



## Vera B. Williams

### Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Vera B. Williams, interviewed in her studio in New York, New York on October 10, 2001.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** As a young child, you had a piece of art in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. What was that experience like?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** Well, I loved having a picture in the museum, of course. I was extremely proud of it. And one day while looking at the picture with my mother and sister, Eleanor Roosevelt came to see the exhibit. She came because that was part of her real passion — to further WPA activities. She walked around the room until she came to my picture, and I talked to her about my painting. It was called “Yentice,” and I told her how to pronounce it.

My painting was in an exhibition of WPA art from clubs all over the country that included pieces by rural and city adults and kids of all ages. The clubs were started by the federal government during the Depression.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Did you do a lot of drawing or painting as a child?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I liked lettering from an early age, from when I learned to write my name. And my mother provided us with lots of ends of paper that she got from the local printer in paper bags, so, my sister and I always had paper to draw on. We didn’t have great supplies, but we always had something to draw with. I was just very taken with both telling stories and picturing, and they didn’t seem very different to me as a child.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your writing is poetic and lyrical. How did you develop this way with words?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I loved language as a child. I was a big reader. My father was a big lover of vocabulary. He used great, huge words to talk to my sister and me. My mother was no slouch either at this, and she started us very well in life with a lot of rhymes, including poems of Robert Louis Stevenson. They got in my head and moved the language along.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What were you trying to convey in your book, *Lucky Song*?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I wrote *Lucky Song* right after my first grandchild, Hudson, was born. I really wanted to say something about what a child’s life could be if they got what they really needed, not just what they wanted.

In this story, little Evie wants to go outdoors, to go out into the world, to be awake and alive. She wants to be beautiful; she wants something new to wear, and she gets this new little hat. The hat represents her “self” — it’s a little costume of the self. She wants something to play with, and she gets something that has scope: a kite. Then, she wants to move and her legs carry

her up the hill. She wants her mother to admire how high the kite flies, and her mother does. Then, she's tired, and she wants to go home and eat. She gets soup from her grandmother. She wants more love, and she gets it from her sister. (Initially, she got love from her grandfather, who made her the kite.) Then, she gets a song from her father and goes to sleep. And then, she gets to do it all over again.

I ended *Lucky Song* in a way that is probably very annoying to a reading adult with, "Go back to the beginning." You hardly have to say that because the child is going to say, "More. Again." But, I put it in because I thought, "You never can hear the story of a child getting what they really need too much."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** The trilogy about Rosa is very substantive and emotional. Had you planned to create them as a trilogy from the start? (*A Chair for My Mother*, *Something Special for Me* and *Music, Music for Everyone*)?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** The trilogy is very familiar to many people by its first book, *A Chair for My Mother*. I wrote *A Chair for My Mother* by itself, but it was barely done when it became clear to me that there was more to the story. People sometimes ask me why it isn't all in one book. My answer is that I didn't know the whole story when I started it. It emerged. The three books are very much one story — the story of this child who does not have a lot of character of her own, actually. Her character consists of getting her mother the chair. And that action is very recognized by children, because I think there is a deep, deep desire in children to give their mother — possibly both their parents but particularly their mother — something marvelous. Children are very moved by the giving of this ineffable, never-to-really-be-in-this-world, rose-colored chair to their hard-worked mother.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *A Chair for My Mother* is unusual because it has a fire in it — Rosa's apartment burns down. What's the significance of the fire?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** There are not very many books with fires that have an emotional quality in the story. There are many books with fire engines. Fire says something exciting. But this fire is a very heavy thing that happens to this family, so I made one page that addresses the sadness of it.

The page after the fire is grayish and blackish, and it shows the burnt-out house. It has a border in which all the flowers are bent over as though to be weeping or scorched. But on the next pages, they change. It's so wonderful that you can do that in picture books. You turn the page and the feeling changes. On the next page, life looks up again and there's this big effort to rebuild things.

*A Chair for My Mother* addresses the fire, the replacement of the chair, the help that the neighbors give, the help that the grandmother gives, the acquiring of money and her chance to sit happily with her mother in this chair and fall asleep.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** That's a lot to cover in one children's book. Another theme is financial responsibility, and it isn't often addressed in books for children.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** Yes, but I must say, there is a little and curious mistake in *A Chair for My Mother* that I certainly should have known because I have worked for tips in my life. In the beginning it says, "Every night when they count up the money all the tips go into the jar." But,

anybody who works for tips must know that you couldn't possibly put all your tips into the jar because that's how you make a living. I should have said something like "all the dimes" or "all the quarters."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How does the *Rosa* trilogy progress in the second book?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** In the next book, *Something Special for Me*, Rosa's little self-hood perks up, and she is going to get something for herself, for the grandmother and the mother discuss at the beginning that it's Rosa's turn to get something for herself. Well, then comes this saga of Rosa not knowing exactly what to get. And this dilemma is really interesting. The child wants various conflicting things, which every child recognizes because they're so torn when they have limited resources and have to make a choice.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You have a lot of struggles and sometimes sadness in your books. Why?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** *A Chair for My Mother* is the story of people who have to struggle. Now this, of course, is not unusual. When I was growing up, everybody around us had to struggle to make a living, to keep an apartment, to pay for a doctor, to take care of tuberculosis. These were things that were very common in my childhood, particularly unemployment and the struggle to make a living. And I really wanted to portray that in this trilogy. In fact, I want a little hint of it in a lot of the stories I tell. It's the life I knew. I'm glad to say that I don't suffer from it myself anymore, but I did as a child.

I think suffering is widespread — that children are very sensitive to the struggle to earn a living and that it is not an inappropriate theme for them. They lie in bed and listen to their parents talking about worries, and this does sadden the children and it does make them worry. So I think that's really appropriate and can be in there.

It's really interesting to think of the questions about sadness, about hope, about fun, about joy, about seriousness in children's books. There's a constant ongoing debate about those things among publishers and teachers and parents just how much of any of these should be in books. And I think it's partly a matter of your own experience and your character, but it's also really a matter of how you feel about life, I guess. And the main thing I feel is that the books should be true. Not factually true, but have a truth. And certainly life without a shadow does not really have truth to it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You also wonderfully depict hope, happiness and love in your books. Do you consider that as much a part of life as sadness?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** My books have a streak of utopian optimism in them. And I was brought up with that. I was brought up in a sad, hard time by people who had lots of struggles. But, my parents believed in life as a really great project, and they passed along that belief to me.

I learned a little rhyme when I was a child that made a big impression on me. It's from a book my father gave me called, *Science and History for Boys and Girls*. There is a black child and a white child holding hands across a globe of the world on the front page, and under it, it says, "We are living, we are dwelling in a great and awful time...to be living is sublime." That still gives me the shivers.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *More More More, Said The Baby* is a love story about toddlers and their caregivers. What makes this story different from your other stories?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** *More More More, Said the Baby* does not bother itself at all with sorrow. It is a love story. I started it when my first grandchild was about two years old.

I was moved by what most people are moved by when somebody is born: the excitement of a new life and the energy and the feeling. The book came to have three little characters and their grown-ups.

Originally the whole book was going to be a celebration of this marvelous, best grandchild who was ever born, who turned out to be very pink and blonde. When I was designing the book, I began to feel that that would really limit me graphically as well as in its appeal to people. I decided its truth would be much more real if it had different children in it.

So, in the first version there's Little Guy, who is my grandson Hudson, and then there's a little guy again but he's called Little Pumpkin because parents just have all these endearing names. So I used three of the endearing names, which were "Little Guy," "Little Pumpkin" and "Little Bird." And they were all this one little guy. But when I was making the dummy I decided to turn it into three love stories, and that became its subtitle. So "Little Guy" is one character and "Little Pumpkin" is an African-American child with an apparently white grandma. And I say apparently because you really can't look at everybody and know just what they are. But this is kind of what they are, and they are just having this little love fest just like "Little Guy" and his Daddy. And at the end is "Little Bird," who is Asian, but she is not of a specific country, which didn't seem necessary to the book.

Anybody can identify with all three of them because they run around and they all have their little clothes sort of falling off their shoulders and have their parents or grandparents adoring them and all. But then you can especially think, "Oh that one looks maybe a little bit like me or my family."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you discuss the importance of nature in your work?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I was raised in cities, and I am not known as an illustrator nor as a teller of nature stories. But, I have a long, intransigent relationship to nature.

My parents traveled across the country in a time when it was not so common and we camped. My father was very fond of hiking and swimming, and he often took my sister and me on hikes. And I gloried in New York's parks in both the Bronx and in Central Park more than anything. I loved Central Park and thought of it as "my" land. We would walk all the way across the Bronx and across the bridge that crosses the Harlem River and to the Palisades.

As an adult, I joined with a group of people to create a community and later a school in Stony Point, New York. I gardened, hiked and learned to collect mushrooms and to canoe. Then, I took many trips on Canadian rivers, which inspired *Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe*.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** There is a great deal of nature and traveling in *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea*.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea* is a really exciting make-believe book in which a kid named Stringbean and his brother travel from the center of the United States to the Pacific Ocean. I was going to call it *From Sea to Shining Sea* originally, but I realized that forty-eight pages would not serve to get them from one coast to the other.

The story kept accumulating itself through little cards that I wrote. And it almost seemed at first like it might be just a travelogue. And, in fact, the book has been used a lot in schools teaching geography and English.

It's an unusual book because it's all fake postcards, each with their own look. I illustrated the book with my daughter, Jennifer.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Where does the name "Stringbean" come from?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I was called "Stringbean" and "Toothpick" when I was a child. Stringbean starts out very skinny, and as he travels, sees things and writes postcards, he gets less skinny. He gains solidity through writing, through his words, through looking, through experiencing. The final postcard turned the book into not only a travelogue, but also the story of how a person grows and realizes their own personality through travel.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your novel, *Scooter*, seems to be about the sense of community that we all need to find.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** *Scooter* begins with Elana Rose Rosen moving to a new neighborhood, knowing nobody, with her mother going off to work. She has to gradually create a community around herself. And that was one of those wonderful things, and probably still is, about the kinds of neighborhoods I lived in as a child. You went downstairs, met people and played with them. And you made some very close liaisons and friendships, even though you had a lot of fights, too.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Scooter* is so energetically and fully illustrated.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** *Scooter* has a very interesting graphic problem. It was already a long story, and I didn't want to illustrate it with just a picture here and there. I wanted the people to spring to life in pictures all along the story, so I put pictures in all the margins. I don't think there's a page in the book that doesn't have a picture.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** In your latest book, *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart*, you cover a controversial subject, i.e. the incarceration of a parent. Was it a difficult decision to explore this subject?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I wrote it from experiences of my own life, which I know very little facts about, actually. I have very strong emotional impressions of this subject, and they came through in poems. What was important to me was the way life felt as a child in that situation with an older sister, and that's the story of these two little girls.

They live with their mother who has to work to support them. And they are coping with the absence of their father and how to understand this crime that has happened. The girls just began to talk about it in the poems, and they knew how to talk about it. One of them had one attitude, one of them had another, and they managed to talk in a way I think that a child can understand, because a child would have very, very mixed feelings.

Children ask themselves: "Is it wrong? Was it right? Is he still my father? Should I hate him? Should I love him? Should I think of him as a criminal? What should I think?" But under all

that, there's no question that they're going on longing for him to come back. And he does come back at the end.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** It sounds as though *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* was important for you to write.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** That book was a real development in my work. I don't know where it will go next or whether it needs to go anywhere next, but I was able to tell a story that was based on some very deep feelings that I had. I think that's true of my other books, too, but this one seemed to particularly give those feelings some room to be expressed.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe the unique design of *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart*.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** In *Amber and Essie* I did something very different in the book than I've done before, both graphically and in the writing. I wrote the whole book in unrhymed verse. I had written it previously in prose but it didn't quite work. And then graphically, other than four introductory portraits in color at the beginning of the book, all of the colored pencil paintings are at the end where you get to go through the poems again — this time in the form of the pictures. I did not want colored pictures of the kind that I often do, which are very rich and varied and full of decoration and borders and life. I didn't want those to draw away from the poems.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You use lots of borders in your books. What is the significance of borders?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I loved borders when I was a child, and I used borders in different forms in the *Chair* trilogy, in *More More More*, *Said the Baby*, in *Cherries and Cherry Pits* and somewhat in *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea*. They add a whole lot to the story and give a kind of folk art quality to the pictures. The pictures are crammed full of details and life and all, and somehow the borders keep them from falling off the page.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many of your books are multicultural in character. Is this a conscious or unconscious act?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** It seems more exciting to make special, different people, just like making special, different everything. That's what illustrating is about.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Describe a difference between illustrating a book and just creating art for its own sake.

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I'm not as free to use what I call "accidents" or experimenting when I'm illustrating a book as I would if I were doing art that was not meant to be a continuous piece in a final book. The books need to have some kind of unity. I feel I push that quite a lot — I put various things in books and don't worry so much about them having a very uniform content of art — but there still is some overall demand in that way.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Could you describe what your workday is like?

**VERA B. WILLIAMS:** I work quite consistently. I go to my studio, I have paints and crayons and chalks and pencils and ink and paper and everything of that sort that you need. And I have a little old watchmaker's desk with as many drawers that I can keep open while I work. But, I did a number of my books on my kitchen table.

I'm not a very tidy worker — nor am I a very planned worker — but when I am in the middle of a book I work long hours on it, and I do a great deal of drawing. I have drawers and drawers full of pencil drawings.

### Books by Vera B. Williams

- AMBER WAS BRAVE, ESSIE WAS SMART: THE STORY OF AMBER AND ESSIE TOLD HERE IN POEMS AND PICTURES, Greenwillow Books / HarperCollins Publishers, 2001
- LUCKY SONG, Greenwillow Books, 1997
- LONG WALKS AND INTIMATE TALKS (stories and poems by Grace Paley), The Feminist Press, 1993
- SCOOTER, Greenwillow Books, 1993
- "MORE MORE MORE," SAID THE BABY: 3 LOVE STORIES, Greenwillow Books, 1990
- STRINGBEAN'S TRIP TO THE SHINING SEA (illustrated with Jennifer Williams), Greenwillow Books, 1988
- CHERRIES AND CHERRY PITS, Greenwillow Books, 1986
- MUSIC, MUSIC FOR EVERYONE, Greenwillow Books, 1984
- SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR ME, Greenwillow Books, 1983
- CHAIR FOR MY MOTHER, A, Greenwillow Books, 1982
- THREE DAYS ON A RIVER IN A RED CANOE, Greenwillow Books, 1981
- HOORAY FOR ME! (written by Remy Charlip & Lilian Moore), Four Winds Press, 1980
- GREAT WATERMELON BIRTHDAY, THE, Greenwillow Books, 1980
- IT'S A GINGERBREAD HOUSE: BAKE IT! BUILD IT! EAT IT! Greenwillow Books, 1978

*Note: Bibliography created in 2001.*

***Please note that this interview took place on October 10, 2001 in lower Manhattan, New York. The events of September 11, 2001 were fresh in the hearts and minds of both Vera B. Williams and Nick Glass.***

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