



Lauren Child

**Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie**

Lauren Child, interviewed in New York, New York on April 20, 2006 while on tour from England.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first book for children, *Clarice Bean, That's Me* began what's become a very successful career in children's books, including, among others, your Charlie and Lola series, which is now a Disney television show. Where did you get your start?

LAUREN CHILD: Early on, I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I definitely knew it would be something to do with drawing. I could never quite commit to one thing because I thought it would prevent me from doing something else that I really wanted to do. If I wanted to be a furniture designer, then that would mean I couldn't be a textile designer or I couldn't be an illustrator or I couldn't have ideas for film or TV.

I even had a lampshade-making business for a while, where a friend and I taught ourselves how to make lampshades and we found all these really interesting fabrics, and made limited edition lampshades.

Somebody pointed out to me that a lot of what I was interested in was children focused. She said, "You're very interested in children's products, children's TV, and children's books, so maybe you should think about doing a children's animation or something." Then she said, "Why don't you write a children's book, because it can serve as a calling card; you could maybe talk to an animation company about your idea. And so I wrote *Clarice Bean, That's Me*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Was this the very first time you'd written or illustrated a children's book?

LAUREN CHILD: I'd had a go at writing children's books before, but they'd never worked because I'd go to a publisher with an idea, and they'd suggest looking at *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or somebody else's book, and plotting it out in this way. To me, that meant writing in a weird way — just writing over the top of someone else's format — not really writing from the heart or from anything to do with me. So everything came out very stale. It wasn't about me, and it wasn't about anything I was very interested in.

When I wrote *Clarice Bean*, I tricked myself into writing a book by just writing about something that I was really interested in that would help me come up with a film idea. I submitted *Clarice Bean* to an agent who took it, which is probably one of the most exciting things that ever happened to me. But then nothing happened. I mean, literally nothing happened for years. And I thought, "I can't write another book because I think this is the best that I can do. And if nobody wants this, then I just won't write another book."

TEACHINGBOOKS: So, how did *Clarice Bean, That's Me* finally get published?

LAUREN CHILD: Lots of people had been very interested in publishing *Clarice*, but there were various reasons why they wouldn't publish it, and the main one seemed to be that they felt it was too sophisticated for children. So, I asked a publisher, "What is the subject matter that's most likely to get picked up by a publisher?" They said, "Animals. If you write a very simple story about animals, you're much more likely to get it published."

I gave it one last shot, and wrote this very simple story called *I Want a Pet*. Unlike how I wrote and illustrated *Clarice Bean*, I made everything in *I Want a Pet* very simple. No fancy typeface, just two or three lines of text on a page, and very simple cutouts with colored backgrounds. Sure enough, it got taken on by a publisher.

And as soon as *I Want a Pet* was accepted — even before it was published — a publisher then took on *Clarice Bean*. That's how it happened.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your recognizable style of cutout figures, photos of real objects and typeface manipulation all appear in your very first book. Did you submit your book idea to publishers with all of those concepts in place?

LAUREN CHILD: Yes. I came up with the story for *Clarice Bean, That's Me*, then I did six sample illustrations. And rather than just sketch them in or provide finished pictures with no text, I decided I was going to put the text in, too. I knew straight away that I wanted to use different typefaces and move the words about to become part of the illustration because, for one thing, there's a lot of text, so you've got to integrate it somehow so it doesn't look scary to a reader or indeed just spoil the page somehow just by having all this writing all over it. I decided I was going to use the text to illustrate the pictures, and make it all one image.

An example of the type becoming part of the illustration is when Clarice observes her sister using hairspray and it worries her that she's making a hole in the ozone layer with the aerosol can. I drew the aerosol can really big and then made the words look like they were spraying out of the can.

My characters are all represented with different typefaces, too, which functions as a shorthand showing the reader what kind of voice they've got or how old they are. Clarice's mother has this beautiful, curly typeface, because she's an elegant woman. Clarice's little brother has this babyish writing to represent how young he is. I find altering typefaces is a nice way to show characters' personalities. I also make the writing big or small if somebody's angry or being very quiet.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Clarice Bean, like you, is a middle child. How much of your own childhood and family life are reflected in the Clarice Bean books?

LAUREN CHILD: Being a middle child definitely has an effect on how I think. I have a lot more empathy, I suppose, with middle children. Being a middle child, you don't really know what your position is meant to be in the family. I have an older sister and a younger sister, and I always felt they both got it easier than I did.

I made the first Clarice Bean book about a quest for your own space and your own peace and quiet, which she never gets. Clarice Bean's little brother is called Minal Cricket, and he really is my little sister. I had to share a bedroom with my little sister, and she drove me crazy. I didn't have my own space, whereas my older sister always had her own room. My older sister was quite responsible and grown up, and my parents trusted her more than they trusted me. My little sister was the sort of happy, jokey one; the cute one that everybody wanted to pick up. So then what was I?

When Clarice Bean is really grumpy about something or she's never got tidy hair and all those sort of things, it is something that I experienced as a child. I really understand the need for children to have their own place. However loving her family is, she just still needs to be on her own some of the time.

In the novel I've just finished writing, Clarice does get her own room, but it took five or six books before she gets it. When I was about seven or eight, we moved and I got my own room. I spent a lot of time there, and I liked having everything the way I wanted it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share more about Clarice Bean — who is she, and some of her unique qualities.

LAUREN CHILD: Clarice is quite a gutsy, confident child, and I like that about her. But she's still flawed by the usual things we all get troubled by. She worries about big and little things.

Clarice Bean tells readers whatever is on her mind. Children are particularly apt to have their minds suddenly spin off and just really want to tell you something. And that's a bit what Clarice Bean is like; she just wants to tell you things.

There are so many things that we're not really meant to say out loud, and I quite like having Clarice say them because, as the author, I can't really say that. But if it's coming out of her mouth, then in a way I think, "Well, she's seven so she can say what she wants to say, to a degree."

Clarice Bean lives in a very chaotic, busy family. She has a mom, a dad, an older brother and sister and a younger brother. Her Uncle Ted, a firefighter, is ever-so-slightly irresponsible, but not on purpose. I remember having a cousin who was a bit like that — an older, boy cousin. He seemed quite cool in a way. Everything he did was funny, and I trusted him. I wanted Clarice to have somebody like that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Clarice Bean started life in picture books, but has grown into middle-grade novels.

LAUREN CHILD: Yeah. Going from picture books to novels with Clarice Bean was quite a big step. It was my editor's idea because I was writing longer and longer picture books. It's been very, very good to write picture books because it made me very conscious about editing. So, although I think sometimes my editors might despair that my picture book text is too long, I think I probably get the advantage when I get to write young fiction because then I am always conscious of editing myself. I illustrate the novels, too, because I don't want to completely lose the feel of the picture books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: With each book, your Clarice Bean character ages, unlike the characters in your other series, the Charlie and Lola books.

LAUREN CHILD: Yes. Clarice Bean is my favorite character because, unlike the others, Clarice doesn't seem fictional to me. I feel like she is a real person, and part of that is because she develops. When I wrote the first Clarice Bean book, I imagined her to be about seven years old. Now she's probably more like 10 or 11 in the newer books, but she still has that same freshness to her voice.

With Charlie and Lola, it's a completely different thing. Charlie and Lola are almost trapped in time. They will never get older; they will always be four and seven. And they will

always live in a very stylized world. That doesn't mean they don't have issues that real children have; they do. But it's very contained, whereas Clarice's world can completely change like a normal person's world can.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first Charlie and Lola book (*I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato*) won you the Kate Greenaway Medal — the UK's equivalent to ALA's Newbery and Caldecott awards. The picture books feature a big brother and a little sister and no adults.

LAUREN CHILD: *I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato* is about Lola, who is a fussy eater, and Charlie, her responsible older brother.

I wanted to write about something that was essentially a really tiny subject, but when you are tiny it's a massive deal. Food is such a big issue for children. It can be terrifying when you go to someone's house and you are served something that you don't know what it is, and it's got bits in it.

Then I came up with the idea that there would be a brother — Charlie — who's older and clever, and he would be able to persuade Lola to do all these things that she didn't really want to do. I also decided there would be no adults. I just wanted children's voices because the thing about being a child with siblings is you spend an awful lot of time with them. And although parents are always around, they are busy doing whatever they were doing. I wanted to show a relationship between a brother and a sister and how much time you actually spend together.

My Charlie and Lola books are about children having to work out problems for themselves. I really wanted the relationship to be very strong between those two children, so the parents are there, but they're in the background.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There are also Charlie and Lola books based on the Disney television series. What is your level of involvement with the books and the show?

LAUREN CHILD: I work two days a week on the show — script editing, design consulting and developing new ideas for the show. Although I don't write or illustrate the episode books, I do work with the publishing house in designing them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you enjoy your work on the Charlie and Lola Disney television show?

LAUREN CHILD: It's interesting adapting Charlie and Lola for television. You see, I'd wanted to put Clarice Bean in a film or a cartoon series for a long time. Then when it came down to it, I couldn't bear to have her put on television. I feel very protective about her. But with Charlie and Lola, I felt it was possible to turn them into an animated series. The Charlie and Lola premise is such a simple idea, and I think it's fairly gettable.

What I mean is, as long as you have real children doing the voices, then you can maintain the sense of what the characters are saying. Viewers can understand the cuteness or the peculiarity of the way that Lola constructs her sentences.

And, I knew that we could get the look right, because so much is possible now in animation; I knew it would look exactly like the books. So long as the stories were good, I knew it was going to work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book illustrations often include photographs of real objects, such as the peas in *I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato* or the toothbrush in *I Am Not Sleepy and I Will Not Go to Bed*.

LAUREN CHILD: The thing about using photographs in my illustrations is I love the way that a real thing looks next to a drawn thing. There's something very nice about that juxtaposition of those two images. In the *Clarice Bean* picture books I used photographs as background or parts of collage.

With *Charlie & Lola*, I decided to use photographs to highlight the thing that Lola is talking about. So if she's talking about not liking peas, I included a photograph of some peas. There aren't lots of photographs all over the place; just when Lola mentions something like carrots for rabbits, then there's a photo of a real rabbit.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Princess and the Pea* is a bit of a departure from your usual format, incorporating three-dimensional sets designed for each scene then photographed as the illustration.

LAUREN CHILD: *The Princess and the Pea* felt like a natural progression for me as an illustrator. I wanted to write a fairy tale that was a retelling of a real fairy tale, with my voice being the difference. I really miss that people aren't doing full-length fairy tales. It's very rare now to get one fairy tale in a book. I wanted to show each little thing that happens in illustration.

I chose *The Princess and the Pea* by Hans Christian Andersen because it was really short. I'd always felt as a child that there was a bit of a flaw in the story, and I thought of a way of putting it right. I felt it was wrong that this girl would turn up at a royal palace in the middle of the night and be given everything she needs. And then in the morning when the Queen said, "How did you sleep?" She says, "Oh really badly, actually." And I just can't think of anybody who would say that to their host. I just thought it was incredibly rude, and it didn't fit with her being a wonderful girl. For me, it didn't make her a real princess; it made her a rather unpleasant character. I wanted to rewrite that, and I thought of a way of being able to do it.

The story of *The Princess and the Pea* is so mysterious. I love the coziness of her coming out of a stormy night and finding sanctuary in that beautiful place.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you decide on a photographer to work with in creating *The Princess and the Pea*?

LAUREN CHILD: I wanted to use photographer Polly Borland because 10, 15 years ago, I'd seen her photographs on the wall of my friend's sitting room, and I was fascinated with the way Polly saw things. She takes really beautiful photographs.

Luckily for me, Polly had wanted to do a children's book for ages. We thought for a long time about what we'd do, and then that's when we came up with the idea of retelling *The Princess and the Pea*, which also happened to be one of her favorite fairy tales.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe what it was like to create and photograph the sets for *The Princess and the Pea*.

LAUREN CHILD: At first, we thought we would use the setting of a doll's house, using all my flatly drawn characters. So I was going to draw all the people, set them in a doll's house, done. It

was going to be a really easy job. So we did a test shot for this, and as soon as we did it we realized it was going to be impossible, because we couldn't get the atmosphere we wanted.

It suddenly turned into the hardest book I'd ever done. It meant building all these sets. They were all made out of cardboard and little bits of wood and plastic bottles, and sort of constructed in this sort of mad way. I was very lucky to have a friend who's a miniaturist, and she helped me do a lot of the things.

Polly strove to breathe life into the sets. For instance, she asked me to draw a really tiny picture of branches in black marker on clear plastic. She shone a light through it to create an enormous shadow on the ceiling then she shot the picture. It was a very complicated thing to do; it took about two days to do that one shot.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book* is fairy tale-like, but goes beyond the usual parameters.

LAUREN CHILD: In *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book* readers can see what it might be like to literally fall into a book and into the story. They can also explore what fairy tale characters might really be like and how they might react to being drawn all over.

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book is a new fairy story about this little boy, Herb, who falls into a book of fairy stories. Herb has defaced the book by scribbling on various characters' faces. His scribbling has upset a lot of the characters, and the book is about Herb encountering them and how they all feel.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There's a real hole in the pages of the book — cut by Herb, the main character in the book.

LAUREN CHILD: Yes, Herb's situation in *Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book* has become a mess. When the book was printed, a jagged hole was die cut into the page to make it appear as if he has really cut a hole in the book. This helps the reader get a sense of how far Herb's been going with his vandalism. I feel like it doesn't matter what any child does to their own copy of *Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book*. It will probably just add to its overall look, because the book was meant to feel like it has really been manhandled.

I also liked having a page printed upside down in this book, and I was surprised that the publishers allowed this to happen. When you're trying to help children read, an upside-down page in a book can make it more difficult for them by having the writing upside down on this page gives a sense of the fun of this story, and this is what Herb has done. I hope children like that they have to keep turning the book one way and another.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Book* allows children to experience what it might be like to be inside a storybook.

LAUREN CHILD: I've always loved the idea of a book coming to life. When you read a good book, and you're really engaged with it, the book's story, setting and characters actually become your world for a certain amount of time. When you're really into a book, you just don't want to leave it. I find that fascinating. I think that is the power of books: that you get completely captivated.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Hubert Horatio Bartle Bobton-Trent* is created in a similar style to your other books, but with an old-fashioned look and a curious parent/child relationship. What was your motivation for creating the Hubert Horatio look and story?

LAUREN CHILD: I knew I wanted to write a story about someone really, really small who was really, really clever — a very brainy child that lived in this extremely big house with very rich parents.

I suppose Hubert Horatio came about for two reasons. One is that as a child I loved watching all those sort of old Hollywood movies which were often set in very sort of lavish worlds with Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn and others. They lived in really wonderful surroundings and they wore wonderful clothes, and I was always interested in that domestic side of films. I had very extravagant taste when I was little, and my mother always felt like I must've been born into the wrong family, because I loved walking around stately homes in England. So *Hubert Horatio Bartle Bobton-Trent* came out that.

I also liked the idea of Hubert being an only child and having rather childlike parents. They love socializing, they love spending money, they're very generous, and they just love having a good time. Hubert is nothing like his parents; he is so adult compared to them. I felt that was an interesting idea to explore, because so many children do feel a bit responsible for their parents. Parents often feel that they're protecting their children or their children don't know things, and actually children do know. It's sort of a joke on that. There's a nice twist at the end where they lose all their money and are not rich anymore, but they are happier than they ever were.

I suppose the most important thing I hope people get out of *Hubert Horatio* is that Hubert is not a sad child. I like that he's very self-competent, yet he's a very happy child. He's not a freaky child that can't engage with anyone his own age.

I really wanted this book to have that kind of 1950s and 60s feel to it. Finely enough, it's the most high-tech book I've ever done because, to get that look meant putting everything through the computer.

We took elements from the American dollar bill and from the old English pound note and wrote to the American Treasury to ask permission to use these elements on the book.

We also wanted to use uncoated paper. Most children's books are printed on coated paper, and have a slight sheen; they feel very smooth and glossy. They print them this way because it brings up all the colors nicely. We wanted *Hubert Horatio Bartle Bobton-Trent* to look and smell like an old-fashioned book, really inky, which happens when you print on an uncoated stock.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your studio and a typical workday.

LAUREN CHILD: I work from home now, but I used to find it impossible to work from home because you have to be really, really motivated. I liked working in a busy space.

There's no such thing as a typical workday because so much depends on what I'm working on. If I'm working on a *Clarice Bean* novel, I tend to work in the countryside, because I need to work solid hours on it without distraction. So I usually go to the west of England when I'm doing that.

When I'm starting a book, I'll go and work in a café because I find that really useful. I can sit there with my laptop and come up with ideas. I'll maybe only work on it two hours at a time.

When I'm finishing a book I need to work really long days, because otherwise I forget the thread. As I'm beginning to pick up pieces of the story I need to make sure that they all weave together properly.

If I'm illustrating I have to be in my studio at home, because I like to have all my supplies and references around me. I've got hundreds of children's books and art books, and I've got magazines and other references.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is there a specific book or illustrator that influenced you as a child or now as an illustrator?

LAUREN CHILD: *The Shrinking of Treehorn* [written by Florence Parry Heide, illustrated by Edward Gorey. Holiday House, 1971.] has been an enormous influence on me, because I read it when I was nine or ten, and I never forgot it. It was one of those books that really said something to me. It's about the way that adults don't listen to children. I would say that's a common theme in my books: the theme of a child having to work out a problem for him- or herself. Clarice is always having to do that, and it's not because her parents are bad, it's just they're busy or they're not listening in the same way that she needs them to. Hubert is also a child having to sort out a problem for himself.

Also, I am very influenced by Edward Gorey. I just love his work and the way he finds the quirk in an illustration. And I admire the work of Ronald Searle: his St. Trinian's characters and his other little black-and-white, sketchy cartoons.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your illustration process.

LAUREN CHILD: All my books are collaged — even *The Princess and the Pea* is a collage, it's just in 3-D. All the figures are created with layers of paper.

Usually, I'll start with a thumbnail sketch, and I'll put in where I think the words should go and just a rough idea of where the images are. Then I send them to my designer, and we work out where the text should be positioned. I have to do that very early because it affects the whole picture. Then I draw everything separately.

So, for example, when I was illustrating the tomato book I drew Lola just a few centimeters big because I like to draw everything small in pencil. And then I enlarge the image quite a lot to get a really lovely black line. I like the graininess of the line. Then, I colored her just using any old paint or crayon and cut her out as a separate piece.

I cut out and laid the Lola drawing on a wooden table, and I was about to draw the table that she was going to sit at when I realized that she looked really beautiful next to wood. So, I got some wood paper, and put it down and sat her as if she's behind it. Then I took a photograph of some peas so they would look super real. Then I cut them out and just laid her hand on top of the photograph.

Everything in my illustrations is just one flat thing on top of another. There isn't any perspective in my work whatever.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Earlier, you spoke of not knowing what you wanted to choose as a career path because there were so many things you wanted to do. How are you feeling about the direction your career has taken?

LAUREN CHILD: By choosing children's books and becoming a writer and illustrator it has led to a series of possibilities. Being an illustrator actually does make you a fashion designer or a costume designer or a furniture designer as well, because you're having to draw all these things. I

can draw them the way that I want to draw them, and I have an animated television series. My career does actually enable me to do everything I've ever wanted to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

LAUREN CHILD: Well, it happens with both writing and illustration. Illustration is a kind of different thing for me because illustration can be very, very hard with a deadline. It physically takes what it's going to take. You can't hurry it along.

When I get stuck, I have various people I usually show my work to. I get to the point where I just can't see my work anymore, so I show my work to designers and illustrators that I really trust. They are very good at giving me advice.

With writing, I have other people who are really great readers. My sister is one of them. I can hand something to them and say "What's wrong with this, why isn't it working?" They're very good at sort of seeing what the problem is.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

LAUREN CHILD: Probably my biggest thing to tell children is, "It's fantastic to be able to see in a unique way. Try to learn to look at things in a different way; notice things."

Both my parents were teachers, and I think they're very happy to be retired now because there's that new sense of "spelling is more important than creative writing," and "math is more important than running." It unfortunately seems that art and being good at drawing comes very low down in what people today really consider as important.

It makes me sad because I think children should value visual awareness. It's so important to notice things. There are many careers and really great jobs that involve being able to see things in a particular way, having a particular slant on things, being good at drawing. I think it's the same with picture books. It makes me very sad when children say to me, "I really like your *Clarice Bean* picture books, but I'm a bit too old for them now." And I think, "Why are you? It's not babyish to look at pictures."

Adult novels used to be illustrated. Sadly, we don't illustrate adult novels anymore. But why aren't pictures as important as words? I love words, but I just think it's a great shame that we don't value illustrations and we don't value the visual and all those things we see around us.

Books by Lauren Child

- ADVENTURES OF PIPPI LONGSTOCKING, THE (written by Astrid Lindgren), Oxford University Press, date TBA
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- MY HAIRCUT: STICKER STORIES, Grosset and Dunlap, 2006
- MY SCHOOL PLAY: STICKER STORIES, Grosset and Dunlap, 2006
- MY WOBBLY TOOTH MUST NOT EVER NEVER FALL OUT, Grosset & Dunlap, 2006
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- WE HONESTLY CAN LOOK AFTER YOUR DOG, Grosset & Dunlap, 2006
- WHOOPS! BUT IT WASN'T ME, Grosset & Dunlap, 2006
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