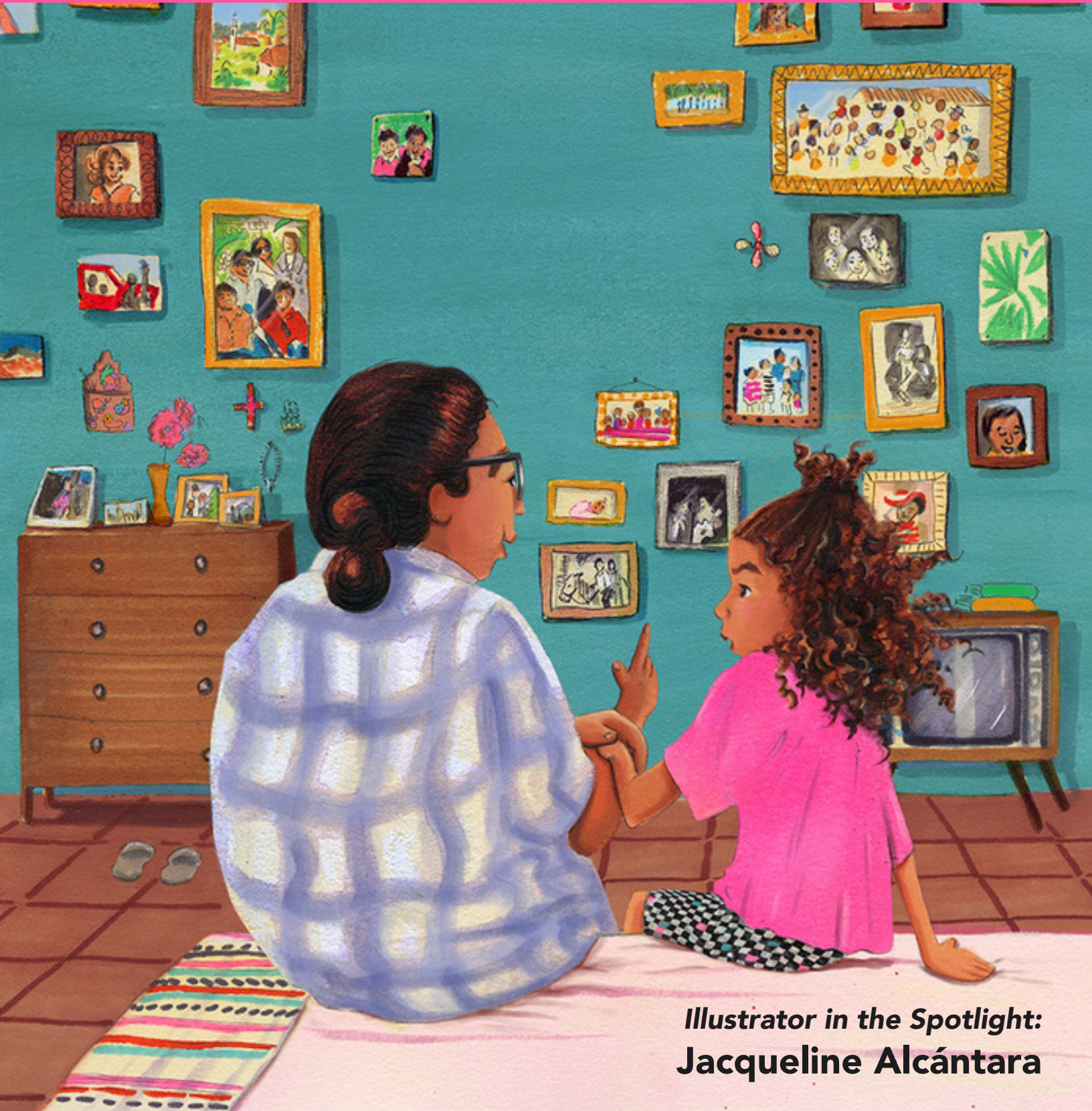


Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

WINTER 2025



**Illustrator in the Spotlight:
Jacqueline Alcántara**



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Illustration by Jacqueline Alcántara

In This Issue

by Shirin Shamsi

A new year is upon us, and a quarter of this century has passed! I wonder, have we as human beings improved our lot? There is much to do. We have our work cut out for us.

I am reminded of Rumi's words, when I see the state of our world:

"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself." ~ Rumi

Upon perusing this Winter 2025 issue of *Prairie Wind*, I cannot help but notice a similar theme meanders throughout. Most speak of overcoming obstacles, in numerous and diverse ways. I pause momentarily as it dawns on me that, just as I am going through challenging times, so is everyone else in varying degrees. The weight of anxiety on my shoulders feels heavy and palpable and can be debilitating.

But a new year brings hope, and my word of the year is STRIVE. For we must strive to be the light, to bring hope with our stories.

Read on and be inspired. Let your creativity grow in leaps and bounds, for each day brings new opportunities.

GREETINGS!

First off, a big welcome to our new Co-Regional Advisors, Sheila Path-McMahon and Pamela Morgan. Sheila's "[Greetings](#)" overflows with inspiration. It is exactly what I need to hear and absorb into my own creative journey, with new goals in the new year. As someone who has yet to visit New York City, and attend the SCBWI Winter Conference, I was glad to hear our new Co-RAs attended the conference and brought back nuggets of wisdom to share with us.

SPOTLIGHTS

Jacqueline Alcántara is our talented [Illustrator in the Spotlight](#) and now officially an author/illustrator. Her bright and vibrant cover design is from her first authored and illustrated picture book. With additional illustrations from her book, *Tios and Primos*, and a step-by-step guide to her process, Jacqueline allows the story to "lead the style."



In [Creative Sparks](#), Rachel Rizzuto shows us how a change in perspective, and advice from critique partners, can make all the difference when faced with a creative slump.

FEATURES

This issue's main FEATURES deal with overcoming obstacles to rediscover one's creative passion. Patricia Toht gives us sage advice in "[It's Okay to Take a Break.](#)"

Robin Currie's "[A Season for Something Else](#)" shares how she pivoted when faced with daunting health challenges.

Shereen Hussain's powerful piece, "[Life Cycle,](#)" reveals how creativity can be a life force in the face of overwhelming loss.

COLUMNS

In "[Releasing the Truth that Is Uniquely Yours: What Goddess Kali Taught Me about Writing.](#)" Anuradha D. Rajurkar offers us ways to overcome the challenges of revisions. She shares that by nurturing our spirit we can truly nourish our creative souls.



In This Issue

Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn offers excellent [Illustrator's Tips](#) to overcome the dreaded but ever-present artist's block, to which we all are susceptible. The answer is to “create for the joy of creating.”

A huge CONGRATULATIONS to Karla Arenas Valenti upon winning the Pura Belpré award, a much-deserved honor at the recent ALA Youth Media Awards. As always, [Karla has invaluable advice on how to tackle what George Orwell calls the “demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.”](#)

In [Writer's Bookshelf](#), Nicole M. Hewitt offers us some excellent resources to hone our craft. I have read Lisa Cron's book and have also found it to be a great resource.

[Sara Schacter says she has been looking at mentor texts “all wrong.”](#) She shares some of her book choices, which are “project-specific” texts.

Last but not least, a special welcome to our new editor on the *Prairie Wind* team, Christopher Worthman—and a huge thank you, too! Thank you to all our contributors for giving us your time and sharing your wisdom, with such informative articles. Thank you to our *Prairie Wind* team. It's an honor to be in your company. May your year be filled with creativity and fulfillment. ✨



WELCOME CHRISTOPHER WORTHMAN TO THE PRAIRIE WIND TEAM!

Christopher Worthman is excited to join the *Prairie Wind* editorial team. He has been a teacher educator at DePaul University for the past 26 years. Before that, he was a middle grade English teacher in Chicago. After years of writing academic articles about in and out-of-school literacy development, he now writes middle grade novels. He looks forward to reading every *Prairie Wind* article that comes his way and immersing himself in the world of children's literature.



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

Editor [Christopher Worthman](#): *who expertly tweaks and polishes all of our content*

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

Advisor [Sheila Path-McMahon](#) *who remains our faithful and supportive Regional Advisor*

Illustration by Jacqueline Alcántara

Greetings!

NEW BEGINNINGS by Sheila Path-McMahon

Greetings from the Illinois Regional Team! As I write this, my head is spinning both literally and figuratively. Literally, because I flew home from the National Conference in NYC last night, and I have a little vertigo. Figuratively, because I just got home from the National Conference in NYC, and I have so much to think and talk about, and so much to do!

The *Prairie Wind* is geared toward illustration, and in my own kidlit journey, I have been working on developing my visual skills. I had the good fortune to attend two 3-hour Creative Labs this weekend, *Embrace the Mess: Transitioning to Traditional Media from Digital* with Illustrator Suzanne Kaufman and *Dreaming In Black and White: Mastering the Art of Light and Shadow in Storytelling* with Illustrator Cátia Chien.

In Kaufman's lab, she shared demonstrations of many of the techniques she uses and how she manages to incorporate both digital and traditional media in her work. I am trying to learn how to use digital tools, so it was a boon for me. She mentioned "value" several times, and although I felt that I knew a textbook definition of value, I didn't know very well how to apply it to my illustrations. I even wrote a note to myself, "watch videos about value," but then Chien's lab was a deep dive into guess what - value! She shared how understanding the concepts of value and contrast are fundamental to illustration and demonstrated how to complete a value study. I walked out feeling that I understood well enough to go and apply the concept in my artwork.

In addition to the Creative Labs, we had an inspiring keynote speech by two-time Newbery medalist Erin Entrada Kelly. It was a beautiful, honest and personal speech. My take-away from it is that the act of following your dreams as a creative is a brave thing to do, and that no matter what the outcomes of our efforts, we will be happier people overall due to the fact that we are trying. It was a great message, and I think it applies to all of us all the time, no matter where we are in our kidlit journey.



Pictured (from left to right, top to bottom):

- Pamela Morgan and Jamie Moscato
- Melissa Zurca-Ng and Denise Holmes
- Anne Awh
- Reniya Brown
- Debbie and Jenny
- Pamela Morgan and Sheila Path-McMahon



Greetings!

One of the best things to come out of this conference, for me, is having the chance to meet my Co-RA, Pamela Morgan, in person. We spent lots of time together and had a chance to develop an idea that we hope to roll out in the fall.

In the essay I am reading right now, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer retells a story in which a character thinks to himself, “Every being with a gift, every being with a responsibility.” Every being with a gift. The RT team hopes that you realize YOU are a being with a gift! Enjoy this issue of *Prairie Wind*. We hope that you get some of what you need to grow in some way right now, whether it be inspiration, tips, or a lead on the next great book to read.

Pamela and I are managing our first Spring Thaw—keep checking emails from us or watching the website for more

information; registration opens March 11th, 2025 (at noon CDT). The Spring Thaw writing contest is open now until March 4, 2025. (by 11:59 pm CST)

Submissions for the Many Voices Prize are rolling in - the deadline is March 1, 2025 (by 11:59 PM CST). If you are a SCBWI member who identifies as diverse or from an underrepresented community and you live in Illinois and are at least 18 years old, please take advantage of this opportunity! Published and pre-published authors, illustrators, and translators can apply, and we hope you do!

Here’s to a great Spring Thaw, both literally and figuratively!

Your Co-Regional Advisors,

Sheila Path-McMahon and Pamela Morgan ✨



Volunteer Opportunity!



Are you a graphic designer with a passion for children's books?

We are seeking a new team member to design the *Prairie Wind*! Must be an SCBWI-IL member.

Please contact Shirin Shamsi at shirinshamsi@gmail.com or Brooke O'Neill at brookelynn_oneill@hotmail.com

Illustrator in the Spotlight

by Jacqueline Alcántara

Are you an illustrator or an author/illustrator?

Woohoooo! As of February 18, 2025 I'm officially an Author/Illustrator! *Tíos and Primos* is my eighth book but the first that I have written, as well as illustrated, and I'm very proud to finally have it out in the world! Like all books, its been a long time in the making.

And what is your preferred medium to work in?

I really try to follow my mantra of, "let the story lead the style" - meaning I really like to think about what materials and mediums might be best for each project. That said, I usually start with marker or watercolor, add gouache and then finish digitally in Photoshop. Some books are heavier in one part of the process or other and some incorporate collage or pastel as well.

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

In 2011, I was laid off from my teaching job and never looked back! I took an illustration intensive summer course at Parsons in New York, then some continuing studies classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. I learned about the industry, read tons of children's books, identified the illustrators I was most drawn to, created a lot, and experimented with different mediums to figure out my "style" (which I hope is ever evolving and therefore never quite figured out). I quit my full time job in 2015 and have been illustrating ever since, along with having plenty of part-time gigs. My first book was published in 2018 titled, *The Field*, and I've been incredibly lucky to have now worked with almost all of the major publishing houses and some fabulous indie publishers and amazing authors including; Alicia D Williams, Tami Charles, Angela Joy, Baptiste Paul and currently Margarita Engle.

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

For *Tíos and Primos* I worked on Arches HotPress Watercolor Paper. It has quickly become my favorite paper. I used to work on a large Canson Marker paper but it was discontinued and I'm still a bit heartbroken about it, but this paper holds marker, watercolor, gouache and basically anything else just beautifully.



I first did a wash of yellow ochre watercolor or gouache. I wanted the streets/background to have a bit of a dusty feeling and felt that changing the base color to yellow could help with that. Then I layered marker on top. I use Copic Markers and just love the vibrancy and luminescence those markers have. I really love using them for skintones and clothing.

I kept layering marker for the buildings, plants, car, etc. Then I added gouache to fix some things that were not looking right, add nice texture, and fix some of the values that maybe got too dark or undefined. I kept messing up the clouds so I had to add them digitally at the end because I was just frustrated with how they were turning out with the gouache.



Illustrator in the Spotlight



I created the spot illustrations on the left page separately with marker. Then I scanned everything, combined it all in Photoshop, added the speech bubbles, and did a lot of cleaning up to correct some colors and values.

While I love to start illustrations on paper, I usually am always doing some degree of tweaks on Photoshop at the end. I love digital tools just as much as traditional ones, but since books are long projects, I love to at least start traditionally so that I'm not on my computer the entire time. Plus real life art supplies are just so much fun.

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

Yes, I think it was a bit subconscious but I think there are palm trees in almost every book I've illustrated. I'm also drawn to stories where there is a musical or rhythmic element incorporated in the text. I love drawing characters dancing, playing, in some sort of action—and I love big family party scenes in books.

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

My dogs are in most of my books :) It's truly the thing that gets kids the most excited at school visits, so I will always sneak them in somewhere. I hope I can come up with a way to make them the main characters soon. I'm dying to do a book with just dogs...and palm trees.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

Not to be too cliché, but I feel like I can find inspiration in anything. I was very daunted with the idea of “being an artist” which is why I gravitated towards illustrating for other people. Being given a manuscript is a beautiful jumping off point for creating your own art. I've only done books where I really feel connected to the story and instantly know there won't be any trouble in finding inspiration for the illustrations. But the research part is so much fun—I love the time learning, sketching, discovering and then letting my own imagination connect all the dots—usually this incorporates emotional, spiritual and creative thoughts in combination with manuscript.

Where can we find you?

You can find me walking around Pilsen, getting cookies at Lavine bakery, teaching at Columbia College, cooped up in my home studio or on [Instagram @_jacqueline_alcantara](#) ✨

JACQUELINE ALCÁNTARA is a freelance illustrator and educator spending her days drawing, writing, walking her dogs and planning her next adventures. She is fueled by dance music, carbs and coffee. Jacqueline studied Secondary Art Education and taught high school art and photography before transitioning to illustration. She is also an adjunct professor of illustration at Columbia College Chicago. She has illustrated many books and is excited to be releasing her first author / illustrator debut in February 2025.

Creative Sparks

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES *by Rachel Rizzuto*

My portfolio needed a shift in perspective. Literally.

My education and earliest professional background are in theatre, a field chockablock with crossover skills for an author-illustrator. Costume design, set design, storytelling, character building, love of language. But I also tend to imagine all the story's physical action in terms of blocking for the stage. My go-to perspective is full-body, straight on, at about mid-distance. I don't always remember that, as an illustrator, I hold a camera in my pencil. In other words, I have the option to employ a more cinematic approach.

At the end of last summer, I invested in my very first iPad and felt emboldened to challenge myself knowing that the "undo button" was a new reality.

So, one day at the playground, when my 4-year-old gleefully scaled the spider web, I was primed to see an opportunity. A few quick snaps and I captured an excellent reference photo looking up from below.

I eagerly imported the picture to Affinity Photo and set to work. How cool that I could draw right on top of my photo instead of awkwardly shuffling papers around or using a light board! I played with color and experimented with texture. I added and subtracted new elements, characters, and details almost as improvisation, figuring out the composition as I went along. The end result was unlike anything I'd made before! In a good way!

But also, in a way that felt not quite right. Because it was... too right.

As I've developed my style, I've landed on child characters being three heads tall, with the head larger than the torso. My daughter's real-life-little-kid proportions didn't fit my illustrated-big-kid proportions. Throw foreshortening on top of that, and the trouble was two-fold.

Maybe I was just being hard on myself? "My own worst critic?" I really didn't think so. Something about the main



Creative Sparks

character was definitely off. Especially when I asked myself whether I could draw that same character in a different moment, one where we would see her head-on, from above, or in profile. I wasn't confident that I'd be able to convincingly draw her from any angle but this one.

Enter the critique partners!

I reached out to Anna Stenger (we met at Prairie Writers & Illustrators Day), Ian Webster (we met through PBParty), and Erin Hookana (we met at a SCBWI Illustrator event). I wrote to them individually, but their feedback came back the same. A very dynamic pose. A good stretch creatively. With a couple of tweaks, a great composition. All in all, a strong addition to my portfolio. But, also, yes, the main character – while technically pretty much correct – was “too correct” to blend with my style. They also all suggested the same exercise as a remedy: sketch the main character several times **WITHOUT** looking at the reference.

Armed with unanimous observations from my critique partners, which supported what my gut had already been hinting at, I knew it was the right next step to take.

Eventually.

Now, I'm usually pretty mindful of editability when creating an illustration. It's the graphic designer in me who's used to getting client feedback and making multiple versions of a design. This was true even when I worked traditionally and in a traditional/digital hybrid. In this case, however, the compositional tweaks and reworking of the main character combined with how I built that particular document's layers meant a complete and total redo. Starting over felt daunting. I knew where I needed to end up, but I couldn't quite chart the course.

In the moment, it felt like I was procrastinating. Certainly, I was hesitating. The spirit of adventure evaporated with the first draft and the fear of failure settled in. The script to give myself a hard time for not immediately rallying was strong. However, as I'm finding time and again, sometimes the best action is allowing things to percolate in my back brain. Encouraging myself to press on when I'm ready is different than giving myself a hard shove because I think I should be ready. So, I gave myself permission to wait.

A full eighteen days later, while sitting in my car in the school pick-up line, I worked up the nerve to try the “sketch with no reference” exercise. Scrounging up a forgotten ballpoint pen and the back of my dog's dental cleaning receipt, I gave it a go. Something clicked.



With renewed energy, I got home and banged out a new version. And, wow, was I proud to show it to Anna, Ian, and Erin when I wrote to thank them for their advice.



Creative Sparks

Climbing outside my comfort zone was definitely uncomfortable. Even with all the advantages of new creative tools, the doubts and inner critic and anxiety got loud. But I'm so glad I moved through it and so grateful I was brave enough to ask for help.

I'll leave you with this picture of me standing next to the gallery wall at my local library. I'm this quarter's featured artist, and I'm excited to include this illustration in my collection. In some versions, I add the text "She climbed even higher!" on the patch of sky next to the main character, as inspired by my 4-year-old's joyful tenacity as she scaled those ropes. Upon reflection, I guess it's me, too. I just needed the shift in perspective to see it. 🌟

RACHEL RIZZUTO is an author-illustrator represented by Jes Trudel at The Rights Factory. With a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Performance Theatre, Rachel has performed in theatres throughout Chicago, taught at The Second City, marketed luxury apartments and book events, and narrated dolphin shows. She draws (literally!) on her experiences with OCD and comedy, creating stories that help anxious, lonely kids realize what it took her years to discover: that they're awesome just the way they are.

Website: [RachelRCreates.com](https://www.RachelRCreates.com)

BlueSky & Instagram: @RachelRCreates



It's Okay to Take a Break

by Patricia Toht

I started writing before the turn of the century, which makes me a bit of an author dinosaur.



That was a time of:

- mailing in manuscripts with a stamped postcard to acknowledge receipt, as well as an SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) for an editor or agent reply, and
- getting a response—either a form rejection or, excitingly, a personal note.

I was making strides in magazine work and work for hire. I had received positive feedback for my manuscripts, but a picture book sale escaped me.

When the 2000s arrived, the submissions process changed. Publishers started closing doors to all but agented submissions. Few agents took on picture book authors. And, even if a publisher accepted un-agented submissions, the new policy was not to respond unless your work was wanted.

It felt like a giant black hole. I no longer knew if a manuscript was received. Did anyone actually lay eyes on it? Did my writing stink? Was I getting close or was I still miles away?

It was stressful and depressing! The writer in me was in a bad place.

So, I quit. For a whole year. That coincided with an overseas move, which was very distracting. New places to explore! New things to try! New friends to make! It was a happy and satisfying time.

But after a while, despite my rejection of writing, my brain started working on its own. Ideas, little snippets of poems, even characters conversing. What was I to do?

Let's divert our attention for a moment to this Venn diagram that author Laura Purdie Salas recently shared on social media. She expressed not being able to find the sweet spot – represented by that teeny, tiny triangle at the intersection of the three circles.

This diagram is helpful for explaining how I pulled myself out of my writing depression.



It's Okay to Take a Break

When I started writing again, I ignored two of the circles completely, focusing only on the “Writing I love” one. I wrote poems. Family stories. Travel articles for my son’s school magazine.

After a while, two ideas kept drifting to the top, wanting my attention. They became passion projects I worked on more and more. I wanted them to be very good, even if my family were the only ones to read them. I delved into craft books. I kept experimenting. Rewriting.

Those pieces got better.

I was moving into the intersection of “Writing I love” and “Writing I’m good at.”

But I still made absolutely no push to submit because I knew these two manuscripts—a historical fiction picture book and a poetry collection—would never be found on an editor’s Manuscript Wish List.

After a few years, we moved back to the U.S. I reconnected with some SCBWI friends who convinced me to attend the LA conference. I only had the historical fiction picture book and poetry collection to submit for a critique. I flipped a coin and sent the poetry collection.

On the second day in LA, I met my critique editor, Andrea Welch, from Beach Lane Books. My question for her was: “What the heck do I do with this?”

Andrea was sweet, supportive, and...interested! Which shocked me.

In the end, Beach Lane did not take the book. But Andrea’s interest gave me courage to submit to other publishers. *All Aboard the London Bus*, a collection of poems about London, became my first published picture book.

Now, I am not suggesting you quit for a year or more. But, if you need a break, take one! Fill yourself up with things that make you happy. You’ll know if, and when, you’re ready to come back.

When you do...

“YOU’VE GOTTA
DANCE LIKE THERE’S
NOBODY
WATCHING,
LOVE LIKE YOU’LL
NEVER BE HURT,
SING LIKE THERE’S
NOBODY LISTENING,
AND LIVE LIKE IT’S
HEAVEN ON EARTH.”

William W. Purkey

To paraphrase the Purkey poem, write like no one is watching. Keep publishing off the table. Write what you love, then make it the best you can.

When you feel you’re at the intersection of “Writing I love” and “Writing I’m good at,” only then consider submitting.

I hope you’ll be surprised by what happens! ✨

PATRICIA TOHT once owned a children’s bookstore before turning a love of books into a love of writing. She writes poetry and rhyming picture books, including her newest title, *Taxi, Go!* (2024). Patricia is also one of the Rhyme Doctors, a trio of poets that offer consulting services for rhyming books. Visit her online at www.patriciatoht.com.



A Season for...

...SOMETHING ELSE by Robin Currie



2023—a whole two calendars ago! And what happened that year only happened to me. We all may have slump times, days or months where the ink is dry and so are the brain cells! I learned some strategies that may help others.

It was a very normal year: we traveled, the kids grew older, the grandkids grew more wonderful, and the truck did not break down.

I was also diagnosed with breast cancer.

Which was distracting! Waiting, tests, results, waiting, surgery, waiting, more tests, radiation. And somewhere in that emotional chaos, I lost my interest or ability to write. I have been writing since my 30's, but then...nothing. No ideas sounded any good. No clever turns of phrase. Not even a bad pun!

So, I offer thoughts on what I found to do when there is too much life to be creative.

CONTINUE LEARNING

I could not travel during treatment, but I signed up for online classes. Paid or free, I watched and rewatched the videos, getting every bit of learning I could. I went to marketing classes, classes for teachers, how to work with social media, the latest trends in publishing, and changes in the industry.

KEEP ENGAGING

I followed new bloggers on FaceBook and Instagram. I committed to leave a comment on at least four posts each week. I bought a subscription to PW and cheered for writer friends who had awards and good reviews. I stayed active in my critique and author support groups and joined a new one.

EDIT OLD STUFF

It was time to drag out the “well there are too many dog books on the market right now” stories and see if one could get a new life. I looked over old lists of ideas. I tweaked a board book rhyme from years ago and submitted it to a contest where it placed in the top 10!

SUPPORT OTHERS

I learned to use Canva and spent a month promoting all the books from my support and critique group members on FaceBook, Instagram and X (when it was Twitter!). I researched commemorative dates from “something for every day” and was amazed that many celebrations matched what my friends had written!

BUILD FOR THE FUTURE

In the hope that some writing ability/interest would return, I updated all my proposal outlines with new comp titles and connections, continued posting on FaceBook and Instagram, and chose new groups to join. I tweaked stuff I already wrote and entered contests.

EXPLORE A NEW DIRECTION

Even in the stupor of treatment, I still loved to research. So I did not worry about the possibility of a book, but amassed data. I still have no idea what to do with all the marvelous factoids! I found a bundle of new blogs and groups by leaders in a new field. I did a month of comp title research. And that evolved into who I am at this moment – a picture book nonfiction author. Still learning, still growing, still writing.

We go through slumps and dry spells – I hope you find ways to keep writing even in the complicated parts, and your next manuscript is your very best! ✨

Multi-award winning author ROBIN CURRIE led children's departments of Midwestern public libraries and volunteered teaching English in developing countries. Robin has published more than 40 traditionally published picture books, selling 1.7M copies. She writes stories to read and read again!

Blog: [Read and Read Again!](#)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Robincurrieauthor

Instagram: www.instagram.com/authorrobincurrie

Life Cycle

by Shereen Hussain

Anyone who has lived in the Midwest is painfully aware of the annual ritual known as *preparing for winter*. It consists of putting away pastels and florals and exchanging them for chunky knits and thermals. Salads morph into soups, cereal turns into hot oatmeal, and so on.

A week ago, while engaged in this critical task of winterization by cleaning out our fireplace for autumnal gatherings, I saw something glistening on the broom. I wondered if it was glitter from my granddaughter's art project. But as I looked closer, I realized it was a tiny wing of a cicada. This made me chuckle as I emptied the pan into the yard, thus liberating the last remnant of summer.

I recalled how panicked I had been about the arrival of these bugs. I had never experienced their coming, as I grew up in Europe, where these critters are unknown. I had heard exaggerated stories of how there would be swarms of these insects everywhere. Rumors circulated that picnics and walks would be out of the question, and it was alarming.

When they did arrive last year, I stayed inside for the first couple of weeks, as it felt like a plague of almost Biblical levels. But after a while, I got tired of being alone. It was impossible to be indoors for an extended period of time. Even my granddaughter looked bored and antsy.

I pondered on how we had handled it in 2007, the last time cicadas had been in this part of the world. I had been on an extended trip to England to visit my parents. My husband was working around the clock, trying to build his newly formed start-up company. He was renting some office space and was complaining about the pesky bugs that were all over the driveway and on car windshields. At the time, he had been in the best of health, at the peak of his career. One day he called me to say that the local library had a brick dedication program and he had purchased one with our children's names on it. What wonderful memories we had shared!

Little did we know that only a decade later he would receive a tragic diagnosis of a terminal illness. When I had spent



that summer in the UK, I never would have guessed that this was the direction my life would take. There I was, over a decade later, wondering if my worst fears would be realized. It was all debilitating. I had no idea how to function in this new life and retreated within.

Although I had been writing since I was a very young child, I initially couldn't even look at my laptop or notebooks. But words had always been a solace for me. After some visits to a therapist and some firm but gentle nudges from my mother, I slowly began to resurface. I began writing again by scribbling thoughts or memories on Post-it notes. This turned into poetry and then into short stories. A kind friend sent me MFA materials, and I began to read the textbooks one by one. Also, the library became a refuge for me—a temporary respite from the caregiving.

Since I had always dreamed of having a children's book published, I finally signed up for a class on craft. The instructor said we'd be writing a manuscript in six weeks, no questions asked. This was what I needed—to be thrown into the deep end. I put together my historical fiction book and started submitting it wherever I could. I had also written a short story about my husband and my very-textbook-Indian-arranged marriage and received news that a publisher was interested!

Meanwhile, my husband's health deteriorated, and dark days were here. A week after he tragically passed away—in the midst of mountains of paperwork and acute grief in all its forms—a package arrived. It was an anthology



Life Cycle

containing my short story! Was this a message from God saying, “Keep on writing!”?

Life did go on. And eventually, there was good news abound. Additions to the family! Weddings! A new baby! And I learned to live again.

This year, I started taking my granddaughter to the library. We found the dedication brick one day, all covered in cicadas. I brushed the wings aside and read out the names of her family members. It was all one big legacy. The library, literature, reading, keeping busy... doing something fulfilling despite all the challenges around us.

My granddaughter often scribbled with crayons. When I would ask what she had drawn, she would often say ‘bug, bug.’ Naturally, she was seeing the flying critters everywhere! Soon enough she would grow up and move on with her life.

It will be exciting to witness all its stages. But as I peered down at the little picture she had drawn, I was reminded that just like the cicada our lives are just so brief, so fragile, yet so precious, and it is important to make our time here count. 🌟

SHEREEN HUSSAIN was born in India, raised in the UK, and later moved to California. She has a degree in French and English Literature from the University of London, and one in Education from San Francisco State. She was a teacher for many years and then entered the field of international business. Writing has been a lifelong passion. She is a published author of several short stories and a play. Shereen has 3 adult children, 2 lovely daughters-in-law, and a grandchild.



Voices of Change



RELEASING THE TRUTH THAT IS UNIQUELY YOURS: WHAT GODDESS KALI TAUGHT ME ABOUT WRITING by Anuradha D. Rajurkar

Are you there, Goddess Kali?

I was lying in the yard, face-down in the grass. The October sun was warm upon my back and the earth smelled like recent rain. Our rescue puppy, Cleo, bounded up, delighted to see me sprawled across her turf. She gazed into my face with curiosity, licked my cheek, and settled beside me. I was in creative slump mode, and she was here to ride it out.

Kali? It's me, Anuradha. I need to rock this revision, but I'm beat. Thoughts?

Kali is a Hindu warrior goddess who symbolizes both the creative and destructive forces of nature—and she has woven her way into my next novel. Known for being fierce but nurturing, she takes no garbage and gets things done. When feeling stuck creatively, I envision her and it helps.

Sometimes.

The truth is my life was undergoing immense change, and overwhelm was becoming my new best friend. Soon after the publication of my debut novel, my family and I moved to Evanston, my hometown, after 30 years away. Despite the challenges of a major move, exciting things were happening: My second novel was acquired on proposal, I was invited to contribute short stories to two anthologies, I secured a full-time job in academia, and we now lived close to family. Life was good. Exhausting, but good.

As I threw myself into the research for my second novel, a gothic thriller set in India, I stumbled upon Goddess Kali. With her indigo skin and wild black hair, she rides a tiger while defeating obstacles in her path with her scythe.

I found myself channeling this symbol of wild, feminine empowerment whenever I became creatively disconnected. Which, as it turned out, was often.

Kali? Halp!

I like to believe she heard me, because I learned some tricks—ones that have helped me reclaim my creative energy and writing joy. Here's what worked:

VOICE MEMO NATURE WALKS

I set an intention: during my daily walks with Cleo, I record voice memos about my WIP (work in progress). I'm not going to lie: Walking Cleo as she hind-leg-lurch-hops at every living thing we pass while I juggle treats, poop bags, my thoughts, and my phone is a lot. But eventually, we hit our stride. These walks help me generate character motivations, plot twists, and new story ideas. Voice memos allow me to stay in close connection with my WIP while physically away from my computer. Plus, it invites Cleo into my process, which she values. 😊

BUILDING A WRITING COMMUNITY

Connecting with other writers and illustrators brings fresh energy to my creative life. Whether it's meeting with my critique partners to discuss our WIPs or supporting new writers, meeting with other creators makes my heart happy. And tips I've gleaned and shared? A) *Story Genius* and *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* help sculpt strong pitches and outlines. B) A clear strategy is essential when querying agents (thanks, *Manuscript Wishlist* and *Publishers Marketplace*, for existing). And C) sometimes, cheerleading is everything (*You wrote a beautiful book and you rock!*). Participating in others' artistic journeys is fulfilling—and inspires me to reengage with my own.

LIVING BOOKMARKS

When I feel stuck, I fold a piece of paper, grab a pen, flop down, and read, writing sentences I love on this "living bookmark." After finishing the book, I have its highlights captured. I keep this bookmark close as I tinker with word choice or sentence structure in my own work. Just as musicians craft songs from samples, writers can use mentor



texts in similar ways. Words are our first loves—and our tools. Studying how your favorite writers wield them will bring out the magic in your writing.

GROUNDING

In drafting a story for an environmental activism anthology edited by Nora Carpenter, I came across the concept of grounding (or earthing). The idea is based in Native American understanding of the natural world, its essence being this: when our bodies connect with the ground, we link with the Earth's electrical energy. Syncing with the Earth's natural frequencies positively impacts our bodies, health, and mood. When I became intentional about earthing—being barefoot outdoors, lying in the grass, and gardening with my bare hands—I began to gain a sense of balance and well-being. After all, Goddess Kali—divine Mother Earth—already knows and practices this.

LOVE LITTLE YOU

A friend shared that she props at her desk a photo of herself as a girl as a reminder to treat her inner child with empathy and compassion. I discovered that it's much harder to berate myself for a writing slump with little me staring back at me. Plus, centering my inner kid helps me write with young people in mind.

ART IMMERSION

On a recent trip to Miami, I saw an art installation featuring green geckos. It struck me like a bolt: lizards! The perfect metaphor to thread through my gothic—and the puzzle piece I was missing. When we view writing as an art form that's linked to other art forms, we find inspiration everywhere: a street mural, a song lyric, a vintage dress, a stained-glass transom in a coffee shop. Even bingeing a television series allows us to examine plot, characterization, and pacing. So, take in art in all its forms. It might just be what's needed to unlock your WIP.

DRAWING POWER FROM YOUR ANCESTORS

When calling on Kali wasn't working, a friend offered this: "Maybe you're too tired for warrior-ing. What if you envisioned being cheered on by your ancestors?" I thought of my late grandmother—the warmth of her hand on mine, her earthy chuckle. The pride in my late grandfather's eyes when I told him I wanted to be a writer. *Anu, you*

are a writer, and writers must write. Go on, now! New ideas flickered, fireflies in a velvet sky. The concept of my ancestors wanting for me what I want for myself motivates me to keep going.

STUDY ARTISTS' OBSESSIONS

Reading about and hearing from artists about their work lend insight into the artistic process. This intentional practice reminds me that we are part of a creative collective and that ebbs are normal—that there's even beauty in the wrangling. So read the arts sections. Visit the local knitting shop. Attend concerts, absorbing the stories the musicians share behind their songs. Check out maker fairs, asking artists about their stories. It supports artists on their journeys and reconnects you with your own.

BECOMING YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND AND OTHER THERAPIES

Setting small goals while speaking lovingly to my brain is a technique shared by a dear friend who is a life coach. Stuff like: *Yes, this is tough, but I have faith in you. You can rest when you need to, and we'll get this done. You got this!* This technique settles the nervous system down enough that you can focus. And once you reach the goal, celebrate yourself. Other therapies that remap negative mind-patterns are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and emotional freedom technique (EFT), to name a few. Each help form healthier neural pathways. Your brain—and creative practice—will thank you.

FACING YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF

Often we torment ourselves over creating, like it's a monster to control or vanquish. But at its heart, creating means connecting with your core self. In researching Goddess Kali, I learned she is known to release in you the truth that is uniquely yours—the stuff of great writing. Kali embraces duality: She is terrifying but loving. She destroys but eradicates evil in protection of children. This ultimate mother also symbolizes the force of time, death, rebirth. She is filled with paradox, as are we all. Honoring my inner Kali helps me write from a place of authenticity—a safe space to process honest queries, deep fears, high hopes. So, as you write, embrace your truth. Kali's got your back.



Voices of Change

A month later, I lay with Cleo in the grass in my puffy coat, staring at the bare ivy vines crosshatched along the side of the house. Their leaves have fallen, decomposing into the black earth as kickoff to an expansive winter. But in time, Kali will sweep through with her warmth, her green shoots, her leaves and her flowers. Destruction, fallow times, rebirth—nature’s cycle.

Goddess Kali reminds me that we, too, are nature. That our creative power rises after rest. After the destruction of old habits that no longer serve us. That to create, we must immerse ourselves with whatever it is that feeds the soul. Kali has helped me understand that only with the intentional care of your spirit can you then release the truth that is uniquely yours. You are a writer, and writers must write. ✨

ANURADHA D. RAJURKAR is the award-winning author of *American Betiya* (Knopf), named a Best Book by the American Library Association (YALSA), Bank Street, and on *Cosmopolitan’s* 125 Best YA Books of All Time list. Born in Evanston to Indian immigrant parents, Anuradha earned two degrees from Northwestern University. For many years she had the joy of being a public school teacher by day, writer by night.

Nowadays, when she’s not writing, you can find Anuradha exploring the shores of Lake Michigan, reading by the fire, or roguishly knitting sweaters without their patterns. Anuradha is currently editing her second novel, a gothic thriller entitled *Temporary Bodies* (Knopf, 2025), along with two short stories for anthologies; *Home Has No Borders* (HarperTeen, May 2025) and *Everything Needs to Change* (Charlesbridge, April 2026). She currently lives in Evanston with her family, including its newest member: a sweet, highly opinionated rescue pup named Cleo.



Illustrator's Tips



WHAT TO DO WHEN ARTIST'S BLOCK COMES OUT TO PLAY

by Shauna Lynn Panczyszyn

We've all been there. One day, the ideas are flowing, and you're creating your best work yet. The next, you're stuck. No ideas, no motivation—it feels like this might be the end of your career. You're washed up. Expired. You feel paralyzed, unable to create, convinced that your creativity is gone for good.

Here's the thing: this is normal. Creativity ebbs and flows. For every high, there's a period of stagnation—or even regression. The good news? It doesn't last forever. In fact, I like to think of these moments as growing periods—uncomfortable, yes, but ultimately necessary for progress.

In 2023, I spent the entire year stuck in a creative rut. I was overthinking every illustration, paralyzed by the pressure to produce something meaningful and good. I had countless unfinished projects and, looking back, not much to show creatively in regards to personal work for the year. To date, it's been my longest creative block, and honestly, it sucked.

That's not to say I wasn't working—I still had client deadlines to meet, and I pushed through as best I could. I even finished two children's books. But my confidence took a hit, and I doubted my abilities constantly.

It wasn't my first block, and it won't be my last—though I sincerely hope it remains the longest one. I'm not looking to break that record. One thing I've come to understand about myself is that I cannot sit still for long, and *I have* to create (thanks, ADHD!). Even in my most frustrating creative ruts, I've found ways to keep my hands moving, whether through studies of work I admired or experimenting with new techniques.

To be honest, a lot of that time felt like fumbling around in the dark. I wasn't producing anything I was particularly proud of, but I kept going, knowing that every skill I practiced would benefit me eventually.

And then, early in 2024, it clicked. I created a faux book cover, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I loved what I made. It remains one of my favorite pieces to this day.

This breakthrough reminded me of an essential truth about artist block: *it doesn't last forever*. Sometimes, all you can do is keep moving, even when it feels like you're going nowhere. Progress isn't always visible in the moment, but it's happening.



IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD.

When you're stuck in an artistic rut, it can feel hopeless. It's hard not to dwell on being stuck. It's frustrating, yes, but it's also something you can work through. Through my own experiences with creative blocks I've learned strategies and habits that can help regain momentum and rediscover your spark. It's not easy, but it's possible.



Illustrator's Tips

Here are some ways I cope with and try to break through artist block when it happens:

ACKNOWLEDGE IT.

That's it—that's the first step. Acknowledging that you're in an artist block is powerful. It puts the control back in your hands and subtly shifts your mindset, allowing your brain to accept where you are and focus on actively moving past it.

CHANGE UP YOUR ENVIRONMENT.

Sometimes the simplest changes can help get you out of an artist rut. We tend to sit and work in the same spaces day after day and it can be monotonous after a while and stifle creativity. If you're able, pack up your sketchbook and/or tablet and take yourself on a field trip to a new location.

Here are some of my go-to spots to get away from my desk:

- **Local Coffee Shop:** I love supporting my local coffee shop, Little Bean Coffee Company. Sitting with a chai latte at one of their tables while I sketch can help inspire me.
- **Bookstores:** Wandering through a bookstore is a great way to find inspiration while giving myself a break from the desk. It's even better when it's a cozy, local shop.
- **Outside for a Walk:** I have a Shih Tzu who loves walks (when the weather cooperates). These walks are a chance to either shut my brain off or let it wander freely.
- **Ice Rink:** When I'm on the ice, all I can focus on is what I'm doing in that moment. It's a forced mental break that I do even when I don't have an artist block happening.
- **My Couch:** Around 4 p.m., my Shih Tzu insists I leave my desk. He'll huff at me until I relocate to the couch, where I can keep working if I choose. Even that small change in location helps to shift my mindset.

It's important to note that I don't always bring my sketchbook or iPad along for these activities. Sometimes, the best thing I can do is let my brain detach from work entirely. Giving yourself permission to step away can be just the reset you need to get your creativity flowing again.

LISTEN TO MUSIC.

Music has a way of unlocking our imagination, tapping into emotions, and bringing stories to life. For me, music is often a key source of inspiration—I can hear a song and

immediately envision entire scenarios I want to illustrate. Whether it's a lush orchestral soundtrack or a lively jazz piece, each genre seems to spark a different creative direction.

Here's how I use music to overcome artist block:

- **Explore Different Genres:** Soundtracks often inspire me to create fan art or dive into reinterpreting a movie or book I love, while jazz evokes a sense of travel and adventure. Experiment with genres to see what stirs your imagination.
- **Let Your Mind Wander:** Choose music that allows your thoughts to drift. Sometimes a lyric, a melody, or even the rhythm can unlock an idea.
- **Start Sketching:** Once you're immersed in the music, pick up a pencil and let your hand move. Don't overthink—just capture whatever comes to mind, whether it's characters, scenes, or abstract shapes.

Music gives us the freedom to explore without boundaries. It doesn't matter if the result is polished or even cohesive—what matters is letting your creativity flow. Sometimes, the best ideas come from simply allowing the music to guide your pencil.

DO ART STUDIES.

Studies are one of the best ways to learn and improve your skills. Even during my artist block, I found myself itching to create—but staring at a blank page was daunting. What helped me was doing studies of work I admired. It took away the pressure of starting from scratch and allowed my mind to wander since I didn't have to overthink composition or content.

This practice not only kept me creating but also gave me the opportunity to learn new techniques and explore styles I might not have studied otherwise. The key is to approach it with intention—study the work with a goal in mind, whether it's learning a new method, style, or technique, or simply enjoying the process. Heck, it was often cathartic to do studies when I was stuck because it was relaxing.

Best case scenario? It helps you break through your art block. Worst case? You come out of it with a new skill. Either way, it's a win.

RECLAIM ART AS PLAY.

In a world where social media constantly demands fresh content, it's easy to fall into the trap of creating solely for an audience. I found myself in that space—feeling that everything I made had to be “useful” or shareable. This



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mindset created unnecessary pressure and stole the joy from my process.

To break free, I have to constantly remind myself that my art doesn't always need to be seen. Sometimes it's okay to just create for the joy of creating.

These are just a few ways that I have done this for myself:

- **Learn Something New:** Try a medium you've never touched before. Watercolors, gouache, clay, printmaking—exploring without expectation can reignite your creative spark.
- **Experiment With Styles:** Push your comfort zone by mimicking different styles or inventing your own. Remember, you're the only one who will see this, so let yourself play.
- **Sketch With Prompts:** Give yourself three random words and use them to guide a quick sketch. This simple exercise can be surprisingly freeing. There are also a multitude of prompts from prior Folktale Week events, monthly prompt lists (like [@ellolovey's](#) monthly Doodle-a-Day lists), Inktober, etc., that you can pull ideas from. I keep a Pinterest board of prompt lists here: <https://www.pinterest.com/shaunaparmesan/illustration-prompts/>
- **Create Just for You:** Keep a private sketchbook (or digital sketchbook). Draw silly doodles, messy concepts, or purely abstract work—things you never intend to share. You can also draw random shapes and then challenge yourself to turn them into something else. This can be liberating and help you reconnect with art as an outlet.

There was a point in my career when I had a morning ritual of spending 30 minutes drawing just for myself. Over time, I drifted from this practice, but I've realized how important it is. Allowing myself that time without pressure to make something "good" or marketable helps me grow as a creative. Play and experimentation are vital for keeping our work fresh and fulfilling.

REVISIT OLD WORK.

Artist block often makes coming up with new ideas feel impossible. One way to push through is to look back at your old work. Find a piece that resonates with you and redraw it in your current style.

Doing this serves three purposes:

1. **It Highlights Your Growth:** Revisiting old work allows you to see how far you've come as an artist. It's a tangible reminder of your progress and can reignite your confidence.
2. **It Sparks New Ideas:** Sometimes, revisiting an older concept can open the door to new possibilities. You might find details you overlooked or ideas you can expand upon.
3. **It Could Be Your Breakthrough:** Who knows? Maybe that's the piece that pulls you out of your artist block.

It doesn't have to be perfect or even finished—it's about exploration and reconnecting with your creativity. You might surprise yourself with how much inspiration your own portfolio can hold.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS, REST.

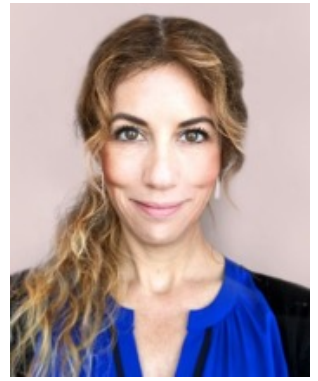
Sometimes, an artist block is your body's way of telling you it needs a break. Creativity can't thrive when you're running on empty, so give yourself permission to rest. Remember, you can't pour from an empty cup.

Rest doesn't have to mean doing nothing. Watch movies or TV shows, read books, listen to podcasts, play video games, or spend time with friends. Even sitting on your couch doing absolutely nothing can be relaxing.

I get it—life is busy, rent needs to be paid, and deadlines loom. But even carving out thirty minutes just for yourself can make a difference. Use that time to relax, recharge, and remind yourself that your value as an artist doesn't depend on being "on" all the time. Sometimes, stepping away is exactly what you need to come back stronger. ✨

SHAUNA LYNN PAN CZYSZYN is an illustrator and lettering artist with a love for creating bright, colorful, and whimsical imagery, as well as all things spooky and cute. Based in Chicago, she works from her home studio alongside her pup, Teddy Bear. When she's not creating, Shauna can be found ice skating, and snuggling with her dog. Shauna has illustrated the following picture books: *Who Took My Lollipop*, *Happy Halloween*, *Teal Pumpkin!*, *The Monsters on the Broom*, and the *Dirt and Bugs Series*.

Writer's Tips



THREE TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE CURSE OF ORWELL'S DEMON by Karla Arenas Valenti

On a panel at the Portland Book Festival recently I was asked what my favorite part of the writing process is. That was an easy one, and my response probably resonates with many of you: “my favorite part is when I write The End. The rest is all tears and hair pulling and questioning of my life choices.”



The audience laughed, but I'm not alone in this sentiment. E.B. White famously said, “writing is hard work and bad for the health.” George Orwell went even further: “writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout with some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.”



And it's this last part I want to talk about here, that irresistible “demon” that drives us to this literary madness and makes it so difficult to find the joy in what we do.

I'm currently in the I-hate-my-writing-self-and-everything-about-this-process phase of my current project (my 15th book). I have re-written this novel at least three times (completely from start to finish) and each rewrite has dozens of versions. Each time I get to a point where [fill in whatever triggers you but for me it could be an unexpected plot hole or I just don't like the characters anymore or the world is too bland or the story is just so boring that I can't continue], a hot panic starts to build up inside me and activates a punishing internal dialogue.

I begin fluctuating between “don't give up, you've come so far. This is part of the process. You need to write terrible stuff first to get to the good stuff. This happens to you all the time and you always pull through. You've got it” and “You're done. This is terrible. You can't do this. Whatever magic mojo you had the last time has expired. You are bound to disappoint your [agent, editor, critique group, family, publisher, etc.]. You are an imposter. This is too hard. It's insurmountable.”

Inevitably, I end up shutting down my work because the emotional rollercoaster is just too much to deal with. Cue the tears, hair pulling, and questioning of my life choices.

“Never again!” I tell Scrivner (my preferred writing platform). “You and I are done forever.”

And I don't show up the next day or the day after that or the one after that.

Like you, I've heard the advice to show up every day no matter what and write something, anything! This might be an effective technique for some writers but not for me. I am flattened out by my self-inflicted despair and no good will can come out of me sitting in front of my laptop. In fact, quite the opposite. So, sometimes I won't show up for months.



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And it will be *such a relief!*
The pressure in my chest lifts.
I'm working out and eating well.
My kids are super charming.
My husband and I enjoy long walks by the beach.
The sun shines down upon me, and there is joy, joy everywhere!



"I should live like this all the time!" I tell whomever I happen to be relishing life with at that moment in time, vowing to never again give in to the brutality that is being a writer.

And then...inevitably...the demon rises.

Just like that, out of nowhere, the burning urge to write flares inside me. It might start as the seed of an idea, perhaps an unexpected solution to a plot hole. I might see something interesting and wonder how my characters would handle it. Sometimes I might even land on a new story concept that I'm curious to explore.

At first, I resist giving in to this urge because I've been down this road before and it always ends in tears and hair pulling and questioning of life choices.

But, as George Orwell aptly stated, this is a "demon whom one can neither resist nor understand."

In fact, the urge becomes so all-consuming and utterly distracting that I find myself doing the only thing I can—rebooting Scrivner and igniting this torturous cycle all over again.

"Uh! I hate writing," I recently told my husband. "Why do I put myself through it?"

This, it turns out, is the wrong question. The better thing to ask is, "How do I deal with the curse of this literary demon in a productive way?"

Because for people like us (of the storytelling inclination) the demon never relents. This part of the process never changes, it never goes away, it never becomes easier. It's not even in our control!

However, what is within our control is how we deal with it.

THREE TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE CURSE OF ORWELL'S DEMON

Elizabeth Gilbert once said, "My path as a writer became much more smooth when I learned...to regard my struggles as curious, not tragic." Which brings me to:

Tip #1: Don't fight it, don't fear it. Accept that the demon is part of the writer's journey and build it into your expectations.

In practice that might look like me saying at the onset of a new project, "I know I will reach a point in the process when I start to lose faith in myself and my storytelling. That's okay. This is hard and messy work. When that happens, I give myself permission to step away and let things settle in my mind without anger or resentment. And I will trust that the demon will alert me to when it's time to return to work."

Tip #2: Practice when you can (even if it's months apart) but just keep showing up.

And, by the way, when you do show up, lower the bar for your expectations. Your goal is not to write a hit; it's simply to get words on a page. The masterpiece will surface later when you revise.

The second tip comes from an anecdote I learned about Issac Asimov. Apparently, he was a very prolific writer (I heard that he wrote over 400 books). Many of his books are well known and widely beloved. However, in that batch of 400, he also had some not-so-great books. And here's why that matters: his success did not come about because he sat down





to write a hit. It happened because he sat down to write a book, and he did that 400 times. It's the repetition that counts.

Tip #3: Think of the demon as the friend that compels you to go deeper, to tap into those parts of you that you don't want to visit but where all the good stuff lives.

Why? So that you can bring that richness out into the world and gift it to the reader who needs that nourishment right now.

The last tip comes from the advice my husband gave me when I told him how much I hate this demonic cycle. It demands so much of me.

"It has to," he said. "It's that very sacrifice that makes readers connect with your storytelling." Which is to say, we give that demon our blood, sweat, and tears (our soul, as it were). But the demon doesn't consume our soul; no, instead, it's the force that channels that part of us into our stories.

To think of the demon in that light, gives new meaning to "my favorite part is when I write 'The End'" because now, The End can be the culmination of a "horrible, exhausting struggle" and also the conclusion of a job well done, the testament of a finale well-earned. THE END. ✨

**Image credits: Canva*

KARLA ARENAS VALENTI writes picture books, chapter books, and middle grade novels. Her latest middle grade novel, *Lola*, received four starred reviews and was listed by Kirkus as one of the Best Books of 2024. The first book in her chapter book series, *Legendarios*, was selected as a 2025 Texas Bluebonnet Award Nominee and chosen by the Illinois Reading Counsel as one of their top titles for 2025. She also recently won the Pure Belpré award for her novel, *Lola*, at the ALA YALSA awards! Despite these wonderful recognitions, not a day goes by when she doesn't feel like an imposter. Connect with Karla at [KarlaValenti.com](https://www.KarlaValenti.com).

Writer's Bookshelf

RESOURCES FOR THE DISTRACTED WRITER

by Nicole M. Hewitt

I'm going to start this article with a confession: I own quite a few writing craft books—many of which I've purchased after reading glowing recommendations—but I haven't read most of them. I always *plan* to read them. Sometimes I even add working through a craft book to my to-do list because I feel the book would help with a specific challenge I'm currently facing in my writing. Unfortunately, over time, I've come to terms with the fact that I'm not the type of person who often completes a to-do checklist.

A month or so ago, I was (re)diagnosed with ADHD. This diagnosis is something I've known about myself for years, but I just recently decided I needed to address it more directly. You see, I'm a distracted writer. I will often start a project or a craft book or a resource but fail to finish. Because of this tendency, I've found that I need writing resources that are actionable and easy to digest.

So, today, I'm hoping to reach some of my fellow distracted writers and share some resources that have worked well for me.

INTERACTIVE ONLINE COURSES

Some of the best writing craft resources I've found have been interactive online courses, where you're learning over a period of a few weeks or months and are encouraged to experiment and share your own work along the way. These types of hands-on courses usually consist of multiple sessions, so you get a lot of information, but it's presented in manageable chunks. Often there's "homework" assigned that gives you a sense of accountability and assures that you'll actually put what you're learning into practice in some way, therefore helping to cement the information in your mind.

One drawback of these courses is that they're more costly than something like a craft book, but this is also a positive if you're a distracted writer like me: I'm much more likely to stick to a course that I've invested in! There are hundreds of online courses available, covering just about every genre, age group, topic, or challenge you can imagine. I've personally



taken courses through The Writing Barn and Highlights, but I know there are many other reputable places that offer them as well. SCBWI even sometimes has opportunities for these more robust interactive workshops, in addition to their standard one-session events. And keep an eye out on social media of authors you admire to find opportunities to work with them!

If you write in verse, I specifically recommend any course by Cordelia Jensen. I've found her courses to be enriching, engaging, and actionable.

IN-PERSON CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

There is nothing quite like meeting in person with fellow writers to inspire you to keep going when you're starting to feel the urge to put down your pen (or, more likely, your keyboard). In-person conferences usually have many different panels and topics to choose from. I encourage you to focus mostly on sessions that apply to you (and your writing goals, genre, etc.) but also throw in one or two curveballs—sometimes I've gained surprising insights from sessions that I didn't think would directly apply to my writing.



Writer's Bookshelf

I've personally attended many SCBWI conferences, both the larger SCBWI conferences and our regional events. I've always found them to be very valuable. I've also attended a full-novel workshop at WIFYR (Writing & Illustrating for Young Readers), which was an incredible opportunity. (One day I'd love to do an in-person Highlights workshop, but that hasn't happened yet.)

TIPS FOR CRAFT BOOKS

I realize the suggestions I've given so far can be pricey. Not everyone has the resources to attend these types of events and workshops. Even if they did, they certainly can't afford to invest in them constantly. So, what's a distracted writer to do in the meantime?

I have a few tips for incorporating craft books into your writing time, even if you're easily distracted, like I am:

- **Find a book with writing exercises that work well for you and reuse them.**

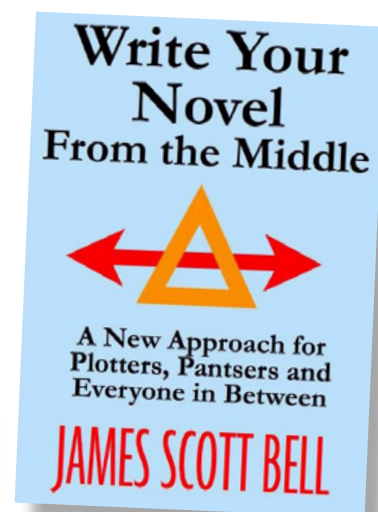
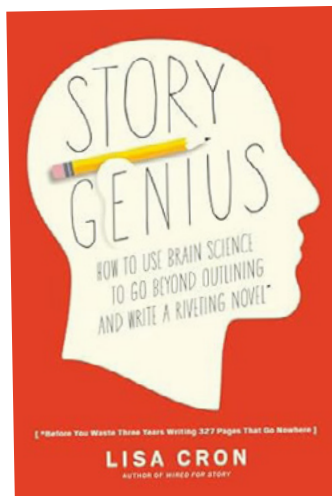
I love the book *Story Genius*, by Lisa Cron, for character development, but I've only read it from front to back once. Still, when I start a new project, I almost always go back and skim through parts of the book and complete the exercises for my new characters.

Since I'm already familiar with the book and its exercises, it doesn't feel so daunting to work through them.

- **Listen to the book via audiobook (or find podcasts about it).**

I often find it much easier to digest non-fiction through audio. I recently purchased the audiobook of *Save the Cat Writes a Novel*, by Jessica Brody, to go along with my physical copy because I think I'll be more apt to pick it up that way. And more nebulous, inspirational craft books are perfect for listening to (for instance, I listened to *The Creative Act*, by Rick Rubin, which is more of a book about creativity than a craft book with specific exercises).

You can also often find podcasts by the authors of your favorite craft books (or inspired by those books), such as *The Hero's Journey Podcast*.



- **Find a short book!**

One of my favorite craft book discoveries is *Write Your Novel from the Middle*, by James Scott Bell. This little gem of a resource clocks in at just 88 pages, but it got me thinking about my WIP in a new way, and it's very practical and easy to put into practice. It looks like he has other books that are equally concise, and I plan to check those out as well.

If you're a fellow distracted writer that's made it this far (even if you skimmed—I don't judge!), I hope this has been helpful and that some of these resources have sparked interest for you.

But before I conclude, I want to reiterate that the best thing I've done to help my issues with focus and concentration is to see a professional to get help for my ADHD symptoms. We all struggle to stay on task from time to time, but if you deal with more than just everyday, life-is-busy distraction, I urge you to seek help as well. *You* are the very best resource you can invest in. ✨

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Mentor Texts

by Sara Shacter

When I first heard the term “mentor text,” my ever-present Imposter Syndrome kicked in.

I was introduced to the concept at a conference. Speakers encouraged me to find these magical tomes. Friends waxed rhapsodic about returning to a title, over and over, to study the lessons held in its pages. Some reserved a special spot, near their workspaces, to have these essential books at the ready.

I had no such books.

There were books that had changed me. Moved me. Held me spellbound. I just hadn't felt mentor-y about them.

Generally, when I read, I want something new. Something that might light up my brain in a fresh way. And it was this inclination that made me realize I'd been looking at “mentor texts” all wrong.

A MATTER OF DEFINITION

Allow me to explain.

My definition of “mentor text” had always been what others said it was: a touchstone, part of my writing DNA, thrumming just below the surface as I worked on my craft.

But there are no “musts” when writing.

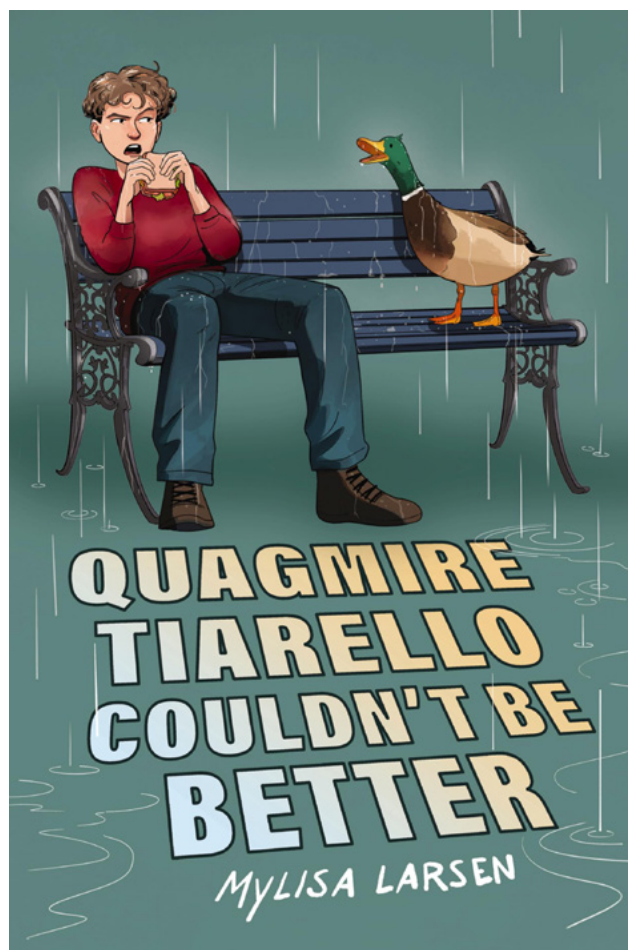
I realized that I have *project-specific* mentor texts. These are books that guide me as I work my way through the challenges of a particular manuscript. But they do not necessarily inform all I do.

FOR EXAMPLE— MY NOVEL IN PROGRESS

Getting Unstuck:

For at least a year, I've had a middle grade novel in my head. It includes a ghost from a previous, unsuccessful manuscript. I love this character and have already built her speculative world. The problem is her “voice.” When she thinks or writes, her voice is true to the individual in my head. But every time she opens her mouth, I lose her.

A few weeks ago, I read the brilliant novel *Quagmire Tiarello Couldn't Be Better*, by Mylisa Larsen. The book is written in a close third person, present tense, from Quagmire's point of view. The voice is captivating. And it wasn't until I was a quarter of the way through the book that I realized Quag barely speaks. He seems to speak, as he responds internally to what people say around him, but in reality, he's almost silent.



Eureka! I had found a mentor text! This genius technique is what my ghost needs. She can act, and react, while remaining silent. Her silence is perfect for her ghostly nature and will play into other aspects of the novel. All at once, a rush of ideas opened in my brain and my novel leapt forward.



Mentor Texts

Market Analysis:

Having already sold a novel, I've learned the importance of having a fresh take on my topic. Hence, I've been reading middle grade fiction dealing with the same theme as my developing manuscript: climate change. (I know—climate change and ghosts? You'll have to stay tuned!) For me, all these books are mentor texts, but in a unique way.

I've found titles in which kids wrestle with eco-anxiety (*Haven Jacobs Saves the Planet*, by Barbara Dee; *Front Country*, by Sara St. Antoine); face climate disasters (*Two Degrees*, by Alan Gratz; *Down Came the Rain*, by Jennifer Mathieu); and are aided by time travel (*We the Future*, by Cliff Lewis; *Girl Out of Time*, by Clyde Boyer).

All great books, but their existence in the market means I need to go in a different direction, away from these fine examples. Find my own twist.

Even so, these existing texts will still be woven into my own story. My work will be informed by how these authors handled their characters' eco-anxiety, introduced peers or adults who don't see climate as a problem, and crafted scenes of actual climate disaster. Any interesting and complex topic has challenges, and it's helpful to see how other authors have handled them.

FIND YOUR TEXTS

So read as you see fit. No one is the boss of you! Find your inspiration in a way that is organic to your process. Someday, someone out there may well use YOUR book as a mentor text! 🌟

SARA SHACTER began her career in children's publishing by editing and writing magazine articles. She has two picture books out in the world and her debut middle grade novel, *Georgia Watson and the 99 Percent Campaign*, will be published in October (Regal House/Fitzroy Books). She is a teacher and actively involved in the Illinois chapter of SCBWI. She is working on many new stories, which she hopes will soon make their way out into the world. See all Sara's accomplishments at sarafshacter.com/about/.

