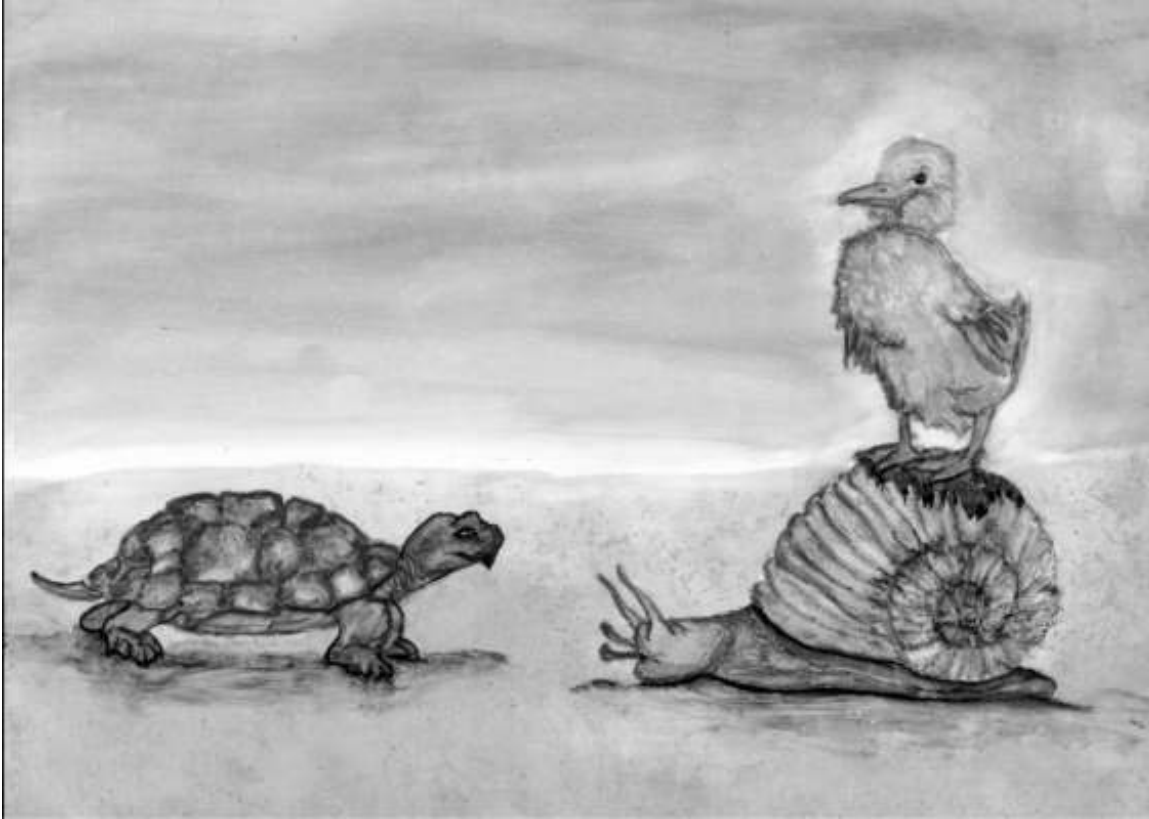


Western Tale Spinner

Spring 2009 Volume Four Number One



By Natalie Smith

A newsletter published by the Western Canadian Chapter of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Information published in this newsletter does not constitute an endorsement by SCBWI and/or SCBWI-Western Canada.

Note from the Editor:

It's Spring at last and I'm sure we're all ready for it! Along with spring comes this issue of the Western Tale Spinner, now in our fourth year. This edition has a few articles written by first timers, including two pieces on writer's conferences. It also has some cute illustrations by Natalie Smith, who is fairly new to the Vancouver area.

It was a delight to assemble the newsletter this time around. You all work so hard at your submissions, researching and getting them in on time in the middle of your busy careers. It's truly appreciated by all who read the Western Tale Spinner. Go and grab a glass of sparkling lemonade, sit in that bit of sunshine before it disappears, and enjoy the Spring 2009 edition of your own newsletter.

Happy writing! *Loretta Houben*

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Artwork by Natalie Smith

Welcome to our new Assistant Regional Advisor, Simon Rose!



Simon Rose is Western Canada's new assistant regional advisor for SCBWI, and will be working in cooperation with Ken Kilback, our Regional Advisor, to bring events and information about SCBWI activities to the area in which he lives, which is Calgary, Alberta.

Simon writes science fiction and fantasy novels for young readers. He also offers

freelance writing services, and has a variety of services for writers, including editing, critiquing, and manuscript evaluation. Please visit his website for more information: simonrose.com Welcome, Simon!

GOOD NEWS

Compiled by Joan Winter

Can learning arithmetic be fun for kids??? You bet!
SCBWI member, Kari-Lynn Winters is pleased to introduce her second book, *aRHYTHMetic: A book and a half of poetry and math* (Gumboot Books, 2009). Co-written with Tiffany Stone and Lori Sherritt-Fleming and illustrated by Scot Ritchie, this book is ideal for home and classroom use-the rollicking rhymes explore basic concepts of arithmetic and rhythm. Math+Rhythms+Rhymes=fun that will bounce you right out of your seat!

Your book sounds like it adds up to a lot of fun, Kari-Lynn. Congratulations!

Sally Rogow's book on priests and nuns has been published. The title is "Priests and Nuns Who Saved People From the Holocaust". It has been published by the Holy Fire Publishing Company.
Congratulations, Sally. Well done!

Sheri Radford's new book, *Penelope and the Preposterous Birthday Party*, is in bookstores now - finally! It's the third title in the Penelope series, and it has already received a good review in *Quill & Quire*. Sheri will be appearing at the Word Weavers conference for students in Fort St. John in May. Photos of some of Sheri's many school visits can be viewed on her website:
www.sheriradford.com.

Way to go, Sheri, in publishing your third title in The Penelope series.
Congratulations!

I, Joan Winter, cannot claim to have written a book (I wish!), but I am still very much enjoying writing short stories and articles for children's magazines. My first attempt at PET HOROSCOPES was published in *Zamoof!* magazine March, 2009, and my story "Me-De-Ocher and the Ping Pong Game" will be published by *Zamoof!* in May, 2010.

Two years and some months after I first queried it, my article "Amazing Sandcastles," complete with supporting photos, is scheduled for publication in the April issue of *AppleSeeds*.

Publishing a book is a huge achievement. Bravo Kari-Lynn, Sally and Sheri! You are an inspiration to us all.

Event Horizon

By Ken Kilback

Conferences and Events

The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators—Eastern Canada Chapter presents its annual event, **The Spring Thing**, on **Friday through Sunday, April 24, 25, and 26 2009** in Barrie, Ontario. Featured guests are Kathy Lowinger from Tundra Books, Lisa Graff from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and Karen Li from Kids Can Press. For registration and conference details, go to www.scbwicanada.org/east/events.

The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators—Western Canada Chapter presents its first annual **WestCwic: Western Canada Children's Writers & Illustrators Conference** on **Saturday May 9 2009** in Burnaby, B.C.

Featured speakers are Alison Acheson (writer and freelance editor), Crystal Stranaghan and Jared Hunt from Gumboot Books, Kallie George from Simply Read Books, and R. David Stephens from Tradewind Books. For registration and conference details, go to www.scbwicanada.org/west.

The 32nd Annual **Vancouver International Children's Festival** takes place from **May 11 through May 18** at Vanier Park in Vancouver. Lots of fun stuff for kids and parents and children's writers and illustrators alike! There are performers from all across Canada, as well as from the United States, Scotland, and Brazil, who will be showcasing their talents in dance, storytelling, puppetry, drama, singing, and acrobatics. For more information, go to www.childrensfestival.ca.

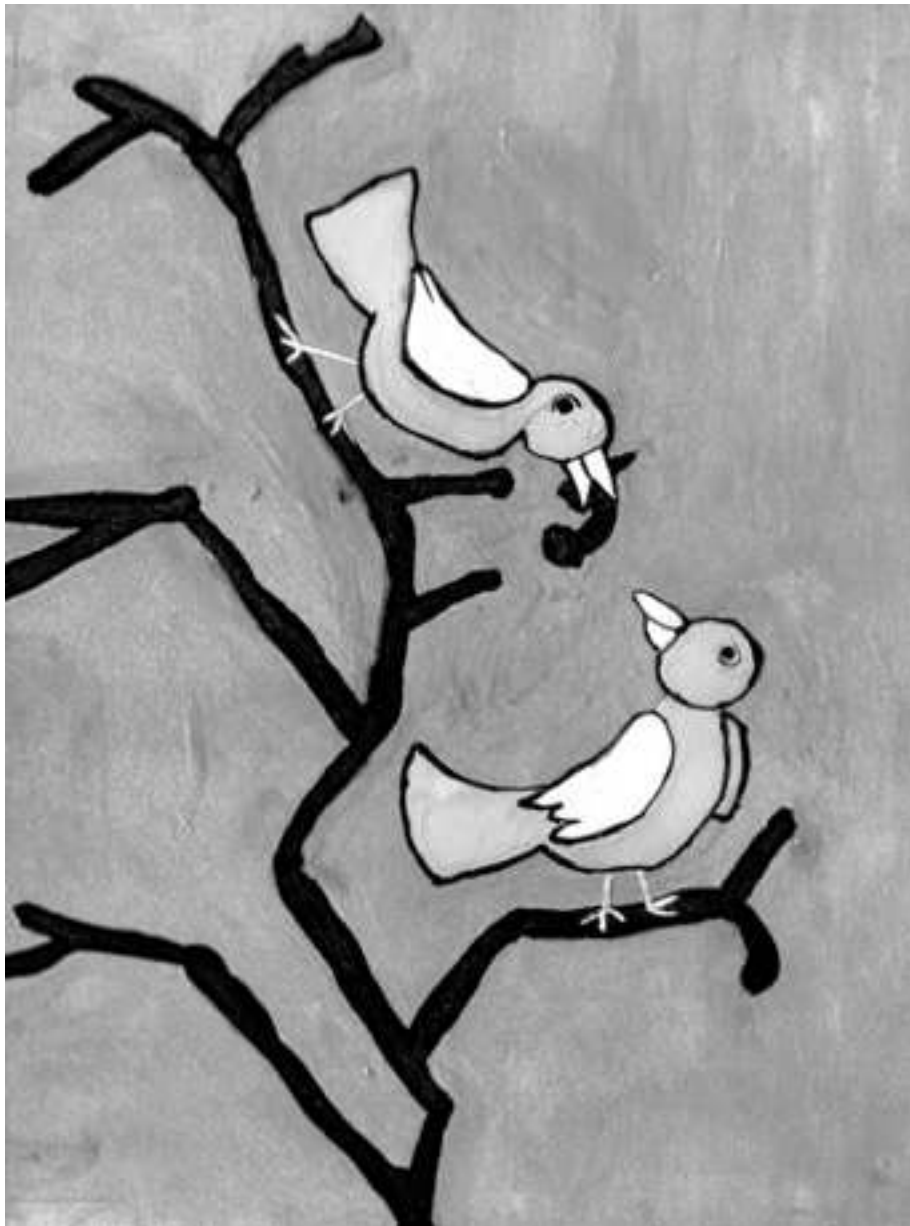
The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators—Western Washington Chapter presents its **18th Annual Writing and Illustrating for Children Conference** on **Saturday through Sunday, May 16 and 17 2009** in Redmond, Washington. Featured guests include authors Ellen Hopkins, Nina Laden, and Jon Scieszka; author/illustrators Grace Lin and Adam Rex; agents Steven Malk from Writers House, Michael Stearns from Firebrand Literary, Nathan Bransford from Curtis Brown, and Kelly Sonnack from Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency; and Joelle Dujardin from Highlights, Elizabeth Parisi from Scholastic, Connie Hsu from Little Brown, Krista Marino from Delacorte, and Sarah Shumway from Harper. Go to www.scbwi-washington.org for registration and conference details.

The 7th **Oregon Coast Children's Book Writers Workshop Summer 2009** is happening the week of **July 13 through 17 2009** in Oceanside, Oregon. The instructors for this year's summer workshop are authors David Greenberg, Eric Kimmel, Pamela Smith Hill, Tom Birdseye, and Margaret Anderson; agent Susan Cohen from Writers House; and editors Molly O'Neill from Harper and Jill Dembowski from Little, Brown. Go to www.occbww.com for registration and conference details.

Vancouver's 15th Annual **The Word on the Street** festival will be held on **Sunday September 27 2009** from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at Library Square in downtown Vancouver. Go to <http://thewordonthestreet.ca/vancouver/home> for details as they become available.

The **Surrey International Writers' Conference** is happening **Friday through Sunday October 23, 24 and 25 2009** in Surrey, B.C. From the world of children's writing and illustrating, last year's guest speakers included authors Carol Berg, Meg Tilly, Eric Walters, Maggie de Vries, kc dyer, Deborah Ellis, Lee Edward Fodi, C.C. Humphreys, and James McCann; publishers Crystal Stranaghan from Gumboot Books and Michael Katz from Tradewind Books; and editors Susan Chang from Tor and Julie Scheina from Little, Brown. This year's program is not yet posted, but check in at www.siwc.ca for registration and conference details as they become available.

The **Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators, and Performers** presents its annual **Packaging Your Imagination** conference in **November 2009**. Last year's featured guest speakers included authors Marie-Louise Gay, Kit Pearson, Kathy Stinson, Julie Lawson, and Celia Godkin. This year's program is not yet posted, but check in at www.canscaip.org/pyi for registration and conference details as they become available.



By Natalie Smith

SCBWI New York:

A High Yield Investment

By Lindsey Carmichael

The SCBWI Winter Conference is a sizeable investment. Tuition is substantial. Time off work, airfare, lodging and Broadway add up fast. As a beginning writer, I wasn't sure attending would be worth it. But I scraped together airmiles, found a cheap hotel, and gambled. Here's what I learned about the top ten returns on my investment.

1) Critiques Are Worth The Cash

My novel has some problems. I now have professional suggestions for solving them. I've also learned that my first line is great and my character's voice compelling; since I've never been a teenaged boy, this is wonderfully encouraging. Another unexpected, but priceless insight: according to Courtney Bongiolatti, Associate Editor at Simon & Schuster, unagented manuscripts don't even make it up the stairs. Save your postage!

2) The Wrong Kind of Attention Will Cost You

If your story is set on a farm, do *not* wear a bright yellow shirt plastered with paper cutouts of barnyard animals. And don't insist that the agent leading your critique leave with your business card. Trust me, he won't need it to remember you. Neither will his colleagues, who now know your name.

3) Your Bookseller is Your New Best Friend

Because children's booksellers (and librarians) work directly with readers, they are an invaluable source of market information. While reading the books they suggest, don't forget the acknowledgement pages: the best way to learn what an editor or agent is looking for is to study their work.

4) Write What You Don't Know

Because, as editor Richard Jackson pointed out, most of what you *do* know is terribly dull! Put stock in research and imagination. Your writing will pay dividends.

5) A Good Agent is Priceless

It took Jay Asher twelve years and four agents to sell his utterly brilliant first novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In today's challenging market, agents are more important than ever. Things to keep in mind if you're in the market: 1) Multiple submissions are acceptable provided you inform all parties before accepting an offer of representation. 2) If you've already pitched to publishers, your query letter should say so.

6) Expect to Be Edited

The book that's accepted is not the book that will be published. Jordan Brown, editor at Walden Pond Press, says, "I acquire an author's vision for a manuscript, not the manuscript itself." According to Krista Marino (Delacorte), "sometimes 10% genius is enough for acceptance." The remaining 90% is an author-editor collaboration.

Remember that even E. B. White got edited, and your editor's goal is the same as yours – to bankroll a bestseller.

7) It's a Brutal Business

50% of published books lose money; 45% break even; 1-5% pay for all the rest. If you're already envisioning sequels, be warned – your series will live or die based on book one's sales. Self-promotion is critical to any book's success.

As far as contracts go, according to Michael Stearns (Firebrand Literary), there's nothing like an unearned advance to kill a career. For long-term income, focus on royalties.

8) It's Not a Downturn, It's a Correction

Yes, some houses are feeling the pinch, but most speakers weren't unduly concerned about the economy. For one thing, spending on children is always cut last. In addition, sales increased during the Great Depression, because books were the most accessible form of escape. In any economic climate, great work will always find a home.

9) SCBWI is On Your Side

Many SCBWI members met their future business partners at SCBWI conferences (e.g. Jill Alexander, *The Sweetheart of Prosper County*, Fall 2009). Attendees, after all, can submit to agents and editors who otherwise accept no unsolicited work. Beyond these opportunities, the SCBWI offers publications, grants and prizes, including the Tomie dePaola Portfolio Award for illustrators (as of 2009, a permanent prize).

10) We Make Things Beyond Livings: We Make Art

So said Richard Jackson, while challenging attendees to keep meaning alive in our work. One way to do that? Character. As author Jack Gantos put it, "Our readers will change only if the character does." Great books, with great characters, change readers for ever. Author Bruce Hale looked at it a slightly different way. "As authors and illustrators," he said, "we mine the stuff of the unconscious. Keep digging."

To me, one conference insight was worth more than all the others. I belong to a community – a community of fellow writers, illustrators, agents and editors, all passionately devoted to the creation of outstanding literature for children. Long and hard

and costly as the struggle may be, we persevere because our work is important, and ultimately worth the price.

So, work hard, learn all you can, and get thee to a conference. Maybe you'll see me there.

Lindsey Carmichael has a PhD in wildlife population genetics, a middle grade science book proposal, and most of a teen fantasy novel. She is eagerly awaiting publication of her first accepted article, "Survival of the Slyest," in *Highlights for Children*. This ode to the SCBWI conference is dedicated to her mother, Ann Carmichael (March 11 1953 – March 9 2009), who insisted she go.

Word on the Street

By Ken Kilback

SCBWI—Western Canada will be at Vancouver's Word on the Street this fall!

This year's Word on the Street festival will be held on **Sunday September 27 2009**, from **11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.** at **Library Square** in downtown Vancouver. The festival runs along Homer and Hamilton Streets, between Robson and Georgia.

The purpose of the festival is to promote literacy by showcasing the literature of Canadian artists to as broad an audience as possible. SCBWI—Western Canada has reserved half a table at this year's Word on the Street for the following reasons: (1) to be a part of the focus on literacy, beginning with our children; (2) to promote our local chapter of SCBWI; (3) to promote the events sponsored by our local chapter of SCBWI; and (4) to promote the published books of SCBWI writers and illustrators from Western Canada.

In order to help pay for the half-table at Word on the Street (even a half-table is expensive!), we are offering to promote the books of our region's writers and illustrators for a small fee:

- \$5— for one copy of one of your titles.
- \$10—for one copy each of two or three of your titles.
- \$15—for one copy each of four of your titles.
- \$20—for one copy each of five to seven of your titles.

The books must have been published by a traditional publisher, meaning you did not pay for any part of the pre-publishing or publishing process. In

addition, please note that we are only looking for **one** copy of each of your titles. **We will not be selling your books; we will only be advertising your books.** The purpose here is to promote what you have written and/or illustrated.

We are hoping not to send the books back to you after the Word on the Street festival has ended. Instead, with your permission, we would like to be able to: (a) award individual or groups of books in a free draw for people who drop by our table during the festival; or (b) hand out individual or groups of books for free (in lieu of a draw) to people who drop by the table in the last 15 to 30 minutes of the festival (between 4:30 and 5:00 p.m.) ; or (c) donate individual or groups of books to a school or public library.

If you are interested in having your book promoted at Word on the Street 2009, then please contact me at kenkilback@shaw.ca for details about where to mail the books and also to let me know your choice for what to do with your book(s) following the event. **Make cheques payable to: SCBWI—Western Canada**

In addition, if you are interested in volunteering some time at the table on the day of the event, then please contact me at kenkilback@shaw.ca .

A Literary Stimulus Package:

The Sixth Bond Children's Literature Conference

by Lois Harris

On Saturday, March 7, 2009 in spite of the possibility of snow, over 200 illustrators, librarians, students, and writers met in Bellingham at Western Washington University for the sixth annual Bond Children's Literature Conference.

Here's my interpretation of what the four award-winning speakers encouraged us to do in our writing and/or illustrating.

Joan Bauer, a young adult author of nine novels including the 2001 Newbery Honor Book, *Hope Was Here*, talked about the power of fiction and sharing your tough times. "The worst things that happen can enlarge our heart." She uses her own experiences to give her teen readers "a coat rack to hang their ideas on." Her characters don't fit stereotypes, and she advised, "Give your characters their head."

Kadir Nelson, illustrator, and most recently writer/illustrator recipient of the Coretta Scott King Author and Illustrator Award and the Sibert Medal for *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*, said he tries "to create images of people who demonstrate a sense of hope and nobility...to show the strength and integrity of the human being and the human spirit."

As a child, he didn't like to read stories and spent his time drawing, and reading a series of library books on how to draw. Later on, he didn't know why, he was placed in an advanced English class taught by a tough teacher. He learned how to write an essay. After college, he pursued an art career and worked in the movie industry awhile before illustrating children's books.

Eight years ago, he started research on negro baseball teams and became hooked. He wanted to illustrate the story, but his publisher couldn't find an author to write the text. The authors they had in mind were too busy. Kadir decided to write it himself, but said he didn't know a thing about writing, except essays. So he organized the book into a series of essays, like his English teacher taught him, and his editor loved it.

Next, he researched the material for the illustrations: the color of uniforms...was the player left-handed or right-handed?...where the home team sat in each baseball field, and conducted interviews with old baseball league players before he did the artwork. He stressed that historical artwork must be accurate and ended by saying, "Take something negative and turn it into something beautiful." Look at *We Are The Ship*, and you'll see that's exactly what he did.

After lunch, Sara Pennypacker, author of the *Clementine* books and other series, said she writes to connect the reader to his or her tribe. She hopes to contribute something of substance, and kids need help with the self-awareness question. "The reader must have the open heart of the character to step into and then will relate." She likes to find an injustice and write about justice. Sarah writes for herself. "It is a joy."

Brian Selznick's presentation gave the audience a taste of his creativity. He wrote and illustrated the 2008 Caldecott Medal winner, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* and got the story idea 20 years ago. Over time, he struggled with how to tell it as he pursued his career and eventually became a children's illustrator and writer. Finally, he decided to weave two separate story threads which would turn into one at the story's end. After many revisions and watching old movies for illustration ideas, his work was accepted and published. Brian finished his presentation with a real treat. Perhaps you've seen the old black and white picture of the face of the moon with a rocket crashing into the cheek, taken from the 1902 movie, "Trip to the Moon"? We watched that short movie---what a kick!

As the crowd filed out of the building munching cookies, snowflakes began to fall. Everyone hurried home inspired by a talented group of speakers to work harder on our craft. Next year's conference date: March 6, 2010.



Lois Harris, Kjersten Hayes, Judy Enderle



Photo of the Skagit Valley, submitted by Lois Harris

SCBWI Hope Card Project: Australia

By Ken Kilback

As you may remember, Australia suffered through a series of horrendous floods and fires not long ago. The fires devastated entire towns, destroying homes, businesses, schools, and libraries. Many people were killed as well, and many more people were severely affected by the damage resulting from these events. The worse day of the fires is now being referred to as Black Saturday.

SCBWI—Australia and New Zealand (under the sponsorship of SCBWI International) has organized the SCBWI Hope Card project, which aims to give assurance and encouragement to all the students affected by this disaster. Each region has been asked to submit a Hope Card to Australia. The Regional Advisors there will then ensure that each school gets one original Hope Card and also a bound photocopied collection of all Hope Cards. SCBWI—Western Canada is indeed working on getting a Hope Card from our region completed and then delivered to them by way of the SCBWI Summer Conference in Los Angeles, at which one of the Australian RAs will be attending.

In addition, though, there are two other ways in which our members can help out: sending a cheque or sending a book. Both will be used to restock the shelves of Marysville Primary School in Australia.

If you are interested in sending a cheque, we are being asked to send the cheque to a contact in the United States. There is a huge transaction fee for each international cheque sent to Australia (from the Australia side, not ours), so Chris Eboch, the RA for New Mexico, is collecting monies for Australia so that in a few months he can send one cheque to Australia and then the Australia and New Zealand chapter will only have to pay one transaction fee. If you would like to send a cheque, please be sure it is in U.S. funds and send it **by May 1st** to:

Chris Eboch
SCBWI—NM
P.O. Box 1084
Socorro, NM
USA
87801

Make cheques out to: SCBWI—New Mexico

If you would like to send copies of any published books you have in order to help stock the shelves of Marysville Primary School, please send the book(s) to:

Corinne King, PO Box 371, Warrandyte, VIC, Australia, 3113

To check out the books they've already received, go to www.scbwiaustralia.org and click on the connection to their Flickr site. Then click on "Victorian 2009 Bushfires" and then on "slideshow."

Raising Readers

By Yasmin John-Thorpe

As a children's author and co-founder of Penticton Writers and Publishers, there have been things I tried and accomplished, which I am very proud of, but I'm most excited about being involved locally with the CanWest Raise a Reader campaign. Our daily newspaper does not belong to CanWest/Global network, however the Penticton Herald's Managing Publisher, Mr. Andre' Martin, phoned me in the fall of 2007 to ask me if funds were raised would our writers' group be willing to run the RAR project. One of the many things our group has done has been to get our members published, mainly in our valley's papers and magazines. We've submitted book reviews, short fiction pieces, poems as well as letters to the editors. Mr. Martin knew if given a task we were reliable.



(PWAP Members, Alan Longworth and Penny Smith)

In October 2007, several members from our group, along with local young writers, celebrities and volunteers, hocked newspapers for donations outside the Tim Horton and Starbucks coffee shops. The Education Minister Shirley Bond announced the Government of British Columbia would match whatever funds we raised. With those

dollars we launched RAR in the South Okanagan. As the co-founder, who writes full time, I took on coordinating the Raise a Reader project in the South Okanagan. I first asked Mr. Martin what he would like me to do with the funds. He answered by asking me what did I want to do with the funds. As an author I knew I wanted to gift books to young children – ‘A book is a wondrous gift’ I said to Mr. Martin.

I continue to host creative writing classes in several Okanagan Valley Schools. I have contacts within the schools. I emailed and asked these teachers if they would like to host an author’s visit to their classes. The RAR funds would pay the author to visit the class and would purchase a copy of the author’s book for each student in the class.



(Yasmin and Education Minister, Shirley Bond)

Most schools can only afford to pay the author’s fee to visit the class. The author leaves a list of his or her books and then it is up to the children’s families to purchase the book.

When I contact the author I ask if I can pay for gas and a copy of his or her book to each student, providing the authors waive the normal fee. Most authors seemed to understand my wish to gift a book, rather than just have them visit and talk about the

book. The students are thrilled to walk out of the class owning a new book, after they have met the person who created and wrote, sometimes illustrated the book they now have tucked under their arm.

This has begun a win situation for everyone. Not only are the schools and the authors happy, this program is helping young readers to own books. With the RAR program we are helping more authors to visit more schools, and are having their books reach more young readers.

Last summer we used RAR funds to host a weekend young readers and writers camp. This was so well received that this year we added a province-wide Young Writers Contest and our judges have invited 133 writers to attend the first British Columbia Youth Write Camp, in Penticton July 5 -10, 2009. Young writers 8 -18 years will come from across our province to hone their writing skills. Our camp faculty this year includes author/illustrator, Lee Edward Fodi, author kc dyer, author James McCann, author Kallie George, YA author/poet Dr. Lyle Weis, and Sci-Fi/Fantasy publisher Brian Hades.

This camp will help us not only raise readers but we'll take this one step further and raise writers – maybe some future award winning writers!



(Lee Edward Fodi, author/illustrator)

The Importance of Query Letters

By Gladys Swedak

(From notes taken at a recent Gum Boot Books Workshop)

The first and most important thing in writing a query letter is to use an easy to read font, either Arial or Times New Roman and 10 -12 size. Do not tell too much about the story. Use a paragraph or piece with action. Spacing is important to make easy reading. Use the 1 ½ line spacing. Include any ideas you have for marketing your manuscript. Schools, libraries, book stores in your area. Any thing that will show you know your market. Be sure to have the right name of the editor and spell it correctly. This is very important. Have word count, name of manuscript and one paragraph as I mentioned before. Mention website and that you are following the submission guidelines. Networking; mention you met at a conference (if you did) and the date. If the publisher or editor requests a rewrite submission to be sent, follow up on it. Many writers do not send in the requested manuscript. Crystal Stranaghan, publisher, mentioned that at some conferences she had been to there were 20 or more people and maybe one half or one quarter would send in a manuscript and mention they met.

Be willing to have marketing ideas and be willing to be involved with the marketing. Research the differences between big and small publishers. Follow guidelines closely as to who to send the query to. Like editor, or assistant editor or who ever. Do not go too far with descriptions of story. Be positive that you believe in your work. Don't say "my friends think this is great but I don't. My family believes in my work but I know you will not like it but they want me to send it to you anyway."

Do not admit this is a first novel. You don't have to mention that at all. Use short sentences. Dwell on the positive. More paragraphs to less so they are not too long. Be descriptive if manuscript is like Harry Potter but do not say you are the next (oh what is her name? I don't read Harry Potter so I forget her name.) Just that your story is in the same vein. Show confidence in your self and your

writing. Mention your favorite books if yours is something like it but not that you are that writer incarnate.

Include e-mail and correct postage, especially if international. Crystal told us of a writer from the states who sent US stamp for return but it should have been a Canadian stamp. Have a blog or website and put the URL at the bottom of the letter after your name and before enclosed manuscript. Be polite! If you want to give them a certain amount of time to have the manuscript inform them politely that you give them say 6 months to get back to you and then you will be sending it to someone else. If you do multi submit and don't tell, any contract of acceptance will be null and void if one of them accepts the manuscript and then finds out you multi submitted. Follow up if resubmitting. Mention that you are resubmitting because of changes.

Read books published by that publisher to find out what they publish, which shows you did your homework. Be concise, this is an interview for work. You are the unemployed and they are the employer. Do not name drop as this may turn them off. Mention awards but be truthful. Be sure name, title and page number is on each page. State age of the character; readers like the main character to be at least two years older than self.

YOU WILL REVISE! That is a given if you want to be published. Be willing to change age of the main character or setting if necessary. Always go for short letters. SASE is enclosed or please respond to e-mail and be sure you have the e-mail address. Spaces rather than indents for query letter which makes it easier to read. When using sentences from main character, make sure it is a hook. Use regular font and right and left indent for this so they know it is from the manuscript. Have someone else read it before you send it. With a female main character for boys to read you need a strong male character. Ask questions then answer after introduction. Use word count instead of page numbers.

If you have a brand or website image use it as a letterhead. No fancy paper or textured paper and no stickers. Check for smudging after printing. Do

not send it smudged. Potential series must stand alone. The publisher doesn't have to accept all but can start with only the first. For instance; Harry Potter books, each stands on its own but is a series. Do homework on publisher if possible. What are the publishing, what do they want? What are they looking for at this time? What do they say on their website that they don't want?

Book Review:
Harold D. Underdown's "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books, Third Edition"

By Ken Kilback

The third edition of Harold Underdown's "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books" is a wonderful resource for anyone already involved or wishing to become involved in the writing and illustrating of books for children. It is packed full of practical information that is relevant to us now wherever we are at in our career, and it is relevant to us even if we haven't yet picked up a pen (or keyboard) or paintbrush (or digital stylus).

The book is very well written and the issues and topics discussed are presented in a style that is conversational and easy for readers to understand. Throughout the guide, Underdown includes a number of margin notes and sidebars to highlight such things as warnings, definitions of terms, anecdotes from or of particular persons in the world of children's publishing, and other tips and information that is useful for us to know. Sections at the back of the book include a glossary, lists of resources (books on writing and/or illustrating, other book resources, review magazines, and organizations), and a variety of sample materials (guidelines from a trade publisher for writers and illustrators, cover letters for writers and illustrators, query letters, and manuscript format).

Underdown starts off with the basics, with an important reminder that if we've chosen to write or illustrate for children then we must see that as neither a pastime nor a hobby but as a business. Not only does Underdown show us how to prepare ourselves in getting started—from our mindset to our office supplies—but he guides us through the different book formats and subjects and genres in children's publishing, as well as the different kinds of publishers we can expect to encounter. He also explores the relationships between companies, divisions and imprints, and how we can best match what we have to offer with the right publisher for us. The section on working with a publisher is particularly informative. He goes in depth into the contract, helping us to understand the details we need to know about everything from advances and royalties to contract language and copyright.

Underdown's guide is still relevant even if we have signed a contract with a publisher and are now working with an editor or art director. He speaks much on protocol, between writer and editor, between illustrator and art director, between writer and agent, between illustrator and artist representative, between us and anyone in the publishing and marketing world. In addition, Underdown helps us understand what more needs to be done once the book is published—such as working with the publisher with ground-level marketing and publicizing of the book, initiating school visits, and building a career; and he provides ideas, steps, and techniques that we will find useful to follow.

While the information in many places has obviously been updated, Underdown has also written two new chapters for this edition, "Finding a Good How-To" and "The Self-Publishing Conundrum." In the first of these chapters, he leads us in our search for a good book that will help us to learn and improve in the craft of writing or illustrating. He specifically does not tell us what we ought to buy but instead guides us in choosing the particular book that best works for each of us. While he does offer examples of good how-to books, he also cautions that a "book that doesn't speak to [us] where [we] are will just leave [us] frustrated or discouraged" (p. 99). In the chapter on self-publishing, he gives a detailed, honest look at what a writer or illustrator needs to know in order to best prepare themselves if they choose this path, and at how writers and illustrators can determine whether self-publishing is indeed the best course of action for what they want to accomplish. Underdown's intention in this chapter is both to inform and intimidate people so that if they do self-publish, they will know what to do to ensure that their book is one of high-quality and one that is ready to compete successfully in the national marketplace.

Whether you're unpublished or published, then, this is a wonderful resource guide for all writers and illustrators to have on their shelves. What you learn here will do well for the career you have chosen.

"The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Children's Books, Third Edition: The inside story on publishing kids' books—from beginning to end!" by Harold D. Underdown. Alpha Books (Penguin Group), 2008. ISBN: 978-1-59257-750-7.

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