



## Mary Ann Hoberman

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

Mary Ann Hoberman, interviewed in her studio in Stamford, Connecticut on July 26, 2001.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** There's something almost musical about the rhymes that appear in your books. Do you have a musical background?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** My parents used to sing to me a lot. They were great fans of musical theater and they took me from the time that I was a very little girl into New York to see the great musicals. I saw *Oklahoma* and *South Pacific* and many others.

I would have liked to have been a female Stephen Sondheim. My friends and I here in Greenwich, Connecticut, for seven years did children's theater. We called ourselves the Pocket People. We had quite a success and we adapted all of our own material. I was the songwriter for the group. So, I wrote lots of songs for our little plays.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What types of books did you read as a child?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** I loved fairy tales. I even still have three of my fairy tale books from when I was a little girl. I felt that these stories were transporting. I don't think anything is as magical as a fairy tale experience by a child.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you consider your writing poetry for children?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** I always hesitate to call myself a children's poet, and I always hesitate to call what I write for children poetry. Though a few of the verses that I've written, yes, I think they are truly poems.

I write a lot of children's verse and I think it delights in the language. It pleases people. It's very musical. It's very lyrical and that's certainly a very important aspect of poetry. But I think that a lot of it is verse. I write well-wrought verse.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you define poetry?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** Well, you're asking what poetry is, and there have been so many definitions. . . . To me, it's a recreation, a renewal of language. . . . The subtlety of what words mean and the fact that you write something and all of a sudden you'll realize that "yes, it reaches out. It meant that, too." Then all of a sudden you'll get a rhyme and the rhyme will throw up a whole new way of looking at things. It's this relationship that you never dreamed of. A poem really does recreate the language, and that's what it has to do. A true poem, I think, has to give you that shiver. That, "yes, it's never been said quite that way before."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *The Llama Who Had No Pajama* is a collection of your poems. What is the genesis for this book?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** I wanted to put a collection of my poems together for such a long time. So many of my poems were out of print. *Hello and Good-Bye* (1959) is a tiny book that my husband Norman illustrated just with black and white little line drawings.

It's my favorite of all my books that I've ever done. I was very young when I wrote it. My children were babies. I wrote these poems for them. It just encapsulates a time in my life that's very precious. I was so close to my own childhood. Everything was so vivid to me

Since, these poems have been anthologized all over the place. One thing about being a children's poet or a versifier, is that there is a large market for your wares. These things really made the rounds. I would meet people and they'd quote my poems to me. It's great.

So, at some point, one of my editors, Linda Zuckerman, knew that I wanted to make a collection of 100 of my poems. We decided that it had to come out in a picture book format because, if it comes out where they just put it over in poetry, that's almost the kiss of death in a library, unfortunately.

Then we had to choose poems, and I chose, and Linda expressed her opinions. She knows my work as well as I do. In the end, all of my real favorites are there and it's awfully nice to have. And Betty Fraser, who also illustrated *A House is a House for Me*, did beautiful illustrations for it. So, now there's this book with all of these poems in it, and I'm awfully happy that I have it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *My Song Is Beautiful* is another collection of poems you put together, but these are other poets' work. How did you choose these poems?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** I was asked if I would like to compile this anthology and I thought, "Oh, that would be great fun." I've been collecting poems, both adult poems and children's poems, for years and years.

The guiding principle was that every poem would be in the first person. The title, *My Song Is Beautiful*, came to me from a line in one of the poems. Once we got that, everything seemed to fall into place. Now, the young editor at the time, who has since gone on to very good things and she's still my editor, Megan Tingley — this was her idea.

She wanted to have a different illustrator for each poem and I thought, "Oh, what a mish-mash. There will be no continuity." But, Megan really wanted to do it this way, and since the book had been her idea in the first place, I went along with it and I was proven wrong. She got some wonderful illustrators and it's really a nice book and I love it. I even wrote a poem specifically for that book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Is it hard to come up with all of the rhymes you put in your books, or do you keep a list of them somewhere?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** No, the list is in my head. I have my faithful rhyming dictionary that sits up there on my desk, but I have to tell you, there are very few new rhymes that I didn't think of. I often just go right through the alphabet in my head when I'm looking for a rhyme.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You've turned many children's songs into playful picture books.

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** Yes, let's see. We have *Miss Mary Mack*, a chant and a game. *The Eensy-Weensy Spider*, is a little hand game and folk songs for children. *Michael Finnegan*. That's

a nonsense song that doesn't have a finger or a play game with it. *Bill Grogan's Goat* is also just a folk song. The latest one is *Fire Fire* and that's another song.

What I'm doing in these books is expanding on a character and keeping up the rhythm. They all have characters. That's what's been the fun and challenging puzzle. People say, "Oh, you should do this one, you should do that one." And it turns out that there's no character in it. There's no central kind of focus and then it doesn't work.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your work with family literacy is important to you. *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You* is a wonderful book for families to read together. How did this book come together?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** I work with the Stamford/Greenwich Chapter of Literacy Volunteers, and I believe in their work. It's just a wonderful organization. One of the things that they do is use picture books to teach literacy, to teach adults and parents how to read. It's wonderful, because with a picture book the vocabulary is pretty suitable. They're beautiful books and there's a point to it. That all was in the background of *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You*.

I love to be read to, I love to read aloud and I love to read to children.

Since I usually work in rhyme, I knew that for *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You* there would be little rhymed kinds of playlettes or duets. And then there would be the third little line in the middle, the refrain at the end of every little story, and it would be, "You Read to Me, I'll Read to You" or "I'll Read to You, You Read to Me."

I saw one voice here, and one voice here, and then each time they laid together, the lines would be in the middle. So then I started writing these little stories, and then I decided yes, it would be good if each one was just on two pages. It would be a collection of little self-contained playlettes.

Megan Tingley called me at one point after we had the page proofs, and then they had the cover, and she said, "I don't think you're going to like this." What they'd done is put the lines in three different colors. Reader one is in, say, blue. Reader two is in orange. And when they read together in the middle, it's pink.

"Oh," I said, "That's so hokey. I don't like that." Yet I was told it's very important that we do this because this will make it much clearer and that's the whole point of the book. Then when I saw it, it all of a sudden seemed so right. That's what gives the book a certain special character.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Storybooks such as *One of Each*, *The Two Sillies*, and my *The Seven Silly Eaters* are fun books, but how would you characterize what's central about them?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** Each of those three books that you mentioned, *One of Each*, *The Seven Silly Eaters*, and *The Two Sillies* has a different genesis. *One of Each* is this fantasy that Stravinsky wrote an opera about. It's very philosophical. I'm sort of like Oliver Tolliver. I really am very happy with one of each, but the story then kind of took its own way. When Peggoty came along and there was no room for her, "What? Just one of each?" You know, there's no room for two. So, I kind of fiddled with that, and it was the wonderful illustrator Marjorie Priceman — she had the idea to make them a dog and a cat. It was not my idea. When I wrote Oliver, it was a person. Probably a little man, you see. So, her contribution is just absolutely crucial.

Then as far as *The Seven Silly Eaters*, again the illustrator's contribution is equally important because there is no Mr. Peters mentioned in the text of the book at all. The daddy does not exist in the text. It was Marla Frazee's idea to illustrate this wonderful husband helping along, diapering the kids, and so forth.

*The Two Sillies* is something yet again. Linda Zuckerman wanted me to write an easy-to-read book for a series. But, then they decided that they were not going to bring this out in that

format, and they would just bring it out as a picture book. I wrote a very simple story with lots of repetition and rhyme and that kind of thing. I had imagined the two characters as children, and the artist turned them into an older lady and an older man. So, the artists have a lot to do with the course with these stories and how they're perceived.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you describe a typical workday for you? How does your day begin?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** I've always been a morning person, and what I don't get done in the morning I really don't get done at all.

So, when I am working on something and really seriously involved in it, I will get up and go to my room. Well, not only my room, because I sort of follow the sun. Even though I don't hold much for any of that, I am a Leo. I was born in August and I love the sunshine. I'm like a cat. We live in a very contemporary house with windows all around it. Wherever a sunspot is, I go to it with my yellow pad and my fountain pen and I write there.

Now that I have a computer, which I've had for many years, I'll go up and transcribe things onto the computer, but I don't really sit at the computer from scratch. I prefer to get my ideas in my fingers and I write longhand first.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you cope when you are trying to write but get stuck and can't accomplish what you want with your work?

**MARY ANN HOBERMAN:** When things aren't going well, I complain a lot and get depressed. I whine and I eat and I go to sleep. I do all kinds of things. And if I'm smart, I'll go and clean out a drawer or a closet or go and pay my bills. I do get myself into situations where I'm not happy with what's going on. But you just have to wait it out and have faith that that dry well will fill up again.

### **Books by Mary Ann Hoberman**

- WHOSE GARDEN IS IT? (illustrated by Jane Dyer), Harcourt Inc, 2004
- Not yet titled book about all kinds of families (illustrated by Russell Ayto), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2003
- MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB (illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2003
- YOU READ TO ME, I'LL READ TO YOU: VERY SHORT FAIRY TALES TO READ TOGETHER (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2003
- BILL GROGAN'S GOAT (illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2002
- LOOKING BOOK, THE (illustrated by Laura Huliska-Beith), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2002
- MARVELOUS MOUSE MAN, THE (illustrated by Laura Forman), Harcourt Inc, 2002
- RIGHT OUTSIDE MY WINDOW (illustrated by Nicholas Wilton), Mondo Press, 2002
- IT'S SIMPLE, SAID SIMON (illustrated by Meilo So), Crown Books / Random House, 2001
- MICHAEL FINNEGAN (illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2001
- YOU READ TO ME, I'LL READ TO YOU: VERY SHORT STORIES TO READ TOGETHER (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2001
- EENSY-WEENSY SPIDER, THE (illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2000

- TWO SILLIES, THE (illustrated by Lynne Cravath), Gulliver Books / Harcourt Inc, 2000
- AND TO THINK THAT WE THOUGHT WE WOULD NEVER BE FRIENDS (illustrated by Kevin Hawkes), Crown Books / Random House, 1999
- LLAMA WHO HAD NO PAJAMA, THE (illustrated by Betty Fraser), Browndeer Press / Harcourt Inc, 1998
- MISS MARY MACK (illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 1998
- ONE OF EACH (illustrated by Marjorie Priceman), Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown and Company, 1997
- SEVEN SILLY EATERS, THE (illustrated by Marla Frazee), Gulliver Books / Harcourt Inc, 1997
- COZY BOOK, THE (illustrated by Betty Fraser), Browndeer Press / Harcourt Inc, 1995
- MY SONG IS BEAUTIFUL (illustrated by various illustrators), Little, Brown and Company, 1994
- FATHERS, MOTHERS, SISTERS, BROTHERS (illustrated by Marilyn Hafner), Joy Street / Little, Brown and Company, 1991
- FINE FAT PIG, A (illustrated by Malcah Zeldis), HarperCollins Publishers, 1991
- MR. AND MRS. MUDDLE (illustrated by Catherine O'Neill), Joy Street / Little, Brown and Company, 1988
- COZY BOOK, THE (illustrated by Tony Chen), Viking, 1982
- YELLOW BUTTER, PURPLE JELLY, RED JAM, BLACK BREAD (illustrated by Chaya Burstein), Viking, 1981
- HOUSE IS A HOUSE FOR ME, A (illustrated by Betty Fraser), Viking, 1978
- BUGS (illustrated by Victoria Chess), Viking, 1976
- I LIKE OLD CLOTHES (illustrated by Jacqueline Chwast), Alfred A. Knopf, 1976
- NUTS TO YOU AND NUTS TO ME (illustrated by Ronnie Solbert), Alfred A. Knopf, 1974
- LOOKING BOOK, THE (illustrated by Jerry Joyner), Alfred A. Knopf, 1973
- RAUCOUS AUK, THE (illustrated by Joseph Low), Viking, 1973
- LITTLE BOOK OF LITTLE BEASTS, A (illustrated by Peter Parnall), Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1973
- NOT ENOUGH BEDS FOR THE BABIES (illustrated by Helen Spyer), Little, Brown and Company, 1965
- WHAT JIM KNEW (illustrated by Norman Hoberman), Little, Brown and Company, 1963
- HELLO AND GOOD-BY (illustrated by Norman Hoberman), Little, Brown and Company, 1959
- HOW DO I GO? (illustrated by Norman Hoberman), Little, Brown and Company, 1958
- ALL MY SHOES COME IN TWO'S (illustrated by Norman Hoberman), Little, Brown and Company, 1957

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