



SELF-PUB **booklife**

JOBZONE

THE MILLIONS

SUBSCRIBE: DIGITAL + PRINT

LOGIN

SITE LICENSE ACCESS

FREE NEWSLETTERS

Search Publishers Weekly



- Home
 - NEWS
 - REVIEWS
 - BESTSELLERS
 - CHILDREN'S
 - AUTHORS
 - PREVIEWS
 - DIGITAL
 - INTERNATIONAL
- Authors | Book News | Industry News

Home > Children's > Authors

Temporary Publicist - Holiday House - Somerville, MA.

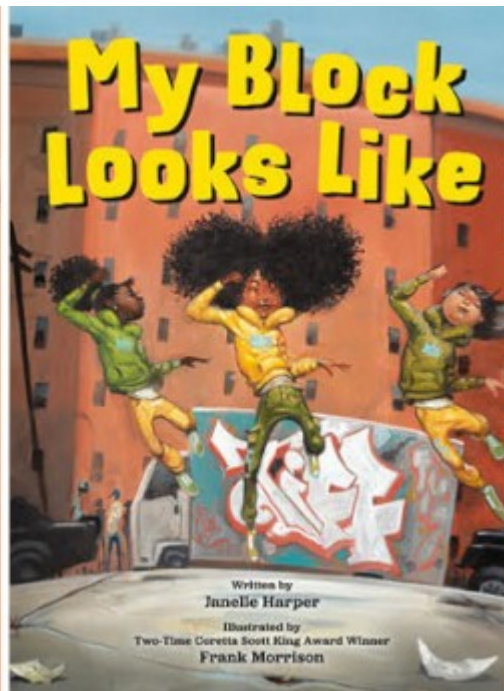
NEXT JOB ▶

Q & A with Janelle Harper

By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 25, 2024

Like 10 Share Post Comments

SUBSCRIBE by the Month



Janelle Harper is a dancer, a 17-year New York public school educator, and now, a debut children's author. Her first picture book, My Block Looks Like, illustrated by two-time Coretta Scott King Award winner Frank Morrison, is a moving and grooving ode to dance and Harper's home:

the Bronx. PW spoke with Harper about how she helped her students tell their stories through dance, and how she hopes to inspire her readers to tell theirs, too.

RELATED STORIES:

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

Can you tell us about your dancing and teaching? When did you start dancing and teaching dance?

FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

Enter e-mail address

PW Daily Tip Sheet

SUBSCRIBE

More Newsletters

My parents put me in my first dance class when I was four years old. They were just trying to find something to keep me occupied, but it turned into a love and a passion. Then, year after year, I kept asking to take another dance class and another. And, I've been studying dance now for the last 35 years.

As for teaching, I come from a long line of educators. Most of the women in my family were or are teachers, coaches, and principals. So, I followed in their footsteps and merged my passion for children and dance to become a dance teacher. Teaching dance was important to me because I knew that the arts could be expensive. By teaching in public schools, I could offer dance classes to students for free. I remember how my mother would volunteer at my dance

school when I was little to reduce the cost of the tuition and to help pay for my dance costumes. I also know first-hand how transformative the arts can be for a child, and I wanted to share this gift with them.

What would you say is the best part of teaching—and the greatest challenge?

The best part has been the students—being a part of their self-discovery through dance, watching them develop, and creating a safe place for them. When I decided to major in dance and minor in education, my parents were hesitant about my decision at first. My mother, being an educator herself, knew the many challenges of teaching. But when she and my father saw me interacting with the students and the work I was doing with the kids—taking them to their first Broadway shows and putting on big productions with them—they were totally supportive of my career choice.

For me, the greatest challenges have always come from outside the classroom. They were from people who weren't educators telling us what's best for our students. In New York City, you need a master's degree to receive your teacher certification. So, we are professionals. We have done everything needed to teach, but outsiders—including politicians—are treating us as if we know nothing. They don't trust our knowledge, expertise, or experience, and are dictating what's happening in our classrooms.

When and why did you transition from teaching kids to writing for them?

I've always been a storyteller, whether it was through dance as a child or my love reading and writing in school. But I never considered it as a career or thought that I could write a book until the pandemic. When the world paused and we were trying to figure out what we truly valued, and what was next, I took the time to explore my passion for writing again.

Being a dance teacher was both rewarding and time-consuming, especially with all of the early-morning and late-night practices, productions, and performances. I've never really had any time for myself. The pandemic gave me the time to reflect on where I saw my career going. I love teaching and I love writing. So, I took a deep dive into online writing classes, and fell in love with picture books. This made perfect sense because I've worked with children for my entire career. Writing for children was a natural progression for me—and it's now my next chapter. With my new book, future titles, and author visits, I believe that I'll be able to reach even more children with my work.



Harper as a young ballerina.

How did you start writing *My Block Looks Like* and where did the idea come from?

When contemplating my next career steps, I picked up *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, and fell in love with her writing and free verse. Soon after, I dove deeper into free verse and read *A Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, and I got an idea to tell a story about my hometown, the Bronx. At first, I didn't really know how to tell this story until I read these two novels in verse. Then, after reading *The Undeclared* by Kwame Alexander, illustrated by Kadir Nelson, I thought, "Maybe I could write a free verse picture book." Alexander's story gave me the courage to tell my own. I was like, "I can tell my story authentically—the way it needs to be told."

As I wrote, I was thinking about my students, and the different styles of dance I taught them that were reflective of their community and culture. Being in the Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop, I always did a hip-hop unit with them. It was rare that any of my students knew that it's one of the most influential genres of music, and that it started right here. Writing *My Block Looks Like* became a love letter to the Bronx and the children who call it home. I wanted to lift up and celebrate all of the things that make our community special, from hip-hop to the poetic language we use to speak to our friends. I also wanted to highlight the amazing people and the places in our borough, and the natural rhythm and cadence to living in New York City.

How do you think your teaching has influenced your writing?

Being a teacher, I've always viewed and treated my students as whole human beings. I was aware that each of them had their own perspectives, experiences, and brought a lot to the table. Kids are not blank canvases where we should be superimposing our own beliefs or creating little clones of ourselves! I kept these things in mind in my teaching—as well as with my writing. I try not to be didactic or hit my readers over the head with a message. My goal is to tell my stories, and trust that they're going to get whatever they need to get from it.

I think this trust is especially crucial today when we're dealing with book banning. People are trying to disguise these bans as "protecting" the kids; but they aren't doing this. Books give kids the tools that they need to better understand and navigate the world. If we keep those tools from them, how are we protecting or helping them to live successful lives?

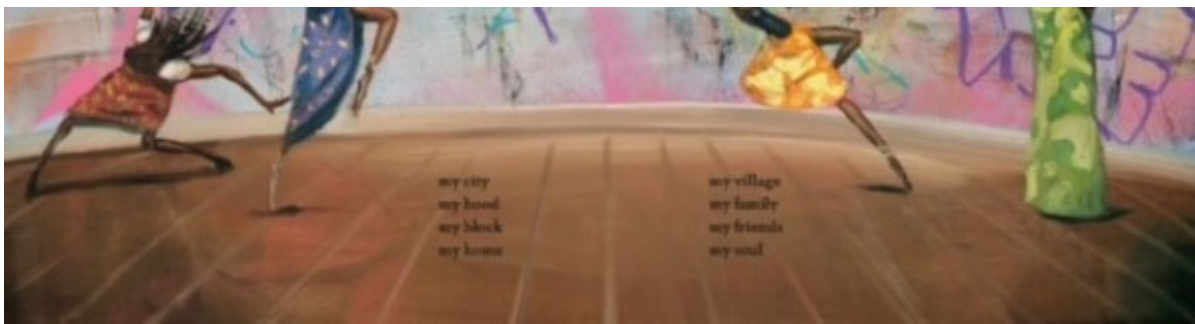
Since *The Block Looks Like's* launch, you've been helping to ensure greater success for kids in the Bronx and beyond by increasing book access. Can you talk about some of these efforts?

I've begun partnering with several nonprofit organizations in the Bronx with a mission to help promote greater literacy in our borough, bring more books to the community, and to offer author events, too. These things are critical because currently we have only one physical bookstore, called The Lit. Bar, for the whole borough. It's an amazing place owned by Noëlle Santos. But, one person can't and shouldn't have to do it all alone. So, along with local literacy organizations including Bronx Bound Books and Loc'd and Lit, we've been looking to do different author and school visits. These visits are crucial for kids to have access to diverse books and to see someone from their community who grew up in the Bronx and became an author. Moving forward, I hope to help increase literacy by bringing more books and bookstores to the Bronx. Contrary to what some people might think, our kids like to read and parents enjoy storytime events. We just need more resources.



How has your own access to books when you were growing up and today's offerings influenced your writing?

When I started writing, I tried thinking back to the books I read



A scene in *My Block Looks Like*, illus. by Frank Morrison.

as a child. Besides the Babysitters Club series, I really don't remember books that stuck with me in elementary or middle school—and I read all the time! I think it's

because I didn't see myself reflected in these books. I did read a lot of Toni Morrison and things like that in high school. But even still, I wish that I'd had authors like Jason Reynolds, Kwame Alexander, Angie Thomas, and Nic Stone, and others that kids have today.

Being a Black writer/author, I'm happy that these books are on the bookshelves. I feel like children's publishing has woken up and said, "Hello! We need to have books for all kids to feel seen, and to know that their stories and lives matter." I think the industry has come a long way; but I believe it has farther to go.

How do you hope to add to what's on the shelves and impact your readers—and children's literature?

I am passionate about writing children's books to help Black and brown children to see themselves, and to love themselves. So, I plan to keep telling these types of stories even if there are already books about these things on the shelves. That's because *my* experiences differ from others' experiences. And we need many different books about the Black experience. We aren't monolithic.

When you go into bookstores, there are many stories about mermaids, llamas, vampires, and werewolves, etc., but no one is saying, "We don't need another one of those!" This should ring true for stories about the Black experience, too. These diverse and different representations will allow kids to see what's possible for their life, and to dream *big*.

ALSO ON PW

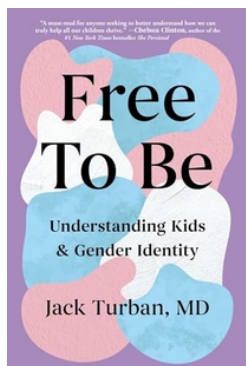


Our 2024 Book Biz Events Calendar



This Week's Starred Reviews

F



FREE TO BE: UNDERSTANDING KIDS AND GENDER IDENTITY

Jack Turban. Atria, \$28.99 (320p) ISBN 978-1-6680-1704-3

◀ PREVIOUS

NEXT ▶

MOST POPULAR

- **PW Summer Reads 2024**
- **The 10 Best Emily Dickinson Poems**
- **Literary Award Withdrawals, Mounting Criticism Prompt 'Review' at PEN America**
- **Five Publishers Join Lawsuit to Stop Iowa Book Banning Law**
- **Rizzoli International to Acquire Chelsea Green Publishing**
- **Book Club Picks for April 2024**
- **10 Dirty Romance Novels**
- **Actress Viola Davis Launches JVL Media**
- **The 10 Best Haruki Murakami Books**
- **This Week's Bestsellers: April 15, 2024**
- **Bologna 2024: Dead Bunnies and Naked Bottoms: What Makes Children's Books Travel Internationally?**

BESTSELLERS

View by genre:

Children's Frontlist Fiction ▼

more

- 1 Dog Man: The Scarlet Shedder: A Graphic Novel (Dog Man #12): From the Creator of Captain Underpants**
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator
- 2 If Only I Had Told Her**
Laura Nowlin, Author
- 3 Powerless**
Lauren Roberts, Author
- 4 The Reappearance of Rachel Price**
Holly Jackson, Author
- 5 No Brainer: (Diary of a Wimpy Kid Book 18)**
Jeff Kinney, 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.

