

MINE!
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“You can’t get more true than funny, so I shoot for maximum funny. It’s up to my audience to decide if I’ve succeeded.”

—Mo Willems

books

by Mo Willems



Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!

- Tr. ed. 0-7868-1988-X \$12.99
- 2004 Caldecott Honor
 - 2004 ALA Notable Book
 - A *New York Times* Best seller
 - A *Publishers Weekly* Best seller



The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog!

- Tr. ed. 0-7868-1869-7 \$12.99
- A *Publishers Weekly* Editors' Pick and Starred Reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*
 - A Book Sense 76 pick



The Pigeon Has Feelings, Too! Board Book

Bd. ed. 0-7868-3650-4 May '05 \$6.99

The Pigeon Loves Things That Go! Board Book

Bd. ed. 0-7868-3651-2 May '05 \$6.99



Time to Pee!

- Tr. ed. 0-7868-1868-9 \$12.99
- *Bank Street* Best Book of the Year 2004
 - A *New York Public Library 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing* Books
 - A *Nick Jr.* magazine Best Book of the Year



Time to Say "Please"!

- Tr. ed. 0-7868-5293-3 June 2005 \$12.99
- Companion book to the popular *Time to Pee!*



Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale

- Tr. ed. 0-7868-1870-0 \$15.99
- A *New York Times* best seller
 - Five Starred Reviews, including: *Booklist*, *The Bulletin*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*

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Visit the author's website www.mowillems.com



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Mo Willems

HYPERION
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Mo Willems



Funny, irreverent, and creative, children's book author and illustrator Mo Willems is a six-time Emmy-award winner whose debut book for children, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, garnered a coveted Caldecott Honor Award. A favorite of critics and kids alike, Willems's books have been called "laugh out loud funny" (*The New York Times*) and "witty and wise" (*Publishers Weekly*). His latest books, *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog!* and *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*, have continued to receive critical acclaim. In a recent interview, Mo Willems was asked to share the details of his background, his current life, and what it's like to be an award-winning author and illustrator for children:

Where did you grow up? Tell us about your family of origin. How did your family background prepare you to communicate with children through your books?

I was raised by Dutch immigrants in a house down the street from a seedy New Orleans blues bar. My father quit his job to become a full-time potter when my house-fraud mother became a corporate attorney.

New Orleans taught me how to tell stories (storytelling in N'awlins is unique because your audience is usually drunk, so you've got to be clear, funny, and succinct); my father taught me the patience of a craftsman; and my mother instilled the importance of negotiating a good deal.

If those aren't the ingredients to making kids' books, I don't know what are.

What were you like as a child?

Shorter, younger, *sadder*, and more intense than I am now. Also, back then I didn't have hair, like, all over my face and arms and stuff, but I do now, and that's really neat. Sorry, what was the question again?

What books influenced you as a child? As an adult?

Good Grief! Those Peanuts collections that sold for 50 cents or so in the drugstores blew my mind as a kid. The star of the strip was an unhappy boy named Charlie Brown. Wow! Finally, someone wasn't lying to me about childhood! And it was funny! With beautiful drawings! God bless Charles Schulz

and that little round-headed boy. Now, I primarily read Arab and Central Asian history with a sprinkling of collected 1960's and '70's SpiderMan comics.

Was there a special adult or mentor that comes to mind when thinking about the development of your career?

Although I've received wonderful support from myriad people, no mentor ever took me under their wing. Probably the seminal moment of my career occurred in eighth grade when Mrs. Laboisse demanded that her students have a good "general fund of knowledge" and quizzed us weekly on the contents of the Sunday newspaper. My world immediately expanded, and I became fascinated by events and people around the globe.

What is your work schedule and where do you work?

Until a few weeks ago, I had to fit my picture book writing and drawing in with my responsibilities as a head writer for a cartoon series, which was nuts. Having escaped the clutches of grinding out TV, I'm content to spend my days in my Brooklyn studio, where I merrily write and draw in the morning, lunch with my family, take the dog for long walks, and conduct business in the afternoon. That's the idea, anyway.

How do children's books today reflect current culture, i.e., TV, movies, competitiveness? How has this influenced your writing?

The (hidden yet pervasive) theme in my picture books so far is Failure. Pop culture for young people incessantly shrieks, "YOU CAN DO ANYTHING!" but any reasonable four-year-old (who doesn't have superpowers, can't fly, and isn't a princess in a castle) realizes that's a crock. Kids constantly, humanly, fail from the time they wake until they're dragged to bed (they even fail to stay up late!). I try to illuminate and celebrate these daily failures; they are what adults and kids have most in common.

What role does humor play in children's books?

You can't get more true than funny, so I shoot for maximum funny. It's up to my audience to decide if I've succeeded.

What is your most memorable school visit?

Actually, this is the story of my first-ever book signing. NYC's Books of Wonder was kind enough to ask me to join Lane Smith and Laurie Keller in plugging our projects. As I looked at the sizable crowd, a darling little girl, clutching a book tightly in her arms, slowly marched up to me, her face filled with tearful admiration. This was obviously the highlight of her young life. Time slowed as she reached my table and broke into a beautiful smile. Then, still in slow motion, her father leaned down into my field of vision and said to her, "Nnnnnoooooo, LLLaaaaannnnneeee Smmmiittthhh iisss ooovvveerrrrr tthhheerrreee..."

Time snapped back as the girl shot me the nastiest expression I have ever seen and marched over to Lane's table, leaving me to spend the rest of the session twiddling my thumbs and feeling guilty for not being Lane Smith.

What are some of your favorite questions young children ask?

My daughter once asked me if I love her. I got to say, "More than anything in the world." That was cool.

Does one disastrous experience stand out as memorable on your way to success?

I was asked by Cartoon Network to come up with some ideas for a cartoon show and diligently worked on two ideas, one about a boy trapped on Mars, and the other about a superhero vice president. When the network executives flew into New York, they told me they were very excited to hear my ideas; anything was possible, except shows about outer space or super heroes. Stuck without anything to pitch, I made up some stuff and took them out to dinner.

The result was an animated sketch comedy show called "Sheep in the Big City," which premiered the next year.

When you're not working, what is your favorite way to spend your free time?

The perfect day would consist of a long walk in Prospect Park with my family, followed by a plate of my wife's Bolognese, a glass of wine, and some tomato, mozzarella, and basil (the tomatoes and basil picked from our garden).

Usually, I spend my free time devising clever plans to get out of doing the dishes.



Is there anything else you want to tell us—a word, a story or anecdote for children, parents, or teachers?

Once upon a time, there were 3,472 Little Pigs. By the time they finished high school, their mother was more than eager to kick them out of her cramped studio apartment into the Big, Bad World to make houses of their own.

Well, the first Little Pig built a house out of straw. The second Little Pig built a house out of sticks. The third Little Pig built a house of bricks. The fourth Little Pig built a house out of steel. The fifth Little Pig built a house out of aluminum siding (which costs less than you think!) The sixth Little Pig built a house out of all those catalogs he got in the mail.

You get the idea.

One day, the Big, Bad Wolf came to the door of the first Little Pig's straw house. He grinned a sharp, toothy grin and called out in a deep voice, "Little Pig, Little Pig! Let me in!"

The Little Pig peeked out of the window, took one look at the Big, Bad Wolf and said, "Sure."

The Little Pig opened the door, the Big Bad Wolf strode right in, and they spent a lovely evening playing backgammon and watching a documentary about Ghengis Khan.

The end.

And the moral is: You Never Know.

—Mo



Interview conducted by Isabel Baker for the *Young Children*, the journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. www.naeyc.org