

• Meet the Author •

Samantha Berger

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).



Photo from www.samanthaberger.com

Even before she knew how to read, Samantha Berger loved children's books (and not just because they were delicious). When she first saw books like *Baby* by Fran Manushkin and Ronald Himler, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* by William Steig, and *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Lillian and Russell Hoban, she knew she wanted to tell stories, too.

And that's exactly what Samantha grew up to do. Today she is a Vice President at Nickelodeon, where she gets to create stories with some of the funniest people on the planet. Samantha also writes stories like *Martha Doesn't Say Sorry*, and *Martha Doesn't Share*. Right now she is hard at work on the Martha "three-quel," because it turns out there are quite a few things Martha doesn't do.

Before working at Nickelodeon, Samantha was an editor at

Scholastic, before that a pre-school teacher, and before THAT, she worked for Rhino Records. Samantha recently moved to sunny California after a lifetime in New York City. She shares her home with two terrific rescue-dogs from The Mutt Scouts, Aurora Mae and Polly Pocket (aka The Senior and The Puppy).

Martha Doesn't Say Sorry! is such a character driven book that I'd love to hear about the development of Martha. Is she based on someone you know? On yourself as a child? Or perhaps your alter ego? How did she come to be?

SB: (laughing) Well, the story of Martha is a funny one. It began on a chilly night in New York City several years ago, when I was out to dinner with a dear friend. She started to tell me an anecdote about her mother, Martha. In this tale, her mother was... a bit out of line. Let's just say she was "really having a day," much like the Martha character in the book.

The next day, my friend's mother was slightly sheepish, soft-spoken, and extremely polite. It was as if she was reflecting back on her actions with some remorse. "She knew she was wrong," my friend said. "It was pretty obvious by the way she was acting."

"Did she apologize?" I asked.

She laughed. "Martha DOESN'T apologize," she said, firmly. We BOTH laughed.

"That would be a great name for a children's book!" I said. And I went home and wrote the first draft that night.

So that is where the title comes from. But that "Origin of Martha" story is also meaningful to me, because it shows how it's an issue that transcends age—both children and grown-ups alike can sometimes have difficulty apologizing. I know I did when I was Martha's age, and that's probably where Martha's character comes from—my own experiences as a child. When I was Martha's age, I even hated the word "apologize" (*Martha Doesn't Apologize* was the original title for this reason). I found it embarrassing, weighty, and so full of stigma. It seemed like something associated with shame and punishment. Instead of just taking responsibility, owning my actions, and sincerely apologizing when I'd done something not okay, I struggled with it. It just felt like a REALLY BIG DEAL to say I was sorry—unlike now, when I say it many times a day!

When my little brother went through a similar phase, he would yell "I'M SORRY, OKAY?!!!" at the

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top of his lungs. That was usually accompanied by a follow-up sit-down on why that wasn't really saying you were sorry and how no one who was truly sorry sounded like that. I've known countless kids who grapple with this challenge in their preschool years.

At the end of the day, we're all human, and we all make mistakes. If you don't make mistakes, you don't learn and grow. What fun is that? Sounds way too stagnant.

Martha makes mistakes sometimes. Lots of them. So do I. TONS! But she's learning, she's evolving, and she's going to be a fantastic otter one day.

Did you ever consider a different ending for the story? If so, what might it have been? If not, how did Bruce Whatley's vision alter or complement your vision for the ending?

SB: The ending was always pretty much the same as it is now. But that was only the text. It was the one page I hadn't art spec'd out, nor done a sketch for. It was Bruce Whatley's genius vision of the birthday cake gag that really added that humor and ending joke. We always knew it would be something that illustrated "Martha's trying, and she's doing a lot better, but she isn't there quite yet!" That was a great idea from Bruce and our amazing Little, Brown Editor, Nancy Conescu, and I adore it!

The text of *Martha Doesn't Say Sorry!* is delightfully spare and works so well with Bruce

Whatley's hilarious illustrations. Was it always so spare or did you trim it back as the illustrations unfolded?

SB: The text was always pretty spare and I think there might be a big reason why. When I first wrote *Martha Doesn't Say Sorry*, I also drew it out from start to finish. It was sketched page by page, in pencil, and that entire book dummy was submitted as the original pitch to the publisher. I had a very clear vision of what this book should be, who Martha was, and what was happening on each page.

However, we all agreed someone else would ideally illustrate—someone whose art we all adored and who really GOT the character. After all, Martha can sometimes be challenging, especially when she is throwing cookie batter, kicking milk cans, and playing drums for her infant napping brother. So it's important she be always lovable, despite whatever new behavior she may be trying on.

Thankfully, Little, Brown was incredible about including me in the art choices every step of the way, and I think we all felt right from the get-go, Bruce Whatley was The Chosen One. His interpretation is incredibly faithful to my original vision of Martha. Only much, much better! I trust Bruce with Martha forever and ever.

I hear that there is a forthcoming sequel in which we get to enjoy more of Martha! Tell us about it.

SB: There sure is! *Martha Doesn't Share* came out in the fall of 2010 with Little, Brown. Now you may remember in the first book, Martha DID share her snack. But, like all of us all the time, Martha is going through a phase. In this new phase she has a new favorite word, and that word is, "MINE!" Needless to say, a certain little otter needs to learn a little lesson about sharing. Also, (big teaser!) in this sequel book we will find out Martha's baby brother's name*!

***Hint: It is a name like "Martha" in that it isn't too common nowadays, AND it rhymes with "Shmedwin."**

Tell us more about your work for Nickelodeon and also how it might have contributed to the sensibility of this book.

SB: I've been writing for Nickelodeon for over ten years now, and it's always been a wonderful match for me because many of their core brand beliefs about kids are similar to my own. We both believe kids should be seen AND heard, respected AND represented, and ALWAYS portrayed honestly, authentically, with humor and heart (and a lot of smart...and a hint of fart). We both believe kids are awesome, amazing little people, and we love to make them smile. And we both believe a good booger-joke is still funny.

Relating to and portraying kids in this kind of sincere, authentic way is something I always strive to do, both in my work for Nick and

in my books, and it's a philosophy I live by every single day. (Luckily this comes quite easily, as I am eternally immature myself!)

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

SB: Good timing! I recently relaunched www.samanthaberger.com. If all goes according to plan, this will be the home site for all my books, past, present and future, as well as my Best-of Animation work. You may be

surprised by some of the things you find there. This is a bit of a spoiler alert, but you'll see things like...me playing the voice of an animated singing breakfast plate doing a public service announcement about the importance of eating breakfast, things like...me playing an animated snowwoman wishing everyone happy holidays, things like...me in a preschool animated hip-hop group called The Mad Caps, rhyming about opposites, and all the nuts and bolts stuff, too!

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of twelve picture books, most recently *Adventure Annie Goes to Kindergarten* (Dial, 2010) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

