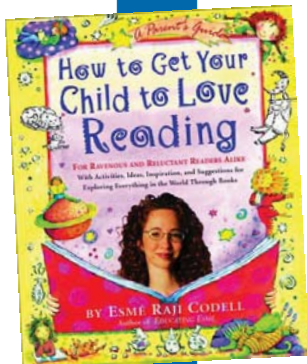


Meet the Authors

Isabel Baker

The four award-winning authors highlighted in these interviews spoke and signed books at the NAEYC 2004 Annual Conference in Anaheim in November. Their energy, intelligence, talent, and imagination have had an impact in the world of children's literature, and educators and families are grateful for their outstanding contributions. These interviews let you learn more about them.



Esmé Raji Codell, a former classroom teacher and librarian, and the author of five books, including *Educating Esmé* and *Sahara Special*, is an enthusiastic supporter of reading aloud to children. In *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading*, she suggests myriad titles, themes, and activities. Esmé runs the popular children's literature Web site www.PlanetEsme.com, where she offers suggestions for books and ways to read aloud.

Isabel Baker: *Where did you grow up? How did your family background prepare you to communicate with children?*

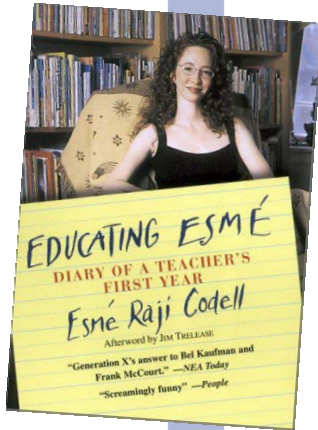
ERC: I grew up in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, with my parents and younger brother. My mother was a secretary, and my father worked as an activity director in nursing homes. Though we didn't have much money, we were always rich in books. They were treated as a necessity, like milk or eggs, and were discussed critically; my mother especially liked to talk about what worked and didn't work in a story, savoring good word choices and evocative descriptions. My father loved poetry and read aloud chapter books with great expression. Thanks to them, I grew up understanding that books are not just words on pages, they are the embodiment of something that someone is trying to share and communicate. That is why I believe children who discover the power of books will never feel as alone as a child who doesn't.

Growing up in the city allowed me to hear many unique and diverse voices and share in experiences that continue to inspire me. It also gave me a respect for all people who work, and an understanding that there are all different kinds of smart; educational background doesn't always reflect the intelligence or potential that a person has. I hope that all my writing can reflect people doing the best with what they have, children and adults alike, and give people a gateway to explore their own potential.

IB: *What were you like as a child?*

ERC: I remember my aunt calling me "the little queen," because I liked to sit quietly and listen, with my chin up in the air. Living in the city and not having a ton of freedom led me to invent other worlds in which to have adventures. I know I played with my "little people" sets for hours, making up intricate narratives about the people who lived in their little plastic town. I also enjoyed balancing on the edge of our sofa to escape a perilous fall into a fiery pit miles below or rolling myself up tightly in a blanket and awaiting rescue from being tied to railroad tracks (I also watched a lot of television; *Mighty Mouse* probably inspired that scenario).

Isabel Baker, MAT, MLS, is president of The Book Vine for Children, a national company dedicated to getting good books into the hands of preschool children and their teachers. Isabel has worked as a children's librarian and is currently a presenter on early literacy and book selection.



IB: What books influenced you as a child? As an adult?

ERC: What a delicious question! *Blueberries for Sal*, by Robert McCloskey; *Put Me in the Zoo*, by Robert Lopshire (and all in that Beginner Books series); *May I Bring a Friend?* by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers; and Richard Scarry's books, which were so busy and lively.

I loved *A Bargain for Frances*, by Russell Hoban, about two badgers who keep trying to trick each other in order to acquire the best tea set. I was so intrigued by how tricky the characters were. I used to cross out the author's name and write my own in its place, and then I would run and ask my mother to look at what I had written.

Luckily, my writing became more original as I grew older, but I did still name my son Russell after the author; I hope putting *his* name on *my* best work makes up in some measure for my early attempts at plagiarism.

I loved a series of silly books featuring characters named Rabbit and Skunk, by Carla Stevens and illustrated by Robert Kraus. They were so unpretentious and full of sound effects. I also loved a strange little book that is now out of print called *Suzuki Beane*, written by the actress Sandra Scoppetone and illustrated in black and white by Louise Fitzhugh (who later gained fame by writing the classic *Harriet the Spy*). The story was about a little beatnik girl who lived in Greenwich Village with her artist parents and meets a rich boy at school. After reciprocating play dates at which both sets of parents behave equally badly, the children decide to run away from home and form their own society, "where a square can be a square and a swinging cat could swing in peace."

The idea was so revolutionary to me, I could hardly stand it. So, you could start something? You could make something? You could fix something? You could *change* something? Even if you were just a *kid*? This book introduced me to the idea of possibility. Even though I never gathered the gumption to pick up and leave home while I was still a child, I think that book must have been in me somewhere when I became a classroom teacher, trying to create an environment where a cat could indeed swing and a square could do, well, whatever it is that squares do.

When I was older, I loved *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, by Betty Smith, and short stories by Grace Paley and Isaac Bashevis Singer. And one of the books that really influenced me growing up was *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, a collection of koans, or little fables [compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki], in which folks gain enlightenment by one route or another. I had that book since I was a preteenager, but when I got interested in boys in high school, I remembered one koan in particular, in which a boy monk passes a girl monk a note that asks her to meet him in secret, and she stands up in front of the whole class and demands that if he really loves her, he should espouse it publicly.

Well, I decided that in order to attain enlightenment, I should espouse my love publicly, so I took to baking cakes and writing "I Like You" on the frosting, and presenting it to the boys I liked. Usually the boys were mortified, and some were polite, but regardless of the reaction, I was never daunted because I figured the ancients were no dummies and because I must have had the ego of Ghengis Khan. Finally, I baked a cake and presented it to a man I fell in love with in college, and he sat down and ate every bite of it, right in front of me. I married him promptly, and we will celebrate our eighteenth anniversary this November.

The love I tend to espouse publicly these days is my love of children's literature, and that truly is one delicious cake, and one that I hope people will eat up to the last crumb. I wrote *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading* with the hope that it will guide adults as much as children into this wonderful world. Truly, I do not often like to read things that are written for an audience

over twelve years old anymore. People think I'm kidding, but I'm not. For a book to succeed for children, it has to be so succinct, the pacing has to be so engaging, the writing has to be strong and clear and say what it means to say. And when paired with the right illustrations, *whoooo!* A great children's book is a thing of beauty.

IB: *Was there a special adult or mentor in the development of your career?*

ERC: Besides my parents, I met many inspiring and empowering people: my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Schultz taught me how wonderful school can be; my high school English teacher Mrs. Robinson taught me all the formal aspects of writing; my former boss Andy Laties, owner of the Children's Bookstore in Chicago, taught me how to read a story to a group; and my fiery cooperating teacher Ismene Siteles, who I wrote about in my book *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*, and many diligent professors of education at Northeastern Illinois University prepared me for teaching in inner-city public schools.

As far as writing goes, one of my mentors from a distance is Beverly Cleary. I am always so moved by the emotional gravity and respect she gives to children's lives, and how things that seem so funny to grown-ups can be very serious to children. Every time I read one of her books, I find something new to admire and learn from. I dedicated my first novel for children, *Sahara Special*, to her. I think I would be a very different reader and writer if it were not for what she put forth into the world.

IB: *What is your work schedule, and where do you work?*

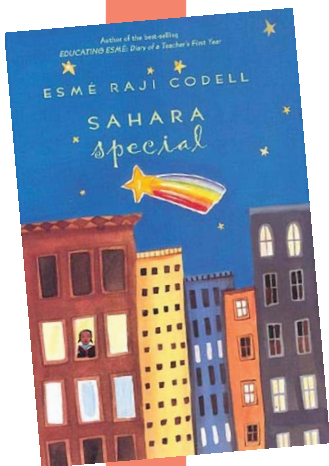
ERC: I wish I were one of those authors who wrote all morning before taking a nice stroll in the woods. Unfortunately, as far as writing books goes, it's a bit of a hectic catch-as-catch-can these days as I am spinning many plates. I recently started homeschooling my nine-year-old son, so I try to be available to him during the day. Then I am in the midst of a pretty big project: using my private collection, I am opening a reading room, a children's literature salon for my community, where teachers and parents can look at the best new books; attend seminars, storytimes, and author/illustrator events; and find the support they need to make literacy happen for their children.

I am also very busy with coding and content for my Web site, www.PlanetEsme.com, which has 25 distinct thematic pages, and also a "Don't Miss" page that regularly features reviews of the very best brand spanking new children's literature.

I used to work in the hallway of our small apartment, scrunched up in a corner, but now I try to write in the reading room. Late at night or very early in the morning, I work on new books for many hours at a stretch. Many things I write for joy or memory, but when I find I have something to say that I wish someone had said to me, or that makes me laugh, I try to put it out there. I do not feel any real urgency to have my books published, because I know how many great books already exist in the world that have yet to be truly discovered and appreciated. I try to balance my time between writing my own books and cheerleading for books by other authors.

IB: *How do children's books today reflect current culture? How has this influenced your writing?*

ERC: I look upon the smiling face of Fred Rogers every day. I always loved children's television, including local programming from Chicago, like *The Ray Rayner Show* and *Garfield Goose*. I loved the easy banter of the hosts, and the way they used what they had to get their points across. These kinds of folks inform my whole educational philosophy, "potato pedagogy," or making the most of what you have, and TV is definitely something we have.



I know TV and books are said to compete with each other and that media has changed since I was a child. Even when a book is not a TV or movie spin-off or a celebrity-written work, it often seems overproduced, more garishly illustrated, and not tightly edited, mirroring a lot of what's on television. I don't know if an author/illustrator like Leo Lionni could make a name in today's market as a featured author.

On the other hand, I don't think my writing could have reflected life in an urban classroom as frankly if I had been published 30 years ago; and we have more positive multicultural representation in both print and visual media today.

I think that media can only influence culture to the extent that we allow it. It's true that there is a lot of explicit garbage, but I think responsible adults should help children develop criteria for excellence in all media. It's the job of adults to create unstructured periods of calm in which children can use their imaginations, take time to explore the work of others, and be with friends. By creating a balance in our homes and being familiar with material before presenting it to children whenever possible, I have faith that we can offer children the best of both the old-fashioned and the new-fangled.

IB: *What roles does humor play in children's books?*

ERC: Humor makes children's books realistic. Children see the humor and the absurdity in so much! A book needs some measure of it to mirror the world with accuracy.

IB: *What is your most memorable school visit?*

ERC: Thanks to a flexible work schedule, I was able to visit my son's classroom to read aloud every week when he was in the second grade. One week I had a terrible cold and was struggling when I got to page three of Kay Winters's *Abe Lincoln: The Boy Who Loved Books*. My son noticed and discreetly got up and said, "Let me take over." I thanked him but resisted, because there were over 30 kids in the room and I wasn't sure if he would have enough command. But he pulled the book out of my hands, held it up so the children could see the pictures, turned his head sideways to read, and proceeded with the most amazing Kentucky accent I have ever heard. He had learned sight vocabulary thanks to nightly read-alouds, but this was something different. It made me think of Becky Bloom's book *Wolf!* in which a wolf learns that reading isn't about sounding out words, it's about sharing a story with others. The day my son read aloud to his class was the day we both realized he was a real reader.

Though that incident holds a special place in my heart, I have so many wonderful memories of children doing crafts and holding them up proudly, of reading next to a small lamp with the children listening so intently that I can hear a clock tick out of the corner of my ear. I don't really have one best memory, it's just a collective warm feeling of time spent with children and books, and a gratitude that I get to do that as part of my work.

IB: *What are some of your favorite questions young children ask?*

ERC: Young children like to ask me things that don't have anything to do with what I might have just read to them. Many ask me where I bought my dress, or whether I like butterflies, or use the opportunity to tell me that their tooth is loose or that their grandparent died or that they are line captain this week. While, frankly, such an incongruous line of questioning took a little getting used to, I have grown to appreciate that children are very in the moment and want to connect personally in their own way, naturally veering away from questions that have right or wrong answers (so opposite of what many children experience at school!).

One of my favorite questions was from a little girl who asked, “What can I do to help other children learn to read?” I knew I was talking to a very special spirit.

IB: *Does one disastrous experience stand out as memorable on your way to success?*

ERC: Teaching under a terrible principal in a dangerous and wild city school was a very important experience. If I had worked in a swank, homogenous school with all progressive approaches, I wouldn't have understood how far we really are from equal education in this country, the pressures so many teachers, parents, and children face, or felt the need to share the diary of my experiences so others could compare it to their own situations. I always wrote, but teaching is what motivated me to try to get published.

IB: *What is your favorite way to spend your free time?*

ERC: I love working on my Web site (I know it's my job, but I do it for fun too), reading, spending time with friends and family, gardening, listening to records, throwing little parties, exploring the city, watching TV (all right, I said it!), and wandering the aisles at my favorite discount store.

IB: *Is there anything else you want to tell us—a word, story, or anecdote for children, parents, or teachers?*

ERC: I am wholly inspired by the work of John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed. By doing the small act of planting a seed every day, he changed the landscape of this country. I think that is a perfect metaphor for reading aloud, which is also one small thing we can do every day for children that would change the landscape of this country.

I talk about this hero and more in my book *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading* in the hopes it will get people thinking about and celebrating folks who played a role in their reading life story, and how they can be a supporting character for somebody else. I just want to say that I think anyone can be a child's best teacher using children's literature.

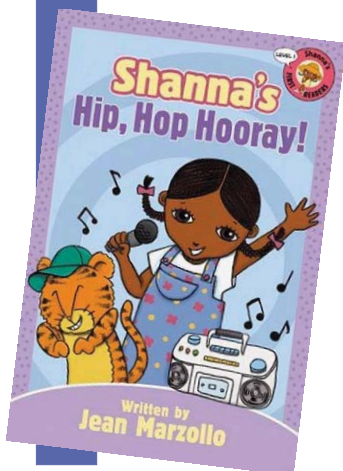


Jean Marzollo is the award-winning author of more than 100 books for children, including the popular I Spy series and the acclaimed Shanna's First Readers series. She is an early childhood expert, a former teacher, and the former editor of Scholastic's kindergarten magazine *Let's Find Out*. Jean's latest passion is to retell and illustrate Bible stories such as *Jonah and the Whale (and the Worm)* and *Daniel in the Lions' Den*.

IB: *Where did you grow up? How did your background prepare you to communicate with children?*

JM: My earliest memory is of crazy grown-ups, including my parents, dancing around a bonfire at the bottom of our street. Some of them threw their shoes into the fire! Why would grown-ups do that? Later in life, I realized that they were celebrating the end of World War II. It was 1945, and I was three.

I was born in and grew up in Manchester, Connecticut, just east of Hartford. People in Manchester struggled to pay their bills. We didn't have a bookstore, but we had a nice town library with a large children's room. If I went there now, I could show you exactly where the Betty Cavanaugh



romances were that I read as a teenager. Going to the library was routine. At my mother's funeral a woman came up to me and said, "You don't remember me," and I replied, "Yes, I do. You're the librarian."

In my family we read because we liked to read. My Irish mother loved poetry and her favorite book to read to us was *A Child's Garden of Verses*, by Robert Louis Stevenson. Sometimes we had a fire in the fireplace and read poetry aloud as a family. My sister's poem was "Little Orphan Annie"; mine was "My Shadow." Clearly, these magical, intimate moments appealed to me. Perhaps they are why I write so often in rhythm and rhyme.

My father was 100 percent Vermont Yankee, with a great sense of humor and a genuine appreciation for individuality. If I wanted to do something different for a school report, he would encourage me to take the risk. He taught me that it was fine to be different, original, creative.

IB: *What were you like as a child?*

JM: I was observant. When I was four, I went with other kids in the neighborhood to a play group run for a short while by a neighbor. We sat in a circle in her basement, and when she asked, "What does your father do?" I said, "My father doesn't do anything. He goes to Hartford every day, and my mother stays home and does all the work."

I didn't have lessons or programmed after-school activities. I walked home from school with my friends, and we played in each other's houses. One of our favorite activities was playing school. When I write the Shanna Show books, I remember that. I liked being the teacher; so does Shanna.

IB: *What books influenced you as a child? As an adult?*

JM: I loved books that fed my imagination with startling new images. My favorites were *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes*, *Many Moons*, *The Golden Egg Book*, and *Make Way for Ducklings*. When I was older, I loved *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mary Poppins*.

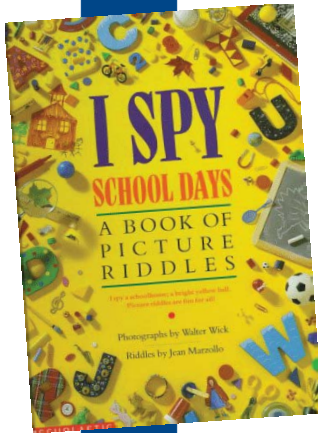
Today I love any well-written story with an interesting plot that introduces me to places I've never been. *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and others in that series by Alexander McCall Smith are good examples.

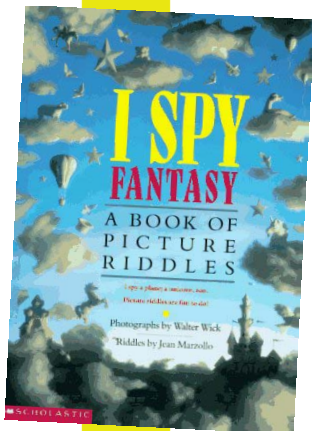
Curiously, I don't write the kind of stories that I loved as a child. I guess I write to teach, and I hope I write well. The author who most inspires me is Margaret Wise Brown, who studied children in classroom settings. Her study of children inspired her poetry.

IB: *Was there a special adult or mentor in the development of your career?*

JM: For 20 years I was the editor of *Let's Find Out*, Scholastic's early childhood magazine. I was fortunate to work with an outstanding art director, Carol Devine Carson, and with superlative early childhood advisers. From Dorothy Cohen of Bank Street College, I learned to meet the developmental needs of children with rich, concrete details. From Bernard Spodek of the University of Illinois and a past president of NAEYC, I learned how traditional stories can be told in ways that help children become socialized into contemporary culture. From Ursula Davis, kindergarten teacher, I learned how a fabulous, child-centered kindergarten can be run. From Leslie Williams, a professor at Teachers College, I learned about multicultural education. From Ellen Booth Church, an early childhood expert, I learned how educational games and songs enable children to express their active, artistic minds.

I am grateful that I was editor of *Let's Find Out*. Each year I learned more and more about children, and ever since I have drawn on that experience to create my books. *I Spy* grew out of *Let's Find Out*. It has all the qualities that my mentors taught me.





IB: *What is your work schedule, and where do you work?*

JM: When my two sons were growing up, I was lucky to be able to work at home. I worked at home while they were at school and became used to that daily schedule. Now that they are grown, I tend to start later and work later. I rarely work at night or on weekends. I am very disciplined to work every day. I usually have several projects going on, so if one isn't working I'll switch to another.

As a child, I loved playing office, and I still feel that way. I've always liked to have a desk with paper, envelopes, tape, paper clips, a stapler, and so on. I even like to file! When I was about eight, I sent away for tourism catalogs so I would have important looking papers to file. About 10 years ago I started painting and added a painting studio onto my office. Early childhood people like to say that play is a child's work. In my home office, my work is my play.

IB: *How do children's books today reflect current culture? How has this influenced your writing?*

JM: Books get branded today. Companies morph them into products of varying quality. Teachers need to realize that authors don't necessarily have control over these products. Both *I Spy* and *Shanna* have been made into TV shows and *I Spy* has also been adapted for games, CD-ROMS, and other products.

As the author of the original books, I have mixed feelings about this experience. To the extent that the branded products hold true to my original goals for the books, I am happy. I am especially thrilled with the *I Spy* CD-ROMS, the Briarpatch *I Spy* games, and *Shanna's TV Show*, and I am grateful to their creators for listening intently to my advice and then going ahead with their own skills to make excellent products.

Children are so open. They deserve the best. I test many of my books with children in classroom settings. I want to see what they like, what bores them, what makes them laugh, what's too hard to understand, and so forth. I want to make sure that my books honor kids.

When I watch some of today's popular children's TV shows, I am appalled at the characters' rude language and actions and at the shallow, self-centered feelings given to children. I don't like these shows. I can't watch them. I couldn't write for them.

IB: *What role does humor play in children's books?*

JM: Children love to laugh, so whenever I can, I put humor in my books. Not all books invite humor, however. The *I Spy* books, for example, are enormously fun for children, but they are not actually funny. *Shanna's First Readers* are rife with humor. As I write them, I hear *Shanna* and her sidekicks say things. It's almost as if I'm watching real children (the child in me included) act out the story and I'm taking down dictation.

IB: *What is your most memorable school visit?*

JM: My favorite school visit last year was when I introduced *Shanna's Hip, Hop Hooray* for the first time to second-graders. They immediately caught the spirit and read it aloud with hip-hop rhythm and sway. That was so much fun and so rewarding for me! Here's how that book starts:

Welcome to the Shanna Show!
Everyone is good to go.
Hands, clap.
Fingers, snap,
Toes, tap.
We rap!

When I visit schools, I show a slide of the Balloon Popper in *I Spy School Days*. (This wonderful photograph by Walter Wick, called “Levers, Ramps, and Pulleys,” is also in *I Spy Gold Challenger*.) I ask for a volunteer to come up and explain how the Balloon Popper machine works. I watch for the most confident hand in the air.

Usually teachers and librarians are clueless about this picture because they’ve never stopped to scrutinize it. But some kids have, even kindergartners. My volunteer comes up, takes the mike, and explains step by step what’s going on in the photo. Sometimes the child can’t speak English well so I supply the nouns: clothespins, funnel, checker. Once a teacher came up and told me that the boy I picked had a full-time aide because he is violent. I remember him as one of the most articulate Balloon Popper explainers I ever selected.

IB: *What are some of your favorite questions young children ask?*

JM: “How old are you?” I tell them the truth, and they go “Ooo-oooh,” and then it’s over with. What’s the big deal? To paraphrase Gloria Steinem, “This is what 62 looks like.”

I used to tell kids that when I was young, we didn’t have TV, computers, Gameboys, PlayStation, videos, cell phones, CDs, and DVDs. One day a child asked, “Did you have electricity?” So I don’t spout my pitiful list anymore. The world is electronic and digital; kids can’t imagine it otherwise.

IB: *Does one disastrous experience stand out as memorable on your way to success?*

JM: I’ve written many, many easy-to-read books. The Shanna readers and the I Spy readers are the latest examples. I have also written a series of science readers, one of which is *I Am a Seed*. In this book, a marigold seed and a pumpkin seed discuss their development as plants. At one point the pumpkin seed says, “My petals died. I’m round and green.” In the first edition, that page read, “My petals died. Now I have green balls!” Unfortunately, it wasn’t until I read the printed book aloud to children and heard their howls that I realized that the phrase “green balls” was a big mistake.

IB: *What is your favorite way to spend your free time?*

JM: I like watercolor painting, reading, swimming, going for walks, enjoying my husband’s Italian cooking, and of course being with my friends and family.

IB: *Is there anything else you want to tell us—a word, story, or an anecdote for children, parents, or teachers?*

JM: The most exciting development in my career is that I’ve started to illustrate my books. So, far I’ve written and illustrated *Ten Little Eggs* for Harper and four Bible story books for Little, Brown: *Daniel in the Lions’ Den*, *Miriam and Her Brother Moses*, *David and Goliath*, and *Jonah and the Whale (and the Worm)*. I love the Bible stories. They are rich with memorable characters, important moral lessons, exciting drama, and, in my retellings, a bit of humor, too. To look at all of my books, you can go to www.jeanmarzollo.com.

I adore painting. Do I wish that I had studied it when I was younger? Yes, but I didn’t. But that’s the way life is—you never know what exciting new development will happen. So far I’ve had four careers: teacher, editor, author, and now illustrator. What’s next?



Rosemary Wells, award-winning author and illustrator of dozens of children's books, is the creator of the familiar and unforgettable characters Max, Ruby, Yoko, Timothy, and McDuff, to name just a few. Her appealing illustrations are instantly recognizable, and her books, such as *Yoko*, *Timothy Goes to School*, and *Voyage to the Bunny Planet*, are favorites of both children and adults. Rosemary's latest book, *My Kindergarten*, provides stories and activities as it follows a kindergarten class through the entire year.

IB: *Where did you grow up? How did your family background prepare you to communicate with children through your books?*

RW: I grew up on the New Jersey shore when it was a simple, rural place. I spent most days outdoors in the swamp or woods, and in summertime I stayed by the ocean all day. We had no air conditioning, so we ate supper on the beach on hot summer nights.

We had no TV in the forties or fifties so we read a lot of books. Children's books were limited in number, so we read our favorites again and again. My parents were theater people and European. I was a blessed child, for their love came before anything. I appreciated their easygoing liberal outlook, attention, and culture; their love of words, books, and good music; and their unhesitant opinionativeness!

My parents loved what I wrote and drew. They left me alone and never thought of promoting my young efforts beyond hanging the odd drawing on the mantelpiece with thumbtacks.

IB: *What were you like as a child?*

RW: I was a dreamy yet very assertive and confident child. I wanted to be a baseball player when I grew up. I did not like the popular crowd but did not feel its heat until high school.

IB: *What books influenced you as a child? As an adult?*

RW: I loved fairy tales and books by the authors Robert Lawson, Beatrix Potter, Arthur Rackham, Carolyn Keene (Nancy Drew books), Hilaire Belloc, and others. My favorite book as an adult is Jack Finney's *Time and Again*. I listen to Tony Hillerman books on tape while I draw. I read constantly.

IB: *Was there a special adult or mentor who comes to mind when thinking about the development of your career?*

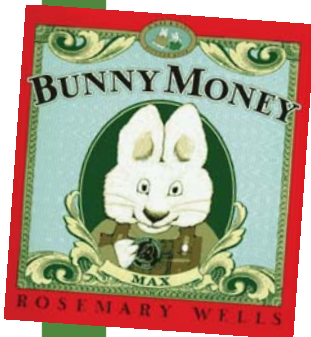
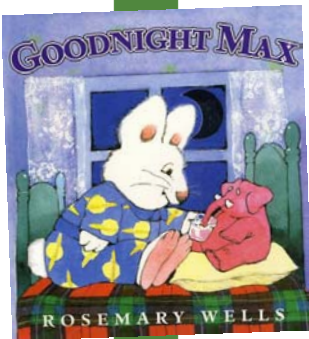
RW: No. It all just came to me because I had the gift inborn.

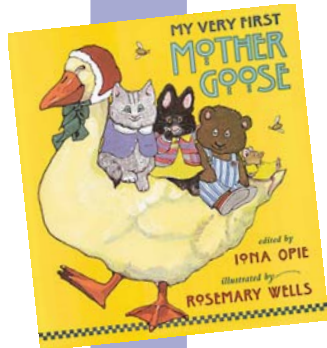
IB: *What is your work schedule, and where do you work?*

RW: I work in a studio in my home in Connecticut. I work from 8 a.m. through about 3 p.m., five or more days a week.

IB: *How do children's books today reflect current culture? How has this influenced your writing?*

RW: Current culture has not influenced my writing. It is my belief that today's movies, video games, and most TV for children are a cultural Love Canal. Innocence in the American child reached its peak in the fifties and did not last into this century. Historically that gilded age didn't last all that long—somewhere from the twenties through the eighties. Before that children were either seen and not heard or "in the mills." Innocence as I knew it has vanished from the American childhood.





In large part children's mass culture in our age is manipulated by large companies that spend millions of dollars marketing to children. Unlimited, unselective screen viewing causes children to grow up not using their imaginations. When it includes violence and inappropriate sexual material, it can be responsible for a breakdown in societal values. Violence and inappropriate sexual material is available to the youngest child and is given the bewitching patina of "cool." The further away children's literature stays from mass children's culture, the better it will remain.

IB: *What role does humor play in children's books?*

RW: It makes the reader come back for more.

IB: *Does one disastrous experience stand out as memorable on your way to success?*

RW: The shipping company once lost the art for an entire book. I had to do it over. It was better the second time. I eliminated all the mistakes that I had left in.

IB: *What is your favorite way to spend your free time?*

RW: I travel a lot. I like to visit Europe because European cities are "eye-baths" for artists. I also love to cook and spend time with my family. I like to walk on the beach with my Westie, Sophie.

IB: *Is there anything else you want to tell us—a word, a story, or anecdote for children, parents, or teachers?*

RW: Message to parents: Provide more books than TV every day of the week, and your child will grow up smart and independent of commercial and peer group forces.



Mo Willems is a six-time Emmy Award-winning writer and animator for *Sesame Street* and the creator of *Sheep in the Big City* for Cartoon Network. When he turned his excellent writing and illustrating skills to his first book for children, the result was the Caldecott Honor book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*. This year the adventure and the humor continue in *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog*.

IB: *Where did you grow up? How did your family background prepare you to communicate with children?*

MW: I was raised by Dutch immigrants in a house down the street from a seedy New Orleans blues bar. My father quit his job to become a full-time potter when my hausfrau mother became a corporate attorney.

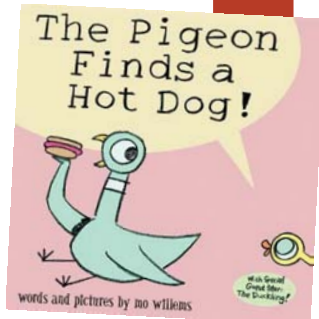
IB: *What were you like as a child?*

MW: Shorter, younger, sadder, and more intense than I am now. Also, back then I didn't have hair, like, all over my face and arms and stuff; but I do now, and that's really neat. Sorry, what was the question again?

IB: *What books influenced you as a child? As an adult?*

MW: Good grief! Those Peanuts collections that sold for 50 cents or so in the drugstores blew my mind as a kid. The star of the strip was an unhappy boy named Charlie Brown. Wow! Finally, someone wasn't lying to me about childhood! And it was funny! With beautiful drawings! God bless Charles Schulz and that little round-headed boy.

Now, I primarily read Arab and Central Asian history with a sprinkling of collected 1960s and '70s Spiderman comics.



IB: *Was there a special adult or mentor in the development of your career?*

MW: Although I've received wonderful support from myriad people, no mentors ever took me under their wings. Probably the seminal moment of my career occurred in eighth grade when Mrs. Laboisse demanded that her students have a good "general fund of knowledge" and quizzed us weekly on the contents of the Sunday newspaper. My world immediately expanded, and I became fascinated by events and people around the globe.

IB: *What is your work schedule, and where do you work?*

MW: Until recently, I had to fit my picture book writing and drawing in with my responsibilities as a head writer for a cartoon series, which was nuts. Having escaped the clutches of grinding out TV, I'm content to spend my days in my Brooklyn studio, where I merrily write and draw in the morning, lunch with my family, take the dog for long walks, and conduct business in the afternoon. That's the idea, anyway.

IB: *How do children's books today reflect current culture? How has this influenced your writing?*

MW: The hidden yet pervasive theme in my picture books is failure. Popular culture for young people incessantly shrieks "YOU CAN DO ANYTHING!" but any reasonable four-year-old (who doesn't have superpowers, can't fly, and isn't a princess in a castle) realizes that's a crock. Children constantly, humanly, fail from the time they wake until they're dragged to bed (they even fail to stay up late!). I try to illuminate and celebrate these daily failures; they are what adults and kids have most in common.

IB: *What role does humor play in children's books?*

MW: You can't get more true than funny, so I shoot for maximum funny. It's up to my audience to decide if I've succeeded.

IB: *What is your most memorable school visit?*

MW: Actually, this is the story of my first-ever book signing. New York City's Books of Wonder was kind enough to ask me to join Lane Smith and Laurie Keller in plugging our projects. As I looked at the sizable crowd, a darling little girl, clutching a book tightly in her arms, slowly marched up to me, her face filled with tearful admiration. This was obviously the highlight of her young life. Time slowed as she reached my table and broke into a beautiful smile. Then, still in slow motion, her father leaned down into my field of vision and said to her, "Nnnnnooooooo. LLLaaaaannnnne Smmmiittthhh iissss ooovveerrrrr tthhheerrre . . ."

Time snapped back as the girl shot me the nastiest expression I have ever seen and marched over to Lane's table, leaving me to spend the rest of the session twiddling my thumbs and feeling guilty for not being Lane Smith.

IB: *What are some of your favorite questions young children ask?*

MW: My daughter once asked me if I love her. I got to say, "More than anything in the world." That was cool.

IB: *Does one disastrous experience stand out as memorable on your way to success?*

MW: I was asked by Cartoon Network to come up with some ideas for a cartoon show and diligently worked on two ideas, one about a boy trapped on Mars, and the other about a superhero Vice President. When the network executives flew into New York, they told me they were very excited to hear my ideas; anything was possible, except shows about outer



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space or superheroes. Stuck without anything to pitch, I made up some stuff and took them out to dinner.

The result was an animated sketch comedy show called *Sheep in the Big City*, which premiered the next year.

IB: *What is your favorite way to spend your free time?*

MW: The perfect day would consist of a long walk in Prospect Park with my family, followed by a plate of my wife's Bolognese, a glass of wine, and some tomato, mozzarella, and basil (the tomatoes and basil picked from our garden).

Usually, I spend my free time devising clever plans to get out of doing the dishes.

IB: *Is there anything else you want to tell us—a word, a story, or anecdote for children, parents, or teachers?*

MW: Once upon a time, there were 3,472 Little Pigs. By the time they finished high school, their mother was more than eager to kick them out of her cramped studio apartment into the big, bad world to make houses of their own.

Well, the first Little Pig built a house out of straw. The second Little Pig built a house out of sticks. The third Little Pig built a house of bricks. The fourth Little Pig built a house out of steel. The fifth Little Pig built a house out of aluminum siding (which costs less than you think!). The sixth Little Pig built a house out of all those catalogs he got in the mail. You get the idea.

One day, the Big, Bad Wolf came to the door of the first Little Pig's straw house. He grinned a sharp, toothy grin and called out in a deep voice, "Little Pig, Little Pig! Let me in!"

The Little Pig peeked out of the window, took one look at the Big, Bad Wolf and said, "Sure."

The Little Pig opened the door, the Big Bad Wolf strode right in, and they spent a lovely evening playing backgammon and watching a documentary about Ghengis Khan.

The end. And the moral is: You Never Know.