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Greeting

On Spring and Springin' Back

How appropriate that this *Spring* issue celebrates Sallie Wolf's publication of her picture book *Truck Stuck*.

Much like the story's star, Sallie too was stuck, for more years than she'd probably care to share, believing in her story yet unable to find that one like-hearted, like-minded responsive editor.



Time and again, though, Sallie sprung back, revising, retooling, eventually resubmitting a stronger manuscript. Soon Charlesbridge editor Yolanda Roy unstuck both the manuscript and Sallie, affirming Sallie's faith in both herself and her story.

Sallie's narrator's closing words suddenly rang true:

*"All clear.
Big cheer!
Out of here."*

Is there a one of us who hasn't been stuck, somewhere, sometime, while telling his story? Of course not.

So, what to do when Bad Things happen to Good Children's Book Writers and Illustrators?

Bad Things, such as rejection letters, failed revisions, orphaned manuscripts, closed and closing imprints, un-won grants, un-won contests, less-than-glowing book reviews, a disastrous school visit, even writer's block.

Well, reading *The Prairie Wind* will surely lift any creative writer and illustrator out of the

mud, the mire and the doldrums. That one Golden Nugget certain to send you triumphantly on your way begs to be mined in this newsletter's columns, features, interviews and news items.

But, for maximum un-stucking, why not share those Bad Things with a sympathetic Listserv?

For years now, SCBWI-Illinois Listserv members have shared their good news the last two days of each month.

Good news, such as the completion of a novel or even a page, attendance at or registration for a conference or workshop, the reading of a book, membership finally in a writing group.

Thanks to member Barb Rosenstock's suggestion, the SCBWI-Illinois Listserv now officially designates Saturday, March 15th – the Ides of March – for the sharing of bad news, those Bad Things That Happen While We're Out-and-About on Our Writers' and Illustrators' Plotlines: for lamenting, whining, complaining, moping, railing, wailing, letting loose what churns inside.

So, if you've not yet joined SCBWI-Illinois' Listserv, e-mail Listserv Administrator Jim Danielson at emanjd2003@yahoo.com; he'll register you pronto once confirming your SCBWI membership.

The stuck truck in Sallie's *Truck Stuck* created a horrific traffic jam; yet eventually that jam became a celebratory block party.

The SCBWI-Illinois community can do the same, turning Bad News into Good News for any stuck member, especially now, when springin' back is so seasonally appropriate.

Esther Hershenhorn
Regional Advisor
SCBWI-Illinois

From the Editor

Bright Spots

It's hard to believe we've reached the Spring issue when winter still has us in its clutches. But at least the longer hours of daylight promise warmer days full of bright spring flowers ahead.

I've been able to find some bright spots amid this long winter in recent weeks, as I've read the copy that's come in for this issue of the *Prairie Wind*. The breadth and depth of talent in our midst has always awed me. But I've realized that with this issue, I'm actually taking notes and referring back to the advice and resources our columnists so generously share.

Check out our two fabulous Op/Ed pieces, where **Lisa Chellman** tells us how we can make good use of the public libraries, and **Cynthia Garbutt** discusses how motivation gets us past the rejections we encounter. Read the Kidslitosphere column by **Margo Dill**, who bravely answered the call to become a contributor (along with **Dawn Malone**) and take over this important feature. Her interview with the Longstockings Bloggers is fun and insightful.

Brenda Ferber in her Book Look column dissects the popular picture book *Fancy Nancy* and gives us all a great blueprint for doing the same with our own manuscripts. **Kathleen Rietz** talks about the value of blogging from the artist's perspective in the Illustrator Tips section, handing us all something to ponder.

The Illustrator in the Spotlight feature takes a different spin this issue as **Jeff Weigel** uncovers the mysteries of graphic novels, so hugely popular among early and experienced readers, providing us with a tremendous history lesson that helps put that curious genre in perspective.

There's so much more, from all of our contributors, to keep us busy until those crocus buds finally peek their heads up. Happy reading! And here's to the promise of Spring and plenty of good things to come!

And once again, thank you to Webmistress **Chris Vasilakis** and fellow editor **Cheryl Bardoe**, as well as to all our columnists, whether you are a first-time contributor or a long-time voice. You're helping build a wonderful resource for writers across the state and beyond!

Kate Hannigan
Editor
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Illustrator in the Spotlight

What Is It?! Jeff Weigel on Graphic Novels



By Jeff Weigel

Dick and Jane taught me how to read, but Batman and Superman gave me a reason to read. Seeing Spot run can't compete with watching the Man of Steel fight a giant gorilla with kryptonite beams shooting from its eyes,

so it's no surprise I fell in love with graphic storytelling ("comics" to us veterans) from the moment I could turn a page by myself. I've watched the style and content of the art form evolve for more than 40 years, and I've also studied the medium's century-long history.

The medium of graphic sequential storytelling has been regarded as a low art form throughout most of its history, but in the last couple of decades a number of breakthroughs in the production, business and aesthetics of comics have altered the landscape for the medium. Now, at long last, this most disrespected of storytelling forms has begun to attract the attention of mainstream publishers. Any series of still pictures that serves as the primary means of relating a linear narrative is graphic storytelling. The beginning of the medium can be in the eye of the beholder. Art from Egyptian tombs and scenes embroidered on medieval tapestries fall under the above definition, but comics as most people know them started in the newspaper circulation wars of the early 20th century. Newspaper magnates like William Randolph Hearst found comic strips with continuing storylines that ran across weeks and months to be a surefire way to keep readers coming back day after day.

In the years before radio and television, comics provided mass entertainment that was accessible to everyone, and so Popeye and Dagwood Bumstead became household names. The adventure strip followed in the 1930s, and *Dick Tracy*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Flash Gordon* and *Prince Valiant* redefined the complexity of story and the beauty of artwork that comics could deliver.

Birth of the Comic Book

But four panels of artwork a day was a serious limitation on the flexibility of the form. In the late 1930s, the comic book was born and a graphic storyteller's available space was increased considerably. Still, the comic book wasn't conceived as a means of expanding

artistic expression but as a product that would keep Depression-era printing presses from sitting idle. Comic books were the invention of businessmen seeking a new model for making money, and these entrepreneurs hit the jackpot in 1938 when they became acquainted with a strange visitor from another planet: Superman.



The runaway commercial success of Superman and his imitators set the path for comics for the next 60 years. The crude printing, the simple, sensationalistic stories and the often primitive, rushed artwork branded the form as a trashy diversion for children. Even as comic book publishers sought new audiences by experimenting with different genres like romance, horror, funny animals and adaptations of literary classics, their business model never changed. As magazine publishing advanced through the course of the 20th century – better paper, better graphics, more sophisticated content, higher cover prices – comic book publishers could never make the same leap of aspiration. Comics' price, production values and content varied only by small degrees over the next several decades. The general public saw comics as disposable junk, and the publishers put up very little argument.

Comic book publishers' low aspirations weren't always shared by comics' creators. Artists and writers like Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Harvey Kurtzman and many others made graphic storytelling an artistic calling as well as a way to make a living. They invented the visual vocabulary of the art form. These pioneers experimented with page layout, illustration style, composition, narrative timing and every other aspect of the medium.

They invented graphic storytelling as we know it today, and there isn't a serious practitioner of the craft alive who hasn't learned most of what he or she knows from the work of these trailblazers.

But the economics of comics kept the finest creators in the field from taking the form to a higher commercial level. Therein lies the reason for comics' longtime lack of respect in the culture.

No Payout

The comic book industry has a sad history of miserly and cruel treatment toward the creative talent that was its lifeblood. Comics paid artists and writers a flat rate per page, and a low flat rate at that. For comics' artists and writers, there were no royalties, no copyrights, no share of film sales or toy sales, no return of their artwork, and seldom even a credit in the published work. Think of it: Of the billions of dollars generated by the adventures of Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and countless other household names, the creative talents behind their success received a royalty of zero!

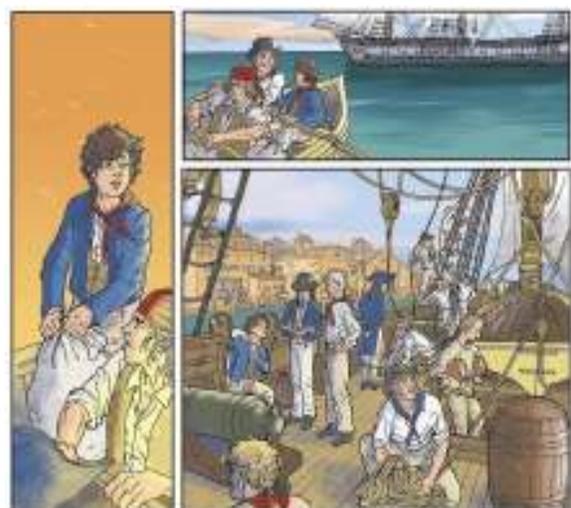
And to add insult to injury, after publication, the original artwork was most often destroyed to prevent it from falling into the hands of anyone who might try to reprint it without authorization! For the pioneers of graphic storytelling, there was very little incentive to push their work to new heights – rushed, slipshod work paid the same as visionary work. But many artistic souls working in the field of comics couldn't be restrained by these harsh truths. The fact that many of comics' early creators were so dedicated to producing inspiring work of limitless imagination in the face of such unfairness is both stunning and inspiring.

More recent changes in the business model of comic book publishers are among the primary reasons for the interest and respect graphic storytelling is enjoying today. Three advances in comics have altered the landscape for

graphic storytelling in the past two decades: one financial, one technological and one ethical.

By the early 1980s, the comic book business was becoming financially untenable. The 32-page, newsprint comic book that sold for pocket change (40 cents by 1980) at the local drug store or newsstand had become a dinosaur. Sales were a fraction of what they had been in the medium's heyday. But a small, rabidly loyal audience kept the form alive by supporting a new outlet for distribution: shops created exclusively for the sale of comic books, owned and operated by enthusiastic fans of the art form.

Under the old model, a publisher might print and ship 100,000 copies of a title, only to find 70,000 returned to them after the publication's normal shelf life was over – a huge waste of resources. With these new stores dedicated exclusively to their product, publishers could ask their storeowners how many copies they intended to sell and then print the quantity needed to fill demand. The new comic book shops couldn't return unsold copies, but this was usually fine with them, since their customers also created a market for the sale of back issues. Freedom from the vagaries of newsstand distribution gave the comic book industry a new lease on life, and a new attitude toward its product.



Pow! Wham! Change Appears

Finally, an atmosphere of experimentation and change began to blossom in the comic book companies. New, small publishers bent on stretching the limits of comics' style and subject matter could enter the market more easily because of the support of the comic book shops. (The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles originated with one such newcomer.) The industry's direct commercial line to a loyal audience gave it room to try new formats and utilize better printing, confident their fan base wouldn't reject paying a higher price for better quality reproduction. Reprinting collections of favorite old comics as trade paperbacks, or even as hardcovers, wasn't such a risky endeavor. From there, creating new comics as "graphic novels" wasn't far behind.

By the 1990s, computers had revolutionized the printing industry and digital technology came to the comics business. Comics' linear art style and limited color palette had always been a concession to poor reproduction on cheap paper. Now the medium embraced quality paper, crisp line reproduction and the limitless range of colors that Photoshop could generate.

And at long last, a key part of this revolution was the institution of a royalty system for comics' creators. The proliferation of new publishers, competition for the industry's top talents and the business sense and consciences of a new generation of comic book company management led to fairer treatment for the artists and writers. The archaic comic book was finally dragging itself into the modern world.

Today, thanks to these changes, publishers of all kinds are seeing the potential in graphic storytelling. Bookstores have taken note of this success, and it's easy to find a collection of both old and new Superman adventures within a few feet of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel on the Holocaust,

or Chris Ware's innovative design and storytelling style in the Acme Novelty Library collections. International comics are available, and young American kids are becoming acquainted with Manga – Japan's unique contribution to the art form. You'll even find both old and newer works by pioneers like the late Jack Kirby and Will Eisner – their dream of a better venue for their work has finally come true.

And all this leads to a new generation of aspiring graphic storytellers bent on carrying on and expanding the legacy of those hard working artists and writers who toiled in relative anonymity for meager reward. In the past 13 years I've done work as a comic book artist and writer, and I've been fortunate enough to have two picture book/graphic novel hybrid works of mine published: *Atomic Ace (He's Just My Dad)* and *Atomic Ace and the Robot Rampage* from Albert Whitman & Co. In fact, Albert Whitman was kind enough to take me to Toronto this year as a guest author at a huge children's publishing convention for educators. I was shocked to see how many publishers there showed an interest in the graphic novel market. And now, thanks to the encouragement and effort of my agent, Steven Chudney, I'll have a children's graphic novel of my own to add to the field. In 2009, Putnam will publish my graphic adventure, *On Board the Defender*, the story of a boy in the English navy during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 1800s.

I couldn't be prouder to be a part of this medium's coming of age. I plan to do my best to make sure that the art of telling stories with pictures will thrill a new generation of readers, which is all Jack and Will would have ever expected of me.

Jeff Weigel is an author, illustrator and graphic designer who lives in Belleville, Illinois. He's been a frequent contributor to Image Comics' anthology title Big Bang Comics for more than 10 years. He was the designer of Curt Swan: A Life In Comics by Eddy Zeno, and he's the author and illustrator of the Atomic Ace books published

by Albert Whitman & Co. He also received a Don Freeman Award Honorable Mention from SCBWI for his picture book work in 2004.

All images by Jeff Weigel. Cover art *Roboconqueror* from Atomic Ace and the Robot Rampage (Albert Whitman & Co.). Second image from Atomic Ace (He's Just My Dad) (Albert Whitman & Co.). Third image from On Board the Defender (Putnam 2009).

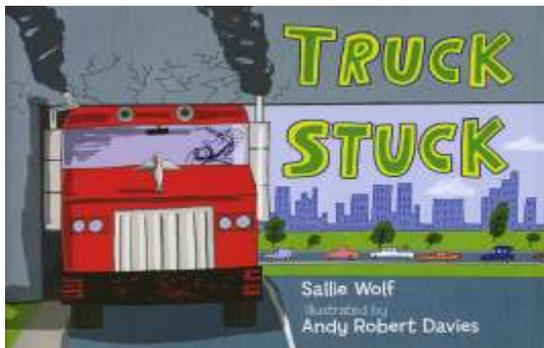
Tales from the Front

Open to Life's Opportunities

By Sallie Wolf

My father once told me that I know how to find good resources and use them. I had seen my reliance on other people's help as a lack of independence. His words were a gift that altered my view of myself. In my writing life I try to stay open to all the opportunities that present themselves, to all the offers of assistance and support that come my way. And I am not afraid to ask for help.

Part One, *Truck Stuck*



Looking back, publishing my first book, *Peter's Trucks* (Albert Whitman, 1992), seems to have been an amazingly easy process. I met an editor at a conference; I submitted; I revised; I revised again; and the book was

accepted. The whole process from manuscript to published book took a little over four years.

While *Peter's Trucks* was in production, I started taking classes at the School for the Art Institute, thinking I would learn to draw so I could illustrate my own stories. My journals, which I have kept off and on since seventh grade, became more and more central to my way of working. I expanded my journal writing to include sketching. I wrote about everything that popped into my head, including wondering whether I was an artist or a writer as I became more and more involved in art and had less time for writing.

But I could not give up the writing entirely, and I did develop another story about a truck stuck under the viaduct, something that happens in Oak Park, where I live, quite regularly. I sent my manuscript to the editor who had handled my first book, and she was enthusiastic. She suggested that I change my emphasis from the careers of the people stuck behind this truck to the kinds of vehicles that would be stuck. She wanted another truck book. The revisions made sense, but it took me about 18 months to make them. I was totally immersed in art school at this time. When I did not hear from the editor, I finally called only to find out that the manuscript, which the editorial department loved, had been nixed by the production and sales departments, but nobody had written to tell me.

I licked my wounds for about six months and then sent *Truck Stuck* to an editor who had put a blurb in the SCBWI *Bulletin* asking for picture book manuscripts. I heard back in less than three months, "I love the title and concept of this manuscript, but..."

This was the first of a long string of so-called "good rejection" letters for *Truck Stuck*. Over a period of 12 years, I submitted this manuscript to 12 different publishers. I took Lisa Cinelli's illustration class in order to refine the manuscript and develop a dummy. Every opportunity for a critique I took.

In the last critique the editor really liked the manuscript, but it was not the sort of book her house published. By this time the manuscript was down to 145 words, the meter was perfect, and I could see the book in my head. She suggested four small, independent publishing houses. I sent my story off to an editor she recommended. No sooner had I sent it off than I got a call from the Magic Tree Bookstore warning me that a new book had just come out called *My Truck Is Stuck*. It's about a truck stuck in a hole and the vehicles that try to help it out. This news was devastating. The editor returned my manuscript without even reading it because of the similarity in titles.

That was in 2002. Sadly, I put *Truck Stuck* in a drawer and continued to work at my art. I also had other story ideas cooking, but *Truck Stuck* felt like a weight I could not put down. Two years passed. My art career was building, but I continued to write and remained a part of my writers' group.

One day, while reading the national SCBWI *Bulletin* I saw a request for humorous picture books from an editor at Charlesbridge, one of the houses recommended in my last critique. I decided to try again. After all, it seemed as if every two years there was a new book about a truck that was stuck or a duck on a truck. The



rhyme is so obvious and fun, and there is a perennial demand for truck books. I was overjoyed to learn months later that Charlesbridge wanted my manuscript.

That is the long version of how I came to have a relationship with Yolanda LeRoy, Editorial Director of Charlesbridge Publishing. Now to rewind a few years. . .

Part Two, *The Robin Makes a Laughing Sound*

Ten years ago I was asked to develop four art workshops for a second-grade unit on birds. You may be wondering what this has to do with children's books. It had nothing to do with children's books when I started, but in order to develop my workshops I began sketching birds. Not only did I sketch birds in my journals and keep a list of birds seen each day (something I had been doing anyway, but now did with more purpose), but I also worked on bird collages so that I could teach collage in my workshops. I ended up creating 12 different bird collages on a discarded calendar, a different bird for each month.

One day as I looked at the calendar, I realized that I had the beginning of a bird book. I had 12 illustrations; if I added a page of text opposite each month I would have 24 pages of book. Add a title page, copyright page, a little back matter and there you have it, a 32 page picture book. I set about writing the text, jotting down in prose everything I knew about each bird. The collages had all been based on original sketches made directly from life, pulled from my journals. My text would also be based on direct, personal observation. I wrote and wrote, and then I read the text to my writer's group.

I could feel the delicacy with which they responded to my project. It became very clear to me that the idea for the book was sound, but the text was too wordy, targeted to an unclear audience and age-group, and not particularly kid-friendly. New inspiration –

poems would force me to pare down the language and spice it up.

Even though my first two books are rhyming picture books about trucks, I've never pictured myself as a poet. But I love poetry, especially really good poetry for kids. I signed up for Heidi Roemer's course by correspondence and set to work creating poems based on my bird observations. At first I set out to write a poem for each bird on my calendar. But there were other birds, not illustrated in the calendar, that were fun to write about. I made rules about the poetry – only the birds from the collages, poems only about specific birds – and then I broke those rules as I gained experience and opened up to the project. I wrote all different kinds of poems, experimenting with meter, rhyme, length, shape, style. If you page through my journals for the past four years or so, you will find bits and pieces of poetry throughout. Also lots of bird sketches.

When my editor suggested it would be fun to meet in person I jumped at the chance. Our first meeting at Charlesbridge was amazing. Yolanda LeRoy is young, energetic and very smart. We hit it off at once. She also included the art director, Susan Sherman. We share many interests and experiences and appreciate many of the same artists. I showed Yolanda and Susan my journals with my sketches and my moon project observations.

I began to feel lucky that it had taken me so many years and rejection after rejection to place *Truck Stuck* at Charlesbridge. Now I had an editor and an art director with whom I could really communicate and collaborate. Yolanda and I revised *Truck Stuck* in her office that afternoon, and I left knowing that they were very interested in the bird poetry book. But I thought the collages would not work for illustrations. They asked me to submit the poetry and sample pages of art based on my sketches and watercolors.

While struggling to figure out how to make collages of my journal sketches without

destroying my journals I met a new barista at our local Starbucks. Micah Bornstein had a degree in art, a background in printmaking, a command of Photoshop and an eagerness to help me with my sample pages. Micah is also a writer and very interested in children's literature and graphic novels, and his wife is a children's librarian. Based on one animated conversation during his break at Starbucks, we struck up a collaboration. We scanned art from my journals and sketches. We poured over children's books that we admired for the page design. Then Micah created several sample pages. I suggested revisions, he made them, and I submitted a collection of 30-some poems and two sample pages.

I had the opportunity to meet with Yolanda and Susan again, and Yolanda told me that what she needed was a 48 page dummy with a couple of sample pages for her to submit to the rest of Charlesbridge. Susan showed me what a 48 page dummy would look like if the end papers were glued down. We made notes about which spreads would have poems and images, which would be front or back matter. Yolanda asked me to select my favorite 18 poems from the 30-plus poems I had written. Soon I had made my choices. The book was now structured not by month but by season. It had an introduction and conclusion, an opening and a closing poem, and four poems for each season. Micah and I played more with the page layout, and I submitted my dummy.

This manuscript is now under contract. The text revisions are complete. Micah and I are waiting for feedback on our submitted "first draft" of the pages. The text revision was a real partnership between Yolanda and myself, and I expect that the creation of the pages will also be a partnership between Susan, Yolanda, Micah and me.

What I like best about the story of this book is that it grew very naturally out of the things I was already committed to doing—observing and sketching birds; making and teaching art; reading and writing. It also is a model for how I intend to work on future projects.

There are three or four ideas I am committed to turning into books and they all originate in sketches and narrative contained in my journals. They all grow out of my deepest, life-long interests.

Freddy Levine, an illustrator, once told our Oak Park SCBWI Network that you must find your own niche in children's publishing. I feel that I have found my niche by turning the contents of my journals into the genesis for my book ideas. The art leads the way to story, and this feels more natural for me than trying to create art to fit a narrative. I'm hoping that Micah and I will be able to continue our collaborative process on other books. But he is headed back to school for an MFA. If he runs out of time or out of interest I will have learned enough to forge ahead. What I realize now is that writing does not have to be a lonely business. I love the collaborative process, and I will find the people who click with my energy.



Check out Sallie's website at www.salliewolf.com/ or e-mail her at salwolf@comcast.net.

Someone You Should Know

Center for Teaching Through Kid's Books

By Ruth Spiro

With this Spring issue, we offer more than Someone You Should Know. We offer Someplace You Should Know, as well.

Tucked away in the library at National-Louis University in Skokie is a hidden treasure: The Center for Teaching Through Children's

Books. Directed by **Junko Yokota** and **Gail Bush**, both PhDs, the Center is "dedicated to excellence in teaching with quality literature for children and adolescents."

So why should we know about it?

The Center recently hosted a program featuring a review of new children's books by ALA Booklist and Book Links editors. I had the opportunity to meet the gracious hostesses, Junko and Gail, and observed first-hand their dedication to inspiring educators to teach using quality children's literature.

Through exhibits, events, professional development workshops and partnerships with schools and libraries, the Center creates a synergy among those in the children's literature community.

The Center also partners with schools and libraries to share materials, resources and expertise, and along the way fosters a sense of community. Regular professional development opportunities, such as an evening with Avi on March 11, make the center an invaluable resource for all of us.

Junko specializes in multicultural literature, and her guidance leads the way for educators to incorporate multicultural and international literature as a core resource for learning about the world and to promote issues of social justice in curriculum using children's books.

Gail, as former director of the School Library Media Program, Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University, also provides the expertise needed to facilitate collaboration between schools, libraries and other organizations in the children's literature community.

As authors and illustrators, we can only benefit from the connections created by these two women.



*MacArthur Fellow Peter Sís launched his national book tour for *The Wall at the Center for Teaching Through Children's Books* in September 2007. Pictured from left are Junko Yokota, Peter Sís and Gail Bush.*

Junko is a professor of Reading, Language, and Children's Literature at National College of Education at National-Louis University, and director of the Center for Teaching through Children's Books. She also specializes in international children's literature, and has served as president of the U.S. National Section of the International Board on Books for Young People (USBBY). She has served on numerous book award and selection committees, including the Caldecott, Batchelder, Newbery, Notable Books for a Global Society Committee, Parenting Magazine Reading Award, and the Hans Christian Andersen Award. Born and raised in Japan, Junko's commitment to international literature has taken her to many countries.

Gail holds a Ph.D. in education psychology from Loyola University Chicago, an M.S. in library science and a B.A. in anthropology from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She was honored with the AASL National School Library Media Program of the Year Award in 1996, and was named North Suburban Library System School Librarian of the Year in 1998-99 for her leadership in collaboration between her school program and the local public library.

Many programs at the Center for Teaching Through Children's Books are open to the public, providing unparalleled opportunities for networking and learning while bringing together the many perspectives of children's literature.

The Center is located at:
National-Louis University
North Shore Campus
5202 Old Orchard Road, Suite 300
Skokie, IL 60077

Ruth Spiro has a B.S. in Communications from the University of Illinois, and an M.B.A. from Loyola University of Chicago. Her articles and essays have appeared in FamilyFun, CHILD, Parents, Redbook, Woman's World, Chicago Parent and more. She's also a contributor to The Right Words at the Right Time, Your Turn, edited by Marlo Thomas, and several Chicken Soup for the Soul titles. Ruth's new picture book, Lester Fizz, Bubble Gum Artist, will be published by Dutton in August. Visit her at www.ruthspiro.com.

Writing Tips

What's In A Name? (Part Two)

By Carmela Martino

In the first installment of this three-part series on character names, I promised that this time I'd talk about the naming process and share some naming tools. As you may recall, my Part One column began with a list of unusual names from award-winning children's books. One character I missed was Holling Hoodhood, the main character in Gary D. Schmidt's Newbery-honor book, *The Wednesday Wars*. In an online interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, Schmidt talks about how he came up with Holling's name, saying:

"... my middle son actually has a friend whose last name is Hoodhood. It's such an

inherently funny name. And I gave him Holling, in part to honor Holling Clancy Holling, who wrote children's books in the 1950s, and because I liked the alliteration."

[As an aside: According to Wikipedia, **Holling Clancy Holling** "was an American author and illustrator, best known for the book *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, which was a Caldecott Honor Book in 1942." But there's no information posted on how the original Holling's parents came up with his name.]

In response to my Part One column, a number of Illinois authors wrote to share their naming strategies. Several said that, like Schmidt, they sometimes use the names of their children's friends, and also their own friends and family members. Other authors, like young adult novelist Ophelia Julien, keep track of interesting names they encounter. Ophelia said, "I literally keep a running list of names. Every time I see a good one, first or last name, I take note, particularly the last names."

Years ago, I started saving any and all lists of children's names I came across: my son's class lists, my nephew's kindergarten graduation program, the program from a niece's band recital, etc. I keep these in a file folder marked simply "Names," and I flip through it when I'm looking for inspiration. Gary D. Schmidt, who is a college English professor, used his own class lists to justify Holling Hoodhood's unusual name when his editor initially objected to it. Click [here](#) to read the complete interview.

Another source for lists of names, first and last, are telephone directories. And, thanks to the Internet, you can search these online. Kate Hannigan wrote that her favorite directory site is [switchboard.com](#).

Phone directories and my "Names" file work well for contemporary names, but they don't help when I'm writing something historical, like my novel *Rosa, Sola*. If you're writing a story set in the United States, a great resource

for both contemporary and historical names is the Social Security Administration [website](#). There, you can see lists of the names most often given babies born in any year dating back to 1880. You can also check the popularity of a particular name in a given time period and even look at the popularity of names by state. Unfortunately, this site doesn't help for characters born before 1880. In that case, you can try a technique Margo Dill shared: "For my Civil War novel, I used first names and last names that I saw during researching, but I mixed them up and put different first names with different last names."

Sometimes, we don't need any lists or directories. A character's name simply comes to mind, like a gift from the universe. This happens often to Pamela Dell, who told me, "odd character names pop spontaneously into my head sort of frequently." She shared an example in an article in the last *Prairie Wind*:

"I was slowly coming up out of the sleep zone . . . I hadn't even opened my eyes yet when a single word popped into my head, from out of nowhere: Doodlebug. This was followed, seconds later, by a couple lines of dialogue: 'This is where we're going to live now?' said Doodlebug Pinkley. 'Weird,' said Dandelion."

Doodlebug, and his sister, Dandelion, became the starring characters in Pamela's *Spider* magazine series "Doodlebug & Dandelion." (To read more about her experience, go to "[Tales From the Front](#)" in the *Prairie Wind's* Winter issue.)

Other times, we have a character's physical appearance in mind before we know his or her name. Leone Castell Anderson e-mailed to share how she named the main character in her historical novel *Sean's War*. She said, "a young boy, presumably the age of the character I wanted to develop as my protagonist, rode by me on a bicycle as I was on my way to the library. 'That's him,' I thought, and went home and wrote a description of him! He had red hair, looked

somewhat neglected, looked as if he was outgrowing his clothes, and I decided, seeing his long-lashed gray eyes, that he was Irish. What else could I name him but Sean? Of course, it was serendipitous, especially when research later proved that the Irish were immigrating to this country during that era of the 1830s!”

My thanks to all the writers who shared their tips with me — I had too many to include them all here. So next time I’ll continue the discussion. I’ll also talk about some special cases, such as coming up with appropriate ethnic names and resources for naming animals. If you haven’t had a chance to share your character naming tip yet, there’s still time. You can e-mail me through my [website](#). (Please put “Character Names” in your subject line so the e-mail doesn’t end up in my Spam folder.)

Depending on the response, this series may end up having four parts, or maybe even five!

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*Carmela Martino is the author of the middle-grade novel Rosa, Sola (Candlewick Press), which was named to Booklist’s “Top Ten First Novels for Youth: 2006.” She has an MFA in writing from Vermont College and teaches writing classes for both children and adults. She is presenting a one-day workshop on using details to bring characters to life at the College of DuPage on April 5, 2008. For more information, visit the “Programs” page of her website:
www.carmelamartino.com.*

Critique Group Tips

EEK! How Do I Critique?

By Teresa Owens Smith

The very first time I was asked to critique was a “cold read” situation. Each member of our

group had brought three new pages of a work-in-progress to read aloud. After each reading, the rest of the group took a few minutes to digest what they had heard. Then each of us made comments.

I did my best imitation of the incredible shrinking woman. It wasn’t because I was missing brain cells or morbidly shy. I knew what I liked and what I didn’t like. And I knew whether the story made sense or twisted my cerebral cortex into a million question marks. But sometimes, I wasn’t exactly sure what *about* the story wasn’t working for me.

Somewhere along my writer’s journey, I’d forgotten how to listen for the basic elements of good storytelling. Most of us learned these in school (I really did learn them, Ms.Gosinski!). Here’s a “refresher” list, along with questions help give feedback on any story:

Character

Are the characters authentic, believable? Does the main character face internal and external conflicts/challenges that move him to act and push him toward change or resistance to change? Are the motivations for characters’ actions/reactions/thoughts clear? Do you care about the characters? Why or why not? Has the author shown you what the main character wants?

Plot

Does it make sense? Is it interesting? Believable? Does it move the story forward, not just in terms of the outer journey of the protagonist, but his inner journey as well? Is there conflict? Is the pacing good? Does it help to build tension? Does the protagonist have an active role in the climax?

Setting

Is there enough description to enable us to see/touch/taste/smell/hear the world through the character? Is there too much description, to the point that it detracts from the story or weighs it down? Is this particular setting

essential to the story, or could the story take place anywhere?

Point of View

Is it consistent or are there slips in POV? Why did the author choose this particular point of view? Is it the best way to reveal the story?

Dialogue

Does it flow or is it stilted? Does it sound authentic? Forced or outdated? Does it reveal something about the characters' personalities, dreams, goals and relationships with each other? Does each character have his own voice (can you tell them apart)?

Beginning

Does it make you want to read more? Set up what is to follow? Make a promise to the reader about what path the story may take (e.g., a fantasy vs. historical fiction)? Does the story start at the right place or is the beginning saturated with backstory (what has happened before this point)?

Middle

Does the tension keep rising or does the middle flounder? Is the protagonist active throughout the story?

Ending

The ending is the big payoff. Was it worth waiting for? Did it make sense? Resonate? Satisfy?

Language

Precise or lyrical? Clear? Does it fit the story and the characters? Does it draw you into the story or jerk you out?

It's a lot to keep in mind when your mind is already crowded with your own stories. And these are just the basics. To further explore the elements of story, read books about the craft of writing. Good places to start include: *Reading Like a Writer* by Francine Prose, *Writing Fiction* by Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, *Characters and Viewpoint* by Orson Scott Card, *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass.

Prose gives wonderful examples to show how authors carefully choose their words to move the plot forward, reveal character, etc.

Burroway offers brief example critiques, as well as writing exercises. The wonderful thing about critiquing is that you can apply the process and anything you learn to your own work, too.

Don't forget to use the basics to identify effective aspects of a manuscript. These elements or ingredients of storytelling operate like signal flares, drawing attention to certain lines or scenes on the page – the ones that don't work and the ones that do. Let the author know what you liked about the writing, in addition to your constructive feedback. From my days working in the psychology learning labs, I know that animals learn best if they get both types of feedback (i.e., what is a correct answer and what is an incorrect answer). This works with writers, too.

And remember that constructive means useful, not insulting. No grimacing or gagging allowed. Skip any references to the author's intelligence being a tad higher or lower than a slug. Everyone is in your critique group to improve their writing. They deserve respect and support. It takes a great deal of courage to reveal ourselves through our stories and to silently listen to suggestions about how to improve them. Our stories are like our children, so please don't call them ugly or stupid. Critiques may often sting, but they need not mortally wound us.

"We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is – knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out."
–Ray Bradbury

Once upon a time, Teresa Owens Smith was a clinical psychologist. After stumbling upon SCBWI-Illinois, she chose to live happily ever after as a writer of middle-grade novels (or of anything interesting that pops into her head). When she graduated from Vermont College's MFA Program in Writing for Children, her fairy godmother granted her

one online critique group and one hybrid critique group. Every day she strives to find any path to wisdom as she and her husband attempt to raise their three teenage sons. You can contact her at PhDTree@aol.com.

Illustrator Tips

The Art of Networking: Why I Blog

By Kathleen Rietz

I began my career as a freelance artist 20 years ago. Back then, it was not uncommon to drive to interviews or meetings and show a hardcopy of my portfolio, chockfull of color copies of my latest illustration masterpieces. It was easy to receive direct feedback from the potential client . . . or at least I could ponder the expression on a client's face as he perused the slick, vinyl pages of my portfolio. I regularly bumped into other freelance illustrators at my clients' offices, so I got to know and network with other illustrators. It was a tight-knit little circle of us. Aaaahhhh, those were the good ol' days.



Fast-forward to today, and meetings with clients have been replaced by instant e-mail access. Overnight couriers have been replaced by FTP uploads. And we illustrators are now identified by little more than a name and a

URL floating around the web. Sort of makes you feel a bit like the Lone Ranger, doesn't it?

Unless, that is, you have discovered the power of blogging.

I created my art blog in October 2006 after discovering the blog of an illustrator who lived halfway across the world. I had e-mailed her to tell her how much I enjoyed her illustrations, and so began a correspondence that I still enjoy today. I did not have a website at the time, and she suggested that I get a blog of my own to showcase my illustrations. "The best part," she said, "is that it's free!" Well, how many things in life are free these days? So I decided to give it a shot and set up my blog.

It wasn't long before I discovered a wonderful cyber world of writers and illustrators out there with blogs of their own. I loved the idea of being able to view other artists' latest works, works in progress, artistic experiments, advice on the business, personal stories . . . things you do not usually find while visiting their websites.

I discovered that blogging is an excellent tool by which I am able to market myself: Even with all of the portfolio websites out there that I use to promote my illustrations, including my own website, I receive the most assignments from new clients who have seen my blog. And because I link my blog to all of my portfolio sites, clients can easily access my website or other portfolio sites. And because my website and portfolio sites in turn link back to my blog, there is a constant flow of traffic back and forth between these sites. In addition, I discovered weekly illustration activity groups such as Illustration Friday and Monday Artday. By participating in these fun groups and posting my latest illustrations on their sites, visitors to these sites are able to link directly back to my blog. And, of course, from my blog to my website and portfolio sites. This gives my name and my illustration work a lot of exposure.

I discovered a supportive community of artists through blogging: While I once had a sense of community with other artists I knew in the Chicago area, that faded as technology grew and I was no longer required to drop off and pick up assignments or be physically present in meetings. I do most of my work now for clients I have never even met. It is not uncommon for me to be e-mailing illustration revisions to a client in Hong Kong at 2 in the morning.

The nice thing about blogging is that I have made friends with artists with whom I am in touch on a weekly – even daily – basis. One of the first friends I made through blogging was local Chicago area artist Debbie Egizio (www.debbieegizio.blogspot.com), whom I invited to an SCBWI meeting last spring. I was able to be with her for the grand opening of her art boutique in the summer, and now we e-mail regularly and get together every few months. I enjoy the support we lend to each other in pursuit of our creative endeavors.



Blogging is a great way to get feedback from peers: A great benefit of posting new work on a blog is that you can request feedback from other illustrators who work in the same market. This has been a very helpful tool when I have gotten “stuck” on a new idea for a children’s illustration and need fresh pairs of eyes looking at my work and offering feedback and advice. I also have enjoyed giving feedback to others when they request it. It’s fun to be part of a mini cyber “critique group!”

One children’s illustrator I have long admired is Kathy Weller (www.wellerwishes.blogspot.com). Kathy is a tenacious artist who has several blogs representing the different types of illustration and design work she does, and she does an incredible job of marketing herself. We set a time to talk “shop” earlier this month. Through our phone conversation we exchanged feedback about illustration, promotional materials, websites and lots of other goodies. We decided to make this a regular “meeting.” I look forward to my future conversations with Kathy. Her attitude is contagious, and her feedback valuable.

Another children’s book illustrator I met through blogging is Kristi Valiant (www.kristivaliant.blogspot.com/). Kristi is an established illustrator and member of SCBWI with over 20 books to her name. We met for coffee last month when Kristi came through town, and shared a mini portfolio review. I am fairly new to children’s illustration, so talking to a pro like Kristi was great. The feedback I received from her made me rethink my approach to illustration in positive ways.

I still sometimes miss the days of face-to-face meetings with clients and lunch breaks with fellow freelance illustrators and designers. Sometimes an impromptu stop by an art director’s office on the way back from another client meeting would yield a crop of new assignments. But as long gone as those days are, there’s a whole new world out there just

waiting to be explored. And in some ways, it's even better. With a little effort and some creative networking through blogging, your presence can be as real as ever, from your hometown to the endless universe of the web.

Kathleen Rietz is a freelance illustrator currently living in the Chicago area and operating her business in flannel pajamas and fuzzy slippers. You can visit her blog at www.licoricegirl.blogspot.com and her website at www.kathleenrietz.com

Writer's Bookshelf

Got Plot? And Don't Forget the Structure

By Jenny Meyerhoff

Plot and Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot That Grips Readers from Start to Finish

By James Scott Bell
(Writer's Digest Books, 2004)

If plot is what happens in a novel, then structure is when it happens. Or so says James Scott Bell in his book *Plot and Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot That Grips Readers from Start to Finish*. Bell, the author of many thrillers, knows first hand the need to keep his reader turning pages with a story that never lags but also achieves balance between scenes of high tension and scenes of reflection and reaction. In *Plot and Structure* he wants to help other writers create books that "work," which he defines as books that "connect with readers."

When a reader picks up a book, she immediately wants to know what it is about, what will happen and why it is important. These might not be conscious questions, but they are still there. Our job as writers is to anticipate them and make certain that they are answered before the reader gets bored and puts the book down. A good plot laid out

against a solid structure will draw the reader into your story.

A plot, according to Bell, has four main ingredients. He calls his system for creating these ingredients the LOCK system: Lead, Objective, Confrontation and Knockout. The LOCK system boils down to crafting a character with a goal that is challenged by opposing forces throughout the book until an ending with power. Bell does spend time defining these elements and discussing how to create them, but he spends more time on what to do once you have them in place. Because even a book with great characters, and a life or death goal can fail to grab its readers if it doesn't unfold in an optimum fashion.

Bell describes structure as the thing that holds a plot together, that helps a plot unfold at a pace precisely designed to keep the reader hungering for more. In his book, he describes the three act structure that is at the core of theater and film and adapts it to novel writing. Act I, the beginning, should comprise the first fourth, or fifth, of your book. By then end of Act I, the reader will know the main character and his opposition, the tone of the story, the story world, and most importantly, the reader will know why she should care. In Act II, the middle (or muddle as Bell jokes,) the goal is to worry the reader and deepen the characters. This comprises the bulk of the book. Act III is the end, the resolution, the place where loose threads get tied up and the reader is left with a feeling of resonance.

Throughout *Plot and Structure*, Bell uses examples from his own books as well as classic literature and best sellers by other novelists to give precise instructions for laying out an evenly paced book. His tips are equally useful for writers in both the first draft stage and the revision stage. Because whether you write by the seat of your pants, or outline page by page, whether you've written one word, or are on your seventh draft, your goal is the same: a reader satisfied all the way from "once upon a time" until "the end" and then some.

Jenny Meyerhoff is the author of the forthcoming chapter book, *Third Grade Baby*, and the forthcoming YA, *Girl in Waiting*. She lives in Riverwoods with her husband and three children. Visit her on the web at www.jennymeyerhoff.com.

Book Look

Books That Make You Go, "Oh!"

By Brenda Ferber

Picture Book Structure 101

Fancy Nancy

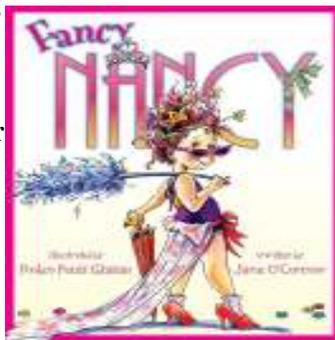
Written by Jane O'Connor; illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser (HarperCollins, 2006)

Oh, I love this book. Oh, it's so simple and sweet. Oh, I wish I had written that!

It's a common misconception that picture books are simple to write. In truth, they are one of the hardest forms of writing to master. In 800 words or less, you need to tell a story with a beginning, middle, climax and end. You need to create a distinct character who changes and grows. You need to leave room in the story for an illustrator to add his or her creative touch.

You need to speak to the heart and/or funny bone (preferably both) of children and adults alike. You need to write a story that begs to be read again and again. You need to choose words that sing.

Not so simple at all. But Jane O'Connor sure got it right with *Fancy Nancy*. In 419 words (just 419!!) O'Connor tells the story of a young girl who helps her family be fancy for one



special night. If you want to learn about structuring a picture book, you should read this book, type it out on your computer and study it. Here's what you'll find:

The Beginning: The first double page spread shows Nancy's bedroom. The text reads, I love being fancy. On the next page, we see some particular ways in which Nancy is fancy. The details here (liking fancy words, wanting to learn French, etc.) will come into play later in the story. And right away, we learn what Nancy's conflict is: Nobody in her family is fancy at all. In fact, they never even ask for sprinkles. Aw!

Beginnings should introduce the main character and the main conflict.

O'Connor does this in just 63 enticing words. Fantastic!

The Middle: The bulk of the story is about Nancy teaching her family to be fancy. Mom, Dad and little sister are all good sports, and soon the whole family is decked out in posh clothes as they head for dinner at The King's Crown. Dad even pretends to be a chauffeur. At the restaurant, Nancy feels like a movie star as the other patrons stare at their interesting clothing choices. Mom suggests parfaits for dessert, and Nancy is thrilled that her mom speaks French. Everything is as perfect as can be. Right? Wrong. As Nancy goes to get the parfaits, we see that her ballet slipper has come untied. Uh oh. . .

Middles should show the main character attempting to solve his or her problem while complications arise.

O'Connor does this in 258 words. There are multiple illustratable scene changes (a grocery store, the kitchen, the living room, Mom and Dad's room, outside the house and in the restaurant), which lend interest and fun to the reading experience.

The Climax: As Nancy carries the tray of parfaits like a fancy waiter, she trips over her ballet slipper, falls and makes a terrible mess.

She doesn't feel fancy anymore. She's mortified. She wants to go home.

The climax is the black moment when all is seemingly lost. O'Connor creates her climax in only 29 words. The four accompanying illustrations by Glasser show Nancy's heartbreak and her family's love and compassion. Readers will be on the edge of their seats!

The End: At home, Nancy can be fancy again. She wears her "dressing gown" (fancy word for bathrobe), and her family is back in their normal clothes. Mom is serving up plain old ice cream sundaes, but the careful reader will note that Dad is putting sprinkles on his. Nancy thanks them for being fancy. They say I love you, and she says I love you. No fancy words at all, Because there isn't a fancy – or better – way of saying that.

The end should show the character's growth and the solution to the problem. It should leave the reader with an "aha" moment. O'Connor does this in 69 words (almost the exact word count as the beginning). I've heard it said that endings are beginnings in disguise. Fancy Nancy is a wonderful example of how that cyclical structure can work.

So how can you use this in your own writing? If you have a picture book manuscript, check to make sure it has a beginning, middle, climax and end. Is there one problem to solve? Does your main character have an easily identifiable overarching character trait? Does your character grow and change? Are there multiple scene changes? Does the end loosely mirror the beginning? Did you keep your word count under 800 words? Is your story sweet, funny and interesting?

If you can answer yes to all these questions, submit that manuscript to a publisher! If not, don't give up hope. It just means it's time to revise. And it's time to read more fabulous books. You'll learn a ton from them.

Have you read a book that makes you go oh? If so, drop me an e-mail at BrendaAFerber@comcast.net and tell me about it.

Deerfield author Brenda Ferber's first novel, *Julia's Kitchen*, was published by Farrar Straus Giroux in 2006. She is currently working on her second middle-grade novel, *Jemma Hartman, Camper Extraordinaire*, to be published in 2009.

News Roundup

Readers, Start Your Engines!

Compiled by Tabitha Olson

Read Across America

The National Education Association is promoting Read Across America Day on March 3rd. If you wish to participate, you can fill out a **form**, and they will post your plans on their **website**, which you may visit for more information.

Avi in Chicago

Join National-Louis University faculty members as they model an author study of Avi and discuss common themes in his work from 10 a.m. to noon March 1.

You can hear a public reading of Avi's new books and enjoy a reception, book sales and book signing from 4:30 to 6 p.m. March 11. Bring your questions and join Avi for a special discussion designed specifically for teachers and librarians familiar with his books from 6 to 7:30 p.m. March 11.

Click [here](#) for more information.

Anderson's Bookshop

Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird*, will be visiting at 7 p.m. March 11. Location is still to be determined.

Dave Almond, author of the award-winning *Skellig*, will be visiting on March 17 in Naperville. Time is still to be determined. Mary Pope Osborne, author of the renowned

Magic Tree House series, will be visiting on March 29. Time and location are still to be determined.

For more information, visit Anderson's [website](#).

Words in the Woods Retreat

Having trouble developing a character? Creating the perfect setting? Stuck at the beginning or in the middle, or just can't find the perfect ending to your story? Check out the Words in the Woods Retreat to be held June 20-22 in Cantrall, Illinois. Special guest speakers *Spiderwick Chronicles* author Holly Black, agent Barry Goldblatt and Hyperion editor Namrata Tripathi will offer their wisdom and guidance in carving out interesting characters, developing vivid settings and plotting paths for page-turning young adult and middle-grade novels, as well as picture books.

For more information and to register, check out the SCBWI-Illinois [website](#), or contact Toni Leahy at cyfarwydd@royell.net.

National Library Week

First sponsored by the American Library Association in 1958, National Library Week is observed across the country each April. This year it runs April 13-19, celebrating the contributions of our nation's libraries and librarians while promoting library use and support. For more information, please click [here](#).

Writing Contests

Delacorte Press First Middle Grade: For writers who have never published a middle-grade novel. Submissions are accepted between April 1-June 30. Winners will be announced around Oct. 31. For submission guidelines and rules, go to their [website](#).

Write It Now: In past years, this writing contest offered critiques as well as sending the winning manuscripts to editors. Information for this year's contest isn't up yet, but last year submissions were accepted through May 15. Check their [website](#) for more information.

Martha Weston Grant

SCBWI offers the Martha Weston Grant for writers who have been published in a certain age group but wish to switch to another. For example: a picture book illustrator might like to write a middle-grade novel or picture-book text, or a young-adult author might like to write or illustrate a picture book. Applications are accepted between May 1-June 10. For submission guidelines or additional information, please visit the [website](#).

BookExpo America

This year's BookExpo America will be May 29-June 1 at the Los Angeles Convention Center. There will also be a Writer's Conference, but further details have not yet been announced. Please visit their [website](#) for general information, and click [here](#) for information regarding the Writer's Conference.

Printer's Row Book Fair

The Printers Row Book Fair, planned this year for June 7-8, was founded in 1985 by the Near South Planning Board. By 2002, it had grown to five city blocks and is considered the largest free outdoor literary event in the Midwest. Events take place at Dearborn and Polk streets and include author readings and signings, panel discussions, booksellers and children's activities. Visit their [website](#) for more information. And check out the **Opportunities** in the *Prairie Wind*.

Newbery Medal

The 2008 Newbery Medal winner was announced in January, and *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* by Laura Amy Schlitz, illustrated by Robert Byrd, took home the award. Maidens, monks and millers' sons – in these pages, readers will meet them all. There's Hugo, the lord's nephew, forced to prove his manhood by hunting a wild boar; sharp-tongued Nelly, who supports her family by selling live eels; and the peasant's daughter, Mogg, who gets a clever lesson in how to save a cow from a greedy landlord. There's also mud-slinging Barbary (and her noble victim); Jack, the compassionate half-wit; Alice, the singing

shepherdess; and many more. With a deep appreciation for the period and a grand affection for both characters and audience, Laura Amy Schlitz creates 22 riveting portraits and linguistic gems equally suited to silent reading or performance. Illustrated with pen-and-ink drawings by Robert Byrd, who was inspired by the Munich-Nuremberg manuscript – an illuminated poem from 13th-century Germany – this witty, historically accurate and utterly human collection forms an exquisite bridge to the people and places of medieval England.

Honor books are *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Wednesday Wars* by Gary D. Schmidt and *Feathers* by Jacqueline Woodson. Click [here](#) for more Newbery news.

Michael L. Printz Award

The 2008 Michael L. Printz winner is *The White Darkness* by Geraldine McCaughrean. “I have been in love with Titus Oates for quite a while now – which is ridiculous, since he’s been dead for ninety years. But look at it this way. In ninety years I’ll be dead, too, and the age difference won’t matter.” Sym is not your average teenage girl. She is obsessed with the Antarctic and the brave, romantic figure of Captain Oates from Scott’s doomed expedition to the South Pole. In fact, Oates is the secret confidant to whom she spills all her hopes and fears. But Sym’s uncle Victor is even more obsessed – and when he takes her on a dream trip into the bleak Antarctic wilderness, it turns into a nightmarish struggle for survival that will challenge everything she knows and loves.

Honor books are *Dreamquake: Book Two of the Dreamhunter Duet* by Elizabeth Knox, *One Whole and Perfect Day* by Judith Clarke, *Repossessed* by A.M. Jenkins and *Your Own, Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath* by Stephanie Hemphill. For more Printz award news, click [here](#).

Caldecott Medal

The 2008 Caldecott Medal winner is *The*

Invention of Hugo Cabret by Brian Selznick. Orphan, clock keeper and thief, Hugo lives in the walls of a busy Paris train station, where his survival depends on secrets and anonymity. But when his world suddenly interlocks with an eccentric, bookish girl and a bitter old man who runs a toy booth in the station, Hugo’s undercover life, and his most precious secret, are put in jeopardy. A cryptic drawing, a treasured notebook, a stolen key, a mechanical man and a hidden message from Hugo’s dead father form the backbone of this intricate, tender, and spellbinding mystery.

Honor books are *Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad* illustrated by Kadir Nelson and written by Ellen Levine, *First the Egg* written and illustrated by Laura Vaccaro Seeger, *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* written and illustrated by Peter Sís, and *Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity* written and illustrated Mo Willems. Click [here](#) for more Caldecott news.

Blogs and Websites of Interest

<http://cwim.blogspot.com/>
<http://nathanbransford.blogspot.com/>
<http://asuen.wordpress.com/>
<http://chavelaque.blogspot.com/>
<http://www.cherylklein.com/>

Chicago author Tabitha Olson writes middle-grade and young adult novels. She first began writing at 16, when a zealous English teacher made her write a poem. She’s been writing ever since. You may contact her through her website www.tabithaolson.com or at tabitha@tabithaolson.com.

Food for Thought

Get Together on March 22

Get together for a potluck brunch and gathering for SCBWI members with trade books. All members who have published or

have under contract trade books are welcome to get together

- To nosh and nibble
- To share ideas
- To think about what SCBWI-IL can do to help our published members
- To get connected
- To consider future programs for published writers

When: 9-11:45 a.m. Saturday, **March 22, 2008**

Where: Gail Borden Library
270 North Grove Ave., Room A
Elgin, Illinois

Cost: \$10. Panel members are free. Please pay the day of the event. (This fee goes toward the room rental and beverages.)

Treats: In the past, we have had half of the members bring a “breakfast” treat. Those whose last names begin with the letter A-L, please bring something to share.

Details: Published authors/illustrators: Are you interested in knowing what works and what could use some jazzing up regarding your school presentations? For our next Food for Thought, we’re putting together a chance for published authors and illustrators to get feedback on their school visits. Your 10-minute presentation will be critiqued by a panel of experts: teachers and librarians. Our hope is to get teachers and librarians from various grade levels to share with you (and the rest of us) specific feedback. In addition, you are welcome to bring brochures to give the panel. You might end up booking a school visit! Because there might be more people interested than there are slots available, we will keep track of the order we hear back from you. We will get through as many 10-minute school presentations (with critiques from the panel) as we can.

For those published authors and illustrators who want to just watch and soak it all in, feel free to bring your brochure, books, bookmarks, business cards, etc. They can be distributed to the panel, as well as displayed on a table for attendees to take.

Teachers and librarians: Are you interested in finding an author or illustrator to come to your school? Would you like to help make his/her presentation cater to the needs of your grade level? We’re looking for panel members for grades K-2, 3-5 and 6-8. By serving on the panel, you will get to attend the workshop for free. If you also are an author or illustrator, you might gain ideas for your own school presentations now or in the future.

RSVP: Please e-mail Sara Shacter at sfshacter@gmail.com and write in the subject line one of the following:

“Presenter”—if you are a published author or illustrator interested in presenting. (Please be advised that there are limited slots. This does not guarantee that you will get to present at this time. We will place you on the list in the order you respond.) PLEASE INCLUDE IN YOUR E-MAIL WHAT GRADES YOUR PRESENTATION IS CATERED TO: K-2, 3-5 or 6-8.

“Panel Member”—if you are a teacher or librarian interested in serving on the panel and offering constructive criticism to the presenters. (Please be advised that there are limited slots. This does not guarantee that you will get to be on the panel at this time. We will place you on the list in the order you respond.) PLEASE INCLUDE IN YOUR E-MAIL WHAT PANEL(S) YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE ON: K-2, 3-5 or 6-8, and what city you work in.

“Observer”—if you are a published author interested in sitting in the “audience” and taking it all in. (You can still bring your marketing materials to be given to the panel members and attendees.)

Questions? E-mail Natalie Rompella at nrompella@prodigy.net or Sara Shacter at sfshacter@gmail.com

SCBWI New York Winter Conference

By David Wartik

I must start by saying that I had a fabulous time at my first **SCBWI Winter Conference in New York from Feb. 8-10, 2008**. I met lots of great people, and it was fantastic just to be in Manhattan. Here's a quick recap of what I saw:

Day 1 *Writer's Intensive*

- I don't know how many people I expected to be there, but there were around 40 tables of eight writers each, eager to meet with editors and agents. It was astounding.
- Judy Enderle and Stephanie Gordon kicked things off in appropriate fashion with a speech on beginnings and first pages. They were very funny and had plenty of do's and don'ts. This sent many of us scrambling to find our 500-word samples for critique, checking to see if we'd broken any of the rules. We all had. (In fact, after being told that the second chapter is often better as the first chapter, one author at my table left, printed out the second chapter of his manuscript and used that for the critique.) But we were able to take a deep breath when they ended with the following thought: "It's OK to break the rules. You write how you need to get the story on paper. But know the rules before you break them."
- The critiques were great experiences. To be able to sit and talk with an editor for two hours and hear her take, not only on your work but others' work as well, was wonderful. I shared different pieces in the morning and afternoon sessions, and I was happy I did. In the morning

group, after an author shared, everyone at the table went around and offered their thoughts before the editor weighed in. I got some great feedback on the beginning of a new novel I've been working on. And being told by the editor that I broke the rules, but she still really liked it, was a highlight.

In the afternoon session, the editor weighed in first, before we went around the table. I think that chilled the comments a little bit, as no one disagreed with the editor (unlike in the morning, where it did happen occasionally). But it still worked out well. We were short one person at our table, so during the time that the eighth person in the group should have been sharing a manuscript, we were able to just talk to the editor and get answers to all of those burning questions we had.

- Andrea Beaty's *Cicada Summer* got a special mention during my afternoon session. I was proud to say she's a fellow Illinois SCBWI-er.
- Jane Yolen capped off the intensive with a great speech on endings. What resonated most with me was her comment, "Sometimes you have to write the wrong ending many times, just to get the right one." She was inspiring and invigorating.

Day Two

- The day began with a fire alarm going off for over an hour in the hotel, with an announcement that the management was looking into it blaring over the loudspeakers every three minutes or so. It turned out to be a fire in the garbage chute, and everything turned out OK.
- Lin Oliver, in her humorous way, kicked things off and welcomed the 1,000-plus people to the conference. She gave us the stats: over 860 women and about 160 men; writers and illustrators came from 46 states

- and seven foreign countries. Quite a turnout.
- Nikki Grimes was the first keynote of the day, and she shared the power of poetry. She is a riveting storyteller.
 - Next up was David Wiesner, who gave a fascinating insight into his “storytelling without words.” He took us through his whole career, walking us through the creation and production of *Flotsam*, which I immediately got out of the library when I returned home and shared with my fourth-grade class.
 - The first breakout session for me was with Jennifer Hunt from Little, Brown. She gave us a nice overview of Little, Brown Books for Young Readers and their other imprints. We heard about her wish list: Her three big things are Voice, Originality of Character and Plot, and Craft. She told some inspiring stories about authors in her stable and reiterated the common theme that I’d been hearing the whole time: You need an agent.
 - During the luncheon, author Carolyn Mackler (*The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*) was hilarious and had the whole room in the palm of her hand. Her stories were comical and bittersweet, and she shared her roller-coaster journey through life, publication and censorship.
 - For the second breakout of the day, I was with Reka Simonsen of Henry Holt. Where Jennifer Hunt’s presentation was a bit more broad, Reka was much more specific in what she liked, what she was looking for and who she liked. She shared some of her authors’ works and left a lot more time for questions. Reka took pride in the fact that Henry Holt still reads unsolicited manuscripts, and she knows that there’s good talent hiding in the slush pile.

- The final event of the day was the panel of agents: Tracey Adams, Miriam Altshuler, Elizabeth Harding, Barry Goldblatt and Jodi Reamer. They each talked a bit about themselves, their agencies and their take on the state of the industry. It was interesting to hear what they all had to say – not to mention that these five competitors were onstage together! Lin Oliver then moderated the rest, asking questions that were probably on everyone’s minds.
- They definitely all see how the industry has changed and how manuscripts that come their way have to be better and more polished than ever before. They also agreed that it’s the independent bookstores, not Borders or Barnes & Noble, that are going to save the publishing industry. As well, Illinois’ own Three Silly Chicks got a specific mention from Barry Goldblatt, when he was talking about how authors need to take more of the marketing responsibility onto their own shoulders – especially via the Internet. It was an enlightening discussion for me, as I hadn’t heard the agent point of view on the industry at all before.

That wrapped up Day Two, and it was a long, exhausting and rewarding day.

Wilmette author and fourth-grade teacher David J. Wartik loves mystery, magic and adventure, and tries to blend them all into his middle-grade fiction. Visit www.vonnesta.com to learn about his Vonnesta Project series or contact him at vonnesta@comcast.net

Don't Miss

IRC Conference March 13-15

Published authors and illustrators have until March 5, 2008, to take advantage of a great promotional opportunity – and you don't even have to leave home to do it!

It is the **2008 Illinois Reading Council Conference** to be held **March 13-15** in Springfield, Illinois.

The spotlight will be on our membership this year. Fifty SCBWI-Illinois authors and illustrators have been invited to meet with attendees at an Illinois Author Luncheon. SCBWI-Illinois will host a booth at the conference to promote members' books, and author and illustrator visits. Thousands of teachers, booksellers and administrators will be there.

Last year, our SCBWI booth was a huge success. Having members' books on display and passing out promotional materials created many new connections.

An enthusiastic group of SCBWI volunteers from Springfield and central Illinois are ready to sell YOU and your books. To be included, consider sending the following type of materials:

- Pamphlets, flyers, posters, news articles, postcards or pictures of you and your work
- Pictures of school visits in action
- Full-size color copy of your book cover
- Letters from children post-presentation
- Two autographed books: one for display and one for a raffle giveaway
- Information about awards you have earned
- Any other promotional information you have available

For details, contact Alice McGinty at alice@mcgintyzone.com or Louann Brown at mamalou@hotmail.com.

Books and materials should be mailed to Louann Brown, 905 S. First St. Gillespie, IL 62033, by March 5, 2008. Materials cannot be returned, but leftovers will be kept for redistribution the following year. If you donate two books, one will be kept and returned to the display for a four-year run and the other book is donated to the IRC/SCBWI '08 key giveaway for a lucky teacher/administrator attending the conference.

Sign Up for Words in the Woods

Words in the Woods Retreat

Having trouble developing a character? Creating the perfect setting? Stuck at the beginning or in the middle, or just can't find the perfect ending to your story? Check out the Words in the Woods Retreat to be held June 20-22 in Cantrall, Illinois. Special guest speakers *Spiderwick Chronicles* author Holly Black, agent Barry Goldblatt and Hyperion editor Namrata Tripathi will offer their wisdom and guidance in carving out interesting characters, developing vivid settings and plotting paths for page-turning young adult and middle-grade novels, as well as picture books.

For more information and to register, check out the SCBWI-Illinois [website](#), or contact Toni Leahy at cyfarwydd@royell.net.

'The Dirty Cowboy' On Stage

Come see the world premiere of *The Dirty Cowboy*, a play based on SCBWI-Illinois member Amy Timberlake's hilarious picture book by the same name. SCBWI-Illinois has purchased a block of tickets for this momentous event. So come along, be entertained, meet Amy and enjoy a Q&A session after the performance with Amy, the playwright and Amy's illustrator, Adam Rex (if his schedule allows).

Here are the details:

When: 1 p.m. March 9, 2008 (Amy will be signing books from noon until 1 p.m.)
Where: Lifeline Theater, 6912 N. Glenwood, Chicago (773) 761-4477
Cost: \$8
Details: Send an \$8 check, made out to SCBWI-Illinois, to

Sara Shacter
3752 N. Leavitt Street
Chicago, IL 60618

Please include your phone number and e-mail address.

Season's Crop

What Spring Brings

* (indicates Fall/Winter 2007 release)

For Younger Readers

Andrea Beaty
DOCTOR TED
(Margaret K. McElderry Books)

Franny Billingsley
BIG BAD BUNNY
(Ginny Seo/Atheneum)

Laura Crawford
TRAVELING WITH AMY
Postcard series (Raven Tree Press)

Carolyn Crimi
WHERE'S MY MUMMY?
(Candlewick)

Beth Finke
HANNI AND BETH: SAFE AND SOUND
(Blue Marlin Publications)*

Arthur Geisart
HOGWASH
(Walter Lorraine/Houghton Mifflin)

Jamie Gilson
CHESS! I LOVE IT! I LOVE IT! I LOVE IT!
(Clarion)

Robin Luebs (Illustrator)
HOW DO YOU SAY GOODNIGHT?
(HarperCollins)

Amy Krouse Rosenthal, Tom Lichtenheld (Illustrator)
IT'S NOT FAIR!
(Harper Collins)

Suzanne Slade
ANIMALS ARE SLEEPING
(Sylvan Dell Publishing)

Catherine Stier
BUGS IN MY HAIR!
(Albert Whitman)

Sally M. Walker, Illustrated by Kevin Luthardt
THE VOWEL FAMILY: A TALE OF LOST LETTERS
(Carolrhoda Books)

Sallie Wolf
TRUCK STUCK
(Charlesbridge Publishing)

Middle-Grade Fiction

Monk Ashland (pen name) Chris Rettstatt
KAIMIRA: THE SKY VILLAGE
(Candlewick Press)

Blue Balliett
THE CALDER GAME
(Scholastic Press)

Andrea Beaty
CICADA SUMMER
(Amulet)

Larry Day
COLONIAL VOICES
(Dutton)

Julia Durango
THE WALLS OF CARTAGENA
(Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers)

Emily Ecton
BOOTS AND PIECES
(Aladdin)

PJ Farris
CROSSOVER DRIBBLE
(Mayhaven Publishing)*

Charlotte Herman
MY CHOCOLATE YEAR: A Novel With 12
Recipes To Make Your World a Little Sweeter
(Simon & Schuster)

Sue Van Wassenhove
THE SELDOM-EVER-SHADY GLADES
(Wordsong)

Young Adult

Stephanie Hale
TWISTED SISTERS
(Berkley Jam)

Stephanie Kuehnert
I WANNA BE YOUR JOEY RAMONE
(MTV Books)

Donna Latham
GHOSTS OF INTERSTATE 90: FROM
CHICAGO TO BOSTON
(Quixote Press)

Denise Thornton
PHYSICAL DISABILITIES: THE ULTIMATE
TEEN GUIDE
(The Scarecrow Press, Inc.)*

Revise Yourself

Self-Sabotage: If You Don't Hear The Tree Fall, Is It Even In The Forest?

By Carol Coven Grannick

“I think I’m unconsciously sabotaging myself.”

Have you ever said that to yourself at times when you seem to get in your own way? When a goal or dream is so clear in your mind, and yet your behavior seems to go in the opposite direction?

I’m not sure if the concept of unconscious self-sabotage was around before Freud, but it’s certainly been abundant in our 20th- and 21st-century culture. And it’s been driving me crazy for over 30 years.

I came in contact with it during the late 1960s and early 1970s in my early experience with psychotherapy. In group therapy, it was common for a participant to be confronted with the probability of “unconscious self-sabotage” when he or she verbalized some desire or goal yet couldn’t seem to achieve it. So when you’re already feeling bad about not accomplishing something you want, now you have to feel worse because your unconscious is out to get you?

After all, self-sabotage is always described as unconscious by the folks who think they’re doing it. Not something they actually feel or think, but something that must be true.

That concept has always bothered me.

The thing about this interpretation is that, in my experience with myself and others, it’s never been helpful. After all, how can we grab on to what is unconscious? By its very nature the unconscious is out of reach.

What’s the purpose of naming our “issues” unless the naming is helpful?

There are different ways to look at the disruptions in achieving our goals, ways more accessible to mind, heart and behavior. Here are some ways that might be more helpful than assuming you are unconsciously getting in your own way:

• We tend to set goals that are too overwhelming, that feel too big. Our personal capacities at any given moment in time, or time of our life, may not be a good match for the “bigness” of the task. Since success is the most motivating experience around, it’s crucial to carve our goals into tiny, doable steps, no matter how strange they may seem (write one sentence every day; sit with a tablet or in front of the computer for a certain amount of time, even if no words come; think about your story for five minutes a day). The best writing reference for taking tiny steps is still Anne Lamott’s *Bird By Bird*.

• Most journeys – and any goal we set implies a journey from one place to the next – are filled with detours and obstacles. We can see those obstacles as “unconscious self-sabotage” or welcome them as opportunities to learn about ourselves. When something gets in the way of the work you want to do, you might ask yourself: Is something bothering me, either about the work or about something else in my life? Rather than assuming that you’re trying to get in your own way, you can view an obstacle as a signal that there’s something to be discovered to help you on your way. Notice your behavior instead of calling it self-sabotage. “This is interesting” is always a good neutral phrase that stops the negativity and opens the door for discovery.

• The process of change, by its very nature, involves excitement and sadness, achievement and loss. When we set out on a journey – and the creation of any new or revised work is always a journey – we also leave something (many things?) behind. And even though we want to do this, it’s always unfamiliar. We move from the known and the comfortable into the unknown and, perhaps, uncomfortable. As much wonder and excitement and joy that this involves, it may also involve natural ambivalence and a sense of loss.

The notion of “unconscious self-sabotage” is not a psychological truth. It’s just one way of framing certain behavior. And I don’t believe it’s a particularly helpful way.

There’s no question in my mind, as a midlife person, writer, therapist: Change and progress evolve most effectively from a compassionate, gentle, positive attitude toward ourselves. We’re likely to achieve more with the assumption that we are our own best friends rather than our own worst, unconscious enemies.

Carol Coven Grannick is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice in addition to being a children’s author and a proud member of the Illinois Chapter of SCBWI. Please feel free to e-mail comments and questions to her at:
carolgrannick@comcast.net

Opportunities

Writing Group Gathering

Here’s the chance you’ve been waiting for to learn about writing groups:

- What they can offer you
- How to find one
- How to run one

Please bring one page of your manuscript (one-inch margins, double-spaced, Times Roman or Courier 12-point font) for critiquing from 9:30–11:45 a.m. **Saturday, April 5th, 2008**, at Hinsdale Public Library.

Name: _____

Address: _____

E-mail address*: _____

Check No. (made out to SCBWI-IL for \$10) _____

*For confirmation and notification

Hinsdale Public Library
20 East Maple St.

[Between N. Washington Street and N. Garfield Avenue]
Hinsdale, IL 60521
Phone: (630) 986-1976

Park on the street, as parking in the lot has a two-hour limit. Cars may be ticketed.

Directions:
From the North, East, and West:
I-294 S toward INDIANA
Merge onto E OGDEN AVE / US-34 W (1.1 miles)
Turn LEFT onto N LINCOLN ST. (.6 miles)
Turn LEFT onto W MAPLE ST. (.1 miles)

Mail registration form and check for \$10 (made out to SCBWI-IL) by March 31 to:

Teresa Smith
P.O. Box 2485
Glenview, IL 60025-6485

Printer's Row Book Festival '08

By popular demand, and despite a significant increase in exhibitor fees, SCBWI-Illinois has contracted to host a space at the 2008 Printer's Row Book Festival on June 7th and 8th. Thirty-two one-hour spots are available on a first-come, first-serve basis for Illinois authors to promote and sell their book(s).

As the largest literary festival in the Midwest, and one of the largest book celebrations in the country, the **Printer's Row Book Festival** attracts more than 90,000 people, over 200 authors and 150 booksellers and exhibitors. Located between Congress, State and Clark streets in Chicago, the festival takes place just outside (as well as inside) the beautiful Harold Washington Library. A list of past speakers include: Dan Brown, Neil Gaiman, Jack Prelutsky, Elizabeth Berg, Julie Andrews, Nikki Giovanni, John Updike, E.L. Doctorow, Dave Eggers, Augusten Burroughs, Carol Higgins Clark, Jim Aylesworth... as well as many Illinois SCBWI authors.

The thirty-two SCBWI-Illinois authors who sign up for this event will sit at the SCBWI-IL booth, under a tent (shade is important!) and have one hour each to promote and sell their book(s). (Payment options and taxes are the responsibility of the author, not SCBWI.) Any SCBWI-IL member is eligible, including self-published authors and authors published by smaller presses. The only criterion is that you must be published.

The cost of this amazing opportunity is \$25. Interested? If so, complete the information listed below and e-mail your application to: **scbwiatprintersrow@mac.com**.

Name:
Daytime phone:
E-mail:

Indicate when you would like to participate:

Saturday, June 7th
Sunday, June 8th
Either day

The festival runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. both days. Please list your top three choices in order of preference. We will do our best to accommodate you. (If there is a time in which you absolutely cannot be scheduled, please let us know that too.)

A: 10 to 11 a.m.
B: 11 a.m. to noon
C: Noon to 1 p.m.
D: 1 to 2 p.m.
E: 2 to 3 p.m.
F: 3 to 4 p.m.
G: 4 to 5 p.m.
H: 5 to 6 p.m.

Booth time is limited to one hour per author. Reservations will close once the 32 openings have been filled. (A notice will be posted on the Listserve.) At that time, the authors will be notified and given two weeks to send in their \$25 check. After two weeks, any openings for which a check has not been received will be filled from the waiting list.

Printer's Row Book Festival VOLUNTEER Opportunities

Organizing and running a booth for two days at the Printer's Row Book Festival takes author power. SCBWI-IL is looking for up to 28 people (14 per day) to volunteer one hour (or more) at the booth helping to promote our chapter, our members, programs and Speakers Directory, as well as answering questions and passing out brochures. If you're planning to attend, why not hang with your fellow writers? (Also, if you happen to be one of the 32 authors promoting your book at our booth, you might consider sticking around and volunteering one hour to SCBWI.)

EVEN BETTER – SCBWI will pay for your lunch!

Interested in volunteering? Openings are available for any SCBWI-IL members. Fill out the information below and send it to scbwiprvolunteer@mac.com. Volunteers will be taken on a first-come, first-serve basis. (Please note: Volunteers will be promoting SCBWI only, not their own books.)

Name:
Daytime phone:
E-mail:

Choose one of the following days to participate:

Saturday, June 7th
Sunday, June 8th

The festival runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. both days. Please list your top three choices in order of preference. We will do our best to accommodate you. (If there is a time in which you absolutely cannot be scheduled, please let us know that too.)

A: 10 to 11 a.m.
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E: 2 to 3 p.m.

F: 3 to 4 p.m.
G: 4 to 5 p.m.
H: 5 to 6 p.m.

Kidslitosphere

Get to Know The Longstockings

By Margo L. Dill

Pippi Longstocking is a character we all know and love. That's why eight middle-grade and young adult authors decided to name their blog after her. *The Longstockings* leave daily posts on areas of interest to writers and readers of children's literature. Recent topics have included an interview with the notorious *Editorial Anonymous*, book reviews, author interviews and the new Barnes and Noble return policy.

I was lucky enough to interview two *Longstockings* authors, **Caroline Hickey** (*Cassie Was Here*) and **Lisa Greenwald** (*My Life in Pink and Green*, Spring 2009). Here's what they had to say about their blog.

Q: How did you all decide to get together and blog?

Caroline: We'd all gone to graduate school together and were in the midst of getting agents and selling our first books when Daphne [Grab] (*Alive and Well in Prague, New York*) suggested it might be fun to start a blog to keep track of everything new authors experience. It's also a fun way to meet other bloggers.

Q: That's really cool that you were all able to work together after graduate school. How did you decide on the name Longstockings?

Lisa: We had a brainstorming meeting to think of names, and then I believe Lisa Graff (*The Thing About Georgie*) came up with the name The Longstockings. It seemed perfect!

Caroline: That was difficult! We had a bunch of brainstorming sessions and were circling around different famous characters in children's literature when we hit upon our personal favorite, Pippi Longstocking.

Q: So, the name was the hard part then! What would you describe as the purpose of your blog?

Caroline: Our blog is about sharing our passion for children's books, from the perspective of both writers and readers. We keep up with industry news and book debuts of note, but we also talk about the day-to-day life of being a writer. It's very lonely working by yourself, and blogs are a way to have some contact with "colleagues" during the work day.

Lisa: To help aspiring writers with advice. To talk about children's literature in a fun and interesting way, focusing on the news in the industry.

Q: This sounds like something all children's writers should read. With eight authors, how do you rotate blog responsibilities?

Lisa: At first, we each had a set day. Now it is more flexible, but I still try to post every Monday, that way I know new content is up on the blog. Also, some people focus more on book reviews, some on news and events.

Caroline: We also each hold a "position" in the group. I'm the blog techie, so I update the sidebar, add cover images, mess with the html. Jenny [Han] (*Shug*) plans our writing retreats. Siobhan [Vivian] (*A Little Friendly Advice*) keeps our workshopping calendar.

Q: So, with eight of you sharing responsibilities, is it easier to keep up with the blog?

Caroline: *Definitely.* I could never keep up with a blog by myself.

Lisa: I think because we don't all have to post every single day.

Q: Yes, that definitely sounds easier. One important thing all bloggers emphasize is keeping the blog current and fresh! What topics do you try to include on a regular basis?

Lisa: We try to include author interviews, book reviews, industry updates and other interesting tidbits. I like to post writing quotes to inspire writers.

Caroline: We write about whatever strikes our fancy; we just try to keep it interesting and relevant for our audience.

Q: Sounds great. I love the idea of posting inspirational quotes. What are future plans for your blog?

Caroline: More roundtable book reviews, more interviews with other authors, more tips and how-tos for new authors.

Lisa: To keep it going and to keep it interesting.

Q: How do you feel a blog can help a writer?

Lisa: It can make a writer feel more connected to the larger community of children's writers, editors, agents.

Caroline: The blog has helped me meet a great community of other bloggers, which includes booksellers, librarians, teachers, parents that I wouldn't otherwise have met. And I love to hear what other industry folk have to say about what's going on in the biz!

Q: You both feel more connected to the larger community of bloggers and children's writers. So, do you read other blogs on a regular basis? Which ones?

Caroline: I love *Editorial Anonymous*, *Bildungsroman*, *Read Roger*, *Shelftalker*, *Mother Reader* and *Blue Rose Girls*.

Lisa: *Bloomabilities*, *Brooklyn Arden*, *Editorial Anonymous*, Sarah Dressen's blog

Thank you, Lisa and Caroline, for taking the time to talk with us about your blog and the benefits it brings to your writing journey as a children's author. Please check out **The Longstockings** online.

Margo L. Dill is a freelance writer and substitute teacher, living in Mahomet. She has been published in several magazines and anthologies such as On the Line, Pockets, Grit, Teachers of Vision and Missouri Life. Her first novel, Finding My Place: One Girl's Strength at Vicksburg, will be published by White Mane Kids in late 2008 or early 2009. Visit Margo at www.margodill.com.

Booksellers' Perspective

The Book Vine's Isabel Baker

By Kate Hannigan

Isabel Baker is the owner of **The Book Vine for Children** in McHenry, Illinois. Isabel has master's degrees in education and library science, experience as a librarian, consults with preschool teachers and does presentations on early literacy at education conferences all over the country. She is a member of NAEYC, National Head Start, American Booksellers Association and Zero to Three. Isabel supports Voices for Illinois Children; Big Brothers, Big Sisters; and Southern Poverty Law Center. As an avid reader of children's literature, Isabel has contributed book reviews to *Early Years: The Journal of the Texas AEYC* and consults on recommended book lists for various organizations. She also writes children's book reviews for "The Reading Chair," a regular column in *Young Children*, a NAEYC

publication. Isabel graciously talked to *The Prairie Wind* in February.

You began The Book Vine over 25 years ago from your apartment in Chicago. Can you explain The Book Vine's mission and what sparked your passion for books for the very young?

I became a children's librarian because of my love of helping children find the best books available, but going into business happened by accident. (Isn't that how it always is?) Well, 28 years ago, when my husband and I were living in a high-rise in Chicago, I had a baby. Of course, because I was a librarian, that baby had to have every good book known to man. One day I got a call from a young Head Start teacher. She had heard that I had a wonderful children's book collection and asked to come over and see it. Since she didn't sound like an axe murderer, I invited her in. She stayed for a couple of hours, and we just looked at and talked about children's books. She said, "We need someone like you, someone to help us choose books." I realized that every elementary and high school in the country had a librarian. However the Early Childhood world was left to fend – and select books – for itself. So, I started doing book fairs (which I no longer do) and selling books to schools. And that is how The Book Vine started. It began on one shelf in our apartment and, within four years, it had taken over every room. Now, we're in a big warehouse in McHenry, Illinois.

My mission today is unchanged: It's my job to get quality books into the hands of preschool teachers and the children in their classrooms.

Hardback vs. paperback. What's your opinion?

I'm a huge proponent of hardcovers. Their robust shape, stitched binding and high-quality paper are a tactile and visual treat, and the weight of a hardcover lets the reader know that they are holding something special. In addition to that, they stand erect at story time,

so they're easier for children to see than a floppy paperback. They stand up on a shelf and have spines large enough for children to identify on their own, which is an important early literacy skill. And, they last longer! Paperbacks often get tossed in a bin, where they're hard to sort through. In my opinion, it's better to have two neat shelves of excellent hardcovers than bins of paperbacks. That said, you may notice we have a list of paperbacks in The Book Vine catalog. We recently began selling paperbacks because they're a great option for Lending Libraries, where books are read one-on-one between parent and child – and are frequently lost in transit.

Pirates and Fairies are battling dinosaurs and princesses for space on the bookstore shelves. What trends have been done to death in your opinion? What are the trends you are seeing for 2008?

I'll tell you what I'm tired of. I'm tired of bathroom humor and books that rely on a single joke without using well-developed characters and interesting plotlines. I'm tired of hip illustrations, hip texts and extra glitz meant to make a book jump off the shelf into the hands of the customer. For 2008, I'm seeing more of the above. I'm seeing more mediocre books being marketed for narrow age groups (birth to 6 months, 6 to 12 months, 12 to 18 months). This kind of breakdown is artificial, anti-intellectual, anti-art and anti-literacy. We all want and need the freedom to explore all kinds of books. Books should be works of art first, including the alphabet books and counting books. Works of art will inspire and teach children more than books designed primarily as teaching tools.

But, I'm not totally down about trends. Lately, there have been more books incorporating children with special needs. There have been more books about two-mom or two-dad families. There are more multicultural books these days, although we're still looking for more books about Arab children, for example. For The Book Vine to carry a title, being topical is not enough. It must be well-written

and well-illustrated. But we're excited nonetheless that these topics are getting more attention.

What are the holes you see, and what should children's book authors keep in mind?

First and foremost, there is always room for quality. Good stories, interesting nonfiction and good illustrations will never go out of style.

The Book Vine for Children is devoted to the very youngest readers, birth to 6 years, and their teachers. For the infants and toddlers, there is a shortage of good, age-appropriate board books. Many books for older children are being printed in board for durability, but I'm referring to books for infants and toddlers. I also see a shortage of well-illustrated age appropriate rhyming books for the very young. Good nonfiction for preschool is just starting to get more attention due to the Universal Pre-K initiatives in many states. There is definitely room for more!

If you could make a wish, what would you like to see happen in the world of children's books?

I would like to see the publishers stop cutting down so many trees to produce and print junk. The vast majority of what is published will be out of print within a season or two. I would like to see more literature and less emphasis on being hip-to-the-moment. I want to see books meant to improve the inner life of a child, where the heart of the child is front and center. A lot of books – like some bathroom humor books – offer a quick laugh, but they're not enduring stories. Parents need to teach their children to have a little patience, because the rewards of reading a more fleshed out and challenging story are incomparable. And, I think the best way to teach children to be patient readers is to give them good books. The problem will take care of itself.

What have been your favorite books in recent years?

Here's a Little Poem is the best poetry collection available for preschoolers. The poems speak to preschool sensibilities, and the illustrations are priceless. *My Lucky Day* is a story about an underdog who's more on top of the situation than his nemesis realizes. Children will love being in on the joke. *Alligator Boy* captures the importance and magic of imaginative play. Haven't we all known a preschool-age alligator – or dog, or fireman – at some point? A book that might surprise you is *Vulture View*. Who knew that, with majestic illustrations and poetic text, the bird that eats dead animals could become so intriguing? I have to mention *Peanut*, a quirky story about a lonely woman who has a hard time seeing her pets for who they are. But, her character – a caring soul who wants the best for them – is clear. Lastly, I'll mention *I Ain't Gonna Paint No More*. This perfectly paced sing-along about a boy who gets into trouble with paints incorporates rhyme, body parts and colors, but what makes it stand out is the incredible fun readers will have with the lively illustrations and text.

What inspires you and makes you want to get out of bed in the morning?

Second to my family is my work. I consider myself lucky, because I do love my work! I love connecting preschool teachers and children with great books. It gives me deep satisfaction, because I know it makes a difference in all of their lives. Reading good books to students makes a teacher proud of her curriculum, and being read to every day enriches childhood, especially when the titles are well-selected. While I sell books mostly to schools and preschool programs, I am also interested in connecting with parents. I never tire of listening to parents talk about the books they read to their children.

I always feel I am on a search for the best new books, and that hunt is my fun. I suppose that's the librarian in me. Finding good art

and beautiful text to feed the minds and nourish the hearts of young children. . . how could I ask for more?

Fitness + Writing

Writers Who Run. Runners Who Write

By Mary Loftus

I know you're out there. The SCBWI Runners' Club. Unofficial. Not organized in any way. But you're out there, putting in the miles. Mile by mile, a solitary sport enjoyed by the same type who toils in a solitary profession. Page by page.

As a writer who mostly hates to run, I'm fascinated by the connection. There seems to be one, for writers who run. My all-time favorite author is said to run compulsively. Or did, in her younger years, according to her biography *Invisible Writer*. Joyce Carol Oates is driven to run in the same way she's compelled to write. I envy that.

Another one of my favorite YA writers includes regular running updates on her blog: Mad Woman in the Forest. Laurie Halse Anderson has this to say about the connection between running and writing, "I do not think of characters when I run, or plots, or clever turns of phrase. I am incapable of much thought while running, which is the point. Running is an escape from my brain, a physical meditation on the here and now (*breathe, breathe, breathe*) that gives my head a much-needed rest. It erases the messy chalkboard of my imagination and allows me to start fresh."

And then there's a screenwriter I know who hates to run. Yet he runs—for exactly the opposite reason Anderson cites. "If I can get lost in the plot I forget that I'm running."

When the mind runs free, the body disappears. Imagination as the way to distract oneself from exercise.

It kind of makes me want to lace up my shoes and go.

Chicago native Mary Loftus is a freelance writer, former middle-school teacher and part-time fitness instructor. She is writing her first novel for young adults. Please send ideas, questions or comments to turtle44@sbcglobal.net

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Digital Library Resources

By Lisa Chellman

I want to tell you a secret about public libraries.

It's not meant to be a secret, but many people don't know it, just the same. They think of their libraries as places to borrow books and music, attend story hours and book clubs. They don't realize the incredible quantity and quality of information available via digital library resources.

Let's say you want to:

- read the latest *Kirkus Reviews*?
- search for chapter books involving sibling rivalry and farm life?
- trace the history of child soldiers around the world?
- find comparative illustrations of the seven rare species of pangolin?
- view department store ads from the 1902 *Chicago Tribune*?
- figure out the title of that book you loved when you were five – the one with the bunny, the weasel and the weird thing with wings?

You can do it all with digital library resources, also known as research databases. And what's more amazing, you may be able to access them without leaving your home.

What is a database?

For many of us, the word database conjures images of rows upon rows of scary numbers. When libraries talk about databases, however, they simply mean a storehouse of information accessed through a computer. Much of this information comes in the form of newspaper, journal and encyclopedia articles. These databases replace older media such as microfilm, microfiche and bound periodicals.

In general, you will not find these articles freely available on the Internet. Just as your library pays to subscribe to *The Washington Post* or *Writer's Digest*, it pays for access to these databases. That's why many libraries allow only cardholders to access their databases.

Why use databases?

Databases contain vast quantities of information. A midsize library might subscribe to 200 print periodicals and keep back issues for five years. In contrast, through databases, the same library can offer access to thousands of periodicals, with articles going back dozens of years.

Databases also make accessing information easier than, for example, spooling microfilm or poring through a periodical index. The experience of using a database is very similar to using an Internet search engine, such as Google or Yahoo!, to find a web page. You type your keywords into a search box, and from the search results you click an article name to read it.

Moreover, many libraries offer their patrons remote access to their databases via their web sites. This means you can use the databases anywhere you have Internet access, by logging in with your library card number. On your

library website, look for a section called something like “Reference,” “Research” or “Databases.” When in doubt, call your library for assistance.

I also encourage you to schedule a one-on-one tutorial with your favorite librarian. Librarians can quickly clear up confusion, help you hone your search techniques and suggest additional resources you may not know about.

Don’t-Miss Databases

Most public libraries subscribe to dozens of digital resources you may find helpful for subject research, catching up on the publishing world or even helping your kids with their homework. These are just a few of my favorite popular databases.

Chicago Tribune and/or New York Times Historical Databases (by ProQuest)

These are great for period research! Search facsimiles of newspaper articles dating back to the mid-1800s. Limit your search by date to find, for example, editorials printed on the eve of the Civil War. I also like using “advertisement” as a search term; old ads give a wonderful sense of daily life. Sadly, these databases are not a good source of high-quality photos.

Gale Virtual Reference Library

Move over, Wikipedia! With a single search, pull up articles from dozens of specialized encyclopedias. Why settle for *Encyclopedia Americana*’s three paragraphs on Nebuchadnezzar II, when you can get three whole pages from *Encyclopaedia Judaica* and others? Many articles include illustrations and photos, often in full color.

General OneFile (by Gale) and ProQuest

General OneFile and ProQuest are the closest thing to one-stop shops for newspaper, magazine and scholarly journal articles, making them great for research on

contemporary issues of the past few decades. Limit your search to “full text” to read the articles online. Click the “Publications” tab to read magazines such as *Publishers Weekly* and *School Library Journal* by the issue.

Literature Resource Center (by Gale)

If you need scholarly information about books and authors, don’t miss this resource. Find author biographical sketches and bibliographies, reviews and criticism of literary works, and more. My sense is that the information tends toward classic and adult literature, but if you’re looking for, say, literary criticism of Grimm fairytales or *Peter Pan*, there’s plenty to peruse.

NoveList

This is a really fun book-finding resource. You can browse and search for books on many dimensions, including genre, subject keywords, age range and Lexile. Try the “Describe a Plot” tool to solve the mystery of that childhood favorite! Find book reviews, author biographies, suggestions for further reading and book discussion guides. There are also special aids for teachers and librarians.

Lisa Chellman is a youth services librarian and writer of novels for young people. Visit her website and blog at www.lisachellman.com.

Motivation Trumps Rejection

By Cynthia Horvath Garbutt

*Sit at desk. Examine blank computer screen. Cursor blinks impatiently. Small fan hums within. Neighbor fires up leaf blower. Mail truck rumbles by. Kid’s voice pierces closed door: “Matthew hit me!” Spouse opens door, mail in hand. Hands over two manila envelopes addressed to you in your own handwriting. Spouse wonders when you’ll be ready to quit. When indeed? — *The Writer’s Book of Hope*, Ralph Keyes*

The icy cold that runs down your spine when those manila envelopes appear unwelcome at your door is like no other. Your mind races as to which editor/agent might be responding, and the uneasy thought always presses: Would they be using my SASE if they had liked it? And then the ice turns to steely resolve as you rip open yet another (while kind, and often even encouraging) rejection letter.

Wouldn't it be far less stressful to write alone and never show our work to anyone?

So why do we do it? Open our creative, sensitive selves to the judgment of others? The answer is simple. Because we have to. We need to. It's something alive inside us that flows through to the outside world in the form of a delightful picture book or a provoking YA novel. It may be the topic that fascinates us, or the message that we think the world of children requires, or just a way of giving back for all the joy we had as children ourselves, finding adventure we could hold in our hands.

Motivation is as unique as the writer — no matter the level of writing experience. A random sampling of November 2007 Prairie Writer's Day Conference attendees confirms that no matter how often those manila envelopes appear, the motivation to write doesn't disappear. Motivation may take a frustrated walk around the block, but it never flees. At times an author finds motivation to write simply because kids need a voice from outside the home, whether that voice reinforces or challenges the world, and because a fun read is always a fun write. (A not well-kept secret: Fun writing takes the sting out rejection.)

Marlene Brill of Wilmette confides: *What motivates me is hearing about people who have been helped by my books, especially those that are parenting or about health and special needs topics. It's the African-American man who thanked me in person for writing about Marshall Major Taylor, the black Lance Armstrong of 1900. It's the neighbor who called to say her son*

was reading a book I wrote for school, or the letters from readers. It's the woman from Japan who has become a penpal because she read my biography of Obama and e-mailed me because she is an Obama fan.

I can't deny another reason — that I'm motivated by seeing a finished product, and one with my name on it. I guess you'd call that pride, the recognition that I worked hard to get that book accepted and edited, sometimes through major revisions.

While rejection may be the nemesis of motivation, it never trumps it. The swirl of emotion that rejection brings is temporary while the act of writing is a healthy, enduring enterprise. **Kathi Baron** of Oak Park finds:

What keeps me writing despite all the obstacles is, I love the process. Being creative and exploring my characters' lives keeps me mentally healthy. When I get discouraged about rejections, I try to step back and ask myself why am I doing this? It's a chance to remember that I am doing it because the process is interesting, magical, surprising, and all the things that I discover about life by writing stories inspires me. I feel out of whack when I'm not writing.

Roger Peck of Long Grove writes of the rewards of seeing motivation fulfill a sense of purpose and desire:

There are two main reasons for writing this novel. The first is to convey the importance of understanding our country's history, specifically the Civil War. The other reason is more personal. Through writing this novel, I get to experience the 10 events that occurred during the Civil War that I wish I could have seen myself.

Margo Dill (Balinski) from Mahomet shares that she keeps writing:

[B]ecause I have stories that beg to get out. I feel alive when I write, and I feel proud when I sit down to the computer and finish a

paragraph, a page and especially a whole chapter. My love for the written word keeps me motivated, as well as a few successes along the way, and my encouraging family and friends.”

From Chicago, **Lindsay Leghorn** reveals:

I keep writing, knowing full well that I may never get another book published. I sometimes struggle at the keyboard but most often feel the thrill of discovering what will happen next, almost as if a mystery is unfolding before my eyes. I love the amazed feeling I get when I look back at something I've written and say “Wow! How did I do that?” And even though I think I'll never be able to do it again, I surprise myself. All that surprise, mystery and discovery keeps me going.

Motivation can, however, be a mistress with an independent mind, and maybe some laundry to do. **Liz Djupe** in Glenview finds:

Motivation to write can some days be elusive. It seems as if everything keeps a writer from showing up at the blank page, yet why write anyway? I write as a means of creating story and expressing myself, and I write historical fiction with the goal of bringing history to life for young readers. They can ponder events of historical past and attempt to make sense of the present and future. Great feedback from editors, and publication, feeds our need for recognition, but there is also the satisfaction in watching a story develop and become polished with much rework. There are many excuses for not writing, but I am reminded of a quote from author Barbara Kingsolver that hangs over my desk. “There is no perfect time to write. There is only now.”

No matter how much time you have to write, it takes bravery to show up at the computer despite rejection. Courage is required, as much courage as we give the heroes in our stories. This was evident at the annual SCBWI Winter Conference in New York in February,

where a fire alarm delayed the start of the Saturday proceedings and true-life heroes — the NYC Fire Department — trooped through the hotel.

At the NYC conference, editors and agents in attendance spoke about what appeals to them. Established authors and illustrators revealed their exemplary work. But of the thousand attendees, a significant percentage wondered — will this ever happen for me? Yes, they were told, if you keep at it and take every rejection as a learning opportunity that strengthens your work.

Rejection can oddly engender hope because it offers an opportunity for change, and change brings possibility. It helps to know that even the best among us face rejection. At a recent school visit at North Shore Country Day School, award-winning author Sharon Creech unfurled a laminated roll of 50 rejection letters. For the children, it was a lesson on the value of perseverance.

The idea that publication is the single goal, and therefore rejection is failure, misses the mark and darkens the journey. Or, as literary agent Elizabeth Harding from Curtis Brown at the NYC Winter Conference advised, publication should be the icing on the cake that you purchased with money from your day job. (Ironically, eating cake is also known to take the sting out of rejection.) A similar sentiment was expressed by editor **Susan Van Metre**, of Abrams Books for Young Readers, at the Prairie Writer's Day Conference:

Writing is an art; publishing is a business (and a crazy business at that). They are not a perfect pair. Some manuscripts are rejected not because they are without merit but because they don't make business sense. Don't make publication the ultimate proof of the value of your work or your life. That truly would be madness. And know that publication isn't a magic wand that will turn you into a princess/prince — it's just one step in a journey that, to bring a measure of

success, involves a lot of hard work, fortitude and pluck.

Pluck indeed.

Cynthia Horvath Garbutt is an attorney and author who resides in Chicago. She is currently working on a literary fantasy series for middle grade readers based upon by the collected Mer folktales of W.B. Yeats. She is inspired by her two children, U2 and cake. You may reach her at Cindyg458@aol.com with comments or cake recipes.

Horoscopes

Nuggets from Nunki: Horoscopes for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

By Nunki Pelagus

Horoscopes for March 1 – April 30, 2008

Special offer!

What do “the stars” say about you? The first three people who send their first name, date, time and place of birth to

nunki@inorbit.com will receive a brief overview of their birth chart, focusing on areas that reflect writing or illustrating skills. Please specify whether you are a writer or illustrator (or both) when making your request.

RETROGRADE* ALERT for this two-month period: Saturn (ruler of Aquarius, Capricorn) remains retrograde until May 2.

ARIES, *The Ram (March 21-April 19)*

Happy Birthday, dear Rams, Happy Birthday to you! What? OK, OK, here you go: “You’re Number One! You’re Number One!” I hope you enjoy your Solar Return (the moment when the Sun returns to the place where it was when you were born) between March 21 and April 19. Writers get an extra boost April 3-17. Illustrators will really feel the love March 1-12. Aries birthdays of interest: Anna Sewell

(3/30/1820), Beverly Cleary (4/12/16); David Wisniewski (3/21/53); Garth Williams (4/16/12).

TAURUS, *The Bull (April 20-May 20)*

Happy Solar Return to all Bulls born April 20-30! Aspects occurring March 1-12 are likely to be pleasant but not conducive to self-discipline. Especially useful to illustrators (but a boon to all Bulls) is the sextile between Venus (exalted in Pisces) and your Sun from March 13-April 6. Writers, your mind is likely to be especially sharp March 15-April 2. Taurus birthdays of interest: Ludwig Bemelmans (4/27/1898); Edward Lear (5/12/1812); Dodie Smith (5/3/1896); Sir James Matthew Barrie (5/9/1860)

GEMINI, *The Twins (May 21-June 20)*

You Twins who are inherently nervous need to make an effort to chill March 15-April 2, when your ruling planet Mercury (in its fall and detriment in Pisces) squares your Gemini Sun. Take time out to slow things down if necessary. Keep your ego in check, especially when communicating with authority figures (“Look officer, do you have any idea who you’re dealing with?”) Writers, you’ve got a lot on the ball March 1-14 and April 3-17. Illustrators bask in a lovely Venus-Sun trine March 1-12.

CANCER, *The Crab (June 21-July 22)*

You crustaceans are likely to be less crabby March 11-12 and April 8-9 when the Moon (exalted in Taurus) sextiles your Sun. Other beneficial dates are March 7-8, 20-21; and April 3-5, 16-17. A power boost is in effect March 15-17 and April 12-13 with a Moon-Sun conjunction, but you may also feel an uncomfortable split between mind and emotions on those days. Writers: You get all that and a bag of chips March 13-14, 20-21; and April 10-11, 16-17. Illustrators: Your bonus dates are March 11-12, 22-24; and April 8-9, 18-20.

LEO, *The Lion (July 23-August 23)*

Lions, your ruler (the Sun) is exalted in Aries and trine your Leo Sun March 31-Apr 19,

bringing you incredible vitality and initiative. Enjoy, but don't forget that other people exist and that cooperation can sometimes be more beneficial than just following your own promptings. April 20-30 could bring a rude awakening that tests the validity of a current endeavor. Writers, April 3-17 is a good time for mental work requiring a broad overview. Illustrators, Venus shines brightly for you March 13-April 6.

VIRGO, *The Virgin (August 23-September 22)*

Ah, my virtuous Virgos, you'll need to "gird your loins" for possible challenges March 15-April 2, when your ruling planet Mercury (in its fall and detriment in Pisces) opposes your Sun. Take care not to give ego and emotions free reign. You should be able to get your act together beautifully April 18-30. The preceding messages are particularly relevant for Writers. Illustrators are likely to experience high creativity March 13-April 6. Just be aware that you might have to go back and fix something later.

LIBRA, *The Scales (September 23-October 22)*

The first two weeks of March look highly enjoyable for Libras, particularly in the area of personal relationships. March 13-April 6 offers reasons to love everybody and everything. From April 7 to the end of the month, however, restlessness and an unwillingness to work could be a problem. Writers, you're at your best March 1-14, thanks to a Mercury trine with your Sun. Illustrators, you get a double dollop of all the sweet stuff up to April 6, but also a double dollop of the challenges faced by all Libras after April 6.

SCORPIO, *The Scorpion (October 23-November 21)*

Scorpions, the placement of your ruler, Mars, during these two months could indicate a tendency to confuse aggression with defense. You know that thing where you suspect that someone's going to sting you, so you sting them back first? Try not to do that, especially with family members. Writers, it looks like

March 15-April 2 is a good time to clear your mind and let curiosity lead the way. Illustrators, a pretty picture is perfectly possible March 13-April 6.

SAGITTARIUS, *The Archer (November 22-December 21)*

As Jupiter continues in its fall in Capricorn, we centaurs would do well to remember that "to everything there is a season." We need to take some of that Capricorn steadiness and no-nonsense attitude and apply it where it will do the most good in our life. Writers, we'll get fired up April 3-17 as Mercury in Aries trines our exuberant Sagittarius Sun. Illustrators are likely to see opportunities for personal advancement as well as for making new friends during a Venus-Sun sextile March 1-12.

CAPRICORN, *The Goat (December 22-January 19)*

Even though your ruler, Saturn (planet of lessons and limitations), is retrograde, it is also trine your Capricorn Sun, which contributes to smooth sailing at any number of levels. Use the time to shore up your world against possible future challenges and obstacles. Keep track of accolades you receive now. You can use them down the road when you need to impress someone. Writers are likely to benefit from group discussions April 18-30. Illustrators get strong support for asking a favor March 13-April 6.

AQUARIUS, *The Water-Carrier (January 20-February 18)*

The Saturn retrograde has extra meaning for you as well as Capricorn, but you don't have the Saturn-Sun trine to smooth things out. Not to worry (at least not too much). It's an opportunity to become more skilled and more disciplined than before. Writers, Mercury forms powerful and/or harmonious aspects with your Sun, giving you a boost March 1-14 and April 3-17. Illustrators, aspects between Venus and your Sun come to your aid March 1-April 6.

PISCES, The Fish (February 19-March 20)
Happy Birthday to all Fish born in March! It's a great month to assert your individuality and put your unique stamp on projects. Between April 20-30, you'll want to focus on working effectively with others, integrating your energies. Writers, you should do swimmingly April 18-30. Illustrators, Venus takes you on a pleasure cruise March 13-April 6. Pisces birthdays of interest: Kenneth Grahame (3/8/1859); Lois Lowry (3/20/37); Kate Greenaway (3/17/1846); Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket) (2/28/1970)

* **Retrograde motion:** An apparent backward motion of a planet among the stars resulting from the observation of the planet from the planet earth which is also revolving about the sun at a different velocity. When a planet is retrograde, its energies are blocked, inhibited, or contradictory.

Nunki Pelagus (probably not her real name) is a Sagittarius with Moon in Taurus and Virgo rising. A member of SCBWI, she has been a professional astrologer for ten years and a writer for way longer than that. If you would like to contact Nunki, she can be reached at nunki@inorbit.com.