

# The Zephyr

*A newsletter for children's writers and illustrators*

July 2009

## From your Regional Advisors

Aloha from the Big Island of Hawaii, where my family and I are wrapping up 15 days in Paradise. I came to give a workshop to our sister Hawaii SCBWI chapter, plus do a little book promo at an Oahu Barnes & Noble and a public library. My family said there was no way I was coming to Hawaii without them, so we made it a working vacation. We've snorkeled, dived, hiked, seen erupting volcanoes, sailed to Lana'i for a look around, and rode horseback for almost 6 hours, exploring the crater of Haleakala.

I have also sent the boys to the beach or pool every chance I could, allowing me time to write my current work-in-progress, *FALLOUT*. Yes, I've got a deadline approaching toward the end of summer. But that isn't what drives me to write. It's the love of the writing itself that keeps pulling me back to the book.

It's been a difficult project, on a number of levels. It's the third and final installment of the *CRANK* trilogy. I never expected to write more than one book about "Kristina," but my readers wanted "the rest of the story," and even *GLASS* couldn't give them that. But I didn't want more of the same, so I chose to write in the point of view of three of her children, now older teens and dealing with the fallout of her choices. It's a good plot device, but also places a lot of pressure on me to basically create the future with information I have now. My goal is to write the best of the three books, and leave the hope of the trilogy with her children.

The point of the story is that even with the success I've realized, my focus remains writing the best book possible. It would sell well regardless, but money is not why I write. I write because it's my heart. Volcanoes are exciting. The beach is beautiful. Still, my writing calls to me every day. Even here in Paradise.

Aloha!

—Ellen Hopkins, Regional Co-advisor, Nevada SCBWI



## Inside this issue

Closing the age gap when writing for teens

Tips for facing research fearlessly

Recaps of SCBWI's spring events

## Plus

A new Illustrators' Corner, featuring an interview with Phyllis Mignard

Dear Nevada SCBWI Members and Friends,

I've taken my sweet time writing this letter, because I seem to have so little of that commodity these days. Summer days may be lazy but they also are surprisingly full and can slip by before we know it. I think of so many of you who've told me you don't have time to write or draw, and so many who somehow find that time. Last week, one of our members, Stephanie Long, was working on art at her booth in the Reno Rodeo. (She created this year's Reno Rodeo poster!) I took a tablet to the rodeo thinking I might write at our Sundance Bookstore table, but instead, I took notes. I seem to be doing a lot of that lately—taking notes and photos of things I want to remember for my next book. Writing paragraphs but not pages. That's all I could manage that week. But it was something. Here are my tips for writing/drawing when the days don't seem to have enough hours:

- 1) Book creation is not a race—but you do have to *keep taking steps toward your goal*.
- 2) Prioritize. Family or work may come first, but where does your art fit in? Is it second, third, ninth? *If your writing or illustrating is high on your personal list, treat it that way.*
- 3) Do what you can. If you can't write a chapter, write a page. *Don't wait to have lots of time.*
- 4) Keep a list of things you might do for your craft or career each day. If you can't write, read that book you thought would teach you about characters. If you feel chatty, make business phone calls. If you are brain dead, clean your office. *Choose what works best for you in that moment.*
- 5) Set deadlines for yourself. Keep them reasonable. If you are raising 1-year-old twins, consider what you can actually get done in a month. It might not be the draft of a novel. *Make reasonable plans and stick to them.*
- 6) Write other things. Whip out an article for our *Zephyr* (check with Jenny MacKay first), or draw a poster for your community yard sale. *Try something different.*
- 7) Get a buddy. Find someone who will support you and hold you accountable for finishing what you set out to do. *Tell your buddy your goals.*
- 8) Have some fun. No one is holding a gun to your head and telling you to do this. If you are having fun or *if you are passionate about your work*, it shows.
- 9) Be thankful that you have your gift. Take help when it is offered. *Say thanks.*
- 10) Take a risk. Open your heart and try new things. *Put that pencil to the page and accept the magic that appears.*

—Suzanne Morgan Williams,  
Regional Co-advisor, Nevada SCBWI

### Articles Wanted!

Add writing credits to your portfolio! *The Zephyr* is seeking articles, including:

- Personal experience pieces from writers and illustrators
- How-to articles
- Writing/illustrating tips
- Interviews with children's writers and illustrators

E-mail *Zephyr* editor Jenny MacKay with your article or idea! She'll be thrilled to hear from you.

[jopm@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jopm@sbcglobal.net)



*The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.*  
—Sylvia Plath



### **Southern Nevada's Sizzling for SCBWI**

Things are heating up in Las Vegas! Our writing and illustrator critique groups are thriving. Turnouts are big. Meetings are filled with sharing work, inspiring greatness, and filling up our creative cups. We carried that excitement into our General Meeting on May 16. Our speaker was Daria Snadowsky, author of *Anatomy of a Boyfriend*, which was honored by the New York Public Library as a "Book for the Teen Age." Daria spoke about her road to publication. Read more about Daria at [www.daria-snadowsky.com](http://www.daria-snadowsky.com).

—Ann Kimbrough,  
Las Vegas Coordinator,  
Southern Nevada  
SCBWI

## **Las Vegas Turns Out for Publish or Perish**

**By Ann Kimbrough**

In March, SCBWI-Las Vegas held a half-day seminar at the College of Southern Nevada. The large crowd learned about building a professional portfolio from Sharon Mann, query letter basics from Ann Kimbrough, and Web sites from Web designer Michael Gazzano. Here are a few tips that pumped up the gathering:

1. Build a professional portfolio anywhere you can: art shows, contests, church newsletters, clubs, nonprofits, local newspapers, children's magazines, craft publications, Internet e-zines, or blogs.
2. Creative résumés include education, professional employment, published work, professional conferences, contests, exhibits, awards, and organization affiliations (like SCBWI).
3. Illustrators' portfolios should tell a story, like a book. Start with a hook and strive for a beginning, middle, and end to your presentation.
4. Never send a query letter before your manuscript or portfolio is done. You're not in a race. You need to have your best work ready when they request your material.
5. Failing to properly proofread material and not following submission guidelines are editors' two biggest complaints.
6. When you e-mail a query letter, put "Query: Name of Proposed Article" in the subject line.
7. In queries, use links to your Web site for writing and illustrating samples.
8. A Web site is like a business card.
9. Update Web sites regularly, as that will improve your rating. A better rating means your site will pop up sooner on searches.
10. On your Web site, use keywords all over your main Web page. The more a keyword pops up on a site, the better chance it will pop up on a search engine. Use keywords in the text as tabs for other pages and in page titles.



*Publish or Perish Half-day Seminar speakers, from left: Michael Gazzano of Perkolate Web Designs, and SCBWI members Ann Kimbrough and Sharon Mann.*

## Writing for Teens and Tweens: Don't Let Reality Bite

By Juli Heaton

*This is a revised version of an article that first appeared in BorderLines, the quarterly newsletter of SCBWI's Midsouth Region. Gracious thanks to Patricia Wiles, editor of BorderLines, and Juli Heaton for giving us permission to reprint this article in The Zephyr.*

Writing a contemporary middle grade or young adult novel can take a lot of research. No, I don't mean writing a historical novel, and I don't mean a novel set abroad. So why all the work? The book is set in the United States today, and you just happen to live in the modern-day United States.

But you aren't a teen or tween. You were one, once. But now? You're just a boring old grownup.

I've judged contest entries that could have been set in the '60s, '80s, even the '90s, and the result is a disconnect. The reader doesn't know how to picture the scene. Are these kids sporting feathered hair, tie-dyed shirts, or Miami Vice pastels? Is the kitchen '70s orange or dusty rose from the '80s?

Many factors can impact the size of the generation gap—your age, how many children you deal with frequently, the time you spend working with technology, even the television shows you watch—but whether you're 30 or 90, you are probably out of touch.

You need to modernize, but how? Editors may not like too much popular culture name-dropping, because it can make a novel feel dated within a year or two. You don't need to name the bands, the songs, the TV shows, or Britney's fall from grace in order to feel current. But there are some things you have to do. In a recent workshop, I gave this pop quiz:

*Sue's mother drops her at the mall to meet friends.  
When she arrives at the food court, her friends aren't there. She spends two hours pretending to eat French fries while she waits for her mother to come back.*

Can you spot the problem?

It's 2008. How can Sue not find her friends? She would have a cell

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### Great Resource

*Children's Writer's Word Book*, by Alihandra Mogilner, *Writer's Digest Books, 2006*

Don't underestimate the power of the school curriculum in determining what today's kids read. Classrooms and school libraries are stocked with books that relate to or fit in with yearly educational standards and benchmark tests in all subjects. Many children's publishers tap into this market and may expect books written for certain grade levels to contain age-friendly vocabulary. *The Children's Writer's Word Book* is a survival guide for navigating word choice in your writing. With age-appropriate vocabulary lists by sorted by grade, as well as tips for sentence length, story pacing, and more, this will be a desktop resource you will refer to again and again.



### **Where the Wild Things Were**

Crazy things happened in Virginia City last April at Nevada SCBWI's 2009 conference. Speakers included Laurent Linn, art director at Simon & Schuster; illustrator/author Yuyi Morales; authors Jane Yolen, Lynda Sandoval, Esther Hershenhorn, and Nevada's own Ellen Hopkins, Terri Farley, and Susan Hart Lindquist; Penguin editor Alisha Niehaus; literary agent Jamie Weiss Chilton; plus Nevada SCBWI Mentor Program participants from far and wide. There was mentoring and networking. There may have been ghosts. There was certainly wine. But mostly, what happens in Virginia City stays in Virginia City. So if you missed out...well, there's always 2010.

Stay informed! Visit [www.nevadascbwi.org](http://www.nevadascbwi.org) and our new social networking site, <http://nevadascbwi.ning.com/>.

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phone, and so would her friends. If she's old enough to be dropped at the mall, she'll have a phone. Assuming she didn't, for some unfathomable reason, her mother would. Sue could borrow a phone and call her mother to pick her up. Oh, and is her name really Sue? Why? Was Sue her mother's best friend?

Can you write a scene like this and make it work? Yes, but you have to set the scene. Give the reader a reason why Sue cannot find her friends. Maybe Sue's mother forgot to pay the cell phone bill. Or her friends are really "new friends," and they are purposely ditching her. The teen's frame of reference will be her own experience—her mother probably would not trust her at the mall without a phone, so you, as the writer, must explain the situation. Otherwise, the reader will be jarred by the inconsistency with her own life.

Kids have phones by middle school and probably earlier. Kids with phones text their friends. They are as comfortable with texting as with walking and often do both at the same time. Texting allows them to carry on a silent conversation with a friend while suffering through the not-so-fun activities of daily life. They also instant message, e-mail, and use the Internet like you use your television. They upload videos of themselves to YouTube, and they take pictures with their phones and send them to their friends with the press of a button. If you are writing for kids ages 8 to 10, you need to take a visit to their world. Learn their language. The Disney Channel and Nick. Hannah Montana and High School Musical. Real kids don't look like models and wear designer clothes, but they are watching these shows.

Girls through age 12 may have the same interests. Writing for teens means reading *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *American Girl*, and *Girl's Life*. You aren't looking for lessons on writing or plotting. You're getting lessons in popular culture.

Boys will often be moving on to the teen scene sooner, watching Comedy Central and Cartoon Network, especially the rude cartoons geared to adults. For the boy perspective, play some video games. Too much to ask? Then watch some boys play. Video games are made up of a series of levels. They "beat" a level and move on to the next one. Your readers may think of the world in these terms.

Can you set your novel in the past? Sure. Can you write dozens of books in which the main characters are grounded and banned from TV, games, and phones? Probably not. The reality of a teen or tween is different from that of an adult. Do research. Don't let reality bite you in the...well, it's definitely not called a tush anymore.

*Juli Heaton writes legal decisions during the day and spends her evenings writing for teens and tweens. Please visit her at [juliheatonwrites.com](http://juliheatonwrites.com).*

## Fear no research

By Jenny MacKay

One of the most common reasons why writers say they do not consider writing nonfiction is that they hate doing research. No doubt they still harbor painful memories of extortion by research paper in high school or college, but here's a news flash: *everybody* hated research back then. It's a poor excuse for still hating it now.

Here's another news flash: fiction writers do research, too. In fact, it's safe to say that if you love to write, you also love to research. There is not one thing without the other. Take for example the novel *Bull Rider*, by our Regional Advisor Suzanne Morgan Williams. The book is about a boy who skateboards and rides bulls and has an older brother who just returned from Iraq. Its author is not a boy who skateboards and rides bulls. She does not have an older brother who is an injured veteran of the war in Iraq. Her book is fiction, but she did enough research during the writing of it to fill a few nonfiction books on everything from rodeos to life on a rural Nevada ranch to living with traumatic brain injury.

### *Allow the prospect of research to be fun*

Whether you write fiction or nonfiction, writing and research go hand in hand. But don't despair. You are not writing a term paper whose topic was pre-selected on account of its being inherently toxic to imaginative people. You are setting out to write about a topic you love, so allow the prospect of research to be fun, whether you're writing about the Grand Canyon or *Grand Theft Auto 4*.

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

#### **Give yourself a reason to research**

Actually, you probably research all the time. If you've ever Googled up tips for taking a red-wine stain out of the taupe carpet in the yacht you borrowed from your in-laws, or if you've ever joined one of those class reunion Web sites under a fictitious name to look for a picture of your high school ex, then congratulations—you've done research. All you need to make it enjoyable is a compelling reason to find answers. (And yes, simple curiosity is a compelling reason.)

#### **...start your research!**

**Watch television.** The Discovery Channel, the History Channel, the Learning Channel, A&E, and Biography are all great networks for finding interesting documentaries. (They also have Web sites that list what's showing, and they sell copies of popular programs.)

**Conduct interviews.** Most people will be flattered to hear that you think their job or their life is interesting enough to interview them. Even the busiest professionals will often make time if you mention you're writing a children's book.

**Read diaries, newspapers, and autobiographies.** These give a true, personal perspective of what it was like to live through a certain time period, event, or situation.

**Pillage bibliographies.** Look through the bibliographies in books on your subject for a handy list of further resources to explore.

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### **Good News!**

**Nanette McGuinness's** article "Marian Andersen: Singer of Courage" was published in the April/ May 2009 issue of *Hopscotch for Girls*. Great going, Nanette!

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**Jenny MacKay's** sixth nonfiction book for teens, *Forensic Biology*, was just released by Lucent Books.



Got good news to share? Send it to *Zephyr* editor **Jenny MacKay**, [jopm@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jopm@sbcglobal.net).

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### **Erase the word *Wikipedia* from your vocabulary**

Imagine you're 9 years old and want to know who Adolf Hitler was. You might surf along to the first hit that comes up on the Google search page, maybe read a paragraph, snicker at the mustache, get bored, and find something else to do. Can a writer afford to approach research the same way? Don't count on it. You'll need to dig up real sources about a subject, and as many of them as you can get your hands on. Publishers will certainly be expecting you to know what an average 9-year-old wouldn't find easily online.

### **Erase the word *Wikipedia* from your vocabulary**

Déjà vu? No, this tip is really in here twice, because not only should you exert yourself to go *beyond* sources like Wikipedia, you should exert yourself not to *trust* what you read online. Perhaps you have never been a humiliated victim of an Internet scam, never bought into an urban legend you read on a blog, and never forwarded a ridiculously slanted incendiary e-mail to all of your politically slanted friends, but even so, it's worth remembering that there is a whole lot of non-truth floating around in the world. Go the extra mile to get the real facts.

***Don't trust everything  
you read online***

### **Give credit where credit is due**

Editors are always happy to know where you got your facts. Take the time to write up a reference list that cites each book, magazine, newspaper, or personal interview you used. It speaks to your professionalism if you can demonstrate that your book has been thoroughly researched (yes, even if you write fiction). And if an editor ever asks "Where did you hear this?" you will be quick with a defensible response.

Whether you are writing fiction or nonfiction, never fear research. You can learn amazing things and meet amazing people when you jump in with both feet, and the more you know about what you're writing, the more authentic your book on any subject will be.

*Jenny MacKay is a freelance editor and the author of six nonfiction children's books.*

## An Interview with Illustrator Phyllis Mignard

By Sharon Mann

*This is the first in an exciting series of illustrator interviews by Nevada SCBWI's new Illustrator Coordinator, Sharon Mann. Stay tuned for more from Sharon in future issues!*

Phyllis Mignard has been an active member of SCBWI for 15 years. We Nevadans are so lucky to have her with us. Her illustrations have won nationwide recognition in books and magazines and on the Internet. In 2008, her design was chosen to represent Nevada in the White House Illustrated Easter Egg Display, which honored just one eggshell entry from each state.

When I asked her to tell me one of her greatest artistic inspirations, one of those “ah-ha” moments, Phyllis said, “Last year when I was at my mother’s home in South Carolina, two little frogs were sitting on the porch in the moonlight croaking. One frog sounded like a screen door opening and closing. His girlfriend sounded like a shoe was dropping on the porch. At first it was a little scary until I finally realized that our invisible intruders were two little frogs! I was in awe of life and the inspiration that comes to me from the smallest happenings. These moments are my greatest inspirations.” Phyllis is a wonderful storyteller.

Phyllis’ love of children’s literature and illustrations began when she received a 10-volume set of Junior Classics from Collier’s Encyclopedia when she was 5 years old. “Being the oldest grandchild with more cousins than I could count on two hands meant lots of baby sitting time,” Phyllis says. “Reading those books to my cousins entertained me long after I was supposed to have outgrown them. Even today, I enjoy rereading them. That’s what a good story does for me. I want to reread it again and again.”

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*That’s what a good story does for me. I want to reread it again and again.*

—Phyllis Mignard



**Meet Nevada  
SCBWI's new  
Illustrator  
Coordinator!**

Sharon Mann's passion is to illustrate. She infuses her love for traditional needle-craft to produce dimensional and novel fiber illustrations. Sharon has a Bachelor of Arts in Art from California State University in Northridge. She is published in magazines and books and on the Internet. She was a contributing artist for the recently published books *The Artful Storybook* and *Kooky Crochet*, published by Lark Books, and she co-wrote/illustrated *Crochet Kid Stuff*, published by Creative Publishing International.

Visit her Web site at

[www.sharonmann  
designs.com](http://www.sharonmann<br/>designs.com).

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Phyllis says she has always been a doodler. When her boys were small, she would draw pictures on their paper-bag lunches each day. In fact, they wouldn't leave for school until their bags were creatively marked. But her drawing style really took off when she worked for the Las Vegas–Clark County Library District in the public relations department. She was responsible for creating all of the print materials for the district, which included illustrations for the children's programs.

Now that computers are our way of life, Phyllis scans her line work and can alter her drawings using Adobe Illustrator. Her computerized drawings are printed on watercolor paper and painted with watercolor paints to produce magical works of art. Years ago, she drew with pen and ink, and mistakes meant redrawing an entire piece of work. She says she loves “undo,” as her Oh No's are now so easily remedied.

I asked Phyllis for a bit of advice for new SCBWI members. She answered, “Be patient and read as much as possible. Get to know the children's librarian at your local library and ask for help. Illustrating a children's book is much different than producing a single piece of art. The art of storytelling takes practice.” She recommends books illustrated and written by Uri Shulevitz, Tommy dePaola, and Barry Moser.

Phyllis's goals for the coming year? “I'm preparing now for the 2010 August SCBWI conference in Los Angeles,” she says. “I hope to see you all there!”

Check out Phyllis' Web site at [www.phyllismignard.com](http://www.phyllismignard.com).