Marie-Louise Gay
Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Marie-Louise Gay interviewed in Outremont, Québec, on March 11, 2011.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You’re very passionate about reading. You’re on the National Reading Summit Board, you are a spokesperson and activist for a non-profit organization that promotes the pleasure of reading to schoolchildren and their parents (Learning with my Child), you give workshops and talks about children’s literature to librarians and schoolteachers across North America, you write and illustrate books for young children, and you have strong opinions about the value and pleasure of reading. Tell us what makes you so passionate.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: Reading is a key to understanding ourselves and the world around us. If we give a child the gift of the pleasure of reading, of exploring his or her emotions, of discovering new perspectives and ideas, we cultivate the joy of discovery and the quest for knowledge that will last a lifetime. The child who grows up to be an adult who reads for information, inspiration, knowledge, and pleasure will be a more attentive and active member of society. Children who have reading disabilities, little or no access to books, or who grow up in families where reading is not a part of every day life will only be able to participate in a very limited way in a democratic and vibrant society.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is it about writing for young children that moves you?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: When I am writing and illustrating for young children, I am addressing small human beings for whom everything is possible. Their perspective is fresh, full of wonder and curiosity. They devour pictures, words, and stories and incorporate them in their lives. Which, in turn, become entwined in the very fabric of their imagination. Children suspend their disbelief with relish, they dive eagerly into a good story, identifying with the protagonists’ emotions, absorbing minute details. What better audience could I wish for?

Most of the books I write and illustrate are for children who are pre-literate, which is why sharing a book with an adult is so important. When a parent, an older sibling, a teacher or a librarian reads a book to a child, the child is just as absorbed by the story being read to him as he is by the pictures he is looking at. I try to incorporate rich visual imagery that can give other insights, other levels of understanding to the child who is “reading” the pictures. This, in fact, empowers the child who, without fail, catches the details and the sub-stories in the illustrations that are not necessarily included in the written story. A complex and rich visual vocabulary augments a child’s verbal vocabulary as well as inciting him to decode the words and instill a desire and curiosity that will eventually bring him to read.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What were you like as a child? Did you create stories with pictures?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I think all children are creative in different ways. I was an avid reader. I was also a tomboy building forts in the forest and putting on plays in the basement, but art was
not part of my life. I remember failing third grade art. I couldn’t draw a symmetrical flower vase; it always came out looking like a fat noodle with scraggly flowers sticking out. But how could a teacher fail a third-grade student in art? I would like my third grade teacher to see what I’m doing today. Maybe I should thank him because after that failure I didn’t draw until I was 16 or 17 years old, and then I was unstoppable. I would cover my schoolbooks with cartoon drawings of flying pigs, rabbits playing tennis, or cats wearing running shoes and striped scarves.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you become the class artist?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: No. I was a loner in school. My grades were not very good and I had no idea where I was headed. People find another outlet when they are in difficult times. So I scribbled and doodled and lived in an imaginary world that I created on paper. Nobody at school, kids or teachers, knew that I lived for my drawings. It was something I did at home, alone.

Faced with a mountain of cartoon drawings and my very low grades at school, my mother suggested that I go to art school. There was no tradition of art or people doing creative things in our family. But she must have sensed that attending art school was the only way I would get interested in studying again. And it was.

The first place I went to was a graphic design school. My mother didn’t know anything about art schools, neither did I, and this is the one she chose. It was the Graphic Institute of Montréal.

A graphic design school is more about perspective, typography, layout and printing techniques than art, of course. There was an entrance exam that included drawing and designing simple objects. I remember that, in the middle of the exam and for the first time in my life, a light bulb went on over my head. Even when I think about it now, I get emotional. It was the realization that I was in the right place, that this was what I wanted to do more than anything and that, in fact, I was happy.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you are addressing a crowd, you seem like an actress. Are you theatrical?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: Yes, in fact, I was an actress as a child. When I was eight years old, we lived in Vancouver where my parents played in amateur theater. A role opened up for a little girl. I played the daughter of my father. The play was called Speaking of Murder. I played the child who finds a dead person in a bank vault.

A TV producer saw me perform and I was recruited to play in different TV series for children as well as TV drama shows. I became a celebrity at school. I loved the acting, the creation of a character and how fascinating it was to play at being someone else.

Our family returned to Montréal three years later and my acting career bit the dust. It was not like today where parents will look for every acting class on the Internet and push their children into acting. Nothing happened. It just fell out of my life.

But I feel that I’m an actress when I write, when I create my characters, their personalities and their voices. When I talk and read to children or teachers and librarians, I literally become each and every one of my characters. I act out my stories. I love doing that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What inspires you to write? Where do your ideas come from?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I observe. I take notes. Everything I do, everything I see, the people I meet, find their way back into my work in one form or another. I think that’s the role of an artist, to
absorb the world around you, then recreate it with your vision, your unique perspective, your emotional quality.

That is why I travel a lot. As an adult, traveling to new places is a way of rediscovering a child's vision of the world. We are in a constant state of anticipation and surprise. Our perspective is fresh. Our sense of wonder is rekindled.

I remember going to live in San Francisco when I was 28 years old. There was such a contrast of light and color compared to Montréal. Montréal is the city of winter, of muted colors: shades of gray and white. San Francisco, in contrast, is an explosion of colors: the houses are painted lemon, pink and purple, scarlet and fuchsia. Flowers bloom all year long, the sunsets glow in shades of tangerine and mauve, the light is blindingly bright. It was just so astonishing for a northern person. It created a profound and lasting change in my palette.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Tell us about your love for what you do.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I still love what I do as much as I did 35 years ago. I am still excited when I start a new project. I totally immerse myself in the exploration of new ideas and different visual approaches. I love elaborating new characters like Roslyn Rutabaga or Caramba's terrible little brother Henry, giving them life and a voice, creating the world they live in.

I am inspired by the enthusiasm of the children I meet in schools, the way they react to my stories and illustrations with wonder, curiosity and emotion. That is why I paint very detailed illustrations, knowing that some children will discover the tiniest details and the inside jokes. I feel very lucky to have found a creative outlet that lets me enter the emotional quality of childhood.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have taken different paths throughout your career; you have been a graphic designer, an art director, an editorial illustrator, a playwright. Why did you finally become a children's book writer?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I mainly write children's books now because I have found my real voice. In my early 20s and 30s, I was an editorial illustrator working for magazines across the United States and Canada. From Psychology Today to Mother Jones, Saturday Night and Châtelaine, to name a few. It was a very intense time, the deadlines were short, the energy was high.

But it was ephemeral. I would put all my energy into creating an image to illustrate a magazine article, there would be a short buzz, and the next month, people were wrapping their potato peels in it. There was no sense of continuity or permanence.

Then an author who was also a publisher asked me to illustrate his text for a children's book. I was interested even though it had never crossed my mind to illustrate a picture book—which was strange because I had read and pored over the illustrations of so many of them as a child. So here I was, creating a story with pictures, developing characters and the world they evolved in. I realized I could show the emotion the characters were feeling by exploring their body language and facial expressions. It felt tremendously exciting and fulfilling. I understood that was something I needed—to dig deeper into the emotional level of the story and explore it visually.

I illustrated three texts, then decided I would try my hand at writing my own stories. The enthusiastic response convinced me I had found my voice. I was also happy to discover the longevity of a book: most of my books are still in print after 30 years.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your drawings have a lot of energy. Are you an energetic person?
MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I think so. I work on many projects at once: I’ll be sketching the storyboard on one, rewriting another and painting the finished art on a third. In between, I travel a lot for pleasure and research as well as doing readings, workshops or speaking at conferences. I also design and illustrate posters for literary events. As an illustrator and writer, I can be a very solitary and sedentary person, but my mind is in constant movement. If my mind goes blank and my page remains empty, instead of trying to force an idea, I will hop on my bike and go up the mountain or work in the garden.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your use of the French and English languages.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I was born in Québec City and my mother tongue is French. I learned to speak English in kindergarten after our family moved to Ontario. We then relocated to Vancouver. So I did all my primary schooling in English. But we were not allowed to speak English at home, only French. I was brought up in two languages that were always kept apart. So I can talk, think and write in both languages (and even a bit of Spanish).

What is curious is that I have no control over which language I will write a story in. When I get a glimmer of an idea for a story, it will either be in French or in English. It is not a deliberate decision. When I have written the story in French, let's say, I then rewrite it in English or the other way around. I don’t do a literal translation because the two languages are so different in their rhythm and humor. So I actually do an adaptation of my original version. Here in Québec, where a lot of people are bilingual, I have been told by primary school teachers that they read my books in the two languages with their students and then search for the differences between the two versions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you wrote Stella, Star of the Sea, did you compose it in English or French or both?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: When I wrote that book, I was living in the south of France with my family. I wrote Stella in English, perhaps an unconscious reaction to the fact that I didn’t hear or speak any English for a year.

A decade later, Stella, Star of the Sea has been published in 15 different languages: German, Dutch, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Serbian, and Welsh to name a few.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have illustrated a lot of books that others have authored. What is that process like compared to both writing and illustrating a book?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I have illustrated many books written by other authors. For example, I illustrated Lizzy’s Lion by Dennis Lee, the Houndsley and Catina series written by James Howe, a few books by Don Gillmor, like The Fabulous Song and Yuck, A Love Story or Please Louise! by Frieda Wishinsky. But I have mainly written and illustrated my own books, such as the ongoing Stella and Sam series, Caramba or recently, Roslyn Rutabaga and the Biggest Hole on Earth!

The two processes are completely different. When I write and illustrate my own books, I have total freedom. I can change anything and everything: the story’s direction, the plot, I can erase a character or transform him into an animal. But with freedom comes a multitude of choices that can lead to a cul-de-sac or a completely different story than what was intended. The choices can be overwhelming at times or perilous because I can lose my way. I am in a forest with paths zigzagging in every direction. But these moments where I am a lost explorer are actually the most exciting in my creative process.
The challenge for me with illustrating other people’s books is that I have to really structure my work and respect the author’s story and characters. I cannot change anything and my freedom lies in the visual interpretation of the author’s words. But still, I have a lot of latitude in my visual interpretation and I often add details and sub-stories that are not part of the author’s intent, but add another rich layer of meaning to the picture book.

One thing is certain: I have to be totally captivated by the story. When I read a manuscript, I immediately know when a story appeals to me. I see the characters jumping off the pages. I start imagining what the landscape looks like, what perspective I could use to emphasize a point in the story. Usually, before I have finished reading the manuscript, little thumbnail sketches have appeared in the margins.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Share an example of how you took advantage of your freedom in one of your own books.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: When I started writing *Stella, Star of the Sea*, Stella was the only character in the story. Her little brother did not yet exist. She was a little girl walking on the beach, looking at the ocean, wondering and asking herself questions. Where do waves come from? Where do starfish come from? Does the sea touch the sky? And she would answer her own questions, all this in a poetic voice.

After a while, I realized how static and unwieldy this idea was. I needed to introduce another character with whom she could have a dialogue. The obvious choice was to have a parent walking along beside her and answering her questions. But then I thought how a parent would want to teach her child, give her a scientific explanation, look up an answer in the encyclopedia…

I realized this was the wrong choice. I unconsciously started sketching a small tow-headed boy, climbing up the huge sand dune where Stella was looking out over the ocean and standing beside her. Then I wrote: *Isn’t this beautiful, Sam?* And Sam (for it was he) replies: “It’s big. And noisy.”

Immediately, a sibling relationship was born. I had found the right path.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you draw the Stella and Sam books, what are you thinking about?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: When I start a book, I find it important to work on the characters visually as I develop their personalities in the story. When I have the skeleton of a story, I immediately start sketching the characters. The first sketches are very important because I’m designing the characters intuitively and emotionally.

As I started drawing Stella, I sketched her in all sorts of very exuberant and active poses: running, jumping, doing cartwheels… The sketches reflected her enthusiastic, outgoing personality. As I drew Sam, I was making him smaller, with a bigger head and hunched, skinny shoulders and a fragile little neck. His expression was often serious and reflective. This mirrored Sam’s timid and more inverted personality.

I realized that drawings can replace a lot of words that would weigh down the story. For example, if I were to begin *Stella, Star of the Sea*, with: “Stella was an exuberant, enthusiastic red-haired girl who loved the sea. She was very brave and would run headlong down the sand dune and jump into the water,” it would be too long and overly descriptive.

Now picture Stella running down the dune, her arms in the air, her curly red hair streaming in the wind, a wide smile on her face, and reading: “Stella knew everything about the sea.” That’s all you need. This is what is so exciting about doing both writing and illustrating. I give the most information possible without words.
TEACHINGBOOKS: What about Stella and Sam as characters?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: One of my pleasures is developing characters. Stella and Sam have very distinct personalities, which you actually can see in the drawings. Stella is curious, exuberant and the world is her oyster. If Stella doesn’t have an answer to Sam’s questions, she doesn’t mind inventing a whimsical, imaginative response. She just wants to explore the world.

Sam is a curious boy with many, many questions about the natural wonders of the world. He is also a timid, cautious, thoughtful child. He carefully considers what he’s going to do before he does it. When Sam repeatedly refuses to even put a toe in the ocean by saying “Not right now” or “Not this minute,” the reader understands that he is actually trying to say he’s scared of the ocean, its vastness, its movement and noise. But I never write that Sam is afraid.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write more Stella and Sam books?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: My first book, Stella, Star of the Sea, was off at the publishers, and I missed Stella and Sam. They had been my kids for two years and they had left home. I felt bereft.

I was walking in a park in Montréal during a snowstorm. Huge snowflakes floated out of a pearl-gray sky and blanketed the earth. I saw two bundled-up, red-cheeked children excitedly trying to catch snowflakes on their tongues. I thought they could be Stella and Sam. I went home and wrote the second book in two weeks. My characters were already developed and they wanted to explore the beauty of winter.

One of the pleasures of writing this series is having them grow a bit in every book. Not much, just a few months at a time. Children, especially Sam’s age, learn so quickly. In every book, Sam becomes a bit more attuned to Stella’s fantastic answers and starts to understand her humor. His vocabulary grows, his own sense of humor develops. As Sam’s perception of the world expands, my drawings grow more sophisticated and detailed, as is evident in Stella, Fairy of the Forest. In this book I incorporated another level of perception: the abstract, imaginary fairy.

What’s interesting about Stella, Fairy of the Forest is that every time I’ve read it to groups of children, and when the story ends with Sam saying, “I saw one, I saw one” (a fairy), Stella says, “Where, where?” Sam answers: “Oh, too bad, it flew away.” I immediately ask the group if anyone saw a fairy in the story. Without fail, at least half the class puts their hands up and says, “I saw one! I saw a fairy!” But there isn’t a single fairy in the book. To me, that’s the ultimate compliment. Children have entered the story, followed Sam in his pursuit of the elusive fairy and have actually seen one, though no fairy exists except in their imagination.

After doing four Stella books, I felt a need to go back into Stella’s life because I realized how important the sibling relationship was between Stella and Sam. Children often asked me what Stella was like as a baby. I remembered how much I enjoyed seeing Babar and Zephyr as babies in the Babar books. I wanted to explore how Stella became who she is today.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like for you to see your books translated into a television program?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: At first I was very wary of my books being adapted for television. I believe in the importance of reading, of slowly turning the pages and examining the illustrations, of imposing our own rhythm. I believe in the emotional quality of the intimate act of reading alone, or the dynamic interaction of a shared book.

The television experience is different. There are, of course, intelligent, thoughtful shows. But for the most part, children are bombarded with noise, action and a frenetic rhythm. The
stories are often prosaic and over-simplified. There is no time for emotional identification or reflection.

There were many proposals to adapt my Stella books, and many were rejected, mainly because the production companies wanted total control over the project—which, of course, excluded the author. I wanted to be a creative consultant; after all, I was the creator of these characters, I knew them intimately as well as the world they lived in. Eventually, Radical Sheep Productions proposed a show that would respect the spirit of my books as well as the visual aspect. And they wanted me to be a creative consultant. All this took many years, but in retrospect, it was a good thing since I was able to write more Stella books and fully develop the characters.

I worked on the “bible” of the show, which is a document that develops the concept of the series, describes the characters’ personalities and the world they inhabit. The bible is the reference tool for the scriptwriters and my illustrations were the inspiration for the animators. I am quite happy with the result. The show reflects my books. It is very imaginative and retains the emotional quality of childhood. It has a slow thoughtful rhythm and a lot of sweet humor.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your writing process.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I carry a notebook or a drawing pad wherever I go. I jot down ideas for stories, sketches, notes. That is were most of my stories start. I write my text longhand as I sketch my characters in the margins. As the writing progresses, I slowly evolve towards a storyboard where the whole book is laid out page by page. My writing and drawing are always interconnected. I constantly go back and forth between the text and the sketches. If I could write with one hand and illustrate with the other, my writing process would be seamless. I write from fifteen to twenty versions of my text: pruning it, refining the dialogues, reading out loud to listen to the rhythm and intonation.

Once I have a version that satisfies me, I write it on the computer and refine it further as I start on the final art.

Reading my text aloud is important because I am mainly writing for children who are pre-literate. The books are read to them so I like to impose a certain rhythm, a poetic cadence to guide the reader.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the reaction to Caramba?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: Caramba is a perfectly ordinary cat with a long tail and soft fur. He likes to eat fish, collect caterpillars and go on long walks, but he has one problem: he can’t fly. When I read this auspicious beginning to a roomful of children, I stop and am greeted with absolute silence, and then a murmur of, “Cat’s don’t fly! What? That’s impossible!” When I resume reading, it only takes a minute for all the children to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the story of this poor cat who is worried because he is different from every other cat in the world, because they can fly.

Children immediately identify emotionally with Caramba. No one wants to be seen as different. All children reach a point where they realize there is something unattainable: they can’t win all their races, or someone has reading difficulties, or another can’t play the piano. . . So they identify with Caramba because they know what he is going through.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have written another Caramba book with a new character: his baby brother Henry. How did that come about?
MARIE-LOUISE GAY: For *Caramba and Henry*, I created a character that would upset Caramba’s life again. Caramba has always wished for a brother he could share everything with. But sometimes you don’t actually get what you wished for. Henry is this terror of a younger brother who shares nothing, screams all the time and, much to Caramba’s dismay, is starting to fly.

So Caramba has to accept that his little brother can accomplish the very thing he longs to do. A classic tale of sibling rivalry and acceptance.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you create the art for your books?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I start doing numerous sketches of my characters in action. I then create the storyboard. I make a color dummy which is a very small book that I send to the publisher to give an idea of what the book will be like.

Then I spend weeks doing research and creating sample illustrations with the materials I might use to create my artwork: watercolor, collage, acrylic, pastels, etc. I establish the palette of colors I will use in the book. I also have been collecting different paper for years, from handmade Japanese paper to very decorative Italian stuff. Sometimes I even dye my paper and hang it to dry on a clothesline in my studio.

I usually work on thick watercolor sheets. I start lightly penciling in the underdrawing. Then I do my watercolor washes, reserving certain areas with masking fluid, so the whites and bright colors stay pure. I paint in the details, I apply the collage and finish with a delicate but fluid pencil line. I add flourishes of colored pencil or pastel to underline and illuminate certain areas. It takes me from four to five months to illustrate a book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your book, *Roslyn Rutabaga and the Biggest Hole on Earth*!

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: *Roslyn Rutabaga and the Biggest Hole on Earth!* didn’t start out as a book but as an editorial assignment for a magazine. It was a few pages long with about six small illustrations. But the story remained with me and I often thought that I would like to expand it into a picture book. A few years later, I did.

With *Roslyn*, I wanted to celebrate the intensity and single-mindedness of small children. How they believe they can do anything. How they wake up in the morning and decide: “Today, I’m going to build a castle, become Superman, dig a hole all the way to China . . .” And they set about doing it.

Roslyn Rutabaga decides she is going to dig the biggest hole on earth. She is a feisty and determined little rabbit who thinks that maybe she’ll find a treasure, or she’ll dig her way to the South Pole and maybe, just maybe, she’ll meet a penguin. She meets different creatures, a worm, a mole, and a dog that try to stop her.

In *Roslyn Rutabaga*, I created my first really nice adult, an adult who really just goes along with his child’s imagination. He ends up confirming Roslyn’s dream to dig the biggest hole on earth even as she is lying in a very small hole that has taken all day to make. It’s an ode to the power of imagination and the intensity of childhood.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You don’t have computers or other distractions in your studio.
MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I need solitude and silence to concentrate on my writing. I could not share a studio with another person. My studio is a quiet room that looks out on the garden. It is lined with books and brimming with art materials. My computer is in another room so I don't get distracted by incoming mail. I turn off the telephone when I am writing. But I love listening to music when I'm drawing or painting.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If you don't compose on the computer, where do you keep your story ideas?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I write my ideas in notebooks of every shape, form, and size. I do little sketches and store pictures, scraps of ideas, lists, postcards, etc. Here's a good example of how I work: I was traveling, and the only thing I had to write on was an old library card that was in the book I was reading. I wrote sketches and part of the text of Stella, Princess of the Sky on the library card.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Tell me about the travel books that you write with your husband, David.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I wrote two novels with my husband, Travels with My Family and On the Road Again! They tell the stories of two adults on trips with their two sons. The two adults happen to be writers, like my husband and I, the two kids are quite like our two boys, and their cat happens to be old, fat and striped like our cat. The family travels in Canada, across the United States and in Mexico. In the second book they spend a year in the south of France in a small mountain village.

We thought the stories would be much more interesting if they were narrated by Charlie, the eldest child. He's eleven years old and comments on everything, his brother, his parents, their adventures, the people he meets. His observations are original, wry and astute. He often laughs at his parents antics. I think this is one of the reasons the books resonate with our readers. Children immediately identify with the narrator who thinks his parents don't understand him, don't listen to him, and most of the time, embarrass him.

When my husband and I read these books in schools or literary festivals to enormous groups of kids, they roar with laughter. A good sign. Often, we ask them to share their experiences of embarrassing moments with their parents. You wouldn't believe the stories they tell us, with much relish and enthusiasm, I might add!

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write your first travel book?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: It was pure nostalgia. Our sons are older now and do not live with us. Travels with My Family is a book of happy, crazy family memories. At first, I started writing it as a picture book, but because we've traveled so much and have had so many adventures, the stories grew longer and longer. It could not be contained in a picture book. So I decided to write a longer book, but I felt overwhelmed by the project.

My husband, David Homel, is a writer of adult fiction and as I was talking about this project, explaining my vision of it to him, he told me he would be interested in working with me. After all, he was in on these adventures too! So we started writing it together.

I wrote the outline and structure and David expanded on it. Then I would go back and revise: working on the dialogues, inserting new ideas and humor.

It was interesting going back and forth. We sent our revisions to one another in our separate studios by computer. But the best part was reliving our memorable family trips and revisiting our children's childhoods.
TEACHINGBOOKS: And how did your relationship fare through that process?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: It went very well. We probably couldn’t move a table together. We’d try to get it in sideways or upside down through the door, because we’d be telling each other how to go about it. But our cooperation was quite smooth. There was respect for each other’s writing abilities.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are you doing any more books together?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: We actually are writing a third travel book where we explore not going on vacation. It is summer, and Charlie is waiting to hear where the family will go this year when his parents say, “We can’t go anywhere. We don’t have any money this summer. We have to work.” Charlie is disappointed but then thinks that for once, he will decide what he wants to do during the summer. Of course he and his brother Max have many hilarious adventures. It’s going to be called Summer in the City.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where do you get your ideas?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I hear this question over and over again from children, parents, teachers and librarians. People seem to think that there is some sort of magical place where ideas suddenly appear. It is as simple as observing the world around you. I have written stories based on real events and then transformed them completely by changing the perspective or twisting reality. I have written stories based on my childhood memories entwined with memories of my children’s childhood. Other stories come directly from my imagination.

A lot of people have asked me if Stella is actually me as a child. I have projected a lot of how I felt about my childhood—I was an active, imaginative child and was always fascinated by the natural wonders of the world, so part of Stella is me. The rest is fiction.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have also written plays.

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I’ve written and designed three puppet plays for children. I also created the puppets, their costumes and the sets. It was a fascinating adventure to work with a theater group, creating puppets of every size and shape, hearing their voices come to life, seeing my characters move.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical day like for you?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I start working quite early in the morning when my mind is fresh, the world is quiet and ideas flow. I usually work until mid afternoon, and then I need physical exercise: a tennis game, a bike ride, a brisk walk. But if the flow of ideas stops, I’ll abandon my work earlier and do a physical activity so that my mind feels free to go elsewhere and free-associate. I get many ideas while I work in my garden.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You talk to a lot of educators. What do you like to tell them?
MARIE-LOUISE GAY: In more recent years, I have been doing more talks with teachers, librarians, booksellers and other adults interested in children’s books. I have decided that it’s good to talk with the mediators—they spread the word about my books and my ideas about promoting reading for pleasure.

I want to communicate my passion for writing and illustrating books for children to these educators. I want to encourage teachers and parents to read more to children. Sharing and enjoying a book with a child is setting a strong example that can move a child toward a lifetime of reading. Schools teach children how to read but are not always instilling the joy of reading. I also underline the importance of “reading” the illustrations with the child.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

MARIE-LOUISE GAY: I like to tell them that anything is possible. They can write stories. Illustrate books. They can do anything they want if they put their minds to it.

I like to bring books to life. Act them out. Ask the children to participate in the storytelling. I want them to understand that stories are living things, and they can be transformed. Often, I ask children to imagine new twists or new endings to my stories. And I tell them to read, read, read . . .

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

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