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## Q & A with Tammi Sauer

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jun 28, 2021

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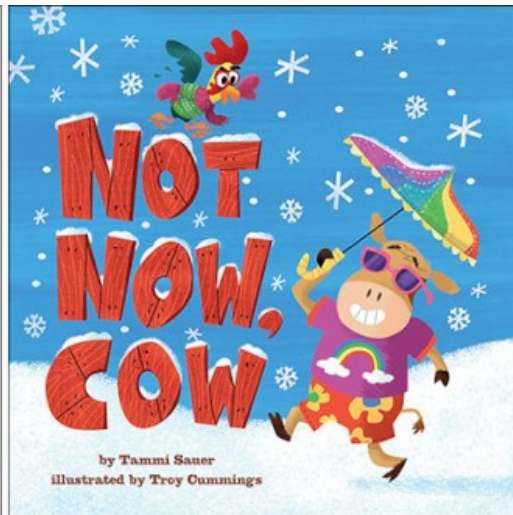
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Tammi Sauer is the prolific author of both sweet and silly picture books, including *Cowboy Camp*, *Mostly Monsterly*, *Mary Had a Little Glam*, *Chicken Dance*, and her latest, *Not Now, Cow*. She has also been known to wear other hats, including school library media specialist, preschool teacher, mother, and popular school speaker. PW spoke with Sauer about the influence that her library and classroom experience has had on her writing, the publication of her 30th picture book, and how she cannot wait to head back to school to celebrate reading and writing with young readers.

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what she was doing.

### I understand from your bio that you initially wanted to be a third grade teacher. How did you make the switch to school library media specialist?

I was fortunate that after completing my undergraduate degree in elementary education from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kans., I got a job opportunity to work as a school library media specialist while earning my library sciences certification (from Emporia State University in Emporia, Kans.) at the same time. While I was doing my student teaching, I got to know the school library media specialist, Kay Weigel, at Ogden Elementary in Ogden, Kans., spending time before and after school learning about the internet—it was all so new back then!—paying attention to her book selection process, and watching the ways in which she engaged with her students. And I fell in love with



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When my student teaching cooperating teacher at Ogden Elementary became the principal at Riley County Elementary School, she was in need of a school library media specialist, and thought that I would be a good fit. I was open to becoming either a teacher or a school library media specialist, but when I was offered the opportunity to be in the school library, my heart started pounding, and I knew this was the position for me.

### What sorts of things did you do as a SLMS?

I soon found out I was going to be more than a SLMS at this pre-K to eighth grade school. At the interview, they said, "Oh! By the way, you'll also be a seventh grade homeroom teacher. Oh! And you'll be teaching middle school electives." The position ended up being such a good fit for me. Not only did I enjoy working with the various grade levels, but I also completely fell in love with picture books. Plus, there's truly nothing like working in the school library with the connections you can make with kids and teachers.

### How did you spend your time working with teachers and kids?

For my teachers, I would put a note in their mailboxes each month to inquire about the themes, topics, and activities they were planning to cover. Then I'd gather books and other resources for them, and I would try to tie what I was doing in the library with what they were doing in the classroom.

For my students, I worked very hard to ensure that the library was a welcoming space for all of them—especially those children who had some struggles and needed opportunities to escape the demands of the regular classroom at times.

I continuously asked students what interested them. I even created a place in the library where students took turns designing displays about their particular interests. One student, for example, regularly participated in rodeos. He brought in his big belt buckles, photos, trophies, and a rope. In addition to having his things on display, I invited him to speak to some classes about his experience with rodeos, and he did an amazing job. Providing kids with opportunities like this gave them valuable experience in presenting in front of others in a way that was low on stress and high on fun.

### How did you transition from teaching with children's books to writing them?

The seeds were actually planted in my senior year of college. I had a language arts professor, Dr. Marjorie Hancock, who noticed that I had a gift for writing—especially writing for kids. One day after class, she pulled me aside, and said, "Tammi, you should pursue publication." Knowing she believed in me helped me to believe in myself. I later thanked her the best way I knew how. I named a chicken after her in my book *Chicken Dance*.

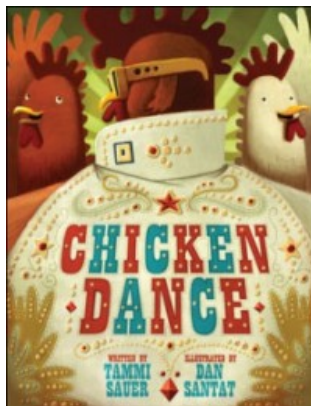
Then, when I was working as a SLMS, we would have storytellers and authors visit our schools. And, when I had a chance, I would ask them if they had any advice about writing children's books. One suggested that I check out the *Children's Writers and Illustrators Market* guide, and I did. I also started dabbling in writing in my free time while I was a SLMS, when I taught pre-K, and then when I stayed home to raise my children.

But, I didn't make a commitment to writing books for children until my daughter, Julia, was in pre-K, and an illustrator visited her school. Just seeing someone who actually created books for kids got my heart racing, again! From this point on, I used my kids' naptime to figure out how to be a children's author. I spent most of that time devouring and analyzing children's books, and trying to write my own. On top of working with kids, there's really nothing that I have loved more than coming up with picture books that resonate with them.



### How did you get your first picture book published?

Once I got serious, I researched, practiced, and worked on writing stories for kids. I started sending them out, and I started to collect rejection letters. Some of those rejections were form rejections, the others I called my nice rejections. The nice letters said things like: "I liked this story, please send more," or



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An illustration by Dan Santat from *Chicken Dance*.

asked for a revision. I put the nice ones in a binder and looked at them when I was feeling low to give myself a little boost. That binder of letters made me feel hopeful that I was getting close.

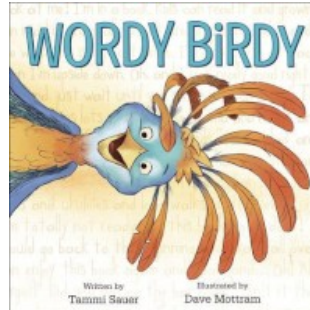
I eventually wrote a manuscript called *Cowboy Camp* that I thought had potential. This manuscript went to acquisitions meetings at three publishing houses but ended up getting three nos. Then, I sent it to a publishing house that was new at doing picture books, Sterling Publishing, and they gave me a yes!

The book came out very quickly. I had sent it to Sterling in 2003, and it was published in less than two years. And, 16 years later, the book is still doing well and connecting with readers. In fact, I just received a letter from a school librarian who had a reader who loved the story so much that he was writing down all of the words and drawing his own pictures so he could have the book at home over the summer.

**How do you think your experience in the library and the classroom has influenced your writing and allowed you to connect with readers?**

To start, I've always tried to be super approachable with kids, to bring a lot of energy to my teaching, and to share my love of books whether it is in the library, classroom, home, or at an author visit. And I try to do those things in my books, too!

Plus, my time in the library and the classroom gave me the opportunity to share countless books with kids *and* to really get to know my audience. The rhythm, structure, voice, and energy of those books stuck with me as I went on to create books of my own. I wouldn't be nearly as good a writer if I hadn't been in the library and the classroom.



**How has being a parent informed your children's books?**

When my son, Mason, was little, he was very picky about the books that he liked. With every book we read, he'd either give it two thumbs up, or say, "Wow, that's a dud!"

Even after all these years, I still have Mason's words in my head because I never want some kid to say, "Well, that's a dud" about one of my books! Mason always gravitated towards funny books. And it turns out they are my favorite books to write. Thanks, Mason!



**How has your SLMS and teaching experience helped you as a presenter?**

Being a SLMS and teacher has helped me immensely with writing for *and* presenting to kids. Both have taught me what works in terms of the length of a program to suit my audience's attention span, as well as incorporating the importance of audience participation, energy, and humor into my presentations.

I also love that being an author gets me back into the schools and lets me talk about what I'm most passionate about: reading and writing. I especially love getting the students fired up about these things, too, seeing them light up, and hearing them say, "There's TAMMISAUER!"—usually it's all one word when they see me in the hallways.

**With 30 picture books under your belt, and more on the way, can you tell us what your sweet spots are in terms of picture book readers? You've recently gone younger, right?**

Most of my picture books are geared toward the four to eight-year-old crowd, but some of them have been written especially for the very young picture book audience. These include *Truck Truck Goose*, *Go Fish*, *Not, Now, Cow*, and the soon-to-be-released *One Sheep, Two Sheep*. These books are easy to memorize and give kids who are just about ready to read the excitement of feeling like a real deal reader.

**Can you tell us about your newest title, and those on the horizon?**

- 1 Dog Man: Mothering Heights: From the Creator of Captain Underpants (Dog Man #10), Volume 10**  
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator
- 2 Gods & Monsters**  
Shelby Mahurin, Author
- 3 Midnight Sun**  
Stephenie Meyer, Author
- 4 A Good Girl's Guide to Murder**  
Holly Jackson, Author
- 5 The Inheritance Games**  
Jennifer Lynn Barnes, Author



*Not Now, Cow*, illustrated by Troy Cummings, involves one cow, four seasons, and a whole lot of silliness. It's so much fun to share as a read aloud. It has a great refrain that kids can join in with:—"Oh, Cow. Not now!"

Troy and I also have a companion book to *Not Now, Cow*, called *One Sheep, Two Sheep*, coming in October 2021. It stars the same cast of characters, but it's about ties in the concept of counting. It starts with the rooster who is trying to fall asleep by counting sheep. Then, much to his dismay, the rest of the barnyard animals want to get involved, too.

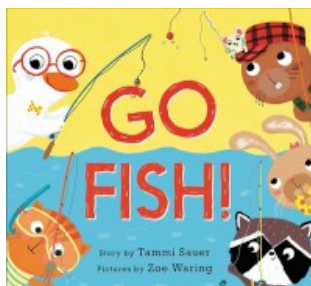
Another is *Lovebird Lou*, which is illustrated by Stephanie Laberis and debuts in December. It's about a lovebird that is trying to find his place in the world. Right after that, in January, I have a book with Ross Burach called *No Bunnies Here!*, and it is a book that is *filled* with bunnies.

### What are your greatest hopes and desired takeaways for your readers of your picture books?

One of my goals as a writer is to create books with humor and heart. I want kids to be delighted by my books, and to feel something when they read them. I also hope that my books help foster a lifelong love of reading, and that after reading a book of mine, readers are eager to reach for the next book. And the next!

### How have you pivoted your in-person visits to virtual visits during the pandemic?

Because of the pandemic, I have not been able to do any in-person visits since early March 2020. It's been hard not being in schools all this time. Once the 2020–2021 school year began, I felt as if I had lost a small part of my identity since so much of my time had previously been spent traveling to and presenting at schools.



I had been asked to do virtual visits prior to the pandemic, but I had always passed. I didn't think a virtual visit could compare to the fun, energy, and conversations that can be found in an in-person visit. Since in-person visits were not an option, I took a webinar on how to create and give virtual visits. And I discovered that I *love* doing them!

Even though I don't hear or often even see the students I'm virtually presenting to, I go into each program as if I am speaking to the most engaged kid in the world. I still include lots of audience participation and strive to make my presentations both entertaining and educational. The feedback that I've received from teachers and librarians has been great.

### Do you have any advice for teachers/librarians who might fancy writing for young people?

The best way for anyone to get good at writing picture books is to read—and *analyze!*—hundreds of picture books. In addition, teachers and librarians are in a position to see which books really resonate with kids. Plus, there's no denying that teachers and librarians are surrounded by so much material! Kids are always saying and doing the best/silliest/most heartfelt things. So, write it down! Another tip for teachers and librarians who are interested in writing books is to join the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators. The SCBWI provides its members with valuable information as well as offers a warm, welcoming community of book creators who share a passion for making great books for kids.

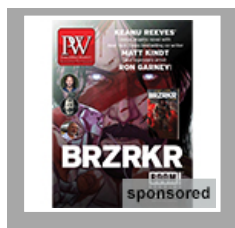
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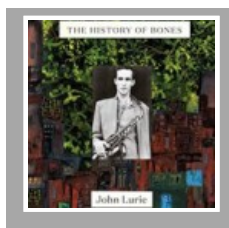
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**Kathy Ansberry D'Aquila**

Hi Tammi, Wow! Your experiences as a teacher and SLMS really resonated with me. I have taught pre-K - 3rd grade and have always sought out the MS for books on my themes to start my lessons. I've attended your presentations at a SCBWI conference in Cleveland a few years back. You are so energetic/fun as a presenter and I see why kids love your school visits. Good luck with your new books coming out. Don't forget to add "supermodel" to your bio! Kathy D'Aquila

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