



Eric Carle

**Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

**Eric Carle, interviewed from his studio in Northampton, Massachusetts on
December 23, 2010.**

TEACHINGBOOKS: Starting with your very first book for children, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, your books have resonated with children worldwide. How does that feel as you reflect on your forty-plus years of writing and illustrating books for young people?

ERIC CARLE: It is very rewarding. I am happy to have made a contribution in this way. And very grateful to have been able to do the work that I love.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Before we delve more into your books and deep commitment to the art of picture book illustration, please share about the meaning of art for you as both a young child (when you were being raised in Syracuse, NY), and then as a teen, where I understand you went to a wonderful art school in Stuttgart. Were you always someone interested in art?

ERIC CARLE: I have always loved to draw, ever since I was a young child. I have spoken many times about my memories of my very early years in school and the colorful paints and large sheets of paper. The sunlight in the classroom. Ever since my boyhood, I have enjoyed the sensation of pencil touching paper, a brush dipping into bright, cheerful paints, patterns and textures and shapes and colors.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I understand you have had some memorable teachers in your life – from a Kindergarten teacher in Syracuse, to some in Germany in your teens. Is there anything you would like to say about your teachers?

ERIC CARLE: There have been many "door openers" in my life, including my teachers. One of the most influential and important people in my life was my first grade teacher, Miss Frickey. She encouraged my creative interests at that early age and impressed upon my parents that they must nurture and encourage my talents as a visual person, which they did. Herr Krauss, my high school art teacher in Stuttgart, secretly showed me the reproductions of Expressionist and Abstract paintings, works that had been banned by the Nazis. I was twelve or thirteen years old. Herr Krauss liked my loose style and encouraged me to continue in that manner despite his instructions from above to teach realism and naturalism. I owe a lot to this courageous and sensitive teacher. At 16, I attended the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart, Germany, and studied

under Graphic Arts Professor Ernst Schneidler, who had trained and produced some of the finest graphic artists in Germany. This is where I first learned about collage.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What would you like to share about being raised in Germany during World War II?

ERIC CARLE: I have painful memories of growing up in Germany during the Second World War and in a way I feel the colorful illustrations of my books are a kind of antidote to the grays and browns of my childhood.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I've read that World War II stifled public artistic expression in Germany, but that there were private opportunities for growth and exploration. If there is truth to this sentiment, can you please elaborate about having artistic desires during the war, and how those could be developed or expressed?

ERIC CARLE: I know this is true, and yet my teacher Herr Krauss, who I mentioned earlier, is a wonderful story. I will never forget the pictures he showed me and his support of my developing artistic expression and style.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I've heard you describe your art today as "deceptively simple". How would you describe your art style when you were in Germany, graduating from school after the war?

ERIC CARLE: Professor Schneidler, under whom I studied graphic design at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Stuttgart, instilled in me the principles of design that remain true for my work today. Simplify and refine, be logical and harmonious.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What prompted your return to the United States in the early 1950s? And is it true you only had \$50 and a few clothes as your worldly possessions at that time? Please tell us that story.

ERIC CARLE: I always wanted to return to the United States and as a young boy imagined building a bridge between the two countries and taking my Oma, my grandmother back with me. I had very fond memories of my life in Syracuse and came to New York again as a young man in my early 20's, with my portfolio and \$40.00 in my pocket.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Legend has it that Leo Lionni was one of the first people you interviewed with for a job? How did that go, and would you say that there are similarities (or influences) in the children's book art that you two made?

ERIC CARLE: When I arrived in New York City, it was suggested that I go see the New

York Art Directors' Show which was on exhibit at that time. There I saw the beautiful designs for Fortune Magazine, for which Leo Lionni was the Art Director. I left the exhibit and called him and asked if I could show him my work. He said I should come in the next day at eleven o'clock. Mr. Lionni looked through my portfolio and arranged a meeting for me with George Krikorian, the Art Director for the Promotion Department of The New York Times, where Mr. Lionni knew of a job opening. I got the job! Leo Lionni was another door opener in my life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You didn't go into children's books for a handful of years after returning to the United States. I understand you were in advertising and even traveled the world for this work. Would you say that there are influences or a notable connection between the graphic work that you did then and the writing and illustration work you now do in books?

ERIC CARLE: I think there were similarities in my design work and my illustration work. I started out my career as a poster designer in Germany and I still think of my illustrations, and in particular of the covers of my books, as little posters.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You created wonderful books with Bill Martin, Jr. Can you please share a bit about your relationship and collaborations with him.

ERIC CARLE: It was a wonderful experience working with Bill Martin Jr. Over the years, Bill and I collaborated on four Bear books: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*; *Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?*; *Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What Do You See?*; and *Baby Bear Baby Bear, What Do You See?*. These now-classic books, with the heartbeat rhythm of Bill's story and my own collage illustrations, have become favorites of parents, teachers and children and have helped millions learn to read. I feel very proud to have worked with Bill Martin Jr. Bill opened the world of picture books for me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I have heard you talk about the responsibility of creating art. What does that mean, and can you give an example with one of your books?

ERIC CARLE: My background is in design and to me a book doesn't work if the design doesn't work. The pictures can be magnificent, but they will not sing if they are not laid out, thought through, in other words, designed in a logical, functional and accessible manner. This is the responsibility that I feel when I am making my pictures. To make my work sing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have written about your picture book illustrations being reductionist – similar to how a novel has thousands of words and gets edited. Can you please elaborate if this is a true statement.

ERIC CARLE: A picture book is really one idea in 32 pages. I am always thinking to

myself when I am working on a book, "Simplify, simplify, simplify." So the answer to your question is yes, it is a constant process of editing and simplifying.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* has become your trademark book. Can you please share about the origin of this book? How did the story and the art develop?

ERIC CARLE: The idea for the book started when I was absentmindedly punching holes into a stack of paper. My background is in graphic design, and I always try to squeeze as much as possible out of the paper. So while punching holes in my paper, I thought of a bookworm. But my editor didn't like the idea of a worm and she suggested caterpillar. Then I said: butterfly! That's how it all started.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How many languages is *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* now translated into, and roughly how many copies would you guess are floating around the world?

ERIC CARLE: It has been published in more than 45 languages and has sold over 30 million copies.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book illustration is almost always collage, and you make your own paper. Can you please talk about how you make your illustrations (or pick one book to use as an example).

ERIC CARLE: My illustrations are collages, which is a technique that has been used by many artists including Matisse, Picasso, Leo Lionni, Ezra Jack Keats. Many children have done collages at home or in their classrooms. In fact, some children have said to me, "Oh, I can do that." I consider that the highest compliment. I make my pictures out of hand-painted tissue papers that I paint with acrylics. Then I cut and tear these painted papers and glue them onto illustration board. My painted papers are like my palette.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your commitment to the art of picture book illustration is so strong that you and your wife Bobbie wanted to open a full-fledged museum devoted to this art form. What led you to create this marvelous museum?

ERIC CARLE: We visited Japan numerous times over the years and we were inspired by the picture book museums there, in particular the Chihiro Museum, and so we started to dream about creating a picture book museum in the United States.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you reflect upon the museum, what memories make you smile?

ERIC CARLE: I have many happy memories of the museum, of the opening celebration in 2002. And every time I walk into the building now, I am impressed and inspired by the

great hall. It is a wonderful building, with many beautiful exhibits and events, and a lovely, talented staff.

[Editor's Note: The Eric Carle Picture Book Museum of Picture Book Art (Amherst, MA), offers numerous resources including the Picture Books of Distinction series, art activities, information about the Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum, and outreach programming for students.

The mission of The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art "is to inspire, especially in children and their families, an appreciation for and an understanding of the art of the picture book. We deliver this mission by collecting, presenting and celebrating the art of the picture book from around the world and by providing interactive experiences and programs that are engaging and educational."

Membership is available at several levels, including rates for individuals, teachers/librarians, students/senior citizens, and national/international associates. For more information, go to www.carlemuseum.org.]

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday like for Eric Carle?

ERIC CARLE: I am now retired and have been since turning 75 but I am fortunate to have a studio in my home and so can wander in and make pictures whenever I feel like it!

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like to be asked by Google to make their logo design? I wonder if that was the largest exposure ever for your art?

ERIC CARLE: It was an incredible honor and an amazing day when the logo was live on Google. We received many, many e-mails from around the world from readers who had seen it and it was actually very moving.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck creating a book or illustration?

ERIC CARLE: Writer's block or any kind of creative crisis is part of the creative life. You have to go through it. There is no avoiding it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You get to talk to a lot of teachers and educators. What do you like to tell them?

ERIC CARLE: I am not an educator but I admire the work that teachers do and appreciate so much the teachers in my own life. I do however believe that children should be encouraged to enter into my books, or any books, in their own particular way. There are many different kinds of learners and we are all individuals. Just continue listening to children and supporting them. It is a big mystery, growing up.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Similarly, what do you like to tell students?

ERIC CARLE: I no longer visit schools but when I did I would talk about my own experiences in school, my fond memories of making pictures as a young boy. And that I still remember and enjoy thinking about my childhood, the child inside of me.

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