

SCBWI SoCal NEWSLETTER



HELLO SUMMER





Summer 2025

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Tahquitz Retreat 2025

by Carlene Griffith



SCBWI SoCal chapter held its annual MG-YA Writers annual retreat May 1st – 4th, 2025 at the Tahquitz Pines Retreat in Idyllwild, CA.

The center provided a beautiful setting for a weekend of writing inspiration and author community building. The retreat has become a favorite for our chapter members and sold out within two days of opening registration.

Attendee **Tim Burke** said it was *“My favorite writer event by far!”* **Kathleen Troy** said, *“I love the location, faculty, the organized activities and... the socialization. It's wonderful to be with so many creative people. I always leave so inspired.”*

This year's faculty provided written critiques before the retreat, in person round-table critiques, and 1-on-1 15-minute sessions at the retreat for our attendees. Faculty included **Joy Peskin** - Sr. Executive Editor at Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers, **Alexa Pastor** - Sr. Editor, Simon and Schuster, **Kathleen Rushall** - Sr. Agent, Andrea Brown, and **Hannah Andrade** - Agent, Bradford Literary. Attendee **Scott Sussman** said, *“Having senior agents and editors was a noticeable difference. The feedback and industry insight was on a MUCH higher level.”*

When asked what benefited attendees the most from their retreat experience, **Dawn Shea** said, *“The honest and very positively-framed feedback from an editor and an agent. It was really helpful to hear from the different types of industry professionals, their different insights, what aligned, and the fact that all 4 were so approachable. Having time to mingle a lot and get to know and learn from them was what really makes an event like this stand out from larger events.”*

This year's organizers included **Heather Buchta, Bev Plass, Tim Burke, and Lori Polydoros**. They started the event Thursday afternoon with a “happy hour,” allowing for mingling as attendees slowly arrived. Later that evening, attendees, staff, and faculty gathered for the first official meeting in the main hall which covered introductions, schedule reviews, and a funny skit showing how to give and receive feedback during critique groups in a positive and constructive way.



Afterwards all 28 attendees had the opportunity to participate in three silly “ice breaker” activities. The first began with dividing up into groups and introducing ourselves by sharing three things that started with the same letter as our names, along with a corresponding movement. As each member of the group took a turn the next member had to remember the preceding names and movements. The second activity involved sharing something we’d learned later in life (such as falsehoods our family told us). In the last game, the group had to find three things we all had in common. The activities helped everyone loosen up and connect with each other in preparation for the long weekend.

Friday through Sunday, attendees participated in four 2-hour critique group sessions, with 7 writers and one faculty member. Many found this to be the most important part of the event. **Kathryn Sanford** said, “*The insight into good writing and helpful suggestions have been a game-changer for me. All that, AND it's fun!!!! Can't beat the close-knit camaraderie of like-minded people.*” **Laurie Young** said, “*My group was especially good this year (no dis to previous year's groups, but this year the level of writing was off the charts!)*” Another attendee said, “*Our critique group was excellent. Thoughtful and respectful, and we had fun. I felt supported throughout the weekend.*”



Between critique group sessions, the event allowed time for organized meals such as pizza night, a 1:1 coaching session with faculty, and a lot of free time. Many used this time to revise or socialize. In addition, staff hosted a yoga class, a group hike, and a game night with board and card games. **Rilla Jaggia** said, “*I enjoy the opportunity the hike gives us to get away into the beautiful surroundings for reflection, making new friends, and refreshing our souls. The organizers work so hard to take care of our needs and to create a retreat for maximum learning and enjoyment. I love the retreat location and the cabins that allow us to escape when everything gets overwhelming. The participants make this retreat extra special—friendly, professional, super critiques. The format of the retreat is especially well thought-out!*” **Kathryn Sanford** said, “*Game night was a blast! It felt good to laugh.*”

Once again, attendees were highly satisfied with the event, feeling they got their money’s worth, and said they’d return next year. I think **Lorian Steider** said it best when she wrote, “*If you want a retreat where you can wear jeans all weekend AND get high-caliber feedback on your work from industry professionals and experienced writers in a beautiful setting, this is your event.*”



Carlene Griffith is the author of the 10 Minute Play for Kids of All Ages and the Rose Maidelaiden series. She has been a proud SCBWI member since 2017 and serves as SoCal's chapter co-Assistant Regional Advisor and Newsletter Editor.
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LA Times Festival of Books: Let the Flowers Bloom

by Kobina Commeh

Like flowers attracting butterflies and birds, the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books draws flocks of book lovers from all over the world. About 160,000 of them! The euphony of sounds arising from the excited chatter is palpable. These people have found their village.

I first experienced this in 2015 and have been coming since. Buying way too many books and comics is the norm. Authors, illustrators, and booksellers hope people will come and get inspired by the abundance of knowledge and joy.

The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SoCal and LA chapters) is always well-represented at the Festival of Books. I've been part of this village of creators for a few years and was excited to visit booth #826 this year. Imagine my surprise when **Charlotte Watson Sherman** (*Brown Sugar Babe* and *Mermaid Kenzie, Protector of the Deeps*) recommended I sign up as a vendor. I had only seen myself as a book lover and not a seller. It would be too overwhelming, right?

Well, **Christine Van Zandt** (*Milkweed for Monarchs* and *The Brief History of Underpants*) swooped in and offered great advice on how to proceed at my first LA FoB event at the University of Southern California. **Beverly Plass**, the SoCal regional advisor, was also helpful, making sure I was a PAL member (Published and Listed). It really does take a village, and I am proud to be a part of such a cohesive and caring community.

The first day of the event was highlighted by pouring rain. A blessing for the earth, but a challenge for vendors. However, they endured as did the book lovers, who braved the elements and still attended en masse.



I showed up on Sunday and was greeted by a slight drizzle, which dissipated as the clouds broke. **Judy Campbell-Smith** (*Ice Cream Everywhere* and *AJ's Neighborhood*) was the SoCal volunteer at our table. She was very helpful and, as always, a joy to be around. **Jennifer Pitts** (SCBWI-LA Liaison) was the conductor who kept us in tune and humming. It was very exciting to share the table with **Lauren Gallegos** (*Baa, Baa, Tap Sheep* and so much more!) as I picked her brain on the illustrator's perspective. Eager passersby could not ignore the SCBWI prize wheel. It was wonderful to see children's eyes light up at the prospect of spinning the wheel. Even the adults gave it a whirl. Gifts included bracelets, pencils, stickers, glow sticks, and bubbles. Others walked away with a smile after winning some slime. We had quite a blast with each member in the booth and made fun connections with readers.



A few budding creators sought information about SCBWI. They must have appreciated the excitement on our faces at meeting a potential member. We directed them to the amazing volunteers who were on standby to share the resources, networking and support available through the society. **Kimberly Tso** (*Tic-Tac-Toe Chicken*) and other volunteers provided the information that will grow our village. **Ann Suk Wang** (*The House Before Falling into the Sea*) and **Marie Chan** (*Mamie Takes a Stand*) also swooped by to say hi.

My author community has expanded since my first visit to the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books. I got to say thank you to **Sebastian Jones** (*Stranger Comics*), whom I met ten years ago. He encouraged me to keep writing when I struck up the conversation in his booth. And I finally met **Christine Van Zandt** in person. She was the first to edit and offer critique for my debut picture book. I also got to sit next to **Glenda Armand** (*Ice Cream Man and The Night Before Freedom*) for a whole ten minutes before realizing my daughters have her books. This experience of engaging with other creators was just as exhilarating as being on the other side of the table.

It was a pleasure to hear people share their reasons for purchasing a book or two. They were for the toddler who loves ice cream. The grandchild having trouble sleeping. The mother who still loves butterflies. The grandmother who never learned how to swim. The reasons were always steeped in love and wrapped in the need to share knowledge. If the hope was to inspire creativity and create connections, well, then the butterflies and birds will return to the flowers again and again. See you next year!



Kobina Commeh moved from Ghana to the United States as a teenager. His debut picture book is *Kwesi and Nana Ruby Learn to Swim*. He was inspired to write stories for children while raising his two daughters. He lives with his family in California.

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Comic Orange: A Day of Books and Connections!

by Susi Schaefer

We had fun at the Comic Orange on May 10th at the Tustin OC Library! So many members from SCBWI SoCal signed up, we had to move into the air-conditioned Clifton event center—a good call since it was a toasty 98 degrees outside.



The day was filled with great moments, from engaging author talks to fun panels on everything from Podcast 101 to Cosplay for Kids. The courtyard had various artisans showcasing their talents against the backdrop of live music. There were even paper shield-making stations and more than one SCBWI member made one.

Author and illustrator **Rodolfo Mondalvo** participated for the first time and described it as a fun event where everyone shares their love for books, comics, and illustrations.

Joy Yi also made her debut at the event and shared how nice it was to put faces to the names behind the books, while feeling a genuine sense of community.

Judy Campbell-Smith loved seeing all the amazing cosplay and felt the support among the artists and SCBWI members.

Robert Mellette appreciated the chance for authors to interact with their readers, noting how meaningful those connections are since they don't always get to see their audience.

A huge thank you to everyone who came out and made the day so special! And thank you to Bev Plass for all her help and great energy!



Susi Schaefer, born and raised in the Austrian Alps, is an award winning illustrator-author that trained as a glass painter in the medieval town of Rattenberg. After moving to Southern California for sun and adventure, Susi studied graphic design. She's the author/illustrator of *ALL EYES ON YOU*, *THE GLOW SHOW*, and *CAT LADIES* and the illustrator of *ZOO ZEN* and *GOOD MORNING, I LOVE YOU, VIOLET!*

Authors and Librarians Should Be friends

by Kelly Powers

I was nearing the end of the school year, ready to enjoy some time off, when a package arrived in my mailbox. I was confused, because the return address read Penguin Random House and I knew I hadn't ordered anything. I opened it up, and as soon as I saw the book and letter inside, I smiled.

Rex Ogle, a.k.a. Rey Terciero, had sent me a copy of his and Claudia Aguirre's graphic novel, *Dan of Green Gables*. The note told the story behind the book and included a personal statement voicing his support for librarians during our ongoing war against book bans. The note also expressed hope that the book would "brighten my day, even just a little." Well, Rex, mission accomplished. More than that, though, it inspired me to write this article for the newsletter.

To all the published authors of SCBWI, please know, as a librarian, a gift of a copy of your book is always wonderful to receive, but is never expected. There are even some instances when a gifted copy might not be able to be entered into a library's collection. It all depends on the library's Collection Development policy.

So it got me thinking about other ways an author or illustrator could support their local library. Things that would create a personal connection, which would in turn support the author or illustrator. After talking with my colleagues in public libraries, here are some suggestions we came up with:

- Volunteer to do a story time with your published picture book. This also works at elementary schools.
- If you and/or your book fall into one of the monthly observations (Hispanic Heritage, Women's History, Pride Month, etc.) offer to do a talk, participate in a panel, or hold a book signing.

- Volunteer to be a guest speaker for one of the library's annual, monthly, or weekly events. Things like AnaCon, Bilingual Storytimes, Draw with Me, Stem Stations, Teen Writer Workshop, or Poetry Pioneers. Check what your local branch is doing and, if it fits in with what you're writing or illustrating, offer to help.
- Offer to speak at a school assembly or Career Day.
- Join the fight against book bans and library defunding. Pick up a sign, volunteer to call your local politicians, distribute flyers, join the marches. Whatever you can do to help is needed and appreciated.

In the end, the relationship between authors and librarians should be symbiotic. With just a little effort, a dash of good will, and a positive attitude, you can create a personal connection with your local librarians, which will make them more open to ordering your book. And, once your book is included in the collection, don't be surprised if you find it in themed displays, and recommended to patrons requesting books like yours. A little charity goes a long way.



Kelly Powers has been a member of SCBWI for over ten years and leads one of the MG/YA critique groups for the SoCal Chapter. She's been a lover of kid-lit since she was old enough to hold a book in her hands and has turned that passion into a career as a junior high school librarian.





GRAMMAR NERD

Rules for Dialogue

by Tim Burke

1 COMMAS

If the dialogue tag (simple statement verbs: said/replied/answered/whispered/etc) comes **BEFORE** the spoken part, use a comma **BEFORE** quotation marks.

Example: (note: period goes inside quotation marks)

He said, "I refuse to obey."

Raising her hand, Thumbelina replied, "I don't know the answer to that."

2

If the dialogue tag follows the spoken part, comma goes **INSIDE** quotation marks.

Example:

"I refuse to obey," he said.

"Be quiet," Thumbelina whispered.

3 END PUNCTUATION OTHER THAN A PERIOD: QUESTION MARK/EXCLAMATION MARK

End punctuation goes **INSIDE** the quotation marks, **REGARDLESS** of where the dialogue tag is.

Example:

BEFORE

He asked, "Why did you do that?"

She screamed, "No way!"

AFTER

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"No way!" she screamed.

But remember, if it's a simple statement word like said/replied/answered/whispered/etc, we follow **RULE 1 or 2** above.

4 CAPITALIZATION

If the dialogue begins with a new sentence, capitalize the first word, **REGARDLESS** of whether the dialogue tag is before the quotation marks or after.

Example:

"That's a beautiful muumuu," Hiram said.

Hiram said, "That's a beautiful muumuu."

NOTE: you don't capitalize the dialogue tag itself

WRONG: "Prune Royal is my favorite ice cream flavor," The girl said. "Why?" He asked.

CORRECT: "Prune Royal is my favorite ice cream flavor," the girl said. "Why?" he asked.



5 INTERRUPTION

If a quotation is interrupted with non-speaking, don't capitalize the section that continues the quotation (because that section is **NOT** a sentence).

WRONG: "I'm thinking," the evil robot announced, "That it was a mistake for you to come here. Bwaa haaa haa."

CORRECT: "I'm thinking," the evil robot announced, "that it was a mistake for you to come here. Bwaa haaa haa."

6 SPEAKER CHANGES

Start a new paragraph whenever a different person speaks.

Evil Robotron crowed, "I will now melt you with my Diode Disruptor."

"You don't scare me, Evil Robotron," adorable Tootsie said. "I know karate and I carry an Allen Wrench with me wherever I go."

"Oh . . . in that case, just kidding." Evil Robotron scooted hastily out the loading dock on his squeaky wheels.

7 NEW PARAGRAPHS FOR THE SAME SPEAKER

When the speaker's dialogue requires a new paragraph but he/she is still speaking, always begin each new paragraph with quotation marks but **DO NOT** put quotation marks at the end of the previous paragraph. This signals to the reader that we haven't switched speakers.

The professor explained patiently, "The squid is often confused with the octopus, but they are significantly different. The squid can grow as large as forty-three feet and weigh up to a ton. Even more interesting, it has three hearts.

"Now, the octopus also has three hearts, but its blood is blue. For protection, it can excrete a dangerous, dark ink that can suffocate the gills of predators. The ink can even harm itself, so it wisely scoots away from the ink."

8 INTERNAL THOUGHT/DIALOGUE

If characters are speaking silently to themselves, use italics.

Example:

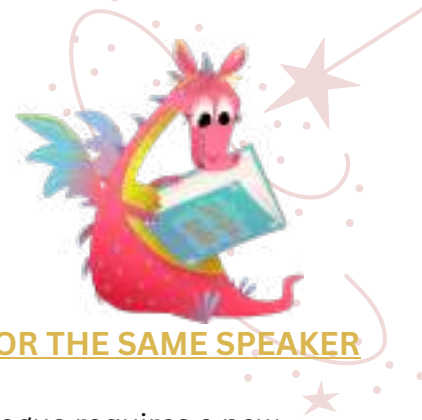
Boris's heart pumped faster. *Oh no, not again!* Boris scolded himself. You fool! *Why did you leave the cage door of the angry giant amoeba ajar?* He slapped his forehead and jumped out the window.

9 DIALOGUE WITHIN DIALOGUE

Use single quotation marks to set off speaking which is inside someone else's speech.

Example: Drusilla said, "The witch told me, 'I'm going to change you into a sentient cupcake.'"

NOTE: punctuation goes inside the single quotation marks here.



Tim Burke is a past Regional Advisor, SCBWI SoCal chapter member volunteer, and author of the Grammar Nerd and Killer First Lines newsletter columns. Represented by Jennie Kendrick at Red Fox Literary, he writes MG and YA novels, though he has also sold stories to the national adult crime fiction magazines, Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine and Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. His debut MG novel, *Troll Tails*, is out on submission (fingers crossed, y'all!). You can contact him at tim@timburketales.com and visit his website at www.timburketales.com.

KILLER Openings



Alfie hated going to the dentist. As a result the boy's teeth were almost all yellow. The ones that weren't yellow were brown. They bore the stains of all the goodies that children love, but dentists hate.

—**Demon Dentist by David Williams**

I've been waiting my whole life for Oliver, so you'd think another fifteen minutes wouldn't matter. But it's fifteen minutes that Oliver is alone on a bus, unmonitored, for the first time, with the most ruthless, malicious, soul-sucking creatures on earth: high school students.

—**Off the Page by Jodi Picoult and Samantha Van Leer**

If you have an older sister, there's a good chance that she's almost killed you at least once since childhood. Maybe not intentionally—or hey, maybe it was intentional—but between pretending you're a life-size doll and generally neglecting you during Friday-night babysitting, it happened.

—**Drop Dead Sisters by Amelia Diane Coombs**

I know what you're thinking: That poor dog only has three legs. But don't go there. It's not that bad, okay?

—**Dogtown by Katherine Applegate and Gennifer Choldenko**

Murder didn't mean much to Raveu. It was a new job. You had to be careful. You had to use your brains. It was not a question of hatred.

—**A Gun for Sale by Graham Greene**

I looked at my friend and saw a man who had robbed me. Deeply disturbing. The ultimate rejection.

—**High Stakes by Dick Francis**

It starts when you pull the lamp chain and light doesn't come. Then you know you will never wake up in time, you will not make it to the end of this paragraph alive.

—**Meddling Kids by Edgar Cantero**

The problem with your best friend dying is that there's no one to sit with you at funerals. It's not the number one problem. Obviously, my best friend's bloated, waterlogged corpse being lowered into the earth for the rest of eternity is currently at the top of my list of Emotionally Debilitating Things That Will Take the Rest of My Life to Recover From.

—**Undead Girl Gang by Lily Anderson**

Felicia Miller was crying in the bathroom. Again. I knew it was her because in the three months I'd been going to Green Mountain High, I'd already seen Felicia crying in the bathroom twice. She had a really distinctive sob, high and breathy like a little kid's even though Felicia was eighteen, two years older than me.

—**Hex Hall Book One by Rachel Hawkins**

When I was little, a kid pointed at me on the playground and shouted, "Her arms fell off!" then ran away screaming in terror to his mom, who had to cuddle him on her lap and rub his head for like ten minutes to get him to calm down. I think, up until then, I hadn't thought about the idea that my arms must have actually fallen off at some point in my life. I never really thought about not having arms at all.

—**Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus by Dusti Bowling**



Member

GOOD NEWS



Social: @katrinatangen
(Bluesky, Instagram, Threads)
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Z.Z. Ozra's new picturebook, **AYDIN STAYS SAFE**, is now available on Amazon!

IG: @kinyarrow
Website: <https://kinyarrow.com/>



Mia Araujo's debut illustrated novel, **AFIA IN THE LAND OF WONDERS**, was published by Scholastic in April. She's been working on it for 12 years!

Also, her book was awarded the Junior Library Guild's Gold Standard Selection and was named one of Amazon's Best Children's Books of the Year So Far (in 2025).

IG: @mllemiaaraujo
Website:
<https://afiainthelandofwonders.com>



Desi and Jon St. Amant are excited to announce that Stephanie Brooks at PaperCutz has acquired **THREE BEE HONEY!** Book 1 of the two-book series will be published in July of 2026.

IG: @st.amantstories
TikTok: @stamantstories
Website: www.stamantstories.com

If you are a SoCal member who has good news to share - we'd like to celebrate you by announcing it on social media and our website. You must be a SCBWI SoCal member and you must "follow" our region on SCBWI.org. Check out our SCBWI SoCal regional page for more information.

Desi St. Amant is a HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH teacher and a middle grade novelist.

To share your good news: Visit <https://socal.scbwi.org/member-good-news/> and fill out the online form.



Illustration by Carrie Schneider <https://carrieschneiderauthorillustrator.com>

Volunteer Opportunity

We are looking for a SCBWI PAL Coordinator

Duties include: planning 1-2 events per calendar year - perhaps one zoom session with a guest speaker, and one in-person happy hour.

Announcements



Welcome Ray Sewell to the SoCal Team! Ray has volunteered to be our new Webmaster.

Ray is an aspiring children's book author and illustrator living in Temecula, where he escaped from the harsh New England winters during the pandemic with his wife, thier youngest daughter, and an aging chihuahua.

He has illustrated his own stories with illustrations that he is working on. When he's not writing or illustrating, he is working at his day job as a Software Solution Architect, running the family around to school, dance, and shows, or cheering for the Celtics.

SCBWI SOCIETY OF CHILDREN'S BOOK WRITERS AND ILLUSTRATORS Summer Virtual Conference 2025

July 31- August 3, 2025 Online
#scbwiSummer25

Register at
scbwi.org



2025 Fall Harvest Writers and Illustrators Day

📅 Oct 04, 2025

📍 California State University Fullerton, Titan Student Union OR online 800 N State College Blvd, Fullerton, CA 92831

Registration Opens Tuesday, July 1st.

CONGRATULATIONS,

FARNZ NADIM!!!

Our October 4th, 2025

Fall Harvest Writers

& Illustrators Day

Conference Banner Winner.

Farnaz's illustration is featured on our Conference

Event pages found on

<https://www.scbwi.org/events/2025-fall-harvest-writers-and-illustrators-day>

Writers and illustrators are invited to a full day of speaker presentations, critiques, pitches and mingling with fellow creatives! We'll have agents, an editor, an art director, published authors and an illustrator. This hybrid event is both in-person and via zoom. Attendees will have access to the videos for 30 days following the event.

NEWSLETTER STAFF

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As a writer and speech-language pathologist, she creates materials and stories that get kids talking!

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A two-time Author of the Month for her stories in Highlights magazine, Christine Henderson is currently revising her first middle-grade novel.

During the school year, Christine works as an instructional aide for the Corona-Norco school district.

Twitter @cm_henderson.



All uncredited Illustrations used in this summer edition were included in a canva.com/pro account. We prefer to use Illustrations from our chapter members. If you are interested in having your illustration featured or have an idea for an article for our next fall/winter newsletter, please contact: Carlene Griffith socal-ara@scbwi.org



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