

• Meet the Author •

Meet Laurie Keller

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



Laurie Keller loved drawing and writing even when she was a kid but didn't realize that "regular people" like her could grow up to become authors and illustrators. After high school she was deciding between a major in education or dance but after attending a senior exhibit at Kendall College of Art and Design, she enrolled there the following fall. Upon graduation she took a job as an illustrator with Hallmark Cards. While working there, she spent many lunch hours in a nearby children's bookstore and developed a love for children's books. She wrote her first book, *The Scrambled States of America*, and decided to pursue a career as a freelance artist and children's book author and illustrator.

Authors are often asked where their inspiration for a story came from, but in this case, I imagine that

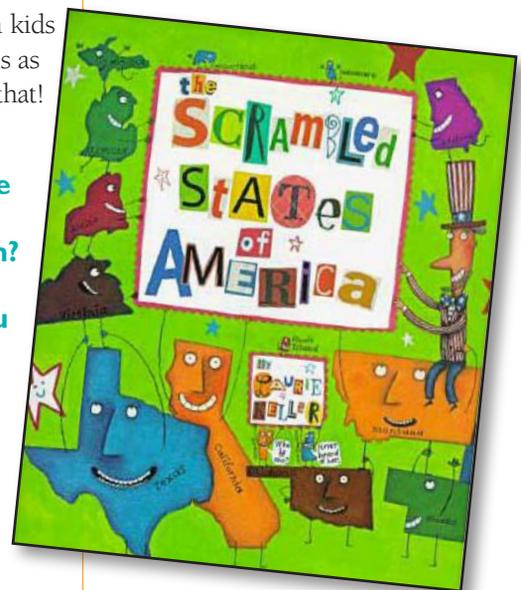
the answer is particularly interesting. Are you a geography nut or is there some other explanation entirely?

LK: I'm not a geography nut (but I don't have anything against geography either). The idea truly came to me in a dream! I was falling asleep one night when some little states with arms, legs, and faces popped into my head. I have no idea why. The next morning I remembered and thought it was the oddest thing. Many of my artist friends were interested in children's books as well so I asked them if they'd seen a book with states as characters, trying to figure out why that image popped into my head. No one had, so I started to think maybe using states as little characters could be a fun way to teach kids about U.S. geography. It was as simple (and as WEIRD) as that!

Did you draw your illustrations first, write the text first, or use a combination approach? Why did you use whichever process you chose?

LK: I wrote the text first but did little doodles and thumbnail sketches while writing. I usually work

that way, which is why I can't write my first couple drafts on the computer. My books usually have lots of little "asides" in them, where a character throws in little tidbits of text that aren't necessarily important to the story, but just silly jokes and comments that a character might make. Those aren't usually in my original manuscript but many of them pop into my head when I'm working on the finished art (especially late at night when I'm tired and delirious). Those little snippets are my favorite part of writing. Sometimes a visual will spark an idea for a book. After I created *Arnie the Doughnut*, I was sitting outside trying to think of my next story idea. Nothing was coming to mind



so I started doodling all sorts of things—numbers, letters, stick people, bugs, etc. After I filled the page I glanced at it and saw a little person who looked like he was standing on a sideways “1,” almost like he was riding a skateboard. That sparked the idea of doing a book using numbers for other things besides counting, which became *Grandpa Gazillion’s Number Yard* (my fourth book). Long story short, I guess the writing and drawing goes back and forth until I decide it’s finished!

Did you learn a lot about geography as you created *The Scrambled States of America*? Did you do a lot of research?

LK: I DID learn things and I did a lot of research. I looked up little facts about states that I could throw in for asides just to add that extra educational element. I mean, who knew that the geographical center of the lower forty-eight states is just outside Lebanon, Kansas, in the middle of a hog farm?

What were the most enjoyable parts of creating this book? Did you get advice and ideas from other people as you worked?

LK: The most enjoyable part of creating the book was working for the first time with my editor. She was so easy to work with, and she made the whole process so much fun. I’d think of little asides and would call her and

say something like, “Hey, how about if New Jersey says, ‘I’m not new and I’m not wearing a jersey—go figure!’” She’d laugh and say, “GREAT!” It was so unusual to actually be working on a project that was totally my own. I couldn’t get used to that idea and would call her and ask things like, “Is it all right if I give Uncle Sam a big nose?” and she’d say, “Of course it is—it’s YOUR book!”

I didn’t really get any advice while I worked because I didn’t know anyone who’d done books at that point. I pretty much sat in my New York City apartment, after just moving there, and painted away. It’s fun to think back on this very exciting time in my life.

Have you ever considered writing a sequel or companion book to *The Scrambled States of America*?

LK: When I wrote *The Scrambled States of America* it never occurred to me to write a sequel. My editor had suggested writing one, so over the years I tried but never came up with an idea that I liked. Kids always ask me about the love story between Nevada and Mississippi and want to know what happened with them after they had to move back to their original spots on the map, so I thought I’d write a sequel having the two of them get married. I played around with that for a while but instead came up with the idea of having a states talent show. So, on the

ten-year anniversary of the first *Scrambled States*, the sequel will be published (September, 2008). It wasn’t easy for me to write a sequel and now that I’ve done it, it’s sparked ideas for other sequels. By the way, the love story is still going on—though a wedding is on hold. Perhaps I’ll keep the tension building on that one.

Your book ideas are always very interesting and different from those of most other authors. What sorts of books did you like to read as a child? Did those books influence the types of books you create now? What else influences you?

LK: I loved Dr. Seuss; P. D. Eastman; Beverly Cleary; Robert McCloskey (namely *Homer Price*); Nancy, Little Lulu and Richie Rich comic books; and Amelia Bedelia books. My all-time favorite book was *My Father’s Dragon* by Ruth Stiles Gannett. I also loved (and still do) Charles Schulz and the Peanuts gang. I’m sure they influenced me even though I don’t consciously think of them when I’m writing. But I know they’re engrained in my psyche! I loved the zaniness of Amelia Bedelia, the adventure of *My Father’s Dragon*, and the warmth and humor of Charles Schulz’s characters and can only aspire to incorporate those qualities in my own writing.

I’m constantly inspired by people and things that make me laugh.

Meet the Author

I love David Letterman, Steve Martin, Martin Short, Bill Murray, Ellen DeGeneres, Jimmy Kimmel, David Sedaris, Ted L. Nancy, Jack Handy, Pee-Wee Herman, *King of the Hill*, and *The Simpsons*. Some of my favorite movies that I watch again and again for inspiration are *Airplane*, *What About Bob?*, *The Jerk*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Fargo*, *Muriel's Wedding*, and anything by Christopher Guest (especially *Spinal Tap* and *Waiting For Guffman*, the latter probably being my all-time favorite movie).

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

LK: Well, I FINALLY have a Web site up and running at www.lauriekeller.com. By the time it was completed, it felt like as much of an accomplishment as completing a book! It has lots of information about my books, ideas of how teachers can use them in their classrooms, downloadable activities for teachers and kids, and a couple of interactive games based on my books. I'm so excited about it!

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*Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of five picture books, most recently **Fire Up With Reading!** (UpstartBooks, 2007) and **Our Librarian Won't Tell Us ANYTHING! A Mrs. Skorupski Story** (UpstartBooks, 2006) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.*