

VISIT THE CURRENT ISSUE OF TALES FROM THE RUSHMORE KID AT
<http://www.tinanicholscouryblog.com/>

June 05, 2007

Barbara Jean Hicks

Over the years, my writers' groups have changed in membership, mostly due to authors moving. Last fall my group lost three out of seven members. But, as luck would have it, a talented children's author had moved into my neighborhood. I recruited Barbara Jean and I am impressed and delighted with her language skills, critiquing and knowledge of children's literature. Her fourth picture book has just been released and she agreed to answer a few questions.

When and why did you start writing for children?

I wrote romance novels and novellas for a number of years but always thought I might like to write children's books too--I adored picture books and middle grade fiction and even though I wrote them, I was never a voracious reader of romance novels.

My last three adult novels and two novellas were romantic comedies set in the fictional and very quirky town of Pilchuck, Washington. These were not typical genre romance novels and one reviewer who clearly thought they were meant to be expressed the opinion that I "really ought to be writing for children, as no one else could appreciate such nonsense." Ouch! But I was ready for a new challenge, and the surface wound inflicted by that (obviously clueless!) reviewer gave me the kick in the pants I needed to try something I'd been wanting to do anyway!

What is the most valuable advice you can give to someone who wants to write for kids?

Don't let anyone talk you out of it! Yes, it's hard to get published as a children's author, but it's not impossible. If you believe in your story, don't let two or three rejections get in the way. Perseverance pays! My first picture book, *Jitterbug Jam*, was rejected by 22 American publishers before Hutchinson Children's Books (Random House London) picked it up. That included FSG, who later bought U.S. rights! It has since garnered several starred reviews and numerous literary and "best of" awards. Remember that one editor's opinion is only one editor's opinion, and besides, you want an editor who is totally in love with your story to make sure it gets the attention it deserves.

What is one of your favorite children's books that you'd like to recommend?

It's hard to pick one favorite, but I've recently read a couple of books I really loved. I've just finished Brian Selznik's new book for middle graders, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which I read in one sitting (Scholastic 2007). Wow! It's a puzzle that this concept--a story told partly in words and partly in pictures--hasn't been tried before for middle graders. Certainly kids that age don't stop loving art when they outgrow the themes and storylines of picture books.

Invention is different from a graphic novel or a picture book, where the words and pictures support each other in each panel or on each page. There are sections of this book told entirely in words and other sections told entirely in pictures. The setting is established in the beginning of the book in soft, grainy graphite illustrations, the images simulating the opening of a movie, starting with a shot of Earth from outer space that then focuses in on the city of Paris, then a particular neighborhood, building, doorway and building interior. Two of the primary characters and the beginning action of the novel are also introduced visually before any words appear, forty-six pages in.

The story is, in part, about the history of French cinema, a topic perfectly suited for this unique and inventive new genre in which Selznik uses cinematic techniques to help tell his tale. The illustrations aren't gratuitous. Like a true picture book or a graphic novel, both the words and pictures are necessary for a complete understanding of the story.

Another recent read I really loved was *East* by Edith Pattou (Harcourt 2003), a retelling of the Nordic Beauty and the Beast folk tale, "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." It's a classic hero's journey with a strong, well-drawn female protagonist. The chapters are told from the viewpoints of several different characters, which adds interest and depth to the unfolding of the story...and the language is lovely.

As for picture books, I generally fall in love with them for the art, not the text-- ironic considering I write picture book texts! I am so enamored of picture book art that I'm taking art classes with the goal of illustrating some of my own texts. I don't know if this is a wise course of action for my children's writing career, but I am thoroughly enjoying myself!

Recent favorites in the picture book category include *Yellow Elephant: A Bright Bestiary* by Julie Larios, illustrated by Julie Paschkis (Harcourt 2006). (Actually, I love the text for this book too--a series of whimsical animal poems.) The stylized gouache animal paintings are absolutely delightful--I especially like Paschkis' use of color and rhythm.

An Egg Is Quiet by Dianna Aston, illustrated by Sylvia Long (Candlewick 2006) is an absolutely gorgeous nonfiction picture book with a very simple text augmented by sidebars that go into more detail. The illustrations are exquisite realistic ink and watercolor images of beautiful eggs and the interesting birds, bugs, fish and reptiles that hatch from them.

Finally, two older but recently discovered picture books: *In the Attic* (Henry Holt 1984) by Hiawyn Oram, illustrated by Satoshi Kitamura, and *Julieta and Her Paintbox* (originally published in Spanish as *Julieta y Su Caja de Colores* by Editorial Patria S.A. 1984, translated 1997 by Macmillan/McGraw-Hill), written and illustrated by Carlos Pellicer Lopez. The first is about the power of imagination, the second about the magic of creating art. I discovered these two stories in a 1997 Macmillan/McGraw Hill elementary literature textbook that I bought at my local library for a dollar or two.

In the Attic is only 140 efficient words long. The ink and watercolor illustrations are

imaginative and varied. I especially love a spread in which the protagonist is standing on his tiptoes on a wooden platform floating in space, looking through a window into another world. Other windows looking into other worlds rest on the platform. In another spread, the boy meets a tiger and they find they speak the same language--stripes! This book is still available in paperback.

The illustrations for *Julieta and Her Paintbox* are wonderful. Julieta and the details of her home are rendered in ink and have a Matisse-like energy and charm. In contrast to the black and white line-drawings, the paintings Julieta produces and the world outside her window are awash with color. The illustrations as a whole are joyful, even exuberant. I found myself wishing that the text were as imaginative as the art. This book is currently available only in Spanish, but the illustrations need no translation!

Isn't kid lit grand?

What is your favorite dessert and why?

If creme brulee is on the menu, I pretty much have to have it. Thank goodness I don't make it myself--I'm trying to stay away from sugar, so I'm only tempted when I go out. I'm in the market for a new "favorite dessert" that I can eat more often! I do like fresh fruit--pear or cantaloupe with a little ricotta cheese or berries with a dollop of whipped cream. Any other suggestions out there?

Barbara Jean Hicks published thirteen romance novels and novellas before deciding picture books were a lot more fun! Her first book for children, *Jitterbug Jam* (FSG 2005, ill. Alexis Deacon), has been published in five languages and recently sold stage rights in the U.K. Early reviews for her latest book, *The Secret Life of Walter Kitty* (Knopf 2007, ill. Dan Santat), are promising, including the following from actress Rhea Perlman and her feline companion: "Walter Kitty is hysterical. I read it with my cat, Stripey. We laughed our tails off!" (Rhea Perlman). "Meow meow meow. Meow meow meow meow meeeooooowww!!!!" (Stripey Perlman). Barbara's current cat-in-residence, Patches, is less enthusiastic. Jealous of the attention Walter's getting, perhaps?

VISIT THE CURRENT ISSUE OF TALES FROM THE RUSHMORE KID AT
<http://www.tinanicholscouryblog.com/>