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Taking NEW to a Whole NEW Level

Happy NEW Year! Check out what this NEW issue of the *Prairie Wind* has to offer:

• **Greeting:** Co-RA Lisa Bierman challenges us to identify NEW ways to grow in our work.

Our Chapter • **Tales from the Front:** Kristin Walker tells us the love story that led to the upcoming publication of her NEW young adult novel.

Happenings • **Classes:** June Sengpiehl lists many NEW classes, workshops, and conferences for writers and illustrators alike. • **News Roundup:** NEW contributor Michelle Sussman keeps us up-to-date with industry NEWS. • **Food for Thought:** Sallie Wolf recaps a recent event and introduces two NEW events to help us market ourselves and our work online. • **Don't Miss (x2):** More NEW SCBWI-Illinois events—January's Buyers, Books, and Buzz; and June's Words in the Woods retreat.

Craft • **Writing Tips:** NEW contributor Jennifer Ward inspires us to make NEW goals for the NEW year. • **Critique Group Tips:** Meg Fleming Lentz offers critique questions to get us thinking about manuscripts through a NEW lens. • **Illustrator Tips:** If your NEW Year's resolution is to become a better illustrator, Kathleen Rietz's tips will help you succeed. • **Writer's Bookshelf:** Jenny Meyerhoff's book recommendation teaches us to write scenes in NEW ways. • **Book Look:** Brenda Ferber's analysis of *Graceling* demonstrates how we can write a NEW and improved first chapter.

Career • **The Irrepressible Writer:** Carol Coven Grannick introduces us to her NEW blog and inspires us to try NEW and different projects. • **Promote That Book!:** Beverly Patt offers tips on forming NEW promotional groups like her Class of 2k9. • **Kidlitosphere:** Margo L. Dill helps us write blog posts that will attract NEW readers. • **A Fly on the Wall:** Deborah Topolski gives us NEW perspective on last November's Prairie Writer's Day. • **Op/Ed:** Lynn Sanders describes her journey of creating a NEW children's musical.

Wishing you a creative 2010,
Heather Banks Editor

Growing Together — Part 1

Greetings to all, and to all, the most hopeful and bright New Year!

Why do we humans make New Year's resolutions? For lots of reasons, I suppose. But I think nearly all of them could be summed up by saying we want to experience growth and change. And of course, in our work, we do grow and develop—otherwise we might never enter an art contest or submit our work to publishers. Even so, growth and change aren't easy for most of us. I would maintain that often there are habits, self-perceptions, or fears (EEK!) that thwart us from our own desired growth.

You know how sometimes a word or phrase will keep showing up in your life, and you start to wonder why? Well, lately what keeps showing up for me is that pesky concept of “getting out of your comfort zone.” It pops up in my reading and in conversations, and I am forced to reckon with it—even in my house.

Over the past few weeks, our home has been in upheaval. The original diagnosis: cracked boiler. The solution: a completely new forced-air heating system. My husband and I have felt defeated some days, due to the progressive destruction of walls and ceilings, the dust that creeps—seemingly even between magazine pages—and the noise that batters.

But there has been an upside. We are examining how we use each room in our house and what we truly want our home environment to be. Truth is, I hadn't spent much mental energy on what surrounded me in years. Much to my surprise, I'm now quite energized by the changes that are necessary—the empty spots crying for a new piece of furniture, the chance to reconsider paint colors, and so on.

So yeah—back to writing and art. At Prairie Writer's Day, I invited everyone to think back over the day, take some “aha! moment,” and use that insight to work in a new way for a few weeks or months. For example, one person's insight might have been, “I'm too lazy about character development, so for the next week, I will not write a word of my story—I will just work on knowing my characters.” Another person might have scheduled herself to work away from home one day every week—to declare victory over the temptation of laundry.

As we ring in the New Year, I'd like to invite you to identify at least one way you wish to grow in your work. And be as specific as you can. Make sure there's an action you can take. Want to know my “homework topic” for 2010? Here goes...I write from my head way too much. I write from my heart way too little. It's a scary thing, to focus on the stuff that really matters to you, or the stuff that would really show people who you are. I have often “kept my distance” from the heart of my own writing—but it doesn't serve me to do that.

So a few months ago I got an idea for a book vastly different from others I've written. The subject matter just grabs me and holds me. I love to imagine a kid learning from this book, and having a good laugh besides. I keep toying with sidebar ideas...when I'm supposed to be figuring out what's for dinner. So I am going to pursue this manuscript— not because I'm sure it will sell, but because I will love every minute of it.

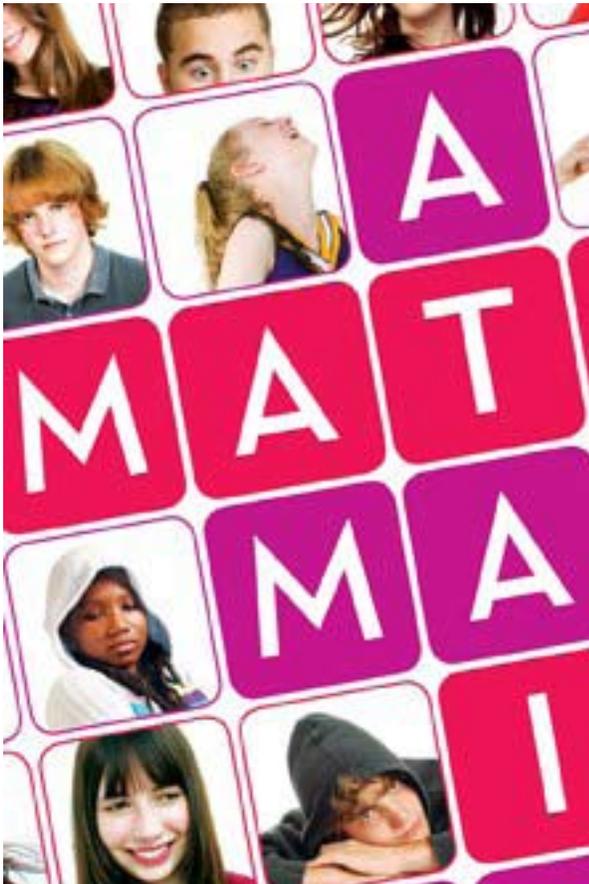
This writing life is so rich—especially if you enjoy sharing it with others, as we take a break from Butt In Chair. And one of my joys of 2010 will be to share the creative journey with all of you—in small ways like this.

Here's to our hearts, our heads, and our productive hands,

Lisa Bierman Co-Regional Advisor SCBWI-Illinois

Publication: A Love Story

By Kristin Walker



For this article, I'm supposed to write about my journey to publication. I've decided it would be more fun to write about a man's journey to his wife's publication. It's a tale fraught with suspense, excitement, and a whole lot of sugary candy. Okay, it's not so suspenseful or exciting, but there is candy.

The tale begins ten years ago, when Sean, the hero of this story, marries an out-of-work actress. They have a child, he gets two jobs, and they buy a tiny American Four-Square in the suburbs of Philadelphia. His lovely wife—we'll call her Heidi Klum—believes she can aptly dash off some children's books while Baby sleeps, bringing in a sizeable second income before winter sets in. Sean, the poor soul, encourages her.

They go to the store and drop a pretty penny on half-a-dozen books about how to write and publish children's books. Sean gives his wife time alone so she can read them. He gets a computer and printer for her to use. She writes her first manuscript—a rhyming picture book about a child who needs to learn a lesson.

I'll pause here while you laugh.

Heidi Klum revises this story. Refines it. Polishes it until it sparkles like Liberace's underwear. She has read that it's considered rude to submit to more than one publishing house, so she spends several days researching and decides a house called HarperCollins is the best fit. She sends her manuscript off and spends the wait time reading another book on how to negotiate your own book contract. Done and done.

When you're finished cracking up, I'll continue.

So...when that incomprehensible *form rejection* arrives in the mail, Sean is there with a comforting shoulder for his beloved wife to cry on. He tells her to keep going. Keep working. Try again. He doesn't blink when she spends money on conferences, SCBWI dues, paper, ink cartridges, envelopes, more books, postage stamps, bottles of wine, and lots of chocolate. He reads her manuscripts. He gently offers suggestions for improvement. He takes it all back when she bursts into tears again.

Years pass. Heidi Klum keeps submitting and Sean works hard. He earns a promotion. They have two more children and move into a larger house in the suburbs of Chicago. Heidi Klum languishes over several more picture book manuscripts. She cuts her teeth on critique groups while Sean watches their three sons. She collects hundreds of rejections. She has more chocolate. More wine. She blames the picture book market for being soft and finally declares that she must attempt...The Middle-Grade Novel.

Sean says she should. She can totally do it. She has the chops, and he will give her the time. He buys *and assembles* (with his *father-in-law*, no less) a cute new desk in the corner of the living room. He keeps the kids quiet while his wife hunches over the keyboard. He slides dishes of food in her direction. He doesn't blink when he comes home from work and the house looks like a bomb zone. Or the kids are still in their pajamas and they've only eaten Goldfish crackers and Fruit Roll-Ups all day.

A month later, when she finally finishes the whopping...wait for it...25,000-word middle-grade masterpiece, Sean brings her a bottle of champagne and toasts her accomplishment. What a guy.

If only he knew what kind of precedent he was setting.

The middle-grade novel is a compilation of Heidi Klum's childhood memories strung together by a thread of syrupy, overwritten narrative. The novel is, in a word, awful. Horrible. Nauseating. That's several words, but you get the picture. Only, Heidi Klum doesn't realize it yet.

Sean, our hero, reads this awful, horrible, nauseating manuscript approximately seven times over the course of its revisions. And this time, since it's a novel after all, his wife goes after a different fish. An agent. It should only take one or two query letters.

I'll wait again...

Done? Okay, so 30+ query letters and 30+ rejections later, Heidi Klum now knows the middle-grade novel is a clunker. She is bereft and has no motivation to write. She can't keep tilting at windmills anymore. She's done. Forget the whole thing. Her children have started to burrow into the floorboards anyway.

Sean brings his wife a plain black-and-white composition notebook. He tells her to write down her ideas. He offers a few of his own. He listens to her complain and whine. And then he tells her to suck it up and get back on the damn horse if this is what she really wants to do. She cries, "But that means another novel!"

"So?" our hero asks.



So Heidi Klum begins *The Young Adult Novel*. Only, this time, it's different. She has a laptop now, so she squirrels herself away in the master bedroom. She locks the door. She forgets to brush her teeth. She wears the same clothes for days. Sean tries to bring her bags of Starbursts and cans of Red Bull, but she growls at him through the door, so he just leaves them there and runs away. She comes out only for glasses of wine and to drive her kids to preschool (not at the same time). She smells. Bad.

Sean never complains. At least not to Heidi Klum's face. He's no dope.

When his wife stalls toward the end of the manuscript, Sean uses his travel miles to book her a hotel room for the weekend. He packs her a box of treats and food. He tells her not to call. He plans a boys' weekend with the kids.

Heidi Klum brings her laptop and a change of underwear that she'll never put on, and she writes. That weekend, she gets very close to the end of the novel.

When she finally finishes the first draft, Sean doesn't bring champagne, so Heidi Klum gets mad. She is delirious. She is irrational. She throws Starburst wrappers at him. (Frankly, Heidi Klum doesn't really remember much about that particular time, so she might be making that bit up. She's kind of a jerk that way.)

Sean reads the manuscript and scribbles down pages of notes. Heidi Klum revises like a fiend and drafts a query letter. Sean teaches her how to use Excel so she can make a spreadsheet of agent info. She inserts the data. She sorts them in various ways. She feels very organized. But she's just procrastinating. Sean says to get the letters out already.

She does. Sean and Heidi Klum wait. She gets a few nibbles. Then some bites. Then she lands The Most Kick-Arse Literary Agent on the Planet. They are ecstatic! This time, Sean brings her champagne. She drinks the whole bottle, that lush.

There is another revision to do, and then the manuscript goes out. Rejections come in. Then an offer! Sean cheers! He brings champagne! (Do you see a pattern here?)

Then comes The Summer of Revision Madness. The novel, now titled *A Match Made in High School*, is due to be published in less than a year. Heidi Klum has to cut and rewrite a third of her book in 3½ weeks! Then do a second revision in 2 weeks! Then revise a third time over a long weekend! Our hero stands bravely by, even though his life is at risk because his wife could turn homicidal at any moment. He supplies her with Starbursts, Dark Chocolate Chex Mix, and coffee. He takes the children and hides out in the basement when she starts throwing things again.

They survive the revisions.

Then ARCs arrive. They're great! A website is designed. It rocks! Interviews, events, and a launch party are all planned. So exciting! Then, three months before the publication date...WHAM.

The launch date gets bumped to the following year.

Sean consoles his weeping wife. He tells her it will be okay. He convinces her that this is, in fact, good news. She believes him.

Over the next year, Sean gathers marketing ideas. He orders piles of swag. He frames a huge poster of the cover art and hangs it in the family room. He reassures her that he's *not* doing all this just so he can claim 50% of the book's profits if they ever get divorced.

When the film rights are optioned, guess what he brings her? You've got it: champagne! He knows that the way to Heidi Klum's heart is through her liver.

And thus our hero, Sean, continues on...making Facebook pages and ordering print material. Anticipating the publication of his wife's book as much as she does. Because he's had so much to do with its success. And because he loves her, and she loves him.

And who knows? One day he might need that 50%.



Kristin Walker is the author of A Match Made in High School, due out from Razorbill/Penguin on February 4, 2010. She lives in a suburb of Chicago with her husband, their three sons, and a hairy dog. Her house is a mess, but on a positive note, she's neither a diabetic nor an alcoholic. So far. Find out more at <http://www.kristin-walker.com>.

Winter 2010: Classes and Conferences

Compiled by June Sengpiehl

Classes, conferences, and workshops provide opportunities for professional contacts, manuscript critiques, networking, and fellowship. Many an unpublished manuscript has been refocused, redefined, rewritten, and published after its author attended a class or workshop. Aside from the listings below, visit <http://scbwi-illinois.org/Networks.html> for events offered by SCBWI-Illinois Networks throughout the state.

CLASSES IN ILLINOIS (roughly by starting date)

EVANSTON ART CENTER (Evanston, IL)

1) *Creating Dynamic Figures* (2nd half of session will use 2 life models)

When: Tuesdays, January 5–March 9, 7:00–10:00 p.m.

2) *Independent Drawing And Painting*

When: Wednesdays, January 6–March 10, 7:00–10:00 p.m. 3) *Transparent Watercolor*

When: Fridays, January 8–March 12, 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Instructor: Michelle Kogan (<http://www.michellekogan.com>)

More Information: Call (847) 475-5300 or visit <http://www.evanstonartcenter.org>.

OFF CAMPUS WRITERS' WORKSHOP (OCWW) (Winnetka, IL) All sessions run Thursdays from 9:30 to noon, and the cost is \$10 per session. OCWW members (for \$30 per year) receive session discounts and may get manuscripts critiqued for \$15. Visit <http://www.ocww.bizland.com> for more information. The following programs are of particular interest to children's writers:

1) *Improvising For Writers: Unlimited Creativity*

When: January 7, 14, and 21

Instructor: Jimmy Carrane

Details: The host of Studio 312 on Chicago Public Radio and an instructor at Second City, Jimmy Carrane will teach us how to use improvisational techniques to become children learning to play again, both in our lives and on the page.

2) *Albert Whitman & Company, Publisher of Good Books for Children*

When: February 18

Instructors: Kathleen Tucker and Abby Levine

Details: Kathleen Tucker is the Editor-in-Chief at Albert Whitman, where she has been for almost 33 years. She keeps track of about 40 titles annually, including board books, picture books and novels. Abby Levine has been an editor at Albert Whitman for 25 years, and her particular interest is picture books; she is also the author of eleven picture books. Kathy and Abby will talk about their work as editors and the best way to get a children's book published.

3) *Writing Historical Fiction for Children*

When: February 15

Instructor: Beverly Patt

Details: When writing historical fiction for children, how do you know what to make up and what to research carefully? Beverly Patt, author of two works of historical fiction for children, will tell us what she has learned. A former special education teacher, Patt published her first book, the young adult novel *Haven*, in October 2009. Her second book, *Best Friends Forever: A World War II Scrapbook*, is due out in April 2010.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO WRITER'S STUDIO (Downtown Chicago, IL)

What: *Writing Novels for Children and Young Adults*

When: Tuesdays, January 12–March 2, 6:00–8:30 p.m.

Instructor: Esther Hershenhorn

Details: Develop and craft a novel for today's older readers. Suggested readings of classic and contemporary fiction across a variety of genres will highlight the structure and demands of the various format possibilities. Writing exercises and workshop discussions will focus on the writing process, elements of narrative, revision, and a story's marketability, with special emphasis on the connection between plot and character. The workshop will keep writers on their respective plot lines, offering measured assignments, project-related goals, models to study, suggestions, and encouragement. Particular needs will be assessed and determined in the first session and addressed in the remaining weeks.

More Information: <https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/php/offering.php?oi=5019>

NORTH SHORE WRITERS STUDIO (Highland Park, IL)

What: *A Facilitated Critique Group for Children's Book Writers*

When: Alternate Tuesdays—January 12, 26; February 9, 23; March 9, 23; 6:30–9:30 p.m.

Instructors: Brenda Ferber and Jenny Meyerhoff

Details: Participants will submit five pages per week to all workshop members, including Brenda and Jenny, for critique. Participants will also receive pages from all other workshop members each week and will be expected to comment on the work of their peers. Open to all children's literature genres. Class limited to six persons, all levels, beginner to advanced.

Cost: \$240

Registration: E-mail northshorewriters@gmail.com.

More Information: <http://www.northshorewriters.com>

THE ART CENTER (Highland Park, IL)

What: *Transparent Watercolor*

When: Tuesdays, January 12–March 16, 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Instructor: Michelle Kogan (<http://www.michellekogan.com>)

More Information: Call (847) 432-8100 or visit <http://www.theartcenterhp.org/winter2010.asp>.

CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN (Glencoe, IL)

1) *Studio Drawing: Composition/Space/Value* (BOA0011)

When: Wednesdays, January 13–March 3, 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

2) *Watercolor in the Greenhouse* (BOA0041tt)

When: Thursdays, January 14–March 4, 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Instructor: Michelle Kogan (<http://www.michellekogan.com>)

More Information: To register, call (847) 835-8261 and press 1 after the greeting, or visit http://www.chicagobotanic.org/school/class_schedule/by_topic#botanical_arts_and_humanities.

COLLEGE OF DUPAGE (Glen Ellyn, IL)

What: *Writing Fiction: Children/Young Adult, from Toddlers to Teens*

When: Wednesdays, January 20–March 3, 7:00–9:00 p.m.

Instructor: Carmela Martino

Details: Author Carmela Martino introduces the children's writing field, from picture books to magazines to teen novels. Learn about the genres of children's literature, the literary elements of children's fiction, and how to submit a manuscript. Get feedback on your writing and set personal writing goals.

Cost: \$119 **More Information:** <http://www.carmelamartino.com/events.htm>

COLUMBIA COLLEGE (Chicago, IL)

What: *Collect. Recollect. Connect! Intensive Writing Seminar*

When: Saturday, January 23, 1:00–5:00 p.m.

Details: Four one-hour sessions will educate writers on how many different sources can be used to

create work, while offering numerous examples on how to turn the past, both personal and historical, into books that entertain and inform. –COLLECT . . . recent history or current events for narrative nonfiction ideas.

Instructor: Jen Cullerton Johnson –COLLECT . . . personal journals, diaries and photos to turn your past into exciting fiction.

Instructor: Trina Sotira –RECOLLECT . . . childhood memories as material for realistic fiction geared toward children and teens.

Instructor: Cynthea Liu –CONNECT . . . use personal family history to create unique nonfiction.

Instructor: Michelle Duster **Cost:** \$85 early registration (through January 18)

More Information: <http://www.MuseWrite.com>

SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO (Chicago, IL)

What: *Children's Book Illustration*

When: Thursdays, February 8–April 25, 6:00–9:00 p.m.

Instructor: Lisa Cinelli

Details: This is a multi-level class focusing on the picture book, experimenting with materials and techniques in children's book illustration and learning how to tell a story visually.

More Information: Visit http://www.saic.edu/continuing_studies/ace/index.html and click on Course Listings, or e-mail Lisa Cinelli at lisacinelli@gmail.com.

Registration: Call the AIC at (312) 899-7458.

HIGHLAND PARK, IL

What: *Materials and Techniques in Children's Book Illustration*

Instructor: Lisa Cinelli **Details:** Work one-on-one or in small classes exploring drawing, painting, and mixed-media techniques used in children's book illustration. Fine tune images in your picture book dummy and then experiment with materials to best tell the story visually. Classes can also be arranged to focus on particular drawing or painting techniques, such as pen and ink, watercolor, gouache (an opaque watercolor), or mixed media.

More Information: Contact Lisa Cinelli at lisacinelli@gmail.com or (847) 433-4287.

NEW TRIER HIGH SCHOOL (Northfield, IL)

What: *The Nuts, Bolts & ABC's of Writing for Kids*

When: Thursdays, February 18–April 29, 1:00–3:00 p.m. (no class April 1)

Instructor: Pamela Dell

Details: If you've ever imagined seeing your name on the cover of a book for children, this course will take you several steps further toward that goal. A combination of workshop and weekly presentations on craft, the class gives participants an in-depth look at the facets of children's book publishing and the widely varying types of "kid lit" editors are looking for. Participants will learn how to submit query letters and manuscripts that look professional and receive information about useful websites, writers' organizations, and numerous markets open to children's writers. The workshop portions of the course will have writing exercises that focus on character, plot, dialogue, and other essential elements of the writer's craft, giving participants valuable feedback on their work. No matter what genre participants are writing in, this course will give participants the increased confidence that leads to success.

Cost: \$200 (seniors \$160)

More Information: Call New Trier Extension at (847) 446-6600 or visit [http://www.](http://www.NewTrierExtension.org)

[NewTrierExtension.org](http://www.NewTrierExtension.org) and click on Catalog.

MAYSLAKE PEABODY ESTATE (Oak Brook, IL)

What: *Putting Together a Great Proposal: A Workshop on the Second Step to Publishing Your Children's Nonfiction Book*

When: Saturday, February 27, 9:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.

Instructor: Patricia Kummer

Details: You've already written a great query letter and sent it to one or more editors. While you're waiting, start assembling a proposal using the information you gathered while preparing your query letter. During this class, you will begin writing a concept statement based on your query letter's opening paragraph, preparing an outline of your book, expanding your author bio to a full page, expanding your market analysis, and developing your book's opening chapter. Critiquing will take place at the end of each of these five segments. Come to class with your query letter, research sources and notes, paper, pen and/or laptop computer, and any work you've started on the proposal. Also bring a bag lunch and beverages.

Cost: \$60

More Information: To register, call (630) 206-9566. For directions, visit <http://www.mayslakepeabody.com>.

THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY (Chicago, IL)

What: *Oh, the Possibilities: Writing for Children in Today's Publishing World*

When: Saturday, March 13, 10:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

Instructor: Esther Hershenhorn

Details: Eager to write that children's book you've dreamed of writing? Anxious to learn what to do once you write it? This workshop introduces newcomers to today's world of children's book publishing—the markets, the genres, the formats and audience niches—as well as recommends a few Rules of the Road and tried-and-true Short Cuts to make navigating that world easier. Participants will have the opportunity to share a work-in-progress in order to see its possibilities in today's publishing world. **Note:** Please bring a bagged lunch as the class will continue to meet during the lunch hour.

More Information: <http://www.newberry.org>

MAYSLAKE PEABODY ESTATE (Oak Brook, IL)

What: *Critique Workshop for Children's Writers*

When: Mondays, April 19–May 24, 7:00–9:00 p.m.

Instructor: Carmela Martino

Details: In this workshop, children's writers receive a critique of their own work while learning how to critically study the work of other writers. Author Carmela Martino will facilitate critique sessions based on specific rules to create a supportive environment. She will also provide specific instruction using examples from the critiqued manuscripts. You must bring copies of your manuscript—a picture book, short story, or novel chapter—to the first class. Also, before enrolling, you must e-mail the instructor for word count limits and manuscript guidelines: carmela@carmelamartino.com. **Note:** Class is limited to 10 students.

Cost: \$110

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

*****LEARNING ONLINE*****

WOW! WOMEN ON WRITING

What: *Writing For Children: Everything You Need to Know About Short Stories, Articles, and Fillers*

When: Starts January 13 (duration is 7 weeks)

Instructor: Margo Dill (SCBWI-IL member)

Details: This class will teach the basics of writing for children's magazines, crafting short stories, nonfiction articles, poetry, and fillers. The student will come away with a short story and cover letter, nonfiction query letter, and a filler or poem. She will also have a list of potential markets, fitting her manuscripts. The instructor will also share an organizational tool for submissions and information on finding other children's writers and networking.

More Information: <http://www.wow-womenonwriting.com/WOWclasses.html#MargoDill>

INSTITUTE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE (ICL) • correspondence courses, articles, tips, and chat room discussions • <http://www.institutechildrenslit.com>

WRITER'S DIGEST ONLINE WORKSHOPS Writer's Digest offers three courses for children's writers: Fundamentals of Writing For Children, Focus on Writing Fiction For Children, and Focus on Writing Nonfiction for Children. For more information, visit <http://www.writersonlineworkshops.com>.

*****SCBWI REGIONAL CONFERENCES*****

SCBWI-MICHIGAN (Lake Orion, MI)

What: *Illustrator Workshop with Matt Faulkner*

When: February 6

More Information: <http://www.kidsbooklink.org>

SCBWI-MISSOURI (St. Louis, MO)

What: *Agents Day*

When: March 20 **Speakers:** Ammi-Joan Paquette (Erin Murphy Literary Agency), Jennifer Mattson (Andrea Brown Literary Agency), and Stephen Fraser (Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency)

More Information: Contact Lynnea Annette (lynneaannette@gmail.com) or visit <http://www.scbwi.org> and search under Regional Chapters.

SCBWI-MICHIGAN (Lansing, MI)

What: *Spring Conference*

When: May 1

Speakers: Editors Ruta Rimas (HarperCollins) and Lisa Yaskowitz (Dutton); agent Beth Fleisher (Barry Goldblatt Literary Agency); authors Donna Gephart (*As if Being 12 ¾ Isn't Bad Enough, My Mother is Running for President!*), Jay Asher (*Thirteen Reasons Why*); and Jim Tobin and Dave Coverly, author and illustrator of *Sue MacDonald Had a Book*

More Information: <http://www.kidsbooklink.org>

*****LEARNING OUTSIDE ILLINOIS*****

HIGHLIGHTS FOUNDATION WORKSHOPS The Highlights Foundation offers an annual summer Writers Workshop at Chautauqua (in Chautauqua, NY), as well as thematic Founders Workshops throughout the year (near Honesdale, PA). Information about all of these offerings can be found at <http://www.highlightsfoundation.org>.

VERMONT COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS (Montpelier, VT) • low-residency MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults • eleven-day residencies in January and July • <http://www.vermontcollege.edu/mfawc>

SPALDING UNIVERSITY (Louisville, KY) • low-residency MFA in Writing with a concentration in writing for children & young adults • ten-day residencies in May and (usually) November • <http://www.spalding.edu/content.aspx?id=1912&cid=2376>

LESLEY UNIVERSITY (Cambridge, MA) • low-residency MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in writing for young people • ten-day residencies in January and June • http://www.lesley.edu/gsass/creative_writing

HAMLIN UNIVERSITY (Saint Paul, MN) • low-residency MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults • eleven-day residencies in January and July • http://www.hamline.edu/gls/academics/degree_programs/mfa_cl

June Sengpiehl lives in Oak Park with her husband, Paul. She writes poetry, articles, picture books, and chapter books. You may contact her at jsseng629@yahoo.com.

New Year, New Opportunities

Compiled by Michelle Sussman

EVENTS

ANDERSON'S BOOKSHOP

Author and Illustrator Appearances: Can't-miss 2010 events at Anderson's Bookshop (AB):

Feb 13: Gary Paulsen, author of *Woods Runner*; 2:00 p.m., AB Naperville.

Feb 25: Mo Willems, author of *Cat the Cat, Who Is That?* and *Let's Say Hi to Friends Who Fly!*; 7:00 p.m., off-site location TBA. **Note:** Information subject to change; some events require (free) tickets. Visit <http://www.andersonsbookshop.com/events.php> for more information on these and other upcoming events.

8th Annual Children's Literature Breakfast

What: Guest authors, giveaways, breakfast, and more!

When: Saturday, February 20, 2010

Where: Abbington Distinctive Banquets in Glen Ellyn

Details: Advance registration and fee required. For updated information, check Anderson's website: <http://www.andersonsbookshop.com>.

NAPERVILLE READS

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

When: February 23–25, 2010

Details: Featuring Neil Gaiman, author of Newbery Medal winner *The Graveyard Book* and others. Find out more information at <http://www.napervillereads.org> as it becomes available.

NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS

• The 2009 winner of the National Book Foundation's National Book Award for Young People's Literature is **Phillip Hoose**, author of *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*. • The finalists are:

- **Deborah Heiligman**, *Charles and Emma: The Darwins' Leap of Faith*
- **David Small**, *Stitches*
- **Laini Taylor**, *Lips Touch: Three Times*
- **Rita Williams-Garcia**, *Jumped*

To read more about the entries, visit <http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2009.html>.

2010 SCBWI MEMBER GRANTS

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

WORK-IN-PROGRESS GRANTS • Four grants are available: General Work-in-Progress Grant, Grant for a Contemporary Novel for Young People, Nonfiction Research Grant, and Grant for a Work Whose Author Has Never Had a Book Published. • Applicants may apply only for the first three grants; the fourth will be chosen from all eligible entries in the other categories. • Each category has a winner, receiving \$1500, and a runner-up, receiving \$500. • Applications must be postmarked no earlier than February 15 and received by March 15. • Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/WIP-Grant> for more information.

BARBARA KARLIN GRANT • Aspiring picture book writers, unpublished and not under contract,

can apply for this grant. • The winner receives \$1500 and a runner-up receives \$500. • Entries must be postmarked no early than February 15 and received no later than March 15. • Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/Barbara-Karlin-Grant> for more information.

DON FREEMAN MEMORIAL GRANT-IN-AID • Established for picture book artists to continue their training and advance their skills. • One grant of \$1500 is awarded to the winner, with a runner-up receiving \$500. • Applications must be postmarked no earlier than January 2 and received by February 2. • Visit <http://www.scbwi.org/Pages.aspx/Don-Freeman-Grant> for more information.

CONFERENCES

SCBWI 2010 WINTER CONFERENCE

When: January 30–31 (optional intensives on January 29)

Where: Grand Hyatt Hotel in New York City

Early Registration (closes January 4): • \$325—SCBWI Members • \$365—Non-members

Regular Registration (after January 5): • \$350—SCBWI Members • \$390—Non-Members

Optional Pre-Conference Intensives (January 29): • Open to full-time conference attendees for the following additional fees: • \$175—Illustrators Intensive • \$225—Writers Intensive • For more information, check out <http://www.scbwi.org/Conference.aspx?Con=5>.

NIU 30TH ANNUAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CONFERENCE: 30 YEARS OF IMAGINATION

When: March 11–12

Where: Northern Illinois University in DeKalb

Cost: Attend the entire conference for \$155, or attend Thursday only for \$75, Thursday evening speaker only for \$15, Friday all day for \$100.

Details: Hear the announcement of the Rebecca Caudill and Monarch Award winners, as well as author Tamora Pierce, on Thursday evening. Friday's speakers include Jill Thompson, Nnedi Okorafor, Amy Krouse Rosenthal, and many more! For more information or to register, check out their <http://www.cedu.niu.edu/oep/conferences/childrenlit/index.html>. **2010 IRC (ILLINOIS READING COUNCIL) CONFERENCE**

When: March 18–20

Where: Springfield

Cost: \$175 for IRC members, \$250 for non-members. Discounted rates for IRC retirees and pre-service teachers before February 1.

Details: Join dozens of authors, including Cynthia and Greg Leitich Smith, Jan Brett, and Gail Carson Levine, for the weekend as they celebrate the theme "Lighting the Way to Literacy." More information is at <http://www.illinoisreadingcouncil.org/conference.html>.

BLOGS AND WEBSITES OF INTEREST

<http://www.upstartcrowliterary.com> <http://www.guidetoliteraryagents.com> <http://editorialanonymous.blogspot.com> <http://cynthialeitichsmith.com>

A freelance parenting writer since 2004, Michelle Sussman is also hard at work on a YA fantasy novel. She's an at-home mom in the Chicago 'burbs and VP of two community organizations. She has no free time, never sleeps, and is fluent in two languages, English and Sarcasm. Knock on the front door to her world at <http://www.facebook.com/michellesussman> or at her website, <http://www.michellesussman.com>.

Scholastic Recap and Two New Events

By Sallie Wolf

On October 17, 2009, Robin Hoffman spoke to our SCBWI Chapter at the Center for Learning Through Children's Books, part of National Lewis University in Skokie, Illinois. The topic was Scholastic Book Fairs, a company Robin has worked at for many years. She is now on the national committee that selects the books.

Mary Jo Reinhart, one of the attendees, wrote this great summary of the presentation:

What I found most inspiring about this event was the speaker herself. Robin had a way of making everyone feel that it was important to be there. I would swear I had met her before, but I don't think so. I think it was because she was so warm and welcoming that I felt I had. Thanks for lining up such a good speaker!

What to convey to someone who wasn't there but wanted to be? Robin stressed that Scholastic Book Fairs is a distributor, not a publisher. They are guests in schools, providing books for over 113,000 book fairs a year. They need to provide something for everyone and offer over 3,000 titles per year. Parents are especially likely to buy lots of books for their 7- or 8-year-old reader who is devouring early chapter books. Robin sees a need for more of these kinds of books.

For the author:

- Grab your audience with a standout first line.
- Push for a great book cover design!
- Make sure your publisher is championing your book by getting it considered for Scholastic Book Fairs.

Thank you, Mary Jo, for summarizing so succinctly what was a fabulous and idea-packed program.

Future Food for Thought presentations include:

- **Facebook for Dummies:** Debbie Pfeifer will present a hands-on explanation of Facebook, how to use it as an author or illustrator, and how to manage it so it works for you. This program is scheduled for February, with the exact date and location to be determined. It will be open to all SCBWI-IL members.
- **Online Book Marketing and Book Trailers:** Amy Alessio and Brenda Ferber are putting together this program, which will cover a variety of online sources for marketing your books. If you have expertise in online promotion and in creating book trailers (meaning you have done it at least once or attempted it), feel free to volunteer for this program. This program is designed for published and soon-to-be-published writers and illustrators. It is scheduled for April 17, 9:30–noon, at Schaumburg Township Library's Youth Services Classroom.

If you have any questions about Food for Thought programs, or if you would like to volunteer for the Online Book Marketing program, please contact Sallie Wolf at salwolf@comcast.net.

*Sallie Wolf is a full-time artist and writer living in Oak Park. She is an avid journal/sketchbook keeper, which led to the creation of *The Robin Makes A Laughing Sound: A Birder's Journal* (Charlesbridge; February 1, 2010). She is also the author of *Truck Stuck* (Charlesbridge, 2008) and *Peter's Trucks* (Albert Whitman, 1992). To learn more about her art—including the ongoing *Moon Project*—and her writing, visit her website at <http://www.salliewolf.com>.*

Don't Miss • Winter 2010

Buyers, Books, and Buzz

Wondering what makes books get noticed? Wondering which books to read next? Come hear **Jan Dundon**, children's book buyer and seller for Anderson's Bookshop, and **Mary Harris Russell**, reviewer of children's books for the *Chicago Tribune*, as they discuss the latest releases in children's literature. Find out which books they love, what hooked them, and why.

When: January 16, 2010; 9:00 a.m.–noon

Where: Mayslake Peabody Estate, 1717 W. 31st Street, Oak Brook, IL

Cost: \$20 for SCBWI members; \$25 for non-members and at the door

To Register: Please send 1) a check made out to SCBWI-Illinois and 2) a piece of paper with your NAME, E-MAIL ADDRESS, and PHONE NUMBER to:

Darcy Zoells
13 S. Elm Street
Hinsdale, IL 60521

Your registration must be **postmarked no later than January 11** for you to receive the discounted rate.

More Information: E-mail Darcy at notmrdarcy@hotmail.com.

Don't Miss • Winter 2010

Words in the Woods Retreat 2010

Would you like to connect with your writing peers and industry professionals? Give and receive feedback on works in progress? Revitalize your creative spirit? Then consider attending this summer's Words in the Woods retreat, with its new format and new location!

The faculty includes **Kathi Appelt** (author of Newbery Honor book *The Underneath*), **Caitlyn Dlouhy** (executive editor at Atheneum, an imprint of Simon & Schuster), and **Stephen Barbara** (agent at Foundry Literary + Media).

Only 42 slots are available, and registration opens January 15.

Date: June 18 at 11:30 a.m.–June 20 at 1:30 p.m.

Location: Villa Maria Conference and Retreat Center, Springfield, IL (<http://www.villa.dio.org>)

Cost: \$290 for SCBWI members; \$315 for nonmembers (includes food and double room with private bath)

Contact: More information will be forthcoming on the SCBWI-IL listserv and website. In the meantime, contact Sara Latta (saralatta@sbcglobal.net) with any questions.

New Year, New Goals, New Contributor

By Jennifer Ward

Hello, fellow SCBWI-Illinois members.

Happy New Year!

My name is Jennifer Ward, and I look forward to getting to know you as I share strategies, content, and wisdom pertaining to writing children's literature. I will do my best to fill the void left by Carmela Martino. (The *Prairie Wind* will miss you here, Carmela!) But we can still visit her on the fabulous blog TeachingAuthors.com.

Who is this new writer the *Prairie Wind* has recruited, you ask? My prairie roots penetrate deep. I spent my childhood (grade school through high school) in Edwardsville, IL, bare-footing through summers, snow-booting through winters, and making mischief throughout the seasons in-between. I graduated from the University of Arizona, then spent twenty-four years teaching and launching a writing career in Tucson. I am finally back in Edwardsville, and I couldn't be happier to be home!

So let's talk writing. For my first column, I considered sharing a specific aspect of writing the children's book. That's what this column is devoted to, after all: the craft of writing. Then I got to thinking about my own writing process at this point in the year, and what weighs heavily on my mind as a person who makes her living through the written word. It's all about the "G" word for me right now. Goals. What do I hope to achieve with my writing in 2010?

It's a new year, and I am a firm believer in the importance of setting writing goals annually. As such, I've decided goal setting would be a nice focus for this issue of the *Prairie Wind*.

Setting and assessing professional goals is an important and valid step in the writing process. It's through this process that we achieve our goals. It's a mind-set. Writing is a process, as we know. And "thinking" about writing is part of that process, as we internalize and evaluate our ideas, plots, settings, concepts, and characters while we go about our day-to-day lives.

Just as important as the process of thinking about writing (all of those thoughts in our heads related to our ideas) is the process of "stating" your goals as they pertain to writing, in an effort to get the words on paper. Trust me on this. Your primary goal might be a set word count placed on paper per week or per month. It might be the number of accepted manuscripts (contracts) you hope to achieve annually. It might be the hours you put into researching facts you need for a novel or picture book you're writing.

Whatever your goal(s) may be, they should be *written down* and assessed and reflected upon quarterly. We are writers, after all. We cannot discount the power of the written word. Write. Down. Your. Goals. This is the first step to taking the goals seriously and holding yourself accountable. You are your own boss, and this is your business.

I set my goals with a friend who also happens to be a prolific author. When we share our goals with each other at the start of each new year, these are the questions we ask of ourselves and each other:

- Is each goal realistic/attainable? Why or why not?
- Is each sub-goal valuable toward achieving a primary goal? How so?
- Is there balance among writing and other aspects of life (for man cannot live on BIC alone)?
- Does each goal advance financial gain? (Remember, writing pays the rent for many.) If a goal does not work toward financial gain, validate its importance in your life and the energy you will put into it.

My friend and I then share and evaluate our goals with each other quarterly:

- January: Set new goals and evaluate them.
- May: Reflect on and evaluate goals.
- September: Reflect on and evaluate goals.
- December: Reflect on and evaluate goals; begin thinking about goals for the year ahead.

Each quarter, we reflect on our written goals and share our progress with one another. We adjust goals as needed and cheer each other on as goals are achieved. (Who says bubbly is only good for the New Year?!) Goals are marked as such: Met (!!!), GIP (goal in progress), or GNM (goal not met). In December, goals that are not met are either carried forward into the following year or eliminated due to a change beyond our control in the work-goal-life dynamic.

Allow me to show you in more detail how I set my goals. I start with the big picture and work down from there. My goals might look like this:

Primary Goals (year-long goals):

- Sell three picture books to publishers.
- Make \$XXX amount of money through writing (advances, royalties, speaking).
- Publish and promote one to two books (books actually released, having been in production in years past).

Sub-Goals (daily, weekly, and monthly activities that make meeting the primary goals possible):

- Completing “Manuscript A”
- Revising “WIP Manuscript B”
- Developing and completing “Manuscript C”
- Marketing strategies for individual books, which might include creating a curriculum guide, updating website, web/viral ideas, targeting/contacting schools to visit, book signings, and conferences to attend
- Writing objectives, which might include dedicating a specific number of hours per day, words per day, or words per week on a particular manuscript. Hours per day may also include research, trips to library necessary to support work, and professional development (conferences, workshops, etc.)

Perhaps a particular goal may not be met. That’s okay! The important thing is that you set the goal and work toward achieving it. You, and you alone, must hold yourself accountable.

So give it a try in 2010. Set your goals. Write them down. Fly solo, or buddy with a partner.

Feel free to share your triumphs and tribulations along the way, because that’s what we are here for, fellow members of SCBWI: to support one another.

From your fellow goal-setting writer on the prairie, Jen Ward

Jennifer Ward is the author of numerous acclaimed books for children, including Way Out in the Desert, Somewhere in the Ocean, Over in the Garden, The Seed and the Giant Saguaro, The Little Creek, Forest Bright/Forest Night, There Was a Coyote Who Swallowed a Flea, Because You Are My Baby, Way Up in the Arctic, I Love Dirt! 52 Activities to Help You and Your Kids Discover the Wonders of Nature, The Busy Tree, Let’s Go Outside! Outdoor Activities and Projects to Get You and Your Kids Closer to Nature, and the forthcoming titles There Was An Old Monkey Who Swallowed a Frog (Marshall Cavendish, 2010) and There Was an Odd Princess Who Swallowed a Pea (Marshall Cavendish 2011).

Her books have received many honors, including the Giverny Award for Best Children’s Science Picture Book, the American Booksellers Association “Book Sense Pick of the Lists,” a Learning Magazine “Teachers’ Choice Award for Best Children’s Book,” a Governor’s First Grade Book Selection for the states of New Jersey and Arizona, and a Grand Canyon Readers Award for the state of Arizona. She is represented by Stefanie Von Borstel of Full Circle Literary.

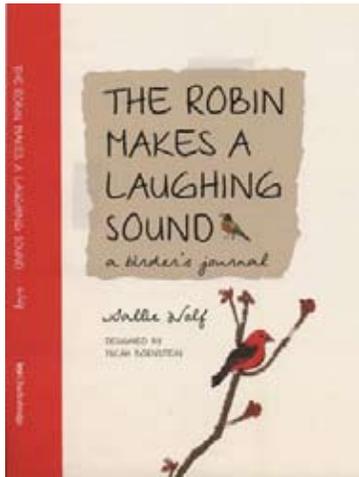
Becoming a “Critical Critiquer”

By Meg Fleming Lentz

Okay, I’ll admit it...sometimes I get so wrapped up in my own percolating manuscript that I forget my purpose in a critique group is twofold. Yes, one goal is to improve my own story, but another goal is also to help with the stories circulating in the group.

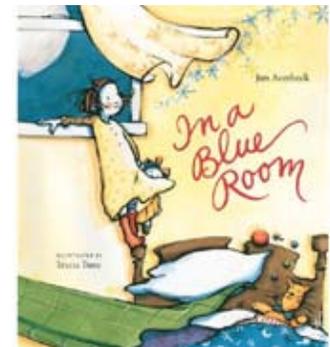
After one meeting, I asked myself, “Did I actually *help* anybody? Was my presence in the group necessary, essential...critical?” When I answered “no,” I decided that my most important job as a group member is to provide useful feedback.

So how do you get beyond “This is good...I liked it...and who *doesn’t* love dogs?”



Sallie Wolf, Oak Park Representative and author of *The Robin Makes a Laughing Sound: A Birder's Journal* (February 2010), outlines the keys to a successful critique: “It’s not about ‘liking’ someone’s work. It’s about reading closely and then telling the writer what you see.” Sallie recommends not focusing a critique on how to change or “fix” a manuscript, because those decisions are up to the writer. “What is helpful,” she says, “is to ask questions where things are unclear, and to reflect back who the characters seem to be—how you perceive them—and sometimes, to relate your own childhood feelings and experiences to the characters.”

Following are two lists of questions designed to help you become a “critical critiquer.” One list is for novels and chapter books (provided by the Oak Park network), and the other is for picture books (inspired by a presentation given by Jim Averbeck, author of *In A Blue Room*, at SCBWI-LA). While some questions cross over from one genre to the next, it is helpful to home in on the specific needs of both types of story.



Novels and Chapter Books

- How does the book begin? How does the first sentence or paragraph grab the reader?
- What age is the book geared to? How do you know? (language choices, age of characters, theme or subject matter, etc.)
- Who is the main character and how do we learn about him/her? What do we learn?
- How are other characters introduced?
- What is the first action?
- What is the problem/conflict? When is it first introduced?
- What does the main character want?
- How is the problem/conflict resolved?
- What recurring themes, motifs, and images are there? What purpose do they serve?
- What is the structure of the book: chronological, flashback, circular, building one line on another, etc.? Can you diagram it or visualize it?

Picture Books

- Is there a strong sense of time and place?

- Are there a variety of settings within the story?
- Is there a chance to use or change perspective?
- Is there enough action and movement?
- Is the pace varied?
- Is there increasing complication?
- Do the main characters have unique attitudes or strong personalities?
- Do the characters have unique physical attributes?
- Is there physical interaction between the characters?
- Is there emotional interaction between the characters?
- Is there a strong sense of mood?
- Is there a strong and appropriate use of color?
- Is there sensory detail?

Becoming a critical critiquer doesn't need to be stressful. Before attending your next critique session, choose two questions and then find their answers in the stories that you read. By shedding light on these areas, you will help a member of your group see their story through a different lens. In doing so, you play an elemental role in getting their idea out of their head...onto the paper...into the mailbox...off of the slush pile...and into the hands of someone who cares about good books.

Anyone who does this is most definitely a necessary, essential, critical...friend.

Meg Fleming Lentz writes picture books, YA novels, and poetry. She is a freelance writer/singer and she facilitates workshops on writing and creative expression. Meg has three kids and one husband. She can be reached at meg.lentz@comcast.net.

Your New Year's Resolution: Become a Better Illustrator

By Kathleen Rietz

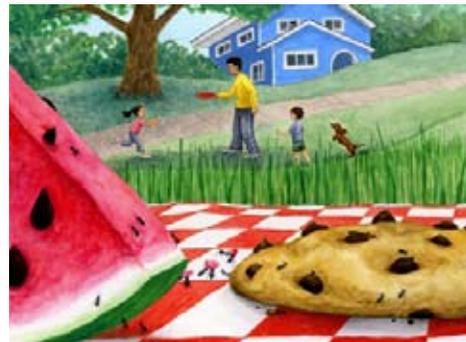
A new year brings new opportunity, but in this challenging economy, only the strong survive. I like to believe the economy is on an upswing, although the children's illustration market might not reflect it just yet. This is a time to offer your very best to each and every illustration assignment you take. Every illustration assignment is an opportunity to add credibility to your portfolio, as well as another rung on the ladder that leads to your next illustration assignment. It may be with the same publisher or a different one. The key is to set yourself apart from your peers so that you are the illustrator who publishers return to again and again. Read on for three tips to becoming a better children's book illustrator:

1) Research Your Subject Matter

You may be offered a book project about a subject or culture you know little about. Don't panic, fake it, or try to rely on stereotypes. Now is the time to expand your horizons and learn something new. Libraries, the Internet, friends, and organizations can all offer a plethora of valuable information to help you research your subject matter.

When illustrator Kristi Valiant (<http://www.kristivaliant.com>) was offered a book to illustrate about a Filipino girl who cooks a special dish, Kristi did her research: "For *Cora Cooks Pancit* (Shen's Books, 2009), I first checked out books from the library and online resources to become familiar with the Filipino culture. Then I made pancit, the Filipino noodle dish that the main character makes in the story, and wow, that was yummy (the recipe is in the book)! I don't usually use models for my illustrations, because I find that my illustrations become too stiff if I rely on photographs, but for this book I took hundreds of shots of a little model and loosely used them to bring Cora's personality into the way she stood and moved."

In my own experience, when I was offered the assignment to illustrate *Little Black Ant on Park Street* (Soundprints, January 2010), I admit I knew very little about ants. I put in many hours of research using the Internet, learning anything and everything I could about little black ants. I even watched videos posted about ants on YouTube so I could see how they built their colonies and moved about. Since the book needed to be approved by the Smithsonian Institution as part of their Backyard Books series, the illustrations needed to be very tight, clear, and scientifically accurate. It was imperative that I learn my subject matter!



2) Become Your Character

There are times when you may be offered a book project with very sensitive subject matter. Such is the case for the book I am currently illustrating, titled *Champ's Story: Dogs Get Cancer Too!* (Sylvan Dell Publishing, 2010). The purpose of the book is to help children diagnosed with cancer deal with and better understand their illness and treatment. The assignment hits home for me, since I have watched several people close to me battle cancer and endure various treatments. For this book, I decided it was important to convey the emotional connection between the main characters of the dog and the boy who cares for him. The editor and I were in touch with several veterinarians who helped us understand aspects of chemotherapy treatments for dogs, including how treatments

are administered, possible side effects, etc. I researched actual video footage and photos of dogs receiving treatments, and looked through dozens of photos of children interacting with their pet dogs, so that I could convey the bond between the main characters in the story. And most of all, I thought of my own love for my dog and imagined what it would be like for both her and me if she ever became sick and had to endure treatment for cancer. Once I became emotionally bonded to the story and the characters in it, I knew that bond would become apparent in my work. It is my ability to empathize with the characters that is giving life to the illustrations.

3) Flex Your Creative Muscle

As the illustrator of children's stories, it is up to you to enhance the words on the pages of books. Before children learn to read, they take visual cues from pictures in a book to try and understand or imagine the story. Even the most basic subject matter can become exciting through creative illustrations. This includes creating mood in your illustrations through lighting, color (or lack of it), and point of view.



For example, in *Little Black Ant on Park Street*, I chose to vary the point of view in the book based on the scene on each page. Some parts of the story took place on the ground, and I imagined the perspective from the eye of an ant. Other illustrations overlooked a park, so I changed my perspective to an ant positioned in a tree. I also paid attention to lighting. In one particular scene, a large carpenter ant invades the ant colony, sending the little black ants into attack mode. I wanted to evoke a feeling of tension through dramatic lighting and a low perspective.

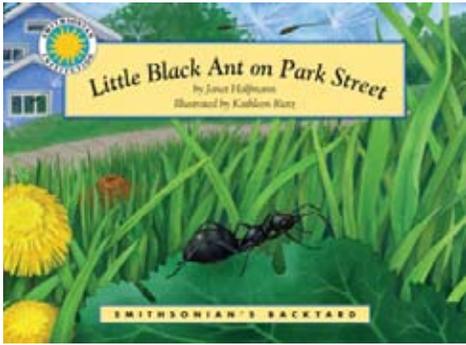
My illustrations are sharp, vivid, and literal. I chose to work in acrylic paint for the entire book because of the crispness of the colors and the permanence of the medium.

On the other hand, in *Champ's Story: Dogs Get Cancer Too!* I want to lend sensitivity and softness to each illustration. I am illustrating the book using a combination of gouache, watercolor, oil pastel, colored pencils, and pastel pencils. It is in the layer of the pastel pencils that I can achieve a softness and feeling of movement in the illustrations. I want the illustrations to be warm and comforting to the child who views them. I am also working to achieve this through the use of a diffused light source throughout the book. My focus is not on creating dramatic scenes, but on creating scenes that convey connection and emotion, all while maintaining my style as an artist.

For those of you who are new to the business and have not yet landed your first book project, these same principles can be applied to the illustrations you create for your portfolio. Editors and art directors want to see how creatively you can think and portray a scene. Challenge yourself. Try a different point of view. Ask yourself how the mood of the scene in an illustration would change if the characters were backlit, or portrayed from a bird's eye view or an ant's eye view. Imagine a modern-day scene taking place in the late 1800s. Or create a color scheme that is monochromatic except for the main character or an object that becomes the illustration's center of interest. In a nutshell, spice it up!

I hope these suggestions have helped to get your creative juices flowing as we start out a new year with a new resolution: to become better illustrators in 2010!





[All illustrations are from *Little Black Ant on Park Street*, written by Janet Halfmann and illustrated by Kathleen Rietz. — Ed.]

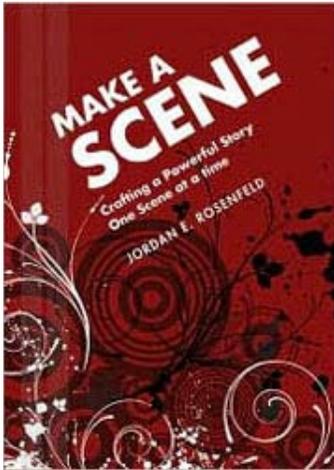
Kathleen Rietz is the illustrator of several picture books for children, including the three-time award-winning The ABCs of Yoga for Kids, Little Black Ant on Park Street, and Champ's Story: Dogs Get Cancer, Too! You can find out more about Kathleen by visiting her website at <http://kathleenrietz.com> and blog at <http://licoricegirl.blogspot.com>.

How to Make a Scene

By Jenny Meyerhoff

Make a Scene: Crafting a Powerful Story One Scene at a Time By Jordan E. Rosenfeld (Writer's Digest Books, 2008)

There are many skills, tools, and techniques involved in writing a novel, and often it can seem impossible to master them all. But if I had to choose one thing to perfect, it would be the ability to write a superior scene. Scenes are the building blocks of novels, and if you can string enough wonderful scenes together, you just might have a pretty good book.



Make a Scene: Crafting a Powerful Story One Scene at a Time, by Jordan E. Rosenfeld, delves deeply into this unit of story and promises that “if you can understand what a scene is, how all its elements collaborate to create a vivid and compelling snapshot, and how those moments add up to a story, you’ll write your drafts differently and become a more self-assured writer with a page-turner on your hands.” Rosenfeld begins by breaking down the anatomy of a scene, detailing how to open with a bang, ratchet up the tension in the middle, and then smoothly leave the reader with an ending that pulls them directly into the next scene. Always Rosenfeld provides examples from well-known pieces of literature that clearly illustrate the techniques she describes.

In the next section of the book, Rosenfeld teaches readers how to incorporate the core elements of good writing, setting, sensory images, plot, character development, and more into her scene-by-scene approach. Much of the information in this section can be found in many other books on writing; nothing here feels really new, but it is all solid advice, and perhaps looking at it on the scenic level will help some writers to better incorporate these elements into their novels and stories.

Rosenfeld’s strength, though, is providing information particular to her scene-centered method, and so the third section, like the first, is full of interesting advice. Here Rosenfeld lists several scene types: dramatic scenes, action scenes, and dialogue scenes, to name a few. She helps writers identify when to use each type of scene, how to structure each type of scene, and how to balance the scene types to create a well-balanced novel.

Rosenfeld concludes with a section on other considerations, which like the second section of the book, is full of useful but not necessarily unique information. Even with these caveats, this book is full of excellent advice for any novelist who struggles with scene structure or wants to learn how to improve the pacing of his or her manuscript.

Jenny Meyerhoff is the author of the chapter book Third Grade Baby and the forthcoming YA Queen of Secrets. She lives in Riverwoods with her husband and three children. Visit her on the web at <http://www.jennymeyerhoff.com>.

Books That Make You Go, “Oh!”

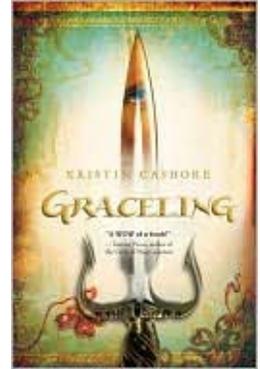
By Brenda A. Ferber

Starting Off on the Right Foot

Graceling By Kristin Cashore (Harcourt, 2008)

Have you read *Graceling* yet? If not, run, do not walk, to your nearest bookstore or library and read this spellbinding story. Even if you don't like fantasy (I normally don't), you will love this book. Maybe because it's not just a fantasy. It's also an adventure story, a romance, and a coming-of-age novel all rolled into one. The language is beautiful, the plot is riveting, and the characters are unforgettable.

Katsa, the strong-willed heroine of the book, is a Graceling, a rare individual with an extreme skill. In the seven kingdoms where the story takes place, Gracelings possess many different kinds of skills (predicting storms, cooking, storytelling, etc.), but Katsa's Grace is killing, and she is used by King Randa as his personal henchman. When she meets Prince Po, who is Graced with combat skills, Katsa begins a journey which will lead her to new truths about her own Grace as well as several secrets, one so dangerous it threatens all seven kingdoms.



There is much to love about *Graceling*, but as always, I'm going to focus this column on one thing. So let's see what we can learn about constructing a first chapter. After all, there is nothing more important than chapter one. Without a tremendous first chapter, you'll never snag an agent or publisher, and you certainly won't capture any readers! In these beginning pages, you have to introduce your main characters; set up your story, theme, and setting; hint at what is to come; and raise the right amount of questions. It's not an easy task, but of course Kristin Cashore makes it look easy with chapter one of *Graceling*.

Graceling's first chapter contains four sections. In the opening scene, Katsa rescues a prisoner from a dungeon, or more specifically, she disables the guards so this rescue can happen. The second section is a memory of how Katsa's killing Grace first announced itself and how she learned to control it. In the third section, Katsa meets a mysterious Graced fighter. And the chapter ends as Katsa and her comrades race to safety with the rescued prisoner. Quite a lot of excitement! Let's examine how Cashore crafted these scenes to create an enticing and effective chapter one.

1. Introduce your main characters. Readers judge characters based on actions, thoughts, and dialogue. The first thing we learn about Katsa is that she is a skilled fighter. She takes out four guards “before amazement had even registered in their eyes.” We then learn she is a Graceling, not because the author tells us so, but because a guard says, “I know a Graceling when I see one....Let me see the colors of your eyes, boy. I'll cut them out. Don't think I won't.” We may not be sure what a Graceling is yet, but we certainly understand it's both powerful and dangerous to be one. We quickly learn that Katsa has a strong moral code and that she won't kill if it's not absolutely necessary. That's why she doesn't kill any guards but merely knocks them unconscious. We see Katsa's kindness when she carefully and gently takes out an old guard. These three things—her skills as a fighter, her moral code, and her kindness—are the three main traits that drive the entire novel. Cashore chose these scenes with care to let the reader root for the heroine. You'll note that she doesn't tell us much. She shows us who Katsa is through carefully chosen action, thoughts, and dialogue.

The other important characters are introduced in this first chapter as well, and we see them all in action. Raffin is Katsa's cousin and longtime friend. He has created the pills Katsa uses to keep the guards unconscious long enough for them to escape. Giddon helps pick a lock in the rescue. Oll has helped train Katsa and has created the maps of the dungeons. And of course, there is the mysterious Graced fighter. He plays an important role in the story, and it was smart of Cashore to introduce him right away.

2. Set up your story, theme, and setting. Story can be thought of as an external quest plus an internal quest. The external quest of *Graceling* is set in motion with the rescue of the prisoner. Who this man is, why he is in the dungeon, and why he needs to be rescued are questions that drive the plot. The internal quest has to do with Katsa's growth. We see this in terms of Katsa being opposed to killing. If she is Graced with killing, how can she not want to kill? Will she learn to accept herself or understand herself better? If this is a coming-of-age novel, she had better!

There are several themes introduced in this chapter. The theme of power comes into play with King Randa using Katsa as his thug. The theme of trust is examined when Katsa must decide what to do with the Graced fighter she meets. The theme of feminine strength shows up right away when the guards assume Katsa is male. All these themes are developed throughout the book. If not, they would have no place in this chapter.

An important note about setting: Many beginning authors are tempted to set up the world in which the story takes place with loads of description and explanation. Don't fall into that trap, even if you are writing a fantasy or historical story. Follow Cashore's example and give us a few quick strokes. We know we are in a land of dungeons, princes, kings, and Gracelings. We have a map to reference if we are really confused. But we also can wait for chapter two when Cashore gives us more information about the setting. Chapter one should be about character and story first and foremost.

3. Raise the right amount of questions. The main goal of chapter one is to make sure your reader wants to read chapter two. To ensure that, you need to raise just the right amount of questions. Pique the reader's curiosity and interest, but don't confuse the reader too much. It's a delicate balance, one that Cashore masters in *Graceling*. By the end of chapter one, we want to know if the prisoner will survive and if Katsa will be discovered. We are curious about the mysterious Graced fighter, and we wonder if Katsa was right to let him live. We want to know more about where this story is taking place and why there needs to be a secret Council. And we especially want to know how a Graced killer with a strong moral code will ever learn to accept and love herself. We'd have to be crazy not to turn to chapter two!

So, how can you learn from *Graceling*? Take a look at your first chapter. How do you introduce your characters? Did you choose the best action, thoughts, and dialogue to capture your reader's attention? How do you set up your story, theme, and setting? Is it clear that there are internal and external quests at work? Are there interesting themes to ponder? Have you raised the right amount of questions? Will your reader be curious or confused?

Invest whatever time and energy it takes to make your first chapter as powerful as possible, because this effort will certainly pay off when it comes to selling your manuscript and, eventually, your book!

Have you read a book that made you go, "oh"? If so, drop me an e-mail at brenda@brendaferber.com and tell me about it.

Brenda A. Ferber is the author of middle-grade novels Julia's Kitchen and Jemma Hartman, Camper Extraordinaire. Both were published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Her first picture book, The Yuckiest, Stinkiest, Best Valentine's Day Ever, is forthcoming from Dial. Learn more about Brenda by reading her blog, Fresh Baked Bits, at <http://www.brendaferber.com/blog.html> or by visiting her website at <http://www.brendaferber.com>.

The Journey to “Flow”

By Carol Coven Grannick

I usually know when I’m on the wrong track with something. For me, “The Wrong Track” (TWT) has a few recognizable characteristics:

- I can’t do what I am trying to do, or any progress feels like pulling teeth.
 - My heart and stomach are twisting into one another, one (stomach) disinterested in sustenance, and the other (heart) crying for help.
 - I can’t make a decision about whether to do it or not, and the debate is in negative language (more about this soon).
 - I watch the minutes tick by because I’m getting absolutely nothing done.
- Being on TWT can happen for many different reasons.

It might have something to do with the subject I’m writing about, the way I’m writing, the place I’m writing in, or the process of the story itself.

Or it could be a project I think I *should* do because I know I’m capable of it, but my heart’s not in it. TWT is a drag. Maybe you call it Writer’s Block (I don’t, but that’s another column).

In addition, when I’m “back and forth” about something in this way, it feels old and familiar. I grew up learning not to trust my own heart and mind, so I had to learn how as a young adult.

I’ll always be vulnerable to that mistrust, though, which is why Learned Optimism has been so important to me. The negativity of mistrusting yourself closes your brain to options, problem solving, and creativity.

In other words, when you’re in an argument with yourself (for me, part of that argument is the stomach-heart fight I noted above), your brain closes itself off to a solution. And that’s what happened to me. What did I really want? What should I do? How could I tell what I really wanted? If I began, could I finish? Would I end up in a kind of world full of social media and blogging that would feel unfamiliar? Would I still have time to write my children’s fiction?

The Irrepressible Writer blog and book proposal was such a project for me. I knew I loved writing my columns for *The Prairie Wind*, doing workshops, and working with individual writers to build and maintain resilience. But as more than a handful of writers suggested an Irrepressible Writer book proposal, I had to think seriously about it.

Did I want to write a book? I wasn’t sure. I knew from keeping up with the writing business that I’d need a platform. That meant connecting with social media, which I hadn’t done and wasn’t sure I wanted to do. And it meant a blog: writing about the applications of Positive Psychology for writers and the writing life much more frequently than my *Prairie Wind* columns. How on earth would I think of topics for an endless number of blog posts?

Yikes! Words and phrases like *can’t*, *don’t have enough ideas*, and *won’t be able to work on my fiction* kept popping up. And look at the language in the previous paragraph. It was Pessimistic Explanatory Style 101 (<http://theirrepressiblewriter.com/2009/11/13/youve-got-style-which-one-will-it-be/>).

So back to TWT: I’d start the proposal, then stop, work on the proposal, get distracted.

I talked with my writing partners and my online “weekly accountability” group. All of them without exception affirmed one of my basic beliefs: give yourself permission *not* to do what you feel

pressured to do, then decide. In an emotional environment of “abundance,” one in which more than a couple choices truly exist, you’re freer to choose what you really want.

And that’s exactly what happened. One of my writing partners put it this way: “Just because we are good at something, just because there’s something we’re even *better* at than our fiction writing, doesn’t mean that we want to do it. But that said, you need to ask yourself whether you want to pass up this possible opportunity, especially since you do enjoy that work, too.”

I did think about it. I gave myself permission not to pursue *The Irrepressible Writer* further than my *Prairie Wind* columns. As I did, I changed my “explanatory style” from pessimistic to optimistic. I wondered what might happen if I opened myself up to learning about social media, developing a blog, and writing a book proposal.

This curiosity opened my heart and mind. I could feel it. You can, too, can’t you? When Carmela Martino posted on our SCBWI-Illinois listserv about four free webinars Greg Pincus and Mark Blevis were offering to writers, I signed up. Wow! My first webinars! I learned. And as I learned, I became more excited, more curious, and even more open. I found a website with a design I loved and checked for the designer. He was available and affordable, and I committed to developing a blog that we worked on together for a month, and about whose technology I’m still learning. In the meantime, I wrote, and rewrote, and rewrote, a nonfiction book proposal for *The Irrepressible Writer*.

The most amazing lesson I learned *once again*, and hope to convey to you, is that it was only when I changed *how I was thinking* about the whole issue that my brain opened itself to possibilities and my own capacities. It works every time. Positivity “broadens and builds” (<http://positivityratio.com>).

The Wrong Track was gone. The Right Track was here. How did I know? Not only did I start having fun (and, by the way, continue working on my middle-grade novel, albeit more slowly right now), but *when I worked on the proposal and wrote blog posts and even worked on the technology of the blog, and when I wrote this column, I lost track of time.*

Have you had that feeling? Maybe you get it a lot, or maybe just a little bit. Maybe never—but you can journey there. It’s called flow, a concept identified by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It’s a core component of the Positive Psychology movement and applicable to all of our lives. You can read about flow (eudaemonia) as a component of a meaningful life here: http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/seligman04/seligman_index.html.

When I experience flow, it’s a decision maker, an absolute indicator that I am in the right place, doing the right thing at the right time.

And with that feeling in mind, I welcome you, with deep pleasure, to <http://theirrepressiblewriter.com>, a blog devoted to helping writers build and maintain resilience for our writing...and our lives.

Carol Coven Grannick is a children’s writer and writer’s therapist. Her picture book manuscripts have won awards for unpublished writing. Her blog is at <http://theirrepressiblewriter.com>.

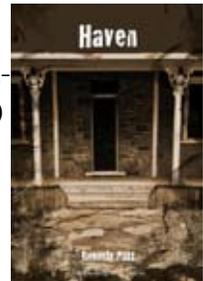
(Twenty-) Two Heads Are Better Than One

By Beverly Patt

After selling my first novel to a small publisher (Blooming Tree Press), I knew I'd be responsible for much of the promotion. So right away, I began researching everything I could about marketing my book. As I read articles urging me to blog; tweet; facebook; network; and do interviews, contests, conferences, and book tours; my initial excitement of Finally Being Published began to fade. I became dismayed and overwhelmed. How was I ever going to do all these things? *I have a husband, four children, and limited resources, I told myself, not to mention a heaping dose of scaredy-cat-ness.*

Then I heard about Greg Fishbone, a Blooming Tree author who had pooled his resources with other debut authors to promote their books. They called themselves the Class of 2k7. As the year went on, I watched as 2k7 authors won awards and garnished praises, and with each recognition, the hits on their group site went up. Every time someone read an interview with Jay Asher (*Thirteen Reasons Why*) or review of Sara Zarr's *Story of a Girl*, they saw the link to the Class of 2k7 (or were already on the 2k7 site) and therefore saw the other 2k7 books. Every time a friend or relative of one of the members went to the site, they'd automatically see everyone else's book too. It was like one giant cocktail party, where the authors went around introducing their friends and family to the other authors. Brilliant! I joined the Class of 2k8.

After a few months of working with the talented ladies of 2k8, I found out my book wouldn't be released until the fall of 2009. (Cue depressing music here. For you born-and-bred Chicagoans, cue the missed-Bozo-bucket "wah-wah-waaah." But I digress.) By default, I became co-president of the Class of 2k9. Yikers. I say yikers because, not to brag, but I am fairly unorganized, socially wimpy, and almost incapable of making a decision. Not exactly leadership material. But you know what? It was good for me. It made me plunge into things I would have just as happily waited for someone else to do (or, had I been on my own, may never have done). It forced me to attack the Marketing Monster head on. And it got me a great amount of exposure.



The biggest benefit by far, however, has been in getting to know a truly gifted and giving group of middle-grade and YA authors. I know it sounds cliché, and you may be rolling your eyes right now (*stop that!*), but it really is true. The individuals who stuck with the group lived out the old "all-for-one-and-one-for-all" approach to life, and even if I never sell one book, just getting to know these incredible people has made the whole experience worthwhile.

Think the group approach to marketing might be a good fit for you? If so, here are a few tips from the trenches to get you started:

- 1. Start small—as in the number of people in your group.** Rosanne Parry (author of *Heart of a Shepherd* and former 2k8 member) and I started the Class of 2k9. We adopted a basic set of requirements from the previous classes: a) the work had to be the writer's debut MG or YA novel, b) it had to be published by a U.S. publisher, and c) the publisher had to be listed in CWIM (*Children's Writer's and Illustrator's Market*). Having just two of us to start the initiative helped us to keep our focus.
- 2. Invite potential members.** After we established an e-mail address, our basic requirements, and an introduction letter with application, we opened up 2k9 to new members. Our application and letter stressed that members would be expected to commit a fair amount of time and a bit of money (for

website, print materials, etc.). We “advertised” on Verla Kay’s message board, LiveJournal, and SCBWI sites. The Class of 2k8 also helped us out by posting our address on their website.

- 3. Set up a meeting place.** We set up two separate places—a Yahoo! listserv like SCBWI-IL’s and a forum at <http://proboards.com>. The listserv was for announcements and communication, and the forum was for the committees to meet and discuss their strategies/duties. Which brings me to...
- 4. Pick officers and committees.** I tend to think the whole “officer” thing sounds very grade schoolish, but it turned out to be extremely helpful, especially for a large group like ours. We had two co-presidents, a treasurer, a secretary, and a 2k8 liaison, and all were chosen by a combination of volunteering and an all-member vote. The advantage of having an executive committee really came into play when conflicts arose. The members needed someone to share their grievances with, without involving the whole class, potentially hurting feelings, etc. It’s like that scene in *Saving Private Ryan* where Tom Hanks walks up to a group of weary soldiers and asks, “Who’s in charge here?” and one of the guys answers, “Ain’t you?” Someone needs to be in charge. (For smaller groups, it would probably be wise to delineate specific jobs for each person, rather than relying on volunteers for each task. Because what usually happens—and you know this if you volunteer at church or your kids’ school—is the same group of people volunteer for every job and the others, um, don’t.)

After brainstorming as a class, we came up with the following committees: Executive, Website, Print Materials, Regional and State Conferences, Online Marketing (blog, Facebook, etc.), Guerilla Marketing (outside-the-box tactics), Literacy/Outreach (community service), BLT (materials for booksellers, librarians, and teachers), and Media/PR. Every member joined two committees. These committees then met at the forum site to hash out ideas. (Just as an aside, the use of the forum never totally caught on, as it was another place you had to go and log into. So what started happening was that committees formed e-mail groups and kept in touch that way.) The Executive Committee set goals, ran monthly “class meetings” (on our listserv), problem solved, and kept the committees accountable.

- 5. Set a timeline and choose enforcers.** Let’s face it, writers are busy people. Many of us in 2k9 were mothers, grandmothers, or fathers, and several had full-time jobs outside of writing. One woman even had a baby during our year! All of us had good intentions, but as I’m sure you have experienced, time has a habit of passing by too quickly, and we were worried our tasks wouldn’t get done. That is why we chose strict deadlines for individual committee work so that all would be ready to go come January 1, 2009, when we wanted to launch our website (<http://www.classof2k9.com>). We also had a few individuals share the job of the blog calendar, nudging each of us when our time to blog approached.
- 6. Extract a commitment.** We kept the membership to 2k9 open for many months, giving those who had just signed a contract (or those who had just heard about us) a chance to join. New people applied weekly. Some older members changed their minds and dropped out. By the summer of 2008, there was so much coming and going, it felt like we had a revolving door installed on our listserv. Committees couldn’t get anything done. Finally (at the urging of my husband, tired of hearing me whine), we decided it was time to collect membership dues. We agreed that any leftover funds at the end of the year would be equally distributed back to the members or spent on something voted on by the class.

And wouldn’t you know it, the group stabilized. We were finally able to get working! Maybe it was just a coincidence, I don’t know. But as my dear hubby pointed out, there is something about spending money—even a few bucks—that makes people take a commitment more seriously. It was time to fish or cut bait. In the end, we ended up with a fine group of fishermen!

- 7. Be Nice.** Do I have to say it? Apparently, yes. Before we collected dues and became more of a

cohesive group, our listserv overflowed with messages from a huge group of strangers. Several times, a post came off as flippant or mean or abrupt, even when that was not necessarily what the writer intended. Unless you know someone, it's hard to tell in an e-mail when they are being sarcastic or funny or silly or what. So, especially in the beginning, reread your posts/e-mails before you send them to make sure they won't be misinterpreted. Which leads me to...

- 8. Write every correspondence as if for public viewing—because you never know when it will be.** Remember (especially at the beginning), you don't know these people and have no idea what crazy thing they may chose to do with what you *thought* was a private correspondence. We had an issue early on with an individual who kept sending us somewhat harassing e-mails, filled with misinformation. Our last response to her wasn't the nicest, and she chose to publish it on her blog (without, of course, the e-mails she'd sent us). We learned our lesson. As the months went by and our group jelled, we did start sharing more personal information and always asked permission before sharing something someone else had said/announced.
- 9. When in doubt, take a poll.** Yahoo! has a poll-taking tool that is great and easy to use. There were twenty-two of us in 2k9, and nice as everyone was, we all had differing opinions on certain issues. Decisions had to be made. A website theme had to be chosen. Colors for the website. Our logo. Our tagline. Whether we hired a publicist or not. The list was endless. Sometimes an informal majority opinion sufficed, but other times, when opinions were stronger and discussion didn't result in agreement, we'd take a poll. I must say it is a credit to our twenty-two members that once a poll was taken, there was no residual grumbling. (Not to MY knowledge, anyway!) Which leads me to my next and final tip...
- 10. Be willing to compromise.** Any time you have a group of people, whether two or two hundred, you have to be willing to compromise. Decide what's really worth holding out for and let the rest go. In working with these twenty-one other individuals, I've found that *what made each of them so different from me, made them invaluable to me as well*. Members joined committees based on their passions, experience, or eagerness to learn about an area. Pooling our vastly different talents and interests resulted in a group with a great website, a publicist, an active blog, bookstore signings, conference panels, outreach efforts, professional teacher/reader guides, and some darn good book-related recipes! None of us on our own could have accomplished a fraction of what we accomplished as a group.

As our debut year comes to a close, many of us are staying together in a new group blog titled Class of 2k9, Sophomore Year (the new blog's address will eventually be announced on the old 2k9 blog, <http://community.livejournal.com/classof2k9>). I hope you will come to visit and will one day tell us about the new marketing group YOU have formed!



Beverly Patt writes from her suburban Chicago home, which she shares with her high school sweetheart husband, four wonderful kids, and faithful dog, Hally. Before becoming a writer, Bev worked as a sick-bird-catcher, waitress, licorice inspector, family counselor, and special education teacher. Haven is her first novel. Close on its heels is Best Friends Forever: A World War II Scrapbook (Marshall Cavendish), due out in spring 2010.

Building Your Blog Readership: Different Kinds of Posts That Work

By Margo L. Dill

A huge debate seems to exist between authors and writers who blog, and those who don't. The issue is whether or not blogging is a valuable use of time when it seems as if there are never enough minutes in the day to get all the work finished. Whether you're starting a middle-grade novel, revising a picture book, or marketing your latest YA, should you be taking time out to blog? And if so, what can you blog about to draw in readers?

Maria Schneider, a former *Writer's Digest* editor and current blogger, says, "A blog is essential for a writer today. Not only does it teach discipline and offer a daily creative outlet, it can help you to build a readership. I can't stress too much how important it is for writers today to begin establishing their own readership well in advance of any thoughts about a book deal."

One key to blogging is creating useful content so you can gain readers. Schneider's blog, Editor Unleashed (<http://editorunleashed.com>), has a large readership thanks to its useful content. Recently, she interviewed YA and MG literary agent Ginger Clark, who is actively building her list at Curtis Brown literary agency. Clark answered questions about what she represents, writing query letters, and how to break in as a new writer. Many writers would agree this is a valuable article, and you may want to check Editor Unleashed for more agent interviews when searching for an agent.

Question-and-answer posts are easy and fun to do if you can find someone to interview whom your readers want to know about. "I've been doing Q&A interviews with writers and publishing insiders for years," Schneider says. "I always enjoy those types of posts. The Q&A format works well for blogs because it naturally provides the kind of structure and brevity that make for very readable online content."

Another type of post that draws readers in is a list of ideas or sources they can use immediately. On my blog (<http://margodill.com/blog>), which is written for parents and teachers, I recently wrote a post about service-learning projects. In the post, I provided several resources where parents and teachers could find ideas for service-learning projects.

On Editor Unleashed, Schneider highlights two list-type blog posts that are popular and particularly useful to children's writers. **The Editor Unleashed 25 Best Writing Blogs 2009** is a fabulous list to begin online explorations. **Twitter Tips for Writers + 25 Good Follows** is a primer for getting started on Twitter, a communication tool that the publishing industry has embraced.

Your readers may also enjoy "creativity and motivational posts," according to Schneider. She has several of these on her blog, which you can easily find using the index on the right-hand side of her home page (click on the inspiration and creativity categories). Read her motivational posts, and then look at your subject. See if you can build a readership with a similar type of post every week or every other day.

The Miss Rumphius Effect (<http://missrumphiuseffect.blogspot.com>)—a blog by Tricia Stohr-Hunt, a professor in the education department at the University of Richmond—has this tag line: "The blog of a teacher educator discussing poetry, children's literature and issues related to teaching children and their future teachers." But she doesn't discuss just these topics; she also includes several motivational posts. And these creativity posts challenge writers to write a poem—even well-known writer Jane Yolen, who often participates and posts her poems. How's that for building readership?

If you have a blog and are looking for ways to build your readership, look at your content. Try some of these different types of blog posts, and make your blog useful, motivational, and interesting for your readers.

Schneider adds, “Take the time to really learn how to work with social media, and it will pay off for you.”

Check out Margo Dill’s blog, [Read These Books and Use Them \(http://margodill.com/blog\)](http://margodill.com/blog), for ideas on how to use children’s and young adult books in the classroom and at home. This blog offers teaching ideas and discussion starters with each book for your children, teenagers, or students.

SCBWI-IL Prairie Writer's Day 2009

By Deborah Topolski

In January, under sepia-toned skies that are an Illinois winter's day, I am reminded that I've dropped the proverbial ball on the 5th Annual Prairie Writer's Day (PWD).

Sure, I filled out my conference feedback form, reviewed my manuscript critique with a trusted Network friend, and filed my submission stickers in a safe place. But what have I done with all the energy and positivity that permeated the meeting at Wojcik Conference Center at Harper College on November 14, 2009? Have I filed that away in a safe place too? Resolving to recapture the warmth of that day in the midst of a bleak and forbidding one, I pull out my conference folder.

Leafing through the sheets, I see my notes, hurriedly jotted down in the margins of the handouts, reminding me of the vitality of the day. As I scroll down the page entitled "Schedule," I am again regaled by Cynthia Leitich Smith's address and note to visit her award-winning website (<http://cynthialeitichsmith.com>) and blog (<http://cynthialeitichsmith.blogspot.com>). Insightful and energetic, Smith said to never set a story in a locale without spending some quality time in it. Hmm...my latest manuscript is set in 1930s Paris. *PWD Resolution No. 1: Get tickets for Paris; invent a time machine.*



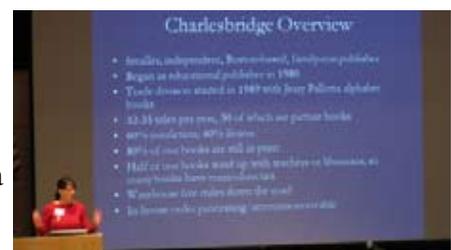
Next, in the editors/agent panel, co-Regional Advisor Lisa Bierman posed everyone's burning questions to panelists Nick Eliopoulos (Random House Books for Young Readers), Yolanda LeRoy (Charlesbridge), Michael Stearns (Upstart Crow Literary), Alisha Niehaus (Dial Books for Young Readers), and Stacy Cantor (Walker Books for Young Readers). Eliopoulos' analogy of himself as a midwife to his authors' work still

resonates: He's seen this all before and he knows it's going to hurt, but in the end all he can do is encourage you to push. *PWD Resolution No. 2: Take Smith's advice to write across genres, and pen an angst-ridden YA novel to get the chance to work with Eliopoulos for the comedy alone.*

I push on as well, finding myself back in the midst of Yolanda LeRoy's introduction to picture books. Reminding us that the art style really informs the tone of the picture book, LeRoy points out how seemingly small details like trim size, typeface, and even the paper's weight can shape the experience of the storytelling. LeRoy summed up her love of children's literature with a rousing rendition of "There's No People Like Book People," based on the Ethel Merman classic. *PWD Resolution No. 3: Use jazz hands when pitching my next picture book.*

As if her overview of middle-grade fiction wasn't enough—citing voice as the heart of stories told to a reading audience that is still confused and forgiving and tapped into the suspension of disbelief—Alisha Niehaus' literal literary dismount was more than enough to keep her words in our memories. *PWD Resolution No. 4: Take gymnastics and master the cartwheel. Get back into yoga class.*

Back in my folder, I find my breakout session tickets. A new feature of PWD this year, the specialty breakout sessions allowed attendees to focus on subjects of particular relevance to them, from the basics of the business of writing for children to finding an agent for one's novel. Presenters Esther Hershenhorn, Carmela Martino, and Beverly Patt answered a variety of craft questions and inspired us to keep on with our work. Jenny Meyerhoff



advised us to write the very best manuscript we could, to send it off, to stop obsessing—and to move on to our next project. Clad in “Paris Pan” purple, Cynthea Liu asked us to ruminate on why we write for young people and to do so with purpose. These morning and afternoon sessions were ideal for getting out of our chairs and through the corridors, reconnecting our bodies and minds, and networking with fellow attendees. *PWD Resolution No. 5: E-mail all those I promised to e-mail a month and a half ago. You know who you are. I’ll get in touch right away. Really.*

Co-Regional Advisor Alice McGinty reminded us of all the help and support available to us throughout the year in many forms. From the listserv moderated by Jim Danielson, to the *Prairie Wind* edited by Heather Banks, to the critique groups coordinated by Teresa Owens Smith, there are a myriad of resources at our fingertips. Writers’ and Illustrators’ Networks pepper the state, thanks to the tireless efforts of our network representatives. I finger the submission stickers with a sense of urgency and come upon Stacy Cantor’s bibliography of nonfiction books, more than enough to make up for her not doing a cartwheel or channeling the spirit of Abraham Lincoln or Jesse Owens into our midst. *PWD Resolution No. 6: Forgive myself for never having learned how to do a cartwheel.*



Michael Stearns inspired us with his new agency and viewpoint of an editor-turned-agent. Then Cynthia Leitich Smith’s final address about writing across genres might help me to break my writer’s block. A writer could even use collage or illustration, and an illustrator could try poetry or prose, to break down his or her story into its elements and build it up again. *PWD Resolution No. 7: Attend the upcoming Words in the Woods retreat at Lake Springfield this summer.*

As I get to the page on my folder labeled “Thank You!” acknowledging the efforts of so many who made the day successful, I am reminded how grateful I am for having been able to participate in this special program. When all is said and done, it’s the encouraging words of other attendees at the conference’s Mix ‘n’ Mingle that come to the fore in my memory. I’m further inspired by colleagues and friends who remember my current and past projects, who’ve shared their stories in classes with me, who inquire about my continued progress, and who ask about my characters by name. *PWD Resolution No. 8: Give back by becoming one of the volunteers Assistant Regional Advisor Sara Shacter will thank at PWD 2010.*

Rifling through the pages, I come upon my picture book manuscript. I resolve to attack the revisions suggested in my pithy critique. But first I take a break to read “Book-Tour-Alex”—honoree Kathi Baron’s debut novel, *Shattered*. After all, in her keynote address, Cynthia Leitich Smith said that reading counts as writing time!

Deborah Topolski is resolved to finishing a dummy for her PWD-critiqued manuscript, Baker’s Dozen, by the end of January. Really. See some of its illustrations, submitted to the Bologna Children’s Book Fair, at <http://www.debrahtopolski.com>.

Confessions from Backstage: The Writing of a Children's Musical

By Lynn B. Sanders

Ever think about turning your story into a musical? If you've created an engaging story, perhaps it's time to bring it to life onstage!

I'm happy to share my own creative journey with you about creating a kid's musical, *A Whooper's Tale: The Incredible Story of Tex*. Where do I begin? Let's start at the very beginning. (I feel a lyric coming on: "A very good place to start...") O.K., I'll get serious. Let's turn the clock back to 1995—the year I first learned about a most unusual true story.



As the scriptwriter on a project for Amoco, I traveled to Baraboo, Wisconsin, with videographer Rick Erwin in order to craft a video about Amoco's support of the International Crane Foundation (ICF). Rick and I needed to educate Amoco's international marketing managers about Amoco's support of this noteworthy environmental nonprofit, which is dedicated to saving the world's cranes.

As I discovered, ICF is the only organization in the world that harbors all fifteen species of cranes. Of course, I learned a lot more by interviewing the Amoco executives and the famous cofounder of ICF, Dr. George Archibald. After walking around the grounds of this magical place, and admiring so many tall prehistoric birds, I fell in love with this hidden treasure in our midst.

Off camera, George shared one of his personal stories with me. In the beginning, George had a tough time finding the rarest of cranes—the whooping crane. George wanted to collect each crane species for education, research, and conservation purposes. He especially wanted to do captive breeding to help the cranes survive. But whoopers weren't so easily found. Eventually, George was able to bring a misfit named Tex to his place.

Tex was born in Texas, and strangely enough, she believed she was human. She'd been raised alone by a zookeeper who didn't know about imprinting. Imprinting means that birds get attached to whoever raises them during their first hours of life. So, after living with the zookeeper during her first two weeks, Tex felt her real family was human. As a result, she spurned other cranes. Meanwhile, the world's scientists needed Tex to lay an egg so she could help save her species from extinction. What could George, a dedicated ornithologist, do?



Well, I won't give away the whole story. But in my case, a challenge of the musical (and the book that will also be published) involved how a scientist gets a bird to lay an egg artificially. In all my research, I found no children's books on the topic of artificial insemination. (That's undoubtedly not something that all elementary science teachers need to discuss with their classes.) How did we deal sensitively with this topic, without getting adults concerned that something strange is going on between a man and a bird? If you attend the show, you'll see. (We're doing more revisions as I write this!)

The major difference between writing books and musicals is that a musical requires a creative team from the start. A musical involves a book writer, a lyricist, and a composer. Sometimes, one person performs multiple roles. (It depends upon how much you want to handle.) In my case, I came up with the concept of the show and submitted it to the staff at Theatre Building Chicago (TBC). As a

member of their Writers Workshop program, I was able to get support in finding a great book writer and composer. TBC's management liked my concept and helped me find two excellent partners: a book writer, Jenny Stafford, and a composer, Russ Coutinho. I chose to write the lyrics.

Just like writing a book for children, a musical needs the following elements: 1) characters, 2) strong desire, 3) culminating conflicts, 4) crisis, and 5) resolution.

In a musical, the book writer writes the words in each scene that are not sung. The lyricist extracts the emotional element from the scene and transforms that content into a song. And, of course, the composer brings the lyrics to life. Our team reviewed each other's work, making comments or suggestions. Our final feedback came from the theatre director, who would point out specific spots for final tweaking.

In this case, after I submitted my concept, Jenny made some changes and then I added other changes. Next, Jenny worked up a musical outline (using scenes instead of chapters), and after I approved that, we were ready to create the musical.

How do you write a musical? We did it one scene at a time. Imagine the game "Pass the Baton," and you'll understand how this creative process works. Jenny would write a scene, and Russ and I would review it, making comments or suggestions. Then I'd study the scene, find the emotional center, and rework the words into lyrics. Lyrics can be used for comedy, drama, or an emotional change, which is called a musical scene. (The easiest example of a musical scene is from the show *Carousel*, when Billy Bigelow delivers a soliloquy about having a son, then realizes that he might have a daughter. That sudden shift in thought influences his decision to do whatever it takes to make money.)

Now, getting back to the creative process, here's how it worked. After laboring over lyrics, I'd e-mail my work to my partners for their feedback. After they were satisfied, Russ would create music to my lyrics, and then it was his turn for feedback. Meanwhile, Jenny would write the next scene. Russ also would send us audio files on the computer so we could listen to his compositions.

As you might suspect, a children's musical must keep kids involved. Even during an hour-long performance, small children could get restless. We've included physical activity in our show so kids can move around. Audience participation is also a fun way to share the story.

Once a month, our team met at the Writers Workshop in Chicago, getting feedback from the group and our teacher, John Sparks. Even though we'd feel nervous before presenting our scenes, the process flowed very smoothly. It took a year to finish the first draft of the show. As John reminded everyone, "Make notes, not changes." Even after getting feedback, we were told to keep plugging ahead and avoid making changes until we finished writing all the scenes. Otherwise, we could fall into the trap of spending a whole year tweaking the first scene and never making it to the finish. It was good advice.

After completing our manuscript, we moved to a table reading. It was a chance to sit around a table and listen to others read our script from start to finish. After more feedback and revisions, we were approved for a staged reading on June 17, 2009. That was really exciting. A staged reading takes place onstage like a finished show, and although the talent reads from their manuscripts, they've rehearsed the story well.

Our staged reading took place in front of a live audience. Many friends trekked out on a Monday night to witness the "birth" of *A Whooper's Tale: The Incredible Story of Tex*. Although I sat in the audience, my nerves were on edge. What would people think? Would they laugh at the funny lines? Would they even like our show?

Fortunately, they did. It was glorious. Like floating on a cloud. I relished the singing, laughter, and applause, which reverberated in my soul. Words can't fully express the joy of seeing your own story live, breathe, sing, and dance.

As an added bonus, our show was selected to become one of three children's shows to be fully performed this year. (Costumes, props, lighting, the works!) Once our newest draft is complete, the story will take on a life of its own with actors, theatre director, musical director, stage director, and crew.

So, how about it? Perhaps YOUR story could be transformed into a children's musical. If you've got a spirit of adventure, consider joining the Writers Workshop at Theatre Building Chicago (<http://www.theatrebuildingchicago.org/workshop.php>). Who knows? Your show could become the next *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, or *The Addams Family*. Try it, you'll like it!

A Whooper's Tale: The Incredible Story of Tex will be performed at Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont, from April 21–May 6, 2010. You're invited to attend. There also will be an evening dress rehearsal and probably two Saturdays added to the current schedule. Visit <http://www.theatrebuildingchicago.org/musicalsforkids.php> for more information.

Lynn Sanders is a writer and video producer whose passion is creating stories that educate, motivate, and inspire audiences. For the past twenty-four years, her writing has helped promote nonprofit, corporate, and small businesses (<http://www.parkaveproductions.com>). Lynn received her first writing award in second grade for a Chicago clean-up poem. Since then, her accomplishments have included writing the lyrics of WGN-TV's "Chicago's Very Own, Channel 9" (with Lou Rawls), a nationally award-winning patient safety video Things You Should Know Before Entering The Hospital (<http://www.patientsafetyvideo.com>), and a number of published articles and poems. Lynn's first children's book, Social Justice: How You Can Make a Difference, was published by Capstone Press in December 2008. The "George & Tex" manuscript is still pending with her publisher, and she hopes it will be published in 2010.