Joanna Cole

TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Joanna Cole, interviewed in her Maine home on July 27, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have published more than 100 books for children and dozens of other pieces. When did you know you wanted to become a professional writer?

JOANNA COLE: I had always been a writer in school—I even won an award for writing in high school—but it never occurred to me that I could be a professional writer until I had a job answering the letters to the editor at *Newsweek.* I got involved in a little bit of proofreading and copy editing of adult books, and in this role I felt surprised that the writing wasn't as good as I thought. I said, "Gee, I could write this." So I wrote a story for *Humpty-Dumpty*, and it got accepted.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first book was about cockroaches. Please explain this topic choice.

JOANNA COLE: I was always interested in science and insects as a kid, and growing up in New York City there were plenty of cockroaches. My father had read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* that said that cockroaches had been here for millions of years and that they would be a species to survive if we became extinct. So I decided to write about them for children.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did The Magic School Bus books begin?

JOANNA COLE: In the fall of 1985, Craig Walker at Scholastic shared with me an idea that basically was The Magic School Bus—where kids go on a trip to see and learn things with the reader, while the teacher keeps on talking like a regular teacher. I promised myself that I would make this a good and funny science story, or I wouldn't do it.

At first, I was putting the story and the jokes and the science all in the text, but that left no room for pictures. Then I tried to put word balloons in, and that, along with mixing science and humor, was a real no-no back in 1985. The library reviewers really disapproved of that. They thought it was sugar coating the information.

Yet this approach seemed like so much fun that I couldn't resist. I found I still had too much text until I remembered that I had loved writing reports in elementary school. So,

I pulled some text and sketched these out on yellow, lined paper, and taped these little school reports on the side … I still use this same format for The Magic School Bus books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Ms. Frizzle, the Magic School Bus teacher, has an inviting teacher style. Is she based on anyone you know?

JOANNA COLE: Ms. Frizzle is based on my junior high school science teacher, who was always running ahead. She didn't stop to make sure that we understood everything. She just went on. And I loved her for that. Ms. Frizzle does this in the books, with the kids always running to catch up.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your goal in writing science books?

JOANNA COLE: My goal is to make a book where all the information can be easily understood while being lively and entertaining. It should not be a pile of facts. It should be about concepts and ideas, because that is what science is for me.

The topics for The Magic School Bus books are always selected by what subjects interest kids that are also part of their curriculum. We first wrote about waterworks, then *Inside the Earth*, and so forth.

I also want the books to be written so that all kids can understand something in it. Before I was writing, I was teaching in an inner-city school, and many kids were not reading at level. I was very sad that so many of the science books, in particular, were very hard for the students to read. Kids would come in and ask for a book about snakes or whatever, and you'd open it up and it would be wall-to-wall text with a black-and-white photo here and there. They just couldn't read it. So my goal is always to write it as easy as it can be without sacrificing any meaning.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are there approaches to teaching science that you incorporate into your writing?

JOANNA COLE: In my experiences, science was always about finding out. It was always about satisfying curiosity, lab techniques, and so forth. It wasn't about memorizing. In fact, I often got credit for something if I showed the teacher that I could understand it even if I didn't remember the words. So that's why in the books I often don't use the technical words if they're not needed. When I do define words, I try to add descriptions that will help the child remember or understand what it means rather than focusing on the word itself. For example, when someone mentions "sedimentary rock," she also says, "layers" so that a reader knows that sedimentary rocks are in layers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your process for putting one of your Magic School Bus books together?

JOANNA COLE: I start with a blank book of 48 sheets of paper that I have numbered. Then I start writing on the computer, and print and cut out the text to tape it into the blank book. I also cut out the balloons and the reports and tape them in. Eventually, I fill up the pages and I move things back and forth and up and down, and then I send it to my editor. I often draw pictures, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share how your collaboration with illustrator Bruce Degen works for these books.

JOANNA COLE: It is a collaboration, but we don't work together very much on the details of each book. I submit the manuscript to the editor before Bruce sees it. In fact, we don't talk to each other about the book very much at all. We have a wonderful friendship, but the work is done quite separately.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many children and families know the animated episodes for television, and the spin-off books. What is your role in these?

JOANNA COLE: I am intimately involved in the spin-off books. I read everything, and edit and sometimes rewrite them. I sometimes write the early reader chapter books from the start.

With the TV show, I was called in as they were planning it and asked to share what was important to us about the books. I said, "Number one, it can't be a pile of facts. Each show has to be an idea, one concept that runs throughout." The other thing that was very important was that there should be no put-downs, because that's an easy way to make humor on television. But for this project, the kids always support each other and don't make any put-downs.

We also read the scripts and critiqued everything for the television shows. We did battle with them over a few things. Sometimes we won. Sometimes we didn't. We are very pleased with the results and think it is a pretty terrific show.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How are The Magic School Bus books used in schools?

JOANNA COLE: The science teachers say they love them. I hear they use the books to introduce a unit, which is how I had imagined them to be shared in the first place. I had also imagined that the books would lead kids to read other books on the subject because they would already know something about it. Science teachers appear very enthusiastic about this aspect as well.

I hear stories of students retaining a great deal of the factual information, which makes sense to me because of the way the information is being attached to a narrative and the illustrations.

Students, I believe, often read the word balloons first: particularly the younger kids. They often skip the school reports at first, but come back to them as the books are read again and again.

Adults often tell me how much they learned when reading the books, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Liz, the class lizard, is one character who the younger students are often attracted to. Where did Liz come from?

JOANNA COLE: Liz was in the books from the start—Ms. Frizzle was too busy feeding her to answer questions of the students. Bruce drew her as an African chameleon, but I had imagined her as an iguana. The TV people made her into the character who does pantomime and funny things.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please tell us about your non-Magic School Bus books.

JOANNA COLE: I have several writing hats. I write straight science books, and I write humorous picture books. *Bony-Legs* is a big favorite. I also write what I call toddler self-help books, including *How You Were Born* and *The New Baby at Your House*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your typical workday.

JOANNA COLE: On days that I'm actually writing, I go to my desk around 8:00 or 8:30. I just write and write and write until I come to a point where I didn't think I could make any more progress. Then I stop. That is usually about 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon. In the olden days, that was about time for me to get ready to go pick up my daughter from school.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

JOANNA COLE: I used to have a lot of anxiety about getting stuck—thinking that I'll never be able to finish writing a book. But over time I realized that I always finish them. If I stop working for a bit, and don't beat myself up for not working, I'm often able to go back to the desk and have a solution. Writing is such hard work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

JOANNA COLE: I tell students that want to be a writer that they should do it. I tell all students that they should read, and that they can learn to write by reading more. Reading is where we get our basics—the basis for writing.

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

For more information about Joanna Cole and her books, go to http://teachingbooks.net/. Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

Copyright ©2010 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.

© 2010 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.