

CONFESSIONS AND SECRETS OF A VETERAN SCBWI CONFERENCE-GOER
(Or, Do As I Say, Not As I Did)
by Esther Hershenhorn

Lucky you! You're about to attend an SCBWI Conference! Soon you'll have the opportunity to meet the very people you need to know to both ready your words and art and connect you with your readers. Networking, of course, is the vehicle for meeting them.

Equally important, networking connects you to your fellow children's book creators and Children's Book Community members - people who share your passion, people who validate both you and your stories.

I confess: I didn't always network effectively. But *you* can, using the following secrets I've learned since attending my first SCBWI Conference in 1986.

Do your homework!

Before you arrive, visit the Conference website and study the Conference write-up. Follow the links to interviews with any and all speakers. Next read the books of faculty members – i.e. the presenters, the moderators, the panelists, the critiquers. Know their stories, their publishers, their awards. Know their agencies, their professional connections. Maximize available social media opportunities, too. Visit faculty members' websites and Facebook pages. Read their blogs. Follow their tweets. Their words, and yours too, will be that much more meaningful when you finally connect.

Consider an individual manuscript or portfolio consultation.

A manuscript or portfolio consultation offers you another point of view from a tried-and-true professional. Listen. Look. Be open to suggestions. Use this up-close-and-personal time well to ask questions that are on your mind, not only about your submitted manuscript or portfolio, but also about your career and publishing.

Choose carefully when submitting your work. Do you want to submit a work-in-progress that needs critical attention? Or, do you want to submit your best work to date?

Don't leave home without your manuscripts and art samples!

Throughout the Conference, writers and illustrators may group instantly by format and genre for constructive feed-back.

These are wonderful opportunities to share your work with interested and knowledgeable colleagues.

Even if you are *already* a Writing or Illustrating Group member, there is much to learn from individuals who are not as personally invested in your work as are your at-home colleagues.

Remember, too: there is much to be learned from hearing and reading *someone else's* manuscript or seeing *someone else's* work.

Bring business cards.

You need not be published to carry a business card!

Many attendees tuck their cards behind their name badge, for easy storing.

Make sure, too, you bring a bag or container for the cards *you're* gathering. Note on the back something personal about the person, to reference if and when you connect post-Conference - a book title, a publisher, a subject matter, a home town.

Remember to also bring a bag/box/envelope for your receipts for tax-deductible book sales, food, transportation, etc.

Cell-phone picture-taking simplifies the above.

If offered at the Conference, participate in and/or attend a Portfolio Display.

If you're an illustrator, ready a portfolio and register for the Portfolio Display. Maximize any opportunities to connect with art directors and fellow illustrators.

If you choose *not* to participate, attend anyway and learn from your competition. Study a portfolio's organization and arrangement. Note art samples, business cards, displays and clever hand-outs. Listen to and note the responses of those around you.

If you're a writer, attend the Portfolio Display to discover a style that best suits your picture book or your novel's interior art. Again, note and collect promotional materials. Consider possibilities you hadn't considered. Get story ideas! Discover an illustrator who might be a match for *your* manuscript.

Meet, greet, eat, sip and mingle at any and all Receptions, Social Events, announced or spur-of-the-moment Gatherings and Book Sales honoring published attendees.

Attend as many featured presentations as you physically, mentally and emotionally can.

At any given Conference, luminaries abound. Faculty members include distinguished authors, illustrators, agents, editors, art directors, publishers, industry professionals and academicians. You never know when you'll hear that one Nugget that will nourish your soul for the next ten years, that one statement that gives you a path into the story you're telling.

Take notes. Give yourself permission to put your Life on hold. Take in every word, from the opening Keynote to the closing send-off.

But, if your mind *should* wander, or for some reason the speaker *doesn't* engage you, ask yourself why. Someday *you'll* be up there presenting, too.

Find your novel's character in the crowd, or perhaps, a secondary character's hair-cut. Observe. Listen. Watch. Sketch. And, duck outside for that sunshine fix. You may well be joined by that one person you didn't know you needed to meet.

Consider your *immediate* needs when selecting Workshop Sessions.

Most Conferences blend featured presentations, workshops, panels, roundtables and break-out sessions. Note the intended audience of each: perhaps picture book writers, novelists, poets, writers of nonfiction, illustrators.

Think what you need to know *now* about (1) your story and/or art, (2) the creative process, (3) your craft, (4) marketing and targeting your manuscript or art, (5) the Children's Book World and (6) your career. Try to select workshops that offer a balance of the above topics.

Know, from doing your homework, which authors and illustrators, editors and art directors interest you, which speakers can shed light on your current project, which presenters are likely to be receptive to your work.

Consider your *future* needs when selecting additional programs.

Choose at least one workshop that focuses on a career issue - i.e. contracts, Internet marketing, book reviews, school visits.

Be open to possibilities.

Choose at least one workshop that you *think* does not pertain to you now and never will - i.e. the fundamentals of art licensing if you're an illustrator, deconstructing the teen voice if you write early chapter books, writing historical fiction if you write middle grade nonfiction, podcasting.

If your best friend writes picture books, attend a workshop on *her* behalf and learn something for the two of you. Self-promotion ideas, the review process, jumping genres could be of interest to your Writing Group. Collect hand-outs to Xerox upon your return.

Divide and conquer, with a friend *or* a stranger.

It's obviously impossible to attend every session, workshop and roundtable.

Take copious - and legible - notes. Collect every single hand-out. Then offer to share them with another attendee at a meal. Better yet, arrange to take and exchange notes with a Chapter colleague or roommate, or even a stranger. Double - or even triple - the sessions you attend. It's a great way to make connections *and* learn.

Arrange with your Regional Advisor to volunteer to write up a session for your local SCBWI Chapter newsletter, Listserv or Network. If possible, sketch the main speakers, the room, the exhibits, to create another way for others to vicariously attend. Return with photos and video clips to upload to your Listserv or website, giving others that "You are there!" experience.

Blog! Tweet! Shoot photos and video non-stop.

Note: presenter/organizational permission is necessary to record any speaker.

Make a point to connect with your Regional Advisor, Assistant Regional Advisor, Network Rep and fellow SCBWI members.

Let your RA, ARA and local Network Representative know *you*, if possible – what you write, what you illustrate and where you live within your region.

Introduce yourself, and the person on your right, to the person on the left and one sofa seat over. Read the name tags and the attendees' hometown names as if you were planning a scavenger hunt.

If possible, post on your local Listserv, Chapter Facebook page or on SCBWI's Discussion Boards, *prior* to the Conference, to **pre**-connect: it's always nice to recognize at least one friendly face in the crowd.

If there's a Conference Bulletin Board in the registration area, check for messages concerning rides, freelance editors, graphic designers, Writing Groups, like-minded creative souls, etc. See who's looking for what. Magic is out there.

Let your Inner Child attend the Conference, too.

You needn't *always* be on task to network effectively. Inner children can network, too. In fact, they excel at connecting.

Enter (and win!) a session's or luncheon's creative contest.

If a group walk presents itself, consider grabbing your gym shoes.

Join the crowds, or stand in line, and meet your new best friend.

Be wherever attendees gather - at the Book Display, at morning coffee or lunchtime gatherings, and Book Sale Sessions, where thinking ahead for Christmas and Birthdays is seriously recommended.

Serendipity and synchronicity reign.

Connect with the person behind you and you may well meet someone who happens to know someone who happens to need a freelance science writer. Introduce yourself to the member beside you and learn about the upcoming Conference in your grandmother's home town, or a library that's looking for a storyteller, or an MFA in Writing for Children program or a local reading council literacy grant to cover your next school visit.

Meet the illustrator who knows *another* illustrator who's looking for a book cover to include in his portfolio.

A new local small press, a Mommy-blogger reviewer, a business card designer, bookstore recommendations, podcast software, a just-opened agency, a book promotion specialist: you can discover all these and more attending any SCBWI Conference.

Don't forget: everything you learned in Kindergarten *still* applies.

According to Webster, *networking* is "the developing of contacts or exchanging of information, as to further a career."

The word *exchange* implies *two* people. Be willing to share - your experiences, your insights, your expertise, your knowledge.

Include others - in conversations, in introductions, at meals, at gatherings.

Express appreciation.

Be considerate. This is *not* the occasion to query a guest speaker for the name of his or her editor, art director or agent. Nor is it the occasion to hand an editor, art director or agent your manuscript or art samples - *unless*, of course, they request you do so. Stalking publishing personnel, especially near rest rooms, restaurants, hot tubs or elevators, is also *not* recommended. Conference Faculty Members announce their preferred contact instructions loudly, clearly and often.

Stay in touch. Once home or on the plane, train or bus, review your notes, revisit your Chapter's posts, review your business cards, read the Conference report in your Chapter's newsletter, read - or reread - the books and materials of the speakers you heard. Share your experience with your Writing Group and/or your Chapter and/or your Listserv. Keep your valuable connections alive and well, in Real Time and Space, in Cyberspace, too. Visit your SCBWI Chapter's website to recapture, in photographs and words, the Conference from start to finish.

My final secret? I confess: I earnestly believe we are six people away from the person we need to know. Some call this theory Six Degrees of Separation. I call it Six Degrees of SCBWI!

Believe it or not, good ol' Serendipity attends every single SCBWI Conference around the world, making sure you meet at least *five* of those six people you need to know.

If you do as I say, and not as I did, you'll soon discover Kodak Moments you hadn't even imagined.

Chicagoan Esther Hershenhorn authors award-winning picture books and middle grade fiction, teaches Writing for Children classes and coaches writers of all ages to help them tell their stories. A Regional Advisor Emeritus, she served on SCBWI's Board of Advisors the past nine years. No one believes her when she shares this Truth: once upon a time and not that long ago, she was very, very shy. Visit her at: www.estherhershenhorn.com