



## Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Michigan Chapter Blog

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Friday, July 19, 2024

### Writer Spotlight: Jean Alicia Elster

Former attorney, Joe Joe, family history, "Cool Papa " Bell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett: author Jean Alicia Elster

*Charlie Barshaw coordinates our regular Writer Spotlight feature and interviews writers of SCBWI-MI. In this piece, meet Jean Elster, a Detroit writer of a children's book series, as well as historical novels for middle grade and young adult readers.*

**You graduated from the University of Detroit School of Law. What did you plan to do with a law degree? Why have you listed yourself as a "former" attorney?**

#### About the Mitten

The Mitten is the official blog for the Michigan chapter of SCBWI. Please spread the word and share with anyone interested in reading, writing, and creating quality literature for children and young adults.

Find local events and learn more at [scbwi.org/regions/michigan/](https://scbwi.org/regions/michigan/) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Instagram Illustrators](#).

#### Meet our Featured Illustrator

Thank you, Rick, for designing our new banner! [Rick Lieder](#) is an illustrator and artist based in Michigan.

#### Meet the Editors

- [Sarah Prusoff LoCascio](#)
- [Charlie Barshaw](#)
- [Christy Matthes](#)
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The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators







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My goal from a young age was to be a writer, an author. In fact, I started writing at the age of six, jotting down very short stories in a notebook. Keeping that goal in mind, I attended the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English, with distinction.

However, as I neared the end of my undergraduate studies, my goal shifted a bit to include selecting a graduate program in a field that would allow me to earn a living and continue to write. Of the options that appealed to me, the only course of study that my father was willing to pay for was law school, so law school it was. I planned to practice law as a career while pursuing my goals as a writer.

As to why I refer to myself as a "former" attorney, I practiced law for several years. But when I got married and had a couple of kids, I wanted to work from home. That's when I fell back on my English degree and became a professional writer (my business name is Write Word LLC). And while I still pay my dues to the State Bar of Michigan and maintain my license to practice law in the state, I am no longer a practicing attorney.

**You've edited the books, [THE DEATH PENALTY](#) and [THE OUTBREAK OF THE CIVIL WAR](#) for Greenhaven Press, and two books with [intimidatingly long titles](#) for Judson Press. How did you become an editor? What do you see as your editorial job when tackling a manuscript?**

My work for [Greenhaven Press](#) and [Judson Press](#) represents two entirely different tracks in my career as an editor. I connected with Greenhaven Press via a group tour of the facilities of the parent company [Thomson Gale](#). That tour was arranged by an organization of professional writers, then known as Detroit Women Writers, of which I am a long-

standing member.

Thomson Gale was interested in expanding their pool of writers and Detroit Working Writers was doing its part to help its members secure writing gigs and publishing connections. After the tour, I submitted my resume and got a callback. I really believe my law degree and past life as an attorney helped seal the deal.



As an editor for the “[Opposing Viewpoints](#)” series at [Greenhaven Press](#), the topics I was assigned required that I use my extensive research skills honed as an attorney to become an “instant expert” in almost every aspect of those topics.

I not only had to compile an exhaustive and chronological compendium of scholarly articles, historic speeches and legal opinions but I had to write

a preface for each one as well as for each chapter and then a forward and introduction for each book. This was not work for the faint of heart!

Regarding my work for Judson Press, let me first clarify that I actually edited a total of six books for them. And the credit (or blame) for those two long titles rests with the Judson Press titling committee!

Now, my initial connection with Judson Press was a bit more circuitous. One of the early client referrals to Write Word LLC was a Detroit-based pastor who was well-respected nationally. He organized a conference focusing on the African American family.

The conference was a huge success and Judson Press—which is the publishing arm of that pastor’s church denomination—asked him to prepare a manuscript based upon the conference presentations. He, in turn, asked me to take on that responsibility. The editors at Judson Press loved the manuscript I submitted and over the course of time offered me five other editing opportunities.

My work as an editor for Judson Press required the use of an entirely different set of the skills that I utilized as an attorney. The books I edited for Judson Press were written by church pastors. And while these authors were all outstanding, nationally recognized preachers, their homiletic gifts did not necessarily transfer to the written word.



So again drawing upon my legal skills, my job as editor was to become their advocate: I had to make the adjustments necessary so that the reader would still hear the distinct and well-known voice of the author but in a way that was more appropriate for a written format.

**You are best known for your novels, but in the early 2000's you wrote and published a series of JOE JOE books for young readers. You wrote JUST CALL ME JOE JOE in 2001, and said the book was inspired by Negro Leagues baseball star Cool Papa Bell. Please explain.**



Photo of Cool Papa Bell through Baseball Hall of Fame

As background, my "Joe Joe in the City" series was also published by Judson Press, and JUST CALL ME JOE JOE was the first book in a four-volume series.

Actually, the ten-year-old protagonist Joe Joe is inspired after reading about the legendary baseball star "Cool Papa" Bell in a library book about the Negro Baseball Leagues.

In each of the four volumes, Joe Joe learns life lessons when he reads about heroes from African American history. I selected historical figures that were outside of the realm of the more widely-known heroes such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks.

So in addition to the Negro Baseball Leagues and earlier black baseball barrier breakers in volume one, in volumes two through four I featured educator and presidential advisor **Mary McLeod Bethune**, the **Tuskegee Airmen** of World War II and **Ralph Bunche** who, in 1950, became the first African American to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.



The books remain in print, and I am still invited to speak at schools and literacy events about the series.

**WHO'S JIM HINES? was your first published novel. In the middle of the text there are archival photos from your family. Tell us how the photos and the story are intertwined.**

The photos are included to represent and support the "historical" portion of the historical fiction narrative.

In the book's prologue, I state that WHO'S JIM HINES? is based on a true story. The photos serve as a reminder of that fact, particularly the two photos of my grandfather standing next to his company trucks and of my grandmother and oldest aunt standing next to a towering pile of wood in the wood yard.



A photo of my grandfather Douglas Ford, Sr. standing next to one of the trucks he owned in his business, the Douglas Ford Wood Company.

I also wanted a visual confirmation that the story was indeed true: that my grandfather came up to Detroit as part of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South, yet did not work in one of the auto factories. Instead, he was an entrepreneur and the owner of the Douglas Ford Wood Company.

I wanted to quiet any naysayers who might dare to question the veracity of my family's history and of my grandparents' contribution to the vitality of the city.



**In *THE COLORED CAR*, the protagonist is Jean, also your mother's name, and yours as well. You've presented a program on creating "compelling oral histories." You've said that your books are "historically correct, but the events were fictionalized." Where does the family history leave off and the fiction begin?**

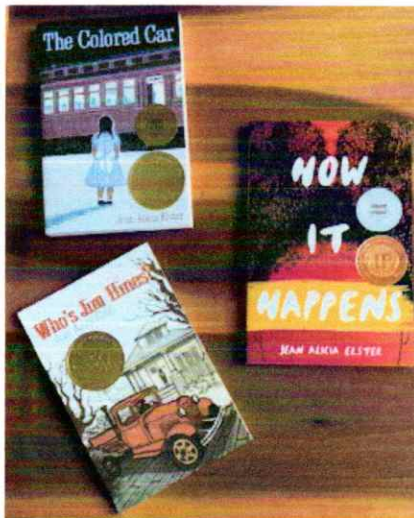


Let me begin by noting that the protagonist in *THE COLORED CAR* is actually Patsy. Jean can be called a secondary protagonist.

Now to your question! I take great pains—by conducting library and archival research, by chronicling oral histories, as well as by traveling to family homestead sites—to establish the veracity and timeline of my family's history. Geographical details that affected the family, such as the 1937 flooding from the Cumberland River in Clarksville, Tennessee, are true as well.

Yet, I strive to embed the actual family history within the fiction narrative in such a way that the reader is not aware where one ends and the other begins. The fiction embellishes and supports the history. The fiction broadens the reach of the historical context so that the narrative becomes more than *my* family story but, rather, expands to become a family story.

**When we first met, many years ago, you'd just completed *THE COLORED CAR* and were attempting to write the book that eventually became *HOW IT HAPPENS*. Even then you had considered the books a trilogy. What is the connective tissue among the three titles?**



Yes, that was, indeed, a few years ago! There are several connecting threads between the three books.

First, my grandparents' business, the Douglas Ford Wood Company, provides a consistent and realistic economic backdrop throughout the three narratives. Of course, the Ford children—the son and four daughters—are a central component, to varying degrees, within each book,

with Doug Jr., Patsy and Jean becoming protagonists in their own right.

Another prominent tie throughout the books is May Ford, whose presence increases within each book until she becomes a dominant protagonist in book three. May Ford's very light—bright as she would call it—complexion is mentioned in the first two books, but the source of that skin tone is the crux of the narrative in the first half of HOW IT HAPPENS.

### **Tell us about **Ida B. Wells-Barnett** and how she has influenced you.**

As I embarked upon my career as a professional writer, Ida B. Wells-Barnett was my role model. She was an anti-lynching crusader during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

But what drew me to her life story was the fact that she was an African American female writer who published a newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee in the 1880s and early 1890s. One of her editorials questioned one of the most common reasons given by whites for the lynchings of black men—the rape of white women—and suggested that if there had actually been a sexual liaison that the encounter was consensual or at the initiation of the white woman.

After publishing that issue, she went to New York City to visit friends and while she was there, in reaction to that editorial, a white mob destroyed her office and printing press. Friends from Memphis told her of the destruction and advised her not to return home. She moved to Chicago where she continued to write and lecture throughout the U.S. and abroad.



Photo of Ida B. Wells-Barnett through Britannica

What influenced me most about her life was the fact that she used her skills as a writer not only to earn a living in that profession but to also address issues that were pertinent to her personally as well as to American society as a whole. I have drawn encouragement from her example and strive to do the same with all of my writing projects.

### **Does your family history have more stories to tell? What's next for Jean Alicia Elster?**

There are many more untold stories within my family history! However, while the trilogy is based upon my maternal family history, my current project is a middle grade manuscript that is



based upon my paternal grandfather who was a jazz musician and composer during the 1920s and 1930s in Detroit.

A couple of summers ago, my husband and I visited many homestead sites of both my grandmother and grandfather in Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia as well as the genealogical library in Paducah, Kentucky. We also visited the campus of [Spelman College](#) where my grandmother was a student in 1921-1922.



Jean practicing for her grandfather

Because my grandfather played the alto saxophone, I began taking lessons on the alto sax just over a year ago. As anyone who has read my books can surmise, authenticity is crucial to my approach to writing historical fiction.

The oral histories that I have collected over the years (particularly some goodies my father shared in the last years of his life), the travel and the music lessons all serve as the backbone

of what I am crafting now.

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Posted by [Charlie Barshaw](#) at Friday, July 19, 2024



Labels: [Charlie Barshaw](#), [Jean Alicia Elster](#), [Writer Spotlight](#)

**2 comments:**



**Ann Finkelstein** July 19, 2024 at 8:30 AM

Jean, it's lovely to learn more about you. Charlie, thanks for another great interview.

[Reply](#)



**Christy Matthes** July 19, 2024 at 11:48 AM

Jean, thank you for sharing! I'm looking forward to your next book.



Charlie, thanks for another engaging interview.

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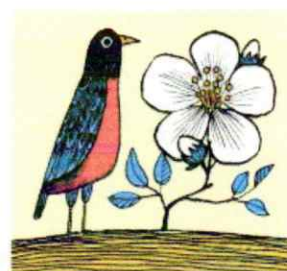
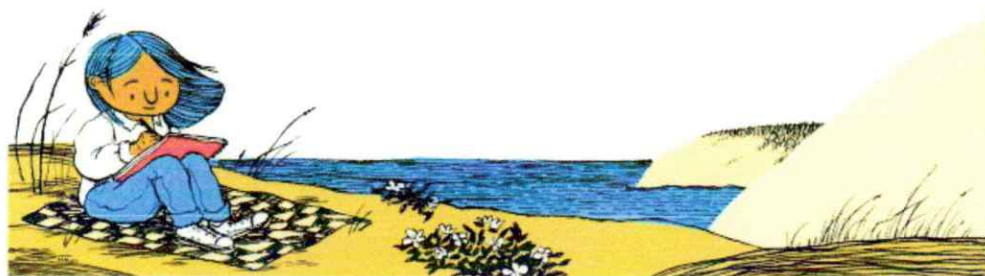
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