



## Arthur Geisert

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

Arthur Geisert, interviewed in his studio in Galena, Illinois on May 4, 2001.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You're always filling your books with humor – often visual, but in *Nursery Crimes*, you added layers of humor even in the text.

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** The title of the book, *Nursery Crimes*, is a pun: it's a tree nursery rather than a child's nursery. And a child would think a tree shaped like a turkey is funny. But you have to be careful of adult humor in children's books. You never want to be exclusive. If the humor is not totally understood, that's okay, though topiary turkeys are funny to adults and children.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is the "crime" in *Nursery Crimes*? Who is the bad guy?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** Well, the bad guy is Volar, who steals topiary. Volar is a notorious topiary thief. He's been stealing topiary in the Ames area for generations. And he thought he was home free because all the topiary was almost identical. The leaves were always green. A new topiary that changes color in the fall undid him.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You clearly love choosing names for your characters.

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** I had fun with the names in *Nursery Crimes*. The lead character "Jambonneau" in French is "ham bone," which I thought was funny for a name for a patriarchal pig. And since it's traditional to name pigs after flowers, such as Petunia, Jambo's wife is "Merville de Peru," French for "Marvel of Peru," which is an American biannual.

The town names in *Nursery Crimes* came from, essentially, Iowa. I wanted to use Ames, because I thought Ames was sort of a humorous-sounding name for a town. I started looking on the map around Ames. It's surprising how much of Iowa is French. There's Des Moines; there's Dubuque. Ames —I wanted a French connection with Ames, so I looked on a map of France, and found "Amiens." The spelling is very close to "Ames."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** So many of your books, including *Nursery Crimes* and *Oink*, feature pigs. Why pigs?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** I draw pigs because I like pigs well enough, but also they're easy to anthropomorphize. And, the neighbors around here all raise them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Crime is not a common topic for a picture book; you have fun with it in *Nursery Crimes*.

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** The idea of working with crime came from my editor, Walter Lorraine. After doing the four Small Town USA books with my wife, Bonnie (which were sociological studies, straightforward things), the editor thought it was time to horse around a little bit. He thought that mystery or crime would be a topic that would lend itself to exploration. Crime is a fun topic, and I think children do like the idea of crime and how criminals do things and what happens to them. At the end, Volar does get caught. He's out-smarted by Marva.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is the genesis for the Small Town USA series by you and your wife Bonnie?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** Actually, we didn't start out to do that series. We started out doing a book called *Haystack*. This was sort of autobiographical; what Bonnie did and observed as a girl. Our editor Walter Lorraine suggested that we have her write the book. Her family provided technical information and acted as consultants for the book. They still farm in that area, and they had some of their old equipment — this was before round bailers.

After that, we started doing *Grain Elevator*, which would be a sequel, so to speak, to *Haystack*. It would talk about the wooden grain elevators, which are fast disappearing on the prairie. Doing the research for that, we went to a lot of small towns. At some point, I thought that it would be more fun to do the whole town, rather than single out the grain elevator. So we dropped *Grain Elevator* and did *Prairie Town*.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is the genesis for the Small Town USA series by you and your wife Bonnie?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** *Prairie Town* was so much fun to do— the idea that Bonnie would write the text, that I would do the illustrations, and that these secondary stories, these vignettes, would be in the book, but not discussed very much in the text. The text would give an overview of what's going on, and act like a counterpoint to the pictures, occasionally hitting on something in the pictures, but more often than not, covering the general feel of what's going on.

Then the little vignettes, you're left on your own to go back and forth and figure those out — little incidental things that are going on in the pictures. Then, at the end of the book, on page 32, there's a list of things that you probably missed most of, so you have to go back through the book again and put all of the pieces together.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** The Small Town books are full of details that playfully reveal changes in small town life. How did you keep track of the details in these visual stories?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** The little vignettes in the Small Town books are so interwoven that sometimes I get confused. When I was doing them, I maintained large charts of what was going on from time to time and the interrelationships of all the various things. Bonnie had some impact on this too, because she would suggest things to include. It was hard to keep straight, even for us. So a viewer, going through the books, would have to read the book backwards and forwards, and look at the pictures carefully to pick up on all the details. What

we tried to avoid was stuff that was very dramatic. We tried to restrict it to the normal ebb and flow of life in a small town.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How important is it that readers notice all the details?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** It's not important that readers see everything. It really isn't. There's so much going on. It's just ordinary things that you would take notice of from time to time, actually living in a place. That's the kind of feel I wanted to convey. For instance, off and on throughout *Prairie Town*, some people mess around with the stovepipe chimney in the post office. At the end of the book, the post office has a brick chimney, and the stovepipe chimney is in the trashcan behind the post office. They just gave up.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** An example of the visual stories in your books is when the lot is being cleared and the house is being moved in *Prairie Town*. How does that story work?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** The story begins on the opening spread. On the very first page there's a little house that's off its foundation — something that you would not even notice on a first reading. Then it starts. In town, a lot is cleared; trees are removed. If you look at the sequence of the tree removal, the trees are pulled out with a tractor, then they're cut into big pieces, and then, as the book progresses, you'll notice that the pieces get smaller as they're being cut up for firewood. Then in the spring, you see that the firewood piles are down. So that's the story of the trees that were removed from the lot.

In the meantime, you see the house being moved into town, pulled by a truck. You see a close-up of the house being moved from the perspective of the grain elevator. The grain elevator guys are at a slow time of the day, perhaps, and so they're just standing in the alleyway watching the house pass. While that's going on, a foundation has been dug and poured, and the piles of fresh dirt are still there. Then you see the house on the site. The dirt piles, of course, are gone. Then a chimney is built. New trees are planted. The house is painted white.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you see children and teachers using these books?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** Well, I think it gives a pretty accurate portrayal of a lot of small-town life in the United States today, so the books can be used to learn about them. The towns Bonnie and I depict are all made up, composites, bits and pieces of a lot of small towns. Sometimes the illustrations look like they're set, perhaps, in an earlier time, but you find that in a lot of these small towns, the size of the towns we're dealing with, not much has happened for a number of years. So a lot of the stuff that's going on in the towns is contemporary, even though the town itself looks twenty, thirty, forty years old or older.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you share some thoughts about your Roman Numerals book being printed in a number of different languages?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** *Roman Numerals I to M* was quite popular in the English version.

The French version was the second one. Then the Japanese published a version, which makes for some very interesting typographical pages, with the Roman numerals in heavy, big capital letters, combined with the Japanese text — just interesting-looking pages.

When it got published in Germany, the publisher, for some reason known only to themselves, did not publish it in German. They had it translated into Latin. In the back of the book, there is a two-page pull-out with a German translation of the Latin text, which, if you think about it, then you have a book by an obsessive-compulsive Midwesterner, dealing with and explaining to young children how to use Roman numerals. And in this there are 4,864 pigs, which I think is probably a record for the number of pigs in a picture book, combined with a Latin text and a handy two-page pull-out German translation of the Latin text. And as I communicated to the editor of the German edition, what we have here is a book that has the word “bestseller” written all over it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What’s your favorite part of creating a book?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** Besides finishing it, which is perhaps my favorite part because the projects are so long, my favorite part is probably the concept — thinking of what you can do, because it’s limitless. Once you start getting ideas and start piecing them together, you limit yourself with every new idea.

Anything goes, and you’re free to move in any direction, do whatever you want. And then with each decision, as you gather your information, you start to limit and narrow yourself.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is the hardest part of doing a book?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** The hardest part of doing a book is also probably the part that’s the most fun, which is the concept and the initial working through your material. And then after that, it’s doing the dummies. And I do very detailed dummies in pen and ink. This is so that they’re easier to edit and see what’s going on. And it’s also easier when the dummy is approved to go into the etchings. So I try to make the dummies as close to the finished etching as I can. It takes a little extra time with the pen and ink, but in the long run, it’s worth it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you explain the medium you have used for your books?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** I use the same technique for all my book illustrations — copperplate etching. Specifically, I use the traditional copperplate technique, called Dutch mordant. The technique has not changed in about five hundred years. I did a book called *The Etcher’s Studio* that explains the process. The premise is that a grandson helps his grandfather, who is an etcher, get ready for a studio sale. In the course of the book you get to see the plates, the inking, the wiping and the printing. The boy’s job in the book is hand-coloring, which was traditionally the role of boys in an etcher’s studio.

A plate for a book will take about two-and-a-half days to do the etching. That’s after the drawings are done. To do the tracing and the plate takes about two-and-a-half days. You can’t quite do two pages a week, or one double spread a week. It takes about three months to do a set of plates for a book. It’s pretty much an all-day, everyday rhythm of work.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Why did you become an etcher?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** I started out as a sculptor, but I've always been interested in print-making and always liked etching. I did etching as a sideline. When we moved to Galena, Illinois, 40 years ago, I realized that making one-of-a-kind pieces of artwork was not going to work, living in isolation like we do.

So I needed something in multiples, something that I could spend all the time that was necessary creating, and then make more than one copy to get it out to galleries and other places.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Would you describe the process of etching step by step?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** All right. The process that I use for etching the illustrations is, once the pen-and-ink drawing is done for the dummies, I make a tracing of that drawing. The backside of the copperplate is coated with an acid-resistant paint. The front side, which is the side I use, is polished. It's almost like a mirror. I make sure that is scrupulously clean. I use ammonia and whiting. Whiting is a very mild abrasive. So the plate is entirely grease-free. Then the plate is put on a hotplate, and then I melt wax, which has pigment in it. The wax is dark brown. Then I roll this wax out in an even layer on the hot copper. It's a thin, even layer. I use a leather brayer, which is the traditional method of laying the ground. The leather brayer is never cleaned, and it's never used for anything else. I keep it in a glass case, because it has to be kept perfect.

Then, once the plate cools, the tracing is flopped, turned over — because everything on an etching is done backwards. The tracing is then attached to the plate. I hinge it with masking tape. Then, using a hard, sharp pencil, I will follow the major lines and draw the major lines. If you lift the tracing paper, with a light coming from the side, a raking light, you can see the lines on the wax. Then you follow those lines and, using an etching needle, which is a sharpened metal stylus, you draw the lines following your guidelines, and that exposes the copper. The copper is shiny. Then you put that copper in acid. Acid eats the lines where the copper has been exposed, eats the lines down into the plate. So there's actually like a little valley where the line was. Then the plate is taken out of the acid. It's rinsed off. It's cleaned off. The wax is removed. Then it's inked and printed.

To ink it, a real thick, sticky, tar-like ink is rubbed over the entire plate vigorously. This gets the ink down into the lines that have been etched by the acid. Then the ink is wiped off. I use paper towels. Traditional wiping would be tarlatan, which is cheesecloth that has starch in it. I use Scott towels. They have the right amount of stiffness.

The plate is wiped. The ink stays in the lines. Then the plate is put on the press bed face-up. Paper that has been soaked in water, oftentimes overnight — it's a real thick, soft paper — is taken out of the water and is put between blotters. This gets the wetness off, but the paper is still damp. Then when it's put through the press, the paper is put on top of the plate, three layers of felt go over the paper, and then it's wrung through the press, which is like a large washing machine ringer. It's just a big, heavy roller that goes over everything and it forces the paper down over the plate, down into the lines, and it picks up the ink. Then, when you peel your print off, you can actually see that a mold has been made of the copperplate. You can see the edge of the plate. You can see that the lines themselves have a dimension.

For the later books, when there's color involved, the black and white etching, while it's still damp, is taped to a board using brown paper tape. This keeps it flat when it dries. Then I use watercolor and acrylic to hand-color, basically following the lines.

I do my own coloring, and I usually print two good copies of each of the illustrations and then hand-color two at a time. Then, the best one goes to the publisher, and the other one I use for exhibiting. The differences between the two are very minimal.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Describe your workday.

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** The workday starts at 4:30 in the morning. Bonnie and I get up and go to town. We walk and get exercise. We walk around town for a mile and a half, or thereabouts. And then, Emmy Lou's is a local café where we have breakfast at 5:30.

The same people have been doing this for a number of years, and we all sit at the same places, and we all say the same things. We all wear the same stuff. The jokes are the same, year after year. We do discuss contemporary happenings, but these comments are superfluous to the rhythm of daily life.

And after that, the grocery store opens at six. We go get groceries. And then we come home and put the groceries away. We find all this very interesting. . . . Then we get to work.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please comment on the role construction has in both your life and your work?

**ARTHUR GEISERT:** It is true that construction has played an important part in a lot of my illustrations and books. Having experienced building two houses mostly by ourselves informed many of the illustrations in the early books. *Pigs From A to Z* is filled with construction scenes, as is *Pigs From One to Ten*.

And for some reason, in *Nursery Crimes*, a kind of reversal took place in that the illustrations now are affecting the design and construction.

The salvage house in *Nursery Crimes* was fun to draw. And when I drew it, I was just out to draw the most outrageous structure I could think of, using salvage-like materials. I liked the house in *Nursery Crimes*. However, maybe six months later, I don't know who had the idea, whether it was Bonnie or myself, or whether we arrived at it simultaneously, it occurred to us that the house could actually be built with a couple of changes here and there — minor changes.

And then one thing led to the other, which leads you to heed the warning of how powerful ideas are. And so you've got to be careful about having ideas because they can get you into a lot of trouble. And right now, well, the long and short of it is we started building that house.

**Editor's note:** Bonnie and Arthur Geisert live on top of a quarry overlooking the Mississippi and the town of Galena, Illinois in the salvage house they built inspired by the one in Arthur's book *Nursery Crimes*.

#### **Books by Arthur Geisert**

- OOPS, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2006

- LIGHTS OUT, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2005
- PIGAROONS, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2004
- MYSTERY, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2003
- GIANT BALL OF STRING, THE, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2002
- PRAIRIE SUMMER (written by Bonnie Geisert), Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2002
- DESERT TOWN (written by Bonnie Geisert), Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2001
- NURSERY CRIMES, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2001
- MOUNTAIN TOWN (written by Bonnie Geisert), Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 2000
- RIVER TOWN (written by Bonnie Geisert), Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1999
- PRAIRIE TOWN (written by Bonnie Geisert), Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1998
- ETCHER'S STUDIO, THE, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1997
- ROMAN NUMERALS I TO MM, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1996
- HAYSTACK (written by Bonnie Geisert), Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1995
- AFTER THE FLOOD, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1994
- OINK OINK, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1993
- PIGS FROM 1 TO 10, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1992
- AESOP & COMPANY, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1991
- OINK, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1991
- ARK, THE, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1988
- PIGS FROM A TO Z, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1986
- PA'S BALLOON AND OTHER PIG TALES, Walter Lorraine Books / Houghton Mifflin, 1984

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