

# Calling children's authors

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The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) has been active since 1971. The headquarters are in Los Angeles, United States of America (USA). There are currently more than 18 000 members worldwide, in over 70 regions, making it the largest children's writing organisation in the world.

SCBWI is the only international organisation to offer a variety of services to people who write, illustrate, or share a vital interest in children's literature. It acts as a network for the exchange of knowledge between writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, agents, librarians, educators, booksellers and others involved with literature for young people; sponsors two annual international conferences on writing and illustrating for children as well as dozens of regional conferences and events throughout the world.

It also publishes a bi-monthly newsletter, awards, grants for works in progress, and provides many informational publications on the art and business of writing and selling written, illustrated, and electronic material.

The SCBWI presents the annual Golden Kite Award for the best fiction and non-fiction books. One of the primary ways that SCBWI provides its members with information about the children's book market is by publishing various newsletters, brochures, articles, and guides on a wide range of topics. These publications are regularly updated.

## Membership

Full membership is available to those whose work for children (books, illustrations or photographs, films, electronic media available for purchase, articles, poems or stories) has been published or produced. Fees are US\$75 for the first year and US\$60 each renewing year.

Associate membership is available to those with an interest in children's literature or media, whether or not they have been published or produced. Writers or illustrators who have been published in markets other than children's literature would be considered Associate Members. Fees are US\$75 for the first year and US\$60 each renewing year.

Membership entails that you will receive all the newsletters, brochures, articles, and guides on a wide range of topics regularly and become eligible for the grants and SCBWI awards. You also automatically become a member of the local chapter and will be informed by the regional adviser of all upcoming events like:

- ~ *regular critique groups* - where you could read or show your work and get feedback from other writers and illustrators
- ~ *shop talk groups* - discussions about what is happening in the publishing world
- ~ *talk groups* - interesting speakers are invited
- ~ *workshops* - to help writers/illustrators develop in their work
- ~ *schmoozes / gatherings* - fun meetings where writers and illustrators get to know each other and discuss their work
- ~ *mentorship programme* - inexperienced writers receive guidance from experienced writers



~ *retreats* - writers / illustrators attend weekend workshops and critique discussions.

## South African branch

To put the objectives and strategies of the South African branch of the SCBWI in perspective, herewith some background:

The life of a children's book writer and illustrator in Africa is a fascinating one. This continent, and specifically the 'new' South Africa has to focus so strongly on education and basic literacy that writers and illustrators can very easily become submerged in producing 'strictly educational' material, virtually on an assembly line basis.

With a relatively small pool of professional writers and illustrators of children's books, the same people very often work in the fields of educational publications and trade books, although relatively few of the latter are published these days. With the aim of having educational publications prescribed at schools and working within the strictly-regulated parameters of curricula, and very often with virtually impossible deadlines, there is the distinct danger that a writer/illustrator may lose the magic of purely creating work to be read for love and pleasure. Keep in mind that talented writers and illustrators in our part of the world do not create educational material only for the money (it really is not terribly much), but also to try and contribute to what our president poetically has called, The African Renaissance, of which education and basic literacy are keystones.

As I try to formulate this dilemma succinctly, I realise that these statements can open up a debate which could last for many

hours and which may even then not result in a complete understanding between colleagues working in the first and in the third worlds.

Nevertheless, let me briefly share a personal experience with you: Some years ago I found myself illustrating one schoolbook after the other. Month after month I worked 'wearing' a straightjacket of educational guidelines and curricula, constantly being 'guided' by educationists and administrators, even for art briefs (!). The results were quite good, the books were accepted and prescribed, but somewhere inside of me the child who needed fantasy, fairies and dragons was being starved.

Then I had a lucky break. I won a scholarship to attend the Highlights Foundation Writers' workshop at Chautauqua, USA. Some kind fairy decided that Ed Young should be my mentor for a week. I had long been an admirer of his work and I could not believe my luck. My sessions with him ended up being mostly discussions about the philosophy of writing and illustrating for young children, rather than actually evaluating my work. Under his guidance I had a complete mind change as to how I looked at the work I do, whether within the strict parameters of school readers or with the freedom of creativity in my own picture books. It put all the joy back into the career I had chosen for myself, or maybe the career that chose me. I brought away a certain insight and perspective I would like to share with my colleagues and, if possible, I would also like to create similar mind changing opportunities for those who could benefit from it.

My personal experience aside, let's look at the South African branch of the SCBWI.

The South African branch is very young - we had our first meeting last October. Together with my colleagues we have decided, rather ambitiously, that the initial emphasis of our activities should be:

- ~ to create opportunities for members to learn and become informed about the industry we work in, locally and internationally
- ~ to provide opportunities for members to communicate regularly with their peers, to compare notes and not only to

work in creative isolation. To share with and to learn from each other. In a sense, to create a community of children's book writers and illustrators

- ~ to stress and strategise with members around the importance of managing the workload in order to set aside time and energy specifically to pursue creative stimulations and to develop creativity and personal development
- ~ to provide opportunities for members to compare notes about career planning and management (also to create a balance between educational and freely creative work (trade books))
- ~ to provide opportunities for members to make contact and to interact with established and successful children's book writers and illustrators, local and foreign.

With these objectives in mind, the following is planned:

- ☛ *Bi-monthly critique sessions* - the first one was held after a St Valentine's Day get-together in February. The objective is to prepare work for the review sessions in September
- ☛ *Regular teas* - a number of informal gatherings ('teas') will be held during the year. These could be in the form of a picnic, a dress-up party, a bring-your-favourite-book event, a story-telling evening, et cetera. The idea is that writers and illustrators who live near each other form a group and start meeting regularly
- ☛ *Bi-monthly open studio day* - every second month (since March), Marjorie will hold an open day at her house at 153 Beach Road, Gordon's Bay (10:00 to 15:00 on the 15th of every second month). Anyone can view books (Marjorie has a very extensive children's book collection) or chat about their work, or just enjoy a cup of tea and chat about children's books in general
- ☛ *Week-end retreats (April)* - at the time of writing it was still in the planning stage... A stay for members at a resort-farm in the mountains of the Cape, including a creativity workshop and specific writer's and illustrators workshops on selected

subjects (some with guest speakers). Also a planning workshop to further develop work for the review sessions in September

- ☛ *Open house (June)* - initially once a year, in June, different local writers/illustrators will take turns to receive members in their home or studio and give an extensive talk and presentation on their work. The idea is to develop this into quite an event and in future it may happen more regularly
- ☛ *Critique meeting (August)* - for those members who have booked for the September reviews, to finalise in detail their manuscripts for submission and illustration portfolios for presentation
- ☛ *Review sessions (September)* - our branch is organising a series of one-on-one review sessions for our members, with editors and art directors of local and international publishing companies. These are planned for 2-4 September in Cape Town, prior to the IBBY World Congress scheduled to take place on 5-9 September in the same city (for more information on the IBBY Congress, see [www.sacbf.org.za](http://www.sacbf.org.za)). Our members will also have the opportunity to submit original illustration work for an exhibition our branch is organising for the period 2-9 September, to coincide with the review sessions and the congress
- ☛ *Year-end party* - the idea is that this will be a typical 'schmooze', held in early December (almost mid-summer where we come from). Members will also be invited to come and display all the books they had managed to get published during 2004.

Hope to see you at our events. For information e-mail Marjorie van Heerden, <[marjorie-van-heerden@ananzi.co.za](mailto:marjorie-van-heerden@ananzi.co.za)> or visit the web site [www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org).

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