

FROM RHYMING PICTURE BOOKS TO GALAPAGOS BLUE-FOOTED BOOBIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH HEILIGMAN

by *Ellen L. Ramsey and Jane Resides*

Deborah Heiligman, author of numerous books for children, including *From Caterpillar to Butterfly*; *Fun Dog, Sun Dog*; and *High Hopes, A Photobiography of John F. Kennedy*, was one of the speakers at the April 2007 SCBWI Poconos Retreat.

Q. What was your first book?

My first book was a rhyming picture book, *Into the Night*, which is now unfortunately out of print. It's a lot of people's favorite book of mine. It's the story of a little boy and his mom as they recount their very special day. The book starts, "Into the night we go, into the darkness, steady and slow. Over the trees and through the stars, and up to where the night winds are."

Q. How did you make the transition from a rhyming picture book to doing your very, very many nonfiction books?

I started out working for Scholastic News magazine and that work was almost all nonfiction, although I did write a couple of plays for them. I was very accustomed to writing nonfiction for kids and to writing about all kinds of topics – from Pacman to nuclear war, for first graders to sixth graders.

I really loved reading biographies when I was a kid. One of my early ideas was to do a biography about Barbara McClintock, the geneticist. I heard about her when I was working at Scholastic—and she had recently won the Nobel Prize. My first book had just been published, and I was working on *From Caterpillar to Butterfly*, my second book, which is still in print. It's my best seller and it's being made into one of those big books and will be coming out next year in this format.

Q. How did you come to be interested in writing a biography of Paul Erdős?

Paul Erdős was a mathematician, not well known outside the math community, but he's like a god in the math community. My older son is very much of a math guy. He told me about Paul Erdős and I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." Then my younger son, who isn't as much of a math guy, came home from middle school and told me about this guy Paul Erdős who didn't have a home and traveled everywhere and did

math. Now I was paying attention. It is a crazy idea for a children's biography because Erdős did such high-level math, but he was also very much a child-like character. I just went for it.

As I said in my workshop, I strongly believe you can write about anything for children. You just have to know how to do it.

Q. What kind of math concepts are you going to include in the book?

The main thing I am hoping to include is Erdős's interest in prime numbers. (Note for the non-mathematically inclined: prime numbers are numbers [e.g., 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, etc.] whose only whole number factors are 1 and the number itself.)

What I am hoping to do is not to describe the specific math, because that is just too complex, but just to give a feeling for it in both the words and the art.

Q. Do you have other books in progress?

I do, I do. I'm working on a book about Charles Darwin and his wife Emma. It's a themed biography and it's basically the story of their marriage. My agent sold the proposal to Henry Holt, and my deadline is this fall so the book can come out in 2008. It's a YA biography.

Q. What kind of presentations do you give for school visits?

I do an interactive assembly where I talk about writing fiction and nonfiction and about doing research. To make the presentation interactive, I ask lots of questions, and I use my books as examples.

I talk about doing many drafts, and I use *Fun Dog, Sun Dog* as an example because I did many, many drafts for this book. I also have some funny stories about rejection letters from editors. When I talk about research, I discuss very specific things about different books that I think kids will be interested in. I allow time for lots of questions – which is always one of my favorite parts – because kids ask such great questions.

Heligman Interview cont'd

Q. Have you done a lot of travel to research your individual nonfiction books?

Back before the Internet, I did a bit more travel. For example, I went to the Barbara McClintock archives in Cold Spring Harbor. Now that the Internet is such a great resource, traveling is not as critical as a research tool. But it's great to travel to get a sense of the places where a person lived and worked.

As background for my Darwin book, I had already been to Darwin's house in England and to the Galapagos Islands. Visiting the Galapagos was utterly, utterly magnificent. Iguanas, blue-footed boobies, and sea lions come up to you because they are not at all scared of people. So you can get kissed by a sea lion or walk right next to an iguana or see any number of birds – it's amazing.

Even though I've already visited Darwin's house in England, I made the trip before I had decided to do the Darwin biography. So I'd like to go back and walk where he used to walk and look at the children's bedrooms. I'm really hoping to go back, but I have such a tight deadline, I don't know if I can or not.

Children's books tend not to pay you enough to travel a lot. When I did the book on Mary Leakey, people asked, "Did you go to Africa?" And the answer is no.

Q. Is there one question about writing you've wished that someone would ask you and no one ever has?

Not really. Except maybe the question, "Could I pay you a billion dollars to write a book?" And the answer is "yes, of course!"

*Books to Look Forward To--*In addition to Deborah's book on Charles and Emma Darwin (due out in 2008), her biography of Paul Erdos, *The Boy Who Loved Math*, is projected for publication in 2009. Deborah is also working on a sequel to *Fun Dog, Sun Dog*, called *Cool Dog, School Dog*, which will be published by Marshall Cavendish.



ARTWORK BY LAURA BROWN

LEADING THE CHARGE

By Kelly R. Fineman



*I spend my weekends on dew-wet grass,
watching combatants advance and retreat.
No ladies allowed: only warriors.*

*I watch them race toward the net,
ponytails waving.
They kick at the ball with armored legs
like crabs, or Rockettes.*

*The playing field is not level,
but girls are used to playing uphill.*

They cannot be kept from their goal.