



Laura Vaccaro Seeger

Author Program In-depth Interview

Laura Vaccaro Seeger, interviewed from her home in Nassau County, New York, on June 24, 2008.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first few picture books for young children have received numerous distinctions, including the Caldecott Honor for *First the Egg* and the Boston Globe Horn Book Award for *Dog and Bear*. What prompted you to start making illustrated books?

LAURA V. SEEGER: I've been making picture books since I was five. I have always had tons of ideas for books, and it is fun to look back on my journals and see "Picture Book Idea" on top of an entry. I used to even draw a big, black box around it so that if I ever needed to find the idea, I could.

Curiously, I never thought about going into the field when I graduated from high school. I continued to make books and stuff, but the only people that I ever showed them to were my family. I went to a college that had a good teaching program, because I thought that I would like to be a third grade teacher. I stayed there for only a semester, though, because it didn't have a good art program. I then went to The School of Art and Design in Purchase, New York.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Was there anything in particular that you loved to draw as a child?

LAURA V. SEEGER: I created one series called *Danny* about a boy who didn't have any friends. A really popular boy named Peter was nice to him and became his best friend. The illustrations show Danny and Peter together, and Peter has a horde of people on his side, and Danny has no one. But he's got Peter. These drawings were always about their friendship.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are very popular with elementary and preschool aged children, and are created with innovative designs and cut-out techniques that convey learning concepts to young children. Where does your interest in early childhood education come from?

LAURA V. SEEGER: I've always loved kids and figuring out ways to explain things to them in fun ways. My sister is seven years younger than I am. When I was 13, she would bring all of her little neighborhood friends over, and we'd play school. We would sing and I would make up games that actually taught them things. The kids would go home, and their parents would call my parents and exclaim, "My child can now do multiplication!"

TEACHINGBOOKS: You worked for many years in the TV business before you started making books. What did you do in television?

LAURA V. SEEGER: When I first got out of art school, I got a summer job at ABC. Then I started working with NBC and stayed there for almost ten years. I helped create the animated openings that you see before the show starts, including the peacock that spreads his wings and turns around. I also worked on the openings for *The Nightly News*, *The Today Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *David Letterman*.

My job included drawing on storyboard paper and then coming up with the computer animations. Back then, in the late '80s to mid '90s, it was quite labor-intensive work. I worked 80 hours a week and loved it, but then I left when my son, Drew, was born.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you publish your first book, *If I had a Rooster*?

LAURA V. SEEGER: After Drew was born, I called up my husband's Uncle Peter, the songwriter Pete Seeger. I said, "Do you want to make a children's video?" He said, "Okay." So we made a children's video, and I did the animation and produced it. Then I got an animation job at ABC for *20/20* and was able to work from home. But unfortunately, it was back to that intense schedule.

It was so hard for me to juggle being a mom and having an 80-hour workweek that I said, "I'm done with TV and want to do what I've always wanted to do." I didn't know anything about publishing and wasn't aware that you're not supposed to call up an editor and ask for a meeting. Yet that's what I did, and I was very lucky because I met Neal Porter, who became my editor. *I Had a Rooster*, which is based on a traditional folk song and comes with an audio CD, was published in 2001. Now I'm starting my twelfth book, all with the same editor.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you see as the connection between creating animation for television and writing a book?

LAURA V. SEEGER: I almost see my books as animation, and the storyboard frames as the pages. I conceive my books on storyboard paper. I take out a storyboard pad, which is the same one that I used for television, and make really rough sketches. I sketch the whole book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your process for creating a story?

LAURA V. SEEGER: I am fascinated by graphic design challenges. I usually become intrigued by a design concept, and then I made a whole book about it. So a book for me is more of a design project at first. Then all the other components get intuitively worked in.

I also love the challenge of telling a story. I ask myself, "What are the fewest number of words I need to convey what I'm trying to convey?"

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where did the concept for your acclaimed alphabet book, *The Hidden Alphabet*, come from?

LAURA V. SEEGER: Neal Porter, my editor, is an alphabet junkie, and he encouraged this book. As for me, I think of everything in terms of cameras—close-ups, wide shots, pans. I was thinking about the idea of zooming into part of a letter and concentrating on its negative space. Sometimes I look at things that most people don't pay attention to. On the "B" page in *The Hidden Alphabet*, for instance, you initially see two balloons against the sky. On the next page, the balloons are the circles inside the letter B. I like that the reader's perspective keeps changing, and want the book to share that way of looking at things.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Will you share some of the design ideas that inspired your next book, *Lemons Are Not Red*?

LAURA V. SEEGER: I was interested in the concept of showing objects that don't exist, such as "Lemons are not red." Then I tried to figure out a cool way to illustrate that concept, and decided to use colors to show what something "is not".

When I speak with children at schools, I'll simply say, "Carrots are not..." and I won't even get to finish before they all sing, "Purple!" Reading this book aloud has become a big game.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Because you think about the illustration process primarily in terms of design, how do *Lemons are Not Red* and *The Hidden Alphabet* differ?

LAURA V. SEEGER: For *The Hidden Alphabet*, the borders between the edges of the letters were very hard and graphic. In *Lemons are Not Red*, I was able to make the pictures as painterly as I wanted to. For instance, I juxtaposed the hard-edged carrot against the painterly eggplant.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Will you share some of what went through your mind when illustrating *Walter was Worried*, in which you use alphabet letters to create facial expressions?

LAURA V. SEEGER: In *Walter was Worried*, my design challenge was, "What are the fewest number of elements you need to show an emotion?" If you go to the "Ursula was upset" page, for instance, my challenge was to make her look upset by using those exact letters, U-P-S-E-T. So those were my design challenges.

Walter is near and dear to my heart. I was recently speaking to 500 school kids, and just before the principal handed over the microphone, she asked the children to show me their surprise. All 500 of them lifted up a self-portrait that they had done, Walter-style, with their feelings as their facial features. That was so great.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your first narrative books, *Dog and Bear: Two Friends Three Stories* and its recent sequel, *Dog and Bear: Two's Company*, come about?

LAURA V. SEEGER: My editor Neil Porter wanted to make sure that I wasn't pegged only as a concept book author. He encouraged me to write a narrative, and after he literally stumbled upon a little stuffed bear in my living room, he suggested that I write a book about it. So that's Bear, and Dog is my family's pet Dachshund.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you describe each character? Who is Dog, and who is Bear?

LAURA V. SEEGER: Bear is sensible, logical, and careful. Dog is a free spirit who loves to have fun and is very loving and caring, but also a bit impulsive. Although Dog is a little self-centered, they really care about one another, but they're very different.

This book is a concept book, too, despite being a series of narratives. It's about the concept of friendship, and there are many sub-concepts within that: fear, bravery, loyalty, love, and so much more. It was a fun challenge to convey each one of these within a limited number of pages.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like for you to write out a full 32-page picture book story, with more text than you had used before?

LAURA V. SEEGER: That's where my animation background kicked in. I intuitively knew which 32 frames were needed to convey the story of the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It is fun that there are three short, accessible stories in each of your “Dog and Bear” books. How did you make that decision?

LAURA V. SEEGER: That was Neal’s idea. Initially, I storyboarded each story as an entire book of its own. When I wrote the second story, I thought it would be the second book. But Neal thought that I should put three stories in one book. I asked if he was nuts. This was one of the few times in our relationship when he said that I didn’t have a choice. He said that the book worked great as a whole, and that he wanted readers to feel that they were getting their money’s worth. I think it does work very well with three stories in each book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Cutouts and images that alter perspective are common in many of your books, including your Caldecott Honor book, *First the Egg*. What was the main design challenge you faced in creating this book?

LAURA V. SEEGER: *First the Egg* came from a journal entry I made that had a perfect little rectangle cut out of one page, and then on the page underneath, I drew a flower so that you saw the middle of the flower through the hole. On the page with the hole, I wrote “Seed,” and on the next page with the flower, I wrote “Flower.” Neal looked at that journal entry and said that we had another book.

Transformation is the main idea behind *First the Egg*. It became obvious that I could also use the chicken and the egg example to explore transformation. And because I just love the word “chicken” — it is fun to say. “Chicken/egg” beat out “seed/flower” for the title.

There are many other transformations throughout the book, and it was great fun to imagine, design, and assemble.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *One Boy* reveals how a sequence of letters used in one word have a different meaning in another. What fun!

LAURA V. SEEGER: The theme of *One Boy* is finding words that exist within other words. It starts out with a page with the words “One boy,” and through a hole in the page you see a boy sitting in a chair with his backpack and other stuff. Then when you turn the page, and look at that boy again, you see the letters O-N-E from the previous page in the word “alone,” and the illustration now reveals that the boy is actually sitting alone in a page full of empty chairs.

This book definitely has a little bit more of a graphic feel than some of the others because it’s not painted and there are no brush strokes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Special needs students seem to react well to your books. Do you know what elements they are responding to?

LAURA V. SEEGER: When I visit schools, special needs teachers often come up to me and tell me how useful certain books are — in particular, *Walter*, *The Hidden Alphabet*, and *Black? White! Day? Night!*

The Hidden Alphabet, and *Black? White! Day? Night!* play with perceptions of foreground and background, and this perspective apparently works with children who are not processing things in a traditional way. I don’t have any experience in that field, but knowing that my books are useful is so rewarding.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your workspace like?

LAURA V. SEEGER: My studio is extremely private, and the only way to get to it is through the master bedroom and master bathroom. If we close off the door between the studio and the master bathroom, no one would ever know that this room is here.

It's small, with bookcases filled with picture books, and a gigantic teacher's desk with writing panels that come out on either side. I also have a card catalog file with tons of little drawers for my art supplies. There's also a big, comfy chair and an easel as well as a closet full of more art supplies. And lots of music.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday like for you?

LAURA V. SEEGER: My boys are old enough now to get themselves up and out in the morning. I get up around the same time that they do, and then do some e-mail answering. It varies depending on if there are any deadlines coming up.

I try to get myself to the beach and go for a two- or three-hour walk most every day, and I spend about 20 to 30 minutes sitting on the jetty. For the most part this time is all about work-related thought. I go barefoot with absolutely nothing but this little pouch that holds my iPhone, where I can write a quick memo if I need to.

I'm usually back when the kids are coming home from school and I do Mom things. Then at about 10:00 or 11:00 at night, I go into my studio and paint until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. That is the only time that I am not interrupted. So the writing and designing part happens at the beach, while the painting part happens late at night in my studio.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What would you like to tell teachers about your work?

LAURA V. SEEGER: It's more about what I want to know from them. I always want to know how they are using these books, what works or doesn't, what the kids respond to, and what they wish that they had. As an author, I'm very interested in that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

LAURA V. SEEGER: If I were speaking to students right now — perhaps I would be speaking to all ages, from 5 to 14 — I'd be saying, "Never stop challenging yourself to look at something in a way that you never looked at it before."

One thing that I've started doing at schools is teaching kids how to draw a dog and bear. Even if I'm with 100 or 200 kids, each of them will get a piece of paper and crayons, and I'll show them. I've gotten it to basic shapes so that they can really do it. Later, they write to me and send their own illustrated books and their own *Dog and Bear* stories. It's great, because it gets them writing and drawing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

LAURA V. SEEGER: It used to be that I would strongly feel, "That's it. I'm spent. I have no more books in me." Yet I have a funny feeling that I'm not the only artist or writer, or really anyone, who has said this.

Just when I feel that the well might be dry, everyone around me reminds me that this is what I say every time I'm stuck. I now know that I just have to be patient. I get back into a zone so that when ideas do come, I can see and hear them.

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