

Spring 2026

# Highlighter

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Journal

A COLLECTION OF FIRSTS

SIER



SCBWI Mid-Atlantic

# Highlighter

Spring 2026 // A Collection of Firsts

## Thank you to this issue's contributors

Cover illustration: Fish School, **Jeff Soifer**, [jeffsoifer.com](http://jeffsoifer.com)

Table of contents background illustration: **Lexi Stanton**,  
[behance.net/lexistaton](http://behance.net/lexistaton)

Letter from the RAs: **Erin Teagan**, [erinteagan.com](http://erinteagan.com); **Valerie Patterson**, [valerieopatterson.com](http://valerieopatterson.com)

"First Things First": **Tanisha L. Brown**

"When a First Feels Like Failure": **Stephanie Phillips**

"Love at First Sight": **Ann McCallum Staats**,  
[annmccallumbooks.com](http://annmccallumbooks.com)

"Meet an Illustrator": **Lexi Staton**

The *Highlighter* is a quarterly journal published by the Mid-Atlantic Region (DC/Virginia) of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).

For more information on our region, see <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic>

Natalie Engel, Editor  
Jeff Soifer, Layout Editor  
Korena Di Roma Howley,  
Copyeditor

To see the full list of regional volunteers, visit <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic/our-team>

### Submissions

Are you interested in contributing an article, illustration, or other content to *Highlighter*? Please send your ideas and/or portfolio link to Natalie Engel at [MidAtlanticHighlighter@gmail.com](mailto:MidAtlanticHighlighter@gmail.com)

*Contributors retain copyright to their work; material can only be reused with their permission. Non-SCBWI resources are not endorsed or affiliated, just included in case they're of interest.*

The background of the page is a stylized illustration of a forest. On the left, a large tree with vertical green stripes dominates the scene. In the foreground, a woman wearing a bright red hooded cloak with a floral pattern is walking through the woods. The forest floor is green with various plants and trees in shades of green and brown. The overall style is whimsical and artistic.

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic

# Highlighter

*A Collection of Firsts*  
Spring 2026

## CONTENTS

- 1 **Letter from the RAs**  
Mid-Atlantic Regional Advisors' column
- 2 **First Things First**  
Tanisha L. Brown
- 6 **When a First Feels Like Failure**  
Stephanie Phillips
- 8 **Love at First Sight**  
Ann McCallum Staats
- 10 **Meet an Illustrator**  
Lexi Staton
- 14 **Resources**  
A curated recommendation list
- 15 **Events**
- 16 **Mood Board**  
Inspiration board featuring work by Mid-Atlantic members



## A Collection of Firsts

Cheers to 2026 and a new Highlighter edition! Please welcome new content editor Natalie Engel who volunteers together with layout editor Jeff Soifer and copyeditor Korena DiRoma Howley to produce the journal.

This issue – “A Collection of Firsts” – features a few different pieces about the “firsts” we encounter on the publishing path: from first realizing an interest in making art for children, to considering the specific elements that make your project’s first impression shine.

We’re happy to announce our upcoming Mid-Atlantic webinar. On May 19, join illustrator Ebony Glenn to learn how to create a sustainable career in illustration and explore

the many ways illustrators can support themselves over time.

We'd also love to see you at a future virtual meet-up: the bi-monthly Illustrator Social hosted by Cynthia Cliff, the Picture Books & Java book club, the Central Virginia Write-In and the Indie- and Self-Publishing social hosted by Joyana Peters.

To read the full description of these events—and more—and to register, please check our regional landing page.

Regards and all best on your creative endeavors,

Erin Teagan  
Co-Regional Advisor  
[midatlantic-ra@scbwi.org](mailto:midatlantic-ra@scbwi.org)

Valerie Patterson  
Co-Regional Advisor  
[midatlantic-ra2@scbwi.org](mailto:midatlantic-ra2@scbwi.org)

# First Things First: *Process Before Progress*

By Tanisha L. Brown

Once attended a master class sponsored by We Need Diverse Books at the Library of Congress. Kwame Alexander hosted. Jacqueline Woodson and Nikki Giovanni spoke. But it was this new guy named Jason Reynolds who said something that got me. He wasn't even supposed to speak that day. Mr. Reynolds sat in the back of the room, simply happy to be there, much like myself, until Mr. Alexander called him to the mic. His advice: process before progress.

This phrase propels my writing to this day. Whenever I'm stuck or frustrated, I look for a process to get me back on track towards progress. Last year, I discovered two processes at the same time. One was for revision, which I'll write about in a future issue. The other was for showing up to do the work. In this article, let's chat about pre-writing rituals.

I'm a busy, slow writer with tons of ideas. I never had a pre-writing anything because ain't nobody got time for that. I sat down and wrote. And it worked—, until I started revising. My current work-in-progress has been through multiple revisions. However, none addressed the major plot problems I knew existed but didn't know how to fix. For months, I tore apart the manuscript, scrutinizing everything. My word count exploded. I began to hate the story and, by extension, my office because that's where I went to be unproductive. The whole thing left me depleted and angry.

I needed a process. So, I enrolled in a 12-week class called "Revise A Novel with Me," taught by Anne-Marie Strohman, founder of KidLit Craft, in hopes of finding one.

One day, we talked about beginning our revising sessions by "breaking the seal": doing one little

thing to tell your brain it's time to work. It can be as simple as turning on your computer or writing a sentence in a journal. I chose to enter my office early in the morning, open the blinds, then leave. Meanwhile, I did other stuff. Later, I returned to

*"breaking the seal": doing one little thing to tell your brain it's time to work... can be as simple as turning on your computer or writing a sentence in a journal.*

the office somewhat relaxed and ready to work. I wanted to work. I wondered, What had changed?

After "breaking the seal" in this way for a week, I realized that revising stresses me out. In choosing



Inside Tanisha Brown's Studio. Photo Courtesy of Tanisha Brown

## First Things First: Process Before Progress

(continued)

to come back to the office later in the day, I had inadvertently created space for me to calm down and ease in—a process also known as a “soft start.”

“A soft start to your day could mean many things, but it often includes an intentional focus on your body, breath and immediate needs, and does so without rushing yourself into problem-solving or productivity mode,” Lauren Thomann writes in *Real Simple*.

Over time, I have honed “breaking the seal” into a soft start practice that I refer to as my pre-writing ritual. It helped me through the class and through a satisfying deep revision of my manuscript. Process before progress, indeed!

My ritual emphasizes physical, mental, and spiritual wellness. Also, I recently completed an office makeover to include a reading nook/calming corner where I can meditate before each work session and disconnect afterward (see photos). On an ideal day, my ritual looks like this:

7:30 a.m. – Break the Seal: Open blinds in office and leave.

7:45 - 9 a.m. – Feed/walk dogs. Work out/personal hygiene. Eat breakfast.

9 - 10:30 a.m. – Sit in reading nook/calm corner with cup of tea. Be still. Daily devotional/meditation.

10:30 - 11 a.m. – Review intentions for the day’s work session. Turn on soothing music. Open laptop. Research/write/revise.

On a less-than-ideal day (which is pretty often, since I’m a full-time caregiver), I may only accomplish one or two of these morning rituals. Regardless, after my soft start, my brain knows what it’s time to do. Other benefits are increased stamina and productivity. I’m able to focus longer during sessions, particularly challenging ones, and get more accomplished.

A first step can be as simple as opening the blinds, or as detailed as following a full-on ritual. All that matters is that the process works for you.

After all: *process before progress*.



Inside Tanisha Brown's Studio.  
Photo Courtesy of Tanisha Brown

# First Things First: Process Before Progress

(continued)

In my excitement on discovering a prewriting ritual, I asked my go-to productivity maven and friend, author Yvonne Ventresca (BLACK FLOWERS, WHITE LIES and PANDEMIC) her thoughts on the topic.



Yvonne Ventresca  
Photo Courtesy of  
Countryside Studios

## TB: Do you preform any pre-writing rituals?

**YV:** It might sound cliché, but I often light a candle while I write, and I don't get up until I blow it out at the end of the session. There is no social media during candle time! And burning candles cannot be left unattended! It really helps me keep my butt in the chair and my mind focused. I have a nice collection I've received as gifts, and I think about the person who gave me the candle as cheering me on.

## TB: Do you notice an increase in productivity?

**YV:** I'm pretty good at staying on task during revision, but the rituals definitely provide a boost during the drafting phase. I interviewed (author and National Book

Award winner) Will Alexander (GOBLIN SECRETS) about rituals for a presentation, and he said, "I find that the single most helpful practice is a strong sense of ritual. Consistency is important—and often impossible. If circumstances prevent us from writing at the same time and in the same place, then listening to the same piece of music or lighting the same candles can establish the subconscious understanding that it is Time to Write."

## TB: When working on a project, how do you gage your productivity?

**YV:** I'm fanatical about tracking my time spent working. I've been doing that for about 10 years, ever since someone asked me during a presentation how long it took me to write my debut novel and I didn't know the answer. It seems like something we should know! Counting words doesn't work for me, because during revision the words go down and that feels like negative progress, even if the story improves. And for me, tracking word count can lead to rushing to reach the goal. But if I'm going to work for two hours regardless of the word count, I might as well do my very best work during that time. I track my time old school, jotting start and end times on a piece of scrap paper, and at the end of the day I note the total on a paper calendar. At the end of each month, I put the totals in a spreadsheet so I can see a snapshot of writing vs marketing vs volunteering vs teaching, etc.

I think the key is to find a process that works and that you don't mind doing, so you stick with it.

## TB: Do you use any productivity software or apps?

**YV:** I used Trello and Forest during grad school (MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts) to keep me on track. I also liked Habitica for a while, although I do less of the gamification now and mostly use it as a checklist. I've heard good things about ToDoist and may try it for 2026. Change can keep it interesting. I also find using a simple erasable whiteboard to plan each week on Sunday night can be helpful.

## TB: What do you do when you aren't particularly productive during a writing session?

**YV:** It's important to give ourselves grace. I think the goal of creative productivity is to make it easier for ourselves. I also don't think it's necessary to write every day. Some people are more productive if they are deeply immersed less frequently. Cal Newport discusses different approaches in Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World.

## TB: What other productivity methods do you recommend?

**YV:** A few ideas:

- Use the two-minute rule. If it can be done in two minutes or less (or substitute your preferred

## First Things First: Process Before Progress

(continued)

amount of time), do the task instead of putting it on your to-do list.

- Batch unpleasant tasks. For example, I hate making phone calls (to schedule things or fix a problem) so I tend to do them all in a row and get them over with.
- David Allen (*Getting Things Done*) says, "Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them." Figure out a system that works for you, then use it to get the to-dos and other minutia out of your brain and stored someplace else. Then you have bandwidth for creative ideas instead.
- Set a timer for a short amount of time. (Ali Abdaal recommends five minutes in *Feel Good Productivity*. I tend to use 15 to 30.) When the timer ends, give yourself permission to stop writing if you want. But more sessions than not, it's easier to keep going once you overcome inertia. "The idea behind the rule is that taking the first step is

often the most challenging part of any task," Abdaal says.

- Keep a notepad (or document) to track all of the things that invariably pop into your head when you try to write. Research can often be done at a later time, and having a place to save ideas keeps you focused on the actual task at hand.
- Brian Tracy (*Eat That Frog*) advises doing the hardest task first, and I often ask myself what difficult thing I'm avoiding so I can tackle it early in the day.

**TB:** Do you have any 2026 goals you would like to share?

**YV:** 2026 continues to be about balance for me. There's writing, and there's the business around writing, and I strive to make progress with both. My current project is a domestic suspense thriller for adults. My most recent short story, "Silence" was included in *Behind the Revolving Door: An Anthology of Choices, Volume II* and nominated for a Pushcart

Prize. I procrastinate by reading productivity books and share writing resources on my blog at <https://yvonneventresca.com/productivity-for-writers.html> and my not-too-often newsletter <http://tinyurl.com/yv-newsletter>. You can find me on most socials @ YvonneVentresca.

Join the conversation. Tell us about your pre-writing rituals or share something special about your workspace by tagging @scbwi\_midatlantic. |H|

# When a First Feels Like Failure

by Stephanie Phillips

Writers often share stories about the milestones in their career that they will always remember. While it is wonderful when those first key moments are positive, the reality is that many of the “firsts” stamped on a writer’s brain are not.

My own negative “first” came at a time when I still carried the zealous, optimistic perspective of a new writer on the querying circuit.

Heading into the critique, I walked through the revolving doors of the hotel with such ease. Anticipation had been building about this day and what it could mean for my writing career. I had written a manuscript I loved, a manuscript I believed had a place in the world. And I had the opportunity to present it in person to an agent and hear what they thought.

My hopeful imagination allowed me to travel down the world of what ifs, wondering what it would be like to hear an agent say my project was everything they had been looking for. The idea that the critiquing agent wouldn’t like my work never crossed my mind. While I had prepared myself for the possibility that it wouldn’t be the right fit for this particular agent, I hadn’t prepared myself for a complete rejection of my writing itself.

When it came time for my critique, I carried my manuscript with pride. I had barely sat down when it became clear that this person did not understand my work or see potential in the piece. Quickly, all pride and potential dissipated. The agent went through her litany of notes, clicked her pen closed, and checked the time. Several minutes remained in the ten-minute slot I had signed up for. But there was nothing but my deflation left to fill the space.

I thanked her for her time and thoughts. I stuffed my papers into my bag and, as graciously as I could, tried to leave before the room closed in.

I needed air. I needed not to be around a bunch of optimistic writers still full of potential and pride. I hurried outside to reach for a lifeline.

“What was I thinking?” I mumbled into the phone. “Seriously. What am I doing here?”

Pacing through the parking lot, I unloaded. I was a fraud, a failure, an imposter trying to be something I wasn’t meant to be. I ranted about how I needed to change my expectations, come back to reality. Why did I ever think this was something I could achieve?

Silence lingered on the other end of the line. Just as I was about to fill the space with more self-doubt, I heard, “Steph. It’s one person. It’s one opinion. Just one.”

I wanted to believe this and see things rationally, but I was too far inside my head to let logic come easily. I considered the role of an agent to be one of unquestionable literary authority, that of a gatekeeper carrying power and prestige. I allowed this voice I had put on a pedestal to be the only voice I heard that day.

While I had prepared myself for the possibility that [my work] wouldn’t be the right fit for this particular agent, I hadn’t prepared myself for a complete rejection of my writing itself.

## When First Feels Like a Failure

(continued)

As soon as the conference was over, I grabbed my bag and raced to escape before anyone else could catch a glimpse of this failed writer.

On the drive home I continued to spiral, questioning myself and my ability to produce

Since the critique, my brain had been trying to tell myself everything I wasn't or couldn't be.

thoughtful, quality work. A voice inside my head told me it was time to stop

fantasizing—I wasn't the writer I had aspired to be. Trapped in a tunnel of criticism, it felt like there was nowhere to go but away from the writing world.

But when I woke up the next morning, it occurred to me: It wasn't my writing that needed a break; it was my mind that needed a pause. Since the critique, my brain had been trying to tell myself everything I wasn't or couldn't be. Any positive feedback I had ever received about the piece was erased immediately by one negative opinion.

Rather than allow the critique to crush my soul, I made a conscious decision to reset and distract myself from the replay cycling through my head. I went to yoga. I took a long walk with a friend. I removed myself from the experience, and with that distance, I could feel my attitude shift—away

from feeling frozen in someone else's ideas about my work and toward a strong desire to prove I belonged. To prove I could handle this. To prove to myself that I could take feedback while staying true to the writer I am.

After a few weeks of space, I revisited the agent's notes and reread my work. I found truth in many of her comments. Yes, the rhyme could be stronger in several stanzas. No, I hadn't given enough consideration to how the story would be illustrated. But the core of the piece was still beautiful and significant—whether she saw that, or not.

I wish I could say that this shift in perspective gave me all the protection I needed to navigate negativity from that point forward. But the reality is, writing is hard. Breaking into the industry is hard. And hearing a critique about work you have poured your heart, soul, and time into is HARD. The road to getting published demands vulnerability, and there is no way to shield yourself completely from the bruises along the way.

But the most challenging thing of all might actually be remaining true to yourself, your voice, your work as a writer—and your dream.

Which is why, rather than referring to the experience as my first negative critique, I choose to see it as my first chance at really understanding what it means to persevere. **|H|**

## Love at First Sight: *Making the First Impression Count*

By Ann McCallum Staats

I recently spoke with an editor who quantified just how much time someone has to garner a positive impression for a book pitch. Was that number a minute? Was it 30 seconds? Less, he told me. In today's short-attention-span environment, he said that a pitch has five seconds to make an impression. How long, then, does a reader take to choose a book? I'm going to guess that it's not much longer.

As with meeting someone new or setting up a profile on a dating app, the first impression counts. You want your manuscript or pitch to convince an editor to put their time and talent into your project—and your reader to treasure the time they spend with it.

You want your manuscript or pitch to convince an editor to put their time and talent into your project -- and your reader to treasure the time they spend with it. [P]ay attention to...your book's title...

That's why it's essential to pay attention to a few key elements, in particular, your book's title, organizational design, and opening lines.

The first hurdle is the title. Sure, it can be a working title and subject to change later, but it can't be a dud from the

get-go because that can immediately shut down interest. A title must pique curiosity. It needs to easily roll off the tongue. *Sam Had a Hat* isn't going to cut it—it's ho-hum and narrow. Neither is *The Dreamy Donkey Who Lived in a Barn With a Clever Mouse*. Too long and unwieldy. Plus,

imagine trying to fit all of that on a cover!

Try to think like a publisher: If a title is too complicated, people aren't going to remember it, and sales will suffer. Simple is better. An effective title hints at the book's content and hooks the reader with just a single word or short phrase. It entices someone, convincing them that the book is something they want and need.

**True story:** I once sold a book based on its title alone. Granted, I had to follow it up with a dynamite proposal, but it was the title that got me in the door. *Eat Your Math Homework* is a book that connects food and recipes with math. Older now and nearly

[I]t was the title that got me in the door.

out of print, it was my fourth book. At the time, I was talking to my editor at Charlesbridge, and when I told her the title, she said, "Send me a proposal and we'll get you a contract." (Oh, that getting a book contract was ever that easy again ...)

But what exactly is it about this title that works? First, it surprises the reader by putting two unlikely things together: food and math. It humorously riffs off the well-known excuse of "my dog ate my homework." There's also the universality of food. We humans—every single one of us—require and mostly enjoy food. The case I made, and suggested through the title, was that we also need and can enjoy math.

In fiction and nonfiction alike, the way you organize your writing can make-or-break the love, as well. For nonfiction, like most of my books, there are a myriad of different frameworks to

## Love at First Sight: Making the First Impression Count

(continued)

choose from. These include chronological order, question/answer, problem/solution, a survey or list, or something else. There are equally as many ways to approach a work of fiction (slice-of-life segment, dual point of view, hero's journey, etc.). The key is to format the story's organization in a way that surprises and woos the reader.

Opening lines can set the scene, foreshadow what's to come, ask a question, or present an idea contrary to reader expectation.

their sense of curiosity and wonder. FANTASTIC FLORA is all about the world's biggest, baddest, smelliest, and strangest plants. I used a survey approach. While the theme of the book is about how all plants use savvy survival techniques in order to thrive, each section investigates a subcategory of these adaptations. The headings tap into the "wow" factor and the appeal of being the superlative—the biggest, baddest, smelliest, or other -est—in a group. (Wait, a tree that weighs the same as 200 elephants? A plant that shoots seeds faster than a bullet? Oh, yeah.)

Finally, let's consider opening lines. These are hard. (Or easy; sometimes they just come to me, while every word that follows makes me toss and turn at night.) Opening lines can set the scene, foreshadow what's to come, ask a question, or present an idea contrary to reader expectation. They can catapult the plot into action or make you love (or hate) a character or situation. Whatever

My latest book is about plants—a potentially dull subject if not handled correctly. For that reason, I tried to hook readers by appealing to

form they take, these beginning sentences are critical to your project's appeal. Keep reading, they say, because this book is going to matter.

Regardless of the target age or genre, I'll make the case that writers need to read their opening lines out loud. Words aren't simply ink strokes on a page; they are the notes to your song. That song, of course, can be sweet, jarring, funny, cold, or mysterious, but it must transcend the page and appeal to your reader in a visceral way, like music.

Now, think back to your first love. Maybe you were a teenager or a wide-eyed ten-year-old pining after the kid next door. Maybe you were older. Regardless, falling in love for the first time didn't involve practical considerations, like where you would both live or who would get to use the bathroom first in the mornings. Instead, it was that feeling of "You are my sun, my moon, and all my stars," to quote E.E. Cummings. That's the first impression we strive to make: evoking that same gut-wrenching, heart-palpitating, urgent emotional response through our work and our words—in five seconds or less.

Read your work out loud to somebody. Does your project's title, the way it's organized, and its opening lines make them smile, pause and think, or cause their heart to trip just a little? If so, then you're on the right track. Let the book love continue. |H|

Words aren't simply ink strokes on a page; they are the notes to your song.

# Meet an Illustrator: Lexi Staton

@the.artist.lexi | [www.behance.net/lexistaton](http://www.behance.net/lexistaton)



## FAVORITE RESOURCES:

- My collection of secondhand children's books; Your Brain on Art by Susan Magsaman and Ivy Ross; Steal Like an Artist by Austin Kleon
- My community: The Richmond Illustrator's Guild, a small coworking illustration group I cocreated, where a group of artists share skills, resources, and offer critique. And my sister Rachel, a former English teacher and aspiring creative writer who reads and critiques all my written works.
- Websites: Pinterest, Creative Howl, and Instagram
- Nature

that I have purchased over the years to create my final works.

- I'm also hoping to become more skilled in analog art. I love playing with watercolor pencils and crayons and tempera paint. Playing with new materials allows me to develop skills while exercising my creativity.

## WHAT INSPIRES ME:

- Inspiration is everywhere, and I try to stay finely attuned to it. My friends and family are prepared for the longest possible walks when we're together, filled with ample pauses for reference photo shoots and pointing out the tiniest details in the world around me. I am also inspired by fantasy and folklore (especially D&D, Studio Ghibli, and old fairy tales), as well as quaint illustrations that make kids feel warm, calm, and curious while encouraging adults to connect to their inner child.

## DESIGN INFLUENCES:

- Melissa Castrillon, Aldison Farias, Richard Scarry, Matthew Forsythe, Agata Zlotko, and Freya Hartas, among others.

## FAVORITE THINGS TO ILLUSTRATE:

- Anthropomorphic animals living a soft, cozy life; pixie sprites; and other fantasy inspired characters. The common thread is lots of nature and greenery!

## WHAT I'D LIKE TO EXPLORE IN THE COMING YEAR:

- Adding more fantasy elements to my work. I am also excited to explore more illustrating opportunities, to continue developing community and form connections, expand my portfolio, find agented representation, and take the next steps to publish my own illustrated children's book.



Time for Tea

## FAVORITE TOOL:

- I use Procreate for final drafts. I typically draw out all my sketches in a sketchbook (I hand-bound my most recent one after learning that illustrator Ema Malyauka binds her own sketchbooks), then photograph them on my phone and transfer them to Procreate. From there, I use my collections of personalized brushes

## Meet an Illustrator: Lexi Staton

(continued)

### HONORING THE INNER ARTIST

From the moment I could grasp a crayon, I began to draw. At five, I wrote and illustrated a short story about a poor girl turned princess. At nine, I was taking commissions from schoolmates to make portraits of their dogs with customized collars and doghouses. By high school, I filled the margins of my notes with doodles and lent my skills to the drama club. But although I have always loved to make art, as I moved into young adulthood, I largely gave it up.

I grew up not knowing any professional artists; I wasn't even aware that people could have a career in the arts. So I earned a degree in the sciences and eventually became a nurse on the swing shift at an inner-city hospital, on a COVID unit.

It was a taxing period, to say the least: I had just moved, I didn't have many friends, and my mental and physical health began to decline. This was rock

bottom for me—but it sparked a season of healing where I rediscovered art.

When a local artist called my style 'sophisticated whimsy,' I was on cloud nine.

It wasn't until I left my hometown, moved to a bigger fishbowl, and went through a quarter-life crisis that I realized that there

was a path to becoming an artist that didn't involve winning the Hollywood lottery. I began to find myself and, for the first time in my adult life, I reconnected with my inner child—the one that felt like an artist.

### STEPPING ON (AND OFF, AND BACK ON) THE PATH

I'll be honest: The first steps in my illustrative journey did not involve illustration. I tried to draw again as an adult and promptly gave up. My desire for perfection and immediate proficiency overrode my desire to draw. I'd love to say that I persevered and dove headfirst into illustration, but instead, I pursued pottery.

For nearly two years, I focused all my energy on pottery and hardly touched my sketchbook. This might seem counterproductive, but it was pivotal for me. Pottery was a new art form, and I was starting from scratch. I had to build up my skills, little by

little. That's when I realized that talent may be innate, but skill is earned. And that the reason I wasn't progressing in illustration may have been because I was relying on talent alone to carry me forward.



Creature Comforts

Moving into another medium helped me arrive at some valuable lessons that all artists must learn.

- Relax. Let the flow of art take you, and start somewhere (anywhere).
- Value the process more than the final product.
- Don't wait for a masterpiece.
- Make big mistakes.
- Let go of perfectionism.
- Trust your artistic voice.
- Figure out what works for you.

And finally: Make tons of "bad" art. That's how you find your style, how you get better, and how you take your first step toward an artistic career.

### TAKING THE PLUNGE

One of my own first steps was posting my work on the internet. Among other things, it provides the opportunity to get over the discomfort of self-promotion. I have built a small following on social

## Meet an Illustrator: Lexi Staton

(continued)

media, which has opened some interesting opportunities.

Finding an in-person art community is important too. The internet can be wonderful for bringing people together and disseminating information, but nothing can replace personal relationships. Creativity is an energy that compounds itself when artists are together.

In my case, I found community by participating in an artist residency. Having never gone to art school, my residency allowed me to try new media, meet wonderful artists, and find mentorship (another invaluable step). It also gave me a platform

Success comes from pushing through the discomfort, trying new things, and seeing yourself in a kinder light.

for showing my work. While there, I sought out other illustrators and built a coworking group, the Richmond Illustrator's Guild.

At the end of my residency, my cohort put on a show. My love for children's illustration was

relatively separate from my interest in fine art until my mentor encouraged me to bring the two together. After three weeks of feeling stuck and depressed, I found a way to do it.

I created a piece called "Creature Comforts," an abstract collage of tufted rugs inspired by the use of plant life in my illustrations. Scattered around, in a seek-and-find fashion, were tiny portraits of my illustrated characters. It was pure joy observing dozens of adults taking in my piece. When a local artist called my style "sophisticated whimsy," I was on cloud nine.

### SELF-PORTRAIT: "THE CHICKEN LADY"



Self-doubt is unavoidable, whether you are an artist or not. For me, it's in my DNA. I have become very aware of an ever-present fear of failure and rejection that paralyzes me and keeps me from even trying for success.

That's why my self-portrait is a chicken. I use it to bring humor into the equation. It helps me remember that while fear is normal, success comes from pushing through the discomfort, trying new things, and seeing yourself in a kinder light.

I also have a new goal for myself this year: 50 rejections. I figure that if I get rejected 50 times, I've done well to put myself out there, and I'm bound to find a few opportunities along the way. Additionally, the fear of rejection is softened—because rejection is the goal in this case, after all.



From Left: Sketchbook First Sketch, Digital First outline, Character color, Background sketch, Background color

## Meet an Illustrator: Lexi Staton

(continued)

### ONE LAST THING

Recently, my artistic mentor told me something that stuck with me. She said that there are lots of people with talent, but what sets talent apart from success is the raw determination to make art, no matter what.

Not long after that, I sat with my mother in the hospital and she imparted some wisdom before she passed. She told me to chase my dreams and to go after whatever I want in life. She believed in me, and her words make me believe a little more in myself.

I now choose to live by these ideas and encourage others to, as well. Chase after your dreams relentlessly. Take that first step, pave your own path, and never accept "no" as the final word on your journey. **|H|**



Counter Clockwise from top left:  
Relentless courage in the face of a big challenge  
The journey can be long, but it's often beautiful  
Soar towards your dreams

## THREE COOL THINGS

### A Curated Recommendation List

by Natalie Engel

Do you suffer from decision fatigue? Are you overwhelmed by the number of resources on writing and illustrating that exist in the universe? Then come and sit by me, friend! Let's share three things—and only three things—that we've found interesting, inspiring, curious, or helpful to our work in some way. I'll start.

#### CRAFT BOOK

Write Yourself Out of a Corner: 100 Exercises to Unlock Creativity, by Alice LaPlante. (Sample available on [Google Books](#).)

As perhaps you've gathered, I am a person who does well with constraints. Thankfully, novelist Alice LaPlante has put together a collection of writing prompts designed to impose constraints on the writer—a gift for someone like me. She sets up each exercise with step-by-step instructions: Write about x, with an eye toward y, but as you're writing, do not do z. It can be a challenge to meet the assignment, but that's exactly the point. By narrowing down the range of possibilities, you are forced to think differently about how to approach the story you wish to tell. First write yourself into the corner, then write your way out.

Bonus: Following each prompt, we see an example from one of LaPlante's students, along with LaPlante's brief comments on the piece. We get both a short mentor text and insight into how the novelist deconstructs it—a mini-writer's workshop you can return to again and again.

#### PODCAST

"[Wild Card with Rachel Martin](#)," NPR

"Wild Card" is a combination game and interview program, where guests answer questions pulled at random from a deck of cards. Though several writers have been featured on the podcast, this is not a program about writing. Still, I have found it to be an invaluable tool for my own work. Why? Because the questions are so evocative and stimulating, and I love considering how my characters would answer them. I have been steadfastly keeping track of questions from each episode on a deck of index cards, and I sometimes use them to write short bursts from my character's point of view, either in their own voice or as a third-party observer. Come for the moving conversations, stay for the writing inspiration they elicit.

#### NEWSLETTER

"[A Pilgrim's Progress through Children's Literature](#)" by Patience Bradford (Substack).

If you, like me, have been enjoying Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen's "Looking at Picture Books," allow me to point you toward a similar deep-dive from a lesser-known source: librarian Patience Bradford. Bradford spotlights a wide variety of picture books, from modern-day classics to long-out-of-print treasures, each with an eye toward figuring out what makes these books so satisfying to read. You'll discover new (or new-to-you) works, learn about the history of children's books, and fall into a delightful rabbit hole along the way.

**Have a recommendation or three?** Pass them along to The Highlighter: [midatlantichighlighter@gmail.com](mailto:midatlantichighlighter@gmail.com)

# EVENTS

## APRIL 2026

- **Saturday, April 4 (12 P.M.):** [Easter Egg Hunt & Celebration of Black Authors](#) at metrobar (DC).
- **Tuesday, April 7 (1 p.m.):** [Central Virginia Write-In \(virtual\)](#). Join Chris Bailey for a monthly coworking virtual social.
- **Thursday, April 9 (7 p.m.):** [A Night of Dragons & Sky Serpents with Scott Reintgen and Marc J. Gregson](#) at Old Town Books (Alexandria, VA). YA fantasy event.
- **Friday, April 10 (7 p.m.):** [Mystery Party with Alyson Gerber \(in conversation with Liz Lawson\)](#) at Old Town Books (Alexandria, VA). A mystery-solving event and book signing.
- **Saturday, April 11 (12 p.m.):** [In-Store Storytime with Nadia Fisher](#) at East City Bookshop (DC). Nadia Fisher reads from her picture book AT THE COOKOUT
- **Monday, April 13 (7 p.m.):** [Indie- and Self-Publishing Social \(virtual\)](#). Join Joyana Peters for an open Q&A session about all things self-publishing and marketing.
- **Friday, April 17 (10 a.m.):** [Storytime and Signing with Joan Waites](#) at Mon Chouchou via Birch Tree Books (Leesburg, VA).
- **Saturday, April 18 (2 p.m.):** [Interactive Children's Event](#) with Marcie Flinchum Atkins at Fairfax City Public Library (Fairfax, VA).
- **Tuesday, April 21 (7 p.m.):** [Picture Book Sound Design: Rhythm and Rhyme with Carter Higgins \(virtual\)](#). Join Carter Higgins for a webinar that will give you tips and tricks for strengthening the musicality of your manuscripts.
- **Saturday, April 25:** [Spring Festival of Children's Literature](#) (Frostburg, MD). Professional development and author/illustrator workshops.
- **Wednesday, April 29 (7:30 p.m.):** [Virtual Illustrator Social \(virtual\)](#). Join Cynthia Cliff for our bi-monthly Illustrator Social. Chat with fellow creatives about kidlit illustration, writing, and publishing.

## MAY 2026

- **Friday, May 1 (7 p.m.):** [Soccer & Secrets Night with Laurie Morrison \(in conversation with Erin Becker\)](#) at Old Town Books (Alexandria, VA).
- **Saturday, May 2 (8 a.m.):** [Editors & Agents Day \(Dulles, VA\)](#). Join us for an exciting day with some of the most respected publishing professionals in the industry!
- **Sunday, May 10 (1 p.m.):** [Special Storytime with Christian Robinson](#) at bbg (Richmond, VA). Caldecott Honoree Christian Robinson reads his new book, Dad.
- **Monday, May 11 (7 p.m.):** [Indie- and Self-Publishing Social \(virtual\)](#). Join Joyana Peters for an open Q&A session about all things self-publishing and marketing.
- **Saturday, May 16 (10 a.m. - 6 p.m.):** [Gaithersburg Book Festival](#) at Bohrer Park (Gaithersburg, MD). Features the Children's Village with author signings and workshops.
- **Saturday, May 16 (11 a.m. - 3 p.m.):** Children's Book Guild: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going (Bethesda, MD). A dynamic conversation with three editors that have made their own impact in the world of children's books: Neal Porter, Taylor Norman, and Emily Feinberg.



Illustrations by Lexi Staton

