



SELF-PUBLISHING [booklife](#)

JOBZONE

SUBSCRIBE: PRINT + DIGITAL LOGIN SITE LICENSE ACCESS

Search Publishers Weekly

FREE NEWSLETTERS

[f](#) [t](#) [i](#) [in](#)

- [Home](#) | [NEWS](#) | [REVIEWS](#) | [BESTSELLERS](#) | [CHILDREN'S](#) | [AUTHORS](#) | [ANNOUNCEMENTS](#) | [DIGITAL](#)
- [Authors](#) | [Book News](#) | [Industry News](#)

Home > Children's > Authors

Senior Editor - Houghton Mifflin Harcourt - New York, NY.

NEXT JOB ▶

Q & A with Christina Soontornvat

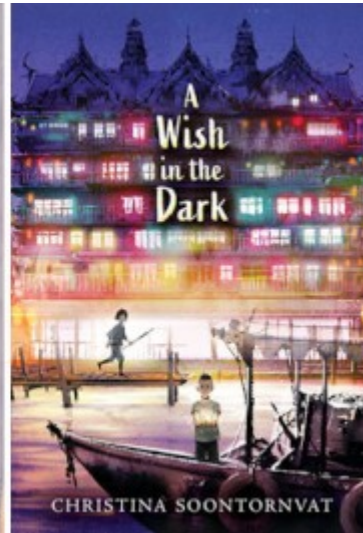
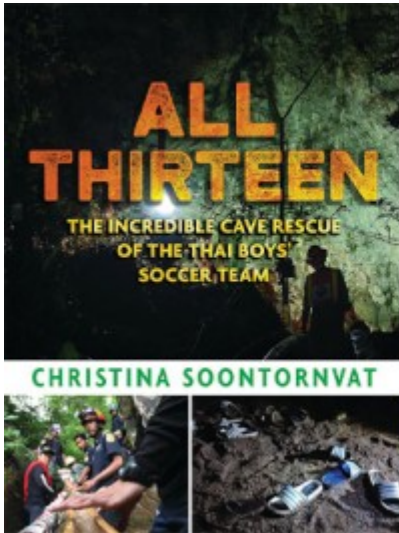
By Patricia J. Murphy | Jan 25, 2021

Like 10

Share

Tweet

Comments



Author Christina Soontornvat has worn many hats over the years—mechanical engineer, STEM educator, middle grade author, and now nonfiction and picture book author. Her growing list of children's books crosses genres,

age levels, and topics that range from light and airy, to heavy and hard-hitting. Two of her latest titles, both of which were named 2021 Newbery Honor Books: *A Wish in the Dark*, a middle grade fantasy twist on *Les Misérables*, and *All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boy's Soccer Team* (also a Sibert Honor book), are set in her ancestral homeland of Thailand. She is also the author of the *Diary of an Ice Princess* chapter book series, and a new picture book entitled *The Ramble Shamble Children*, illustrated by Caldecott Honor artist Lauren Castillo. Soontornvat spoke with PW about how her many passions and roles allow her to create books that explore scientific and culturally diverse themes, which she hopes will open hearts and minds.

RELATED STORIES:

Can you tell us about your experience as a mechanical engineer and STEM educator?

- [More in Children's -> Authors](#)

- More in Authors -> Interviews

Want to reprint? Get permissions.

FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

Enter e-mail address

PW Daily Tip Sheet

SUBSCRIBE

More Newsletters

I feel like my engineering background comes up all of the time. For instance, as a STEM educator, I have used what I've learned as an engineer to get kids excited about STEM, and to show them how it is applied in real life.

And, when you are an engineer, the thing you are taught to do—your training—is to be a problem solver. I feel that much of what I am doing as a writer is solving problems. With each book, I have a number of constraints including the number of pages, the age level I am writing for, and what I want to get across. And I have to figure these things out to tell the best story. Sometimes, I feel like writing a novel is like solving an engineering problem!

How and why did you first choose to be a mechanical engineer, and then transition to become a STEM educator?

I went into engineering because I love math and science. It felt like a natural path for me. There was also a practical reason. My parents had worked so hard all my life to save up for my education, running their own grocery store and a Thai restaurant. Majoring in the sciences felt like the best way to make the most of their investment.

But once I was out in the real world and I started practicing mechanical engineering, I felt like something was missing. So I shifted paths and began working in a science museum. I was still doing math and science; but instead, I was working to get kids and families excited about these subjects. It was a perfect fit for me because I also always loved working with kids.

After working at the science museum, I worked as a consultant for an indoor skydiving company creating field trip programs to bring kids in, and to teach kids about the science behind skydiving. It's chockful of physics and math! I was able to travel all around the country teaching kids about physics and math, and to spend a lot of time in a wind tunnel, and go indoor skydiving!

So, how did you ultimately dive into writing?

For most of my life, I had this idea that I was a science person—not an artist. And, of course, those two things are not mutually exclusive at all. Many people who work in the sciences are very creative, and people who work in the arts are very technically talented. I had to learn my own lesson that I teach to kids: “You don't have to choose—you can do lots of different things and use lots of different types of skills!”

We put ourselves into boxes—especially if we are good at something. The people around you can push you in that direction. And that's great. But where you get into trouble is when you start to exclude possibilities for yourself. I had excluded the possibility of being an author. I didn't think that it was in the cards for me.

However, as a kid, I always enjoyed making up stories. And my job at the science museum was to tell stories about science content. For example, I'd be writing content for a dinosaur exhibit, but it would be through telling a story because that is how you teach and connect people. So when I decided I wanted to try writing children's books, it felt like a leap, but not too impossible.

How did you actually take the leap?

When I began writing my own stories, I loved it right away. The more I wrote, the more I fell in love with writing. Then, when I had my own children, my world was filled with picture books and all kinds of children's books. And I was remembering all of the books that I had loved as a kid. So it just really felt right. I also felt that I could do good work and make a positive difference. Like I tell kids when they ask for career advice, “Do what makes you happy and where you can make a change. That is ultimately the most rewarding.”



How did you choose to write across genres? Or did they choose you?



Sometimes stories do choose you. I've learned that when an opportunity comes along, even if you feel nervous or maybe even a little bit unqualified, or unprepared to tackle it, if you feel passionate about it, just jump on it and figure it out later. That's what I did when the opportunity came along for the *Diary of an Ice Princess* books. Scholastic asked me to write that, and I had never done chapter books before, but I had kids that were that age. I thought it would be so sweet to write a book that my kids could read for themselves, and that could have diverse characters, so I jumped on it.

And then when the Thai cave rescue happened, I knew that I wanted to tell this story, to try to tell it from the Thai perspective as much as possible, and to let people know about Thailand. Then again, I had to jump in, put together a proposal, and go for it. I think that my background, having very varied experiences, has equipped me to feel confident doing lot of different things. I've never been a writer who writes one type of thing. And I've never been a person who just does one thing or has one career. When I was younger, I felt this was a weakness. But now I feel it's a strength because I can do lots of things and pursue many interests.

If you had to pick, is there one genre that is closest to your heart—as a reader and a writer?

As a child, middle grade fantasy books were probably the books that hooked me as a reader. I read every one that I could get my hands on. So middle grade fantasy novels were the first two published books that I wrote, and I think that out of everything that I write that's where my heart goes when I am thinking about doing something new. There's just something so special about a magical story where you can talk about the real world by talking about a fantasy world. You can say things that are important about the world we live in now in, through fantasy, in a way that is special and different from a contemporary novel.

Can you talk about the importance of weaving your life experiences and family background into your stories, and your views about representation of diverse cultures in your work—and the industry at large?

I feel like everything I write about comes from my experiences, and my family. Growing up I had books around me—my mother made sure of it. And my family is filled with great storytellers. My dad was a natural storyteller about how he grew up in Thailand, and how he came to America. The same is true with my mother. From a young age I learned that there were stories everywhere—and that everyone had something interesting about them, and fascinating stories to tell even if you didn't think of them as authors.

As far as weaving my background and experiences into my stories, as a writer, it would be hard for me to do anything else because they are part of me, and part of the stories that I want to tell. And I do this with a realization that there aren't a lot of stories like mine out there. There are also not enough books written by Thai American authors and other people from marginalized backgrounds. But that is changing—and that's wonderful.

There is now a growing appetite for stories with all sorts of characters in them that there never was when I was a kid. I think that it's recognition of who our children are today. Our children are all sorts of readers, and they deserve books that reflect them and the people they are surrounded by. And that's how they are going to be equipped to go out in the world: to read stories about many, many different types of people *by* many, many different types of people. They also happen to be great stories.

If you truly want to be reading the most interesting, exciting, inspiring stories, you need to read diversely, or you're going to miss out.

It is obvious from your career choices that STEM is important to you. Can you elaborate on why STEM and STEM education matter to you, and why they should matter to all of us?

Whatever you do, if you can understand, appreciate, and be fluent in science (and STEM), that is so important. It's going to help you personally—to have a more sustainable career, to make good decisions, and to be more financially stable.

These are also the skills we really need as a society, as humanity, for all of the problems we are facing. Our biggest problem as a species right now is probably climate change. We need everybody to be fluent in science to help tackle it—not just the scientists who are researching it, and/or the engineers who are designing solutions for it. Average citizens need to be able to take in scientific information and feel comfortable with it, know how to tell what is true and not true.

It's the same thing with the pandemic, with the vaccine, and the scientific information about preventing the spread. We are seeing very clearly in real time what the consequences are when people are not scientifically literate.

I think one way we can do this is by getting kids excited about STEM, showing that it is really fun and interesting, that it's not just something they read in a book. It is everywhere—and part of everything!

Can you talk a little about your upcoming picture books?

The Ramble Shamble Children is coming out this March with Nancy Paulsen Books at Penguin. It's a magical story about a family of kids that make a home together. I also have another picture book, *To Change a Planet*, illustrated by Rahele Jomepour Bell, out next year with Scholastic. It's a nonfiction book that discusses climate change with hope, and offers practical tips on how we can act on it.

Do you have any advice for teachers and/or librarians hoping to find writing magic?

I think they're the best equipped to do it. They probably are reading all of the time—and in different age groups. They are also always around kids, listening to their conversations, and knowing what matters to them. And they know that the best children's books don't try to teach kids anything. They just encourage kids to do what they already know is right, and to give them hope, too. It's all about hope.



ALSO ON PW

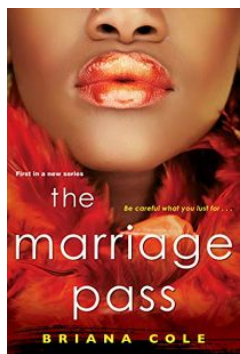


PW's Person of the Year 2020



Check Out Our Podcasts! more...

FEATURED REVIEWS



THE MARRIAGE PASS

Briana Cole. *Dafina*, \$15.95 Trade paper (320p) ISBN 978-1-4967-2955-2

◀ PREVIOUS

NEXT ▶

MOST POPULAR

- **Best Books 2020**
- **Clint Smith's Nonfiction Debut Reckons with History**
- **Keller, Goade, Nayeri Win Newbery, Caldecott, Printz Awards**
- **NBCC Awards Finalists Announced**
- **Book Deals: Week of January 25, 2021**
- **The 10 Best Emily Dickinson Poems**
- **Audible Makes Improvements to ACX Terms**
- **The 10 Best Haruki Murakami Books**
- **Bracing for Another E-book Price-Fixing Case**
- **Obituary: Kathleen Krull**
- **Walter Dean Myers Awards Announced**

BESTSELLERS

View by genre:

Children's Frontlist Fiction ▼

more

- 1 Cat Kid Comic Club: From the Creator of Dog Man**
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator
- 2 Concrete Rose**
Angie Thomas, Author
- 3 Diary of a Wimpy Kid Book 15**
Jeff Kinney, Author
- 4 Dog Man: Grime and Punishment: From the Creator of Captain Underpants (Dog Man #9), Volume 9**
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator
- 5 Midnight Sun**
Stephenie Meyer, Author

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Submission Guidelines](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Do Not Sell](#) | [Calls for Info](#) | [Editorial Calendar](#) | [Archives](#) | [Press](#) | [FAQ](#)

© PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

