



Michael Emberley

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

Michael Emberley, interviewed in his studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts on August 14, 2001.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You incorporate a comic book style into the “sex books” you create with Robie Harris. Would you elaborate on that?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: The “sex books” (*It's Perfectly Normal* and *It's So Amazing*) are nonfiction picture books about puberty and growing up and reproduction and how babies are made. And they use some elements that comic books have, but they are certainly not comic books.

There were many points to be made in these books. And it was such a complex topic that it started to become logical to me that different techniques would work extremely well. There was biology and there were society issues in growing up, etc. For certain types of communication points, there's an appropriate format. I think it's legitimate, even for hard science, to abstract it, because you're trying to teach a concept, not a pure reality.

The biology material just seemed far more suited to a comic book style. How sperm are produced, for example, how eggs are released from the ovaries, etc., seemed suited to comic books.

The rest of the book is done in a style of small paragraphs and drawings in the same style, but not in the panel-by-panel format. Also throughout the book are the voices of what are supposed to represent children commenting on the text. To achieve this, Robie and I created bird and bee characters, which are comic book style characters.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The “sex books” have been criticized for some of their content and even banned from some schools. What's your reaction to that?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: There is a very fine line between creating an informational book and an instructional book. Neither of these books that Robie and I did are instructional books on how to do anything. They are simply informational books. And the reasons why we included certain drawings in the books were part of our mantra that Robie and I developed in creating them, which I think is good for any nonfiction book for kids: “what's in the best interests of the child?” And whenever we had to make a hard decision we always went back to this question. And part of the *It's Perfectly Normal* concept (about reproduction and the fact that the body changes happen to everybody), is about making kids comfortable with things that are perfectly normal.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you describe how you researched the illustrations for these books?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: We did incredible amounts of research for both books from a variety of sources. The most unique source that we used was a variety of professionals in fields connected to the topic. I can't imagine anybody other than Robie Harris, the writer of these books, being able

to assemble such a large number of professionals to give advice and information, both before, during and after I executed sketches. They guided us toward the best possible way of communicating a point, and deciding what that point is. It's not always apparent when you begin the project what the point is you're trying to get across. And it often changes, at least it did for me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *It's Perfectly Normal* has been printed in many languages around the world.

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: *It's Perfectly Normal* and *It's So Amazing* have both been translated into many languages. That's because they are books that are filling a need. And that has been great — it's a completely different experience to have somebody thank you for doing a book as opposed to saying that they like the book. The response around the world has been terrific. I've been told these books have saved a lot of lives; saved a lot of punishment; saved a lot of injury and illness. And who can say that about *Little Red Riding Hood*?

There's been a lot of issues recently surrounding sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases like HIV, which has fueled an interest in sexual education because sexual education of kids has been seen as a primary weapon in fighting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy and unwanted children around the globe. We've been a part of that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You used a very different artistic style when you illustrated the “baby books.”

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: Yes, the *Happy Birth Day* book and the *Hi New Baby* book are a completely different drawing style than my other books. When you read something, you envision something. And whether you're capable of executing it or not is another story. But when I read the manuscripts to those books, I didn't see little cartoon characters running around the page. They're very personal and sweet. And you certainly can't depict a sweet, tender viewpoint with something that's harsh and comic.

Happy Birth Day is about the baby's first day and it's told from the mother's viewpoint in expressing to an older child what it was like when they were born. It contains impressions and memories and emotion. I did huge pictures because it's all about getting up close. Every relative is in the baby's face and the baby is in their faces. So I thought it was appropriate that the pictures be big. In fact, some of the pictures are bigger than life size.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In your research, you and Robie Harris witnessed an actual birth. What was the impact of this experience on the subsequent illustrations?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: Everything about that day, that particular birth, seeing the baby come halfway out, seeing the sights, the sounds, the smell, the feeling of the place, is all important to what an illustrator does because you are trying to depict that event. It is so different than when you see photographs; you get a completely different impression. It's so remote. But when you're there, it's not like that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It sounds like you've gotten a lot out of doing those books.

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: It's really interesting to be exposed to so many different worlds of people involved with kids. That's been a real eye-opener in being exposed to the teachers and the health professionals and the doctors and the psychologists and all these people that are working for the good of children. And, they do it because it's the right thing to do. There are so many of them, and they're so anonymous.

There are many different worlds that our books have encompassed. Scientists and that whole world of academia, teachers and the world of education and schools; psychologists and hospitals and nurses, doctors and the whole world of healing the sick and preventing sickness. This is not something that I would have anticipated either. It's an unexpected benefit.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe what it was like illustrating the first *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You* book.

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You* is another collaboration. I illustrated what Mary Ann Hoberman wrote. It was a more typical arrangement, where I was contacted by an editor that I hadn't worked with before — Megan Tingley. She had Mary Ann's manuscript and she asked me if I wanted to illustrate it.

The book is a series of poems for two voices. That sounds at first like something completely different from what I'd done previously. But, one of the things about poems for two voices is you can see them as dialogue. And I saw them as dialogue and I saw them as connecting very directly to dialogue and comic book and acting and picture books and everything else that I have done before. So it didn't seem distant at all.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And you were able to use a familiar style of illustration.

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: Yes, I did each poem in a comic-like series of pictures, all framed out. But it's not in a classic comic book format. I used a cheap ballpoint pen to draw the pictures because that gave me more freedom. And they're done vertically because the poems are in columns. But, having a series of drawings allowed me to make more comments about the poems than you would have with a single picture. I could make ten comments about each of the poems.

I did the illustrations featuring a lot of animals. I enjoy drawing animals, anthropomorphized animals more than people in general, and I especially needed a break after drawing so many bodies and so much this-has-to-be-this-way-because-it's-a-nonfiction-book.

The characters for each poem are pretty weird. I was very lucky in this particular case. You're not always lucky when you do this, when you just go out on a limb and you kind of weird-out somebody's work. But luckily Mary Ann Hoberman was thrilled. Just lucky that once again I connected with an author in a way that worked. And even though I didn't work closely with her, she felt that I did a great job. It was a nice break after doing so much nonfiction to get a chance to go wild a little bit.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you have freedom to create what came to you when you read the text?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: I was allowed a lot of freedom with these books. I connected poems that weren't previously connected into a story. The first three poems I connected into a single basic story. It's a cat and a mouse and I did a classic mouse/cat/dog scenario. Mary Ann was writing about cats and mice. But, to me, they were obviously connected, so I connected them with my

drawings. You could call the poems various things: Are they poems for two voices? Rhyming dialogue? Very short stories to read together? They're all of the above.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to use ballpoint pen for the illustrations?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: I've always wanted to get back to trying that after I did some sketches for *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* that I had to crank out in a hurry. I was at a speaking engagement, and I had nothing to draw with in the hotel room except for ballpoint pens and stationery. I never even liked writing with ballpoint pens before because they seemed too squiggly to me. But the more I drew with one, the more I liked it, and the more I could see all these funky shadings you could get out of them and stuff.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You grew up in a family of artists — parents Ed and Barbara and sister Rebecca — how would you describe the impact that had on your development as an artist?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: Growing up I saw people creating artwork, and the biggest benefit to me in having artists in-house was making it normal. This is very fortunate, because some great artists have achieved through resistance and having everybody in their life not only not understanding or not doing it, but verbally, mentally and physically thwarting any of their efforts to proceed down a path of artistic creation.

Probably the biggest help came not just in becoming an artist or a writer, but getting involved and doing books and becoming a published illustrator and author quite young. I could see all that this entailed. They normalized getting involved in a business (that's also an art) that for some is even more mysterious than the actual trade of creating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your father's style of drawing books. [Ed Emberley is a Caldecott medalist and creator of the Ed Emberley's Drawing Books series.]

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: My father's done a series of books that show you a way to draw a certain kind of an image that will give you a certain kind of a reward for what you have put out. It's teaching you to draw symbolically, which is the way a lot of people see things anyway. You remember an abstract image. The smiley face is a perfect example — two dots and a curved line — people see that as a face. They say that the smiley face is so memorable because it's the kind of an image that you retain after you close your eyes. You tend to focus on eyes and mouth on a face.

If you draw an abstract image, like from one of my father's books, where you're putting together blocks and dots and lines, you get an enjoyable result. You get something recognizable that seemingly took no effort.

TEACHINGBOOKS: After collaborating with your father on drawing books and publishing *Dinosaurs: A Drawing Book* in your late teens, *Ruby* was the first story that you illustrated. What was the genesis for this book?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: The genesis of *Ruby* came from a story I was writing, called *Lorelei*, which is about a little girl that was going somewhere, and she was going to encounter two different people. One was going to be a very polite, nice person who was the bad guy, and the

other a very rough, awful person who was the good guy. Well, maybe not good guy, but at least he wasn't lying. And the more I wrote the story, the more it started sounding an awful lot like *Little Red Riding Hood*. So I had to make a decision: either change it completely or call it a parody on *Little Red Riding Hood* and go with it. It was fun to go with it, because I got really intrigued by folk tales at that time. I renamed it *Ruby*.

I was writing about five or six other stories simultaneously — sketching and dummied them up — because I was so paranoid about going back to publishers with just one thing and having it be rejected. When I finally went to a publisher with *Ruby*, I had five other dummied books and one un-dummied manuscript with me. And it turns out that I published four of them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Ruby* there are a lot of things in the pictures that aren't in the words.

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: Yes, picture books are better when things in the picture tell part of the story, and the words can't completely stand alone. The words and pictures should complement each other. This also makes it more fun, because otherwise the illustration becomes decoration. It's like listening to a television show on the radio or watching TV with the sound muted. You can't always understand what's going on. Television or film is just like what picture books are supposed to be. It's really necessary to have both words and images together.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're a fan of graphic novels and comic books. In what ways are these styles similar to picture books?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: Most comic books are told exclusively through dialogue. It's like storyboards for films. If you've ever looked at a storyboard for a film, it looks just like a comic book. It's panels of scenes of people talking and carrying a story, primarily through dialogue. Comic books are the purest form of printed image and word complementing each other.

Unfortunately, one of the reasons why people stick in a lot of words to explain things in picture books is they may not be able to draw well enough to represent what it is they want to express. And they often want to tell a complicated story, so they tend to stick in a lot of stuff to make it work. But, if you had more time, and that's what comic books usually do, they are able to express all kinds of complicated things.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What other kinds of art projects are you involved in?

MICHAEL EMBERLEY: I recently did an event for an organization called "Reach Out and Read," trying to encourage kids to read through the hospital systems. The hospital has trouble getting art. So I'm doing some illustrations for them to use for whatever they want, for posters, etc.

Books by Michael Emberley

- MAIL HARRY TO THE MOON (written by Robie Harris), Little, Brown & Company, 2007
- IT'S NOT THE STORK! ! A BOOK ABOUT GIRLS, BOYS, BABIES, BODIES, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS (written by Robie Harris), Candlewick Press, 2006
- GROWING UP STORIES: DAVID DINOSAUR-RRR! WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 3! (written by Robie Harris), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2005

- YOU READ TO ME, I'LL READ TO YOU: VERY SHORT MOTHER GOOSE TALES TO READ TOGETHER (written by Mary Ann Hoberman), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2005
- GROWING UP STORIES: SWEET JASMINE, NICE JACKSON. WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 2—AND TO BE TWINS! (written by Robie Harris), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2004
- IT'S PERFECTLY NORMAL: CHANGING BODIES, GROWING UP, SEX, AND SEXUAL HEALTH, Second Ed. (written by Robie Harris), Candlewick Press, 2004
- RUBY AND THE SNIFFS, Little, Brown and Company, 2004
- YOU READ TO ME, I'LL READ TO YOU: VERY SHORT FAIRY TALES TO READ TOGETHER (written by Mary Ann Hoberman), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2004
- GROWING UP STORIES: GO! GO! MARIA! WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 1 (written by Robie Harris), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2003
- GROWING UP STORIES: HELLO BENNY! WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A BABY (written by Robie Harris), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2002
- YOU READ TO ME, I'LL READ TO YOU: VERY SHORT STORIES TO READ TOGETHER (written by Mary Ann Hoberman), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2001
- HI NEW BABY! (written by Robie Harris), Candlewick Press, 2000
- IT'S SO AMAZING! A BOOK ABOUT EGGS, SPERM, BIRTH, BABIES, AND FAMILIES (written by Robie Harris), Candlewick Press, 1999
- RUBY AT THE POOL, Little, Brown and Company, 1999
- THREE: AN EMBERLEY FAMILY SKETCHBOOK (written and illustrated collectively by Ed Emberley, Michael Emberley, Rebecca Emberley), Little, Brown and Company, 1998
- HAPPY BIRTH DAY! (written by Robie Harris), Candlewick Press, 1996
- PRESENT, THE, Random House, 1995
- IT'S PERFECTLY NORMAL: CHANGING BODIES, GROWING UP, SEX, AND SEXUAL HEALTH (written by Robie Harris), Candlewick Press, 1994
- WELCOME BACK, SUN, Little, Brown and Company, 1993
- RUDOLPH'S SECOND CHRISTMAS (written by Robert Lewis May), Applewood Books, 1992
- RUBY, Little, Brown and Company, 1990
- RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER (written by Robert Lewis May), Applewood Books, 1990
- MORE DINOSAURS! AND OTHER PREHISTORIC BEASTS, Little, Brown and Company, 1983
- SPORTS EQUIPMENT BOOK, THE, Little, Brown and Company, 1982
- DINOSAURS: A DRAWING BOOK, Little, Brown and Company, 1980

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