

April 2023

JDLA

Newsletter

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency Celebrates 22 Years!

Welcome to our Spring issue! So many deals, so little space, but here are some of our highlights, plus our agent roundtable, and interviews from a JDLA author and illustrator. Thanks for reading!

Recent Highlights



Sold in less than one week!

Most manuscripts take weeks or even months to sell. Claudia Mills's middle-grade novel, *THE LAST APPLE TREE*, was sent to her editor of 35 years, Margaret Ferguson, early one morning and by mid-afternoon, she told JDLA agent Stephen Fraser that she couldn't resist reading it right away, that she loved it, and that she was taking it to the very next editorial meeting for discussion. And the offer came in a few days later. How's that for fast!

Author of more than 50 children's books, including several popular chapter book series like

AFTERSCHOOL SUPERSTARS (Holiday House) and *THE NORA NOTEBOOKS* (Random House), the recent *THE LOST LANGUAGE* (Holiday House, 2022), Mills's latest, tells the poignant story of two classmates, Sonnet and Zeke, who dislike each other

until they are forced to work together on a class project interviewing seniors. It's a school story about friendship, family, and one very old apple tree.

Debut mystery novel sold

Debut author Suja Sukumar's *WHEN MIMI WENT MISSING*, in which an Indian-American teen must recover memories of the night her cousin disappeared to find out what happened—and prevent herself from being framed for murder, to Alexa Wejko at Soho Teen, for publication in the spring of 2024, by Zabé Ellor at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world).



Art for award-winning author's graphic novel

Eisner, Webby, and Telly Award-winning writer Caleb Goellner's *MINNIE POUCHES IN THE MICROREALM*, a middle-grade graphic novel in which the camera-shy hulking preteen daughter of multiversal travel influencers must push past her fears to rescue her parents and lost pets from would-be dimension-

conquering monsters, illustrated by Eric Lide, to Riley Farmer at IDW Publishing, in an exclusive submission, for publication in fall 2025, by Tori Sharp at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency for the illustrator (world).

Agent Roundtable

We spoke to three agents at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency who are also published authors: Marie Lamba, Zabé Ellor, and Tori Sharp.

Q: *Has being a published author given you a unique perspective as an agent, as you work with your client list?*

Marie: Definitely! I'm so fortunate that Jennifer De Chiara is *my* agent. She's so wonderful to work with, but even so, I well remember just how terrified I was to talk with her at the start. The



author-agent relationship can feel intimidating to writers, so I always do all I can to make my clients feel comfortable. And I know the world of publishing once felt very mysterious to me. I didn't even know what questions to ask my agent. Because of this, I definitely make sure to explain things every step of the way. I think it really helps clients understand the submission process and what to expect.

Zabé: I think being able to see from an author's perspective makes me more empathetic to authors' needs.

Tori: While navigating my clients' manuscript revisions, submissions, rejections, offers, and releases, I know what each step of the process is like from the other side of the phone, so I know how to support clients through the ups and downs of each milestone. Parts of the journey can be heartbreaking, but I've had the firsthand experience of walking around in a happy, pinch-me daze after being offered my first book deal, and I truly treasure witnessing that joy in fellow creators.

Q: Do you ever feel torn between wanting to write and trying to help other writers with their work?

Marie: When I started out as an agent, I put my own writing on the back burner for a while just because there was so much to learn about this side of the business. I worked day and night (and weekends!) to get up to speed, find clients, and make all the contacts that I could with editors. Now I make a point of spending one day a week devoted to just my own writing, plus my weekends are my own. The rest of my time I focus on my clients' works. That seems to be a good balance for me.

Zabé: I think both things go very smoothly together. Editing and writing are complementary skills, and the keen eye you develop working on both roles means you can use both to help authors.

Tori: I don't experience that often, since they each give me a different kind of fulfillment, but I am constantly torn between wanting to write and wanting to draw. When I'm working on a graphic novel, it can take a lot of creative energy to switch to writing prose and then back to comics. I began as a novelist, though, and will always be one deep in my bones; I know I've got more manuscripts in me, and I chip away at them when I can.

Q: Do you generally see the publishing world through a writer's eyes or through an agent's eyes? Or both?

Marie: When we are getting a manuscript ready for submission, I look through writer's eyes to get a feel for the author's passion and purpose in their manuscript. And I also use agent's eyes to be sure there isn't anything they are doing that might make their work unsaleable in the marketplace. When it

comes to sending that manuscript out to publishers, it's all agent eyes. I'm looking to find the best home for my client and the best deal for them.

Zabé: I think I can see both--both the business side and the creative part, and how they can fit together!

Tori: Both, and through a reader's eyes. I hold tight to the wonder and magic of growing up reading, writing, and dreaming about making books, and with time I've learned more about the practicalities of the business. Perhaps because of my background in marketing, I have a fond interest in the commercial aspects of the industry. I tend to see agent-minded considerations as a boon to my creativity rather than as a hindrance, and I hope I can share that perspective with clients.

Q: Do you think every agent should also be an author? Or is this a unique niche that you occupy?

Marie: It's so interesting that agents come from all sorts of backgrounds. Some are former editors, who have unique insight into the acquisitions and editing process. Some are from marketing, who have a flair for pitching. Others are from the book world – booksellers, librarians – and have their own special knowledge of the field. Agents who are also authors have unique insight into the concerns of their clients, and also have the experience of editing, and promoting their own work, plus their own experiences with their own agent as well. For me, I've also worked in publishing as an editor and as a book promotion manager, and I've done PR, so I get to fire on all cylinders as an agent. Every bit of experience you can bring to the table is a plus.

Zabé: I don't think it's the right fit for every agent, but I do find it common for many agents to have creative pursuits, in the writing world or elsewhere. We're all drawn to creativity and to work with creative people for different reasons, but we all genuinely enjoy being around art.

Tori: Agents bring varied and valuable expertise to their careers, and we certainly don't have to be writers in order to have good taste, to be strategic, or to offer competent editorial advice. I suppose it's even more niche, though, to be an agent while also a graphic novelist. I like being able to "speak the same language" as my comics clients. Hopefully it serves them well that I know what tangents are in comics, and that I sometimes go on tangents about digital brushes or about which buttons are the best in Photoshop.

Author Spotlight: Wendi Silvano

Wendi Silvano (www.wendisilvano.com) is the award-winning author of the wacky TURKEY TROUBLE picture book series (Two Lions) featuring an inventive fowl who thinks he's the master of disguise. Its 8 titles include TURKEY TROUBLE (with around 140,000 copies sold to date), TURKEY CLAUS, TURKEY TRICK OR TREAT, TURKEY'S EGGCELLENT EASTER, TURKEY GOES TO SCHOOL, TURKEY'S VALENTINE SURPRISE, TURKEY'S SANDTASTIC BEACH DAY (which comes out this



May), and the upcoming TURKEY'S BIRTHDAY. She is also author of the upcoming picture book HOW A FOREST FEELS (Holiday House), HEY DIDDLE RIDDLE (Little Simon), as well as a variety of other picture books, early readers, and educational materials.

Q: Congratulations on all the wonderful success with your fun TURKEY picture books! The first, TURKEY TROUBLE, came out more than 10 years ago. How did you get the idea for Turkey's story, and why do you think he is so popular with readers?

A: When I was 21 I lived in Peru for a year and a half. Part of that time I lived with a family high up in the Andes Mountains. They had a variety of animals, including dogs, chickens, and one turkey. When we would finish eating we would all take our plates out to the courtyard and scrape any leftovers into a stone trough for the dogs. Well, it turns out that the turkey must have thought he was one of the dogs, because he would come running too. Sometimes he would follow me around and make weird noises or surprise me by jumping out. So, many years later, when I started writing children's books I remembered him and considered what type of problem a turkey might have, and it was obvious—getting eaten! That's how TURKEY TROUBLE came about. Why I think that book is so popular is that it is funny (mostly due to the incredible disguises that the illustrator, Lee Harper, designs for Turkey), has a nice pattern in the text that makes it easy for kids to read and even act out, and has puns that make it fun for older readers and adults. It also is one of very few Thanksgiving books that is humorous, so kids love it and teachers all over use it at that time of year. Turkey's sequels are popular for many of the same reasons (Lee's clever disguises really get so much of the credit!).

Q: When did you start writing? And how did your first traditional publishing deal come to be?

A: I actually had no idea that I would be an author until after my third child (of 5) was born. I had been a teacher for 11 years, but quit because my husband had finally finished school and I wanted to be home with my children. I was searching for a creative outlet (and some way to possibly earn a little income). Having been a teacher I thought that maybe I could write some teacher resource books. As I began looking into that, I realized I really loved picture books. I have had a passion for children's literature since my youth and, as a teacher and mother, I was always reading the newest books that came out. If I went into any bookstore I always went straight to the children's section (still do!). So, I realized that what I truly wanted to write was what I loved to read. This was all back before the internet. I bought market guides, joined SCBWI, wrote publishers to request submission guidelines, etc. It took some time, but I began

selling a few things to children's magazines, and got some work-for-hire projects. Then, finally, after 7 years I sold my first picture book manuscript (JUST ONE MORE) to All About Kids Publishing. I was so excited I did a cartwheel (or at least attempted one) in the living room! My kids just laughed at my lame attempt.

Q: You come from a teaching background. Did your time there teach you some things that have helped you as a writer of children's literature?

A: Having been a teacher has definitely been an advantage as a children's author. Not only did it provide many opportunities to read all sorts of children's books so I became very familiar with the market and what publishers were accepting, but to also see which ones appealed to my students and why. It gave me insight into what kids find funny, what kind of characters they are drawn to, and what types of books teachers are looking for. I now watch my daughter who teaches Kindergarten and see that she is always looking at picture books she might use in her class and quickly deciding whether one will appeal and hold the kids' attention. Word count is certainly at the top of her list. She knows her kids just won't sit through a story that is too long, or too dry, and that doesn't have considerable kid appeal (no matter the topic). So, I am always thinking about that as I write.

Q: Your new picture book, HOW A FOREST FEELS, is sensory, poetic, and lovely. Your TURKEY picture books are silly and punny. What is your writing process like? Is it different for these very different types of stories?

A: One of the most valuable things that helps me in my writing is to read books similar to what I want to write. I admit that my favorite picture books to write are character-driven stories with humor (which I also LOVE to read), but I am also drawn to very lyrical language and beautiful rhythms. So, when a topic doesn't seem like a good match for a "funny character book" I spend time reading books that are lyrical to get my mind in the right frame to write something similar. I have many book and online sources for finding the right words I want (my latest favorite being www.rhymezone.com, where I can find rhyming words, synonyms, related words, etc.). It's magical when you find just the perfect word that says precisely what you want, matches the rhyme, and fits the rhythm exactly (if the book is in rhyme).

Q: What advice would you give a new writer looking to break into picture books?

A: My best advice would be to read hundreds, or even thousands, of picture books so that your brain is filled with the patterns of language and story that picture books use. (I request so many picture books from our library that they

gave me my own reserved shelf!) Read old classics, but even more so, read the more recently published books. Figure out why the books that appeal to you the most “work” and why those that don’t appeal to you don’t. Join SCBWI, get a critique group (even if it’s all pre-published authors), attend conferences, watch webinars, read books on craft elements, and practice. Be patient and persistent, but never stop learning. I have dozens and dozens of stories that will likely never get published, but each one has helped make me a better writer.

Illustrator Spotlight: Dabin Han

Dabin (rhymes with robin) is a freelance illustrator with a passion for storytelling. She believes powerful stories can be told through weaving writing and illustration together to create multidimensional narratives, while being accessible to a wide variety of audiences. Select clients include The New York Times, NPR, and The Washington Post.



Q: You create fantastic nonfiction and diary comics to share online and in publications like The New York Times and NPR. When did you start drawing about your life?

A: I first started drawing from my life when I was in high school when I took a zine-making class called “Drawing as Thinking.” I found that comics helped me express myself in ways that I couldn’t with words alone. As my senior project before graduating, I self-published an 80-page graphic memoir about my four years in high school. I drew it on a school-owned Lenovo laptop that promptly gave out

after I finished the project. I remember working on the project and thinking that this was the most exciting and rewarding thing I’d ever done. Since then, my writing and drawing has steadily evolved, but my love for creating and reading comics remains as strong as ever. I also remain in touch with my former art teacher, Caitlin Cass.

Q: How would you describe your visual style or voice as an artist?

A: I think self-awareness is something that can be traced in all of my works—although, I do make an effort to make sure that I don’t come off as taking

myself too seriously. What I mean by that is, I don't want to come off as self-aware for the sake of it. I try to use it as a tool to add a bit of humor and to make the reader feel like they're being brought in on a secret. The self-awareness comes out in the details, like when my characters give a side-eye or have a shy/coy look about them. In moments like these, I feel that I am able to be direct and honest in ways that I can't quite capture with words alone.

Q: You incorporate a lot of figurative and hyperbolic illustrations into your work. How did you learn to do that so beautifully, or has that always been intuitive?

A: I think that more than being intuitive, it's something that is familiar to me. A lot of the figurative and hyperbolic elements of my work is deeply rooted in the complicated feelings around growing up bilingual. I grew up speaking Korean in the home and English everywhere else. As I grew older, my ability to communicate the complex feelings and experiences of adolescence in English grew with me, but my ability to do the same in Korean didn't. This discrepancy was frustrating and it gave me early insight into the inadequacy of language, the distance between the things I was feeling and the things I was saying.

It felt very natural to discover a new form of self-expression as I was encountering these speed bumps with language, and art became a refuge for me where I could tell my story through a medium that held it better. For instance, a lot of the ways I incorporate figurative and hyperbolic elements into my work is by creating a mismatch between words and imagery. My ability to create the mismatch feels intuitive to me because it's something that I've felt from growing up speaking Korean. I think that now, I've found a way to harness that feeling and turn it into something playful and joyful in my work.

Q: What are some of the books that have stuck with you since childhood?

A: There are so many stories that have stuck with me since childhood. When I think about it, though, a common feature in all of them happens to be clever and determined children. As a child who so badly wanted to be taken seriously, nothing gave me more pleasure than reading about kids thwarting adults.

One of the first books that comes to mind is *THE MYSTERIOUS BENEDICT SOCIETY* by Trenton Lee Stewart. I loved the sense of kid society and how direct the children were. Themes of right and wrong were discussed so frankly and honestly in a way that made me feel like even though I was a child, I could still have big ideas. I also had a fondness for Roald Dahl's books. The stories were so fantastical and whimsical, but there was always a note of sadness in all of them that struck a chord with me. His writing made me feel like I was being taken seriously as a person and not just as a child to be entertained. And paired with Quentin Blake's wild and iconic illustrations, I couldn't have been more

entertained as a child!

Toward the end of childhood, I treasured my complete collection of HIS DARK MATERIALS that I had to beg my parents to buy at the Scholastic book fair at school. For a while, I carried it around with me everywhere until my mom had to tape the spine back together. In a way, the series shattered my sense of confidence in right and wrong that all the books that I had previously read instilled in me. The series helped me become a critical reader.

You can find more of Dabin's work at <https://www.dabin-han.com/>



To see the work of other illustrators represented by JDLA, please visit our website at www.jdlit.com/illustrators.

Watch for our next newsletter, coming soon! You can access our previous newsletters here: [JDLA Newsletters](#).

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency

New York - Los Angeles
www.jdlit.com



[Unsubscribe](#)
[Update preferences](#)

