



Author Spotlight – Brenda S. Miles and Susan D. Sweet



Brenda S. Miles

Susan D. Sweet

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When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

Susan: I've always loved to write. I actually had a short story included in a book of children's writing when I was in Grade 6. Of course, it's horrifying to read now! Anyway, I wrote for many years until I got far too busy with graduate school, and then there was the family building stage when I hardly had time to shower. But once the dust settled, I came back to it with open arms. I truly love writing, and it fits my busy lifestyle since I can do it anywhere and for whatever amount of time I can manage to scrape together. It's definitely my creative outlet—along with cooking!

Brenda: My Dad loves writing, so I learned from the get-go that words have power to move readers and listeners. I was never too coordinated (my sisters were the athletes in the family), so I knew that any slam dunks from me would have to be of the pencil-and-paper variety. In early elementary school, I would post original poems on my bedroom door. My parents loved them, of course—because that's what loving parents do. In high school, the weekly TV guide insert of the Toronto Star newspaper asked, "What cancelled television show would you like to bring back, and why?" I wrote a response vying for **Breaking Away**, a show about competitive bike racing starring Shaun Cassidy and based on a movie of the same name. My response was published the next week for thousands of Canadians to read—or at least any Canadians who chose to read the fine-print on an editorial page in a publication devoted almost entirely to television programming. I was thrilled, and hooked on the idea of seeing my words in print. Sure, I was in love with Shaun Cassidy at the time, and the show was cancelled after 8 episodes, never to return—so I suppose my words weren't all that persuasive. But my writing had advanced from my bedroom door, and I wanted that moment to be the start of something special—with or without Shaun Cassidy.

What do you use to write – pencil and paper or computer?

Susan and Brenda: We might sketch out a few ideas with a paper and pencil, but when it comes time to write, it's the computer all the way! We cut, paste, revise, delete, start over, research online... Plus with two writers, we are constantly emailing text back and forth, so a computer is key. We actually spend more time together over Skype than we do face to face!

When do you write?

Susan: My children are old enough now that we have a routine where the first hour we get home is reserved for something we each *want* to do, versus something we *have* to do. So as soon as I get home from work, I check in with my children, and then hit the computer to write. I've learned that if I leave it too far down my to-do list, it just doesn't happen, so I prioritize it as much as I can. The routine doesn't work perfectly, but I'm able to flex my writing muscle almost every day. Then there is the summer. Since I work for a school board, I am fortunate enough to have two months off. That's when the binge writing happens!

Brenda: Sadly, I'm not as disciplined as Susan when it comes to writing daily. Far too often I let my 9 to 5 work get in the way—or should I say 9 to midnight? But, every day I strive to think about something creative, and then vow to get down to it if I can steal a moment or two here and there.

Where do you write? Do you like to be by yourself in the quiet, or do you like to write in a noisy space?

Susan: Quiet, quiet, quiet. Did I say quiet? I was the same as a student. I needed quiet to think deeply then, and I still do. So, I crawl away by myself wherever I can find a quiet spot. No Starbucks work space for me! Of course, there are exceptions. For instance, I created an initial draft of this response at a picnic table while my children were at an outdoor climbing park. Life is like that sometimes! But for the heavy-duty stuff, I'm pretty much always hidden away at home.

Brenda: In my head, anywhere, anytime. Like Susan, I need quiet for the nuts and bolts stuff of choosing the right word or phrase when I finally put pen to paper. But I feel most creative when I am walking, or riding public transit, or looking in store windows, or strolling around the buzz of people going about their day. I wrote my first published children's book on a hotel napkin at a Sickle Cell Conference in LA. Oh, yeah—hotel rooms are my favorite writing spots. I don't have to worry about vacuuming or doing laundry, or even cooking!

Brenda and Susan, Cinderella is just one of the books that you have written together. How does the process of writing collaboratively differ from that of writing alone?

Susan and Brenda: There are many pluses and a few minuses to co-writing. A huge plus is the creative energy you get talking through ideas with someone else. You find flaws, have an extra critical eye throughout the entire process, and have two sets of skills on which to draw. It's fantastic! You can really get lost in your own head when writing by yourself, and co-writing definitely helps ground you. The only minuses are that some publishers aren't as keen on cowriters—which may impact your chances of publication, especially for new authors—and the logistics around coordinating time to write are sometimes tricky, especially when we are in separate countries, which we often are. But we make it work because it's worth it!

Why did you choose to work on Cinderstella together?

Susan and Brenda: We believe in helping children be happy and healthy, and mental health is an important part of that. Our goal is to create, in collaboration with Magination Press, a series of fractured fairy tales that focus on mental health topics. Each book features a different princess. The first was a retelling of The Princess and the Pea. Cinderstella is the second book in the series, and stay tuned for the third book this fall! We wanted our princesses to provide an alternative to some of the more traditional examples out there. While we hope that they still appeal to children captivated by fairy tales, our characters have a modern update and solve their own problems. They provide positive messages that parents and caregivers can get behind, and (we hope!) entertain and inform at the same time.

How did each of you contribute to the Cinderstella story?

Susan and Brenda: We worked together every step of the way. From brainstorming, to creating a first draft, to the edits, we talk it all through. It's a very collaborative process, and we want to make sure we're both happy with what ends up on the page. It involves a lot of Skyping and even more chocolate.

What gave you the idea for this story, and why do you think it was important to tell?

Susan: I have a daughter who has always been hugely interested in science. When she was little, someone gave her a Barbie. It sat in the box for 3 months. Finally, I told her, if she was okay with me donating it to a toy drive, that I would trade her the Barbie for a book about black holes. It was a done deal. I just want little girls and boys to see examples of ALL kinds of children with ALL kinds of interests. There is no right or wrong. But there should be options so every child can find themselves somewhere in the stories they read.

Brenda: I'll second that thought! Girls and boys should have the option to revel in all kinds of possibilities—not sit in a box of someone else's choosing. My niece will soon graduate from university as an engineer! I dedicated the book to her.

What do you like best about Cinderstella's story?

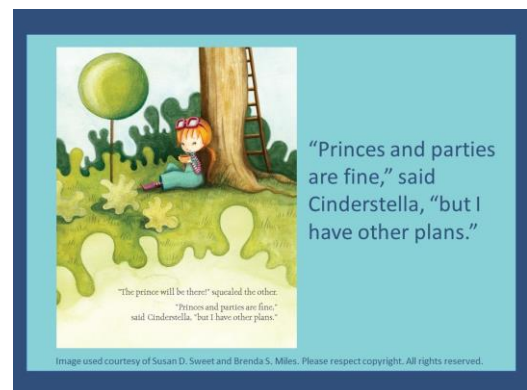
Susan and Brenda: It's a hip update on a classic tale that never grows old. But that tale needs to evolve! We hope Cinderstella contributes to the evolution in a positive way.

Do you like the illustrations?

Susan and Brenda: We love them. Serious. LOVE. Valeria Docampo illustrated all three of our princess stories and, in our eyes, her work is high art. We think she's brilliant, and she totally captured the whimsical look we were hoping for. She's the perfect fit for princess stories. If you want to see more of her amazing art, check out her website online: <http://valeriadocampo.com/>

How did you feel when you wrote Cinderstella?

Susan and Brenda: We knew it was special—at least to us! It seemed to be such a great balance of fun, artistic whimsy, and content. We couldn't wait to get our copies. It was quite a thrill when they arrived.



How do you hope readers will feel?

Susan and Brenda: We hope they feel a sense of possibility and wonder. We hope they'll stop and think, "What are my own plans?" and realize those plans don't have to be the same as anyone else's.

How would you like teachers to present your book to children?

Susan and Brenda: Crack it open and start reading with a smile. Mood, tone, and intonation are everything!

What messages you would like them to discuss?

Susan and Brenda: Cinderella says parties and princes are fine, but she has "other plans." Ask students about their own plans and respond with enthusiasm. Talk about how to make plans possible. Do astronauts go to school to learn how to fly rockets? What can your students do right now to learn more about any profession they are interested in? Plan some field trips to cool places to help bring the story to life. And most of all, help each child find their own happily ever after.

Do you have any advice for teachers in their role as writing guides?

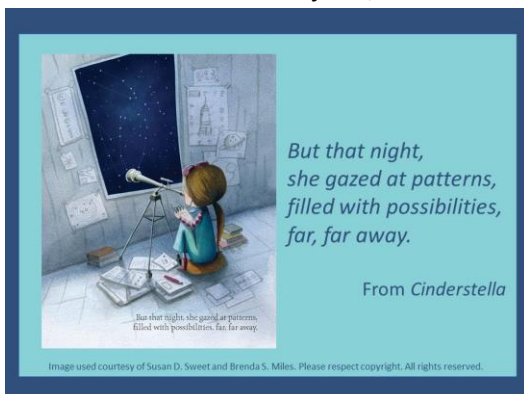
Susan and Brenda: As psychologists in schools, we've seen many children who struggle with fine-motor skills that make printing or writing with a pencil or pen difficult. Remember that story telling is more than just the physical act of writing. Speaking a story while a computer types it out is a great solution if motor skills get in the way. Or, for students who don't enjoy writing, offer the opportunity to tell a story through pictures. But planning a story ahead of time in a series of steps during brain-storming sessions is the key to any great narrative—whether using a pencil, computer, words, or pictures.

Do you have any advice for children as writers?

Susan and Brenda: If you love writing, then write! Write what you know about and what matters to you, and write lots. Writing is just like any other skill. It takes practice to improve. So write as often as you can, and don't be afraid to unleash your imagination. One trick we've learned is to read what we write out loud. It's amazing how many mistakes we catch, and how many things we discover that we'd like to change, just by listening to how the words sound. Listening is a huge help in the writing process. Most of all, though, have fun and enjoy the chance to make your writing your own.

What is the most important message you would like children to take away from the book?

Susan and Brenda: Doors should not be open or closed based on gender. Boys and girls can both be great at STEM-related subjects, and we need the voices and contributions of both to truly advance these fields.



To find out more about Susan Sweet visit:
[Meet Magination Press Author Susan Sweet, PhD](#)

To find out more about Brenda Miles visit:
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