

October 2024

JDLA

Newsletter

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency Celebrates 23 Years!

Welcome to our Fall issue! So much wonderful news to share. Our client, ghostwriter Lindsay Harrison, just hit the New York Times bestseller list for the 10th time with *THE THIRD GILMORE GIRL: A Memoir* by Kelly Bishop (Simon & Schuster, Gallery Books, 2024) at #3 on the New York Times bestseller list! *COMPOUND FRACTURE* by Andrew Joseph White hit #4 on the New York Times bestseller list AND Andrew Joseph White's debut novel *HELL FOLLOWED WITH US* (Peachtree Publishing, 2022) is being adapted into an animated feature by Lilly Wachowski and a bevy of production houses! Congratulations to all. Thanks for reading!

Recent Highlights

Middle-Grade Novel Sold

Popular author of the chapter book series *AFTERSCHOOL SUPERSTARS* Claudia Mills's middle-grade novel, *CALLIOPE CLARKE AND THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM*, about a girl living with her grandparents who is inspired by ancient philosophy, to Margaret Ferguson at Holiday House, by Stephen Fraser at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world rights)



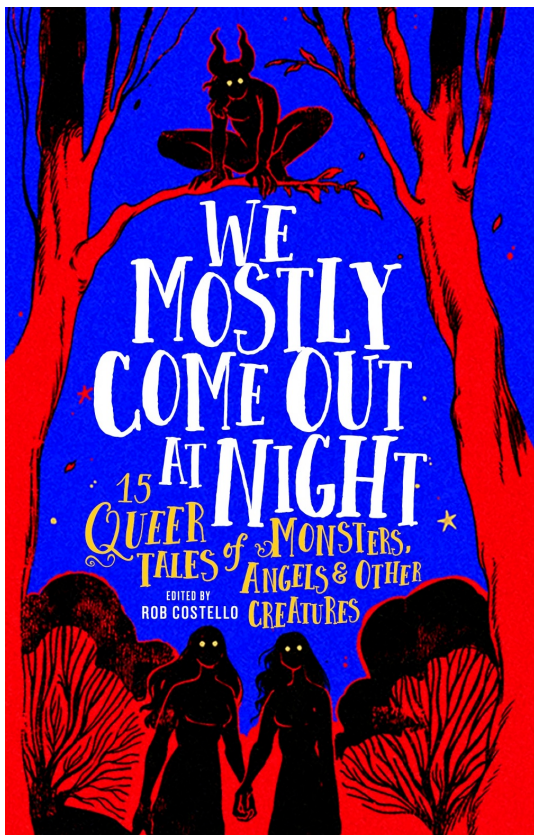
Picture Book Sold

Author/illustrator of GRUMPY PETS Kristine Lombardi's delightful CROUTON, about a kitten who adopts a family, to Maria Correa at Random House Children's Books, by Stephen Fraser at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world rights).



Young Adult Novel Sold

Contributing Editor of the YA anthology WE MOSTLY COME OUT AT NIGHT (Running Press) Rob Costello's debut YA novel AN UGLY WORLD FOR BEAUTIFUL BOYS, a queer coming-of-age story about a deep betrayal between secret lovers and the dangerous collision course that changes both their lives forever, to Steve Berman at Lethe Press, for publication in April 2025, by Marie Lamba at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency (world English).



Author Spotlight: Rob Costello

Rob Costello (www.cloudbusterpress.com) is the contributing editor of the YA anthology *WE MOSTLY COME OUT AT NIGHT: 15 QUEER TALES OF MONSTERS, ANGELS AND OTHER CREATURES* (Running Press Teen, 2024) and author of the story collection *THE DANCING BEARS: QUEER FABLES FOR THE END TIMES* (Lethe Press, 2024). His debut YA novel *AN UGLY WORLD FOR BEAUTIFUL BOYS* is forthcoming from Lethe Press in 2025. Rob is also a contributor in the YA anthology *RURAL VOICES* (Candlewick).

Q. The year 2024 has been a big year for you, with the publication of an anthology, a short story collection, and a contract for your debut YA novel. Congratulations! Can you share a bit about your journey as a writer?

I've been writing since I was in junior high. Back then, I wrote (very bad) poetry. I didn't start writing short fiction until college, but it wasn't until years later, in my thirties, when I worked in academic administration at Cornell University, that I was able as an employee to take an elective creative writing course that truly changed my life. The brilliant writer and teacher, Helena Maria Viramontes, was the instructor for that course, and for whatever reason she took a liking to my work and went out of her way to encourage me to continue writing. With the boost in self-confidence her kindness gave me, I pursued writing more seriously. I began to send my short stories out to literary magazines, and was fortunate to have a few published. In 2012, I earned my MFA from the Writing for Children and Young Adults program at Vermont College of Fine Arts. A few years later, I met my wonderful agent, Marie Lamba, at the Highlights Foundation, where I've been teaching since 2014. Marie and I hit it off immediately and she offered me representation. The rest is my own little piece of history. The novel that Marie signed me with—*AN UGLY WORLD FOR BEAUTIFUL BOYS*—comes out in April of 2025, fresh on the heels of both my debut short story collection and my debut anthology as contributing editor.

Q. Your anthology *WE MOSTLY COME OUT AT NIGHT* has been garnering rave reviews, including from Shelf Awareness, who dubbed it “A gloriously layered collection...” With many moving pieces and authors involved, anthologies can be perceived as a lot of work. What was your experience as editor of this anthology?

It was a genuinely delightful experience! In fact, I keep saying it was the most fun I've ever had working on anything. The team at Running Press Kids has been fabulous to partner with, especially my editor, Britny Perilli, and publicist, Becca Matheson. The book itself is absolutely gorgeous, with stunning illustrations by James Fenner Zuk and design by Frances Soo Ping Chow. Best of all, my contributors each brought their A-game to the project. With tremendous enthusiasm and professionalism, they wrote stories that far exceeded my wildest dreams. The results speak for themselves.

As far as the amount of work involved goes, it's true that there was a lot of it, probably more than I anticipated. But I was able to tap into my long dormant skills in cat herding (from my former life at Cornell), and ultimately found the job of editing to be deeply satisfying. In fact, I sometimes tease Marie that I wish I could make a career out of being an anthology editor—it's a lot more fun than working alone on novels—but, alas, given how difficult it is for kids lit anthologies to get the green light these days, we both know that's probably not going to happen.

Q. *WE MOSTLY COME OUT AT NIGHT* and your story collection *THE DANCING BEARS* are both works of queer horror. What draws you to this genre?

This is such a tough question to answer. I think a big part of my attraction to queer horror and dark fiction, in general, comes from my difficult childhood. My early life was shaped by the overlapping traumas of family dysfunction, addiction, mental illness, and bullying. Without excavating all the gory details

here, I'll say that I grew up in an environment of fear. On top of that, I came of age during the height of the AIDS epidemic, which, as a closeted gay teen, only crystallized my sense of impending doom. Basically, I learned to be afraid of the world at an early age and never really grew out of it.

I think what I've just described is pretty typical of a lot of horror readers and writers. In my personal experience, when you live in darkness, you often find solace only in darkness. Stories that radiate hope and love, joy and positivity can feel like the cruelest of lies when those qualities are precisely what you lack in your daily life. A big part of my attraction to horror is, frankly, that it helps me to process the fear, anxiety, loneliness, and rage I felt growing up but didn't know how to articulate or address at the time.

Q. Your debut YA novel, *AN UGLY WORLD FOR BEAUTIFUL BOYS*, is a queer coming-of-age story set in a rural town. Can you share a bit about why you wrote this novel, and what you hope readers will take away from it?

I wrote this book in response to what I *wasn't* seeing in a lot of contemporary young adult fiction: namely, stories about the dark side of the queer experience. We went for years, decades even, with the rare depictions of queerness in the literature for young readers being focused solely on the trauma and pain of homophobia. Recently, the pendulum has swung very strongly in the opposite direction, toward positive and uplifting depictions of queerness. Yet, while I love and appreciate queer joy narratives as much as anyone, they aren't the only stories worth telling.

I wrote *AN UGLY WORLD FOR BEAUTIFUL BOYS* for all those kids out there who don't often see themselves reflected in contemporary YA. Kids who lose their innocence too early. Kids who make big, ugly mistakes. Kids who get seduced by the seedy underbelly of drugs, sex, and exploitation that exists in the queer community (just like it exists in the straight world). For me, the book is about what it feels like to grow up in the shadow of shame, and how the corrosive effects of shame can distort the lives of individuals, families, and whole communities—especially the rural working poor (see: MAGA). It's also about survival, and how, no matter the magnitude of the mistakes one makes, redemption is still possible with enough love, compassion, and understanding.

I know there are kids out there right now going through the same kinds of raw, messy experiences that my protagonist, Toby Ryerson, endures. I hope the book reaches them so that maybe they feel a little less alone.

Q. If you could give your younger self any advice about writing, what would it be?

To be patient with the process and with myself. One thing I've learned over the years is that it takes a really, *really* long time to build a writing career. I wasn't prepared for that. I wasn't prepared for how long it would take me to finish my first book, let alone how long it would take to sell that book and have it appear on bookstore shelves. The timescales involved in publishing are glacial. And yet,

once things start happening, they tend to happen in rapid succession, which can sometimes feel overwhelming. Though I've been at this for nearly 20 years now, debuting with three very different books in the span of a single year has been, dare I say, *challenging*. Not that I'm complaining; I'll take this over the endless waiting any day!

Agent Spotlight: Stephen Fraser, Executive Literary Agent

Stephen Fraser has worked in the publishing industry for 45 years, first as an editor (at seven different publishers) and then as an agent (for 20 years). He has a degree in English Literature from Middlebury College in Vermont and a Master's degree in Children's Literature from Simmons College in Boston. His clients have won the Newbery Honor, the Edgar, the PEN, and been on the New York Times Bestseller list. He is a popular speaker at writer's conferences. Recently, Stephen established the Encouragement Fund at SCBWI, which awards three \$2,000 grants annually to writers with at least one book published.



Q: After working as both an editor and an agent, what do you think are essential qualities for someone in publishing?

A: Patience and a sense of humor! Looking for literary quality is of course the primary goal of both editors and agents. And that is something that I have made my purpose, to find the singular manuscripts that deserve to be published. I remember (as an editor) first reading Brent Hartinger's debut novel *GEOGRAPHY CLUB* – hallelujah! And (as an agent), Margi Preus's *HEART OF A SAMURAI* – a winner from the get-go. Christine Brodien-Jones's magical fantasy novel, *THE OWL KEEPER*, Jackie Azua Kramer's charming *THE GREEN UMBRELLA* – a star discovered! – and Susan Edwards Richmond's stunning *NIGHT OWL NIGHT* – perhaps one of the best picture book texts I had ever read. All of these are books that begged for a reader. And they all had remarkable lives once they made their way into print.

Q: After 20 years, is there anything new you have learned about agenting?

A: I have learned that you never really know everything. Every day there is something new, situations you have never confronted before. Like selling a right you've never sold before. What to do when a client passes away. Or doing a virtual event in a different time zone (it's already tomorrow!). Other than not being able to sell a book, which is always frustrating, the hardest lesson is if a client leaves for some reason. I'm sure all agents have dealt with this. You have invested so much time and passion into someone's career that it's hard to say goodbye. But you learn to stay fluid.

Q: Are there any special powers you develop as a longtime agent?

A: An agent develops a sixth sense of what will sell. It comes from years of watching manuscripts sell, I suppose. I can say with honesty that every single time I have had the intuition, "Oh, this will sell!" it has come true. You just have an inner feeling about the potential of some manuscripts. I felt this when I read a manuscript called THE TRUE STORY OF THE DOUGHNUT. Who wouldn't want that story? Also, BLUES WITH A BUTTER KNIFE. A great title. And GLIMPSE. When I read that astounding young adult novel by Carol Lynch Williams, I literally couldn't sleep that night because I was thinking about how I would sell it. And I did!

Q: How did your Encouragement Fund come about with SCBWI?

A: I have participated in writers conferences for over forty years, first as an editor and then, of course, as an agent. Years ago, I met an older gentleman at an SCBWI conference, who told me about a letter he once got from an editor that had some encouraging words. He said it was what had kept him going all these years. And then, without missing a beat, he said, "And you were the editor." At that point, I realized how a simple word of honest encouragement can have a profound effect on someone. Thus, the idea for the Encouragement Fund was born. I had always wanted to do something for writers, who, along with other creative artists, are not – at least to my mind – adequately supported in our culture. So, I gave some money to SCBWI and stipulated that it be given to encourage writers, with no strings attached. We have now awarded \$2,000 grants to each of three writers annually for the second year in a row.

Q: How often do you read for pleasure?

A: I make myself read at least half an hour every night just for myself, beyond the things that I read as an agent. I read a lot of nonfiction (biographies) – MR. B., the recent biography of George Balanchine by Jennifer Homans, for instance, and Benjamin Moser's THE UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD (about Dutch painters of the "golden age"), and contemporary fiction. All my favorite writers it seems are Irish! John Banville, Sebastian Barry, and Colm Toibin. I also like American authors Julia Glass and Peter Cameron. Some poetry. And I read children's book authors who aren't my clients when something piques my interest, like Jonathan Auxier, Kate DiCamillo, M.T. Anderson, and Sophie Blackall.

Author-Illustrator Spotlight:

Kristine is the author and illustrator of several picture books, including LOVEY BUNNY (Abrams), THE GRUMPY PETS (Abrams), MR. BIDDLES (HarperCollins), and MY WISH FOR THE WORLD (Little, Brown). Her work has also appeared extensively in advertising. In her free time, she loves to swim, roam around NYC, and play with her sweet calico Boo.



Q: You just sold your sixth book, CROUTON, which is forthcoming from Random House. Congratulations! Does it ever get old, the news that a book has been sold?

A: Not at all! Each book feels like a huge victory. There is often a long wait until you hear back. Sometimes you must wait for the book to go through an acquisitions meeting. At times those meetings get pushed back and there is more waiting ahead (*insert small scream*). But when that news finally comes, it is time to celebrate! Pop that champagne or treat yourself to something special!



Q: Where do you get your ideas from?

A: Most of my ideas start from scribbles in my sketchbook. I always keep one nearby to record seedlings of ideas, characters, and little bits of dialogue that I might find funny. (*I get a kick out of some of the funny things kids say and I often eavesdrop at the pool from my table by the water slide.*) I also seem to get a lot of ideas while I'm in motion, so I have had more than a few story ideas while swimming or out walking. My pets have always been a source of inspiration as well, and CROUTON was sparked by my beloved calico Boo. Adopting her was the best decision I ever made. Sadly, she passed just one month before this book was sold. She was such a special little cat. But I am so happy to be able to honor her this way.

Q: How long does it take to create a new picture book, from ideas to sketches to completion?

A: By the time the book is sold, I have already written and rewritten the story numerous times, drawn out the entire dummy and then reworked the text and drawings to get the pace "just so." It's a lot of work and then a lot of waiting until it finds the right editor. Once the book is sold, you start the process all over again—making edits to both text and illustrations with the publisher. It is a long process. From start to finish it can easily be three or four years. Most books come out about two years after acquisition, so it is not an expedient process by any stretch.

Q: Who were your influences – any classic picture book illustrators or famous artists?

A: Oh, I am a huge fan of picture books from the 1960s. There were so many wonderful creators. I just adore Margaret Bloy Graham, Lisl Weil, Bernard Waber, Arnold Lobel, Roger Duvoisin, and Syd Hoff, to name a few.



Q: Is there anything you would share with aspiring picture book writers-illustrators?

A: Never ever give up! If you really want it, keep working diligently at it and read as many books as you can. I am a firm believer in utilizing your local library. Keep a sketchbook and record all your ideas in one place. I still go back to old sketchbooks from five to ten years ago. Sometimes ideas take a while to percolate. If it isn't working, don't try to force it. I have one story that I've chipped away at for seven or eight years! I still can't get it to work, so I shelve it until I am ready to look at it again with fresh eyes. Move on to another project or dig deep to think of a subject you'd be excited to work on. Be true to yourself and don't try and follow any "trends" in publishing. In a few years, there will be another trend. Things are always changing! But if you write from your heart, your story will touch someone. Keep the faith!

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