

Winter 2025

# Highlighter

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Journal



Inspired by  
**True  
Stories**

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic

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Winter 2025 // Inspired by True Stories

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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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### Submissions

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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*Inspired by True Stories*

Winter 2025

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## Happy New Year!

There's nothing like turning over the calendar to spark a creative burst of energy in writing, illustrating, and translating books for young readers.

For even more inspiration, read this issue of the *Highlighter*, which features articles on how authors have used real-life experiences to ignite fictional stories.

We jumpstarted January with several offerings. On January 7, volunteer **Chris Bailey** held the first virtual Central VA Write-in of the year. On January 11, SCBWI Mid-Atlantic and Fonts Books and Gifts in McLean, Virginia, co-sponsored a panel of local SCBWI members (**Gabriella Aldeman, Nadia Fischer, Megan Wagner Lloyd, and Leah Moser**, with moderator **Ruqayyah Doud**) to discuss the path to publication. On January 13, Indie- and Self-Publishing Coordinator **Joyana Peters** hosted a free-for-members networking social on Zoom. Multi-published author **Candice Ransom** presented a webinar on magical realism on January 14.

For all our regional events, please check periodically for updates and registration links here: <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic/events>

There's also still time to register for the SCBWI in-person New York Winter Conference (January 31-February 2) [here](#) and the Virtual Winter Conference (February 21-22) [here](#).

Finally, we're excited to ask that you please "save the date" on your new 2025 calendar for the following Mid-Atlantic events: Illustrators Day (March 8) and the second annual Agents and Editors Day (May 17). More details to come.

May the New Year bring you creativity and renewed passion to follow your literary and artistic dreams.

Warmest regards,

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

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Barbara Carroll Roberts



## Writing Realistic Fiction Means Getting the Details Right

by Barbara Carroll Roberts

**M**y son loved to read. An athletic kid, he had shelves full of books about boys who, like him, loved playing sports.

My equally athletic daughter was happy reading books about cats and dogs when she was very young. But by the time she got to sixth or seventh grade, she stopped reading for pleasure. A basketball player, she wanted to read books about girls like her—girls who, like the boys in my son's books, were passionate about sports.

But this was 2007 or so, and there were hardly any books like that. And of the few that did feature girls who played a sport, the sport itself didn't have anything to do with the story. Instead, it was a background element, with the little bits of action skimmed over or, worse, described with inaccurate terminology.

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**If I didn't get the details right, young readers, especially young athletes, would know I didn't respect their love of the game.**

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I didn't respect their love of the game. And they wouldn't read the book.

In *TURNING LIFE INTO FICTION*, author and writing instructor Robin Hemley says, "If you want to write, you must pay attention." I took that advice to heart. During the hundreds of hours my daughter played basketball—through middle school, high school, and college—I paid attention and took notes. I watched games and practices closely. I eavesdropped on countless conversations among players, parents, and coaches (and yes, I know eavesdropping is rude, but we writers get a pass on this). I asked innumerable questions about things that happened on and off the court. I noted what

So I decided to write a real sports book for my daughter and girls like her.

Unfortunately, I didn't know very much about basketball. But I did know one thing: If I didn't accurately describe the game and the players' thoughts and feelings while they played—if I didn't get the details right—young readers, especially young athletes, would know

<https://BarbaraCarrollRoberts.com>

 @Barbara Roberts

### Favorite writing resources:

- *THE SCENE BOOK: A PRIMER FOR THE FICTION WRITER* by Sandra Scofield. This book is helpful in thinking about each scene's purpose and how it functions to move your story forward.
- *20 MASTER PLOTS AND HOW TO BUILD THEM* by Ronald B. Tobias. I know the title makes this book sound overly prescriptive but I've found Tobias's ideas helpful in thinking about the kind of story I'm writing and the general plot patterns that might apply to it.
- *THE MODERN LIBRARY WRITER'S WORKSHOP* by Stephen Koch. Stephen Koch was the chair of the graduate creative writing program at Columbia University. Reading this book is like sitting in the office of your favorite professor who offers you a cup of tea and maybe a cookie and says, "Don't panic. You can do this."
- My Zoom critique group with classmates from my MFA program at Hamline University. I know my second novel would never have come together without them.

## Meet a Writer (continued)

gyms sounded and smelled and felt like. And I wrote everything down.

I also realized that I had some experiences of my own to draw on. I'd been a competitive athlete in high school, so I knew how hard it was to go up and down stairs with sore muscles, how my lungs would burn during wind sprints, how badly blisters stung. And I knew how joyful it was to play a game I loved. I wrote all that down, too.

But I still had more research to do.

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**But the reality, of course, is that most players on a team are not the star. ... This was the kind of girl I wanted to write about.**

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Award-winning children's author Gary D. Schmidt says that when he was doing research for *THE WEDNESDAY WARS*, he read an entire year of *The New York Times*, front to

back, from the year in which the story takes place. I didn't have to go quite that far, but I read many books about coaching, game strategy, and team dynamics. I watched videos of star players demonstrating drills to develop ball handling and shooting skills. I even retrieved my daughter's genetics workbook from her seventh-grade science class and did quite a bit of additional reading about inherited traits so I could accurately describe the lessons my characters worked on at school.

And along the way—during all that watching and listening and reading—my story idea took shape.

In the sports stories my son loved, the main character was most often the star of his team—the player everyone counted on to win the big game, hold the team together, stand up to the bully on the opposing squad.

But the reality, of course, is that most players on a team are not *the* star. And as kids move up to more

Barbara Carroll Roberts



and more competitive leagues, fewer and fewer will stand out. Those NBA players who sit at the end of the bench and never get into games? They've been the best player on every other team they've played on.

How do they handle that situation? How does a *child* handle that situation? If she's always been a star but is no longer one of the best players when she moves up to a more elite team, does she give up? Or does she dig in, work harder, learn new skills, and keep playing the sport she loves?

This was the kind of girl I wanted to write about.

Which brings me to something else Robin Hemley says: "If you don't give up, if you're persistent, you can turn almost anything into a good story."

It took me a long time to write *NIKKI ON THE LINE*. I worked on it on and off for several years while my kids were in school, then when my daughter went to college I began working on it in earnest. And around the time she graduated from college (and I got an MFA), I signed with an agent and sold the book. And then I did revisions with the editor for another year. All told, I worked on this book for close to ten years. Which, I suppose, is the definition of persistence.

My new novel, *THE METAMORPHOSIS OF BUNNY BAXTER*, about a girl who's fascinated with insects (for which I read a whole shelf of books about bugs and dug up my garden so I could replant it with native plants), comes out in July. It only took about five years to write, so I guess I'm making progress.

Certainly, not all novels require as much research as I did for *NIKKI ON THE LINE*. But if we're writing reality-based fiction, our books do require *enough* research. Enough research to write about the subject with authority—to get the details right. It takes a lot of work and even more persistence, but our young readers deserve it. //H//


Laura Diehl



## Self-portrait



<https://www.LDiehl.com>

 @LauraDiehlArt

 @LauraDiehlArt

 @LauraDiehlArt

### **Favorite tool**

My trusty Wacom Intuos XL digital art tablet

### **What inspires me:**

Beautiful lighting, fantastical imagery, whimsy

### **Design influences:**

The Brothers Hildebrandt, Michael Whelan, Scott Gustafson, old fairy tale art

### **Favorite things to illustrate:**

Cute kids and GIANT gentle creatures. Natural settings with fantasy elements.

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

I want to explore both writing and illustrating my own picture book stories. //H//

## Meet an Illustrator (continued)

Laura Diehl



## A peek into the process (my studio)





# Truth Through Fiction: How a Change in Genre Saved a Story

by Korena Di Roma Howley

When I was new to writing for children, I kept a stack of picture books on my desk for inspiration—recent offerings about the natural world, unsung scientists, and nearly forgotten but consequential moments in history. All beautifully told and illustrated. And all nonfiction.

I may not have started down this writing road at all if nonfiction hadn't been an option. At the time, I found facts to be far less daunting than fiction. I had spent nearly a decade at National Geographic and several years as a freelance science writer—qualifications I believed would ease me into what was otherwise unknown territory. I planned to focus on narrative picture books that, like my favorite titles, were lyrical, maybe even poetic at times, but still powered by real-world knowledge and events.

So I forged ahead with a handful of ideas and laughably little regard for word count. The results were exhaustively researched, lovingly expressed, and, if you squinted, somewhat kid-friendly.

They were books, perhaps, but they weren't stories. I had run up against the need to deliver on the "narrative" part of narrative nonfiction. If I had hoped to avoid the perils of fiction, I had apparently wandered down the wrong path.

I began to wonder what strange magic went into the nonfiction storytelling I was so drawn toward. And were any of my ideas still worth pursuing?

## *A true inspiration*

One did seem especially promising. I had read a story several years earlier in *The New York Times*: Korean grandmothers who were denied an education as children were offered the chance

to enroll in struggling local schools in a bid to keep them open. Often they attended alongside their grandchildren, and many expressed joy and pride in taking steps toward empowerment and independence. It was a wonderful, inspiring account that sparked memories of my own Korean grandmother. And, unlike many of the other ideas on my list, it was already a story.



**The *New York Times* article that inspired my story (read online [here](#))**

Encouraged by this, I began studying nonfiction picture books that brought true events to life. But this treatment didn't feel quite right. I didn't want to report broadly about a group of women and their experiences. I wanted a story with emotional stakes that children could relate to.

# Truth Through Fiction: How a Change in Genre Saved a Story

(continued)

## *A change in genre*

Through trial and a lot of error, I figured out that the best approach was, in fact, through fiction.

Once I accepted this, I thought the story might unfold much as it had in real life. But explanations about societal shifts stemming from cultural and economic changes don't make for an especially good read-aloud.

And there were fundamental questions to answer. Would it work to center Halmeoni, the grandmother, rather than a child? What role would a grandchild play? Do I focus on Halmeoni's experiences at school or on the execution of the idea?

In one version, I started with several grandmothers already in the classroom and flashed back to how they got there. In many versions, there were scenes of grandmothers and grandchildren learning together, riding the bus, eating lunch. Sometimes the grandchild, Sarang, visited a greenhouse where her grandmother grew strawberries.

Even though the story's town and characters are fictional, I wanted the details to reflect reality. What activities might a grandparent and grandchild do together in a rural seaside community? What might Sarang's parents do for a living? What other responsibilities might Halmeoni have? Because of my respect for the subject matter, I wanted every element to ring true.

## *Experience as a resource*

I thought back to my own years as a child in Korea, spoke with my mother about the nuances of language and relationships, and spent hours reading and researching.

All of this helped to inform the story's focus. I eventually decided that SARANG SAVES THE

SCHOOL would have, at its heart, an idea that becomes a catalyst for new beginnings. I had come to feel that the biggest step of all for both Sarang and Halmeoni was the very first one. Deciding to take action. Deciding to say yes.

And that had been my biggest step too. Once I knew I would tell this story, everything that came after was simply the work of being a writer: considering all of the possibilities, soaking up the wisdom of others, going down paths that might lead nowhere but continuing along them all the same.

Whether you start out writing fiction or nonfiction, the key is to trust that your writing will go where it's meant to.

Because every story, in the end, is based on something true. //H//

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### Experience-based Genre Term Round-up

**Nonfiction** - Narrative based on information from cited sources or logically deduced from them

**Memoir** - Nonfiction narrative about a specific time period in the author's life

**Biography** - Account of a person's life written by someone other than the subject

**Autobiography** - Account of a person's life written by the person

**Fiction** - Narrative created from imagination that may be based on a true story or draw on real events

**Historical fiction** - Narrative that takes place in the past and includes fictionalized characters and minor events but does not contradict actual history

**Autobiographical fiction ("autofiction")** - Fiction in which the protagonist is based on the author and a major plotline mirrors events in the author's life

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# Landing in Hope: Finding a Positive Way Forward

by John Cochran

**M**y middle-grade novel, *BREAKING INTO SUNLIGHT*, is about 12-year-old Reese, a boy facing his father's opioid addiction. Everything Reese feels—despair, grief, frustration, anger—I have felt, because I also have watched people I love struggling with addiction.

My real-life experiences provided insight into the dynamics of addiction, and are the source of the book's energy. At one point, after Reese's dad relapses again, a despairing Reese yells at him, "What do we have to do to get you to just stop?" My own emotional memories were close to the surface as I wrote, powering the scene.

But in writing Reese's story, I couldn't go straight to the page with the raw stuff of my life. I had to take a big step back, for two important reasons.

**1.** First, I felt strongly that the individual stories of my family members were theirs to tell, not mine. They should not recognize themselves in the characters or the story. Certain aspects of the book were suggested broadly by my experiences, but the specifics are fictional.

**2.** Second, I needed distance to find the right framing for young readers. I did not experience what Reese goes through as a child myself. I was a grownup when I faced it. And honestly, when I sat down to think through the story, I quickly realized that I hadn't processed my own experiences thoroughly or deeply enough to be able to speak clearly and constructively to kids.

I had a lot of reflecting and reading to do before I could write.

It was important to me to be real and honest with young readers in my portrayal of Reese's story. No pulled punches. No softened edges or euphemism. I came to fiction from journalism, so staying grounded in

the facts was my default and where I felt comfortable. But more importantly, I wanted to keep it real because kids experiencing hard things like addiction in their families need to feel seen to know they are not alone. I also wanted to help people around them—friends and classmates, neighbors, teachers and coaches—better understand the dynamics of addiction in families, because these kids need the understanding and support of their community.

They also need hope, a positive way forward for themselves. So I knew Reese's story ultimately had to land in a hopeful place.

That last point was the most challenging aspect for me when writing the book. Where do you find hope in such tragic, complicated circumstances? What is the good news here, realistically? I imagine this question confronts any writer of kidlit taking on hard realities that young people face but have no control over, such as mental illness or the death of a friend or family member.

The answer can't be simplistic or easy or pat. Kids see through anything phony or glib anyway and know when adults are talking down to them. Instead, stories should point to a hope that kids can expect to attain.

*BREAKING INTO SUNLIGHT* takes place over an intense few weeks, after Reese's dad accidentally overdoses. Realistically, the hopeful ending could not be a magic cure for his dad. I know from my own experiences that the path to recovery is most often long and twisting and uncertain. His dad's struggle with addiction will go on after the book ends, so I needed to show Reese finding a way to cope regardless and to move forward with the joyful life he deserves.

The same would be true for a story about chronic mental illness. Or death. Or abuse. The struggles go on. The difficulties, the scars, the grief will always be

## Landing in Hope: Finding a Way Forward (continued)

there. You can't wish them away or promise kids they will evaporate.

I ran up against my own experiences here very directly: Where do I find hope? How do I cope?

As I thought it through, I consulted the experts working with kids and families facing addiction and substance abuse. Thankfully, many resources are on the web, including helpful material from two groups in particular: Eluna Network (<https://elunanetwork.org>) and the National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA) (<https://nacoa.org>).

### The Seven Cs

An important piece of the puzzle was something called "the Seven Cs," developed by writer and counselor Jerry Moe for kids dealing with addiction in their families. It can help people touched by grief and mental illness and other difficult things in life. And it's definitely not just for children: It's helpful to me in my life.

The Seven Cs are:

1. I didn't cause it.
2. I can't control it.
3. I can't cure it.

But

4. I can take care of myself
5. By communicating my feelings
6. Making healthy choices
7. And celebrating myself.

That short credo helped clarify for me the path that Reese had to take, and I kept the Seven Cs in mind, alongside my own experiences, as I sketched out the plot. In the beginning, Reese believes he *can* control and cure his dad's addiction, and he is not communicating with anyone, not even his best friends at school, for fear of his family being judged. He needs to accept what he can't control and connect with people around him, sharing his burden. That's his way forward.

Given the heaviness of the subject for kids, I also knew the story had to have light in it—good times,

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some kid-sized adventure, space for the characters to breathe. I drew on my own experiences again and set *BREAKING INTO SUNLIGHT* in the summertime in a beautiful part of the world I know and love: eastern North Carolina. The story takes place on the banks of a black-water river that's based on real-life rivers I've explored over the years.

Thinking about Reese's need for communication and connection, I gave him two new friends to explore the river with, a brother and sister who, as he learns, need his friendship as much as he needs theirs. They are carrying sadness, too—they have lost both their parents in an auto accident—and like Reese, they feel stranded in a life that doesn't look like what they want or deserve.

### Confronting Crisis

Finally, considering the seventh C, "celebrating myself," led me to a plot point that the story turns on: Reese's 13th birthday celebration, which is approaching as the story opens. At first he doesn't want to think about a celebration, with his family coming apart and his dad struggling, and then as his dad seems to be getting better, he piles big expectations onto the day, seeing it as a potential fresh start for his family. At the novel's crisis point, the family celebration blows up when his dad shows up high.

At last, though, as the story draws to a close, Reese has internalized the other Seven Cs, and he's ready for the last: He's shown emerging from the shadow of his dad's disease by celebrating his birthday belatedly, with friends old and new.

The most important thing Reese ultimately discovers is the healing power of friendship. We're all carrying sorrows and regrets. This connects us, and we lighten our burdens by opening our hearts to each other.

For myself, I discovered—through researching, thinking, and reflecting—the benefit of writing a piece of fiction drawn from personal experience: In working through Reese's story, I was able to better work through my own. In finding Reese's happy ending, I saw more clearly where the hope lies for me as well. //H//

# Fiction from Family: A Q&A with Katherine Marsh

by Katherine Marsh and Korena Di Roma Howley

**K**atherine Marsh's award-winning middle grade novel, *THE LOST YEAR*, does many things at once. It plunges readers into Soviet-era Ukraine, where a man-made famine called Holodomor killed millions under Stalin's rule. It invites us into the lives of Ukrainian immigrants during the same time period in Brooklyn, New York. And it summons up our own recent reality through characters who are navigating the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. *THE LOST YEAR* does all of this while also being compulsively readable, with a high-stakes plot and sympathetic portraits of family members thrust into near impossible situations.

Marsh's story was inspired by family experiences—her grandmother's in 1930s Ukraine and her own during the early days of the pandemic. This intimacy with the subject matter comes through in the tender descriptions of family life and meticulously researched details that fill the narrative. Here, Marsh discusses how she came to write *THE LOST YEAR*, why its messages remain relevant today—and why the best family stories to tell are the ones that are universal.

## What first inspired you to write a novel based on your family's experiences during Ukraine's Holodomor?

I was inspired to take on this subject because I knew about the existence of this horrible famine as a child growing up in a family with Ukrainian roots. But I was bothered that so few Americans knew what Holodomor was or that it had even happened. As a journalist, I was also intrigued by the roles of journalists both in obscuring this history and, in a few cases, preserving it. Finally, Holodomor seemed like a historical case study in the power of disinformation, a problem we think of as contemporary in nature. Understanding how disinformation has shaped history in the past

gives young readers a better sense of why it's important to combat it through critical thinking and media literacy today.

## How did writing from the point of view of children affect how you told the story?

This is a great question. What I love about writing historical fiction from a child's point of view is the universality of it. Children are children

**A child's central drama is themselves: growing up, moving from innocence to experience, learning that their parents are flawed, as are they, and that they have their own divergent mind and desires.**

throughout time—they process the world through their own lives and emotions first. A child's central drama is themselves: growing up, moving from innocence to experience, learning that their parents are flawed, as are they, and that they have their own divergent mind and desires. In writing about Holodomor from the point of view of children, I focused on the characters' universal growth intersecting with history, how history can provide a catalyst for this kind of discovery of the world and themselves in it.



## Fiction from Family: A Q&A with Katherine Marsh

(continued)

### **How much did your own memories and relationships shape the narrative?**

I couldn't have written this book without my memories and relationships. Even though I'm a third-generation American, I grew up in the immigrant home of my Ukrainian grandma, whose Old Country stories, food, and sensibilities shaped mine. My mom grew up in East New York, Brooklyn, and I also integrated her stories and memories. Finally, I studied and lived in the former Soviet Union and have relatives in Ukraine whom I keep in touch with, so all of this influenced the characters and scenarios in my book.

### **In your research, did you discover more about your own family's story?**

I did. One of my favorite discoveries was from my ninety-year-old uncle, who shared that my grandma used to sew money into the hems of clothing she'd send to her relatives in Ukraine

By virtue of the vantage from which we write, the reconstruction of history is inevitably imperfect, but on a personal level I wanted to get the emotional gist of it right.

during the Soviet era. I subsequently used it as a plot point in my book. But I couldn't find as much as I'd originally hoped to because written records either didn't exist because of Soviet oppression, or they were destroyed. My cousin, Ruslan, went to our family village's local town hall/library in Ukraine to try to find some information about Holodomor, and nothing existed.

### **THE LOST YEAR draws on both current and historical events, as well as personal histories. Did your approach to research differ for each?**

I had already started THE LOST YEAR when the Covid pandemic began; it was such a powerful and frightening experience that I had to work it into the

book, and I could do so as an eyewitness. In the case of Holodomor, I had to rely more on others' accounts, including those of survivors that had been passed down to their descendants, including in my own family, and contemporaneous oral histories. I also read a lot of scholarship to expand my knowledge and verify details.

### **THE LOST YEAR explores tragedy and loss as they occurred several generations ago and also as many might experience them today. How have young readers responded?**

My favorite responses have been from a young reader who recorded a powerful video about the book's importance to her as a Ukrainian-American, and another who wrote that the story had inspired her to ask her grandparents about their own experiences in the Great Chinese Famine. I am delighted that THE LOST YEAR has not only educated American young people about this horrible chapter of history in Ukraine, but that it's also made them more interested in their own.

### **Did you find writing a story based on personal and family experiences more or less challenging than other projects?**

THE LOST YEAR was definitely more of a challenge than any other book I've written. I felt a lot of pressure being a "story keeper," as my protagonist Matthew himself becomes, not just for my own family but for others of Ukrainian descent whose lives were touched by Holodomor. By virtue of the vantage from which we write, the reconstruction of history is inevitably imperfect, but on a personal level I wanted to get the emotional gist of it right.

### **What advice do you have for authors who might wish to take inspiration from their own family stories?**

Think about what would make your family story resonate with a complete stranger. Think about how it fits into the larger historical context. Take inspiration, but don't transcribe. Do your research, but don't add historical detail that doesn't serve the narrative. Put character first—history is best understood through individuals. //H//

## **Kickstart the search for story ideas from your own life**

["From Personal Experience to Pages: Mining Story Ideas From Your Own Life"](#) by Tracy Badua for *Writer's Digest*

"Not sure where to start in your own search for inspiration or how to build it out into a larger, book-worthy idea? Here are a few questions that I use to help kick off the quest."

## **Use true stories as a source for writing fiction**

["How to Write Fiction Based on a True Story"](#) by MasterClass

"Retelling and adapting true stories is a time-tested method that many great fiction writers use to produce iconic fictional stories. If you're working on your first novel, fictionalizing your own experiences is a great way to craft an original narrative that you connect with on a deep emotional level."

## **Transform memoir into fiction**

["Turning Memoir Into Fiction: A Recipe"](#) by Susen Edwards for *Writer's Digest*

"Author Susen Edwards shares her recipe for turning memoir into fiction by sharing the story of 'Ava,' who wanted to share the truth of her story in fiction."

## **Turn family drama into fiction gold**

["How I Turned Family Scandals Into Fiction"](#) by Francine Falk-Allen for *Writer's Digest*

"Author Francine Falk-Allen divulges how she turned family scandals into fiction after being shocked by a revelation from an aunt."

## **Get tips on how to write a book based on a true story**

["How to Write a Book That's Based on a True Story"](#) by David Safford

"In all stories based on true events, you'll need to make specific choices about the characters, their motivations, and the events. ... Here are four steps on how to write a book that's based on a true story."

## **Consider illustration's role in conveying realism in stories**

["Historical Accuracy in Illustration: Shifting Standards or Stubborn Certainties?"](#) by Betsy Bird

"There's been a lot of talk about accuracy in children's nonfiction recently ... Everything from invented dialogue to series that are nonfiction-ish. One element we haven't discussed in any way, shape, or form though is the notion of accuracy in illustration. And not just in nonfiction works but historical fiction as well."

## **Learn tips for writing autobiographical fiction**

["Writing a Novel Inspired by Your Life? The Do's and Don'ts of Writing Autobiographical Fiction"](#) by Eva Langston

"Using our own experiences can be a great jumping-off point for a novel...as long as we concentrate on telling a great story instead of sticking too closely to what actually happened. So if you're writing autobiographical fiction, or a novel inspired by your life, how do you do it well? Here are a few suggestions."

## **How to balance protecting real world identities with depicting life as you know it**

["How to Write Compelling Family in Fiction \(Without Alienating Your Actual Family\)"](#) by Carolyn Jack for *Writer's Digest*

"Award-winning journalist Carolyn Jack discusses how to write compelling family in fiction...and still be welcome back home afterward."

## 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 Iowa: Time Management and Goal Setting for the New Year with Chloe Burgett**

January 18, 10:30 a.m.-12 p.m. ET (*paid, virtual event; registration closes January 17*)

Learn from illustrator Chloe Burgett on how to manage multiple projects, make progress on long term goals, and meet your deadlines! She's used her time-management system to achieve her goals while illustrating for the last 5 years (including 2 years pre-published, then 12 published books in 3 years). She will talk about how to have meaningful check-in meetings for your creative business, and demonstrate how she schedules her work week. Progress your goals without experiencing burnout and start setting reasonable expectations for your work as a creative. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/time-management-goal-setting-for-the-new-year-with-chloe-burgett>)

### **SCBWI San Francisco North/East Bay: Discover Your Story with Sahar Shams**

January 18, 1-4 p.m. ET (*paid, virtual event; registration closes January 15*)

Transform your experiences into powerful, relatable stories. Create authentic characters by connecting with your unique voice. Walk away with a story draft or fresh insights for your next manuscript. Ready to elevate your craft to new heights? (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/discover-your-story-with-sahar-shams>)

### **SCBWI 2025 Winter Conference In New York City**

January 31-February 2 (*paid, in-person event*)

Our annual Winter Conference for children's book writers and illustrators is back! Highlights include: industry panels, one-on-one manuscript and portfolio critiques, the popular Portfolio Showcase for illustrators, deep-dive creative labs taught by established authors, illustrators, editors and art directors, and two brand new programs that give participants unprecedented access to the children's publishing industry. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/winter-conference-in-new-york-city>)

## FEBRUARY

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Central VA Virtual Social**

February 4, 1-2:30 p.m. (*free, virtual event*)

Join Chris Bailey for a monthly co-working virtual social for members living in Central Virginia on the first Tuesday of the month at 1:00 pm. Participants will chat and share their writing or illustrating goals for the day and then do two 30-minute timed work sprints, checking in with the group in between work sessions. It's a great way to meet other creatives living in your area and get some writing or illustrating done, too. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/central-va-write-in-pf-otmvgbm2/register-info>)



### **SCBWI Virtual Winter Conference 2025**

February 21-22 (*paid, virtual event*)

Don't miss this chance to boost your children's book career! Join us online for exclusive industry panels, hands-on sessions diving deep into the craft of writing and illustrating children's books, and valuable networking with fellow creators. Whether you're looking to sharpen your skills, gain insider knowledge, or connect with other talented authors and illustrators, this event is for you. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/scbwi-virtual-winter-conference-2025>)

### **SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Virtual Illustrator Social - February**

February 26, 7:30-9 p.m. (*free, virtual event*)

Join our bi-monthly Illustrator Social, hosted by PAL member Cynthia Cliff! Connect with fellow illustrators to chat all things kidlit—from book dummies and color palettes to marketing tips and the latest picture books. Whether you draw while chatting or simply enjoy creative company, this gathering is all about connection with zero pressure. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/virtual-illustrator-social-february>)

## MARCH

### **SCBWI Pennsylvania East: The Power of Novels in Verse with editor Julie Bliven**

March 3, 7-8 p.m. (*paid, virtual event*)

Explore excerpts from published middle-grade and young adult novels in verse to examine elements and choices that create powerful impact. Consider ways to make your own poetry come together to make a satisfying and striking overarching story. A limited number of MG/YA Novel in Verse or PB manuscript/dummy critiques are available. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/webinar-the-power-of-novels-in-verse-with-editor-julie-bliven>)

### **SCBWI San Diego: Perfecting Your Pitch with Eddie Gamarra, Media Rights Consultant and Former VP of Literary Affairs at Paramount Global's Kids & Family Division**

March 8, 5-7 p.m. ET (*paid virtual event*)

With a wealth of high-octane experience in Hollywood & Nickelodeon—combined with a genuine support for writers and their best interests—Eddie Gamarra will share insider tips on how and where to pitch ideas that could get your book a fighting chance. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/march-8-SD-chapter-meeting>)

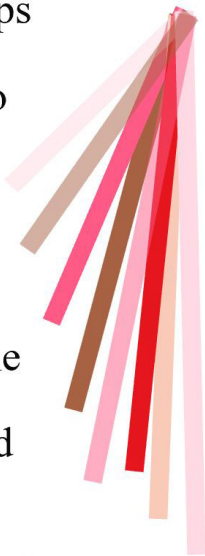
### **SCBWI Pennsylvania East: On Dialogue—Distinguishing Characters through Speech with literary agent Taj McCoy**

March 13, 7-8 p.m. (*paid virtual event*)

Whether you are writing an epic fantasy with dynamic world building, a suspenseful thriller, a creepy horror, a dramatic family saga, a charming romance, or an otherworldly adventure, it is important to build characters who are complex and distinct. ... In this workshop, we'll talk about the different ways we can enhance a character's voice through dialogue and other forms of communication. A limited number of MG & YA critiques are available at an additional cost. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/webinar-on-dialogue-distinguishing-characters-through-speech-with-literary-agent-taj-mccoy>)

As she took a few steps closer to the door she took a deep breath, no more crying now, she thought, no more crying. As she closed the door behind her, she felt the biggest lump in her throat. She hated all of this she thought, she just hated it all.

- Excerpt from ALL SHE KNEW by Carlisse L Davis (Carlisse L. Davis, 2024)



SERENA CALL

Whoa! Abuela spoke English for me. Her accent is rich and clumpy like rice pudding. It's beautiful.

Abuela winks at me and returns to Spanish, "¡A comer!"

- Excerpt from SQUAWK OF SPANISH by Gabriella Aldeman (author) (Charlesbridge, 2024)



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