

A Q&A with Author-Illustrator Timothy Basil Ering

Which came first: the art or the story?



PHOTO BY JENNIFER ERING

The art came first. *Snook Alone* had just been released, which led to an invitation to the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C. There, I was involved in an illustrator's

workshop. I was giving short painting demonstrations, creating random images to show my process. During one of the sessions, when my editor Karen Lotz was present, I painted a frog. She later commented that she liked my frog and hinted that it would be a fun character for a book. That was enough inspiration for me! That very day, I decided that I would somehow use that frog in my next book. Alas, I needed a story. When the story finally came a year later, it was in bits and pieces. I needed to create more art to help me write, and my writing helped me illustrate.

What was your inspiration for the story?

I stewed and I searched for months to come up with a story for that little frog. One day I realized that the inspiration was right beneath my nose, thanks to the amazing imaginations of my two sons. Wielding wooden toy swords I made with them in my studio, they fearlessly battled all sorts of inanimate objects—lamps, chairs, trees, stumps, even flowers and tomato plants. To my boys in battle, these objects were fierce creatures of some sort. When their bedrooms turned dark, however, this fearlessness ebbed. My two warriors would scramble from their beds to their

“safe spot,” and many times, due to lack of space from small knees in my back and hands in my face, I slept with one arm braced on the floor to keep from falling out of my bed. It was clearly time to share a secret I developed as a young boy to make my scary dreams fun. The trick that helped me stay in my own bed throughout the night was to make friends with the monsters in my dreams, somehow converting them into nicer creatures. A year after painting that frog at the National Book Festival, I finally had a story. I decided that the frog would be the main character, a metaphor for my boys and any other children who are *almost* fearless.

How did you create the illustrations? Can you walk us through your creative process?

My writing inspires my art, just as my art inspires my writing. When I'm first creating my illustrations, I begin by soaking my paper with color. Then, hopefully fearlessly, I scribble and sketch into the paper and the paint, sometimes while they are still wet. My scribbling is very loose. I'm always looking into the paper, watching for characters and their environments to emerge. I search and stumble over layers, continuously experimenting with facial expressions, gestures, shapes, lighting, color, and so on. This helps my writing because painting and drawing can create wonderful moods, sometimes moods that my writing is lacking. My writing in the beginning is long and descriptive. When I'm staring into fields of color, descriptive writing helps me imagine what I'd like my illustrations to look like. Eventually it gets edited down as the art alone begins to tell the story. I constantly go back and forth with writing, painting, and drawing and sooner or later, after lots of hard work and editing, the book falls into place.

How did you begin to visualize young Hamilton Squidlegger? Does he remind you of anyone in particular?

Hamilton took on many frog shapes, attitudes, and colors in my drawings and paintings. I knew all along that he couldn't be *just any* frog, but rather a unique species of frog. I began to draw him with long spindly legs, and he soon became Hamilton Squidlegger. Hamilton Squidlegger reminds me of my two boys. I was also thrilled to hear that from the very beginning, Hamilton's personality reminded Maryellen Hanley, the designer of this book, of her almost fearless dog!

Are you almost fearless? What is something that you are scared of?

I'm far from fearless. If I'm atop super-high places, I have awfully scary thoughts of falling. I also am scared of high speeds and being trapped in tiny spaces. I'm a huge believer in facing fears, but I don't mind avoiding these particular ones. Unless, for example, I had to rappel down a

ten-thousand-foot cliff to avoid a raging forest fire. Then I'd face the fear. I love the ocean, and I'm always on it or in it, but for years I used to wonder what I would do if I encountered a large shark while snorkeling, diving, or surfing. One day, while snorkeling near a remote island in the Bahamas, it happened. A big bull shark swam up to within ten feet of me. I wish I could say that my bedtime trick of making friends with the monster worked, but in this case I thought it would be best not to try. I slowly swam back to my boat and tried to stay calm, even as I looked under me and saw not just one, but three sharks! When I made it to the boat, I was thrilled.

Public speaking is a different kind of fear that I battled for years. I had to tackle that fear head-on because I wanted so badly to accept invitations to schools, libraries, and bookstores and share stories with all of the wonderful people in the book world. Overcoming fears is without a doubt one of the most rewarding experiences in life!

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