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# A Worldwide Network for Children's Writers and Illustrators

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Writers and illustrators for children have a worldwide organisation they can turn to in order to help them improve their craft, provide networking opportunities, and promote their interests regarding copyrights and contracts. The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) has over 20,000 members worldwide in over 70 chapters around the world and represents writers and illustrators in all genres and for all ages. As a professional organisation for children's writers and illustrators, it seeks to offer opportunities for the exchange of ideas between experts in the field, including editors, agents, publishers, librarians, educators, and booksellers. In this article, I'll detail the ways this organisation aids writers and illustrators, and I'll also explain its unique organisation structure, as SCBWI is primarily run by volunteers.

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## Introduction

Some authors that write for adults trivialise works written for children or young adults. Martin Amis is a recent example. In an article in the *Guardian*, he noted that writing for children would necessitate the need for him to write at a lower register, and he would only be able to do so if he suffered a brain injury (Page, 2011). The fact that books for children are, by and large, shorter than books for adults often factors in as a reason as to why they are considered 'easier' to write. Moreover, the commercialisation of children's texts, including Disney books written as summaries of films, or books written by celebrities, are additional factors that lead many to turn their noses up at the idea that books for children are literature or even important at all.

These points have been refuted on many counts both directly and indirectly. The most elegant direct refutation by a writer was Neil Gaiman's discussion of the importance of children's literature after he won the Newbery Medal in 2009. He says:

Children's fiction, for me back then, was the most important thing there is. It has a holy place and position that adult fiction doesn't have. Adult fiction is a wonderful thing and enriching to the soul and mind, and it takes you to great places. But children's fiction can change the world and give you a refuge from the intolerable. It can give you a place of safety and show you the world is not bounded by the world you live in – there's more than that. (np)

Gaiman is a prolific and acclaimed novelist who writes for both children and adults (and makes no distinction between his adult and children's books on his homepage). His children's books deal with difficult issues; some are scary, some are funny, and all of them are thought-provoking and not soon forgotten – especially if read at a young age.

Academic research on children's literature has also demonstrated the high cognitive level of complexity involved in appreciating quality texts written for children. Colston and Kuiper (2002), for example, demonstrate the amount of figurative language used for children is comparable to that used in adult texts. In addition, picture books rely on the cognitive interplay between illustration and text. Researchers, including Serafini 2010, use a multimodal analysis approach to argue that picture book text and illustrations interact at three different levels of complexity. Other researchers explore how children approach this complexity (i.e. Arizpe, 2009, Styles & Noble, 2009, Goodwin, 2009), or explore the qualities that are necessary in the text to create an emotionally complete experience (Ahrens, In press).

In fact, writing well for children can be even more difficult than writing well for adults. The adult writer must at some level understand children and what clicks with them. They also need to recall and describe the details and feelings of being a child or young adult in order to create the authenticity of that period in one's life where everything, including one's physical and emotional self, is changing and nothing is exactly as it seems. Furthermore, they do so not retrospectively, but with an immediacy that engages the child and young adult reader. Some writers and illustrators may have extensive experience working with children and put this to very good use in their writing, and some write for children intuitively. However, it is not a gift that everyone has, and those that lack it should not consider themselves superior to those that are graced with it.

Writers for children also face a conundrum that adult writers don't have – they are writing for children and young adults, but at the same time they are also writing for the adult agent, editor, bookstore buyer, parent, librarian, book critique, and teacher. Many authors work around this issue by saying they are writing for themselves or for the child within, but the fact remains that a manuscript, in order to be published, must resonate first with an adult before it can reach the hand of a child. Books written for adults only need to please the adult reader. No one expects these books to entertain and beguile both children and adults.

The question then arises: how can writers create the best possible works of literature for children? That is, how can they create literature that appeals to the heads and hearts of children as well as to the heads and hearts of adults (i.e. the librarians, teachers, and parents) who are oftentimes selecting and suggesting books for children and teenagers to read?

## **A Brief History**

These questions were asked by the founders of the Society of Children's Book Writers (SCBW), Steve Mooser and Lin Oliver, in the early 70s when they were working together on a reading series for the United States Department of

Education. They looked for an organisation that could help them become better writers for children. When they didn't find one, they started their own, beginning with a four-page black and white Bulletin in June 1971. By February of 1972, there were 100 members and a national conference was planned for October 1972, at which 70 members attended. In October of 1973, the Golden Kite Book award was announced as 'the first award of its kind to be presented to a children's author by his or her fellow authors' (Heyes, 2011: 23).

Regional meetings started as well, and at the national conference in Los Angeles a report was given yearly on the state of the children's book publishing market, discussing market trends, reporting on the movement of editors, the opening and closing of imprints, and mergers of publishing houses. SCBW also followed legislation relating to copyrights and other areas of interest to writers and wrote to Congress on behalf of its members. By September 1992, membership had grown to 8,000, and SCBW changed its name to Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators to recognise its illustrator members (Heyes, 2011). In the mid-90s, SCBWI expanded to include regions outside the United States, including Uruguay, France, Australia, and later the United Kingdom and Canada, and in the mid-2000s, SCBWI started holding events in conjunction with the Bologna Children's Book Fair. In 2010 and 2011, SCBWI was a co-sponsor of the Asian Festival of Children's Content, organised by the Singapore Book Council.

Now, 40 years after the organisation was founded in 1971, membership exceeds 20,000 and there are 70 regional chapters around the world with 25 active international regions, including Australia/New Zealand, Belgium, British Isles, Canada East, Canada West, Caribbean North, Caribbean South, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Israel, Japan-Tokyo, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, and Taiwan. That's 20,000 people that believe in the power of writing for children and who believe that they can change the world by expanding children's perspectives beyond what they can simply experience themselves. In addition, 40 years later, SCBWI is still sending out a bimonthly Bulletin (now 40-plus pages long) and still provides detailed market information for members on its website. It has expanded its awards to include unpublished as well as published work, and it still represents the views of its writer and illustrator members to the US Congress on relevant issues.

## **How SCBWI is Organised**

SCBWI is unique in that each of its 70 regions is run by a volunteer regional advisor. The US regional advisors have a chairperson who oversees them (RA Coordinator). The international regions also have an International Regional Advisor Chairperson. Both of these are volunteer positions. Headquarters, located in Los Angeles, employs ten paid staff, including Steve Mooser, the co-founder and President, and Lin Oliver, co-founder and Executive Director. The paid staff are in charge of organising and running the yearly New York and Los Angeles Conferences, which recently have had about 900-plus attendees, as well as scheduling manuscript reviews, liaising with regional advisors and RA chairpersons, running and updating the newly

revamped website ([www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org)), publishing the SCBWI Bulletin, running many diverse awards and grants, and handling member questions.

The regional advisors are in charge of holding events in their region, welcoming new members, coordinating critique groups, maintaining the regional homepage, handling finances, and reporting to headquarters twice yearly on their events. The RA Coordinator and International Regional Advisor Chairperson are in charge of overseeing all the RAs in their region, including reading and responding to all reports and requests for grant money to hold special events.

When members join SCBWI, they pay their dues to the main office headquarters. Dues are US\$85 for the first year and US\$70 a year thereafter. Members belong to the international SCBWI organisation and can attend events in any region in the world. All SCBWI events offer a lower event fee for SCBWI members as compared with non-members. Money is distributed from headquarters to the various regions via the RA Coordinator and International Regional Advisor Chairperson who get a budget to work with each year. Regions then apply to either the Coordinator or Chairperson to hold events in their region. In addition, if the region itself makes a profit on an event, this money is then used to hold future events.

Why would Regional Advisors work so hard in a volunteer position? First, they believe in what they do – they believe that their work will make a difference in the life of a child. Second, they really enjoy working with others who write for children – SCBWI is full of talented, generous, and fun people. Third, they do receive various benefits such as waived conference attendance fees to either the Los Angeles or New York conferences once a year, where they help with registration and other assigned tasks, such as escorting agents and writers to their sessions. There are also special developmental grants for RAs, including the Works of Outstanding Promise Award (WOOP).

SCBWI also has a Board of Advisors, consisting of the President, Executive Officer, Regional Advisor Coordinator, International Regional Advisor Chairperson, US Illustrator Coordinator, International Illustrator Coordinator, and two dozen who are respected illustrators, writers, editors, art directors, or publishers, including Judy Blume, Arthur Levine, Walter Dean Myers, Linda Sue Park, Lisa Yee, Jane Yolen, Ellen Hopkins, David Diaz, Susan Patron, and many others. Four board members are elected by the SCBWI members to represent them on the Board. The Board is in charge of discussing trends in the children's publishing field, such as the growth of e-publishing and its effect on writers and illustrators, and overseeing the financial reports of the organisation in order to keep it true to its mission to serve as a network for knowledge exchange among professionals in the field.

## Levels of Membership

SCBWI Membership is open to anyone who is interested in creating, publishing, or evaluating content created for children and young adults. Writers, illustrators, librarians, educators, artists, musicians, dramatists, publishers, editors, and art directors are all part of the SCBWI Membership. There are three levels of membership to meet the needs of different types of

members. All members pay the same fees, US\$85 for the first year of membership and US\$70 for each subsequent year of membership.

Associate membership is open to anyone with an active interest in the field, including those who have been published in markets other than children's literature, as well as journalists, bloggers, educators, and librarians. Associate members have access to the full range of information on the website, including the SCBWI Bulletin and membership rates at all SCBWI events around the world.

Full membership is open to those who have had books, articles, poems, stories, illustrations, photographs, electronic media, films, or TV shows produced or published for children. The benefits are the same as for associate members.

Published and Listed Membership (PAL) is open to those whose materials (books, articles, media, etc.) have been commercially published by an organisation listed in one of the SCBWI Market Surveys. PAL Members can be listed in the 'Find a Speaker' section of the SCBWI website and they can request to be able to sell or display their books at select SCBWI events. A publisher is given PAL status if the creator did not pay to have the work published and it went through a professional editorial process prior to being published at no cost to the creator. The publishing company must also be able to broadly distribute the work to the customer, have at least one prior list and some means of marketing, and it must publish works from more than one creator or one family.

## **What SCBWI Does for Its Members**

SCBWI serves first and foremost as a professional guild for children's writers. On behalf of SCBWI members, the organisation lobbies for issues concerning copyright legislation, fair treatment of authors or illustrators, and transparent and fair contract terms. Most recently, SCBWI has lobbied against forced cuts in parts of the California library system that would eliminate the positions of librarians.

SCBWI takes a personal interest in the careers of its members, providing information and advice as needed, and through its extensive range of publications on the scbwi.org website, it allows members to locate reputable publishers, agents, freelance editors, writing and illustrating courses, book reviewers, and book producers. SCBWI has also provided extensive market survey resources for members including major US publishers (SCBWI Market Survey), small publishers (Small Press Market Survey) as well as an International Market Survey, an Educational Press Market Survey, a Religious Press Market Survey, an Illustrators Market Guide, and a Magazine Market Guide. Other publications include information about copyrights and contracts, information on how to publicise published works, keep published books 'alive', as well as information on how to successfully plan and carry off school visits.

Along with the wide range of useful information on the scbwi.org website, there are members-only Discussion Boards including a wide-range of forums that allow members to gain timely information and get their questions

answered quickly. An impressive range of awards and grants are given to SCBWI members each year. There are six type of annual awards: the Golden Kite Award, which is the only major children's book award given by one's peers, the newly-created Crystal Kite Awards, which are given by a large geographical region to one's peers for the best book, the Sid Fleischmann Humor Award, the Magazine Merit Awards, the Sue Alexander Most Promising New Work Award, and the Portfolio Award. SCBWI also organises contests for a range of grants for writers and illustrators, including work-in-progress grants. These grants are currently funded by Amazon.com in conjunction with SCBWI.

In addition to these above types of 'virtual' offerings where all communication takes place online, over the phone, or via post, SCBWI also has over 70 regions that hold live events regularly around the world. While the two major international conferences are run by the main office (the New York conference is in January each year and the Los Angeles conference is in August each year), all other conferences, booths, face-to-face critique groups, and other events are run by local regions. Many conferences, including the Los Angeles conference, have opportunities for attendees to pay for a one-on-one consultation session. In these sessions, an industry professional reads and comments on the attendee's 10-page submission and synopsis in advance of their 15–20 minute meeting. In addition, the regular conference fee covers talks given by writers, illustrators, publishers, agents, editors, and art directors about craft and the market place. The New York conference has a special art showcase of illustrators (for an additional fee) where art directors from New York publishing houses view the portfolios and award prizes to the best illustrations. While the New York and Los Angeles conferences usually have 900 or more attendees, the regional conferences tend to be much smaller and more intimate. Depending on one's location and one's budget, members can usually find that they can attend at least one SCBWI event each year and gain valuable contacts and information from these events.

## **International Regions**

While the majority of SCBWI members live in the United States, approximately one-tenth live in other countries, with Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and France having the largest number of members. Depending upon the membership in a given international region, local events may focus more on members getting published in the US market or in the local market. All event listings can be found on the [scbwi.org](http://scbwi.org) site under the regional chapter information or by searching by date. In this section, information will be presented about several of the more active international regions and the events held in these regions in order provide an idea of the scope and range of offerings.

Canada has two large and active regions – Canada East and Canada West. In Canada West, there is a conference once a year in Vancouver, as well as monthly critique sessions that focus on one topic e.g. critiques of query letters, synopses, picture book manuscripts, or first chapters. Many other regions in the United States and around the world also have similar critique groups for

writers and for illustrators. Canada East most recently held a fall writing retreat in 2010 with Hilary Van Dusen, Senior Editor at Candlewick Press, and has established four online critique groups with the help of Canada West.

There are several active regions in Asia, including Hong Kong, Japan-Tokyo, Taiwan, Singapore, and the Philippines. Hong Kong has two regular critique group meetings and often works on major events with Tokyo where they bring in an editor for a two-city Asian tour. Japan-Tokyo holds monthly events that focus on a topic of particular interest to writers, illustrators, or translators, and also produces its own newsletter, *Carp Tales*. SCBWI-Taiwan has held illustration critiques at the Taiwan International Book Fair for the past several years. Illustrators bring in their portfolios for feedback from publishers. SCBWI Philippines holds events throughout the islands, helping its writers and illustrators to become published in the local market, and paying special attention to writing in local and endangered dialects.

The Australian/New Zealand region holds a major conference once every two years, as well as a writer's retreat and other quarterly events at different locations throughout the two countries. This region was the first to start the Crystal Kite Awards so as to help published writers gain recognition for their work.

SCBWI British Isles holds a 'professional series' programme to help writers and illustrators navigate the tough UK market, as well as an annual agents' party and an annual retreat. They also have launched many writing careers through their *Undiscovered Voices* anthology, in which they judge submitted first chapters for quality. In conjunction with the Working Partners, a UK book packager, they publish the best entries in an anthology and present it to editors and publishers to let them know about the best up-and-coming UK children and young adult writers.

The International Regional Advisor Chairperson, with the help of the Assistant International Advisor, the International Illustrator Coordinator, and other international regional advisors, has held a Showcase at the Bologna Book Fair on even years since 2008. The Showcase is a booth at the Bologna Book Fair. SCBWI PAL members may apply to display their books during a one to two hour period during the Fair. Regional Advisors may display the works of authors and illustrators from their regions. There is also an Illustrators' Display Portfolio. Art directors and publishers stop by to view the illustrations and books on display. This has led to illustrators gaining contracts based on their portfolio and to subsidiary rights later being negotiated by authors/illustrators/agents on previously published books.

The Bologna Book Fair is important for those in the European regions, but these regions also hold a variety of regular events in their own areas. SCBWI France holds a bi-annual Sequester at the Royaumont Abbey, which is an intensive writing retreat, and a wide variety of other talks and events, such as its Savior Faire series on children's book publishing. SCBWI Ireland holds a conference once a year, while Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands have organised critique groups and other speaker events. Spain produces an online Spanish newsletter in conjunction with Mexico.

SCBWI International has also co-sponsored the Asian Festival of Children's Content (AFCC) for the past two years with the assistance of the SCBWI

Regional Advisors in Singapore and Malaysia. This Festival is in fact a four-day conference that brings in agents, editors, illustrators, and writers from the United States as well as India, Australia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and other Asian regions to help local and regional writers improve their craft and their networking opportunities. It also offers different tracks to content creators, librarians, teachers, publishers, and parents over its four-day conference period.

In short, SCBWI provides a plethora of opportunities for creators of children's content to receive feedback on their work, learn about the market, and learn how to market themselves and their work. All this is possible due to the vision of the two co-founders, Steve Mooser and Lin Oliver, as well as the hard work of thousands of Regional Advisors over the past 40 years.

## Conclusion

The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators is an organisation that helps writers and illustrators improve their craft and network with professionals so that they can create texts that resonate with this generation of children, and if their work is worthy enough, generations beyond. To paraphrase the Newbery Award Winner Richard Peck at SCBWI's 40th Anniversary conference in Los Angeles in 2011: children's writers and illustrators allow readers to find themselves early 'on the page' so that when they grow up, they won't go looking for themselves 'in all the wrong places'.

It's that finding of oneself on the page that creates the 'refuge from the intolerable' that Gaiman (2009) talked about. In that refuge, the child sees that she or he is not alone, that others have experienced similar joy, sadness, or loneliness. That identification is critical to a child's emotional growth, i.e. since there are others who have felt this way, the reader is not alone. Furthermore, they recognise others have feelings, feelings that are different from theirs, and different perspectives on what is right and what is wrong, what is socially acceptable or unacceptable in a particular culture. All this is not done by telling the child or young adult 'this is who you are, this is where you are from, this is how you shall behave', but by showing a character in a specific time and place struggle with a difficult issue. In doing so, it allows the child to see that even though they may be from a particular time and place (with all its incumbent advantages or disadvantages), they do have choices. To quote Gaiman (2009) again, it allows the child to see that 'the world is not bounded' by the world he or she lives in.

Moreover, if there was no literature created for children – if everything had stopped with Dick and Jane readers and Beatrix Potter – if there were no picture books, early chapter books, chapter books, middle grade readers, or young adult fiction written for today's child – how would the children of today learn to treasure the gifts that a well-crafted story brings? Who would open children to the range of human emotions that exist in a variety of settings? And how many of them would grow up to read the fiction written by adult writers?

It is those writers who are able to grab the young reader and pull them into the story and make it so vivid and emotionally compelling that she sits curled

up at the foot of the couch while her mother shouts at her to do her homework, and her phone beeps with texts and tweets, and her brother kicks her feet – those writers are laying the groundwork for this child to grow up into an adult reader, and it seems short-sighted for an adult writer such as Amis to suggest that he is too smart to write for children. If anything, he may not be smart enough.

SCBWI members know that children can only appreciate the intrinsic benefits a life of reading provides if there are well-written books on the library and store shelves that they can relate to. This issue is even more pressing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century given the other types of visual eye-candy that compete for their attention and their limited time. Children who love to read grow up to be adults that read. All writers who write solely for adults rely on writers and illustrators for children to create texts that draw readers in and bring them to a world different from their own, so they want to continue to experience the wonderful parallel worlds that reading provides long after they have left the wonder and the confusion of childhood.

### Correspondence

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