



Photograph by Diane Ahern

## Author Spotlight with **Samantha R. Vamos**

### **How did you come up with the idea for *Alphabet Trucks*?**

I was riding in an airport van on a highway and spotted a zipper truck. The zipper truck was moving a temporary median from one lane to another in order to accommodate traffic flow. I was enthralled. I had never seen one before. I had a pad of paper in my purse and I took it out and wrote a rhyme describing the truck's function, hoping to later entertain my then six-year-old son with the couplet I'd written. Upon reaching the airport, I had written two additional couplets about two other trucks, and by the time I had flown the five-plus hours home to Seattle, Washington, I had sketched out about half of the first draft of *Alphabet Trucks*. This "conception story," however, makes the entire process seem incredibly easy. What I haven't disclosed is that, initially, the manuscript featured both trucks and truck parts from A to Z. When complete, I sent that truck and truck parts manuscript to my agent, Jen Rofé of Andrea Brown Literary Agency. Jen replied that she'd prefer to see the manuscript feature only trucks and no truck parts. She thought that the manuscript would be far more unique. Per usual, she was correct. At that time, I had no idea there were twenty-six different trucks from A to Z, but I began researching, and now I know differently!

### **How many of the trucks featured in the book did you know before you wrote it?**

Great question. I haven't thought about that question before. Okay, I just counted the trucks I knew prior to writing the manuscript and I knew eight out of twenty-six! I knew "D" for dump truck, "P" for pickup truck, "I" for ice cream truck (a childhood favorite), "M" for mixer truck, "N" for news truck, "S" for snowplow truck, "T" for tow truck, and "Z" for zipper truck. I won't reveal more, but a favorite is the ore truck (and I adore how Ryan O'Rourke illustrated that truck full of the letter "O"). Initially, I was stumped regarding the letter "O." My wonderful Charlesbridge editor smartly noted that the "O" truck I had initially supplied wasn't the truck's formal title. I mentioned this to my husband and he quickly responded, "What about an ore truck?" He had lived in Australia for close to a year after college and had seen ore trucks there. I was able to write a rhyme that was descriptive of the ore truck and also rhymed with the couplet for the pickup truck, so his suggestion saved the day. Some ore trucks are driverless (called "autonomous"). Most have wheels that are eleven to thirteen feet tall.

## **You were a lawyer before you became a published children’s book author. What inspired you to switch career paths?**

I graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 1989 and worked in an international law firm headquartered in Washington, D.C. I was twenty-four and had been submitting manuscripts to publishing houses and agents for several years. I submitted my first story (a 300-page chapter book) when I was about twenty-years-old (I’m still working on it twenty-eight years later!). I signed with my first agent when I was twenty-six, but she was primarily an illustrator’s agent, dipping her toe into the author arena. Not so surprisingly, we didn’t sell anything together, so that arrangement culminated.

In the meantime, while working as an attorney, I wrote stories on nights and weekends. I basically wrote whenever I was inspired and could find time. At thirty-four, unagented, I sold a manuscript to the imprint of a major publishing house. Shortly thereafter, however, HarperCollins acquired that house, and while my manuscript moved over (a good sign), it was backlisted with no publication date (not a good sign). I obtained a release, continued to edit that manuscript, and signed with an agency again. By that time, I was living in Chicago and working for another international law firm, yet I was no longer litigating so I found it easier to write. I had two “almost-sales” from various publishing houses, but it was not until I turned forty (the same year I had a baby) that another manuscript sold (to Viking Children’s Books/Penguin).

At that point, I stopped working at my law firm not because I was switching career paths, but because I wasn’t able to leave my son. I cried when I resigned, and it took a long time for me to feel okay about the decision. I not only loved my job but also respected the people for and with whom I worked. It was a stimulating, challenging environment and my direct report boss was fantastic and valued my ideas. What I desperately desired was to harness the ability to clone myself so that I could both be with my son full-time and maintain my law firm job (and write in whatever spare time I naively thought possible). As that wish was impossible to fulfill and I was madly in love with my baby, I resigned and became a full-time mom and part-time writer. I know now that these are two of the best jobs in the world for me, and I’m very grateful that I can do both. And my husband deserves a lot of credit here for supporting my dreams.

## **You are an enthusiastic and tireless self-promoter—a quality that is extremely important to have as an author in this day and age. What advice can you give aspiring writers who are just starting out and who may have trouble practicing self-promotion?**

In 2011, as part of the promotion I was doing for my second book, *The Cazuela That The Farm Maiden Stirred*, which was my first with Charlesbridge and illustrator Rafael López, I wrote a “Seven Things I’ve Learned So Far” column for Chuck Sambuchino’s blog, Guide to Literary Agents. In that column I offered advice about building a platform.

I believe a multi-faceted platform can be crucial for promotion of one’s work. I’ll synopsise here: “create a website and a blog (confession: I don’t have a blog, but I want to create one at some point. Realistically, I don’t have the time to do



everything I'd like in order to promote my work so I try to focus on items or projects that will secure the most benefits); open a Facebook author/fan page; tweet on Twitter; reap the rewards of social networking sites by connecting with potential fans and people in the industry while making your name, or simply your book title, known; draft your "writer's" biography for utilization on your website and other publications; order business cards and/or postcards and hand them out as much as possible; contemplate blog tours; plan for school, conference, and library presentations and consider what you can offer in such presentations; attend industry events and network."

One easy and pleasurable thing to do is simply be supportive of others. For example, there are so many writers and illustrators whose work I admire. I am genuinely excited about sales, publications, and successes achieved by writer and illustrator friends. When I can post about a friend's success or news, I enjoy giving them the press. In the process, I also learn a lot from others. Moreover, I have had friends give me comparable publicity and I'm very grateful. I consider promotion a creative endeavor, so it's fun to me. I like the fact that there's no set template and it allows for thinking outside the box. Also, as a former litigator, I am accustomed to being direct about requests. In fact, I try to temper that nature of mine so I don't seem too direct!

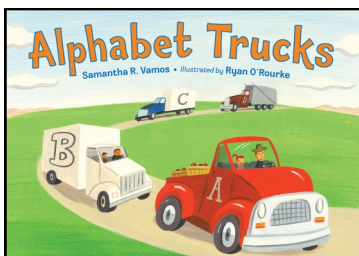
### What other projects are you working on at the moment?

I'm enhancing and revising my all-time favorite manuscript: my novel. It is the project I am closest to, yet also the manuscript I feel most intimidated by—I fear getting it wrong. I'm also trying to revise a children's picture book manuscript (my second favorite current project, which features a dog—I love dogs). And I am returning to a middle grade novel I began over fifteen years ago. It has some unique aspects and I want to see how my protagonist evolves. I've been stumped because I haven't figured out a character's motivation and, related thereto, the conflict needs further development. I'm also anticipating that a portion of this summer will be devoted to editing *Alphabet Trains*, my fourth children's picture book and third book with Charlesbridge (publication in 2015). Of course, I'll be gearing up for the August 2013 release of *Alphabet Trucks*, too. All good things! I'm extremely grateful to be able to do what I do. I'm always learning and that's another exciting part of being a writer.

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By Samantha R. Vamos

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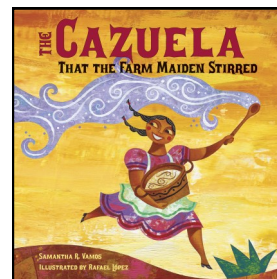


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