

• Meet the Author •

Steven L. Layne

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

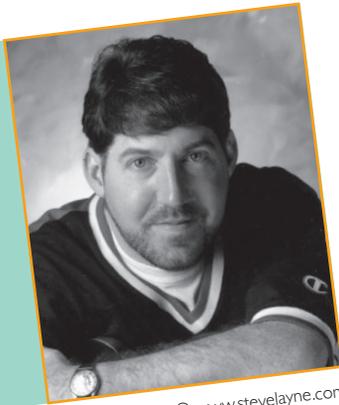


Photo © www.stevelayne.com.

Note: Steven L. Layne serves as a full-time faculty member at Judson University in Elgin, Illinois, where he directs the Master of Education in Literacy Program and teaches courses in children's literature and reading. Dr. Layne is a respected literacy consultant, motivational keynote speaker, and featured author who works with large numbers of educators and children during school visits and at conferences each year. His growing collection of more than fifteen books includes multiple award-winning titles in both the picture book and young adult genres. His newest titles include the young adult thriller *Mergers*, and a new picture book co-written with his wife Debbie —*P is for Princess: A Royal Alphabet*. The Laynes live with their four children in Elgin, Illinois.

Love the Baby just sings with personal experience! Please share the back-story that inspired this particular picture book.

SL: It's a story I never tire of telling. My daughter Victoria is not fond of the concept that there are other people in the world whose needs and wishes might in some way keep hers from being met according to the schedule she has organized. When her mother and I sat down in 2004 to explain that to our then 2½-year-old that she was becoming a "big sister," love and joy did not abound. She quickly latched onto the fact that someone would be usurping her role as "the baby," and she was none too happy. When little Jackson arrived in our home, she looked at him with contempt if she looked at him at all!

The first time she was in a room alone with him, he was playing in a little baby "saucer" that was enabling him to stand with support; he had a tray of toys around him. My wife called me into the dining room which gave time for some sibling bonding—not a bad idea I thought. Minutes later,

there was a crash followed by piercing screams from little Jackson. We raced into the room to find the baby saucer upside down on top of him. Victoria stood a few feet away, arms folded, looking rather disinterested. While my wife took care of the baby, I knelt by my daughter and said, "Victoria Grace—what did you do to the baby?" She shrugged and unapologetically announced, "Oh, he fell." I literally ran to my study and drafted *Love the Baby* within an hour.

I can't imagine a better pairing of illustrations for your delightful text. How



Meet the Author

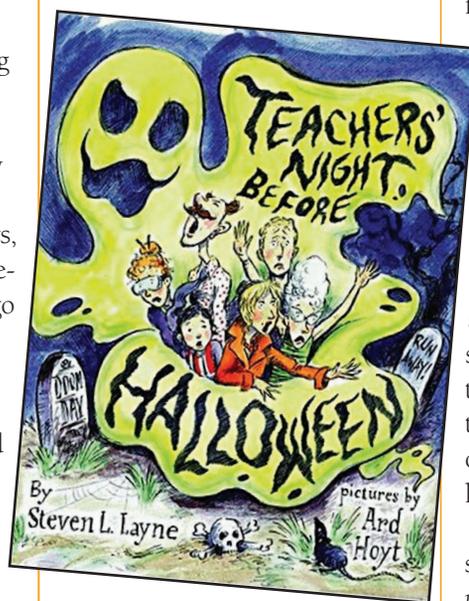
did the talented Ard Hoyt come to be the illustrator for this book?

SL: Ard and I met at a literature festival in 2003 and were friends from the word go. We arranged our schedules so we could meet up at some conference events over the next year, and I came to know his wife and four girls. In early 2005, I fell gravely ill and was on life support for months, leaving my wife and three young children with no means of support. It was a very rough time. Many in the literacy community worldwide carried us through those dark days in different ways, but Ard and his family did something uniquely special. I won't go into the personal details, but I'll say that they ministered to our spirits during that time.

Ard and I had already talked of our desire to do a book together, and he had gotten a look at the manuscript for *Love the Baby* just a few days before I fell ill. Of course, the manuscript was all but forgotten in my battle ... and then a hand-made card arrived at the hospital from Ard. In very few words, he called me ahead to my recovery in a way no one else had yet done, and I will always be grateful for that. When I was released from the hospital and putting the finishing touches on the story, a fourth Layne baby came to our family—and while Ard was drawing the story, a fifth Hoyt baby came to Ard's family! Timing, as they say, is everything.

Another interesting note to the story is that the *Love the Baby* family went through many

transformations before becoming the rabbits we all know and love! The characters were actually puffins, walruses, dogs, polar bears, geese, and seals before finally becoming bunnies! My friendship with Ard survived all that and has only grown stronger. We also collaborated on *The Teachers' Night before Halloween*.



Repetition is a key component of the text of *Love the Baby*. I know that you have the advantage of being a professor of reading and thus possess insider knowledge of all of the desirable textual supports for young readers. Please discuss your use of repetition and other supports you employed. How do they affect early literacy?

SL: I love to give credit where credit is due. My dear friend Mem Fox gave a lecture in Anchorage, Alaska, where we were both appearing some years ago. Ever the student, I took copious notes. I carried away

much from that lecture as Mem is “the master” to me, but the one thing that stood out above all else was her charge to attempt to tell a story in less than 500 words if you were going to write for little ones. Such a strict parameter on word count would force the author to truly make every word matter. She insisted that we might all wish to jump from the tallest bridge if we dared try this—and as always she was right. I nearly did! As I looked back, though, at the books I often recommended as the best read-alouds for young children, I noted that text was often sparse. So word count was the first piece of influence on story, and I have come to consider the word count, truly, a textual support, in the case of this type of story. Given the success of *Love the Baby*, I won't need to learn that lesson again.

The next support for the story, I believe is the quality of *universality*. Everyone can relate to the experience of being “de-throned” in some way. And if we haven't had it happen to us—we've seen it happen to someone we care about. A universal experience draws in readers young and old. I've had school visits at the middle school level (where I don't even mention my picture books), and teachers have told me they read *Love the Baby* aloud just for fun and these teenagers were laughing really hard and declaring the book a real winner. I think that's because those feelings of rivalry are so true for us all.

Finally, the repetition, as you mentioned, is key and was intentional on my part.

Repetitive text affords young readers the chance for successful prediction as well as allowing them to easily join in the oral reading experience. What more can you ask for in a book for young readers?

You've written in such a variety of genres and formats, from this young picture book to poetry to young adult novels. What do you consider to be the particular challenges of writing such a brief picture book text? How did you address them?

SL: As I mentioned above, word count is now an essential consideration for me when I write for young children as is the quality of universality. It is also important that I avoid talking down to children. I tried to avoid any type of didactic feel in the text of *Love the Baby*. If readers “learn” through the story, I’d like it to be because they made an emotional connection with the text or characters, which prompted them to consider a new perspective. First and foremost, though, I want readers to be entertained. I addressed these different issues, one at a time really, over the course of eight story drafts. I want to mention, too, that my author friends Esther Hershenhorn and Denise Brennan-Nelson (“Aunt” Esther and the barber—Mr. Nelson in *Love the Baby*) were a great help to me in discussing some of these issues as we considered each other’s works-in-progress on a lengthy car ride in Missouri. Where would we be without our friends?

Would you mind putting on your professorial hat for just a moment and discussing the advantages of Reader’s Theater for young readers?

SL: I can’t say enough about my strong feelings concerning the value of Reader’s Theater. With fluency being such a big topic these days, Reader’s Theater is really getting some good time in the spotlight. I think the opportunity to rehearse oral reading, first of all, is essential. Too often the children who struggle with fluency only read aloud in front of their peers at times when the cards are stacked against them! If I know I don’t read well orally, and you’re going to ask me to do so *in front of my peers*, and it’s my first look at the text ... WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?! With Reader’s Theater, kids often have the chance to practice before they’re in front of the crowd, and the lines can be easily divided in such a way as to not put too much pressure on the striving reader. The lack of focus on props in Reader’s Theater also allows the teacher a chance to focus discussion on vocal qualities such as pitch, tone, and inflection. This is terribly important as these qualities communicate so much of our emotion. I fear, too often, such discussions are saved for the gifted and talented. Reader’s Theater provides the chance for all boys and girls to have such discussions, and I think they are all quite capable of doing so.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

SL: I welcome readers to visit my Web site—www.stevelayne.com. The Guestbook is full of comments from kids, teachers, and conference coordinators. There is a resource area which provides some great classroom activities for use with my books, as well as bookmarks that can be downloaded—and they come autographed not only by me but by the illustrators! Anyone wishing to contact me can easily do so via the Web site.

❖ ❖ ❖

Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of eight picture books, most recently The Library Doors (UpstartBooks, 2008) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.