

Rosemary Wells

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Slide Shows

Rosemary Wells, interviewed in her studio in Greenwich, CT on March 25, 2004.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are perhaps best known for your Max and Ruby board books — the younger brother and older sister bunny duo. How did you create such a universally accurate depiction of siblings at this age?

ROSEMARY WELLS: I arrived at them quite easily. My children, at the time I began writing these books, were five years old and nine months old. And the five-year-old was trying to teach the nine-month-old how to eat and dress and talk and any number of important things in the world. The five-year-old knew all about doing those things, and she was bound and determined to get her younger sister on track. The younger sister paid no attention at all, and the conversations between them — when they didn't know I could hear them — were very wonderful and astonishing. It was these conversations that inspired the creation of the Max and Ruby books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: None of the Max and Ruby books include adults.

ROSEMARY WELLS: That's one of the keys to the appeal of these books: these are the real conversations of kids when no grownups — no parents or teachers — are around. This is the secret world of children.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you hope the Max and Ruby books bring to children's books?

ROSEMARY WELLS: As a young mother, I could not find books that had humor and were based in story for the very youngest child. So, I decided to make them up and write them myself.

The Max and Ruby board books were truly an innovation in that they had story and humor and were grounded in a real world. These books represent a kind of writing for children that neither sweetens up the world nor dumbs it down, but presents it just as it is, with a lot of laughs.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Humor is very prevalent in your books.

ROSEMARY WELLS: Yes, but I don't use broad humor or slapstick. It's all a subtle, internal kind of humor that reflects the emotions between the characters.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please provide an example of that humor.

ROSEMARY WELLS: Max and Ruby shopping for Grandma's birthday present is a good example of the kind of humor I use. Ruby wants to buy Grandma a musical jewelry box with skating ballerinas. Max is completely uninterested in this. That is the first joke. He is totally bored by skating ballerinas. Everybody has his or her own idea of what someone else will enjoy. And

Max wanders away and decides he wants to get Grandma a pair of cherry syrup, glow-in-the-dark, vampire teeth. That's another joke: the description of objects in our culture; I love to make fun of parts of our culture that children can understand the humor of.

So, Max is after the vampire teeth, and what does he do? He buys them with his dollar that's supposed to go for lemonade. And here is the joke: he decides to try the teeth out and see if they work. He puts them in his mouth and oozes cherry syrup all down his shirt. This starts off the whole story of the book.

Those are the kinds of jokes I like, and they are jokes that come out of an inevitable relationship between an older sister and a younger brother where the tension is always about which agenda are we going to follow. And they both have perfectly opposite agendas. Max's agenda never fails. Ruby's agenda never succeeds. And the way you get there is what's funny about the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did other books emerge from your children's experiences as well?

ROSEMARY WELLS: I'd like to think that my own childhood and the childhoods of my two girls provide me with enough stories forever. Here's why: childhood is really about a set of private emotions and thoughts and sometimes, even worries.

What's going on in the classroom is usually about 20 different little personalities and egos, all leaping up and down, rolling all over the floor together on top of one another, separated, hurting, loving, being responsive to one another according to who's inside.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What inspired the Yoko books?

ROSEMARY WELLS: In my older daughter's class there were three little girls from Japan who brought sushi to school in boxes every day for lunch. I wondered, "What would it be like if it had been one little girl, not three, who had been teased for bringing sushi to school?" And that was the birth of Yoko, a little Japanese cat who does indeed bring raw fish to school.

The kids act like kids; they say, "yuck" or "slimy" or "who's going to eat that?" Being six and seven years old, they say everything that comes into their minds. And they hurt Yoko's feelings to the core.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you year about how teachers use your books in school?

ROSEMARY WELLS: The impact of putting these feelings and relationships into a book is that it will open up the classroom discussion. I've seen this happen where teachers will ask the class, "Yoko brought her lunch to school, and her mom made that lunch, and she loved her sushi. How do you think she felt when somebody teased her?" And that gets kids to open up their minds to other people's feelings.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *My Kindergarten* covers the seven areas of kindergarten curriculum, yet it's a storybook as well.

ROSEMARY WELLS: *My Kindergarten* covers reading and writing, science, math, music, art community and holidays, but I found that if I didn't use what I know to be the main draw of writing any book — emotional content — no one would want to read it. I had to get to the curricular

subjects via a system of characters. So, the book begins not on the first day at school, but the night before the first day of school when everybody has butterflies. There is emotional content on every page because everything that happens in school is primarily about the people who make it happen, who interact with each other or who learn something. It's not just about learning that four comes before five. It's about how we are prepared to meet the day.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else do you express about school in your books?

ROSEMARY WELLS: It's about going into the wider world and having the confidence to make your own way, to make your own mistakes and to make your own friends. And the way to do that is to be lucky enough to have a very supportive and loving family at home.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The voices of the teachers in your books hit just the right note.

ROSEMARY WELLS: Mrs. Cribbage of *My Kindergarten* and Mrs. Jenkins of Yoko's class are really one and the same voice. They are based on a single teacher I know in Connecticut.

She is not the voice of calculus, she is not the voice of SAT prep — she is the voice of ultimate patience and wisdom. She has had at least 5,000 kids go through her hands for 25 years, and she has not forgotten the name of a single one. And when they write her letters from their later lives, she is always thrilled to find out what they have done. The voice of this teacher is really my ideal teacher, and I was lucky enough in New Jersey in the 1940s to have a lot of these teachers. They were smart and patient and kind, and mostly they were very stable influences.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Have you always been an artist?

ROSEMARY WELLS: When I was a child, I remember drawing more than any other single thing. I loved the outdoors, and I used to play baseball and run around in the woods. But when I came home in the evening, I would draw. I would go to my table and I would draw for three hours every night. I made up stories in my head, and I would draw baseball players and men having sword fights and all kinds of dramatic things that I had seen in the movies or imagined myself or had read in the books I enjoyed so much. I read all kinds of books and would copy the drawings and illustrations in those books.

Looking forward to *The Saturday Evening Post* coming in the mail was one of the most important parts of my week because I would pore over the cover and look at all of the things that Norman Rockwell had depicted.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Mother Goose books have a very different feel compared to your other books.

ROSEMARY WELLS: I would say that in the Mother Goose books I took a quantum leap as an artist by really studying and concentrating on the work of artists of the 1920s and 30s in Europe and America who did posters, advertising and trademarks. I have about 12 books filled with nothing but trademarks from the early 20th century. Each trademark is a little world of its own. And I got into that and started finding images all over the place and brought them together in Mother Goose.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In your opinion, what is behind the enduring appeal of Mother Goose?

ROSEMARY WELLS: As Iona Opie, the editor of the Mother Goose books said, "This is the greatest short poetry in the world." And it is. These poems are like sea glass: warm and smooth with sometimes three and four and five hundred years of history in each rhyme. They are the words and the rhymes of the people, not of individual poets. They are the words of farmers and bricklayers and bakers and millers. It's how they put their children to sleep; it's how they taught them their numbers and their ABCs. And that reality came through to me so loud and clear that I felt blessed and privileged to be the chosen artist.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your books seem to hark back to an earlier era. Is this intentional?

ROSEMARY WELLS: A forever 1948, a world of innocence in childhood, appears again and again in my books. I think we've lost the innocence in childhood in America now. Far too many kids watch MTV too young. However, my world is a world of innocence. There's enough that goes on in that world to keep everybody busy.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you write *Voyage to the Bunny Planet* with a particular message in mind?

ROSEMARY WELLS: If there is any book that I feel defines my spiritual core more than any other single work, it's *Voyage to the Bunny Planet*. People have commented to me on this book all over the country, saying exactly the same thing: "I need a voyage to the bunny planet!" It's three books on the bad days of three little bunnies. And those bad days are rescinded and solved by an imaginary mother bunny that comes down from the sky and takes them to the day that should have been.

The message is that no matter how bad things get, you can always have a silver lining. You can always go to a better place. And no matter how bad things are or how good things are, it's all in our minds. The "Bunny Planet" is a state of mind.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You create the McDuff books with your friend Susan Jeffers.

ROSEMARY WELLS: Collaborating with other artists is one of the great joys of my work. I have a lifelong friendship with Susan Jeffers and a wonderful one. And the McDuff books are the apogee of that friendship and professional relationship. I really wrote them with Susan's drawings in mind. I can conceive of Susan's art and I can see what she can do. She can do and draw things that I could never do.

McDuff is a little West Highland Terrier. Susan has a Westie and I have a Westie; they were the models for the books. What we wanted to do is center on the dog, because we love our dogs and we feel that dogs can be like children. They have all the emotions and all the feelings that children do. McDuff is a child disguised as a West Highland Terrier.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've written some middle grade novels as well.

ROSEMARY WELLS: *Mary on Horseback* and *Wingwalker* are both books for older readers. *Mary on Horseback* is true history and it represents an enormous amount of research. *Wingwalker* is also true history, but it represents no research at all — only memory.

I saw Mary Breckinridge's autobiography in a jumble of books in a box that had been sent to me. And, for some reason, I could not put it down. It was called *Wide Neighborhoods*. And I didn't know why I should read it, but I started on the first page and did not stop until I finished. It occurred to me that this was a woman who had saved the lives of 25,000 people, and yet she was unknown. She was an American of the 20th century, but you don't find her in any of the compilations or anthologies. So I thought, "My goodness, I found a goldmine." Other than Eleanor Roosevelt and Amelia Earhart and a few other heroines, I think the children get an unbalanced view that they don't get a lot of the real people who were working in the world. And Mary is one.

So I went to Kentucky, to her house, and I visited one of her rural hospitals. She started the Frontier Nursing Service. I talked to all the people who today still run her hospital about her memory and about her work. I delved into every part of her life as best I could. I even got tapes that had been recorded during the WPA era in Roosevelt's term, which had been made of people from Kentucky who were talking the Kentucky talk and language and inflection from that time. That was invaluable. And, I drew from a film that was made by Mary Breckinridge's niece. She was 97 when I met her. It was a promotion film about three children's lives to raise money for the Frontier Nursing Service.

I was very, very fortunate and won the Christopher Award for *Mary on Horseback*, and that was probably the most wonderful moment of my professional career because it's a medal awarded to people who, as the brothers Christopher said, "light a candle in the darkness."

Wingwalker was another book entirely. As someone who grew up in the '40s, I have different kinds of memories than people who grow up now. Time did not move so fast, nor did changes occur so much. And we lived in a world that adults dominated, not a child-central culture. And so we learned all about State Fairs and the way it was to be in an America that was much bigger because we didn't have so much transportation and so much speed in our lives. So, Wingwalker comes from a collection of memories.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe a typical workday.

ROSEMARY WELLS: My workday starts at 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning. The first thing I do is walk for an hour, because I find that exercise is very stimulating to a creative condition. I have breakfast then I come upstairs to my studio to either write or draw. I try to do that for the hours of the morning, because I work very well in the morning. I have lunch around 1:00, then come back and finish what I'm working on, always mindful of the fact that an hour before lunch is worth three after lunch. And then I quit at about 3:00 and I try to do some walking again, because that allows me to think back on what I've worked on during the day. In the evening, I try to see friends or family or go to a movie to get away from my work. I also do a lot of reading at night in a wide variety of subjects.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your process for creating a picture book?

ROSEMARY WELLS: Well, every book is different. Some take a long time and some don't take very long at all. But the first thing I do when I pull a book together is to come up with a layout sheet of exactly what the story is going to be and what the direction of the story is. What I'm really looking for here is to put down an outline of the beginning, the middle and the end.

For example, when you have a linear story like a book of Yoko bringing sushi to school, you start off with "Yoko Brings Sushi to School." And then you leave three or four pages for that to happen. And then you go to maybe page eight where she opens the sushi and everybody says "yuck," and they all tease her. So what I write on that page on that layout is the word "Yuck." That's enough for me to know what's happening on that page. Then I go to resolving the problem, and I race to the end and say "Okay, this is how we are going to resolve the problem." And I have to figure out who is going to accept the sushi and like the sushi and make Yoko feel good about it. I might reserve two or three pages at the end of a book for that to happen.

Then, I put that layout sheet aside and I go to the computer and I write it with the words I want to use — as a story. I print it out once I'm happy with it, and I make myself a little "dummy," as it's called. I use16 pages of paper folded in half and turning like a book, making 32 pages, and allowing for a title page and a copyright page. I put the story in with tape and scissors, cutting it up and making it so that the pages fall right in the story.

Then I take my pen and my drawing paper and make a very rough sketch of what the picture on each page should be. After I do that, I cut the words of the story in half, because the words are telling more than they need to now that we have pictures.

Then I wait for about a month, because in a month I will write and draw that story a whole level or degree better. And that's my first revision. At that point, if I'm happy with it, I send it in to the editor, who works for my publisher, and see what she has to say and whether she likes the book. Usually she asks me to change things, and so I have to do a second and a third and a fourth and sometimes a fifth and sixth draft of just a simple picture book. But I don't mind doing that because it's part of the whole writing process.

And once those drafts are completed, then I know that I have listened to a third ear and allowed myself to go back to square one and to listen to somebody who wants the book to be as good as I want it to be, but who has a different point of view.

For my artwork, I use everything you can find in an art store. I use very heavy paper called 265-pound cold press paper. I start in lead pencil and have a special sharpener for that. I use little marker pens, which are very fine, for my final line. I use water colors, colored inks, acrylic inks, pastels, pencils, pencil pastels, oil pastels, neo-colored crayons, gouache, powder paint, markers and anything else you could possibly imagine.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

ROSEMARY WELLS: When a picture is not coming out the way I want it to, I put it aside and I do it again later. Very often, I'll save the best parts of that picture by putting it on a light table and tracing what I want to keep, and then drawing it better a second or third time.

When I'm writing and I get really stuck, I stop writing and I go to another project or do something else, because what un-sticks me is the passage of time when I'm not trying to force something. It will happen in my subconscious by itself, if I allow it to.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to be involved in the national campaign for literacy, *Read to your Bunny*?

ROSEMARY WELLS: Well, kind of by accident I wound up sponsoring and then leading *Read to Your Bunny* — a campaign for reading aloud to children. Reading aloud was a really central part of my childhood and my children's childhood. Reading aloud is close to nutrition, seatbelts and

inoculation in importance to a young child, even as young as four and six-month-old babies. It's a way of being one-on-one with a parent, and it's irreplaceable.

In the school systems that have a Read to your Bunny program (where the parents agree to read to their children 20 minutes a day, come rain or shine for a whole year, usually in kindergarten), the reports I get are astonishing. What happens in those families is amazing, because the kids slow down, they learn to listen to grownups, they don't want to buy so much at the shopping mall and they learn to use their imaginations. And it's the beginning of critical thinking — simply from reading books.

Children's Books by Rosemary Wells

- FATHER ABRAHAM, Hyperion Books for Children, 2006
- JESUS IN DISGUISE, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2005
- BUNNY MAIL, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2004
- MCDUFF'S FAVORITE THINGS: TOUCH AND FEEL (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 2004
- MCDUFF'S HIDE-AND-SEEK: LIFT THE FLAP / PULL THE TAB BOOK (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 2004
- MY KINDERGARTEN, Hyperion Books for Children, 2004
- ONLY YOU / SOLO TU, Viking /Penguin Putnam, 2004
- RUBY'S RAINY DAY, Grosset & Dunlap, 2004
- FELIX AND THE WORRIER, Candlewick Press, 2003
- MAX DRIVES AWAY, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2003
- MAX'S VALENTINE, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2003
- RUBY'S BEAUTY SHOP, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2003
- RUBY'S TEA FOR TWO, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2003
- SMALL WORLD OF BINKY BRAVERMAN, THE (illustrated by Richard Egielski), Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2003
- BUBBLE-GUM READER (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #09), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- GERM BUSTERS, THE (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #06), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- HOUSE IN THE MAIL, THE (written by Rosemary Wells and Tom Wells; illustrated by Dan Andreasen), Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2002
- MAKE NEW FRIENDS (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #11), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- MAX AND RUBY'S BUSY WEEK (Sticker stories), Grossett 2002
- MCDUFF SAVES THE DAY (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #10), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- TIMOTHY'S TALES FROM HILLTOP SCHOOL, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2002
- WINGWALKER, Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- FELIX FEELS BETTER, Candlewick Press, 2001
- SECRET BIRTHDAY, THE (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #07), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- WHEN I GROW UP (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #12), Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- BUNNY PARTY, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2001
- MCDUFF GOES TO SCHOOL (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001

- BE MY VALENTINE (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #05), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- DISCOVER AND EXPLORE: BASED ON TIMOTHY GOES TO SCHOOL AND OTHER STORIES, (illustrated by Michael Koelsch) Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2001
- DORIS'S DINOSAUR (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #04), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- HALLOWEEN PARADE, THE (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #03), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- MAMA, DON'T GO! (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #01), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- READ ME A STORY (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #08), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- SCHOOL PLAY, THE (YOKO & FRIENDS: SCHOOL DAYS #02), Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- YOKO'S PAPER CRANES, Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- EMILY'S FIRST 100 DAYS OF SCHOOL, Hyperion Books for Children, 2000
- GOODNIGHT MAX, Viking / Penguin Putnam, 2000
- MAX CLEANS UP, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2000
- MCDUFF STORIES, THE, Hyperion (illustrated by Susan Jeffers) Books for Children, 2000
- TIMOTHY GOES TO SCHOOL, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2000
- BINGO, Scholastic Press, 1999
- HERE COMES MOTHER GOOSE (edited by Iona Opie), Candlewick Press, 1999
- RACHEL FIELD'S "HITTY, HER FIRST HUNDRED YEARS", a new edition by Rosemary Wells (illustrated by Susan Jeffers) Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1999
- STREETS OF GOLD (pictures by Dan Andreasen), Dial Books for Young Readers, 1999
- TALLCHIEF: AMERICA'S PRIMA BALLERINA (by Maria Tallchief, with Rosemary Wells; Illustrated by Gary Kelley), Viking / Penguin Putnam, 1999
- BEAR WENT OVER THE MOUNTAIN, THE, Scholastic Press, 1998
- FISHERMAN AND HIS WIFE, THE: A BRAND NEW VERSION (pictures by Eleanor Hubbard), Dial Books for Young Readers, 1998
- ITSY-BITSY SPIDER, THE, Scholastic Press, 1998
- MARY ON HORSEBACK: THREE MOUNTAIN STORIES (illustrated by Peter McCarthy), Dial Books for Young Readers, 1998
- MAX'S BATH, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S BEDTIME, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S BIRTHDAY, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S BREAKFAST, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S FIRST WORD, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S NEW SUIT, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S RIDE, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MAX'S TOYS, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- MCDUFF'S NEW FRIEND (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 1998
- OLD MACDONALD, Scholastic Press, 1998
- YOKO, Hyperion Books for Children, 1998
- BUNNY CAKES, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1997
- BUNNY MONEY, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1997
- MCDUFF AND THE BABY (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- MCDUFF COMES HOME (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- MCDUFF MOVES IN (illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- READ TO YOUR BUNNY, Scholastic Press, 1997

- LANGUAGE OF DOVES, THE (pictures by Greg Shed), Dial Books for Young Readers, 1996
- MAX'S CHRISTMAS, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1996
- MAX'S DRAGON SHIRT, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1996
- MY VERY FIRST MOTHER GOOSE (edited by Iona Opie), Candlewick Press, 1996
- EDWARD IN DEEP WATER, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- EDWARD UNREADY FOR SCHOOL, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- EDWARD'S OVERWHELMING OVERNIGHT, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- LASSIE COME-HOME (original by Eric Knight, illustrated by Susan Jeffers), Henry Holt, 1995
- MAX AND RUBY'S MIDAS: ANOTHER GREEK MYTH, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1995
- MAX AND RUBY'S FIRST GREEK MYTH: PANDORA'S BOX, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1993
- WAITING FOR THE EVENING STAR (paintings by Susan Jeffers), Dial Books for Young Readers, 1993
- VOYAGE TO THE BUNNY PLANET, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1992
- FRITZ AND THE MESS FAIRY, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1991
- MAX'S CHOCOLATE CHICKEN, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1989
- SHY CHARLES, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1988
- THROUGH THE HIDDEN DOOR, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1987
- HAZEL'S AMZING MOTHER, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1985
- MAN IN THE WOODS, THE, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1984
- PEABODY, Dial Books for Young Readers, 1983
- LION FOR LEWIS, A, Dial, 1982
- GOOD NIGHT, FRED, Dial, 1981
- WHEN NO ONE WAS LOOKING, Dial, 1980
- STANLEY AND RHODA, Dial, 1978
- DON'T SPILL IT AGAIN, JAMES, Dial, 1977
- LEAVE WELL ENOUGH ALONE, Dial, 1977
- ABDUL, Dial, 1975
- MORRIS'S DISAPPEARING BAG: A CHRISTMAS STORY, Dial, 1975
- NONE OF THE ABOVE, Dial, 1974
- BENJAMIN AND TULIP, Dial, 1973
- NOISY NORA, Dial, 1973
- FOG COMES ON LITTLE PIG FEET, THE, Dial, 1972
- UNFORTUNATELY HARRIET, Dial, 1972
- IMPOSSIBLE, POSSUM, Little, Brown, 1971

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