



# The Prairie Wind

Newsletter of the Illinois Chapter of the SCBWI

## Current Issue • Winter 2012 • from the editor

SCBWI-IL is fortunate to have such a large group of talented and committed writers who are willing to donate their time and expertise to the Prairie Wind. This means that when one writer is ready to step down as a columnist—usually due to personal and professional commitments—another writer is waiting in the wings to step in. This has happened with this issue. Several of our authors who have been with the Prairie Wind for the past few years are moving on: Michelle Sussman (News Roundup), Lisa Cinelli (Illustrator Tips), Kim Winters (Writer’s Bookshelf), and Hilary Wagner (Kidlitosphere). To each of them we say a big thank you! At the same time, we would like to introduce our readers to two new columnists: Corie Ramos-Azem (News Roundup) and Laura Montenegro (Illustrator Tips). To Corie and Laura we say welcome! We’ve decided to make Writer’s Bookshelf a guest column (with a different author each issue), and the format of Kidlitosphere is being revised in time for the spring 2012 issue.

We have several guest columns. If you would like to write an occasional column for the Prairie Wind, please contact Jeanne at beckerjeanne@hotmail.com. It’s a great way to get published!

Jeanne Becker Editor

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## Breaking Down Barriers, Part One

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The season of midwinter throws many barriers in our way. Relearning how to drive safely in snow and sleet . . . Remembering to leave extra time to get pretty much anywhere . . . Finding the perfect pair of boots that are toasty, not too hideous, and tall enough for the worst snowdrift you're likely to stomp in. And really, keeping a sunny disposition through a week's worth of gray days may be the worst challenge.

The creative life throws many barriers in our path as well. This is especially true if we pursue our creative life with the intent that it also be a livelihood. There are many classes worth taking, but how to sandwich in the time? There are lots of tools for marketing yourself, but maybe that feels too scary, so you stay at your desk, writing.

Have you got anything that you resist doing, even though you know it would benefit you in your creative journey? Consider this an invitation to think for a moment and find an activity or a skill-building task that you've been shying away from.

Go ahead, fill in the blank! \_\_\_\_\_ Doesn't all that empty space just look wrong unless you know what goes there?

Some of our Illinois colleagues weighed in on this issue, sharing what they're daunted by:

"I put off starting a new story . . . it's a big investment of time to start researching and figure out a clever way to tell the story, and I worry it won't be nearly as good on paper as in my head, so it's easier for me to do lots of other writer stuff. I plan school visits, try new promotion ideas, or update my website. But these aren't as important as writing."

"I like to read books on the art and craft of writing, but I avoid the writing exercises. I understand they might help me discover something new, but I still avoid them like the plague! It feels to me as if those exercises rob me of my precious writing time. On the other hand, if I go to a conference and we're given an exercise as a group, I do it because it's part of what I paid for. If only there was a way someone would pay me to do writing exercises at my desk . . ."

"I have been resisting launching my blog . . . even though I think it would give me a better web presence and help folks get to know me as an artist, etc. . . . I have concerns about telling folks too much or upsetting/insulting my reader in some way . . . because I know that once it's out there, it's out there. I've talked to colleagues who've said, 'Just do it,' or comment after

I've stated one of my many opinions, 'I think you should blog about that.' I just have to force myself to write some entries, try and get the formatting down, ask for help, ask for help again, and hit POST. Any. Day. Now."

Well, here's my dilemma. I'll share it with you.

Perhaps many of you keep a journal or notebook where you routinely write about the books that you read. I have done this for short bursts of time in the past, but always with a specific, temporary purpose. I have never kept it as part of my routine. Recently I was struck by the sheer number of books I have read without keeping any record of them whatsoever. It gave me a strong sense of lost opportunity, and I had to admit that for my development as a writer, this is a way that I am truly throwing a barrier in my own path.

I decided to examine this on paper. I used the oldest trick in the book—creating a list to make the writing seem easier. My list was labeled:

#### "Why I Don't Want to Keep a Reading Journal"

- I'm lazy.
- I usually read at night before bed. I can't possibly journal then too! I've put in a full day already. Can't a girl just relax?
- What if I die and someone reads my journal and finds out which books I didn't like? That could be bad, right? What if someone finds out I liked their book, but evidently I didn't get it? Gads, should I really be recording anything about books written by people I know?
- I get intimidated by the task of trying to analyze why I like a book or why I don't.
- I did enough commenting with my critique groups this month, thank you kindly.
- Really . . . do I need any more excuses?

After writing that list, I decided to make a more subversive one:

#### "How I Could Benefit If I Kept a Reading Journal"

- I might see patterns showing me why I love certain types of books. That, in turn, might help steer me through the "sea of a hundred ideas" when I pick a new writing project.
- A sense of accomplishment should build as my notes accumulate. There would be a reference for any time I can't remember an author's name, a title, or how long it's been since I read a certain book.
- I could keep tabs on how much time I'm devoting to one genre over time. I could even work toward a goal such as: read at least ten picture books about cute baby antics BEFORE I go back to revise my own picture book about cute baby antics. Maybe then I'll actually know if mine has anything fresh to offer!

Hey—a payoff . . . at this point I was starting to get excited. But I didn't quit there. Those darn writing teachers are always telling you to push past your first few ideas, so my list continued:

- A journal would be the perfect place to practice useful skills like condensing a complex plot into a few sentences; determining what the hook is for a book; taking a practice shot at writing a logline for a book. Oooh, and what if this was my own book? How would I want to market it? What ideas would I have for presenting at school visits, etc.?
- OK, I'm on a roll now. I see what I've been missing. And I think I'm up to the task. I hope that you find yourself grabbing for your legal pad or your trusty laptop . . . and are you making a list yet?

No . . . not a shopping list. You know . . . the other list. What you'll be gaining when you finally take that next step that you've been avoiding. Only you know what it is.

I hope it holds a great reward.

Lisa Bierman  
Co-Regional Adviser  
SCBWI Illinois

## Remembering Mary Jane Miller (1936-2011): Author, Teacher, Colleague

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*By Marlene Targ Brill*



A tribute to Mary Jane Miller is the most difficult, yet most important, article I've ever been asked to write. How do you share the life of someone who has meant so much to so many people, including readers and students? How do you find words to describe a good friend, confidant, and colleague who will be sorely missed?

Trust me. This article took lots of chocolate and solitaire to complete. But those of us who knew Mary Jane want those of you who didn't to understand why we feel so strongly about her as a writer and person and so sad about her passing on September 19.

### A Little History

Author and SCBWI-IL member Mary Jane Miller was the total package. As talented author of four acclaimed books, she mastered the art of creating sensitive, realistic characters. As an educator, she shared the gift of imagination and love of story with her readers and students. But it was Mary Jane the person who touched so many in the writing community with her kind, supportive personality.

Mary Jane began her writer's journey in the late 1980s with many of us. We joined Children's Reading Round Table (a group interested in children's books, including authors, editors, illustrators, and teachers), Off Campus Writers Workshop, and Society of Midland Authors. Mary Jane also participated in the early days of SCBWI-IL, helping to grow our state organization.

"After I joined SCBW (before the 'I' was added), I met Mary Jane at various writing events," said Mary Jane Buskupic. "She asked me to join her critique group, and we drove together to OCWW on Thursdays. No one had a computer then. Everyone used a typewriter, making carbon copies. Revising was a huge deal. It was a big day when Mary Jane and some of us got a word processor—not a computer but better than the typewriter.

"It's amazing that Mary Jane's four books—Me and My Name, Upside Down, Fast Forward, Going the Distance—were published a year apart, capturing that middle grade, junior high voice. In the dedication of her books, Mary Jane thanked people who helped her, including Maude. Maude was Mary Jane's word processor who helped her write her books."

Mary Jane came to writing after raising four daughters. According to her husband, Joseph Miller, "she always had a heart for the special needs of children, and her stories, like a quilt, are woven pieces from a specific experience, a particular place and feeling, dream or memory."

Mary Jane particularly enjoyed the opportunities her books afforded for her to visit classrooms and present to writer's groups. "She was always there to support, cheer on, share, and encourage us," said Esther Hershenhorn. "Her warm and welcoming smile made you feel good for days."

### Mary Jane, the Person

Mary Jane's positive, can-do attitude attracted many of us. "I remember Mary Jane's smile," wrote Charlotte Herman. "It's what drew me to her when we first met at OCWW. She was a gentle person. Even her critiques of the manuscripts we read in our writer's group were gentle. Always constructive and encouraging, but always gentle."

Many people I spoke with reinforced Charlotte's impression of someone who was soft-spoken and approachable. Yet Mary Jane had a fun side that often came across in her writing and with colleagues.

"My fondest memories of Mary Jane are our rides to Off Campus and of a time we met at O'Hare on our return from one of our rare writing-related trips at publisher's expense," said Glennette Tilley Turner. "She was in the limo that I also took and we delighted in the coincidence. We giggled all the way to the western suburbs—before returning to real life of raising kids and

being chief cook and bottle washers.”

Some of us may not know of Mary Jane’s spiritual side and how it influenced her writing. “Her faith and family were of primary importance to her. Using her writing skills, she sought ways to come closer to them both,” said Jennifer Bartoli-Kalina, friend, writer, former CRRT and OCWW member.

Jennifer recalled that Mary Jane studied writing with Madeleine L’Engle and later shared the lessons and inspirations she learned from class with groups at Off Campus.

### Mary Jane, the Author

For Mary Jane, the love of story came from her heritage. She wrote on her SCBWI-IL author page that one of her earliest memories was drinking tea with her Irish grandmother. As they sipped tea, her grandmother regaled her with tales of Irish folklore. The stories Mary Jane later wrote took shape just as her grandmother wove stories from tea leaves.

Of Me and My Name (1992, Rebecca Caudill Young Readers’ Book Award nominee), Publisher’s Weekly wrote that “with humor and sensitivity, Miller explores the complexity and confusion of early adolescence. She gently reminds readers that solutions they seek elsewhere can often be found within themselves. A quick, enjoyable read.”

We particularly treasured Mary Jane’s comments during the many years we shared stories in a writer’s group. Mary Monsell recalled that time and Mary Jane’s skills best. “If anyone understood the heart of a story, it was she. Mary Jane was a superb writer, with a natural, evolving voice, characterizing fictional actors with well-crafted believable detail.

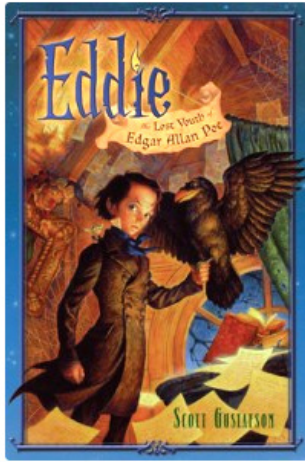
“I miss Mary Jane’s presence, though I still remember her piles of books stacked neatly under the bed, her love of Chanel, and anything and anyone Irish, including her beloved Joe. She loved sharing the art of writing, passing on that joy to so many children. What I think she wanted all of us to know is that creating in and of itself has extraordinary value in our world. Mary Jane leaves us all with a sense of hope that what we do matters. And we love her all the more for it.”

Marlene Targ Brill writes nonfiction for preschoolers through adults and historical fiction for primary and middle graders. Her latest books include Annie Shapiro and the Clothing Worker Strike, Diabetes (2nd ed.), The Rough-Riding Adventures of Bronco Charlie, Pony Express Rider (graphic novel), and The Underground Railroad Adventures of Allen Jay (graphic novel). But her greatest accomplishment is having great friends, like Mary Jane Miller.

## My Life as an Illustrator-So Far

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By Scott Gustafson



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Of the fifty-five years of my life thus far on this planet, I've had the great good fortune of spending more than thirty as an illustrator. Even though there were early stages when I found myself wanting to become either a truck driver, a cartoonist, or an animator, after the truck driver stage, when I was about five years old, drawing pictures for a living was how I envisioned my future.

I was so intent on getting into this field that I imagined I could just skip college and somehow become a professional artist. Life soon proved me wrong, and six months after graduating from high school in Marengo, Illinois, where I had spent my entire life, I found myself

living in Chicago and attending the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts.

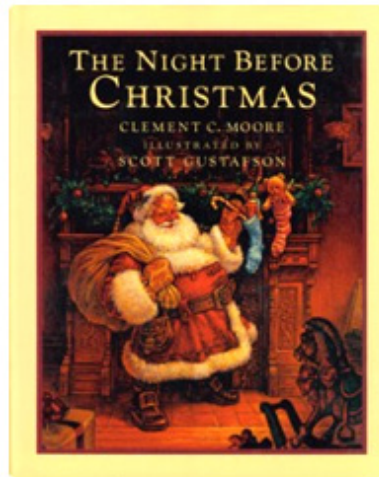
Unfortunately for my fellow students and me, that venerable institution of seventy-five years closed its doors a year and a half after I enrolled. Fortunately for us, Columbia College accepted many of our credits, and I took classes there for about another year.

During that time, a friend who had become an art director at a local slide production house started hiring me as a freelance cartoonist when he needed some extra help. The work was always under insane deadlines and was rarely gratifying, but it did plant in my impressionable mind the notion that I could support myself as a freelance illustrator/animator.

Once the professional world became a possibility, for better or worse I decided not to resume classes that fall. Instead, I began shifting my focus entirely to illustration and concentrated on learning to paint in acrylic, gouache, and eventually in oils.

Throughout my career I've been lucky enough to work on a variety of projects, from greeting cards and prints to designing characters for toys and animated films. But no matter what twists and turns my career path has taken, it seems I've always returned to illustrating children's books.

I think that stems from my belief that only pictures that are in some way associated with a story are the ones that truly have any lasting meaning for people. It's just a theory of mine and one I've only recently put into words, but I think it might be true.



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## Early Books

The first children's book titles that I illustrated were for Chicago-based publishers, but these books were targeted directly at libraries and schools and weren't available to the general public.

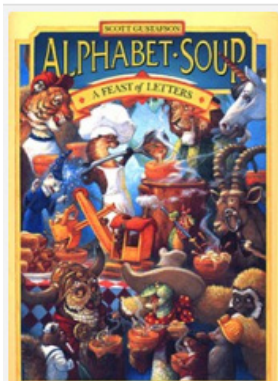
Then, in 1984, Ariel Books, a New York book packager, asked me to illustrate *The Night before Christmas*. It was my first trade book and also the first that I painted entirely in oils. To this day, deadlines permitting, oil paintings are my preferred medium.

*The Night before Christmas* was originally published in 1985 with Alfred Knopf and was reprinted in 2005 by Hallmark.

Ariel then asked me if I was interested in doing an illustrated edition of *Peter Pan*. Even though I was familiar with the story, I had never actually read the book. Once I had, I couldn't believe my good fortune for getting a chance to work on such a fantastic title. In addition to all the wonderful elements like Edwardian London, pirates, mermaids, Indians, and fairies, the story also featured three of the greatest characters in children's literature: Peter Pan, Wendy, and Captain Hook.

Unfortunately, my desire to live up to the task overwhelmed me, and a project that was originally planned to take a year and a half ended up taking three years. Several years after the book was released, however, I was surprised to get a call from Michael Jackson, who told me it was his favorite illustrated version of the book. Since it came from someone who actually lived in Neverland, I took that as very high praise indeed.

*Peter Pan* was originally released by Viking in 1991 and remains in print.



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One of the partners at Ariel Books had approached a Chicago publisher about starting a children's division, and because they were planning on introducing a new imprint, they were looking for basic types of books. I was asked to do an alphabet book, and *Alphabet Soup* became my first real foray into writing as well as illustrating.

The story was very simple. An otter moves into a new home, and finding it empty except for a large soup pot, he decides to throw himself a potluck housewarming party. Twenty-six of his closest animal friends attend, and each brings an ingredient to add to the soup pot.

Of all the books from this period, this was probably the most enjoyable to work on, even though it took longer than expected (they always do!). Animals have always been a favorite subject of mine, and it was a lot of fun to arrange assortments of food into “still lifes” from which I painted directly.

Alphabet Soup was originally published in 1990 by Calico Books, an imprint of Contemporary Books in Chicago. The book was reprinted by the Greenwich Workshop Press in 1994 and remains in print.

### Collector’s Plates



By the time I had completed Alphabet Soup I had dedicated about six years of my career to illustrating children’s books exclusively. In 1990, I was contacted by the Bradford Exchange, a Chicago–area company that produced collector’s plates. Unexpectedly, this business relationship turned out to be a timely and welcome change for me. As much as I loved working on children’s books, the amount of work required, along with my time–consuming approach and the deadlines, had started to wear me down.

The Bradford Exchange was interested in developing plates based on familiar children’s fairy tales and nursery rhyme themes. The subject matter was very intriguing. It also gave me a chance to concentrate more on individual pieces. And even though I created these images to appear on plates, I also hoped that they would eventually end up as book illustrations. Little did I know that it would take ten years before the first of those books would become a reality.

Eventually, I painted approximately twenty–six images that were made into collector’s plates for the Bradford Exchange, including Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Little Red Riding Hood, the Frog Prince, Jack and the Beanstalk, and Humpty Dumpty.

### Limited Edition Prints

Several years after I started working on plates, I decided to branch out a bit and contacted the Greenwich Workshop, a limited edition print company. They were not only producing high–quality artist’s prints, but also had success in book publishing, with titles like James Gurney’s Dinotopia.

The Greenwich Workshop published many of my plate images in print formats, and they offered me an opportunity to create new paintings that didn’t need to conform to the circular compositions needed for plates.

### Classic Fairy Tales



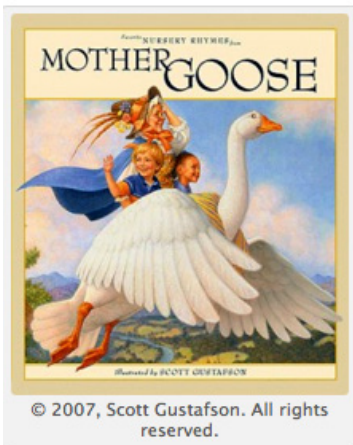
Finally, in 2001, the time became right to collect all my large-scale fairy tale images between two covers, and I began work on a fully illustrated book for the Greenwich Workshop Press. Two years and approximately fifty illustrations later, *Classic Fairy Tales* became a reality.

While working on the additional illustrations for this book, I spent a lot of time researching and absorbing paintings from various periods in the history of European art—everyone from medieval masters to Georges de La Tour, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van

Dyke supplied inspiration for the different stories.

*Classic Fairy Tales* was released in 2003 by the Greenwich Workshop Press and remains in print.

### Favorite Nursery Rhymes from Mother Goose



In addition to the fairy tale pictures that had been painted for the Bradford Exchange, I had also done eight nursery rhyme pieces. So at last, in 2005, some fifteen years after painting the first of these pictures for a plate series, I began work on a *Mother Goose* book.

In retrospect, this book provided some of the most pleasurable time I have ever spent in front of an easel. The lighthearted nature of the rhymes and the variety of characters and locations allowed for a range of approaches. In most books it is very important to keep all the elements consistent, but for *Mother Goose* I let each rhyme dictate its own two-page spread. The end result may seem a bit uneven, but to me it is simply a reflection of the fanciful nature of those classic little poems.

*Favorite Nursery Rhymes from Mother Goose* was released in 2007 by the Greenwich Workshop Press. Some of the images have also been licensed by Lasting Memories and published as three separate “Record-a-Books.”

### Eddie: The Lost Youth of Edgar Allan Poe

Throughout the years I’ve worked on a number of original children’s book ideas. Some are little more than a few sketches and scribbled notes stuffed into manila file folders, but others have been developed into full-scale dummy books and have landed on a few editors’ desks. Unfortunately, that is where their short lives have ended.



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Then, late in 2007, I was rereading a paperback book that I had purchased when I was about thirteen. It was a collection of Edgar Allan Poe's best short stories, and it got me thinking—what would Poe have been like when he was twelve or thirteen? Soon I was making sketches and doing research, and when I found out that family and friends had called the young author Eddie, I knew that there was something there.

After getting good responses from my wife and a few friends, I tried my hand at writing a rough draft. Eventually, with the help of a fellow author-illustrator, the manuscript was picked up by Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers.

On several levels, Eddie was a departure for me. It was my first novel and was intended for a slightly older audience (ages 8-12). It was also the first time that I would do all the interior illustrations in black and white.

For years, I'd been toying with the idea of trying something akin to a graphic novel, not with pages bearing panels and multiple images, but a fully illustrated story with pictures incorporated into the text. Ten to fifteen years ago, the assumed wisdom in children's publishing was that readers in this age group weren't interested in pictures; pictures were for "little kids." But the work of artists like Brian Selznick as well as others has proved that assumption wrong.

I hoped that by combining the pictures and the text, I could create more of an atmosphere than simply with the text alone. By the time it was finished, Eddie had almost ninety pictures and took over a year to illustrate. It was a wonderful challenge and a great opportunity to venture into some new territory, both as an author and as an illustrator.

Eddie: The Lost Youth of Edgar Allan Poe was released in August 2011 by Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers. The interior drawings were rendered in graphite and Liquid Pencil on Bristol board.

For more information, please visit Scott's website at <http://www.scottgustafson.com>.

## A Little Boy's Nightmare Is a Dream Come True

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By Keir Graff



My first children's book, a middle-grade novel titled *The Other Felix*, had its origins in a nightmare—but getting it published was a dream come true.

Three years ago, my older son was having bad dreams. Night after night, he found himself chased through a spooky forest by monsters. These weren't aliens or cyborgs or intelligent robots capable of transforming into semi-trailer trucks but old-fashioned storybook monsters with fur, fangs, and horns. Each night the monsters got closer and closer until my son woke up crying. Then he woke me up. After a few nights of this, I felt like crying, too.

I tried to reassure him with the usual bromides (“Don't worry, son, dreams can't hurt you”), but I was no help. When he was awake, he knew perfectly well the dreams couldn't hurt him. But asleep, the dreams seemed utterly real and he felt completely alone.

But then one night the dream was different. He met a boy who looked just like him, right down to the bright orange hair. The other boy had the same name as him, too. And this boy knew how to fight monsters. The battle was epic. At its end, the largest monster was flung from a cliff and buried in volcanic ash. (I believe National Geographic had recently published something about Pompeii.)

I tucked him in and raced to my desk, where I wrote down all I remembered of what he could remember. It filled only a single sheet of reporters' notebook paper, but what a story!

### Lying Just for the Fun of It

I had published three novels at that point, all for adults, but had no ambition to become a children's author. I loved reading aloud to my kids at bedtime, and though I winced at some of the books I didn't like, I assumed I lacked the insight necessary to write for young audiences. Still, I wanted to explore this story and it was definitely not for grownups. So I decided to write for the smallest audience I knew: my two sons.

I planned to write a short story, ten or twelve pages at most. But as I began to write about Felix and the Other Felix, I found I couldn't stop. I was curious about the boy and his doppelgänger, about the dream world where

they met, about how the monsters looked and behaved.

After years of writing about the world of adults in depressingly dystopian detail, it was a joy to set my imagination free. I remembered the reason I loved writing when I was a kid: it's really, really fun to make stuff up.

Before I knew it, I had a short novel. I was eager to read it to my sons but my professional instincts kicked in. I had done a lot with the dream world but not enough with Felix's waking life. His family and school life didn't seem nearly as real as his dreams.

So I did another draft, adding characters, scenes, and chapters, trying to add resonance between Felix's dream world and waking life without making the connections obvious. When I introduced a classroom bully, it was important to me that the monsters not become didactic metaphors.

After a second draft, I was quite pleased with the book and it occurred to me that I might actually be able to publish it. My imagination went to work once again: if I could sell it, wouldn't it be wonderful to read to my sons from an actual, published book?

I am lucky enough to be a friend and colleague of Ilene Cooper, who has published more than two dozen children's books (most recently *Angel in My Pocket*). I asked if she would read it and share her thoughts.

"I think you probably could publish it," she said. "But I do have a few suggestions."

Or More Than a Few

Did she ever. Ilene helped me think more rigorously about how kids other than my sons might respond to the book. She asked, "What age group are you writing for?" and made me defend my answer. She told me to add more dialogue, to cut some of the description, and to pick up the pace in places. She helped me clarify the way in which the Felixes fight the monsters. (In my book, it's not a fistfight as it was in my son's dream.)

I did another draft. The manuscript was definitely improving. Ilene gave it to Lauren Wohl, then associate publisher of Roaring Brook Press. Lauren loved the book and took it to busy publisher Simon Boughton, then kept after him. Eventually, informally, I was told they would like to publish the book. And did I have an agent?

I didn't have an agent. Unusual as it sounds, I had sold my other books without one. Ilene, once again showing peerless generosity, introduced me to her agent, Ken Wright at Writers House. Ken and I hit it off and decided to work together. After a lot of time, a few false starts, and plenty of persistence on Ken's part (the wheels of publishing do turn slowly), we got

an offer.

I was in a hotel room in Indianapolis, sick with the flu, when Ken called with the good news that Roaring Brook was willing to sign a generous deal. He seemed puzzled that I didn't sound happier. I was extremely happy—but I was also trying hard not to throw up.

### The Importance of Editing

Now the real rewriting began. Working with my wonderfully talented editor, Kate Jacobs, we went over the story again and again until the plot was consistent, the characters breathed, and the prose sparkled. When I meet writers who tell me that traditional publishing is dead and they're going to do everything all by themselves, I ask, "So who's going to edit you?"

### The First Review

I still hadn't told my kids about the book. I was planning to wait until I could read from a finished copy. But when, in spring of 2011, I received an advance readers' edition, my resolve crumbled. It had an attractive cover, the pages had words on them, and some of the drawings were finished—it was basically a paperback, right?

I sat down and read it to them over two nights, then waited for their review with bated breath.

"I like it," said my older son. "You're almost as good as Jeff Kinney."

### The Other Albert?

So I should mention that my older son's name really is Felix. When I started writing the story, I used his name because it was his story and I was writing it for him. When the story became a novel that I began to think might really get published, I started thinking I should change the name. I worried that he might get a big head, or that he might start having the dreams again, or that his classmates would think it was nonfiction. If the reviews were bad, I feared that I would take them too personally, as if the critics were targeting my own flesh and blood.

I tried out at least a hundred variations: The Other Aaron, The Other Albert, The Other Alex, The Other Avram, and on through the alphabet. None of them worked. Finally, I decided I was overthinking things. It was his story and the whole thing had just happened naturally. And, as one friend pointed out, if the book happened to be a smash hit and the ensuing fame went to his head, at least I'd be able to afford his psychiatrist bills.

My wife had a more down-to-earth concern: "You do realize we have another son, right?"

Yes, we do, a kindergartner named Cosmo. He's been very patient despite seeing his big brother's name on the front of a huge stack of books. Thankfully, Roaring Brook signed me to a two-book deal, which may just keep Cosmo out of therapy, too.

What is the next book about? Well, despite another friend's joking suggestion that I whisper scary things to Cosmo as he drifts off to sleep, I already have an idea of my own.

And, Cosmo, that one's for you.

Keir Graff is the editor of Booklist Online, a publication of the American Library Association. He is an SCBWI member and is also on the board of directors of the Society of Midland Authors. His second middle-grade novel is tentatively titled The Matchstick Castle. Find more information at <http://www.keirgraff.com>.

## Winter 2012 Classes, Retreats, and Workshops

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*Compiled by June Sengpiel*

Classes, conferences and workshops provide opportunities for professional contacts, manuscript critiques, networking and fellowship. Many an unpublished manuscript has been refocused, redefined, rewritten and published after its author attended a class or workshop. Why not consider one of the learning opportunities below? Visit [www.scbwi-illinois.org](http://www.scbwi-illinois.org) and click on “networks” to find out about other events offered by SCBWI-Illinois Networks throughout the state.

### CLASSES

SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

37 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, IL 60603

Department of Continuing Studies 312-899-7458

To register, contact:

[http://www.saic.edu/continuing\\_studies/ace/index.html](http://www.saic.edu/continuing_studies/ace/index.html)

Multi-Level Children’s Book Illustration, Class #1663, ILLUSTR 505-001

Wednesdays, February 8 to April 11, 2012, 6 to 9 pm

Instructor: Lisa Cinelli, Teaching Artist

<http://www.lisacinelli.com>

Illustration Materials and Techniques, Class #1715, ILLUSTR 503-001

Thursdays, February 9 to April 12, 2012, 6 to 9 pm

Instructor: Lisa Cinelli, Teaching Artist

Beginning Children’s Book Illustration Class #1662, ILLUSTR 504-001

Tuesdays, February 7 to April 10, 2012, 6 to 9 pm

Instructor: Laura Nyman Montenegro, Author/Illustrator

<http://www.lauranymanmontenegro.com>

For more information, check the SAIC.EDU Continuing Studies website or call Continuing Studies and Special Programs through the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Continuing Studies and Special Programs, now has a Certificate in Children’s Book Illustration Program with Lisa Cinelli and Laura Nyman Montenegro as Instructors.

Materials and Techniques in Children’s Book Illustration

440 Oakland Drive Highland Park, Illinois 60035

Teaching Artist: Lisa Cinelli

Work one-on-one or in small classes exploring drawing, painting and mixed

media techniques used in children's book illustration. Fine tune images in your picture book dummy and then experiment with materials to best tell the story visually. Classes can also be arranged to focus on particular drawing or painting techniques such as pen and ink, watercolor or gouache (an opaque watercolor) or mixed media. Painting, drawing, and putting together a portfolio are among the choices for particular classes.

For more information, contact Lisa Cinelli at [lisacinelli@gmail.com](mailto:lisacinelli@gmail.com).

THE NORTH SHORE ART LEAGUE

620 Lincoln Avenue, Winnetka, IL 60093

### Illustration Class

Fridays, January 20 to March 23, 2012, 9:30 am to noon

Instructor: Lisa Cinelli

To register, contact the North Shore Art League at

<http://www.northshoreartleague.org> or 847-446-2870

COLLEGE OF DU PAGE

GLEN ELLYN CAMPUS

425 Fawell Blvd., Glen Ellyn 60137

For Continuing Education information, call 630-942-2208.

### Get Started Blogging - New Class for 2012

Saturday, February 25, 2012, 9 am to 3 pm

Instructor: Carmela Martino, Author

In this hands-on class, you'll learn how to define, set-up and maintain your own blog, whether for business purposes or to connect with family and friends. The instructor will walk you through basic blog set-up (on WordPress), including how to add photos, clip-art, and video clips. You'll also learn how to attract your target audience and keep them coming back.

Prerequisite: Basic computer experience.

Please bring a sack lunch.

Course code: LEISR-0052-003 Cost: \$69

### Transforming Life Into Fiction

Saturday, March 10, 2012, 9 am to 3 pm

Instructor: Carmela Martino, Author

This one-day workshop will introduce you to techniques for creating fiction based on your own life events, or those of others. Learn how to mine your past for story ideas and details that will bring your fiction to life. Find out how to create composite characters from real people and turn anecdotes into stories that have a beginning, middle and end.

Please bring a sack lunch.

Course Code: LEISR-0052-002 Cost: \$69

For more information on either of the above classes, see:

<http://www.carmelamartino.com/events.htm>

## THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY

60 W. Walton St., Chicago

To register: <http://www.newberry.org> or phone 312-255-3700

Oh, The Possibilities: Writing for Children in Today's Children's Book

World Saturday, March 24, 2012, 10 am to 4 pm Instructor: Esther

Hershenhorn, Author and Writing Coach Eager to write that children's book

you've dreamed of writing? Anxious to learn what to do once you write it?

This workshop introduces newcomers to today's world of children's book publishing – the markets, the genres, the formats and audience niches – and recommends a few Rules of the Road and tried-and-true short cuts to make navigating that world easier. Participants will have the opportunity to share a work-in-progress in order to see its possibilities in today's publishing world.

(Note: Please bring a bagged lunch as the class will continue to meet during the lunch hour. Class size is limited.) Cost: \$110

To register go to <http://www.newberry.org/writing-workshops>

University of Chicago Writer's Studio

Downtown Gleacher Center

450 North Cityfront Plaza, Chicago 60611

For information, call 773-702-1722

Writing Novels For Children and Young Adults

Tuesday, January 10, 2012 to February 28, 2012 6 pm to 8:30 pm

Instructor: Esther Hershenhorn, Author and Writing Coach

Begin the process of crafting an early chapter book, middle grade, or young adult novel for young readers. Suggested readings will highlight the structure and demands of the various format possibilities. Writing exercises and workshop discussions will focus on the writing process, elements of narrative, revision, and a story's marketability, with special emphasis on the connection between plot and character. The workshop will keep writers on their respective plot lines, offering measured assignments, project-related goals, models to study, suggestions and encouragement. Particular needs will be assessed and determined in the first session and addressed in the remaining weeks.

To register, visit <http://www.grahamschool.uchicago.edu/php/writersstudio/>

The following classes are taught by Michelle Kogan

Email Michelle with any questions. Website

<http://www.michellekogan.com>;

email: [mkogan@mdandmk.com](mailto:mkogan@mdandmk.com)

Michelle also works with students independently, email her for more specifics.

Chicago Botanic Garden  
1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe 60022  
<http://www.chicagobotanic.org/school>

Watercolor in the Greenhouse Thursdays, January 19 to March 8, 2012, 9:30 am to 12:30 pm

Instructor: Michelle Kogan, illustrator/painter/instructor

Join us for a warm retreat watercoloring in the Greenhouse. In this lush venue, we will create finished compositions using your choice of watercolor pencils, cakes, and tubes. Both beginners and seasoned artists are welcome. Beginners will focus on exercises starting with monochromatic paintings and build up to full-color compositions, while seasoned artists will be given criticism in composition, color and materials. Each student will receive individual critiques. Cost: \$299 member/\$374 non-member. Register online at [chicagobotanic.org/school](http://chicagobotanic.org/school) or call 847-835-8261.

Evanston Art Center  
2603 Sheridan Road, Evanston 60201  
Click on link to register or call 847-475-5300  
<http://www.evanstonartcenter.org/school>

Multilevel Figure Painting (01767)

Tuesdays, January 10 to March 13, 2012, 6:30 pm to 9:30 pm

Instructor: Michelle Kogan

Working in the medium of your choice – oil, acrylic, watercolor or drawing media – students will create finished works from a live model. One pose will be carried out through several classes. Techniques may include gesture, contour line, organizational framework and modeled drawings. Cost: \$295 Regular Member Rate/\$285 Discounted (Resident) Rate. Register online at <http://www.evanstonartcenter.org/school>

Intermediate Painting (0181)

Wednesdays, January 11 to March 14, 2012, 9 am to 12 pm

Instructor: Michelle Kogan

In this mid level class, students will choose their painting medium and create a series of works from material they bring in, including objects, and photos. Individual and group critiques will cover composition, color and structure. We also will review contemporary and historical artists who work(ed) in series or with a particular focus. Cost: \$265 Regular Member Rate/\$255 Discounted (Resident) Rate. Register online at <http://www.evanstonartcenter.org/school>

Basic Drawing (0282)

Wednesdays, January 11 to March 14, 2012, 12:30 pm to 3 pm

Instructor: Michelle Kogan

This class focuses on creating strong compositions, using positive and

negative space and building a full range of values in your drawings. We will work from still-life arrangements created by the instructor and the students. All levels welcome. Advanced students will work independently, while receiving one-on-one critiques. Cost: \$265 Regular Member Rate/\$255 Discounted (Resident) Rate. Register online at <http://www.evanstonartcenter.org/school>

#### Transparent Watercolor (0261)

Fridays, January 13 to March 16, 2012, 9:30 am to 12:30 pm

Instructor: Michelle Kogan

This class will emphasize the use of composition, color and glazing with transparent watercolors. Students will work independently on a series of paintings over the session. Students will have the option to bring in reference materials and/or still life materials for creating their own compositions, or may work from still life materials that the instructor provides. Cost: \$265 Regular Member Rate/\$255 Discounted (Resident) Rate

#### Poetry Writing Correspondence Course

What: The ABC's of Children's Poetry Correspondence Course

When & Where: At your convenience in your own home

Instructor: Heidi Bee Roemer, poetAuthor of three poetry books and over 400 magazine sales, Heidi teaches students how to write poetry for children with an eye on publication. Learn how to write a variety of poetry forms, basic meters, rhyme schemes, devices of sound and more. Poetry assignments are exchanged via e-mail. Detailed critiques are offered. Includes instruction on how to find and target poetry publishers. Materials you receive: 60 page ABC workbook, POETRY PLACE booklet, five CD's, sample magazines, and market newsletters.

Cost: \$195 (includes shipping)

Do you want professional feedback on your story-in-rhyme, poetry collection, picture book or nonfiction? Heidi Bee Roemer, a children's author and instructor for the Institute of Children's Literature, offers detailed written critiques with an eye on publication-yours!

For more information, please contact

Heidi at [HRoemer@hotmail.com](mailto:HRoemer@hotmail.com)

The following institutions offer classes and workshops for writers and illustrators. Specific class information was not available at time of publication.

#### THE RAGDALE FOUNDATION

1260 N. Green Bay Road, Lake Forest, IL 60045

Phone 847-234-1063 or visit <http://www.ragdale.org>

#### THE WRITERS CENTER AT ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1700 Spartan Dr., Elgin, IL 60123  
Regular writing workshop plus weekend special–topic workshops  
Phone 847–214–7578

For more information on the SCBWI events listed below, go to  
<http://www.scbwi.org> and click on regional chapters.

#### SCBWI INDIANA

March 5, 2012, 9:30 am to 2 pm

Brunch & Book Fair

Carmel, IN

Contact: Kristi Valiant

<http://ezregister.com/events/2323> (Note: At the time of publication, it appears that the brunch is sold out but that the book fair is still open. No registration required).

#### SCBWI IOWA

April 20 to 22, 2012

Spring Conference

The Lodge

Bettendorf, IA

Contact: Connie Heckert

#### SCBWI MICHIGAN

March 10 to March 11, 2012

Critique Meet

Various host sites across the state Contact: Anita Pazner

#### SCBWI OHIO

March 12, 2012

Keys to Successful Children's Illustration

Holiday Inn Cleveland – South

6001 Rockside Rd., Independence, Ohio 44131

Contact: Victoria Selvaggio

#### WISCONSIN SCBWI

March 25 to March 27, 2012

Novel Workshop

Bishop O'Connor Center

Madison, WI

Contact: Pam Beres

April 28, 2012

Spring Luncheon

Oconomowoc Lake Club

Oconomowoc, WI

Contact: Emily Kokie

## SCBWI INTERNATIONAL

13th Annual Winter Conference

January 27 to 29, 2012

New York, NY

Visit <http://www.SCBWI.org> for faculty, registration and information

## RETREATS, CONFERENCES, WORKSHOPS AND LECTURESHIGHLIGHTS

### FOUNDATION FOUNDERS WORKSHOPS

For professional and aspiring writers and illustrators

Honesdale, PA

Conferences include seminars, small-group workshops, and one-on-one sessions with some of the most accomplished, prominent and supportive authors, illustrators, editors, critics and publishers in the world of children's literature, all determined to help authors and illustrators meet their goals.

For all workshops, phone 877-512-8365 for more information.

To register, e-mail Jo Lloyd, Program Assistant, [jalloyd@highlightsfoundation.org](mailto:jalloyd@highlightsfoundation.org).

For more information on the workshops, visit

<http://www.highlightsfoundation.org/fw-sched-preview>

### Making the Web Work For You

March 4 to March 8, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Katie Davis, Lindsey Leavitt, Bobbie Combs, Laurina Cashin

Special Guest: Jules Danielson

### Writing For Magazines: Fiction and Nonfiction

March 8 to March 11, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Paula Morrow, Rich Wallace, Rachel Buchholz, Lou Waryncia

### Whole Novel Workshop

March 11 to March 17, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Kathi Appelt, Jeanette Ingold, Alan Gratz, Martha Milhalik

Special guests: Janet Fox, (Teaching Assistant), Karyn Henley (Teaching Assistant)

### Screenwriting for the Children's and Young Adult Audience

April 12 to April 15, 2012

Workshop leaders: David Paterson, Shelly Mellott, Maureen Green

Special Guest: Sandy Asher

### Nature Writing Boot Camp

April 16 to April 19, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Dianna Hutts Aston, Mark Baldwin, Robert Hynes, Andy Boyles

### Science Writing Boot Camp

April 19 to April 22, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Catherine D. Hughes, Sally M. Walker, Doug Wechsler, Andy Boyles

### Creating an Authentic Cultural Voice

April 26 to April 29, 2012

Putting imagination, experience, empathy, and research to work for you

Workshop Leaders: Mitali Perkins, Donna Jo Napoli

Special Guests: Kathryn Erskine, Alvina Ling

### Finding Your Story (And What To Do About It)

April 29 to May 6, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Juanita Havill, Susan Pearson

### Life in the Spotlight: Author Opportunities after Publication

The Path to Successful School and Library Visits, Self-Promotion, and Press Interviews

May 6 to May 11, 2012

Workshop Leader: Peter P. Jacobi

Special Guest: Kate Messner

### Heart of the Fantasy Novel (Part One of Two-Part Class)

Map a Fantasy and Set Writing Goals

May 10 to May 13, 2012

Workshop Leader: Patricia Lee Gauch

### Poetry for All

May 13 to May 17, 2012

Workshop Leaders: Eileen Spinelli, Rebecca Kai Dotlich, David L. Harrison

Special Guests: Melanie Hall, Marjorie Maddox, Rebecca Davis

### 28th Annual Writers Workshop

Chautauqua Institute, Chautauqua, NY 14722 July 14 to 21, 2012

For more information, phone 570-253-1192 or email [contact@highlightsfoundation.org](mailto:contact@highlightsfoundation.org)

[highlightsfoundation.org](http://highlightsfoundation.org)

## RESIDENCY PROGRAMS

### VERMONT COLLEGE BRIEF RESIDENCY

#### MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Montpelier, VT

July and January

11-day intensive residencies in July and January on campus alternate with 5 month nonresident projects (4 semesters, 5 residencies)

Faculty includes M.T. Anderson, Kathi Appelt, Marion Dane Bauer, Sharon Darrow, Ellen Levine, and Norma Fox Mazer

Contact Melissa Fisher at 800-336-6794, Ext. 8637 or e-mail melissa.fisher@tui.edu or visit the website at

<http://www.vermontcollege.edu/low-residency-mfa/writing-children-young-adults>

### SPALDING UNIVERSITY BRIEF RESIDENCY

#### MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN WRITING PROGRAM with a

Concentration in Writing For Children

Louisville, KY

Semesters begin in May or October

Program is 4 semesters, 5 residencies

Contact Graduate Admissions at (800) 896-8941, Ext. 2423 or e-mail: mfa@spalding.edu or visit the website at <http://www.spalding.edu>

### LESLEY UNIVERSITY LOW-RESIDENCY

#### MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

Cambridge, MA

Offering a concentration in Writing for Young People

Semesters begin in January and June

Program is 4 semesters, 5 residencies

Contact Jana M. Van der Veer (jvanderv@lesley.edu) Assistant Director, Advising and Student Services

### HAMLIN UNIVERSITY LOW-RESIDENCY

#### MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

1536 Hewitt Avenue

Saint Paul, MN 55104

Semesters begin in January and July

Program is 4 semesters, 5 residencies

Office phone: (651) 523-2047

For questions, call (651) 523-2900 or e-mail [gradprog@hamline.edu](mailto:gradprog@hamline.edu)

## LEARNING ON-LINE

### INSTITUTE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Correspondence courses and access to articles, tips, and chat-room discussions on writing.

Visit <http://www.Institutechildrenslit.com>

## WRITER'S DIGEST ONLINE WORKSHOPS

"Fundamentals of Writing For Children" (12 week beginning course)

"Focus Course in Writing For Children" (14 week intermediate course)

For details and starting dates on these workshops and other Writer's Digest Online Courses, visit <http://www.writersonlineworkshops.com>

June Sengpiehl lives in Oak Park with her husband, Paul. She writes poetry, articles, picture books, and chapter books. Her email is [jsseng629@yahoo.com](mailto:jsseng629@yahoo.com).

## News Roundup Winter 2012

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*Compiled by Corie Ramos-Azem*

\*\*\*EVENTS (roughly by date)\*\*\*

### ANDERSON'S BOOKSHOP

Information is subject to change; some events require tickets. For more information on these and other upcoming events, visit <http://www.andersonsbookshop.com/events.php>, or call 630-355-2665 for AB Naperville (123 W. Jefferson Ave., Naperville) and ATDE (Anderson's Two Doors East, 111 W. Jefferson Ave., Naperville) or 630-963-2665 for AB Downers Grove (5112 Main St., Downers Grove).

- Jan. 15: Not for Kids Only Book Group discussion of *Masterpiece*, by Elise Broach, 2 pm at ATDE
- Jan. 21: Mother-Daughter Book Club discussion of *The Secret Ingredient*, by Laura Schaefer, at AB Downers Grove. New members are welcome. Please call to make reservations.
- Jan. 23: Christopher Paul Curtis, author of *The Mighty Miss Malone*, 7 pm at AB Naperville
- Jan. 23: Marissa Meyer and Megan Miranda, authors of *Cinder* (Meyer) and *Fracture* (Miranda), 7 pm at ATDE
- Jan. 24: Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman, author and illustrator of *Why We Broke Up*, 7 pm at AB Naperville
- Jan. 26: Gene Wojciechowski, author of *The Last Great Game*, 7 pm at AB Naperville
- Jan. 28: Super Saturday, featuring a Madeline theme, celebrating the books of Ludwig Bemelmans and John Bemelmans Marciano, 10 am at AB Naperville and 11 am at AB Downers Grove.
- Feb. 2: Ann Hood, author of *The Treasure Chest*, 7 pm at ATDE
- Feb. 8: Adam Rex, author of *Cold Cereal*, 7 pm at AB Naperville
- Feb. 25: Super Saturday, featuring a Strawberry Shortcake theme, celebrating Strawberry Shortcake books, 10 am at AB Naperville and 11 am at AB Downers Grove.
- Feb. 25: Mother-Daughter Book Club discussion of *Northanger Abbey*, by Jane Austen, 2 pm at AB Downers Grove. New members are welcome. Please call to make reservations.
- Mar. 11: Kristi Yamaguchi, author of *It's a Big World, Little Pig*, 2 pm at AB Naperville
- Mar. 24: Kevin Henkes, author of *Penny and her Song*, 2 pm at AB Naperville
- Mar. 24: Mother-Daughter Book Club discussion of *Stranger with My Face*, by Lois Duncan, 2 pm at AB Downers Grove. New members are

welcome. Please call to make reservations.

- Apr. 17: Herman Parish, author of *Amelia Bedelia's First Vote*, 7 pm at AB Naperville

#### 10<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE BREAKFAST

What: Illinois authors and illustrators, full breakfast, door prizes, giveaways, book sales and more! CPDU credits

When: Saturday, February 18

Where: Glen Ellyn's Abbington Distinctive Banquets

Details: Advance registration and \$55 fee required

More information: Check Anderson's website <http://www.andersonsbookshop.com> or call (630) 820-2802 for details.

#### NAPERVILLE READS

What: Celebration of reading, sponsored by Anderson's Bookshop, Naperville Public Library, Naperville School District 203, and Indian Prairie School District 204.

When: February 9 at 7 pm

Where: Wentz Hall, North Central College, 171 E. Chicago Ave.,

Naperville  
Details: Featuring Antonio Sacre, author of *The Barking Mouse*; *A Mango in the Hand: A Story Told Through Proverbs*; and *La Noche Buena: A Christmas Story*

More information: <http://www.napervillereads.org>

#### \*\*\*AWARDS\*\*\*

#### NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS

The 2011 winner of the National Book Foundation's National Book Award for Young People's Literature is:

- Thanhha Lai (*Inside Out and Back Again*)

The finalists are:

- Franny Billingsley (*Chimes*)
- Debby Dahl Edwardson (*My Name is Not Easy*)
- Albert Marrin (*Flesh & Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and It's Legacy*)
- Gary D. Schmidt (*Okay for Now*)

#### YALSA (YOUNG ADULT LIBRARY SERVICES ASSOCIATION) 2011 TOP TEN BEST FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

1. *Ship Breaker*, by Paolo Sacigalupi
2. *Revolution*, by Jennifer Donnelly
3. *Finnikin of the Rock*, by Melina Marchetta
4. *Amy & Roger's Epic Detour*, by Morgan Matson
5. *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer*, by Lish McBride
6. *Trash*, by Andy Mulligan

7. Bamboo People, by Mitali Perkins
8. The Things a Brother Knows, by Dana Reinhardt
9. Last Night I Sang to the Monster, by Benjamin Saenz
10. Revolver, by Marcus Sedgwick

\*\*\*2012 SCBWI MEMBER GRANTS\*\*\*

Need financial help to complete your current project? Look no further.  
Note: Applicants may only apply to one SCBWI grant per calendar year.

#### WORK-IN-PROGRESS GRANTS

- Five grants are available: General Work-in-Progress Grant, Grant for a Contemporary Novel for Young People, Nonfiction Research Grant, Grant for Work from a Multi-cultural/minority Perspective, and Grant for Work for an Unpublished Author.
- Applicants may apply only for one of the first four grants; the fifth will be chosen from all eligible entries in the other categories.
- Each category has a winner, receiving \$2,000, and a runner-up receiving \$500.
- Applications must be postmarked no earlier than February 15 and received by March 15.
- Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/WIP-Grant> for more information.

#### BARBARA KARLIN GRANT

- Aspiring picture book writers, unpublished and not under contract, can apply for this grant. The Grant is available to full and associate SCBWI members who are not previously published and who do not have a picture book under contract.
- The winner receives \$2,000 and a runner-up receives \$500.
- Entries must be postmarked no earlier than February 15 and received no later than March 15.
- Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/Barbara-Karlin-Grant> for more information.

#### DON FREEMAN MEMORIAL GRANT-IN-AID

- Established for picture book artists who wish to continue their training and advance their skills.
- One grant of \$2,000 is awarded to the winner, with a runner-up receiving \$500.
- Applications must be postmarked no earlier than January 15 and received no later than March 15.
- Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/Don-Freeman-Grant> for more information.

\*\*\*CONFERENCES\*\*\*

SCBWI 2012 WINTER CONFERENCE

When: January 27 - 29, 2012 (optional intensives on January 27)

Where: Grant Hyatt in New York City

Regular Registration (after January 1):

\$375 - SCBWI Members

\$415 - Nonmembers

Optional Pre-Conference Intensives (January 27):

- Open to full-time conference attendees for the following additional fees:  
\$225
- Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Conference.aspx?Con=7> for more information.

NIU 32nd ANNUAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CONFERENCE

What: The Right Book for the Right Reader

When: March 16, 2012, 7:30 am - 4:40 pm

Where: Holms Student Center, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb

Cost: Attend for \$125 (early bird registration before February 16) or \$135. NIU Alumni rate is \$115 early bird, or \$125 after February 16.

Includes handbook, breakfast, lunch, and all sessions. Details: Hear the announcement of the Rebecca Caudill and Monarch Award winners. Speakers include Nic Bishop, Floyd Cooper, Greg van Eekhout, and Sneed B. Collard III. For more information or to register visit <http://www.cedu.niu.edu/oep/conferences/childrenslit/index.html>

2012 IRC (ILLINOIS READING COUNCIL) CONFERENCE

When: March 15-17, 2012

Where: Springfield, Illinois

Cost: \$175 for IRC members, \$250 for nonmembers. Discounted rates for IRC retirees, pre-service teachers, and early registration (before February 1, 2012) - \$150 for IRC members, \$225 for nonmembers. Details: Join dozens of authors, including Gary Paulson, Patricia MacLachlan, and Carolyn Crimi for the weekend as they celebrate the theme "Literacy in the Land of Lincoln." More information: <http://www.illinoisreadingcouncil.org/conference.html>

Corie Ramos-Azem is writing a YA novel as well as picture books. She is co-chair of SCBWI-IL Southland group and teaches preschool part-time. The rest of her time is spent with her family or eating chocolate!

## Alternative Publishing Options

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*By Sallie Wolf*

On December 3 a wonderful conversation took place among SCBWI members who are interested in exploring alternative publishing options, such as namelos, Create Space, and print on demand.

Genevieve Ching, Norm Cowie, Sheila Welsh, and Carol Saller each have experience with nontraditional publishing as well as traditional. They shared some of their knowledge, and then a lively conversation with plenty of questions for all took place.

Genevieve publishes under the name G. P. Ching. Because her first book, *The Soulkeepers* (book one of *The Soulkeepers Series*, released March 2011), did not fit clearly into traditional YA marketing niches, she chose to self-publish, using Create Space and other internet tools to put out an e-book and a print-on-demand paperback version. The e-book sells for \$2.99 on all platforms, and Genevieve nets about \$2 per copy. While marketing through Facebook, Twitter, her blog (<http://www.GPChing.com>), and website (<http://www.TheSoulkeepersSeries.com>), and a blog tour, Genevieve continued to write the sequels of this trilogy. As she got ready to release her second novel (*Weaving Destiny*, book two of *The Soulkeepers Series*, released September 2011), she decided to offer volume 1 for free. The Apple Store was happy to let her set the price at \$0, but Amazon refused until she showed them how many downloads the Apple Store had. When Amazon allowed her to match the price on the other platforms, the number of downloads skyrocketed. If even a fraction of the people who downloaded volume 1 opt to buy volumes 2 and 3 (*Return to Eden*, book 3 of *The Soulkeepers Series*, coming spring 2012), Genevieve will realize a very tidy income. Clearly Genevieve has a well-written manuscript, real marketing savvy, and the discipline to maintain both her writing and her marketing presence while raising her family. She is part of an author's cooperative, Darkside Publishing (<http://www.DarkSidePublishing.com>), whose members edit each other's books and also promote them at every opportunity.

Carol Saller and Sheila Welch both have been published by namelos. Carol described namelos as similar to traditional publishing houses, who select manuscripts and then provide editing, production, distribution, and marketing services, but very different in that namelos publishes only in the new technologies of print on demand (paperback and hardcover) and e-book formats. (Namelos has a separate "services" division for authors interested in paying for manuscript evaluation and editorial advice, but the "publishing" division does not take money from writers.) The founder of namelos, Stephen Roxburgh, comes from a long career in traditional

publishing. But the current technological innovations are challenging the profitability of traditional publishing. Namelos is one response to these changes.

Carol (author of *Eddie's War* <<http://www.carolsaller.com>> ) has also experimented with creating a book using Create Space. She described how she set out to prepare an entire book without spending any money. She is determined to figure out the formatting and design elements herself, merely as an exercise, whether or not she publishes it. She approached this project almost like a scientific experiment. Again, one must admire the discipline and spirit of adventure as she explores this new publishing option.

Sheila Welch has long helped other people realize their dream of being published, and she and her husband founded their own publishing company, ShadowPlay Press. Sheila is also published herself in both traditional and self-published venues, and she has reissued two of her out-of-print books through the Authors Guild BackinPrint.com Program. In addition, she has a new book, *Waiting to Forget*, just released by namelos.

Norm Cowie writes witty columns for trade magazines, which led him to write several humorous adult books. These in turn inspired him to write for the YA market. When the publisher of his *Adventures of Guy* adult series was unable to release his books as e-books, he refused to renew the contract and decided to take over the publication himself. He also opted to turn down a contract from the publisher of *Fang Face*, his YA vampire book, and instead released its sequel *WereWoof* himself. He chose Create Space to rerelease his first adult book and self-publish several more, including his new release *Bonk & Hedz*, a caveman adult/YA crossover humor book. All of his books are available as e-books and print-on-demand paperbacks and can be found on Amazon, B&N, most online retailers, or his website <http://www.normcowie.com>.

The real issue is marketing. Once your book is available as an e-book or print-on-demand paperback, how do you get people to know about it? Twitter and Facebook continue to be the best way to reach the YA market. Middle-grade and picture book authors have a harder time marketing directly to their audience. Instead they must reach the "Mommy-bloggers" and the kidlitosphere bloggers who review and recommend books to parents, librarians, and teachers.

It is hard, but not impossible, to get self-published books reviewed by the traditional review media (Kirkus, *Publisher's Weekly*, *SLJ*, etc.) Many teachers and librarians are required to base their buying decisions on the reviews in these respected journals. This greatly restricts the market for self-published and nontraditionally released books. Some of these journals will review e-books for a fee. Paying for a review does not guarantee a glowing or even positive review, but it does get your title reviewed in the same media as traditionally published books.

I left this Food for Thought with quite a few new ideas to consider. It seems to me that traditional publishing is searching for ways to make the digital revolution in publishing profitable and that the trend is to put more of the editing and production costs on the authors. Authors are pushing back by assuming the risks of self-publishing in order to realize much greater returns on each book sold. Namelos is a way to retain the vetting of experienced editors and publishers while sharing the costs and profits between author and publisher. Where this will all lead is anybody's guess right now, but these enterprising authors have decided to be in the forefront of redefining publishing as we know it.

Food for Thought is occasional, member-generated programming for published and under-contract (not limited to P.A.L.) authors and illustrators who are members of SCBWI. Email Sallie Wolf (salwolf@comcast.net) with suggestions for future Food for Thought programming.

Sallie Wolf is a full-time artist and writer living in Oak Park. She is an avid journal/sketchbook keeper, which led to the creation of *The Robin Makes a Laughing Sound: A Birder's Journal* (Charlesbridge, 2010). Sallie is the author of *Truck Stuck* (Charlesbridge, 2008) and *Peter's Trucks* (Albert Whitman, 1992). To learn more about her art, including the ongoing Moon Project, and her writing, visit her website at <http://www.salliewolf.com>.

## Spring Thaw: SCBWI-IL Proudly Welcomes Dynamic Duo Steve Mooser and Lin Oliver

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*Mark your calendars, save the date . . . and prepare to be inspired!*

*Saturday, May 12, 2012*

*10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Morton Arboretum in Lisle, IL*



SCBWI~Illinois is in for a treat this spring! If you haven't had the opportunity to hear Lin Oliver and Steve Mooser speak at one of the national conventions, now is your chance! And if you have heard them, you know that they will have you rolling with laughter as you stretch your imagination and stake a claim on your profession. It's no wonder that SCBWI is brimming with heart and humor, just look at our honored guests . . .

Stephen Mooser is the president and co-founder of SCBWI and the author of nearly sixty books for children. He began his career as the author of several reading programs, including those for SWRL/Ginn, ABC, and Harcourt. But most readers know Stephen for his trade books, which began with the publication of *101 Black Cats* (Scholastic) in 1975, and continues through his most recent series, *Goofball Malone, Ace Detective*. Steve has written across all genres: picture books (*The Ghost with the Halloween Hiccups*), to series books (*The Creepy Creature Club, It's a Weird, Weird School*), to nonfiction (*Lights! Camera! Scream!*), as well as novels (*Elvis Is Back* and *He's in the Sixth Grade*).

Lin Oliver is not only the executive director and co-founder of SCBWI but also a writer and producer of movies, books, and television series for children and families. She is the author (with Henry Winkler) of the New York Times best-selling "Hank Zipzer" book series, with over three million books in print. Her comedic four-book middle-grade series "Who Shrunk Daniel Funk?" from Simon and Schuster includes *Attack of the Growling Eyeballs, Escape of the Mini-Mummy, Revenge of the Itty-Bitty Brothers, and Secret of the Super-Small Super Star*. Lin released, *Sound Bender*, a book she co-wrote with her son, Theo Baker, this past fall. The first book in a new series written with Henry Winkler called *Ghost Buddy* will be out from Scholastic this spring.

With the beautiful Morton Arboretum as our backdrop, surely a thousand muses will be in bloom! The cost for the day, including a gourmet box lunch and admission to the Morton Arboretum, is \$35. Seating is limited, so register early. Watch for registration details on the SCBWI~Illinois website and listserv soon.

We look forward to seeing you at the SCBWI~Illinois Spring Thaw. Questions regarding this event may be directed to: Lori Degman and Meg Fleming (ldegman@aol.com, megfleminglantz@gmail.com)

## Unstick Yourself

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*By M. Molly Backes*

If you're reading this article, you're probably doing everything right. You're a member of SCBWI, and you actively work to build your network of fellow writers. You're a student of storycraft. You spend a lot of time thinking about structure and plot and characterization and how to hook your reader. Your bookshelves are full of books about writing: *Bird by Bird*, *Writing Down the Bones*, *If You Want to Write*, *The Artist's Way*, *The Elements of Style*. You take writing classes and belong to a workshop and have a writer's group. Maybe you even have an agent or have publications under your belt.

With all this studying and support, the writing part is a snap, right?

No?

If you attend every meeting and every class, read every book and every blog, and the writing is still hard, it might be simply because writing is always hard. It's supposed to be hard. Writing pushes us to confront our deepest secrets and fears, to dig around in what it means to be human and build something beautiful. It's not easy.

But maybe it doesn't need to be this hard, either.

Too Much of a Good Thing?

As a fiction teacher, of course I believe in the value of writing classes. I also have an entire bookshelf full of books about writing and storytelling, and I love my various writing groups and networks. But I also worry about too much of a good thing. There's a delicate balance between studying craft to improve your writing and reading "just one more" book on fiction in order to procrastinate on actually writing. There are times when knowing story structure can help you to shape your manuscript, tighten up your arc, and heighten the tension. But there are also times when too much knowledge can paralyze you or send you spinning into a vortex of panic and excuses. "I can't start writing this until I know my climax!" "I'm halfway through Chapter Four and I still don't have a B Story!" "The character arc isn't going to be steep enough!"

The paradox of writing is that every time you sit down at your computer, you have to forget everything you know about the rules, and just write.

Trust Your Inspiration

If you find yourself spinning your wheels on a project that used to excite

you, go back to your original kernel of inspiration. Before you started worrying about plot and hooks and marketability, what was it about this story that originally appealed to you? Do a ten-minute freewrite about how this story started. “I want to write about Patrick and his mother and how hard it is to start over when you’ve lost everything. That scene where they don’t have anything, not even a pair of scissors, because it all burned in the fire, and how hard it would be for Patrick to lose not only his home but also his mother, who’s changed since the fire . . .” Find the thing that first drew you to this story, whether it was a character, a scene, an event, or a relationship, and focus on fleshing that out without worrying about plot, character arcs, or endings.

Alternately, try writing a letter to your ideal reader, someone who loves you, loves your writing, and is excited to read your work, whether it’s a family member, a good friend, or your younger self. Tell them the history of your work on this project—how it started, where and why it got messy, what’s giving you trouble, and why you still believe in it. Talk about the pieces of the story worth saving: the scene you love, the moment between the two characters that feels true, the time you cried as you wrote because you were so sad for your character.

Trust the spark of inspiration that first led you to this story. There was a reason you wanted to write it; rediscover that spark and you may find the push you need to get unstuck.

### Retreat Into Your Cave of Silence

Writing workshops can help you flesh out character and motivation, clarify plot, address reader questions, and discover potential you didn’t realize your story had, but they can also get you stuck in an endless loop of revision. I often end workshops by saying, “Go home, jot down your thoughts about this chapter, read through the suggestions people made on your manuscript, and then set it all aside and forget about it! Don’t revise this chapter; write the next chapter instead! **FINISH YOUR MANUSCRIPT** before you worry about revisions!”

Too many workshopppers end up with beautifully crafted, carefully polished first chapters . . . and no ending. If you’re struggling to finish a first draft, consider taking a break from workshop for a few months, and focus on finishing the draft before you show it to anyone else. If you need the structure of workshop to motivate you to write your next chapter, that’s fine, but don’t let the comments and questions of your readers distract you from making forward momentum. Finish your draft! Worry about revisions later!

Take it a step further: don’t show your manuscript to anyone until it’s finished. Don’t even talk about it. Many writers believe that talking about a

project diffuses its energy and hurts its momentum. Instead of talking about it, focus all your energy on writing it.

Go even further and go on a narrative diet. Take a break from TV, movies, and books, so all your narrative drive is concentrated into this one project. Instead of reading before bed, muse about your characters. Instead of reading on the train, scribble in a notebook. Instead of watching TV when you get home from work, attack the next chapter of your story.

Trust yourself. There's a reason you wanted to tell this story in the first place. The writer in you knows what to do; get out of her way and let her work. And most important: KEEP GOING!

M. Molly Backes is the assistant director of StoryStudio, Chicago's center for writing and the related arts. Her novel *The Princesses of Iowa* will be published in May by Candlewick Press.

## Murmuration and the Dialogue of Shapes

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*By Laura Nyman Montenegro*

I have fallen. Fallen over backward. Fallen into the messy world of theater.

How did it happen? I do not know. I do know that it is a world of story, just like our own picture book world. But I am now in the illustration, I am the collage piece moved about on the page by the hand of the director. I look over and see the other collage pieces on the stage with me. The director is looking for composition; arranging, rearranging, providing text. We listen. Tell us. Tell us what we are to do. Where we are to stand. The words we are to say. But then, let us listen. Listen to each other.

We are like a murmuration, a collection of starlings.

Murmuration. I love that word. It is soft and dreamlike—not like a heart pounding.

Your heart. The doctor leans in toward you. He presses his stethoscope against your chest. He listens. You listen with your eyes to his face. He removes his stethoscope and folds it in his hands. He says he hears a murmur.

A murmur. A murmuration. A collection of starlings.

A bird flies close to your ear, feathers beating air. You look up. Above you, a murmuration. A collection of starlings.

In a single voice, hundreds of birds sweep across the sky, glissando, together shape-shifting, tumbling, turning, ascending. Black, like a shadow thrown against the sky. Twisting and turning, the spiraling ladder, climbing high and then higher, plummeting down, straight to the black dirt. LISTEN. With eyes, ears, wings, feathers, listen.

Your heart pounds.

I have fallen. Again.

This time from the sky. I have fallen into my visiting chair right next to Iris in the dementia ward of the nursing home. Iris's ear is turned toward the piano. She is so sick. She is lost. The music enters through her ear. She is suddenly connected to the pulsing energy of life and its tumbling, swirling, twisting, wild madness. She fills with tears—her face is red, she laughs, she looks like she will explode, the tears come, release. The piano is right next to her ear. The piano player plays in a minor key of longing, yearning. He

plays. It enters Iris. She stares straight ahead. This music—the longing—it enters her. She suddenly feels the wild shimmering brilliance and the dark shadow, the magnificent birth of the universe, the stars colliding, turning, the light, sparks drifting in dizzy, slow-turning circles. Iris is connected and she begins to cry. Silently. If you didn't look at her closely, you would not know.

The dialogue of shapes, the arrangement of notes, the flocking of birds, the position of actors.

Art is a game. Your audience, your reader, your listener agrees to play the game with you. To come with you. You agree to deliver its promise. But how?

By finding the composition that best tells your story. A composition that activates the alchemy of emotion. This is your promise.

But where in the world do you get this kind of composition?

We move our shapes around on the page believing we know what will evoke emotional response; the triangle sitting on the page with two points touching the ground will imply balance and stability. The triangle positioned with only one point touching the ground, instability and uncertainty. Arranging our shapes symmetrically will evoke equilibrium, positioning them asymmetrically conjures impulse and movement.

But even with the awareness of the effect of these arrangements, composition seems to defy formula. We place our figures, our musical notes, our story elements in accordance with these understandings and we wait for the combustion. We set our sticks just right but the fire refuses to catch.

The problem is that composition is really derived from the shapes' interacting with each other and comes from within the picture rather than by being imposed from the outside. Combustion really comes from the shapes' "listening" to each other.

Even the spaces between shapes, between notes, between actors onstage are busy creating composition. The vast white space of the page in which the tiny object floats, the crowded figure pushing against the edges, the juxtaposition of shape and shape, note and note, turn the elegant composition into the eloquent composition.

Inherently, within ourselves, we know these things about the positions of triangles and the effect of white space, because inside of us, we all have an intuitive sense of composition. We hurry home from the store to tell a story, and we tell it perfectly, in just the right way to make the other person laugh out loud.

We insist that the other person sit down while we play a song that we can't help crying to when we hear it and we want the other person to cry too, to experience this. We play the Coventry Carol from the sixteenth century over and over and over because we need to hear the note at the very end of the song that switches it from minor to major key—so beautiful is the switch, the playing of one note, that it causes tears to pour out of our eyes.

Ultimately, this is why we are drawn to art.

Composition. Emotion.

It has to do with the promise that the artist made. To deliver a composition so beautiful, so intuitive that we can't help crying or laughing,

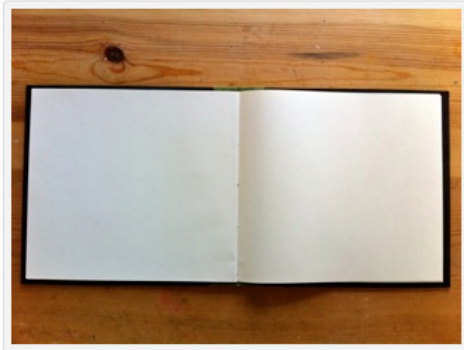
Because inside that wild big vibrating world of relationship between artist and audience where one speaks through shape, rhythm, and note and the other listens, we are able to share with each other the human drama, the experience of being human.

A Little Exercise for Exploring Composition

Playing with shapes, arranging, rearranging, exploring the infinite possibilities is the window to building on the innate sense of composition that we each carry within us. It is really a matter of listening. Letting shapes have their effect on one another, letting notes clash or harmonize and feeling the effects, that is the study of composition.



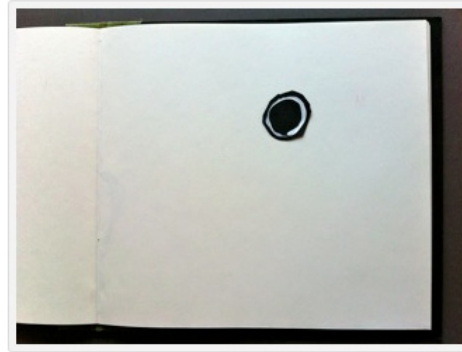
Begin with your pile of scraps



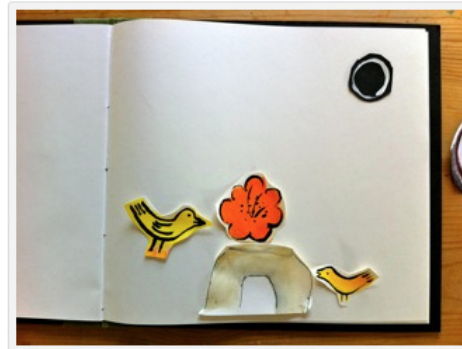
and your blank book dummy.



Pick nine scraps out of the pile.



Choose one of the scraps and allow it to lead.



Let the other scraps take the lead while the first one listens.



Add, subtract, and move shapes on the left-hand page. Let these shapes listen to the ones on the right until you find . . . the satisfying finished spread.

For a beautiful film of a murmuration please see: <http://player.vimeo.com/video/31158841?autoplay=1> created by Sophie Windsor Clive and Liberty Smith.

Laura Nyman Montenegro teaches children's book illustration at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is illustrator/author of *A Poet's Bird Garden*, *A Bird About to Sing* (featured on Reading Rainbow), *Sweet Tooth*, and *One Stuck Drawer*. Her books have won Parents' Choice Awards. She is a founding ensemble member, actor, musician, and visual artist of Theatre Zarko, Puppet Symbolist Theatre. [www.lauranymanmontenegro.com](http://www.lauranymanmontenegro.com); [lauramontenegro@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lauramontenegro@sbcglobal.net)

## Writing with Joy

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*By Juliet C. Bond*

Joy Cowley was born on a chicken farm in Levin, New Zealand, at 6:00 p.m. on August 7, 1936. This sounds like the beginning to a great story, because it is! Like her own life story, Joy's prose weaves together tantalizing tales with a hint of whimsy and a dash of wacky.

But her work stretches beyond the "joy" she injects into her magnificent tales. It's the twinkle in her New Zealand eyes, her pitch-perfect humor, and her generosity of spirit that have drawn readers and writers to her for almost fifty years.

Since the 1960s, Joy has entertained the world with over 650 early reading books, 50 picture books, 80 short chapter books, and a dozen novels.

My personal favorite is the jaunty Red-Eyed Tree Frog, in which a hungry amphibian makes his way through tempting jungle delicacies, finally leaping to a tasty lunch.

But she's probably best known for her picture book series "Mrs. Wishy Washy."

Joy's new book, *Writing from the Heart: How to Write for Children*, is a treasure for those of us who genuflect at the feet of a great story—or storyteller.

She opens by explaining that the content is not meant to be instructional but rather offers a shared experience. She states that writers "can only take on new information if we are ready for it."

Still, the short, eighty-page book is certainly informative. She plants tips, gentle reminders, and caveats throughout. It's also uniquely organized. The eleven chapters cover some expected topics (plot, dialogue, etc.), but there are some surprises too. Joy includes plays, poetry, and humor as chapters. She insists that "our first duty to children is to entertain. The key ingredients for young children are affirmation and humor."

Joy carries this commitment to affirmation and humor throughout by providing the adult reader distilled wisdom dotted with cartoon drawings and witty observations. Her "playful sage" persona is evident in the book, but it's also truly a part of who she is.

When I met Joy, in 2007, her easy smile and head-thrown-back laugh left their impression. Then the last night of the weeklong workshop, Joy

auctioned off a hand-knit shawl to the highest bidder. This shawl, she promised, would both warm and inspire the writer who wore it. I marveled at the long hours of labor and love she'd woven between the strands of soft yarn.

"That's beautiful," I said to the woman sitting next to me.

She nodded. "Joy does one every year. The money raised goes to scholarships so new writers can attend the workshop."

Joy's commitment to writers stayed with me, and I had a hunch that when I reviewed her book for this article, Joy would graciously allow me to interview her. I was right!

### An Interview with Joy Cowley

I started the interview by asking how Joy's shared experiences could assist writers in improving their craft. She said,

I suggest that a writer go through the book and mark the passages that have meaning for her or him. A year later, the writer may want to read the book again. This time different sections will probably be meaningful.

Peppered throughout the book were gentle warnings for writers. These seemed like tiny street signs, placed carefully to remind the reader of the most important aspect of writing for children, the child.

The counsel she repeated most was "keep your adult voice under control." Joy explained,

The serious adult voice is usually dictatorial. It is the voice of the instructive parent or teacher. All books contain messages, but if the message is the purpose of the book, it will probably fail to interest a reader. Adult values are not necessarily a child's values. Write for the child experience of life and language.

She also cautioned the reader away from "therapy writing," the kind of writing we do "not to rescue the child out there but the one inside us."

I started writing adult novels and I think they were nearly all "therapy" writing. Writing is a form of meditation: we go to a deeper place of awareness, and in the early stages, the negative stuff will surface. Beyond that there is healing or wholeness, a balance of light and shade. New writers almost always have to unload trauma before they come to this balance. The place for therapy writing is a journal, not a children's book that projects pain and pity.

Her own childhood was certainly trauma-filled. The daughter of a

schizophrenic mother and a seriously physically ill father, Joy hints at a wounded past.

My dear parents struggled. We lived on a pension. There were five children and life wasn't easy . . .

But she also reminds us that the traumatized (or not) child inside of us is essential because he or she is ultimately our best audience. Joy encourages writers to create stories that “speak to” their inner child because “your childhood is not behind you. It is within you.”

And Joy spends a lot of time with kids. She has thirteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren! I asked Joy if being a grandmother gives her a different perspective on childhood or children's literature.

Young people will tell grandparents more than they tell their parents. For an older writer, these insights are a valuable resource.

After adapting a play myself, I was particularly interested in Joy's chapter on playwriting, so I asked if she thought plays were child-centered in a way that books can sometimes fail to be. She said,

Children find a certain freedom in pretending to be someone else, and shy readers will often show confidence when reading a part in a play. Confidence is reinforced by the shared story and the fact that a reader has only small chunks to read, not a whole book.

I also enjoyed the description on her website that states, “Joy sees herself as wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. This is who she is; writing is what she does.”

It made me wonder if this was a sort of reminder to herself to balance the way she navigates rejection letters, mixed reviews, or unsupportive comments from those who believe writing for children is simple. I asked Joy how she manages to keep the “gremlins of self-doubt” away. In return, I got an inspiring story:

I thought of rejection slips in a different way after my first novel, *Nest in a Falling Tree*, was published by Doubleday in 1967. I kept three scrapbooks full of reviews, and no two reviews were exactly alike. I thought that was amazing. But it did teach me that individuals read and evaluate our writing.

I decided that a rejection slip came for one of three reasons: the story was substandard; the story had gone to the wrong publishing house; an editor had reacted in a personal way to the story. Whatever, it was up to me to decide which of these applied.

As an example, a junior fiction novel, *The Silent One*, was sent to three publishers in 1971, and all said it was neither a children's book nor an adult novel and would not find a market. In 1978, another publisher asked if I had a children's novel. I said I had written one that was a failure, and he asked to see it. He published it in 1979, it was NZ Children's Book of the Year 1980, was made into a film that still shows on the Disney channel, was published in thirteen languages, and is still in print in South Pacific countries!

For the armchair critics, the people who think writing for children is not "real" writing, I could usually manage a smile and an enthusiastic "I'd love to read your books!"

Take THAT, armchair critic!

While Joy can deliver a well-aimed retort to her adult critics, she lavishes the utmost care on writers and on child readers. In fact, each week she gets between two hundred and a thousand letters from children, and most of her writing time is spent replying to these letters.

I wondered if the content of the letters she receives has changed over the years or if there are new issues on kids' minds today.

Children write about the same things: Mom, Dad, grandparents, that pain of a brother or sister, pets, their favorite hobbies, films, sports, food, family news, and the ups and downs of being small.

With playful insight, she zeroed in on the child's voice, sharing a few verbatim excerpts from children's letters:

"I broke my leg and it was hard going to the toilet in the night."

"I clean out the bird cage because normally I have a blocked nose."

"The only person in our family who doesn't have eyeglasses is our cat Emily."

At the end of our interview, I asked Joy about her goals for the future and what she is working on now.

I am still writing early reading material for beginner readers, but I have also other interests that have developed over the last two decades. I facilitate spiritual retreats. The demand for this has grown and 2012 is now booked out.

There is another children's novel on the back burner, waiting for space for the writing. But I am now in my seventy-sixth year and energy is not what it was. I'd like to be less busy—to listen to the flowers and smell the rain!

The pleasure in spending a bit of time with Joy Cowley is indeed a bit like listening to the flowers and smelling the rain. Her joy (pun intended) and enthusiasm for stories is contagious.

Maybe this is best illustrated by Joy's response during an on-camera interview.

The basics of reading almost missed me until I was nine and discovered that reading acts as story. I loved stories! I found that as often as I opened a book I could enter new lives!

Her merry eyes lifted at the corners as she laughed.

Whoever said you could only live once wasn't a reader!

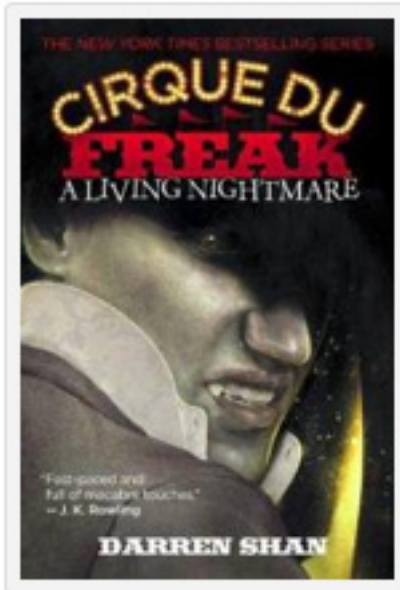
As a reader and a writer, I am grateful to Ms. Cowley. The gift of her wisdom left me feeling as though I'd donned one of her shawls, settled in front of a campfire, and readied myself to enter a new life, as a skilled storyteller welcomed me into the flickering orange lights ahead.

Juliet C. Bond is a college professor and children's book author from Evanston, Illinois. She began writing after working in social services for many years and realizing that, as the poet Muriel Rukeyser once wrote, "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms."

## Darren Shan's Cirque du Freak Series: A Racing Read for Reluctant Readers

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By Jodell Sadler



When we write a series for reluctant readers, we children's writers must aim for a story that opens with immediacy, provides horrid fun, and exudes movement and excitement book after book, page after page. When we aim to write the ideal boy book series for middle-grade readers, we might study the genius of one writer who dares to give his readers the ultimate, action-packed thrill ride. Darren Shan, writer of the "Cirque du Freak" twelve-book series, offers reluctant readers a racing read by presenting a great hook, awesome characters, a fast-paced plot with twists and spins, along with flashy, action-packed scenes.

### Great Hook

As writers for children, we do not have the luxury of a page or two, or even a chapter, to capture our readers' attention. It must be immediate. Often, it's the first seventy-five words on page 1 that determine that pivotal reader decision: Will I stay with this book or not?

Warning readers before the story begins, Shan writes, "Real life is nasty. It's cruel. It doesn't care about heroes or happy endings and the way things should be. In real life, bad things happen. People die. Fights are lost. Evil often wins." Why? It sets the tone, sets up for a great hook, and poses the question: Will evil win?

Shan begins chapter 1 on a toilet. "I was in the bathroom at school, sitting down on the toilet, humming a song. I had my pants on. I'd come in near the end of English class, feeling sick." His teacher, Mr. Dalton, knew when someone was faking or not. "Throw up whatever is making you sick, Darren," he said, "then get your behind back in here." The reader learns that Shan is faking his illness just before his best friend, Steve Leopard, steps in looking for him. The boys find a ticket to a freak show, which becomes a personal invitation to a whole lot of trouble. They sneak out at midnight to attend this horrid event and meet Mr. Crepsley, a vampire (whom Leopard adores enough to want to be his assistant), and Madame Octa, a highly-trained spider (whom Shan adores enough to steal). Leopard gets bitten by Madame Octa. Will Shan become a vampire's assistant to save his best friend? Immediately, the reader is hooked on a story that proves to be a real

fast-action adventure, filled with movement and vivid characterization.

### Awesome Characters

Shan uses vivid details to punctuate characterization. In this series, there are two different kinds of vampires: Vampires and Vampaneze, who are purple-faced fighters with red eyes, nails, and hair, who always kill when they feed. Both kinds are flocking to Vampire Mountain to take over the Vampire nation. Readers learn there exists a Vampire Lord, a Vampire Prince, and a half vampire, Darren Shan himself, who must complete a series of challenges, called the Trials of Death, in order become a full vampire. But Shan's characterization doesn't stop there. There is also a witch with one blue eye and one green eye, the colors shifting back and forth every minute; she can also transform herself from hag to beauty queen in seconds. There is a leader of the Cirque du Freak show, Mr. Tiny, a Little Person, and Harkat Mulds, creatures who have lost all identifying features and who don shriveled skin and serve others, wearing only robes to hide their disgusting features. And these name only a few of Shan's captivating characters.

### Plot Twists and Spins

As J. K. Rowling attests, Shan's series is "compelling . . . a plot full of twists which leaves the reader hungry for more." Shan and Leopard think they know each other well. They grew up together, but when Leopard gets bitten by Madame Octa and Mr. Crepsley arrives to get her back, there is a price to pay—a life to pay. Shan must decide: Will he will give up his life and become the vampire's assistant—a half vampire—in order to save Leopard? Readers have to grapple with the fact that Shan's best friend may not be who he first appears. Does Shan really know his best friend at all?

Shan must learn to fight Vampaneze and prove himself worthy in order to become a full vampire through a series of challenges: the Trials of Initiation, or Trials of Death. What is at stake for Shan? He learns that these challenges, normally reserved for high-ranking Vampire Generals, are tough tests. How does Shan up the ante? After he commits to the trials, Shan shares with readers that if he fails, he will be killed. He will fight wild boars, climb perilous mountains, crawl through a pit of snakes, or worse. Given that the snake keeper died nine years ago and hasn't been replaced, Shan may need to survive the Hall of Fire. This sets up the promise of many action-packed scenes for those who are reluctant to read.

### Action-Packed Scenes

In one opening scene, Shan is walking home and hears a sound: "Crunch. Crunch. Crunch." At first, Shan thinks it's the wind, a squirrel—or a monster: Snap! The pattern abruptly shifts: "His foot hung in the air, midair, and his heart pounded quickly. That was no squirrel! The sound was too

sharp. Something big was up here. Something that shouldn't be up there. Something that had never been up there before. Something that— / Snap!”

Short sentences help Shan create a feeling of swiftness within his text. He also selects words with purpose. “Something” and “air, midair,” used in repetition, dramatize the importance of this scene. Onomatopoeia also gets the reader into the story: Wham! Action keeps the pages turning.

Short sentences mix with short phrases and shift to a list, as action plays against reaction and a creature of the night descends upon his prey. “And the red thing was on him. Stanley opened his mouth to scream, but before he could, the monster’s hands—claws?—clamped over his mouth. There was a brief struggle, then Stanley was sliding onto the ground, unconscious, unseeing, unknowing. / Above him, two creatures of the night moved in for the feed.” Using dashes, questions, and short phrases, Shan actively engages his readers.

During one of trials, Shan is placed in the middle of an underwater maze and given a rock to carry that is half his weight and meant to slow and challenge him even further as he fights to maneuver his way out before the maze fills completely in seventeen minutes. Will Shan make it through? The pace quickens: “I was lost! / I lurched to the end of the corridor, then up another, desperately trying to establish my position. Panic flooded my system. I kept thinking, ‘I’m going to drown! I’m going to drown!’” “The water was up to my chin. It splashed into my mouth. Sputtering, I slapped at the water, as though that would make it go away. I stumbled and fell. Came up spitting water and gasping. Terrified, I started to scream.”

When it comes to writing for reluctant readers, fast pacing is key. As writers, we might aim for Shan’s immediacy, movement, and excitement. After all, reluctant readers—as well as avid readers—are waiting.

Jodell Sadler serves as an editor, illustrator, and adjunct professor for Rasmussen College Online, where she teaches English and literature. She is a professor by day, a writer/illustrator by night, and serves up online Children’s Writing courses on the side. Her Pacing the Picture Book Online Workshop begins soon, so please log into <http://www.sadler4kids.com/writing4kids.htm> to learn more.

## Never Too Late

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By Carol Coven Grannick



I'm not big on New Year's resolutions, and also not big on setting huge lofty goals. I like tiny steps and constant renewal. So I'd like to share a resource that will refresh and renew your writing life, if or when it needs the input.

In 1934, Dorothea Brande had the brains and courage to insist that attention to the writer's heart and mind is the first step in becoming a writer. That books on craft are useless without those first steps.

And while I don't spend a lot of time with regret, after picking up Dorothea Brande's short book *Becoming a Writer*, on the recommendation of a critique partner, I did give in to a bit of regret. I couldn't help wishing my undergraduate creative writing degree had begun with this work. I have no question that my committed, productive, energetic writing life would have begun much earlier had I read this book.

If you've read the book, and found it important, skip this column and pass the book along. If you haven't read the book, find it (it's back in print, and it's in plenty of libraries). This book belongs right next to Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* on your writer's bookshelf. Maybe in front of it.

A taste of her no-nonsense content:

- "The stupid conclusion that if [the writer] cannot write easily he has mistaken his career is sheer nonsense."
- Writers do—and must—have "dual personalities": the workman and critic, and the artist, cognitive skills and unconscious working in balance and tandem.
- Writers should write "morning pages" to create and maintain a brain-muscle habit of writing. (Brande made this recommendation long before Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*.)
- It is necessary to recognize, but move beyond, resistance to the work.

In my last *Prairie Wind* column I wrote, "...for me the source of working at staying resilient is telling myself the truth about what keeps me whole and alive in the way I need to feel alive. And that's the everlasting need to create my place in the world through language, and to make sense of my inner world via the written word."

I do wish I'd gotten there earlier in life, but I'm grateful to be there now. Brande's little book with big ideas validates the emotional and intellectual

place writers need to be, and provides guidelines for getting and staying there.



The inner life of the writer can always use nurturing, and Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* is a wonderful way to refresh a productive new writing year - anytime at all.

Carol Coven Grannick writes picture books and middle-grade novels. In private practice as a clinical social worker, she works with writers and others to create and maintain emotional resilience. She can be reached at [carolgrannick@gmail.com](mailto:carolgrannick@gmail.com).

## Prairie Writer's Day: Smooth Sailing

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*By Michele Weber Hurwitz*

Two hundred and thirty-nine writers and illustrators attended the sold-out 7th annual Prairie Writer's Day on November 12 at Harper College in Palatine, and the word on the street, well, make that the word on the beach, was that "Get Hooked" certainly lived up to our expectations. The day was action- and information-packed, with many breakout sessions, a chance to hear from experts in publishing, and the opportunity to mix and mingle with each other as well as the industry experts. The very creative fishing theme gave us a chuckle now and then—especially when we were greeted at registration by Swedish fish candy in a tackle box!

The day kicked off with a panel featuring Josh Adams of Adams Literary, Stacey Barney of Penguin/Putnam Books for Young Readers, Michele Burke of Knopf Books for Young Readers/Random House, Mary Rodgers of Lerner Publishing Group, Molly O'Neill of Harper Collins/Katherine Tegen Books, Kathy Landwehr of Peachtree Publishers, and Daniel Nayeri of Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

The panelists gave the audience some background on how they started in their publishing careers, what type of books they look for and have edited, and why they love what they do. O'Neill particularly likes books with a "what if" premise and stories that keep her thinking, while Rodgers, who was a political science major in college, noted how that has benefited her in publishing by honing her "truth-telling" skills when editing nonfiction.

When asked what advice is often given to aspiring authors that isn't true, Nayeri mentioned that it isn't necessary to have a website before you become published and urged writers to spend more time on writing than on designing an eye-catching website. O'Neill added that it's not true publishers don't market anymore. A good deal of marketing, she said, goes on behind the scenes—to librarians, booksellers, and at conferences. And Landwehr added that conventional wisdom doesn't apply to every writer, every time, so know yourself and stay true to your vision.

As for changes that are rapidly occurring in publishing, Landwehr commented that there is much more competition among information media in today's world. O'Neill said, however, that a positive element is that authors can now reach their audience much more directly than they have in the past, through their websites, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs.

### Tips from "First Pages" Session

Here are some of the tips gleamed from one of the breakout sessions, First

Pages with Josh Adams and Kathy Landwehr, where they critiqued first pages submitted by attendees.

- Watch extraneous description and details that can distract from the story's start. The reader doesn't need to know everything in the first page. Focus on one scene.
- A character's internal thought can slow things down. This can come later. A character just sitting and talking to himself or wondering isn't usually a beginning that will grab a reader.
- Watch overdone issues such as the child moving to a new town or the orphan scenario. Differentiate your story from what's already out there.
- Emotionally invest in your characters. Let the reader like them early on.
- If you are creating a fantasy world, realize that you know this world but your reader doesn't so you need to give your reader enough information to understand the scene.
- And of course, the ever popular "show don't tell." Let the reader experience what the character is feeling.

Adams noted, interestingly, that his agency asks the question "Do we love it?" before they take on a project, not necessarily "Can we sell it?"

#### Breakout Session with Molly O'Neill

Molly O'Neill, an editor with Harper Collins/Katherine Tegen Books, led us through an informative session on how editors choose the books that will become published. She displayed first drafts from authors Bobbie Pyron, Veronica Roth, and S. J. Kincaid and then showed the final published versions, illustrating how much revision took place. O'Neill discussed such essential issues as

1. The first few chapters of a book need to be compelling, something she can't put down.
2. Voice—a term heard over and over—is simply where a book starts. It's the essence and personality of a story captured on paper.
3. Characters need to be strong and memorable. Readers need to care about them, and they should grow and change through the story, especially in unpredictable ways.
4. Be sure to balance the interior or emotional plot with the external or active plot. Both are necessary.
5. Details help in showing not telling.
6. Everything matters, especially the little things, the everyday nuances that help shape the image of the story.

#### Bruce Hale via Skype

What a treat to hear from the fabulous and very funny Bruce Hale, award-winning author of the Chet Gecko series and numerous other books. With

only a few minor (and funny) technical difficulties, Hale shared with us via Skype his pointers for incorporating humor into writing. He said that he was the kid who whispered lines to the class clown when he was in school and that he has always loved humor. Hale's seven secrets to engaging kids with humor included killing your inner editor and taking a risk, as well as knowing your audience. Humor in a picture book is different from humor in a middle-grade reader. Hale noted that using exaggeration and giving characters an obsession are great ways to create humor, as are funny words and sounds. He left us with the parting thought to "find the funny" and urged us not to be afraid to write what we find humorous.

### Breakout with Josh Adams

Another fantastic breakout session was with Josh Adams, co-owner of the Adams Literary Agency with his wife, Tracey.

Josh explained to attendees how Adams Literary goes about pitching a book, taking us through their strategy and follow-up. They strive to find a hook for the work, or an "anchor concept" in which to describe the story in a succinct way. Often, they prefer to let the work speak for itself, sometimes telling an editor simply, "you have to read this." Adams Literary strives to work with authors for the length of their careers, not just sell a book. "Our job is to open doors and create opportunities."

Adams noted that while exclusive submissions were popular in the past, now his agency mostly submits to multiple editors, ranging from two or three up to ten or twelve. There are some instances where they do submit exclusively, if they believe a specific editor is right for a book.

Adams also explained stand-alone books versus series, preempts versus auctions, and giving editors deadlines to respond versus "nudges."

### "A-Luring" School Visits

Roxanne Owens, Chair of Teacher Education at DePaul University and Chair of the Illinois Prairie State Award for Excellence in Children's Writing, shared with attendees how to create school visits that resonate with children. Owens came up with an acronym E I E I Mo (she even made us sing "Old McDonald's Farm," rewritten with lyrics about author visits), which stands for Engage, Inform/Instruct, Educate/Entertain, Inspire, and Motivate!

Owens advised setting goals with the school to know exactly what they expect of your visit; doing what you do best, whether it's being funny or educating; and getting the kids' attention in the first few minutes of your presentation. She stressed that active presentations are better than passive (just talking) ones and that even a failed visit can make for good reflection and the opportunity to plan a better visit next time.

## Catch of the Day

Prairie Writer's Day closed with a "Catch of the Day" panel where all of us could hear summaries of the presentations we weren't able to attend. Michele Burke reminded us about the importance of setting in enhancing the emotion of a story, and Kathy Landwehr shared that there is still room and a need for nonfiction books.

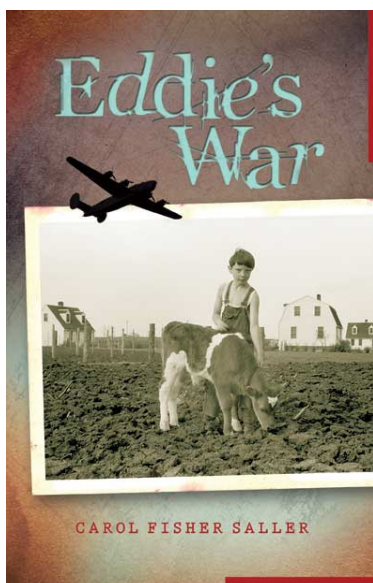
Thank you to the hardworking committee who planned and carried out this wonderful event: Lisa Bierman, Laura Crawford, Lori Degman, Meg Lentz, Alice McGinty, Janet Nolan, Natalie Rompella, Sara Shacter, Suzanne Slade, and Darcy Zoells.

Michele Weber Hurwitz's debut middle-grade novel, *Calli Be Gold*, was published this April by Wendy Lamb Books/Random House. Michele lives in Buffalo Grove with her three teenage children and CPA husband. Although she loves attending SCBWI events, her favorite day in the whole world is to stay home in her PJs and write, write, write. She's working on a second middle-grade novel.

## The Character Who Got Away

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By Carol Fisher Saller



There was a moment when I was writing *Eddie's War* when it occurred to me that I had a cast of thousands (well, dozens), interacting and overlapping like the characters in an Altman film, in a collection of little scenes that was speedily adding up to . . . not much. “You have a handful of pearls,” my editor told me, “but it’s not anywhere close to being a necklace.”

The problem lay in my method. Instead of outlining a proper plot (because I couldn’t think of one), I had mentally put myself on a farm in central Illinois during World War II and had started writing little scenes, or vignettes. Random, unrelated, related—whatever came to mind went into the collection.

But no plot.

I didn’t really have a main character, either, although there were several characters who turned up more often than others, and I was keeping an eye on them. Eddie seemed promising, but he was too young to go to war. His older brother Thomas and Thomas’s friends were hogging the spotlight by enlisting and shipping out. And Thomas’s girlfriend Pauline kept demanding more scenes, along with her brother Howard, who had already come home from the war wounded—maybe with a little PTSD. The stage was getting crowded even before Jozef turned up. Jozef, a refugee gypsy from Poland, was becoming an important symbol of the war in Europe.

And then there was Leo. Between Eddie and Thomas in age, Leo was having entirely too much fun in a novel that was not, on the whole, supposed to be about having fun. And I was pretty sure it wasn’t supposed to be about Leo. The thing about Leo was that he was maybe—I was never sure—gay. I was sure that he was extravagant and effeminate. He was smart and competent and literate among townspeople who generally were not. He was Eddie’s mentor and idol.

And finally, he had to go.

There were several reasons. First, I came to realize that Eddie was the essence of the book, never mind that he didn’t have much flash. Eddie’s quiet ability to observe and reflect evolved into the first-person narrative I wanted. Second, Leo was becoming an “issue” in a book that already

had enough issues. Was he gay? Even if he wasn't, would he be bullied and persecuted for who he seemed to be? Could a book be about the war, and about xenophobia, and about domestic abuse, and about Leo and homophobia?

When I began to hone and trim and find plotlines in my patchwork of vignettes, it was easy to cut Howard; a cinch demoting Pauline to a cipher. But cutting Leo's scenes from the book made me sad. I sensed his disappointment, and I still do. In the published book he appears only in cameo in one scene (and it's a doozy—involving something like a striptease at a church social), but I cut everything else, including his greatest moment of triumph. For in my mind, Leo was a hero on the battlefield in France and present in Paris on Liberation Day.

So to somehow make up for letting him go, I'm giving him his fifteen minutes of fame here. Thank you, Prairie Wind, for the opportunity! Go on, Leo—make me proud.

May 1945

From Leo in Paris

Chère Mère et Père,  
I'm coming home!  
Things are mad here in Paris,  
but I'll soon be on my way—  
I can't wait to get back  
and see you both,  
feel that good old Illinois soil  
under my feet.  
Yesterday, Paris was the center of the universe—  
if only you could have been here  
to see us celebrate.  
I have to say,  
it's the biggest thing  
that ever happened to me.  
The avenues were roaring—  
people, soldiers, children, bikes and cars  
all in one big mash.  
Church bells ringing, music blaring,  
people laughing and cheering,  
dancing in the streets.  
Every ten steps, it seemed,  
someone spotted my uniform,  
had to slap me on the shoulder,  
give me a bear hug.  
I quit counting the number of women

who kissed me—and they were all beautiful!  
“Uncle Sam! Uncle Sam!” they shouted.

I lost my buddies in the crowd,  
but it didn't matter—  
the whole of Paris was my buddy yesterday.  
Some GIs shouted at me,  
“Hey—this way!  
De Gaulle and Eisenhower are in the parade!”  
I started to go with them—  
but then I saw the Arch of Triumph  
up ahead,  
just like the postcards—  
a huge, stone mass  
against a brilliant blue sky,  
giant flags hanging from it,  
and crowds of people on the roofs  
houting and waving.  
It had to be the best view in Paris,  
and I had to see it.  
I wish I'd thought to count the steps—

there must have been hundreds.  
People were coming down and going up,  
so it was quite a crush.  
Just when I thought I'd be trapped on the stairs forever,  
I felt the fresh air from the top,  
and then I was there,  
stepping out onto the roof.  
The second I did, a man in a top hat and tails  
handed me a glass of champagne.  
“Mon ami americain!” he cried,  
and kissed me on both cheeks,  
sloshing champagne all over me.  
I was a mess, but all choked up, too.  
I wished I knew more French.  
All I could say was “Merci! Merci!”  
for the thousandth time that day.  
When I finally elbowed my way  
into a place by the rail, I  
was stunned by the view:  
even that high, I could hear the cheers  
of the masses below.  
In every direction as far as I could see,

the streets were teeming with revelers,  
the whole of Paris,  
packed to overflowing with shouting  
and music.  
You could just feel the pride and joy, the relief  
that the fighting was over,  
that the boys were coming home.

I could have stayed there forever,  
but it began to get dark, and I knew  
I needed to find my outfit  
and that it might be tricky  
getting through the streets.  
But as I pressed through the crowd  
toward the stairs  
I heard people around me gasp, and  
everyone began pointing and shouting,  
“Voici les lumières!”

Mom and Dad,  
you wouldn't have believed your eyes  
if you'd seen it.  
In the dusk, the lights of Paris  
were blinking on.  
Six years,  
darkened by the blackout,  
and now they began to twinkle.  
Sacre Coeur, Notre Dame, the Louvre.  
And shooting straight out  
from under the Arch where I was standing,  
the great avenue Champs Élysées,  
more than a mile of it!  
all of a sudden grand and gleaming  
with light.

Then the crowd roared again—  
“La tour Eiffel!”  
There it was—  
the most famous sight in the world,  
lights blazing, fireworks popping  
along the river Seine,  
the people around me  
weeping with joy.  
I didn't even try to fight the tears.  
I thought of home, of you both,

of good old Ellisville,  
and I wished you were all here  
so fiercely  
I thought my heart  
would break with happiness  
and longing.

But soon!  
Soon I'll be home again.  
Until then, I remain, with much, much love,

Your devoted  
Leo

Carol Fisher Saller's middle-grade novel *Eddie's War* (Nanette Press, August 2011) was recently named a Best Children's Book for 2011 by Kirkus Reviews. Carol is a manuscript editor at the University of Chicago Press and blogs at *Lingua Franca* for the Chronicle of Higher Education.