



Laurie Keller

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

Laurie Keller interviewed in her home in Muskegon, Michigan on July 26, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books, starting with the highly acclaimed first picture book *The Scrambled States of America*, are filled with funny, energized illustrations. As a child, were you an artist?

LAURIE KELLER: Anything art-wise was pretty much my favorite thing to do when I was little—making things out of clay, gluing stuff from around the house, drawing things ... and always creating stories.

Art was my favorite thing to do in school, too. In elementary school we would get assignments to write stories and draw pictures, and I always loved this. Sometimes teachers would even ask me to draw things for their bulletin boards, and I liked doing extra things like that. As I got older, there were some little poster contests that I won—and generally, art was something that I kind of excelled at. It was truly something that I loved to do, so it just stuck with me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Scrambled States of America* was your first book for children, and has become a staple in elementary schools to playfully teach geography. How did both the book and your opportunity to get published come about?

LAURIE KELLER: One night, when I was falling asleep and had just starting to drift off, a little state with arms and legs and a face popped into my head, jolting me awake. I was like, “What was that?” I couldn’t get this image out of my head, so I started to ask my artist friends if they had seen anything in a book with animated states and faceless characters. “No, no,” they hadn’t. So then I thought, “Wow! This could be my first children’s book and I could use these characters as a way for kids to learn a little bit about U.S. geography in an enjoyable, silly way.”

Over the next few weeks, I would come home to feverishly work until the middle of the night, having total fun with this story. Once it was done, I wanted to try to get it published. I decided to take my first trip to New York to peddle this around and see if I could get someone to publish it. I think the only reason a few publishers met with me is that working for Hallmark gave me a little bit of credibility.

I wasn’t at home when Christy Ottaviano (an editor at Henry Holt) first called to say she wanted to publish my book. I still have the tape of that phone message. I feel so grateful for the whole book experience and that I can do this for a living.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Prior to publishing your book *The Scrambled States of America*, you made greeting cards for Hallmark. How would you suppose that work influenced your future in children's books?

LAURIE KELLER: Working at Hallmark sort of became my springboard into the children's book world. Near Hallmark's offices was a great children's bookstore, Reading Reptile. I would spend a lot of lunch hours over there looking through the books—initially just for art inspiration, because I was blown away by all the great art that people were doing. But over time I got hooked on the stories themselves, and how creative, fresh, and wonderful all these books were. I was so inspired, and I thought, "You know, that is what I would really love to do someday."

At Hallmark, one inspirational experience was a four-month workshop with about eight different artists. The idea was that for these four months, we would create "blue sky"—whatever we wanted. We could do our own writing, do our own art, do whatever type of style we wanted and incorporate them into cards. It became four months of total creative freedom which was the first time I had really let loose like this—and I was hooked.

After that workshop, I returned to my regular job, which was still fun, but it was nothing like that creative freedom. Within a year after the workshop, I ended up leaving Hallmark because I wanted to do my own writing and illustrating. And during that year, I thought of the idea for *The Scrambled States of America*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How might you explain that most of your picture books contain educational topics? (Health care, geography, math, and manners are the topics of four of your first five books.)

LAURIE KELLER: On one level, it might have just kind of worked itself out that way. But it is true I come from an educator background. My mom and grandma were teachers. And I thought for a while about being a teacher, too. Now, I just feel like I have the best of both worlds where I can do art and write, but I can also work a lot with kids.

I do love the idea of taking subjects that some kids consider dry or sometimes boring and bringing some light to them. But I don't consciously say, "Okay, now I want to do another educational book that can work into the curriculum."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was the genesis for *Open Wide, Tooth School Inside*, where Dr. Flossman teaches a class of teeth how to take care of themselves?

LAURIE KELLER: *Open Wide* was a conscious decision to write about teeth. The tooth fairy was my favorite when I was growing up, and after I did *Scrambled States*, I liked the idea of working with a big cast of characters again.

I started by asking, "If I was a tooth, what would be the worst thing that would ever happen to me?" It would be a cavity. And once I knew that, this little guy popped into my head. And shortly thereafter, I went to a school talk, and thought, "Oh my gosh, a classroom is about the same size as a mouth full of teeth. I could put these teeth in school, and the book can be a day in school, and I could have all this educational stuff

about how to take care of teeth, but they're learning how to take care of themselves." So that's how *Open Wide* came about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your exceptionally well-received *Arnie the Donut* come about?

LAURIE KELLER: Arnie was inspired by going into a Krispy Kreme donut shop in New York City for the very first time. You can watch the donuts being made, and I had never seen that before. I stood there for about twenty minutes watching these donuts rise and go through this whole process. And each of them they looked like little characters coming at me, two-by-two, floating down this river of grease, and frying, and draining, and cooling; and I just thought it was the neatest thing.

As I walked home in the rain, with a big box of donuts and an umbrella, my mind was just reeling, thinking of these little donuts as characters. I didn't know at that point that I was going to write about a donut that didn't want to be eaten, but I called my editor the next morning and told her a little bit about my thoughts about a donut character, and she said go for it ...

TEACHINGBOOKS: On almost every page of all of your books you have characters saying asides, which add depth, humor, and personality to the stories that children thoroughly enjoy. Can you describe the process of creating these asides?

LAURIE KELLER: Many of these little asides come about in a similar way as the experience that led to the original idea for *Scrambled States*, where once I start to let go of things and not consciously try to think—like when I'm falling asleep or just starting to wake up—I hear the little characters saying something.

Most often, though, I'm involved in painting when all of sudden some words will pop into my head that some little guy needs to say. It's almost like they're telling me what they want to say. It's really strange.

Virtually none of these asides are in the original manuscript, and I don't know them until they continuously appear, sometimes not until the very last minute before the book goes off to print.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share an example of a memorable aside in one of your books?

LAURIE KELLER: When I did my very first school talk for my first book (*The Scrambled States of America*), I was scared to death. I had the book on slides and was going to read it in a huge auditorium with the entire school in attendance.

The kids kind of went crazy over the little love story between Nevada and Mississippi, and that blew me away. I hadn't ever read *Scrambled States* to any child when I was working on it, so it was very gratifying and exciting to see that they both liked *Scrambled States* and reacted to this little love story between Nevada and Mississippi. The students asked me what happened to these two states when they went back to their

original places; they asked, “Are they still in love?” One child asked what Mississippi saw in Nevada. I said that Nevada is a very nice state, and he has those big, broad shoulders ... And she said, “Oh, okay.” It really was pleasing to see that they were paying attention to these little asides because they are one of my favorite parts of making the books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have a lot of word play and puns in your books. Are you a wordsmith of sorts?

LAURIE KELLER: Yes, I’ve always loved playing with words. I often read words backward to see if it makes a word. I mix up the letters to see what other words I can get. I enjoy playing Scrabble and doing crossword puzzles, so I am really fascinated with individual words.

Another thing that’s kind of critical throughout my books is that I’ve never been convinced that inanimate objects don’t have feelings. People at Hallmark dubbed me as the patron saint of inanimate objects, because even as a kid I was obsessed with this. For example, if I saw a gum wrapper on the street all by itself, I would tear it in half and put it back down in its place so it would have a friend. Or still to this day, like if I go to the grocery store to get a bottle of laundry detergent, and I grab one off the shelf and I notice that there’s just one left sitting there by itself, I can’t leave it alone. I pick up the other one up, too, and buy both of them, or I move it over and arrange it with some other friends.

This has definitely worked its way into my books because all but one has been about inanimate objects. And I really like that challenge of taking these inane, everyday items and just giving them life and a personality; creating a little world for them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Do Unto Otters: A Book About Manners* is your first book not about an inanimate object, but about a rabbit teaching otters about polite behavior. Why did you write this book?

LAURIE KELLER: I’ve tried to write this book for years, going back to right after I wrote *Scramble States*. I didn’t want it to be forced and preachy because, you know, manners books aren’t anything kids normally run to pick up off the shelf. I wanted this to be something that was fun for them to read, but also something that would help them learn a thing or two about manners.

It was my love of bad puns that finally got me on the right track with this book. I was thinking about basic kindness and how we treat each other when I started to play around with “do unto others” from the Golden Rule. And then the bad pun, “Do unto otters,” with “otters” sounding like “others,” struck me. I had my idea—everywhere that you would normally use the word “others,” I used “otters.” And then the book came together.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It has been more than ten years since you made your first book. What do you think when you look back on *Scrambled States of America*, particularly because now you’re in the midst of making the sequel?

LAURIE KELLER: Looking back on *Scrambled States* that I did ten years ago, I remember being really scared when I painted that book. I didn't know how to approach it. I was so blown away the knowledge that, "Oh my gosh, I'm doing a book. This art is going to be in a book." So I really got nervous, and I wasn't sure how to approach it.

With each book since, I'm becoming more confident in my artwork and the way to draw a character and express thoughts on paper. Yet, every time I do a book I look back when the book comes out a year or more later, and see a million things to do differently. For example, Sam (in *Scrambled States*) doesn't look quite the same from page to page. And I wish I had put Sam on the very last spread, which I didn't even think of doing then. I'm now more aware of trying to tie things together more consistently. I am continually learning.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Weston Woods produced an animated movie of *The Scrambled States of America*. What was it like seeing that for the first time?

LAURIE KELLER: I cried when I saw it the first time. It was so amazing to see these characters that I'd imagined in my head coming to life—moving around so that others could see them, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

LAURIE KELLER: Days are different at different stages of the work. In the writing process, I'm always thinking about it, and need to force myself to sit and write for a couple of hours each day. Once I get to the illustrating and drawing the rough versions, I'll work all day long, from the morning into the evening. I really like my work, and I have a hard time pulling myself away until it is done.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck in your creative process?

LAURIE KELLER: There are certain things I can do that really get me lightened up, because when I'm stuck I'm taking myself too seriously and not having enough fun. When my work seems a bit forced and feels flat, I turn myself around and lighten myself back up with certain movies, books, and music that I really enjoy. Also, sometimes seeing something unexpected that is so special, like watching a performance with someone doing their own thing without worrying what anyone else will think, gets me back on track and reminds me to just be myself.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you work with students, is there something you like to tell them?

LAURIE KELLER: I think it's really huge for authors to let kids know that if they love to write and/or draw, that they can feel encouraged to work hard and keep perfecting their craft, because it is entirely possible for them to become professional authors and

illustrators, too. I also like to let kids know that if they write something and it doesn't sound good the first time, that this is just the writing process. All authors go through this. All of us have to write things over and over before it is right. That is the great thing about the creative process. Don't think that something isn't good if it doesn't go right the first time. If we keep going and try something different the next day, our work evolves.

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

For more information about Laurie Keller and her books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

Copyright ©2010 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.