



SELF-PUBLISHING

JOBZONE

THE MILLIONS

SUBSCRIBE: PRINT + DIGITAL

LOGIN

SITE LICENSE ACCESS

FREE NEWSLETTERS



NEWS

REVIEWS

BESTSELLERS

CHILDREN'S

AUTHORS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

DIGITAL

Authors | Book News | Industry News

Home > Children's > Authors

Publicist/Senior Publicist - Pegasus Books - New York, NY.

NEXT JOB ▶

Q & A with John Schu

By Patricia J. Murphy | Feb 28, 2022

Like 433

Share

Tweet



Comments



SUBSCRIBE by the Month



John Schu knows the power of books. He is the Bookelicious children's librarian and a part-time lecturer at Rutgers University. He is also a former school librarian, elementary school teacher, and ambassador of school libraries for Scholastic Book Fairs. In addition, Schu is the debut

author of two forthcoming picture books—This Is a School, due out next month, and This Is a Story, hitting shelves in spring 2023 (Candlewick)—as well as a nonfiction book, The Gift of Story (Stenhouse, May). Schu has two other

upcoming publishing projects that he exclusively reveals in this interview. PW spoke with Schu about when he first discovered the power of books and how they can change lives, and why he's dedicated his life to helping readers find books that will change theirs.

Do you remember the first time you fell in love with books?

I fell in love with a type of story that is oftentimes judged and not regarded in the most positive light: it's the novelization of television shows and movies. I'd read any book that was based on Disney movies, TV shows, feature films, or media properties. That was the hook for me because as a kid I loved watching movies. These books included *Oliver and Company*—which I bought from the Scholastic Book Fair—*Apollo 13*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, among others. My Aunt Kelly owned a video store so I had unlimited access to movies. And, by watching so many movies, I found my way—an entry point—to “story.” Today, I see the real power in these types of stories. I think that kids like these books and series because of their familiar characters. I feel there's a real safety in that. I also believe that I'm a reader today because of these books. While it started with *Oliver and Company*, there was one book in particular that really did it for me.

Which book was that?

It was *Goofy's Big Race*—one of those books in the Walt Disney Collection where you could go to the grocery store and buy one each week over a period of time, and collect an entire series. I always loved going to the grocery store with my Grandma Ruth on Saturdays, and leaving with a new book. I think this book is so special to me because of this ritual with my grandma.

Do you still have the book?

I keep *Goofy's Big Race* in my office, and it's always behind me when I am on Zoom. In fact, every so often, I'll bring it up in conversation and say, “This is the book that turned me into a reader!” I also show a picture of me in second grade reading *Oliver and Company* with my cat, Jesse. I keep this close, too, because I like to remember *that* kid, and how he often felt so alone; but because of “story” that kid grew up to be the person I am today.

Do you remember having someone turn you on to reading, the way you do for kids today?

I had two people. First, it was Grandma Ruth. On top of her taking me to the grocery store for books, she was always modeling reading for me—reading to me and telling me stories. She was the person in my family who encouraged a love of story. And, while I didn't have a wonderful experience with reading in grades K–4, it was my fifth grade teacher, Dr. Mary Margaret Reed at Manteno Elementary School, in Manteno, Ill., who turned things around for me. She read aloud to us, book talked all of the time, had an amazing classroom library—and helped me fall in love with story all over again.

How do you think your early love of books has informed your career path?

Ever since I was in second grade I had this small box that I used to play “library” with in my bedroom. In it, I kept all the library cards of my imaginary students. And, so, I've always felt comfort in books. As I shared, I spent a lot of my childhood feeling alone, different, and like I was on the outside looking in. I also wasn't very confident, had a lot of anxiety in middle school and high school, and wrestled with some issues that I wrote about in one of the previously unannounced books we're going to talk about.

Before we pivot to talk about your books, can you share a little about how you chose to become a school librarian—and an elementary school librarian in particular?

I always knew that I wanted to be an elementary school teacher, and all through college I worked at Barnes & Noble in the children's section. While I was surrounded by children's books, I started thinking that maybe I should become a school librarian. After graduation, I taught third grade for three years and fourth grade for one year. However, while I was teaching fourth grade and decided to enroll in library school at Dominican University, to get my Masters in Library

and Information Sciences, my principal encouraged me to transition from being a classroom teacher to becoming our school librarian. She believed that I could touch the reading lives of every single child on our school's campus in that role. And, so I did it, and it was such a beautiful experience. I did that for eight years.

What do you find to be the best parts of being a school librarian?

The best parts were book talking and helping kids see and identify themselves as readers by finding “the book” that changed everything for them. I also loved helping students stand up for themselves and their reading identity. For instance, when somebody would tell a student that a graphic novel wasn’t a real book, I would give them ammunition to say, “No, it *is* a real book, here are all the reasons why—and reading is reading!”

On the flip side, what were the most challenging things?

The most challenging thing was to see people try to take away the joy of reading from my students by imposing their own opinions on it. We see it all of the time—and we’re seeing this right now in record numbers—people trying to ban books and keep children from reading books. Another challenging part was people seeing kids as reading levels. As a result, I’ve seen many kids who would just stop reading books because what they chose to read was not good enough for others. Again, I always stood up for my students and what they wanted to read. I hoped by doing this, and giving them information, that they could stand up to people who didn’t believe the same things.

Can you share a little about how you made the transition from school librarian to Scholastic Book Fairs?

When I became a part of the Scholastic Book Fair Summits, I experienced so much joy developing workshops and programs. And, then, when they approached me about creating a larger role, we came up with a model that allowed me to work in schools and connect with children, to demonstrate different ways that teachers and librarians can talk about story, and to offer professional development to educators. I loved that I could do all of these things and advocate for school libraries and librarians.

What about your new role with start-up Bookelicious?

My new role as children’s librarian with Bookelicious allows me to use my library degree to curate and to evaluate book collections, to help develop programming, and to speak with students and teachers. It also affords me more time to dedicate to my own writing.

What was your motivation to start writing books for kids?

It was actually my school visits that got me thinking about writing a book. More specifically, there’s this moment at the end of them when I have students turn to face their teachers, and repeat after me a message about the power and importance of story, and other things I want teachers to hear. And, after reflecting on my visits one day, I thought there had to be a story that I could read to them instead. But, I couldn’t find a story that said exactly what I wanted to say, and then I said, “Maybe, I could write it!”

What happened next? How did you put pen to paper—and start writing?

Something that the late children’s author Amy Krouse Rosenthal said stuck with me. It was, “Make the most of your time here!” I remembered these words and just started writing. And it came out as a poem about everything that I believe about the power of story, libraries, and connection. The end result is *This Is a Story* written by me, illustrated by Caldecott Honor illustrator Lauren Castillo, and due out in spring 2023.

Can you tell us about the two books you have coming out this spring?

My debut picture book, *This Is a School*, is illustrated by Veronica Miller Jamison and will be out from Candlewick on March 29. It is my love letter to students, teachers, librarians, principals, school secretaries, custodians—and everyone in a school! It’s about creativity, play, trust, interconnection, and everything I love to talk about with students. It’s also

about students being excited or nervous about the beginning of a new school year, becoming part of a community—and honoring and celebrating everyone who is part of school. My inspiration was many of the conversations that I had with my third and fourth grade students during the first two weeks of school when we’re getting to know each other, and the energy I experienced visiting hundreds of schools around the world.

My other book is called *The Gift of Story: Exploring the Affective Side of the Reading Life*. It is written for teachers and librarians and explores how we define, revise, and imagine ourselves through story. It is published by Stenhouse Publishers, and will be on shelves in May.

Can you tell us about your two yet-to-be-announced books that you're exclusively revealing here? Let's start with what will be your third picture book.

It is called *The Poetry Place Is Our Space* (Candlewick, illustrated by Holly Hatam), and is a celebration of poetry possibilities and big ideas. The main character, Ruthie Rose, named after my Grandma Ruth, wakes up with this big, beautiful idea to create a poetry space within her school. She recruits the art teacher, the librarian, and her classroom teacher to take her idea and put it into motion. And that's all I can say about it, except that it will be out in spring 2024.

What can you tell us about your fourth—and most personal book coming out?

It's called *Louder Than Hunger* (Candlewick, fall 2023) and it'll be my debut novel-in-verse for older readers. At first, I didn't know I was going to write a novel in verse—or that I was a poet. But by the time I finished writing the first few sentences, I knew it had to be a novel-in-verse because of the white space I needed to tell it. The story required a lot of white space not only for the subject matter, but for the main character, Jake Stacey, because of how he sees the world. This format allowed me to show Jake's anxiety in ways that I don't think that I could have written in any other way. Ultimately, it gave me more freedom to tell Jake's story—whose story is based on my own adolescence experience of dealing with anxiety and an eating disorder. While it's not 100% about me, every emotion that Jake has in my book I experienced in my own adolescence.

It was a story that I needed to write, and one that I've been writing myself toward for a long while now. When I first met my agent, Molly O'Neill, she asked me, "What's the story that only John Schu could write?" And I said that I had this story about myself that I've never shared publicly, and maybe, I could write it. Then last year, Jake just started "talking" to me, and I wrote down what he told me. What's on these pages are deeply personal. And I cannot wait to fully talk about it!

What are the common threads of your books, and your hopes for your readers?

I think the common threads are about building empathy, compassion, self-acceptance, and love for all. They are about finding community and family. *Louder Than Hunger* is also about finding one's place in the world. For Jake, it's about how he does this through story, music, and theater, and how these things saved him. I hope that readers who are struggling or going through similar things to Jake are going to see how he survived.

Looking back, did you ever imagine that you would work as a school librarian, travel the world talking about books and story, be an ambassador for school libraries, and write kids' books?

I feel like so many things in my life have come together because of my personal response to *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate. To begin, it was the first book that I read that I wanted to tell as many people as humanly possible about, and I bought and/or gave hundreds of copies away. [To date over 3,500 copies!] I think this is because of how the book helped me learn about Ivan's story, and make a comparison to my own story—the isolation and sadness that I felt so much as a child. This story resonated with me so deeply and in such a profound way—and then offered me many opportunities.

I often say to kids, "I wouldn't be standing in front of you if it weren't for *The One and Only Ivan*." That's because many people started inviting me to their schools to talk about my connection to the story. I also had the chance to meet the real Ivan [the gorilla that Applegate's book is based on], he even signed my copy of my book, and my very first publishing credit is the letter that appears in the back of the paperback version. All of this led to even more speaking opportunities which led to greater confidence in myself to write my own stories.

opportunities which led to greater confidence in myself to write my own stories.

What do you love most about being a cheerleader and champion for books?

I love being able to talk about books that resonate with my heart. These are the books that get me excited and make me feel things—and are books that I want to tell everyone about! And, while I am at it, I also want to spread the word about my passion for reading—and to expose kids to books that they might not have read before and to discover their own passions through books.

ADVERTISEMENT

40,000 of the best kids' books!

Start Today

epic!

PWxyz

The advertisement features a young girl with dark hair, wearing a white patterned shirt, holding up several tablets. The tablets display various children's book covers, including 'Miss Daisy is Crazy!', 'Wings Fire', and 'Goodnight Moon'. The background is a dark purple with white stars. The Epic! logo is in the bottom left, and the PWxyz logo is in the bottom center.

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Submission Guide](#)
[Sell](#) | [Calls for Info](#) | [Editorial Calendar](#) | [A](#)

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Do Not](#)

© PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.