

# Prairie Wind

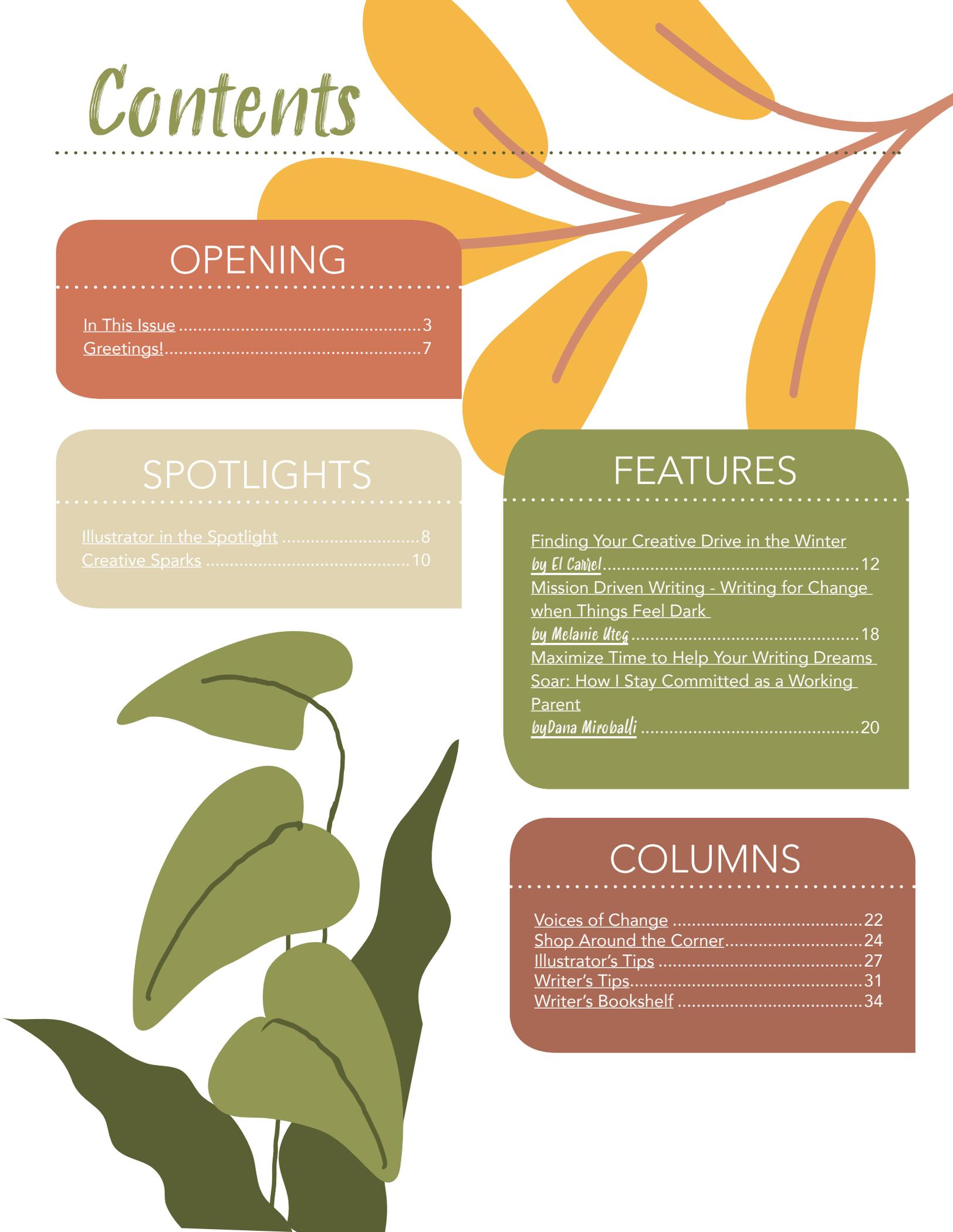
Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

Winter 2026



**Illustrator in the Spotlight:  
Manal Miriza**

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# In This Issue

by Myania Rankins

Hello, hello Prairie Wind readers! I hope you're enjoying your new year so far and remaining warm as we experience the beautiful part of living in the Midwest...the cold.

Despite the dropping temperatures, it's been a true honor to curate the winter issue as your new director. While I promise to keep the spirit of Prairie Wind alive as the previous Directors did before me, I am excited to incorporate new ideas and possibilities into this beloved newsletter. Like a sandwich, we'll be adding magical ingredients to a classic dish!

This issue is jammed packed with great articles from great authors and illustrators that want to share their viewpoints on the world they occupy. They will also share their favorite hot drinks that get them through the winter blues.

Do you have a favorite hot drink you like to sip on while you get through these harsh winters? Let us know on Instagram and Facebook @SCBWI.Illinois!

Sheila's "Greetings" sets the tone for not only the issue but for 2026 as a whole as she shares what she learned from her trip to the annual SCBWI National Conference and why being a Kidlit creator is a bigger job than we realize, especially in this timeline.

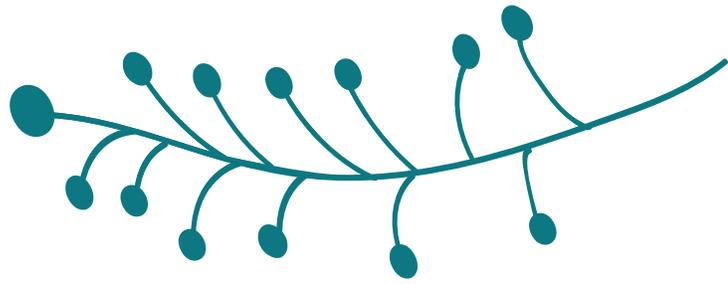
For "Illustrator in the Spotlight," Manal Mirza is back and showcasing her vivid talents on the front page, with a great interview article of who she is as an artist and the things that inspire her to keep creating every day. Her favorite hot drink is a 50/50 mix of coffee and hot chocolate.

With an interesting, in-depth article for "Creative Sparks," Andrea Bell lets us peek inside her world (actually her desk!) and explains her creative process of bringing a graphic novel pitch to life, from idea to comic book pages. Her favorite hot drink is a cappuccino made with oat milk served in a large mug.



For our "Features," we have three marvelous articles to read and enjoy. In the first, El Carrel shares detailed and informative tips to truly staying motivated in the winter. That's something we definitely all need right now! Their favorite "hot" drink is an iced peppermint mocha. As long as it's iced, they're happy!

Following up with our second feature, Melanie Uteg informs us on how to bring change in real time and in monumental ways. A very powerful and necessary article to digest and bookmark for a future reread. Her favorite hot drink is coffee with milk and sugar. She relies on this fuel to keep up with her spirited 1st grade son and 3rd grade daughter.



Lastly in our third feature, Dana Miroballi shares a powerful acronym that helped her make time for her creative process while taking on the challenges of being a working parent. If you feel like everything around you is out of control, this article will get you back on track. Her favorite hot drink is peppermint tea with honey.

For our “Voices of Change” I, Myania, decided to begin an article series that will document a current passion project of mine: to build StoryBook Walks in my surrounding neighborhoods. Part one of the series will explain how the project came to be and to see if support from the community will take place.

For “Shop Around the Corner,” our favorite interviewer, Laura Smetana interviews Yellow Bird Books’ manager and owner. Yellow Bird is a popular woman-owned bookstore in Downtown Aurora. Laura’s interview gives us exclusive details on the owner’s motivation, inspiration, and mission to maintain such a staple brick-and-mortar for the past three years. Her favorite hot drink is Jasmine Green tea.

Moving right along to our “Illustrator Tips,” Julesa Espionza, a new SCBWI member, gives us how-to knowledge on handling Inktober, a 30-day art challenge on Instagram, with great questions, detailed answers, and adorable artwork. Her favorite hot drink is Champurrado. It’s similar to hot chocolate, but it has masa (the same ingredient used in tamales) to make it a bit thicker.

For “Writer’s Tips,” we have a new three-person team that we can count on to give us bountiful advice! Starting off with the trio’s first article of the year, we have Jill Stuck writing about her time at Vermont College Of Fine Arts (VCFA). Despite it having taken place years ago, as we read on, we realize that her experiences and moments there are timeless. Her favorite hot drink is a black tea latte.

Lastly, “For Writer’s Bookshelf,” Tahi Phunog shares a captivating and heart-warming article of where her love for books began and through years of figuring out her career, how she became the illustrator of her dreams. Her favorite hot drink is hot cocoa, with a bit of whipping cream on top and cocoa powder sprinkled on top.

For this issue, there’s no “Tales by the Front” article or “Mentor Texts” article, but do not fret, they’ll be back to next issue with some new changes in the mix!

Now, before we start reading, we must say farewell to Brooke O’Neill. Brooke was our amazing graphic designer, providing vivid and heart-warming designs for “*Prairie Wind*” for six years. On the next page, we not only say farewell to Brooke but also hello to our new graphic designer, Janet Walker.

Brooke, thank you so much for your hard and spectacular work with “*Prairie Wind*”. Your illustrations and beautiful color schemes will always be remembered!

Janet, welcome to the crew! We can’t wait to see where your imaginative vision will take us and hey, by the looks of this newsletter, we have a lot to look forward to.

Lastly, I’ll leave you with this last statement: to all my authors, illustrators, teachers, educators, librarians, and kidlit enthusiasts alike, you are important and you are needed. While we face very daunting times in our world today, this reminder needs to be repeated consecutively.

I hope you enjoy each article that was written with you in mind, and if you don’t take anything from this issue, take the fact we have to remain vigilant. Reading is revolutionary. Creating books with diverse points of views is revolutionary. Guiding children in the way that we do is revolutionary. Do not forget that.



# Farewell, Prairie Wind!

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Six years.  
Six years of design.  
Six years of illustration.  
Six years of taking care of kids, pets, husband, house, and everything in between.  
Six years and sixteen issues of Prairie Wind.

What was I doing six years ago? The previous Prairie Wind director, Amy Alznaur, asked if I would be interested in designing the Prairie Wind. At the time, I was working from home, taking care of my young children, taking art classes, freelancing, building my portfolio, and desperately trying to break into the children's book industry. A lot on my plate, but I wholeheartedly agreed! The first issue I created released, and then COVID changed everything.

Six years later, everything feels different... and in a way it all feels the same.

I still work from home, take art classes, freelance, build my portfolio; and take care of the kids, pets, husband, house, and everything in between. The big difference is I DID break into the children's book industry! Thanks to Astound US Inc for giving me a chance and making my dreams come true. I've illustrated over 30 books now, and I'm thrilled!

I've considered Prairie Wind as my baby, not wanting to let it go... but with an ever-increasing workload, I must say goodbye and pass the opportunity on to the wonderful and talented Janet Walker!

I've enjoyed working with the amazing Prairie Wind team over the years. I will miss the Barne's & Noble meetups, the Zoom calls, the kindness, laughter, and our collaboration. Thank you for making me part of the team and thanks to SCBWI for making it possible! I look forward to reading future issues of this joyous magazine.  
That's all, folks!



XOXO ~ Brooke O'Neill

*Let's be friends! Please follow me on Instagram!*

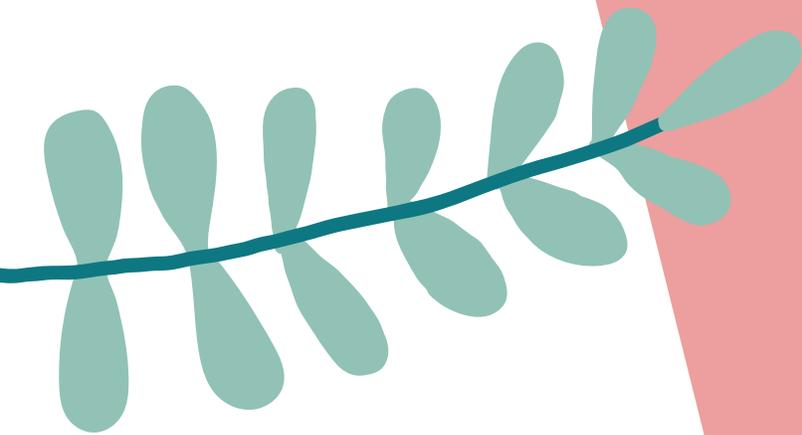
<https://www.instagram.com/brookeoneill.illustration/?hl=en>

*To see my illustration work and more, please visit my website:*

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

*To see my Astound US Inc portfolio, visit here:*

<https://astound.us/publishing/brooke-o-neill>



Here's to our amazing crew!

Myania Rankins, the one who organizes and showcases our amazing writers. Her favorite hot drink is an Irish hot chocolate with a bunch of marshmallows and whipped cream.

Christphor Worthman, the one who edits swiftly, keeping our words in check. His favorite hot drink is Coffee, always coffee, strong, no flavors or frills, black with a tinge of 2% milk.

Janet Walker, the one who designs our newsletter and brings our artistic plans to life, her favorite hot drink is a Hot Toddy.

Sheila Path-McMahon, the one who advises our region and gives us whimsical direction. Her favorite hot drink is peppermint mocha with whip cream and crushed candy cane.

Hi everyone!

I'm Janet Walker, and I'm excited to introduce myself as the new Graphic Designer for the Prairie Wind Bulletin.

I'm an illustrator and designer who loves funny, cartoonish children's books and playful, story-driven visuals.

I'm currently working toward my goal of becoming a published picture book author-illustrator, so kidlit is very close to my heart.

I'm thrilled to support SCBWI Illinois and help bring our newsletter to life with cheerful, engaging design.

I can't wait to collaborate with this wonderful community!

# Greetings!

by Sheila Path-McMahon

Greetings, SCBWI members!

I am writing this on the coldest day of the year - the coldest we have had for several years. It is currently -7 in Chicago, and even colder in other parts of the country, but I'm fired up. While the world seems to be unmoored, with protests ongoing in Minneapolis and other major cities around the US, keeping a focus on kidlit creation can seem superfluous, but as we find out time and again, art is essential for turning up the heat on the cold calculated actions of some. Our work is more important than ever. The lure of devices and other distractions is ever pulling at us and our young people, but us providing genuine human-created media works toward keeping everyone grounded in reality.



At the SCBWI National Conference last week, I attended a panel presentation of writers who spoke on the theme of "Banned but Not Silenced." Tiffany D. Jackson, A.S. King, Meg Medina, and Jason Reynolds answered questions posed by Lesa Cline-Ransome around their experiences with book challenges.

They had a lot to say, and I'm not going to try to summarize it here, but one take-away for me was a comment A.S. King made about how book challenges have become so pervasive that in some schools, teachers are not allowed to have a classroom library. I looked it up. Florida, Texas, Missouri, Utah, and South Carolina all have such daunting cataloguing and approval processes that many classroom teachers are just not keeping a classroom library; some cover their books, some remove them completely.

The panel discussed how the resulting chilling effect is not accidental - there are people taking deliberate action to pour money and resources into this push to limit youth access to books. In the end, young people are the ones affected but authors and the whole kidlit industry are profoundly affected as well. So what can we do?



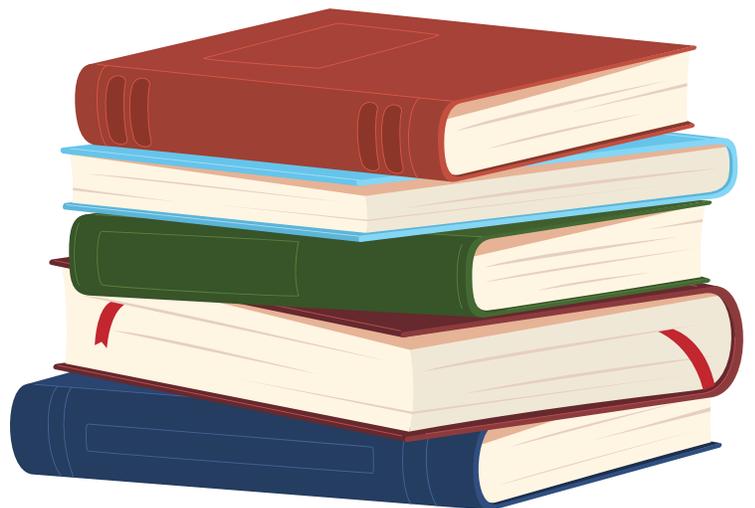
One thing is that we can join up with authorsagainstbookbans.com, an organization that SCBWI partners with. I encourage you to go on and join, and then see what further action you can assist with. Another great resource, either to donate to or utilize, is firstbook.org which is a non-profit dedicated to creating a low-cost way for teachers and other public service workers to provide books to kids. We here on the Regional Team of SCBWI-IL are exploring an idea that you will read about in Director Myania Rankins' article, "StoryBook Walks for all, the quest of building StoryBook Walks in my neighborhood." I encourage everyone to get creative and help to ensure that kids have access to books.

We here on the Regional Team of SCBWI-IL are exploring an idea that you will read about in Director Myania Rankins' article, "StoryBook Walks for all, the quest of building StoryBook Walks in my neighborhood." I encourage everyone to get creative and help to ensure that kids have access to books.

It is also imperative that kidlit creators continue to generate books that are inclusive, thoughtful, and honor our collective true history and shared humanity. It's a lofty goal, but every artist that I know understands the power of providing materials that will help our next generation of young people become fully literate citizens of the world.

Thank you for taking the time to read the Prairie Wind today. Whether you are writing, illustrating, translating, or any combination of those, know that you are a part of something vital. Even if you are writing for the pure joy of a fun story, something that might not seem consequential, every word and image that kids process leads them toward literacy. Thank you for your work and keep going!!

Stay warm,  
Sheila Path-McMahon  
Co-Regional Advisor, SCBWI Illinois



# Illustrator in the Spotlight

Manal Miriza

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

I'm an illustrator. I primarily work digitally, but I also enjoy using traditional mediums such as acrylic paint and colored pencils, and I'm definitely trying to practice more with traditional work.

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

I've always been someone who loved coloring and drawing as a kid. It was one of my favorite things to do and something I naturally turned to just for fun. I ended up going to art school with a more technical focus in UI/UX design, but I never stopped illustrating on the side. I started sharing the work I was making outside of my day job and over time that led to illustrating my first book, connecting with other illustrators and authors, and eventually creating my own page and growing from there.

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

I usually start with a bit of research and reference gathering. I'll look through books first if I can, then browse Pinterest and online for inspiration. From there, I create a mood board to help define the direction and overall aesthetic. Once the sketch is done, I move into coloring, which is where most of the magic happens for me.

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

I do tend to return to women as my main subjects that are usually expressive, thoughtful characters. I'm drawn to more cultural elements, and I love using color to bring emotion and personality into the work.

**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.**

Vines and flowers, in particular, are motifs I remember from Islamic designs, South Asian miniatures, and even the patterns of Pakistani clothing I wore growing up. I'd sketch these elements casually, sometimes just doodling them in the margins of my notebook during math class, and over time those small sketches evolved into more intentional work. They show up in almost all of my pieces now, often unconsciously; if there's a piece of paper in front of me, I'm usually drawing them without even realizing it.



### What three words best sum you up?

Curious, a little goofy, observant.

### Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

Quentin Blake.

### Which illustrators are your favorites now?

I have been looking at more fashion illustrators for references, such as René Gruau.

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

I don't do it in every illustration, but I do sometimes tuck in small personal details. One of my favorites is referencing my nephews when designing characters, which I did for Malala Yousafzai (*Little People, Big Dreams*) (Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2021). It felt special to weave a bit of my own world into the work in a subtle way and maybe something they could tell their friends one day.

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

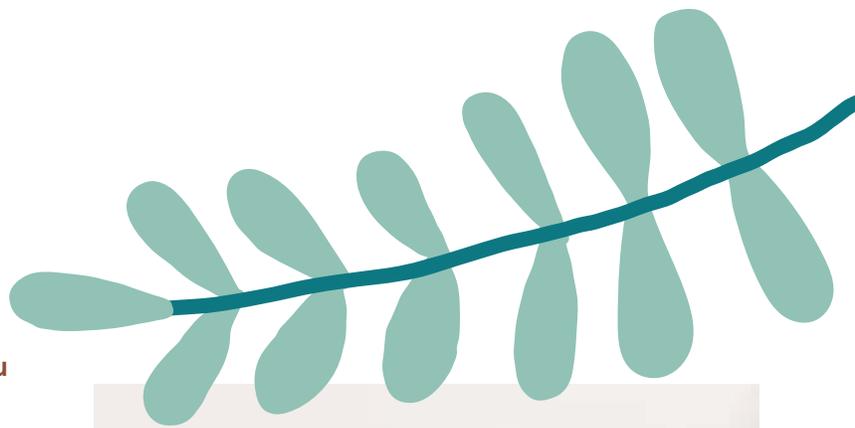
I use a lot of red in my artwork, but I kind of hate it in real life. I'm always surprised when people approach me about my work. I usually listen to debates or political commentary while I'm working on my art.

### What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

Creatively, I'm inspired by the act of making itself. Drawing and illustrating have always come naturally to me, and it's one of the spaces where I feel the most at peace and challenged.

### What gets in the way of your creativity?

Trying to overperform, procrastination, and maybe a little sprinkle of self-doubt, but I think that's always part of the process. You kind of just have to push through it, especially since illustration is a practice/skill you have to show up for every day.



### Where can we find you?

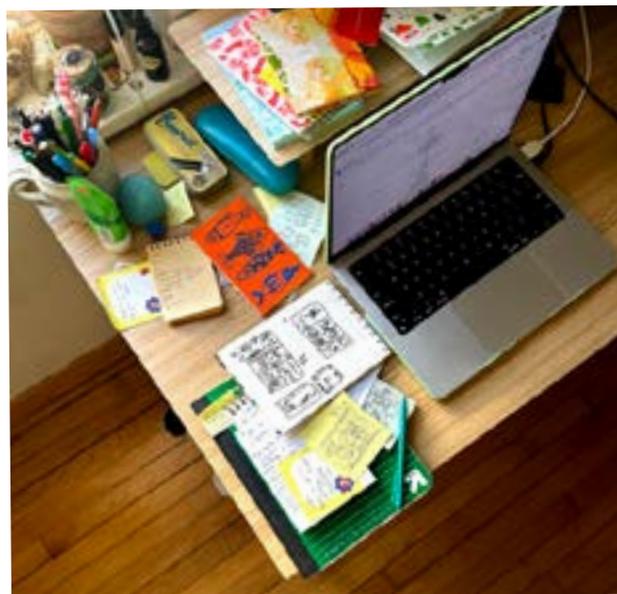
[\*Instagram: @manal\\_mirza or manalmirza.shop\*](#)

**Manal Mirza** is a designer and illustrator based in Chicago.. Manal creates her paintings digitally and draws inspiration from her experiences. Being a young Muslim American Pakistani woman, her illustrations highlight the different identities she juggles day to day. Manal brings her own positive outlook to her work, aiming to empower women around the world.

# Creative Sparks

by Andrea Bell

I finished my most recent graphic novel before the December holidays. Happily, I now have some bandwidth to shift my focus into developing a comic pitch that's been simmering on my brain's backburner for a few months. The story is a spooky, summer adventure, and it was a concept I dreamt up about three years ago. Back then, it looked completely different: a long saga with complicated mechanics, an ending that wasn't fully formed, and a huge cast of characters that were unnecessary. This year, that initial spark, that "click," happened. Oh, I know how to craft this. That's when the flood gates opened. On the surface, sure, a comic is a sequence of words and illustrations, but it feels like so much more than that. It feels like breathing life into a new creature — something that will soon stand and talk on its own. It's magical. And all that magic makes for an amusing, messy, chaotic creation process.

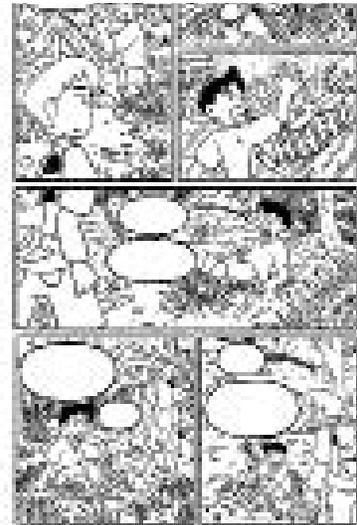
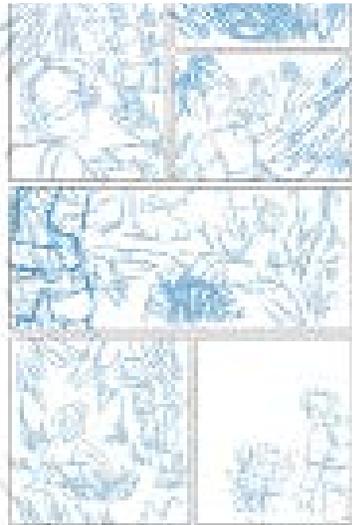
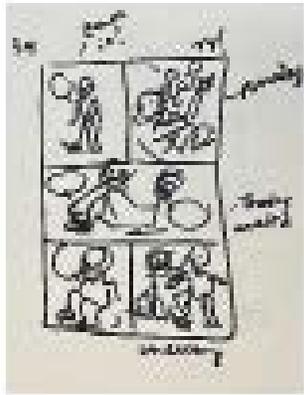


My studio set up isn't as glamorous, polished, or aesthetically pleasing as the cute ones I've seen artists post about on social media. It's cluttered yet orderly and gets the job done. On a long, light wooden desk comfortably fits my MacBook and second monitor. They project my script, as well as the character designs I am continuously referring back to. When I first started making comics it was in a self-publishing capacity, and I never really wrote down a full script, mostly a bullet-point outline. Now that I'm in a privileged space where I work with a team on most book projects, they can't read my mind. I must have something written for them to initially fall in love with the comic.

On the right side of my work area is my old but mighty Wacom tablet. It is elevated on two reams of paper and three graphic novels, giving it a suitable height boost so my neck doesn't crane. An iPad sets on top of the Wacom screen. I primarily use it to sketch, ink, and draw the word balloons, but coloring and laying out the text is so much easier (and quicker) for me to do on the desktop.

Alongside the screen with the script are piles of mismatching pieces of paper with plot notes, intentions, ideas, doodles, and inspirations. This is part of my approach that hasn't changed since the self-publishing days. Sometimes it's a helpful exercise to "free write" or journal about the story. I've found that I can't keep the flowing ideas from flowing right past me, so it's been handy to have any paper nearby for when this happens. I have to capture the ideas quickly.

They could be brainstorming of how I'm racializing the character's actions, jotting down fragments of dialogue for a future argument at the climax of the tale, or recording an idea for a color palette, or how the lighting should look in the scene. Once the idea is tangible and out of my head, I can work in the scraps contemporaneously with the script and sketch portions of the process. The suggestions that are not used are set aside just in case I run into a hurdle later with the development.



The time between my written script and the pen in my hand is when I really start to feel enmeshed in the story. As I draw, I know I am designing an entire world for a reader to escape to, and I only know it feels “right” when it feels musical. I often feel like I’m creating music when I draw comics. As a life-long band nerd (oboe and mallet percussion), I know I need to settle into a groove as I play around with the composition of each panel, each panel layout on each page, and how each page reads like a longer rhythm in the story. We don’t have the gift of volume in comics the same way we do music, but there are visual ways we can show dynamics. Sound effects and how they are drawn, the size of the text, the line quality of the panel borders, and the absence of all the above gives the reader a silent beat to reflect on what they’ve just read and adds to the momentum of the story.

Opening these figurative and literal doors to peer inside someone’s creative process is fascinating for the watcher and so vulnerable for the subject. I love to learn about how other artists set up their workspaces and make their own magic happen, but there is always a comparative element

**ANDREA BELL** is a comic artist living in Chicago, drawing stories of adventure and nurturing nature and adolescent independence.

Her most recently released graphic novels are *Millie of the Manor* (co-authored with Karina Evans, harperalley, 2025) and *crumble* (co-author meredith mcclaren, little brown, ink 2025.)

to that. Should I be more streamlined? Do I work fast enough? Should I use more traditional tools? All of those inner thoughts are normal and valid. I wanted to pull back the curtain of my own personal brand of comics-making-mayhem because I don’t really see that represented through online curated forums. Maybe my creative process will change and grow with me, or maybe this is the system that suits me best. Maybe one day I will consolidate or become attached to the nib and inkwell but today is not that day.



# Finding your Creative Drive in Winter

by El Carrel

In the winter, it's always difficult to stay working. It's cold, the days are short, and it feels like there is always a holiday around the corner, tempting you to just drop it all and spend all your time snuggled up under the nearest blanket. As a creative, it's important to face these distractions head on. The question is, how do you keep up with all the work that needs to be done?

My first piece of advice may be the opposite of sitting down and working. Go outside! It may be cold, but bundling up and getting out of the house will keep you motivated and rejuvenated to tackle new projects. As an illustrator, I get a lot of my ideas from going for walks or people watching. If you exist in the same space for most of your time, your ideas will stagnate and your motivation will dwindle. Going to a cafe to work in a different environment will bring you new ideas and keep you inspired to work even more!



One of the things that keeps me the most inspired is sharing my work with other creatives. Having a community who supports you while you support them in return is one of the best feelings in the world. So, have another creative in your corner! Something as small as getting coffee or chatting on the phone can spark new ideas. While I do love it when my mother sends me her thoughts on what my next illustration should be about, she doesn't know much about the technical side of things. That doesn't include the number of times I, and I suspect a lot of other Illustrators, have had to explain the difference between illustrating and designing to confused family members.

Having another person who understands what you do—someone who can keep you accountable—is such a help! I will often text my fellow illustrator friends progress shots for advice or even motivation to keep working, and in turn they do the same! If not in person, having an online network of people does the same trick! Reach out to that illustrator you admire, write that author you love, surround yourself with people who understand and love creating.

Another thing that has worked for me throughout all my years at school is setting up goals and rewards. What do you need to have done? What would you like to have done? Meaning, what are your immediate and reachable goals? Writing out your goals can be as simple as a checklist in your notes app or as complex as a thorough plan with ten steps per goal in your diary! Knowing how you work, and responding to your workflow, is how you truly shine.

Overplanning is a problem I see a lot out in the world. If you are stuck forever on the logistics of a project, or spinning in circles, you are going to run out of steam and never get it done! If you are really struggling just getting a sketch done, reward yourself when you do finish it! Take a small break, eat that piece of candy, or drink some hot chocolate. Having an outline of what you need to do will make the next steps less intimidating and having rewards for yourself will incentivize you to actually start taking them.

When all of this advice fails, and it very much might, do not beat yourself up! It's okay and even expected to take those days off. It's okay to spend time relaxing. This is a lesson I have tried to learn many times. Creating is a response to living, so if you are not out there living your life, how can you create? Spend time with your loved ones, and let the joy of living inspire your next project. I may be just starting out in this large world of Illustrating, but having the tenacity to tackle any project headed my way has kept me motivated!



**El Carrel** is a nonbinary kidlit illustrator entering their final semester at Columbia College, Chicago, studying Illustration. Their work emphasizes the bright, colorful, and fun aspects of life combined with whimsical fairy tales to illustrate stories that inspire and motivate others.

See more of their work at  
<https://www.elcarrelillustration.com/>

or follow them on Instagram at  
<https://www.instagram.com/l0cal.tv/>

# Mission Driven Writing

...WRITING FOR CHANGE WHEN THINGS FEEL DARK.

by *Melanie Uteg*

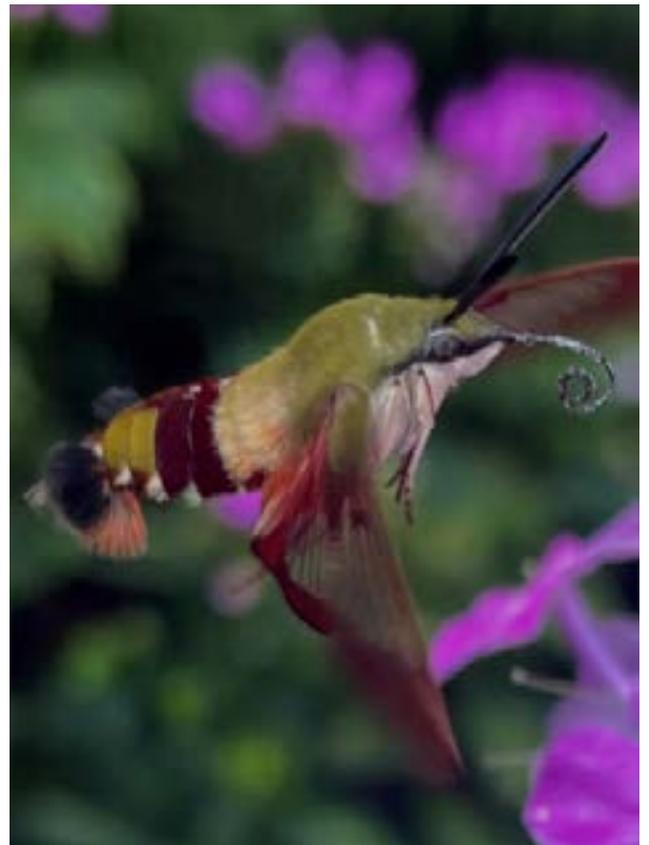
Winter Solstice felt significant this year. December 21, 2025, the darkest day of the year. This year felt heavy and left me yearning for more light. To be an informed world citizen is to be a concerned world citizen. So, as my elementary-school-aged kids lazed on the couch, shrouded in Flu-A fogs, I announced we would light candles around the house for winter solstice. Home Alone was put on pause and my kids lumbered out of their blanketed cocoons. Cooped up, and stuffed up, sibling bickering over who got to light the matches ensued. In the end, each child helped light a candle, though the smoke triggered my daughter's bad cough. We muscled through the activity — choosing to welcome light, and some additional chaos, on a dark day. I've learned it is important to show up and take action — even when it's imperfect and messy.

What do I consider mission-driven writing? I see it as a way to bring about change. I hope the change starts as a subtle shift in mindset or a small change in behavior that may eventually give way to greater, more global changes. In many ways, I view mission-driven writing for children as a way to create light when things feel dark. I hope my stories spark curiosity about the world and ignite a desire for change.

My path to becoming a published author was driven by my concern for human rights and our environment, two issues that are inextricably bound together. For fifteen years, I taught middle school in Wilmette; including teaching the U.S. Constitution to 7th graders. Our curriculum addressed human rights and our responsibility to uphold and protect those rights. In 2019, I quit teaching to raise my baby and toddler, but bringing children into this world had magnified my desire to bring about positive change. I wanted to continue working towards making this place a little bit safer, cleaner, and kinder. In the COVID-age of Zoom, I joined 2 new organizations and got active while my babies napped. I joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and Moms Demand Action, a national grassroots gun violence prevention organization. I am grateful for the ways these two organizations have shaped my past five years.

My children's book writing timeline unfolded in tandem with my gun violence prevention advocacy. After the Parkland school shooting, I resolved that if I was not part of the solution, then I was part of the problem. Years of teaching exposed me to children who were afraid of school shootings and anxious about lockdown drills. In my advocacy work, I learned the power of showing up. I saw the truth in Margaret Mead's call to action, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." To build the communities we desire, we must show up.

By the time the Uvalde and Highland Park mass shootings took place in the summer of 2022, I served as a volunteer



leader for the Illinois Moms Demand Action chapter. In the aftermath of these tragic shootings, I drove to Springfield, met with lawmakers, rallied with gun violence survivors, and witnessed legislation I had advocated for become law. I wanted to bottle up that feeling of agency and purpose and share it with future generations.

“Do not despair! We can change things!” I wanted to shout



from the height of Springfield’s capitol.

While gun violence prevention advocacy has taught me a lot about community, agency, and change-making, the bulk of my writing for kids has focused on environmental issues, particularly protecting our natural spaces. My recent six-book debut chapter book series, *Dung and Bo Go to School*, features two beetle best friends who set off on adventures to visit different insect schools. I hope to inspire kids to protect biodiversity, locally and globally, and to protect the small invertebrates who keep our natural world healthy. Go bugs!

## How can one get started with mission-driven writing for kids?

### 1. Identify Your Why:

The National Geographic article by Elizabeth Kolbert, “You’ll Miss Them When They’re Gone,” featured our imperiled global insect populations. Kolbert explained why our dwindling insect biodiversity and biomass is harmful to humans and our environment. This article ignited a concern in me: How can we get kids passionate about protecting insects and insect habitats? What issue are you most concerned about? Perhaps it is book bans or AI’s environmental impact? Do you worry about children’s screen time? Maybe human rights abuses keep you up late at night? Lean into those concerns.

### 2. Read and Connect:

Once I learned about our struggling insects, I read widely. I read *The Insect Crisis*, by Oliver Milman, *The Sixth Extinction* by Elizabeth Kolbert, and myriads picture books featuring insects. The more I read about insects, the more I wanted to talk about them with friends. So, I found fellow insect-lovers in the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. I became a member. Since joining, I’ve enjoyed interviewing a Xerces’ Pollinator Conversationist and listening regularly to their *Bug Banter* podcast. Find your people and join them.

### 3. Take Action

Insects face the threat of habitat destruction. Last summer, my kids and I sought to address that problem. We planted a pollinator garden that included milkweed and dill, food sources for Monarch and Swallowtail caterpillars. We gathered the tiny caterpillars from our plants and raised them to be butterflies. We even hosted a butterfly release party with our family members. Taking action feels good and it often ends up being fun!

### 4. Write Your Story:

Write! Get creative. Think about ways you can make your issue interesting and accessible for children. Do you want to capture the attention of elementary or middle school kids? Will your story be fiction or nonfiction? Do you want to pique their interest in the topic or go into a deep dive of the issue?

### 5. Create Joy and Light:

A lot of the issues we face these days can be dark and heavy. I wanted to teach children about how important our threatened insects are to human survival and thriving ecosystems, but I wanted to do it in a fun way. Hence, my main character was a dung beetle. Poop jokes keep things light!

I hope my story and my ideas about mission-driven writing inspire you to write about an issue that has been tugging at your heart. We need stronger communities. We need more light. I look forward to hearing more about your writing and the ways you shine a light in our communities. Thank you for writing for our children. We need you.



**Melanie Uteg** is an author, educator and naturalist, who lives in the Chicago suburbs with her spouse and two children. She divides her time between writing books with STEAM and civics themes and volunteering in her Lake County community. She is the author of *Dung and Bo Go to School*, a six-book chapter book series.

# Maximize Time to Help Your Writing

## HOW I STAY COMMITTED AS A WORKING PARENT

by Dana Miroballi

Life as a working parent can feel like a circus sometimes, so committing to a creative endeavor may seem impossible. I have two kids, ages 8 and 10, with homework, music classes, and scouting activities on weeknights. How do I juggle writing while balancing multiple obligations and an overflowing mental load with limited stretches alone? It's not easy, but I've discovered actions and habits that work for me.

I developed a new meaning for the acronym "SOAR." For me, SOAR stands for Schedule, Organize, Accountable, and Reflection. It is a reminder of ways I can lighten my mental load and maximize writing time as a working parent. What this looks like in practice will vary depending on a person's writing career stage and personal, work, and family dynamics. Just remember, success shouldn't be solely quantified by reviews, sales, and awards. Success is effort. Success is growth. Success is commitment. Let me share some suggestions and strategies I use to help my writing dreams SOAR.



### SCHEDULE

I use calendars, schedules, and routines to manage parenting and household responsibilities and to identify windows for daily and extended writing time. If you're going to commit to writing, planning time to write is essential. Mental bandwidth is essential, too. Schedules and household



routines lighten my mental load by minimizing uncertainty, establishing expectations, and encouraging the kids to be more independent.

I add everything from trips to appointments to spirit week themes to Google Calendar because it reduces the burden of remembering. I also add tasks to my online calendar like "mail books" and "pay gas bill." Sharing an online calendar and using a large, physical monthly version keeps everyone in the house on the same page, reducing repetitive questions.

### ORGANIZE

Google Calendar keeps my parenting and adulting life organized. My physical and digital workspaces need to stay organized as well so that I'm ready to write whenever and

having my laptop on the table and my mug for tea ready, so I can make the most of my hour. Before I had a designated workspace, I kept my writing materials in a tote that was easy to grab when needed.

I use multiple devices for writing, including a desktop computer, a laptop, and a smartphone. Warning: This might sound like an advertisement, but Google has been a lifesaver. Google Drive makes it easy to work on multiple projects simultaneously, even when I'm on the go, by keeping files organized and allowing document access across devices. The shareability aspect facilitates collaboration with critique partners and fellow authors for presentations and writing courses.

When I was querying agents, I used Google Sheets to track submissions and replies. One of my favorite reasons for choosing Google Docs as my preferred word processor is the tabs feature, which allows me to create separate pages in the same document for notes, research, and drafts. I also use a writing tablet called the reMarkable 2, which features file sorting, cloud storage, and pdf annotation.

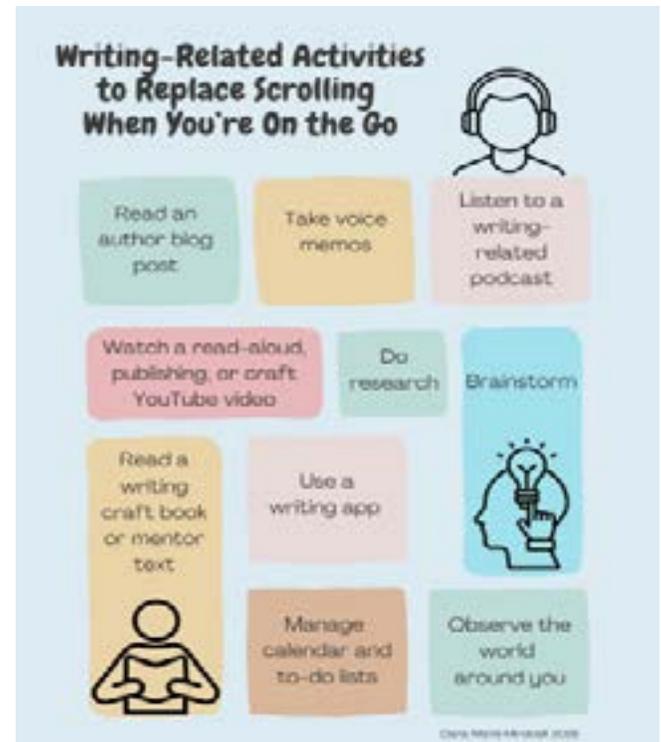
## ACCOUNTABLE

A major way I stay accountable to my writing dreams is getting up early during the work week to write before the kids wake. It was a tough commitment at first, especially since it means going to bed earlier, but my brain feels fresher in the morning, and being productive before breakfast is a positive way to start the day.

I already mentioned how I use calendars to plan daily and extended writing time and stay organized to make the most of it, but I also stay accountable by maximizing what I call "pockets of time" as they arise. How? Limiting screen time. Yes, you'll see me on Instagram, but I set a daily screen time limit on my phone and recommend that you do, too.

Have a bonus fifteen minutes because the kids' bedtime routine went smoother than usual? Bored during a commute, on a break, at the dentist's office, or while waiting for a music lesson to end? My goal is not to scroll. Why?

Scrolling steals time and mental space even after you put your phone aside. It clutters your brain and messes with your dopamine reward system, which increases anxiety and impairs focus, attention, and working memory. I'm not suggesting that you give up social media completely or stop watching your favorite show. Just try to make thoughtful choices about how you spend time.



I typically keep my notebook or writing tablet in my bag, but if I don't have access to those or a laptop, I remember that being a writer is not limited to time spent with pen and paper or on a computer. There are plenty of writing-related activities to do on the go. Read a writing craft book or mentor text, watch a read-aloud, publishing, or craft video, listen to a writing-related podcast, read an author blog post, do research, brainstorm, use a writing app, take voice memos, or observe the world around you. Small moments of time are also opportunities for other activities that keep me accountable, such as replying to emails, connecting with critique partners, and managing my calendar and to-do lists.

## REFLECT

Reflect is intertwined with Schedule, Organize, and Accountable. Reflecting helps me make necessary changes to schedules and routines, understand my organizational preferences, set realistic expectations for short and long-term goals, establish priorities, and make reasonable choices about writing projects, deadlines, and commitments.

How SOAR works for me shifts somewhat when demands change. I need more frequent blocks of time when I'm on a deadline, which means staying up late or temporarily adjusting parental duties. Naturally, that makes it harder to stick to my 5 a.m. routine and I might get less sleep than usual. I have fewer opportunities for extended writing time during Girl Scout Cookie season, when my husband is out of town, if anyone in the house is sick, or if I need to prioritize self-care. That's reality. I keep a writing log to track plans, productivity, progress, and bumps in the road. There will be bumps. That's okay.

## CLOSING

Methods for maximizing time will look different for different people, but I think these suggestions and strategies can benefit anyone, even if you're not a parent. I hope you'll print out the graphic I created for SOAR and keep the acronym at the forefront of your mind whenever you tell yourself, "I don't have time to write." Find ways to mine your schedule for time, stay organized and committed, understand your wants, needs, and limitations, and don't forget to celebrate the work you put in. Happy writing!



**DANA MIROBALLI** is a former teacher and current speech-language pathologist for Chicago Public Schools. She grew up in Germany, served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Uzbekistan, and now lives in Chicago with her family.

Dana is the author of *If My Hair Had a Voice* (Beaming Books, 2024), illustrated by Patricia Grannum, and *Inventions to Count On: A Celebration of Black Inventors* (Abrams Appleseed, 2025), illustrated by Sawyer Cloud. *Inventions to Count On* was recently selected for the 2026 Illinois Reads List sponsored by the Illinois Reading Council. Dana's forthcoming board book *Whatcha Doin'?* is scheduled to be released by Penguin Workshop in 2027.



# Voices of Change

## StoryBook Walks for All: The Quest of Building StoryBook Walks in My Neighborhood. Part 1: "Why don't we have one of these?" by Myania Rankins

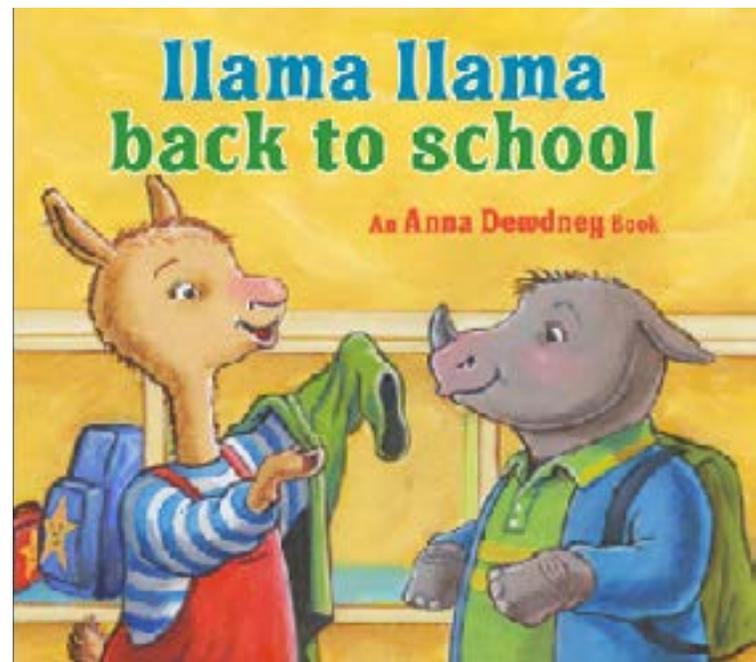
I have a small question. How much are you willing to do for your community? Or better yet, how long are you willing to wait to see things change for your community?

I'm still looking for the answer, but I can tell you that question hatched something in me after discovering a StoryWalk display for the first time during Labor Day weekend last year..

It was a sunny afternoon, and I was walking on the Prairie Path from Berkeley to Elmhurst with my mom, getting some needed air. Making our way back to Berkley, we noticed the typically empty display pillars along the curve at Berkley Park had pages of what looked like a book. As we walked towards it, we realized it was pages of a children's book, Llama, Llama Back to School (Anna Dewdney, 2022). My mom loves the Llama Llama Books. She read them to the kids when we had our home daycare. Now, we read the book backwards (We were going east while the display went west), but as we got closer to the "end" we grew more excited. Giggling, we pointed at all the animal characters and Llama Llama himself. It was truly the highlight of our afternoon walk.

After we finally made it back to the car and buckled up, we discussed what we experienced. "This would have been amazing if we had it more on other parts of the prairie path," I said. "I would have loved walking by a display like that growing up." For a moment, I flashed back to when I walked on the Prairie Path to get to high school. Just a display with basic pictures would have held my attention as I made my way back and forth to school every day. Something to brighten up my week.

My mom exclaimed in agreement, "This is like your volunteering! You should tell your SCBWI people!" My mom is a force of motivation. She wasn't wrong, though. This was within my wheelhouse. Literally, it was right up my alley. When we got home, the brainstorming and googling began.

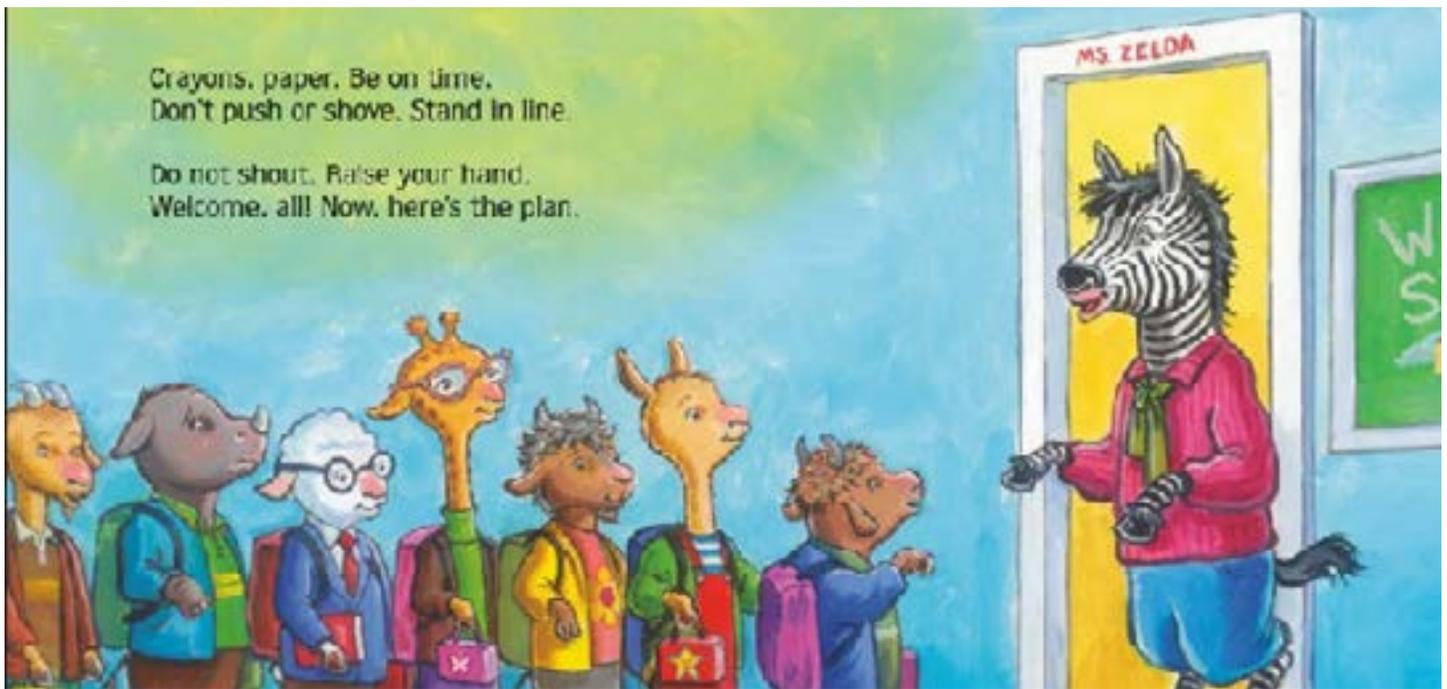


I learned a lot about these displays. When we finished reading the Llama Llama book, I took notice of the beginning display pillar. It showcased that it was a "StoryWalk" managed and built by the Berkeley Library, not the village like I thought it would be. This realization will be relevant later.

Putting on my thinking cap, I began to research what a Storywalk is. Citing from this website "StoryWalk" was created in 2007 by Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, Vermont, in collaboration with former staff member Rachel Senechal, and is a registered service mark of the Kellogg-Hubbard Library."

In the midst of learning about StoryWalk the company, I ended up googling and learning about "StoryBook Walk." I found out that not only were they two different companies but while Storybook Walk was inspired by Storywalk, they weren't affiliated.

I accidentally learned about StoryBook Walk due to reading about the opening of Berkely's Storywalk in 2021 in The Village Press. I searched for other Storywalks which



led me down a rabbit hole to this article listing 14 storybook walks in Illinois as of 2022.

As you can imagine, they were a big hit during the Pandemic when libraries were closed or letting in a small amount of people at a time. They allowed families to move around, enjoy the air, and read all in one. Some suburbs made it their mission to keep the love of reading alive for children, so here we stand. Storywalk...StoryBook Walk...you can see how my wires got crossed. To negate that, I looked into StoryBook Walk (since that was my common denominator here). I found a huge distinction. StoryWalks can be borrowed if you live in Vermont. Now, if you are outside of Vermont, you have to contact Kellogg-Hubbard to learn how to build your own.

With StoryBook Walk, you can buy your own displays, DIY or permanent, and your laminated book of choice from their catalog. All you have to do is assemble the set display using the website as a guide.

With my research coming to an end, something was really bothering me as I read over the list of fourteen StoryBook Walks locations. Outside of Berkeley, which is close to home, all of the others were farther west. Naperville, Glen Ellyn, Bloomingdale, just to name a few. The real striking fact was that they were all in predominantly white areas.

My face flamed as I thought about my childhood again. I was a heavy reader and thankfully my mother exposed me and my

younger brother to different suburbs outside of my own, which was predominantly Black and Hispanic. We took trips to different libraries, and the book selection alone showed me how other libraries were compared to the ones in my neighborhood. Not to be crass, but the whiter the area, the wider the collections of books.

A great idea was bubbling but I wanted to fully understand the concept of StoryBook Walk and to see if one can add their own book to the displays. Since the website, as helpful as it was, wasn't really answering my question, I decided to email the founder and CEO of Storybook Company, Kelley Donner.

Kelley was super nice and answered my email the next day, a lot quicker than I thought. The word CEO made me think I would never get a response let alone a quick one.

I told her the story of how I found out about her company. I asked if I had to buy a book from the catalog to present the displays properly and if authors could add their books to the catalog and be set up for the display.

I expressed that I really wanted more people in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs to know about StoryBook Walk. Her response was exactly what I was looking for. She's always on the lookout for new books. Authors and illustrators can submit their books but first find out what types of stories they are looking for and what the requirements to submit are.

Thanking her for answering and finding out Kelley was part of SCBWI, a new idea hatched. It was an idea overload, though, so I stuck to my first brainstorm and tabled my second idea for another time (It will require more hands.). Now that I had concluded my research, it was time to execute my first idea. I would email my surrounding suburbs and try to build more StoryBook Walks.

At first, I thought I would email village halls to discuss the need for a StoryBook Walk display, but remembering Berkely's display was owned by the library, it made sense to email the libraries instead. Plus, books equal libraries! It made even more sense.

I emailed only eight libraries to get myself started. If I could get a response or even just an inkling of one, this would be a good way to go about this. I would continue with my goal to email locations more eastbound.

The chosen locations were Oak Park, Maywood, Bellwood, Forest Park, Northlake, Broadview, Berwyn, and, lastly, my hometown and previously place of employment, Hillside.

I formulated a professional yet concerned email to request a StoryBook Walk display for the community. I mentioned other locations further out that had displays and informed them I knew it would benefit our communities to have some closer to home. I crossed my fingers and sent those eight emails on their way.

I had some high hopes for my home library. In the twelve years since I worked there, they had upgraded the library.

The staff was a lot younger and matched the community that was truly the Hillside I knew it to be. Plus, Hillside took up most of the Prairie Path. Before crossing to Taft Avenue and after crossing Manheim, a nice chunk of the Prairie Path was in Hillside. Perfect location to add a StoryBook Walk might I add.

*"Myania, thanks for your suggestion. We'll study it," was the response from Hillside's Executive Director.*

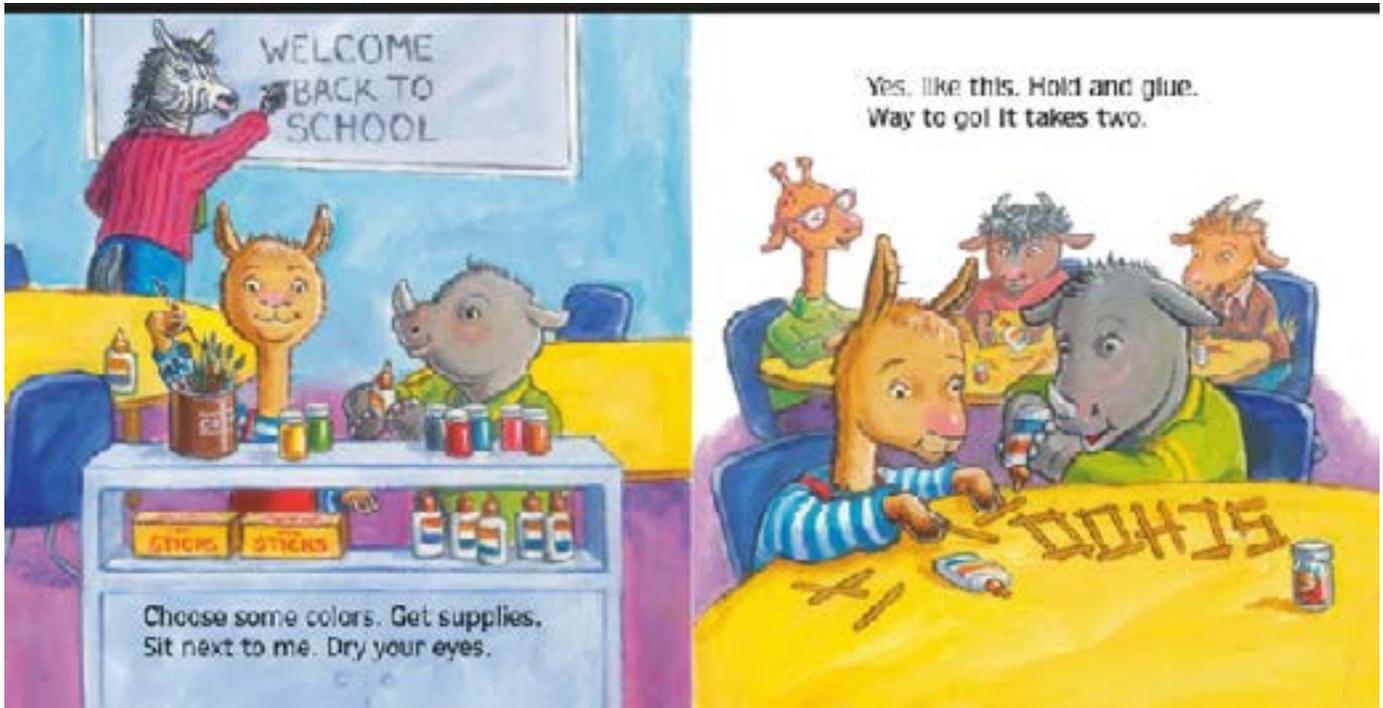
*"Hm." Was my genuine response.*

I wasn't surprised. Dare I say not even disappointed. I was ashamed, if anything. I knew what that meant and since I lived here, I really knew what that meant. I wasn't dumb. While this wasn't the same director I knew from working there, it was nice to know things really do stay the same.... Thanks Hillside.

I guess looking back, I should've been grateful I got a response because the other libraries didn't even email back. Again, I wasn't surprised but I was very disappointed.

I wondered if I needed to visit each location. I knew how that would go though:

"Email so and so and tell them your idea" or "I'll relay the message, thanks!." The same old rigmarole. My best bet was emailing.



I told my mom of my newfound passion project and among her proudness for me starting this path, We just discussed how fighting for what your neighborhood needs is important.

I wasn't a child anymore. I had a voice that could be heard. In my experience, grown ups don't listen to kids, let alone to Black children. Black children are grouped as a whole and within that whole, it's based on what the grown ups "think" we need. We weren't allowed individuality. That was an expensive privilege I only saw granted to White children. The only way individuality was granted was if you were smarter and proper than the average school grade Black child. Yet and still, that was a stretch. The moment you fall out of the category, back to the group you go.

I prayed that it was better now than what it was back then, but based off the news alone and my current email box, not much has changed in almost thirty years.

A week passed, and while I was brainstorming on my secondary idea I tabled earlier, I checked my emails. Lo and behold, Forest Park library responded. And it was an exciting response.

To summarize, the Youth Service Manager of Forest Park library was excited to work with me on the idea of building a StoryBook Walk. The manager had previous experience hosting StoryBook Walk displays around the community (one off Madison street, which is partnered with local

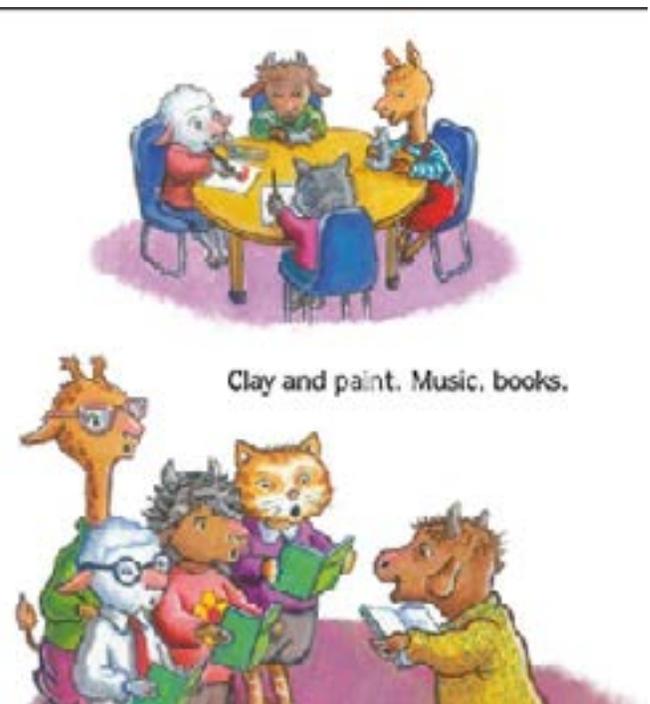
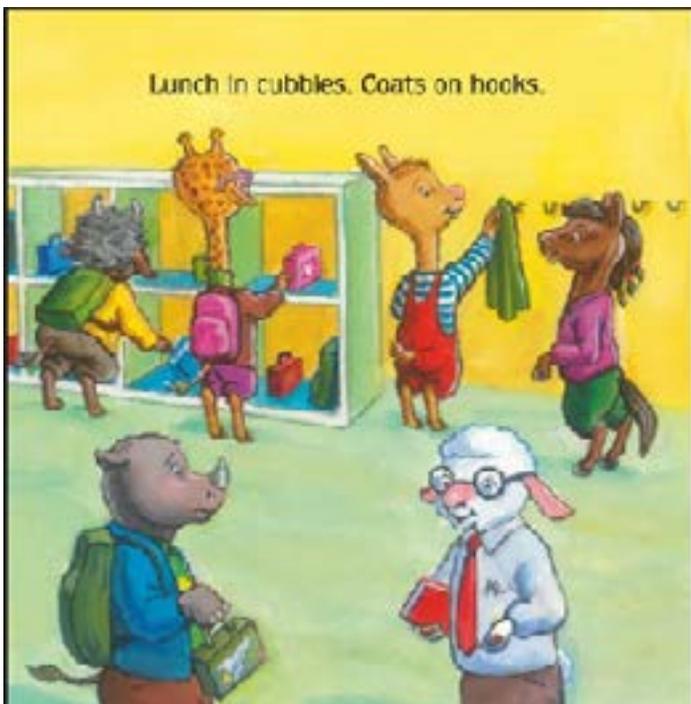


businesses and one with the Trailside Museum) and loved the idea of the library having their own. The idea to put it on the Prairie Path really sweetened the deal. It had never been done and out of all the trails, that was the most popular and just an overall great location.

By the end of the email, the manager stated that they emailed the non-profit company of the Prairie Path to see if this could happen.

It was a hell of a lot better response than Hillside! I was beaming! This is gonna happen! I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting Forest Park to reach out of all the libraries I emailed. I thought they would ignore me on the idea. Especially since Oak Park and Forest Park had their own ecosystem. Thankfully, they proved me wrong.

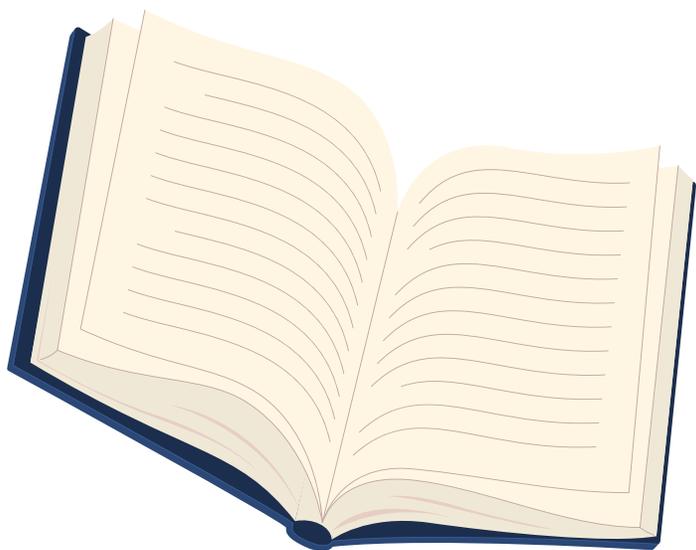
December was the last time we spoke about any updates on the StoryBook Walk. I knew it wasn't gonna happen overnight, something like this was definitely going to take time. We both wanted to at least get the thumbs up in the winter so by the spring once the ground thawed, we could break ground and get the displays built. The manager informed me they didn't get a response as of yet and had to use a different connection.



It was a waiting game, and although my mother was pumped as I was about Forest Park responding back, she wasn't for the waiting part. "Look, at this point, we can buy the displays and do it ourselves," she spoke. "What are we waiting for? When you want something done you gotta do it yourself." She wasn't wrong. I definitely thought of going down that route. StoryBook Walk broke down the pricing and it wasn't bad at all. Price is nothing to me if it's for the community. As tempting as it was, I wanted to be a "citizen" about this. Go through the proper channels if I want something to change for the community. Talk to the community, to build the community per say. And honestly, I was tired of doing things on my own. This is a group project for the whole community. I wanted all hands on deck.

I'm here for the long haul. For the children who love reading and the ones that don't know it yet but just need a different perspective to open their minds.

**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

YELLOW BIRD BOOKS by *Laura Smetana*

Located in the heart of downtown Aurora, Illinois, about 50 miles southwest of Chicago, Yellow Bird Books is a woman-owned independent bookstore that carries a thoughtfully curated collection of books across genres, as well as a unique selection of one-of-a-kind gifts made by local artists.

Opened in 2023 by former teacher Karen Nicholas, Yellow Bird Books is a welcoming place where members of the community can discover the joys of reading, make connections, and engage their creativity. In addition to author readings and signings, Yellow Bird Books hosts a variety of other events including story times, drop-in activities, crafts, and more!

Whenever I visit Yellow Bird Books, I feel like I've entered a magical world of books and art—and I always leave feeling inspired to read, create, and follow my curiosity. I had the pleasure of interviewing Melissa Rinaldi, manager of Yellow Bird Books, and Karen Nicholas, the owner. Here is what they had to say:

## How did Yellow Bird Books come to be, and what is your mission as an independent bookstore?

**Karen:** I've loved books for as long as I can remember. I recall sitting on the floor as a child, before I could even read the words, looking at the pictures in any book I could find. The day I was old enough to get a library card was one I will always remember. I spent many years as a teacher, and watching a child's world open up before them when they've discovered just the right book was a special joy. My sisters and I were all involved in education, and we used to imagine, "wouldn't it be great to open a bookstore?" though I never really thought I would actually do it. In the fall of 2021, I learned that the preschool at which I was teaching was going to close its doors at the end of the school year. I'm not sure exactly when, but one day I entered "how to open a bookstore" into the search engine, and the journey began. About two years later, Yellow Bird Books opened its doors. I've always thought of a bookstore as a marker of a vibrant, successful community. Yellow Bird Books

was created to support the needs of our community in a welcoming environment by offering a thoughtfully curated selection of books and related merchandise, and to help customers discover the joys of reading, encourage curiosity, and inspire creativity.

## What is the inspiration behind the name Yellow Bird Books?

**Karen:** When my son was young, we had a birdfeeder by the window. The goldfinches would come and feast, and he would just start saying "yellow bird, yellow bird." Plus, yellow is the color of joy and aren't books just that?

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

**Melissa:** We carry all types of books and genres. Everything from Spanish, Manga, Board Books, Science Fiction, Horror...pretty much a little bit of everything! Deciding on what to carry can be a difficult task. We often listen to what our customers are looking for as well as doing tons of research on up-and-coming books/themes that we know our community will be interested in. We like to say we have a very carefully curated collection.



**In addition to books, you also partner with local artists and makers to offer a variety of unique gifts—which is one of the reasons Yellow Bird Books is so special! Why is it important for you to partner with local artists, and what items can people expect to find?**

The arts are a very important part of our community, so in partnering with local artists and makers, we can develop and support that relationship between our shop, the artists, and the community. This also adds an element of originality to what we offer at the store, that “big box” or “chain” stores don’t provide. We carry art prints, greeting cards, stickers, candles, 3D printed items all made locally, and we are always looking for new items that we can add to our selection.

**Yellow Bird Books also participates in First Fridays hosted in downtown Aurora and curates framed art and prints by local artists around a different theme each month. Tell us more about your First Friday Art events. What are some of the past themes?**

We often feature six to ten artists on First Friday. Their work is displayed for the entire month, and prints are available for sale. Some of our themes have included book-inspired art, Enchanted Forest, Something Wicked, Winter Solstice, Make ‘em Laugh. A favorite was “Put a Bird on It,” inspired by an episode of Portlandia Karen’s son even helped us create a video to parody one of the scenes! Another unique event was our Teen Art Market, organized by our own Teresa Fiehn Millies, in conjunction with the Stolp Island Block Party.

**If a local artist is interested, how can they learn more and submit art for consideration?**

On our website, there is an “Artists & Authors” tab. There is a First Friday Public Call for Art category to select. From there, you just fill out the request and someone will be in contact!

**What other types of events do you host? Where can people find out about them?**

We love events! We have had author signings, author readings, summer story time, summer drop-in activities, book bedazzling, painted book pavers, book binding classes, Galentines, and so many more! All of our events are posted on our [Website](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

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

Just one? I like to joke that no one told me before I opened the bookstore that new books come out EVERY week! It’s a challenge to keep up with all the new book releases and select which ones to carry in our store, let alone find time to read them. I have to be very intentional about setting aside reading time for myself. One of my goals for the new year is to incorporate events at the bookstore that encourage and allow time for reading, such as ongoing book clubs and silent reading events, because I suspect many of our customers experience this same challenge. That said, I enjoy curating the books that we carry in our little store, and it fills me with joy when we can help a customer find just the right book they need at the moment.





### What are your hopes and plans for the future for Yellow Bird Books?

I hope that the bookstore continues to grow as a place in our community where people feel welcome, and find opportunities to find community, make connections, and engage their curiosity and creativity. This year, our focus will be to find ways for people to “unplug” at the bookstore through events and activities ranging from book discussions, creative activities, community reading sessions, game nights...the possibilities are endless! As always, we look to our community to let us know what they'd like to have at the bookstore, too.

### Is there anything else you'd like to share?

We are so grateful for the support Yellow Bird Books has received from the community in our first two years. I hope those who have visited our store will continue to spread the word about our little bookstore right in the heart of downtown Aurora, so we can continue to encourage a love of reading, develop community, and offer opportunities for creative endeavors for many years to come. Come visit us!

### You can learn more about Yellow Bird Books at:

Website: <https://www.yellowbirdbooksaurora.com/>

TikTok: @yellowbirdbooks

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/yellowbirdbooksaurora/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/yellowbirdbooksaurora/>

**LAURA SMETANA** is an award-winning children's book author and illustrator. She loves creating bright, joyful cut-paper watercolor collages inspired by nature. Her latest author-illustrated book, *My Love for You Is Like the Night Sky*, is the companion to her Kirkus-starred, *My Love for You Is Like a Garden*. When she isn't writing or painting, Laura can be found inspiring kids to create their own books at school visits. Laura lives with her family in the Chicago suburbs. Visit her at [www.laurasmetana.com](http://www.laurasmetana.com)



# Illustrator's Tips

by Juleesa Espinosa

Inktober is an annual month-long drawing challenge originated by artist Jake Parker, created to practice inking skills by drawing and inking an image every day in October.

Although largely positive, there has been some criticism that the event added unnecessary stress to artists. I have participated a handful of times, and this past October, I tried out a few new ways to stay motivated throughout the month. Here are some tips to keep in mind the next time you want to participate in Inktober.

## What do you want to accomplish?

This year, Inktober felt like a nice break, a chance to “play”. As illustrators trying to make it in the children’s book industry, we spend most of our free time working on book dummies, querying agents, and honing our skills. Inktober gave me a chance to work on something merely for fun.

It’s also a chance to ask yourself, “What do you want to accomplish with this drawing challenge?” Can you add some new pieces to your portfolio? Can you take this time to force yourself to get that book dummy out? Or work out some character designs for that story you’re working on? I used this past Inktober as a chance to play with my illustrations.

## Does this challenge fit your style?

Inktober includes a list of daily prompts to inspire your drawings. Even though this is meant to be inspiring and challenging, it can end up just being stressful. You might get stuck trying to figure out how to incorporate these prompts into your illustrations, leaving you feeling distressed before you even get started. This year, I did not look at the prompt list. Instead, I worked on an idea I’ve been wanting to draw for quite some time: I illustrated the song “Little Ghost” by The White Stripes. Every time I heard this song, the visuals would pop up in my head, and this Inktober gave me a chance to finally get them down on paper. So I took a look at the song lyrics, broke them down visually, and illustrated what I imagined.



**Juleesa Espinoza** is a children’s book illustrator and author living in Chicago. She strives to create vivid characters full of emotion and worlds filled with color and texture. Juleesa’s debut picture book, *Emilia’s Corte*, was published in 2024, which she co-authored with her mom.

## What media works for you?

This past Inktober, I used traditional ink and brush, and an ink wash style, for my illustrations. I chose this medium because I wanted to practice working with it and take a break from digital drawing. It connected with my goal of “play”, and doing something different from my usual illustrations.

It’s important to make Inktober work for you. If you want to practice using traditional inking, markers, or digital inking, then go for it! But if that’s not something you’re interested

in, don't force yourself. Treat Inktober as a way to stay disciplined in October. This should be a creative exercise, not something you dread doing. If you use pastels or watercolors, use that. Limiting your color palette is a good idea, though, keeping with the spirit of ink and Inktober.

### Plan ahead

A couple of weeks before October, I made thumbnails of what I wanted to illustrate. I kept it quick and loose, but this was an important step toward alleviating the pressure of having to come up with a new scene every day. When working on the final sketches, some sketches inevitably changed, but having general layouts ready helped immensely.

I also practiced using my materials ahead of time. Before deciding on using a brush and ink, I explored different markers and paper types. I also cut all my paper to size and had my materials ready to go.

### Work in your time frame

Working with the song I chose to illustrate, I split it into 16 lines, which yielded 16 images. Having only 16 images meant I didn't have to post every day, which already felt like a load off. On weekends, I also made time to sketch some of the illustrations ahead of time. Having a bunch of drawings ready to go for inking also helped with the stress. And sketching can be done almost anywhere, helping to break up the daily monotony. I sketched on the couch while

watching a movie and at the table while drinking coffee. Then, when it comes time to do the actual inking (or coloring or painting), you can focus on the fun part and enjoy it. There were also a handful of days that I inked a few illustrations at once (this is a secret between us). I was on a roll and had the time. So why not? Make Inktober work for you!

### Did you achieve your goal?

The purpose of Inktober is to grow and level up your skills through consistency. By illustrating every day, every other day, or every few days, you should see progress, and hopefully feel like you've increased your familiarity with the medium.

Drawing challenges can be stressful. It's essential to take what you want from the challenge.

Many of us have work, family, regular lives to live - along with trying to get our illustration career going! So, take Inktober for the inspirational and creative challenge it is. And don't forget to cheer on your peers, we're all working on this challenge together. See you next Inktober!



# Writer's Tips

## *What's the big deal about an MFA anyway? by Jill Stuck*

I came to writing as a second career. I started as an actor and improviser in Chicago. When the pandemic hit – my artistic life shut down. No schools and no theaters. Eventually adjustments were made, and there was light at the end of the tunnel. But I took that time in my apartment to wonder about what was next. I'm not old enough (or rich enough) to retire, but I'm also no spring chicken.

I had always romanticized writing a picture book. I had taken one or two workshops and thought about it on and off. But now I had the time.

I took workshops. I watched webinars. I read. And read and read. I followed classes and seminars and eventually found Vermont College of Fine Art's low-residency masters program that would allow me to stay in Chicago but still give me access to everything I wanted to learn. It is my respect for craft that led me to my MFA. I had spent twenty-plus years in improvisation and theater and knew all that time was necessary. Through VCFA, I awarded myself two years to intensively learn as much as I could because I knew I didn't have the luxury of twenty-plus years to master another art form.

During my time at VCFA I wrote 27 unique titles. I presented two Picture Book Intensive mini-presentations: one about writing to elicit a performance from an adult reader for picture books and one about writing to enhance a parent-child connection during a read-aloud. I completed my Critical Thesis, "Reframing the Picture Book Audience to Elicit Play." I presented my graduate lecture about using improvisation in writing. I participated in five residencies, which included three traditional workshops and two generative workshops. And I read over 2000 books.

Could I have done similar work outside of an MFA? The creative wouldn't have been a problem. I think there are a lot of programs set up to push you to complete creative work.

However, outside of a MFA, I never would have done the critical analysis work I did. It's easy and fun to focus on the creative. The creative is playful and joyous. The critical is less glamorous.

I'll even admit that in my first semester, I didn't appreciate the full value of critical work. Instead, I had flashbacks to my theater undergrad where we had to write "Body/Effort/Shape/Space" papers for all the characters we performed. It seemed to me like busy work and something to have concretely on paper for grades and accreditation (If I went back and did the degree in my forties, I wonder if I would view them differently?).

There are many aspects of my time at VCFA that I am immensely grateful for, but what I think sets an MFA apart from other writing programs I have participated in is the critical. Looking back at VCFA and all I gained and learned, a lot stems from the critical work.



Through the critical, I walked out of my graduation with three workshops that I can teach. Each Picture Book Intensive semester I participated in culminated in a mini-presentation based on my critical work during the semester. Then my final semester, I prepared my graduate lecture that focused on improvisation as a tool in drafting, revising, and critiquing.

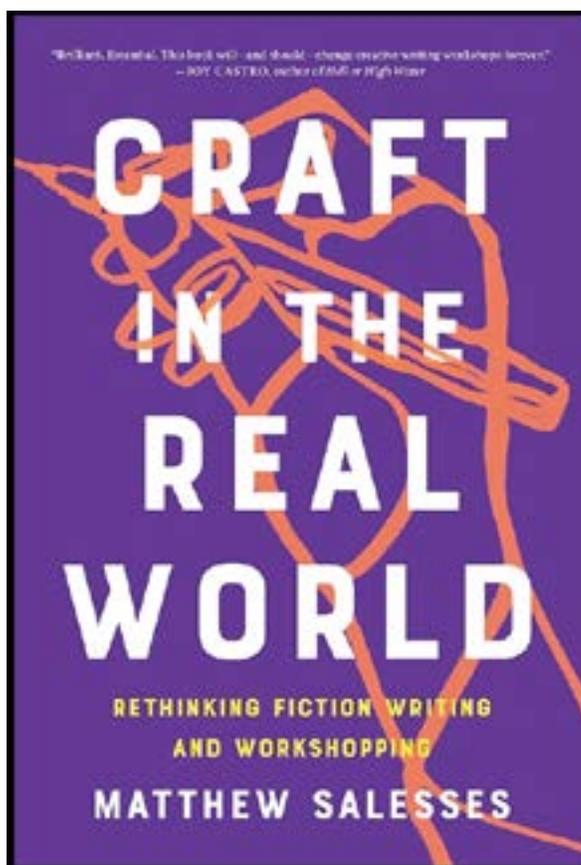
More importantly, I can see and feel how critically analyzing work and having to effectively communicate that analysis to someone else made me a better writer. Some of you may be saying that you read books with a critical eye, but the most important step is effectively communicating the analysis to someone. In regard to VCFA, that was written communication. Here are a few tips for honing your analysis skills.



Tip #1: Read the book *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, by Matthew Salesses. I'm not a big craft book pusher. I love doing and learning through doing. Improvisation taught me to linger and enjoy the process. **BUT READ THIS BOOK.** For me, this book really made me check myself and my ego and consider how I was approaching people and art and what was possible if you look at art from a different angle. It was on the recommended reading list for incoming VCFA students. I was a nerd and read everything they told me to. *Craft in the Real World* hit me the hardest in the best way possible. It made me reexamine all the "rules" and assumptions associated with writing. There is a review in the 2022 *Prairie Wind*.

Tip #2: Follow Rabbit Holes. The wonderful aspect of my critical work at VCFA was that I found it fascinating. I let one idea lead me to the next. I followed what I was curious about step by step and landed in places I never expected or places that seemed inevitable and validating. Follow them all. Be curious and investigate.

Tip #3: Collect comps and mentor texts. Write any mentor or inspirational or comp titles at the top of your manuscript as soon as they come to you. Copy and paste onto any revision. This gives your CG a feel of how you want them to read your manuscript. It might encourage a new discussion about revision. It might illuminate something that you feel is present but the CG is not getting from the text. The bonus is then the comps are all right there when you start to construct your pitch and queries/submissions.



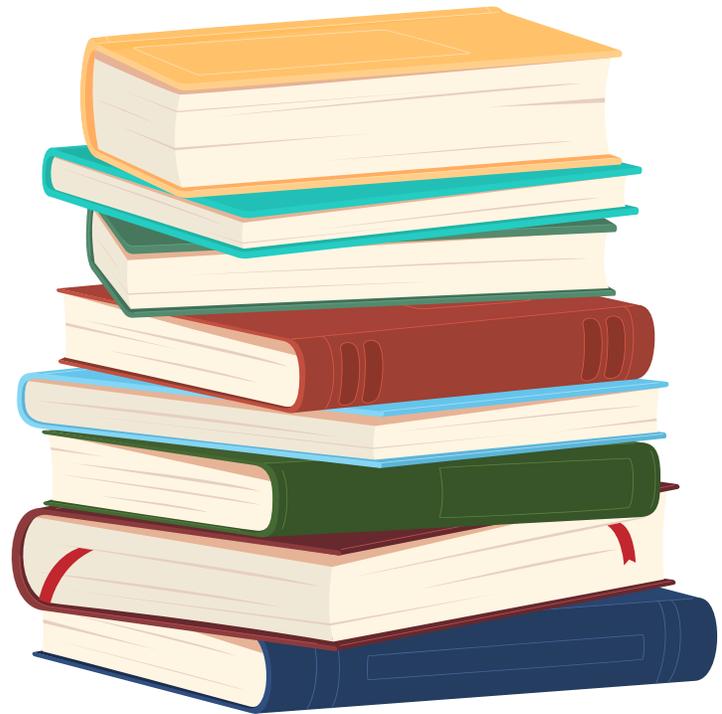


**Jill Stuck** is a writer and improviser/educator based in Chicago, IL. Jill Holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts' Writing for Children and Young Adults Program. Prior to becoming a writer, she studied improvisation at the Second City and IO Theater where she founded and directed "Storytown", a fully improvised, interactive adventure for kids, for 13 years. She continues to teach improv to kids and kids-at-heart age pre-k through 89. Jill Stuck is represented by Christie Megill at the Cat Agency.

Tips #4: Don't stress "the rules," instead, take care of your audience. I don't follow "rules" about word count, art notes, and three-act structure. I pay attention to the story I am trying to tell and how best to convey it to my audience. It's about making the story more efficient and effective, not "better."

Tips #5: PLAY. At the start of each semester, each cohort got on a zoom meeting with a few advisors to get an overview of the goals and requirements for that specific semester. In my second semester, I remember them telling us that second semester was the time to play. The first semester you were learning the ropes and adjusting to grad school, so the second semester was the time to play. A friend of mine wrote in the chat that I always play. I appreciate being known for that. I take my play very seriously. Try new things and ask yourself why not try a different approach. Why not play? Enjoy it.

Happy writing!

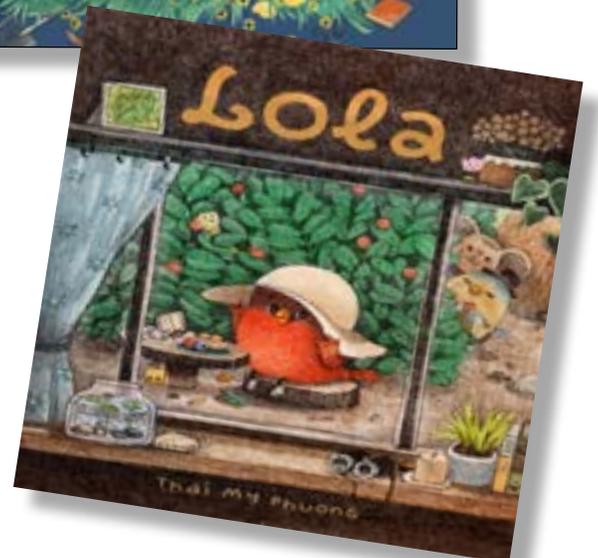
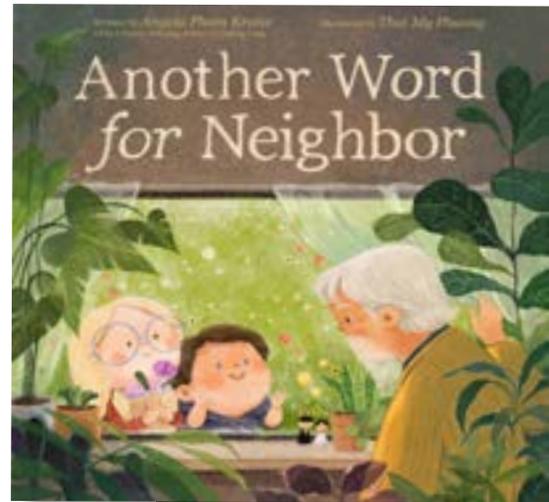


# Writer's Bookshelf

by Thai Phung

My Dad was a respected musician. He passed away many years ago because of cancer. One of his quotes that my heart remembers forever: "Humans one day will die, but what they created will last forever." I love it, since I remember all his songs wherever I go, especially some early songs he let me listen to from the day I was a little kid, without any fancy toys, but with an old chalk or pencil to draw mermaids on the wall. Back then, to me, those mermaids were my only imagined friends, from which I got inspiration from like the Disney animation characters I saw on TV from the neighbors' house. I remember five-year-old little Phuong. For the first time, my family hosted a simple birthday party for me with a few muffins and ice juices and invited a few friends from next door. My favorite gift was a manga book from Japan. It was the first book I ever owned. That was the moment I realized what a book means to me: a gift that is full of imagination and comes from the beginning of a friendship. This book made little Phuong so happy, and she wanted many more books.

That memory didn't stay vivid for a certain time in my young journey. It was not easy to afford books from my breakfast budget savings. I sometimes borrowed books from the library or rented manga books from manga book rental stores or collected abandoned fairy tale books from neighbor friends. As time flew, I forgot what a book meant to me. I still drew, though. I enjoyed drawing from random subjects at school: geometry, math, geography, and biology. I also made pop-up cards for friends or to sell to friends. I drew mimicking my favorite manga. I was a main young artist who illustrated school newspapers. Until I was seventeen years old, my friends and family told me that I should go to Art School. And I did, I took a big trip on the train, crossing half of Viet Nam to attend art exams. I was lucky to pass thousands of candidates, and I truly began as an art student. I felt awesome, especially as a fresh student at the University of Architecture, the top art school. I enjoyed all the creative flows and problems to solve, designing various buildings from basic spaces, such as rooms, houses, shops, to the bigger spaces like resorts,





hotels, airports, museums, or offices. My creativity and ego grew as much as the happiness to see my creative work consistently be featured as top projects for five years. I ended up graduating as Valedictorian. However, at the same time, something wasn't feeling right in my heart. Yes, the major I was trained and educated in can have a larger impact on people, but since I love to design concepts while being afraid to actually bring those concepts to life, could I truly make customers happy? Will it be a career I want to do for the rest of my life? Those questions felt like some missing puzzles in my heart.

The confusion all started from the non-relatable job I got during my second year as a student. To be honest, my biggest fear back then was not about how to graduate with high achievement but rather how to survive independently in a megacity without so much risk of financial failure. I studied really hard to maintain my scholarship. I didn't even know my true purpose was the love of creating relying on creating as the tool to serve the need to feel secure, or the combination of both. Therefore, I also worked on any part-time job opportunities: body painting for models, illustrating magazines, book designing, book illustrating, and art editing. The more I explored different creative fields, the more those part-time jobs reminded me of the pure joys of my childhood: books and seeing beautiful imagination on paper.

I kept wondering what my real choice was for my future career, while most of my classmates were becoming architects, engineers, interior designers, fashion designers, and product designers. Compared to book publishing, the joy of seeing my imagination on paper was undeniable. Book form is more economical, simple, a sense of familiarity, easier to share with anyone, and most importantly, anyone including a child,

could afford that form of beauty and keep it forever (assuming that they love books as much as me). My book-making part-time job reminded me of what my dad said, and reminded me of my first birthday gift that kept my childhood purely sparkling, kept me always surrounded by the rental comic store and reading books weekly instead of enjoying different jobs and activities. Books grow my mind and images warm my heart like a good friend who's always there to cheer me up. That felt right, so I made a decision that I'll go with the flow, which means say yes to the offer from a publishing

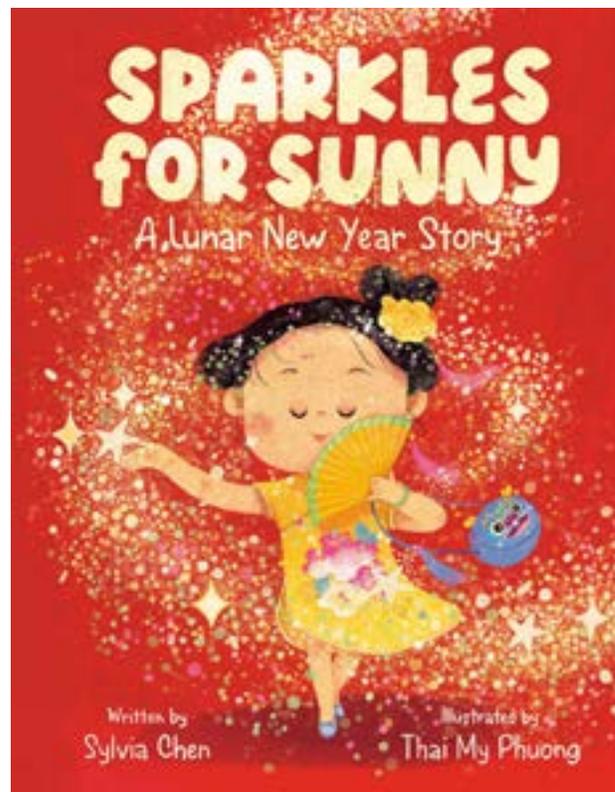
company for two years to satisfy my love for books. I'd still have the rest of my life to work on interior and architecture. I said, "Let's give book-making a try!" I was confidently believing it would work.

The two years of trying the publishing field were quite successful. I was an art editor at a reputable publisher in Vietnam. I designed approximately a hundred book covers, illustrated best-selling picture books, won some awards, and grew a big love for the book industry. I felt blessed to sign my books at festivals, to draw the faces of readers who come to welcome my books, and to see how they adore my art on the cover or on every page. I also got some interviews about my book-making journeys, and at that point, an insecurity arose in my thoughts. I didn't professionally study illustration or books. Am I qualified enough? My work is approved by audiences, but is it welcomed by experts, too? Am I still missing something? How could I grow this career stronger with more professional and academic knowledge? I have got a recognizable style, but it just keeps repeating for years until I feel an art block. At that point, I paused for a while and rethought my next choices. I needed to study illustration to fill the gap of missing knowledge and doubtful confidence. Back then, there was no illustration school in Vietnam. And the bad news was in order to study abroad, I had to achieve a certain level of English, which was my biggest fear.



Luckily, after so many efforts and failed English tests, I got a scholarship to finally go to Brighton, England, to study an MA in Sequential Design and Illustration.

The UK study-abroad journey was amazing. I felt it was the best decision, despite some difficulties due to the language barrier. I couldn't write a good essay, even though my art assignments always got an A or A+. I was still shaky to speak and present in English and was frozen in front of an international classmate. I couldn't make a proper call in English to the bank or doctor since traumas from failing many IELTS academic tests caused me to fear listening to English confidently. I couldn't get any joke from classmate, or I misunderstood important parts of the lectures. My tutor, Margaret Huber, was an angel; she once saw me cry in the restroom. She was the warmest tutor and mentor I was blessed to meet in my life. She was extremely patient with my English skills. Her respect and patience led me to become aware of the universal language, which I have full power to control and keep going: visual languages.



Images sometimes speak louder than words; I believe in that, and I made a bold decision for my graduation project: a combination of a silent picture book and non-dialogue stop-motion film. If I really have stories that needed to be told, I'll find a way to communicate them no matter what. English writing is one among the tools, and visual language is one among the tools, too. To me, visual is a universal language that has many components: composition, characters, expression, body language, background, color, movement, lighting, pattern, texture, etc. I felt rich and lucky to have so many ingredients to continue telling my story. I was so happy that my stop motion film and book achieved a distinction, but more importantly, I earned the belief that every obstacle will have a solution, every story will have a suitable tool in which to tell it. And as a result, I welcomed my new identity: a visual storytelling artist who will tell stories with the eagerness to experience the new form and material.

Being a visual storyteller directed me to another journey in the branding and marketing industry, as well as in the academic field. The time was like living in a new dream. I was blessed to have so many opportunities to tell short stories or messages for brands to present the value of their products and engage audiences.





This type of work was fun, flexible, and various, which allowed me to experience many quality up-to-date products, business trips, public speaking, commercial videos, and more. Back then, I loved illustrative photography; it was the thing that combined my skill of illustration and characters into the photos I took. I loved taking photos because it helps collect memories and moments. The combination of line art and photography is interesting. It brings the scene of a personal story or selective feeling, and at the same time, emphasizes the real moments. I love how the illustrative photography art looks beautiful, authentic, and memorable. Besides working with brands, I was also happy to explore the role of a lecturer teaching comics, book art, and illustration. I loved teaching very much. It forced me to focus and relearn all knowledge together with personal experiences and then figure out how to communicate it all with students in an effective way.

Teaching formed a special creative bond with young talents for months or years, in which all of my skills supported them to achieve their dreams and grow their talent. To be humble and to question whether or not I'm a good lecturer and a good academic friend toward them or not. I supported students to publish their books or projects, but I didn't focus on my books that much. I still did some, but not with a humble mind.

With it or without books, my new career seemed amazing and stable. Until the glory covered my ability to continue learn as a fresher.

In 2021 residing in the US, I redirected my life as well as my core beliefs. At first, I was too excited and confident, even though I wasn't prepared at all for an identity crisis in a new country. My English was still frustrating, I missed teaching, and I was not so ready to believe I would be able to teach in a new culture in a new huge land. I still loved visual storytelling, but I also felt lost at the same time. I doubted that visual storytelling would open any map for me in a totally new world. I doubted that drawing would help me to survive and grow in this huge country. After a few times applying for jobs and failing, I started to panic. My ego was so used to constant success, titles, reward, and glory. It was my arrogance that stopped my resilience and patience, and it even stopped my ability to see my core purpose. During my identity crisis, I studied animation, I changed my illustration style, I studied character design, I made film, I just kept going with what I could do best--any form of visual storytelling--but with a purpose for surviving rather than for pure love of creativity, as I used to do. My new art looked professional, but I didn't feel professional.



I chose some trendy art styles to adapt and be flexible in both the animation and book industries, but nothing worked.

That was a hard time of being constantly rejected, not just from companies or agencies, but also by my own self. I chose to stop for a while to re-analyze why everything seemed to go wrong. I remembered who I was when I was young. I was braver, I was so much less afraid of studying new things, and I welcomed every failure more easily. That self-reminder set me a new thought: what if I allowed myself to be born again, wouldn't it be so much easier to restart and

learn with a fresher mind? That self-reminding work. I reworked my CV, portfolio, and website. I researched deeper to learn from all the mistakes and advice. I rebuilt and polished my work as well as my identity based on what I already had. And luckily, I'm grateful that the dream of making picture books chose me again, that Christy Ewers from the CAT Agency accepted me, and welcomed me to the larger and wider book-making journey. It was so, so magical. I have had more than seven books published on my new journey in the USA has taught me to keep a humble and learning attitude.

Wherever I will be, I'll remember to let the pure childhood memories spark and guide me on the road. I hope my Dad is proud of me. After all the ups and downs, I am still working on books - and working harder - not just to be remembered, but to put my heart and imagination on every paper again to let many more children have the best reading time, and hopefully, the happiest childhood time.





And who knows, my books may inspire them to make many more books for future generations. To be remembered is not about building a name that lasts but for building the shared inspiration that lasts and crosses nations as well as generations.— That would be the new meaning of ‘forever’, I believe.

**THAI MY PHUONG** (a.k.a Tamypu, she/her) is a Vietnamese illustrator who loves phở, boba milk tea, and homemade matcha latte!

She graduated with a BFA in Interior Design. Working in publishing, doing various part-time jobs, she began to love illustration and storytelling more. Given this, she made the decision to move to Brighton, UK, to study for an MA in Sequential Design/Illustration with a partial scholarship. Since then, she has cultivated a deep passion for visual storytelling and teaching for international publishers, magazines, brands, and universities.

She now resides in the USA. In her free time, she loves drawing cards to send to friends, sketching on the go, riding her moped, and practicing creative thinking to be a better storyteller.

