



## Denise Fleming

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

Denise Fleming, interviewed in her studio in Toledo, Ohio on May 20, 2002.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Bright colors and gorgeous illustrations are what most everyone first thinks about your illustrated books. Yet not everyone sees, or understands, your unique pulp painting technique. Can you please describe the process of creating your pulp painting books?

**DENISE FLEMING:** Let me walk you through the process. First, I have to get the idea — this is the most exciting part — and then somebody buys the idea and we sign a contract. Then, I start working on sketching. I do little scribbles here and there with a china marker, which is like a crayon. That way I don't create too much detail — I can't use a lot of detail in the papermaking. Then I copy the rough sketches, and my husband David scans them into the computer. Then, we put together kind of a loose working dummy to see what's going on.

At this point I'm just kind of getting an idea of where I'm headed, and I may make tons of changes. Once I really decide what I want the pictures to look like, I do a much cleaner drawing.

I order my fibers from a papermaking supply company in big five-gallon buckets. Then, I dye the fiber all the different brilliant colors.

Next, I cut my stencils. The stencil cutting is probably the most tedious. That just seems to go on and on and on. But it is also the most important stage because that's the point where I'm figuring out what stencil goes next when I'm pouring the paper. In the beginning, that was the hardest thing to figure out, what stencil I put next on the paper to pour the different images. So now I pretend that I'm in the back of the actual piece of art walking toward the front. That's how I figure out what layer goes next. It's a little bit of a puzzle, but that's kind of fun.

And then I pour the paper pulp. It's wet on wet. When I have the picture just the way I want it, I take it and I flip it off and press it. It's a sheet of damp paper. Next, I put it in the vacuum table to draw out all the excess moisture. Then, I put it in the drawing press so that it dries flat. There's a lot of process, and it's time consuming.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you have to create your pulp paintings within a set amount of time?

**DENISE FLEMING:** I do have some time constraints. I have to work wet on wet. In other words, I can't start to pour a piece and then go away for two weeks. It has to all be poured wet, and if it dries, the color balance might be off, and there's nothing I can do about it. I just have to start all over again. It's not like paint where you can go back in and just paint over and put in a stronger color.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You were a successful artist and children's book illustrator working in a variety of media before papermaking. What was the impetus to try papermaking?

**DENISE FLEMING:** The papermaking I discovered just by accident. There was a flyer that came in the mail from the local high school about adult-ed classes, including one on papermaking. So, my sister and I signed up. And that was it. From the first moment I walked into the room and saw all these big vats of beautiful color, I was just hooked.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you determine the color schemes for your books before you begin, or do you decide as you go?

**DENISE FLEMING:** In choosing the colors for my books, I have kind of a feeling ahead of time for the basic colors I want the book to be. *In The Tall, Tall Grass*, I wanted it to feel like a hot summer afternoon, so I use a great deal of yellow in that book because yellow feels hot. In *Time to Sleep* I use the very, very warm colors of fall. But generally, the colors kind of happen as I'm pouring the pulp. It is influenced by the mood I'm in and what music I'm listening to at the time.

I use a lot of complementary colors in my books: colors that are opposite one another on the color wheel, like orange and blue, purple and yellow, red and green, because when you put those colors next to one another, they vibrate. And they make each other stand out more. Complementary colors also gives a feeling of more movement and excitement, so I use a lot of them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you maintain color consistency throughout the illustrations?

**DENISE FLEMING:** Before I start a book, like if I'm doing a mouse, I make all the grays for the mouse ahead of time. This ensures that I continue to use the same gray throughout the book because it's too hard mixing it each time as I go.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You not only write and illustrate all your books, but you even design how the book will look overall. What are some of the challenges you face in book design?

**DENISE FLEMING:** Remembering the "gutter" [where the pages come together in the middle of the book] is one of the most important things in designing the picture book. You don't want to lose words into the gutter; you don't want to lose people's noses into the gutter, you don't want to lose an important part of the picture in the gutter. It's different than when you do a painting that's to be hung on a wall. You don't have to worry about any of that.

Also, making the art for a book is different than a painting because, when you're doing a book, everything has to work together. You have to have continuity. Lots of times I have to take out a picture I really like because it doesn't work with the whole. Sometimes there's a different feeling in a picture that doesn't fit with the rest. So I'll take that piece out or redesign and pour it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** All of the books that you've written and illustrated are read-aloud books. What kind of thinking goes into designing a book that is good for reading aloud?

**DENISE FLEMING:** The first books, *In the Tall, Tall Grass* and *In The Small, Small Pond* are a nice, square, big size. So when you open them up, you have this kind of panoramic view. They are nice books for lap reading.

Also, I use big, bold type. The words are part of the pictures in most of my books, because the words are important. I don't want them to just be a little line down at the bottom of a page. I

want them to be integrated into the pictures. I also manipulate the words, move the letters around. For instance, in *In The Small, Small Pond*, the word “wiggle” wiggles and the word “jiggle” jiggles, reinforcing what the words mean.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** In *Alphabet Under Construction*, you had the mouse creating each letter using a different artistic or creative technique. Could you describe a couple of those treatments?

**DENISE FLEMING:** The mouse folds the “F.” It’s origami. I tried to think of techniques that kids could reproduce either in the home or in the classroom that weren’t too difficult. For “J,” I thought of joining the “J,” and then the mouse judged it and gave himself a blue ribbon. Originally for “P” I had *paint*, but because I had *airbrush* and *roll* (other painting techniques) already, I decided I needed to do something different. My sister is a horticulturist, and she started doing topiary designs for the zoo so I thought, “I’ll make it a topiary and the mouse can prune the P.” At the end of the alphabet, after constructing all the letters, the mouse is quite exhausted, and you see he’s crossed everything off his “work schedule.”

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Let’s now review your thinking on many of your other titles. To start, *Time to Sleep* has a different color scheme than your other books.

**DENISE FLEMING:** Yes. I love fall, in part because it is a little different color palette for me. So when I made the greens in this book, instead of using yellow to mix the greens, I used an ochre, a kind of a gold. This creates totally different greens. This is one of the things I love about the seasons, all the changes of color.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Time to Sleep* is also a very cozy book.

**DENISE FLEMING:** At the end of that old TV show, *The Waltons*, they would say good night to one another, and that made me feel so safe. So, on the last page of *Time to Sleep*, it’s “good night Bear; good night Bug; good night Turtle; good night Woodchuck; see you in the spring.” It is that sense of being safe, that someone is aware you’re there and they’re going to look out for you.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** In *Mama Cat Has Three Kittens*, one of the cats (Boris) is rather lazy. I understand his character is similar to one of your own cats.

**DENISE FLEMING:** *Mama Cat Has Three Kittens* is from my own life. Our cat had kittens under our porch, and we adopted all the kittens. There was one cat who slept all the time and I worried about him. I thought maybe something was wrong with him because the other cats would follow Mama and do everything, but he wouldn’t. Then one day, he got up and he did everything they did. Then he went back to sleep. And I realized he just really liked to nap. He could do what they wanted to do; he just had his own rhythm. We all have our own rhythm in this world, and he’d found that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Where Once There Was a Wood* is about the loss of green space. It is powerful without being preachy. Please share the genesis of this book.

**DENISE FLEMING:** *Where Once There Was a Wood* is probably my most personal book. A block over from where we live, there was a large tract of land that was woods, meadow and creek. And I spent a lot of time there. It was sold to developers. The neighborhood tried to block the sale of it, hoping the city would buy it as a pocket park, but we failed.

So, they came in and started cutting down the trees and bulldozing. I was in my studio, and when the trees would fall, everything in my studio would shake. This made me decide to go over there and witness what was happening. As I watched, I thought, "Some day soon I am going to be telling people this is where once the woods were." And then the whole text for that book came to me. Unfortunately, I didn't have a paper and pencil with me, so I ran home, chanting the text so that I wouldn't lose it before I got there.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** The design of *Where Once There Was a Wood*, both on the cover and on the internal pages, look like a scrapbook of a special memory.

**DENISE FLEMING:** I used a typeface that looked like handwriting, like you'd use in a journal, and on the cover the picture looks like it's been glued onto a handmade book. Inside, you notice there are uneven, angled, white borders. My feeling for that was that this is a place that once was, and it is no longer there.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** And then you provide suggestions for creating small wild spaces.

**DENISE FLEMING:** The last four pages of *Where Once There Was a Wood* offer ideas on things you can do in your own space, like make a butterfly garden, ponds, shelter. It's about providing all the things for wild creatures in a regular backyard.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *The Everything Book* is the first book where you included a lot of people. Why is that?

**DENISE FLEMING:** *In the Tall, Tall Grass* and *In the Small, Small Pond* there is a person on the cover of each, but that's it. *The Everything Book* is full of kids, because I'm now more familiar with the technique of pulp painting and I have a little more control. In pulp painting, you can't totally control everything, so it is a little harder to do things like people.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many of your illustrations tell stories beyond the text – different layers of meaning in addition to the layers of paper. Can you share an example?

**DENISE FLEMING:** Yes. In *Barnyard Banter*, there is other meaning that is not in the text. If you look at the cow on the page where it says, "Cows in the pasture, moo, moo, moo," what it really says, if you look deep into that cow's eyes is, "Please, will somebody milk me?" When I'm working on a book for a long period of time, I have all these scenarios that aren't in the copy.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Barnyard Banter* seems to have many different textures in it as well.

**DENISE FLEMING:** It is one of the first books where I added a lot of different materials to the paper pulp. There are coffee grounds, rhubarb, tea leaves, straw, oats, even a potato string sack for the wire fence. It is full of everything.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Pumpkin Eye* is such a rich, spooky and fun Halloween book. It offers a great balance for the younger reader.

**DENISE FLEMING:** I loved creating the costumes in *Pumpkin Eye*. It is the first book that is very dark, with a lot of blue and purple, but with those wonderful glowing pumpkins. I loved trying to make them look like they had the candle inside and they were glowing.

I loved Halloween growing up, because you got to stay out after dark, you could reinvent yourself, and you could ask for candy and were allowed to eat it. I wanted *Pumpkin Eye* to be scary, but not too scary — just that delicious feeling of being just enough scared to be fun.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What advice do you give students when you visit a school?

**DENISE FLEMING:** I suggest to kids that they experiment and try all sorts of different creative things. For instance, I never thought I'd be illustrating using papermaking. So I say, "Try papermaking; try different media. And, don't think that because you are good with watercolors you should just only do those — try other things....Experiment. Research."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Were you encouraged to be an artist when you were growing up?

**DENISE FLEMING:** I grew up in a household that was really into creative endeavors. My mother was real active in local theater, and my dad built sets at the local theater. My dad had a workshop in the basement where he built furniture and carved decoys. I had a space down there where I could work, and I was always making things out of scrap wood, whatever my dad had around.

He always thought of me as an artist, and he would buy me grown-up art supplies. They were kind of expensive, but that made me feel that I truly was an artist. Once we went to the store, and there was this beautiful box of pastels — which I still have and I still use. I was just a kid in grade school . . . and the fellow at the art store said, "Well, these are for professionals." And my dad said, "My daughter is an artist." And he bought them for me. That kind of reinforcement is real important when you are a kid.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kind of research do you do for your books?

**DENISE FLEMING:** I research everything. For my books, even like *Time To Sleep*, I learned everything about each one of those animals even though that's not in the book. But then that becomes a part of the way I design the book. I learned everything about them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe a typical workday.

**DENISE FLEMING:** It really varies with the point I'm at in the book, because if I'm pouring the book, once I start pouring the pictures I usually just move right through because I'm really in the

moment. I just love the pouring. I mean, that's all I want to do. I don't want to be bothered with a social life or anything.

When I'm in the writing part and trying to figure out how I want the book to look, then it's kind of on and off. I may work a couple of days and then not work at all. I really subscribe to Gertrude Stein's statement, "Making a book takes a heap of loafing." I totally agree with that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you're stuck?

**DENISE FLEMING:** When I'm stuck I do one of two things. If it's summer, I go out in the back in the screen house and lay in the hammock and just kind of rock to calm myself down. We also have a place on a lake that we go to year round, and it's so separate from my work. It gives me time to just think about things, because usually you solve the problem when you're doing something else. If I totally focus on it, I can't solve it. Yet if I go off and do something else, then it kind of drifts in my mind.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What's next for your work?

**DENISE FLEMING:** Right now I'm working on a book called *Buster*. It's a story about a dog who has a perfect life. He has everything a dog could ever want until one day Brown Shoes, his owner, brings home a big box. And what's in the big box changes Buster's whole life. He has to re-evaluate everything. And this book has a different look from all my other books. I have vignettes on the page — four little pictures on a double page spread, which I've never done before. And it's kind of a beginning chapter book.

The book after that is *The Cow Who Clucked* which is a story about a cow who dreams that she's a chicken, and when she wakes up she has a cluck. So she goes in search of her moo, because she can't find it. It's a rewriting of an old folk tale. I love that premise — that dream thing where you switch places — the hen, of course, has the cow's moo. And in the end you see the cow dreaming again, and she's dreaming she's a frog.

**Books written and illustrated by Denise Fleming using her pulp painting technique:**

- COW WHO CLUCKED, THE, Henry Holt and Company, 2006
- FIRST DAY OF WINTER, THE, Henry Holt and Company, 2005
- BUSTER, Henry Holt and Company, 2003
- ALPHABET UNDER CONSTRUCTION, Henry Holt and Company, 2002
- PUMPKIN EYE, Henry Holt and Company, 2001
- EVERYTHING BOOK, THE, Henry Holt and Company, 2000
- MAMA CAT HAS THREE KITTENS, Henry Holt and Company, 1998
- TIME TO SLEEP, Henry Holt and Company, 1997
- WHERE ONCE THERE WAS A WOOD, Henry Holt and Company, 1996
- BARNYARD BANTER, Henry Holt and Company, 1994
- IN THE SMALL, SMALL POND, Henry Holt and Company, 1993
- COUNT!, Henry Holt and Company, 1992
- LUNCH, Henry Holt and Company, 1992
- IN THE TALL, TALL GRASS, Henry Holt and Company, 1991

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