

Prairie Wind

Bulletin of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI

FALL 2025



Illustrator in the Spotlight:
Sarah Kurpiel

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*Illustrations by
Sarah Kurpiel*



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In This Issue

by Shirin Shamsi

As we enter this beautiful “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,” I have mixed feelings. I’m sad that my time as Director has come to an end, yet happy to see what the future will bring. I want to thank everyone who has contributed to *Prairie Wind*. It has been such a privilege and honor. I truly thought I would happily stay in this position for as long as it was possible. But as we all know, life happens, change happens...

“To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose.” We have to embrace change as a positive move. Sad though I am at leaving, I could not be happier to pass the baton to the wonderful, talented, energetic, resourceful, and inspiring Myania Rankins.

Thank you all. Here’s to a brighter, better, more just, and peaceful future. Peace be with you.

Shirin



I’m so grateful for not only being the new Director of *Prairie Wind* but also having Shirin as a mentor, as she guides me to being the best Director I can be. Am I nervous? Yes. Am I thinking that this might be a dream and none of this is real? Yes!

But just like the leaves falling on the ground and the weather cooling down, I’m reminded that change will come. Things will be different, and all you can do is prepare and hope for the

best. I’m thankful I have great people to help me prepare, and I hope I truly do my best in this new role.

Myania

We begin with “[Greetings](#),” where Sheila talks about learning a new way with words, and along the way, realizes that this new lesson might be bigger than her vocabulary.

For “[Illustrator in the Spotlight](#),” we showcase Sarah Kurpiel and how she became the author/illustrator she is today. Her detailed process on creating her illustrations isn’t an article you want to miss.

For “[Tales from the Front](#),” DJ Corchin shares how he bridges the generational gap through picture books and how his recent book sparks deep conversations among young and old minds.

For “[Creative Sparks](#),” Malcolm Newsome goes back in time to break down how to combat writer’s block in three easy steps after being asked by a fellow fan.

For our first Feature, “[AI, the Antithesis to Authenticity](#),” by Gina Buckles, we get a constructive inside look into the world of AI and how it affects us in the book world. Her point of view gives us guidance and hope for the future.



In This Issue

For our second Feature, “[Keeping a Habit in Turbulent Times](#),” Emily Keener gives us real and concise tips on how to keep a strong writing habit, especially during these tough times.

For our third Feature, “[Why Representation Matters](#),” Manal Mirza highlights why representation is important and necessary in books and how she became the change she always wanted to see when she was younger.

For “[Voices of Change](#),” Valerie Reynolds explains the responsibilities of being a kidlit writer and how we must write with intention because our words influence young minds.

For “[Shop Around the Corner](#),” Laura Smetana interviewed the owner of an independent bookstore called Frugal Muse Books, Music & Video in Darien, IL. Her interview spotlights why it has been so beloved by all for over twenty years.

For “[Illustrator Tips](#),” Stacey Previn writes seven needed tips on how to grow and excel as an illustrator. Whether you’ve been illustrating for years or you’re just starting, This article is the perfect guide to get you your A-game.

For “[Writer’s Bookshelf](#),” Gauri Dalvi Pandya shares her journey to publishing and how having patience while getting to your goal was a huge takeaway from becoming the author she is today.

Lastly, for “[Season’s Crop](#),” Sheila rounded up a lovely spread of new books from our local authors that we need on our shelves for the fall season.

For “[Mentor Texts](#),” Jenny Wagh gives us a fun way to get better at your craft. She made “assignments” that you can do to help you diversify your book writing and illustrating! Homework for the holidays anyone?

We must hold onto hope. We must trust there’s more goodness in our world, hard though it may be at times, when humanitarian crises are ongoing. Everything affecting others, touches us. For we are all connected as one human family.

I hope you take inspiration from all that’s offered in these pages. I’m grateful for this community, all our contributors, and our wonderful *Prairie Wind* team.

May you find joy, peace, and solace in your creative endeavors. 🌸

*Illustration by
Sarah Kurpiel*

Director [Myania Rankins](#): *who joyfully plans and acquires content for each issue*

Editor [Christopher Worthman](#): *who expertly tweaks and polishes all of our content*

Designer [Brooke O’Neill](#) *who creatively designs and lays out every page*

Advisor [Sheila Path-McMahon](#) *who remains our faithful and supportive Regional Advisor*



Greetings!

by Sheila Path-McMahon



I learned something new this week. It's a small thing, but it has made a great impact on me. See, despite being a reading teacher, I have long struggled with spelling some words. Two very specific letter combinations throw me—*ei/ie* and *el/le*. *Ei/ie* at least has a rule that I can rely on in many cases, but with the *el/le*, I've always just guessed—usually wrong. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that probably 90% of the time I would write, for example, *lable*, versus the correct *label*.

But things just got a little easier for me on the spelling front, because I learned that *-le* can be a suffix that creates a frequentative verb to show a continued or repeated action. Thus, *crumb* becomes *crumble*, *daze* becomes *dazzle*, and *prate* becomes *prattle*! Now that I have become aware of this function, I have been noticing examples all around. Could it be *kand*, meaning “to shine,” has yielded a word that describes glowing in small amounts, giving us *candle*? Now, you may have already intuitively learned how to spell all of those words, but I think there's a lesson there, and it's not just a spelling lesson.

See, today was also the day that fifteen SCBWI-IL members from all levels of the kidlit journey came together to pack “swag bags” for the upcoming AISLE conference. We laid out various postcards, bookmarks, stickers, buttons, and



flyers from members and walked around four large tables at the library stuffing one-gallon bags to distribute to Illinois school librarians who attend the conference.

As we stuffed, we chatted. I was privy to conversations where members new and old(er) introduced themselves, shared about their kidlit careers, and enjoyed each other's company as we systematically worked together to fill 500 bags. In the course of two hours, we took small but continuous action to finish. And we compared notes on how we are all trying to take small continuous steps in this journey—whether it's morning pages, sketching, taking classes, attending conferences, listening to podcasts, or the myriad things we do—they all add up.

I searched the dictionary websites looking for an appropriate *-le* word to finish off with, and forgive me, I couldn't help myself:

*We scribble
Intending to dazzle,
Sometimes we fumble
But we continue to wrestle
Word orders we jiggle
Even when scribbles
slow to a drizzle
Our faith doesn't crumble
Progressing, even if we wobble*

So continue to mingle and giggle, and we will handle this journey, as always, together.

Sheila Path-McMahon
Co-Regional Advisor of the Illinois Chapter 🌟

Volunteer Opportunity!



**Are you a graphic designer with a
passion for children's books?**

We are seeking a new team member to
design the *Prairie Wind*!
Must be an SCBWI-IL member.

Please contact Myania Rankins at artsygal4ever@gmail.com,
Sheila Path-McMahon at illinois-ra2@scbwi.org,
or Brooke O'Neill at brookelynn_oneill@hotmail.com

Illustrator in the Spotlight

Sarah Kurpiel



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

I'm an author/illustrator. While I often sketch in pencil or Micron pen in my sketchbook, I create my final illustrations digitally on a Wacom tablet connected to my laptop. I mostly use a mix of digital dry media and digital watercolor brushes.

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

For as long as I can remember, I've loved to draw. Growing up, I drew people from magazines, characters from movies, my pets from real life, and scenes from my imagination. I never studied art formally, mainly because I have a progressive disability that limits my mobility and arm strength. Drawing was my hobby, a way to relax.

In college, I studied English literature. There a professor introduced me to graphic memoirs. I had never read a book-length graphic narrative before. I was blown away. That's the first time I seriously considered making my own narrative illustrations. I made some comic strips that I never shared, but that's as far as I got. Later, I went on to library school and eventually landed my first library job. That's when Philip C. Stead and Erin E. Stead's picture book, *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (Roaring Brook Press, 2010) crossed my desk. I couldn't stop thinking about this gentle, moving, whimsical

story. To this day, I turn to it whenever I need to remind myself what it is I love about picture books. Suddenly, I had a goal.

Once I settled into my library career, I taught myself how to draw digitally and posted my drawings anonymously online. I participated in some of those fun drawing challenges on social media that pushed me to draw new things. I drew every single day for more than a year, and gradually my style emerged, though it's evolved quite a bit since then. One day, an illustration account with a large following unexpectedly shared one of my drawings and, long story short, a few months later, I was offered representation. My co-agents helped me build a portfolio and revise my dummy, which became my first published book, *Lone Wolf* (Greenwillow Books, 2020).



Illustrator in the Spotlight



Since then, I've written and illustrated four more published books. My latest, *A Little Like Magic* (Rocky Pond Books) came out last year. I was deeply honored when it won the Schneider Family Book Award for Younger Children and SCBWI Midwest Division Crystal Kite Award. My next book, *More than a Tree* (Rocky Pond Books), will be out next March.



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

My ideas often start while I'm doodling for fun. For example, last year, I doodled a picture of a moose and mouse working on a puzzle. (My family was working on a puzzle at the time.) I started with a rough digital sketch. Then, I reduced the opacity and drew final lines on a fresh layer. Even though the final lines are cleaner than the sketch, they're still pretty loose. I often prefer my sketches over my final pieces. So, I've been trying to keep some of that sketchiness in the final work to capture the energy of the original sketch.



Next, I started a new layer below the linework and did some rough color tests. I tried two or three variations. In the end, a very warm palette fit the cozy feel I was looking for. I started a new layer and, using the color test as a guide, flatted in the colors. Originally, I made the table dark brown. Wanting to draw the eye toward the center of the image, I changed it to an ivory white color. Finally, I added a layer for shadows and a layer for highlights. At some point along the way, I changed the color of the linework to dark brown.

Sometimes, for a piece like this, I'll overlay some texture at the end. In this case, however, the digital brushes I used for the highlights added enough texture, so I called it done. I was happy with how it turned out.



Illustrator in the Spotlight



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

I enjoy drawing cute, whimsical characters—human or animal—playing, taking journeys, and experiencing the wonders of nature. Lately, I've been having fun doodling pond animals, like frogs, ducks, and dragonflies. I love making pictures that make people smile. I also enjoy drawing gentle nature scenes, like distant mountains under a starry sky or a lone sailboat on a vast sea. No matter what I draw, I try to focus on expressing a feeling.



I also have a trio of bug pals—a ladybug, moth, and spider—that I've been doodling for years. As a personal project, I recently started a webcomic about their tiny adventures. It's called [Lucky Bug](#). You can find it on my [website](#) or [newsletter](#). A comic strip is something I've wanted to try for a long time. I kept waiting for the magical day when I'd have gobs of time and energy to publish weekly. Alas, that day never comes. So, I finally decided to just start and make new ones whenever I have the time.

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.

So far, all my books have been rooted in a memory from my childhood. My upcoming book, *More than a Tree*, is no different. When I was a kid, there was a giant old tree in my backyard. It was a real fixture of my childhood. But it stood precariously close to our house. So, when it started creaking all the time and dropping big branches, an arborist advised removing it. And because it was so close to our house, they had to use a giant crane to lift it over the roof. The emotions attached to this memory led me to write a fictional account of a kid working through feelings of loss and discovering nature's renewal. It felt like a fitting book to follow my previous book, *A Little Like Magic*, which touches on some similar themes. Fortunately, my editor agreed. *More than a Tree* is scheduled to come out in March 2026.

Which illustrators were your favorites when you were little?

E. H. Shepard, Arnold Lobel, Virginia Lee Burton, and Tomie dePaola. I'm a '90s kid, but my bookshelf held books from earlier decades, handed down from friends of my mom.

Which illustrators are your favorites now?

Sarah Gonzales, Sydney Smith, Elly MacKay, Lucy Ruth Cummins, Erin E. Stead, Vera Brosgol, Rebecca Green, Jarvis, Blanca Gomez, Christian Robinson, Jess Hannigan, Freya Blackwood, Matthew Forsythe, Ebony Glenn, Lauren Paige Conrad...the list could go on and on.

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

Yes! In *A Little Like Magic*, I snuck a few family members into the festival crowd. I also tucked my debut picture book, *Lone Wolf*, in the backseat of the van.



Illustrator in the Spotlight



What inspires you creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

Nature. Simply being outside in my backyard, surrounded by trees and flowers and birds, helps immensely. I use a power wheelchair, so accessible trails, garden parks, arboretums, paths alongside rivers or ponds—these can feel like a lifeline for me. I feel most inspired and restored emotionally and creatively when I'm outdoors on a sunny day.

What gets in the way of your creativity?

While I try not to worry about things I can't control—like reviews and sales and all the exciting stuff other people are doing—sometimes, these things weigh on me. Spending less time online and more time doodling for fun usually helps. Turning a blank page into a picture is such a great feeling. I often catch myself smiling while I'm drawing.

Where can we find you?

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

Substack: [Sarah's Newsletter](https://www.substack.com/p/sarahs-newsletter)

Bluesky: [@sarahkurpiel.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/sarahkurpiel.bsky.social)

Website: sarahkurpiel.com 🌟

SARAH KURPIEL is the author and illustrator of several picture books, including *Lone Wolf* and *Snake's Big Mistake*. Her latest book, *A Little Like Magic*, won the Schneider Family Book Award and the SCBWI Midwest Division Crystal Kite Award. A librarian by day, Sarah lives in the Midwest. Her stories are inspired by animals, nature, and moments of wonder in everyday life.



Tales From the Front

by DJ Corchin

Recently my 9-year old son put on their sneakers, filled their water bottle to the top, put on a “RITOS” t-shirt from *Star Trek: Lower Decks* (a show we enthusiastically watch time and time again together), and grabbed a granola bar “for power” before we jumped into my super cool, “Damn-what-kind-a-job-does-this-guy-have,” weather bundle included, 2014 Subaru Forester named Whitaker to go to the largest video arcade in the United States. And it was glorious.

About 900 classic cabinet arcade games were available, ranging from well-known staples like *Pac-Man* and *Tron*, to obscure or even absurd titles like *Ninja Clowns* or *DinoCopters*. Unlimited play, no coins, all awesome.

As we were about to dive into the 8-to-16-bit utopia, my son asked me if I would stay with them the entire time and play

a bunch of two-player games. “Totally,” I said, “Let’s start with *Battletoads*.”

Now, *Battletoads* is a notoriously difficult game but with unlimited play we spent a lot of time on the sticks (“On the sticks” is something only awesome people say). Something interesting happened while we were engaged in hyperboarding. My son asked a lot of questions, first about the game we were playing, then about video games in general when I was growing up, then about screen time and the differences between then and now. The conversation just kept evolving. By the end of the visit, we had covered topics that involved some pretty important life lessons. A far distance from a *Spy Hunter* discussion on how much to use the gear shift when being approached by the cars with spiked-wheels.



Tales From the Front

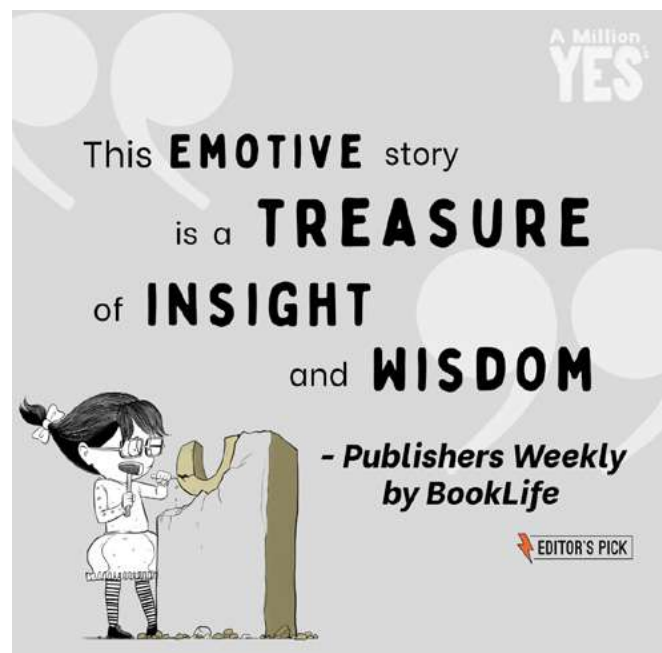
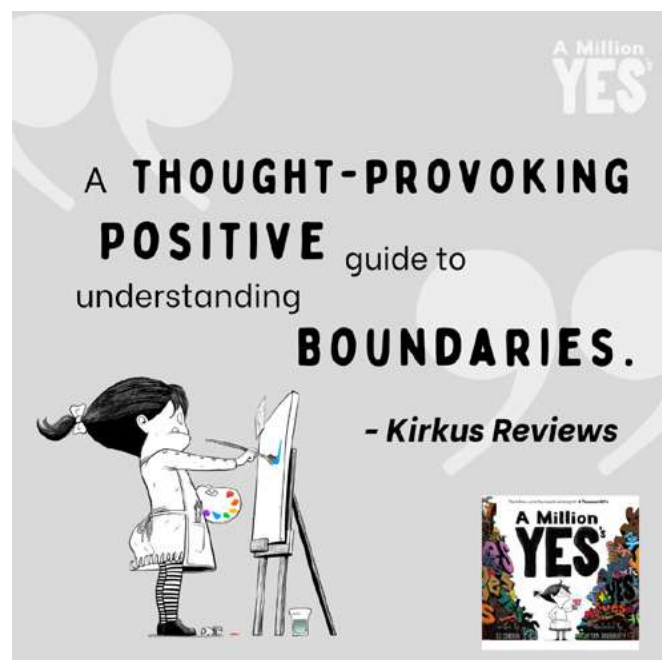
Video games can be something that people do by themselves. They're a place one can retreat into or even pretend to be someone else. Some games create a story so immersive that an individual can vanish for days or weeks at a time. On the flip side, video games can be a shared experience. They can spark conversations that cause people to go and learn more about a topic. And one of my favorite things video games do is cross generational bridges.

Picture books can do the exact same thing. Some are meant to be read by a child alone or have them follow along while someone reads to them. When the book is done, it's over. But other picture books, and in my humble opinion some of the best ones, are designed to be shared experiences across generations. They're layered so that the takeaways are different depending on your life experience. The most important aspect, however, is that the end of the book is the beginning of the conversation. They encourage questions in the moment that force both child and adult to be somewhat introspective. It's beautiful.

In 2020 I released *A Thousand NO's* (Sourcebook Explore), a picture book about grit, creativity, and learning to work with others. It jumped to the top of the Barnes & Noble charts and was seen in indie bookstore windows across the U.S. It has incredibly interesting illustrations that are different from the sea of books in the aisles. It uses metaphors that may require very young readers to partner with an adult to understand the lessons. Some critics said it felt like an adult book. I see that as proof of its strength.

"This book is for adults." "A picture book lesson should be obvious for young readers to understand." These aren't facts. They're individual's expectations of what a picture book should be. The big lesson of *A Thousand NO's* is not to let your expectations of what something *should* be get in the way of seeing what it *could* be. With that in mind, I would rephrase those quotes to "This book **CAN** be for adults." "A picture book lesson **CAN** be obvious for young readers to understand." They're not rules. Preferences maybe but not rules.

The reviews for *A Thousand NO's* are wonderful overall. It connects with adults for sure, but that doesn't mean the book is for adults. It means that they wished they learned these lessons when they were kids (as said in many of the reviews). *A Thousand NO's* is meant to be a shared experience. To spark questions. To discuss within context of the moment or the community. I love these types of books. These are the books that get remembered. (Well that and poop books. Always poop books.) There is tremendous wisdom in picture books. Wisdom isn't always instantly understood because one reads the lesson. It needs to be engaged with. Absorbed. Discussed. These are the picture books I love to write.



Tales From the Front

So I wrote another one.

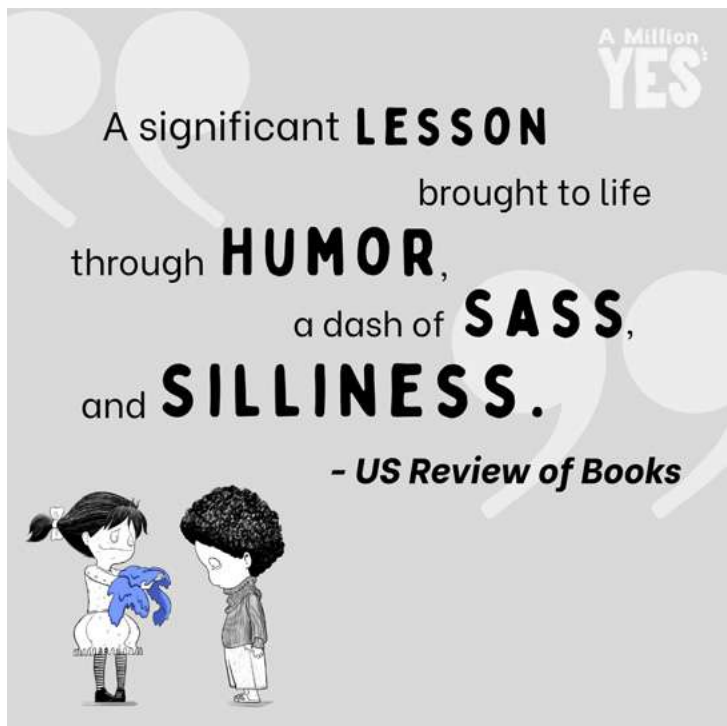
A Million YES's (The phazelFOZ Company) is about setting healthy boundaries. It was released on September 1, 2025. Today, it's sparking conversations across classrooms and living rooms. Think of it as *The Giving Tree's* opposite. Kids have responded to it with amazing maturity (always give kids the benefit of the doubt). The adult response has been very similar to *A Thousand NO's*. "Wow I wish I learned this when I was young." "Adults need this book too!" And it's true, they do. But what I love to hear most is, "Adults need to read this book WITH their kids." Picture the very people who are most likely experiencing burnout or lack of self-care, reading with their kids a book about setting healthy boundaries. Kinda meta. Very cool.

A Million YES's gives adults opportunity to discuss with their kids past, present, and future relationships using examples from their own lives. The book has so many nuances to talk about. Adults and kids together can discuss what is most important to them, what they want to protect, and what it feels like if you give away too much. Probably a good yearly exercise for us all, so it makes it a great re-read.

I decided to release this follow-up book independent of a larger publisher because they wanted to make the story more direct, less metaphorical, and a different feel from its predecessor. I couldn't make the story fit their vision without losing what made it meaningful. So I chose to publish independently. I'm glad I did.

The book opened to wonderful trade reviews but, more importantly, meaningful conversations between readers. I've already done a number of school visits centered around *A Million YES's*, and the discussions are richer than I've ever had with elementary students. Seeing kids' wheels turn while thinking about what is most important to them is fascinating. Watching all the teachers shake their heads in agreement as I talk about feeling empty when one gives everything away is validating. We're on to something here.

There's something wonderfully human about picture books that live at the crossroads of childhood and adulthood. They elevate our connections. They bridge generational gaps. They encourage curiosity and exploration and remain in our memories as little voices we can revisit in a turbulent world. But hey, if that's not your thing there's always *Battletoads*. 🌟



DJ CORCHIN is a an author and illustrator of many award-winning children's books including *A Thousand NO's*, *Do You Speak Fish?* and *The I Feel...* children's series. He is a former high school teacher and featured performer in the Tony and Emmy Award-winning Broadway Show *BLAST!* When not spending time with his family or producing innovative corporate internal communications strategies, he writes and draws about silly and fun things in Oak Park, IL. www.djcorchin.com

Creative Sparks

by Malcolm Newsome

A few weeks ago, I had the great fortune of speaking to a brilliant, aspiring young author at a back-to-school book bash. She stepped up to the table where I sat, unassuming. Flanked by two younger siblings, I figured she'd ask about the picture books I had on display. She adjusted the hair band that held her afro puff, retrieved a phone from her pocket, looked intently at me and asked, "Can I ask you a few questions about writing?"

I was wrong. She was there to pick my brain.

She went on to pepper me with questions while pausing to tap notes into her phone after each of my answers. She asked questions like:

"How do you determine what your characters will do in the story?"

"How do you figure out how to start and end your stories?"

"Where does conflict come from?"

I was so thoroughly impressed with the depth of her questions that, at one point, I had to stop and ask her what grade she was in. "Eighth grade," she replied.

You may be thinking now what I was thinking then. This young author was well beyond her years. I didn't read her writing but I'm convinced she's a writing prodigy.

We went on to talk for at least thirty minutes about writing, the creative process, and reading.

Then, before we ended, she asked one more question that has replayed in my mind since:

"How do you stay excited about what you're writing—especially when you're blocked?"

I would hazard a guess that the vast majority of writers have felt that way at some point in time. I certainly have. It's something I think about quite often, but have rarely had the chance to discuss. I was glad she asked because it gave me the chance to at least attempt to highlight something that often gets lost in the pursuit of publishing:

Our ability to separate the performance of writing, the practice of writing, and the play of writing.

It's nothing super deep. But let me break it down.

THE PERFORMANCE OF WRITING

I have been an athlete and musician for most of my life. I had many games, tournaments, recitals, and concerts. At each level, those events came with increasingly higher stakes. The scrimmage game had lower stakes than the state tournament playoff game. The concert in the small coffee shop had lower stakes than the final night in the regional battle of the bands with hundreds of attendees and a potential trip to Germany on the line.

The thing that was the same about each of these is that each event required some level of intense focus. While I could probably get away with being a little less focused at the scrimmage game, the lack of focus at the state qualifier game could be the difference between the season continuing on to glory or ending.

But, no matter what, each performance—was exhausting.

That's what it's like for me when I'm working on a fiction manuscript with the intent of getting it into publishable shape. That, to me, is the performance of writing.

The main difference between concert performances and writing performance, however, is the fact that there are well-defined start and end times for concert performances.

Start and end times scarcely exist for most types of fiction writing. As a result, many of us put pressure on ourselves to work, work, work, on that manuscript each day for days on end—not realizing that it's effectively the same as playing



a soccer match or a baseball game every single day. The reality is that the vast majority of us are just simply unable to sustain that indefinitely.

THE PRACTICE OF WRITING

Using the band analogy, if the concert is the performance, there has to be preparation for the performance. That's why we practice.

In the world of athletics or music—or, frankly, anything that requires a skill that can be further developed—it boils down to two things:

1. Development of specific skills;
2. Coordination with others.

For example, a solo flutist might spend time practicing scales and perfecting their songs. But, at some point, will also need to do at least one rehearsal with organizers at the concert venue.

Depending on how one practices, preparation can similarly be as taxing as the performance itself. Nevertheless, it is much more common for even intense focus on skill development to be more sustainable than performing.

Why is that?

It's because we are in control of how much energy we exert toward practice.

You may be wondering, How does the practice of writing show up?

It shows up in any way that we work on skill development. That could be focusing on building our vocabulary, studying grammar rules, revising or rewriting, outlining, mastering archetypes for a given genre, and much more. The distinction here is that the practice is often in line with direct preparation for the performance (e.g., the manuscript that you're wanting to have published).

But even the most diligent find that their practice routines sometimes plateau or that they need a break.

That's where the final piece of the puzzle comes in.

THE PLAY OF WRITING

I've often marveled at amazing feats like the soccer player that can juggle the ball for minutes upon minutes and the football player that can dribble a football as though it were a basketball. Examples like these are plenty—both inside and outside of sports. What is true about these feats, though, are that they are almost never skills that are specifically used in a performance. So, why do people possess them?

I think it's because they captured and held onto the youthful, carefree essence of their chosen craft. They broke away from the standard practice and performance regimens and just let their own personal creativity take hold. Sure, they may never use it in a performance, but it's fun. It brings joy. Probably especially during the times when they may have plateaued.

Young people tend to play like this naturally. Many adults lose it somewhere along the path to responsibility.

For creators, this can look like doodling in notebooks, writing random poems or rap lyrics, or drawing stick figure comic strips. But, in reality, there's no end to what shape or form it can take. It's the stuff that pours out of us without really even thinking much about it. It's the stuff that just brings smiles or that fills our cups. It's what we create randomly with no intention of ever using anywhere.

Which brings us back to the brilliant, young author and her question:

"How do you stay excited about what you're writing—especially when you're blocked?"

You find a way to make your writing time fun, joyful, and unencumbered. You find a way to explore the previously unexplored. You find a way to play. 🌟

MALCOLM NEWSOME is the author of *The Daddy-Daughter Dance*, which was recently released on October 21 with Holt:Macmillan. His previous titles include *Dear Star Baby* (Beaming Books, 2023), *Sydney's Big Speech* (HarperCollins, 2024), and *I Am The Spirit of Justice* (co-author) (Zonderkidz, 2025). He also has forthcoming titles.

AI: The Antithesis...

...TO AUTHENTICITY by Gina Buckles

The fear of being replaced by machines, while long present in factories and warehouses, has now reached the desks of artists and writers. In a recent study published by Microsoft, the profession of writers and authors was ranked number four on a list of careers most likely to be taken over by Artificial Intelligence (AI). While we can collectively raise our eyebrows at the confirmation bias in a publication like that, it's still scary to think that the passion we all hold dear could ever be ripped away. AI can certainly produce a book much faster than I can. What would take me as a writer months to complete, a Large Language Model can spit out in mere seconds.

Well, maybe the machines can “write” faster, but they definitely can’t do it better.

I work in IT, and the AI space is one I inhabit. I’m not an engineer or developer, so I’m not the person inputting logic or ingesting training data, but I do have a close-up view of what goes on behind the curtain. And I assure you, there is no wizard.

I asked Gemini, Google’s AI, to explain generative AI to me as if I were a five-year-old. It gave me this response:

Imagine you have a toy box full of LEGOs. Generative AI is like a really smart friend who can build new things with your LEGOs, even if you don’t tell it exactly how to build it. It learns from all the things you’ve built before and then can make new, unique things all on its own, like a new spaceship or a cool house.

Translating that, it essentially means that AI is consuming everything on the internet to try to predict the best response to the user’s prompt. When we apply that to writing of any kind, AI is reading anything out there it has categorized as similar and then regurgitating it in a new format.

To anyone reading this and seeing red over the blatant copyright violation, I am right there with you. There are many ongoing lawsuits, including a recent one brought against the company Anthropic, that could cover over



seven million books. At the time of the writing of this article, Anthropic had settled out of court for \$1.5 billion—the largest payout in the history of U.S. copyright cases, according to the [New York Times](#).

While AI is a tool that can be used for good, I don’t believe it extends to creative pursuits. I recently read a Reddit post in which a woman expressed distress that her mother had used AI to “write” and publish a book of business advice. A writer herself, the woman couldn’t get through to her proud mother that the machine had done all the actual work. What I found most interesting were the replies, all reassurances that the book wouldn’t sell because consumers wouldn’t find the content authentic.

Why do we write in the first place? If merely to disseminate information to others, sure, use AI to craft that email or summarize those meeting notes. But if we’re writing to share the human experience, then a tool like AI is going to fall short every single time. There’s a reason that the publishing world focuses so much on Own Voices. We know when a story rings true it’s because the creator has an intrinsic understanding of the humanity behind that story.

As a machine, AI is the antithesis of authenticity. It can never understand what it means to be a human being on this Earth. It can never know what it feels like to be sad, or angry, or discouraged, or all three at the same time. It can never understand anything at all. All it can do is consume what others have written and copy their sentiments, tone, and



AI: The Antithesis to Authenticity

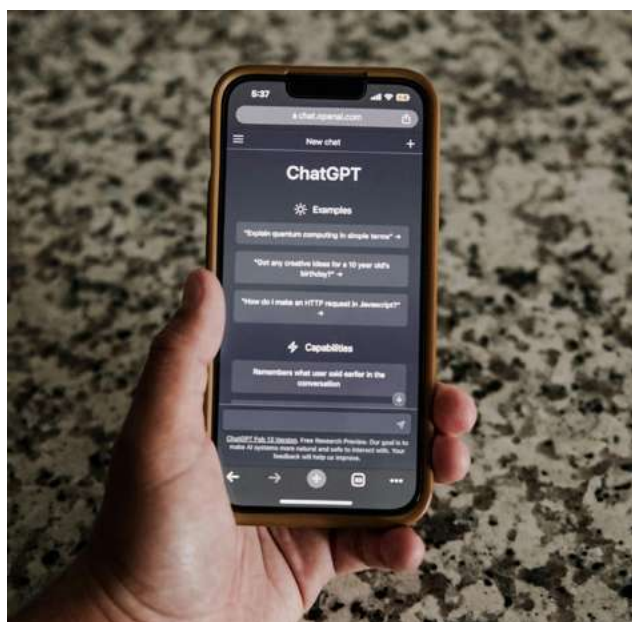
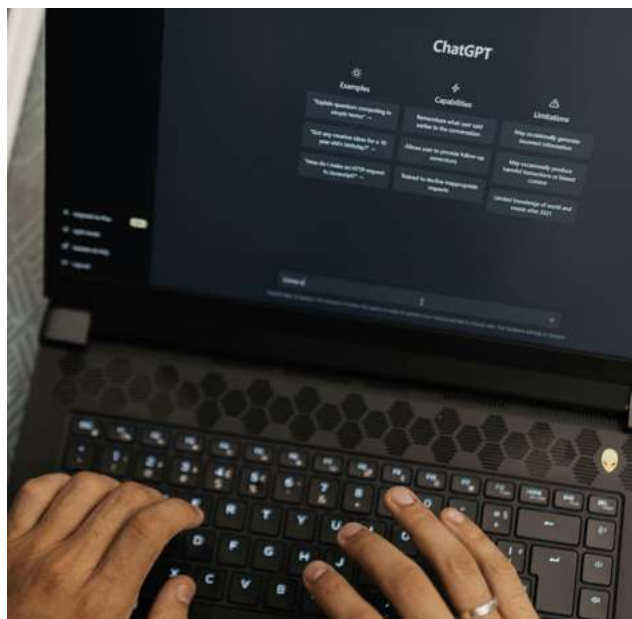
wording. And for those of you wondering what prevents AI from training on outputs written by other chatbots, the answer is that it's already happening, yanking the responses even further from reality. There's a reason the internet has coined the term AI slop—it so often spits out just that.

AI is not a person. It's not self-aware or sentient. It's not even really intelligent, in direct contradiction of the acronym. It's a regurgitator, an organizer, and often a thief. Can it do a great job of writing up a meal plan for you? Sure, and it'll throw in a grocery list as well. But it certainly is not a creator because nothing it produces is ever truly original.

When I write about a child going through a challenge, I want my lived challenge to be on the page. When I write about the subsequent triumph over that challenge, I want the experience of my own triumph to be what connects to the reader's heart. I want my words to resonate, to inspire, to normalize. Can I always achieve that? No, of course not, and it's something I work on improving all the time. But the good news is that AI simply can't.

As a writer, I wouldn't use AI for any portion of my process. Not in the brainstorming phase, plotting stage, and definitely not during the actual act of writing. First, because I'm not comfortable with my words and my voice being out in the ether, but foremost because I think it removes the integrity of the act of creating art. I know some writers who feel comfortable utilizing tools like ChatGPT for things like a synopsis or a short pitch. I would caution against even that. Unless you're using AI tools in a closed software setting, whatever you upload into the chat will be used for training data.

The AI fear is real, but hey, isn't fear a part of the human experience? We may see an uptick of AI slop hit the book market, but I believe it will be short lived. Because the other thing we have as humans is the ability to sniff out truth, and so do our readers. They know what feels right and what doesn't. Just like we're always told in craft advice, we have to trust our audience. If we remain authentic as writers, together, we can overcome anything. Even the machines. 🌟



GINA BUCKLES has served as the Rockford SCBWI co-representative for five years and has been a member of SCBWI Illinois for over a decade. She lives on the Illinois-Wisconsin border with her husband and pet rabbit. Mystery and fantasy are her genres of choice, usually for middle grade readers, but she also dabbles in picture books and the occasional YA novel. After a long day of work as an Analytics Product Manager, she enjoys apple orchards, coffee shops, and learning guitar.

Keeping a...

...WRITING HABIT IN TURBULENT TIMES

by Emily Keener



Keeping a writing habit is hard. Keeping a writing habit when everything around you seems to be falling apart can feel impossible.

But if I can crawl out my most recent multi-month dry spell, so can you. Here's the advice and practices that helped me finally to produce a manuscript this year and, as a bonus, start journaling again.

MAKE LITTLE HABITS STICK

I had tried and failed to form an exercising habit throughout my 20s, but I tried again in my 30s and it stuck. Why? Was it because I was having children and wanted to be the type of grandma who rolled around on the floor with her future grandkids? Yes. But it was also because I approached the whole fitness thing differently in my third decade.

No more gym memberships. No more resolutions or grand promises to myself. I just brought a yoga mat to work and left it there, aiming to move my body once a day.

A few years later, after reading James Clear's book, *Atomic Habits*, I understood why the habit finally formed. I had inadvertently followed the laws of habit building. I made my workouts:

1. **Obvious:** My yoga mat was in clear view in my office. I couldn't avoid seeing it.
2. **Attractive:** As a new mom with barely enough time to trim my own nails, office exercise became something I looked forward to. I started blocking an hour for lunch every day, and I protected it like it was my newborn baby. Exercise became an act of self-care, maybe even rebellion. I felt utterly free for one hour a day in my little cube.
3. **Easy:** I made a playlist of workout videos on YouTube, so I never had to search for a routine before I got started. The hard decisions were already made.

I also didn't set a specific goal for what I did or for how long I did it. I just got on the mat at roughly the same time every day. If my head hurt or I was feeling tired, sometimes I did a little stretching and lay there in corpse pose. But I always moved my body a bit.

4. **Satisfying:** I only ate lunch *after* the workout. The act of committing to the workout and completing it each day became enough satisfaction, but the lunch reward helped.

So when I thought about how to get out of my writing funk, James Clear's framework came to mind. Here's how I put it to work:

1. **Obvious:** I left my journal on top of my keyboard. If I wanted to do anything related to work in the morning, I had to physically move my journal out of the way.
2. **Attractive:** I made my office somewhere I wanted to be. I pulled back the drapes and let the light beam in. I put a little coaster on my desk for tea. I added a few plants by the window. The office was now my Zen Zone.
3. **Easy:** One of my writing friends reminded me to dial down my goal setting. We can psych ourselves out when we set big goals and fail to reach them. She said, "Just write something. Anything!" And that's what I started doing. A few lines in the journal one day. A page the next. I wrote whatever I was thinking, even if it was musing about maybe shutting the drapes because it's too darn early for all this light.
4. **Satisfying:** I've learned to love stretching, so instead of doing it first thing in the morning, I started saving it as a reward for journaling. When I'm done writing, I roll around on the floor for a bit (practicing for granny life).



Keeping a Writing Habit in Turbulent Times

Sounds too easy, right? Well, yeah. That's not the whole story. Because sometimes we feel icky and depressed and it's hard to pull back the drapes.

SLOW THE SCROLL

How many of us have doom scrolled into a panic this year? Danced the Delete and Redownload Tango with social media apps? It's a special kind of exhaustion to live in the times we're living in. But the urge to disconnect is paradoxical.

Because we need each other. We need to pay attention. We need to stay connected. Not in the way a company designs for profit but in a way that uplifts humanity.

I decided to remove social and news media from certain parts of my life. I'm no longer allowing tech billionaires into the precious beginnings and endings of my day. Breakfast and bedtime are now reserved for real, analog living – talking to the family, reading books, staring out windows, and the like.

I'll check in on current events and select social media from my laptop at different points in the day but never in the sacred zone of waking or resting before bed. And I'm trying to keep news and social media off the mobile device altogether. It makes eternal scrolling a little too easy.

Has this helped my mental state? It has! But it's not perfect. I still have moments of overconsumption and spiraling. Just like with any habit, though, it's not about perfection. It's about showing up consistently every day.

If we want habits to stick, we need more reward and less punishment. So, there's no need to tear yourself down when you fall off track. Just hop back on and feel good that you did. Even if you write one sentence, or one word. Try to get back on and then tell yourself, "Nice work!" (Yes, this nugget of advice comes straight from therapy and, nope, I won't charge you a copay.)

STAY CONNECTED

Humans are social beings (even the introverted ones). We function better when we are connected to each other, whether through casual conversations with neighbors or friendly online forums full of lovely writers. We need to refuel with real human connection.

When I cut out a lot of social media, I missed out on some of the good parts. Conversations with old friends. The occasional new friend. School announcements (still haven't figured that one out—with any luck, they'll send an email).

Now I'm working on rebuilding those connections in ways that feel better than social platforms, like with email, text, or phone. And I'm curating online content that highlights our collective goodness and gives my mind a dose of anti-horror. I'll share a few of those at the end of this article. But some of my most mentally uplifting connections are with my SCBWI friends and fellow writers. Even when I feel like closing all the curtains, crawling under the desk, and taking a multi-day nap, somehow they draw me out. They're the ones who never ask why I'm not writing. They understand. And they give me great ideas, like "Just write something."

I hope something in this article will help you, whether you are going through rough times or just wanting to find a way back to a solid writing habit. As with all writing advice, take what works for you and leave the rest. But hopefully you won't do it alone.

WEB CONTENT FOR CURATING HOPE AND MENTAL WELLNESS

- [The Goodnewsletter](#)
- [The Hopemakers](#)
- [Jess Keating's Epic Email](#)
- [Emily Gaines Demsky's 3 Good Things](#) 🌟

EMILY KEENER writes about science and nature to inspire young readers to explore and protect our wonderful world. Emily began her career as environmental educator, working for U.S. parks and nature centers. She later stepped into the field of instructional design, where she remains today, writing for children as often as possible in the spaces around her 9-5. She lives with her husband, two daughters, and beagle pup outside of Peoria, IL.

Why Representation...

...MATTERS by Manal Mirza

Growing up in America in the early 2000s, I rarely saw representation in the books or media around me. The shelves were filled with talking animals, colorful objects with personalities, and plenty of human characters, but almost none who looked like me or reflected my community. Even the few “brown” characters in mainstream media, like *Aladdin*, didn’t feel like real representation. They were distant, simplified versions of the world I knew. At times, I even caught myself relating to animals just because their fur was brown. Looking back, that feels like a stretch, but it shows how eager I was to find even the smallest point of connection.

When I moved on to chapter books in school, it became almost automatic to imagine every main character as white. It never crossed my mind that a protagonist could be from another race. That was such a sharp contrast to my own life as a Muslim Pakistani American, surrounded by color, conversation, and little adventures every day. Of course, my community experienced the same complex and ordinary things as anyone else. We are human. But what else was I supposed to think when every book, movie, and TV show I consumed centered on people who didn’t look like me? For a long time, I could only picture characters as white because that was all I ever saw on the page. It never occurred to me that my community could have stories filled with adventure, friendships, plot twists, or even romance. Even in the world of Bollywood, which technically counted as representation, I still didn’t see myself reflected there either.

Representation isn’t just about comfort; it actively shapes the way we see ourselves and others. Growing up without seeing your identity reflected quietly teaches you that your story doesn’t matter, or that it doesn’t belong in the world of imagination. On the other hand, when a child finds a character who shares their culture, faith, or family, it validates their existence in a powerful way. This isn’t only for kids who need mirrors, it’s also for kids who need windows. A white child who reads about a South Asian or Black protagonist learns empathy and respect. Books plant seeds of understanding long before stereotypes take hold. That’s why the lack of representation is more than a



personal disappointment, it’s a social loss. It limits everyone’s imagination about what kinds of lives are possible.

Representation must be authentic, not forced or stereotyped. Too often, when diverse characters do appear, they’re written in ways that miss the mark or even reinforce harmful ideas. If it isn’t done well, it feels hollow. And since we’re constantly consuming media, the standard should be higher. We need stories and illustrations that are true to the people they represent. To get there, we need more artists, illustrators, and writers from those communities telling their own stories, and plenty of them. People are not a monolith. Even within the same culture or identity, experiences are unique. That’s the beauty of authentic storytelling. It shows real variety. At the end of the day, we’re people. Just as there are thousands of mystery novels, movies, and shows with white characters, there should be just as many with characters from other races and communities.

The statistics make this clear. In 2022, only 46% of children’s books had significant BIPOC content, and just

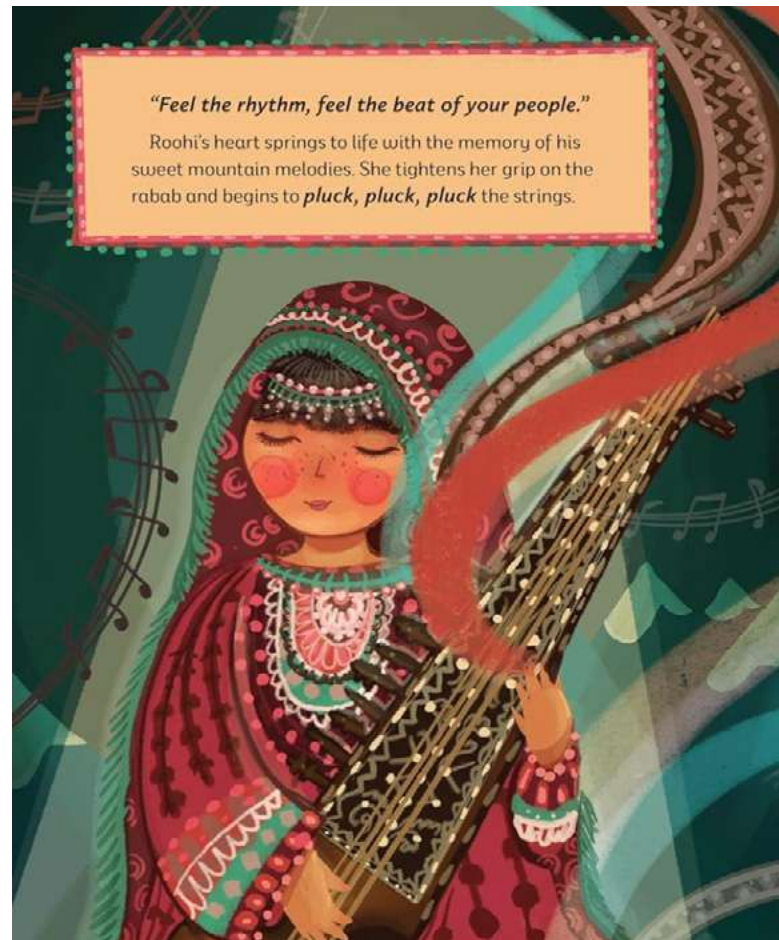


Why Representation Matters

39% featured a BIPOC primary character (Social Justice Books). By 2023, those numbers rose slightly to 49% and 40%, respectively. In 2024, the CCBC reported that the number had finally passed the halfway mark, with over 51% of books containing significant BIPOC content (Social Justice Books). That's progress, but it also shows how much work is left to do. Research also shows that positive media representation can boost self-esteem for marginalized youth and help reduce stereotypes when done authentically (*Psychology Today*). And this is especially urgent when you consider that today's children are far more diverse than adults. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2020 that the Diversity Index for children under 18 was 68.5%, compared with 58.3% for adults, meaning there's a much higher chance two kids picked at random will be from different racial or ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau).

Looking back now, it feels surreal that I've been able to contribute to the very change I once longed for. As an illustrator, I've had the privilege of bringing characters like Hana, in *Hana's Hundred Hijabs*, and Zahra, in *Zahra's Blessing: A Ramadan Story*, to life on the page. These books center Muslim girls in joyful, everyday ways such as shopping for hijabs or preparing for Ramadan. The kind of moments that would have meant so much to me as a child. Hearing from parents and kids who finally see themselves reflected in these stories has shown me just how powerful representation can be. It isn't just about visibility, it's about belonging. My younger self might have felt less invisible if books like these had been around, and I hope today's children never have to feel that same absence.

Representation in books matters because it shapes identity, builds empathy, and expands the imagination of what's possible. For me, the absence of authentic stories once made the world of books feel smaller than my own lived experience. Today, I can help fill that gap through illustration, but the work doesn't end with me. The diversity of our children demands a diversity of stories. Ones that are truthful, layered, and full of humanity. Every child deserves to find themselves in a story, not as an afterthought or a stereotype, but as the hero of their own adventure. That's the standard we should hold literature to, because stories aren't just entertainment. They are how we learn who we are and who we can become. 🌸



MANAL MIRZA is a Chicago-based product designer and illustrator. As a Muslim-American-Pakistani woman, her work reflects the layered identities she navigates daily. Through her illustrations, she hopes to uplift women, celebrate cultural nuance, and create moments of joy, softness, and strength.

Her art blends vibrant storytelling with a personal lens, often rooted in themes of faith, femininity, and belonging. Manal has illustrated several children's books, including *Hana's Hundreds of Hijabs*, *Zahra's Blessing: A Ramadan Story*, *Little People*, *Big Dreams: Malala Yousafzai*, and *Music of the Mountains*.

Voices of Change

MORE THAN JUST STORIES: THE ENDURING POWER OF WRITING FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES by Valerie M. Reynolds

I don't fancy myself a children's writer. I don't even fancy myself a writer, per se. I consider myself more along the lines of "a creative"—a person who loves to create. Be it books, plays, art, music, events, baked goods, etc., I love the process of seeing an idea come to life. The world of children's literature is often viewed through the gentle lens of whimsy and delight, a space for escapism into worlds of talking animals and fantastical adventures. While these elements are undeniably central to the genre's magic, to limit our perception of writing for young audiences to mere entertainment is to profoundly misunderstand its monumental significance. Children's literature is, in fact, one of society's most vital and long-lasting educational forces, a bedrock for the development of the future adults who will shape our world. This is how my mission as a creative and storyteller brought me to children's literature, as I was called to create stories that will cement themselves in history and bring a sense of self, belonging, joy, and history to children who often do not see themselves in mainstream children's literature.

As children's book writers, we are often serving as world shapers. With this comes the responsibility of reminding ourselves how young children learn. Unlike adults—who process information through established frameworks and critical filters—a child's mind is a vibrant sponge, absorbing virtually everything it encounters. Storytelling is one of the first play-based models of learning; every illustration, every character, every sight, and every sound is a piece of data woven into the tapestry of a child's understanding.

Because of this profound, unfiltered absorption, the words and narratives crafted by children's book authors carry an immense ethical and social responsibility—whether we want them to or not. We are not just writing books; we are writing the foundational scripts for future decision-making adults. Every character we create, every conflict we resolve, and every lesson we impart—subtle or explicit—contributes to the moral, social, and emotional architecture of the next generation.



Beyond the essential emotional and social education, children's literature holds the unique power to serve as a preservation vessel for history and cultural identity. Embedding historical context and nuance into stories for young audiences is a critical act of truth-telling and heritage maintenance, especially for children from marginalized communities and identities. I'll never forget the time I went into a school to read *The Joys of Being a Little Black Boy*. During the question and answer period after the book introduced King Tut to them, a young boy asked: Were Black people *really* kings and queens in Africa? He didn't believe it at first. He had no concept of this idea. He does now.

Authors who consciously weave historical or cultural threads into their narratives ensure crucial aspects of the human experience are not lost or forgotten. This is ever so important today. When I wrote books like *The Joys of Being a Little Black Boy* and *The Twirl of Being a Little Black Girl*, the goal was multifaceted: to provide mirrors

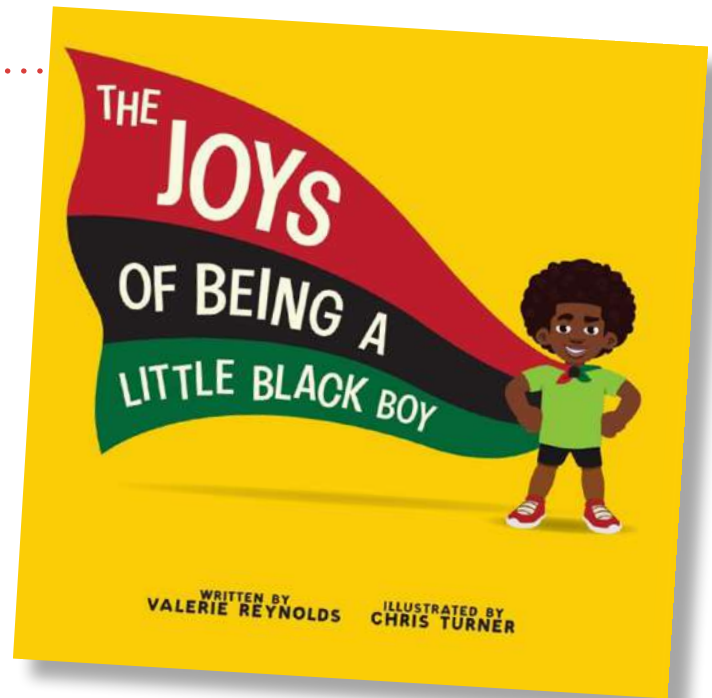
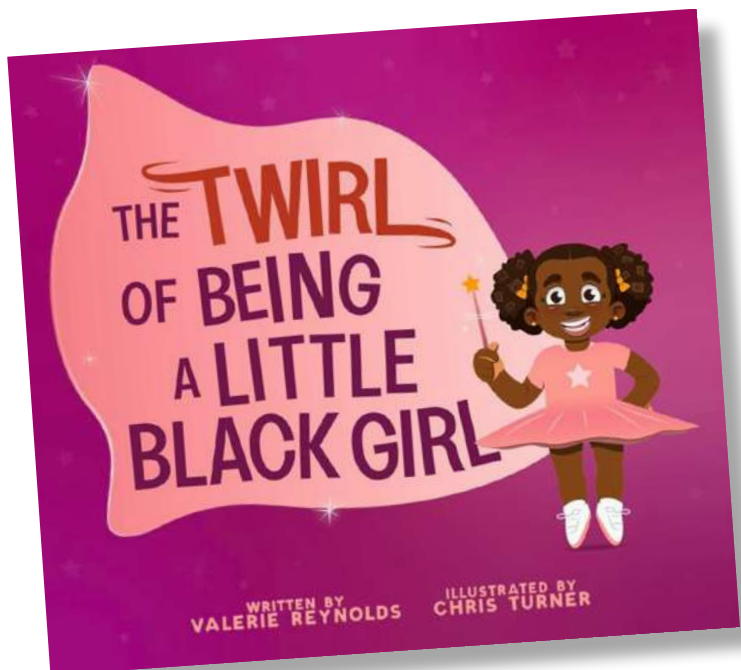


Voices of Change

for Black children to see themselves celebrated, affirmed, and valued but also to provide windows for all children (even some adults) to appreciate the depth, history, and beauty of Black childhood and culture.

As authors, grounding a story in a historical moment, a cultural tradition, or a particular identity experience, we do two things:

- **Preserve the Record:** We ensure that history—not just the facts and dates of “Upper-Case Education,” but the felt experience of people—is passed down in an accessible, engaging format. This is how the legacy of diverse communities endures.
- **Foster a Deeper Understanding:** Children who read stories that celebrate and gently educate on different histories and identities grow up with an innate appreciation for the complexity and richness of the human world. They are equipped to be the adults who challenge monolithic narratives and advocate for inclusive futures.



Writing (or creating in my case)—no matter the age of the audiences—is a calling in and of itself. But writing for young people? Now, that requires a certain level of creativity, empathy, and a deep respect for the transformative power of narrative. Whether the intention or not, children’s book development is an art form that operates at the nexus of play, ethics, and education. We are not just writing stories to fill bookshelves, we are designing and building the social and emotional landscape of tomorrow. To be a children’s book writer is to be an essential contributor to the continuity of human understanding, shaping readers who will one day become the decision-makers, the empathetic citizens, and the historians of the world we hope to build. 🌟

VALERIE REYNOLDS is a prolific storyteller with a passion for crafting narratives that span both fiction and children’s literature. Her debut novel, *In the Middle of Wanting*, published by Windy City Press in 2015, captivated readers with its evocative narrative and rich character development. Valerie has authored two beloved children’s books, *The Joys of Being a Little Black Boy* and *The Twirl of Being a Little Black Girl*. These vividly illustrated works celebrate the lives of remarkable Black individuals, weaving together history and inspiration to create unforgettable stories that resonate with young readers.

Shop Around the Corner

FRUGAL MUSE BOOKS, MUSIC & VIDEO by Laura Smetana

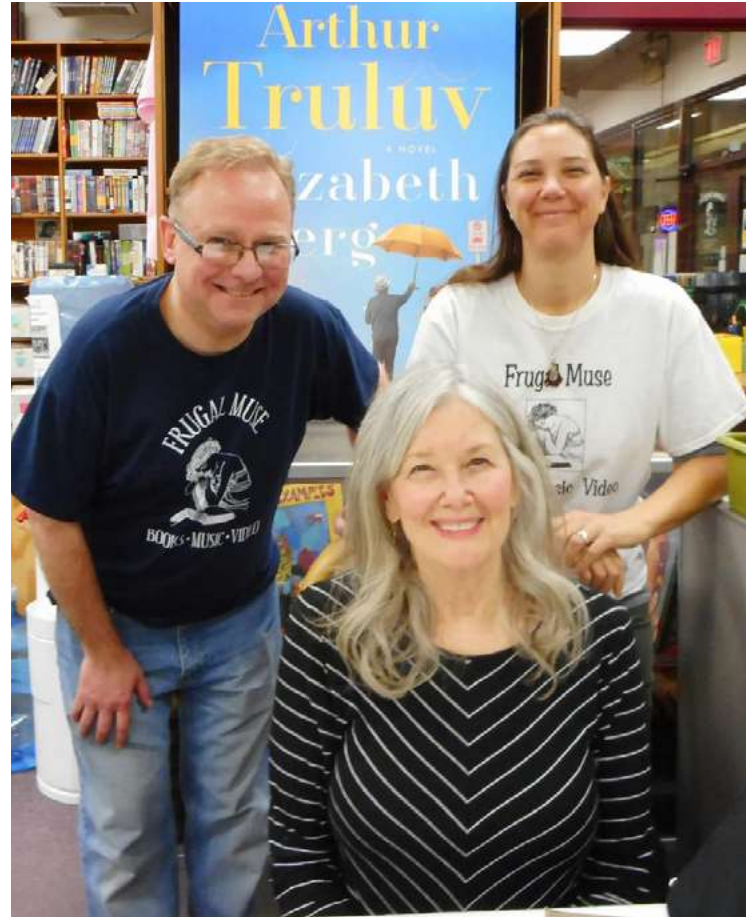
Nestled in a strip mall in Darien, Illinois, about 30 miles southwest of downtown Chicago, [Frugal Muse Books, Music & Video](#) is an independent bookstore filled with an extensive collection of new and gently used treasures. I first stumbled upon Frugal Muse when I was in high school and have been going back ever since to trade in my gently used books for other items as my interests have changed over time.

Owned and operated by Paul and Robyn Garrison, this unique bookstore carries adult and children's books, as well as music, movies, games, and local gifts. I've had the pleasure of doing four children's book launch events at Frugal Muse, and I love seeing people find unexpected gems as they browse seemingly endless bookshelves in the store.

In addition to book readings and signings, Frugal Muse hosts other events and has served as a community hub for over 20 years. Paul and Robyn make everyone feel at home, and there is truly something for everyone. I interviewed co-owner Paul Garrison about the store, and here is what he had to say.

In 2014, you and your wife Robyn purchased Frugal Muse Books, Music & Video in Darien, Illinois. What inspired you to own and operate a local independent bookstore?

When the previous owners of Frugal Muse decided to close the store, I approached Robyn about the possibility of purchasing the store. Having managed Frugal Muse for 12 years and therefore possessing a working knowledge of the store and the industry, I was well-equipped to take over as an owner. A smart and quick study, my wife left her previous job and soon became my partner in the decision-making process, and we've been happy about the decision we made.



What is the story behind the name Frugal Muse?

Our somewhat esoteric name was created by one of the store's previous owners, and some customers are confused while others find it quaint. It's certainly unique. I tell people to think of "cheap inspiration" when they ask what our name means.

In addition to stocking new books, you allow customers to trade in their gently used books for store credit. This is one of the things I love about Frugal Muse! Tell us more about how this works, and why trade-ins are important to you as a store.

Donations and trade-ins are the lifeblood of our business, as our primary inventory is gently used. As you say, we also



Shop Around the Corner

sprinkle in brand-new books every week to ensure we have some of the latest and most popular titles.

You have an extensive collection of books full of gems—once I found a signed copy of Lois Ehlert's *Planting a Rainbow*! What types of books and genres do you carry? What makes your offerings different from other bookstores?

We carry every genre and virtually every type of book, and we pride ourselves on having the widest variety of gently used books in Chicagoland. Rather than stocking multiple copies of remainders, as most used bookstores do, we prefer to house a more diverse selection, and our 7,000-square-foot space certainly helps us do that.

It's a challenging time for local independent bookstores. What does your bookstore mean to the community—both the geographic community and book loving community, including kidlit and adult? How can readers support bookstores like yours?

Over the past 25 years, we've gradually become a staple in the western suburbs. Hosting book signings and other events has also helped us reach out to the community and differentiate us from the antisocial internet. Readers can support our store and our mission by avoiding sites like Amazon in favor of independent brick-and-mortar shops, paying with cash rather than cards, leaving positive online feedback, purchasing gift cards for loved ones who may not know about us, and, of course, by simply spreading the word about us.

Your support of local authors is something that makes Frugal Muse so special. (I'm so grateful to have had four book launch events at your bookstore!) What types of events do you host and why do you make an effort to partner with local authors?

We host a variety of events, from famous author signings to kids' parties, comedy nights, movie nights, and poetry/music open mic's. Our support of local authors, in particular, whether traditionally or self-published, in large part stems from my own authorship and my intimate understanding that local authors need support now more than ever.



Shop Around the Corner

If a local author is interested in doing an event, what is the best way for them to contact you?

The best way for local authors to inquire about possible signings is to email us at frugalmuse@currently.com with their book information and what they hope to accomplish from a signing event. We usually respond within one week.

You are also an author yourself! What inspired you to become an author and what you are working on now?

I've been writing since I was a little kid and writing seriously since high school. After getting my Master's degree in English, I taught creative writing and literature for many years in college and have published nearly a dozen short stories. My first novel, *The Cryptic Reflex*, is forthcoming later this year, and I have several other completed novels, a play, and a children's book parody that I'm shopping.

What are your hopes for the future for Frugal Muse?

My hope is that more people slowly return to in-person shopping and begin to support independent local businesses, in general. Brick-and-mortar bookstores, in particular, and real paper books (as opposed to E-books) are vital to the lifeblood of a community and culture; people retain more when they read real books, and the experience of reading paper books is less stressful and more enjoyable for most folks.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Our mission is and has always been to sell books and other media at great prices and help people recycle their used items in return for the things they want now. As "shop local" people by nature, my wife Robyn and I get lots of satisfaction from the smiles our customers get knowing their stuff won't go into landfills and that they get freebies with their credit and purchase other items at rock-bottom prices.

As for discounts, we're always happy to order brand-new books at 20% off. As long as the title's still in print, we

can accommodate the customer. Also, we order used books from other sources for folks who either don't have or use computers or simply don't wish their personal information to be on the internet.

You can learn more about Frugal Muse Books at: <https://frugalmusebooks.com> 🌟



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

Illustrator's Tips

by Stacey Previn

Being a guest speaker for students taking graphic design and illustration courses is one of the things I love doing! I have done it for several colleges and high schools. It's a day of answering questions about things that aren't in any curriculum and helping young designers and illustrators find their way and get honest answers.

Having published three children's books as the author-illustrator—*Find Spot* (Little Brown for Young Readers), *Aberdeen* (Viking), and *If Snowflakes Tasted like Fruitcake* (Little Bee)—doesn't make me an expert by any stretch, but I have also have done a lot of advertising, editorial, and publishing illustrations for a wide range of clients over the last 25 years. I know enough about how to get your work published. It is rough. I am not going to lie and say it is easy. There are less illustrations published now than in the past 20 years, but the good news is that publishing has been a mainstay. Publishers are always looking for fresh new illustrators.

My day job involves a lot of digital work, so I am in Adobe Suite every day. This is partly why I am not focusing on digital as my illustration style. I need to walk away from the computer, although working digitally has some benefits. I can work faster on the computer than by hand for the most part. Sometimes, I don't even need to sketch the scene first, and being able to copy and paste makes it very easy to be consistent with your character's proportions and keep colors exact.

I certainly don't have all the answers. I am still making my way in this publishing world, but no matter what medium you choose and style you have, some things are universally applicable.

Take what works for you and discard the rest.

EXPERIMENT WITH TECHNIQUE

Try different mediums and play. Every Illustrator I have ever known can use many mediums and work in many styles. There are endless ways to use the mediums and styles to perfection. Something will float to the top. Most editors



want an illustrator to be associated with their style. Once you have found something that feels right for you, stick with it for a while and really make it your own. I wrote and illustrated three books in three different styles. The first was in the style I was known for. I only got to do the others in different styles because I was the author. So, there's your loophole if you want one!

LEAN INTO YOUR STRENGTHS

If color is your thing, go all in. If highly detailed images are what you thrive for, then by all means hunker down and go deep. You don't need to work on what you are not good at as much as you need to hone what you excel at. That is what will set you apart.

LOOK AT OTHER ILLUSTRATORS' WORK

You are not copying but understanding what they did to solve certain composition and color quandaries, which can help unlock a way for you to tackle your toughest illustrations. I am always looking at how others have handled backgrounds!

LISTEN TO FEEDBACK

If you show your work to random people and get the same comments you might want to listen to what they're saying. It doesn't matter whether it's your kid, your mom, or an editor. Find out what they are reacting to. If they all say they love the same thing, ask why. Is it the expression on a face or the color choices? Understand what is making the connection



Illustrator's Tips

for them to that piece. Same goes for the opposite. If many people don't like a piece, ask why. Is something out of proportion or perspective? The viewer is not always able to articulate exactly what they like or don't like so you need to glean that info from the cues they are giving and ask question to get there. The more you know about why something is or isn't resonating with your audience, the better.

KEEP A CALENDAR

If you have a big project, like a picture book you are trying to get done by a certain date, break it down. Put some complicated illustrations in between some simple ones on the calendar to get you to the finish. Figure out how long you think it will take and double it. It always takes longer than you think. Being able to see it on paper makes it feel real and crossing off finished pieces gives you that sense of accomplishment that is tough to see in big projects and makes the anxiety of the unknown go away.

ALWAYS MOVE FORWARD

Even on days when you feel you didn't make any headway, you did. Don't be discouraged. You now know what doesn't work so that is also progress. So, the next day when you start again, you have more information than you had the day before and that is still moving forward.

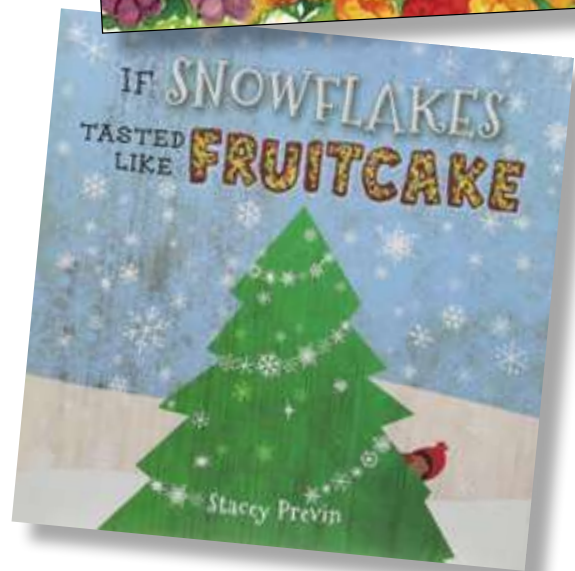
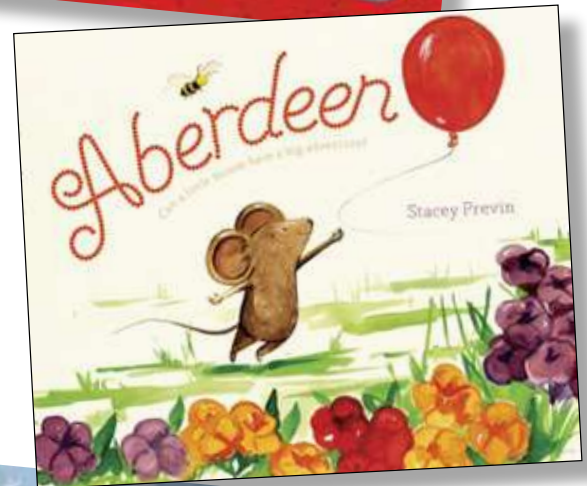
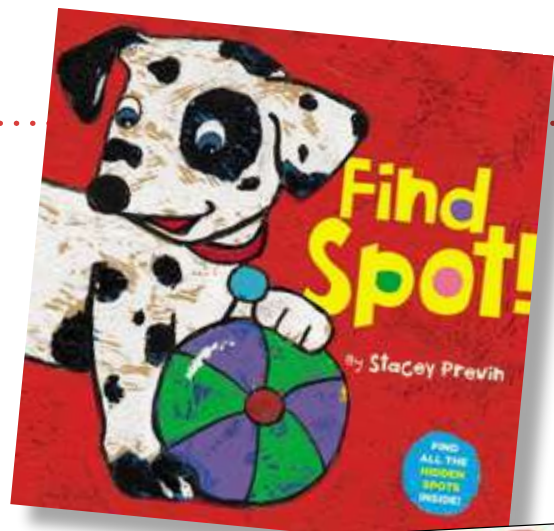
BE PERSISTENT

Tenacity is key to success. An illustration job doesn't fall in anyone's lap (for the most part it doesn't). It takes a lot of hard work and a really strong portfolio. It's a long journey, so prepare yourself for the climb. If it's what you want, it's well worth the hard work.

NETWORK

Meeting someone is the best way to get your work seen. It also give you a chance for your personality to shine. There are so many industry events with SCBWI. Take advantage of the opportunities to put your work in front of professionals. This is the best way to get on someone's radar and hopefully land a job.

I hope some of these tips prove helpful and if you have some of your own, I am all ears! 🌟



Writing and storytelling is something STACEY PREVIN has always loved. She has been an illustrator her entire adult life, so combining the two is her true passion. Seeing a child become hooked on reading is an amazing thing, and it is a privilege for her to be part of that in any way.

www.staceyprevin.com

Writer's Bookshelf



WORTH THE WAIT—MY JOURNEY TO PUBLISHING by Gauri Dalvi Pandya

"Patience is not the ability to wait but the ability to keep a good attitude while waiting"
— Joyce Meyer

All I knew in the beginning was that I wanted to write picture books for children and get published. What I didn't realize is how much patience it would require.

A lot happens when you are waiting.

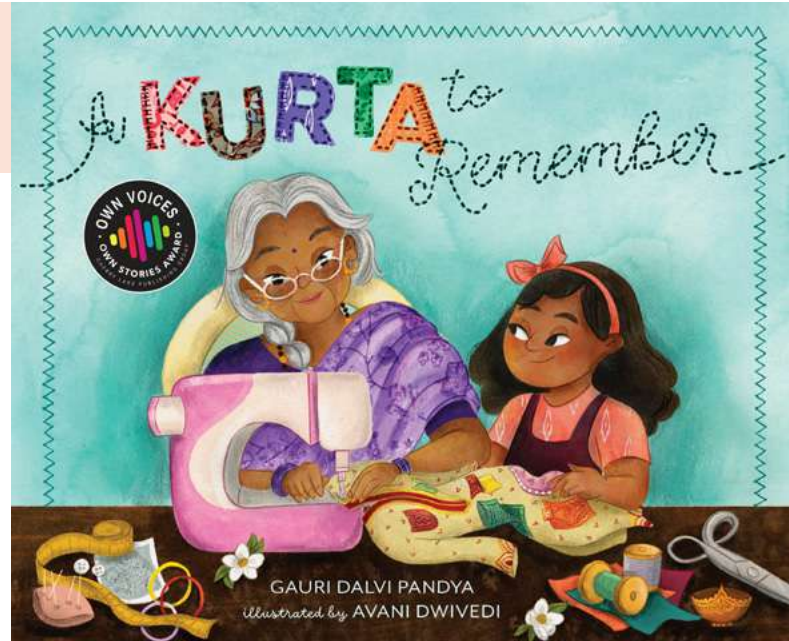
At first, it was exciting. The advertising writer in me was looking forward to the ideation, the words that would take the idea forward, and how they would culminate into a story.

But slowly, the anticipation morphed into perfectionism, and it began to hold me back. I was graduating from writing 30-second advertising scripts to a full length 500-word manuscript. As the ideas flowed and the words appeared, the critic in me began to overpower my writing. It began to dictate what I *should* write... how I *should* write... and not what I wanted to write.

That's when the loneliness of both writing and waiting hit me, that is until a dear friend offered some advice that I join a bigger network, a bigger support group, a group of like-minded people who loved writing for children and who were willing to read my stories. I joined SCBWI and the 12X12 Challenge, created by Julie Hedlund.

Through SCBWI, I attended various workshops, conferences, and sessions on First Pages that guided me in the right direction. 12X12 gave me the discipline of writing a draft every month. Sometimes I would have a draft, sometimes I would just jot down ideas for the stories I wanted to tell. At the end of the road, a writing workshop led by Esther Hershenhorn, helped me find my first critique group.

Writing together as a group made the waiting easier. Sometimes, I couldn't write for days but the group helped me stay on track because even when I wasn't writing,



reading their manuscripts taught me a lot about my own process. But even then, on some days, the waiting brought out my insecure side. Frustrating moments of self-doubt, jealousy, and thoughts like "am I good enough?" and "can I even write?" began to surface. It got tougher, but giving up never entered my mind.

While I was scribbling ideas, I joined a 3-year course on the glorious teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā taught by Swamini Brahmaprajnananda Saraswati. This enriching course helped me to dig deeper and uncover layers that I never knew existed. Facing my fears, my insecurities, and my limited self-beliefs helped me grow as a person. I rediscovered my strengths and worked on my weaknesses. And most importantly, I learned to be kind to my creative self. It was an eye-opener!

I was glad that I was still waiting to be published.

I went back to the start.

I began to write about what I knew. I drew from my experiences as a mother, mining memories and making it personal, but at the same time, universal. Over a decade of advertising writing became a bonus, and my life experience



Writer's Bookshelf

of having lived in three countries provided perspective, helping me tell universal stories about my culture. I learnt to surrender to the paper and to the process of storytelling, and I let the story guide me.

I finally found my voice.

I began to see the joy and the magic in waiting.

I read more to write better. The library turned into my university, and I spent hours reading picture books, observing, making notes. I began to notice that how sometimes the illustrations took the story forward and how sometimes a few impactful words were more effective than lengthy sentences. How a character's arc evolves, what brings about the changes and conflict resolution, all these aspects, began to unravel better.

I read the books aloud. I typed the text to feel the rhythm of the writing.

I began to listen to the stories. I looked up podcasts of authors and illustrators I admired and learned from their writing journeys.

Now, I wasn't chasing ideas anymore, the ideas were choosing me.

Finally, after about forty drafts and numerous title revisions, *A Kurta to Remember* (Sleeping Bear Press) was born in 2018. The title of the book was suggested by one of my critique partners, once again, proving how important it is to be a part of a critique group.

Once I was confident with my story structure, page turners, and character arc, I sent it to my list of agents and editors. After a long and hopeful wait, I received rejections from everyone.

But waiting had taught me well.

It no longer felt like a burden, now it was an opportunity to rethink and revise. Based on new feedback, the manuscript was once again rewritten,...many times. Every piece of feedback helped me dig deeper. Every revision helped me to transform the story into something uniquely me. It reflected my voice, the way I wanted to write for children.

I decided to take the leap and enter the story in various contests.

While waiting for more agents and editors to respond, I finally received some encouraging news. The manuscript of *A Kurta to Remember* won the SCBWI Many Voices Prize (2021). It was exciting, and in a way, I felt validated for my hard work.

Amidst some more rejections, in the same year, my manuscript was also chosen as a #PBParty finalist (2021) hosted by Mindy Alyse Weiss.

And finally came the big news!

A Kurta to Remember was the grand prize winner of Sleeping Bear Press's Own Voices Own Stories award in 2022. This landed me a publishing contract with Sleeping Bear Press. I was delighted that this story had finally found a warm, welcoming home.

The book was released in April 2024. It is my debut children's picture book, illustrated by Avani Dwivedi.

This book is now a finalist for The Pedro and Daniel Intersectionality Book Awards, 2025.

Patience is a great teacher.

I learnt not to give up on my writing goals.

I learnt to push my boundaries when I felt stuck.

I learnt to better my craft when I wasn't getting the desired result.

And while I needed a lot of *patience to wait*, what I did *while waiting* taught me to be *patient*.

It was indeed truly worth the wait. 🌸

Born and brought up in India, GAURI DALVI PANDYA is an author and illustrator now living in Chicago. An ardent fan of picture books, she has also published a Sanskrit shloka book series for children on Amazon. She is also a teacher for a program called SHINE (Spiritual Heritage of India for Next-generation Empowerment) that shares the glory of India's spiritual heritage with children.

Follow her on Instagram @gauridalvipandya
www.gauridalvipandya.com

Mentor Texts

TEN MENTOR TEXTS TO JUMPSTART YOUR NEXT PICTURE BOOK by Jenny Wagh

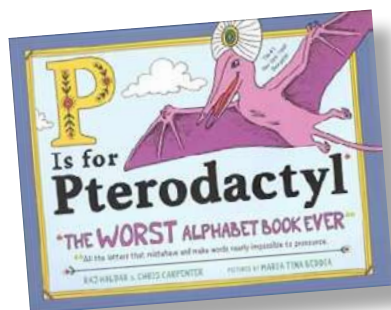
Sometimes we all need a little motivation to write. When I am having a tough time creating new innovative ideas for a manuscript, I give myself an assignment. It may be sparked by the season, like a spooky fall tale or a narrative nonfiction after a walk in the woods. Below are ten mentor texts to inspire you.

Your Assignment Is...

WRITE AN...

1. ALPHABET BOOK

Mentor Text: *P Is for Pterodactyl: The Worst Alphabet Book Ever* by Raj Haldar & Chris Carpenter, illustrated by Maria Beddia (Sourcebook Explores, 2018). "...Raj Haldar (aka rapper Lushlife) turns the traditional idea of an alphabet book on its head..."



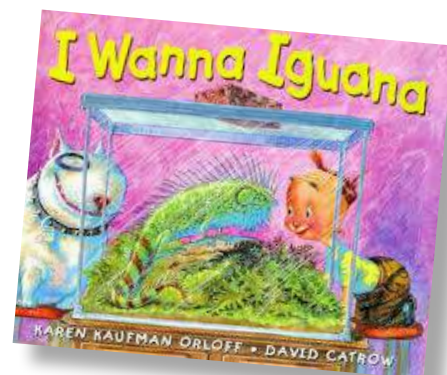
Create two columns on a sheet of loose-leaf paper. Every few lines write a letter. A, B, C, D, E... Jump in with any letter you want to build your story around. Example C for cat. Build your story letter by letter. Perhaps by M there is a mouse joining into the antics.

Another great example of an alphabet book is *Oops, Pounce, Quick, Run!: An Alphabet Caper*, written and illustrated by Mike Twohy (HarperCollins, 2016).

2. EPISTOLARY STORY

Mentor Text: *I Wanna Iguana* by Karen Kaufman Orloff, illustrated by David Catrow (G.P. Putman, 2004). "Alex just has to convince his mom to let him have an iguana, so he puts his arguments in writing."

Imagine a correspondence between two main characters. Is there a misunderstanding? Are they trying to persuade Grandma to come for a visit? Note by note, let your story unfold.

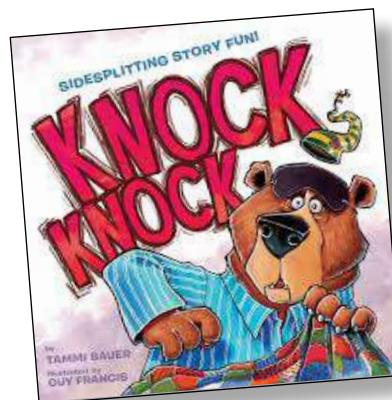


This assignment became my debut picture book, *Eggasaurus*, illustrated by Hallie Bateman (Simon & Schuster, 2022). A moment of squee for me was seeing *Eggasaurus* paired with *I Wanna Iguana* on a teacher's desk.

3. KNOCK KNOCK JOKE BOOK WITH AN ARC

Mentor Text: *Knock Knock* by Tammi Sauer, illustrated by Guy Francis (Scholastic, 2018)

"*Knock Knock* is a fresh and innovative method of humorous storytelling that uses knock-knock jokes to tell the story of Bear and his woodland friends."



Developmentally children begin to enjoy the format of the joke by four or five years old, understanding the turn-taking involved. By six or seven, they begin to enjoy the complex word play.

Internet search knock-knock jokes. You can even focus on a theme. Example: barn yard animal knock-knock jokes. Knock, Knock! Who's there? Interrupting cow. Interrupting cow w...? MOOO! What would happen if animal after animal arrived at the farmer's door?



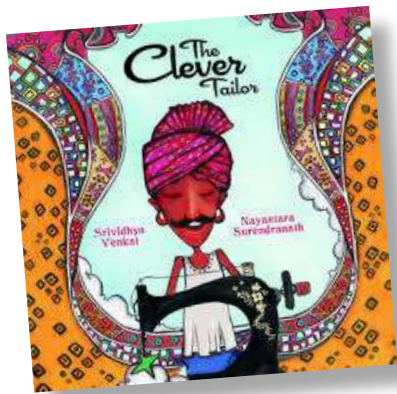
Mentor Texts



4. CUMULATIVE TALE

Mentor Text: *The Piñata that the Farm Maiden Hung* by Samantha R. Vamos, illustrated by Sebastia Serra (Charlesbridge, 2023). “...the farm maiden prepares a piñata from scratch with help from a boy, horse, goose, cat, sheep, and farmer... with the familiarity of ‘The House That Jack Built,’ the tale cleverly incorporates Spanish words...”

This format is highly interactive and engaging, especially for children, as they develop vocabulary, memory, and comprehension skills through the predictable yet playful structure. Create a buildable story around a holiday, family, or community event.



5. RETELLING OF A FOLK TALE

Mentor Text: *The Clever Tailor* by Srividhya Venkat, illustrated by Srividhya Venkat (Karadi Tales, 2019). The Clever Tailor “is a contemporary Indian take on a European folktale about the value of being resourceful and finding creative ways to minimize waste.”

Put a modern twist on tales orally told throughout time. What would an Aesop’s fable look like today? Can you find a modern take on “The Lion and the Mouse”? What about a Grimm fairy tale?



6. SHORT & SWEET

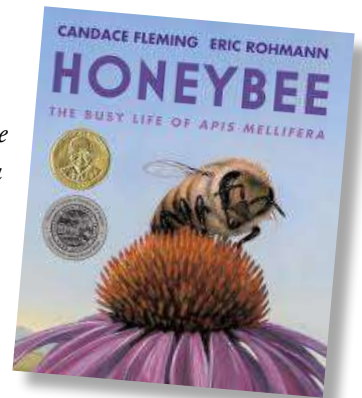
Mentor Text: *Together We Swim* by Valerie Bolling, illustrated by Kaylani Juanita (Chronicle Books, 2023). “Jumping into the water can be more than a little scary! But with Mom’s steady arms, there’s no fear of sinking. With a kick, a splash...one

determined boy finds his groove, making waves in this fun-filled day at the pool.” Only seventy-seven words!

Make a splash with a short and sweet text. [Watch this clip](#) of Simone Manuel and Penny Oleksiak tie for the 2016 100-meter freestyle Olympic Gold Medal, with a time of 52.7 seconds. Write a text in fifty-two words expressing the excitement of her race. Brainstorm additional moments that can be captured with emotion and brevity.

7. NERD OUT WITH NARRATIVE NON-FICTION

Mentor Text: *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera* by Candace Fleming, illustrated by Eric Rohmann (Neal Porter Books, 2020). “A tiny honeybee emerges through the wax cap of her cell. Apis builds wax comb to store honey...defends the hive from invaders. And finally, she begins her new life as an adventurer.”



Think of a plant, animal, or insect you want to take a deep dive into. Observe it in nature, watch a documentary, or read other nonfiction books. Choose a fascinating fact that you are dying to share with your neighbor, Aunt Ida, or the person in line behind you at the grocery store. Use it to hook others into your manuscript.

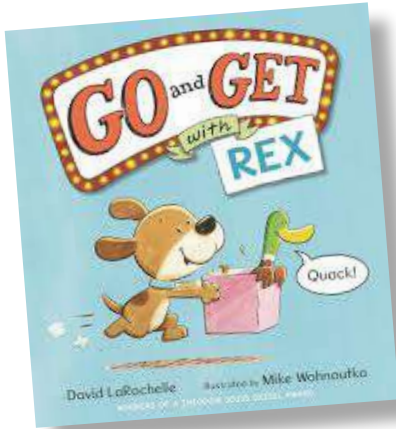
8. ONE DAY

Mentor Text: *Saturday* written and illustrated by Oge Mora (Little Brown, 2019). “...a mother and daughter look forward to their special Saturday routine.... But this Saturday, one thing after another goes wrong.... Mom is nearing a meltdown...until her loving daughter reminds her that being together is the most important thing of all.” Give yourself a set period in time for your story, a specific



Mentor Texts

day of the week, or time of day. Is it a weekly story time at the library or Tuesday tee ball? Create a story around a single day or event that resonates with children and caregivers alike.



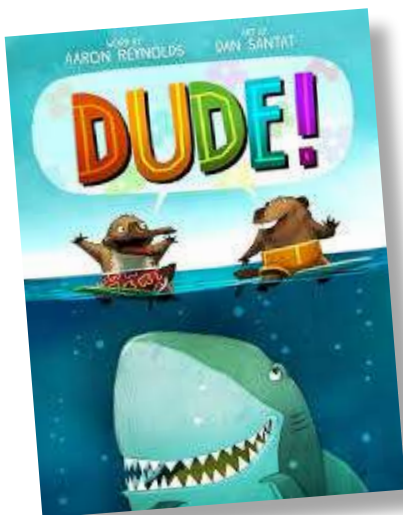
9. DELIGHTFUL SURPRISE

Mentor Text: *Go and Get with Rex* by David LaRochelle, illustrated by Mike Wohnoutka (Candlewick, 2024). “Jack, Jill, and Rex are excited to play a game of “Go and Get! The rules are simple: on the count of three, each player must go and get something that begins with a certain letter,” but Rex’s unconventional choices add a humorous twist to this alphabetical adventure.

Start with the expected and give it a twist. Maybe there is a dragon that cannot breathe fire, or a penguin that wishes it could fly. What delightful twist will surprise the reader?

10. WORDLESS OR NEARLY WORDLESS

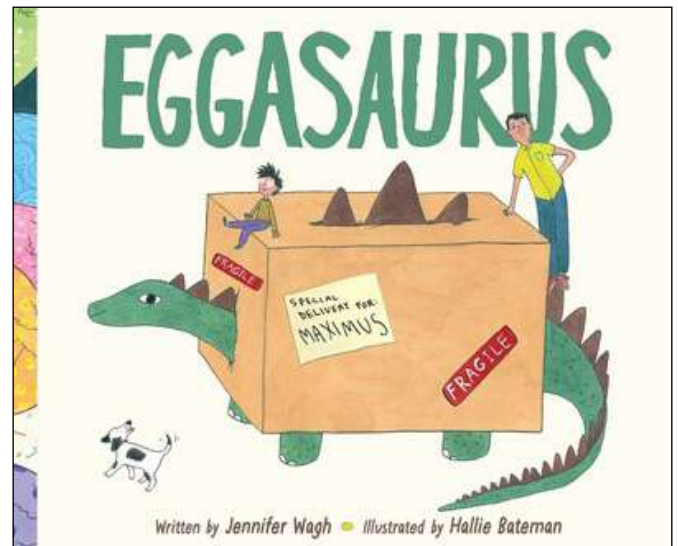
Mentor Text: *Dude!* by Aaron Reynolds, illustrated by Dan Santat (Roaring Brook Press, 2018). Platypus and beaver “want to go surfing but dude, there’s this shark in the ocean, too.”



Fold a scrap piece of printer paper, creating sixteen rectangles. Ignore the first and last space. Select a word or go wordless. Sketch out or create art notes for the rising and falling action. My word is **SQUIRREL** because they are sweet, cute, and loveable until they chew through the drywall.

I hope this list of mentor texts inspires you to complete an assignment or ten. Remove the pressure to create a perfect manuscript. Consistent creative writing lets you learn what works and what does not, allowing you to refine your personal style and process. Have fun and play with a set of parameters. 🌟

JENNY WAGH is a former preschool teacher and author of *EGGASAUROS* (S&S 2022). She has four kayaks, confetti makes her happy cry, and she has a passion for pagination and short picture book texts.



Season's Crop

by Sheila Path-McMahon

Picture Books

FICTION

Don't Forget Dotty

Written and Illustrated by Renée Galvin
Publisher: Renée Galvin
August 2025
ISBN: 9798218661250

Can I Keep It, Please?

By John Sullivan
Illustrated by Jessica Gibson
Beach Lane Books
August 2025
ISBN: 9781665955560

The Daddy-Daughter Dance

By Malcolm Newsome
Illustrated by Jenin Mohammed
Henry Holt & Co.
October 2025
ISBN: 9781250874382

I Can Invent Great Things, Too!

By Scott Comperda
Illustrated by Noah Warnes
Self-published (Amazon)
May 2025
ISBN: 9798316317219

NON-FICTION

Consider the Birds

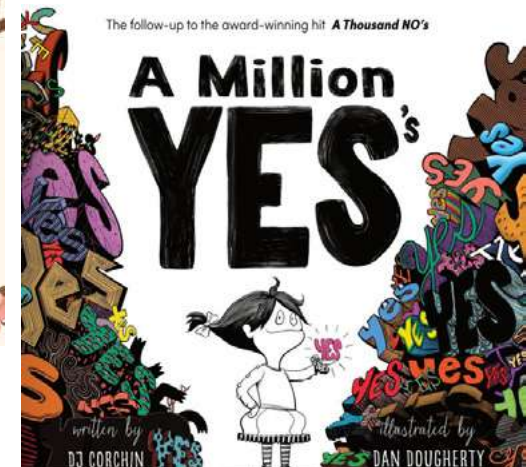
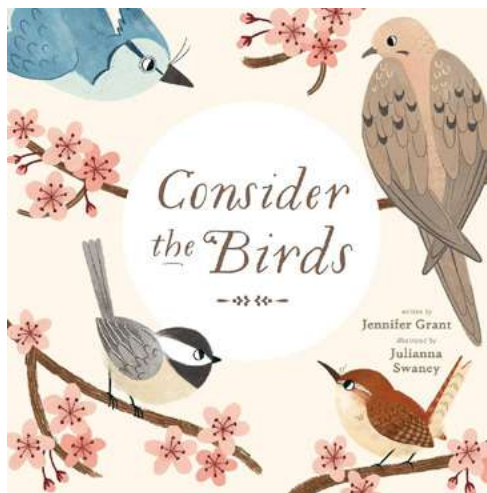
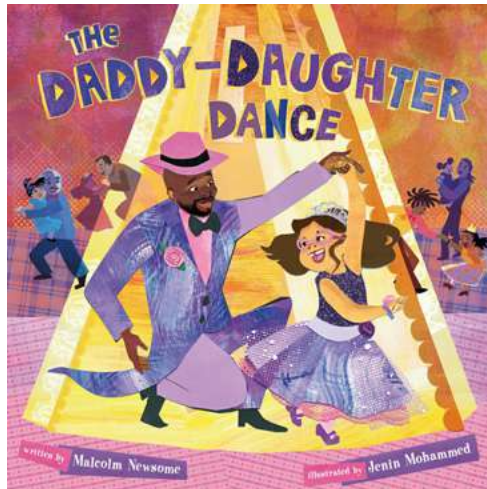
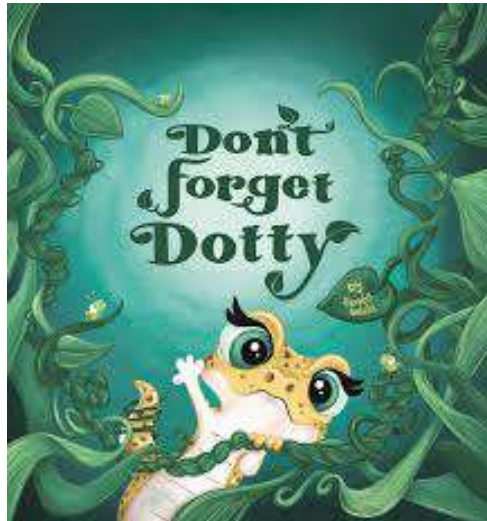
By Jennifer Grant
Illustrated by Julianna Swaney
Eerdmans Books for Young Readers
August 2025
ISBN: 9780802855628

Plants of Enchantment: ABCs of New Mexico Plants

By Ashley Hansen-Zappe
Illustrated by Dawn Wheat
Self-Published under Viridian River
Books, October 2025
ISBN: 9798218738976

A Million YES's

By DJ Corchin
Illustrated by Dan Dougherty
The phazelFOZ Company, LLC
September 2025
ISBN: 9781732864634



Season's Crop

Middle Grade

FICTION

Georgia Watson and the 99 Percent Campaign

By Sara F. Shacter

Illustrated by Deborah Topolski

Regal House/Fitzroy Books

October 2025

ISBN: 9781646036356

The Dog Who Made It Better

By Katherin Nolte

Illustrated by Brooke O'Neill

Random House, August 2025

ISBN: 9780593814703

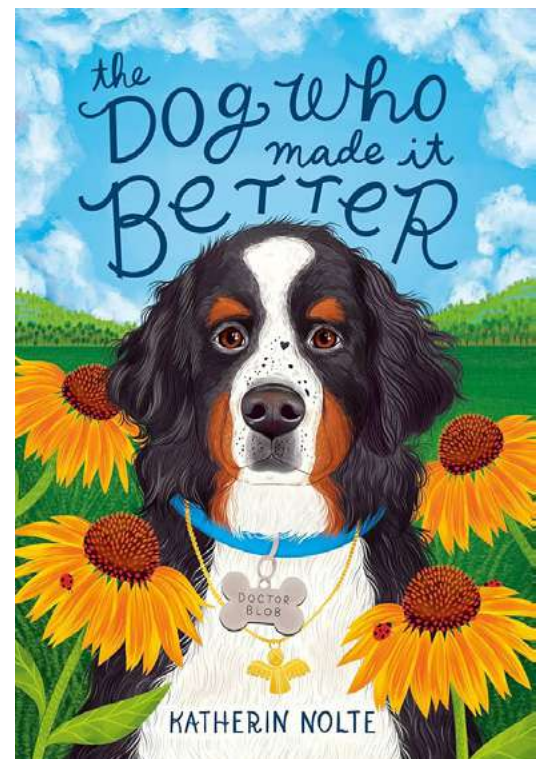
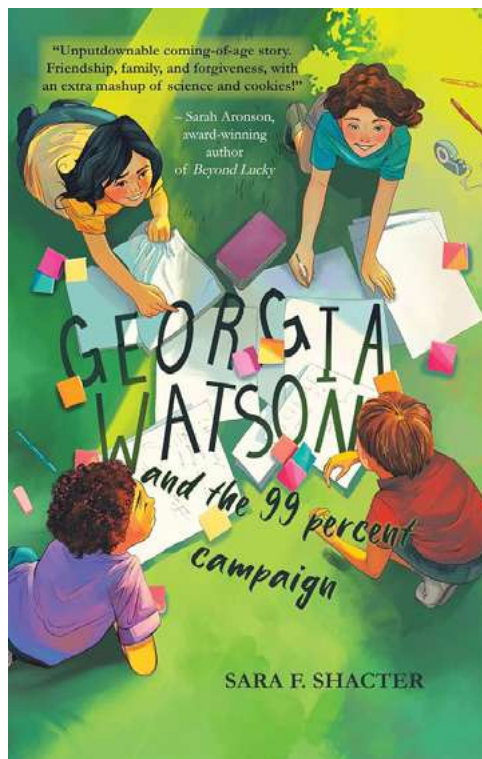
Make Way For Monarchs (ECO WARRIORS), Book 3

By Carolyn Armstrong

Climate Kid Adventure Books

September 2025

ISBN: 9798218392390



Young Adult

FICTION

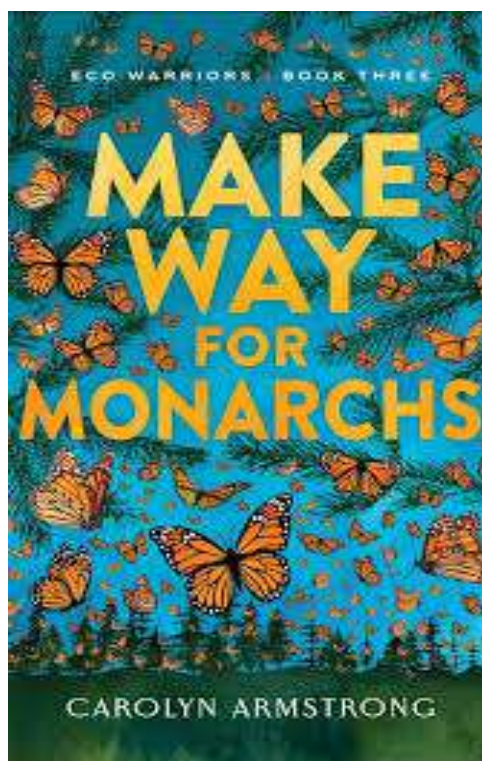
Playing by Heart

By Carmela A. Martino

Arquilla Press

September 2025

ISBN: 9798999435217



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