



Illustrator in the Spotlight:
Sheila Path-McMahon

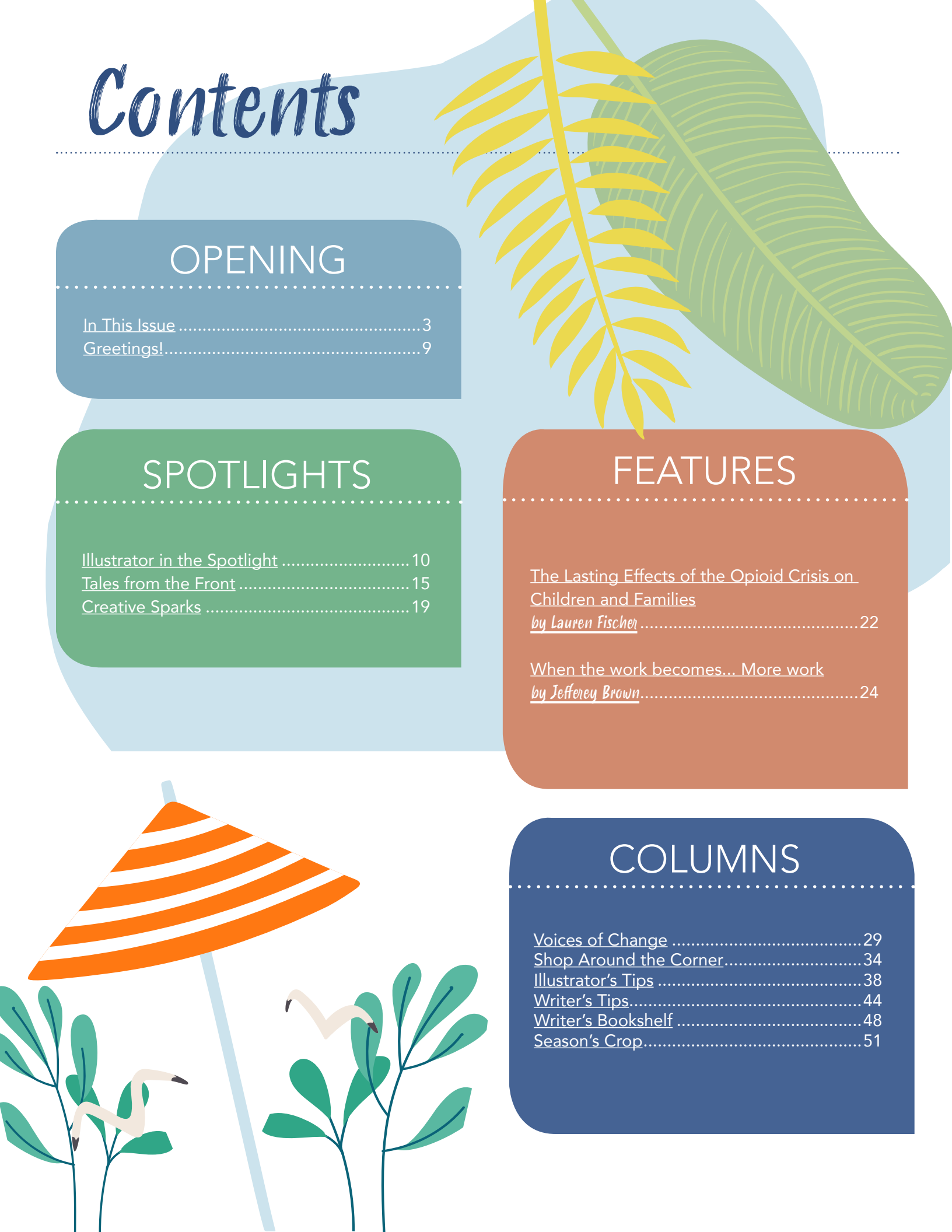


Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

Summer 2026

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In This Issue

by Myania Rankins

Hello everyone and happy summer! I hope everyone is enjoying their year so far. Month six, huh? Where does the time go...?

Very quickly, a special guest has made it to the newsletter! Meet my new quack-y assistant! My mom bought it for me randomly because it's reading a book! Isn't it cute? Even ducks love to read! It doesn't have a name yet but rest assured, you'll be seeing my assistant often.

Not sure if everyone agrees, but this time of year always gets me pumped up to try new things and really get creative. Maybe it's the power of the sun or the restlessness I held in during the winter, but summer breeds new ideas and workshopping old ones.

Back in April, I went to Spring Thaw for the first time and it was amazing. It was a truly great experience although I felt widely unprepared. As a writer and illustrator, I didn't have any finished illustrations of my book ideas, let alone a stable idea to really set up for a manuscript. Loglines? First 250 words? What the heck are those? By the grace of god and pixie dust, I figured it out and presented my written work accordingly.

That experience taught me something huge: you need to put yourself out there. You're more ready than you think and even if you're not, you have to take that first step to get closer to your goals you've been working so hard on.

If that's not motivating you, take this approach: you have no choice. You have to at least try, imposter syndrome be damned. You have an idea only you can bring to life. You have the words only you can use to conjure an amazing story. You have a vision only you can draw out and color in. Nobody else. Y.O.U. When you realize that you'll never be fully "ready" or prepared, the worst part is over.

Opportunities are going to pass you by and sadly, there will be 1001 reasons why you can't do something. You need only one reason to do it. So why not?



This season is all about coming out of your cocoon and basking in the sun rays and the fresh grass. Super sorry to all my allergy-stricken readers.

In honor of this season, I implore you to do it scared. Do it "unprepared." You got a huge project on your plate that needs to be tackled? A pitch that needs perfecting? A manuscript that needs editing? A book dummy that needs retouching? Get to work. You don't have much of a choice here. We're waiting on you. I'm waiting on you and I hate to say it but I'm a very impatient person!

Lastly, just a gentle reminder: as I write this, a lot has happened in our community as of late. To keep things gentle and to not spoil your reading pleasure, your books are not "crud." Let's not let one person that doesn't respect the true community, the loving creation of the Kidlit space, disrupt why we do what we do. We write for ALL children, past, present, and future. I said it once

and I'll keep saying it, we need your stories and we need it from you. Personally, the only advice I'll take seriously are the children that read our books and want more books to read.

Before we segue to our new and exciting articles curated for you, fantastic readers, the question for this issue that our PW crew and submitters will share: What is the title of the first book or book series you read that ignited your love for reading and why?

Wanna share and showcase your favorite book/book series? We would love to hear about it! Please let us know on social media @SCBWI.illinois on Facebook and Instagram, and tag us! We can't wait to see the books that got you reading!

Our RA Pamela Morgan joins us in writing "[Greetings](#)" in honor of our RA Sheila Path-McMahon, who illustrated the cover of this summer's issue! In the midst of celebrating a huge accomplishment, Pamela let us know to not let imposter syndrome hold you hostage. Also, you should name your imposter syndrome so you can look it in the eye and tell it no more!

On the trend of not listening to imposter syndrome, as mentioned, Sheila Path-McMahon is our "[Illustrator in the Spotlight](#)." Not only do we get a chance to admire the art that shines throughout the issue, we also get a chance in her interview to know the brainstorming and the creative process of her current Picture Book work in progress. We're so proud of you Sheila!

Moving on to "[Tales from the Front](#)," Nancy F. Goodfellow discusses how she became a disability advocate for children and how to become one while creating a safe space for children to learn about the world around them. A great and required read!

For "[Creative Sparks](#)," Tracy Brown shares his point of view on his creative process through the power of storytelling from his favorite childhood books, his

of storytelling from his favorite childhood books, his vibrant life, and his debut published book.

For our "[Features](#)" section, which we only have two this issue, an article written by Lauren Fischer, that was originally published on the Mother-Daughter Book Club website, informs us of the true lasting effects of the opioid crisis on children and how important it is to talk about these issues with them. Truly a needed article to read and learn.

For our second "[Feature](#)," Jeffrey Brown breaks down in his own words what it's like to be a published author who works on licensed projects. Mixing real advice and humor, he'll leave you chuckling while learning more about a fascinating market.

In "[Voices of Change](#)," I recap a Black Book Fair event that took place back in February at Forest Park Library. The article highlights the authors that participated, the books that were bought, and a bonus interview of the person that put it all together.

Moving on to our next section, "[Shop Around the Corner](#)," Nicole Hewitt interviews a cozy indie bookstore located in Libertyville called About Time Bookstore. From the type of books they sell to the owner sharing her love for hosting, after you finish reading this article, you'll be eager to check them out!

In "[Illustrator Tips](#)," beloved graphic artist and author Lucy Kinsley shares her love for stationery and gives advice for great pens to buy for all your artistic needs. For all my art supply addicts, this is the perfect article for you!

For "[Writer's Tips](#)," Carmela A. Martino discusses great lessons she learned from her MFA program that still serves her well to this day. Proof that even in things you learned from the past, you can always apply them to the present.

Making our way to our "[Writer's Bookshelf](#)," section, Monica Swope writes an article about the act of writing and how this process is bigger and deeper than just putting words on a page. An informative



piece if you are in need of revamping and recalibrating your writing practices.

For “[Mentor Texts](#),” we’re doing something new and our crew is very excited to share! We’re getting articles straight from the source, book industry professionals sharing intel and needed information. For the first article of our new Mentor Texts section, Robyn Chapman, senior editor of First Second, provides insight into her world and answers those crucial questions that will turn your pitch into a masterpiece.

Lastly, in “[Season’s Crop](#),” Sheila Path-McMahon is back and gives us the all-mighty list of all the new book releases coming out this summer.

On the next couple of pages, our submitters and newsletter crew share their first book or book series that jump-started their reading journey and made them the amazing people they are today. Again, let us know yours on Facebook and Instagram @SCBWI.illinois!

PAMELA (RA): The first book to ignite my love of reading was *A Wrinkle in Time*. My elementary teacher had her own personal library in her classroom that she would let us pick from on special occasions. This was the first book I picked because I liked the cover. I’d never read science fiction or anything like it before. I related to Meg, being awkward and bookish myself. But I fell in love with Mrs. Whatsit and this weird world of time travel and tesseract and children rescuing their parents. It launched a lifelong love of fantasy and science fiction because of the possibility it holds. I can still remember the magic and awe of reading that book for the very first time, and I try to capture that same feeling when I write.

SHEILA (RA): I was always a big reader, but the first series I have strong memories of is the Sweet Valley High series. It is simply that there were over 100 books. That volume of reading helped me to become a faster reader, which I think made reading more difficult works much easier later in life.

CHRIS (EDITOR): Fourth and fifth grade, way back in the late ‘60s, early 70s, it was all about the *We Were There* books and *The Hardy Boys*. From that point on, there were few books I read until I got to college. There, majoring in philosophy and English gave me plenty of opportunity to catch up on my reading and develop a love not only for the writing process but also for the teaching of literature. I haven’t stopped doing either since then.

JANET (GRAPHIC DESIGNER): *Garfield*. I stayed with my Grams every Wednesday, I could stay up as long as I wanted as long as I was reading. I woke up many times with a *Garfield* book on my face.

MYANIA (DIRECTOR): The *Junie B. Jones* series. I was invested and read as many as I could get my hands on, plus I loved the illustrations! Looking back, I think it was her series that got me into journaling and eventually into writing. Barbara Park really did her big one and I’ll never forget about my girl Junie “The B stands for Beatrice. Except I don’t like Beatrice. I just like B and that’s all” Jones.

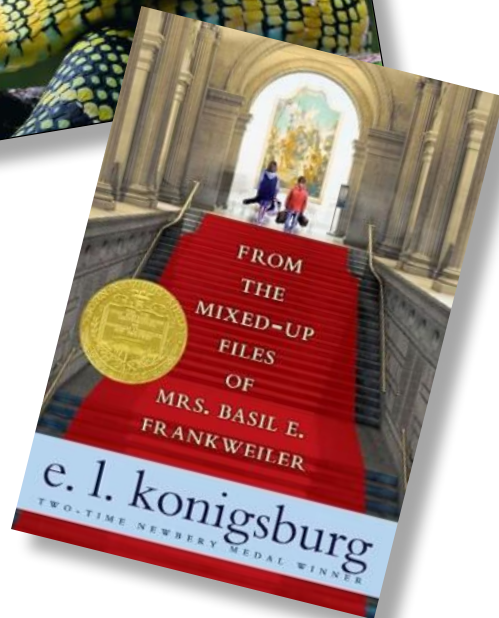
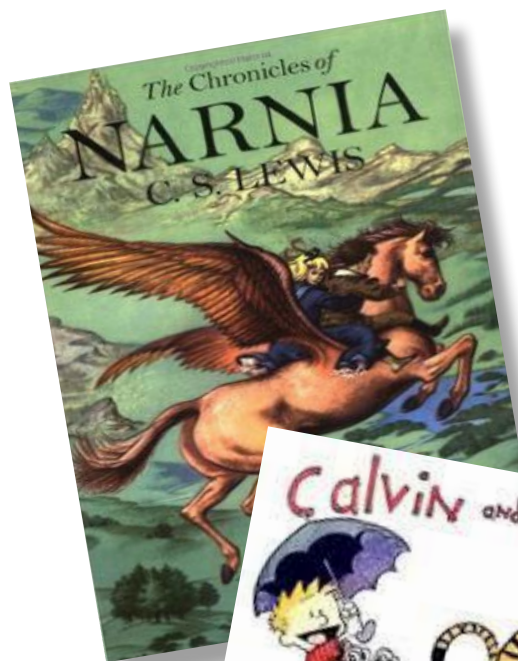


NICOLE HEWITT: The first book I truly remember falling in love with as a girl was called *The Ghost Next Door* by Wyllly Folk St. John. I actually loved this story so much that in the sixth grade, I wrote my own story inspired by it—which won my school’s Young Authors’ competition and set me on the (long, winding) path toward becoming an author!

ROBYN CHAPMAN: The book series that ignited my love of reading was *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson. I’m old enough that the comic strip was in newspapers when I was growing up, but I also devoured the paperback collections. They had great titles too, like *Scientific Progress Goes “Boink,”* and *Something Under the Bed Is Drooling.*

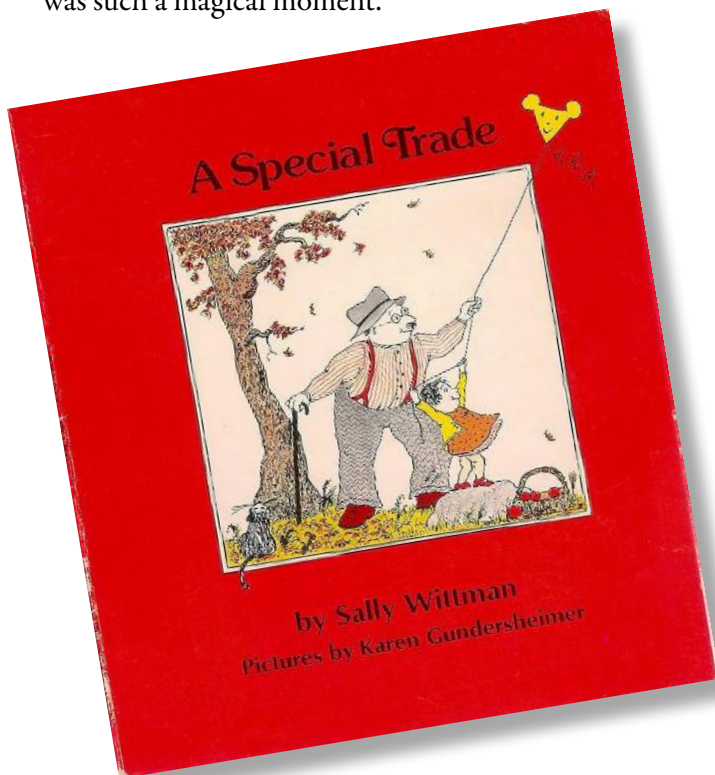
LAUREN FISCHER: I loved the *Chronicles of Narnia* when I was young. I read the entire series, but *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was my favorite. I grew up in a family of four siblings (two brothers, two sisters), so I was intrigued by the sibling dynamics portrayed in the book. My favorite part was the magical wardrobe, and my favorite character was Aslan. I was very emotionally invested in the story, and I loved the fantasy element of going to a different world that had talking animals. I can still picture it all so clearly to this day!

NANCY GOODFELLOW: I remember reading *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg when I was grade school. I think at the time, I felt like I connected to the main character and her desire to run away. I remember spending hours packing up all of my stuffed animals and then waiting for my mom to get home from work so I could tell her I was running away to escape my big brothers. I envied Claudia getting to live in a real museum - and solve a mystery on top of it! As a young adult, I worked for a rare book dealer and attended book fairs and auctions. I was thrilled to come across a first edition copy of *From the Mixed-Up Files*. It became the first in my collection of books I treasured as a child.



LUCY KINSLEY: In my kindergarten classroom, we had a book called “Amazing Snakes” that I would read obsessively and then copy into a hand-made folded paper booklet, reproducing the photographs with my drawings, and copying out each word of the snakey information. I am TERRIFIED of snakes. I always have been. I think this book seemed like some sort of magic to me, because it held within its pages the objects of my terror. By making my own version of the book, I could regurgitate the information in a way that made me feel like I somehow controlled my own fear. It was clear, even then, that I understood that a book can contain powerful multitudes.

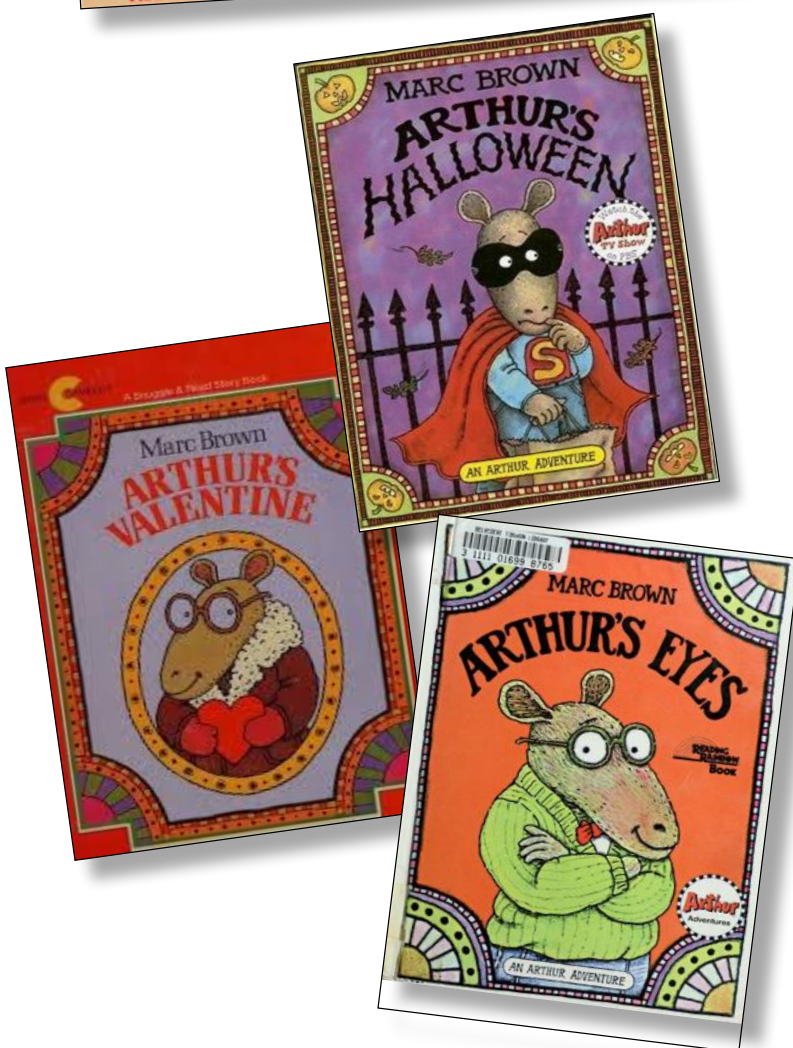
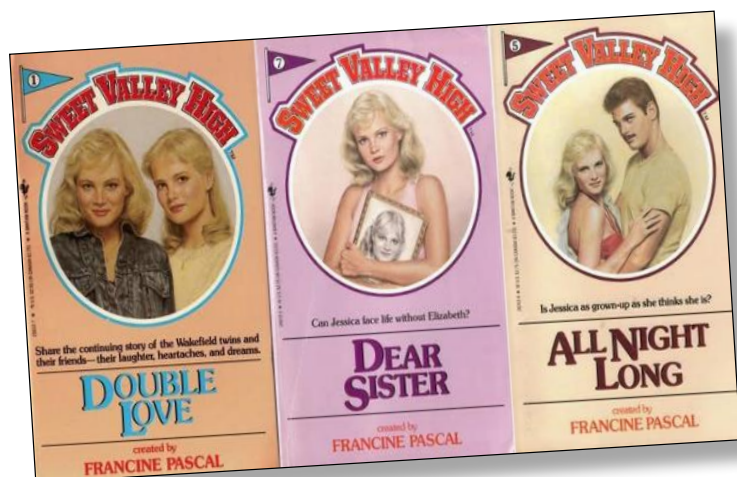
JEFFREY BROWN: It would be hard to name just one specific title - it could be J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, or maybe Mark Alan Stamaty’s *Small in the Saddle*. *Garfield*, *The X-Men*, *Choose Your Own Adventure* - there are so many! I think I’m going to go back even further, a very deep cut, but when I was first learning to read, I had the old 1970’s Ginn and Company *SWRL* preschool readers. There was one titled *Sid*, and the mouse leading the drooling horse using an apple tied to a stick is an image that has stuck with me, and I remember that book in particular, but reading something by myself, alone, was such a magical moment.



MONICA SWOPE: The book that truly ignited my love for reading was *A Special Trade* by Sally Wittman. It is a beautiful story about the changing nature of a friendship between a young girl named Nelly and her older neighbor, Bartholomew. As a child, I was moved by the way their roles reversed over time. Bartholomew pushed Nelly in her stroller when she was small, and later, Nelly pushed him in his wheelchair.

It was the first time I understood the profound beauty of intergenerational bonds and the dignity found in mutual care. That story planted the seeds for my lifelong passion for legacy work and storytelling, teaching me that our histories are inextricably linked to those who came before us. It showed me that literature has the power to build a bridge between the young and the old, a theme that continues to drive my work today.

CARMELA MARTINEZ: I think I was in fifth grade when I developed a passion for mystery novels. I loved the Nancy Drew books and read all the copies at my Chicago public library branch. From there, I went on to read any mystery they had in the children's section. I still love reading mysteries, and I especially enjoy figuring out "whodunit" before the protagonist does.



TRACY BROWN: One of the biggest influences and first book series I read was the Arthur series created by Marc Brown. I saw myself in Arthur's world—a place where children learned lessons about courage, friendship, kindness, and self-belief. Marc Brown's stories through the lens of Arthur, his community and friends made reading for me engaging, comforting, meaningful and inspired me to imagine, create, and eventually write stories of my own. I specifically loved the thought process Marc Brown had with the development of his characters. Each of his characters, like mine, are concepts of actual people whom he experienced throughout his childhood. It is something magical and powerful to be able to retell your childhood stories and relate to the imagination of children across different generations. I vividly remember in one of his books, the character, "Alan Powers" or referred to as "The Brain" spelled the word "Psychology" in class. I immediately went home, looked the word up in Webster's dictionary, and used that word in my own 2nd grade class! I would actually go on to major in Psychology because of this. That is the power of literacy and storytelling. Through Albert, I hope to offer young readers that same sense of encouragement, comfort, and inspiration that Arthur gave me. I want them to re-imagine what reading is and how it can open new worlds and creative alternative and imaginative pathways.

Greetings!

by Pamela Morgan

Greetings, SCBWI members!



I'm pretty thrilled (and a little intimidated) to be writing the greetings for the Prairie Wind this season. Usually, my joyful and loquacious co-Regional Advisor, Sheila Path-McMahon has the honor of greeting readers, but this time around, she's on the front cover! And what a well-deserved place for her to be.

When she was first asked to do a cover, over 18 months ago, she replied with phrases like, "I'm not good enough," "I'm not ready," and even the heartbreaking: "I'm not an artist who does covers." Take a minute to flip back to the cover. I'll wait. Notice the color, the design, the skill. Notice the artistry. Notice the effort.

Sheila IS an artist, she IS ready, and she's good enough.

But she has a negative voice in her head that tells her she's not.

Most of us do. I named mine Linda. And my apologies to anyone who shares her name! Linda likes to tell me a lot of things that aren't true. She tells me I can't write. She tells me I'm not really an author. She tells me I will never make it. She even told me I couldn't write a greeting for the Prairie Wind!

Linda lies, and I have proof. I have a published picture book, I've made connections with industry professionals, and I even wrote this article! Take that, Linda! Though I might not have "made it" yet by her standards (whatever those might be), I've certainly moved the dial ever closer. Every draft I write, every critique group I attend, every workshop I take, I move that dial.

Sometimes Linda gets really loud. Like when a dream agent passes on a project or I don't get the feedback I was hoping for (what do you mean my first draft isn't Caldecott worthy??) She's hard to ignore, but I force myself to call her a liar and I tell her to pipe down. Because if I listen to her, even for a minute, I might believe her. And if I believe her, I might stop creating.

There is so much joy in creating. Take a look at this cover one more time if you're not convinced. Sheila's not drawing for awards or accolades. Those are nice, don't get me wrong, but she's drawing for love, for passion, for joy. And you can feel it leaping off the page.

Sheila is an artist. She's ready. And she's more than good enough.

If we give in to that voice that tells us we're not enough, how much do we risk losing?

As we're coming out of the winter and a very long, troubling year, I think a lot of us are battling with that inner voice. Call it Imposter Syndrome, call it Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria, call it poor self-esteem. It doesn't matter what you call it...but call it out and call it a liar. Go on, take a minute. I'll wait. And then keep on creating. For love, for passion, for joy.

For yourself.

Because the world is a better place for it.

Thank you for your work, please keep sharing your joy, and I assure you, no Lindas were harmed in the writing of this greeting.



Illustrator in the Spotlight

Sheila Path-McMahon

Are you an illustrator or an author/illustrator? And what is your preferred medium to work in?

I am an author turned author/illustrator, and I love exploring different mediums. Maybe my favorite medium is gauche, but I've dabbled with watercolor, scratch art, pen and ink, gelli prints, and recently I've been learning how to scan and edit my traditional art digitally in Procreate.

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

My journey has been convoluted. I never studied art formally. I had a Drawing and Rendering class as part of my Theater major at the University of Minnesota, but that was it. Even so, I have had many moments of inspiration where I simply had to express my ideas through drawing or painting. I would do various small projects for theater, such as using crafts to create props, or drawing the illustrations for programs.

I didn't start illustrating for children's books until about 10 years ago. In 2013, I had a wonderful opportunity as a writer - my good friend Heather Bassler Zemien, who is an artist, wanted to collaborate on creating a picture book. She approached me to see whether we could work on a book together. In the process, I learned all sorts of skills: a little bit of photoshop, a lot about how to set up files for a printer, and some things about promotion and sales as well. The successfully completed project showed me that the world of creating books is open to me if I follow through.

After that, I thought of the idea for No Bare Feet for Barnaby, and I asked Heather if she would illustrate that as well. But time did not permit her to do that. I shopped the story around a little and no one was interested. Eventually I just started with doodles that I figured I would show to a "real artist" some day. But meanwhile, I kept drawing and studying art here and there, and eventually I felt skilled enough to attempt illustrating my own stories.

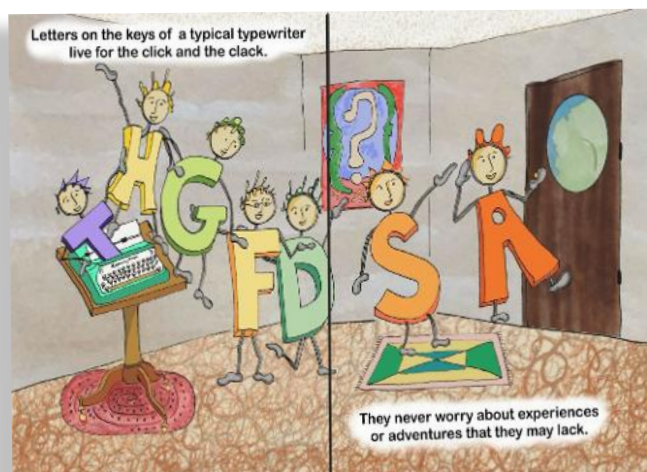
What I love about being an author/illustrator is that I'm



collaborating with myself - I usually write the stories first and then create the art, but as the art is coming along, I am able to edit the text so that art and words go hand in hand.



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



This piece is the first spread of my WIP PB *Not An Alphabet Book*. This image has had quite a few iterations - first it took me about 1,001 tries to invent the style for the letter-characters. I brainstormed many options, most of which I have no idea where they are. But I tried eyes directly on the letters, different styles of hands and feet, different styles of body, like bubble letters and blocky letters. I tried human faces and human hairstyles, human hands and feet. eventually the story itself helped me to visually shape the characters - since they are able to stamp the ground and leave an imprint of their name, it only made sense to me that their hands and feet would be what are called typewriter letter strikers or typebars.

Once I decided that, it seemed logical that their faces would also be something directly from a typewriter, thus I used uniformly round keys for their faces. I still started out trying to figure out human hairstyles to put on each of the letters. After enough brainstorming and doodling, I just started scribbling hair. And that's when I realized that I could use cursive letters for the hair. This had the added benefit of the fact that I would not need to go back and look at which letter had which hair - letter k always has several lower case cursive k's as a hairdo.

Once all of that was decided, I needed to work out what illustrations I should create. I started with a pencil drawing. All I knew for sure was that I wanted the letters to somehow hop out of their typewriter. I imagined them in an

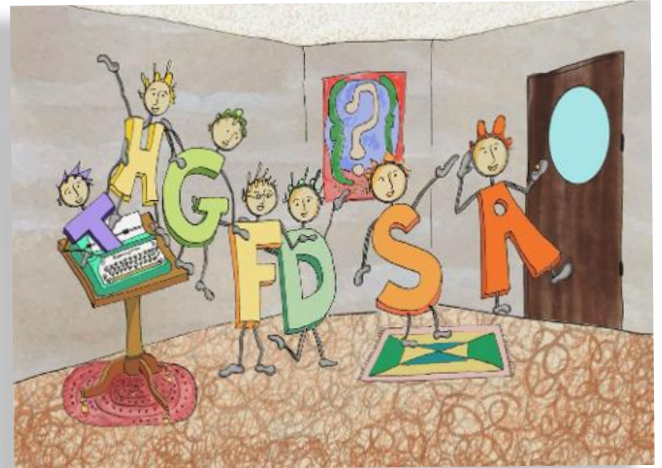
apartment, maybe because I live in an apartment right now. I used Tara Lazar's wonderful webpage about picture book dummies to plan out my thumbnail sketches.



Once I had the general idea sketched out, I used pencil to work out what the page would look like. It's around then that I decided that I wanted to use ink, so I used a dip pen, which I had to learn how to use - side story: The first day I was using the pen and ink, I decided to bring my work to the library and draw there. I ended up smearing ink everywhere - huge blotches on my paper, ink all on my hands and face, and all over the table I was working on. I felt so bad. Luckily, there were still wipes provided at the library left over from Covid days, so I was able to get it all cleaned up. I was shocked at how difficult it was to control the dipped ink pen! Even though that was discouraging, I kept at it and eventually I was able to figure out little tricks to keep control and achieve the look I was going for.

I didn't like inking right over the pencil lines, so I bought a light box, which was extremely helpful - I used the ink on a fresh sheet of watercolor paper, loosely tracing my original pencil drawings. The next phase was trying to paint it. I started with liquid watercolor, and that was a whole adventure in and of itself because I wanted each of the letters to be different colors. I did manage to purchase quite an array of colors between liquid watercolors and inks, but it was very difficult to manage keeping the saturation consistent from page to page. And having spent a lot of time pencil drawing and more time inking, it felt like I couldn't make a mistake with the colors or I would have to start over. Well, let's just say mistakes were made,

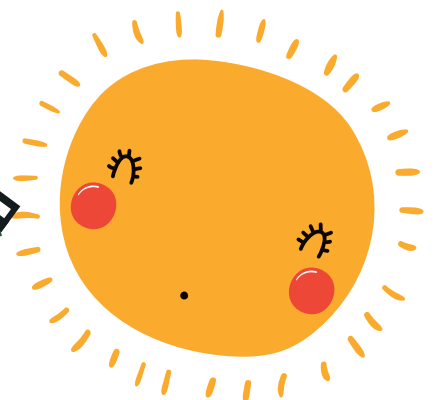
I was in this phase for a long long time - working off and on over a couple of years. And then I started hearing other illustrators talk about Procreate. I had used Photoshop and found it very difficult, so I was skeptical about Procreate. I purchased the app for my iPhone and started playing around with it. That was enough to convince me to go ahead and get an iPad so that I could have the full sized version.



I took my pen and ink drawings to the library to scan them, opened them up in Procreate, and haven't really looked back since. Learning Procreate has taken some time - I heard from Brooke O'Neill that Bardot Brushes had some good tutorials. I did my own mini crash course of the Art Maker's Club for about two weeks straight and learned all kinds of skills that are useful. The most helpful thing in Procreate for this piece is the ability to fill in with color; now I can be certain that the colors are consistent from page to page, and I really like the opaque look.

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

Whatever works for the story I'm telling is my favorite. I like painting turtles, and when I draw myself I always draw the same simple little girl.



Please share an instance in which the seed of an idea or experience (though small at the start) took root and grew to become one of your books or illustrations.

My niece and I were reading on the couch together when she was about 5. The sun was shining on us - the hairs on her legs were lit by the sunshine so they glowed. She said "I have goosebumps." I said, "that's because you have bare legs. Luckily they're not BEAR legs, roar." We almost fell off the couch laughing about it, and that eventually turned into my first PB, *No Bare Feet for Barnaby*.

What three words best sum you up?

Hilarious, intelligent, generous. (My husband helped me with this list. I think it applies to him, too)

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

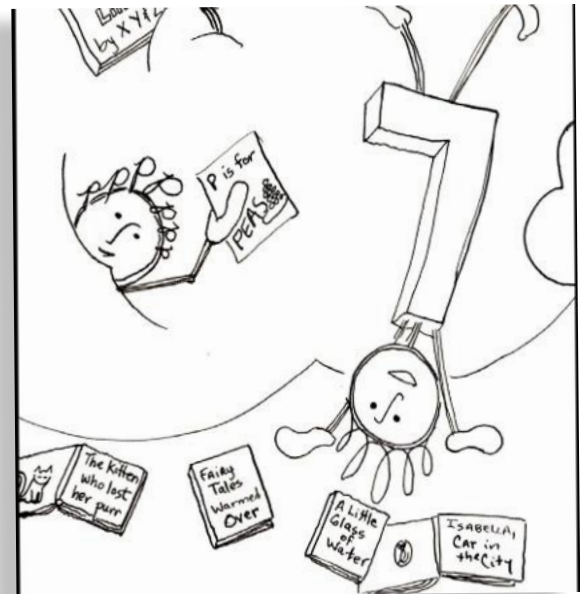
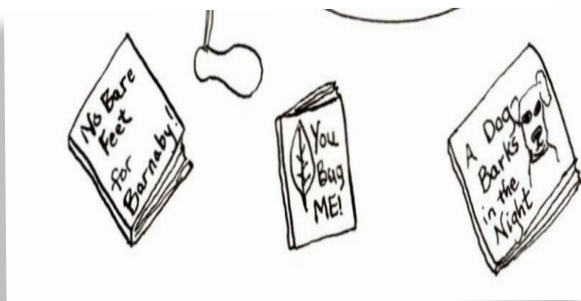
I loved a basal reader called *Sunshine and Rain*, I loved *Hats for Sale*, *Raggedy Ann*, and I had an extremely detailed coloring book about angels.

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

Jon Klassen, Cece Bell, Suzanne Kaufman and many many others.

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

When the letters are going wild in *Not an Alphabet Book*, I have them 'write' some of my books.



What's three things that may surprise people about you?

I have bouts of shyness, I feel like turtles completely represent my soul, and poetry can take me into another plane of existence.

What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

There are so many sources of inspiration; to sum up all of them, I would say I'm inspired when I remember to pay attention to the insanely unlikely fact of our existence.

What gets in the way of your creativity?

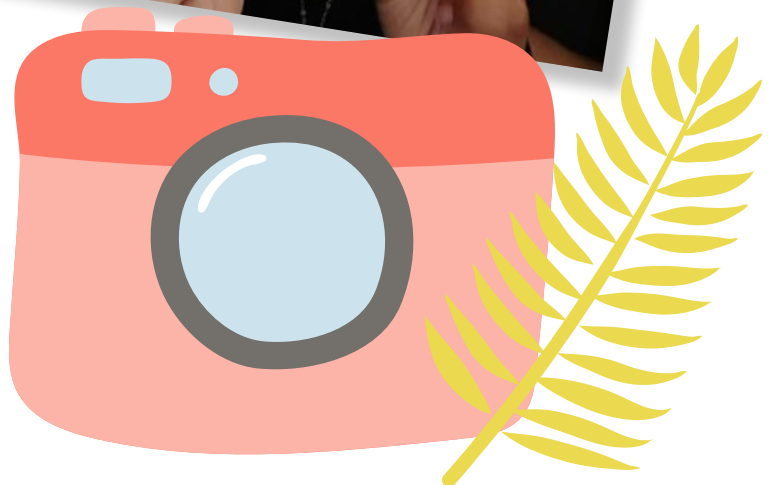
Not much ;)



Where can we find you?

www.sheilapathmahon.com

Sheila Path-McMahon is a Co-Regional Advisor for SCBWI Illinois. She is a middle school English teacher and has taught in various roles for 27 years. She has written a self-published novel and collaborated with illustrator Heather Bassler Zemien for several self-published picture books. She is currently working on illustrations for several of her own picture books and hopes to traditionally publish at least one of them so she can learn that side of the industry.



Tales from the front

Understanding, Acceptance, and Inclusion of Peers with Disabilities: Creating a safe space for Students to learn and share by Nancy F. Goodfellow

After receiving a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome for my first child, Lily, I quickly became an advocate for those with disabilities. By the time she was four years old, I had served as a parent support volunteer and was on the board of directors for the National Association for Down Syndrome. I had also trained to be a public speaker and regularly presented to doctors and medical students about how to deliver a diagnosis of Down syndrome. I spent nearly a decade giving these presentations.

Occasionally, I would speak to children who had a classmate with Down syndrome. Lily is the oldest of three, and as she and her siblings grew, I recognized a need to teach kids about all intellectual disabilities. I was more nervous to speak to a group of children than to a lecture hall full of doctors, but I'd seen firsthand how teaching them about empathy and understanding could lead to compassion and appreciation for all people, regardless of differences.

I created a presentation for all ages about intellectual disabilities and focused on a message of understanding, acceptance, and inclusion. I am accompanied by a young woman named Michelle, who has Down syndrome and speaks about her own experiences growing up. Michelle is almost ten years older than Lily, and her mother was one of the first local moms who reached out to me after Lily was born. Michelle began speaking with me through the National Association for Down Syndrome and is now my employee. Through her stories and photos, she shows students that she lives a full and happy life and that her time in school was much like their own.



I use books to reinforce my messages, comparing the term mudblood from Harry Potter to the r-word, and referencing *Rules* by Cynthia Lord and *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper to explore different ways people communicate. And now, I am able to reference my own middle grade novel, *Special* (Mission Point Press, March 2026), to highlight the core message of my presentation: we are all different, yet we all want the same thing—to have friends.

I have presented to over 20,000 children around the Chicagoland area, ranging from preschool through high school. My favorite audience is fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students. They often arrive skeptical but quickly soften as they listen to Michelle and see that her photos look much like their own. They see themselves in the stories I tell about how words can hurt and how each of us is different, but we all want to be treated with kindness and respect. They ask thoughtful questions and aren't too jaded or embarrassed to share about themselves. They're willing to give compliments but are still blissfully (or brutally) honest. One fifth grader once told me, "I really didn't want to come to this, but it was 1,000% worth my time."

During my presentation, I explain that things that seem strange at first become normal once we understand them. For example, seeing someone with diabetes check their blood sugar might seem alarming until you know why they do it. Understanding removes fear. It leads to acceptance, which can lead to opportunities to both honor and embrace differences or disabilities.

I talk about how to increase understanding and learn about differences by asking questions respectfully. I discuss tone, word choice, and intention. I use characters from *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio to illustrate how a question asked by Jack Will could be completely different if asked by Julian, even while using the exact same words. I ask the children to consider how it would feel to be asked “What’s wrong with you?” or “Why are you acting so weird?” compared to “Where do you go for math class?” or “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Most importantly, I leave time for Q&A and tell students that any question is welcome. During one presentation, a girl shared that she has diabetes and carries a phone to alert her when she needs to check her blood sugar. Her classmates looked at her in surprise. Many said, “I didn’t know that,” and “That’s why you get to have it.” She used the moment as an opportunity to explain why she had a special privilege. It was clear that a lack of information had led to misunderstanding and resentment.

Moments like this happen often. Dozens of students have asked, “Is ADHD a disability?” because they’ve been given a diagnosis but not an explanation. Children raise their hands and say, “I have dyslexia. It makes it hard to read,” and share why they receive extra time or leave the room for certain subjects. These conversations give children the chance to explain any differences on their own terms.

Teachers may be caught between protecting a child’s privacy and ensuring that children aren’t excluded or ostracized because their peers don’t understand the need for particular accommodations. Many teachers have indicated my presentations lead to honest conversations back in the classroom, allowing students to choose what they want to share and helping peers better understand one another.

I hope that my novel, *Special*, will also serve as an impetus for these conversations. Every lesson that I teach can be found within the story, even though the idea came to me long before I began public speaking.

Just before Lily started preschool, I read a guide for parents on inclusion in education. It explained that when children are very young, they naturally gravitate toward one another, regardless of differences. As they get older, parents and teachers recognize children who have befriended classmates with disabilities and often rely on those children for help. That help—on the playground, on field trips, at birthday

“Hearing from Michelle was the best part... the kids were able to better understand what it is like for a person to have a disability and were able to see that she is just like them.”

- 4th grade teacher

“Wonderful program!!” – grade school principal

“Paper activity was a great visual!”
- 4th grade teacher

“Your candid answers and open attitude helped with perspective and was an invaluable resource.”
- 3rd grade teacher

“You guys were fabulous!”
- 3rd grade teacher

“I loved that students were able to have an open conversation about this topic in a safe, positive way.”
- 5th grade teacher

“Students really enjoyed the presentation and were very grateful!” - 6th grade teacher

“...loved how you talked about how we can’t always see a disability or difference on the outside.”
- 4th grade teacher

“The presentation was informative, age-appropriate and heart-wrenching...”

Wonderful job!
- 2nd grade teacher

“We had a great conversation when we came back to our room about understanding others.”
- 5th grade teacher

—can alter a friendship. Without realizing it, adults may create a helper relationship, and children may begin to see their peers with disabilities as their responsibility rather than their friend.

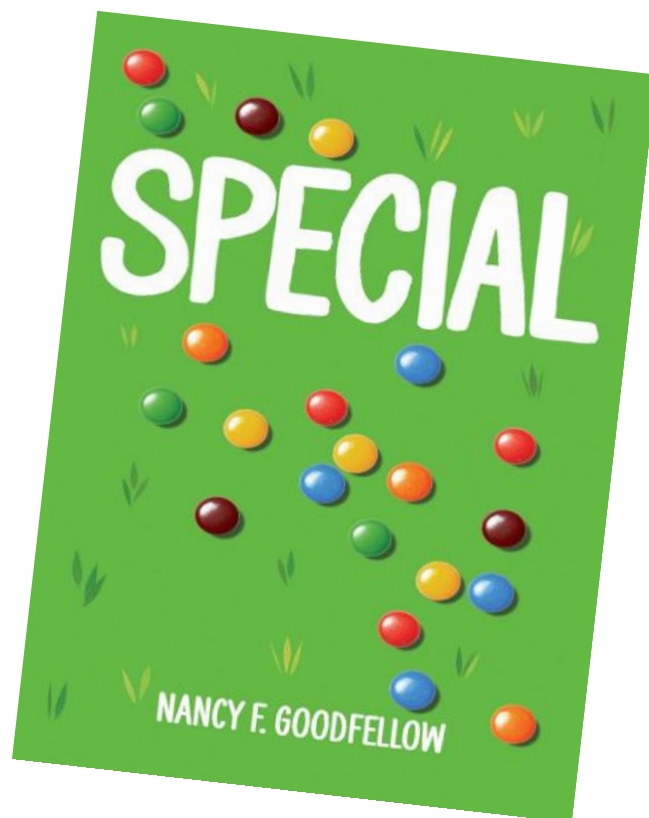
I wanted to create a story that focused on a relationship between two girls—one with a disability and one without—where their friendship survives past this stage but then faces challenges for more typical reasons and life circumstances: new schools, new interests, new friends.

Told from the perspective of both girls through alternating chapters, *Special* is the story of Madison and Meg. Best friends since kindergarten, the girls are starting seventh grade at a large junior high. Until this point, Madison has always helped and protected Meg—not because of Meg’s Down syndrome, but because they are best friends. Why wouldn’t she?

Madison’s father has passed away, and she is feeling alone and insecure. Without his guidance, she doubts who she is and questions her relationship with Meg. She believes she is singled out as “special” because her best friend has a disability, and all she really wants is to fit in. When Madison gets the chance to join the popular kids, Meg is left behind and forced to learn how to navigate school without Madison and advocate for herself. Both girls must figure out what makes them who they are—and who they really want to be.

One way Madison processes her feelings about her grief, Meg’s Down syndrome, and more is through journal entries assigned in her Honors Language Arts class using lines from *To Kill a Mockingbird* as prompts. Teachers can use the same prompts for their own students, create new ones from *Special*, or have students select lines to serve as prompts and discuss their choices.

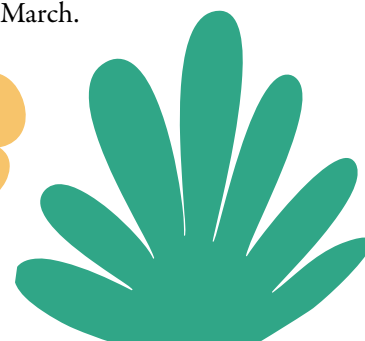
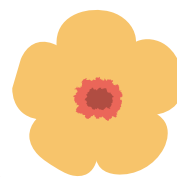
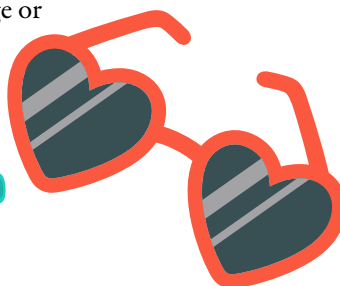
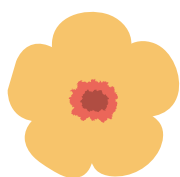
Text messages are also used throughout the story to show how children communicate and how something that may seem easy can be complicated and confusing for someone with an intellectual disability. Discussions can focus on the ways we communicate, word choice, emojis and images, and how a disabled peer might misunderstand a message or intention.



Meg and two of her classmates with disabilities become part of a lunch group led by the school social worker. The group uses the movie *High School Musical* to learn how to recognize positive and negative interactions with classmates and how to stand up for themselves. Students can identify other movies that could be used to teach similar lessons and share clips.

When Meg struggles to understand unwanted changes, the adults in her life misunderstand her behavior in and out of class. Teachers can use these scenes to emphasize that the more we know about specific disabilities and the why behind certain behaviors, the easier it is to understand and make space for them.

During Down Syndrome Awareness Month, Meg’s lunch group creates “Did You Know?” posters to raise awareness about the disability, with plans to create posters about autism in April. Teachers can have students research various disabilities and create their own posters, perhaps for Disability Awareness Month in March.



As Madison learns how to identify valuable friendships, Meg learns how to advocate for herself. She creates a list of things she can say when she is feeling picked on, embarrassed, or excluded. Students can work together to create their own lists of responses for uncomfortable situations, giving them the opportunity to share experiences when they have felt different or left out.

Excerpt: MEG

When we're done with our paintings, we have to take turns standing at the front of the class. To tell about what we painted and why. I feel nervous when my name is called. I want to put my head down on the table and cover my face. But I don't. I go to the front of the room.

"I painted my blue bedroom," I say.

The paint is still wet. It's on my hands. It's on my clothes too.

Some kids laugh.

I feel bad. I want to throw my painting on the floor. But I remember I need to use my words.

"You are hurting my feelings," I say. "I tried my best." The kids stop laughing. One even says, "Sorry, Meg." The teacher takes my painting and gives me a towel. I wipe my hands. Then she gives me a hug and tells me she's proud of me. She's going to hang my painting in a special spot.

Miss P. is right. It feels good when I stick up for myself.

Like my presentations, *Special* can provide a gateway to open and honest discussions about how we all feel different at times—and how we all want to be accepted and included. Both can be used to create an inclusive classroom environment, increase SEL skills, and enrich literary instruction.



Creative Sparks

Reimagining Black Boy Creativity: The Intersection of Literacy and Black Boys in Education

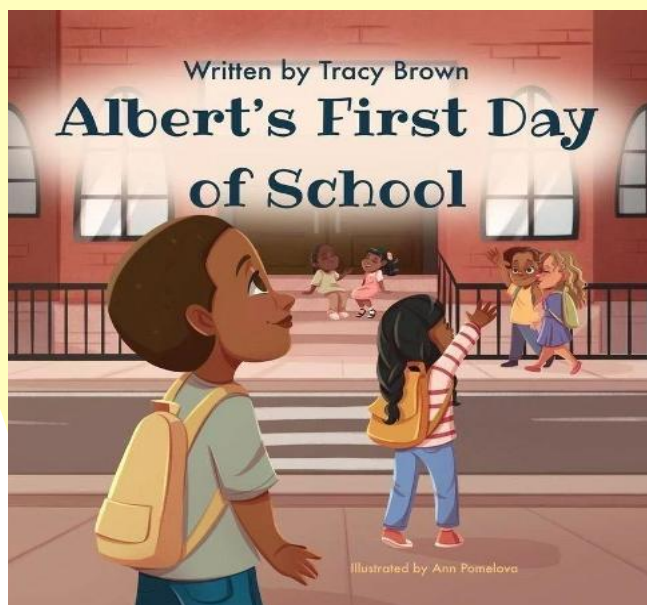
by Tracy Brown

My name is Tracy Brown. I am a school administrator, children's book author, and educator with over 15 years of experience in urban education across primary, middle, and secondary settings. I spent 11 years as a literacy teacher (K–12) and the past four years as a school administrator. I currently serve as Dean of Instruction and Advanced + Gifted Programs in the Noble Network of Charter Schools.

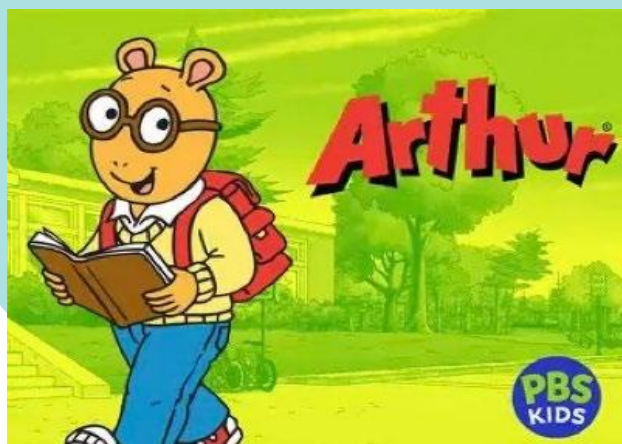
My debut children's book, is inspired by my own experiences as a first grader. Albert is a heartfelt story about overcoming fear, building confidence, and discovering the joy of learning. Like Albert, I remember feeling nervous and uncertain in my early school years—experiences that ultimately shaped my love for reading and storytelling.

One of the biggest influences on that love was the Arthur series and the beloved Arthur created by Marc Brown. I saw myself in Arthur's world—a place where children learned lessons about courage, friendship, kindness, and self-belief. Marc Brown's stories made reading engaging, comforting, and meaningful, and they inspired me to imagine, create, and eventually write stories of my own. Through Albert, I hope to offer young readers that same sense of encouragement, comfort, and inspiration that Arthur gave me.

As a children's book author, school leader, and educator, my



goal is to use storytelling to provide positive representation of Black children in literacy and to inspire young readers—especially in urban classrooms—to see reading as a pathway to confidence, imagination, and success. That early connection to reading shaped my commitment to breaking barriers in education and increasing representation for Black boys in literacy. Too often, Black children feel disconnected from reading because they do not see themselves positively reflected in the stories they encounter. Through my work in urban education, I have seen how literacy becomes transformative when students engage with texts and learning environments that affirm their lived experiences and cultural identities.



My passion for literacy was further strengthened by two educators: my sophomore English teacher, Ms. Rossi, an Italian American educator who reignited my love for learning during one of the most difficult periods of my life, and Mr. Griffin, my high school physics and music teacher. At the time, I was struggling with bullying, family challenges, and a lack of academic identity. Both Ms. Rossi and Mr. Griffin reminded me of the power education has to change the trajectory of a life. Education and storytelling give us the power to create alternate *worlds and new realities*.

give us the power to create alternate worlds and new realities. For me, storytelling became a way to reconstruct my own life through imagination—turning experiences into meaning and possibility. Their mentorship inspired me to become an educator committed to investing in Black and Brown youth with the same care, encouragement, and belief they showed me.

That journey eventually led me to write a children's book and launch a publishing company centered on positive and empowering representations of African Americans in children's literature and animation. I believe children deserve stories that reflect not only struggle, but also joy, imagination, creativity, and excellence. For Black and Brown children especially, seeing themselves positively represented in books at an early age can shape how they view their potential, education, and future. Literacy has the power to affirm identity, inspire confidence, and remind children that their voices and stories matter.

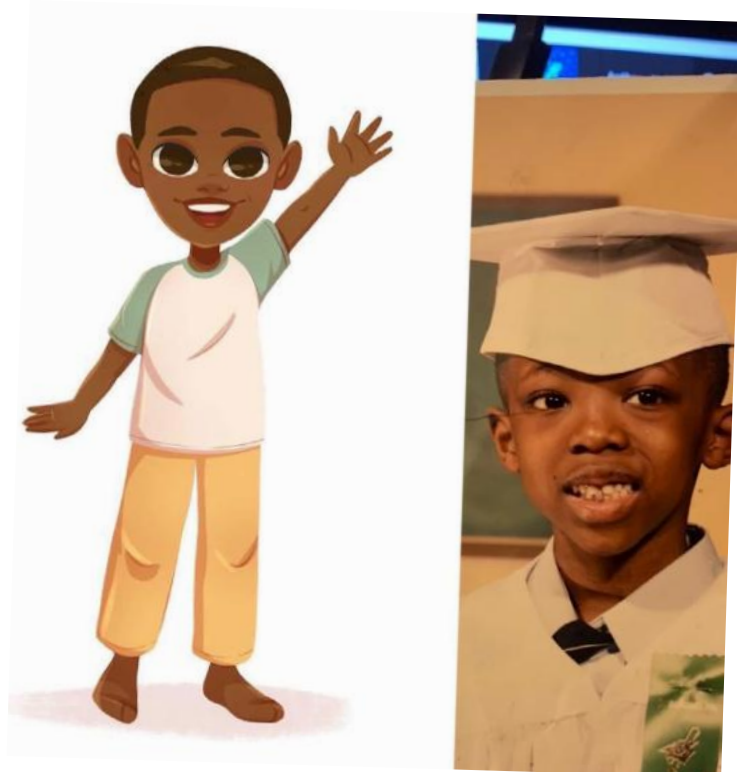
My creative process is grounded in lived experience, childhood memory, and the communities I serve. Growing up in Chicago's Little Italy neighborhood deeply shaped my storytelling, giving me a strong sense of culture, community, and identity.



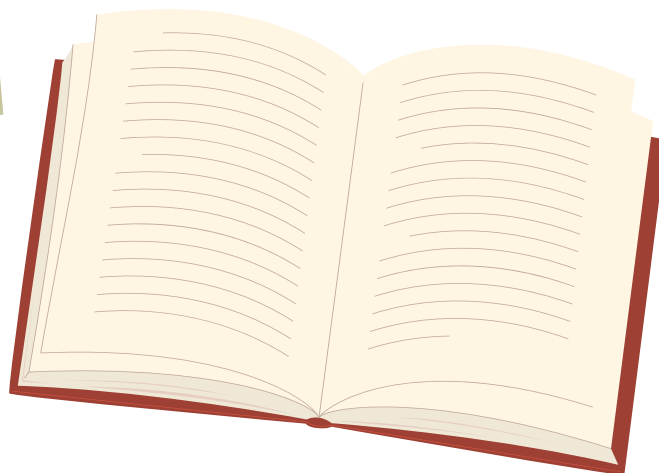
I draw inspiration from real-life moments in education, as well as photographs and cultural snapshots from my upbringing and neighborhood life. These experiences help me build authentic characters, settings, and narratives that reflect the voices of children in urban environments. Through this approach, I aim to create stories that feel real, relatable, and culturally meaningful, while honoring the everyday experiences that often go untold in children's literature.

My writing and storytelling is also driven by my students—their stories are rich, powerful, and full of personality, and they matter. Every day in the classroom feels like a mix of comedy, curiosity, and unexpected wisdom. One moment they're making me laugh with the most creative explanations for homework, and the next they're asking questions that stop me in my tracks because of how thoughtful they are.

So many of my ideas come straight from those everyday classroom moments—the funny analogies they come up with, the way they describe their world, or the “you can't make this up” stories they share in passing. Those experiences often become the spark for characters, dialogue, and storylines in my writing.



Teaching has shown me that storytelling is happening all the time, right in front of me. My classroom is full of energy, imagination, and personality, and my students constantly remind me that their voices are not only important—they're entertaining, insightful, and inspiring. In many ways, they are the best storytellers I know. They are the driving archetypes behind Albert, Ruby and Raymond.



The Lasting Effects of the Opioid Crisis on Children and Families:

Talking About a Stigmatized Topic by Lauren Fischer

This article was originally published by the Mother-Daughter Book Club website (March 9, 2026) and has been modified for publication in the *Prairie Wind* newsletter. You can find the original post at <https://motherdaughterbookclub.com>.

A parent's job is to prepare their children for what happens in life, not to shield them from it. Easier said than done, right?

My family watches TV using streaming services, which means we control exactly what we see. My kids' grandparents, however, have cable TV, often turned on and playing in the background. When my two children were very young, I remember lunging for the remote as the news came on. I couldn't turn it off fast enough. I wanted to protect them from stories like a traffic stop gone wrong or the death toll from a weather event or people dying from drug overdoses on the street.

But the reality is that children witness the world around them. For some children, that reality hits close to home. I was struck by this when I worked as a medical editor and watched the opioid crisis play out in real time. The focus was on the people who were dying, but I couldn't stop thinking about the kids who were left behind to witness the effects of the crisis.

A recent study from the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that during the decade from 2011 through 2021, over 320,000 children lost a parent to overdose. In an interview for NPR, NIDA's director, Dr. Nora Volkow, said, "we don't really speak much about" the impact of the overdose epidemic on children. I have seen this firsthand.

Last fall, I was an attending author at the Louisville Book Festival in Louisville, Kentucky. Nearly every person who visited my table knew a friend, family member, or neighbor



who had been affected by the opioid crisis. An author at the table next to me—also a mom—had written a memoir about her experience coming out of opioid addiction (*The Nature of Pain*, by Mandi Fugate Sheffel). One mom told me that her ten-year-old son had been asking questions about opioid use, because his friend's dad died of an overdose.

"I don't know what to tell him," she told me.

Children impacted by the crisis might not want to talk about having lost a parent to an overdose. They might feel stigmatized at school or among their friends. A framework for having challenging conversations can help families, schools, and communities affected by the crisis. Books provide a safe space for having such discussions.

Barbara Kingsolver wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Demon Copperhead* because she "wanted to write a novel about the epidemic of opioid use disorder that

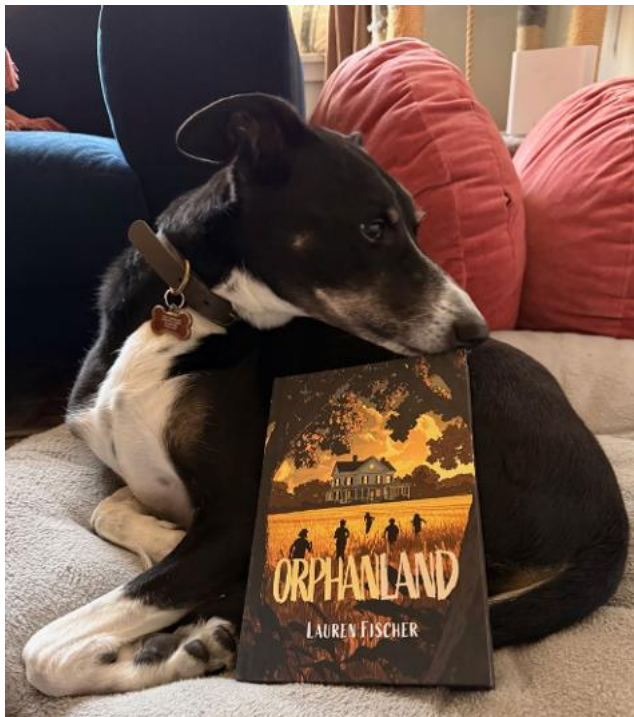
was tearing apart the place and people I love.” She has strong ties to Appalachia, having spent part of her childhood in rural Kentucky. She recently wrote an introduction to a photo essay in *The New York Times* (“The Opioid Crisis Never Ended. It Was Inherited by the Children.”) in which she observes that addiction is “a condition that nobody has ever asked for.”

“If you came to visit me, I could walk you down our country roads and point out all the houses where grandparents are raising little ones whose parents are incarcerated, sick or dead of addiction.” She notes that the hardest stories are the ones that begin in the mother’s womb. In West Virginia, according to West Virginia University researchers, from 2020 to 2022, nearly one in eight babies was born exposed to drugs—ten times higher than national rates.

It is important that we understand these statistics, but it is even more important to recognize that hundreds of thousands of young people in our country have first-hand experience of the opioid crisis. If we can talk about opioid use and bring this stigmatized topic out into the open, it can help the kids affected by the epidemic feel less alone.

Children’s book creators understand the importance of having a safe space to explore topics that might be challenging. Whether we like it or not, we can’t protect kids from every thorny issue life brings their way. In the current climate of rising book bans, it is more important

than ever that authors continue publishing books in which all children feel seen and represented.



Lauren Bomberger Fischer was born and raised in Indiana, graduated from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and lives in Chicago with her family and rescue cats. She edited many articles about the opioid epidemic while working as a science editor at The JAMA Network. She advocates for LGBTQ and disability representation in children’s fiction. Her debut middle grade novel, *Orphanland*, was published in November 2025 and is a Foreword INDIES finalist for Book of the Year in Juvenile Fiction.

See more of her work at
<https://www.laurenbfischer.com>

or follow on Socials

[@authorlaurenfischer](#) , [Lauren Bomberger Fischer, Facebook author page.](#)

When the work becomes... More work

by Jeffrey Brown

When I was a kid making art, the only compromises I had to make were with myself. Other than, of course, those with the limits of the scrap paper or pencils I was working with and going to school or church or whatever other activity my parents dragged me to. Besides those things, the only other obstacle that held me back in art making was self-editing. I would have an idea, write it and draw it, and there it was, all done. There'd only be one copy so no chance of it being a bestseller or getting any kind of national attention. But let's be honest, despite what charm my early work may hold, it's not great literature by any stretch. The feeling I had making that work, though, is something I yearn for, strive for, hope for with every project I work on. For a variety of reasons, it's much harder to find it, though.



The Fierce Knight was one of the first books I made when I was a kid, clocking in at a brisk 6-7 pages.

First, there's life. I mean, art is life, but the stupid relentless practical logistics of living are a constant obstacle. The dog wakes you up barking because she needs to go out. The coffee tastes funny. The cat is eating the dog's food. The hot water in the faucet upstairs has a slow drip. Laundry. Dishes. The cat threw up. The younger son has soccer practice. Taxes are due. The older son needs something sent to him at college. The dog has eaten whatever the cat threw up. The clothes are still really wet as if the washer didn't drain the water and



How am I supposed to focus when I'm being confronted with these puppy dog eyes?!

now they all have to be hand wrung before going into the dryer. There are emails from readers or stores or libraries or teachers. The dog needs to be walked again because it's eaten whatever the cat threw up. The phone has app time limits set but then you can just ignore the limits. I think some days I only get a couple hours of actual working time, and it's chopped into ten-minute segments and scattered across the day.

Most of the work I've done the past fifteen years or so has been with licensed IP: *Star Wars*, Marvel superheroes, *Batman*. They're all different in various ways and details, but in general, they share some basic elements. First, to



Some rough draft pages from the new Hulk Teach book, A Tale of Two Teachers. Copyright Disney.



This was the drawing for the hardcover case of my picture book. The dust jacket has the title, "My Teacher Is A Robot" but if you take the jacket off I get to have my preferred title there.

varying degrees, there are limits on what you can do with the characters and worlds. Even when they say they want you to really have your own take on their property, there'll be weird, random things that they say no to, forcing you to rework entries, pages, or sections to fix the loss of your totally awesome joke because that character isn't allowed to be depicted eating any food except in a vehicle that's parked and only when there's another character also eating. There may be (what you think are) minor details that you alter because you're drawing a comic and it looks wrong if you draw it differently, but they think it looks wrong the way you drew it, so now you have to draw something that looks wrong to you for the whole book. There may be things they say no to without giving you a reason, or their reason may not make sense to you, or their reason has to do with whatever other books/movies/toys/games they have planned, and they want your book to align with the other merchandise.

And a good portion of the time you spend working on a licensed project may be spent just waiting for several dozen people to look at and give their notes. Not sure if it's better or worse when after spending three weeks waiting for feedback, all you get is a "looks good!" On the upside, licensed work has a built-in audience, can potentially sell more books, and can lead to other non-licensed opportunities for your own work. It can be a lot of fun to work with characters you grew up with, and it can be a nice change of pace to be able to dive into a story without also having to do a bunch of worldbuilding and character backstory. Still, working with licensed properties will always be limiting and restraining, beholden to someone else's input and final say.

That said, working with any publisher is almost always going to mean having to take someone else's input. Generally, the bigger the publisher or the bigger the advance, the more they're going to expect you to let them have a say in what final form your book takes. Don't be too attached to that perfect title you've had in mind since starting your book, because it might be too long or too obtuse, or it might cause problems in one specific market...it may even be that a group of people you've never met have sat around the table and group-think a new perfect title that they think is just hilarious and that's what your book is called now. They might want you to add a whole new character, or take out a new character, or combine two characters, or split a character into a whole group of characters that sit around a table and think about things. This is not necessarily for the benefit of the story but may be based on what books are currently popular, what they see as market trends, or what they may be interested in reading.

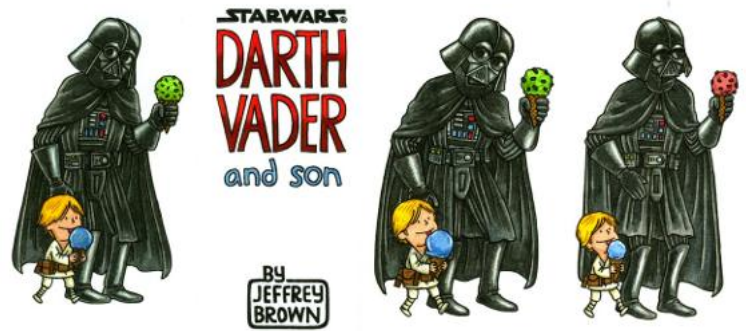
Marketing and publicity are another area that can affect or interfere with the creative process. It could be an explicit suggestion: "It would be great if your book had x, y, or z in it." Or it could be them presenting a plan that appears to be marketing a book different from the one you thought you were writing. And there are a multitude of asks, like requests for special drawings, interviews, events, social media posts. All things that will help your book sell, surely! And also, all things that will further eat away at what little time you have to create once you've finished cleaning up after the cat, who has thrown up again. A good marketing and publicity team can be a huge help in getting your work out into the world, but it can be a double-edged sword if you're someone who has a hard time saying no, or if you let yourself start thinking about that side of publishing while you're writing, and suddenly your story isn't being told for its own sake, but in order to better sell itself once it's finished.

One of many promotional drawings I've done for my books over the years. Copyright Disney.



One thing marketing and publicity will want as early as possible is a cover. Unfortunately, the nature of the publishing schedule means having that cover complete before the book is complete. As a cartoonist, that sometimes involves trying to draw characters before I've fully settled into how I'll end up drawing them, making decisions that can't account for changes that may occur from the current plan for the story.

Added to that, the publisher is most definitely going to have ideas of what they want the cover to be, and they are going to care a lot about it. I've always thought of the cover as part of the book, the outward facing part, sure, but intimately tied to the interior. A publisher tends to be more focused on the cover as a sales ad for the interior. It has to sell the book, something a reader sees and wants to buy, something that clearly tells what the book is like and about, something that will fit in and look good on the store shelves but also will be instantly digestible as a tiny thumbnail on someone's phone. The cover needs to exist separately from the book as just packaging. Still, it at least starts with you getting to sketch out ideas. I usually try to come up with at least a dozen ideas, even if some are slight variations of others and some are throwaways I include to guide the publisher to my preferred concept. At least a couple times, the publisher has chosen one of what I thought was a throwaway idea, which may either mean that even my lame ideas are good or that I have a bad sense of what makes a good cover.



The core influence a publisher has is through that dreaded literary archetypal villain: the editor. The editor serves many roles, and depending on the publisher and editor, may be involved with the cover and marketing and publicity. They'll be the one bugging you about your deadlines and delivery. And they'll be giving you notes. Opening an email with my editor's notes always feels like, to me, the anticipation of a soccer ball kicked straight at my face full power from a few feet away. There's a split second of recognizing the ball is going to hit before it does. Except that split second is drawn out from the time I see the email show up in my inbox and the time I open it and start reading the notes, even if the notes are all positive.

Sometimes an editor will remind me that these are suggested changes, and it's up to me if I want to make them or not, but it's hard not to defer. After all, the editor's job is to make the book better, and if this is what they think will make the book better, it should be changed, right? They have experience and perspective. If you're an insecure author, it's a small step to take the editor's notes as an indication your book isn't very good and needs a lot of work.

I've found myself, at times, internalizing the imagined voices of editors (and marketers and publicists and designers), anticipating what I think they'll want and preempting my own instincts for a story. Of course, it can always be worse, because you could end up with your editor leaving midway through a book or series, or you could have an indifferent

Notes on Lucy & Andy Neanderthal from my amazing editor Phoebe Yeh

Sometimes my job includes playing with toys. I really should stop complaining. Copyright Lego



or deadline or publishing plan, leaving all of that for later, or maybe even never. I've practiced blocking out the perfectionist voice in the back of my mind and only listen to the voice of my internalized editors in regard to tightening things up and clarifying and making things better, not just to second guess it all. And the biggest thing is I just keep writing and drawing and making books. After all, it's all I wanted to do when I was a kid, and now I get to do it, so why stop?



One of my favorite spreads from my X-Men book, which I ended up needing to redraw because I had to rearrange the composition. Totally worth it, despite the extra work, as the final spread is one of my favorite drawings from the book.
Copyright Marvel

Bio:

Jeffrey Brown is a Chicago cartoonist and author mostly known for his bestselling Star Wars books *Darth Vader and Son* and *Jedi Academy*. He has also written a dozen or so adult graphic memoirs, a bunch of parodies and humorous comics often about cats, and several middle grade graphic novel series. His next books are a second Marvel middle grade graphic novel, *Hulk Teach: A Tale of Two Teachers*, and a Lego middle grade adventure graphic novel, *Nikolas Nurdblok and the Lost Brick*. He also teaches comics at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Left: I went back to my childhood for inspiration with my 400 page fantasy adventure graphic novel that I've been working on while waiting for dreaded editor feedback on other projects.

A memorable page from the Sid book.

I wrote and drew this book purely for my own amusement. It's about my cat rampaging through the house, and after bringing it to a few publishers, they all seemed to want to change it. But it was exactly how I wanted it and eventually it found a home, hopefully will be published next spring.



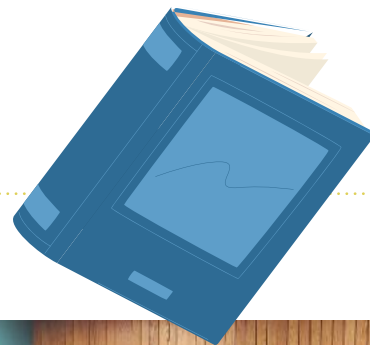
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Sid sees it!



Voices of Change

by Myania Rankins



Previously, in the Winter issue, I wrote about working with Forest Park library on building a Storybook Walk for the surrounding communities where I live.

In the midst of getting to know Susan Farnum, the amazing Forest Park Youth Services Programmer, I learned of a book fair event for Black History Month taking place at the library. Our Voices, Our Stories Children's Book Fair is an event where local Black children's book authors showcase their books and published work. Along with the authors, there would be face painting, snacks, and a drawing for a huge prize: a book basket with a book from every author! Susan asked if I wanted to participate, and while I wasn't an author, I spread the word to others and told her I would love to show up and support.

The day of the book fair was busy, busy, busy. That morning I went to the 26th annual Anderson's breakfast. (Thank you, Shirin Shamsi, for telling me about this event!) I had a grand ole time and right after it was over I made my way from Woodridge to the Forest Park Library.

The event took place on the lower level of the library, and it was packed! Tables were set up around the space with each author exhibiting their great books and providing great conversations. I checked out each table and learned about each person's reasoning and motivations on the creation of their book, wanting to be an author, and future projects.



One author I had a fantastic conversation with was named Deanna Barnes. She wrote her book, *A Very Good Helper*, because she wanted to inspire young children to be helpful no matter how young after she caught her own daughter trying to wash dishes at three years old. When she realized her daughter really wanted to help at all times, Deanna knew she had a great story on her hands.

While she talked about the book and I flipped through it, I was reminded of my goddaughter. She was at that age when she too wanted to help her mother at all times. I purchased the book with a smile on my face, excited to add to my goddaughter's expanding bookshelf of books I send to her and her mother.

Afterwards, I met Monica Swope, another uplifting author (Check out her article in our *Writer's Bookshelf* section!). She wrote a book called *Everyday Daredevil: Becoming a Risk Taker to Achieve what You Once Believed Was Unimaginable*. She told me the motivation for her book was to take life by storm and always believe in your dreams no matter how long it may take to reach them. Her accompanying journals, bookmarks, and various stationary had me in a chokehold. It took all of me not to buy her whole stand of magnetic bookmarks. After having a good chat, I asked her if she wanted to write for the *Prairie Wind*, and as you can see, she said yes!



Making way to the other side of the space to see the other tables of authors, I spoke to Tanae B, who has published a poetry book. She was a lovely soul who actually performed spoken word while I was chatting to Deanna. It was beautiful. Her performance singlehandedly made me want to buy her book, and I did! Along with her book she also sold magnets with her poems on them. Definitely added one to my purchase. To this day, that magnet sticks to my fridge and sends a ping of hope after grabbing milk for my breakfast every morning.

Lastly, I met a super cool author and Illustrator named Tara Levy, who was selling stationery like Monica. What drew my eye immediately was her illustrated greeting cards. Vibrantly stylized art of Jill Scott and Living Single? On a card?? I basically threw my wallet at her table.

Sadly, my social battery was low and after being up since 6 a.m. I decided to leave early. I didn't get a chance to see who won the book basket prize, but I hope they enjoyed that prize as much as I would have. All and all, I left that event with a big smile on my face and a jammed-pack bag of books and amazing goodies.

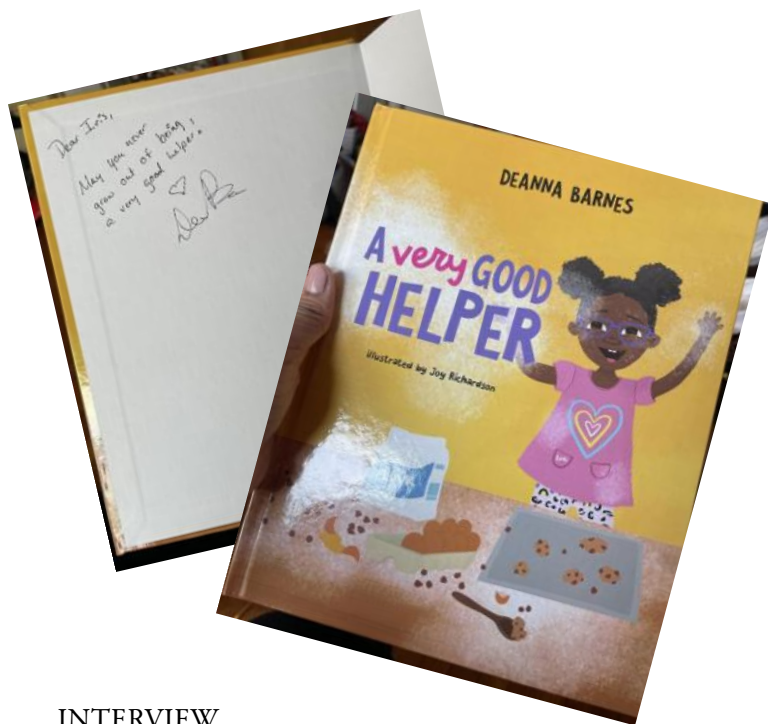
A few days later I gave the book, *A Very Good Helper*, to my best friend to give to her daughter, my god baby. Not even two weeks later, I got a raving review of the book purchase.



“Girl, she LOVES the book,” my bestie raved. I found out that not only did the book keep my god baby engaged, but she was reading it back to my bestie. She has a speech delay, and my bestie is constantly teaching her. The book heightened that experience overnight. “We read it every night since you gave it to me,” my bestie said, “plus we catch the little behind the scenes stuff too!”

The book has cute little Easter eggs that really let you know it holds a special place for Black children. From the picture frames of Black families hanging on the walls in the home on one page to little colorful mementos the child in the book was surrounded by on the next, the book is a warm reminder of how both my bestie and me were raised. It was lovely to see that in a picture book.

To wrap this article up, here’s a short interview with Susan Farnum I conducted to get more information on how the book fair came to be and what people need to know if they want to start their own!



INTERVIEW

Please mention your name, your profession, and how long you have been in your profession/the timeline of your career progression.

My name is Susan Farnum, and I’m a Youth Services Programmer of the Forest Park Library. I’ve been at FPL for sixteen years in different positions. I’ve worked in libraries since college, worked in a special library dealing with Ohio authors for a while, then went to library school and came out here!

As we know, you conducted a book fair event for Black authors and illustrators called Our Voices, Our Stories. How did this event come to be and how long has this event been going?

I had an author event before. I put together an author panel with local authors. We called it Book-tober fest, and it was a pretty small event. It was only five authors involved but hearing the authors really talk about their work, the energy, and the conversations we had from that event made me think I would really like to try this again, do it bigger, and involve more people I knew we have a huge community here in Forest Park, authors who are starting out and who are going independent. And I noticed we were connecting a lot with black authors and authors of color in the area, so I thought, wouldn’t it be great if we could pull all these connections together, celebrate everyone, and give them a



chance to showcase their work? The first one was an experiment, and it was such a good year when we did it! It was such an emotional experience. A lot of the authors were so grateful and so energized afterwards that we had to do another one!

When I arrived there, it was busy! Approximately how many attendees were present? And who won the ultimate book basket prize?

We were at 55 attendees for the whole event, maybe even a bit more than that. I know for sure it was more than the first one. We were really happy about that. I feel like all the authors had a pretty good streams of people at their tables, which I love to see! Someone's father won the ultimate book basket, which was pretty cool.

Running an event like this seems like a lot of work. Were there any difficulties you faced? How was it handled?

I will say one thing I'm really lucky with is that the both years I ran this I've worked with an incredibly lovely group of people. Everyone is very positive and very responsible, which helps me out so much. With the event getting so big, I think I might pull more of my staff in with me. It's a lot of moving pieces!



We all know you'll definitely be doing this next year! What are you planning to do differently?

I would love to get some more illustrators, more artists involved! That would be really cool. I know Tara Levy who has been one of our exhibitors for the last two years and is with the Liberated Arts Movement, is a really wonderful and amazing person. She has a ton of artist connections so I'm hoping I'm able to work with her and get more artists involved.

We're working with a lot of independent authors, so they're not in a situation where they can get signed and get an illustrator. So any connections we can make there could be really beneficial.

If anyone wants to do an event like this, what are some tips/ advice you give them so it runs perfectly?

Definitely connect with your local bookstores, if possible. We were working with The Pile Bookstore this year. I love The Pile. Rebecca is amazing. And they connected me with Lucky Jefferson, which was one of our exhibitors this year. So that was an amazing connection I had not known about. Her help was really wonderful with that, and she has connections with local authors too, so it really helps to connected with your local bookstores. They can totally help out with those contacts.

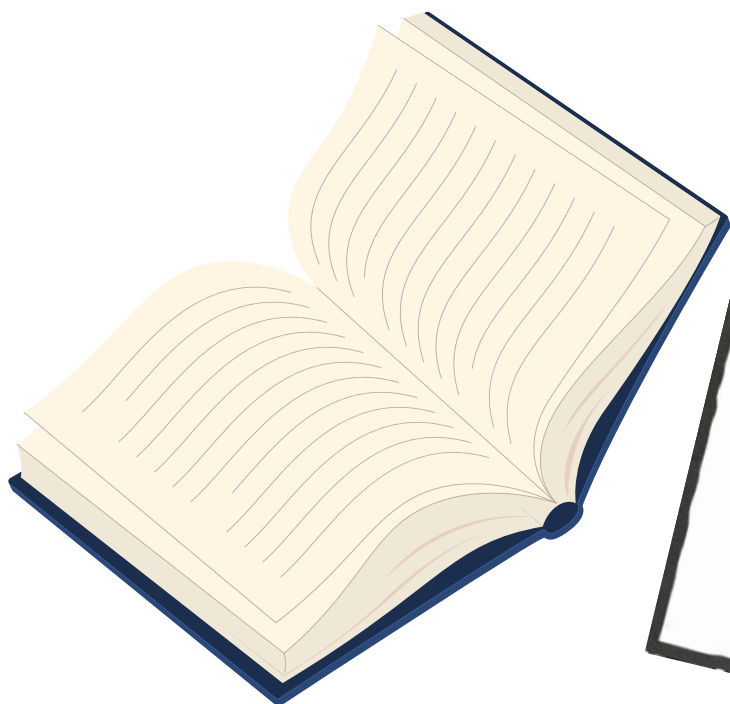
COMMUNITY BINGO

BLACK HISTORY

How to Play:

Explore these local places with your little ones and discover Black history, creativity, resilience, and stories!

 Bust of Percy Julian Scoville Park, Oak Park	 Underground Railroad Memorial honoring the site of the Ten Mile Freedom House in Maywood	 Geraldine McCullough's "Pathfinder" Sculpture at Village Hall in Oak Park
 Forty Acres Fresh Market in Austin	 Read more about each of these places at: collab4kids.org/bh-bingo	 Fred Hampton Aquatic Center in Maywood
 Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation in Austin	 Gwendolyn Brooks Mural at Brooks Middle School in Oak Park	 Chieftan Statue by Geraldine McCullough in Austin



MYANIA RANKINS is a freelance Writer and Illustrator raised in Chicago with a mean love for comic books and a good story. With 5+ years of experience in graphic design and illustration, she decided to begin her journey to create books of her own. When she's not working on new artwork, she's doing yoga in the grass and updating her Goodreads yearly book challenge.



Shop Around the Corner

ABOUT TIME BOOKSTORE *by Nicole M. Hewitt*

When About Time Bookstore opened just a few miles away from me in downtown Libertyville, I was thrilled. And I wasn't the only one—the community welcomed the grand opening announcement enthusiastically. In fact Delanie Dochelli, the store's owner, adopted a phrase she heard often as the store's unofficial motto: "It's About Time Libertyville had an indie bookstore!"

About Time Bookstore opened its doors in October of 2024 and has grown in its offerings and reach ever since. In addition to a curated list of books, the store features creative gift items, a monthly writing critique group, author events and signings, release parties, a cozy kids' corner, and even an adorable pup mascot named Finn! The atmosphere at About Time Bookstore feels homey and welcoming, with comfy couches and a warm and enthusiastically friendly staff. Every time I step into the store, I discover something new to love, so I'm excited to introduce this fabulous indie bookstore to you, my SCBWI friends!

I had the pleasure of interviewing Delanie, store owner. Here's what she had to say:



How did About Time Bookstore come to be? What made you decide to open an independent bookstore?

It was always a dream of mine to start a small business within the book publishing industry! I worked for a bit in the publishing industry when I was in college and wanted to get back into that world, so I started to save money. I decided on a bookstore 5+ years ago when I lived across the street from Roscoe Books in Chicago and the space became one of my favorite spots. It was a space where I could go to relax and chat books with other reading lovers. It turned into my happy little escape.

What made you choose your Libertyville location? How has the village and community rallied behind your small business?

I grew up about 25 minutes from Libertyville, and we used to come to town for dinner often. Chicago has a lot of amazing Independent Bookstores, and the culture around them is something I did not see often growing up in this area. I wanted to bring that culture here and create a space that anyone could come to find an escape.



This community has been nothing but incredible! Everyone has shown the store so much support over the last year and a half, and it just continues to grow. From author events, book clubs, community events, and more, the space has become a space that everyone can feel welcome in. Mainstreet Libertyville presented About Time with the Pride of Downtown award for 2025 and we couldn't be more excited! Getting to know everyone in this community has been our favorite part of this last year, and we are honored to call Libertyville home.

What types of books and genres do you carry? How do you decide what titles to stock?

We carry all types of books for all ages. From baby/pre-school, ages 4-8, ages 9-12 and Young Adult to Adult fiction and non-fiction. Our sub genres include General Fiction, Romance, Historical Fiction, Mystery/Thriller, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and more. We also have a small section of used children's and adult books.

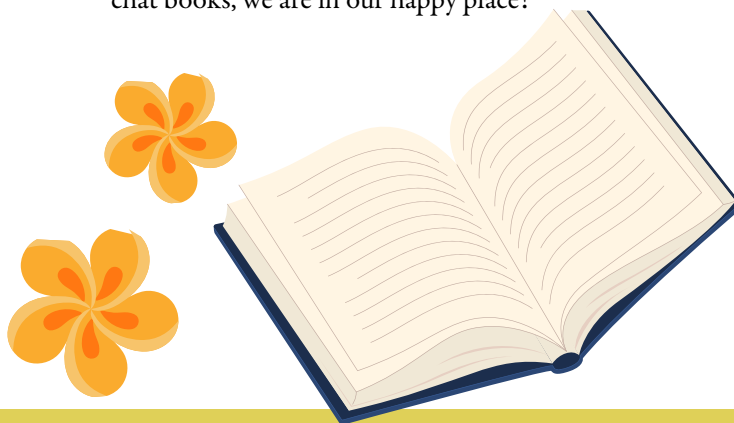
We work directly with the large publishers to build front lists each season of the books we want to carry in the store. We also take recommendations from customers, do our own research for self-published and local authors, and are starting to work with smaller indie publishers as well.



One of my favorite aspects of About Time is the unique events you host, many of them in partnership with other local businesses. What have been some of your favorites?

We love events! It's been one of my favorite aspects of opening the store. I would say the midnight and general book release parties have been a favorite for us and our customers! These are popular books coming out that we host a release party for, with fun games and activities for attendees before they take home the book on release day to read. We also hosted a large romance author at a local restaurant in town in October, and it was a blast! She had just released a new book and 80 book loving friends came together with the author to celebrate.

Anytime we get to just hang out with our customers and chat books, we are in our happy place!





What are some of your upcoming events? Where can people find out about them?

All our events are listed on our website [here](#): Upcoming Events|About Time Bookstore. We have book clubs, a writing critique group, children's story times, and author events coming up that we're excited for! This fall we're hoping to host some more authors at the store as well, so be on the lookout on our social media (@abouttimebookstore) for any announcements around those.

What is an unexpected challenge of running an indie bookstore? What is an unexpected joy?

An unexpected challenge running an Indie Bookstore has been balancing logistics of working with so many different publishers. Every one has their own unique processes for ordering, invoicing, inventory, returns, and more. Once you figure out a process that works for your store, it becomes like second nature. We are constantly working towards onboarding new smaller indie presses so having these processes in place has been vital.

An unexpected joy has been all the friends I have made that are not just considered "book friends" anymore, but everyday friends to my family and me. I have had the greatest time getting to know everyone and can't wait to continue to grow with them over the years. This also goes for all the visitors we have in that are just passing through town! It's been really cool to see how independent bookstores are a destination stop for them as they travel.

What are your hopes and plans for the future of About Time Bookstore?

I hope to continue to be a safe and fun space for anyone to experience. At the end of the day, you don't go into this business to make a lot of money. You go into this for the love of bringing people together and providing them with access to amazing literature, and that will continue to be my goal!

A few things we are focused on this year include expanding a bit on the look of the store, including a children's mural in the back of the store, and landing larger author events for the community to attend.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

We love meeting new friends in the area! Even if you are not a huge reader, come by to enjoy the space and explore what Libertyville as a whole has to offer.

You can learn more about About Time Bookstore at:

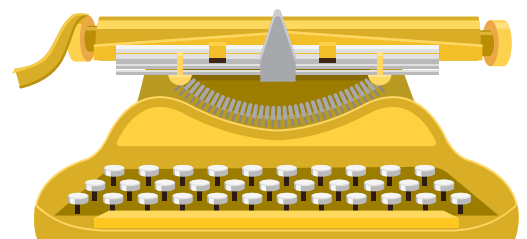
Website: AboutTimeBookstore.com

TikTok: [@abouttimebookstores](https://www.tiktok.com/@abouttimebookstores)

Facebook : [About Time Bookstore](https://www.facebook.com/AboutTimeBookstore)

Instagram: [@abouttimebookstore](https://www.instagram.com/abouttimebookstore)

Events: Upcoming Events|About Time Bookstore





NICOLE M. HEWITT IS A MIDDLE GRADE AUTHOR LIVING IN THE CHICAGO SUBURBS WITH HER HUSBAND, THREE GROWN KIDS, AND TWO OVERLY-ENTHUSIASTIC PUPS. SHE FIRST FLEXED HER CREATIVE MUSCLES AS A THEATRE MAJOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AND LATER TAUGHT THEATRE, WRITING, AND ELA AT A LARGE HOMESCHOOL CO-OP. MORE RECENTLY, SHE WORKED AS THE KIDS' SPECIALIST AT HER LOCAL BOOKSTORE. HER DEBUT MIDDLE GRADE FANTASY NOVEL-IN-VERSE, *THE SONG OF ORPHAN'S GARDEN* WAS CHOSEN AS A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD GOLD STANDARD SELECTION AND IS NOW AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK. VISIT NICOLEMHEWITT.COM TO LEARN MORE!



LET'S BUY PENS AND MAKE SKETCHBOOKS

BY LUCY KNISLEY

In March, Chicago hosted its first Stationary Festival. It was conceived by the team at the beloved Andersonville stationary store, Paper & Pencil, which routinely has lines of customers waiting to crowd into the tiny shop, and has recently become so successful that it's moving to a larger location.

The festival went up for ticket sales and almost immediately sold out, months before the festival took place.

I didn't snag tickets in time. I'm not bitter, I swear.



It is incredibly heartening to me, an author/illustrator of over 20 years, to see the popularity of the “analogue movement.”

In recent years, the internet has gone from a Wild West of sharing art and stories, celebrating weirdness and creativity and making it widely accessible, to a barren landscape of monetization, content factories, algorithmic chokeholds, and slop. I'm furious that younger generations of artists and writers have this facsimile of the internet to work with, where their efforts are reduced to “content,” stolen by slop machines, and monetized for billionaires, while they are forced to game the broken system like one of millions of buskers. Frustration with this mutant internet

and the widespread use of generative AI in creative industries has given birth to a revolution of folks realizing the power of the pen and sketchbook (or notepad, pencil, stamps, etc.).

Welcome to what some would call “analogue creating,” and which I have also referred to as “my problem with art-supply hoarding.”

Not to be too “back in my day” about it, but we had to walk uphill in the snow, both ways, to get Japanese cartridge pens. Actually, we often went to Kinokuniya, where, in my 2005-era college days, I haunted the near-empty aisles of the basement stationary area, examining wondrous items with labels I couldn't read, and spending my rent money to take a gamble on a pen with an interesting vibe

I've tried a lot of pens, friends. It's part of my actual job as an author/illustrator, which fully justifies it! Eventually you may, like me, find the pen that best works for you, and you'll miss that seeking—the (expensive) trial and error of saying “maybe this one will revolutionize my creative process!” Once it hits best, you sort-of only need to buy that one sort of pen. (How BORING.).

The process is personal to everyone. One of the most common questions I am asked at book events or workshops is “what pen do you use?” I, too, have asked this of nearly every working artist I've ever met. It translates to “I love your art” and also “I want to climb into your skin and draw like you.” The highest compliment, while also insinuating that perhaps it is the material used, and not your proficiency and practice with it, that creates the art you make. (A kuretake zig insert, in case you had that question primed and ready.)



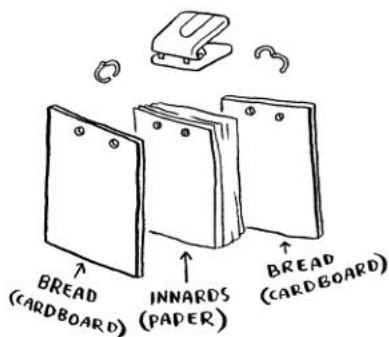
What a glorious time to be alive, when the popularity of good pens and quality notebooks has created a wider availability here in the US, filling shops and festivals with what, in the past, you had to backorder on Jetpens!

But listen, this is a hard lesson I've learned in years of that analogue life: Nobody will make the PERFECT ITEM for you. Sometimes, you have to make the art supply you want to see in the world.

If you, like me, are not so much a Goldilocks—trying multiple items until you find the best one—so much as the princess and the pea, I celebrate you.

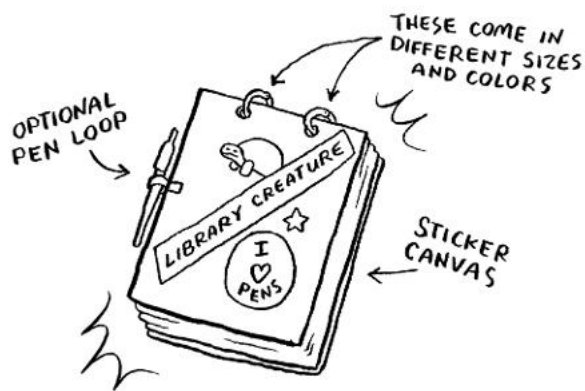


I've been making my own sketchbooks for over 15 years. I make them seasonally, which means I usually fill one to the point of unwieldy weight/size in approximately three months time, and then I make the next. It is modular, highly adaptable to paper type, size and use, and best of all: CHEAP. Actually, my favorite aspect of these sketchbooks that I make is that it sheds much of the horror vacui of an empty, pristine notebook; that familiar feeling of "no, I mustn't mar this with anything less than perfection." The enemy of done—the roadblock of practice! Because this one is basically a paper sandwich.



Materials include:

1. Cardboard, harvested from the carcass of a used-up paper pad
2. Paper that you like and is comfortable for you and your tools—I started out using copy paper, and now I use Blick's illustration Bristol.
3. A two-hole punch. Smaller than a 3-hole punch and almost always available at your nearest thrift store..
4. Book rings. Get 'em at your office supply store.



You can have as many or as few pages as you like, removing or adding as you see fit. Sizing is easily adjusted to fit in your favorite bag. Use hot-glue to attach a strip of elastic to act as a pen loop, and you're good to walk far away from your computer, perhaps never to return.

You can use multiple types of paper easily, including watercolor or planner pages printed at home to round out your book.

Gotta scan a drawing or page of writing? Pop open the book rings and slap that baby down on your flatbed without wrestling with a bound spine. Like a pretty cover? Think of the cover cardboard as a perpetually changeable showcase of collages, paintings and stickers.

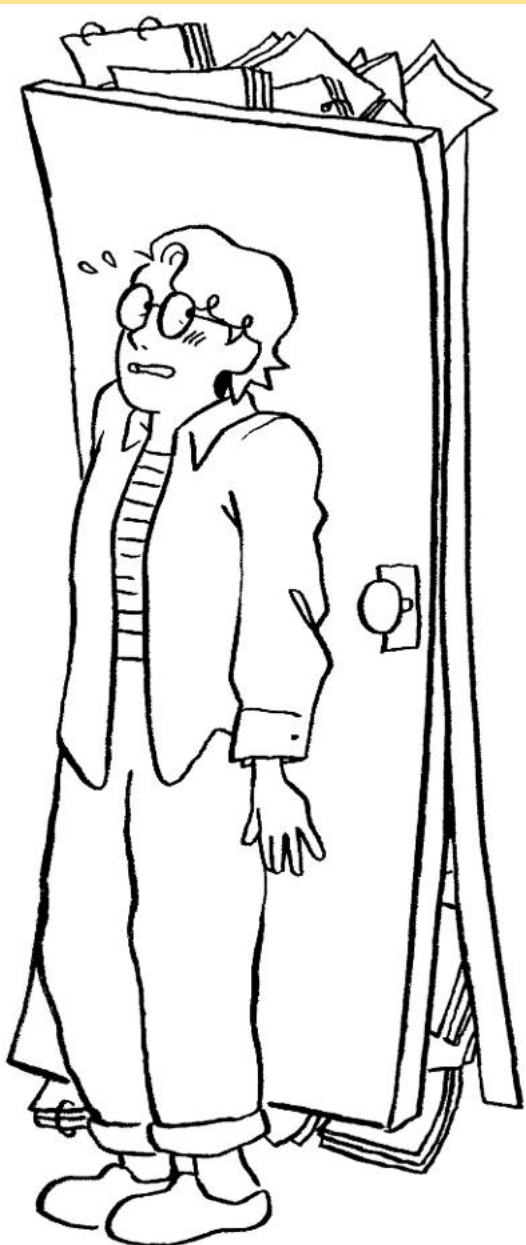


It travels well, personalizes easily, and costs a fraction of what most notebooks and sketchbooks do.

I hope my years of trial and error help you save a few bucks and feel extra special—Next time someone asks you to admire their picture-perfect hobonichi, you can drop a casual “That’s nice, but I make my own.”

Alas, a warning; I hope you like a home slowly filling with stacks of flammable material. In this, I admit, I am jealous of the spaciousness enjoyed by my digital art friends. But not jealous enough to relinquish my hoard.

Happy pen-purchasing!



Writer's Tips

MFA Lessons that Last by Carmela A. Martino



The publishing world was a very different place when I entered the Master of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults program at Vermont College back in 1998. In those days, most children's publishing houses were open to unsolicited manuscripts, though submissions had to be made via snail mail and include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) for the editor's response. And editors did indeed respond, even if it was only to send a form rejection letter. At that time, the Vermont College residencies were held in Montpelier, Vermont, under the direction of Norwich University. Now, the College is called the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA), and it's an affiliate of the California Institute of the Arts. So, when I was first asked to write an article about my MFA experience, I wondered what I could say that would be relevant in the current publishing environment. Then Myania Rankins, the *Prairie Wind* Director, suggested I write about the lessons I learned that still serve me today. Thinking back on the program, I realized that, despite the many changes over the years, what I learned continues to influence my writing and teaching. Here are four writing tips gathered from those lessons:

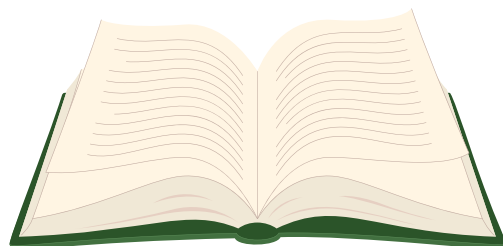
1. Be flexible

When I applied to Vermont College, my writing sample was from a nearly finished young-adult novel I'd been working on for over two years. My goal was to complete and then polish it as my creative thesis. Marion Dane Bauer, my first-semester advisor, generously read the entire manuscript even though it exceeded the standard submission page count. She then responded with a five-page, single-spaced revision letter. As I read and reread her letter, I realized that I didn't yet have the skills to address all the issues she highlighted. Disappointed, I put that novel aside hoping to return to it later in the program. Meanwhile, I started working on my backup idea, a middle-grade novel with a twelve-year-old male protagonist. But I had trouble getting my character's feelings to come across on the page. Marion gave me a writing exercise to address the problem: write a first-person account of an event from my childhood that still aroused strong emotion in me. I chose to write about fear—the fear I'd felt at age ten, when my mother nearly died in childbirth.



As I revised the exercise into a short story, I learned not only how to show my character's emotions but also how to create reader empathy. At the end of the semester, Marion approved the story, which I called "Rosa's Prayer," for inclusion in my creative thesis. I'd entered the program set on completing a young adult novel for my thesis. But I'd been surprised by how much I enjoyed the process of writing a short story. So, I changed my goal to create a short story collection instead.

Although Marion had said "Rosa's Prayer" was good enough for inclusion in my thesis, she suggested I submit it for additional critique at the next residency workshop, which I did. My workshop group provided insightful feedback that would help make the story even stronger. But I was again surprised when they also encouraged me to expand the story into a novel—they wanted to know what happened to Rosa and her family in the aftermath of their tragedy. I initially resisted the idea. I'd never imagined writing a novel based on my own childhood, let alone such a difficult period. But the workshop feedback convinced me it was a story worth telling. I again revised my plans and began working on a middle-grade novel called *Rosa, Sola*. My need for flexibility wouldn't end there, though.



2. Be open to experimenting (even if it means tackling tough revisions).

I originally wrote “*Rosa’s Prayer*” and the first draft of *Rosa, Sola* using third-person limited viewpoint. In the Vermont program, you work with a different faculty advisor each semester, and my first three advisors never questioned that viewpoint choice. So I was stunned when, partway through my last semester, my final advisor suggested I rewrite the story in first person. I hated the idea. My main character, Rosa, is only nine years old at the beginning of the novel, and she struggles with grief and loss after a family tragedy. Given that, and the fact that Rosa isn’t very precocious, I felt she didn’t have the linguistic skills to tell the story adequately as a first-person narrator. I tried to convince my advisor that the story needed to be in third person, but she disagreed.

I discussed the issue with my friend, Sharon Darrow, who was also on the Vermont faculty at the time. Sharon reminded me that I was in the MFA program to experiment and learn. If I didn’t like the end result, I could always go back to the third-person version. I followed Sharon’s advice and rewrote *Rosa, Sola* into first person. My advisor was pleased—she thought the new voice was just right. And that version became my creative thesis.

Revising the novel into first person did give me a much deeper understanding of my character, which in turn helped me strengthen the story. Along the way, I also discovered some plot issues I needed to fix. But in the end, the point of view still didn’t feel right. Rosa sounded too mature to me, and she struck me as too observant for a young girl in mourning.

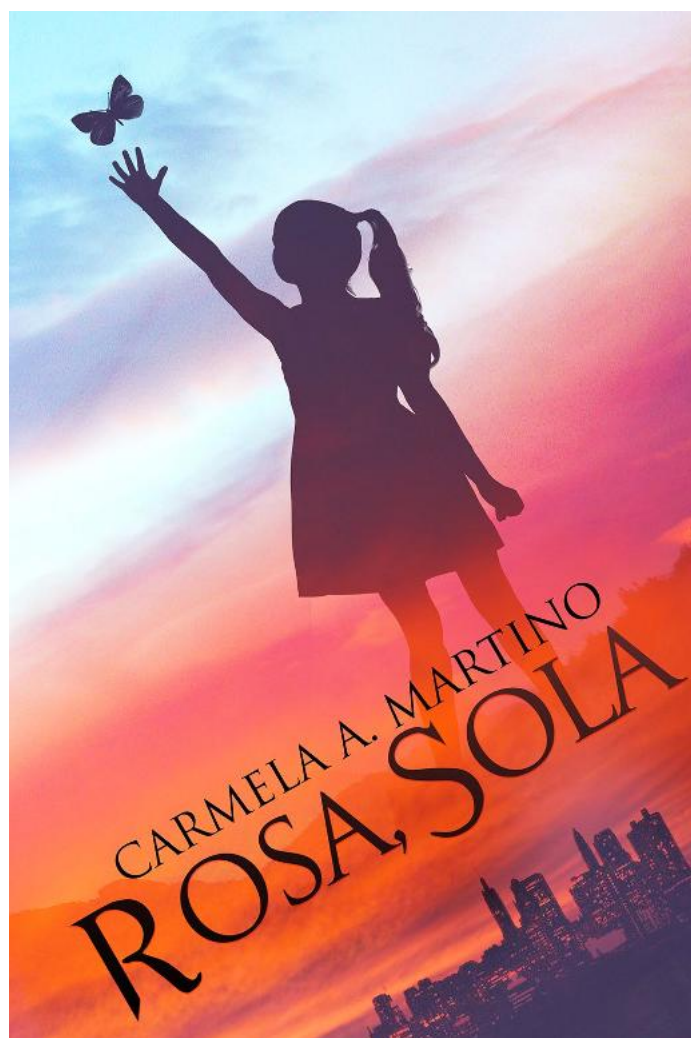
After graduation, I didn’t know what to do with the manuscript. If my last advisor hadn’t liked the first-person version so much, I would have gone back to third person right away. But because of the plot changes I’d made between versions, that would require a major rewrite. I hesitated to do that. What if my advisor was right and I was wrong? After all, she was not only a published author—she also worked as an editor at a major publishing house.

3. Trust your gut.

Not knowing what to do with the novel, I did nothing. Fortunately for me, I attended the American Library Association (ALA) national convention in Chicago the same summer I graduated. While there, one of my Vermont College advisors introduced me to her editor, whom she’d told about *Rosa, Sola*. When I explained my dilemma regarding the point of view to

the editor, he generously offered to read both versions. Even though he later turned down the manuscript, he gave me some invaluable feedback: He thought the third-person version was the stronger of the two. His comments gave me the courage to go against my last advisor and rewrite the story my way, which I did.

Despite all the work, I was grateful my advisor had suggested I try first person. The multiple rewrites not only gave me a deeper understanding of my character, they also helped me better appreciate the nuances of the different point of view approaches. That knowledge was a great asset when I began teaching writing classes. The experience also taught me that there is no intrinsically “right” or “wrong” point of view. What matters, instead, is that the storytelling feels right to me, as the author. All my work was later rewarded: *Rosa, Sola* was eventually published by Candlewick Press. The novel received a starred review from Booklist and made their list of Top Ten First Novels for Youth.



4. Cultivate close connections.

When I started the Vermont College MFA program, I had been a freelance writer for newspapers and magazines for over five years, but I had no children's writing credits. I felt a bit intimidated to be taking classes alongside many well-published children's writers and illustrators. I needn't have been—my classmates treated me as an equal. They included fellow Illinois author Carolyn Crimi and Indiana author April Pulley Sayre, who were both members of my graduation class. Another Illinois author I got to know at Vermont College—Phyllis Harris—was also in our class. Phyllis was nearly seventy years old when she entered the program, and her zest for learning was a great inspiration to me.

Our class became known as the “Hive” because we were always “buzzing” about something. After our graduation in summer of 2000, we stayed connected via regular group emails, with April and Phyllis initiating many if not most of our conversations. While we occasionally critiqued each other's work, that wasn't our group's main function. Instead, it was a place to get advice, share frustrations, and encourage one another. Initially, we had bonded over our common experience of Vermont College, but our email group became a lifeline as we navigated the turbulent waters of the publishing industry. Sadly, several members of the Hive are now deceased, including April and Phyllis. I miss them both terribly, but I am forever grateful for how they kept the Hive buzzing over the years. Although our email group isn't as active without them, our Hive connection is still strong, and I know I can turn to them for help and support when needed.

I think all writers/illustrators can benefit from cultivating close connections with fellow creators. The SCBWI-Illinois listserv provides terrific support, but I believe having a smaller group of trusted confidants can be crucial to maintaining our sanity and sense of commitment amid the challenges of today's publishing industry.

The MFA program provided many other valuable lessons—teaching me not only about the craft of writing and the publishing process, but also about myself. One of my most important lessons was understanding how much I love both learning and sharing what I learn with others. And I don't want to ever stop doing either one.



Carmela A. Martino is an author, poet, and writing teacher who lives in Naperville, IL. She wrote the middle-grade novel *Rosa, Sola* (Candlewick Press), while working on her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College. Carmela's second novel is the award-winning young-adult historical *Playing by Heart* (Vinspire Publishing). Her credits for young readers also include poems and short stories in numerous magazines and anthologies. Carmela taught writing classes for children and adults for over twenty years at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and she blogs about teaching and writing at TeachingAuthors.com. Read more at www.carmelamartino.com, where you can subscribe to Carmela's Creativity Newsletter.



The Bravery of the Blank Page.

Finding Stillness in the Craft by Monica Swope

The Visceral Act of Writing

Writing is often framed as a technical exercise, a series of calculated decisions about syntax, pacing, and plot. We talk about the “mechanics” of a story as if it were a clock to be wound or an engine to be tuned. But for those of us who move between the worlds of education, coaching, and wellness, writing is something far more visceral. It is an act of “micro-bravery” to put a single word on a blank page is to take a risk; to share that page with the world is to be a daredevil.

For me, this process has evolved into a meditative practice that mirrors over a decade of experience as a certified yoga instructor and a mindfulness practitioner. Whether I am drafting a self-help guide for adults or navigating the whimsical, risk-taking worlds of my *Brave Friends* children’s series, I have come to view the keyboard and the notepad not just as tools of production, but as vehicles for healing and self-discovery. However, I didn’t always see myself as a writer in this capacity. My relationship with the written word began in a much more turbulent place.

The Reactive Muse: From Turmoil to Stillness

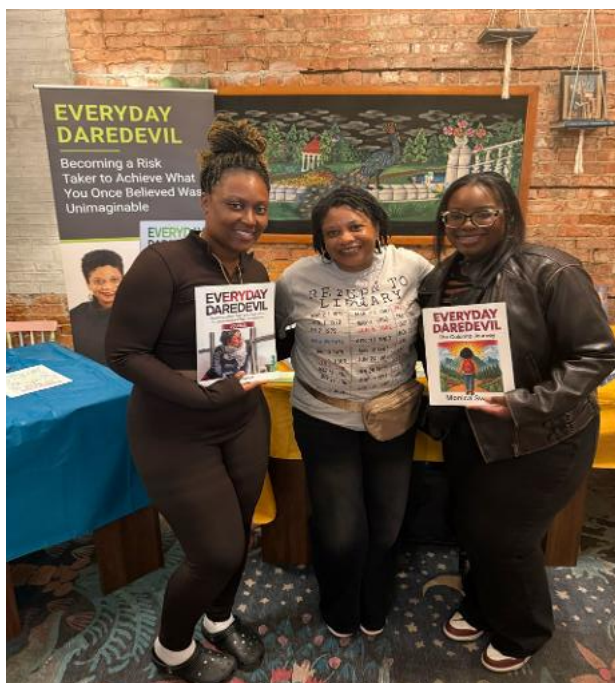
My earliest writing projects were born from a place of “angry poetry.” These were usually reactive pieces, penned in the raw, emotional wake of a breakup or a personal storm. At that time, writing was an emotional vent, a way to affirm myself when I felt disregarded or to lash out at the world when I felt wronged. I would write love ballads or fiery verses, finding that my creativity was inextricably linked to my external drama.

The problem with a reactive muse is that it is contingent on turmoil. When the drama subsided and my life found a peaceful equilibrium, I found that my “muse” disappeared with it. I was left with an unsettling silence. I had to discover a new way to write that wasn’t fueled by external contention, but rather by internal clarity. I needed to learn how to write when I was happy, when I was bored, and, most importantly, when I was still.



The Turning Point: Two Workshops and a Global Pivot

The transition from reactive poet to intentional author didn’t happen overnight. The turning point came during two pivotal workshops that reframed writing as a practice rather than an outburst. The first, hosted by a well-known author and educator over fifteen years ago, introduced me to the concept of free-writing and the power of semi-autobiographical storytelling. I realized then that writing could be calming and reflective; it could be a tool for state-of-mind improvement rather than just a release valve for pain.



The second workshop occurred in my community just before the pandemic. The facilitator shared a philosophy of storytelling as a way of “stating your truth” and “conjuring memory.” This idea of writing as a legacy-building act resonated deeply with my background in education and history. When 2020 arrived, the forced solitude of the pandemic provided the space for a full pivot. The world suddenly demanded a quiet introspection that I was finally prepared to meet. I wrote my first book that year, finding a profound, unexpected joy in the solitude.

The Goldberg Philosophy: Bridging Structure and Flow

Due to the pandemic, that external “reactive muse” that had fueled me for years was silenced by the sudden, unsettling stillness of isolation. For months, I sat before a blank screen, waiting for a spark of frustration to ignite a sentence. It never came. In that silence, I realized that if I wanted to continue creating, I had to learn how to write from a place of internal clarity rather than external turmoil.

I turned to the philosophy of Natalie Goldberg, who teaches that the writer’s job is to simply “stay in the chair” and meet the silence head-on. By applying the same breathwork and presence I use on a yoga mat to my writing desk, I learned to navigate that “unsettling silence.” I stopped waiting for the lightning bolt of emotion and started practicing the discipline of the craft and draft. This shift allowed me to move from being a reactive writer to an intentional one, birthing the *Everyday Daredevil* collection and my subsequent children’s books.

When I first encountered Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*, I wasn’t looking for a craft book. I was looking for a way to bridge the gap between the structured, rigid world of curriculum design and the fluid, often intimidating world of creative expression. What I found was a philosophy that mirrored my daily work as an educator: the idea that writing is a practice of mindfulness and a testament to human tenacity.

Goldberg’s core message, “keep your hand moving,” is deceptively simple. It is a directive to bypass the internal critic and tap into what she calls “first thoughts.” In my professional work with educators and students, we often talk about inquiry-based learning, the process of asking questions without the immediate pressure of a “right” answer. Writing, as Goldberg defines it, is the ultimate form of inquiry. It is a way to sit with the discomfort of

This “staying in the chair” is a form of calculated risk. In my coaching practice, I help individuals realize their capacity to live a life where fear is not an inhibition. We take risks to reach a greater version of ourselves, and the blank page is the first arena where that risk is taken. Whether I am drafting a series about children facing their fears or developing a curriculum centered on justice and history, the “bones” remain the same: we must record the world with honesty and find the stillness required to hear our own voices above the noise.

Tactile and Vocal Rhythms: The Architecture of a Story

My writing process is a study in contrasts, dictated by the genre I am inhabiting. Today, I view my work as being about both the “bones” of structure and the “breath” of creativity. When I am working on non-fiction or self-help, like the *Everyday Daredevil* collection, the process is highly structured and research-heavy. I start with a concept statement, move into an intensive outlining phase, and write with the precision of an academic piece.

However, when I transition to children’s literature, the *Brave Friends* and *Brave Friends Adventure Club* series, I tap back into my poetry and creative roots. This is where the process becomes tactile and kinesthetic. I am a visual and kinesthetic learner; I need to see the words move. I often use Post-it notes to physically move powerful words and concepts around a board, building a visual map of the narrative. This allows the story to remain organic, letting the “poetic and creative muse” dictate the flow before the



“academic editor” takes over.

Perhaps the most essential part of my craft is dictation. For me, storytelling is a deeply auditory and vocal experience. I love listening to audiobooks, and I find that typing can be slow and restrictive for the initial flow of a tale. Speaking the words allowed me to experience the writer’s journey with all my senses. There is something about the human voice, the literal “breath” of the story, that bypasses the inner critic. By dictating the story first and then transcribing and editing, I ensure the “voice” of the piece is authentic and rhythmic before it ever meets the cold light of the screen.

An Annotated Bibliography of the Process

The following texts and influences served as a guide during the creation of the Everyday Daredevil collection and the Brave Friends and Brave Friends Adventure Club series. They represent the blend of psychological insight and educational theory that informs my multi-generational approach to storytelling.

- *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg: Goldberg’s philosophy of “keeping the hand moving” was the bridge I needed between structured curriculum design and fluid creative expression. Her emphasis on “first thoughts” aligns with the mindfulness I bring to my workshops, encouraging writers to bypass the internal critic.
- *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown: Essential for shaping the emotional landscape of my characters, Brown’s exploration of vulnerability provided the framework for “micro-bravery.” It helped me move beyond heroic tropes to find courage in the small, quiet moments that children and adults face daily.
- *The Art of Spiritual Writing: How to Craft Prose That Engages and Inspires Your Readers* by Vinita Hampton Wright: As a certified journal therapist, I utilized this text to stay grounded while developing the *Everyday Daredevil* guided journal. It ensured that the prompts I created were not just creative exercises, but restorative resets for the mind.

- **Creating Character Arcs:** *The Masterful Author's Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development* by K.M. Weiland: This was a staple for the *Brave Friends Adventure Club* series. Weiland's work on "positive, negative, and flat character arcs" helped me structure character arcs that give young readers the agency to rewrite their own narratives of fear.



Monica Swope is the founder and Principal consultant of Learning Dimensions, a Chicago-based consultancy dedicated to inquiry-based education and learning that transforms lives. A Master Certified Life Coach and certified yoga instructor, she has nearly 30 years of experience in education, mindfulness, and holistic well-being. She is the author of the *Everyday Daredevil* collection, *Brave Friends* picture books, and the *Brave Friends Adventure Club* transitional chapter book series, focusing on cultivating risk-taking skills across generations. Her current work focuses on finishing the final books in the *Brave Friends Adventure Club* series and developing a young adult novel that continues to explore the themes of risk and fortitude across the lifespan.



Mentor's Text

by Robyn Chapman

Before we begin the question/interview, please mention your name, your profession and how long you have been in your profession/the timeline of your career progression.

My name is Robyn Chapman, she/her. I'm a senior editor at First Second, an imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group. I've been working in publishing for sixteen years, and at First Second for ten.

Please describe the acquisitions process in your publishing house. What factors are taken into account? Who contributes to the decision to acquire a book? What happens after the contract has been signed?

It all starts with a pitch, usually sent via email by an agent. If an editor is interested, they share it with their editorial team. If there's enough enthusiasm, it goes to the publisher for approval. All this happens before the pitch is taken to an acquisition meeting. First Second's "pre-screening" stage helps ensure that if a book makes it to the acquisition meeting, it's likely to be approved. (Not all imprints work this way, though.) Once the book is at the acquisition meeting, several departments weigh in, including publicity, sub rights, school and library marketing, sales, and finance.

A lot of things factor into the decision to acquire. The current market, the editor's tastes, and the author's platform are key. The editor's current workload also matters. If an editor is overloaded and the book requires a heavy edit, it might be a pass, even if the editor really likes the work.

Once the contract is signed, the work begins. I usually ask the author to meet these goal posts: simple synopsis, chapter-by-chapter outline, script or lettered thumbnails (one or the other, usually not both), pencils, inks, and colors. That being said, I think graphic novel editors need to be flexible and work around their author's process. For example, many cartoonists working digitally go straight from thumbnails to inks, bypassing pencils. And that's totally fine. The important thing is to give feedback early in development, before the final (or near-final) artwork is drawn.



How has your role changed from when you first started in publishing? Are you wearing more hats? Why is this good or bad? Etc...

Like most careers, you take on more responsibility as you advance. I started out as an editorial assistant, and now I'm a senior editor. That took over ten years.

The nature of my work hasn't changed much, but now I touch more books and play a more meaningful role in their development. You acquire more as you advance as an editor, and you have full responsibility for those books. So, you own those successes or failures.

How do you work to be at the top of your game?

It helps if you care about what you do. Thankfully, everyone I know in publishing is passionate about books. It's not a career you chance into!

Try focusing on these three things: the book, the author, and the publisher. Of course, I want the book to be a success and the author to be happy—every editor does. But it's also important that the publisher I work for is thriving. I can help make that happen in small, practical ways, like making sure our

metadata is optimal and keeping an eye on the budget.

Other than writing a winning story or creating grand-slam illustrations, what other qualities and skills do you like to see in authors/illustrators? For instance, in the promotion of a book, what kinds of things do you especially enjoy or like an author/illustrator to do?

It's great to see an author engaging their audience—all the time, not just during the book tour. Authors can do this in small ways, like tabling at comic conventions, visiting schools and libraries, or posting on social media in a meaningful and genuine way. It's a good idea for debut authors to work on this in the years before their book publishes. Then, on pub day, they'll feel a lot more comfortable in the spotlight.

By the way, First Second doesn't use the roles "author" and "illustrator" the way picture book publishers do. We try to avoid the word "illustrator" all together. We prefer "writer" and "artist" because these roles are clear and descriptive, without giving greater status to one or the other. We consider writers and artists equal co-authors. So when I use the word author, I'm talking about both writers and artists.

What has recently happened in the industry that shocked you?

I was shocked and saddened by the closure of the California College of the Arts and the shuttering of its comics MFA program. A lot of great cartoonists and editors have come through that program, including one of my colleagues at First Second.

Colleges everywhere are going through challenging times. It's troubling, and I'm worried about the future.



What do you hope to see in your mailbox now? What sort of stories are you currently looking for?

You mean my inbox? Please don't send submissions through the mail!

I'm drawn to real-life stories more than fantasy, and I love discovering debut authors. I'm looking for authors from diverse and underrepresented communities. And I'm looking for art styles that are a good fit for the age group. Look at the middle grade and young adult graphic novels we publish. Would your title sit well in our catalogue, in terms of topic and art style?

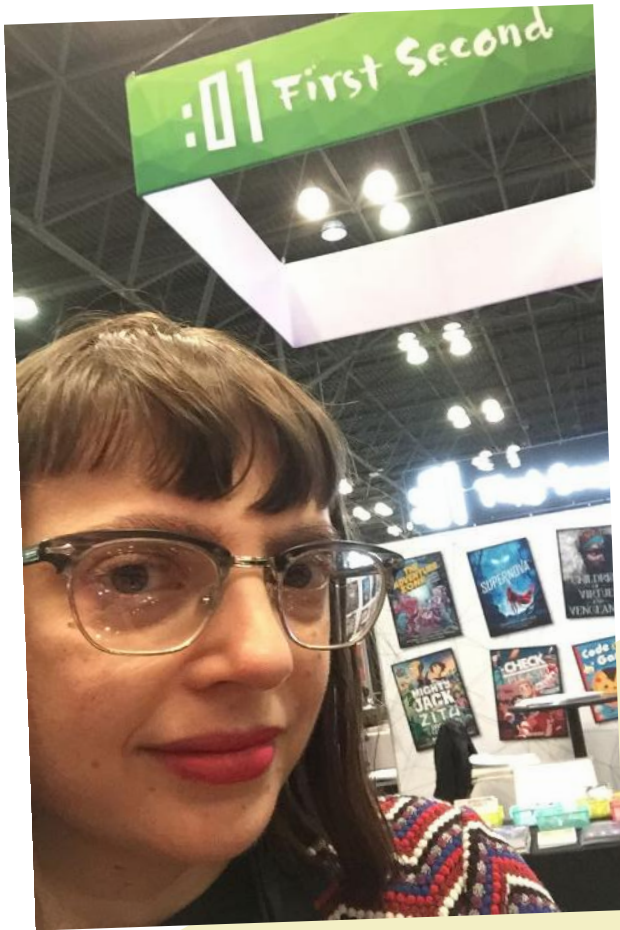
What are some misconceptions out there in publishing that you like to clear up?

Graphic novel editors edit both the text and art. The storytelling is in both; you can't separate one from the other.

Name the top 3 of your favorite kid books/graphic novels that have been published in the last 5 years. If you like, explain why.

I just read *Welcome to St. Hell* by Lewis Hancox. It's funny, with a great voice. And *The New Girl* by Cassandra Calin is great. I love a good immigrant story. And check out the self-published *Missy* comics by Daryl Seitchik. You can find them on Etsy. She's basically transcribing her childhood diaries. I think these comics will be a book someday. I hope so!

I just noticed all three of these are graphic memoir! It is one of my favorite genres.



How do you and your publishing house combat against book bans?

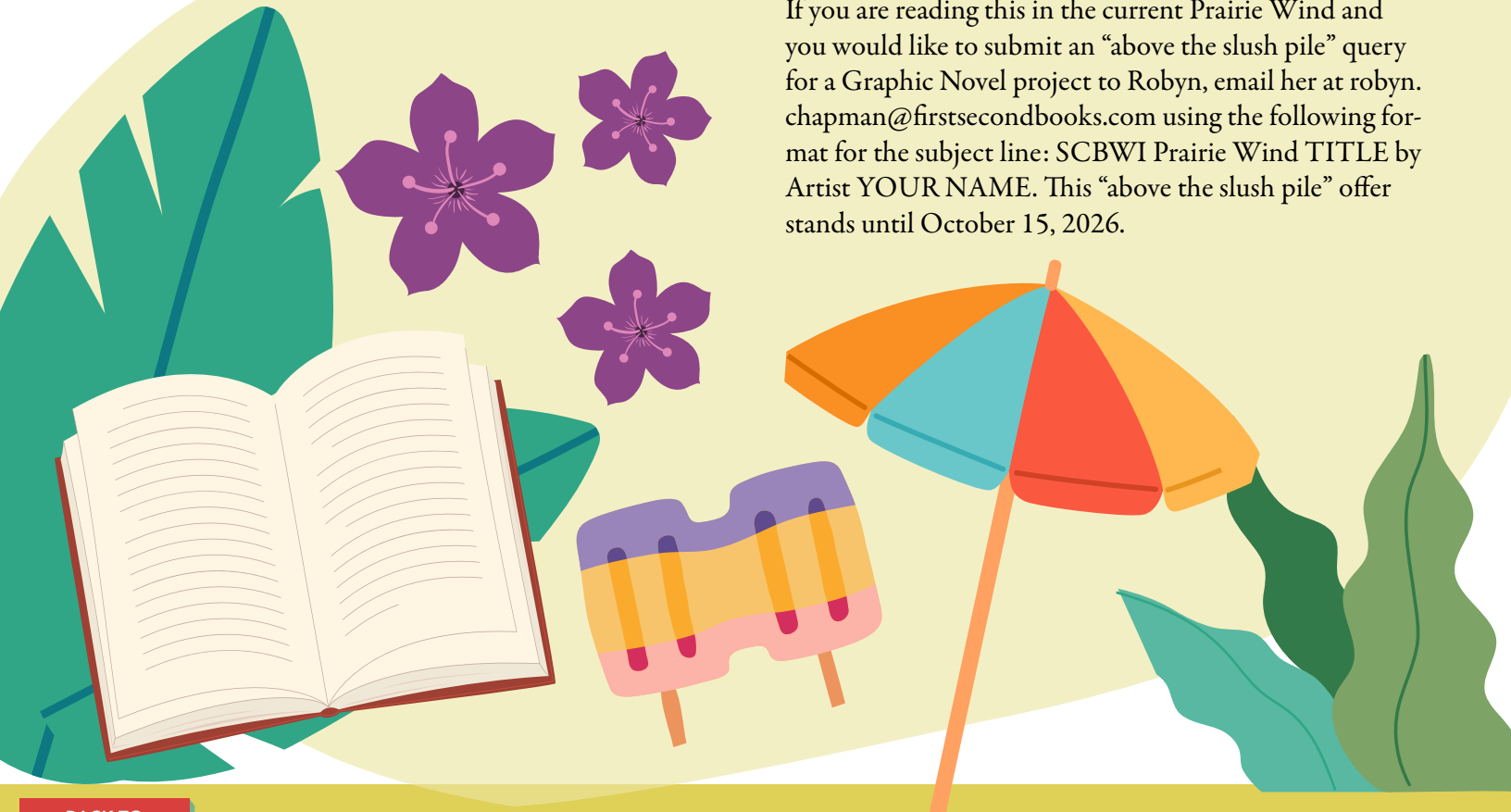
Macmillan is very involved in this cause. The company has taken part in multiple legal challenges to book-banning laws. Check out <https://sites.macmillan.com/banned-books> to learn more.

As an editor, I do my best to protect an author's vision and not edit from a place of fear. And when book bans happen (and they do), I take my lead from our school and library marketing team, who are great at offering practical and empathetic support.

What are your thought processes and what steps do you take while selecting an illustrator that will best match an author's text?

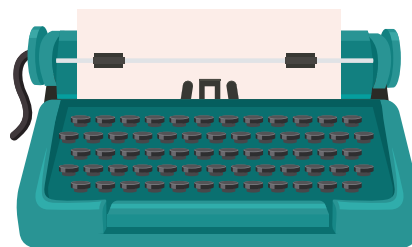
I don't acquire script-only graphic novel projects that often. I prefer to sign up a solo writer/artist or an established writer/artist team. But when I'm pairing an artist with a script, I look for a dependable cartoonist with some comics work under their belt. When you hire an untested artist, there's a risk they'll take several years to finish the book, or maybe never finish it at all. (Drawing graphic novels is really, really hard!) Meanwhile, the script writer can do nothing but wait. It's a bad situation to be in.

If you are reading this in the current *Prairie Wind* and you would like to submit an "above the slush pile" query for a Graphic Novel project to Robyn, email her at robyn.chapman@firstsecondbooks.com using the following format for the subject line: SCBWI *Prairie Wind* TITLE by Artist YOUR NAME. This "above the slush pile" offer stands until October 15, 2026.



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by Sheila Path-McMahon



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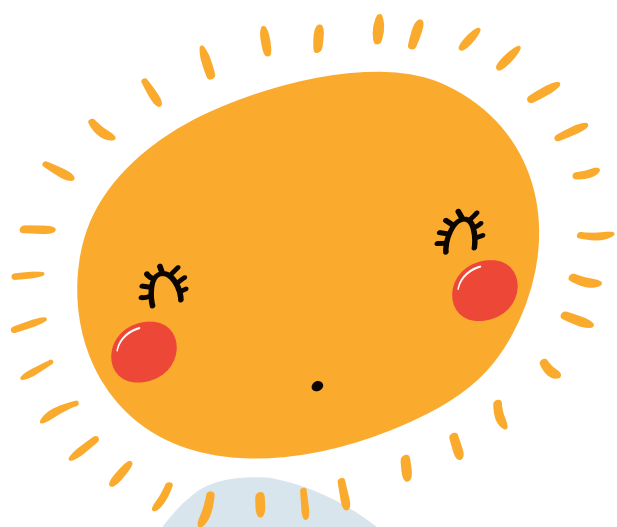
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Kristina Kaufman, author and illustrator
Notable Kids Publishing
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ISBN 9798989590421

The Lonely Spaceship's Big Journey
Jaiyen L. Bhandari, author and illustrator
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Non-Fiction Picture Books

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