

July 2025

JDLA

Newsletter

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency Celebrates 24 Years!

Welcome to our Summer issue! I'm delighted to announce our newest Associate Literary Agent, Jael Morrill! Please check the JDLA website to learn more about Jael and the kinds of projects she'll be representing. Welcome to the family, Jael! Happy Summer, everyone, and thanks for reading!

Recent Highlights



Debbie Dadey

Marcia Jones

Audio Rights Sold

Audio rights to Debbie Dadey and Marcia Thornton Jones's next 42 books in the iconic Scholastic chapter book series The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids with more than 30 million books sold to date, to Kim Budnick at Tantor Media, in a

multi-book deal, by Marie Lamba at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world English).

Picture Book Sold

Award-winning author of THE BOY AND THE GORILLA Jackie Azúa Kramer's delicious new picture book – her fourteenth! – PIRAGUA MEMORIES,

about a boy who moved from his native Puerto Rico remembering his favorite icy treat, to Alex Robertson at North-South Books by Stephen Fraser at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world).



Memoir Sold

Joe and Tara Petito and Nichole and Jim Schmidt's *AMERICA'S DAUGHTER*, an unprecedented, behind-the-scenes account of their journey through unimaginable grief, an international media frenzy, and the devastating truths surrounding Gabby Petito's relationship that ultimately led to her murder. For the first time they open up about the signs they



missed, the lessons they've learned, and their mission to protect others and honor Gabby's legacy by sharing her story, to Leah Wilson at BenBella Books by Jennifer De Chiara at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency, Scott Kaufman at The Don Buchwald Agency, and Babette Perry at Innovative Artists Agency (world).

Agent Spotlight: Tori Sharp

Tori Sharp joined The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency in 2020 after a two-year internship. She has a BFA in Sequential Art from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and she is the bestselling author/illustrator of three graphic novels from Little Brown Ink. When she's not reading, writing, or making comics, she can be found swing and blues dancing, playing tabletop games, or admiring her tiny poodle in beautiful Seattle, WA. Tori represents all manner of children's literature. You can learn more about her at www.torisharp.com.



Q: In addition to being a literary agent, you happen to be a children's graphic novelist. What insights from being an author/illustrator influence your approach to working with clients?

A: So much of making books is about sitting with uncertainty and trusting that a story or illustration will come together if we keep at it. And each new book can have unique challenges that can send writers reeling. Fortunately, we can be just as creative about how to motivate or inspire ourselves as we are about writing and drawing! When I can help authors feel confident and eager to write, that is so fulfilling to me in this career. I'm always down to be a sounding board or give a pep talk—or, for less peppy clients, to figure out which questions might prompt their own solutions. Creativity keeps us on our toes—and I personally find problem-solving to be a lot of fun!

Q: You've been on both sides of the slush pile—any advice for querying writers?

A: Getting to the point of having a project to query is already an accomplishment, so please celebrate that! My advice is to be curious about what makes you love the stories that you love and to form your own opinions about what makes good writing and art. Basically, keep writing and keep refining your sense of taste. Our taste becomes the stories we tell—it makes them simultaneously familiar and new.

Q: What helps a graphic novel proposal stand out?

A: Of course a good story is essential when pitching a graphic novel, but something that really excites me — across all art styles — is clarity. Clarity is the first pillar of storytelling, and it's incredibly difficult to achieve in comics. If I'm reading a graphic novel proposal and the sample pages grab me, then I compare them against the synopsis to check whether the illustrator clearly communicated what's supposed to be happening in the scene. The art might look charming, but if the sample pages don't convey and evoke what they intend to, then they're ineffective. Readers on average look at each panel for only a couple of seconds, so the storytelling in graphic novels has to be very efficient. When a proposal makes this look effortless, I absolutely notice!

Q: What would you love to see "happen next" in publishing, regardless of what's realistic?

A: I'm always craving more fantasy books for mid-teen readers that truly bridge the gap between middle-grade and young-adult books. There are, of course, some existing books in that niche, but it's still such a rich space to explore, and I'll never get tired of novels and comics that entice middle-school readers to become avid high-school readers.

Q: Is there anything else you're excited about?

A: I've recently launched a project called THE PAGE TURN PODCAST, in which I interview children's graphic novelists about their experiences making books. I've loved these conversations with industry pros, and it's always inspiring to hear how artists broke into kids' graphic novel publishing and how they approach storytelling. If you or an author you know may want to appear on the show to promote a graphic novel launch, you can find more information at <https://torisharp.com/podcast>.



Author Spotlight: Susan Richmond

Susan Richmond has a B.A. in English from Williams College and an M.A. in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry from the University of California. A naturalist and educator, Susan has spent much of her professional life designing curricula on nature and the environment for preschool age to adult audiences, and has taught in schools, libraries, and nature centers. She is the author

of five poetry collections and the picture books BIRD COUNT (Peachtree), NIGHT OWL NIGHT (Charlesbridge), BUSY LITTLE HANDS: SCIENCE PLAY! (Storey), BIOBLITZ! (Peachtree), and THE GREAT POLLINATOR COUNT (Peachtree).

Q: Your picture book NIGHT OWL NIGHT so beautifully captures a child's fascination with nature. Were you that kind of child?

A: Yes, I was! We had a wooded area behind our house and I spent countless hours in imaginative play and exploration, both with friends and on my own. My first poems and stories focused on animals and the environment, and, to this day, I am most at peace in a natural setting.

Q: Your picture books are generally focused on science topics like owls and birding or pollination. Does this come from your direct experience from working with children at Mass Audubon?

A: I read as much nonfiction as I did fiction growing up, and was always curious to learn more about animals and natural science. I also love to travel both throughout the United States and in other parts of the world. Wherever I go, I make sure I have a field guide along to help me identify and learn about the birds and other creatures I encounter.

I sought out Mass Audubon because I wanted to work for an organization that promoted conservation and access to nature. Working with young children in the nature preschool was the perfect fit for me, as I was already moving from

writing primarily adult poetry to children's literature. Reading to my own children and then to my young students made me fall in love with picture books all over again. (I would definitely say, however, that working for a nature nonprofit like Mass Audubon has introduced me to a wide community of people with deep knowledge and experience in areas that I want to learn more about, such as bird ecology, including bird banding and wildlife monitoring.)

Accompanying the manager of our saw-whet owl banding program one night provided the inspiration for NIGHT OWL NIGHT. Likewise, picking the brains of senior naturalists at the sanctuary where I work gave me the background and an understanding of biodiversity counts, which evolved into BIOBLITZ! COUNTING CRITTERS.

Q: What comes first: the topic or the story?

A: Usually the topic. Often, in fact, I approach a topic in a number of different ways before I find the story arc and approach that suits it best. For example, with my new release, THE GREAT POLLINATOR COUNT, my editor at Peachtree was looking for a community science book about counting bugs to follow BIRD COUNT. At that point, I was already developing BIOBLITZ!, a book featuring a biodiversity count that was full of insects and other invertebrates. (The main character, Gabriel, loves bugs!) So I took up the challenge of finding a different type of insect count, focusing on a specific environmental issue.

After researching various insect counts around the world, I discovered a woman at the University of Georgia Extension, Becky Griffin, who had just started a statewide pollinator count. We connected, and she was thrilled that I was writing a book that would help her educate her audiences about pollinator health. She sent me videos of children doing counts in their school gardens, and my husband and I joined her in the field the following summer, so I could see the mechanics of a count in action. It was only then that I started to envision a child character who loves science—and is really good at it—but realizes she still has lots to learn from others. And that's a good thing! A timely lesson for all of us.

Q: How long does it take to write a picture book? And how much revision is involved, both on your own and with an editor?

A: This can vary so much. Often I am immediately swept up in a story, and may finish an initial draft in one or two sittings. But that's only the beginning. On a first draft, I throw everything in, knowing I can always cut and refine later. I may start with too many characters or too much content. As I drill down, I learn what more I need to research and how much material will fit on a spread. Then, because I have a fictional story arc as well as an informational one, I look for ways to heighten tension or build excitement in subsequent drafts. For example, in NIGHT OWL NIGHT, I wanted to show the complete arc of a night of bird banding. But I also wanted to show Sova's emotional arc, as she questioned herself and her own competence, finally gaining resilience and understanding.

After I believe I've produced my best draft, I will bring it to my critique group, which may spur another few revisions. For my books, I also add in time for a review by topic experts for accuracy and sensitivity. Then, finally, it's ready for my agent, Stephen Fraser. This writing process may take anywhere from two months to more than a year, depending on my schedule, availability of reviewers, and other factors. Once an editor is interested, there may be more rounds of revision, and then the search for just the right illustrator. Once we've signed off on a contract, for picture books, it's generally another year or more before the book is published.

Q: What advice would you give to authors who want to tackle a natural science topic?

A: Look for topics you're keenly interested in—find mentors and ways to experience your subject firsthand, and do the research! Also know your market. What hasn't been written about, or hasn't been covered in the way you want to cover it? If you do choose to write about a popular subject, find your own unique angle. My books so far have grown either out of activities I was doing (or wanted to do) and believed would interest young children, or compelling subjects I found little written about for my audience. Or both.

No matter what you write, it should be something you'd like to learn more about. Because if you are engaged as an author, you are much more likely to excite and engage your readers as well!

Illustrator Spotlight: Gabby Benda

Gabbie Benda is an illustrator and graphic novelist. She has a degree from VCU Arts and loves bringing stories to life for kids of all ages. After working over a decade as a camp counselor, and art teacher, she has gotten a lot of inspiration for her art. Her graphic novel, *SERENDIPITY*, is soon to be published! You can visit Gabbie at www.gabbiebenda.art.



Q: What drew you to make books for kids?

A: I've always been the type of person to crouch down and look at the flowers and bugs. There's something really special to me about capturing

moments that might feel small, but really do build up. What is life but tons of small moments strung together into something beautiful? Storytelling has always been a passion of mine. I actually have journals from when I was super young where I was telling stories and making comics. My mom has my very first picture book, which we made together out of a cardboard waffle box we pulled out of the freezer. I always wanted to be an artist, but as I grew up I started feeling pressure to be a "real artist." In my head, I thought that to be a respected artist I needed to create something serious and huge that would change the world. I spent a long time chasing that, and I really regret not turning around and seeing how obvious kidlit was for me. I love kids, I've been working with kids for most of my life. All the media that's inspired me most has been made with younger audiences in mind. I think there's something so special about speaking to children, who are so often overlooked or talked down to, and treating them with the respect and personhood they deserve. Their conflicts and problems might seem small to an adult, but kids feel big and I think it's so important to honor that.

In my senior year of school I was lucky to have a few really great professors who pushed me to be more authentic to myself and my interests. I took an "Imagery for Children" course my senior semester and the rest is history and hard work. I loved that course so much I actually teach it now!

Q: You are also an adjunct professor! What have you learned from working with students? Can you tell us about your approach to teaching art? What do you want aspiring illustrators to carry with them after your classes?

A: I started teaching this past semester, and I truly feel like it's been a missing puzzle piece in my life. I'm really passionate about working with students, and I've been super lucky to have an amazing group of students for my first semester. I miss them already! Working with and teaching them really helps me flex those editing muscles, which is so important to do for others and bring back to your own work as well. I feel like teaching really helps put me back into that creative mindset.

No matter which course I'm teaching, I want my students to be learning the skills it takes to make it as a professional artist. We work a lot on goal setting and research. I didn't really find my direction until my final semester of school, so a lot of my work toward publishing had to come later. The sooner you can explore a potential career, the sooner you can rule it out or bookmark it as an option you'd want to research more. While art school definitely covers drawing skills, I also want to focus on some of the soft skills that get glossed over. Whether you want to be an animator or a picture book illustrator, there are a lot of skills that are overarching in the arts. How do you organize your portfolio? Do you need social media? How do you query? These are all topics I wish had been covered more in my education, so I make it a point to go over these with my students.

Q: How important have comics conventions and other art fairs been to you as an artist?

A: Hugely important! I've had the privilege of tabling at lots of comics conventions and art fairs these past few years. Some of my favorites have been MOCCA fest NYC, Small Press Expo Bethesda, and Genghis Con Cleveland. Making graphic novels can be pretty isolating work unless you're making an effort to get out into the world. Through events like these I've been able to meet well-known artists who inspired me to even give this line of work a shot, as well as bright young creators with amazing stories I can't wait to see unfold. I think online it's easy to build people up in your mind; follower counts, book deals, and online personas can make approaching people feel a little daunting. But then you get to chatting and realize again that we're all just people with the same passion. Going to these types of events really fills my creative cup in a way nothing else does. I've been quite busy this year, but I'm hoping to fill up my event schedule again soon!

Q: What are some similarities and differences between illustrating picture books and graphic novels?

A: I love this question! When I'm trying to teach, I always call comics "manipulation of time." Your graphic novel is a movie, and you're the director. Each panel is a shot, and you can squash and stretch them to your will. Is a moment long, awkwardly so? Are things happening so fast you can barely see them? Every panel represents a moment of time passing. Sometimes life feels like it's moving glacially slow, and other times it's so fast you can't seem to keep track. I think comics are so perfect to capture this feeling.

Illustration feels like the total opposite side of the same coin. I'm using the same drawing skills, but in a different framework. An illustration is still a story, but you have one moment you can capture (or 30ish, if it's a picture book!). With illustration, I'm really drawn to seeing how much I can capture in one image. I get really attached to every background character or set piece, and I try to give it all a story. That way, one image still feels dynamic. When sketching illustrations, I think of the action that I'm trying to depict. Then I rewind and fast forward the actions in my head to try and find the moment that captures what I'm looking to do best. The moment right before a beaker explodes? The cleanup after? The actual action of it happening? It can be really challenging sometimes because I get passionate about every option, but illustration is really about boiling things down to their exact most communicative moment.

Q: You excel at social media promotion! How do you approach building a community online around your work?

A: Well, thank you, although it doesn't always feel that way, haha! I've had a lot of ups and downs with social media, and I think I've landed in a spot that works for me. I approach all my social media with the same rule: the art comes first, always. The second I start thinking "I need to make art for x social media post"

I've already lost. Social media is so draining, and there's so much out there designed to sell to you or influence you. Behind the scenes these platforms are constantly trying to show me scary analytics to get me to create in a way that's more engagement-friendly, and it can wear me down. When I feel this, I force myself to step away and remind myself that I'm an artist before I'm anything else.

All my social media is based on my authentic love for something. I love making art, I love talking about my favorite art supplies. I love making silly sketchbook spreads. I find the spark to make something first, and the recording and social media come second. This type of authenticity can make viral moments from time to time, but you'll never be the biggest creator out there. I don't think I'd ever want to be, if I'm being honest. I always try to tell myself that I would make art for myself alone in a padded room, and everything else is just a really lovely bonus.



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

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