

Making Music of Ordinary Days: *Big Talk* with Paul Fleischman

With *I Am Phoenix* and the Newbery Medal-winning *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, Paul Fleischman effectively devised a new genre of children's literature. "Social, not solo," in the author's words, these collections of verbal duets might best be described as performance art. Perhaps because it's difficult to categorize them, critics and the reading public took a while to embrace the books.

Though Fleischman prefers breaking new ground to repeating himself or others, he found himself hungering to write more multi-voice poetry. He found the needed challenge in writing longer poems scored for a quartet of speakers. The result is *Big Talk: Poems for Four Voices*, a volume of toe-tapping, tongue-flapping poems illustrated by Beppe Giacobbe and published by Candlewick Press.

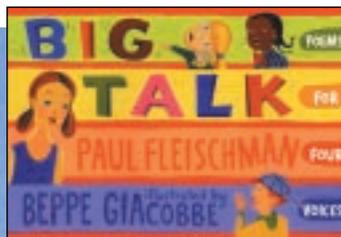
Do-it-yourself entertainment

"The idea for *Big Talk* came years ago," says Fleischman. "I was staying with friends who kept a box of graces on the table—blessings for the meal, taken from many sources. Before dinner each night, one of us would pull out a card and read. My friends' daughter was taking first-year French that year. With her in mind, I composed a grace for four voices that named the common fruits and vegetables in French." That cozy incident laid the framework for "Ghosts' Grace," the final poem in the book. The kitchen table setting provided the setting for the book as a whole.

"Families used to play games together and make music together. We did both all through my childhood. I wanted to give families something they could perform together—not in Carnegie Hall, but around the table. My first idea for a title was actually *Kitchen Table Quartet*."

The camaraderie of chamber music

After spending years alone on the piano bench, Fleischman took up the alto recorder, joined a recorder consort, and fell in love with the camaraderie of chamber music. At age 40, he began playing the violin and joined his first string quartet. "It was absolute bliss. I couldn't believe I was making that wonderful string quartet sound. Duets are



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fun, but quartets are even more fun. I've tried to bring that bliss into the book."

The three poems had very different origins. "The Quiet Evenings Here" was written as a performance piece for old-timey musician David Holt, a master of body percussion. The poem was performed at a party, with Holt rendering on his body all the sounds mentioned in the poem.

"Seventh Grade Soap Opera" is a simplified version of a similar poem written about adults, not teenagers. "I considered writing a whole body of multi-voice pieces that would be much more complicated than those I'd published—pieces that would need musical notation and rehearsal. I'd put a troupe together and we'd go off performing. It never happened, but I did write this piece."

Potential for chaos

What are the challenges of writing a book like *Big Talk*? "First and foremost," says the author, "I wanted it to be fun, not frustrating. Because there's no musical notation, the rhythm had to be self-evident, as in a Dr. Seuss book." Four voices also meant more potential for chaos. He found he had to simplify his early drafts.

The book was tested on many readers, including a group of reading teachers at a convention. "They flunked," Fleischman wryly observes. "Which told me that I had to make the instructions clearer. I ended up revising them many times."

A re-creation of childhood

A grateful Fleischman says he grew up in a home filled with books, music, and creative energy. Besides family games and music, there was a family printing press and family reading when his father, children's author Sid Fleischman, read aloud from his latest chapter. "*Big Talk* is really a re-creation of my childhood. Many of my books have both come out of those evenings in the living room and gone back into them—books that can give others the same experience of family synergy."

Whether you gather with family, friends, or unexpected dinner guests—around the kitchen table, on the front stoop, or in the classroom—these rousing, rib-tickling poems will fill you full of the joys of reading and being together.



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