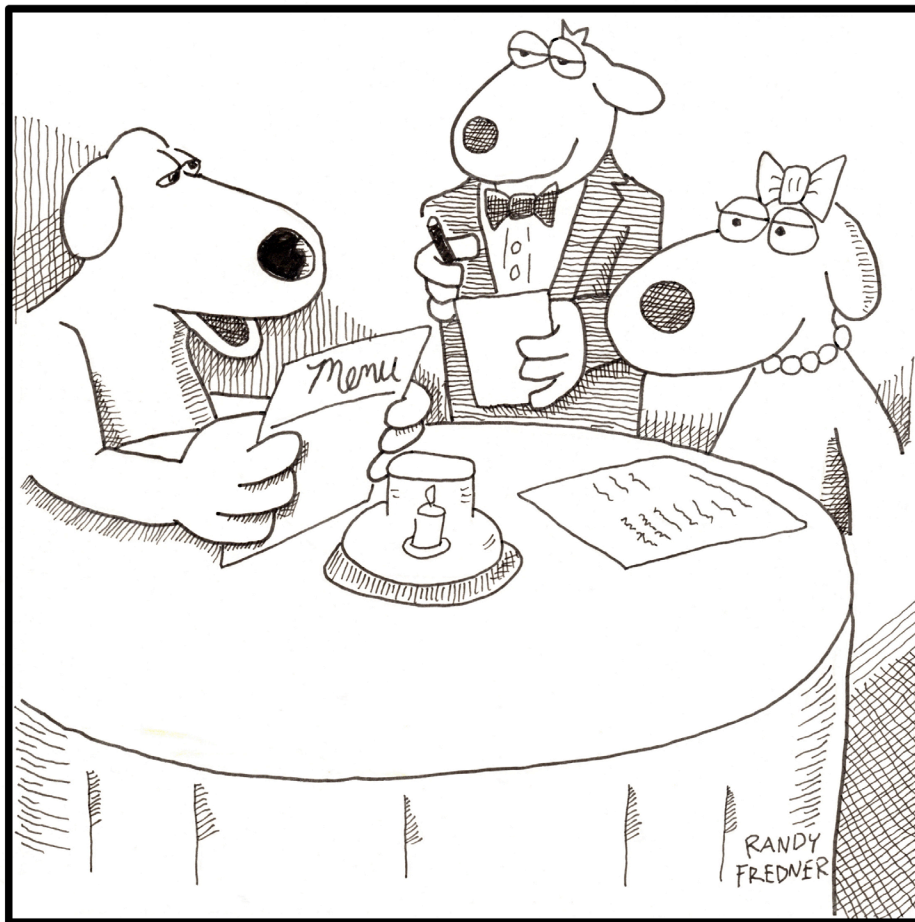


# Highlighter

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Journal



"I'll have the math homework."

# Humor.

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic

# Highlighter

Winter 2024 // Humor

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The *Highlighter* is a quarterly journal published by the Mid-Atlantic Region (DC/Virginia) of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).

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

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Are you interested in contributing an article, illustration, or other content to *Highlighter*? Please send your ideas and/or portfolio link to Denise Taranov at [MidAtlanticHighlighter@gmail.com](mailto:MidAtlanticHighlighter@gmail.com)

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A soft, pastel-style illustration of a child sleeping in a bed. The child is tucked under a blue blanket with red stripes. A white rabbit is curled up next to the child's head. The bed has a white pillow with blue stars. On the floor next to the bed is a brown teddy bear. The overall mood is cozy and peaceful.

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic

# Highlighter

Winter 2024 // Humor

## CONTENTS

- 1 **Letter from the RAs**  
Mid-Atlantic Regional Advisors' column
- 2 **Meet a Writer**  
Ashley Wilda
- 4 **Meet an Illustrator**  
Nadia Fisher
- 6 **"The Science of Humor"**  
Use timeless techniques to bring your own sense of humor into your stories
- 10 **"Engaging Readers Through Humor"**  
Use humor to inject levity into your writing and awaken readers' curiosity
- 12 **"Timing ... and Surprise!"**  
Explore how and why things make us laugh to strengthen your comedic voice
- 15 **Resources**  
A compilation of helpful things
- 17 **Get Connected**  
Ways to collaborate and get involved
- 19 **Mood Board**  
Inspiration board featuring work by Mid-Atlantic members



## New Year, Renewed Focus

Welcome to the cozy season! With the rush of the holidays behind us, we hope you find these coming months of short days and cold weather a time to refocus on your creative projects. Start something new or dig into your desk drawers and breathe some life into an abandoned work in progress.

Our Beltways to Bridges yearlong program is now entering its winter phase with [in-person and virtual write-ins](#). Meet us at a local library or on Zoom for some accountability, camaraderie, and writing or drawing exercises to inspire productivity. Each of these sessions is free and will start with a 30-minute motivational talk by a local author or illustrator. We hope these events will give you the space you need to make some progress.

Set a goal to polish up your winter work in time for our spring in-person [Editors & Agents Day](#) featuring nine publishing professionals: four editors, four agents, and one art agent, on April 27 in Dulles, Virginia. Attendance will be limited to

allow interaction between faculty and attendees. Registrants will have the opportunity to ask questions and receive feedback on work while also getting to know other creatives in our region. Save the date for this event! Registration opens February 1.

We're also offering virtual socials throughout the winter and two webinars: "Tightrope Tension: How to Build Tension in Picture Books" with Valerie Bolling on January 16, and "How to Use Narrative Distance in MG and YA Fiction" with Lisa Rowe Fraustino on February 6.

We would love to see you at one of our events. We hope you make 2024 the year to reach your writing and illustrating goals!

Warmest regards,

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

Erin Teagan  
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Ashley Wilda



# The Story You Have Yet to Tell

by Ashley Wilda

"I don't know if I can do this." That's what I said to my husband after reading the editorial letter for my young adult novel, *THE NIGHT FOX*. There was one major problem—I had too many walls.

At first glance, it seemed like a story problem. Scenes that weren't shown, characters that didn't interact enough. But the real issue? There were important places where I was holding back.

But those walls were there to protect me. From the grief, the memories. When I pressed against those places in the story, I felt ... blank. Like some invisible force held me back.

How was I going to uncover the raw emotional truth the story needed if I couldn't even go there myself?

Let's rewind for a sec. This story begins with a person who believed their writing was broken.

When I started grad school for creative writing, I was scared. I hadn't planned on my life and health falling apart and honestly didn't know if I could write anymore. All I'd managed to write was poetry, trying to make sense of the pain that had taken over my life.

Then, at the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA), I listened to a graduate lecture by Mercer Black about grief and the writing process. About the stories we **NEED** to write, for ourselves. The stories we may be avoiding.

The stories we may be afraid to dig deep and tell.

I slipped out at the end of the lecture and found myself in the farthest corner of the library basement, surrounded by the musty smell of old books. I sobbed. I cried for all the pain I was living through, for the story I wanted to write, for the fear of writing it. But I knew I had made up my mind.

When I left that library, I started writing what would become *THE NIGHT FOX*.

[Return to Contents](#)

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### Favorite resources

- *WONDERBOOK: THE ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO CREATING IMAGINATIVE FICTION* by Jeff VanderMeer
- *BIG MAGIC: CREATIVE LIVING BEYOND FEAR* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- *STEERING THE CRAFT* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- [Ink in Your Veins](#) by Rachael Herron



**THE NIGHT FOX** by Ashley Wilda

## Meet a Writer (continued)



**Ashley Wilda at a book signing**

Writing about grief is really freaking hard. I started writing THE NIGHT FOX because I had to, for myself. But also because when I was going through the darkest time in my life, it was the book I wish I had. The book I couldn't find. And on the chance

that someone else out there was going through something similar ... I had to write it for them too.

The work was beautiful and tender and sharp-edged ... and I mostly kept it to myself. I knew one day other people would read it. But for the moment, I couldn't really imagine that without getting freaked out.

The story was unconventional to be sure—between the magic and the faith elements and the dual narrative arcs and poetry thrown in there to boot, I worried the story wouldn't find a home. It didn't fit neatly into a box ... but that was the point. Neither does grief, or love.

The first business day after the manuscript went out, I learned a senior editor at Penguin was interested. I cried. The hurt and the beauty were all twisted up inside with hope, and I couldn't wait to see what happened next.

Then the editorial letter came. And once again, I was stuck with a story I didn't know how to write.

I returned to my beloved VCFA as a graduate assistant for the summer residency and sat with my feelings. I soaked in the craft and the astounding courage of the community. I pulled it all in until I felt full. Then I sat down. And cried. And wrote out a plan.

[Return to Contents](#)

Ashley Wilda



Sitting in the faded blue armchair at my favorite coffee shop, I finally arrived at the part of the story that was hardest for me. It wasn't the climax or the flashiest part. But for me, it hit the deepest.

I wrote the scene.

I hurried to pack my things.

I made it to my car and closed the door.

And I sobbed.

That's the thing, writing about grief. You may be writing fiction. But the feelings are real. You know it'll be worth it, in the end. To tell the story you need to tell, to reach the reader who desperately needs that particular story. But I'm not going to lie—it hurts.

Turns out, that final revision was my best work yet.

So to all my writers who feel broken, invisible, opposing realities held in one beautiful, flawed body ... Don't give up. Somewhere, someone needs the story you have yet to tell. Don't give up on you. //H//

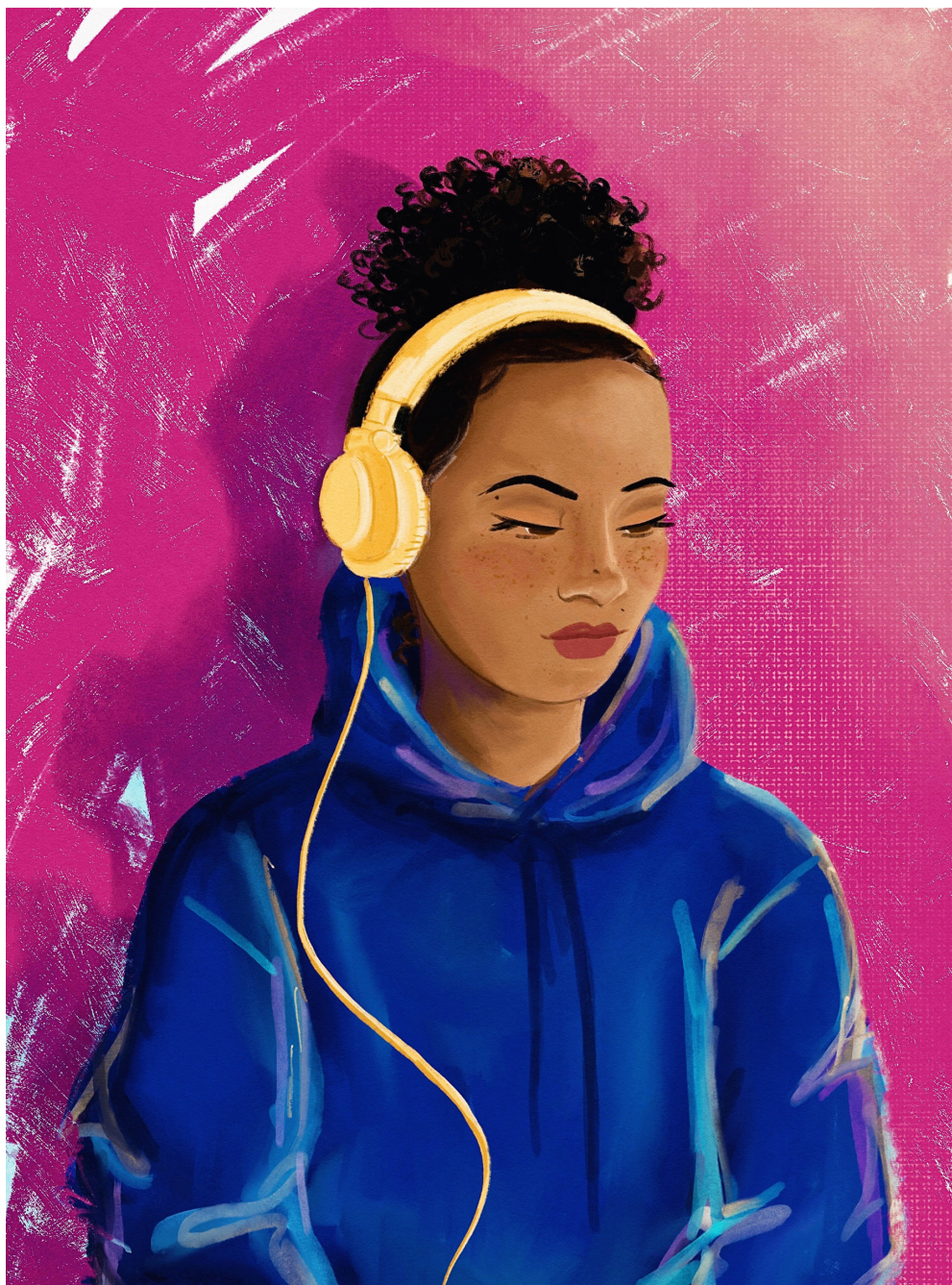


**Author Ashley Wilda**

Nadia Fisher



## Self-portrait



[www.ariadelsole.com](http://www.ariadelsole.com)

 ariadelsole

 ariadelsole

### **Favorite tool**

For book work, I work digitally on my iPad Pro with Procreate, but I love working with gouache, watercolor, and acrylic for personal work and hope to try to incorporate it into my digital work.

### **What inspires me**

Any and everything. Nature, music, my daughter, wanting to see the world become a better place for everyone.

### **Design influences**

Disney, Richard Scarry, midcentury styles

### **Favorite things to illustrate**

Children having fun, big emotions, heartfelt stories, adventurous stories, nonfiction.

### **What I'd like to explore in the coming year**

I'd love the opportunity to illustrate more picture books and book covers and to work on my own stories as well. I also want to experiment more with incorporating traditional mediums with digital.

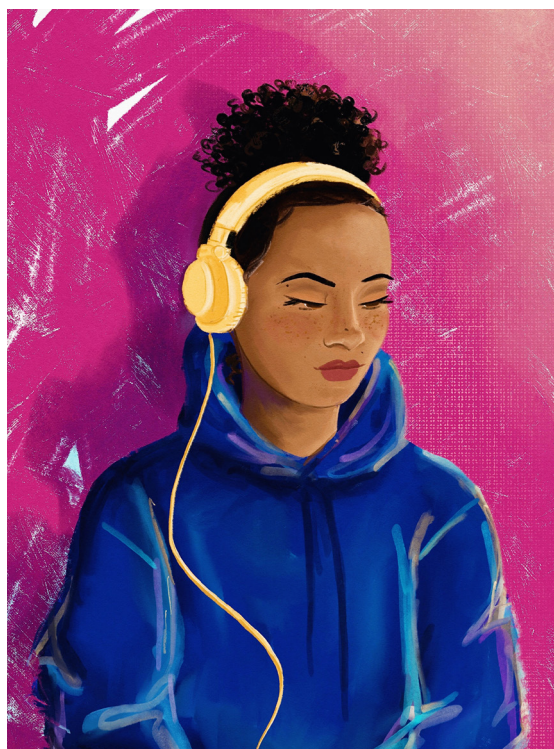
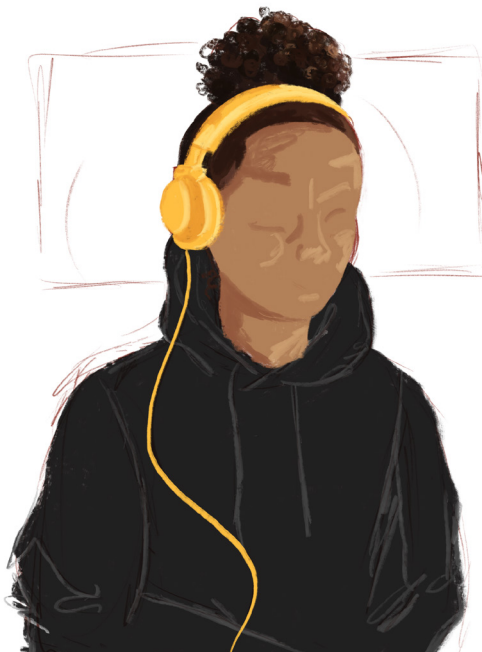
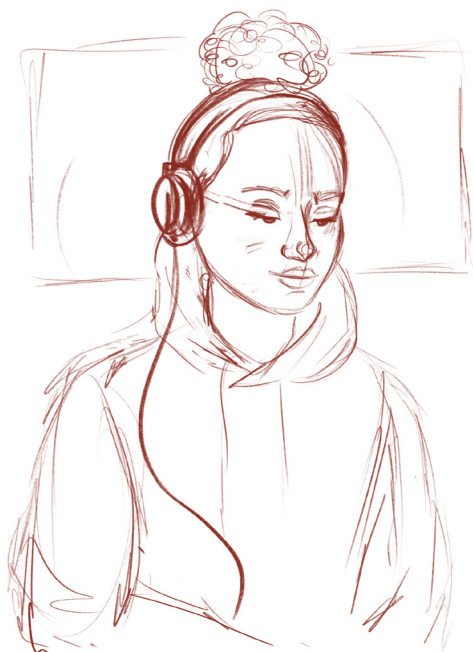
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## Meet an Illustrator (continued)

Nadia Fisher



## A peek into the process





# The Science of Humor

by Erin Teagan

Like turkey and stuffing, humor and writing for children go hand in hand. Bringing a little comedy into our writing can help draw in reluctant readers, make complex topics more accessible, and make tougher subjects easier to swallow. And yet, some writers—even if they want to write funny—feel like they’re lacking the skills to pull it off. Well, let me tell you: There are no credentials required. If you have a healthy sense of humor, then you pass the test, and I’m here to show you how to get started.

The great American humorist, Robert Benchley once said, “There are no lengths to which humorless people will not go to analyze humor.” (Read more Robert Benchley quotes [here](#).)

We’re going to have to agree to disagree on this one, Mr. Benchley. While some people may be born a comedy prodigy, the vast majority of us need to learn how to write humor just like any other literary technique. Reading mentor texts, recognizing strategies, and breaking down techniques can help make any of us the next comedic genius of our time.

Analyzing humor has actually been a thing since the ancient Roman era, when Plato and Aristotle hypothesized that people laughed at the expense of others to feel better about themselves in the Superiority Theory. Freud proposed the Relief Theory, believing people laughed to release pent up emotions. But the theory that really stuck over the ages and is still embraced today by humor philosophers and scientists is Immanuel Kant’s Incongruity Theory. (Read more [here](#).)

“People laugh at the juxtaposition of incompatible concepts and at defiance of their expectations—that is, at the incongruity between expectations and

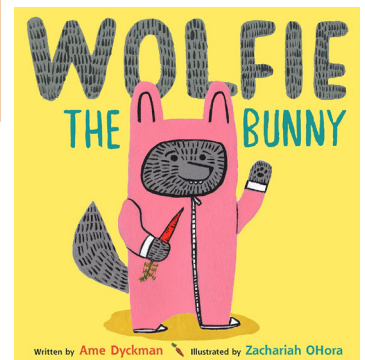
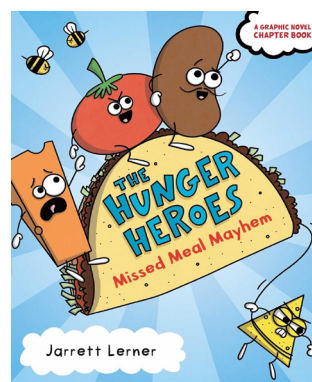
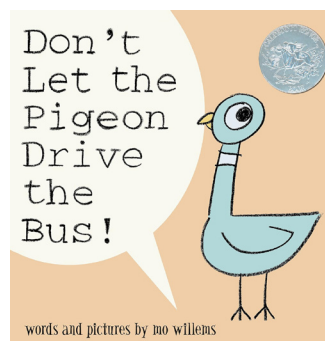
reality.” —Giovanni Sabato for *Scientific American* (read the article [here](#))

People like to be surprised. It’s funny when something feels out of place or doesn’t belong. People like a punch line.

So how can we use the Incongruity Theory to inject humor into our own work?

Let’s start with the premise of your story. How can you use juxtaposition to bring your premise to the next level of funny? Before you start writing, come up with some ideas ripe with incongruity. A pigeon who wants to drive a bus (DON’T LET THE PIGEON DRIVE THE BUS, Mo Willems, Hyperion 2003)? Hilarious. A wolf cub who gets adopted by a family of bunnies (WOLFIE THE BUNNY, Ame Dyckman, Zachariah O’Hora, Little Brown 2015)? Yes, please. A

bunch of hero taco ingredients that save hungry humans (THE HUNGER HEROES, Jarrett Lerner, Aladdin 2021)? I’d read that.



**Incongruity = hilarious (unless you're Pigeon)**

## The Science of Humor *(continued)*

In revisions, take a second look at your major plot points. Can you mix it up for your character and bring in more incongruity? In my book, *SURVIVOR GIRL* (Clarion, 2019), my main character goes on set with her father on his survivalist show. Since her personality is fancy-smoothies-on-a-beach-resort, I made their destination the polar opposite of where she would thrive: The Great Dismal Swamp. This change not only upped the comedic potential of the book but helped drive my plot as well.



### Family curse: surprisingly funny

Not all funny books need to have a funny premise, though. The vast majority of books that can be described as funny show their humor in more subtle ways. Let's take a look at the Sid Fleischman Award winners from 2023. (Did you know SCBWI sponsors one of the only humor awards for kidlit writers? See the past winners [here](#).) *FREDDIE VS. THE FAMILY CURSE* (Clarion, 2022) by Tracy Badua, which won in 2023 is about a Filipino-American boy who tries to break the family curse or else get trapped in an amulet for eternity. The honor award went to *THE REAL RILEY MAYES* by Rachel Elliott (Balzer + Bray, 2022), a coming-of-age graphic novel about a girl who feels out of place in her world and writes a letter to her favorite comedian for a class assignment.

Based on the blurbs alone, these books may not sound hilarious. Their premises aren't laugh-out-loud funny and actually, at first glance, a boy fighting for his life and a girl on a journey of self-discovery sound pretty serious. And you would be right. These books do touch on some serious themes, but the authors use humor in an effective way to draw in their readers and make these tougher topics feel less heavy—and they do it through their characters.

Like all great characters, Riley and Freddie are flawed yet likeable. And most importantly—they're relatable.

"Social science research suggests that the strongest laughter is generated when a comedian shares

an observation that supports or reflects audience members' experiences of the world." —Anne Libera, *AMA Journal of Ethics* (read the article [here](#).)

Some of my favorite comedians center their entire sets around everyday things—going to the grocery store, dating, raising kids—and it's funny because it's true! (Have you seen Tina Fey talk about [what it's like to have a teen daughter](#)? As someone with two teens at home, I highly recommend this clip.)

In this same vein, Badua starts *FREDDIE VS. THE FAMILY CURSE* masterfully with this line: "There's nothing more heart-stopping than the wheeze of an empty glue bottle the night before a big school project is due." We've all been there. Just when we need it the most, the printer glitches, our phone dies, or we run out of paint when we've finally reached the last wall in the kitchen.

Not only is this first line funny because it's relatable, but Badua has also executed a perfect example of incongruity. She sets us up with, "There's nothing more heart-stopping..." And it could be anything—an adored pet gets out of the yard? A family member is hurt or sick? A bad guy is pounding on the door? It's none of those things. Freddie's glue is out, which is unexpected and maybe not a heart-stopping situation at all. It's this mismatch that will get a chuckle from Badua's readers.

Besides relatability, another proven way to introduce more humor through character is to give your characters a reality disconnect. You want your



Alternative reality through a flawed, lovable character

# The Science of Humor

(continued)

character to believe a different reality than everyone else. The pigeon who wants to drive the bus? He's living in an alternative reality of his own making. Pigeons can't drive buses. We know this. But Pigeon? He knows he can drive that bus if someone would just give him the chance. (Read more about this idea [here](#).)

In one of my favorite TV shows, [The Office](#), main character Michael Scott has a severe disconnect with reality. He thinks he's the best boss ever to walk the Earth when in reality he is a terrible manager. He's selfish, socially awkward, inappropriate with his employees, and lacks all self-awareness. The writers on the show expertly put Michael into just the right situations to showcase this disconnect.

But in the first season, producers weren't getting the audience numbers they had hoped for. They took a closer look at the Michael Scott character. Time and time again, Michael comes out looking like the buffoon he is at the close of each episode. But was he a lovable buffoon who was capturing the heart of his audience?

Comedy writer Mindy Kaling says, "Characters can have flaws, but if they're an outright moron with no redeeming intelligence, they are nothing but one-dimensional." (Read Mindy Kaling's [Six Rules for Writing](#).)

The writers of *The Office* took a closer look at Michael Scott's character and layered him with a few redeeming qualities. They gave him some heart and good intentions. So, while Michael still had an unhealthy disconnect from reality, they softened him with some decency. And their character work paid off. Michael's endearing qualities made him a character viewers could root for despite his flaws. This helped make *The Office* the success it is today. (Read a great character analysis of Michael Scott [here](#).)

Plot, premise, and character are great ways to bring a lot of humor into your work, but what if you just want a sprinkle of funny? What if you're not look-

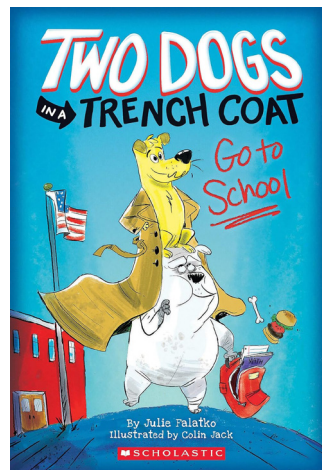
ing to make a full humor commitment? Here are a few ways to insert some humor at the scene and sentence level, which can really add up and make a difference.

## 1. Rule of Three

A well-known technique used by comedians and writers: (1) set up, (2) reinforcement, and (3) surprise. This technique can be used at the plot level and at the sentence level.

"... certainly he'd been called many things in his life—'too serious,' (*set up*) 'ahead of the curve,' (*reinforcement*) 'Sebastian' (his parents didn't believe in nicknames) ... " (*surprise*) THE EXPLORERS: THE DOOR IN THE ALLEY by Adrienne Kress (Turtleback Books, 2018)

"... they got out of the doggy door easily enough, but then they were stuck in the backyard. First they got rid of all the squirrels in the yard. (*set up*) (It



**Rule of three is a classic technique (give it a try!)**

didn't take long, since there weren't any to begin with, which just proved what excellent and professional dogs they were.) They spent five minutes trying to jump over the fence (*reinforcement*), and another ten minutes of Waldo lecturing Sassy about "this is why my airplane plan would have been better." (*surprise*) — TWO DOGS IN A TRENCH COAT GO TO SCHOOL by Julie Falatko, Colin Jack (illustrator) (Scholastic, 2018)

## 2. Hyperbole and under-statement

This is where you can really ramp up your character's reality disconnect.

# The Science of Humor

(continued)

"So superb are his talents that out-of-this-world contenders line up to challenge him." – NINO WRESTLES THE WORLD by Yuyi Morales (Square Fish, 2015)



**Hyperbole in Huda in HUDA F. CARES? by Huda Fahmy (Dial, 2023)**

"Well, Monday was a pretty good day, if you don't count Hamburger Surprise at lunch and Margaret's mother coming to get her. Or the stuff that happened in the principal's office when I got there to explain that Margaret's hair was not my fault and besides she looks okay without it..." CLEMENTINE by Sara Pennypacker, Marla Frazee (illustrator) (LBFRY, 2008)

## 3. Metaphors and similes

The more specific to your story and characters the better!

"Lisa waves her hand like she's drowning and needs a lifeguard." –THE MAGNIFICENT MYA TIBS: THE WALL OF FAME GAME by Crystal Allen, Ed Kaban (illustrator) (Balzer + Bray, 2018)

"Bad luck follows me like toilet paper stuck to my shoe." –FREDDIE VS. THE FAMILY CURSE by Tracy Badua (Clarion, 2022)

"Turbill was as blind as a sea-slug when it came to magic." –THE VOYAGE TO MAGICAL NORTH by Claire Fayers (Henry Holt, 2016)

## 4. Running jokes and callbacks

Readers love being in on a joke and a well-placed placed callback or a punch line at the end of a running joke can really pay off.

In THE HUNGER HEROES, Leonard the chunk of cheese is scared of bees, and throughout the book if there is a strange noise, he immediately thinks it's a swarm of bees heading in his direction, calling back to the original joke.

In my novel, THE FRIENDSHIP EXPERIMENT (Clarion, 2019), my main character's mother discovers a beautiful classical painting of a nearly naked lady in her father's house that she brings home and displays over their fireplace. Throughout the book, the kids keep taking the embarrassing painting down, and the mother keeps putting it up. In the end, the punch line is the nearly naked lady in the painting is a family member.

And one of my favorite examples is from an episode of the show *Seinfeld*, when Geoge Costanza makes up a fictional character, Art Vandelay, to get himself out of a mess at a job interview. Art Vandelay keeps coming up throughout the series and plays a big part in the final episode. (Read about all the running jokes in *Seinfeld* [here](#).)

In the end, to make any of these techniques work in your writing, you need to follow your own sense of humor. Become a humor consumer. Read funny books. Watch funny movies. Binge funny TV. What makes you cackle? What kind of humor do you connect with the most?

And how can you bring that humor to your own writing? Practice and play around. Push your internal editor aside and let your funny flow. Because if you have a sense of humor, then you have all the qualifications you need to write humor—just ask the scientists! //H//

# Engaging Readers Through Humor

by Jen Steiner

When my good girlfriends and I get together, no one thinks twice about what makes our conversations funny. Laughs come naturally—the result of a comedic “call and response” honed over years of shared experiences and a willingness to say the unsayable at the most inappropriate time. Our laughter washes away sad tears. Jokes flip fear and sadness on their heads. They offer moments of levity amid tension.

My favorite books read like the best kiki sessions with my friends. I want to write like that—but how? Fortunately, people more qualified than me have a few thoughts on the matter I’d like to share.

In December 2022, I attended “Writing Humor: Finding and Crafting the Funny in Your Novel,” a seminar facilitated by Chris Tebbetts, co-author of the MIDDLE SCHOOL series. Chris considers two questions when assessing stories for comedic opportunity. First, what’s the source of gravity (tension) in the story/scene/beat? Second, what’s the source of anti-gravity (levity)? Chris highlighted three opportunities in writing to elevate humor: contrast, story structure, and language.

## Contrast

In 2008 my great-grandmother died just shy of a hundred years old. In recounting the life of a woman who—with barely an elementary school education—endured Jim Crow, persevered after the death of two husbands, and witnessed all of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren attend college, that pulpit-rocking preacher only cared about one thing: She didn’t get stuck in “the muckity muck.” What in the world was the *muckity muck*? That turn of phrase unraveled me, and I burst into a

shoulder-shaking laughter that lasted the rest of the funeral service.

Unintentionally, the preacher injected humor at a moment of high tension. I felt like my laughter was the highest praise! My mother did not.

Another way to use contrast, according to Tebbetts, is to employ “What If?” questions. What if the character says the unsaid (“Thank you for the Oscar. I

## The preacher injected humor at a moment of high tension

deserved it, and the rest of you all are no-talent losers! Thbpttt!)? What if traditional power structures are turned on their heads (students run a school for teachers)? What if your great-grandmother’s eulogy is all about the muckity muck?

It’s no surprise that surprise is an effective way to play up contrast in humor writing. Contrast works because it leans into the unexpected—and nothing’s more unexpected than a surprise. Whether it’s a punch line or a plot twist, using surprise in humor is an effective way to tickle the reader’s funny bone.

## Story Structure

The Rule of Three is pervasive in writing (at least in writing seminars). Three acts. Trilogies. Three Little Piggies. No surprise that it also works in humor writing. Sarah Garfinkel and Julie Vick’s blog about the Rule of Three sums up the comedic technique as follows:

# Engaging Readers Through Humor

(continued)

The first two ideas set up a pattern; the third idea deviates from the pattern in a way that surprises and delights the reader.

Of the Rule of Three, Chris Tebbetts simply says beat, beat, punch line: "I sat down for a dinner of turkey, mashed potatoes, and regret." This method works as well in a scene or beat as it does in a sentence. In a scene it's setup (beat), emphasis, (beat),

## Rule of Three: beat, beat, punch line

payoff (punch line). If this seems familiar, it's because this is also an example of contrast.

Another Rule of Three is to cluster ideas into threes. There's a reason the book's not titled *Eat, Pray, Love, and Travel*. How much of a mouthful would *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once, and All the Time* have been? "I sat down for a dinner of turkey, mashed potatoes, collard greens, and regret" just doesn't roll off the tongue in the same way.

## Language

How a character says something can be just as funny as *what* a character says. Voice, wordplay, and dialogue are important conduits of humor. In stories, varying characters' (or the narrator's) voices

## How something is said can be just as funny as what is said

can convey different humorous messages. In Kevin L. Smith's article *Five Great Voices for Humor and Satire*, he lists five common humor voice styles and their best use:

### 1. Argument of a Fool

Argument of a Fool, also known as an Argument of Absurdity, "presents an obviously insane idea as the only reasonable solution to a problem." It's useful to illustrate ideological, political, or social subtext.

### 2. Self-Aware Mocking

The second, Self-Aware Mocking, is great for ridiculing a particularly ridiculous person or character.

### 3. Aggressive Confidence

Half cheerleader, half drill sergeant, this voice is great for a character who harbors outsized intensity about mundane issues.

### 4. Witty Conversational

Witty Conversational, my favorite voice, is secretly recording kiki sessions with your besties and transposing them into your story. It's a great vessel for observational humor.

### 5. Accusatory Omniscient

This is the voice of a know-it-all who wins every argument because it's all in their head.

The use of contrast, story structure, and language to add humor must complement the story's broader arc. Unless we're writing a joke book, jokes support the plot, not the other way around. Humor isn't a Band-Aid for a weak plot or lack of character development.

The use of jokes and humor should be meaningful. Humor's superpower is its ability to make us think about serious issues in unserious and surprising ways. Humor draws us nearer to the characters. It makes the story more accessible and relatable.

As writers, we can use these techniques and others to inject levity and awaken curiosity in our readers, making our stories more engaging—and a little funnier. //H//

# Timing ... and Surprise!

by Kyle Reardon

It ain't easy being funny. Anyone who focuses on humor in their written or illustrated work will tell you that being funny is just plain old *difficult*. It takes patience, hard work, and a lot of gained experience after trial and error. Real success in putting humor onto the page requires taking humor seriously in order to understand it as a craft and a skill.

I personally consider it a net win for humanity that the same joke told three different ways can make three different people laugh. Since we're lucky to have so much diversity when it comes to who finds what funny, no one can tell you what is or isn't objectively humorous. But as someone who has spent a lot of time trying to make people laugh by studying how others make people laugh, I've noticed two things that are consistent across really good comedy. It doesn't matter if it's a stand-up special, a sitcom, a funny middle school novel, or a picture book—they all share these core concepts that can bolster anyone's personal style of humor. Surprise and good timing.

Has someone ever told you a joke you've heard before? Have you ever seen a punch line coming from a mile away halfway through a setup? Did you laugh? Maybe you have a favorite sitcom that you like to watch over and over again. Maybe you're like me, and you can recite *Parks and Recreation* episodes line for line. Even though shows like this are comforting and we still enjoy watching them for the second, third, or fifteenth time, we usually don't laugh like we did the very first time. It can't surprise us anymore. We know the joke.

But when you come across a joke that truly surprises you? That's a special moment. There's joy in a gag that outsmarts you, or one that you didn't see coming. Good humor tends to be found in jokes or gags that are either wholly original or something familiar that's told or delivered in a way we haven't seen before.

Now that doesn't make an episode of *Friends* a terse drama when you watch it for the second time. Good timing is what either creates something new or keeps something familiar fresh. Even the most surprising joke will fall flat without good timing. It's also one of those obnoxiously difficult concepts to master—something that comes more from time and experience than from instruction. I can't tell you where and how to apply good timing to your humor, and besides that, different timing can turn one gag into four new ones.

It's not some mystic formula, either. Timing in humor is just storytelling with the punch line as the climax. With practice in storytelling you learn the perfect moment to reveal the final confrontation between two characters, or just why, exactly, the chicken crossed the road.

I've talked a lot about the philosophical ideas that make up humor, but how the heck do we apply that to something like picture book illustration? How am I supposed to put surprise and timing into a drawing?

**Well, allow me to become everyone's favorite character, the Man Who Explained the Joke.**

## Timing...and Surprise!

(continued)



**"King Dog" by Kyle Reardon**

I drew this, and I'm not too proud to admit that I find it very funny. Maybe you don't! Maybe you just saw this and thought to yourself, "If this is what this guy finds funny, I'm starting to think this whole article is a little suspect." That's fair. But allow me to explain ...

The core of this gag is pretty simple. It's a king that is also a dog. I dug deep into my personal creativity and gave it the brilliant title of "King Dog." So what's the surprise? What's the timing? I'll feel silly typing this, and you'll feel silly reading it, but here goes! The surprise is that kings generally aren't dogs, and dogs usually aren't kings. Timing is a little more nuanced—since King Dog is featured so clearly and prominently in the center of the framing, the gag leaps out immediately. It smacks you at first glance. KING DOG! You don't have time to form expectations of what a king or a dog should be doing at this moment; it's already too late! It's KING DOG!

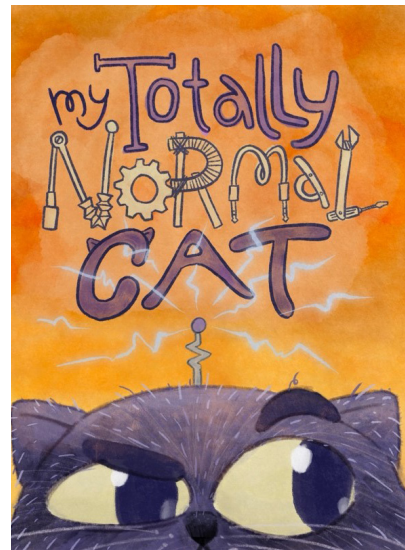


**"King Dog" detail**

Plus, look at this guy's face. Why would a King Dog be so darn confident in himself, with his tongue hanging out of his mouth? Ridiculous.

Timing in an illustration or a picture book can be realized in a whole host of ways. A strategic page turn is a perfect opportunity for a well-timed joke (again, another opportunity for a big surprise as well). You can also be intentional in your framing and in how you lead the viewer's eye, grabbing their attention and pulling it to your gag (or even leaving the gag in the background for them to catch at the last second before they move on). But one of my favorite versions of good timing in a picture book is direct contradiction.

I tried to find the right page in Jon Klassen's modern classic *THIS IS NOT MY HAT* to make my point, but there are so many examples that it's just easier to encourage you to check it out from the library yourself. Klassen's narrators often say something to the reader, only for the illustration beneath the text to directly contradict what's just been said. In *THIS IS NOT MY HAT*, the fish narrator confesses his crime to us, then explains how easily he's going to get away with it. Meanwhile, every illustration shows the exact opposite of what he believes will happen. The tension is inherently funny but only grows as we watch another character make up his mind and chase after the narrator.



**Illustration by Kyle Reardon**

bonkers. And there's no fooling you; you're way too smart.

I have my own rudimentary example here. The text and the illustration simply don't square up; my cat clearly isn't "normal." The presentation and the timing of the image bring you the joke fast and loud. You may think this cat is nice—or at least I *told* you he was—but he's clearly



## Timing...and Surprise!

(continued)

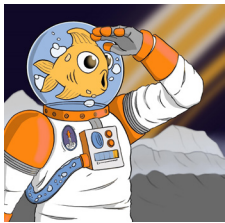
I'm sure there are plenty of people who have read this who disagree with me, and that's completely expected. Humor is such a strange thing to hold down and study. It's like trying to hug smoke. As soon as you stop and study the joke to understand what makes it funny, it starts to lose its humor. That's

why I try to keep myself true to those two ideas: surprise and timing. We might not all agree on what we find funny, but understanding how and why certain things really make us laugh is a surefire way to strengthen your comedic voice. //H//

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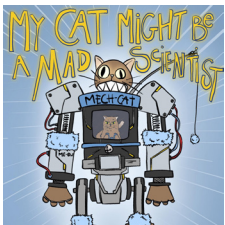
## KYLE'S GREATEST HITS

*Wondering what goes on in the mind of a humorous illustrator? Check out a few of the illustrations Kyle found especially fun to create and what he loves most in each.*



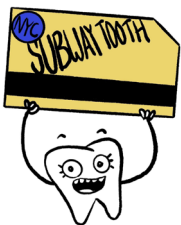
### "Fish Astronaut"

The little things here are what I really loved focusing on. The idea that a fish astronaut would need to use water instead of air is funny. The little tips on the gloves are a sort-of-accurate nod to real astronaut suits. But the funniest thing about this picture is the idea that Fish NASA (FNASA) would take the time to make a mission patch of a fish launching into space.



### "Mech-Cat"

This one plays to the kind of madcap '80s comedies I half remember. A fun thing about creating this one was imagining just what would be important enough to a cat to put on a robot; hence, the fuzzy ball on a string and the collar bell still attached at the center. You know, so you always know where it is.



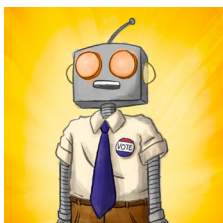
### "Subway Tooth"

It would take too long to explain what the heck went on in my noggin to produce "Subway Tooth," but the idea of a tooth that excitedly rides the subway is just ... silly at its core. It's also a tooth with teeth, and that makes me laugh.



### "Lil' Frankenstein"

The thing I really like about this lil' Frankenstein monster (or to be REALLY specific—The Creature) is that it essentially takes what is a rather horrifying moment from the book and turns it into a benign request from a little kid.



### "Robo-Robbie"

Robots with personalities are almost a cheat code for making people laugh, but I wanted to dial that up to the most un-robot personality a robot could be: an optimistic elementary school student who is running for student council. Everything about that character is something that doesn't make sense for a robot—which is what makes it so funny to me. And look at that lil' stinker! Talk about charming.

## Learn strategies to jump into writing humorous stories

["12 Ways to Write a Hilarious Children's Book"](#) by John Matthew Fox, Bookfox

"You've been there: curled up on the couch, reading a children's book to a giggling kiddo, and thinking, 'Wow, I wish I could write something this funny.' Good news—you absolutely can! And with a dollop of humor and a dash of creativity, you'll soon be on your way. Here are ten chuckle-worthy strategies, inspired by everyone from Dr. Seuss to Judith Viorst, to write a funny children's book that'll have kids and adults in stitches."

## Pick up funny books in your targeted kidlit level

"*School Library Journal* is the premiere publication for librarians and information specialists who work with children and teens. A source of quality journalism and reviews for 70 years, SLJ produces award-winning features and news coverage on: literacy, best practices, technology, education policy and other issues of interest to the school library and greater educator community. We evaluate a broad range of resources, from books and digital content to databases, in 6000+ reviews published annually."

- **Picture books:** [10 Funny Picture Books To Read Together](#)
- **Middle grade:** [22 Titles to Make Middle Graders LOL](#)
- **Young adult:** [17 Side-Splitting Teen Titles](#) and [Laugh Out Loud with These 16 Funny YA Books](#)
- **Graphic novel:** [Nine Funny Graphic Novels About Talking Animals](#) and [Standout Comics and Graphic Novels by Black Creators](#)

## Analyze favorite laugh-out-loud picture books (and read them out loud!)

["Make Me Laugh: The Epic Librarian List of Funny Books for Kids"](#) by the New York Public Library

"When asked what they want from a book, parents most often say they want a book to build character or inspire goodness in their child. You know what kids want? Something to make them laugh. Let's give them what they want. Our staff name their young patron's laugh-out-loud favorites."

## Write for laughs

["How to Write Funny"](#) by Rebecca Katzman for TIME for Kids

"You don't have to be a professional to write jokes. There are tips and tricks you can use to come up with jokes of your own. TIME for Kids spoke with Theresa Julian, author of *THE JOKE MACHINE*, about writing to make people laugh. 'When a joke lands and someone cracks a smile, there's just so much satisfaction,' she told TFK. Here are a few of her pointers, along with examples. Study these, then try writing a few jokes of your own."

## Learn techniques for using humor in chapter books

["Humor Techniques Inspired by Kate DiCamillo's FRANCINE POULET MEETS THE GHOST RACCOON"](#) by Jackie Friedman Mighdoll for KidLit Craft

"I love Kate diCamillo's gentle humor and poignancy. (Kristi has written about her use of comedic set up in one of my favorites—*FLORA AND ULYSSES*—[here](#)). I decided to look at her techniques in a chapter book, *FRANCINE POULET MEETS THE GHOST RACCOON*, to find techniques to try in my own writing."

### **Get insight on humor in middle grade stories**

["Finding the Sweet Spot for Funny: Writing Humor for Middle-Grade Readers"](#) by Jake Wheeler and Jeff Sikaitis

"Emmy-winning creators Jeff Sikaitis and Jake Wheeler share their thoughts on finding the sweet spot for funny when writing humor for middle-grade readers."

### **Balance humor and trauma in writing middle grade fiction**

["Balancing Humor and Trauma in Middle-Grade Fiction"](#) by Mark Goldblatt for *Writer's Digest*

"The preteen years are filled with contradicting emotions, both good and bad, that are inescapable parts of the experience of adolescence. Here, author Mark Goldblatt discusses balancing humor and trauma in middle-grade fiction."

### **Write a humor-filled novel**

["7 Serious Tips for Writing a Humor-Filled Novel"](#) by Jim Hardison for *Writer's Digest*

"Writing humor can be tricky. Use these tips to humor writing in your novel to make your readers laugh so hard milk squirts out their noses."

### **Take a class to learn how to add humor to your writing**

["The Mechanics of Humor: How to Write Funny Children's Books with Confidence and Consistency"](#) from the The Kidlit Hive

"Humor is hard. It can feel elusive. Some people are just naturally funny. But did you know that humor is a skill that can be honed? This course will deconstruct humor and how it works and equip you with the knowledge and know how to effectively incorporate humor into your children's book stories."

### **Get inspired by humor-loving female authors and illustrators**

["Funny AND Female: A Research Project by a Hoity-Toity Otter"](#) by Abi Cushman

"Well wouldn't you know, there ARE funny female authors and illustrators! Quite a few actually. Dare I say, LOTS. I decided to reach out to some of these creators and gain more insight into this phenomenon. Interestingly, for my first question I got the exact same answer from every single person I asked."

### **Learn tips for illustrating a funny picture book**

["How to Illustrate a Humorous Picture Book!"](#) by Tibi Puiu for ZME Science

"We hear all about how to illustrate a humorous picture book from the super talented Brett Curzon! Illustrator of the laugh-out-loud tale, DANDY AND DAZZA."

### **Use 'illustration improv' to find the weird and funny**

["Illustration Improv: Loosen Up and Find Your Weirdest Ideas!"](#) from SkillShare

"Learn how to create more creative, original, and downright weird illustrations in this fun project based class by Award-Winning Illustrator and Top Teacher, Mr. Tom Froese! Along the way you'll learn how to overcome those two annoying pain points: creative block and self doubt!"

## 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/>

## JANUARY

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: "Tightrope Tension: How to Build Tension in Picture Books" with Valerie Bolling**

January 16, 7-8:15 p.m. (*paid virtual event*)

Join award-winning author Valerie Bolling to learn how to captivate and create tension to make readers feel like they're walking on a tightrope and see examples from picture books that will show how to heighten tension in your story. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/tightrope-tension-how-to-build-tension-in-picture-books>)

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Indie and Self Publishing Networking Social**

January 22, 7-8 p.m. (*free virtual event*)

Join the indie and self publishing networking social hosted by SCBWI Mid-Atlantic's Indie and Self Publishing Coordinator, Joyana Peters. Register to attend; Zoom links will be sent by email the night before the event (you will also be able to access the Zoom link under MEMBER HOME > My events). (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/indie-and-self-publishing-networking-social-pf-rgy4pkv6>)

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: January Virtual Write-In/Draw-In with author Katie Erickson**

January 29, 7-9 p.m. (*free, virtual event*)

Katie will share tactics to get over the blank page and into the "flow." Following the presentation, participants will have time for writing and/or illustrating. Leave inspired and ready to conquer that page. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/january-write-in-draw-in/register-info>)

## FEBRUARY

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: "How to Use Narrative Distance in MG and YA Fiction"**

February 6, 7-8:15 p.m. (*paid virtual event*)

Talk about narrative distance (how far the narrator takes the reader inside a character's thoughts and perceptions) with Lisa Rowe Fraustino. Understanding narrative distance helps with controlling point of view and mastering the craft of showing characters versus telling about them. The workshop will look at examples across a range of narrative distance, from remote to close-up, and practice placing sentences on the spectrum to achieve a desired effect on the reader. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/how-to-use-narrative-distance-in-mg-and-ya-fiction>)

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Winter Write-In/Draw-In with author Terry Catasús Jennings**

February 18, 10:30-1:30 p.m. at the Shirlington Library (Campbell Room) *(free, in-person event)*

Attend an author talk by Terry Catasús Jennings, author of the DEFINITELY DOMINGUITA series, PAULI MURRAY, and THE LITTLE HOUSE OF HOPE, and participate in a draw/write-in. The event is being held in partnership with the Arlington Public Library. (For more info: <https://arlingtonva.libcal.com/event/11573622>)

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Editors & Agents Day 2024**

April 27; **registration opens on February 1** *(paid, in-person event)*

In this event, attendees will get up close and personal with some of the most well-respected agents and editors in children's publishing. Whether you need feedback on your elevator pitch for a new project or portfolio, you need advice in the query trenches, or you're published and want an insider view on career longevity, leave this event smarter, better educated about the industry, and confident in your next steps. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/editors-agent-day-2024>)

### **SCBWI Pennsylvania West: "How to Make a Story Bible" with JD Donnelly**

February 26, 7-8 p.m. *(paid, virtual event)*

A story bible is a tool to help any author organize the aspects of their world-building—the cultures, rules of magic and/or science, weather, politics, ecology, economy, and all other kinds of nitty-gritty details—timelines of important plot points and histories, and character interviews and designs in a handy physical or digital body of reference for when you're fleshing out your later drafts. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/book-bibles-with-jd-donnelly>)

## MARCH

### **SCBWI Minnesota: "Advocating for Yourself: Offers of Publication and Contracts 101"**

March 4, 7-8:30 p.m.; **registration closes February 26** *(paid, virtual event)*

Gallt and Zacker Literary Agent Erin Casey Westin covers the most important things to understand and advocate for when negotiating an offer of publication and a contract. Whether you have an agent or not, knowing what is standard, where you can ask for improvements, and what might be missing from a contract is empowering and keeps you protected. Come learn the basics you need to enter negotiations with a publisher with confidence. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/advocating-for-yourself-offers-of-publication-and-contracts-101/register-info>)



Illustration: Katelyn Workman

# MOOD BOARD



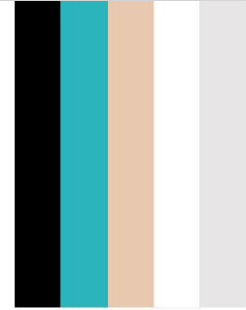
MEGHANA NARAYAN

I said you had good handwriting  
and you laughed, saying no one  
had ever told you this before.  
I placed the hated green Skittles  
on the blanket between us, and you  
ate every last one of them.

- Excerpt from *THE NIGHT FOX* by Ashley Wilda,  
Rocky Pond Books (2023)

**A POTTY  
PARTY'S  
COMING  
THROUGH,  
SO RAISE  
SOME  
HANDS,  
FLUSH SOME  
POO.**

- Excerpt from *POTTY  
PARTY!* by Dionna L. Mann  
(Author), LB Kids (2023)



KATELYN WORKMAN