

October 2022

JDLA

Newsletter

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency Celebrates 21 Years!

Welcome to our Fall issue! We've had another amazing year, filled with book deals, film deals, foreign deals, and much more. Here are some highlights from our last quarter, as well as an Agent Roundtable, so you can get to know us better. Thanks for reading!

Special Announcement



Senior Agent Starts Fund for Writers and Illustrators

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency's Senior Agent Stephen Fraser announced the formation of the Stephen Fraser Encouragement Fund (through SCBWI) to offer three \$2,000 grants annually to writers and illustrators with at least one published

book who express financial need. After 40 years in the industry, his goal is to "spoil creative people with encouragement." Look for details at www.scbwi.org.

Recent Highlights



More Turkey Trouble

TURKEY TROUBLE author Wendi Silvano's TURKEY'S SANDTASTIC BEACH DAY, the seventh title in the Turkey Trouble series, illustrated by Lee Harper, to Kelsey Skea at Two Lions, for publication in Spring 2024, by Marie Lamba at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency for the author

(world).

Graphic Novel

Two-time Newbery Honoree Christina Soontornvat's THE TRYOUT and THE SQUAD, a memoir about being the only Asian-American kid in her small Texas town to try out for the cheerleading squad, illustrated by Joanna Cacao, to Tracy Mack at Graphix, at auction, in a two-book deal, for publication in 2022, by Stephanie Fretwell-Hill at Red Fox Literary for the author, and by Tara Gilbert at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency for the illustrator (world English and NA Spanish rights).



Epic Fantasy

Author of SHADOWBRIDGE and LORD TOPHET, Bram Stoker finalist Gregory Frost's RHYMER, launching an epic fantasy series featuring Thomas the Rhymer, legendary 12th-century figure of Scottish balladry, as he battles throughout time to save the world from an alien race known to everyone as elves, to Toni Weisskopf at Baen Books, in a three-book deal, for publication in Summer 2023, by Marie Lamba at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world).

Agent Roundtable

Q and A with agents Jennifer De Chiara, Stephen Fraser, Marie Lamba, Tori Sharp, Marlo Berliner, and Zabé Ellor.

Q: Is there something that you learned right away when you started agenting that has helped you?



SF: My first year, I began by looking for projects that I loved. For me, that means books with a lyrical quality, something upbeat, and something fun. Agenting is all about communicating your enthusiasm for a project. But pretty quickly I realized that you also have to be confident that a book will sell in the current market, too.

ML: To expect the unexpected. You can try to manage your workflow, but I quickly learned that so many unpredictable things can come up, including a task that appears out of the blue and is suddenly urgent. As a hyper-organized person, I've learned to now embrace organized chaos in order to get everything done.

MB: Many editors are as eager to connect to agents, as we are to connect with them.

TS: No two agents have quite the same methods, and this career allows for a lot of creativity. Whenever elements of this job have felt like a struggle, there has always been a simpler solution.

ZE: Be confident when it comes to reaching out and making connections! Everyone in the industry is passionate about books and the craft of making them.

Q: Has anything funny ever happened to you as an agent?

JD: Years ago at a writers conference, after I'd given a speech, a writer followed me into the ladies room. While I was in a stall, she actually slipped her manuscript underneath the stall door. I didn't think it was funny at the time, but I laugh about it now. (Writers: DON'T do this.)

MB: I was once on a train riding back from a conference in MD and I got so engrossed talking to another agent seated next to me, that I completely missed my stop in Jersey and didn't realize until we were in NYC. I had to take another train back to Metropark, but it was well worth the chat.

SF: I once submitted a nonfiction manuscript to an editor. She rejected it and shortly thereafter went on sick leave. Her publisher happened to see the same manuscript sitting on her desk, loved it, and made an offer. So the same publisher rejected AND acquired the same book. (I never said a word, of course!)

ZE: Thanks to auto-correct, I accidentally typed a swear word in an email to an editor! She was very gracious about it.

TS: There is apparently an agent or journalist in the music industry who shares my name, so I have received quite a few pitches for songs in my inbox rather than books!

ML: I'd received a wonderful query from a Virginia-based writer named Erin Teagan about a fabulous middle-grade novel (which went on to become *THE FRIENDSHIP EXPERIMENT* published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). When I called to offer her representation, she let me know that after she'd sent me her query, she'd read my debut novel *WHAT I MEANT...* and was surprised to discover that it took place in the little town where she grew up. It turned out that her parents still live there, and I'd just walked my dog past their house like an hour earlier!

Q: What trends have you been noticing from your contact with editors recently?

SF: It's still tough for an author to write outside their own ethnic or cultural spheres. While "own voices" is a positive thing, if taken to the extreme, I do think it can have a limiting effect on creativity. One of my clients is feeling nervous about fulfilling her multi-book contract because of this.

ML: That many of them are now looking for graphic novel submissions. Just a few years ago, I rarely saw this mentioned by an editor who wasn't part of a graphic novel imprint.

TS: More editors than ever seem eager to acquire children's comics, and their tastes are getting easier to interpret as they have more published comics to point to while saying, "More like this!"

MB: Though many editors seem overwhelmed by the state of the publishing industry these days, they are still determined to champion books that will make a difference in the world, particularly in terms of diversity and inclusiveness.

ZE: Editors are really looking for books that cheer them up, make them feel warm and hopeful about the world--even in tricky times, hopeful books are always needed!

Author Spotlight: Kyra Leigh

REAPER is Kyra Leigh's first young adult novel (Paula Wiseman Books/Simon & Schuster, 2017), which Booklist called "very readable." Her second book, *IT WILL END LIKE THIS* (Delacorte, 2022), is a dramatic contemporary retelling of the Lizzie Borden murders. She lives in Salt Lake City, where she works off and on at the annual Writing and Illustrating for Young Readers (www.wifyr.com) conference. She loves to travel, play classical piano, and gossip with her four sisters. You can visit her at Facebook, Instagram, and on the blog she shares with her mother, author Carol Lynch Williams. www.throwingupwords.com.



Q: Your second book, *IT WILL END LIKE THIS* (Delacorte, 2022), has now come out. Was it easier to write a second novel? How was it different from writing *REAPER* (Simon & Schuster, 2017)?

A: It was easier in some ways, and harder in others. The revision process came more naturally with *IT WILL END LIKE THIS*, which made that portion of writing the book easier. Before, I struggled with things like "sense of place." Over the years I've learned

things like matching your character's mood with the weather, or making sure to mention your character's surroundings at least twice a page. This has helped with sense of place. (Both bits of advice I got from fellow authors.) However, because *IT WILL END LIKE THIS* was so different from what I'd written before, that first draft was harder than drafting *REAPER*. I think that's because this new book has a bit of a mystery element, as well as multiple points of views. This challenged me with both voice and character development. How could I make these sisters, going through the same thing, sound different in their grief? As a whole, though, *IT WILL END LIKE THIS* was more enjoyable to write. I love a good mystery, I'm always watching crime shows on TV, and I've always been intrigued by the Lizzie Borden murders.

Q: *IT WILL END LIKE THIS* is based on the famous Lizzie Borden murders in nineteenth-century Fall River, Massachusetts. How much research did you do? Does your contemporary retelling include any of the actual elements of Lizzie Borden's story?

A: When I threw my own ideas into the story, I discovered later (during research) that those same elements actually happened in the real life story. For example: I had no idea that Lizzie Borden's mom had a child pass away in real life, but I had put that into my story. When I uncovered this part of the true story, I was so surprised. As well, I hadn't realized that Lizzie and her sister, Emma, were so close growing up, and the death of their mother brought them even closer together. Another element that aligned with my story was I didn't know Lizzie's father was financially favoring his new wife, Abby. I did a ton of research and included a lot of what I found in the book, but also added my own twists as well!

Q: Your mother is popular young adult author Carol Lynch Williams. What did you learn from watching her handle her writing career? What do you admire about her writing?

A: To keep on keeping on. My mom has never given up, no matter what curveballs the business or life threw at her. And that has inspired me to just keep doing what I'm doing. I can only control what I can control, and she taught me that. What I admire about her writing is that she knows how to write a character that is extremely relatable and real. She's a master at voice and I aspire to be as good as she is someday.

Q: The young adult market is very competitive and always changing. Do you read a lot of young adult novels? Which writers do you most admire?

A: I do read a lot of YA. I try to read at least one young adult book a month (and one adult novel a month). I love Kathleen Glasgow (*GIRL IN PIECES*), Nina LaCour (*WE ARE OKAY*), Kara Thomas (*THAT WEEKEND*), and, of course, my mom, Carol Lynch Williams. Her novel *GLIMPSE* was one of the books that inspired me to try writing myself.

Q: Is there any advice you'd like to give aspiring writers?

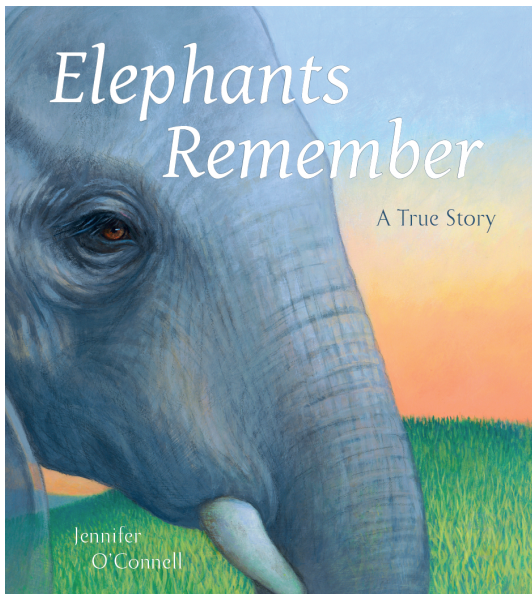
A: Here are a few things that have helped me. Get that draft done. Don't go back and revise and revise and revise until you have completed the entire story. You'll end up with a million great starts and no completed novel. Finish that draft and let your reward be revising the completed story! Read everything you can get your hands on. It's going to be nearly impossible to write a book if you're not a reader. Reading is the best tool you have! Go to conferences and learn as much as you can. Conferences (like Writing and Illustrating for Young Readers, WIFYR.com) will help you network, as well as connect you with other authors and fabulous agents (like Steve Fraser!).

Illustrator Spotlight: Jennifer O'Connell

Jennifer O'Connell is the author/illustrator of the stunning picture book *ELEPHANTS REMEMBER* (Tilbury House), which comes out this Fall. *Kirkus* has called it, "An excellent story, well told. You'll remember it always." She's also the author/illustrator of *TEN TIMID GHOSTS* (Scholastic), which was a *New York Times*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *USA Today* bestseller with more than one million copies sold to date. Jennifer's other picture books include *THE EYE OF THE WHALE* (Tilbury House), *IT'S HALLOWEEN NIGHT!* and *HARVEST PARTY!* (Scholastic), and she's the illustrator



of *A GARDEN OF WHALES* by Maggie Davis (Firefly Books). Her honors include the Green Earth Book Award for *THE EYE OF THE WHALE* and two Christopher Awards for illustration.



Q: Your upcoming picture book *ELEPHANTS REMEMBER* is based on a remarkable true story. Can you tell us a bit about this book? What were the joys and challenges of creating a picture book based on factual events?

A: *ELEPHANTS REMEMBER* tells the story of how South African conservationist Lawrence Anthony saved a traumatized herd of elephants at his reserve when, against all odds, he earned the trust of the matriarch, whom he named Nana. Years later, after Lawrence died suddenly while

away on a trip, Nana led all the elephants in a procession across the reserve to the edge of Lawrence's yard, where they stood quietly. And they returned for the next two years on the same day, at the same exact time.

I was captivated by this story, which shows how intelligent, sensitive, and complex elephants are and how one man risked everything to save the small, misunderstood herd. One challenge was to simplify the complicated narrative in a way that would work as a picture book. Lawrence knew and named every elephant, but his first and deepest relationship was with Nana. This became the focus of *ELEPHANTS REMEMBER*.

I loved learning about elephants and how unique each one is. I found many reference photos and bought plastic models to sketch from, but then I had to adjust each drawing of Nana to look like her, with her 33-year-old body, huge head, and single tusk. I photographed my husband, Kevin (in his Covid-lockdown beard), and our dog, Daphne, for reference images of Lawrence and his dog.

Q: Where did you train as an artist? Do you have any favorite illustrators who have influenced your style?

A: I earned my BFA in Illustration from The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. For inspiration I look at many different illustrators and painters. I like to learn from James McMullan's amazing Lincoln Center posters and Emily Arnold McCully's expressive characters and settings in *MIRETTE ON THE HIGH WIRE*.

Other illustrators I enjoy are Chris Van Allsburg (*JUMANJI*), Jason Chin (*WATERCRESS*), David Wiesner (*FLOTSAM*), Melissa Sweet (*A SPLASH OF RED – THE*

LIFE AND ART OF HORACE PIPPIN), Brian Lies (THE ROUGH PATCH), and Dan Satant (BEEKLE).

My favorite painters include Edward Hopper, Richard Diebenkorn, Connie Hayes, Jamie Wyeth, David Hockney, John Singer Sargent, and Jon Redmond.

Q: What are your favorite mediums for illustration? Has this changed at all over time?

A: I have mostly used acrylic paints on gesso-primed Strathmore Bristol, vellum surface. For ELEPHANTS REMEMBER I also used Prismacolor pencils and for several images I used Procreate software, which is new for me. I also paint in oils, which influences the book work and vice versa.

Q: You are a popular presenter at schools and libraries. What is your secret to keeping kids engaged during your author/illustrator talks?

A:

- Know your material well enough that you can talk directly to the audience while making eye contact, instead of reading off a sheet.
- Be interactive – Have a back and forth rhythm with the children, which feels more conversational than a lecture. I use the laser on my slide remote to point out things in the projected images.
- Change it up and draw if you can – Plan some unexpected surprises. First I project slides, as I talk about my background and the story of creating the featured book. For my whale presentation I then play a game where the kids have to guess which music of three very different songs inspired me when I was painting whales. Then, with the obvious choice (Enya, Shephard Moon) playing, I quickly draw three different whales in pastels on a big piece of dark blue paper on an easel. Then I unfurl a life-size canvas mural I painted of a 23-foot-long baby blue whale.
- Connect your story to theirs – Share your beginnings. I show the audience several pictures that I drew in grade school. They are not impressive *at all*. I hope to convey that everyone starts somewhere, and my passion to create art began when I was their age.
- Use props – I pull out a large grapefruit to show how big a whale's eye is. I also hold up a life-size, 8-inch-high clay model of a sperm whale's tooth when talking about the one I drew. Children always come up afterward wanting to hold or touch the tooth!
- Show examples of revisions and rejections – Students assume that since you are a published author/illustrator you get everything right the first time. WRONG!

Q: What advice do you have for illustrators trying to break into the picture book market right now?

A:

- Sketch and doodle all the time to hone your drawing skills. In your portfolio, show that you have the ability to tell a story with sequential images and can portray characters consistently in different poses, movements, and expressions.
- Get your work out there on social media sites like Instagram and have a website showing your portfolio. Show what you like to draw. People can tell if you've had fun creating something.
- Go to your library's children's section's "recently acquired" shelf and your local bookstore to see what's being published. Buy the catalog of The Original Art, or better yet, go to the annual juried exhibit at the Society of Illustrators in NY that showcases illustrations from the previous year's top picture books. The catalog lists the publisher, art director, and editor, along with the illustrator and author of each book.
- Believe in yourself and never give up! Always remember that you will miss 100% of the shots you don't take.

You can find more of Jennifer's work at www.jenniferoconnellart.com.



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

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