

Interview with YA Novelist Patti Buff

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/interview-patti-buff/>

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Patti Buff and I met in Bologna, Italy, during the [International Children's Book Fair](#) there (April 2016). She's a super nice, helpful kind of gal with an earnest twinkle in her eyes. If you don't know what an SCBWI Regional Advisor is, you're about to find out - because that's what Patti Buff is. She's that, and she's a writer of YA novels who just landed her first literary agent.

SCBWI Regional Advisor Patti Buff is a woman you'll want to meet simply because she's a creative writer and she's cool.

If you live in Germany or Austria, you need to know who she is.

Introducing Patti Buff

Patti Buff grew up in an Irish Catholic family, the tenth child out of eleven. Add to that the 200+ foster kids her family helped over the years, it's perhaps no surprise that she writes fiction for teens!

Patti's favorite shoes are comfy Mush flip-flops, which she wears all the time while at home, even in the Winter. Her favorite color is bright Spring green, but her wardrobe is filled with blues. She enjoys drinking Augustine Helles and her favorite food is the unbeatable bacon cheese burger.

Patti Buff is from Minnesota (USA), and lives now in Germany. Her favorite place in the world? It's still her mom's house. "Because it's home and most of my family is close by and come often to visit me while I'm there, which is only once every two years."

Patti is always ready with a smile and some helpful insider tips. Like most SCBWI members, she will tell you that her writing career really got started when she decided to join.

Patti Buff, artist Sanne Duft, artist Maria Bogade (in the back: artist Andrea Renner Ipaktchi) - at the SCBWI Booth, Bologna Book Fair 2016.

The [SCBWI](#) is an excellent way for writers and illustrators of children's books to network. (I'm a member myself.) Patti Buff is a writer of YA novels. She just signed with literary agent [Hannah Sheppard](#) of the [DHH Literary Agency](#).

While in Bologna, Patti and I talked about her process for approaching agents, how we write, why, and what we hope to achieve as authors. At that time, Patti had just gotten an offer from an agent - while at the book fair! [It was a very exciting time for both of us](#).

Here's our recent interview, just a couple of months later.

Chazda: Tell me, how did you get into SCBWI and how did you become a Regional Advisor?

Patti Buff: Ok – it's 2011 and I'm living on a farm in the middle of southern Germany [pictured below]. I had a plotless Women's Lit book sitting in a trunk and even though I had just finished a YA manuscript, I had no idea what to do next. Back then, our Internet connection was excruciatingly slow, but I researched the YA authors I loved and tried to glean as much knowledge from them as possible.

The farm where Patti Buff wrote her first manuscripts.

[Cassandra Clare](#), the author of **City of Bones** and countless other YA novels, mentioned she wouldn't be where she was without SCBWI. So I googled it, found the website and scared the cows with my hoots of joy when I discovered there was a Germany/Austria Region with a critique group in Munich – a mere 50 minutes away. I became a member pretty much that day.

As to how I became the Regional Advisor, that was due to the fluidity of expat membership, causing the region to have three Regional Advisors since I joined. I volunteered to be the region's Assistant Regional Advisor when [Maria Bogade](#), a wonderful illustrator and dear friend became the RA in 2013. We tag teamed all of the events with her organizing all the illustration and picture book events and me doing all the middle grade and young adult events. When she [stepped down as RA in 2015](#), I fell naturally into the role and haven't regretted it one second.

Undiscovered Voices: Discovering Patti Buff

Chazda: Your first YA novel was featured in [The Undiscovered Voices Anthology](#). What was the push that got you to send your story in for that? How has being included in the anthology affected your writing

career?

Patti: Signing with Hannah still seems like a dream. I wish REQUIEM (my Undiscovered Voices submission) was my first YA novel, but it wasn't. It was actually the third book I'd written and the second version of this story I wanted to tell about immortal Cathars. Can you tell I'm a perfectionist?

What pushed me to submit to Undiscovered Voices was I felt I had done the best job I could do on this story and knew from observation the type of exposure UV Finalists receive, so I wanted in. For me it was a final test situation.

I'd spent four years working almost full time on my writing with little to show for it and was reaching the end of my husband's patience so I decided that if REQUIEM wasn't accepted I needed to push my author career to the back burner, at least for a little while, and find a "real" job. (shudder)

And how did Undiscovered Voices affect my career? It started it. Due to being included in the anthology, I had publishing professionals contact me for the full manuscript, one of them being Hannah Shepard of DHH Literary, who I connected with not only on a professional level, but also on a personal level, during the UV Launch Party in February. We met up again in Bologna where she made me an offer. And all because of Undiscovered Voices.

Why Patti Buff Writes YA

Patti at work.

Chazda: How did you decide that it was young adult fiction you wanted to write?

Patti: I love YA. Even though I'm over forty (cough) five, I still listen to punk music, I still feel insecure about everything and I still have a problem with authority figures. So for me it seemed a natural fit.

Chazda: What is your stance on literary agents? Do you feel that they are necessary in today's book market?

Patti: I don't think they are an absolute to publishing. If an author wants to write a book and get it out there for the world to read as is, then good on 'em. But that's not for me. I'm more traditional and when I think of being an author I automatically picture physical books (even though I mostly read on my devices) and seeing my book in a bookstore. And in Target.

And to reach that level of distribution your book has to be published by one of the Big Five and to do that you need an agent. Or be the one in ten-thousand that signs a contract without an agent, but even then I'd definitely get an agent to make sure there is someone in my corner helping me with all the details like subrights and payments, etc.

Patti Buff and SCBWI

Chazda: What is it about the SCBWI that you love most? Could you discuss the types of things you do

for writers? Also, where do you see yourself in 5 years, as a member?

Patti: Community. Community and Community. I was on a farm in Germany when I started writing, where I was not only the only English speaker in our small village, but the only writer as well.

Becoming a member of SCBWI opened up the world of writing colleagues, of critique groups, of professional workshops and conferences, and most importantly, the chance to get feedback from publishing professionals. And these are the types of events I try to hold for our members on a regular basis. I try to balance craft related workshops (or webinars) with upfront critique sessions with professionals because both of them were so helpful to me when I was learning how to write.

Five years from now? I hope I won't be too old and tired to still be RA for Germany/Austria. But I will always be a member and hopefully by then have a few books published.

Chazda: What do you say (or write) to people who ask if they should join the SCBWI?

Patti's second office.

Patti: I gush about SCBWI, so better not get me started. But when people ask, I tell them the professional benefits to being a member like the discounted tuition at all events, access to critique groups around the world, to grants and awards that are only for members.

SCBWI recently produced a series of videos that do a wonderful job describing the benefits of membership. They can be found at [The SCBWI Channel on YouTube](#).

Patti Buff will be at the Frankfurt Book Fair!

Chazda: What book events do you attend and what's your favorite?

Patti: Since I'm still unpublished, I don't attend a lot of book fairs. Bologna (where we met) was my first one, so - would I be cheating by saying that's my favorite? I was on the SCBWI organizing committee for the fair so I was only there as an SCBWI Advisor. But due to members being interested in going to the [Frankfurt Book Fair](#), I will be organizing something for that as well and so will be attending that in the fall.

Chazda: Have you ever worked with an editor?

Patti: No, I haven't. I'm expecting my first editorial letter from my agent in a few weeks. Hannah used to be the Acquiring Editor for [Headline Publishing Group](#)'s YA and crossover division so she knows all about editorial letters. I'm taking bets on how long it will be. (gulp)

Inspiration for Patti Buff

Chazda: Who would you say has been your greatest inspiration in life?

Patti: Too many to list only one as I could list dozens of authors, musicians, even world leaders who've inspired me. But if I have to choose just one, I'd have to say my husband. He's been working in a creative field much longer than I have and is the hardest working person I know. His work ethic is impeccable. And he pushes himself to always do his best while also having an insatiable appetite for learning new things. From him I learned what it means to be committed, not just to a project, but also to a creative lifestyle as a whole.

Family Life as a Writer

Chazda: Tell me about your extraordinary family life, all the foster kids your folks supported and your family now - and how that impacts being a writer for you.

Patti: Good ole Irish Catholics! Yes, we had a large family, but not the largest in the community. Maybe there was something in the water in southern Minnesota? And I'm not exaggerating when I say hundreds of foster kids. My mom had counted up the number of kids we had taken in over the 7 years we did it and she came up with over 200 and she thinks she missed a few.

The kids we took in were usually only with us for emergencies. Sometimes a night, sometimes a week. Others could be longer when there just wasn't any other place for them to go. So most of them are a blur in my mind. But a few stick out, mostly those that stayed longer of course, and I do wonder what happened to them.

Luckily, one reached out to me last time I was in Minnesota. We're friends now on Facebook and I'm so happy to have her back in my life... we spent a summer together as 17 year olds and became really close.

And I do think having all those kids in my life influenced my writing. The last job I had before moving to Germany was in a group home for juvenile delinquents, so I've always had this connection to teens – especially at-risk teens. And I want to write stories where they are the heroes, so I guess the answer is a definitive YES!

My family here in Germany is very supportive of my writing career. And now that there might be some fruits of all that labor coming, they are very excited for me. The only problem is my husband's extended family wishes I wrote in German so they could read my books right away.

The YA Challenge

Chazda: What is for you the most challenging aspect of writing a YA novel?

Patti: The most challenging aspect for me was how quickly you have to get to the action. No room for backstory or a build up of drama. If there isn't a problem on the first page then you're starting your story too early!

This was a surprise for me, because I was an English major and read all the classics and was used to the slow build up. And while that did serve its purpose back in the 19th and 20th centuries, tastes have changed (for the better in my opinion) and stories start much quicker now.

Patti Buff's Future

Chazda: Are you working on another book?

Patti: When Hannah and I met in April, she asked what else I was working on so I pitched her two stories that were floating around in my head. I had about 30 pages written on one and hadn't even started the other.

Of course she liked the story I hadn't started yet the most and made a very strong case as to why that book should be my debut and not REQUIEM which was the book she'd just read and liked enough to want to work with me. So instead of doing revision on REQUIEM, I wrote a new book in ten weeks and just sent it off to her last week. I don't want to say too much, but will say that it is as different a book from REQUIEM as I think any book can be and still be called YA and fiction.

Chazda: How on earth did you write a first draft in only ten weeks!

Patti: Lots of long, hard hours alone in front of my computer, friends and family who cheered me on from the sidelines and a compulsion to see if I could do this professional writing gig or not.

I gave up reading, watching TV, cleaning the house, feeding my kids balanced meals, and basically thinking about anything that didn't have something to do with my book. And it was worth it because even if this book doesn't work, I didn't waste a whole year (or five) on it like my previous books.

Chazda: If you could read your novel to any particular person in the world, who would it be?

Patti: Excellent question! I'd love to read REQUIEM to my dad who passed away in 2003. He loved a good story and was a history buff just like me. Only he could actually remember details like names and dates while I'm absolutely hopeless with things like that.

Resources

- [Patti's Blog](#)
- [DHH Literary Agency](#) (where Patti is repped)
- [SCBWI](#)
- [SCBWI Germany/Austria](#) Website
- [Patti on Facebook](#)
- [Patti on Twitter](#)

Keep creating, no matter what.

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