

READ ALL THE CALIFORNIA READERS' AUTHOR/ARTIST INTERVIEWS AT  
<http://www.californiareaders.org/interviews/index.php>

## MEET BARBARA JEAN HICKS

by Ann Stalcup

### What did you most like to do as a child?

Read! I read in as many places as poet Eleanor Farjeon claimed a cat slept: "Anywhere! Any table, Any chair. Top of piano, Window-ledge, In the middle, On the edge..." Well, maybe not on top of piano, since we didn't have one, but under the covers at night with a flashlight...you betcha! I also was the designated reader and storyteller for the younger three of my six siblings.

I gained my love of reading from my parents, who read to us from the time we were tiny babies. We grew up without a television in our home, so listening to Mama and Daddy read aloud was our family entertainment. Mama took us through the picture books we picked out on our weekly trips to the library in our early years. Later, Daddy took us through all the children's classics, one chapter a night before bedtime. He also read aloud at the dinner table, opening the dictionary to a word at random and reading the derivation and definition, and then pulling out a volume of a grocery-store edition of Funk & Wagnall's Encyclopedia—again opening at random and reading an entry from beginning to end. I owe a huge debt to my parents for instilling in me a great love for the kind of knowledge one gains from reading books.

### What do you most like to read?

I love the "funny papers." I rarely start my day without reading the comics. Current faves are *Pearls Before Swine* by Stephan Pastis, *Sherman's Lagoon* by Jim Toomey, and *Mother Goose & Grimm* by Mike Peters. Past faves included *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Waterson and anything by Gary Larson. In just a few strokes and a few words, a good cartoonist can make me smile, chuckle, or even howl with laughter. My local paper doesn't carry Patrick McDonnell's *Mutts*, unfortunately, a comic strip that often makes me smile in recognition and sometimes, with its "shelter stories," makes me go all mooshy inside. (McDonnell is an advocate for animal rights, especially animal adoption—an issue near and dear to my heart.) Also, although it doesn't generally make me laugh, I'm intrigued by Brooke McEldowney's *9 Chickweed Lane* for its fabulous graphic style.

Of course I also read lots of picture books. I tend to be most attracted to those with a strong graphic element to the art and either a funny or a very lyrical text. I like early readers and middle grade fiction, too, but don't read much YA. Too realistic. Too depressing! Once in a while I even read a grown-up novel, especially one with elements of magical realism, like Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* or Francesca Lia Block's *Necklace of Kisses*. Except for research purposes (and I dearly love to research a topic I'm interested in), I rarely read nonfiction. I guess in my mind, fiction is more compelling and even "truer" than nonfiction for me because it speaks to the experience of the heart.

### **What is it that most triggers your imagination?**

Appropriately for a picture book author, I'm a very visual person, so many of my ideas come from visual images: scenes from real life, photographs, performance and visual art. I got the idea for *I Like Black and White* from observing my tuxedo cat, Miguel, sitting on the lawn in his meatloaf position. He looked so incredibly black-and-white against the intense green of the lawn. Before I wrote any words for the book, I went to the library and found dozens of photos for visual references. The idea for *Jitterbug Jam* came from a Mother Goose and Grimm cartoon and the idea was further developed from observation of kindergartners on the school playground.

I also get story ideas by playing with perspective. I try to put myself inside the mind and experience of another person or creature, to see and explain the world from a unique point of view. I think part of a writer's (and an artist's) job is to provoke readers to think about the world and their place in it in new ways. A unique perspective provides the "So what?" factor in any creative work. It gives a story or painting or performance meaning beyond pure entertainment.

### **What are you working on now?**

I just finished a picture book text called *Monsters Don't Eat Broccoli*. My editor likes it but as of early 2008, I don't yet have a contract! I'm working on a follow-up to *The Secret Life of Walter Kitty* called *Don Coyote*. It's a middle-grade graphic novel text I've had some interest in and am really hoping will sell. I've also been working on a middle grade novel, a humorous ghost story called *Maisie's Ghost*, for a couple of years, but I can't seem to settle down to it. In addition, I've been taking design and drawing classes and have a couple of ideas for picture books that I'd like to both write and illustrate. And I've had an idea for an adult novel swimming around in my brain the last several years that's getting a bit more pushy lately. Ideas are everywhere, and I'm not sure yet which one will pester me enough to get me glued to my chair until it comes to fruition. I'm waiting to find out!

**READ ALL THE CALIFORNIA READERS' AUTHOR/ARTIST INTERVIEWS AT**  
<http://www.californiareaders.org/interviews/index.php>