

A Q&A with Betsy Bird and Julie Danielson

What was it like to collaborate on this book? Describe the writing process between you two and Peter.

BETSY: It's funny but I felt like our process was as smooth as silk. First we brainstormed a bunch of stories that we wanted to include. Then we parceled them into different categories and chapters. As we did so, a theme began to emerge. Certainly all three of us are fans of subversive children's books in some fashion. Once we'd hammered down a thesis of some sort, we assigned chapters. We found that our writing voices, though distinctive on our blogs, melded together effortlessly on the page. Jules was the one who always kept us on track with her online forms, while Peter and I frittered away our deadlines. Then it was just a matter of sending one another our chapters, getting notes, amending our writing, and putting it all together. There was a lot of back and forth. I now have a healthy respect for writing collaborators of the past who didn't have e-mail at their fingertips. What on earth did they do?

JULIE: It was a wonderful experience for me, and I learned a lot from Betsy and Peter. My favorite moment was when Peter e-mailed us a chapter that I had thought was initially assigned to me. I had already begun writing it myself. So we compared the two and ended up merging what I'd written into what he'd written. Even moments of miscommunication such as that worked out, because we worked well together.

What is your favorite children's book anecdote featured in Wild Things?

JULIE: Hands down, the Trina Schart Hyman stories. I came away from this book with even more respect for her. She was smart and had a refreshingly irreverent sense of humor. So did James Marshall. I wish someone would write biographies of them. Hmm . . . next project?

BETSY: That question is the equivalent of a child asking his mother which of his siblings she loves the most. I guess if I had to sit down and pick, I'd have to go with the true tale of what really happened to Robert McCloskey's ducklings. I love it for its simplicity, for the behind-the-scenes peek, and the gruesome ending. It has my heart.

What do you predict will be the biggest trend in children's literature next year?

BETSY: Multiculturalism. I mean that sincerely. This year all anyone could talk about was the dearth of kids of color appearing in books for kids or on their book jackets. There will be a response. I don't think the trend will extend to YA, but in picture books, early-chapter-book fare, and

middle-grade chapter books, I'm fairly certain publishers will heed the call. And I'm not just being optimistic. I've seen inklings of it already.

JULIE: I'm afraid I'm horrible at predicting trends, but I *hope* the next trend will be a moratorium on the proclamation that the picture book is dead, which seems to happen every few years. I don't think the picture book's going anywhere, thank goodness.

Looking back at the early days of publishing, what are you most nostalgic for?

JULIE: I understand why authors and illustrators no longer directly collaborate on picture books, instead now working through editors, but how I'd love to have been a fly on the wall when, say, Maurice Sendak and Ruth Krauss were collaborating, back when authors and illustrators were generally more permitted to do such a thing.

BETSY: My nostalgia is centered entirely around the personage of the great children's book editor Ursula Nordstrom. Obviously she was the exception rather than the rule, but that woman was so inventive in how she found her authors and illustrators. She took gigantic risks that paid off wildly. Can you imagine an editor today grabbing artists from *Playboy* one day and then turning around to lure in *New Yorker* writers the next? I feel like Ursula had a freedom that a lot of editors today would kill for. That's what I miss. Editorial freedom from constraints.

What else would you like readers to know about Wild Things?

JULIE: That no actual fuzzy bunnies were harmed during the creation of the book. Nor were anyone's copies of *The Giving Tree*.

BETSY: We have a ton of fun stories and content in there, but you should see how much was left on the cutting-room floor. Just reams and reams of material! So Jules and I are going to do our darndest to salvage some of these fabulous stories for online content. Just the same, keep an eye out for your favorite authors and illustrators. Odds are they'll be in there somewhere.

Which author or illustrator have you been most starstruck by?

BETSY: Judy Blume. That's such a rote answer, isn't it? But I find that typically I'm most starstruck by the authors and illustrators I read in my youth. Now, Judy Blume was best known to young me as the author of *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. So when she came to speak to a group of NYPL librarians like myself, I was agog. I was perusing our table

of snacks and there, lo and behold, was Ms. Blume herself. She was infinitely recognizable as she apparently does not age. As I approached, she looked at the sea of cookies on the table and commented something along the lines of, "Boy, I don't know what to pick!" to which I managed to croak out a desperate, "Yeah, the black-and-white cookies are really great." Knowing that this was probably the most inane sentence ever constructed (it didn't help that my voice cracked like a fourteen-year-old boy's), I hightailed it out of there.

JULIE: In my early days of blogging, I'd get starstruck. That has passed. People who make books are regular mortals, indeed, who struggle like the rest of us. That said, I'd have loved to have met Maurice Sendak. I would have given my entire collection of fuzzy bunny slippers, even the pink ones signed by the Easter Bunny.

What is the funniest interview you've ever done?

JULIE: I have a special place in my heart for Chilean-born illustrator Claudio Muñoz, who answered many of my interview questions primarily with very funny line drawings he'd created specifically for our chat. I also remember laughing at author-illustrator Peter Brown's depiction of meeting deadlines for final art on his picture books. This involved his editor breaking into his apartment and finding him hiding under a pile of dirty clothes, crying and singing Neil Diamond's "Shilo."

BETSY: I wanted to interview the illustrator Dan Santat on my blog and asked if I could send him some questions. He wondered in return if it would be cool if I recorded my questions on video and he recorded video answers. Worked for me! I sent him the list to answer, and in what I believe was just a scant week or two he sent back his answers. His long, lengthy, amazing answers. There were twins and light sabers and cartoon clips and all manner of amazing details. Best. Interview. Ever.

What was your favorite picture book growing up?

BETSY: *A Time to Keep* by Tasha Tudor. I get asked this question fairly often, and that's always my answer. The reactions I get from people vary widely. Those who knew Ms. Tudor in her day will ask me in a conspiratorial whisper, "Did you ever meet her?" I didn't, and that is fine with me. For me, when I was a child, the book was this amazing glimpse into a fantasy world as foreign as Oz or Narnia. It was a time period where you could float birthday cakes down rivers and have Halloween parties in your barn. Something about the book appealed wildly to me. I still crack it open and read it from time to time.

JULIE: My best friend's aunt, while visiting one summer, gave me a copy of Trina Schart Hyman's illustrated version of *Snow White*. I was probably nine or ten years old. I wasn't terribly familiar with picture books as a child. I was mesmerized by the artwork.

How many books arrive on your doorstep each day?

JULIE: A whole heapin' lot. Enough for me to now respond to folks who say "One can never have too many books!" with "Perhaps, but one can most certainly have *not enough space for them.*"

BETSY: Hoo-boy. Well, that depends on the season, of course. When the publishing pendulum swings into high gear, I can receive on average about ten books a day. When the season cools down, it might just be three or four. Please bear in mind that that ten books a day is just an average. Today I received a box of thirty, and yesterday I fielded forty books easily. It's changeable. I get them not only as a reviewer on my blog but also as a materials specialist buying for New York City.

What is the highest number of books you've read in a week?

BETSY: If we count picture books (and we do, right?) then I think I've topped out at seventy. If you mean books with chapters and plots and character development, I probably only got as high as five. I tend to read on the subway more than anywhere else. It curtails my speed a tad.

JULIE: It might be easier to count the books I *don't* read. That's to say: I read lots of picture books for my freelance writing, and my daughters and I always have a stack of children's novels, new and old, that we read aloud together. That's my favorite thing about parenting—sharing stories like that.

What is the most memorable awards speech you've ever attended?

JULIE: I attended my first ALA conference in 2013. Jon Klassen's and Katherine Applegate's speeches were exceptionally good—regular conference-goers have told me I was spoiled by those speeches ("You don't know how good you had it, 'cause you should have heard so-and-so's ramblings in nineteen-so-and-so")—but Katherine Paterson's was particularly moving.

BETSY: The most memorable awards speech I witnessed firsthand was Laura Amy Schlitz's after she won the Newbery for *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* It was, without a doubt, the best year to attend the speeches. First off, you had Brian Selznick doing this ultra-media-inspired glitzy speech for *Hugo Cabret*, using slides and music and all sorts of stuff. Then you had Ms. Schlitz. She eschewed a podium and was given a clip-on mic, I believe. Then she came into the audience. She was wearing this flowing cerulean-blue gown that I remember she'd hand-printed with images of bears. She's a storyteller in the truest sense of the word, and her speech was part story, part speech. It was magnificent. Best I've ever seen. Selznick gave us glimpses into the future, and Schlitz rooted us to our past.