

• Meet the Author •

Mary Casanova

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



Photo courtesy of www.marycasanova.com

Mary Casanova is an award-winning children's author of more than twenty books for young readers, from picture books to series to novels. Many of her books reflect her life on the Minnesota-Canadian border. Some of her stories have taken her as far away as France, Norway, and Belize for research. Her book awards include: American Library Association "Notable," Aesop Accolades by the American Folklore Society, a Parents' Choice "Gold" Award, and Booklist Editor Choice.

Casanova grew up in a family of ten children in St. Paul, Minnesota. In a bustling camp-like atmosphere, Casanova found that writing became her voice. She also says she was a reluctant reader, which is why she now has two main writing goals—"to write books that matter, and to write books that kids can't put down."

I like to describe *One-Dog Canoe* as "The Mitten goes to the North Woods." Tell us how the seed for this cumulative story was planted and why it grew to be a North Woods tale.

JW: One summer while I was on an island retreat with a group of children's authors, I headed out with my friend, Phyllis Root. When I spotted a cocker spaniel following our canoe, I suggested we pull over to a rocky reef and give him a ride (also to keep him from drowning). Off we paddled, and when we rounded a bend, there at the end of a dock was a golden retriever, hanging his head and staring at us forlornly. I knew if he could have talked, he would have said, "Can I come, too?" So out loud, I told him, "Sorry, this is a one-dog canoe!"

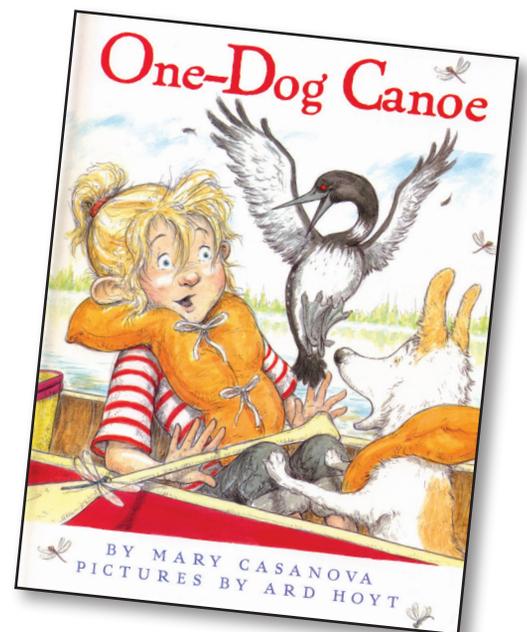
I turned to Phyllis. "That sounds like a picture book title, doesn't it?" She was quick to agree.

I returned to my cabin, scribbled down a rough draft of a silly little rhyming story that I was sure would never sell. Only thirty-two drafts later—picture books look deceptively simple!—Melanie Kroupa at Farrar, Straus & Giroux signed it up. And lucky for me, she spotted Ard Hoyt's talent just

as he was getting out of art school, and signed him up, too.

You have seven animals in your story, one domestic (Dog) and six wild. I suspect that you entertained other animals as options as well. What were some of the animals that didn't make the cut and why?

JW: Because of where I live on the Minnesota-Canadian border, I wanted to populate my canoe with some of my favorite north woods animals. I had to choose a loon, as I love seeing and hearing them, (plus the loon is the Minnesota state bird). I knew I couldn't have both an otter and a beaver, because they're too simi-



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lar in size and coloring to be easily differentiated by the youngest fans. I adore otters, so this was tough. Fortunately, otters have found their way into my newest picture book with Ard Hoyt called *Utterly Otterly Day*.

As I have talked to librarians and children's literacy specialists about *One-Dog Canoe*, they have expressed an appreciation for the presence of the narrator's PFD (personal floatation device, or life vest) from the first page on. Did you guide Ard Hoyt with an author's note, did he come up with the PFD himself, or did someone outside of the author/illustrator team suggest it?

JW: A PFD—or life jacket—was a must for the child character. Having grown up around water, I knew I couldn't send my main character off in a canoe without one! It was Ard's idea, however, to make sure the family dog also wears a life jacket. I love his interjection of humor, but it also underscores a basic safety reminder.

You appear to have an enormous fondness for dogs, considering the dog in this story, the dog in your new picture book, *Some Dog*, and your *Dog Watch* series of chapter books. Tell us more about this fondness for dogs.

JW: I love dogs and have been around them from as young as I can remember. From playing as a preschooler with our black lab's

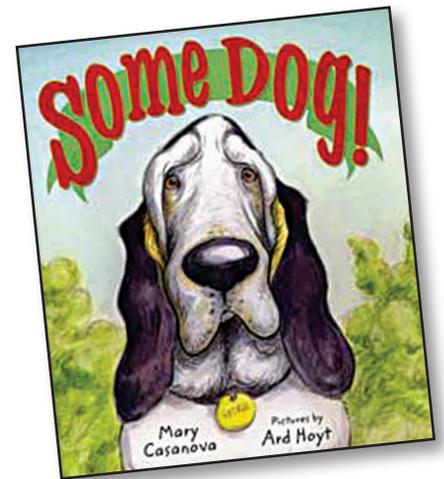
litter of 12 puppies, to a half-dozen sled dogs, to the two dogs we own today, my life has always included the companionship of animals—and especially a dog or two. They are the truest of friends, always there to greet us, always expressing their unconditional love. Honestly, I can't imagine why anyone would go through life *without* a dog.

This issue of *LibrarySparks* magazine has a travel and transportation theme. Would you share with readers why you consider a canoe to be one of the best modes of transportation available?

JW: When I speak at schools, I always remind kids to pay attention to the world with their five senses. What better mode of transportation than canoeing to do this? Paddling a canoe means slowing down enough to hear your own breath and the sloshing of water against the sides. It means noticing the jewel droplets of water falling from the paddle to the water. It means feeling the focused effort of shoulders and biceps, the heat of exertion in one's own muscles. It means inhaling the perfume of cedar and white pine . . . of pausing to listen, to watch, and to drink cool water from a thermos.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

JW: Readers may visit my website at www.marycasanova.com. Also, for more information about my life, the stories behind my stories, and my writing process, I suggest picking up a copy of



Mary Casanova and You, which is an autobiography in The Author and You series published by Libraries Unlimited.

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*Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of ten picture books, most recently *The Great Dewey Hunt* (UpstartBooks, 2009) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.*