

# acorn

Local members sharing ideas, art, tips and news

November/December 2013

December 2012 – January 2013



## A Note from the Editorial Desk

Hi everyone,

Can you believe we're already at the end of the year? As that reality sinks in, I'm taken back to the beginning of the year, more specifically to that moment when I penned down resolutions for 2013. I am sure many of you can relate. Did we reach our goals? How has 2013 changed us? Are we any closer to being the writer, illustrator, person that we aimed to be when the year started?

I also can't help but consider the changes and growth that we've gone through as a community, in North/Central California. I hope that we look back without regrets, knowing that we gave it our all when we fought for our dreams, our stories and ourselves.

Beth and I warmly thank the amazing regional members who contributed to the ACORN this year: Thank you for the photos, the illustrations and the articles, which made us smile and helped us remain connected with one another, while giving us the motivation to grow as artists.

We wish you a warm and happy holiday season.

Sincerely,  
Nathalie

A Note from the Editorial Desk	1
What Today's Writers can Learn from Victorian Authors	2
Interview with Robin Howard	3
Digital Mentorship Program Round-Up	6
A note from Nancy Barnet	8

## Upcoming Events

For all upcoming events, please see our [regional SCBWI page](#) for details.

- Character and the Seven Deadly Sins, November 20<sup>th</sup>, Citrus Heights
- Digital Mentorship Program for Picture Books registration opens December 1st
- Holiday Mixer, December 5<sup>th</sup>, Citrus Heights
- Watch for details for a Sketch Crawl in January!
- Spring Spirit Conference, April 5<sup>th</sup>, Citrus Heights

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## What Today's Writers Can Learn from Victorian Authors

Elizabeth Varadan

Many Victorian children's novels are still popular today. What are the secrets of these classics? The answer involves two factors: Character and plot. Indeed, character drives plot, as illustrated by the summaries of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. In two examples below, a sympathetic protagonist deals with obstacles created by an antagonist. Their interaction moves events to the climax and resolution.

In Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*, Sara Crewe is smart, independent, and imaginative. Born in India, at age seven she is brought to Miss Minchin's Seminary for Young Ladies. Unintentionally, she embarrasses Miss Minchin by conversing with the French teacher in French. Miss Minchin, a bully at heart, doesn't speak French well. She fawns over Sara because of her rich father, but harbors a grudge over the years. Then word comes that Sara's father died of jungle fever. His diamond mine failed. His partner disappeared. Sara is penniless.

Miss Minchin makes Sara a servant, moving her to the attic. She barely feeds Sara, giving her terrible jobs, including running errands in freezing weather. Sara copes by imagining how a princess would behave: Kind. Compassionate. Generous. When Sara finds a four-pence, she shares buns with a beggar girl whose life seems harder than hers.

Mr. Carrisford moves next door, recovering from an illness he contracted in India. When Sara returns his servant's runaway monkey, she learns Mr. Carrisford was her father's

partner. Ill when her father died, he's been looking for Sara. The diamond mine didn't fail. Sara is rich. This is a more coincidental ending than writers would use today, but Burnett employs a cardinal rule of writing for children: Sara's actions bring about her happy ending.



artwork courtesy of Robin Howard

In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, pirates abound for excitement, but it is fourteen-year-old Jim Hawkins who moves the story. A mysterious lodger at his father's Admiral Benbow Inn dies after receiving a hand-delivered death notice. Jim and his mother find a treasure map in his sea chest. Jim takes this to Dr. Livesey, a magistrate, and Squire Trelawney.

Trelawney buys the ship *Hispaniola* to seek the treasure, but he ends up hiring a crew of pirates hand-picked by Long John Silver. Captain Smollett is suspicious of this strange crew. As they near the island, Jim overhears Silver making plans to mutiny once they find the treasure. He immediately warns Trelawney and Livesey.

Silver takes part of the crew ashore, including, Jim. Jim runs away and meets up with a marooned pirate who knows where the treasure is. The doctor and squire

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manage to overcome the remaining crew aboard, fleeing to a stockade. Jim finds them and helps fight off the pirates. From then on, it is one encounter after another. Jim beaches the Hispaniola. Taken hostage by Silver, he manages to help Trelawney and Livesey. To the last, the outcome seems “iffy”, but at every turn, Jim saves the day and outwits Silver.

Character drives plot. In these two Victorian tales, we see how the characters’ personalities drive their actions and thus bring about the stories’ resolutions—the plots unfold as they do because of who the characters are. Like Sara and her foe Miss Minchin, Jim and Long John Silver still captivate readers today, and their stories still dazzle. Today’s writers can write stories that dazzle by analyzing the characters they’ve created: Are their personalities unique enough to drive an interesting plot? Do their actions evolve from who they are and inevitably lead to the plot’s resolution? By making sure they do, a story becomes not merely good, but one that shines.



[Elizabeth Varadan](#) has published her work in *Story Friends* and *LadyBug*. Her juvenile fantasy novel, *The Fourth Wish*, was self-published in September 2008. Her current MG mystery, set in Victorian London, is in submission by her agent.

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## An Interview with Robin Howard

Nathalie Mvondo

NM: Dear fellow SCBWI-creators, it’s my pleasure and honor to introduce Robin Howard, who won the 2013 Spring Spirit Logo Contest, and recently became the Illustrator Coordinator for our region.

Robin, thank you for the opportunity to chat with you and to get to know you better. I can’t help but ask: what made you fall in love with writing and illustrating for children. What were you first – a writer or an illustrator?

RH: Those are both hard questions to pinpoint answers for. I have always had a love affair with books which included untold hours in many different libraries since I was little. And I have always loved to dabble in different art and craft forms. I first felt the call to develop children’s stories when my own children were young. Then 20 years later, I took a Learning Exchange class from the fabulous Mira Reisberg and haven’t turned back since.



NM: Please, tell us about your background.

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RH: I started out as a business teacher in high school and junior college, moved into the accounting field, worked for several consulting firms, then went back to school for a Masters in Marriage & Family Therapy. I have been working the past 10 years for a non-profit providing therapy for underprivileged children and I am currently the director of a children's program that serves about 500 children per week. The power of story is very evident when working with children who have experienced trauma.

NM: What media do you use for your illustrations?

RH: Most of my illustrations so far have been in watercolor, but my passion is mixed media with collage. I simply adore texture and experimenting with all kinds of tools so I am working on a few ideas in that vein.



artwork courtesy of Robin Howard

NM: What age do you write for?

RH: So far I have written primarily for non-readers, the type of books that parents can cuddle up with their kiddos and enjoy. Now I am adventuring into a YA epic urban fantasy as well as a few non-fiction picture book ideas.

NM: What is your source of inspiration? And what comes first: the images, or the story?

RH: I really have been focusing on receiving inspiration from God. I am learning to be quiet so that I can receive ideas from the Creator since He is a master artist and story teller and I figure He can really help me develop my own creativity. On images vs. story first, it varies a lot. When a story starts to gel, the pictures pop in my mind just like reading any other story. If I start with an image I really relate to, then I can ask the character all kinds of questions to find out what journey they are on.

NM: Please, tell us what the experience was like when you won the Spring Spirit Logo Contest— what motivated you to enter the contest, and what were your thoughts throughout the process?

RH: That was a fabulous experience as I was able to meet and work with amazing folk through the process. I was motivated to enter after hearing Daniel San Souci speak in Oakland last fall at the SCBWI San Francisco North and East Bay Region Fall Conference. He recommended going back to memories of your childhood adventures and developing ideas from there. As I thought back to some of my fondest childhood experiences, many of them were spent making tents in the backyard. Shortly after that, the announcement came out for the contest and I really felt the urge to enter my piece. I am in an online illustration group where we have the ability to post work and receive critiques. Their input was so valuable in refining my art, just as critique groups help refine manuscripts.

NM: Has the logo contest impacted your writing/illustrating life in any way?

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RH: The first area it impacted was in building my confidence to develop a portfolio. Up to that point I did not think I had anything good enough and never even considered creating a portfolio. Since part of winning the contest was a portfolio critique, I had to get things in gear and create a body of work to represent what I could accomplish. Taking into consideration how much time I had until the Spring Spirit event, I created a work plan in order to finish enough pieces for my portfolio. Again, my illustration critique group helped a great deal in revising these pieces. The portfolio review I received from Laurent Linn then gave me fabulous direction on how to grow and improve my work. I know that I still have so much to learn and I am thoroughly enjoying the journey.

NM: Your closing message in the recent September / October issue of the ACORN whetted our appetite regarding possible events for 2013/2014. What is your vision for our region? What are your goals?

RH: My vision is to encourage growth in both personal and professional arenas. I would love to have more free or low cost events that would bring the illustrator community together. There is such a wealth of information, experience and talent in our community that could benefit us all. I'd love to receive input on what types of events you would like to see and what would be of most benefit to you.

NM: Is there anything you'd like to share regarding your current writing/illustrating projects?

RH: I have been focusing on adding more whimsy to my work and experimenting with different materials. I am also a member of Inspire Christian Writers, which includes

those who write for all age groups. I recently had a short story accepted into an anthology for adults called *Inspire Victory*, which will be coming out next summer. Woohoo!

NM: Last but not least, if you could hang out with a writer or illustrator of any century for a day, who would that be?

RH: R.G. Howard would love to have breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses, lunch, afternoon tea and the rest of the day with J.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Their ability to create worlds that draw you in and enable you to see an IMAX-sized adventure in your mind has always amazed me.

NM: Thank you so much for your time, Robin, and for the energy you put into connecting our writers and illustrators. I look forward to the upcoming events, and to good news regarding your projects.



artwork courtesy of Robin Howard

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## Digital Mentorship Program Round-Up: Meet the Mentees

The excitement continues for our Digital Mentor Program for novelists, as mentors and mentees were matched up earlier in October. We contacted our mentees and asked them either what they hoped to learn over the course of the program or, if they were having dinner with their mentor, what's the first question they would ask? Responses below!

[Connie Goldsmith](#), from California  
North/Central

Mentor: Carol Lynch Williams

I hope to learn to make my characters more real and likeable in spite of their flaws, and to streamline the plot and pace.

[Suzanne Morrone](#), from San Francisco  
South

Mentor: Amy Goldman Koss

I hit a wall with my novel, getting lots of positive responses from editors and agents but still getting No Thanks! So I hope to learn how to take my novel to the next level. How can I dig in and really revise until I get a Yes!

[Sarah Scheerger](#), from California  
North/Central

Mentor: Suzanne Young

I want to learn to fine tune a manuscript, how to make it more marketable, and get a better understanding of both what works and what doesn't work.

[Leza Lowitz](#), from Japan

Mentor: Amy Goldman Koss

I want to learn how to hook the reader and make them care about my characters.

[Jeri Chase Ferris](#), from California  
North/Central

Mentor: Kate Messner

In the DMP I hope to learn how the big boys (and girls) of fiction do it. I must learn how to develop a fully-rounded, likeable, flawed but endearing, brave, heart-warming character. I absolutely have to learn to create a story an agent/editor cannot resist and the reader cannot put down.

[Colleen Sakurai](#), from Japan

Mentor: Donna Gephart

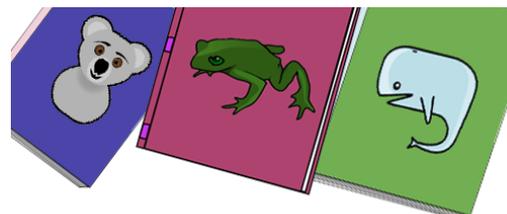
Given the opportunity to have dinner with my mentor, my first question would be; "Who's picking up the tab?" Followed closely by; "What is your most important goal as mentor?"

[Beth Hull](#), from California North/Central

Mentor: Holly Thompson

I hope to learn how to make my verse novel into poetry, and not just prose with funny line breaks. I also want to learn some techniques for making the motivations of my characters feel more real and matter more.

**And—don't feel left out, picture book writers! Our region is offering the Digital Mentor Program for picture books as well! Registration opens December 1<sup>st</sup>!**



## Picture Book Digital Mentorship Program

for authors and author-illustrators

registration opens 12/1/13



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## About ACORN

ACORN is the newsletter for the California North/Central region of the SCBWI.

- ACORN is published online and is free to members of SCBWI.
- The editors and regional advisor reserve the right to make decisions about content and to edit submissions.
- No payment is made for articles or illustrations, but contributing authors and illustrators are entered in a drawing for half-price registration for our Spring Spirit conference.
- Each contributing author and illustrator retains the rights to his or her work.
- News about book releases and signings may be passed along.
- No article or piece of art may be reprinted in any form without the express written consent of the person who created it.
- We love you and welcome your comments, feedback, and questions! You may [contact the editors](#).

## Submission Guidelines

Do you have an idea for an article? Have you recently attended a conference or workshop? Do you have a piece of art you'd like to share? [Send it to us!](#)

Please keep articles between 300 and 500 words, and include a short biography (including website, if you have one), and an author photo.

Illustrators, please send your artwork as .jpg files no bigger than 1000 dpi in either direction, and send your website address as well!

**Deadline for next issue: December 15<sup>th</sup>!**

Tweet Tweet! Do you have some good news, a favorite writing quote, a book signing, or some other tidbit of information or advice that would be relevant to our region's followers? Email your tweet, in 140 characters or less, to [Bitsy Kemper](#), our Twitter Diva! If your tweet is time-sensitive, please give her at least 24 hours' notice.

## Good News!

- [Lori Mortensen](#)'s *Cowpoke Clyde & Dirty Dawg* was released in May 2013 with Clarion. It is now in its third printing and was [recently reviewed by The New York Times](#).

Since its success, Lori's editor has asked for a sequel, and she also recently signed a contract with Henry Holt for her rhyming picture book *Chicken Lily* due out in 2015.

- [Judy Slack](#) signed copies of *Crunching Carrots, Not Candy* and *Willy and the Winchester Motorcycle* at the "Great Valley Bookfest" on Saturday, Oct. 19th. She will also be at the Book Barn in Clovis (640 Clovis Avenue) for the Picture Book Festival, 12- 4pm on Saturday, Nov. 16<sup>th</sup>.
- [Erin Dealey](#) will sign copies of *Deck the Walls* (Sleeping Bear Press/ 2013) at a holiday family fun and book signing on Nov. 12 @ 10:00 am at Learning Express (on Douglas, in Roseville) and on Nov. 13 @ 11:00 am at the Westfield Galleria (Roseville).

Do you have good news to share with our region? Let us know! Please format your good news as you see it here, and [email it to the ACORN editors](#)!

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## A Message from Your Regional Team

### Life on Paper

Nancy Barnet

Although I received a few as gifts during my formative writing years, I never kept a personal diary, the “Dear Diary” type of book with its tiny lock and key that in no way keeps your younger/older sister/brother from breaking through the token security to harvest potential blackmail material.

Inspired after reading *Harriet the Spy* in the fourth grade, I kept a small black notebook in which I recorded observations of my world and circle of friends. This journaling lasted a couple of months before I began to worry that if my little spiral-bound notebook fell into the wrong hands (i.e. anyone’s but my own) I’d likely have no friends to observe. I sometimes wish I’d kept that notebook. Grown-up Me would love to read what Nine-Year-Old Me considered worthy of tossing into the family fireplace.

Dear Diaries and Little Black Notebooks aside, I *have* been an avid keeper of calendars and personal planners since my late teens. I have a shelf in my office with decades of wire- and ring-bound planners, all of them filled with evidence of life. There are passings of loved ones noted in a shaky hand and births of others with hearts and happy faces. A child’s first piano recital, trips to the emergency room, family vacations and school schedules. Assignment deadlines marked in red, a call from an editor about a book illustration contract in big letters with an exclamation mark. There are reminders to put gas in the car, return library books and make grocery lists.

My ring-bound planner sits open on my desk every day, collecting the bits and pieces of life moving forward. New pages for 2014 wait to be filled up, a few penciled-in notes in January looking, now, like bare tree branches against a blanket of snow. That will change as plans and possibilities become real—among the reminders to trim the cat’s claws and put the garbage out—and each page will become as dear to me as those in a diary with lock and key.



### The California North/Central Team

#### Regional Advisor

Patricia Newman

#### Assistant Regional Advisor

Catherine Meyer

#### Illustrator Coordinator

Robin Howard

#### Spring Spirit Conference Coordinator

Connie Goldsmith

#### Critique Group Coordinator:

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#### Membership Coordinator

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