Barbara Reid

Barbara Reid, interviewed in Toronto, Ontario on May 23, 2012.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where did you grow up? What were your interests as a child?

BARBARA REID: I was born in Toronto, Canada, and have lived there ever since. I spent summers at our family cottage north of the city; it’s my favorite place in the world. As a child, I loved animals, the outdoors, reading and drawing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What can you share about your childhood as it relates to being a writer and illustrator now?

BARBARA REID: I had a great deal of freedom as a child. I didn’t have any brothers or sisters, but the street I lived on had plenty of kids. Most of our free time was spent outside. We climbed trees and garage roofs, put on plays, started secret clubs, created comic books, put our dolls through horrifying adventures and played all sorts of imaginary games. At the cottage there were cousins to play with plus a river for swimming and canoeing, a forest and swamp to explore and railway tracks to walk. I also valued time alone: reading, drawing and making things.

I wanted to be a writer from an early age because the people who created books were my heroes. I copied the art from books and comics that I liked, and learned a lot about timing and story telling from watching classic Chuck Jones’ cartoons like Bugs Bunny. I believe unstructured free time plus a certain amount of solitude helped me to be self-motivated and creative.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you love about your job?

BARBARA REID: I love creating pictures that say something, which express ideas or emotions that are important to me. When a reader, especially a child, “gets it” or even finds something unintended that speaks to them in some of my work, it’s a real thrill. I also love meeting young artists and feeling that common spark of imagination, it’s inspiring.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your illustration process.

BARBARA REID: For me, the process for creating a Plasticine illustration always starts with drawings. In the drawing stage I create thumbnails and storyboards to plan the
whole book. I design the characters, what they wear, etc. I also collect any reference material I may need. The rough sketches eventually become final drawings, then Plasticine comes out and the real fun begins!

Plasticine is non-hardening modeling clay and comes in many colors. Building a Plasticine illustration is like building a pizza. In the case of a pizza there is the crust as a base, and then a layer of sauce, then cheese, and finally toppings. With Plasticine art, the base is illustration board, then a layer of Plasticine background, then modeled shapes pressed onto the background, and finally textures added for detail. This method of working from the background of a picture and building to the front takes a little planning, which is where the drawings help. It is magical when the final details are added. The picture really comes to life. Plasticine is a very flexible and changeable medium, and it is wonderful for making details. Did I also say it was fun?

For books, I like to design where the text goes on the page. I usually get a printout of the approximate size of the text. As an illustrator, I’m trying to take all the room I possibly can for the art and have to grudgingly give some space to the words. Where the text is placed makes a difference, and I like to control that. I like the reader’s eye to flow through the page in the right direction and turn the page at the right moment.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you get into Plasticine?

BARBARA REID: I’ve been playing with Plasticine for as long as I remember. It was one of my favorite materials. I’ve made everything out of Plasticine: villages, zoos, and artificial food to fool people into eating it. It was never boring.

At The Ontario College of Art and Design I improved my skills as an artist and learned how to become a professional illustrator, but I always had some Plasticine in a drawer and I continued fooling around with it. Through a series of flukes, and winning a competition, Plasticine artwork became part of my portfolio.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I understand you wanted to be a writer before you chose to be an illustrator? Can you please elaborate?

BARBARA REID: I loved to read, and loved the relationship between reader and writer. To become a writer would be a way of experiencing the relationship from the other side. Because I find it easier to express myself with art more than words, my career began in illustration. But my work is always about something, and I try to tell a story whether it is in words or pictures.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you do non-book illustrations? And if so, are they always in Plasticine? What are some examples of non-book art that you do?

BARBARA REID: I have illustrated educational material and created posters for libraries, festivals and a children’s theatre. At the start of my career I also worked in pen and ink and watercolor, now it’s pretty much all Plasticine.
TEACHINGBOOKS: What do children ask you most about your work?

BARBARA REID: One of the questions I get the most in schools, particularly if the kids have had a chance to do some Plasticine artwork, is “Do your thumbs get sore?” The hardest part of making a Plasticine picture is the patience-requiring time of spreading the background. It does take a little bit of pressure, and, yes, my thumbs get sore. Kids also want to know how long it takes to make a picture. A simple picture, like Humpty Dumpty in *Sing a Song of Mother Goose*, can take a day or two. A large detailed piece like the pile of sleeping animals in *Fox Walked Alone* can take eight or nine days.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was challenging for you about illustrating *Gifts*?

BARBARA REID: *Gifts* was a challenging manuscript to illustrate. When I first read the poem, which was originally a song, there were a lot of verses about traveling. It was visually very exciting, but I wanted them to be linked somehow. Creating the story and developing the characters—the grandmother and the grandchild, who were not described at all—was a challenge. It was a challenge creating the characters and giving the verses some kind of timeline.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share what struck you as an illustrator about the opening text of *Gifts*.

BARBARA REID: The opening page of *Gifts* introduces readers to the grandmother and granddaughter. It starts, “My grandma went a traveling, said what would you have me bring? Not much, said I, just a piece of the sky and a hundred songs I can sing.” This is a really nice way to get to know the relationship between the two people.

For me, the whole book is a puzzle—how do you bring home a piece of the sky? I had the vision of swinging because on a swing you get a piece of the sky—and it’s an action they can do together. Then, I thought about songs and singing, which is something we learn from our parents and grandparents, and we pass on. It’s a really nice gift. So the illustration came together very naturally showing the singing and the swinging.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If you’re working with other writers, such as you did with Jo Ellen Bogart for *Gifts*, do you have a conversation with them in terms of what they might have been visualizing?

BARBARA REID: When I work on a manuscript written by another author, it’s very exciting for me because as soon as I read a book, I have images in my mind. I love to read those words and sink into the story and imagine those characters. Sometimes, it’s a little worrisome in case the author has a different vision than me. But I’ve been
fortunate. Jo Ellen was very open to ideas and helped with a good deal of the reference material.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe some of the decisions you made to make the illustrations for *Gifts*.

**BARBARA REID:** In *Gifts*, each spread takes place in a different country. I had to think of a way to get that across quickly in the illustrations. For me, the starting point was color. When you think of Australia, it has a certain palette of colors: warm yellows, red earth and the gum trees are quite ghostly. When I thought of China and the Great Wall of China, it was cooler with more greens and a misty effect to imply the distance. I was flipping through the newspaper and read that “pink is the beige of India,” so I knew my palette for India would have a lot of pink.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk about your book *The Subway Mouse*.

**BARBARA REID:** I had a lot of fun creating *The Subway Mouse*. I think of it as a true story because I live in downtown Toronto, and I ride the subway. I’m always looking for nature, and you can find it even underground in the subway. I had noticed the mice that live there, and I thought it was a terrible environment for them—noisy and dirty with really terrible food.

I imagined a mouse finding his way to the end of the tunnel and coming out on a beautiful starry night. The hero, Nib, is inspired by stories of “Tunnel’s End.” They are just stories to the other mice, but real to Nib. He decorates his nest with found objects that remind him of the stories, and even has a postcard reproduction of Van Gough’s *Starry Night*.

To create the gritty subway world I used collage, including bits of newspaper, candy wrappers, maps and bits of dried flowers. Usually I work very hard to keep the Plasticine art clean; for *The Subway Mouse* I brushed graphite dust onto the mice and the backgrounds to add grime. It was quite liberating!

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you come to create *Perfect Snow*?

**BARBARA REID:** The book *Perfect Snow* was inspired by eavesdropping on our daughters when I was in the car with them. One of them was recalling a snow fort that her older sister had made many years ago. I thought, “That’s a legendary fort,” and it piqued my interest.

I can remember some legendary days as a child, and I know about all the tensions in the schoolyards about forts being created and wrecked, and I wanted to play with that. I picked a dreamy artistic character who is a creator, and a kind of a bruiser who is probably a fort smasher. It was terrific fun, and I used probably 15 pounds of white Plasticine to create the book.
Because there was a lot of information and action in the story, I added ink and wash drawings to fill in the details between the larger Plasticine illustrations. I loved getting back to a technique I hadn’t used for a long time. So long in fact that our youngest daughter – aged 17 at the time – said, “I didn’t know you could draw!”

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to create Picture a Tree? What was a new challenge for you in creating this book?

BARBARA REID: We live near the Don Valley ravine system that runs through Toronto. The ravines and wetlands thread a bit of wilderness through the city; I have seen raccoon, fox, deer, muskrat and beaver plus and incredible variety of birds. Most mornings, I set out with our wire-haired fox terrier, Ruby, for a walk in one section of the valley or another. Ruby does doggy things and I look at nature and think.

One dull February day, I noticed that the bare branches of a tree looked like lines drawn on the paper white winter sky. I thought how trees really “illustrate” the landscape with changing shapes, colors, and their relationship with the earth, sky, light, weather, animals birds and people. A year in trees, one spread per month of the year plus a few extras, seemed like a good picture book idea. The book is dedicated to Ruby, and you can spot her on many of the pages.

Trees are such a rich subject matter that the challenge was fitting everything in! My aim was to capture the visual and emotional response to trees, especially from a child’s point of view. I love asking a classroom full of kids if anyone there likes to climb trees – almost all the hands shoot up. At the first book signing, a little girl was in line with her arm in a sling. I asked her what happened and she just beamed and said: “I fell out of a tree!” I was worried for a nanosecond, but she had clearly survived the adventure and was keen to get back up into the trees. We shared some tree stories and had a good laugh.

There were so many images that would not fit into the book that I filled the end pages with 40 small tree “spots.” These small simple images seemed perfect for young artists to try, and we ended up filming four how-to videos to demonstrate some simple techniques. Those videos and others on how to create Nib the mouse, can be found on my website and YouTube, and have proved very popular with kids and teachers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

BARBARA REID: I like to tell students how rewarding it’s been for me to do something that I love doing—drawing and playing with Plasticine—and have it turn into a career. I like to tell kids to pay attention now to what they love to do. I say that if there’s something you love to do, whether it’s throwing a ball or reading or singing, you’re practicing without even knowing it. I tell them to keep doing it because they never know where it’s going to take them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?
BARBARA REID: When I get stuck, I just walk away from it. I put the art or story line I’m stuck on away and don’t look at it for a couple of days. Then I sneak up on it a few days later, and all of a sudden, it’s really clear what’s wrong and what needs to be changed. I also work out a lot of problems when I’m out walking.

If I’ve taken a few days away from the problem, I can be a little bit tougher about letting something go that isn’t working.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are your beliefs about reading and the importance of books for young people?

BARBARA REID: I think that books and stories and artwork are hugely important to children. I heard a wonderful analogy from someone at the International Board on Books for Young People. They said, “Books are windows and mirrors.” I just love that because a book is a window that opens the world for a child, but it’s also a mirror, where they can find themselves and put themselves into a story.

A book for a young child can be one of their first experiences imagining the world through someone else’s eyes. When they read a book, they can become a mouse. They can be someone that lived 100 years ago. They can become someone in the future or living in another country. I think those experiences and imaginings are very important for young children, and they foster a sense of the world from a young age.

Picture books are a child’s first art gallery, letting them explore a wide variety of styles, mediums, history and culture.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is something else about your work that you want to share?

BARBARA REID: Art in any form is about communication. It is important for kids to learn how to take meaning from words or images or music, and it is equally important for them to learn how to communicate their own meanings to the world. Each child is different; we are lucky if we find the right art form that a child connects with.

Plasticine is a very non-threatening medium, it’s playful and fun, and the process is as valuable as the finished product. I have seen kids (and adults) of all ages, backgrounds and abilities become totally absorbed while working with it, and the artwork is always surprising and extraordinary. I am absolutely thrilled when kids see the Plasticine artwork in my books and decide to give it a try. I share some of that student work on my website in the hopes of inspiring more kids and teachers to explore this amazing material. And again, just in case you missed the main message: it’s fun!

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