



# Prairie Song

## SCBWI Nebraska Newsletter

## Mark Your Calendars!

Events to keep you writing & illustrating all winter long.



Our next *Shop Talk* is set for Jan. 22 @ 12pm. Join us for this Nebraska member exclusive event where we'll discuss messy middles!



Join us for the Winter Social on Saturday, Jan. 24th from 5-7pm @ Vino Mas in Omaha. We hope to see you there!



Get Ready. Get Set. Go! The annual Indi-500 Writing & Illustrating Challenge will kick-off on Jan. 30th. Visit our website for [details!](#)



Heather Dawn Torres  
SCBWI-Nebraska Co-Regional Advisor

### A note from Heather...

DECEMBER 2025 - For me, December is a busy time of year filled with holiday activities and preparations. One of my favorite, although most time-consuming tasks, is writing our family's annual holiday letter. This year, I felt myself dreading the task. I knew my creative brain would be taken away from my current work-in-progress. But the clock is ticking and the holiday shipping deadline looming. So, I tucked my manuscript away and opened the newsletter template on my computer. Before long, I was immersed in sharing highs and lows of the last year from the POV of our family pet. I found myself thoroughly enjoying the task and later returned to my manuscript with a fresh perspective. Did I complete my edits? No. But I did end up with an idea for an entirely new picture book that I can't wait to get started on. In the end, the task I dreaded turned out to be the start of something new.

What tasks are you dreading this season? Are there things on your to-do list that you just never seem to get done? Do those never-ending holiday tasks feel like an interruption to

your writing or illustrating? Well, maybe they are an interruption. Or maybe, just maybe, they're exactly what you need!

So, this season, instead of dragging your feet, perhaps try diving into all of those dreaded tasks with as much energy and enthusiasm as you can muster. Just remember to keep a notebook on-hand as you might find yourself with an unexpected boost of creativity!

And to help with your creativity boost we have been busy planning 2026 events including a brand-new in-person event: Spring Book Camp! We can't wait to share more details with you soon. Until then...

Happy Holidays & Happy Creating!

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## FEATURED MEMBER: Let's Meet Rebecca Atanassova



**REBECCA ATANASSOVA** never really considered herself a writer. She just wrote. The first thing she ever recalls writing is a short play. It was an adaptation of *The Three Little Pigs* for her neighborhood to perform. As Rebecca grew older, she often got lost in *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little Women*. It was sometime later in life when she connected the dots and realized these were stories about women who longed to be published authors. In her twenties, inspired by seeing the world through her children's eyes, Rebecca wrote in a flurry. Unfortunately, at that time, after two publishing deals fell through, Rebecca set her ambitions aside for a few decades while her stories and publishing dreams gathered dust on the shelf.

Meanwhile, Rebecca taught children in different settings and capacities but never lost that sense of wonder. One day, her sister Rachel, reached out asking if Rebecca still had "all those wonderful stories." Indeed, she did! Rachel had been involved in politics and speech writing in Washington, D.C. for years and was looking to pivot into a creative career publishing children's books.

Rebecca currently has 27 published books with Popsicle Publishing. Her book, *Your Heart Can Hold the Whole Universe*, is an Independent Press Award winner. Rebecca has received many favorable reviews from The Prairies Book Review, five stars/"Must Reads" on Reedsy, What is That Book About, and more. On a personal note, "Explore More With Alice" is one of Rebecca's favorite series. She loves how "Alice" sees the world.

Rebecca has a very exciting new project forthcoming in Spring of 2026. She teamed up with Nebraska artist and illustrator Alissa Hansen to create a book series based on George the Mouse in a Log Pile House. They sincerely hope you will enjoy the whimsical artistry and classic feel of their work. Rebecca looks forward to sharing George's world with you very soon!



Stefanie Raszler  
Retreat & Social Events Coordinator

### From Stefanie's View...

Hi! I am Stefanie Raszler, Nebraska SCBWI's Social Events Coordinator! I have been a member of SCBWI for several years and have enjoyed meeting so many creative people who have made me not only a better writer, but also a better human. I've been impressed by how kind and supportive the kid lit community is. Many of you have become close friends of mine and I cherish that. When recently asked if I would step into the role of coordinating social events, I admit, I was hesitant at first. *Me? Oh dear. Am I really the right person for this?* My next thought was, *why not me?* I decided I should give back to the community that has been behind me all this time!

I enjoyed planning and attending our fall social at Chapter Books in Seward. Owner, Kelley Limback and former owner, and fellow SCBWI member, Carla Ketner, were very helpful and generous with the event! I look forward to planning our winter social and hope to see you all there!

## EVENT RECAP: November Creative Connections



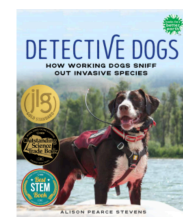
Thank you to everyone who attended the November *Creative Connections* event with author Mylisa Larsen. It was such a fun evening! Mylisa led the group through a series of writing games to help us build more real and rounded characters.

We would also like to thank the Baright Public Library in Ralston, Nebraska for hosting! Be sure to watch your email for details about our next Creative Connections event coming Spring 2026.

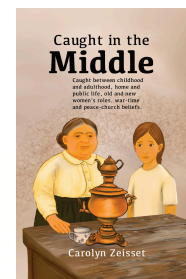


## Congrats to Our Nebraska Members!

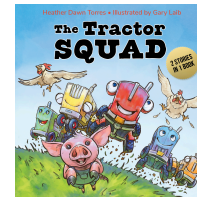
**ALISON PEARCE STEVENS** - The National Science Teaching Association (NSTA) and Children's Book Council included Alison's book, *Detective Dogs*, in their list of Outstanding Science Trade Books for K-12 students. *Detective Dogs* was also included on their list of 2026 Best STEM Books. Way to go, Alison! We're thrilled for you!



**Carolyn Zeisset** - Carolyn Zeisset's middle grade historical fiction novel, *Caught in the Middle*, has been released. The story relates experiences of people with German-speaking heritage in World War I. The main character, Alice, is the 12-year-old daughter of the MC from the preceding book, *Then the Rules Changed*, which tells the story of 9-year-old Isaac, whose German-from-Russia family immigrates to the U.S. Great Plains. Cover illustration was done by Nebraska illustrator Kathleen Gadeken! Well done, Carolyn!



**Heather Dawn Torres** - Heather was recently selected as a panelist for the upcoming 2026 Imaginarium Convention in Louisville, Kentucky this July. Nice job, Heather!



## INDI-500 CHALLENGE

### January 30 - February 1



Start your creative engines because January means it is once again time for our 6th annual Indi-500 Challenge!

The live kick-off for this **FREE** event will take place on Zoom on **Friday, January 30 at 7:00pm**. Based on selected themes, contestants will create a 500-word story or spot illustration in only 48 hours. The selected writer & illustrator winners will each receive a critique from an industry professional. Runners-up will win a free SCBWI webinar of their choice (up to a \$20 value to be used by the end of 2026).

So...polish up those manuscripts and portfolios and get your registration in! You must be a member of the Nebraska region **AND you must register to participate**.

**REGISTER TODAY!**

## WINTER SOCIAL

### Saturday, January 24

There's nothing like a dark, cold wintry season to make you want to warm up with friends, both old and new. Let's get together and support each other in our creative pursuits. We hope to see you there!

Mark your calendar for our in-person Winter Social on **Jan. 24 from 5-7pm at Vino Mas in Omaha**. Please register in advance so we know how many to expect.

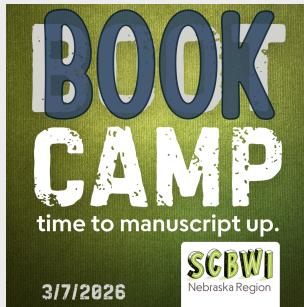


**REGISTER TODAY!**



# SPRING BOOK CAMP

Saturday, March 7 w/ Editor Anna Parsons



It's time to manuscript up and mark your calendar for Saturday, March 7th! You won't want to miss our brand-new in-person event: Spring Book Camp! We are thrilled to announce that our guest editor will be Anna Parsons from Simon & Schuster.

Participants will enjoy a morning intensive, a live feedback session, a Q&A, great food and more! Additional details and registration coming soon!



## Shop Talk: Navigating the Messy Middle

Every kidlit creator eventually reaches it—the dreaded messy middle. It's that swampy stretch between a shiny new idea and a polished final draft or illustration, where enthusiasm dips, doubts rise, and everything feels harder than it should. But the messy middle isn't a sign that your project is failing. It's a normal, necessary stage of the creative process—and one you can navigate with confidence.

**1. Reconnect With Your Core Idea.** When the middle gets muddy, return to the spark that made you start this project. What emotion or message drove you to write or draw this story? Keep a short “north star statement” somewhere visible—a sentence that reminds you what the heart of your project is.

**2. Break the Middle into Mini-Missions.** Divide the middle into small, achievable tasks: revise one scene, refine a character sketch, rework just the page turns. Mini-missions create momentum and give you more chances to feel successful along the way.

**3. Allow Yourself a Messy Draft or Messy Sketch.** The middle often stalls because we start judging our work too soon. Kidlit thrives on playfulness—so let yourself play. Write the clunky dialogue. Sketch the character eight different ways. This messiness is raw material you can refine later.

**4. Invite Curiosity, Not Perfection.** Ask yourself questions instead of issuing critiques: What if the character made a different choice? What if the setting were more whimsical? What if I pushed the color palette? Curiosity opens doors; perfectionism slams them.

**5. Step Away When Needed.** Sometimes the best way through is a short break—an afternoon walk, a day with a different creative project, or time spent reading other kidlit. Step back and let your brain solve problems behind the scenes.

**6. Find Community.** Critique groups, kidlit forums, or trusted creative friends can illuminate what you can't see from inside the mud. Sharing struggles with peers also normalizes the messy middle—everyone experiences it, even seasoned pros.

Embracing the messy middle isn't a detour; it is the journey. Treat it as a stage for exploration rather than an obstacle—you'll grow as a storyteller or illustrator in every project that follows. Please join us at our **next lunchtime Zoom on January 22, 2026**, from 12pm-1pm as we focus on Messy Middles.

Until then, Happy Writing!

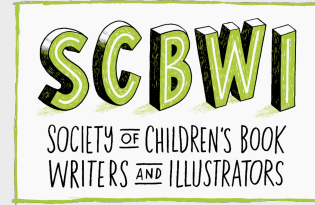
~ Mary Beth Rice & Ashley Karges, Shop Talk Co-Coordinators

## SHOP TALK CALENDAR

# SCBWI VIRTUAL WINTER CONFERENCE

February 6-7, 2026

Don't miss your chance to boost your children's book career! Join SCBWI online for exclusive industry panels, hands-on sessions focused on the craft of writing and illustrating children's books, plus valuable networking with fellow creators. Whether you're looking to sharpen your skills, gain insider knowledge, or connect with other talented authors and illustrators, the SCBWI Virtual Winter Conference is for you! If you can't make it to the live sessions, video replays will be available to view through March 15th. [Register today](#)



## Events In Other SCBWI Regions:

### [SCBWI Oregon: Not Your Grandma's Nonfiction](#)

FEB. 21 - Today's nonfiction is bold, engaging, and innovative! Attendees will take an in-depth look at what books are (and aren't) being published. We will explore how books cover the "What?" "So What?" and/or the "Now What?" of a topic. For the sake of time, the exemplars will be picture books, but the principles explored apply to all informational books. Come ready to investigate, explore, sort, and discover with author Heather Montgomery.

### [SCBWI San Diego: Crafting a Compelling First Chapter](#)

FEB. 28 - Agent Hillary Fazzari will be sharing hands-on editing strategies to polish First Chapters that hook agents, editors and readers, using examples of projects she personally represented and First Page submissions from attendees. You will also get an agents overview of the parameters and importance of a well-written synopsis when submitting novels – which more agent and editor submission guidelines are now requesting.

### [SCBWI Eastern PA: How to Handle an R&R](#)

MAR. 24 - What is a "revise & resubmit" request, and what do you do when you get one from an agent or editor? This path to publication is more common than you might think, but it doesn't always look the same. This webinar will take creators through the ins and outs of R&Rs from all angles—why an author might do one, what risks might occur, how an editor thinks about them, and what the ultimate outcome might look like.

### [SCBWI Kansas/Missouri: Recharge Your Writing Retreat](#)

APR. 17- 19 - Who's ready to take a step back from everyday life and focus on their writing for 2 solid days! Who wants to fill their creative soul with nature and children's book talk? If I'm describing you, take time for yourself to dive into a manuscript or two in the bucolic setting of Conception Abbey with Editor Ruqayyah Daud of Little Brown Books for Young Readers.

[MORE VIRTUAL EVENTS](#)

[MORE IN-PERSON EVENTS](#)



[Got questions? E-mail us by clicking here!](#)



SCBWI Nebraska | 11755 Wilshire Blvd. Suite 1250 | Los Angeles, CA 90025 US

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