

MEET THE AUTHOR



Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Barbara Lehman in her home in Albany, New York, April 29, 2015.



BARBARA LEHMAN

You are the creator of many intriguing wordless picture books—including the Caldecott honor-winning *The Red Book*—whose characters encounter unexpected surprises or embark on fantastical adventures. What is the inspiration behind these extraordinary stories?

BL: People are often interested in how the ideas come about for the wordless books I've done. Beginning with *The Red Book*, I've always tried to work from childhood memories. Not memories of things that actually happened, but memories I have of childhood fantasies or daydreams—things that are not possible in the visible world, but things I absolutely wished could be real.

In the case of *The Red Book*, the memory was of sitting in school near the maps hanging on the walls. If I had a seat near a map, I would stare at it all the time, imagining what all the different islands and countries were

like. But there was more to it than just imagining; it was almost as if I were experiencing this poignant, intense desire to actually go into the map—and that longing was so strong that I could actually see the place I was imagining. In *The Red Book*, a girl and a boy are looking at a book with maps in it, and they're looking at it in a way that allows them to actually see people living in another place. Basically, the story is drawn from that strange fantasy of mine, back when I first wished I could see inside of a map.

What were your hobbies when you were young?

BL: I definitely loved drawing. Also, I was the kind of kid who enjoyed playing outside. So I spent a lot of time outdoors with other kids in my neighborhood in New Jersey. I also loved reading, and I went to the library often. I was allowed to go as much as I wanted, alone or with older siblings, and I read anything I wanted. I found that to be quite an experience, having the feeling of complete freedom when it came to reading. A book could have anything inside of it, and it might be completely fascinating.

Who encouraged your creativity?

BL: I got wonderful feedback from teachers about drawing, but it was also really great to have the genuine interest of my peers. They always wanted to see what I was doing. They especially wanted to watch me draw comics. Snoopy was a big hit. Kids used to trade me candy for drawings, or I'd do the lettering on their book covers. Those were the earliest commercial applications of my drawings.

I would write little stories, too. I was always trying to imitate things in *Mad* magazine; I'd make my own magazines that would be filled with comics and articles and activities and games. Then I would force my older sister

to buy them from me as if it were a real magazine. I would make her do all the activities and puzzles while I watched. I definitely enjoyed creating content with the anticipation of people using it.

As a child, did you know you wanted to pursue an illustration career?

BL: Even though I always liked drawing, I didn't necessarily connect that enjoyment to a possible career. I had a lot of different interests as a little kid, and at the time, I didn't necessarily know what I wanted to do. But in eighth grade, my class was given an assignment to select a film from a box that contained these little [film] strips, each one labeled with a different career. We were supposed to pick a career we were interested in, watch the film, and write a report. When I saw the film canister that said "Commercial Artist" on it, I didn't know what that was, but since the word *artist* was there, that's the one I picked.

That film introduced me to artistic career options for the first time. I had no idea how many there were—graphic design, fabric design, clothing design, wallpaper design, and so on—all these things made by commercial artists and illustrators. It was mind-blowing to suddenly make the connection between all the things I saw around me and the fact that people went to school and got jobs to create those things. Before, I'd always thought of artists as people who made the sorts of things you see in museums. Growing up near New York City, I had been to museums and enjoyed them, but I didn't necessarily see myself as a fine artist. So watching that film strip was one of those school assignments that did exactly what it was supposed to: blow a kid's mind and change her life.

You found your way to art school all on your own. What was that process like?

BL: When I was in high school, there was only one art class you could take per year, so it tended to be filled with the more serious students, and classes were more intense. Around then, I became more focused on the idea of children's books, and I started to practice doing children's book-type illustrations. I had a book on illustration that showed different techniques, and I concentrated on watercolor.

At that point, I knew that if I wanted to continue studying art, I had to get myself into art school. My father had died, and my mother was working and going to school at night, so I was really doing a lot of things on my own. I got the applications and filled them out myself. I used public transportation to visit schools in New York City alone, except for once, when another kid drove me.

Now it's surprising to me just how much I did without parental supervision. I don't know how supportive my mother would have been of me going to art school if she'd really been in on the process, but once I was accepted, it was a done deal.

How did art school shape your perception of children's-book illustration?

BL: I definitely had a good experience at school. But at the time, if there was anyone there who was open to children's books, it wasn't always easy to tell. There was only one children's-book course being taught, and it wasn't even held on the main campus. I had to go into Manhattan to take it. The subject just wasn't on people's minds very much. I actually had a teacher try to talk me out of children's-book illustration after class one day. He said I was too smart to do children's books. And I thought that was a strange thing to say, because I would hope people working to create things for children were smart.

Obviously, I stuck with it. For me, the field was appealing because it's less constricted by fads. It's one of the last areas where people can work in a huge variety of styles and have their work nicely printed and published for a lot of people to enjoy. And children's-book illustration is basically the things I like most put together: art and words and books and reading.

You enjoy words and writing, yet your body of work is full of powerful wordless picture books. Please talk about what appeals to you about making books without words.



BL: I haven't ruled out writing with words. In fact, *The Red Book* had words when I first showed it to an editor. But I have to say, when it was suggested that I try telling *The Red Book* without words, I liked that approach a lot more. I think if I were doing a different type of book, writing would be more suitable. But for now, for these kinds of stories, I enjoy the challenge of showing the content rather than writing it.

I wasn't terribly familiar with wordless picture books when I first started out; it just sounded like a cool thing to try. But as I learned more about them, I began to appreciate so much more about the genre. I saw that teachers were using them in tons of different ways, including as resources for special needs students. I realized that a kid could send a wordless book to a friend in another country and it wouldn't require translation. I learned that really little kids can read them, but they can also be read at a higher, more sophisticated level, too. One great exchange I had was when I gave one of my books to some friends, and the mother told her daughter she'd read it to her later. Then the girl got a hugely satisfied look on her face and said, "I've read it already." It's great to be able to give children an independent book experience if they want it, regardless of their reading level.

And, to be honest, the story is really as much theirs as it is mine; they add so much information. I rely on kids being my coauthors because they have to fill in a whole lot. When they see the interpersonal scenarios and the actions that I've set up with the art, they need to imagine how the dialogue goes and what's being said. I find it fascinating when teachers send me things their kids have written to go along with my books, because the kids' stories absolutely work. There's a totally cohesive structure. Sometimes they'll reinterpret things to fit their

own way of thinking, and it still comes together as a story.

You've mostly concentrated your career on making wordless picture books, but you've also illustrated books with text.

How does the illustration process differ?

BL: The thing about wordless books is that I feel the drawings have to be a little bit more finicky than they would be if they were accompanied by text. That's because, for me, for the illustration to work, every element has to pull its narrative weight. I can't put a lot of extra details in an illustration, and I don't want to. I need for everything in an illustration to help advance the story or set an emotional tone.

The design of the book can help me with that emotional tone, too. I find that design can act similarly to a soundtrack for a movie. I love movies, and I think they have a lot in common with children's books because they're mostly visual. The types of decisions that bookmakers and filmmakers have to make can be very alike.

Before *The Red Book*, you'd illustrated other books and worked in a variety of creative jobs.

BL: I was twenty-five when I got my first book contract; it was an alphabet book. And I did a bunch of books through my twenties, but then I drifted out of illustration. During that time, I did a lot of design jobs. I worked in animation. I worked in the garment industry. I worked on all kinds of crazy things, like Budweiser commercials and a Duran Duran video.

When I decided to give illustration one more big try, I redid my portfolio and changed my artistic approach. That's when I published *The Red Book*. And, luckily, *The Red Book* got so much positive attention that, for the first time, I was able to do book illustration full time.



***The Red Book's* many accolades include a Caldecott honor. What was running through your mind when the committee called to tell you the news?**

BL: Honestly, it took a long time to sink in because, at first, I thought the call had to be some kind of hallucination. And then I thought they must have made a mistake, and I was anticipating another call from them, saying they'd changed their minds.

I think those were my immediate thoughts because recognition from the Caldecott committee was something I never considered. I wasn't following the ALA news, and I didn't even know when the announcements were made, so it really came out of left field for me. I was astonished. Of course I had hopes and wishes for the book—things along the lines of *I hope this makes it to a second printing*. I just didn't want it to fade away. I hoped that somehow, even though it's sort of a quiet book, it wouldn't fall through the cracks. So for it to go as far as it did was really something.

I'd say the news actually took years to sink in. And to see that sticker, the sticker you've seen on picture books since childhood, is fantastic. It's unreal in the best way.

After *The Red Book*, you illustrated another fascinating adventure story, *Museum Trip*.

BL: The inspiration for this book came from a trip I took to the Pierpont Morgan Library (now the Morgan Library and Museum) when I was little. I was there one day in this big room full of books that went up and up the walls. [The books] looked as if they were in glass cabinets, with little catwalks all around. I'd assumed there were once staircases in the room and the stairs had been removed.

I guess I was feeling chatty, so I approached the guard and asked him how one would get to the books that were so high up. He got this look on his face, and then he looked around and motioned me over. Then—I'm not kidding—he took out his flashlight, pressed a button, and opened up a secret door. He didn't let me go through the doorway, but he let me peer into it. And it was through the door that you could access the higher areas of the library.

Of course I never forgot this, and I loved the idea of a guard who sits there all day long with the art, knowing the secrets of the building, noticing things no one else notices, having all this specialized knowledge and a relationship with the collection. That is the story behind *Museum Trip*.

Rainstorm, Trainstop, and The Secret Box are all wordless adventure stories with very different premises.

BL: *Rainstorm* was a story I wanted to tell about a child who seems to have everything he could ever want in his huge house—but his world is truly enriched when he's able to connect with other kids and have a real adventure.

The premise for *Trainstop* came from my love of subways. I really enjoy riding them, looking out the windows, going in and out of tunnels, under- and aboveground. For this book, I thought about what an

experience it would be if a character on a subway went underground and then came out somewhere completely unexpected. What would her interactions with the people in this other place be like? And when she goes home, what about her has changed because she's made this connection to another group of people? Her life goes on, but with a different flavor.

The adventure in *The Secret Box* was prompted by a gift I received when I was a kid in New Jersey. We had these elderly neighbors who befriended my family. They were like grandparents to us. When the gentleman died, my siblings were all given furniture, and I was given a little box. The little box was filled with toys from his childhood—but they were miniature, all of them teeny-tiny things, like figurines and playing cards. I was fascinated by the idea that this elderly man had saved his toys for decades. Because I so enjoyed the experience of opening that box and imagining his relationship to all those little items, all those things that were special to him, I started thinking about a book concept with a box of things being hidden, then discovered and leading children on a fascinating adventure.

Please talk about your artistic process.

BL: My books are pen and ink, and then they're colored in with watercolor. I start a book with a general idea of something fantastical that I want to happen in a story. Then I have to figure out how that comes to be, within some sort of plausible framework. I build around [that idea] to create a situation in which the fantastic is possible. I make a lot of notes and little drawings at this stage.

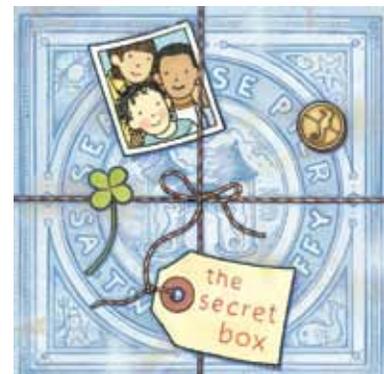
I'll switch over to storyboarding when I really feel like I have some scenes to flesh out. I'll make a bunch of storyboards, and I find them really

helpful because I can see the entire story at once. It's a good way to examine the pacing and rhythm of the book.

When I move on to the dummy phase, the next question is, how does the story work as a physical object, where I'm turning the page? That's a different experience than looking at a storyboard, which is more like a comic panel. During this stage, I'll often go back and change things in the storyboard because I've discovered that turning the pages gives the story a different feel. I might want to change the sequence of certain things or switch up the pacing. I end up working a lot with dummies.

Throughout this process, I send dummies to my editor and get editorial letters back that may or may not have a lot of changes in them. I like to show those editorial letters to kids when I visit schools, because I think it's good for us all to remember that books aren't finished on the first try; there's really a process to them, and it's helpful to get suggestions and insight on your work.

After my final dummy, I'm ready to make really tight drawings on tracing paper. These compositions take me a long time. But once I'm finished, unless I make a mistake, things go rapidly. I transfer the drawings from tracing paper to heavy watercolor paper, then ink them and color them. In the end, what takes the most time for me is just getting things right, like





a gesture or an expression, on that tracing paper. I use miles of tracing paper and continually refine a drawing until it satisfies me.

What do you do when you get stuck?

BL: I play Tetris. Or sometimes I'll just quit for the evening. What often surprises me is that, even though it's good to take an occasional break to get some perspective, I tend to benefit most when I just push through the artist's block. That's because usually the solution is not as far away as it seems. No matter how frustrated I am, the best course of action for me is to just keep pushing.

When you work at home, it's almost too easy to walk away. I've worked in an office doing design work, and in those environments, you can't walk away. You have to sit there and make it work. That's good training for working at home, because when you're at home, no one's going to stop you if you walk out the door.

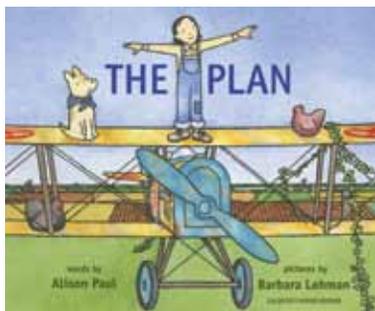
What do you like to tell students when you talk to them?

BL: When I do school visits, I'll often show kids the comics and little books I used to make when I was a child, as well as the storyboards and dummies I use in my work now. I like them to see how they're all quite similar—and

to know that, yes, I went to art school and learned a lot, but I also did a lot of learning about my future career just sitting at the kitchen table doing my own wacky projects when I was a kid. I want them to know that the things they're doing now are important, whether those hobbies end up being a career or not.

The other thing I like to tell kids is that it can be very intimidating to try to make art, and it can be frustrating when you don't get the results you want. It's important to be able to manage frustration and disappointment and keep pushing through. Learn from your mistakes and keep going. I think the creative process can be idealized sometimes, as if artists produce finished work without ever having gone through a revision or making a mistake.

I think that's why a lot of kids, and adults too, stop their creative pursuits—because their first attempts don't turn out the way they hoped. Maybe they feel embarrassed by their efforts. But I think we should all enjoy being creative at whatever level we're comfortable with. It's the perseverance that ends up being more important than talent.



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