

Keep Telling Stories

Shaping How Young People Engage With the World

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE

Four accomplished authors — Shauntay Grant (SG), Ben Philippe (BP), Sarah Raughley (SR) and Nandi Taylor (NT) — escort us along the unique paths that led them to become the compelling storytellers that they are today. They reveal their motivations and turn back the cover on the books they loved as kids. Ultimately, we learn how they work to inspire and engage with today's generation.

No matter the genre or subject matter, their enduring love of writing stories that speak to them and to their readers leaps off the page. As they keep telling stories, there is an accompanied determination that meaningful change will be here to stay — once and for all.

What were your favourite stories as a kid?

SG I loved stories that gave the “supernatural” authority in the natural world. *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe and *The Balloon Tree* by Phoebe Gilman are among my favourites from childhood.

BP Murder mysteries. I loved them. The reveal of who had done it at the end always felt like a toy at the bottom of the cereal box. I would skim entire tomes to get to that moment where Poirot gets to be smug in the parlour.

SR My favourite stories were basically any stories that made me feel like I was vicariously going on an adventure. I loved *Sweet Valley Kids*, and K.A. Applegate’s *Everworld* series, as well as O.R. Melling’s *The Hunter’s Moon*. I also loved stories told in other mediums, like anime, role-playing games, etc.

NT My favourite stories were from this big, illustrated book of fairy and folk tales my parents got for me when I was about five. It has stories from all over the world — West Africa, India, Australian Aboriginal stories, Native American stories — and the art is so, so gorgeous. That book definitely planted the seed for my love of fantasy.

Why did you become a writer? What drew you to writing books for children and youth?

SG I love reading and writing. I love poetry and pairing poetic text with picture books — playing with rhythm, repetition and rhyme. And I love research and working to make lesser-known and sometimes challenging histories accessible to young audiences.

BP I’m not sure. I think once you realize that some people make a living practicing your favourite pastime, you develop a curiosity for that path. I dabbled in fanfiction as a teen, but I started “writing” pretty late. In college-ish. I think that’s why I went the MFA path; I needed that structure for it to become “a thing.”

SR I guess I dreamt so much of adventure as a child that I started wanting to tell my own adventure stories. It’s kind of wish fulfillment. But most importantly, I want to make others feel how great stories made me feel as a youth — and still make me feel!

NT At first, it was simply a love of stories and wanting to see those stories continue. I started out writing what I now realize was *Power Rangers* fanfiction as a kid. As I got older, I started to come up with my own ideas based on my dreams or daydreams. I especially like writing YA because I remember how fraught that time was for me, how lonely, especially as a Black kid growing up in a predominantly white community. My hope is that *Given* will speak to and inspire kids who need it.

What inspires you to write your stories? How do particular themes speak to you?

SG I can trace my family’s history in Nova Scotia back to the 1700s. I write a lot of family histories and stories rooted in African-Nova Scotian and African diasporic experiences. I love my culture, and I’m constantly looking for opportunities to research and write about it.

BP Oooh, I made a list once. Hold on. I’ll just copy and paste it here: “Protagonists who talk too much, class disparity, outsiders, bad first impressions, private schools, absent parents who don’t talk enough, blackmail, payback, and breakups.”

It admittedly doesn’t sound super healthy once you remove the bullet points and put it all in a sentence. Ha!

SR I think sometimes it’s about just wanting to tell fun stories that inspired me as a kid. Sometimes, there are also things going on in the world that make me feel like I need to speak to it through narrative. Especially in the times we’re living in, there are so many ways to deal with and make sense of the world around us through tales.

NT I write the stories I want to read, essentially. I want to see books where a Black girl is the hero, the beauty, the magician, the chosen one, etc. And I’m a sucker for a good romance. I also love stories where characters go through a lot of personal growth, which is why I enjoy writing YA so much.

How have your own experiences infiltrated your writing?

SG My first four picture books are inspired by personal and family histories. My first publication, *Up Home*, is kind of a mini-memoir — a true account of growing up in a close-knit family and community. The next three books are inspired by childhood events, including summers in the city, family trips, and bizarre Halloween costumes.

BP Every time I think I’m writing something that exists completely outside of me and is wholly fictional, I turn around and realize it was therapy writing all along. Ha! In the case of Henri Haltiwanger, the protagonist of *Charming as a Verb*, I think I was processing the expectations of exceptionalism that flared up around the time I was applying to American colleges. As you can see, I’m always a good decade behind.

SR I stray from being too literal about translating my own experiences into my books, although I think there was one time I wrote a bully into a manuscript! But I think when you’re a writer, or any kind of artist, who you are will affect your work no matter what — whether you mean it to or not. We are products of culture, and so are our works. There isn’t a way that our works won’t be inspired by our experiences, by our values, by our psyche.

NT I spent four years living in Japan, teaching English and working as a travel writer. I definitely drew on my experiences as a foreigner abroad to inform Yenni’s experiences in *Cresh*, her culture shock, both good and bad, and also how people related to her. But I also drew on my experiences as a Black woman in a predominantly white community. For example, as a kid, and even sometimes today, people are always asking to touch my hair. So, I included an awkward scene about that in *Given*.

What did your road to publishing look like?

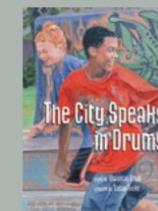
SG I read a poem one night at a writers’ gala — a poem I wrote for my family and my community, called “Up Home.” A senior editor from a local publishing house happened to be in the audience. She approached me after my reading and said something like, “That poem you just read would make a cool picture book. Would you like to do one?”

BP I majored in writing in college, lucked my way into a fancy MFA program that gave me time to get all the bad short stories out of the way, submittable rejections, submittable rejections.... ghostwriting gigs, real day jobs while writing on the weekend, more rejections, pitching myself to editors, and eventually... Book deal!



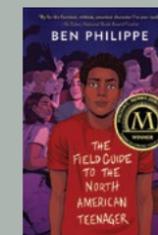
Shauntay Grant

Shauntay Grant is the author of six books for children including *Africville*, winner of the 2019 Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award and a finalist for the Governor General’s Literary Award, the Elizabeth Mrazik-Cleaver Canadian Picture Book Award, and the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children’s Book Award. Her other honours include a Best Atlantic-Published Book Award from the Atlantic Book Awards and a Joseph S. Stauffer Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts. She is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Dalhousie University in Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia), and she served as the third poet laureate for the City of Halifax.



Ben Philippe

is a New York-based writer and TV writer, born in Haiti and raised in Montreal, Canada. He has a Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University and an MFA in fiction and screenwriting from the Michener Center for Writers in Austin, Texas. Ben also teaches film studies and screenwriting at Barnard College. He is the author of the William C. Morris Award-winning novel *The Field Guide to the North American Teenager*. Find him online at benphilippe.com.



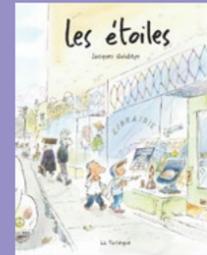
Congratulations

TO THE WINNERS OF THE 2020 CCBC BOOK AWARDS



Birdsong

Written and illustrated by Julie Flett
Greystone Kids
Winner of the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award



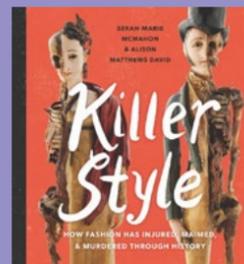
Les étoiles

Written and illustrated by Jacques Goldstyn
Éditions de la Pastèque
Winner of the Prix TD de littérature canadienne pour l'enfance et la jeunesse



Small in the City

Written and illustrated by Sydney Smith
Groundwood Books
Winner of the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award



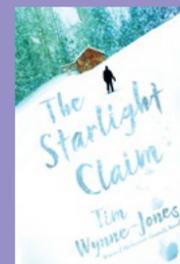
Killer Style

Written by Serah-Marie McMahon and Alison Matthews David
Illustrated by Gillian Wilson
Owlkids Books
Winner of the Norma Fleck Award for Canadian Children's Non-Fiction



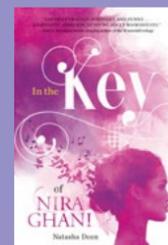
Orange for the Sunsets

Written by Tina Athaide
Katherine Tegen Books
Winner of the Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People



The Starlight Claim

Written by Tim Wynne-Jones
Candlewick Press
Winner of the John Spray Mystery Award



In the Key of Nira Ghani

Written by Natasha Deen
Running Press Teens
Winner of the Amy Mathers Teen Book Award



Des couleurs sur la Grave

Written by Marie-Andrée Arsenault
Illustrated by Dominique Leroux
Éditions la Morue verte
Winner of the Prix Harry Black de l'album jeunesse



For more information, visit: bookcentre.ca

SR I've been writing since I was a kid. But it took me several years to finish one book. It took about 10 months to find an agent. Then it took four years to publish my first book — with an indie publisher, but that imprint, unfortunately, collapsed only a few months after publishing. Two years after that I published *Fate of Flames*, Book 1 in the Effigies series, and an old Nano project!

NT I started posting the story online to Wattpad in 2017. I was consistent with uploads, once or twice a week, and the story eventually caught the eye of the Wattpad editorial team, earning me a feature. In 2018 *Given* won the Worldbuilders Watty Award, and soon after, Wattpad reached out to offer to publish the book with their brand new publishing house, Wattpad Books.

What do you hope to accomplish with your work for young audiences? What are you most proud of?

SG I want to tell stories that connect with young readers. I'm mainly focused on picture books right now, but I've also got a verse novel in the works, which I'm pretty excited about.

BP I was very happy receiving a 1200-word email from a 14-year-old breaking down all the ways in which I had messed up the love pairings in *The Field Guide to the North American Teenager* last year. I printed it. That level of involvement with your work is something that most writers only dream of.

It's the easiest thing in the world to stop reading a book, so if someone finishes and enjoys my books, then I've done my job. I don't think writers get a say in their takeaway or "legacy." Fifty years from now, I might be a recycled unknown or the face of a dystopian tribe of young underground children planning a revolution on the surface people. Either would be fine.

SR I want to make people happy. I want to make them dream because stories allowed me to dream as a child. Those were the best moments, truly. And I'm happy when I get letters and feedback that tell me I'm accomplishing just that.

NT First and foremost, I want young nerds looking for comfort, escape or just to be entertained to also find works that feature them rather than silently suggesting they don't belong through omission. I loved fantasy growing up but looking back, I always felt like a voyeur partaking of something that wasn't really meant for me due to the homogeneity of the casts, which were overwhelmingly Eurocentric. That's something I want to change for the coming generations.

How do you feel Black authors and illustrators have contributed to children's literature in Canada?

SG We're creating stories that investigate and celebrate our experiences, interests, histories, languages and cultures. I'm especially excited about books that foreground Black vernacular languages.

BP Positively.

SR I think there is so much work out there, but still, not enough is done to really acknowledge Black authors and illustrators in Canada or support them. Our work is rich — we speak not only to our unique Canadian experiences and histories but also to possible futures of justice and joy. I would love to see more work done to bring our work to the forefront.



Sarah Raughley

Sarah Raughley is a writer, academic and author of the YA fantasy trilogy *The Effigies Series* and the upcoming *The Bones of Ruin*. She is also a columnist on CBC's *Here and Now* with Gill Deacon and has written for publications such as *ZORA*, *The Washington Post*, *Quill & Quire*, and *CBC Arts*.



Nandi Taylor

Nadia Taylor is a Canadian writer of Afro-Caribbean descent based in Toronto. Her debut novel *Given* garnered over one million reads on the online story-sharing site Wattpad and earned a starred review from ALA's *Booklist*. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in English literature and a diploma in journalism. Common themes she writes about are growth, courage, and finding one's place in the world.



NT Unfortunately, that's something I think needs work. Any Black children's authors I can think of off the top of my head are American, with the exception of Sarah Raughley, who wrote the YA Effigies series. I'm sure there are more I don't know, but that's part of the problem. It's not as though we're not here or capable of writing engaging stories, but there has been resistance within the publishing industry to promote our stories for fear that they are too niche and will not sell. Thankfully, that's slowly changing.

Are there any specific titles that have particularly resonated with you?

SG Nadia L. Hohn's work comes to mind. Her Malaika picture book series, as well as her illustrated biography of Jamaican poet and storyteller Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett-Coverley, have strong notes of Black English and Jamaican Patois.

BP Téa Mutonji's *Shut Up You're Pretty* is a phenomenal collection. It's just filled with insight and heart and gets under the skin in a universal way I very much enjoyed.

SR I teach Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* in classes because I feel like it does everything I spoke of above. I also adore Desmond Cole's work, and well, let's just say I'm always putting Black Canadian books on my "To Read" list!

Looking to the past, present and future, why is the representation of Black voices so crucial?

BP I think you can just look at "the present" on this one. 2020 is a case study for just so many things we would prefer to believe have long been resolved and sealed into history books — global pandemics, racial protests, human rights violations, etc. We're not massaging the past away or even looking ahead to a bright idyllic future that's out of reach; we're trying to cobble a functioning present.

Addressing this present through the books that shape how young readers see and engage with the world around them seems as valid as an approach as any.

SR Can you believe there are still people out there who believe that Black kids don't read! And that there are Black kids who love storytelling that are being told that writing isn't a career for them. That there's no point. That they don't have the "ability" to do it. That Black people aren't "cultured" enough to tell stories. Or that our stories don't matter. That's why the representation of Black voices is crucial.

NT The relationship between art and life is symbiotic. People absorb lessons about the world around them through art and play them out in life, and vice versa. So, if most of the media featuring Black people are struggle stories, society unconsciously arranges itself so that the narrative fits. And these subconscious categorizations absolutely affect things like hiring practices, prison sentences, pay, etc. For example, studies show Black people are less likely to receive pain medication when hospitalized, largely due to narratives propagating the belief that Black people are physically stronger and more capable of "handling" pain.

Is there still work to do? How can we further document, illuminate and celebrate Black lives, experiences and voices in children's and YA literature?

SG By asking ourselves — as writers, as readers, as publishers — this very same question. And then answering it wholly and objectively (while considering perspectives from others, including Black writers, illustrators, and industry professionals). And after that, taking meaningful steps towards change.

BP I think I love YA because I'm a lot more of a moody teen than a sharp race commentator at heart. The faster we get to a point at which Black writers have to write at, against, for, through some monolithic construct of Blackness, the better off we will be. From a very selfish authorial perspective I don't always feel equipped to do it. Or, I just don't wanna, I guess. It can take a toll to decode and then argue the race thesis of your own work.

Everything I write is inevitably "Black Content," but the call is coming from inside the house... It can be a "Black story" to readers — I don't resent that — but to me, it's just a story. For example, Henri, the protagonist of *Charming as a Verb*, is "charming and unsure of who he is" to me... not "Black, charming, and unsure of who he is."

SR I would like to see Canadian publishers pay Black authors and illustrators more so that they can continue to do what they love and earn a living wage. I would love to see more work done to gather data on disparities in the publishing industry with regards to diversity on the page, among authors and behind the scenes. In Canada, there isn't as much data as there is in America.

NT Connected to my previous answer, I think the publishing industry needs to take a good hard look at who they're publishing and why. Beyond that, representation within the publishing industry needs to change as well.

How do you hope Black authors and illustrators continue to influence children's and YA literature?

BP Hmm, I'm endlessly pessimistic about the world and optimistic about future generations. I realize that this doesn't quite add up as children are not raised in a vacuum. I generally hope that by exposing children to a better and more inclusive world in books, they will inevitably build one in its image... It's already game over for us, ha!

SR I hope we keep writing, keep taking up space. I hope we keep telling our stories, whatever those stories may be. I hope we inspire the next generation to tell their own.

NT I hope we'll see more stories normalizing Black characters in a diverse array of roles and stories. And as sci-fi and fantasy narratives continue to gain popularity, I hope we see more Black sci-fi and fantasy, especially from Canadian creators. 🌱

Maryllynn Miller Oke is a freelance writer. Hoping to make the world a better place, she writes frequently for academic and non-profit sectors.



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Supports Canada's diverse Children's authors and illustrators.

These are just some of the many people who continue to write and illustrate stories that represent all children.

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