



Judy Sierra

Author Program In-depth Interview

Judy Sierra, interviewed from her home in Northern California on February 28, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've been writing poetry and telling stories since you were a child. As a professional writer, you have published many folktales. What is it about folktales that you believe is so enduring and alluring for readers, especially school children?

JUDY SIERRA: Folktales have a power that transcends time and place. When I was a children's librarian, and later as puppeteer and storyteller in the schools, I found that folktales drew every child into the story or drama experience.

When I read picture books aloud, even the most highly acclaimed, original picture books, not all of the kids were interested. But when I used folktales every child participated in the experience. Later, when I had a chance to write picture books myself, I wanted to create ones that would really grab kids, so I began by retelling folktales.

I hoped that kids who thought they didn't like books would realize that yes, there were stories just for them. For reluctant readers, especially, I'd found that exciting and funny and scary books filled that bill. In general, I think folktales and folklore are more attuned to kids' tastes in these areas than most original picture books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's an example of a book of yours that students have embraced?

JUDY SIERRA: *Monster Goose* (monstrous parodies of Mother Goose rhymes) is very popular. When I visit a school, the children often recite these poems from memory along with me. Teachers appreciate the book, despite its creepiness, because it gets kids excited about reading.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In addition to *Monster Goose*, you've written a number of other scary stories.

JUDY SIERRA: For *The Gruesome Guide to World Monsters*, I collected monster traditions and wrote them up as a tongue-in-cheek travel guide. *The House That Drac Built* is a parody of *The House That Jack Built*. At the end of *The House That Drac Built*, the scariest monsters of all turn out to be children dressed up for Halloween, which makes what happens earlier in the book a lot less scary. This twist at the end came to me in a flash. Ideas like this are unexpected, and they surprise and delight me.

I enjoy creating and retelling scary stories because so many children love a bit of a fright. Some children can never find enough scary books to read. Oddly enough, I was one of the most easily frightened children, but there is a side of me that really likes being the teller of scary stories and exploring kids' fears — but not scaring them *too* much.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you see folktales being applied in today's modern age?

JUDY SIERRA: It's amazing to me that folktales from another culture or era still work. You can tell a preschooler a variation on *The Gingerbread Boy*, like *The Runaway Johnnycake*, and they will just be mesmerized. Folktales that appeal to today's children are ones with enduring messages, such as (from *The Gingerbread Boy*) "if you run away from your family, you could meet an untimely end." Despite my love of tradition, I'm not averse to putting the latest technology in my original poetry (especially if it scans and rhymes). I've include computers or the Internet in *Wild About Books*, *Monster Goose* and *The Secret Science Project That Almost Ate the School*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You wrote the highly acclaimed *Wild About Books*, illustrated by Marc Brown. The two of you are collaborating again on a similar book, *Born to Read*. Please talk about that book.

JUDY SIERRA: *Born to Read* is a tall tale, a rollicking adventure, written in rhyme, about a young boy can do all sorts of amazing things because he's such a good reader. I hope it convinces reluctant readers that reading will help them get better at just about anything they want to do, from winning sporting events to toppling giants. Reading isn't just a school subject or an end in itself, it's necessary to accomplishing just about anything.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Before you wrote children's books, you wrote books like *Multicultural Folktales for Feltboard and Reader's Theater*, now published by Greenwood Press. Reader's Theater is increasingly popular as a teaching tool. What's been your experience?

JUDY SIERRA: I'm an advocate of all kinds of drama in the classroom. For *Multicultural Folktales for Feltboard and Reader's Theater*, I created very brief Reader's Theater' scripts from very simple folktales. While I was working on the book, my husband Bob was teaching fourth, fifth, and six grade English language learners. They spoke 19 different languages at home! We tried out the scripts on these kids.

Because folktales — especially patterned, nursery folktales like "The Three Pigs" — are so easily understood across cultures, the children could pick up the gist of the story and give characters the right intonation. Saying the same lines over and over in rehearsal helped them get the pronunciation just right. They used the scripts from my book to put on shadow puppet shows for the English-speaking students at the school.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you consider yourself a storyteller, a writer, both?

JUDY SIERRA: I don't tell stories very much anymore, though I often recite my poetry to children while showing slides of the art. Still, my writing is very much influenced by my years as a storyteller, and I am always aware of the read-aloud potential of my books. I definitely write to be read aloud.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

JUDY SIERRA: When I speak to groups of teachers and librarians, I encourage them to make lots and lots of different kinds of books available to students. There's this wealth of fiction and nonfiction books published for kids, and they especially need to have access to a wide variety of

books when they're just beginning to read fluently. Like the animals in *Wild About Books*, individual children have different tastes and different needs. Naturally, I'm advocating for good school libraries staffed by credentialed librarians.

When I write, I'm trying, above all, to show kids that books and language are fun. The feedback I get from teachers really validates the reason I write, because teachers tell me their students want to read my books over and over. Librarians say they can't keep them on the shelves.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

JUDY SIERRA: I encourage kids to read as much as they can, and I tell them that librarians can help them find the best books. This is one of the most important messages in *Wild About Books*. I also encourage kids to write for fun and to write outside of school assignments.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Were you raised in a home that supported your aspirations?

JUDY SIERRA: My parents were exceptionally creative, talented people. My dad was a photographer, my mother made silk screen prints, and my grandmother was a potter. They loved literature, especially poetry.

As a child I could go into my room and spend hours drawing and writing, then come out and show my work to my parents, who were always excited about it. It was great.

My mother was a huge fan of Gilbert and Sullivan, and of Broadway musicals. She played her albums over and over, and that gave me kind of a backbeat of musicality for my writing. I tried from an early age to imitate and even parody my parents' favorite songs and poems. Now, I have a library of songs and poems in my mind, and their form influences my writing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

JUDY SIERRA: I get up between 5:30 and 6:00, sit in a comfortable chair and start my most creative work. Early mornings are best for poetry. I'll work on that for maybe two or three hours. Then I go to my desk and look at what's on tap for the day. I usually have business that I need to take care of, from phone conferences with editors to reviewing contracts. Then, after a break for errands or exercise, I continue writing until mid-afternoon, usually revising and planning.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your writing process.

JUDY SIERRA: First, I must decide what to write. That's both more difficult and more important than one might imagine. There are lots of books I *could* write, but I have to choose subjects and themes I know kids (and parents and teachers) will not just like, but go wild about. Any project has to fascinate me and promise to be both challenging and fun, especially since I may be working on it for several years.

I keep a notebook of book ideas, and from time to time I'll peruse them, making notes. Once I start a book, I'll start a file for it, and begin working on it every day. "Work" may vary from frantic, inspired writing, to painstaking revision, to daydreaming.

So, the first step is deciding what to write. The second step is putting something on paper, no matter how awful it is. Then, I start revising and expanding. At a certain point, I'll need to see what it looks like "in print" on the computer.

I know that a story or a poem is almost finished when I begin going backwards, changing the revisions I made yesterday to what I'd written the day before. At that point, I know that I'm just about ready to send the manuscript to my editor.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

JUDY SIERRA: It's upsetting to become stuck, but it happens to everyone who writes, and every writer struggles to find a solution. Putting a manuscript away for a while allows me to see it afresh. Unlike students, I have the luxury of being able to put a manuscript away for as long as a year or two if I have to. I became stuck many times while writing *The Secret Science Project That Almost Ate the School*. It took me five years to complete the manuscript, but for most of those years, it was slumbering in my file cabinet.

Another method I use for getting unstuck is to ask a friend to read the manuscript aloud to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have a doctorate degree in folklore. You've written *Nursery Tales Around the World* and *Can You Guess My Name?* Each collection presents groups of tales around the same theme and plot that are from different countries. What do folktales offer that other stories do not?

JUDY SIERRA: A really fascinating thing about folktales is that it's possible to learn and tell them quite successfully without being a trained actor. You can learn a folktale by picking up the gist of it, then you can tell it to a group of kids, and they help you shape it. It's possible to put in your own touches, or even to go way off on a tangent and then come right back to the story. Folktales have an amazing flexibility and memorability that written stories just don't have.

It's also amazing that some folktale types are so widespread — there are Cinderella tales in Spain, Finland, India and Japan, for example. How did this happen? It's certainly mysterious, especially because folktales developed without writing, leaving behind no evidence of how they were created.

I'm fascinated by how folktales work, and why they work, and how they fit into history and human evolution. I've been researching this for several years, and just completed an adult book on the cultural history of nursery tales.

Books for Children by Judy Sierra

- BORN TO READ (illustrated by Marc Brown), Knopf, 2008
- MIND YOUR MANNERS, B. B. WOLF (illustrated by J. Otto Seibold), Knopf, 2007
- THE SECRET SCIENCE PROJECT THAT ALMOST ATE THE SCHOOL (illustrated by Stephen Gammell), Simon & Schuster, 2006
- GRUESOME GUIDE TO WORLD MONSTERS (illustrated by Henrik Drescher), Candlewick, 2005
- SCHOOLYARD RHYMES (illustrated by Melissa Sweet), Knopf, 2005
- WHAT TIME IS IT, MR. CROCODILE? (illustrated by Doug Cushman), Harcourt, 2004
- CAN YOU GUESS MY NAME? CLASSIC TALES AROUND THE WORLD (illustrated by Stefano Vitale), Clarion, 2002

- SILLY AND SILLIER: READ ALOUD TALES FROM AROUND THE WORLD (illustrated by Valeri Gorbachev), Knopf, 2002
- 'TWAS THE FRIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS (illustrated by Will Hillenbrand), Harcourt 2002
- MONSTER GOOSE, (illustrated by Jack E. Davis), Harcourt, 2001
- PRESCHOOL TO THE RESCUE (illustrated by Will Hillenbrand), Harcourt, 2001
- BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLY, THE (Illustrated by Victoria Chess), Clarion, 2000
- GIFT OF THE CROCODILE, THE (illustrated by Reynold Ruffins), Simon & Schuster, 2000
- THERE'S A ZOO IN ROOM 22 (illustrated by Barney Saltzberg), Harcourt, 2000
- DANCING PIG, THE (illustrated by Jesse Sweetwater), Harcourt, 1999
- TASTY BABY BELLY BUTTONS, (illustrated by Meilo So), Knopf, 1999
- ANTARCTIC ANTICS: A BOOK OF PENGUIN POEMS (illustrated by Jose Aruego and Ariane Dewey), Harcourt, 1998
- COUNTING CROCODILES (illustrated by Will Hillenbrand), Harcourt, 1997
- GOOD NIGHT, DINOSAURS (illustrated by Victoria Chess), Clarion, 1996
- NURSERY TALES AROUND THE WORLD (illustrated by Stefano Vitale), Clarion, 1996
- WILEY AND THE HAIRY MAN (illustrated by Brian Pinkney), Lodestar, 1996
- HOUSE THAT DRAC BUILT, THE (illustrated by Will Hillenbrand), Harcourt, 1995
- ELEPHANT'S WRESTLING MATCH, THE (illustrated by Brian Pinkney), Lodestar, 1992

Books for Teachers & Librarians by Judy Sierra

- FLANNEL BOARD STORYTELLING BOOK, THE, H.W. Wilson, 1987; 2nd ed., 1997
- MULTICULTURAL FOLKTALES FOR FELTBOARD AND READER'S THEATER, Oryx, 1996
- STORYTELLERS' RESEARCH GUIDE: FOLKTALES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS, Folkprint, 1996
- MOTHER GOOSE'S PLAYHOUSE: TODDLER TALES AND NURSERY RHYMES, BKMA, 1994
- CHILDREN'S TRADITIONAL GAMES (with Bob Kaminski), Oryx, 1995
- CINDERELLA (Oryx Multicultural Folktale Series), Oryx, 1992
- FANTASTIC THEATER: PUPPETS AND PLAYS FOR YOUNG PLAYERS AND YOUNG AUDIENCES, H.W. Wilson, 1991
- MULTICULTURAL FOLKTALES (with Bob Kaminski), Oryx, 1991
- TWICE UPON A TIME: STORIES TO TELL, RETELL ACT OUT AND WRITE ABOUT, (with Bob Kaminski), H.W. Wilson, 1989

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