprehensive when I saw it was just me and the host, Raghav. I flashed back to an in-person write-in experience, where the organizer, seeing I was the only attendee, said, “Since it’s just us, I’m going home.” Gulp. Would Raghav shut down the room, since it was only me?

Not Raghav! He welcomed me, excited to hear I was working on a ghazal. We wrote silently together, and we applauded each other’s progress at the end.

More and more people joined the OMC group, week after week. Other OMC hosts, Jill and Sophie, were equally welcoming. And although the OMC is based in the “vibrant, vigorous metropolis of Chicago,” as Raghav likes to say, writers join from around the country, and sometimes the world. It’s been a comfortable, safe space to write since that very first session. When I confessed to the group that I missed writing in Dunkin’ Donuts, but that these sessions had become a beautiful substitute, Raghav proclaimed, “We’re happy to be your Dunkin’ Donuts!” There’s a serious yet creative and kind vibe to OMC sessions. Many groups tout the accountability factor: Raghav says that he has found it to be more than that.

Like many writers who discovered online groups during the pandemic, I am forever grateful to the OMC. Gradually, I discovered more virtual writing groups: Shut Up and Write (SUAW) (much friendlier than the name suggests!). The Chicago Writers Circle. The London Writers Salon (LWS). The Online Creative Collective.

Virtual writing sessions reminded me that I had a writing life separate from my no-longer-happy work life. A Sunday night SUAW group helped me endure the Sunday Scaries. When I decided to leave my job, online sessions helped me build the life of a full-time writer. Would I set my alarm

and get up before 7 a.m. to write if not for my desire to join virtual buddies in a “Happy Writing” toast?

Even in 2024, online groups have advantages. If it’s too cold, hot, or precipitous, we don’t need to drag our laptops anywhere. Some people attend morning write-ins in bathrobes. Also, there’s less temptation to socialize instead of write! Almost any time of day or night, a virtual write-in is happening somewhere. Each group has its own flavor.

One SUAW group exudes welcome. Whenever someone mentions being new, people rush to the chat: “Welcome!” “Welcome to the group!” “This is the best group!” If a newbie comes back, or if someone attends who hasn’t been around a while, “Welcome back!” messages abound. In this group, a young woman attended who was dealing with cancer; she always wore beautiful pastel scarves, and she was a gifted crafter as well as writer. Sometimes she’d use session time to make paper cranes as an alternative to boring prescribed OT exercises. I wasn’t there the day her death was announced, but the grief was palpable. Years later, people mention her and lessons they’d learned from her during her time with us. The sessions may be virtual, but the connections are real.

LWS sessions have lovely creative rituals. After people put locations and intentions in the chat, someone reads the daily “words of wisdom” to inspire us. I’ve volunteered and read quotes by Toni Morrison, Emerson, and Vincent van Gogh. Then the host invites us all to raise a glass, mug, or cup, real or invisible, to toast each other: “Happy writing!”

LWS writing hours are offered four times a day, at 8 a.m. in four global locations: London, the U.S. East Coast, the U.S. West Coast, and New Zealand. These sessions are free, and LWS promises they always will be. But you can join for other benefits. By paying about \$20 a month, I have access to a 24-hour virtual cabin where I can always drop in and write with other members of the “cabin crew.” The membership fee is an expense—but I remember how much I spent at coffee shops!

Online groups are wonderfully global. Writers zoom in from everywhere: Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, England, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Luxemburg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Norway, the Philippines,





# The Joys of Online Writing Groups

Scotland, Singapore, Spain, Trinidad, Uruguay, Wales... while I join from my Chicago apartment desk.

While one member complains about snow shoveling, a writer in another hemisphere sighs about the heatwave. When Queen Elizabeth III died, I heard somber church bells during the LWS check ins, and writers talked of their parents' reaction to the death. In one gathering, people discussed an Australian bill regarding representation of Indigenous people. An LWS friend posted on social media about a referendum in Ireland, while wishing everyone Happy Mother's Day—theirs occurs two months before ours in the U.S.

Because of LWS, I find myself using the word lovely, and I know what chuffed means. I'm quite chuffed to be writing to you at this very moment, while sitting in a lovely virtual cabin. I'm chuffed that when I mentioned my writing deadline, a lovely cabin crewmate says, "Diane, you've got this!"

Curious? Why not give online writing groups a try? See you in the virtual world! 🌟

DIANE O'NEILL's debut picture book, *Saturday at the Food Pantry*, illustrated by Brizida Magro, was *Parents Magazine's* October 2021 book club selection, and her picture book *PLEASE BE OK: A Story About Addiction*, illustrated by Anastasiya Kanavaliuk, will be out in October 2024. Her works have appeared in *Ladybug* magazine, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *South Side Weekly*, and *It All Changed in an Instant: More Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous & Obscure*. She completed the 24-hour 2023 Poetry Marathon, and one marathon poem has been accepted for their anthology.

## LIST OF GROUPS

### OFFICE OF MODERN COMPOSITION

<https://www.meetup.com/Office-of-Modern-Composition/>

### SHUT UP AND WRITE

<https://shutupwrite.com/events/online>

### LONDON WRITERS' SALON

<https://community.londonwriterssalon.com/c/writers-hour-links/how-does-writers-hour-work>

### ONLINE CREATIVE COLLECTIVE

<https://www.meetup.com/online-creative-collective/>

### CHICAGO WRITERS' CIRCLE

<https://www.meetup.com/the-chicago-writer-s-circle/events/>

# Voices of Change

## BEYOND THE STARS: EXPLORING AFROFUTURISM IN YOUNG ADULT SCIENCE FICTION

by VB Miller



### COSMIC CHOREOGRAPHY—WALKING THE MOON'S TIGHTROPE

“Voices of Change” holds a profound significance for me, not just as a title for a column, but as a reflection of my personal journey and aspirations. As an African American woman, there was a period when I sensed my voice was overlooked, belittled, or scorned. The expectations of my family, the community I grew up in, and society as a whole did not lend itself easily to allowing certain freedoms of expression to me, or others that looked like me when I viewed the homogenized images reflected on television, billboards, or publications I saw in the supermarkets while growing up during the post Civil Rights Movement era in America.

Growing up in the racially tense environment of the American Midwest, my lower middle-class family’s outlook was heavily influenced by a striking lack of cultural diversity. It wasn’t until I stepped into the corporate world that I was truly exposed to diversity, a discussion for another occasion. However, amidst this dull uniformity, I found comfort and motivation in the realms of art and science fiction, where imagination reigns supreme and diversity is embraced.

From a young age, I immersed myself in creative pursuits, finding kinship with characters like Nichelle Nichols’ groundbreaking portrayal in *Star Trek*. However, my passion for artistic expression ran as deeply as my love for science fiction, both resonating with the freedom of creativity and adventure that appealed to me as an introverted child. Despite having younger step-siblings, the significant age gap meant I effectively grew up as an only child for many years. During my leisure time, between schoolwork and chores, I immersed myself in reading, painting, dancing, and crafting abstract collages. Some of these creations depicted the solar system and the vast expanse of the galaxy, reflecting my youthful imagination and insight.

Science fiction became my sanctuary, a universe where I could explore strange new worlds and defy the limitations imposed by my surroundings. Yet, even within the boundless expanse of these fictional realms, I yearned for greater representation, for stories that reflected the rich tapestry of humanity.

### THE COSMOS WELCOMES ALL WITH OPEN ARMS

My transition from avid viewer to aspiring author was fueled by this desire for change. I devoured works by Orson Wells and Arthur C. Clarke, envisioning a future where diversity was not just a footnote, but a centralized point of storytelling. With each page turned, I felt a stirring within me, a conviction that I could be a catalyst for transformation within the genre I loved.

In crafting my own narratives, I seek to capture the essence of science fiction—its sense of adventure, exploration, and wonder—while infusing it with the vibrancy of diversity and inclusion. My goal is not just to write books, but to create a space where young readers from all walks of life can see themselves reflected in stories of courage, resilience, and possibility.

Representation, I realize, is not just a matter of visibility, but of empowerment. By amplifying voices that have long been marginalized, I hope to inspire a new generation of storytellers to embrace their own unique perspectives and experiences. Through literature, I believe, we can plant the seeds of innovation, creativity, and empathy, nurturing a future where every voice is not just heard, but celebrated.



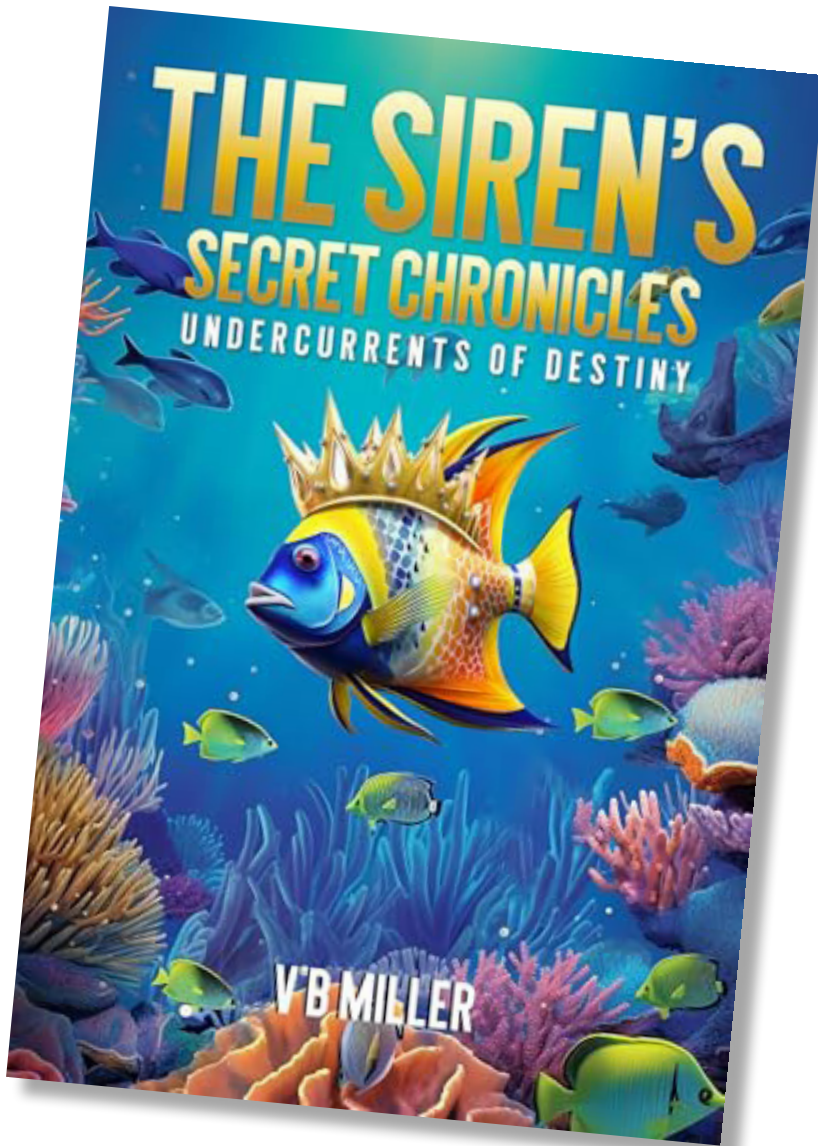


# Voices of Change

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As I embark on this journey, I find myself drawn to the concept of “Voices of Change”—not just as a title, but as a call to action. For me, writing is not just a means of self-expression, but a vehicle for social change. In sharing my story, I hope to inspire others to embrace their own truth, to challenge the status quo, and to forge a path toward a more inclusive and equitable future.

In the vast expanse of the cosmos, there is room for us all—every voice, every perspective, every story. And it is through the power of our collective voices, raised in harmony and solidarity, that we can truly effect change. As I embark on this chapter of my journey, I am filled with hope and determination, knowing that together, we can create a future where every voice is not just heard, but valued. ☀



Meet VB MILLER, a contemporary writer fueled by a fervent dedication to crafting captivating science fiction for young adults. Her natural gift for storytelling sparks the imagination of readers young and old, fostering inspiration for future generations. Drawing from her travels to more than 10 countries, her narratives weave together a vibrant mosaic of cultural influences. VB Miller is also an accomplished lapidary and digital artist, who finds fulfillment in volunteering at food pantries and sharing the magic of storytelling. Embark on an adventure of limitless imagination with VB Miller.

Website: <http://www.vbmiller.com>

Instagram: @vbmiller

Facebook: @vbmiller

# Shop Around the Corner

## THREE AVENUES BOOKSHOP by Sheila Path-McMahon

This is my first Shop Around the Corner column, and it was daunting to try to pick out an independent bookstore to focus on, that is, until I happened to drive by Three Avenues Bookshop. I loved the vibe as soon as I entered the shop—the layout is inviting and the exposed brick walls are warm. The whole place is cozy and well-organized. My first impression was so good that I just had to find out more. The story of how owners Tim Wurman and Jordan Felkey came to open the store in the first place can be found on their [website](#). I contacted them and Tim agreed to meet with me for the following interview, and Jordan shared some answers through email.

Before diving into the interview, Three Avenues Bookshop owners Tim and Jordan urge SCBWI to call for an immediate ceasefire in Palestine.



**I saw on your website that you gave a shout out to Call and Response, which I think is so awesome. My question is, is there a community of bookstore owners?**

Absolutely—there's a community of independent bookstore owners I'll say, and anyone who works at bookstores in general feels like part of the community. The biggest event that we do is Independent Bookstore Day, which is on the last Saturday of April every year. There's a Chicago Independent Bookstore crawl, and so people do effectively like a bar crawl but for independent bookstores. If you make it to 10, you get 10% off for the rest of the year at all independent bookstores, and if you make it to 15, you get 15% off. The event is very unifying.

**I love it! I saw that you have Saturday storytimes, can you talk about that?**

Yes, we do. Jordan runs it, she's a licensed speech therapist. She was actually a pediatric speech therapist before becoming a bookstore owner, so she's got the engagement and literacy angle of it down. Saturday Story Time is usually very bumpin' - it's very crowded, and a lot of the kids are generally toddlers to pre-K age. They come in and do a story and they do bubbles and activities.





# Shop Around the Corner

## So does Jordan read, or are there guests?

Jordan reads, and occasionally authors will come in and do a story time, but overall it's Jordan's event. She loves to read books from the displays in our stores. During the month of Ramadan, she read a Ramadan book every story time. During Mental Health Awareness Month, she read books focusing on emotions. And every once in a while, she lets the kids choose the books—and that's always a hit!

## Can you tell me about the author events?

Yes - we haven't done too many adult author events, we're still growing in that area, but we do work with a good amount of kid's authors, so we've had a number of middle grade author events and events with hardcover picture books, too.

## So if there was a local author interested in doing an event, how would they contact you?

They reach out over email and we take it from there.

## Ok, I'm going to ask this because I know our readers want to know – do you stock books by self published authors?

Not typically, no. Pretty rarely.

## What do you feel your bookstore brings to the community?

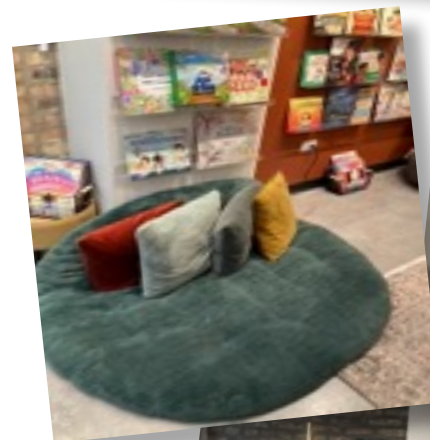
We feel like we bring a space for the community to gather, and a new voice in literacy promotion that just wasn't here before. We live in this neighborhood - the reason we chose this spot was because the only bookstore around was the Amazon bookstore, and they basically offered what the algorithm said was the top 50 or 100 books. I basically felt like an Amazon returns location rather than a bookstore, so it really felt like doing this was something for us as well as the community.

## So you're not really trying to follow an algorithm in how you pick your books, so how do you do that?

We are focused on highlighting marginalized voices—Black and brown voices, Palestinian voices, disabled voices, and more. We do a lot of amplification of marginalized groups, like our square table right now is all AAPI, so you will find works by Asian Americans and Pacific Islander authors - both stories and non-fiction. We are also disability justice advocates, so we have a whole table that is year-round dedicated to disabled voices, including mental health and disability and all its forms.

## I noticed you have a nice big children's section with a lot of out-facing books and some cozy seating - are there some kids who come in and absolutely love to sit in those seats?

Yeah—we have only been open for a year and a half, but it's crazy to see the kids growing up in front of us.



# Shop Around the Corner

## And what are you looking forward to with the store for the future?

We are looking forward to more growth and community, welcoming more community members into the family—that's one of the most special things to me, it's why we opened the store in the first place, building our own community. I would love to see more connections with authors and how that grows, and honestly seeing the kids grow up will be wonderful. 🌟



SHEILA PATH-MCMAHON is an aspiring author-illustrator, currently working on a picture book called *Not an Alphabet Book*. This is her second issue as the editor of *Prairie Wind's* online illustrator magazine of the Illinois chapter of SCBWI. She teaches English at an alternative high school and lives in Chicago with her husband Jay, dog Nola, and her cat Arun.



# Illustrator's Tips

## HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE KEY COLOR'S COMPETITION?

by Darcy Day Zoells

This is a shout out to picture book creators—especially author-illustrators—looking for publication. If you have a dummy or a dummy idea, the Key Colors Competition might be a good opportunity to submit your work.

### THE BASICS

- Key Colors Competition is for creators in the USA and Canada (an international Key Colours Competitions also exists for the rest of the world).
- Clavis Publishing, based in Belgium, is the organizer.
- It's held every other year. The next deadline is June 30, 2024.
- The winning book is published by Clavis.
- In addition, there is an \$8,000.00 prize for the Gold Medal winner!

There is so much that is out of our control in this industry, and sometimes just the act of getting work out there and seen feels like progress. In 2022, when I received an email

from Illinois' own fairy godmother, Esther Hershenhorn, suggesting I take a look at the Key Colors Competition, I was feeling restless. I didn't have any projects in production or on the horizon. I took two dummies that I loved, but were not on submission anywhere, formatted them, and sent them into the competition.

Both dummies made it to the final ten, and a couple weeks later, *The New Bicycle* took the Gold Medal. Of course, I was thrilled, but I don't think I fully realized the extent to which this would change my trajectory. It has been an amazing journey so far.

First and foremost, *The New Bicycle* was published by Clavis Books. This is my debut as an author, which is very exciting. *The New Bicycle* came out a little over a year after winning the competition and my second entry, *Are You Mad?*, is also going to be published by Clavis in the coming year. Other entries from the top ten selection that year were published



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Clavis

# Illustrator's Tips

as well. Therefore, even if you don't win the top prize your book may get published (there is only prize money for the Gold Medal winner).

What has been extraordinary is the support that Clavis has given my book every step of the way. I realize that some of the opportunities are due to the Gold Medal award, like an interview in *Publisher's Weekly*. However, there were other unexpected decisions that have made a lot of difference. For example, Clavis decided to publish the book in Spanish for the North American market. This makes the book accessible to a much wider audience and of special interest to many libraries. Since this was not a part of the original award/contract, it was an unexpected benefit. However, *La Bicicleta Nueva* is now on Bank Street's Best Picture Books in the Spanish Language 2024 list! Shortly after this announcement, the Spanish language edition went into a second printing.

I know I have been very lucky in so many ways, but sometimes, luck is a combination of making an effort and receiving a response. For example, I live walking distance to McCormick Place where the American Library Association Mid-Year Conference took place last summer. My book wasn't going to be out until November, but I contacted Clavis to ask if they would be there. I thought it would be nice to meet the people I'd been working with. Clavis' response was enthusiastic. They had a booth and offered to print advance copies of my book and schedule a signing! Me? A signing at ALA? Yes, please! Then, when I arrived, they had actually bought a child's bicycle to raffle off as a promotion for my book! I spent two days in the booth talking with librarians and getting to know the people at Clavis. It was a great experience.

At this point, I should mention that the award money is generous and is not an advance against royalties. In my case, I have been able to use part of the money for promotional purposes. For example, I printed up bookmarks, stickers, and a maze to give away at ALA. I also printed postcards and mailed about 200 to libraries before the conference. I think this was money well spent. When the signing happened, we had a line and ran out of the advance copies. I believe that this was due to the postcard mailing, since there are many signings at ALA and I'm an unknown.

Clavis Books, who runs the competition, is a publishing company based in Belgium. By the way, Clavis means key in Latin, hence the Key Colors name. The company started about forty years ago. They only publish children's books and are the largest publisher of children's books in Dutch. However, because the Dutch-speaking audience is small, they have always looked to other markets for growth and been interested in translations and the sale of rights.

If you are wondering whether you are a good fit for Clavis, I would recommend looking at their catalog. They publish fiction and non-fiction. Collaborations (for example between an author and an illustrator) are also accepted for the competition. You do not need to be agented. In fact, it is worth mentioning that you can submit to Clavis at any time through their website submissions link, however, the competition has some advantages (as I've already mentioned).

Guidelines are on the Key Colors Site. You will be submitting a digital dummy of your book. Three or more pages should be what you consider final and the rest can be sketches. The book should be aimed at children ages 2-7 and be previously unpublished. The story should be told in 24 pages (this is the standard 32 page book dummy format if you remove the covers, endpages, and title/dedication pages).

I recently recorded a presentation about the Key Colors and can provide the link to anyone who is interested. You are also welcome to email me with questions and I will do my best to answer them.

<https://www.clavis-publishing.com/keycolors2024>

My email: [notmrdarcy@gmail.com](mailto:notmrdarcy@gmail.com)

My website: [DarcyDayZoells.com](http://DarcyDayZoells.com)

The New Bicycle: <https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-new-bicycle-darcy-day-zoells/19799044?ean=9781605379647> 🌟

## Where can we find you?

Website: <http://www.darcydayzoells.com>

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

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

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# Writer's Tips

## THE GRAPHIC NOVEL SCRIPT FROM A WRITER WHO DOES NOT ILLUSTRATE *by Urania Smith*

### PAGE 1

**Panel 1.** URANIA SMITH is typing on her computer. Her brows are furrowed.

*Caption 1:* Writing a graphic novel has its challenges.

**Panel 2.** Urania stands up looking at the screen, scratching her head.

*Caption 2:* Particularly for a writer who does not illustrate.

I'm working on my first graphic novel project and it occurred to me that it is imperative for graphic novel writers to understand the balance between text and art, even more so since we don't illustrate. The words in a graphic novel are icing on the cake when us writers are used to baking the whole cake. I'm not trying to dissuade author-only creators from writing graphic novels, but we need to know how our words fit into this visual art form in order to be able to successfully write a script.

The style of script that I use is pretty basic and easy to read. My captions are capitalized. My panels are lowercase and in bold print to distinguish them from the dialogue. There isn't a set standard for graphic novels script formatting, although I do hear some agents and editors have preferences. I honestly don't think it matters what style you chose as long as it's easy to read and you stay consistent throughout the manuscript. Here is a sample page from my graphic novel manuscript *The Villains*.

Understanding how the text enhances the visuals allows me to manipulate graphic novel conventions during the writing process. I'm not experienced enough to know all the conventions of a graphic novel, but the ones I am going to talk about are the most important to writing a script and are ones that should be studied by all graphic novel writers.

**CAPTION:** THE VILLAIN BLOODLINE WENT EVIL 4000 YEARS AGO WITH THE BIRTH OF ANOTHER BABY—MY MANY TIMES GREAT GRANDFATHER VILLONIOUS T. VILLAIN.

**Panel 2.** A cave nurse holds the newborn Villonious. The cave mom is in the hospital bed. Cave father is standing next to the bed. They are holding hands beaming proudly.

NURSE: Look, his hair.

**Panel 3.** Baby Villonious bites the nurse.

F/X: CRUNCH!

**Panel 4.** Nurse drops Villonious.

NURSE: OUCH!

**Panel 5.** Villonious runs around the hospital room as the Cave mom and nurse screams.

NURSE: AHHHHHHH!

CAVE MOM: AHHHHHHH!

**Panel 6.** The cave dad is standing on chair as he screeches.

CAVE DAD: EEEEEEEK!

**Panel 7.** A naked baby Villonious jumps through a hospital window.

**PAGE 5**

**Panel 1.** Villonious lands on the back of a raptor and takes off.

**Panel 2.** Villonious looks over his shoulder and is being chased by a police force on raptors.

**CAPTION:** AT LEAST THIS IS THE STORY I WAS TOLD.

**PAGES 6-7**

**SPREAD:** A spread shows the Villain family Tree. The family tree has rotten apples piled underneath and one fresh apple attached to the tree.

**CAPTION 1:** WITH EACH GENERATION OF VILLAINS, THE ROTTEN APPLES DIDN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE. UNTIL. . .

**CAPTION 2:** ME. (This caption is near the apple that remains on the tree with an arrow pointing to it).

*Here is a sample page from my graphic novel manuscript *The Villains*.*



*In Shannon Hale's *Real Friends*, she simply uses the caption "1979, Salt Lake City" to date the novel.*



# Writer's Tips

## CAPTION

Graphic novels scripts have captions which are sentences that are offset from the dialogue. Many times they act as the heading of a panel. The POV of the story is told through the caption, and the writer speaks directly to the audience either through the main character or a narrator. Captions are a narrative tool that, when used effectively, can enhance storytelling by providing context, deepening character development, showing time lapses, and enriching the reader's experience. When I write captions, I try to make sure they integrate with the dialogue and the visual elements on the page to create a cohesive storyline.

## PAGE TURNS

Page turns in graphic novels are a crucial part of the storytelling and they significantly affect how the reader engages with the book. Unlike traditional novels, the page numbers in a graphic novel's script correspond with the book's page numbers, not the typed manuscript pages. They contribute a lot to the voice of the graphic novel and are used to build suspense with cliffhangers and dramatic reveals, set the pacing and rhythm of the story (through scene transitions, pauses and beats), and can produce emotional responses in the reader. An emotional moment placed after a page turn makes that scene more impactful. I like to build suspense into my page turns to keep the reader engaged with the story and turning the page. As I'm writing, I'm consciously thinking of how the words, panels, and the art on the current page will lead my reader to the next page.

Varian Johnson uses this page turn in his graphic novel *Twins* to amplify a moment that foreshadows the theme of separation in the book.

## PANELS

Panel descriptions in a graphic novel script are the lines of communication between the writer and the artist. Since panels serve as a frame that contains a segment of the story, each panel description will contain one action that contributes to moving the script from scene to scene. Their arrangement, size, and content influence how the story unfolds and how readers engage with the story. Some panels will contain dialogue, some will not. When panels are silent, that is where the action in your story carries readers from scene to scene. Every smile, grimace, pose, and setting is used to tell the story. Good panel descriptions give art direction to the Illustrator while somehow still leaving just enough space for the illustrator to add their flair.

*Dav Pilkey uses the panels in Dog Man to move the story along at a fast pace. This pacing adds a slapstick element of humor to the novel.*



Varian Johnson uses this page turn in his graphic novel *Twins* to amplify a moment that foreshadows the theme of separation in the book.





# Writer's Tips

## SPREADS

Double page spreads span two pages, delivering a broader visual impact to the scene. You could use spreads to highlight key moments, for the introduction of a character, to slow down a fight, or as a point of comic relief. Spreads are a powerful way to control pacing and enhance the story.



*Jerry Craft uses spreads in New Kid to comedic effect in the opening of his chapters as he gives glimpses to Jordan's thoughts and emotional state.*

## SPLASH PAGE

Like spreads, splash pages are a powerful storytelling device capable of delivering dramatic, emotional, and visual impact. Splash pages are one page art pieces used to highlight important moments, control pacing, and enhance the reader's immersion in the story. Through careful planning, splash pages can create some memorable and striking images in a graphic novel, leaving a lasting impression on the reader.



*In Eoin Colfer's Artemis Fowl, the splash page is used to introduce and give the background of Artemis' father who is integral to the storyline, but does not appear in the book.*

## DIALOGUE

The dialogue for graphic novels is featured in speech bubbles in the art. Dialogue also controls pacing and moves the story from scene to scene and page to page.

Keep dialogue tight and to a minimum on the page. Break it up so it doesn't crowd your speech bubbles. If my character is saying more than one line, I typically break up the dialogue so it appears in multiple speech bubbles. I'll also break up the dialogue to indicate a verbal pause.

In Mariah Marsden's *Anne of Green Gables*, this particular page is more text heavy than the rest of the book. Notice how Marsden breaks up a character's dialogue to create a natural pattern in the character's speech.



*In Mariah Marsden's Anne of Green Gables, this particular page is more text heavy than the rest of the book. Notice how Marsden breaks up a character's dialogue to create a natural pattern in the character's speech.*



# Writer's Tips

## SOUND EFFECTS

Sound effects (often written SFX in the graphic novel script) add a visual representation of sound to the story. Sound effects can help the reader hear the action, making scenes appear more real and immersive. They are important in action scenes, where they can illustrate the impact of a punch, the roar of an engine, or the clash of a sword. Sound effects should blend with the art to enhance a scene without overwhelming it. They need to be placed thoughtfully within the panels to ensure they complement the visuals.

In Raina Telgemeier's autobiographical graphic novel *Smile*, The onomatopoeia "WHAM" is used to dramatic effect as Raina trips and hits the ground. Telgemeier uses large red letters to emphasize the hardness of the impact.



**WHAM!**



A script from an author-only graphic novel creator has to stand out to an agent or editor, and learning how to balance these conventions with your text will go a long way towards polishing your work. Author-illustrators have the opportunity to submit character sketches and sample art pages with a few chapters of complete script while author-only creators typically have to submit a completed manuscript. A script without visuals is more difficult to envision, so it is important to use the tool you have (words) to clearly and concisely dictate the visual aspects of your graphic novel manuscript in order to make it shine. ✨

*In Raina Telgemeier's autobiographical graphic novel Smile, the onomatopoeia "WHAM" is used to dramatic effect as Raina trips and hits the ground. Telgemeier uses large red letters to emphasize the hardness of the impact.*

URANIA SMITH has a B.A. in English and has been writing for children for 20 years. She is the winner of the 2017 We Need Diverse Books Mentorship and an editor at Phoenix Media and Books. Urania is also a team member at KidLit GN. KitLit GN hosts a graphic novel pitch contest the first Wednesday of October at <https://kidlitgn.com>. She highly recommends that if you are interested in writing graphic novels you should check out the website Kid Comic Unite <https://kidscomicsunite.com>.





# Writer's Bookshelf

by Ronni Davis



I love a good craft book. If it's informative, inspiring, and easy to digest, it's going on my forever shelf. I've been reading craft books since I was a teenager, and I still have some of those original copies. To this day, I still pull them out, some of them with yellowing pages and brittle covers, and comb through them seeking the perfect morsel that works with what I'm trying to accomplish. While trends change and rules evolve, some things about writing remain steadfast, tried, and true.

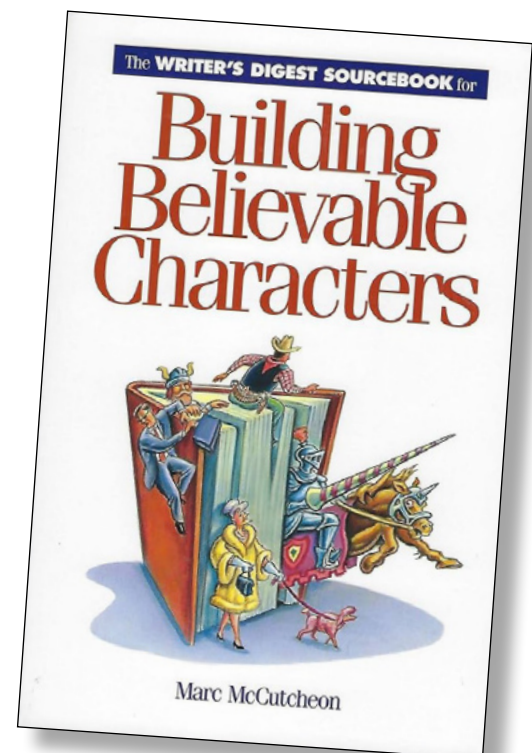
One of the most important ingredients of writing a story is character. Characters make the story come alive. They project their feelings, beliefs, and moods onto everything around them, giving us unique perspectives and points of view.

I love creating characters. I believe this goes back to when I was a little girl. I had a lot of Barbie dolls, and I loved a Saturday afternoon with the dolls and all their clothes and accessories surrounding me. I dressed them up, set up their houses, and then admired my handiwork. But then I noticed that I didn't play with them the same way the kids in the commercials did. Once they were set up and dressed, I was done playing. The same thing happens sometimes now. There is a game called *The Sims*, where you can create characters, build their homes, and play with their lives. When I play *The Sims*, I create the Sims and build their homes. But then I'm happy to sit and admire what I've created: this family, ready for a story.

The same thing happens when I'm writing. The character usually comes first. She pops into my head, nameless, plotless, and demanding I do something with her. I can usually see her face and get an idea of her sense of fashion clearly, but that's about all. I know that's not enough—if I don't know who this person is, how am I supposed to know what she wants (and needs), what keeps her from getting it, and how the world (or her world) will be upset if she doesn't get it? How can I write an entire story based only on what someone's wearing and how their hair is styled?

It's important that my characters feel so real you expect to see them standing in front of you when you look up from

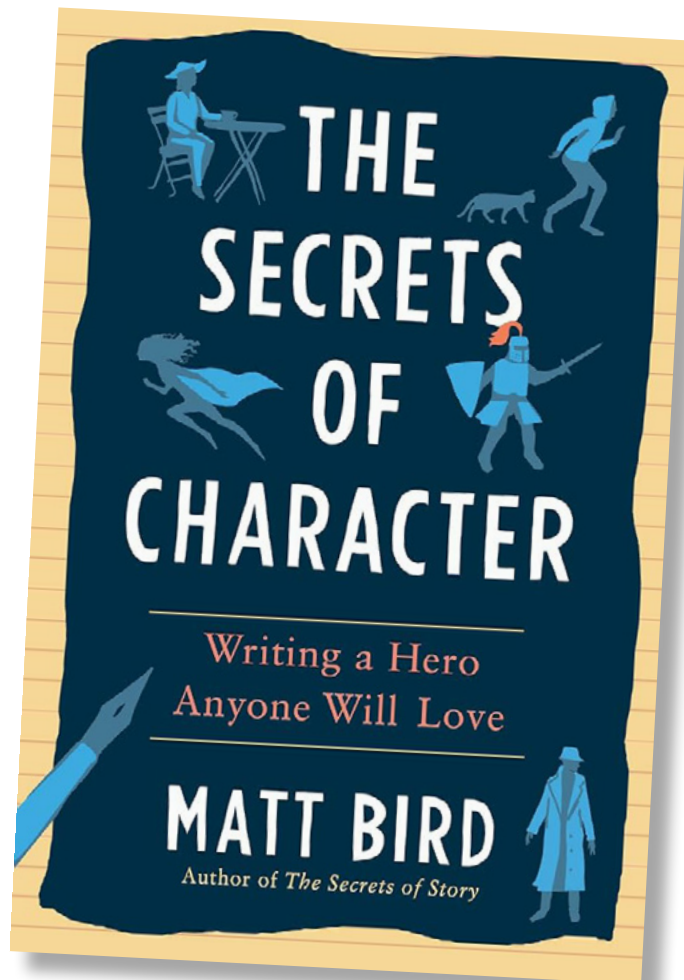
the page. I pull from so many different places to develop my characters, but one of the books that helps me round them out is *The Writer's Digest Sourcebook for Building Believable Characters* by Marc McCutcheon. This is one of my tried and true sources. The book is nearly 30 years old, so I have to keep that in mind and adjust for the way my writing, the world, and society has evolved. But the book has a lot of practical information that helps me with the physicality of my characters. It is the ultimate thesaurus to help me visualize and describe my characters' physical traits. I get terminology about certain fashion choices and education levels. The information is so varied, and even if I don't use exactly what's from the book, it jump-starts my brain into digging deeper and developing my characters. My characters are never meant to be one-dimensional cutouts, and all of the little things in this book contribute to my creating a rich, complex, fully fleshed-out character.



# Writer's Bookself

Another book I reach for is *The Secrets of Character* by Matt Bird. While *Building Believable Characters* is more of a thesaurus that tends to focus on the external and more superficial aspects such as physical characteristics and facial expressions, *The Secrets of Character* digs more into the psyche of the character. We're asked to explore what makes audiences actually care about characters, and we're given examples from all sorts of media to back up those explorations. For me, the examples are imperative, as they help me apply all the things I'm learning in a tangible and easy-to-understand way. It's one thing to read about the theories of story, but it's another thing to understand them.

These books help me build complex, loveable characters who are easy to root for and care about. *Building Believable Characters* gives me the lists, and *The Secrets of Character* helps me decide what to do with the items on the lists. And while no book is an end-all, be-all for craft, I get a lot of value and information from these two in particular. If I had known as a little girl what I know now about developing characters, who knows what lives my Barbie dolls would have led? As it is, I get to use these resources for my books now, and that's a great thing. 🌟



RONNI DAVIS lives in Chicago, where she writes about brown girls falling in love. Her first novel, *When the Stars Lead to You*, and her second novel, *This Night Is Ours*, are both available now from Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.



# Mentor Texts

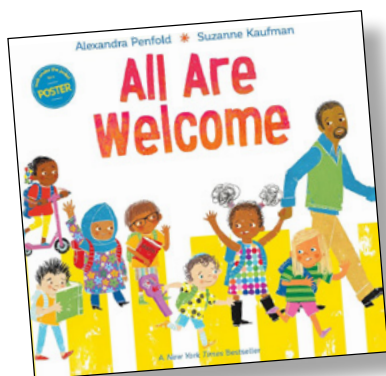
## THE RICH TAPESTRY OF DIVERSITY: A LIFELONG JOURNEY

by Andy Wowor

Growing up in Indonesia with the motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”—meaning “unity in diversity”—has shaped me into the person I am today. Indonesia is a country with a rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Being surrounded by this diversity fostered an appreciation for different perspectives and backgrounds.

### ALL ARE WELCOME

by Alexandra Penfold, illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman



This book emphasizes that everyone is welcome in the classroom, regardless of their background or differences. It highlights the importance of learning, sharing, and having fun together. The classroom is portrayed as a safe and supportive community where students can learn and grow without judgment in an open and affirming environment.

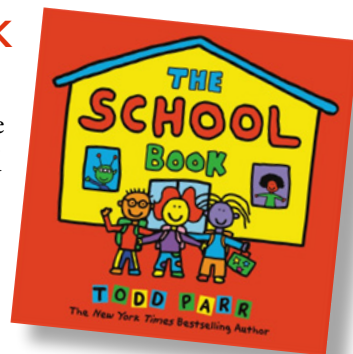


Suzanne Kaufman's sketch of me.

### THE SCHOOL BOOK

by Todd Parr

*The School Book* illustrates the routine aspects of a school day, from getting ready in the morning to going home and sharing experiences. The use of short, simple sentences and familiar vocabulary makes it



easy for young children to understand. The book encourages the importance of a well-rounded education that includes not only academics but also social-emotional development.

### WE'RE DIFFERENT, WE'RE THE SAME

by Bobbi Jane Kates, illustrated by Joe Mathieu

This story leverages a simple yet effective structure: introduce a difference, and highlight and explain the similarities. This pattern repeats throughout the book, focusing on hair, mouths, skin, eyes, bodies, and feelings. The book concludes by comparing diversity to a rainbow. Just as a rainbow with all its colors is beautiful, so is the world with all its different people and unique qualities.

The United States truly opened my eyes to the power of diversity. Here, immigrants from all corners of the globe have come together to build a nation unlike any other. Cities like Chicago truly embody this spirit—a vibrant blend of cultures that celebrate their heritage throughout the year.



Parades, festivals, and cultural fairs are more than just fun; they're a window into different customs and traditions. It's a melting pot in action, where diverse cultures come together to create something entirely new and exciting.



# Mentor Texts

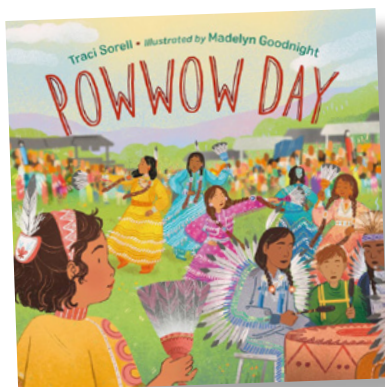
This exposure to different perspectives is a gift. It broadens our horizons, challenges our assumptions, and opens doors to a world of learning. We can make friends from all walks of life, learn new things, and gain a deeper understanding of the world around us. It's a journey of growth and discovery, and the United States offers a front-row seat to this incredible experience.



## A MOON FOR MOE AND MO

by Jane Breskin Zalben,  
illustrated by  
Mehrdokht Amini

This story features two boys, Moses (Moe) Feldman and Mohammed (Mo) Hassan, who live on opposite ends of Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. Despite their different backgrounds—Moe's family celebrates Rosh Hashanah and Mo's family observes Ramadan—the kids find common ground through their love of sweets and a chance encounter in Mr. Sahadi's store. The book is a charming testament to the power of friendship and the beauty of diversity. It reminds us that despite our differences, we can find common ground and build meaningful connections with others.



## POWOW DAY

by Traci Sorell, illustrated by  
Madelyn Goodnight

*Powwow Day* is about cultural pride, resilience, and the healing power of community. The book depicts dance as a form of healing and cultural expression. While River can't physically dance, she experiences a connection to the spirit of the powwow through the music and observation. The story focuses on the importance of tradition and the strength found in facing challenges with the support of loved ones.

## FESTIVAL OF COLORS

by Surishtha Sehgal and Kabir Sehgal, illustrated by  
Vashti Harrison

*Festival of Colors* is a delightful introduction to the vibrant festival of Holi. It blends the excitement of preparation, the significance of colors, and the joyful spirit of celebrating with loved ones. The book briefly touches upon the deeper meaning of Holi—a festival of fresh starts, friendship, and forgiveness.



Books rooted in personal experience are often the most powerful and engaging. By sharing our personal experiences, we open a window into our world. This allows others to see themselves or their own experiences reflected in ours. Even if the specifics of our experiences are different, the underlying emotions of joy, sadness, or triumph can be relatable across cultures and backgrounds.

## TÍA ISA WANTS A CAR

by Meg Medina, illustrated by Claudio Muñoz

*Tía Isa Wants a Car* is a beautifully told story about the power of dreams and the importance of family. The book evokes a sense of hope and determination. We root for Tía Isa and her niece to achieve their dream of a car, which symbolizes a brighter future with their family.





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## A DIFFERENT POND

by Bao Phi, illustrated by Thi Bui



The touching story follows a young boy on a pre-dawn fishing trip with his father, a Vietnamese immigrant in America. The book hints at the hardships the father faces as an immigrant working two jobs to support his family. The story captures the boy's curiosity about his father's past, his empathy for the fish, and his pride in helping his family.

## TAR BEACH

by Faith Ringgold

The book introduces us to the imaginative world of Cassie Louise Lightfoot, an eight-year-old girl living in Harlem. It paints Cassie's innocence, her determination to help her family, and her frustration at racial prejudice. The book celebrates the boundless imagination of a child who creates a world of wonder on her rooftop.



The journey of embracing diversity is a continuous process of growth and discovery. The books I've chosen offer a glimpse into this journey, and I believe the power of stories lies in their ability to inspire us to continue exploring, learning, and celebrating the beautiful cultures that enrich our world. ✨



ANDY WOWOR loves crafting stories that explore universal experiences and feature characters that reflect his Asian background. Andy strives to inspire kids of all ages to embrace themselves and each other by learning and growing together. Andy lives in Chicago, where he spends time with animals and art. With an adventurous spirit, Andy enjoys traveling and engaging in conversations with others. Connect with Andy on Instagram at @wowor.andy or on X at @AndyWowor.



*Faith Ringgold  
Tar Beach II, 1990  
Silkscreen on silk with pieced fabric*

# Season's Crop

JANUARY–AUGUST 2024 by Jenny Wagh



## Board Books

### FICTION

#### *Baby Loves Automotive Engineering!*

By Ruth Spiro  
Illustrated by Irene Chan  
Charlesbridge, June 2024  
ISBN: 9781623543976

#### *Baby Loves Paleontology!*

By Ruth Spiro  
Illustrated by Irene Chan  
Charlesbridge, June 2024  
ISBN: 9781623543976

#### *Meet The Trees*

By Emily Dangremond  
Illustrated by Summer Morrison  
Orange Hat Pub, July 2024  
ISBN: 9781645387572

## Young Adult

### FICTION

#### *This Night Is Ours*

By Ronni Davis  
Little, Brown Books May 2024  
ISBN: 97880316373616

## Picture Books

### NONFICTION

#### *Seeker of Truth: Kailash Satyarthi's Fight to End Child Labor*

By Srividhya Venkat  
Illustrated by Danica da Silva Pereira  
Little Bee Books, July 2024  
ISBN: 9781499815696

## Picture Books

### FICTION

#### *Hide-and-Seek*

Written & Illustrated by  
Molly Cranch  
Clavis Publishing, July 2024  
ISBN: 9781605378321

#### *I Can Do It Even If I'm Scared*

By Lisa Katzenberger  
Illustrated by Hannah George  
Sourcebooks Kids, July 2024  
ISBN: 9781728272689

#### *A Kurta To Remember*

By Gauri Dalvi Pandya  
Illustrated by Avani Dwivedi  
Sleeping Bear Press, April 2024  
ISBN: 9781534113107

#### *A Love Letter to My Library*

By Lisa Katzenberger  
Illustrated by Rob Sayegh Jr  
Sourcebooks Kids, June 2024  
ISBN: 9781728272719

#### *Joan of Art*

By Lesa Engelthaler  
Illustrated by Brooke O'Neill  
Morehouse Publishing, May 2024  
ISBN: 9781640656765

#### *Maya Hears In Style*

By Terri Clemmons  
Illustrated by Lucy Rogers  
Beaming Books, February 2024  
ISBN: 9781506488749

#### *One Small Spark: A Tikkun Olam Story*

By Ruth Spiro  
Illustrated by Victoria Tentler-Krylov  
Dial Books For Young Readers,  
August 2024  
ISBN: 9780399186318

#### *Sydney's Big Speech*

By Malcolm Newsome  
Illustrated by Jade Orlando  
Harper Collins, February 2024  
ISBN: 9780063141414

## Chapter Books

### FICTION

#### *Croc & Gator: Swamp Ranger School*

By Lisa Katzenberger  
Illustrated by Mike Ciccotello  
Pixel + Ink, June 2024  
ISBN: 9781645951506

#### *Frankinschool 2:*

#### *The Cupsnake Escape*

By Caryn Rivadeneira  
Illustrated by Dani Jones  
Red Chair Press, February 2024  
ISBN: 9781643713014

## Middle Grade

### FICTION

#### *Killer Chill, Luna Garza: Accidental Detective Series*

By PJ Gray  
Saddleback, January 2024  
ISBN: 9781645989295

#### *Mother's Tomb, Luna Garza: Accidental Detective Series*

By PJ Gray  
Saddleback, January 2024  
ISBN: 9781645989288

### NONFICTION

#### *Jane Adams: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*

By Marlene Targ Brill  
Ohio University Press, June 2024  
ISBN: 9780821425541

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