



SELF-PUB **booklife**

JOBZONE

THE MILLIONS

SUBSCRIBE: PRINT + DIGITAL

LOGIN

SITE LICENSE ACCESS

FREE NEWSLETTERS

Search Publishers Weekly



NEWS

REVIEWS

BESTSELLERS

CHILDREN'S

AUTHORS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

DIGITAL

Authors | Book News | Industry News

Home > Children's > Authors

BookLife Freelance Reviewers - Publishers Weekly.

NEXT JOB ▶

Q & A with Elaine Vickers

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 25, 2023

Like 1

Share

Tweet



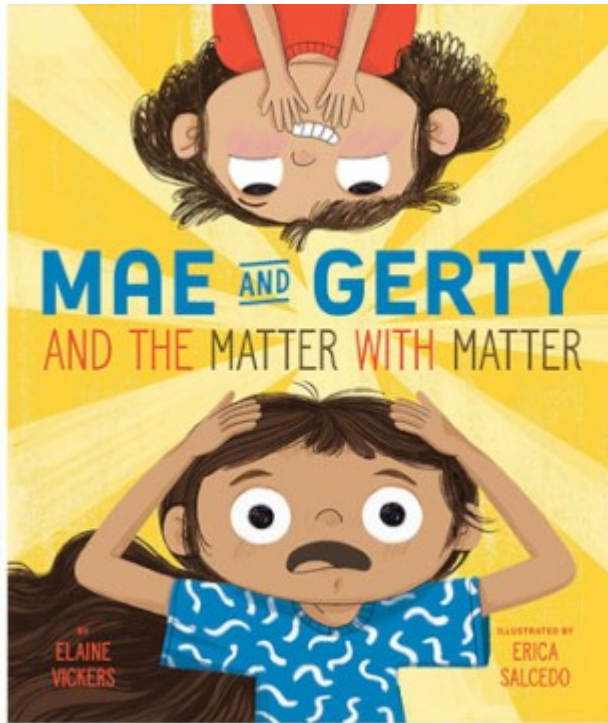
Comments



SUBSCRIBE by the Month



© Brooke MacNaughtan



As a college chemistry professor, Elaine Vickers knows all about matter. And, as a children's author, she writes books that she hopes will matter to her readers. Her picture books include *How to Make a Memory* and *Thankful*; her middle grade novels include *Like Magic*, *Paper Chains*, and *Half Moon Summer*;

and her YA titles are *Fadeaway*, and the forthcoming thriller, *Where There's Smoke*. Her latest picture book, *Mae and Gerty and the Matter with Matter*, illustrated by Erica Salcedo, follows two sisters as they explore matter, messes—and more. PW spoke with Vickers about why she loves chemistry, how elements of her teaching and writing impact and enhance one other, and how she hopes her new book will encourage kids to think about science differently.

RELATED STORIES:

- More in Children's -> Authors
- More in Authors -> Interviews

Request permission to reprint of this article.

FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

Enter e-mail address

PW Daily Tip Sheet

SUBSCRIBE

More Newsletters

Can you tell us about your current teaching position, and how you chose to teach chemistry at the college level?

I teach chemistry at Southern Utah University in Cedar City, and I've been teaching there for 18 years. Like a lot of people, my journey to becoming a teacher started with a teacher. Mine was Mr. Steffensen. I took my first chemistry class with him in high school. He made the subject matter really come alive, and he opened my eyes to a whole new career possibility that I'd never really considered. And, so, when I headed to college, chemistry was right at the top of the list.

So, I studied chemistry, went to graduate school, and earned my PhD. Through my studies, I realized that while I loved chemistry, what I really wanted to do was to teach. Spending hours and hours every day in the lab doing research further illustrated to me that teaching was the right choice.

What is it that you love about chemistry? What have you discovered to be the greatest joy of teaching it—and the biggest challenge?

I love that chemistry just makes sense and it makes the world make sense. It's not always quite as neat as that, though. Sometimes, you get the opposite result of what you would expect. But then there is always an answer if you ask the right questions, and you're willing to put in the work.



Elaine Vickers leading a science activity.

© Troy Edler

As for the greatest joy of teaching chemistry, I teach a lot of students who are taking their first and often their only chemistry class; and I love the change that I see in them from the first day of class to the last. Many come in thinking chemistry is going to be too hard and boring, or they're a little afraid of it. But they leave with confidence—a

feeling like "I can do this, and this is accessible to me now."

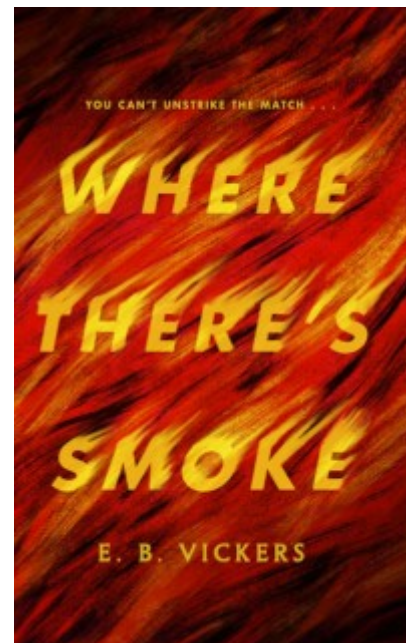
I think the biggest challenge is that our students are dealing with a whole life outside the classroom that we don't always understand or see, and that's out of our control. But since Covid, I do feel we've been a little more open and vulnerable with each other, seeing one another as fully human.

You've gone from teaching young adults to writing for them. How did you begin experimenting with writing children's literature?

I've always been a reader and loved children's books. Even while I was in graduate school, I'd start out in the library's science journal section, and sneak over to read picture books. Then, once I had kids of my own, I read to them all the time. And the more I'd read these books, the more I wanted to be a part of that world, and I wondered, "Maybe there is a children's book in me, too!"

Can you tell us a little about your path to publication and some of your books?

In the beginning, I moved on quickly from writing picture books to writing a middle grade novel. My first published books were my middle grade titles *Like Magic* and *Paper Chains*. After those books, I had a bit of a drought. My agent was sending things out, but we weren't selling anything. I thought, "Well, if middle grade isn't working, let's try something else!" So I went in two different directions and wrote some YA manuscripts and started playing with picture books again. I ended up selling a YA novel and a couple of picture books before I sold another middle grade novel. I have a new YA coming out in December titled *Where There's Smoke*. It is about abuse and looks at the issues of who we believe and who we protect in situations of abuse. It is written under my pen name, E.B. Vickers, because it is for older audiences. And my latest picture book, *Mae and Gerty: The Matter with Matter*, will be out in October.



In this new picture book, you explore the science you've loved since chemistry class with Mr. Steffensen. Can you tell us about this love letter to chemistry and matter—and its celebration of siblings?

Mae and Gerty and the Matter with Matter is about two sisters who are very different. Mae has her own routines and likes to do things in a certain way. Gerty is a bit of a wild card. She's less ordered in the way she does things. Their parents begin to think that Gerty's something of a scientist because she's always making messes, asking questions, and exploring things. And through the course of the story, the sisters learn these things are what a scientist does, and together they become a terrific scientific team.

The idea for the book had permeated my thoughts for a while. The first picture book manuscript that I had ever written was about siblings and I wanted to revisit that; and I was doing some STEM outreach in my community at the time. On top of that, it has always bothered me how often television shows, movies, and media keep perpetuating the ideas that science is all about memorizing facts and performing controlled experiments. I wanted to write a story that was the opposite. I chose chemistry and matter because I think they're often underrepresented in science content and media for kids. It was important to me to write a science book that is based on my favorite science, that is aligned with the current science standards, and that can be used in the classroom along with what students are already learning.



Which elements of your teaching and writing do you think impact and enhance each other?

I have this great Mary Oliver quote hanging on my office wall, "Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." I feel that is exactly what scientists and writers do. In the beginning, I tried to keep my teaching and writing separate. However, as the years have gone by, they've intertwined in a lot of ways.

For example, in my chemistry classes, I have one assignment every semester where I ask my students to read a book—not the textbook. They have to choose a book, read it, find the chemistry in it, and come to my office and tell me about it. So far, they've read everything from fishing manuals to romance novels.

Part of my goal as a teacher and a literacy advocate is to get my students reading for pleasure. The other part is that the assignment really does have an impact on their understanding of chemistry. One of the things that I'm trying to teach my

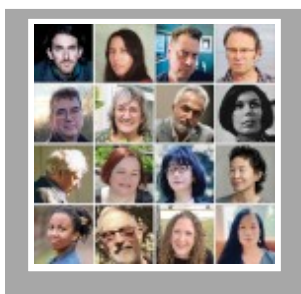
students and show them throughout the class is that chemistry is everywhere all the time. And while I share many examples of this in everyday life in the classroom, when they're the ones looking for it and realizing it really is everywhere, I think that it reinforces this idea in a whole different way.

As for my chemistry teaching affecting my writing, initially, there was an expectation that there would be a lot of science or STEM content in my books, but this hasn't been the case until recently. My first YA novel, *Fadeaway*, has a character who's interested in chemistry, so there are a couple of poems that incorporate chemistry. But it's only a few pages out of a 400-page novel, whereas my picture book with Mae and Gerty is all about chemistry.

What are your hopes for Mae and Gerty's story and their readers?

I hope it helps make chemistry and matter fun and accessible for kids. I hope that the book and the activity guide will spark something in teachers, and that they'll help open kids' eyes to the world of science—and how exciting it can be. But my greatest hope is that maybe one day when kids are asked to picture a scientist, they won't picture an older white guy in a lab coat, but they'll picture themselves instead. The world needs more scientists—and more storytellers, too.

ALSO ON PW



Big Indie Books of Fall 2023 more...



This Week's Starred Reviews

ADVERTISEMENT

fiverr pro.
Meet *talent* that knows what your team needs.
Find Top Fiverr Pro Talent

FEATURED REVIEWS



THE YOUNG MAN

Annie Ernaux, trans. from the French by Alison L. Strayer. Seven Stories, \$13.99 trade paper (64p) ISBN 978-1-64421-320-9

◀ PREVIOUS

NEXT ▶

MOST POPULAR

- **PW Best Books**
- **The 10 Best Emily Dickinson Poems**
- **Book Business Applauds Government Lawsuit Against Amazon**
- **U.S. Book Show 2023: Matthew Gray Gubler**
- **The State of the Printing Industry**
- **Simon & Schuster Sets New Return-to-Work Policy**
- **In a Blistering Opinion, Judge Officially Blocks Texas Book Rating Law**
- **Lit Agent Landscape Diversifies Some as Anxieties over Book Business Grow**
- **Generative AI vs. Copyright**
- **Authors Raise \$100K for Levine Querido**
- **Booksellers Stock Up on Genre Fiction**

BESTSELLERS

View by genre:

Children's Frontlist Fiction ▼

more

- 1 The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (a Hunger Games Novel)**
Suzanne Collins, Author
- 2 The Traitor (Michael Vey #9)**
Richard Paul Evans, Author
- 3 Dog Man: Twenty Thousand Fleas Under the Sea: A Graphic Novel (Dog Man #11): From the Creator of Captain Underpants**
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator
- 4 The Brothers Hawthorne**
Jennifer Lynn Barnes, Author
- 5 Divine Rivals**
Rebecca Ross, Author

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

© PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. PUBLISHERS WEEKLY and the PW Logo are registered trademarks of PWxyz, LLC.

