

Fall 2024

Highlighter

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Journal



Carverina

how
to
get

Noticed

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic

Highlighter

Fall 2024 // How to Get Noticed

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For more information on our region, see <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic>

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Fall's New Possibilities

Happy fall from your SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Regional Advisors!

We've always considered fall as a time of new possibilities—we still buy new pens and notebooks as if we were going back to school. There is something hopeful about fresh paper, sharp pencil points, and colorful gel pens.

This fall we're happy to launch our second annual Beltways to Bridges program, with classroom-sized workshop sessions that allow for a deep dive into an element of craft.

Register for in-person workshops in Fairfax, Virginia, on October 26, 2024, or in Charlottesville on November 12, 2024. Workshops on October 26 will be held on GMU's beautiful campus in Fairfax and will feature Picture Book Revision with Kathy McMillan; Revising the Longer Manuscript with Lee Gjertsen Malone; Hooked from the Start: How to Craft Opening Pages that Hook Readers with freelance editor Julie Scheina; and Writing Your Novel - Off the Page with Candice Ransom.

We're offering two hybrid workshops in Charlottesville in November: Writing 101 with Terry Catasús Jennings and Distinguishing Character Voices Through Dialog with literary agent Taj McCoy. For more information and to register, visit <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic/beltways-and-bridges-a-kid-lit-road-trip-2024-to-2025>.

Please also check the SCBWI website for other regional events—inperson or online: <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic>.

Enjoy your spiced pumpkin latte or spiced cider and have a productive fall season!

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin".

Erin Teagan
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Val".

Valerie Patterson
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Heather Murphy Capps



Using the Magic of Fiction to Tell Tough Stories

by Heather Murphy Capps

As a young reader, I loved magic. Some high fantasy to be sure (part of my heart will always belong to Narnia) but also witches and books where the magic came from science, meaning most everything written by Madeleine L'Engle.

As I grew older, my appreciation for magic grew more nuanced. I developed a deep connection to the works of Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, and Toni Morrison. I loved the way these authors used subtle magic as an unquestioned, non-plot-driving facet of their characters' everyday lives to convey sharp political or social commentary or to soothe the razor edges of stories about revolution, oppression, trauma, and death. I didn't know the term magical realism when I first read these authors; I just knew the narrative style spoke to me.

Fast forward to the time when I began my writing career. In spite of my great love of all things books, I was also drawn to a more immediate form of storytelling. I got a master's degree in journalism and went on to build a 15-year career in television news. I was passionate about connecting with people and being part of the narrative of the times, but I will say that because there was no shortage of grim stories to tell, I often wished I could use a little literary magic. That wasn't because I thought I could wave a wand and fix the world, but because I appreciated the way magic in books could help people cope with, process, and talk about pain, grief, and anger.

It's no surprise, then, that when I put away my microphone and started writing middle grade fiction, my journalism background inspired a calling to tell stories about tough topics, and my lifelong love of magic and magical realism called me to lean into that technique to make those challenging topics accessible to young readers.

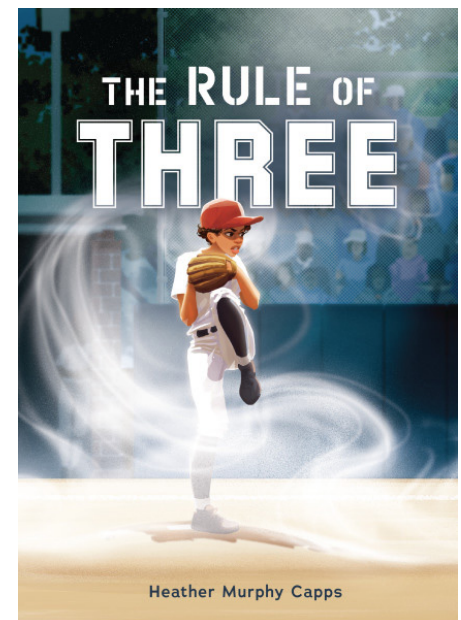
My debut novel, *INDIGO AND IDA*, used light touches of magic to lend a glow to a connection between Indigo, a contemporary young journalist, and historic 19th century journalist Ida B. Wells. Indigo finds parallels between her life and Wells's experiences, some of which are pretty hard but ultimately empower Indigo to speak her own truth and stand up for justice in her own world.

<https://heathermurphycapps.com>

 @HMCWrites

Favorite resources

- Jami Gold's [Worksheets for Writers](#)
- SAVE THE CAT! books by [Jessica Brody](#)
- STORY ENGINEERING by [Larry Brooks](#)
- [THE EMOTIONAL CRAFT OF FICTION: HOW TO WRITE THE STORY BENEATH THE SURFACE](#) by Donald Maass (founder of the Donald Maass Literary Agency)



THE RULE OF THREE by Heather Murphy Capps. Cover art and character illustrations (*next page*) by Jethro Unom

Meet a Writer

(continued)

My latest book, *THE RULE OF THREE*, is about baseball, family, and friendships. But it also tackles mental health, generational trauma, and a tragic event from 1985. My main character, Wyatt, displays visible signs of stress—smoke leaks out of his palms.

His father has always displayed the same stress response, so when Wyatt's smoke shows up, he's not happy about it, but he's not exactly surprised. This is the magical realism—Wyatt doesn't question smoke leaking from his palms (!!!) because it's a part of his life. The one traditional hallmark of magical realism I depart from is in explaining the magic—in *TROT*, I do explain the origins because it's important for Wyatt and his father to understand where it comes from in order to begin the healing process.

What we learn is that Wyatt's and his father's inherited smoke trait is epigenetic—the DNA coded legacy of trauma. Communities that have withstood repeated trauma—like slavery, the Holocaust, structural racism, extreme poverty, and domestic abuse—manifest trauma-related health and behavior traits and pass them on to future generations.

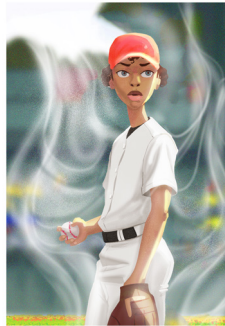
I chose to use this magical smoke so that readers could have a narrative buffer between themselves and what they are about to learn—that Wyatt's father lived through the 1985 bombing of the MOVE home in Philadelphia. MOVE was a Black liberation movement that lived in community in a home on Osage Avenue in Philadelphia throughout the late seventies and early



Dallas



Yannah



Wyatt



Dominic

Heather Murphy Capps



eighties. In May of 1985, responding to neighborhood complaints, police evacuated the area around the MOVE home and then surrounded it. They fired water cannons and guns into the home, and when they couldn't get the members to leave, dropped a bomb. The bomb exploded a nearby gas can, and the ensuing fire leveled a city block.

I was living in a town only a few train stops away from Philadelphia that year, and so as the crisis unspooled in raw, shocking video on our local news, I was part of a community of angry, scared people who literally couldn't believe what they were seeing with their own eyes. Decades later, I felt it was important to tell their story, to remember the people who lost their lives that day. This is how I found Wyatt and his father's voice; this is how they found their magical smoke—telling their story in a way that was accessible for upper middle grade readers.



Osage Avenue after the MOVE home bombing in May 1985 (Photo by the *Philadelphia Daily News*)

I don't want to end without noting, however, that while their story is hard, it is also one that ends with joy and resilience, and I wanted to honor that as well. One of the best parts about writing tough topics for young readers is that we get to lift up opportunities to come out of a hard time stronger than ever—which is exactly what Wyatt and his father did. I'm grateful every day for the chance to tell their story and for the readers who have connected with them so far. //H//

MEET AN ILLUSTRATOR


Janelle Washington



Self-portrait



<https://www.washingtoncuts.com/>

 @WashingtonCuts

 Washingtoncuts Papercuts

Favorite tool

My craft knife

What inspires me

Flowers, profile silhouettes, poetry, human emotions, world history and cultures

Design influences

Old photographs, African American natural hairstyles, art exhibits, patterns in nature, Adinkra West African symbols

Favorite things to illustrate

Profile silhouettes, portrait paper cuts and patterns

What I'd like to explore in the coming year

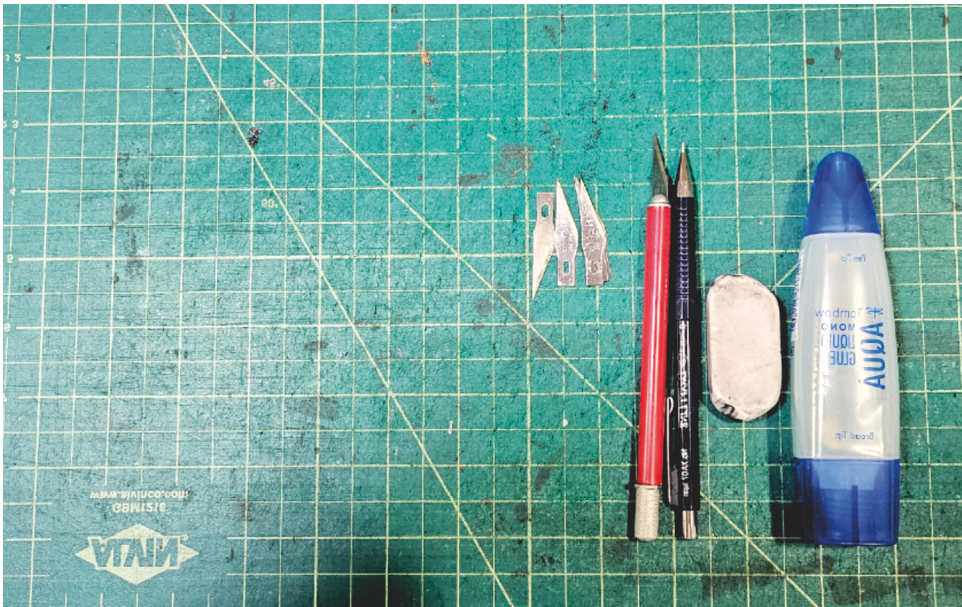
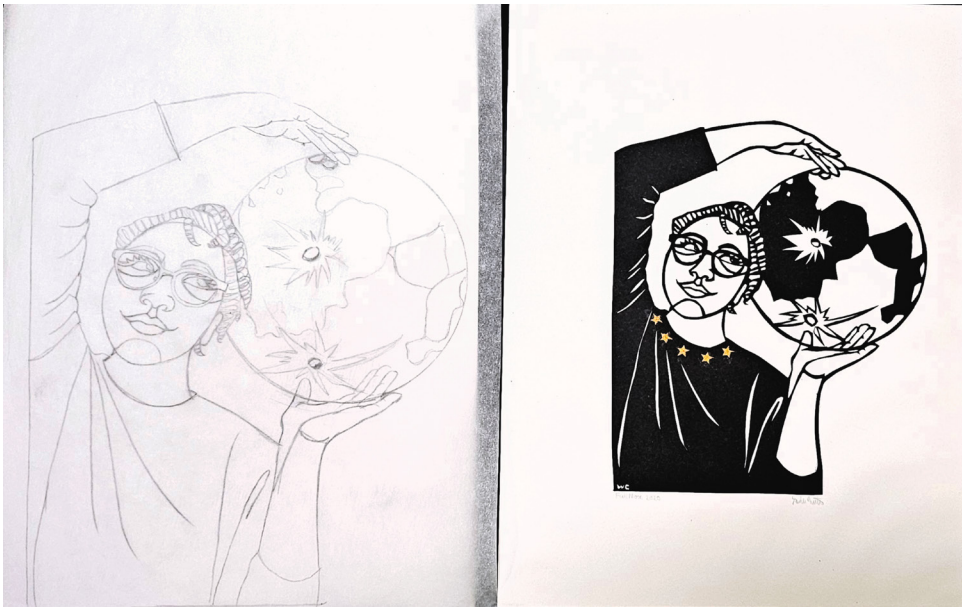
I am interested in illustrating more picture books with themes of nature, family, poetry, and biography (especially about Betty Reid Soskin) using my paper cut medium. //H//

Meet an Illustrator (continued)



Janelle Washington

A peek into the process



Made You Look! Crafting Successful Opening Pages

by Tanisha L. Brown

My first lesson in crafting opening pages came unexpectedly with a gut check during my first SCBWI conference a few years ago. As a new writer, I decided to sit in on an open session featuring a panel of agents critiquing anonymously submitted first pages. Things. Got. Real.

The first reading was a middle grade story. It had a horse in it. The horse was not significant to the story at that point. Yet, all of the agents disliked the horse for seemingly random reasons, which *really* bothered me.

"It's not about the horse!" I said, a little too loud. (OK, it was very loud.)

"Welcome to publishing," the guy next to me whispered.

I left. Witnessing five agents reject a fellow writer's work over an insignificant horse was too much. I reevaluated whether the writing life was for me because if agents were literally going to beat dead horses then what was the point?

Bless my heart! I had a lot to learn.

As I did the work of reading, writing, and developing a critical eye, the horse stayed with me. My instinct that day was correct ... for the wrong reason. It truly wasn't about the horse. So why was it there? Why weren't the things that were important to the story clear? My attempted defense didn't matter; the writer missed their mark. The story did not connect with the agents. Their comments confirmed as much.

So how do we connect with agents and ultimately readers in ten pages or less (with attention spans being what they are these days)? Let's dig into the purpose, process, and practice of crafting opening pages.

First pages welcome readers into a story's world. Easy, right? After all, in the book of ye olde three-act story structure, they fall within Act I, or the beginning, as part of a story's setup. I asked Julie Scheina, an independent children's and young adult book editor and former senior editor at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, for her advice on opening pages. She said the book's opening pages should give readers a sense of the story, world, voice, and characters. "Though the exact balance is unique to each manuscript, effective opening pages typically include a mix of dialogue, action, and description and give readers a sense of the main character's goals, motivations, and conflict."

But here's the rub: Once readers enter the world, the story has to keep them there. Successful opening pages contain a hook that encourages readers to turn pages. "One of the simplest ways to describe a hook is the most literal: If we think of readers like fish, a manuscript's hooks are what catch readers' attention and draw them into the book," said Scheina.

She explained that in practice, a hook can be anything that makes a book compelling or distinctive. It could be the premise (THE SECRET LIBRARY's heroine discovers a library housing her family's closely guarded secrets). It could be the format (THE MONA LISA VANISHES treats a nonfiction topic like a thrilling whodunit). It could be the perspective (in OLIVETTI, a typewriter is one of the narrators). Or it could be the setting, illustrations, voice, or any number of other elements.

Scheina said the hook is just one part of the whole. "For example," she said, "while readers may initially be drawn in by Vashti Harrison's beautiful artwork in BIG, the book's authentic, affirming text is equally essential."

Made You Look! Crafting Successful Opening Pages

(continued)

Hooking readers requires tapping into their curiosity and trust. Unfortunately, when querying, we don't have the benefit of a beautifully illustrated and lettered book cover to grab an agent's attention. However, we do have a title. Titles are the bonus part of the opening pages. The best ones leap off the page in a word, phrase, or sentence. Imagine the titles of some of your favorite books as part of an agent's slush pile. Is it any wonder why it made you and the agent curious enough to choose it?

Here are a few of my personal faves and why:



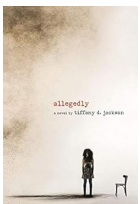
TRISTAN STRONG PUNCHES A HOLE IN THE SKY by Kwame Mbalia (Rick Riordan Presents, 2019)

Cool name. Who is this kid? How does he punch a hole in the sky and why?



LAST CHANCE DANCE by Lakita Wilson (Viking Books for Young Readers, 2023)

Hey, it rhymes. Dances are fun. The last chance for what? Dancing? Love? Both?



ALLEGEDLY by Tiffany D. Jackson (Katherine Tegen Books, 2017)

Whoa! Sounds messy and criminal. Fingers crossed for both.

As readers give in to their curiosity, they need to trust in the story to build on the hook. In his workshop, "Make Me Care! The First 10 Pages of Your Novel," Alex Sanchez, author of *YOU BROUGHT ME THE OCEAN* (DC Comics, 2020), suggests developing trust by physically and emotionally grounding readers in the story using "The 5 W's (and 2 H's)" (reprinted with permission):

To ground readers *physically* in the opening, ask:

1. Who are the characters at the opening?
2. When does the opening take place?
3. Where does the opening take place?
4. What are the characters doing?
5. Why is this scene happening? (What is the

purpose/goal in the story? To reveal a significant aspect of character? And/or to serve a plot point?)

To ground readers *emotionally*, ask:

1. How does the scene's opening create empathy?
2. How does the opening create conflict?

Additionally, the entire [Fall 2023 issue](#) of the Mid-Atlantic *Highlighter* journal has great in-depth articles and exercises on writing emotion.

Some common mistakes made in opening pages involve content, length, and pace. Everything within opening pages should matter to the story. But not everything that matters to the story belongs in the opening pages. Remember the horse? Perhaps it was significant—just not at that moment.

"Openings are notoriously tricky," said Scheina. "I encourage authors to consider multiple options. For example, sometimes a scene in the second or third chapter can make for a stronger opening because it skips over pages of backstory and explanation. In other cases, a book may need to start a little earlier in order to be most effective."

Scheina also provided the following tips:

- If it takes more than a couple of chapters for the core plot to start, authors may need to shorten, simplify, or reorder their opening scenes.
- Backstory-heavy openings can be especially tempting in genres that require additional research or world building, like fantasy, science fiction, or historical fiction. However, the job of the opening pages is not to introduce all the story's complexities at once, but rather to give readers enough information to make them want to keep going.
- If authors are struggling with a lengthy opening, they should prioritize the details that readers need to know in the moment, rather than zooming out to introduce places, characters, or rules that don't impact the opening pages.
- On the opposite end of the spectrum, while it can work well to start with an action-focused scene,

Made You Look! Crafting Successful Opening Pages

(continued)

if the opening pages are all action, readers may not have the necessary context or emotional investment to care about what is happening. Finding the right balance is essential.



To help put it all together, let's take a close look at the opening pages of Jason Reynolds' award-winning middle grade novel *GHOST* (Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, 2017), a story about a funny but guarded kid named Castle Crenshaw, aka Ghost, who finds his chosen family in a track team. The hook for me? Castle's voice. Reynolds had me within the first five sentences on page 1:

“CHECK THIS OUT. This dude named Andrew Dahl holds the world record for blowing up the most balloons . . . with his nose. Yeah. That's true. Not sure how he found out that was some kinda special talent, and I can't even imagine how much snot be in those balloons, but hey, it's a thing and Andrew's the best at it.”

First, Reynolds' ability to authentically write what I call boy-speak, specifically Black boy-speak, snatched my heart. “Check this out,” “... how much snot be in those balloons,” and “... but hey, it's a thing” roughly told me Castle's age and personality. Second, he creates a feeling of intimacy through the first-person POV. Castle speaks directly to me about something that's important to him. He trusts me to listen. Why? Out of curiosity and, for some reason, concern, I read on. Last, as Reynolds gradually widens the lens of Castle's world in the upcoming paragraphs, I trust him to

answer my question. I walk with Castle to buy some sunflower seeds from Mr. Charles' corner store then to the bus stop across from the gym, where he sits to eat and watch people work out. Tension builds as Castle's mood changes from funny as he describes Mr. Charles and the people working out to serious when he shares his fondness for sunflower seeds and his father, to anger about the thing he really wanted me to know:

“He was shooting at us! My dad! My dad was actually shooting . . . at . . . US! His wife and his boy!” (p. 6)

Wait. WHAT? I read the whole book right then.

Crafting opening pages for query or critique feels akin to that high-stakes scene in the movies where the struggling protagonist finally catches their break to shine. Before stepping into the spotlight, remember: Hook your readers, hold them in the story, and focus on the moment. You got this. And to learn more about crafting opening pages, join Julie Scheina for her workshop, “Hooked from the Start: How to Craft Opening Pages that Hook Readers,” during [SCBWI Mid-Atlantic's Beltways and Bridges fall conference](#) on October 26 in Fairfax, Virginia.

Last year, I officially entered the query streets with my own middle grade story. In my opening pages, I wrote the best story I could instead of worrying about whether agents would like it. So far, out of the five agents I queried, two responded. One, my top choice, requested the full manuscript. And guess what?

Best rejection letter EVER! #winning. //H//

Katie [REDACTED]
to me

Feb 15, 2024, 12:49 PM ☆ ↩

Dear Tanisha,

Thank you so much for following up and my apologies for the (long) delay. I spent a lot of time with [REDACTED] and found so much about it compelling—[REDACTED] Unfortunately our list is overfull and we're currently taking on very few new manuscripts, so we are unable to offer representation at this time. I'm sorry to not have better news, especially after the long wait.

I wish you all the best with your work and hope that [REDACTED] finds its perfect home very soon!

Warmly,
Katie

Interview with an Agent

Q&A with Lori Steel by Denise Taranov

Lori Steel is the founder of SteelWorks Literary and an experienced agent for authors, illustrators, and author-illustrators. She is also a former educator, school librarian, freelance editor, and writing instructor, and earned an MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA).

A DC resident and past SCBWI Mid-Atlantic event faculty member, Lori shares her insight into how to make work stand out (*spoiler alert for illustrators: It's a "yes" on postcards*).

Creating a Compelling Read

What are the top three to five things that typically need to be improved in unpublished manuscripts?

Each project is different, but the most consistent feedback to authors focuses on one thing: time. Time to spend learning craft, time to sink into their stories with depth of understanding, time to let it percolate, time to get valuable feedback from critique partners, time to give distance from their hard work and look at the manuscript with a cold, critical eye.

Often, projects are submitted far too early. Time is the best gift an author (and artist) can give themselves before submitting projects and portfolios for consideration.

What makes a narrative voice stand out as authentic and/or unforgettable?

It's a fine line, voice. We need the author and protagonist to almost merge as one on the page. Rather like dreaming in a foreign language after six months abroad, when you've walked in your MC's

world long enough, the voice will emerge in the narrative.

Consider how a sense of place is inextricably linked to voice. I've found this to be one of the most overlooked opportunities in developing an authentic and unforgettable voice. Setting can guide an author to make choices such as what slang they use, what clothes they wear, and the music their characters play/listen to.

Without these seemingly disconnected setting understandings, a narrative voice may sound stilted, overwrought, or forced, as if the writer is still working out where their MC fits in their story world, rather than walking in their MC's shoes.

What about a story signals to you that the writing has deep trust and respect for readers?

A narrative that is able to connect the reader to the protagonist in a way that makes her care about the character's story without being overly self-aware reflects an author's deep understanding of their readers. Overtly pointing readers to what they should see, feel, and understand can feel didactic and prescriptive.

When authors spend time and develop a deep connection with their characters and story, it shows on the page and allows an authentic collusion between the author and reader to emerge.

How do agents and editors remain aware of what will connect with young readers today?

While young readers' frame of reference to contemporary events or the newest tech gadget on

Interview with an Agent

(continued)

the block may evolve, their core wants and needs do not. A sense of belonging, questioning who they are and where they fit in their family/neighborhood/world, remain evergreen themes. So while the landscape in which children grow and learn evolves, the big questions remain the same.

Connecting and Collaborating with Agents

When you review queries, what's on your checklist for knowing if the manuscript and author or portfolio and illustrator are a good match for representation?

I represent careers, not projects, so while it starts with the project, I'm also thinking in terms of a shared vision and developing a long-term relationship. A professional approach starts with the query, so I'm evaluating the pitch, but also if the author's comps show a sense of the marketplace and cannon, and if the project is ready for submission.

Given all that, I'm particularly interested in authors and illustrators who are driven to create beyond the boundary of a book getting published.

Where would you suggest illustrators seeking representation share their work to get in front of agents and editors searching for new talent?

I've found illustrators in the slush pile, on Twitter and Instagram through #kidlitpostcard and Debbie Ohi's postings, at conferences and portfolio days, and via editor/colleague referrals. In other words, I've been fortunate to connect with illustration clients through various outlets.

While some of these spaces (such as social media) feel less inviting, the kidlit community is supportive and welcoming. We want you and your art in these spaces! I often bookmark an artist and follow their progress. And I take note when illustrators follow me or SWL. Whether they're there to find out more about our authors or seeking representation, I always jump onto their Insta page to get a sense of their aesthetic and where they are in their careers. And I'm curious about

how they're growing their portfolio and joining in the discussion. Are they continuing to develop their craft, pushing their narrative storytelling to become a unique artistic voice? And, when they're ready, are they sharing their art regularly with the world in one way or another?

While the pandemic created a big shift to digital, editors and agents are back at their desks again. Most of us (yes, me!) enjoy receiving postcards. I hang mine on a bulletin board next to my desk and think about the art, often returning to the portfolios many times. Editors do the same—and when a project comes along

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... craft—and creating a
unique narrative voice—
always comes first.

- Lori Steel

and that postcard that's been hanging next to the coffee machine makes the perfect partnership for the story ... Well, it may help find a home.

In short, craft—and creating a unique narrative voice—always comes first. Then, sharing your portfolio with the kidlit community in a way that connects your portfolio with industry professionals will help illustrators find representation and publishing homes.

We Need Diverse Books was founded 10 years ago. What have you seen change in the industry since then and what's yet to be addressed to fully realize its vision?

Through its support, advocacy, and programs for underrepresented authors and industry professionals, We Need Diverse Books has shifted the landscape across the industry, providing mentorships and awards for underrepresented creators and those interested in becoming publishing professionals. And their impact has been noted! With ALA recognition in 2023 and

Interview with an Agent

(continued)

the recent recognition from the Library of Congress, WNDB has made an incredible impact in one decade. More books are being acquired and successfully nurtured to publication by a more diverse workplace than ever.

But there are still substantial gaps in that representation—which is only exacerbated by book banning and obstructive library acquisition policies in some parts of the country. It's essential that young readers have access to all stories, most importantly their own. WNDB and other organizations have moved the needle, but it takes a community of advocates and allies to affect long-lasting change.

What advice would you give to diverse authors/illustrators on how to discern if an agent or editor will be truly engaged and collaborative in achieving their vision for their work?

Nothing replaces a real-time discussion to get to the heart of your professional goals and why they want to acquire your book or offer representation. Asking questions about their editorial vision for the project and how they support their authors from submission to publication is essential.

Consider their communication style and how it might/might not align with yours. What resources,

“
Don't be afraid to ask questions, ask for client referrals, and, if it doesn't feel right, wait until the right partner comes along.

- Lori Steel

community support, and time can the agent or editor provide to help you learn more about the business of writing? While it's exciting to have someone interested in the prospect of your manuscript turning into A Book, the right partnership can be critical to its

success. Don't be afraid to ask questions, ask for client referrals, and, if it doesn't feel right, wait until the right partner comes along.

With published writers and illustrators, what advice do you give them on how to grow throughout their career?

I tend to work with creators who are curious about the world and interested in experimenting with new forms, audiences, and mediums. This doesn't mean that they are constantly changing what they write or create, but are interested in evolution. Aren't we all?

Creative people are, by nature, interested in exploring new topics and new ways of conveying story. Staying connected to craft, finding critique partners that provide honest feedback and cheer successes, putting on the business hat when needed whilst retaining a sense of play—and a hefty dose of patience!—are good ingredients to a long-term, successful career in publishing.

Starting the Next Chapter and New Collaborations

You recently founded SteelWorks Literary. Congratulations! What prompted you to take the leap to create the agency and what's your aspiration for it?

Thank you! It's been a busy and exciting time in the office, and we're incredibly grateful for the enthusiasm and support we've received for SWL from clients, colleagues, and industry professionals.

Launching an agency was a big decision, but I've had a long-time vision for creating an agency home focused on craft and career development, and a strong sense of community. A place where deals are made but also where relationships are forged alongside a professional development mindset. At SteelWorks Literary, we hope to create a space where creatives are supported and encouraged to explore, stretch, and grow throughout their careers.

What are the top things you hope to find in your query inbox in the next six months?

When I open to queries later this fall, I'll be focusing

Interview with an Agent

(continued)

on illustrators, middle grade and YA authors, and graphic novel author-illustrators. I worry about being too specific because I may miss something unexpected and special! But my MSWL gives a sense of projects that draw me in. I like to be surprised but am always drawn to authentic voices, unexpected forms/structures, fully realized settings, and stories that reflect a deep understanding and respect for their readers in both commercial and literary-leaning projects.

Enjoying the Mid-Atlantic Region

What are your favorite spots or places in DC and/or the DMV?

Politics & Prose is always at the top of my list for favorite bookstores, and Brookside Gardens, Rock Creek Park, and Sugarloaf Mountain for weekend walks. We love our local theater in Bethesda, Round House Theatre, and seeing Broadway shows at the National Theatre (DC) during summer months. Waredaca Brewing Company's beer garden adjacent to the horse fields and pumpkin picking at Sharp's at Waterford Farm is a seasonal favorite. As you can see, I'm ready for sweater weather!

Are there any voices or settings from the DC area or mid-Atlantic region that you wish would show up in stories?

All of them, of course! I love seeing the DMV represented in stories beyond the DC mystery/nonfiction genre. I respond strongly to stories that authentically reflect the neighborhood and regions in which they're set—not just dialectically, but by weaving in the intangible cultural undercurrent that the DMV provides. We live in an area full of contradictions—neighborhoods that many generations call home, and a transient political population that changes every two to four years.

The DMV has terrifically diverse neighborhoods, rural regions, and waterways—each with its own microculture—that provide rich fodder for authentic storytelling. I hope some of them will find their way to my inbox! //H//

About Lori Steel



Lori Steel is the Founder of SteelWorks Literary and an agent for authors and illustrators. She began her career in young people's literature first as an educator and school librarian, later as a freelance editor and writing instructor.

She has degrees in history, education, and an MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA), where she also received certification in the Picture Book, and was honored with the Alumni Gift Award. After graduating in 2012, Lori coordinated the VCFA Summer Residency Abroad (Bath, UK) for four years, initiated the kidlit writing class program at her local indie, Politics & Prose, and entered publishing as an Agency Assistant at Greenhouse Literary. She interned at two other kidlit-focused agencies before taking on her own clients first at Raven Quill Literary, then at Red Fox Literary.

Lori founded SteelWorks Literary in 2024 with her talented list of authors, illustrators, and graphic novelists. Lori is a longtime member of ALA and SCBWI, and is a member of AALA, where she serves on the Illustration Committee. Her clients include both debut and award-winning authors, and she continues to seek diverse perspectives, literary approaches, and unique story experiences for her list. Lyrical language, compelling voices, evocative settings, and evergreen stories told with heart are areas of particular interest in any genre/audience.

Originally from the Washington, DC, area, Lori has also called Appalachia and England home. When not at her desk, you can often find her plotting her next travel adventure, testing out a new recipe, or pottering in her Washington, DC, garden with her English husband and Secret Agent pup sidekick, Juice.

For more information:

SteelWorks Literary: <https://steelworksliterary.com/>
Manuscript Wish List: <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/mswl-post/lori-steel/>

Have You Ever Been Called an Idiom?

by Liza Martini

I'll bet you've never called anyone an idiom. Or maybe a doppelganger? A bandersnatch? A solipsist? How about a pixilated peduncular pandowdy?

If you have, chances are you were a kid becoming acquainted with big words that sounded hilarious when used for the first time. There was no need for real accuracy—just the feel of them in your mouth made you laugh uproariously when you called your cohort an idiom.

The kids I've known never shied away from the challenge of big words—they embraced it. Big and unusual words are the icing on the cake of literacy, a reward for sticking it out and finding that reading can be fun and entertaining, that there's more to books than lessons and facts. Suddenly, at the ripe old age of eight, they're impressing their teachers, their parents, and their parents' friends with words like borborygmus or tintinnabulate.

Where do they find words like these in children's books? Good question. Someone has to write them. And many authors do sprinkle their stories with unusual words, usually defining them on the spot, and sometimes including a glossary.

Such words take children way beyond the onomatopoeia of ZAP! POW! SOCK! A kid could now ask his parents if they are not being too pragmatic about cleanliness. He could tell them that he'd never prevaricate about snacking, and that he'd only eaten a quantum of cookies before lunch. This has a stunning effect on the listener, sucking the air from their lungs and expunging their own prosaic retort, leaving them to perpend not just the words but also the *wunderkind* that stands before them.

Vocabulary empowers one with confidence, as the user suddenly has the weapon of words in his

VOCABULARY EMPOWERS ONE WITH CONFIDENCE, AS THE USER SUDDENLY HAS THE WEAPON OF WORDS IN HIS QUIVER TO LAY LOW ANY BULLY OR INSULT, OR TO DEFLECT ANY COCKAMAMIE IDEA THAT COMES DOWN THE PIKE.

quiver to lay low any bully or insult, or to deflect any cockamamie idea that comes down the pike. We tell children to use their words rather than punches, and then often shield them from the most powerful ones. A well-placed idiom like "cease and desist" says much more than "Stop it!" It says, "Stop, never do it again, and remove yourself from this place, or I will bring all authority to bear and you will rue the day!"

Now when the teacher lays her hairy eyeball on this intrepid kid, he can say, "Really, I wasn't plagiarizing, I simply appropriated the sections of her story that were not of her lived experience but of mine."

Suddenly they have agency to speak on their own behalf, because there is nothing a kid with a thesaurus cannot do. Even the very misuse of words that happens from time to time draws the attention of adults who will dig deep to recall the definition, and who may be forced to overlook the error, lacking the confidence to correct the cheeky little sophism.

Anyway, it's better to misspeak at eight than twenty-eight. Armed with a treasure trove of words and

Have You Ever Been Called an Idiom?

(continued)

a nonstop memory, your young sesquipedalian is captain of his own debate team, master of his IQ!

So those were my thoughts when I hatched "Mr. Bandersnatch," a story about minding your p's and q's and loaded with words beginning with q's and p's and, naturally, back-loaded with a glossary of unusual words and idioms. It was wrought some time ago—just for fun, because I've known so many kids who enjoyed unusual sounding words. And they're not always the nerds. Every child is trying desperately to engage with and decode the language he's been given. Teach a kid one new word and he'll ingest it—give him a vocabulary and stand back. *Formidable!*

This short (really short) story was sitting on my shredder because, it seems, I was very shortsighted and had no idea what to do with it. One reason, as I mentioned, is that it's short: 2,737 words, including said glossary. And secondly, I worried something so weird

BUT WAIT! A SHORT STORY
CONTEST SEEMED A BETTER
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DERANGEMENT.

and quirky would be off-putting, and might say a little too much about the author. But I was tired of running across the thing, so one morning, in a spasm of decluttering, I gave due process short shrift, delivered a hasty verdict, and laid "Mr. Bandersnatch" with other doomed detritus atop the Fellowes shredder, whom I can always count on for a swift execution, skillfully grinding evidence, guilt, and any further moral obligation into dust.

But wait! A short story contest seemed a better death for this perplexing piece of work, this manifestation

of momentary derangement. I could humiliate myself and Mr. Bandersnatch and allow a third party to kill him off in a *coup de grâce*, sending him quietly into the Sea of Syncope and possibly a burning pyre. And *then* I could grind him up with a clear conscience.

With nothing to lose, I packed him up with a few more p's and q's, loaded him into the template, and hit Send. Then, like a forlorn parent shipping her eldest off to camp, I mooned around the house for days reminiscing about all the reasons I had created him in the first place.

By and by, [Next Generation Short Story Awards](#) announced the winners for 2024, and I was stupefied to learn "Mr. Bandersnatch" had won the category for General Fiction. "Mr. Bandersnatch"? I never imagined any of the judges getting past the first sentence of a middle grade story that begins with difficult words only later defined in a glossary. I had grossly miscalculated the perspicacity of the esteemed judges who sit on these panels, wading tirelessly through hundreds, if not thousands of stories, and hardest of all, agreeing on a winner.

I owe them an apology. And so I do apologize. Beg pardon, in fact. Most sincerely and unaffectedly. Additionally, out of an abundance of gratitude, I add my full-throated appreciation and warmest THANK YOU!!!

Alrighty, then, I said to myself. It seems he has been granted a reprieve, and I escorted "Mr. Bandersnatch" away from the gallows (that's right—back off, fellah!). Mr. B. is now lovingly three-hole punched, sandwiched between Davey board, and sitting upon a climate-controlled shelf with other remarkable characters enjoying his new lease on life.

We can all find him in the 2024 NEXT GENERATION SHORT STORY AWARDS ANTHOLOGY OF WINNERS, as well. The book is filled with all the winning stories and the names and titles of the short-listed contestants, who are probably, like me, scratching their heads over the unlikely and now oddly outstanding "Mr. Bandersnatch." //H//

Ideas for Getting Noticed Pre-published Authors

Set up your author website
(get tips at <https://janefriedman.com/author-websites/>)

Create work you're passionate about

Research agents' interests and books they represent
(see <https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com> and <https://www.publishersmarketplace.com/browse/category.cgi?c=8>)

Follow agents, editors, and writers on social media
(find more info at <https://www.kidlit411.com/2014/01/places-to-go-people-to-virtuallysee.html>)

Volunteer at SCBWI and/or other professional, kidlit-related events

Join a critique group
(find the Mid-Atlantic coordinator info at <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic/our-team>)

Draft a strong, professional query letter for your completed manuscript

Get 1-on-1 consultations and/or a writing mentorship
(see <https://www.kidlit411.com/2016/01/mentorships.html>)

Learn what agents love (and don't love) in queries
(check out <https://manuscriptacademy.com/podcast>)

Keep creating and improving your work

Participate in IRL or virtual pitch events
(find a Twitter roundup at <https://www.futureworldsediting.co.uk/twitter-pitch-events-2024/>)

Research your targeted agents' and/or small publishers' submission guidelines (and adhere to them)

Interact with agents at smaller conferences
(check <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic/events>)

Participate in writing contests and publish in other media (e.g., magazines)

Have fun!

Attend kidlit events
(find event info at <https://carolynbfraiser.com/kidlit/>)

Ideas for Getting Noticed

Illustrators

Set up your illustrator website

(get tips at <https://kidscomicsunite.com/how-to-create-your-author-illustrator-website/>)

Experiment with techniques, materials, and characters (play!)

Build your portfolio (see suggestions at <https://www.myblankpaper.com/blog/2022/4/28/ntyr5x27r3iz3h667yhow6ev365epc>)

Read new books in your targeted kidlit level/format to learn the market (find the *New York Times* bestseller lists at <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/>)

Follow agents, editors, art directors, and kidlit illustrators on social media

Participate in "draw this" events (like <https://www.scbwi.org/awards-and-grants-for-illustrators/draw-this>)

Post illustrations on social media (e.g., Instagram, Bluesky, Cara)

Get 1-on-1 consultations with successful illustrators, agents and/or art directors

Research agencies and agents that represent kidlit illustrators and check out their clients' work

Update and refine your portfolio (see the "SCBWI Illustrators Guide" in <https://www.scbwi.org/resources/the-essential-guide-to-publishing-for-children>)

Research your targeted agents' query guidelines (and adhere to them)

Mail postcards to editors and agents (see <https://www.abicushman.com/how-to-articles/how-to-send-illustrator-promo-postcards-to-art-directors/>)

Enter portfolio showcases to show your work (look into SCBWI national events at <https://www.scbwi.org/annual-events>)

Consider selling other retail products (e.g., print-on-demand t-shirts, greeting cards) to increase exposure

Post kidlit art postcards (learn more at <https://www.ginaperry.com/postcard>)

Keep creating and improving your work

Ideas for Getting Noticed

Published Authors & Illustrators

Prepare for your book launch
(see tips at <https://kidlit.com/marketing-a-book/>)

Perform school and library visits
(find prep. notes at <https://authornews.penguinrandomhouse.com/how-to-prepare-for-a-school-visit/>)

Get book reviews
(find tips at <https://selfpublishingmastery.com/four-steps-to-getting-reviews-before-you-publish-your-book/>)

Continue creating work that you're passionate about

Create online content that conveys the value of your books and how to schedule a visit

Become a writing or illustration mentor
(see <https://www.kidlit411.com/2016/01/mentorships.html>)

Create a sign up on your website to build a distro. list for direct communication (e.g., print sales)

Participate in book fairs and festivals
(<https://www.writersdigest.com/publishing-insights/list-of-book-fairs-and-book-festivals-by-state>)

Read about lessons learned in book marketing
(see <https://sarahallen.substack.com/p/funnels-and-flywheels-in-depth-marketing>)

Prepare for interviews
(see <https://fullfocusplanner.com/what-every-author-should-know-about-radio-and-television-interviews/>)

Validate illustration pricing
(<https://www.svslearn.com/3pointperspectiveblog/2019/6/19/pricing-your-work>)

Keep creating and improving your work

Visit bookstores to see what's on shelves and get insight on customer interests

Try new ways to get noticed
(see <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/company-article/how-to-get-your-writing-noticed>)

Rediscover what inspires you

Learn from self-publishing
(see <https://janefriedman.com/how-to-make-six-figures-self-publishing-childrens-books/>)

RESOURCES

Walk the path from writing alone to getting published

["The Three-Step Process From Isolation to Publication"](#) by Joanne Ramos

"Debut author Joanne Ramos talks about letting herself get lost in the world of her book, when she knew to let others in and when to let THE FARM out into the world."

Take advice from a panel of agents on what gets their attention

["How to Get an Agent's Attention"](#) by Lisa Katzenberger for *Writer's Digest*

"Eleven agents attended the South Carolina Writers Workshop conference and four participated in the panel discussion 'What Gets Our Attention.' They didn't mention fun things like serving them mashed potatoes in the buffet line or skywriting your query over lovely Myrtle Beach. Instead, they gave us simple advice, a great reminder that it's not really rocket science."

Search for established literary agents

["AgentQuery.com: The internet's largest free database of literary agents"](#) by Agent Query

"AgentQuery.com offers one of the largest searchable database of literary agents on the web—a treasure trove of reputable, established literary agents seeking writers just like you. And it's free (not because there's a catch, but simply because not enough things in this world are free)."

Learn what agents are currently seeking

["Manuscript Wish List®: The most human database for the most efficient querying"](#) by Manuscript Wish List

"Manuscript Wish List® and #MSWL are designed to answer one crucial question in the submissions process: 'What do you wish you had in your inbox?' ... What started as a hashtag and a Tumblr in 2013 (listen to the full story [here](#)) became a blog we hand-edited, then—thanks to Mike Chen and Sierra Godfrey Fong—became a site where agents and editors could login and update their own wishes."

Read interviews with agents in your targeted book level

["Literary Rambles: Spotlighting Children's Book Authors, Agents, and Publishing"](#) by Natalie Aguirre

"Agent Spotlight is a feature of writer Casey McCormick's blog, Literary Rambles, a roundup of an agent's interviews, web presence, and submission information."

Improve your odds of finding a literary agent

["How to Find a Literary Agent: The 6-Step Strategy That Works For My Clients"](#) by Tiffany Hawk

"Landing a literary agent will be a challenge, but let's dramatically improve your odds. In this post, I'm going to help make that search a little less painful and a lot more effective. If you follow steps, you will improve your chances of attracting an agent who is looking for books like yours (and knows how to sell them)."

Get the lay of the land with a summary of the publishing path options

["The Key Book Publishing Paths: 2023-2024"](#) by Jane Friedman

"Since 2013, I have been regularly updating this informational chart about the key book publishing paths. ... One of the biggest questions I hear from authors today: Should I traditionally publish or self-publish? This is an increasingly complicated question to answer ... My chart divides the field into traditional (advance-based) publishing, small presses, assisted publishing, indie or self-publishing, and social publishing."

Learn how to evaluate small and independent publishers

["How to Evaluate Small Publishers—Plus Digital-Only Presses and Hybrids"](#) by Jane Friedman

"Small publishers often have little or nothing in common with each other; each has unique contracts, distribution power, and quality, not to mention title count and revenue. ... With a clear view of the business, you can learn how to identify whether a small press offers an advantage to you over self-publishing. Incidentally, understanding this can also help you evaluate what value, if any, a hybrid publisher offers."

Get lessons learned from a self-published PB case study

["Self Publishing Children's Picture Books: A Case Study"](#) by Mary Kole

"It's my pleasure today to feature a self publishing children's picture books case study for a change of pace. ... Here, [the author] shares her experience with deciding to 'go indie,' the unexpected things she learned, and her lovely book."

Get advice on breaking into picture book illustration

["Three Tips For Those Interested In Illustrating Children's Picture Books"](#) by Debbie Ridpath Ohi

"How do you become an illustrator or artist for children's books? As the others who have answered this question so far have pointed out, there is no one right route to becoming a children's book illustrator."

Learn how to position yourself as a kidlit illustrator

["Breaking In as a Picture Book Illustrator and Writing an Illustrator Query Letter"](#) by Mary Kole

"Picture book illustrators need an illustration query letter to break into the field. You have several extra considerations when crafting an illustrator query letter and starting to pitch your illustration services, so here's how you will want to approach the topic of pitching yourself and your art."

Use free methods to promote your self-published book

["20 Easy Ways To Promote Your Book For Free In 10 Minutes"](#) by Derek Haines

"For authors, learning how to promote your book for free or as cheaply as possible is one of the most challenging tasks in self-publishing. But promoting your book doesn't need to take hours and hours of your time every day or break the bank. ... In this article, you will find twenty easy and cost-effective ideas to help you extend and improve your promotion."

Pick up creative tips for how to market your kidlit book

["12 Creative Tips to Market Your Children's Book"](#) by Marianne Richmond

"No matter how you publish your children's book—traditional or self-published—you will still need to market your books to increase awareness and drive sales of your books. Check out these twelve creative tips to get you started!"

Learn tips for getting more publicity for your book

["15 Tips for Getting Book Publicity"](#) by Dan Smith

"Book publicity can be defined in one sentence: it is using the media as a conduit to spread the word of an author and book to general and/or target audiences. ... Here are 15 important tips to consider when you're trying to get media attention and coverage to promote your book."

GET CONNECTED

ONGOING

SCBWI regional events

Various dates (virtual)

Find events with children's literature industry professionals from all around the world: <https://www.scbwi.org/regional-virtual-events/>

OCTOBER

SCBWI Pennsylvania East: Creating in Community Webinar

October 22, 7-8 p.m. (*free, virtual event with optional paid critique*)

You already know: Working with a critique partner or group can help improve your creative projects!

Incorporating useful feedback into your art or writing can make the difference in whether your work attracts attention from an agent, gets accepted by a publisher, or wins an award. Building on her experience as a writing coach and as a sensitivity reader for publishers of adult and KidLit titles, Lisa A. Crayton will explore how critique partners (and groups) can better celebrate, uplift, and empower creators through community. PB, MG and YA manuscript critiques are available for an additional cost. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/webinar-creating-in-community/register-info>)

SCBWI Pennsylvania East: Annual Eastern PA Virtual Illustrator Day

October 26, 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. (*paid, virtual event*)

Join us for a day of curating your illustrator portfolio as we honor keynote speaker and local author-illustrator, Julie Fortenberry, plus world-class presentations from invited faculty and add ons—an AD assignment and portfolio reviews. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/curating-your-craft-annual-epa-virtual-illustrator-day/register-info>)

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Fall Workshop: Fairfax, VA

October 26, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. (*paid, in-person event*)

Join us for a day of craft and comradery! Select a morning and/or an afternoon intensive session with an optional virtual one-on-one manuscript or portfolio consultation after the event. Intensives are classroom-sized sessions that allow for a deep-dive into an element of craft and may include activities (e.g., drawing and/or writing exercises, group work, discussion). Intensive attendees are encouraged to attend the onsite lunch from 12-1 p.m. to spend extra time with the faculty, meet creators with similar interests, and catch up with those you already know. The lunch cost is included in the tuition. The event will be held at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/fall-workshops-2024-fairfax-va/register-info>)

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Virtual Illustrator Social - October

October 30, 7:30-9 p.m. (*free, virtual event*)

Join us for our bi-monthly Illustrator Socials, hosted by PAL member and author/illustrator Cynthia Cliff!

Connect with your fellow illustrators as we chat about all things kidlit—from book dummies and color palettes to illustration marketing strategies and the latest stunning picture book releases. Whether you prefer to draw while you chat or simply enjoy being in the company of creatives, this is all about connection and creativity with zero pressure. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/virtual-illustrator-social-october>)

NOVEMBER

SCBWI Pennsylvania East: 8 & Under 2024

November 2, 9:30 a.m.-1 p.m. *(paid, virtual event)*

This half-day, virtual event is designed especially for writers and writer-illustrators who create for children ages 8 & Under. The "full" 8 & Under event will include two faculty-led webinars plus a mini-mentorship with a published author (one of Eastern PA's PALs), complete with a written critique and an extended one-on-one virtual session. Agent/editor post-event critiques will be available for an additional fee. We are also offering the option to purchase "webinar-only" tickets, for those who are unable or do not wish to take part in the live PAL mini-mentorship portion of the "full" program. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/8-under-2024>)

SCBWI Southern Breeze: Crash Course in Craft

November 2, 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. *(paid, virtual event)*

Have you ever purchased a book to learn the craft of writing books for kids, but aren't sure how to best put it to use? Here's a chance to learn from the authors themselves! Join us for a full day of craft talk from the authors of preeminent books on writing craft. All sessions will be recorded and available to registered participants for 30 days. Each speaker will provide one free critique (SCBWI Gold Form + 15-minute Zoom session) to a randomly selected participant. Check out the event page to learn about the faculty, craft books covered in sessions, and full schedule. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/crash-course-in-craft>)

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Fall Workshop: Charlottesville, VA + Virtual Session

November 9, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. *(paid, in-person and virtual event)*

Meet us in Charlottesville for our first ever hybrid event! We have two great sessions to offer: a writing 101 with multi-published author Terry Catasús Jennings and a deep dive into enhancing character voice through dialogue with agent and author Taj McCoy. If you can't be there in person at the Hillsdale Conference Center, you'll still have 30 days to watch the replay. The faculty members are also available for optional written critiques. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/fall-workshops-2024-charlottesville-va/register-info>)

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: WHERE'S THE BEEF? A Query Critique Workshop for Creators Who Undershare

November 12, 7-8:15 p.m. *(paid virtual event)*

Have you ever wondered how to turn a 500-word story into a 100-200 word pitch without giving away too much? Jes Trudel, agent with The Rights Factory, finds one of the most common mistakes board book and picture book creators make is underselling their story by undersharing the details. In this webinar, Jes will help authors and illustrators improve their queries by "beefing up" their pitches using practical tips for drawing out the plot and character details agents need to chew on to make a decision. This event will be recorded and a replay will be available for 30 days after the live event. After registering, you may send a one-page query for a picture or board book (which could be critiqued live) and the picture book or board book manuscript itself. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/where-s-the-beef-a-query-critique-workshop-for-creators-who-undershare>)

MOOD BOARD



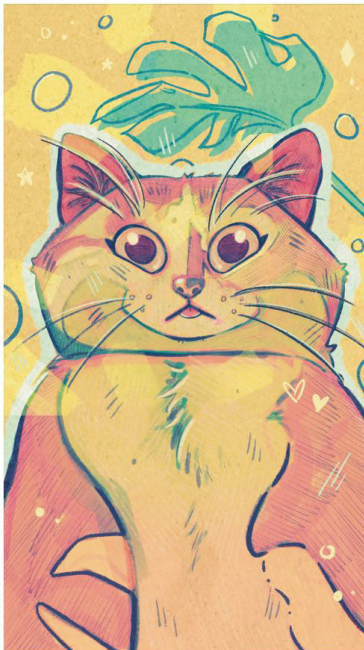
TYLER CHARLTON

Wind is a dance – a dance of air.

Warm air leaps high, while cool air bows low.

Day by day, fast or slow, wind changes.

- Excerpt from WIND IS A DANCE by Debra Kempf Shumaker (author), Kids Can Press (2024)



ASIA RORICK

Hank was a pup, happy and free, with one little problem—a tiny flea.

- Excerpt from I'D RATHER BE ME by Emily Peace Harrison (Author), Belle Isle Books (2024)

