

Story Monsters Ink

APRIL 2026



The Literary Magazine for Teachers, Librarians, and Parents

Kristen Mei Chase

Steve Schirripa

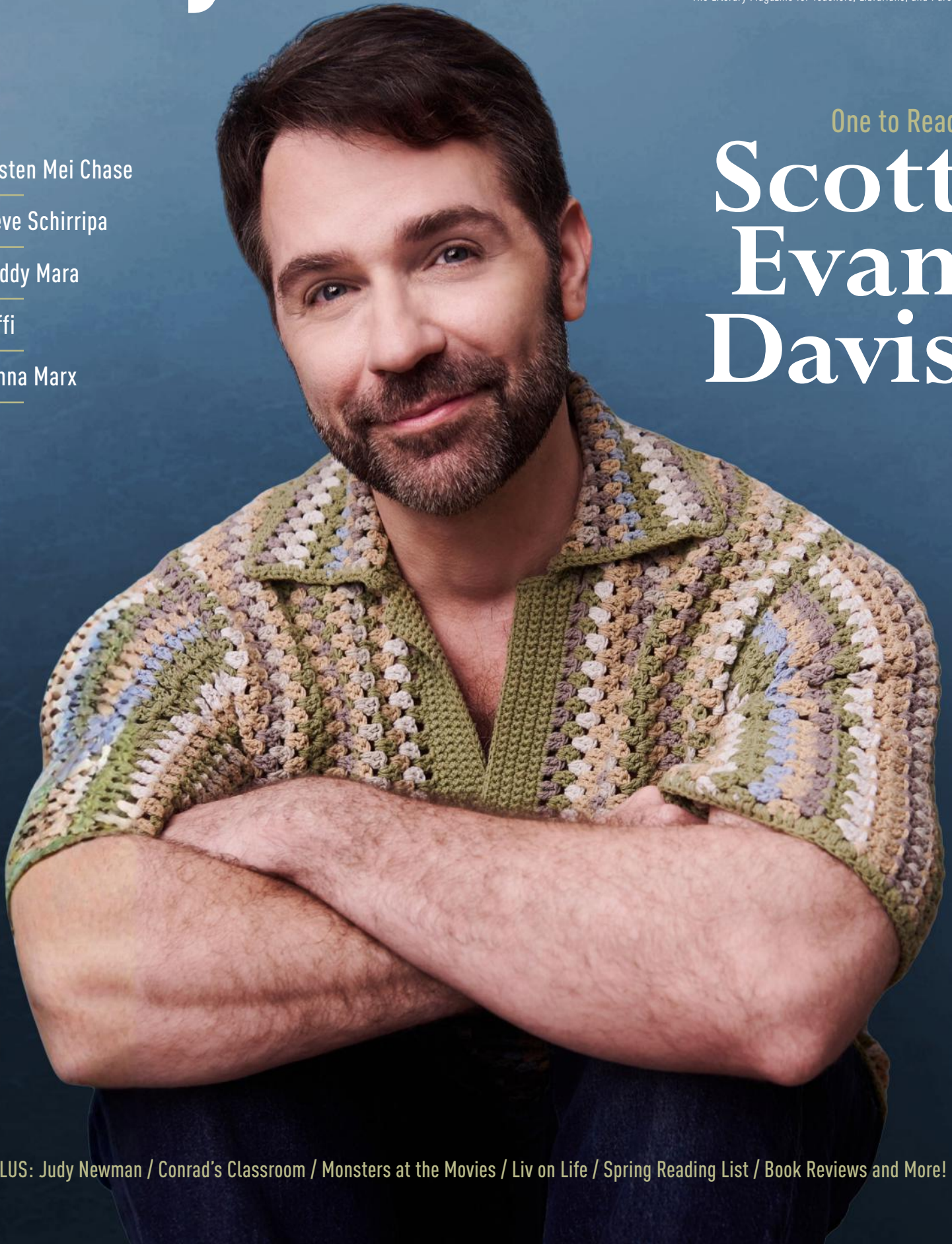
Maddy Mara

Raffi

Donna Marx

One to Read:

Scott
Evan
Davis



PLUS: Judy Newman / Conrad's Classroom / Monsters at the Movies / Liv on Life / Spring Reading List / Book Reviews and More!



MEET THE TEAM

PUBLISHER

Linda F. Radke, Linda@StoryMonsters.com

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cristy Bertini, Cristy@StoryMonsters.com

WRITERS

Julianne Black DiBlasi, Raven Howell

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTORS

Olivia Amiri, Judy Newman,
Nick Spake, Conrad J. Storad

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE DIRECTOR

Paula Hurd

CREATIVE DESIGNER AND ILLUSTRATOR

Jeff Yesh

PROOFREADER & CURRICULUM WRITER

Deb Greenberg

ADVERTISING

Cristy Bertini, Cristy@StoryMonsters.com

BOOK REVIEWERS

Christine Irvin, Dawn Menge,
Pam Morris, Cynthia Kern OBrien

Story Monsters Ink magazine and www.StoryMonsters.com are trademarks of Story Monsters, LLC. Copyright ©2026 Story Monsters LLC, ISSN 2374-4413, All rights reserved. Contents may not be published in whole or in part without the express written consent of the bylined author and publisher. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the individual writers and are not necessarily those of Story Monsters Ink or its advertisers.

Story Monsters Ink is published by Story Monsters LLC

Postal mail may be sent to
Story Monsters Ink
4696 W. Tyson St., Chandler, AZ 85226
Phone: 480-940-8182

JOIN US

PROMOTE YOUR BOOK IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!

Would you like to promote your book, product, or business?
Contact Cristy Bertini at Cristy@StoryMonsters.com or call 413-687-0733
to reserve your space! Discounts available.

BRING STORY MONSTERS INK INTO YOUR CLASSROOM!

Visit our website at StoryMonstersInk.com to download free classroom question sheets to aid in learning comprehension and encourage your students to discuss what they've read in each issue!

SUBSCRIBE

It's a monster of a magazine, filled with great reads for growing minds!
Subscribe for FREE unlimited digital access!

StoryMonstersInk.com

ISSUES OF STORY MONSTERS INK ARE RECORDED EACH MONTH BY THE ARIZONA TALKING BOOK LIBRARY.

FOLLOW US



Facebook.com/StoryMonsters



@StoryMonsters



instagram.com/storymonsters



linkedin.com/in/storymonsters/



youtube.com/@storymonsters



LET YOUR STORY FLY!

Story Monsters® Book and Media Awards

Four Worldwide Contests that Celebrate Excellence in Books & Media. storymonstersbookawards.com



Studio Story Monsters®

Bring your story to life with enhanced audio, musical and theatrical creations. storymonsters.com/studiostorymonster



Story Monsters Greenie Box™

A Place For Free Books and More. Visit storymonsters.com/story-monster-greenie-box to learn about sponsorship opportunities.

HONOR ROLL

2025 Publisher of the Year

"Outstanding Creator Awards"

**Named Among the
"Great Magazines for Kids and Teens"**
by School Library Journal

Mom's Choice Awards
Gold Award Recipient

2018 Irwin Award Winner
"Best Magazine Writer of the Year"

2016 Irwin Award Winner
"Best Publisher of a Literary Magazine"
and "Best Editorial Director"

FEATURES



- 04** One to Read:
SCOTT EVAN DAVIS
- 10** **KRISTEN MEI CHASE**
Introduces Young Readers to Gracie Wei
- 16** **STEVE SCHIRRIPIA**
Takes Little Readers on a Tail-Wagging Adventure
- 22** **MADDY MARA**
Issues the First Sharknado Warning

COLUMNS

- 30** **MONSTERS AT THE MOVIES**
The Muppet Show
- 32** **JUDY NEWMAN**
Thank You, James Patterson
- 38** **Q&A**
Raffi
- 42** **THE BOOK BUG**
Donna Marx
- 46** **CONRAD'S CLASSROOM**
What Lurks Beneath the Mulch?
- 49** **KIDS CORNER**
- 50** **LIV ON LIFE**
Coping in Today's Society

RESOURCES

- 26** **SPRING READING LIST**
- 34** **BOOK REVIEWS**

ONLINE

Check out StoryMonstersInk.com to keep up with book news, feature interviews, and more!

COMMENTS

Tell us what you think of this issue!
cristy@storymonsters.com
linda@storymonsters.com

One to Read:

Scott Evan Davis

by Raven Howell

April is Autism Awareness Month and multi-award-winning composer/lyricist, arts educator, and author Scott Evan Davis is happy to celebrate the release of his first children's book. Launching as the hottest new release on Amazon, *Queen Bea* has quickly become an Amazon bestseller. "This new book is the thing I'm most excited about," Scott says. "The other thing is my musical, *Indigo*, that had a London premier this summer. We're gearing up for a West End run in 2027."



“Writing and publishing *Queen Bea* was just a different way of doing what’s really important to me. Ninety percent of the work that I do is centered around the neurodiverse community. It’s just what I do. It’s where my work and career has taken me.”

Scott says he’s wanted to be on the stage since he was a child. “I taught myself how to play the piano at 11 years of age. Thank God because that’s how I make my living now. But I went to school for theater. I got my equity card, toured off-Broadway. Then when I was about 30, I dreamed about a mentor who had been a teacher of mine. In the dream, he hummed a melody and when I woke up, I couldn’t get it out of my head. And it became my first song. It became the title of my first album, and from that moment, I only wrote songs. Never did I think I’d end up writing a book, let alone a children’s book!” he admits with a smile.

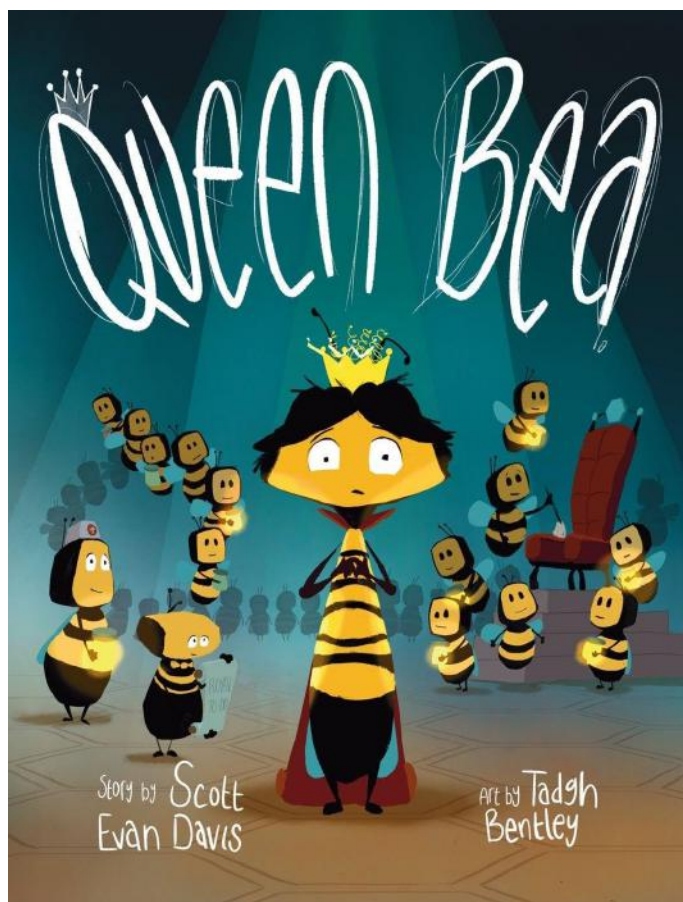
The composing began around 2010, after working as an actor. Scott gained international recognition in both musical theatre and cabaret. He performed concerts at the Birdland Jazz Club in NYC, The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in London, Dublin, Australia, and all around the United States. The *Huffington Post* reviewed his debut album, *Cautiously Optimistic*, and dubbed Scott among five “must see and must know” emerging writers.

He won an ASCAP award, Broadway World Award, the Musical Theatre International Award, and a MAC for his music. His most well-known song, “If the World Only Knew,” is sung globally for its social message. Amiable and modest, Scott doesn’t want to call attention to his accolades, but he continues to be an influential and dedicated supporter for the neurodiverse of our world. His contribution, without a doubt, is significant.

His musical, *Powerful Day*, was written with and for autistic children at PS94 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Scott’s work with the students was featured in a segment on *CBS News* and featured as a documentary called *Spectrum of Hope*. He’s on the advisory board, and musically directs for an organization called Epic Players, an all-inclusive neurodiverse professional theatre company in NYC.

Scott is also a sought-after vocal coach and music director. He has a huge global audience on social media where he shares humor and his own unique creativity with fans and friends. His present musical on the rise is *Indigo*, centered around a non-speaking autistic teenager with synesthesia.

“*Queen Bea* was another musical I had written. It was inspired by my work at the Brooklyn Children’s Theater, where I taught



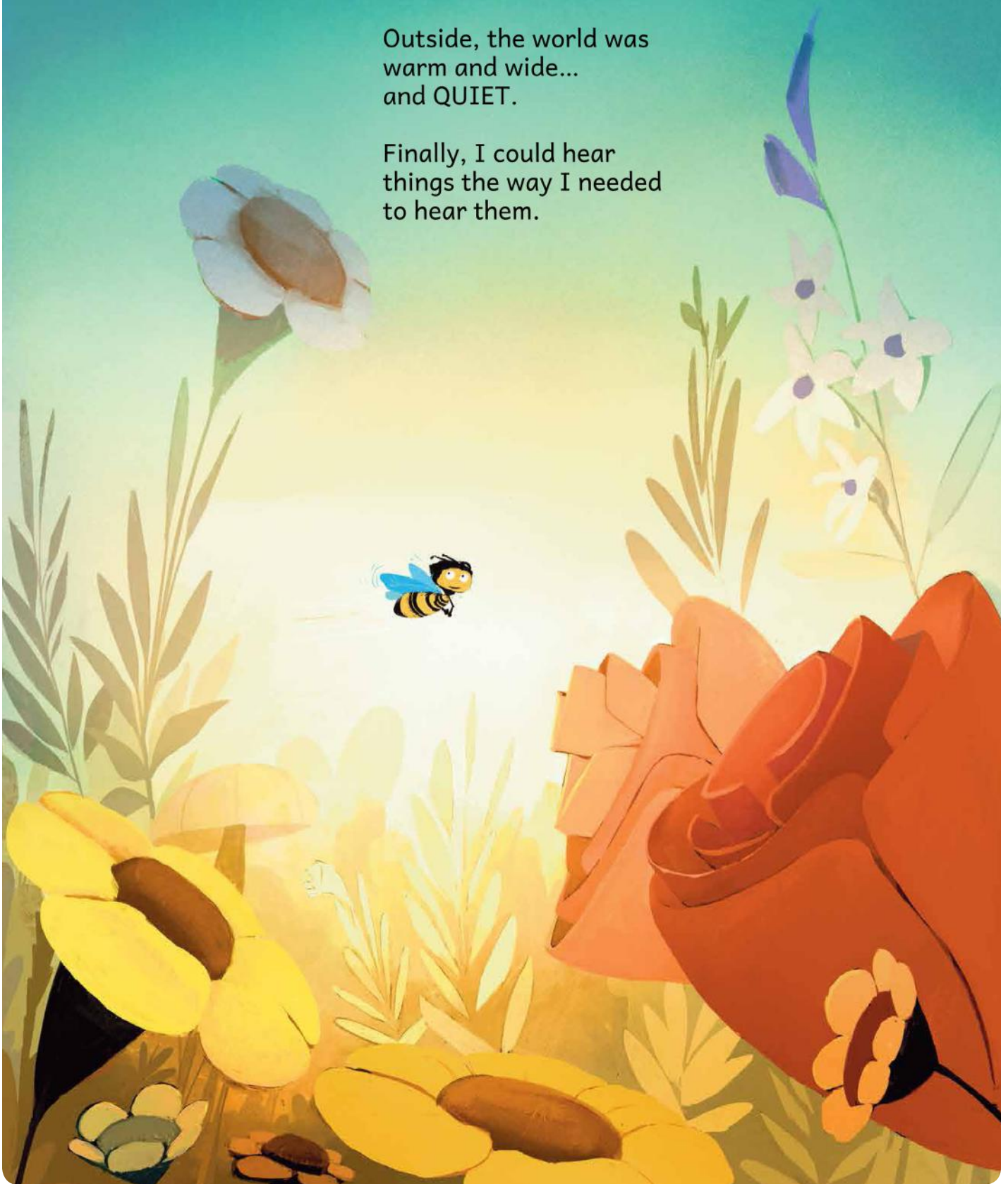
the kids and wrote musicals. At one point, the head of the theater company asked, ‘What are you going to write next? I have a lot of bee costumes.’ So I went home and thought about it. It dawned on me—the hive mind. Maybe a particular bee next in line to be queen, feels like she can’t be a true leader, so she flies away. She can’t do it—she doesn’t have the capacity to have the hive mind, she doesn’t understand, she processes the world differently. *Her* skill is that she notices miniscule details. Everything may move fast, but she hones in on small things. In the story, a firefly, Franklin, lets her know what her talents are. The fact that Bea experiences things differently makes her the leader that she truly is. It’s about neurodiversity in a subtle way, it doesn’t scream about it. It’s about different thinkers.”

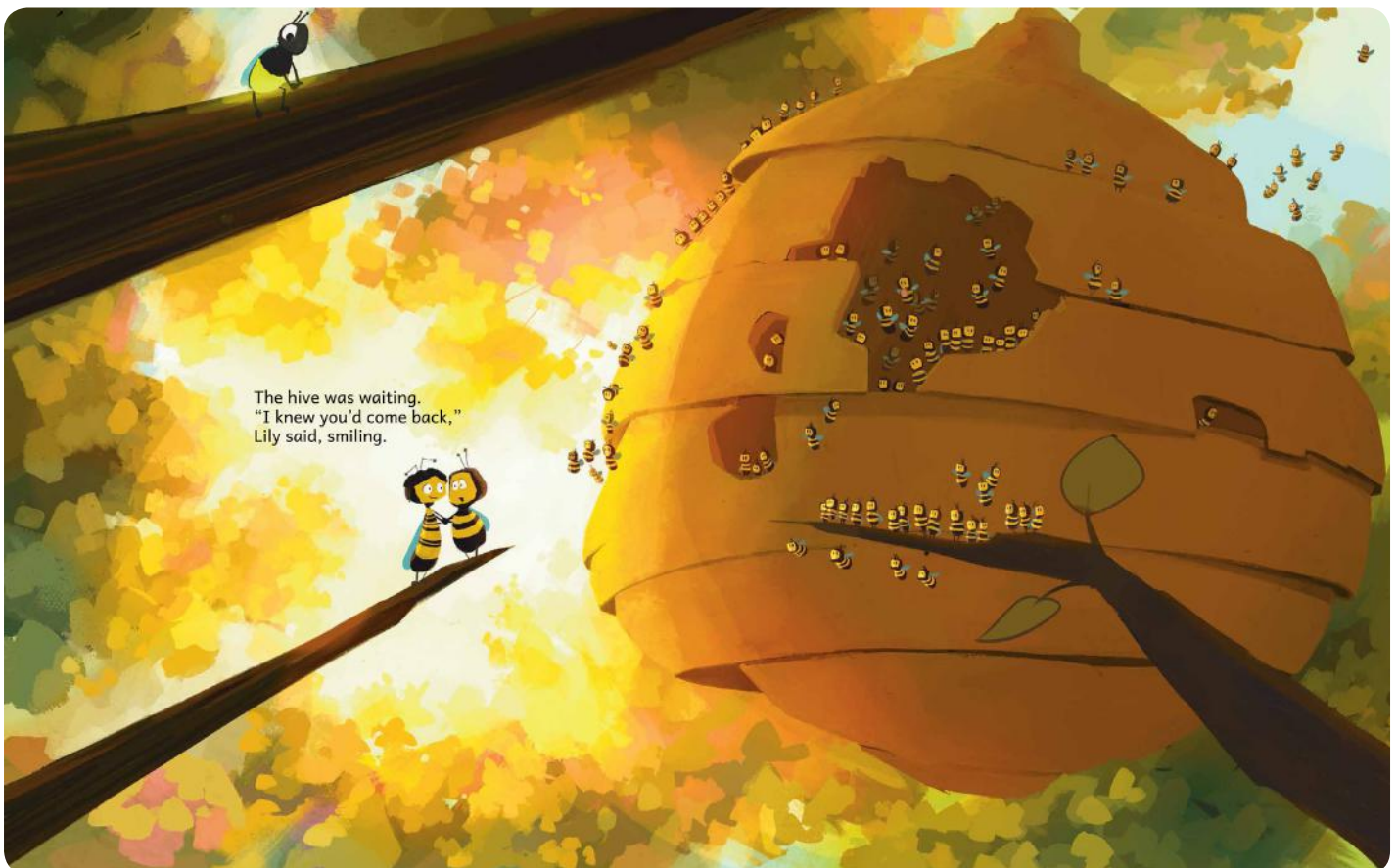
But Scott explains he couldn’t get the musical produced. “Children’s theaters would ask what it was based on. So I decided I’d write a children’s book first.”

Consequently, the children’s book is adapted from this original musical with the same name, highlighting themes of belonging, bravery, and discovering one’s own strength and inner light.

Outside, the world was
warm and wide...
and QUIET.

Finally, I could hear
things the way I needed
to hear them.





"My goal had changed. I'd never written a book. I fell in love with the experience, but boy did I learn a lot! I could write a thesis on it," Scott laughs. "But now when I approach people in regard to the musical, I can show them the book."

To find an illustrator, he researched many artists' portfolios until he found Tadgh Bentley. "I got to see how the illustrator tells the story a different way, and the process of creating and collaborating on the book was fascinating for me. I don't see images in my own mind, so it was fascinating for me to see Tadgh make the illustrations. Now I want to write a whole series on *Queen Bea!*"

"I truly believe, if you follow what you want to do from your heart, the universe will conspire to show you who you need to meet, and what you need to do ... the universe says 'yes!'"

Scott says he loved *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* as a child. "It was inspiring and made me want to do my best. My hope is that kids see the entertainment, the fun, in *Queen Bea* first, and then see themselves represented in the story. I like to write stories about a character's differences that don't depict

victimhood but represent their gift instead. The overlying theme is that everyone expects something from you that you don't feel like you're good enough to do—the imposter syndrome. But with encouragement, you can do it."

He also created an educational guide to accompany the book, and a teacher in California made *Queen Bea* the lesson for the week. "Reading the book, doing the guide, and analyzing the characters. That was my favorite feedback about the story so far. It validated for me that the children saw themselves in the book."

Goodwill and gratitude radiate from Scott. "Happiness looks like waking up every day to not only do what you love, but what you think may add some more beauty to the world. It's following your passion in whatever way you can do it without feeling you have to suppress it. I hope to leave a mark as best as I can, and I feel like what I can leave behind is in what I am creating now."

For more information about Scott Evan Davis and his work, visit scottevandavis.com. For more information about *Queen Bea*, visit queenbeabook.com. ●



Kristen Mei Chase

Introduces Young Readers to Gracie Wei

by Raven Howell

In one fell swoop, children's author Kristen Mei Chase tells it like it is: "If I'm working on a project, I wake up before the sun to get some words in before my morning rush: walking dogs and driving kids to school. Then, I work as a marketing director all day, then go back to mom duties after school, where I sometimes find time to write while I'm waiting for my daughters at horseback riding or field hockey practice. Once I eat dinner and walk the dogs again at night, I'll write some more!"



Kristen's writing career took off in 2005. Her blog, *Motherhood Uncensored*, spoke frankly and humorously about motherhood and the challenges the parenting culture faced. "I started Motherhood Uncensored on a complete whim, inspired by a friend of mine who had started a blog to keep in touch with friends as a military wife moving to England. I really struggled with motherhood and felt rather ill-prepared for all the challenges, so I decided to write honestly about my experience in the hopes that I'd help even just one other woman not feel as overwhelmed. I didn't realize that there were so many other women at the time who felt the same way."

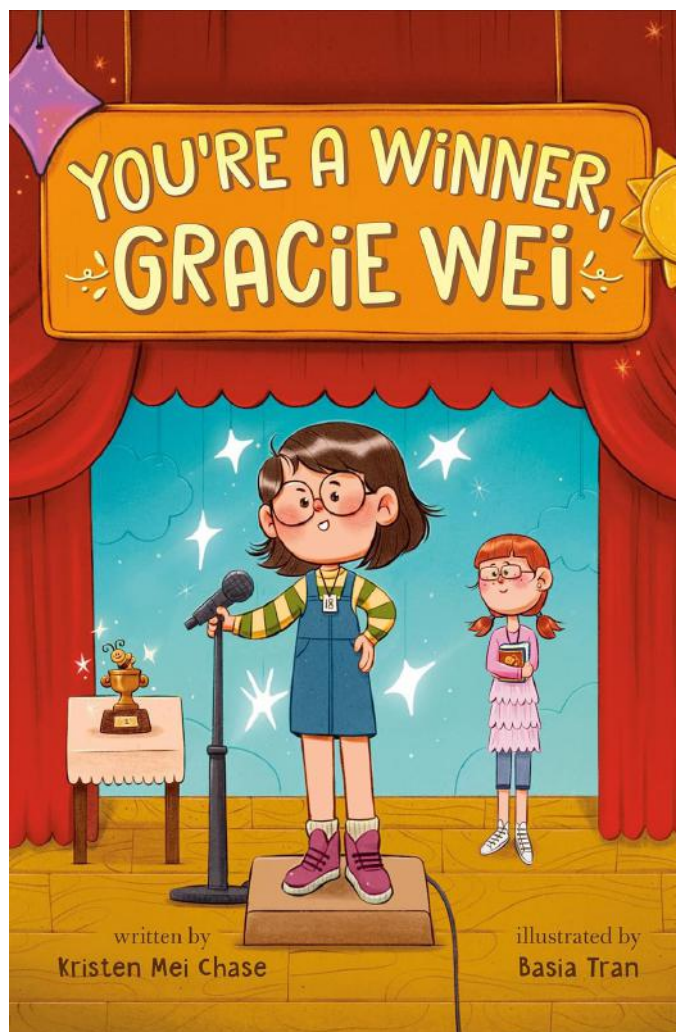
In subsequent years, she was a frequent guest on various TV news shows, including NBC's *Today Show*, CNBC, HLN, and CNN. She found success in hosting *The Kristen Chase Show* and *Coffee Shop Confessions* on YouTube, was the original co-host of award-winning podcast, *Spawned with Kristen and Liz*, and she co-founded Cool Mom Picks network. The accolades rolled in.

Kristen tells me these were the stepping stones to further achievements. "Absolutely! I found my confidence and voice as a writer, outside of academic writing when I worked as a college professor, composing those almost-daily blog posts."

Her writing and business chops have additionally been honed by fifteen years of experience as a marketing expert. But a different kind of breakthrough happened when her first novel was published by Grand Central/Forever in early 2023. Considering it a pivotal point in her career, she says, "I had been dancing around the idea of *A Thousand Miles to Graceland*, my debut women's fiction novel, for several years, and had written a few chapters here and there in my free time (which was rare with four little children). I'd often abandon it, just due to time and energy, then return to it again and again, always believing that the characters felt important—like they should see the 'light of day.' I can't pinpoint exactly when it was, maybe 2017 or 2018, when I decided that I was going to finish it, no matter what. Everything changed from that point on."

Growing up in southern New Jersey, Kristen reveals her dreams as a child were of a different caliber. "I wanted to be a ballerina, and was pretty close to it, but ended up focusing on what everyone told me was the more 'reliable' route: music (specifically music therapy). Even though I don't do a lot of music anymore, I definitely use a lot of creativity in my daily life."

"I was also both a reader and a writer as a kid. A writer, thanks to my mom who was adamant that I keep a journal, even when I could barely write a full sentence! This ritual later



transformed into poems and fictional stories. As far as reading goes, it was my mom again—always reading to my brother and me growing up. So, it felt natural to have books in my hand wherever I went."

"I feel as though all books influence our writing in one way or another. *The Phantom Tollbooth* is an all-time favorite, ever since I read it in fifth grade. I was so drawn to how creatively the author constructed the imaginary worlds. I also loved the *Clementine* books for their humor, though I came to those when my kids were reading them."

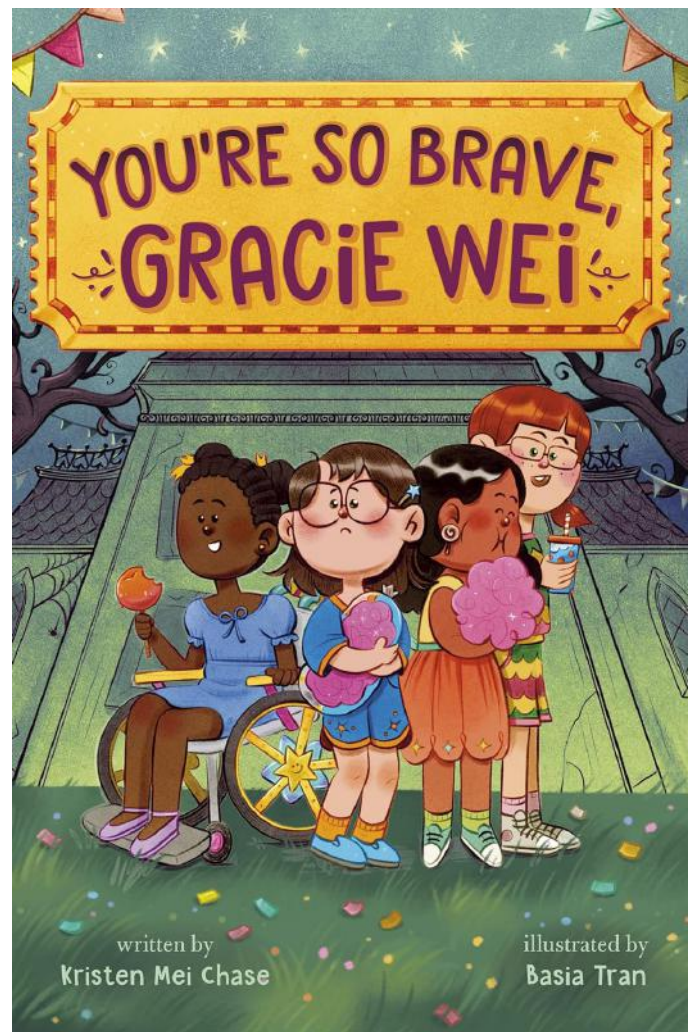
Kristen's own first children's picture book, *We Are American, Too*, was released spring 2025. But this year marks the special debut publishing of the *Gracie Wei* series for young readers. *You're a Winner, Gracie Wei* is the first story, followed by *You're the Boss, Gracie Wei*, and *You're so Brave, Gracie Wei*. And there are more planned.



"I describe Gracie as an opinionated fourth grader with a heart of gold, so what I imagine a typical fourth grader to be! Smart and determined, but also kind and growing into introspection. And also, unintentionally funny!"

"My hope for the books is twofold. One, that mixed-race Asian American kids and kids of color get to see themselves represented in everyday stories. And two, that the messages help them develop into emotionally mature adult humans."

"The stories have so many new and unique perspectives! A lot of how I created the characters and structured the groups (the family, the friend group, the classroom) was to push up against what we typically see in this genre. For example, in the first book, the dad is the one who does a lot of the emotional lifting with Gracie Wei, which you don't often see. Also, the older sister isn't mean to Gracie. Aside from typical older sister things, like 'sharing' her hair glitter, she's loving and supportive of her younger sister."



Kristen admits there's a little bit of real-life threaded into the series. "Well, as someone who lost her fifth-grade spelling bee, and still remembers the word that took her down, that's a big chunk of my real life represented in *You're a Winner, Gracie Wei*."

"Of course, there are various Easter eggs throughout the book that are little hat-tips to friends and family. But honestly, most of the books are built on a family, friend, and school community that's hopeful for what our world could look like."

"I think Gracie's ambition and inner growth are intended to feel realistic—in the innocent, child-like way she believes that 'practice makes perfect and perfect people win spelling bees.' But also that kids have the potential to grasp deeper and more meaningful emotional concepts than we often give them credit for, like the ones that are woven throughout each of the books in the series."

On that note, Kristen tells me Gracie has a few recommendations for our student readers. “Her advice is to try new foods at least once, always wear a helmet when you ride a bike, and don’t take books in the bathtub!” she says with a laugh.

“I hope that readers find some element of her life that allows them to feel seen, whether it’s her mixed-race-ness or her determination to win something or anything else that feels familiar to them.”

“At a recent school visit, I heard a little girl get so excited about the reference to samosas. “I’ve never seen them in a book before,” she said. I could tell how proud she was that her culture was recognized in a book. It was lovely.”

“I absolutely see Gracie’s character evolving throughout the series. If we’re able to extend the series, she’ll be in fifth grade, which brings all sorts of new challenges—with schoolwork, with friendships evolving, and with independence from her family.”

“Basia, the illustrator, is incredibly talented and did such a beautiful job of bringing Gracie Wei and the entire cast in the book to life. The publishers at Knopf worked like a matchmaker, providing several different artist portfolios to peruse. Once I found my top two or three, we matched up with the editor and art director’s choices, and they reached out to make it happen.”

“As a parent, children’s books have been a safe and supportive way for me to process difficult things with my kids. And the

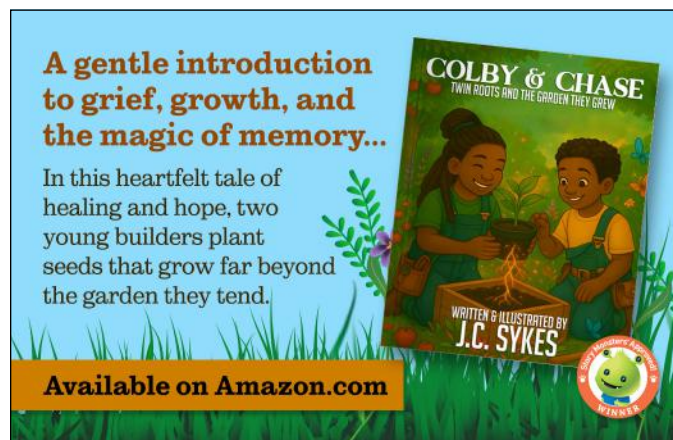
biggest reward from being a published author is connecting with readers over characters and stories I’ve created. When you write a book, the cast becomes your family, and so when someone else loves them too, it feels like a family reunion!”

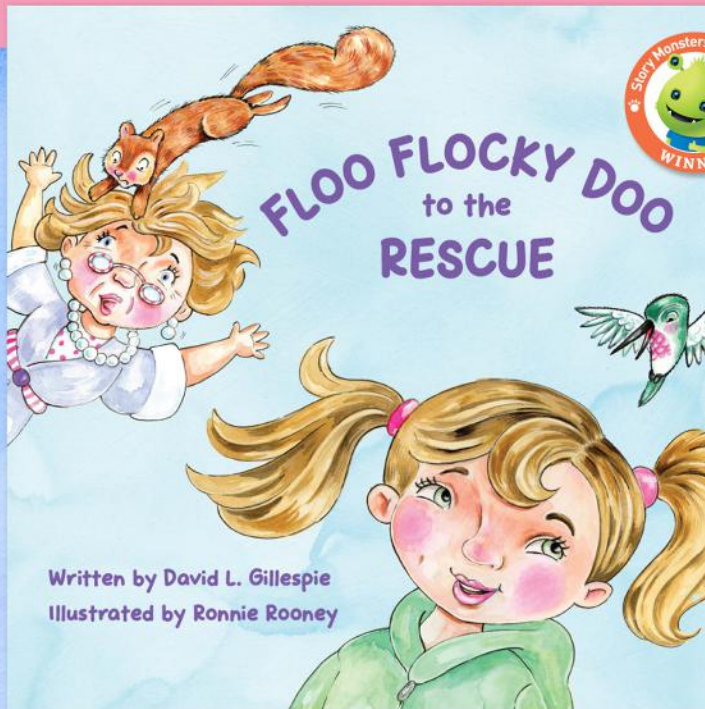
“I already feel like I’ve been living my dream with these books, but I’ll add that I’d love to see Gracie Wei become an animated series or a graphic novel. And how cool would it be for Felix, her younger brother, to get his own spin-off?”

While Kristen is munching her favorite snack these days, Gluten-free Cheezits, she’s drafting new storylines, and feels inspired. “I have the idea for *Gracie Wei Book 4*, and it’s very exciting! I’ve also been working on another children’s chapter book series, as well as a middle-grade book about a female figure skater who secretly wants to be an ice hockey player. And I’m out on submission right now with my second adult book—a rom-com.”

“As someone who writes in the wee hours of the morning or late at night, I love imagining days when I can just sit at my computer or with my big notebook and pen and just focus solely on writing my stories. That sounds magical! But my kids keep me motivated. While writing is deeply satisfying for me at a personal level, I want to leave them a legacy to pass down to their kids ... and their kids.”

For more information about Kristen Mei Chase and her books, visit kristenmchase.com. ●





OUR VERDICT
✓ **GET IT!**

A runaway squirrel.
A frantic chase.
A hummingbird
with a secret clue.
And a brave little girl
who knows just
what to do!
An imaginative story
based on the adventures
of Miss Floo Flocky Doo!

ISBN: 979-8-9943408-1-3 [paperback]
ISBN: 979-8-9943408-0-6 [hardcover]

"I am thrilled to share that your book
has been honored with the prestigious
International Firebird Book Award!"

—Pat Rullo, Founder of The
International Firebird Book Awards

.....
"A lively, rhyming
picture book with an
energetic protagonist
and bright images."
—Kirkus Reviews



For Agent Representation or Information on Publishing and
Film Rights, DGillespie@TrustmarkEnterprise.com • FlooFlockyDoo.com

Steve Schirripa

Takes Little Readers on a
Tail-Wagging Adventure

by Raven Howell

Bestselling author and world-renowned actor Steve Schirripa has every reason to give his undivided attention to his beloved pet dachshund. “WillieBoy *never* stays out of trouble. He’s always looking for his next meal,” Steve tells me. When I ask Steve what three words he thinks WillieBoy would use to describe his owner, he naturally replies, “The Best Dad.”



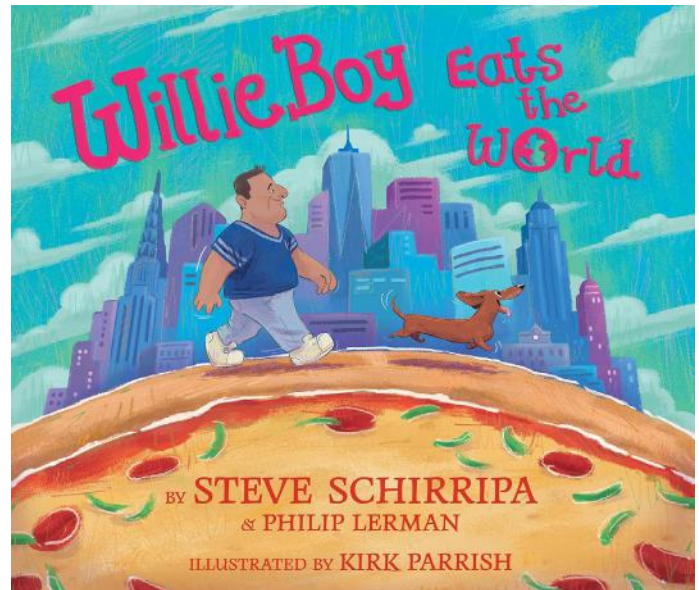
His new picture book, *WillieBoy Eats the World*, was inspired by the viral videos he and WillieBoy have become famous for. People love watching this New York City-based duo enjoy a variety of ethnic foods from Mexican to Italian and everything in between.

Steve's career includes many notable achievements in the acting industry. He played Bobby Bacala on *The Sopranos*, Detective Anthony Abetemarco in *Blue Bloods*, Leo Boykewich in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and many films. His most recent bestseller (co-authored with Michael Imperioli and Phillip Lerman), *Woke Up This Morning: The Definitive Oral History of The Sopranos*, was spun off of the popular *Talking Sopranos* podcast he co-hosted.

"This is my eighth book," Steve says. "I have been lucky enough to have two *New York Times* bestsellers—*A Goomba's Guide to Life* and *Woke Up This Morning* that I co-authored with my friend Michael Imperioli."

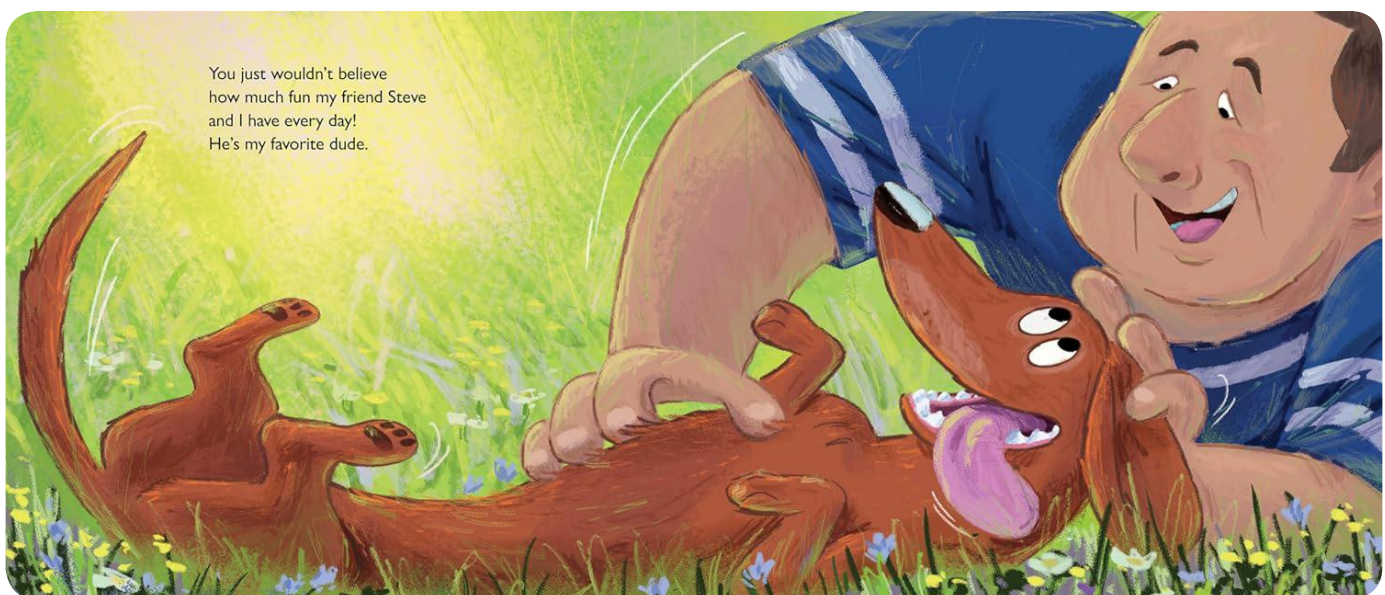
Steve also wrote the YA novel, *Nicky Deuce: Welcome to the Family*, which was made into a Nickelodeon film and stars a few *Sopranos* alums.

"*WillieBoy Eats the World* was inspired by my making a video promoting *Blue Bloods*, as the cast would do every Friday." Steve describes the momentous day, "I was eating a bag of popcorn, Willie was sitting on my lap, and he inadvertently popped his head into the bag, came up for air, and went back in for a second mouthful. We posted it and got close to 2M views."



"That's when our adventures of Willie eating and posting began. He has garnered over 100 million views (and counting!) with his eating adventures on my Instagram."

"We have yet to find any food he doesn't like to eat. We are really focused on him not overindulging and are always sure to implement portion control and small bites when feeding him. Willie has been welcomed in many different restaurants from coast to coast."





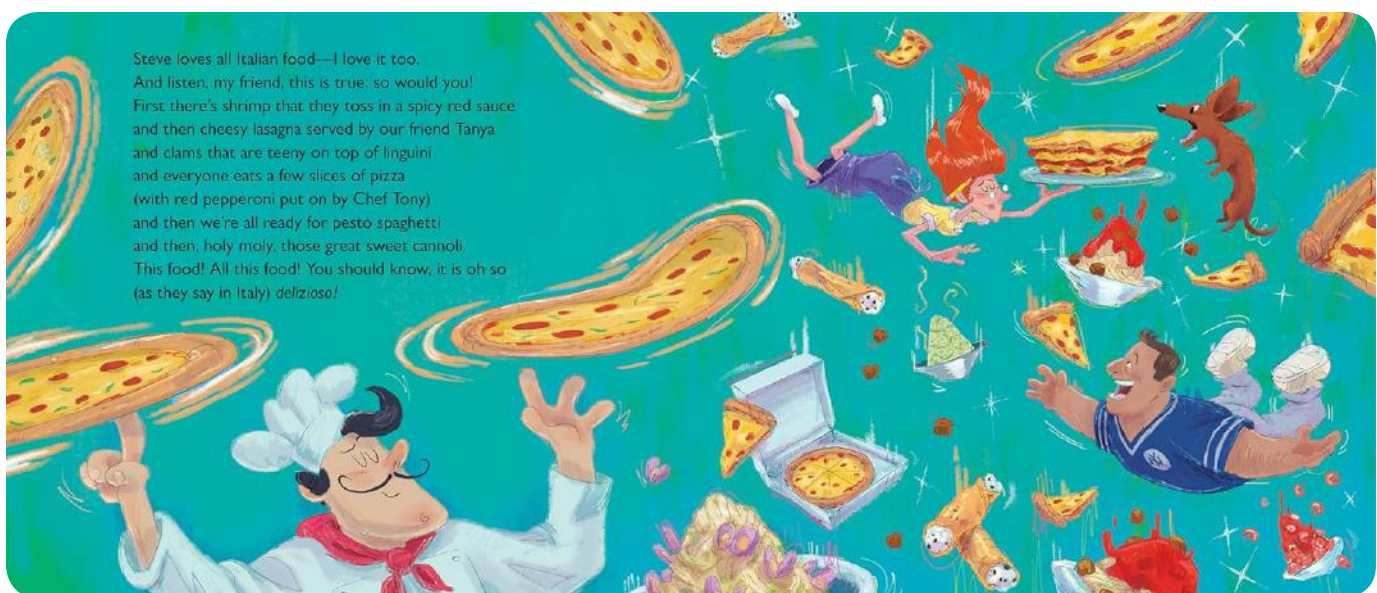
“The idea of the book is that I only eat Italian food. Willie meets a couple of friends at the dog park and comes back to tell me that there’s much more to eat than Italian food and convinces me to try it. The theme of the book is to try new things—no matter how old or young you are—and you might just surprise yourself and discover you like it. It’s all real! Real food, real dog breeds, real messaging.”

“The book covers over 20 types of cuisines from different countries and explains the culture that they derive from. I hope

that readers take away inspiration to be open, accepting, and be willing to try or learn new things.”

He says co-authoring the book with Philip Lerman was a wonderful experience. “This is our third book together. He’s a delightful guy to collaborate with and always comes up with great ideas. And we already have ideas for a sequel to this book,” Steve reveals.

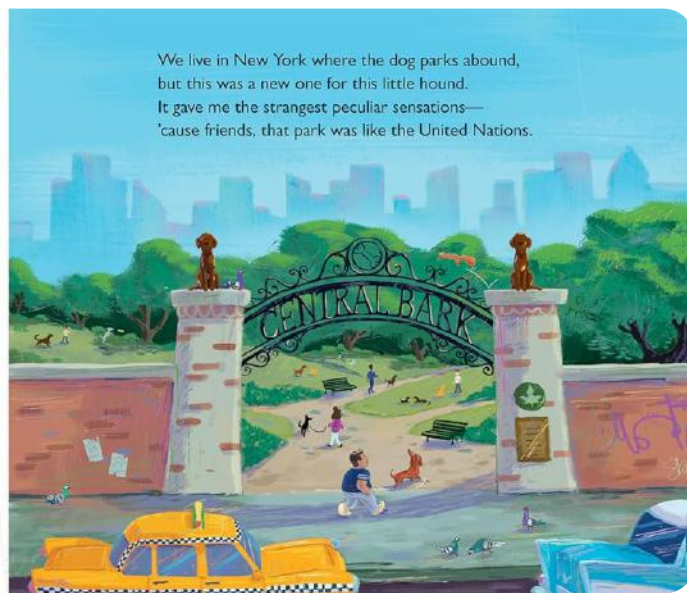
Looking back at his childhood, he says, “I grew up in the wonderful neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, where



I never thought much, though it's funny to say
that we eat the same food every single same day.
But something strange happened when, just for a lark,
we walked down the block to a brand-new dog park.



We live in New York where the dog parks abound,
but this was a new one for this little hound.
It gave me the strangest peculiar sensations—
'cause friends, that park was like the United Nations.



everyone knew each other. It was a very fun time to grow up in that community during the 1960s.”

“I was a big reader growing up. I loved *Miracle on 33rd Street: The New York Knickerbockers’ Championship Season* by Phil Berger—really any books about baseball and basketball. Today, I am still a big reader of nonfiction and my taste in books hasn’t really changed all that much.”

Although WillieBoy is an important family member these days, Steve did not have a connection with pets as a child. “My relationship with dogs really started when I met my wife, Laura, who raised dogs with her parents from the time she was young. We got our first dog together, a lovable and mild-mannered golden retriever named Sunny.”

“It’s my family that keeps me motivated. I’m happy being with my two daughters, my wife, and WillieBoy—and with a big plate of eggplant parm!”

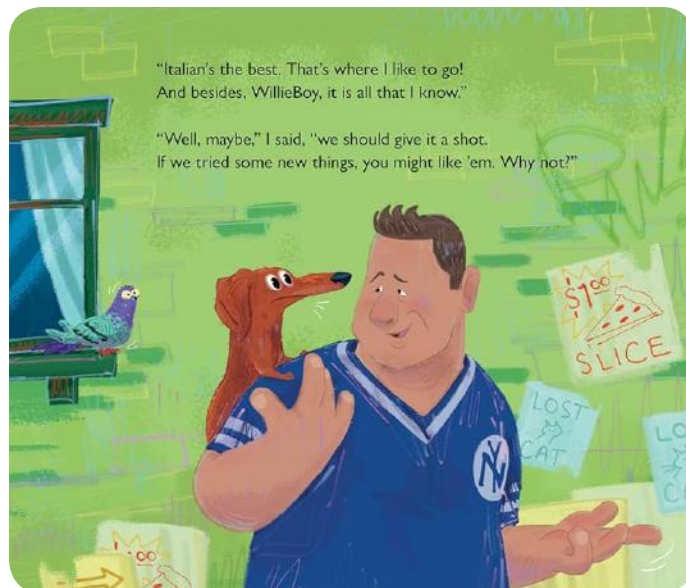
“Right now, I’m just getting ready for a book tour and enjoying some Yankee spring baseball, Knicks playoffs, warmer weather, brainstorming our next book project, and working on a few secret projects.”

“I think we’re putting out a nice message with this book,” he says. “Willie will be out at all the book events, and I am looking forward to spending time with my wife Laura, who is the brains of the whole operation.”

Steve’s fave fun food recommendations: “For breakfast, it’s huevos rancheros, then I would have a nice dish of penne vodka from Da Nico’s on Mulberry Street (Little Italy/NYC), and a side of meatballs from Longo’s in Westerly, Rhode Island.”

For more information about Steve Schirripa (and WillieBoy!), follow them on Instagram @steveschirripaofficial. ●

“Italian’s the best. That’s where I like to go!
And besides, WillieBoy, it is all that I know.”
“Well, maybe,” I said, “we should give it a shot.
If we tried some new things, you might like ‘em. Why not?”



Treasured Gifts for

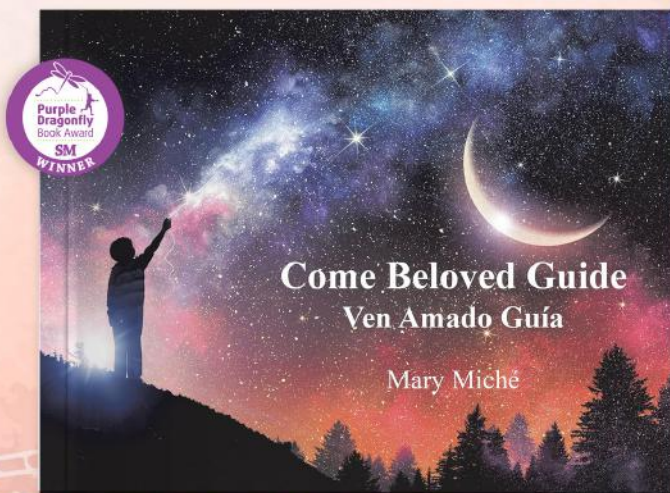
All Children



Kids Pray in Many Ways

Children of all cultures pray in varied ways. Sharing this book with children gives us the opportunity to talk about spirituality.

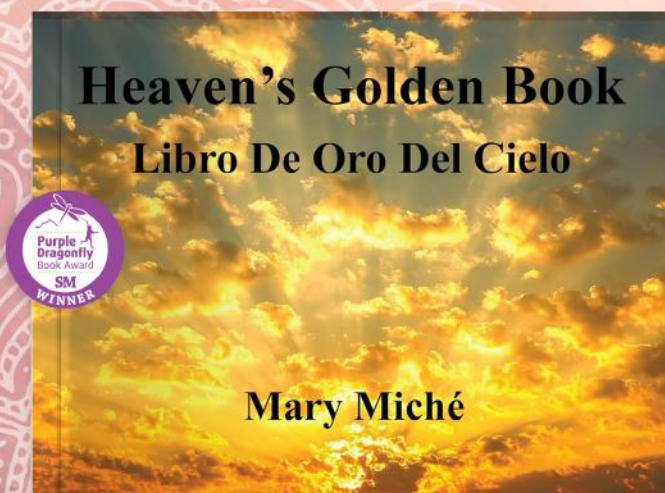
2025 Purple Dragonfly Award Winner



Come Beloved Guide

Children can enjoy the beautiful images that bring spirituality into their lives and adults can use this book to share their spiritual journey with children.

2025 Purple Dragonfly Award Winner



Heaven's Golden Book

We often tell children that someone who has died is in heaven, but we don't have much to say about what heaven is like. Sharing this book with children encourages them to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

2025 Purple Dragonfly Award Winner

Available on Amazon.com for \$9.95 each.

Maddy Mara

Issues the First Sharknado Warning

by Raven Howell

If sharks had 3 rules, they'd be: "Chomp first, ask questions later. Always bite off more than you can chew. And why be just a *good* white shark when you can be a *great* white shark?"

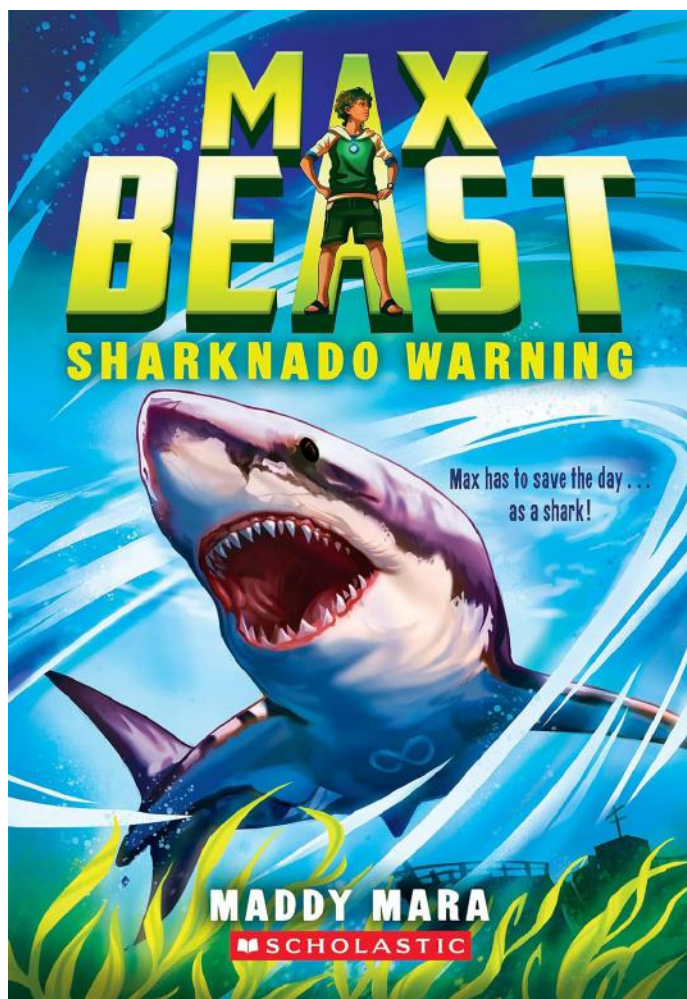
Australian powerhouse writing partners Maddy Mara aren't kidding when they tell me they're happy to attribute their conversation to "we." Meredith Badger, a writer and second language English tutor, and Hilary Rogers, a writer and former publisher, playfully tell me, "We're basically the same person at this stage."

They felt they needed something snappy for their book covers and Hilary Rogers and Meredith Badger would take up too much space. "At first we tried constructing something that was a mixture of both our names, but "Hiladeth" or "Merery" didn't quite work. So in the end we used our respective daughters' names. Meredith's daughter is called Madeleine and Hilary's is called Asmara. Their nicknames gave us Maddy Mara."



“The best thing by far is when something you write connects with kids,” they say about the rewards of being successful children’s authors. “We specialize in creating books for children who aren’t necessarily naturally enthusiastic readers. There is nothing in the world as delightful as receiving a letter from someone who has discovered a love of reading through something you’ve created. That’s when you realize you have the best job in the world.”

“We are very, very lucky to write as part of a team. This means when one of us is feeling unmotivated or a bit lazy, the other one can leap into the cheer squad/whip-cracker role. Working this way is also great for generating ideas and for being productive. It’s like having two heads, but where the other head is slightly smarter than your own (and has a better hairdo). We have become completely co-dependent because of this and can’t imagine ever going back to working as individuals. Working with a friend is way more fun too.”



Maddy Mara's books are loved by kids worldwide, and include the series, *Jet Set Pets*, *Forever Fairies*, *Dragon Girls*, and *Dragon Games*. Their *Itty Bitty Kitty* series is delightfully charming, and picture books, *Brave in Every Which Way*, *The Wonders of Never Giving Up*, and upcoming *The Greatest Mistakes That Went Right* are all impressively noteworthy literature contributions.

"Children's books have always been invaluable to society. We have all seen the statistics that link a love of reading with improved mental health and relationships. But in a world of falling literary rates, increased uncertainty, and frayed attention spans, children's books feel increasingly urgent. If we want this generation of kids to grow up with resilience, kindness, flexibility, and the ability to focus and problem-solve, we must all work harder to limit early screen time and give children access to a wide, fun, and nourishing range of books."

"All stories depend on a combination of compelling characters, interesting plot and engaging writing. The trick is to get them all working at the same time. We like to create relatable characters that find themselves in incredible situations, so for us plot is a very important element. We want our readers to be really invested in what is going to happen next. For us, another essential ingredient is a sprinkling of humor. That provides the reader with a chance to take a breath in amongst all the action. *Phew!*"

The emotional worlds of the characters they create ring true, allowing strict reality to be abandoned in the plotting. "If a reader believes in the character's reaction to the wild events in a story, then they get to build empathy and curiosity, while having a fantastic adventure."

"The two of us worked together on a series in Australia called *Zac Power*. It was also an action series (with a spy theme) and it taught us a lot about pacing for stories that unfold over constrained periods of time. These kinds of books have to be very tightly plotted and we've learned that having a super structured chapter breakdown before writing is essential. Despite this, we almost always chat after every couple of chapters to see if we need to revise the plan for the upcoming chapters. We have definitely learned that the more we communicate, the smoother the writing process is."

The Maddy Mara dynamic duo is now celebrating their newest book series, *Max Beast: Sharknado Warning*, exclaiming, "We're super excited about it. We wanted to create a really exciting, action-packed book and we think we've done it."

"In the story, Max is traveling around the country with his parents when he comes into contact with a mysterious amulet. When the amulet transforms him into a great white shark, Max is thrown into the deep end—literally! Suddenly, he must work out how to 'drive' his new powerful predator body, all while dealing with killer whales, giant squid, and menacing divers with a bomb. Then there's Hector, the weird kid who used to own the amulet and wants it back ASAP. Max must fight to protect himself (and his parents) from harm. And then there's the slight problem of how to turn back into a kid again...."

Regarding the wonderfully quirky narrative, they say, "Yes, we think finding yourself in the body of an apex predator is a pretty unique perspective! Imagine yourself suddenly behind the wheel of a racing car traveling at top speed ... that's the situation that Max finds himself in when he gets transformed into a beast. We love the idea of our readers imagining what it would be like to have a totally different form."

What's it like when you have a heightened sense of smell, for instance? Or the ability to breathe underwater? And how do you communicate when you don't share the language of the creatures around you?"

"Max is a combination of many people we know. He doesn't have any superpowers or elite skills—he is just a regular kid who finds himself in extraordinary situations and has to switch into problem-solving mode. We wanted Max to inspire our readers to think about what they would do, if they found themselves suddenly transformed into a huge, powerful beast. Max is the sort of character we love to create—someone who shows their strength and intelligence when put under the pump."

They say working on *Sharknado Warning* involved the same process as working on any of their other series. "We start with a big brainstorming session together, where we get excited about all the possible plots and storylines we could create. Then we pick out our favorites and write a chapter breakdown, which leads into writing the first draft. We send this back and forth between ourselves, refining and improving it until we feel it's ready to send off to the publishers."

"The biggest difference with Max is that there's just so much action. We felt kind of sweaty after writing each chapter. Many of our books have a fast-paced style, but *Sharknado Warning* was the next level."

Overall, they feel a key skill for being a children's author is the ability to recall what it was like to be a child. "For us, that was a while ago, but we can both still bury back down into that period of our lives and remember the feelings and thoughts that we had then. Little bits of our own experiences—and the experiences of our children, and our friends' children—seep into everything we write."

"We're also big revisers, so we basically revisit all aspects of writing with every draft on every project. When you write books with limited word counts, every single word is important. This is another great thing about working as part of a writing team—you have another set of eyes to look over what you've done, fix things, and make suggestions. Of course, it's important not to be precious about your words if you work

like this. Luckily, neither of us mind when the other one cuts or changes things. We just want the book to be the best it can be. Helpfully, both of us tend to forget who has written which bit (and we always think the other one is responsible for the best lines)."

"We've designed each story to be a stand-alone adventure, so kids can read whichever Max Beast book is available," they say about the new series. "So to a certain extent, Max will struggle in each book to adapt to his new animal form and change back at the end. We've found that our readers often really like a dependable framework like this, so they can relax and enjoy the elements that change. For instance, Max picks up new skills each time, and these skills thread through the following *Max Beast* books. He sometimes refers to previous challenges he's had, or creatures he's become, and learns what does—and more dramatically, doesn't—work. He grows, over the books, in confidence and adaptability, just as we all need to."

"Working on the *Max Beast* series has taught us some pretty incredible animal facts. For instance, sharks have 'conveyor belt' teeth. As one set gets old and falls out, another set is lurking in the background, ready to take their place. In a lifetime, a shark might generate up to fifty thousand teeth! We defy anyone to find that ordinary."

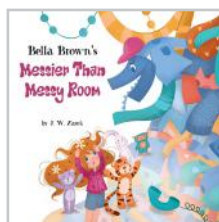
And if sharks had 3 rules, they'd be...? "Chomp first, ask questions later. Always bite off more than you can chew. Why be just a good white shark when you can be a *great* white shark?"

"One of the best things right now is receiving messages from librarians and teachers that their students are engaging with *Sharknado Warning*. We had one recent email where the teacher said her students kept BEGGING her to read from the book (and yes, she used capital letters). Those are words to gladden any author's heart!"

"For us, happiness is walking through a park in the sunshine with your writing partner, discussing a brand-new project which you both can't wait to start writing." So stay tuned!

For more information about Maddy Mara and their books, visit maddymara.com. ●

SPRING READING LIST

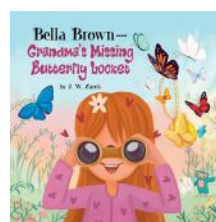


Bella Brown's Messier Than Messy Room

by J. W. Zarek

Eight-year-old Bella Brown wants to visit the new butterfly garden, but her messier-than-messy room stands in the way. With a call from Grandma Yetta,

Bella discovers that even the biggest mess gets tackled one small step at a time. A 2025 Story Monsters Approved winner, 2025 Moonbeam Medal recipient, and Chanticleer Reviews Series finalist. For ages 4–8. Free comprehensive and one-topic-focused lesson plans for grades Pre-K through 4th grade for this book at jwzarek.com.



Bella Brown—Grandma's Missing Butterfly Locket

by J. W. Zarek

With Grandma Yetta's butterfly locket missing, eight-year-old Bella becomes a memory detective. Together they retrace adventures across China, Japan,

Colombia, and Arkansas, each stop alive with real butterfly wonders. A heartwarming story of family bonds, curiosity, and treasures found in shared memories. Literary Titan Gold Book Award, 2025 Story Monsters Approved winner, and Chanticleer Reviews Series Finalist. For ages 4–8. Free comprehensive and one-topic-focused lesson plans for grades Pre-K through 4th grade at jwzarek.com.



Bella Brown Visits a Bee Farm

by J. W. Zarek

Bella Brown runs terrified from a bee in Grandma Yetta's garden. A visit to Farmer Joe's Sunny Meadows Bee Farm turns fear into fascination as Bella discovers the wiggle dance, honey-

making, and why bees matter to every garden on Earth. Literary Titan Gold Book Award, 2025 Story Monsters Approved winner, and Chanticleer Reviews Series Finalist. For ages 4–8. Free comprehensive and one-topic-focused lesson plans for this book, grades Pre-K through 4th grade at jwzarek.com.



The Stomp-Clomp-Clump Monster Above the Bed

by J. W. Zarek

What are monsters under the bed afraid of most: children. Fred and his dust bunnies, brave Brutus Bunfluff, scaredy-cat Gunnar Puffbutz, and germaphobe

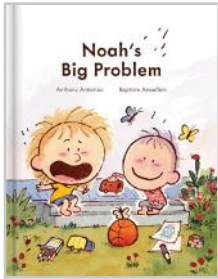
Dust Puff Ted ... their lives are turned upside down when a boy named Billy moves in. A clever role-reversal story about friendship and empathy. Literary Titan Gold Book Award, 2025 Story Monsters Approved winner. For ages 4–8. Free comprehensive and one-topic-focused lesson plans for this book, grades Pre-K through 4th grade at jwzarek.com.



Just a Minute!

by Josée Bournival, Luke Ives

"Just a minute!"—we hear it every day. But how long is a minute, really? In this playful and thoughtful picture book, children explore how time feels different depending on what they're doing—whether they're waiting in line, playing their favorite game, or being asked to clean up. *Just a Minute!* introduces the concept of time perception with humor and heart. Through relatable situations and expressive illustrations, it encourages young readers to be patient, mindful, and more aware of the world around them. Perfect for ages 4–7, this story supports Pre-K to Grade 2 learning and is a great tool for discussing routines, emotions, and perspective. Whether at home or in the classroom, this book makes "just a minute" feel like a moment worth exploring.



Noah's Big Problem

by Anthony Antoniou, Baptiste Amsallem

Noah loves spending time with his little brother, Gabriel. But there's a problem—Gabriel is autistic, and playing together isn't always easy. In this touching and relatable story, based on the real experiences of young author

Anthony Antoniou, Noah must find a way to connect and share joyful moments with his brother. With gentle humor and vibrant illustrations by Baptiste Amsallem, *Noah's Big Problem* is more than just a story—it's a celebration of understanding, empathy, and the beautiful differences that make us who we are. Includes a book testimonial from Tempe Grandin-famed scientist and autism advocate.

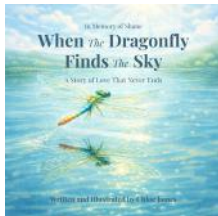


Frances Flamingo: Soccer Star

by Dottie Lee

Frances Flamingo: Soccer Star is a heartwarming picture book about courage, teamwork, and trying something new. When Frances joins a soccer team for the first time, she feels nervous and unsure—

but with encouragement, she discovers her confidence and joy on the field. Perfect for ages 4–8, this uplifting story supports social-emotional learning and helps children build resilience, self-belief, and a willingness to try. "It's not hard—it's just new!"



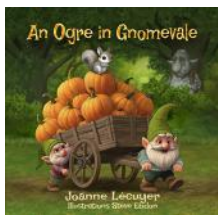
When the Dragonfly Finds the Sky:

A Story of Love That Never Ends

by Chloe James

In *When the Dragonfly Finds the Sky: A Story of Love That Never Ends*, Chloe James transforms personal grief into a tender children's story that brings

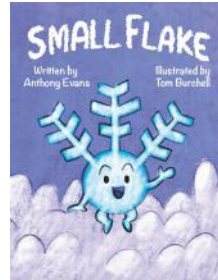
comfort and hope. Inspired by losing her father at a young age, she uses the symbolic journey of a water bug becoming a dragonfly to gently explain loss. With a soft, faith-centered tone, the book offers families a meaningful way to navigate grief while reminding children that love always remains.



An Ogre in Gnomevale

by Joanne Lécuyer, Steve Ebdon

There is no place like Gnomevale at harvest time. That is, until an ogre decides to join in the festivities. A lovely story about how friendship comes in all sizes. Beautifully illustrated picture book for kids ages 5–7. Purchase a copy at topsybooks.com.



Small Flake

by Anthony Evans

Come along on a small flake's quest to become part of a snowman. Find out the troubles he goes through in reaching the ground. Will he reach his destination? There are lessons to be learned in the journey of this small flake.

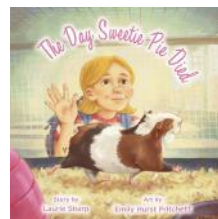


Hudson's Monarch Nursery

by Laurie Sharp

Join Hudson on a heartwarming adventure as he discovers the magic of monarch butterflies and their life cycle. With curiosity, care, and help from BeBe, the horse, he learns the responsibility of nurturing monarchs from caterpillar to butterfly.

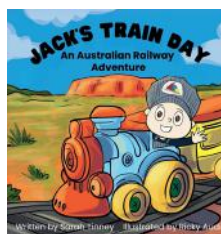
This beautifully illustrated story, printed in a dyslexia-friendly font, blends science and wonder, inspiring children to explore and protect the natural world. Perfect for young nature lovers, educators, and families eager to foster curiosity and environmental stewardship.



The Day Sweetie Pie Died

by Laurie Sharp

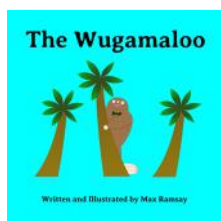
When a beloved classroom guinea pig dies, a group of young children must navigate grief, confusion, and love together. Guided by their compassionate teacher, they learn it's okay to feel sadness and ask questions while honoring Sweetie Pie's memory. Through shared stories, art, and a heartfelt goodbye, this gentle, age-appropriate story helps children understand death as a natural part of life. A comforting resource printed in a dyslexia-friendly font for families, educators, and caregivers.



Jack's Train Day: An Australian Railway Adventure
by Sarah Tinney

All aboard for an unforgettable Australian adventure! Jack loves trains, big, small, old, and even solar powered. Join him in *Jack's Train Day* as he rides

some of Australia's most iconic railways, from the open-sided carriages of Puffing Billy to the lush rainforest views of the Kuranda Scenic Railway. Each stop brings a new experience, inviting young readers to explore, imagine, and discover the joy of trains and travel.



The Wugamaloo
by Max Ramsay

Do hairy monsters have families, or do they live alone? "This island is home to a great hairy beast! With humongous feet and gigantic teeth. He eats with his toes while

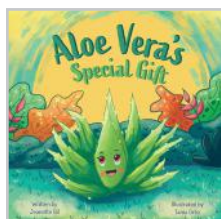
having his feast." When space kid Bud crashes on a mysterious island, he meets Amy, his aviator protector. Can they brave the rustling bushes? Will Bud find a home? *The Wugamaloo* is a picture book for ages 4 to 8. Crash land into adoption!



Dungoolee
by Lolisa Marie Monroe

Dungoolee is a timeless tale about a lonely dragon with a long purple tail! Dungoolee meets Ada, a gentle girl who speaks to animals and listens with her heart. From that day forward,

Dungoolee's life begins to change. Ada shares her ability to look beyond appearances and see others for who they truly are inside. Look for all of Miss Lolisa's Tales & Tails!



Aloe Vera's Special Gift
by Jeanette Gil

Aloe Vera's Special Gift is an award-winning children's book that introduces young readers to themes of self-worth, kindness, and resilience through the gentle story of

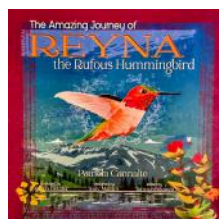
an aloe plant discovering its purpose. Perfect for ages 3–8, this heartwarming story blends social-emotional learning with nature and science, making it a meaningful resource for classrooms, libraries, and families seeking to nurture confidence, empathy, and growth in every child.



Legends of the Old Birds: The Journeys of Duck
by Ian Anderson

Duck had lived peacefully by the pond with family for his whole life. But when his mother one day becomes mysteriously ill, he is thrust upon a dangerous adventure to achieve things he never thought were possible. Follow Duck on his three journeys, each to

a place of legend where no simple duck has ever walked before. Accompanied by ten enchanting, full-color pictures, this debut children's novel about courage and generosity will charm early readers.



The Amazing Journey of Reyna the Rufous Hummingbird
by Pamela Cannalte

The Amazing Journey of Reyna the Rufous Hummingbird is the story of a tiny hummingbird's 4,000-plus mile journey from her birthplace in Alaska in late

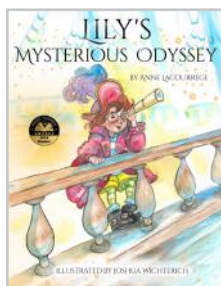
spring, to her wintering home in central Mexico via the Rocky Mountains. Readers are welcomed into the awe-inspiring world of this little warrior that weighs less than two U.S. pennies as she matures and migrates from the northern reaches of the United States to the tropical forests of Central America. Winner of Story Monsters Approved Award 2026 and Royal Dragonfly Book Award 2025. Available on Amazon.



Footprints in the Snow
by Alison Bellringer

Mack knows he's not allowed to go wandering in the forest alone, but that doesn't stop him from convincing his friend, Katrina, to go with him. However, it's been so long since the track has been used that the children quickly realize they are completely lost. Mack and Katrina aren't the only ones in the forest though and a startling

encounter with a ferocious animal hastily forces them to retrace their steps. But with his mother anxiously preparing for relatives to visit, including Mack's twin cousins, providing an accurate description of the animal is soon put aside as Mack discovers there are more important matters to deal with than his scratched-up arm.



Lily's Mysterious Odyssey by Anne Lacourge

Lily, a young girl in New Orleans, discovers artifacts in her historic home and is swept into an imaginative journey with Anne, Captain Harry's daughter. This leads Lily on a magical adventure across the ocean, where she encounters amazing places

and meets fascinating people. Together, they explore Greek cities, myths, and Olympic games, forming bonds that bridge generations. The story emphasizes the connection between past and present found within old homes.

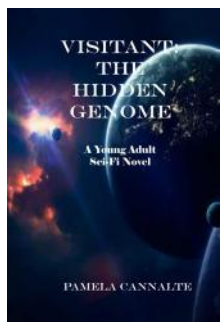


Home of the Spirit Animals

by Cyd Raschke

A reviewer wrote, "I home-schooled my kids and would have bought Home of the Spirit Animals in a heartbeat!" Although all ages will enjoy an adventure set in the 1400s when horses returned to the land of their ancestors, educators are particularly drawn to this novel that brings to life the Columbian

exchange of flora and fauna, world religions, geography, Indigenous, Spanish and Moorish cultures, paleontology, and other historical milestones. A glossary is included.

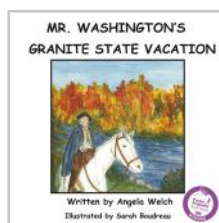


Visitant: The Hidden Genome

by Pamela Cannalte

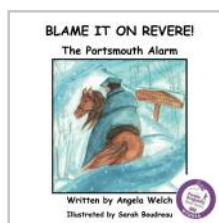
Humans have been on a path of self-destruction for ages but have been guided by forces from alternate universes since the beginning of time, helping mankind through genetic manipulation. As the human species careens toward self-extinction, alien DNA surfaces in select doctors, scientists, and gifted intellectuals

around the world. We follow a gifted group of superhumans on a preordained path to save the world, including adolescent Grace, who possesses superhuman abilities. 2022 Purple Dragonfly Book Awards Winner, Sci-Fi and YA Fiction categories and 2023 Story Monsters Approved Winner in YA Novels; 2022 Purple Dragonfly Award Winner 1st PLACE SciFi/Fantasy and Honorable Mention in YA Category 2021 Royal Dragonfly Award Winner YA; 2021 Royal Dragonfly Award Winner Sci-Fi. Second in the series coming out later this year!



Mr. Washington's Granite State Vacation by Angela Welch

In the fall of 1789, George Washington decided to visit the northern states to talk about the new Constitution. He wanted to meet and listen to the people he met along the way. During his trip, he crossed the Merrimack River in Massachusetts, heading for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the capital of the state at that time. Come along as President Washington takes his Granite State vacation.



Blame It On Revere! The Portsmouth Alarm

by Angela Welch

Paul Revere's famous ride in April of 1775 is well known by many. However, his first ride took place on a cold, stormy day in December of 1774 where he headed to the quiet coastal town of Portsmouth in the colony of New Hampshire. What message was so important that led to this journey? Read about the ride that led to the first shots of the American Revolution before those at Concord and Lexington, Massachusetts. www.lunabooksnh.com



Tailspin

by Joan Buchanan

Summer Wagner, a curious and smart 9-year-old, finds herself in a cold lonely place after a tragedy. Summer slowly adapts, and as she grows into a teen, she learns how to rebel without getting caught. Told through Summer's eyes as an adult in therapy, you'll travel through her tumultuous childhood cheering her on, all the while wondering how her caregivers could be so cruel.



The Greatest Treasure

by Anne Lacourge

This story follows Lily, a curious young girl living in a historic home built by a sea captain. Intrigued by a mysterious locked doorway in her bedroom, Lily discovers an old silver key hidden in the basement. Encouraged by a gentle, unseen voice, she bravely decides to unlock the door, eager to uncover the secret that has captivated her imagination for so long.

Click on the book cover to purchase any of the titles.

To advertise your book in our Reading List, contact Cristy Bertini at cristy@storymonsters.com for rate information.

**MONSTERS
AT THE
MOVIES**

The Muppet Show

Grade: B+

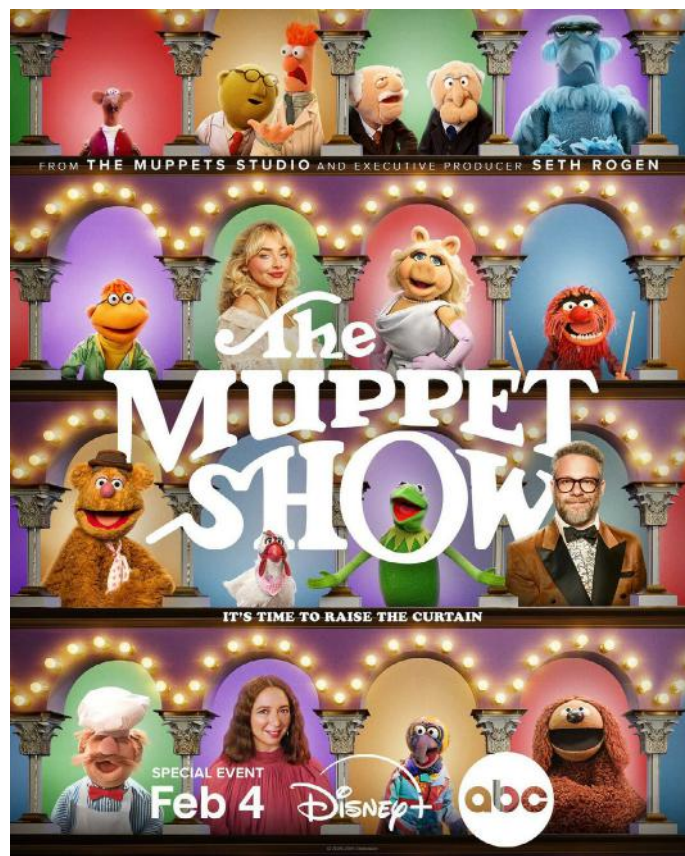
reviewed by Nick Spake

Throughout their decades-long history, the Muppets haven't drastically changed their brand of humor, which ranges from self-referential, to slapstick, to surreal. What has changed is the format in which their comedy is presented. Over the years, the Muppets have starred in retellings of literary classics, mockumentaries, and animated shows that explored their baby years. Yet, the Muppets have rarely revisited the format that made them household names: a variety show. The original *Muppet Show* ran from 1976 to 1981, winning an Emmy for Outstanding Comedy—Variety or Music Series. While Jim Henson could've kept *The Muppet Show* going longer, he bowed out while it was still on top.

Since then, we've only occasionally seen the Muppets return to their variety roots. The closest we got to a revival of the 1976 show was *Muppets Tonight*, a very '90s incarnation right down to the Arsenio Hall-esque host. Now, after 50 years, the Muppets reopen their old theater for a one-off special ... or possibly a full revival. As Kermit, now performed by Matt Vogel, says at the top of the show, this is basically a trial run to see if there's enough interest to produce a whole season. Honestly, though, if Disney doesn't move ahead with a revival, then they clearly don't know where they're going with the brand. The Muppets were tailor-made for the stage. Their talents shouldn't be wasted on Booking.com commercials.

The opening sets the tone as Kermit returns to the Muppet Theater, set to a piano rendition of "Rainbow Connection." What starts as sentimental turns meta as Kermit realizes that Rowlf the Dog has been playing the tune, which wasn't just a nostalgic ballad in his head. Speaking of nostalgia, the classic *Muppet Show* intro is lovingly recreated in a special that largely plays the greatest hits, from Fozzie's corny puns, to Gonzo's absurd stunts, to virtually every sketch going off the rails. While the structure isn't radically different, this *Muppet Show* isn't without fresh blood.

Continuing the Muppets' tradition of celebrity cameos, the special features appearances from Seth Rogen, who serves as an executive producer, and Maya Rudolph, who scores the biggest laugh with a near-fatal accident. The special guest, though, is Sabrina Carpenter, who's the ideal candidate to bridge the gap between Muppet fans old and new. Carpenter only recently achieved superstar status, but you can tell



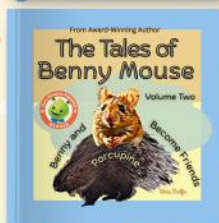
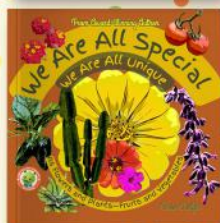
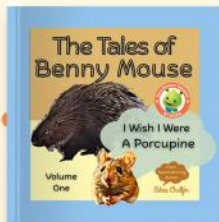
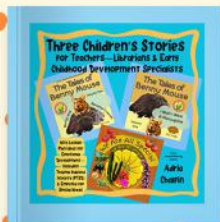
she has deep respect for the Muppets' legacy. As such, she acts opposite Miss Piggy with the same reverence she had performing alongside Paul Simon at *SNL*'s 50th Anniversary.

Although this *Muppet Show* is a faithful return to form, some may argue that it shares too many similarities with its predecessor. Considering that this is essentially a proof of concept, it makes sense for the special to remind us of the good old days. The result finds a solid balance between being current and classical, although if *The Muppet Show* gets picked up for a full season, nostalgia won't be enough to fuel it. The show will need to experiment to forge its own legacy. That said, hopefully things are just getting started. ●

Nick Spake is the author of *Bright & Shiny: A History of Animation at Award Shows Volume I*. For more information on the book, please visit CartoonContender.com.

What better way to face tough subjects with a child than through an entertaining story?

Available in paperback, ebook (Amazon only) and a special three-story educator's hardback edition with lesson plan ideas throughout.



For wholesale purchases find them listed at IngramSparks catalog.

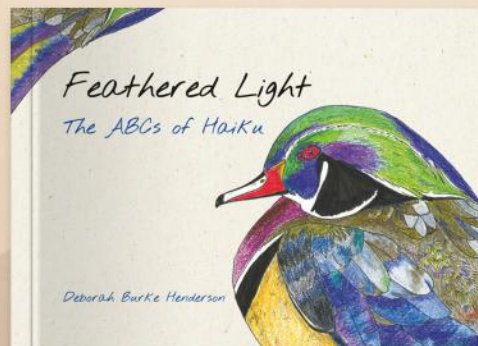
www.adriabooks.com

A Helpful Resource for Teachers and Students Alike!

Whether you are new to haiku or an aspiring poet, you will learn about the key aspects involved in crafting effective poems!

"I wish I had this book when I was starting out, full of clarity and inspiration when it comes to reading and composing haiku.... Offers engaging explanations of the basics that provide an entry point into this genre of poetry."

—Barrie L., Amazon reviewer



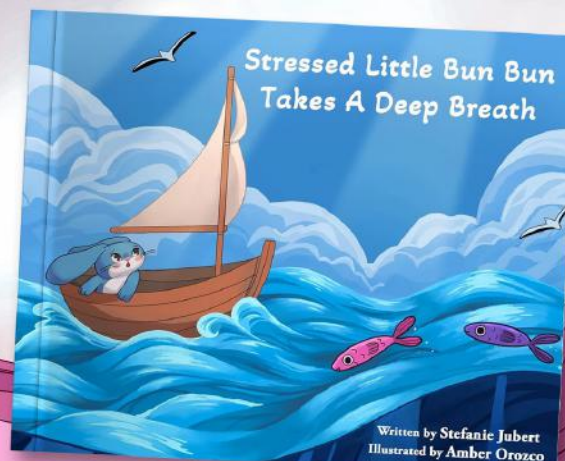
Available on Amazon.com

EMPOWERING KIDS TO MANAGE ANXIETY ONE DEEP BREATH AT A TIME

A whimsical, rhyming picture book that teaches children mindfulness breathing techniques as they follow the story of an anxious bunny who must rescue his big brother from a dangerous island. Along the way, he learns to face his fears and take control of his emotions—one deep breath at a time.

"Written in verse with interactive prompts, Jubert's debut is an excellent read-aloud option, especially for anxious kids... keeps children engaged for repeat readings."

—BookLife



WWW.WINDYSEAPUBLISHING.COM
Available on Amazon.com



JUDY NEWMAN LIFE OF A READER

Thank You, James Patterson

by Judy Newman

“There’s no such thing as a kid who hates reading. There are kids who love reading, and kids who are reading the wrong books.”
—James Patterson

I walk, talk, and work among many champions of children’s literacy—people who understand that it is essential to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that every child is able to read. And that the way to get kids to read fluently and proficiently is to give them access to choose and own age-appropriate, quality books they are interested in. Motivation matters most!

All authors love to have as many children, teachers, and families as possible read their books. Publishers want to find ways to distribute their books to places—schools, libraries, bookstores—where children can have easy access to choose and own their own books and build their home libraries. Foundations and philanthropists conduct impact investing to support literacy organizations they believe do a good job of advancing and enhancing literacy, and to challenge the pernicious and appalling fact that in the US, 70 percent of kids cannot read proficiently by third grade.



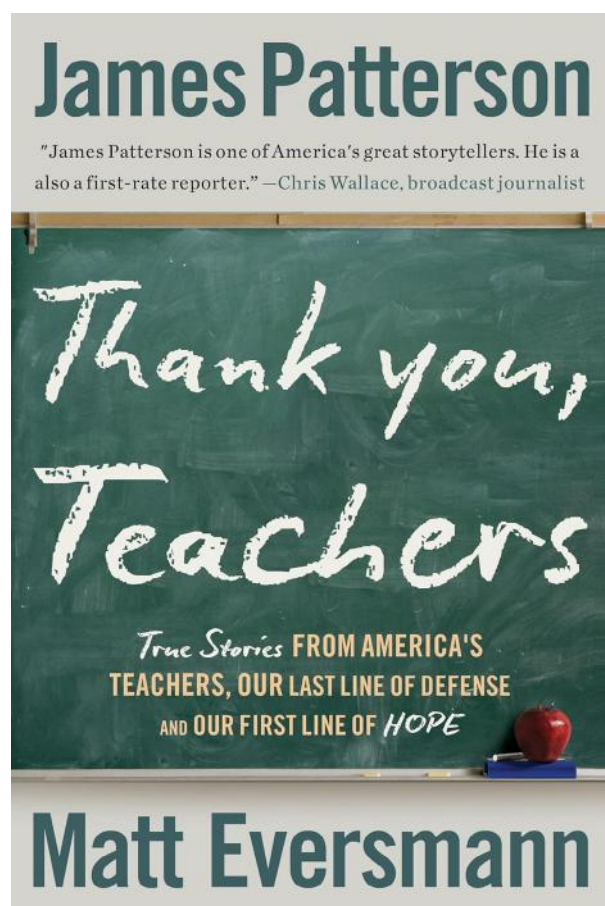
And there are some deeply conscientious folks among us who also realize that our best chance of changing that unacceptable trajectory of illiteracy is to support teachers.

But James Patterson—above anyone I have met—does it all.

As an author, publisher, philanthropist, and son of a teacher, James Patterson uses his considerable influence to support literacy for all kids and their grown-ups—and teachers in particular—without whom most kids would have no access to books and reading.

No one walks the walk like Jim!

His brand-new *New York Times* bestselling book, [*Thank You, Teachers: True Stories from America's Teachers, Our Last Line of Defense and Our First Line of Hope*](#), is out now, and it is the perfect end-of-school-year gift for special teachers you know.



This Spring, to tie in with the publication of *Thank You, Teachers* and to celebrate teachers in a truly meaningful way, James Patterson is donating \$200,000, so 1,000 teachers can each get \$200 Scholastic eGift cards to purchase books and materials for their classrooms.

[Here is a video](#) where he announces the program.

And [here is the link](#) to nominate a teacher or apply yourself.

James Patterson is also the founding supporter of Impact Reading's flagship program, the [United States of Readers](#), which, in partnership with Scholastic, aims to bring book choice and ownership to millions of children attending high Title 1 schools—along with their teachers and families—who currently have no access to choose their own books, build their home libraries, and develop their confidence as readers.

James Patterson spends his life spreading gratitude. Now it's time we thank him! Please join me in expressing appreciation for a true champion of literacy.

Judy ●

Thank You, Teachers Giveaway

We at Impact Reading are giving away free copies of *Thank You, Teachers* to the first 10 readers who email me at jnewman@impactreading.org with a thank you message for James Patterson (cards, notes, letters, drawings—all accepted).

Judy Newman, Board Chair, Impact Reading
Chief Impact Officer Emeritus, Scholastic

BOOK REVIEWS



You're Still Pretty New Here

by Mariyka Foster
(Peachtree)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

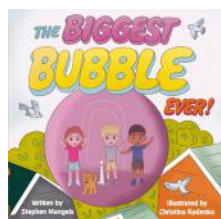
There's so much to learn when your sweet bundle of joy arrives. There was so much that needed to be learned before that special day. Going all the way back to their ancestors and to before humans were around, they had to figure it out. Same as you, the new parents. In this reassuring and silly story, warm illustrations detail the generations and backgrounds of learning all these new things. Ideal for new parents, a baby shower gift, or anyone experiencing being a new parent. (Ages 3-6)



Firefly Lullaby

by Kenneth Kraegel (Candlewick Press)
Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

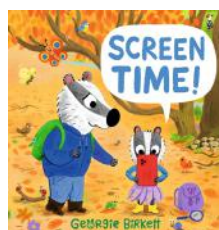
The author and illustrator of *Mushroom Lullaby* and *Mermaid Lullaby* adds another soothing story to the *Lullaby* series, one filled with the sound of fireflies dancing to tiny trumpets, feasting on a banquet, and singing songs. As they settle their wings, little readers drift off to cozy dreams. Mesmerizing words and pictures combine for a special snuggly story. (Ages 3-7)



The Biggest Bubble Ever!

by Stephen Mangels, Christina Rudenko
(Independently Published) Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

When all ideas for what to do on a boring summer day are kicked to the curb for one reason or another, three friends take an ordinary activity of blowing bubbles with their bubble gum and turn it into an adventure that almost gets them into a sticky situation. Join the laughter in this easy to read and easy to imagine story. (Ages 3-7)

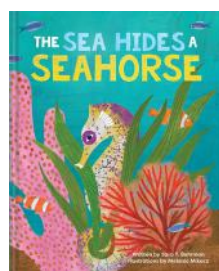


Screen Time!

by Georgie Birkett
(Candlewick)

Reviewer: Cynthia Kern OBrien

When Doris refuses to play or talk with her parents, only wanting to watch her favorite show nonstop, her family sets out to find what it will take to bring her back to the joys of offline life. The result is a super cute, relevant story—perfect for today's families navigating the world of ever-present screens. It's a reminder that sometimes, the best substitute for screen time is an adventure in the real world. (Ages 3-7)

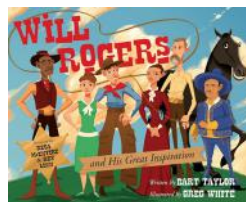


The Sea Hides a Seahorse

by Sara T. Behrman, Melanie Mikecz
(The Collective Book Studio)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

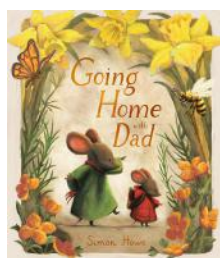
Dive under the sea and learn about a fascinating creature and other marine animals in this informative and eye-catching story. Seahorses swim, hunt, mate, and camouflage themselves on the pages, hiding from sea stars, squid, kelp, octopus, and other ocean animals. An engaging (kids can look for each seahorse in the pages) and educational book with additional resources and suggestions for ways to protect these unique creatures. (Ages 4-8)



Will Rogers and His Great Inspiration

by Bart Taylor, Greg White (Yorkshire Publishing) Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

This book concludes author Bart Taylor's award-winning picture book series about one of America's legends, Will Rogers. In his effort to teach kids about Rogers' story, Taylor introduces readers to the people who shaped the talented and world-famous trick roper, writer, and actor. Meet the influences who taught Rogers to lead with kindness and humor, from family and friends to cowboys and a vaquero. An educational, motivational, and informative story that every classroom should have on its shelf. (Ages 4-8)



Going Home with Dad

by Simon Howe
(Candlewick)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

A father mouse takes his child for a walk through the woods. Along the way, the two observe bugs and hornets and all manner of things. When the young mouse sees the bugs, he wants to know where they are going. His father says they are probably going home. This is a perfect picture book for children and their parents to enjoy together with its sweet message and its engaging illustrations. (Ages 4-8)



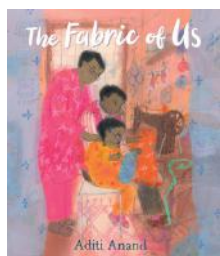
From the Fields to the Fight

by Angela Quezada Padron, Sol Salinas
(Atheneum Books)

Reviewer: Cynthia Kern OBrien

A timely and inspiring picture book biography of Jessica Govea Thorbourne, a Latina labor activist

who worked alongside Dolores Huerta to bring attention to the plight of migrant farmworkers. Jessica's journey and the collective efforts of the farm labor movement continue to resonate as a testament to resilience, leadership, and the ongoing push for workers' rights. (Ages 4-8)



The Fabric of Us

by Aditi Anand
(Candlewick)

Reviewer: Cynthia Kern OBrien

When a little girl loses her papa—a tailor who makes beautiful clothes—the silence in the house is overwhelming.

But maybe she and her other dad can

bring the house back to life, starting with a single thread.... A story that touches the heart and invites both adults and children to explore the profound journey of grief together. Through simple, emotionally moving, and relatable text, it guides readers through the process of bereavement, offering comfort and understanding. (Ages 4-8)



Me & Lavender

by Melody C. Peugh, Eve Farb
(Flashlight Press)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

Little Ella can't resist outdoor activities with Lavender the elephant when he drops in for a playdate. But can she keep herself tidy and clean for her mom's afternoon tea party? Bring your playful imagination along with the pair as they start with quiet activities like swinging and biking but soon escalate to more exciting ones like water wars and mud-pies. Detailed and colorful illustrations accompany the whimsical words ... a combination sure to entertain little readers. (Ages 5-7)

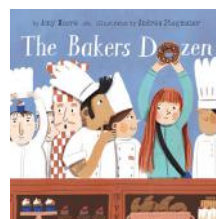


I Want to Dance in Pants

by Jess and Ruymán Hernandez,
Teresa Martinez
(Sleeping Bear Press)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Who says a girl has to wear a dress to a holiday party? When Ava is invited to a special birthday party, she refuses to pick out a dress to wear. Instead, she chooses a comfy pair of pants. When she ends up on the dance floor, she creates quite a sensation. The sparse text and the bright, expressive illustrations make for a fun but thoughtful book, one that shows how to be different, be yourself, and be comfortable in your own skin. Who knows? You may show others how to do the same. (Ages 5-8)



The Bakers Dozen

by Amy Moore, Andrea Stegmaier (Sleeping Bear Press) Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

Twelve cookie, cake, and pastry makers had their own system until one day when in walked Kristen looking for a job ... her specialty? Making doughnuts.

Will the bakers welcome a new chef aboard and figure out a way to make it thirteen? A sweet story written in rhyming couplets ... and the icing on the cake? Learn to make a variety of doughnuts from the pages in the back. (Ages 5-8)



Pia in the Forest

by David Bruggink
(Holiday House)

Reviewer: Pam Morris

A graphic novel that engages the reader with simple pictures that draw you in to this fun adventure, introducing nature along the way. Pia is a typical child who is constantly on the move but not very

observant, which bothers his father to no end. His first trip to the forest opens his eyes, his ears, and all of his senses, teaching him that sometimes it pays to stop, look, and listen. (Ages 5-8)



You Are Brilliant

by Shauneille Smith
(Independently Published)

Reviewer: Pam Morris

Through vibrant illustrations and uplifting storytelling, young readers follow two bright and curious friends

as they discover that brilliance isn't about being perfect—it's about being yourself, trying your best, and shining in your own way. An uplifting story to provide support and role models for children to follow and find ways to rise above the challenges thrown at them. A must-have for the classroom. (Ages 5-8)



Just Keep Going

by Lynn Smith, Lauren Gallegos
(Sourcebooks Jabberwocky)

Reviewer: Cynthia Kern O'Brien

If you have kids in your life, teach little ones, or simply care about nurturing young minds, this book stands out.

Its message is incredibly important: encouraging children to never give up, believe in themselves, and keep moving forward. This is a must-have for any library, whether at home or in school. The overall message is cute, heartfelt, and sure to resonate with children and adults alike. It's a lovely reminder for everyone to stay positive and persevere, no matter what life brings. (Ages 5-9)

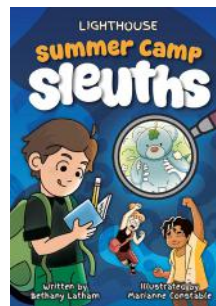


Hansel and Gretel

by Stephen King, Maurice Sendak
(HarperCollins)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

Two literary legends collaborate on a fascinating retelling of a classic fairy tale about two brave children lost in a dark and dangerous forest. King keeps the old-fashioned aspect with some updates, and adds a personal introduction, all accompanied by amazing black and white illustrations. This adaptation of the kids' adventure is a definite page-turner and a wonderful retelling of the tale. (Ages 7+)

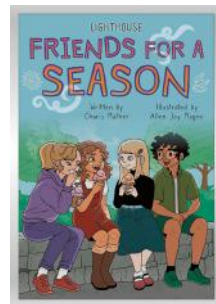


Summer Camp Sleuths

by Bethany Latham, Marianne Constable
(North Star Editions)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Cooper loves a good mystery but he doesn't make friends easily. When his parents send him to summer camp, he is apprehensive about being there, afraid he will be isolated without anyone to talk to. But soon after his arrival, the campers' snacks come up missing. Can Cooper solve the mystery and gain some new friends? A short chapter book perfect for reluctant readers. (Ages 7-10)

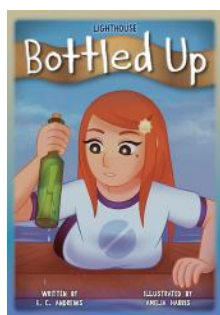


Friends for a Season

by Charis Mather, Allen Joy Magno
(North Star Editions)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Winter attends an international school, a place where students come and go each season. She is best friends with Kathryn as they have both attended the same school for several years, unlike many of their classmates. When Kathryn's family moves away, Winter is afraid she has lost her best friend forever. Short chapters, simple sentence structures, and an accessible format make these books perfect for reluctant readers. (Ages 7-10)



Bottled Up

by E.C. Andrews (Author), Amelia Harris (North Star Editions)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Bella's life in the big city is fine. Though her mom died last year, she still has her friends. She still has her school. But when Dad's aunt dies, leaving him her house across the country, Dad says it's a sign for them

to go home. Bella does not know what he means. The big city is her home. But Dad's decision is final: They're moving to a place called Driftwood Bay. At first, Bella is determined to hate the sleepy seaside town. Then a strange message in a bottle washes up at her feet.... (Ages 7-10)



Midnight Mayhem

by Christina Uss (Holiday House)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

What happens when you eat a glob of goopy mustard and wash it down with a rootbeer float? If you're 11-year-old Kaz Jakobsen, you are no longer able to sleep. After Kaz and his family move to Philadelphia, in addition to having to make new friends, Kaz now has to

figure out his insomnia. When he meets a fellow non-sleeping kid named Floyd, they embark on midnight adventures that include all the things he would never be allowed to do. Stay up with the boys and see what Kaz decides to do when he learns about an antidote that would take him away from his new best friend. (Ages 8-12)



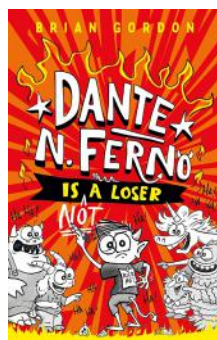
Eleven Kinds of Blue

by Katherine Wolff (Holiday House)

Reviewer: Pam Morris

This is a story of depression and how the disease affects the whole family, not just the person with the illness. Margot is a talented artist but a very distracted student. She has a big heart, a best friend, and a family that needs her desperately.

You will root for Margot's success and her family to finally listen to her. Her artist's eye makes her observant, probably more than a young girl needs to be. This is a beautifully written story that children will enjoy and relate to. (Ages 8-12)



Dante N. Ferno Is NOT a Loser

by Brian Gordon (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
Reviewer: Pam Morris

A graphic novel that is the first in a series of many more, hopefully. Brian Gordon created a fictional world for middle schoolers, highlighting their insecurities with humor and realistic situations that any preteen can relate to. Dante is made fun of in elementary school and longs to reinvent himself but unfortunately nothing seems to go his way until he meets his new friend. Join Dante in his quest for fame (in a good way) and you will root him on for his success! (Ages 8-12)

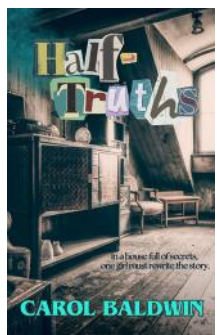


The Thing About Giants

by Christopher Galvin (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Pam Morris

Discover a new world filled with giants and humans, both afraid of each other in the beginning. Their fear seems to be born from ignorance, hearsay, and rumors. Corman the giant and Jacq the human become the best of friends, protecting each other and learning that you shouldn't always believe what you hear. It would be a wonderful read-aloud for story time. (Ages 9-12)



Half-Truths

by Carol Baldwin

(Monarch Educational Services, LLC)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

The author of this historical fiction novel offers an accurate account of segregation and racial discrimination in the South in the early 1950s, with themes that reflect the realities of the period, such as prejudice and injustice. Fifteen-year-old Katie dreams of a career in journalism but her father can't afford for her to go to college. When she witnesses racial injustice at her father's store and the arrival of the KKK, it only fuels her ambition more. Follow Katie's story, as she moves in with her grandparents, forms a friendship with their Black maid, Lillian, and learns a startling truth while sifting through their attic. Teens and young adults (and adults) won't want to put this one down. (Ages 13+)

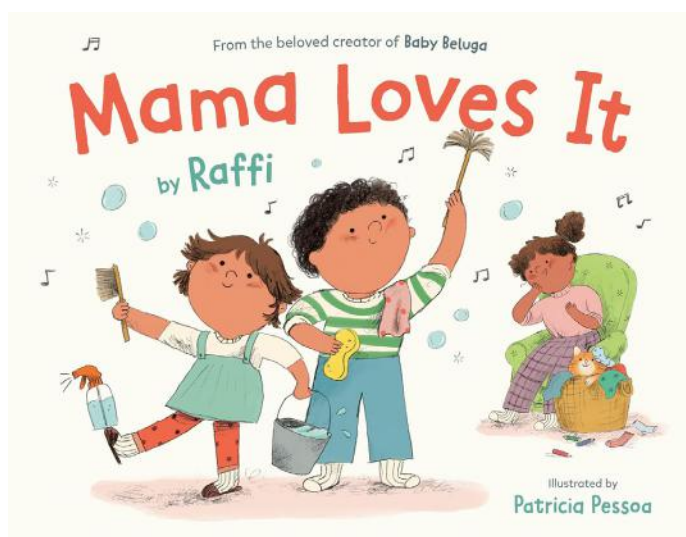
To submit your book for review, email [Cristy Bertini at cristy@storymonsters.com](mailto:CristyBertini@storymonsters.com) for submission guidelines.

Q&A
WITH

RAFFI

by Raven Howell

As the creator of beloved children's songs such as "Shake My Sillies Out," "Baby Beluga," and "Bananaphone," Raffi has been entertaining generations of young audiences for decades. Now, with illustrator Patricia Pessoa, he presents *Mama Loves It*, the first of his *Songs to Read* series.



*Set the table, clean the sink, make your bed, and sweep the floor.
Mama loves it when you help her do the chores,
Mama loves it when you lend a hand.*

Full of rhythm and repetition, Raffi's catchy song is perfect to sing along to as one family comes together to care for their home.

Q: Tell us about the basic premise of *Mama Loves It*.

A: The song about helping Mama and Papa with chores is fun! So we made a book about it.



Q: How do you hope readers (and listeners) will connect with *Mama Loves It*?

A: Singing and smiling.

Q: Families can be experienced on a level of complexity, yet love remains the foundation. What can you share with our readers about the elements of working together as a team that you've integrated throughout the song's story?

A: It's fun to feel part of a team, helping our family.

Q: What do you feel is a key element of writing a children's song?

A: Make it fun.

Q: Is there one aspect of writing/composing music that you tend to revisit as you're working on new material?

A: The joy of writing.





Q: After many years of working as a champion for children, what are you most excited about for our global community these days? And what are you most excited about for yourself, personally?

A: I'm so grateful to still be making music. Happy my fans still enjoy it.

Q: What does your life look like these days—your average day?

A: Gratitude starts each day. Then yoga, music, and play.

Q: What do you consider your strongest trait?

A: Love, faith, and joy.

Q: What does happiness look and feel like to you?

A: Contentment, caring, and service.

Q: What upcoming projects can you share with us?

A: I'm recording a new album on the power of love. ●

What If We Were All™

The Must-Have SEL Series for Every Library & Classroom

10 Book Rhyming Series

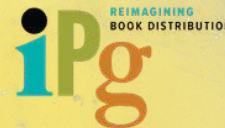


Perfect for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs

Bulk Orders, School Purchases & Author Visits Available

"A message every child—and adult—needs."

National Distribution Through IPG



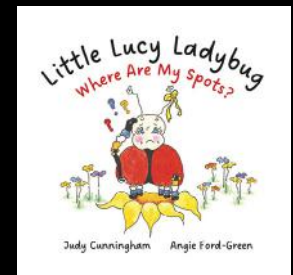
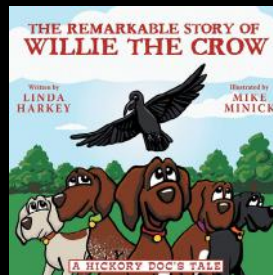
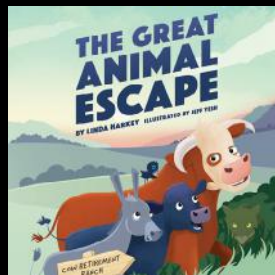
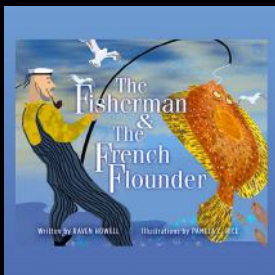
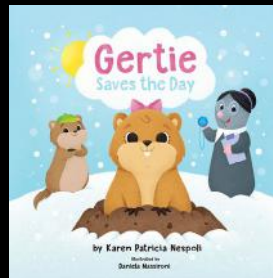
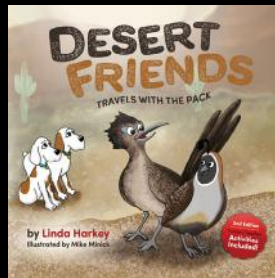
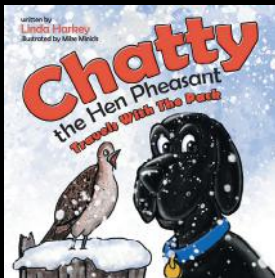
**Order Now:
WhatIfWeWereAll.com
Learn More: CMHarrisBooks.com**

Little Monsters Read-Along Audiobooks

Take your child's imagination on a magical journey with little monsters read-along audiobooks—where young voices make every story come to life!



OUR LITTLE MONSTERS READ-ALONG AUDIOBOOKS



Audiobooks
narrated by a
talented cast of
young voices.

Visit storymonsters.com/little-monsters-readalong
to start your read-along journey.



STORY MONSTERS®
Everything Children's Books

storymonsters.com

DONNA MARX

Drops Her Debut Picture Book

by Raven Howell

"I hope readers will be inspired to step out of their comfort zones and try new things. I hope they persevere until they discover their true passions," says children's author Donna Marx. "And it would be a bonus if they realize that their failures will inform their future successes."

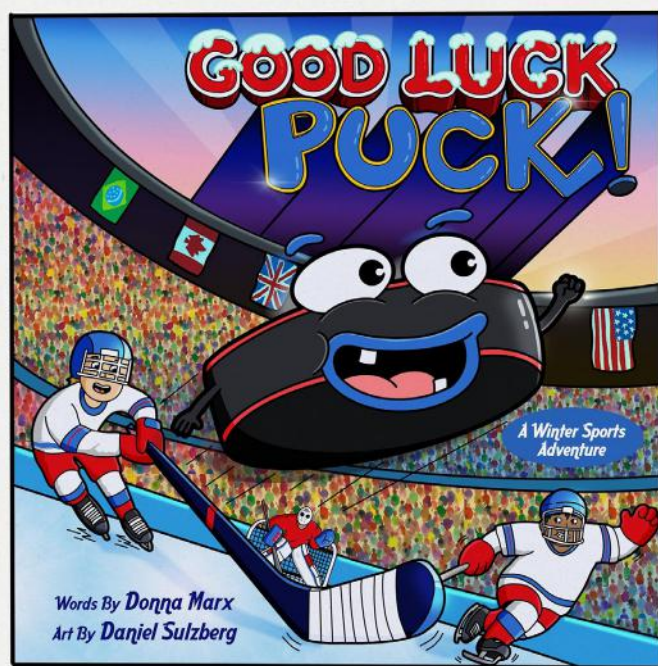
Donna, a former educator, is happy to discuss her wish to motivate readers in the themes thread throughout her debut picture book, *Good Luck, Puck*. "Much of my career was spent teaching gifted and talented students. They often struggled to find their fire within. I hope readers will think of Puck's journey when they are questioning and exploring their talents. I want them to step out of their comfort zones with confidence, knowing that they can always circle back if it doesn't work out."

The "Puck" Donna refers to is literary a puck. She laughs, "You'd be hard-pressed to find another picture book with an anthropomorphic hockey puck as the main character. The book offers a Winter Olympics setting, and a unique perspective on being part of a team."

The Little Press spring 2026 release features an adventurous hockey puck, Puck, who's done with being overlooked. He gets dropped and passed and hit but his teammates are the ones who get the recognition. Time for Puck to find a life outside of the hockey rink in search of where he can truly shine! The book, for ages 4-8, is a lively sports-themed journey, teaching kids about perseverance and teamwork.

"Puck loves ice hockey," Donna explains, "however, when his teammates get all the credit, he decides to go solo. Puck tries bobsledding, snowboarding, and skating, determined to stand out. After a series of wipeouts and penalties, Puck realizes his true passion. He learns that being a team player is more important than being the star."

"*Good Luck, Puck* was inspired by my grandsons. We were playing hockey on the driveway. The puck kept getting away from us and rolling down the street. So we started yelling, 'The Runaway Hockey Puck!' It reminded me of a picture book we



had read called *The Runaway Pea* by Kjartan Poskitt. It's a story about a pea that rolls off the plate and into some adventures. So, I started writing my story with a similar pattern, although the two books are very different."

"One of the best parts of teaching, that has informed my writing, was the ability to share a variety of good literature with students. From storybooks in the elementary classroom to novels at the middle school level, I helped students learn that good writing can take you so many places. And editing my students' stories and essays helped increase my understanding of sentence structure, word choice, and voice. But this didn't





make me an automatic expert on picture books. I quickly found I had a lot to learn about the craft.”

“I stay motivated with a dedicated writing community. My success is due, in part, to the amazing critique partners and mentors I have acquired since I began this writing journey. Their honest feedback and creative suggestions elevate the quality of my work. They make me want to be a better writer.”

“Oddly enough, I was not an avid reader as a child. I think the picture books of today make reading much more fun and inviting for kids. Even nonfiction is being written in so many creative ways. But writing was not something I remember being passionate about.”

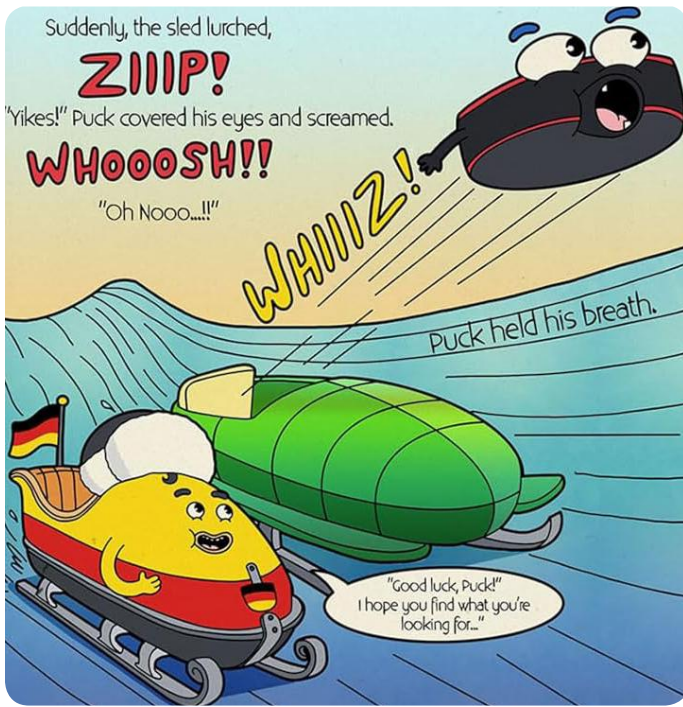
“I grew up in the suburbs of St. Louis, MO. My childhood was typical of the 1960s. We played kick-the-can, jump rope, and rode our bikes around the neighborhood. Our only directive from my parents was to ‘come home when the streetlights come on.’ In the summer, we looked forward to a two-week vacation at the Lake of the Ozarks. We slathered up with Coppertone suntan lotion, swam off the dock, and learned to water ski. And the 4th of July fireworks, with Roman candles as the finale, were akin to a Disney World display for my siblings and me.”

“When I took the time to read, my go-to authors were Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary. Their books had characters with everyday problems that I could relate to. And their use of humor made them fast paced and fun to read. Humor is an essential element in the stories I write. My dad was a great joke-teller, so maybe that’s why it comes naturally.”

As the oldest of four siblings, Donna was a born leader and organizer. She says, “I believe I imagined myself as a teacher ... always. Playing school was one of my favorite things to do, if I could convince my brothers and sister to be the students. I played piano and sang in school choirs, so for a time I thought I might want to teach music. In the end, the variety of subject matter in elementary education appealed to me.”

“These days my life as an author includes lots of works in progress. Once I know the story’s key elements are strong, I tend to focus on word choice. I’m always looking for juicier verbs, varied speech tags, and more kid-friendly language.”

“I tend to focus on one or two stories at a time. I’m not the kind of writer who has a new idea every day. I’m not good at creating ‘on the fly.’ I need time to think about the concept and formulate the potential story in my head. And because of other interests and commitments, plus time with my grandsons, writing can be sporadic. However, when I do have time for pen



to paper, it's productive. There is nothing in the publishing pipeline yet, but I am working on a companion book that's set in the Summer Olympics."

When Donna's two-year-old grandson begged, "Read it again!" referring to *Good Luck, Puck*, Donna took the compliment to heart. "He's completely enamored with Puck, which is a testament to the illustrator. But he also loves the onomatopoeias and the fast-paced action. He's too young to form an opinion just because I'm his grandma. His desire to read it repeatedly is genuine. I'm confident other readers will want to do the same."

"When you look at Puck's illustrator, Daniel Sulzberg's work (danvillage.com), it's obvious why the publisher chose him for my story. Drawing anthropomorphic characters is second nature to him. When I first saw Daniel's artwork, I was excited to see how his bright, whimsical style would make Puck and his friends come to life. Then, the cover was revealed, showing Puck with some missing teeth, just like a typical hockey player. That's when I knew I was paired with the perfect artist!"

"I would be happy if *Good Luck, Puck*, were in the hands of all the hockey-loving kids in Canada. And wouldn't it be cool if it were translated into French for that purpose? It's actually being read to a friend's grandson in India. I'm hoping for a picture of Puck in front of the Taj Mahal!"

Donna says if Puck had 3 rules for children, they would be:

Be a team player.

Try something new.

Never give up.

"The most rewarding part of this journey has been the example I've set for my grandsons. They've seen me challenge myself to try something new. They've witnessed my perseverance through each revision. I was SO excited to share this acquisition news with my them—my beta-readers! The oldest one couldn't understand why no one 'wanted' this story. It was totally like a pregnancy reveal for me. I bought some hockey pucks, added a face, wrapped them, and surprised the boys with the good news. I think they may have been even more excited than I was—if that's possible," she adds.

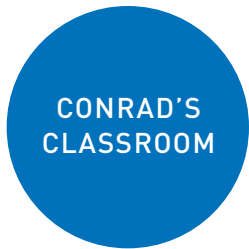
Donna says, "Presently, I can see spring and summer on the horizon. I prefer to be outside, soaking up the sun, taking walks, and watching everything bloom. Pilates, walking, and weightlifting are my current focus, and I enjoy cooking. I look forward to time with my grandsons. There is so much truth to the idea that you blink, and they are all grown up. I don't want to miss one milestone."

"SO many things make me happy: a husband whose mission in life is to make me smile; a vacation to the beach with the entire family, chaos and all; siblings and friends who drop everything in times of need; the gift-wrapped aftermath of Christmas; and homemade cards from my grandsons ... to name a few."

"And I believe that reading to children is an essential building block for their overall growth. The skills they acquire are numerous. Beyond the exposure to vocabulary, language, and story, kids are being taught empathy, problem-solving, and cultural differences. Even the act of sitting still while reading teaches them about having an attention span. I can't imagine a world without picture books," she concludes.

For more information about Donna Marx and her work, visit donnamarx.com. Visit littlepresspublishing.com for book and publishing information. ●

Raven Howell is an award-winning children's author and poet. ravenhowell.com



WHAT LURKS BENEATH THE MULCH?

by Conrad J. Storad

Moles and Voles and Short-tailed Shrews

You get to pick one

Which do you choose?

Sounds like a fun verse to start a children's picture book. Sometimes lines just pop into my head while I'm sitting at my patio table sipping iced tea. Don't steal my story idea! Nah, just kidding. There are plenty of ideas for everyone.

But while sipping tea, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of movement in the mulch covering our flower beds. At least I thought I did.

A chipmunk, perhaps? A squirrel? Something else?

I took a closer look at the old mulch covering the flower beds. Then I glanced at the backyard grass, thick and green after days of rain. Then at the line of white pine trees and flowering shrubs that marked our property line.

The answer was clear. My yard, like yours and everyone else's, is a miniature ecosystem. It contains lots of different habitats for all kinds of creatures.

Some animals live among the treetops. Others live lower in the branches and leaves. The grass is home to other inhabitants, both above and below the ground. So are the mounds of mulch in the flower beds.

Forget about the microscopic life for a moment. And the insects and arachnids. Think only about the mammals. Mulch may look like simple piles of wood chips or leaves. For small mammals, those mounds are like a multilayered luxury apartment complex.

Take a closer look at your own garden. Have you ever noticed little tunnels, bumps in the dirt, or plants that suddenly tipped over? Lots may be happening just out of sight. Those piles of mulch are home to a busy underground neighborhood.

Living beneath mulch, grass, and soil are three tiny mammals that spend most of their lives hidden from humans. Meet your underground neighbors: moles, voles, and short-tailed shrews. To us, mulch decorates a garden. To them, it's home sweet home.

Mulch provides warm insulation in winter. It offers cool shade in summer and protection from predators. The mulch and moist soil allow for easy digging. Mulch piles are like a supermarket filled with insects, worms, and other tasty treats. Best of all, tunnels stay hidden and safe beneath the mulch.

Moles and voles and short-tailed shrews are excellent diggers. Each is an accomplished hunter. All are survivors.



Moles dig tunnels that form animal transportation systems beneath your backyard.

MEET THE MOLE.

Moles are tiny underground construction workers. They are perfectly designed for life underground. Some people say that a mole's body looks like a fuzzy potato with a nose.

Cool mole facts:

- Moles have huge front paws shaped like shovels.
- They can dig tunnels up to 18 feet in one hour.
- A mole's fur points forward and backward. It doesn't get stuck while moving in tunnels.
- Moles don't see very well, but they have an excellent sense of touch and smell.
- A mole's long pink nose helps it find food in total darkness.

Moles eat earthworms, slugs, and insects, which actually helps your garden. One mole can eat nearly its own body weight in food every day!



Voles are plant nibblers. They travel via mole tunnels beneath the mulch.

MEET THE VOLE.

Voles are often confused with mice. Both are rodents, but they are different. Voles are closer cousins to hamsters and lemmings.

Voles have short tails and round, stocky bodies. A vole's ears are small and its eyes are tiny. They live under mulch because it keeps them hidden from predators like owls, hawks, foxes, and cats.

Unlike moles, voles are vegetarians. They are plant nibblers.

A vole's diet includes grass, roots, bulbs, and bark from small trees. Unfortunately, they also enjoy tasty garden vegetables that we grow.

Just out of sight

Take a closer look at your garden. Gently move some mulch off the surface. You might see a series of tiny pathways. Voles create little surface runways under leaves or mulch.

Voles do eat plants that we like. That's why gardeners get frustrated with the little rodents. Still, they are important because they provide food for many other animals. Nature works like a giant puzzle — every piece matters.



A Northern short-tailed shrew is always hungry!

MEET THE SHREW.

The short-tailed shrew might be the most surprising animal living under your mulch. Shrews are skilled hunters. Shrews look like mice, but they are not rodents. They are more closely related to moles and hedgehogs.

And here's the coolest fact...

Shrews are the only confirmed venomous mammal in North America! Don't worry, shrew venom is not medically dangerous to a human. The venom is used to paralyze insects, worms, spiders, and other tiny prey. They even eat mice. The shrew can eat now or save the prey as a snack for later.

Shrews have a very fast metabolism. They must eat every few hours. Shrews can starve if they stop eating for long.

Shrews are always hungry. They are like miniature wolves patrolling the tunnels beneath the mulch.

Cool shrew facts:

- Excellent sense of smell
- Active day and night
- Always hunting

Underground Cities

Believe it or not, your mulch beds and backyard may contain an entire underground transportation system!

Different animals often use the same tunnels. They share a subway system beneath your feet. A mole might dig the original tunnel. A vole may move in later and use it as a roadway. A shrew will patrol the tunnels hunting for insects and worms.

Each of these creatures has a purpose. Moles, voles, and shrews help to mix soil nutrients. They control insect populations. They are food for larger wildlife. And they create habitats used by other animals.

Healthy soil means healthy plants, and healthy plants help animals and people too. Even though we may not notice them, these underground mammals help keep nature balanced.

Next time you walk across your yard or garden, imagine the hidden world beneath your feet. There are tiny diggers, plant nibblers, and fearless hunters all living secret lives under the mulch.

Nature isn't only in forests or national parks. Sometimes, the greatest wildlife adventure is happening right in your own backyard. ●

Fun facts from beneath your feet:

- A mole's tunnel system can cover an entire backyard.
- Voles can have 5 to 10 babies at once. They have several families each year.
- Short-tailed shrews must eat every 2 to 3 hours to survive.
- Moles can detect vibrations from insects moving underground.
- Voles stay active all year long, even under snow.
- Shrews sometimes store paralyzed prey to eat later.
- A single owl family may eat thousands of voles in one year.
- Mole tunnels help rainwater soak into soil.
- These animals are usually only 3–6 inches long.

Learn more about creatures lurking beneath the mulch:

BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS:

- *The Secret Life of Moles* by Liz Burgess
- *National Geographic Kids Readers: Weird But True? Animals*
- *The Big Book of Mammals* – DK Publishing

WEBSITES AND VIDEOS:

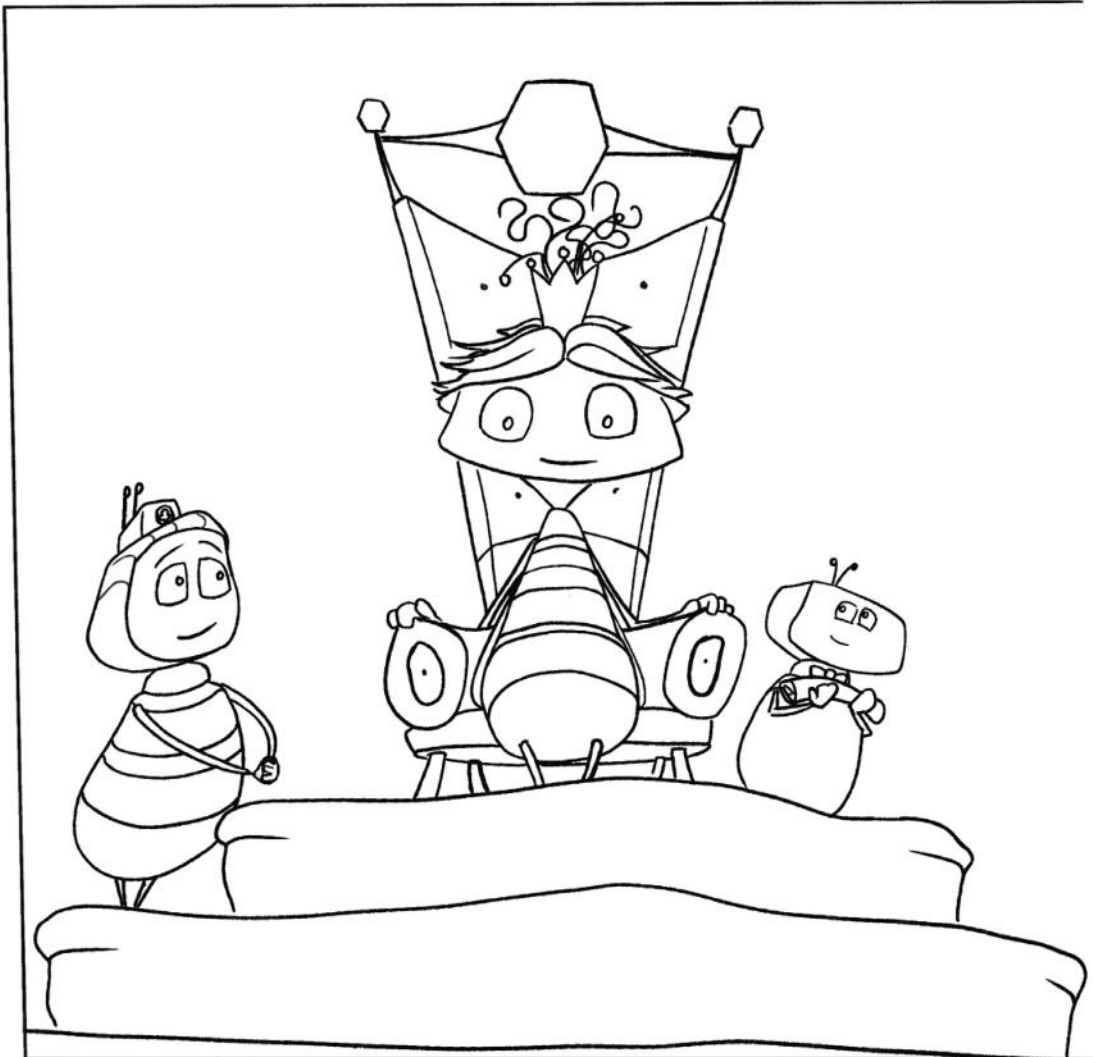
- National Wildlife Federation – www.rangerrick.org
- YouTube: *The Science of Shrews, Voles & Moles*
- YouTube: *How to identify Shrews, Voles & Moles*

Conrad J. Storad is the national award-winning author or editor of more than 50 science and nature books for children and young adults. His first book in a new series, *Night Watchers: Nocturnal Creatures of North America*, is out now. conradjstorad.com



Writing Prompt:

How can someone use their courage to help others?



Queen Beatrix

From *Queen Beatrix* • Story by Scott Evan Davis, Art by Tadgh Bentley • www.queenbeabook.com

Coping in Today's Society

by Olivia Amiri

Coping—when our daily lives seem rife with never-ending instability—issues can be polarizing and overwhelmingly disarming. Seeking them out is easy. You only need to open up a browser in an electronic device to locate websites and platforms with a wealth of almost any type of injustice, tragedy, or conflict.

In not even a second of hitting enter, you are greeted by a stream of generated articles, texts, photos, and videos. Some of which we don't know if they are real or not real. Some generated by AI, while others are false reporting. In the morning over breakfast, the faces of men and women on the news are crinkled, standing somewhere in front of something terrible. One could say to turn off the TV, shut down your laptops, take a break from your smartphones or iPhones—just turn off everything. Or to lower the volume, but you can't.

Some of these problems are not fabrications, and ignoring them merely stalls until you find them unearthed in dinner table conversation or at your favorite coffee hangout. Most times, the volume dial is the only control you might have—you are so far away, unable to *do* anything for these vacant-eyed children, starving families, tortured humans walking away from ruin. You can just make it quieter, and sometimes you must, for the helplessness crowds your thoughts and

you become numb. Masking it with a fun day doing yoga or maybe hitting a museum and dropping off a donation of worn clothing to those in need.

This has created a population that is attracted to large problems and large solutions as we have become conditioned to accepting conflict and injustice in a routine sort of way. Each day the death tolls of various incidents become simply that. Tolls, numbers, measurements—whatever applied expletives to soothe the injustice and make us feel like the numbers are digestible, easy digits and not breathing people. It would be wrong to assume that we play no part in these horrors occurring so very far away, but it seems at times like distance renders us barred from any influence.

What is necessary is an adjustment of our current coping mechanism. Ignorance is bliss and so is silence, and in turning the volume down to an indecipherable murmur, we feel less uncomfortable, but their cries are smothered. ●

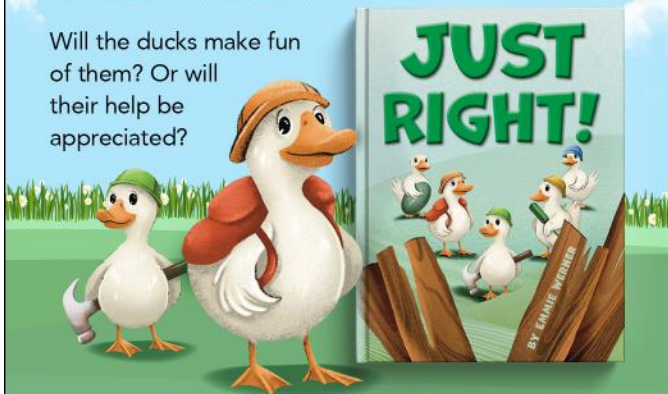
Liv Amiri is a student at Yale University, an author, poet, and activist. She champions literary freedoms by creating a space where students can explore issues together, and hopes that ultimately her work will influence positive change in the world. livamiri.com

A 'JUST RIGHT' READ-ALOUD FOR STORY TIME!

Five ducks set out to the meadow to build something special. As they pull out their tools to work, more feathered friends arrive. And they each want to help.

However, each one has been teased about their unusual, unique skills which include a very loud voice, extreme height, extreme smallness, and even one who drills holes with its beak.

Will the ducks make fun of them? Or will their help be appreciated?



WWW.DOODLEANDPECK.COM

Available on Amazon.com and major retailers

A Great Resource for the Mindful Classroom!

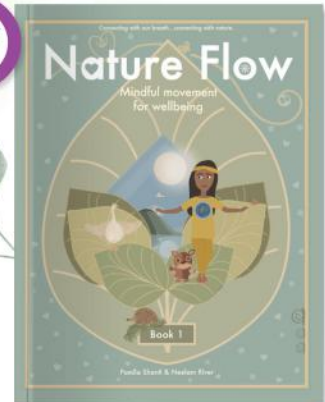
Infused with beautiful artwork and poetry, Nature Flow takes you on a journey of mindful movement through nature! With simple, easy-to-follow guidance and gentle cues, Nature Flow invites you to discover the ancient arts of mindfulness, yoga, and qigong and learn practices that foster well-being and a sense of connectedness to nature.



Follow us on
social media:
@sealight.life

Available on
Amazon.com
and Ingram Spark

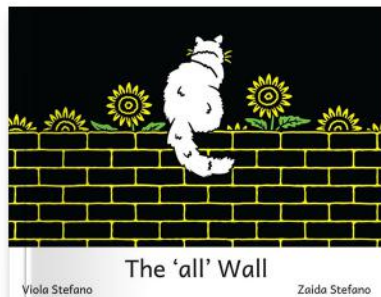
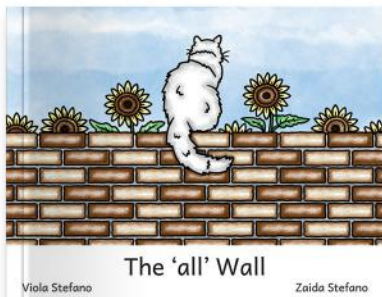
www.sealight.life



Finally, VI inclusive literacy!

Our reading books offer a high-contrast alternative for students with low vision & other visual learning needs. Our VI range includes yellow text & vibrant illustrations on black backgrounds. Each VI book offers a parallel reading option, i.e., standard colours & black print on a white background. The matching content allows children to access and engage with the same information, thereby promoting inclusive teaching practices. Our books also support explicit vocabulary instruction for students with and without complex communication needs.

Monsters Approved Book Award winner – 'The 'all' Wall: VI'



Available on Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com,
or directly from veezeepublications.com



Bring **Shakespeare** to Life in Your Classroom— in Just **60** Minutes!

The Sixty-Minute Shakespeare Series by Professor Emeritus Cass Foster makes Shakespeare accessible, engaging, and performance-ready—while keeping his original language intact.

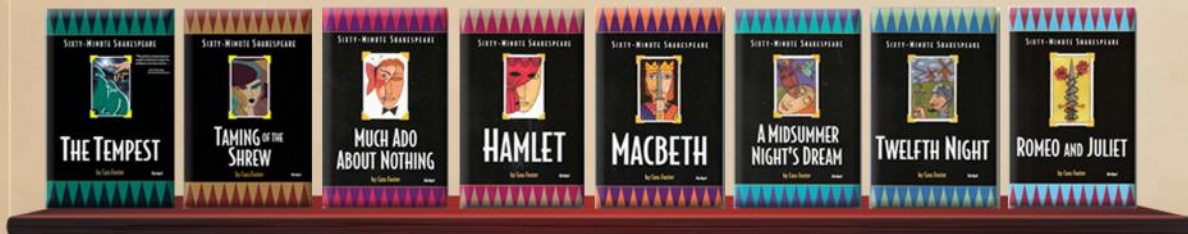
For nearly 30 years, teachers nationwide have trusted this award-winning series to help students rediscover the joy, humor, and emotion in Shakespeare's plays. Each edition preserves the Bard's format and words, with clear footnotes that make every scene come alive for today's readers.

Perfect for:

- One-class readings and scene studies
- Literature or drama units (grades 6+)
- School plays and classroom performances
- Strengthening comprehension through creative expression

"Rather than retell, the series preserves the original play format and the Bard's language, while providing excellent footnotes to archaic words. It's a smart stepping stone to the real thing."

—NEA Today



www.IntroducingShakespeare.com

Published by Book Street Press, an imprint of Story Monsters® LLC
Performance rights available through Dramatic Publishing.