



**Lois Ehlert**

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

**Lois Ehlert, interviewed in her home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on March 2, 2009.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You are the author-illustrator of dozens of books for children in your signature style of boldly colored shapes and die-cut collages. How did your distinctive style develop?

**LOIS EHLERT:** I think it began when I saw my mother and my dad making things. I never really did things in the usual order. I grew up in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, which is a relatively small city, and there were no art supply stores. So I used materials that were gifts from my mother and my dad from their projects. I've always worked in a form of collage, more out of necessity than anything else.

My mother was a good seamstress and my dad worked with wood, and he had a workshop down in the basement. They would let me help them, and there often were scraps I could work with.

Most importantly, they let me have a folding table so I could work on my art projects. I speak to this subject in my book called *Hands*. As long as I enjoyed doing it, my parents would allow me to make a mess on this table. I think that was very unusual, because parents usually like to keep their homes very neat. The table is still in my closet, and it's a little bit worse for wear. It has some holes in it and splotches and cut marks from, cutting paper on there, but it's still serviceable.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Where did you receive your formal art training?

**LOIS EHLERT:** I went on scholarship to the Layton School of Art, which is now the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. I had a strong urge to become an artist, so I just went ahead with it, and I've never been sorry. Later in my life and career, I earned a degree from the University of Wisconsin, but I did the art part first.

I have to thank my parents for being tolerant, not knowing what was going to happen to me. They must have wondered whether or not I would be able to earn my living that way, or if I would do it as a hobby. It was rather uncharted waters, especially for people of their generation. They had "job" jobs, and did their creative activities in their spare time or on weekends or evenings. It wasn't like doing it professionally, as I do now.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk about your early art career.

**LOIS EHLERT:** When I was 22 years old, I got an agent that did both trade books and textbooks. That firm still represents me after all these years.

My art styles were always a little bit out of left field, partly because of the color, but also because the stylization was not a popular commodity, either. So I got a job in an advertising art studio. After four years of art school, I began as the studio's apprentice. In other words, I put together things that other illustrators in the firm did for presentation. I worked there for about eight years, always doing my own illustration in the evenings and on weekends, and doing assorted work through my agent.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** At what point did you begin creating your own children's books?

**LOIS EHLERT:** It wasn't until I was in my late 40s or 50s that I actually began to do the writing and the art, and to conceive of my own books. I had always done some informal writing, but it was not until I got to the point where I wanted to combine my writing with my art that I studied writing a little bit more thoroughly.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe your process for creating a picture book.

**LOIS EHLERT:** I always get the visual concept for the book first. I know that's contrary to what most illustrators do, because unless they do both the writing and the art, they generally would get the manuscript first, and then they would illustrate it.

The way I work, I begin with the art and then write, and then go back to the art and change it, and then go back to the writing and change it. So in other words, I have two lines of narrative, both the visual and the written, as opposed to illustrating one narrative, which is more common.

When I worked as a graphic designer, I always was conscious of the page layout and shape of the book, and that's another perk that you can get if you start from ground zero. I've always considered a book format a very experimental adventure.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you give an example of an experimental adventure in your book format?

**LOIS EHLERT:** In *Leaf Man*, I designed die cutting along the top of every page to show the perspective as the leaf man is flying over the landscape. As you turn the pages, the perspective changes. Or, in *Color Zoo* or *In My World*, I designed the apertures so that they form the images by the overlay of pages with the cutouts.

The text of my books is usually fairly slim, because I know I'm writing for emerging readers. The pictures do some of the talking, and I use an easy typeface for anyone to read. Century Schoolbook is the font in my Harcourt books, and the ones published by HarperCollins are set in Avant Garde, which is a sans-serif typeface, very similar to the way a child learns to print the letters of the alphabet. I think it's another way to teach a child how to learn to read without putting up any roadblocks, like fonts that are too cute or obscure.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you talk a little bit about different examples of art media you've used in your illustrations?

**LOIS EHLERT:** I love fabric. In fact, I have a collection of textiles from all over the world. Sometimes I throw a few little things into my illustrations from this collection. I think the first book in which I experimented doing two- and three-dimensional images was *Snowballs*, where sometimes I use actual objects and glue or wire them right to the surface. I did a little bit in *Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf*, with the tree branch and the garden gloves, and so forth.

This integration of real objects presents an added level of art interpretation, but it's difficult to photograph. We've had to search for special photographers that know how to photograph this kind of art to create a slight shadow without diminishing the color forms. It's pretty tricky, but if it turns out well, it's more intriguing to look at. In fact, some kids say that they touch the page because they think the texture is three-dimensional, like in *Wag a Tail*. I used buttons for the eyes on the dogs, and they do look like they're jumping right off the page.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How would you describe your art in your 1990 Caldecott Honor book, *Color Zoo*?

**LOIS EHLERT:** *Color Zoo* and *In My World* are primarily die cuts or apertures. The total illustration is made by the negative space that allows the next page, and subsequently the next page, to show through. It's very difficult, if not impossible, to describe. It's sort of a slow form of animation.

With those two books in particular, you can actually use your hands and follow the forms. The die cuts make the books more tactile. And the same could be said for *Fish Eyes*, where I had cutouts for the eyes on the fish, so that a young child could count three different ways: with the number, with the name for the number, or just by putting their finger in the fish's eyes. All of this is a way to get the young child to interact as they're learning something. It's learning in a very physical sense.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your books also encourage children to interact with nature.

**LOIS EHLERT:** I'm an outdoors person who believes that the world, even in its present shape, is still a pretty wonderful place. So I try to encourage kids to go outside and explore through my books. For instance, *Leaf Man* encourages readers to go outside and pick up leaves. I say to them with my book, "Look, leaves are free. They're free art supplies. You can find them and make your own art." That's another thing I like to encourage: young children making their own art.

In *Eating the Alphabet*, readers are encouraged to go to the grocery store with their families and just look at all the beauty in the fruits and vegetables. Or maybe their parents or grandparents have had a garden. I want readers to look at all these wonders.

My books deal with common, ordinary things that anyone, whatever their means, would probably come in contact with in their own yard or in a nearby park. The more I

know about nature, it seems the more I need to know. It's never ending. But it's just wonderful. I can't stress enough that I really want to do books that inspire at least one person to go outside and look at things a little more closely.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** There is an unusual story about how you went about creating *Eating the Alphabet*. Would you share this please?

**LOIS EHLERT:** There's a fruit and vegetable store near my house that I've gone to for many, many years. At the beginning of my creation of *Eating the Alphabet*, I went to the grocery store once a week, usually on Saturday, to buy fruits and vegetables alphabetically. I started with the A's: apples, artichokes, and asparagus. And then I would take them home and do a painting of all of them (this is before I even had the format of the book figured out), and then I'd eat them. The next week I'd go back to the store for the B's, and so on. I wondered if someone at the store would notice and start to talk about this lady that would come in and buy only fruits and vegetables that began with the letter A, or B, or C, but they were very discreet. The employees never did question me about it. But when I had the whole book finished, I showed it to them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your illustrations often include labels that specifically identify what readers are looking at. Why do you do that?

**LOIS EHLERT:** My brother and my sister are younger than I am. And when my mother would read to us, she'd read us from the same book. In order to stretch the age range of my books, I put labels in them.

When I create my own books, I like to give as much information about a subject as I can. Labels help with that, because although it may not be obvious, given the simplicity of the images that I make, I do a lot of research before I begin. After a while, it almost comes to the point where I have to unlearn all of the details that I know, and then illustrate something that's a stylized version of what it is.

I often get so fascinated with the research that I want to put something more than labels in the book. Sometimes it's a glossary, or notes from the artist—something that gives a little more information not only for the older child, but also for the parent or the teacher, or someone who is working with the child. For instance, in *Waiting for Wings*, I identify the different parts of a butterfly and the different names. I don't always put the labels in the front part of the book, but that in-depth information is usually there somewhere.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You are one of the most colorfully dressed people I know. Please share a little bit about your relationship to color.

**LOIS EHLERT:** Color lifts my spirits. I can't think of any color that I haven't used, but maybe there is one. When I gather my art supplies, I use a variety of papers, and if I can't find the color that I want, I will make paint and/or make paper that is that color. I do a lot

of cutting and throwing things away until I get the color to be very harmonious, at least to my eyes.

I also must give credit to the publisher's production department for finding ways to produce books with the colors and formats. If you look at some of the older children's books, although the colors are nice, they're not quite "there," because color printing was not as sophisticated then as it is now.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many of your books reference folk art, and I understand you collect it, too.

**LOIS EHLERT:** I've done a lot of traveling, and I usually end up buying art from whatever country I visit. I've spent a lot of time in Mexico, and I'm sure part of my attraction to Mexico is its artists' sense of color. It's interesting to me as an artist to delve into other cultures, because both Peruvian and Mexican art, for example, naturally tends to be quite stylized. My art form is, too. I can visually read and relate to that very easily.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** A few of your books are bilingual folk tales. What influenced you to create these?

**LOIS EHLERT:** I got interested in illustrating folktales after I went to Peru and Mexico. But the idea of a bilingual book was a little bit controversial at the time that I first proposed them. Publishers thought that maybe the book should not be bilingual, but it should be in solely Spanish or English. I kept arguing that with a bilingual book, maybe a child that spoke only English might learn some Spanish, and a Spanish-speaking child might learn some English. Bilingual books do present a design problem, because you have to use twice as much space for text when you do both languages in one book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Tell us about *Moon Rope* and *Market Day*, two books that call upon your love of folk art in your illustrations.

**LOIS EHLERT:** In *Moon Rope*, I was trying to use some stylization that would be reminiscent of the pre-Colombian culture. There are a lot of ceramic pots in the shape of corn or squash or bird forms that are readily identified, even though they are very stylized. It reminds us that there is continuity to both culture and culture art, and to nature, too. There's still that constant presence of the sun and the moon, and other phenomena that every culture has tried to describe or explain. It's very interesting to me.

For *Market Day*, I photographed my folk art and used the photos to make compositions. The folk art is predominantly from Central and South America, although there are some African objects in there, too.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kind of impact did your illustrative involvement with *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* have on your career?

**LOIS EHLERT:** *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* is a case of my illustrating another artist's book. That text of this book was unusual, in that I didn't really know what the heck I was going to do with it. I really didn't. It really made me have sweaty hands for a while. But, it worked out all right.

I learned a little bit about writing with the rhythm of words from Bill Martin, Jr. I've always thought of the writing in a book as similar to a piece of music, and in *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, of course it's more pronounced. The rhythm in that book is so strong. Language, especially with the books that I work on, are for a younger child, so the books start out being read aloud, which is not quite singing but it's close to it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you choose the subjects for your books?

**LOIS EHLERT:** There's no set rule to how I choose the subject of my books, other than it must be something that I'm really interested in. For instance, I have picked up leaves all my life, and saved them and pressed them in the phone book. Each time I pressed a leaf, a couple of months later, I'd look at it and it would be all brown and crinkly. So I started to color copy leaves so that the colors would stay fresh. Eventually, I had a whole folder filled with photographs of leaves of all kinds. And then I just started thinking about making the characters in the book out of leaves, and *Leaf Man* was born.

When I get interested in a certain subject, I really jump in with both feet. After finding lots of facts and ideas, I like to incorporate them in my books when I can, because I think it just enriches one's life the more you know about the world around you.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You also collect ice-fishing decoys.

**LOIS EHLERT:** Yes. I bought my first ice-fishing decoy without knowing what its function was. I bought it because it was a wooden carving. It was a big yellow fish with orange spots on it. I don't think in Lake Winnebago there are any yellow fish with orange spots, but one doesn't know what that looks like to a fish.

I later found out from a fisherman that these are used for ice fishing. They dangle these decoys down through a hole in the ice into the water to attract the bigger fish that is hungry and looking for something to eat. Over the years, my collection has multiplied and I have I think about 180 decoys now.

These wooden fish decoys are interesting to me because the people that carve them are fishermen, not professional artists. Their goal is to make them look as much like fish as they can.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** The floor of the Milwaukee Public Library's Central Branch Betty Brinn Children's Room is striking. Navy blue linoleum frames 31 different animal pictographs in a variety of colors that you designed. Please describe some of the non-book art have you done, and what is it like.

**LOIS EHLERT:** A pictograph is a very simplified form something, almost like a cookie cutter shape. On the linoleum floor of the Milwaukee Public Library there is only one color

per animal pictograph. The pictographs were laser cut out of the background and then inset, so that the linoleum floor is all flat and even.

I had a good time doing that art. There are so many animals in children's stories, and I tried to pick animals that I knew there was a story for. I also did a *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* wall at the Shorewood (Wisconsin) Library, where the letters of the alphabet are cut out of wood and hinged together to form a partition between the children's area and the rest of the library.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe a typical workday.

**LOIS EHLERT:** Well, my workday begins early. I get up early, partly because it's a very peaceful time of day. And it seems like I get my ideas either early morning or sometimes in the middle of the night.

I'm usually at my drawing board by 8:00 for certain, sometimes 7:30. If I'm working on something that's really exciting me, I get up earlier, eat my breakfast, then get in there as fast as possible. I find that I don't break very much for lunch. I usually eat my lunch right at my drawing board, but I do take a break at dinnertime.

Sometimes I find that if I have a creative problem that isn't solved by the evening, sleeping helps me resolve it. The next morning I can often see what my mistakes are, and fix them. I don't work all the time. I go to the symphony and the ballet and movies, watch TV, do the laundry ...

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you get stuck?

**LOIS EHLERT:** There are days when the ideas don't come. Being an illustrator is not like a regular job. I wish it were sometimes. I get very frustrated when what is in my brain doesn't come out on the paper just the way I want it to. But you know, eventually it works out.

I sometimes walk away from my art and do something else, like play with my flowers, or go to a concert or a movie, or just go out to dinner with friends.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell teachers?

**LOIS EHLERT:** I really want my books to be a jumping-off point for either the child or the teacher, or both, to do their own thing. I want them to interpret whatever is in the book in their own way, and use that interpretation as creative inspiration.

I've seen some really neat things in schools, and I get a lot of photographs in my fan mail from classes that are doing different creative things. It's just wonderful.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell students?

**LOIS EHLERT:** I tell them that I was a late bloomer and that I really didn't find success in the children's book field until I was in my late 40s. And I tell them that just because

somebody doesn't like what you're doing, doesn't mean it's not good. It just means that you haven't found the right person to like it. Students should not get discouraged, because in creative fields, success is not immediate. I encourage them to be more attuned to doing what they really want to do, rather than what somebody else is going to want them to do.

I have been an art teacher, and I still lead occasional workshops. I like to have the art to be accessible enough that a child could say, "Well, I could do that, I could do something like that, to not make it so slick and perfect." They can see the materials that I'm working with, and in fact I say to them, "Look, all you need is some colors, scissors, a glue stick, and pencil and paper to do something. You don't need to have expensive things around you to make art. You make art with what you have."

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For more information about Lois Ehlert and her books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net).

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