

April 2021

JDLA

Newsletter

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency Celebrates 20 Years!

Welcome to the second issue of our agency newsletter. Since our last newsletter, we've participated in many exciting auctions, made a number of fabulous sales, and watched as our books made their way into print and received rave reviews and awards. In this issue, we spotlight another JDLA agent, author, and illustrator. Thanks for reading!

Recent Highlights

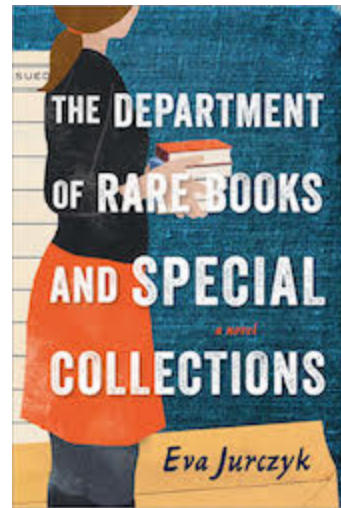
YA Graphic Novel Sold At Auction

Cartoonist Alex L. Combs's debut nonfiction YA graphic novel *TRANS HISTORY: A GRAPHIC NOVEL* was sold at auction to Andrea Tompa at Candlewick by agent Zabé Ellor. Written and illustrated from an #ownvoices perspective, this book accessibly and entertainingly introduces readers to the history of transgender identities, the transgender rights movement, and what it means to be trans in the USA and beyond. Publication is slated for 2023.



Debut Novel Sold to Sourcebooks

Debut author Eva Jurczyk's *THE DEPARTMENT OF RARE BOOKS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS* was sold to Anna Michels at Sourcebooks by agent Erin Clyburn. The novel follows an assistant to the head of the department of rare books and special collections at a large university, who is thrust into the spotlight when her boss falls seriously ill and a priceless manuscript is discovered to be missing from the collection, revealing the dark edge of obsession running through the most devoted bookworms. Publication is slated for January 4, 2022.



Memoir from Oscar-winning Actor George Chakiris

Best known for his role as Bernardo in the 1961 film version of *West Side Story*, for which he won both the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor and the Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Motion Picture, George Chakiris's memoir, *MY WEST SIDE STORY*, was sold to Rick Rinehart at Rowman & Littlefield by agent Jennifer De Chiara. Released on March 1, 2021, the book details Chakiris's experiences as an actor, dancer, and singer in Hollywood, on the set of *West Side Story* and

beyond.

Agent Spotlight: Stephen Fraser

Q: How did you get started as an agent, and what inspired you to do so?

My very first job in publishing, forty-one years ago, was at the children's magazine *Highlights for Children*. Interestingly, while I was there, I attended a writers' conference in Philadelphia and met a young author who was just getting published. Her name was Claudia Mills. (See Author Spotlight.)

I was an editor for twenty-five years at seven different publishers, most recently at Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins. Some of the authors I published there were Mary Engelbreit, Gail Gibbons, Michael Hague, Brent



Hartinger, Gregory Maguire, Stephen Mitchell, Daniel Pinkwater, and Ann Rinaldi. I also published Dan Gutman's million-selling MY WEIRD SCHOOL series.

As fate would have it, when I left HarperCollins, an agent who sold me GEOGRAPHY CLUB several years earlier told me she was expanding her own agency and asked me if I would be interested in joining her company. That agent, of course, was the darling Jennifer De Chiara. And, of course, I said yes. That was 16 years ago. (Interesting fact: GEOGRAPHY CLUB won the LAMBDA Award, was made into a feature film, and is still in print.)

Q: What is your favorite memory as an agent at The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency?

One morning, I woke up and thought to myself: *We have won an award*. And, do you know, one of our clients, Margi Preus, had won the Newbery Honor Medal for her debut book, the middle-grade novel HEART OF A SAMURAI (Abrams, 2010), which was also a *New York Times* bestseller. It was the first major award for the publisher. We sold the book in a number of foreign markets, and it's still in print.

Q: What would be your dream query or something on your manuscript wish list?

That's hard to say. It's like shopping – you know it when you see it. However, I always look for well-crafted language and for originality of concept. I love picture books, like DRUM CITY by Thea Guidone and THE GREEN UMBRELLA by Jackie Azua Kramer, which won the Parent's Choice Silver Award. Both books are a delight to read aloud. I also have a sweet spot for middle-grade novels like the verse novel CATCHING A STORYFISH by Janice Harrington and ICEFALL by Matthew J. Kirby, which won the PEN Award, as well as the prestigious Edgar Award.

Q: What are you the most proud of out of all the years you've been working for the agency?

Finding some amazing writing talents is probably what I am most proud of. It is what makes waking up each day so joyful. I can honestly say I am proud of every one of the more than one hundred books that I have sold. I haven't ever compromised my insistence on quality. And, it might sound hokey, but every day I think about getting good books into the hands of children and teens.

Q: What advice do you have for those who are looking to transition into the publishing field or become a literary agent?

Learning the market is very important. I had the advantage of working in children's magazines, book clubs, paperbacks, and then hardcover books. So I knew all the publishers and all the editors. You have to learn how to navigate

the publishing world and its ever-changing nature. Part of it is also a passion for books. You need persistence and patience. A sense of humor helps, too!



Author Spotlight: Claudia Mills

Claudia Mills is the beloved author of more than 60 books. Some of her best-selling books include *7 x 9 = TROUBLE*, *BEING TEDDY ROOSEVELT*, and *HOW OLIVER OLSON SAVED THE WORLD*. Perhaps best known are her chapter-book series, which include *FRANKLIN SCHOOL FRIENDS*, *THE NORA NOTEBOOKS*, and *AFTER-SCHOOL SUPERSTARS*. *School Library Journal* has said, “Mills has a knack for creating characters who demand compassion due to a pitch-perfect sense of humor and pathos.”

In 2019, Claudia won the prestigious Kerlan Award, “in recognition of singular attainments in the creation of children’s literature.” A graduate of Wellesley College with a Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton University, she taught philosophy for many years at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is the former president of the Children’s Literature Association.

Q: You have published an impressive 60 books. How has publishing changed over the years?

It’s changed a lot! The biggest and best change has been the new emphasis on diversity with terrific “own voices” authors brilliantly telling stories that young readers desperately need to hear. But the field has also become more competitive, just because there is so much new talent, with authors now needing to assume a much greater share of promotion for their books. In the end, though, the constants endure: everyone involved in the making of books for young readers has a passion to create and share literature that is brave and beautiful and true.

Q: Margaret Ferguson has been your editor for over a decade, first at Farrar, Straus, and Giroux and now with her own imprint at Holiday House, and you were with your previous editor for a full thirty years. What is it like for an author to have such a long relationship with her editors?

In a long-term relationship between author and editor, so much trust develops. If Margaret has a critical comment about one of my manuscripts, I know from confidence born of long experience that she is always right that something needs to be changed, though it may still take me a long time to figure out

exactly how to do this. Likewise, if I feel strongly about some feature of the book, Margaret trusts me, too, as she knows everything I write comes from my heart.

Q: Your new novel, *THE LOST LANGUAGE*, is a verse novel, which is a new format for you. Is this a kind of breakthrough?

The verse novel was indeed a breakthrough for me! I'd long admired the form and yearned to try it, but I needed to find just the right story to be told in that way. But when I did, words just came pouring out of me; I had found my best and truest voice at last, where it was so easy for me to be honest with my reader, and myself, in a deeper way than I ever had before. Also, strangely, the form of the verse novel helped strengthen my plot, as the poems distill and reveal particular crystalline moments, like pearls on a necklace, where I could see clearly which pearls needed to be added or taken away. Writing *THE LOST LANGUAGE* was bliss!

Q: Are you in touch with your readers? Do they ever offer story ideas? Do you like to visit classrooms?

I love hearing from readers! I think all authors do. Although children offer ideas to me all the time, I've never used a story idea from a reader; I always tell them that this is *their* idea, this is *their* story to tell. Because so many of my books are school stories, I adore visiting classrooms, and there I get ideas just from osmosis, just from being in that sacred space where learning takes place.

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

Do all you can to find, and hold fast to, joy in your writing. If you love to write, you will end up writing a lot, and the more you write, the better you'll get, and the more you'll love it! I cherish writing rituals that add even more joy to this work that is so dear to me. For instance, when I am finally ready to write the very first sentence of a new book, I make a point of writing it somewhere special, not just on my same comfy couch at home. My current favorite spot is at the Denver Botanic Gardens, sitting on a bench surrounded by greenery. So: let yourself write with joy!

To find out more about Claudia and her books, visit www.claudiamillsauthor.com.

Illustrator Spotlight: Andy Leimontas

Andy Leimontas is an Argentinean artist based in Buenos Aires. Always passionate about literature and art, it was her work with children and a restless

imagination that launched her career as an illustrator.

She has been studying illustration with well-known local artists. Her style could be described as magical, with a solid emphasis in mixed media. Her work has been exhibited at local and international events, where she has found the support to grow as an artist.



Q: How did you get into visual arts?

A: Creativity has always been an important part of my life. That's probably the reason I became a teacher. Working with kids freed my imagination. That was the starting point; I created stories, places, and characters to make my classes entertaining and keep my students

engaged. Their reactions, even today, are priceless. I just love it when a good story is not only a great teaching tool, but also a memorable moment that makes everyone talk and keep coming back for more!

And, just like that, I realized that illustrating for children was something I'm passionate about. I started taking art classes with a local painter and artist, took additional courses, and participated in workshops and art fairs.

Q: Where do you find inspiration? How do you channel it into your work?

A: I actually find inspiration everywhere. It usually appears when less expected. Most of the time it's just a small gesture, a word, a story I hear or a memory that triggers the story. The idea shows up little by little, and it starts taking shape within my head. Usually, all the initial work happens in my head; it's like a movie where I'm the director and play with the characters and scenes until they make sense. Once the picture is clear and I like the direction it's going, I grab my Wacom tablet and start sketching.

Q: How has the pandemic affected your work or your process?

A: As a teacher, the pandemic turned my world upside down. Literally. I had to dedicate many hours to adapt to the changes and reorganize my entire approach which, of course, caused a lot of anxiety, fear, and exhaustion.

My inspiration was greatly impacted due to the fact that I had to redirect all of my creative "juices" to be the best teacher I could be in a world where new rules applied. My priorities changed. The whole creative process, from watching an idea turn into an illustration to testing colors and textures, had to wait. I miss that part of my life terribly, so I'm working really hard to get back to it. I feel that overcoming the pandemic will almost be like a new beginning for me as an author and an artist. I am more determined than ever to produce and create beautiful art and stories to communicate not only the joy of being here today, but also to bring all the pieces back together.

You can find more of Andy's work at www.andyleimontas.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!

The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency

245 Park Avenue, 39th Floor
New York, NY 10167
212.372.8989
www.jdlit.com

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

