



*Adapted from*

***My Teacher Can Teach . . . Anyone!***

**On the Creation and Production of a Children's Picture Book**

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Several years ago I decided to chronicle the publishing process of one of my children's books, so I began keeping notes on a new idea, an alphabet book about a teacher who taught her students about various occupations. The combination of a book about a teacher, careers or occupations, and an alphabetic structure make me think that this idea would develop into a saleable book concept. I was right: Lee & Low Books published *My Teacher Can Teach . . . Anyone!* in the fall of 2004. This is the story of the manuscript's development and production.

**Inspiration Strikes**

It all started in April of 2001. I was driving to a school to do a series of presentations on writing and an idea for a picture book struck me. This is not unusual: my strength as a writer is generating ideas. I am never in want of ideas for books.

The idea I got was for an alphabet book based on items that would be normally found in a school context, i.e., aquarium, bus, chalkboard, dictionary, fire drill, gymnasium, etc. I thought I could embellish each alphabetic item with a brief commentary, such as the following:

A is for Aquarium

Our class has an aquarium. In fact, we have three aquariums.

One for snails. One for fish. One for our hermit crab.

Does your classroom have an aquarium?

I jotted this all down while I was driving to the school. I always carry a small briefcase with writing utensils, my computer, the latest book market newsletters and magazines, and several pads of paper. I am always ready to jot down an idea when it hits me; that's when it has the most energy; that's when the language is freshest.

The teacher of the classroom I was to visit was a former graduate student of mine. As soon as I entered the classroom she started showing a PowerPoint presentation that her kids had put together in response to my book *Can You Top That?* (Lee & Low, 2000). Watching the presentation and the children's response to it, I kept thinking: What a great teacher! And, then, *bingo!* The light bulb went off. I started to think of a young student bragging about his teacher, how good she was, and in his bragging he kept echoing this refrain: She can teach . . . *anyone!* And that was it, the first lines of my "new" story:

My teacher is so good  
she can teach . . . *anyone!*

For the next few days I was consumed with jotting down my ideas. I envisioned couplets joined by an end-rhyme, as in:

She could teach an Astronaut  
how to float in space.  
She could teach a Ballerina  
how to land with grace.

It only took me a few days to get a complete first draft. Not everything was perfect, but it hung together in a way that pleased me. Fortuitously, an opportunity to read it in public afforded itself at a school in Chicago. I was part of the Chicago Public Schools "hire an expert" program, and was visiting elementary students on Chicago's south side.

At the end of my program one of the students asked: What are you working on now? I often get this question, and my usual answer is to read a work that has been sold, but not yet published. I'm not one to read unpublished work in public. But this seemed like a good time to read *My Teacher*.

As I read it, I noted that parts of it didn't scan well, and that some of the occupations seemed awkward, while other seemed inappropriate. I mentally noted these defects and then said my good-byes. Fortunately, I didn't have another appointment that day, so I went to a nearby café and worked on the story.

When writing rhymed verse, not only do you have to have perfect end-rhymes, but you also have to have lines that scan well; that is, you have to have control over the rhythmic aspects of the line through syllabication and accent placement. You don't learn this in high school or college English classes: the best way to learn this is to listen to

stories from a very young age. Every time you hear another story or piece of poetry it's like putting a deposit in a bank; in this case, your "story bank."

As I worked on the *My Teacher*, I knew that I had to rethink some of the professions or occupations I had chosen. In my original version I used a variety of occupations, i.e., Astronaut, Ballerina, Carpenter, Dentist, etc. But I also used a few terms that seemed questionable, like Eskimo, Yo-Yo Maker, Zulu Chief, even the Queen of England.

I should expect such things in a first draft. Writing a first draft should be a "stream of consciousness" experience; that is, you should write down anything and everything that comes to your mind. Initially, you write from your gut—or, as some people say, your heart. It is only later during the revising process that you write with your head. Of course, it's never as cut and dry as this, but the balance does seem to shift from intuition to reasoned analysis. But the revision process is a tenuous experience because even the finest adjustments in text often necessitate—usually unknowingly—additional adjustments.

### **A Fresh Pair of Eyes**

I had finally made the revisions I thought necessary. Now it was time to share my story with someone: my agent. So I wrote a brief cover letter of my intentions and sent the manuscript to her. A week later I received her response:

*I like this little story. The idea is funny, and the rhyming is good. Unfortunately, the parts that I find least successful—the "framing" sections about the narrator's teacher—are the ones meant to ground the rhyme and give the story meaning. I think that perhaps the teacher and the narrator should not be so anonymous.*

*At the risk of making the story too long, it would make sense for the opening and closing stanzas to give the reader some idea of the narrator's and the teacher's personalities (or names). We only learn at the end that the narrator is a "rascal," and we never really have any reason to care about the teacher.*

*I have a few comments about some of the verses. Should an engineer be the one to build the house? Why is the fireman an expert at catching mice? Should the teacher be able to teach the novelist how to write prose? Why does the Queen of England need to know how to drive a car? Why does the zookeeper say "good day"?*

*I think this story is definitely the kind of whimsical work we have been hoping to get from you. I just think that the opening and closing stanzas could provide more context for the story.*

I mulled over her comments, and then began the revising process—by entering *all* of her comments directly into the piece at the appropriate places. I begin the revision process from her perspective—whether or not I agree with her critique—but as I

continue, more and more of my writing instincts take over and, in the end, I either accept or reject her—or anyone else’s—comments. In other words, it’s important to listen to yourself, your audience, and your peers (especially someone as invested in you as your agent or editor), but in the end the most important thing is to listen to yourself.

The main struggle I was having was with the opening and closing lines. I liked the terse two-line opening that I had submitted to her. But I began to play around with other approaches. The main problem was tone. Who was this student? Was he a smart aleck? A cut-up? The teacher’s pet? Who was he? I had to answer this question in order to find the right opening and closing lines to frame the alphabetic structure in between.

Since the piece was somewhat autobiographical, I saw a smart aleck as the narrator. Yes, that’s the kind of student I was growing up. I was the cut-up, the smart aleck always in trouble. So, naturally, I wanted to create that kind of atmosphere. I envisioned a small child, a boy, who is the class clown, who is always getting in trouble for this or that.

What I envisioned was a young boy, hands on hips, looking squarely at the viewer, emanating a mixture of defiance and self-awareness, saying, rather tersely:

My teacher is so good,  
she can teach . . . *anyone!*

As the reader read through the various occupations, A–Z, the young boy would be seen in each frame, generally misbehaving to draw his teacher’s attention. On the last page, we see him again looking directly at the viewer, with his stern-looking teacher standing beside him, hands on her hips, as he intones:

Yes, my teacher can teach anyone;  
it’s as plain as plain can be.  
‘Cause everyday my teacher teaches  
a rascal just like . . . *me!*

I thought about what my agent had said about giving more information about the teacher, and perhaps this child, but I always returned to my original lines somewhat satisfied: I liked the tone and the attendant image I envisioned (and thought that the illustrator could provide the information that was missing in the text).

So, I put most of my energy into revising the A–Z occupations. When working on rhymed poetry I carry a few tools around with me: standard dictionary, rhyming dictionary, and thesaurus. These are my three “bibles.” They always seem to come in handy. It was to the dictionary I went to first, to find alternatives to some of the occupations that didn’t seem to fit. Despite the number of tools you might put in your book bag, revising is still a tedious, exasperating, and unpredictable enterprise. You have to be conscious of so many factors all at the same time: How do lines scan? How do

words sound together? Are the images evocative, or even interesting? How will the illustrator depict the images? And, most importantly, how do the images lend themselves to a child's imagination? And, of course, the story has to work as a whole as well!

It is a bumpy road to say the least. But I have learned a few things along the way. For instance, often when I get stuck in the revising process, it is because I am holding on to pieces of writing that I like, whether or not they continue to work in the piece. Instead of including them as fair game in the revising process, I often revise "around them."

One of my favorite stanzas read:

She could teach a Soda Jerk  
how to make a shake.

She could teach a Truck Driver  
how to stay awake.

I really liked the idea of a Soda Jerk, it evoked a kind of Norman Rockwell-like image, a lanky guy in white apron and hat mixing a milkshake behind a diner's counter. It was an image I grew up with, though nowadays is less frequently seen. I tried my best to keep the line in until my editor noted that the image is not only somewhat outdated, but the term "jerk" carried negative connotations as well. I had to let it go, as well as the Truck Driver trying to "stay awake." I mean, what would the illustrator do, show the trucker slapping himself awake, or, better yet, taking No-Doz!

I had a similar experience with the lines:

She could teach a Yo-Yo Champ  
how to walk the dog.

She could teach a Zulu Chief  
how to serve up hog.

I really liked the image of a Yo-Yo champion "walking the dog" with his Yo-Yo. I thought this was interesting both textually and illustratively. I certainly knew that the Zulu Chief had to go: it was a place marker from the beginning. This was reinforced for me when I read the story to a diverse population of students in Chicago: I felt somewhat uncomfortable reading that line at the end. I knew it didn't fit.

As it turned out, the letter Z proved to be a bit more difficult than I had imagined: there just aren't a lot of occupations that start with the letter Z: zookeeper and zoologist are about it. As I sat pondering this verse—in my favorite neighborhood coffeehouse—a limousine drove by, a very large, black limousine, and—*presto!*—I had it: Zillionaire!

What a great word, but now to match it to the line about the Yo-Yo Champ. I tried, and tried, and tried, but ultimately I couldn't get the two to fit together. So, back to my

dictionary for other occupations starting with the letter Y, and one that had the same pizzazz and verve as Zillionaire. After several attempts, I had it:

She could teach a Yodeler  
 how to sing a mile.  
 She could teach a Zillionaire  
 how to live in style.

It has taken most of the school year to work through my drafts of *My Teacher*. I don't write full time: I split my time among three endeavors: I teach graduate education classes at a local university; I write books for children and articles for the professional literature; and I visit schools as a published author. During the school year I don't get as much time to write as I would like, so I always look to the coming of summer. And summer has just arrived. My school visits have come to an end for the year, and my teaching will end in a week or two.

So, as summer comes, I dive headlong into revising *My Teacher*, until I arrive at a version I can again send to my agent. I do, and she responds:

*Thanks for your most recent version of My Teacher. I still think that the intro section is not quite what it ought to be. I wonder if you could open with some sort of quick summary of the teacher's specific accomplishments. Since the rest of the piece is going to be very specific, in a fanciful way, it seems like the opening could be as specific, in a realistic way, and in a way that would give the reader a real sense of this teacher.*

Well, it was something to think about. What I've found over time is that agents and editors often can target a problem in the text, but usually they are not that good at solving it. So, I took her thoughts, played with them, and came up with:

My teacher—  
 An Einstein she's not!  
     A Picasso? *NEVER!*  
     A Mozart? A Beethoven?  
 I don't think so!  
 But then she never wanted  
 to be more than she is—  
     a teacher who cares.  
 And that makes her one of the best  
 teachers in the whole wide world!  
 She is so good, in fact,  
 she could teach . . . *anyone!*

I sent the new introduction off to my agent, and received a quick response:

*Thank you for your revisions, I read them and thought about them for a long time. We still really like the alphabet verses. What if we eliminate the introduction and just focus on a conclusion for the piece. Editors always look for the "point" of a piece like this one, and a strong conclusion might be able to provide such a point.*

So I reinserted the terse two-line introductory verse, and changed the ending to:

Yes, my teacher is the best teacher  
in the whole world.  
She could teach . . . *anyone!*  
That is, if she wasn't so busy . . .  
teaching me!

This went into the mail to my agent, and I received this response:

*Thank you for your revisions of My Teacher. I really think the ending is exactly right. We like the last two lines and think it sums up the story very well. We still think that the piece might not need an introduction. We'll send it out with a letter keeping your options open.*

### **The Art of Waiting**

I was glad to get *My Teacher* into the mail so I could move on to other projects. I don't fret too much about a manuscript when it is out being reviewed by editors, unless it is taking an inordinately long time to get a response. I'm very forward-looking in my outlook. I am always thinking about the next project. It's the same with out-of-print books (I have several at this point). I'm not interested in reselling them; they've had their life—long or short. I'm always ready to engage in the next idea, the next story.

Summer ended, I began my fall classes, and, then, sometime after the New Year, editorial responses to *My Teacher* began to arrive. Many of them were saying the same thing: "The market is tight right now, especially the market for alphabet books;" or "We just did an alphabet book and can't do another one right now." In other words, they were polite rejections, but rejections nonetheless. However, the manuscript was still making the rounds and I was hesitant to touch it until I received additional feedback.

I also know that if I'm patient that a good manuscript will sell. And I was confident—along with my agent—that *My Teacher* would sell. And it did: at the end of April I got a call from my agent, announcing that Lee & Low Books was interested in *My Teacher*. Indeed, they wanted to buy it!

### **Signed, Sealed and Delivered**

Since I use an agent I am one-step removed from the acquisition process. My agent is the intermediary between the publisher and me. With Lee & Low Books the process went rather smoothly, probably because I had signed four previous contracts with them, but perhaps more importantly the relationship was one of advocate rather than adversary. By the end of May, I received the completed contract, signed and returned the enclosed copies, and now I awaited the next phase: working on the final revisions.

### **To Change or Not to Change**

It is rare that once a manuscript is accepted that it doesn't need more revising. The reason for this is manifold, but usually it is because an editor always brings to the process a more expansive vision: she sees not only the text, but also the illustrations and the overall design of the book. Hence, often the call for more revisions is a response to her more comprehensive concept.

I look forward to working with the editor at Lee & Low, mainly because we just completed a book together a year ago, and I really like this publisher's mission of publishing multicultural picture books. In the contract negotiation process I found out that the release date for *My Teacher* will be Fall 2004, so I don't anticipate a hurried revising process. Although the concept of time in the publishing world is a very strange one: although a book can be slated for publication one or two years down the road, when the call comes for revisions, the turn-around time is usually quick, very quick. In fact, everything seems to be due *yesterday!*

Now, I await word from the editor of *My Teacher*: it comes the first week of December, 2002:

*I've been having some preliminary discussions with an artist for My Teacher (nothing definite yet, but hopefully we'll finalize things soon), and as we talk about how the illustrations might shape up, I wanted to know if you had any specific visuals in mind as you wrote the manuscript. Do you see this as having one main character (a child) and his/her teacher? Did you envision a boy or a girl, or doesn't it matter? Who do you see taking the roles of astronaut, ballerina, carpenter, and so on? Any thoughts you'd like to share about this will be most welcome.*

*As I've been reading over the manuscript, what comes to mind is that this is a fantasy grounded in the reality of a classroom setting. We have one main character (a child) and his/her teacher, and then we see many other children (the other members of the class) taking the roles of astronaut, ballerina, carpenter, and so on. Somehow the artist will need to work the teacher and main character into the picture for each occupation. The artist I have in mind is Latino (from Mexico), so I would probably opt for the teacher and*



*main character to be Latino. The other children would be boys and girls of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds.*

*I'll be in touch with more specific information soon.*

Ironically, my editor's call for revisions came at an awkward time: my wife and I were just about to board a plane for Iceland. We will be there for a month, our second stay in the country in the last few years. As both of us teach and live creative lives, we try to take our summers in an entirely new environment: Iceland is quite a different environment, one of our favorites.

I write the editor a brief note, telling her of our travel plans, but also that I'd like to work on the A-Z occupations first, before finalizing the opening and closing lines. I also share my concern about Internet access in Iceland. As it turns out, the public library is right down the street from where my wife and I are staying and there's plenty of access to computers and the Internet. I check my email once we are settled and awaiting me is my editor's first salvo in the revision process, she writes:

*The artist for My Teacher Can Teach is going to get started soon on the illustrations, so I wanted to finalize the manuscript with you. The text is really a lot of fun, but I have some questions and comments, and I think we need to tweak some of the "occupations," for a variety of reasons, listed below.*

Here are a few of her specific comments:

*p. 9: Dairymaid is considered a sexist term by some, and the educational community is particularly sensitive to this kind of thing. Possible to change?*

*p. 11: Change fireman to Firefighter, for the same reason as above.*

*p. 16: Knucklehead. This is kind of demeaning, and harder to illustrate than most of the other "occupations." Perhaps change.*

*p. 22: Not sure how the illustrator will show a quarterback "reading the field," or if young kids would know what this means. Could you change this so that the quarterback does something that will be easier to illustrate concretely?*

*p. 23: Riot squad. Hmm. I think this one is problematic. Do we really want to encourage awareness of riot squads? Please change.*

*p. 26: Undertaker. Hmm. This is another one that it might be better to avoid. How about Umpire? We have boxing and football, so why not baseball also?*

*p. 27: Vampire. This is fun, but everything else in the text is based in reality, so I think this should be also. Also, vampire is not a positive image.*

As I start revising the manuscript, I do so with the usual resistance. But as I mull over her comments, I begin to see that her main concern is for the consistency of the occupations and elimination of out-dated and/or sexist terms. The problem for me, is that I don't only write on the level of meaning; I also write on the level of sound.

So, even though “firefighter” is a more politically correct term, “fireman” was the two-syllable word I needed to have that particular line scan well. The same is true for “weatherman” vs. “weather forecaster” (which eventually became “woodworker”). Even replacing “ballerina” with “ballet dancer” (an equal trade in terms of syllables) is awkward since to my ear “ballerina” is a much lighter, brighter sound than “ballet dancer” and goes better with “lands with grace” than the suggested replacement.

For this manuscript, however, I realize that sound may have to be sacrificed somewhat for appropriate, non-sexist language. It is, after all, a large part of Lee & Low’s mission: to bring into the world books that reflect the best in multicultural literature.

After several exchanges of emails we finally settled on the list of occupations: Astronaut, Ballet Dancer, Carpenter, Dentist, Engineer, Firefighter, Governor, Heavyweight, Illustrator, Janitor, Kayaker, Logger, Mechanic, Novelist, Opera Singer, President, Quarterback, Rodeo Clown, Sailor, Trucker, Umpire, Veterinarian, Woodworker, Xylophonist, Yodeler, and Zillionaire.

Aside from the occupations, we also discussed the concluding verse. My editor did not like the tone of the child narrator being a smart aleck or cut-up. Not all children are smart alecks and she wanted the book to have the greatest appeal it could. At the end of one of her emails she wrote:

*I know you’ve wanted to wait until the A–Z verses are final before working on the ending, and I think we’ve done that. Just a thought about the “message” of the last verse: the way it is now kind of implies that the teacher can only teach one child at a time, which obviously isn’t true of teachers. Even though the main character is a bit of a cut-up, maybe the final thought could be something more like “I’m glad she’s teaching me.”*

We continued to email each other about the ending. I was willing to let go of the smart-aleck tone, but I didn’t want the book to take on a sugar-sweet, sappy tone either.

Revising is a painful, but necessary part of the writing process. Nevertheless, in the give-and-take of the process between the editor and me, there were humorous moments as well. When I changed “rock star” to “rodeo clown” (because I couldn’t get the letters Q and R to work together in terms of the end rhyme), my editor sent me a quick email: “Sob. I’m sorry to lose the rock star. Rodeo clown just doesn’t have the same appeal.”

We were also having trouble with the letter set E and F. It was the last couplets we finalized. My editor really didn’t want to lose “She can teach a firefighter how to douse a flame” which I had come up with early in the revising process. But finding an adequate matching line for E proved to be quite difficult. Finally, tired of the entire process, I sat

down with a table full of dictionaries, thesauri, and rhyming dictionaries and generated a half dozen alternatives, the last one being:

She could teach an Editor  
how to crack the whip.  
She could teach a Freelancer  
how to keep his grip.

Of course, I did it tongue and cheek, and it was received as such. We had a good laugh. This is the part of the publishing process that can be very rewarding: working with an editor that you know and trust. I really appreciate my editor's comments: she knows kids and the market in ways that are practical and make sense in the world of children's books. I can't say that I'm always like that: writing to me is such a personal experience. I write for my own satisfaction, even though I know that the greatest satisfaction is being able to share my published work with an audience.

As for the last verse, perhaps the most crucial lines of the story, we emailed back and forth until we came up with an ending that we both agreed upon:

Yes, my teacher is so good  
she can teach . . . *anyone!*  
And that makes me happy  
because this year . . .  
she is teaching *ME!*

I was sorry to lose the smart-aleck, cut-up tone, but this ending seemed to be the most encompassing and inviting to all children. With the revisions finalized we could now focus on the development of the attendant illustrations. My editor thought so too, as she wrote in her last email:

*I think that's it. I'm very happy about the way has shaped up. It's going to be a really fun book. I can't wait to get Felipe started and see what he comes up with.*

### **Out of My Hands**

As an author of children's picture books, I am often asked what input I have in the selection of the illustrator, and then to what degree do I work with him or her. The answer is usually surprising: I have very little input into the selection of the illustrator, and I rarely have contact with him or her during the production phase. Why? I think there are several reasons for this.

First of all, producing an illustrated picture book demands the time and energy of many people, and the editor's job is to manage this production team. What if the author

and illustrator didn't get along? That would be a problem. Or, what if they got along with each other, but not the editor? That, too, would be a problem.

There's another reason for keeping them apart, one that is more concerned with aesthetics. The illustrator wants what I want: *the freedom to create!* If I were an illustrator, I wouldn't want too much contact with the author. I'd rather come up with the illustrative ideas myself; after all, it's my professional, why I was hired.

In terms of selecting the illustrator in the first place, that is usually the editor's prerogative. Again, for several reasons: she knows whose art style might best suit the text; she knows who's available, and who's affordable. But, you might also say, that in the entire process of producing an illustrated picture book making the match between author and illustrator is the editor's finest "creative moment." When a book wins a major award, the editor takes great pride in her achievement—maybe not overtly, on center stage, but certainly in private.

Regarding *My Teacher*, the editor had signed illustrator Felipe Galindo. It would be his first picture book project. I awaited the arrival of his sketches to see how the project was progressing. They came in March 2004. I had requested them because I was attending a state reading conference at the end of March and wanted to have them available to show participants attending my presentation.

I wasn't completely pleased with them, however, which doesn't surprise me (it's always jarring to see your book concept take shape: I usually respond with either overwhelming acceptance or doubt and skepticism). First of all, the copies my editor forwarded to me didn't reproduce well. The color seemed garish and the children somewhat flat and uninteresting. Beyond that, I thought the representation of diversity among the children was stereotypical. I shared my concerns with the editor. She urged me to be patient. She was confident that the colors would look differently in the proofs and that the cast of children would become more diverse as he worked into the paintings. She urged me to study the illustrator's style more closely.

Although I expressed some doubt about the illustrations, I was excited about the way in which the illustrator chose to illustrate each occupation: in each scene the teacher was teaching her children how to be an astronaut, a ballet dancer, a carpenter, a dentist, etc., and he did so in very creative and colorful ways.

So, now, I await the proofs: they arrive at the end of April. And, yes, the color is much better. The proofs also come with the book jacket and end material. The book is taking shape. As far as my concerns about the stereotypical depiction of diversity in the illustrations, I am seeing that differently as well. The representations of the children are less stereotypical than they are stylistic caricatures, which are consonant with Felipe's

bold, colorful style. Not only are the children animated, but so too are animate and inanimate objects, as well as the attendant backdrops.

And the boy who prompts the story in the first place appears, like so many school children across this country, truly enjoying his teacher and the things she teaches him. You get the sense that when he writes in his journal at the end of the day (and the story) that he is happy she is his teacher, he truly is—without being overly sappy or nostalgic.

At the end of May the F&Gs (“Folded and Gathered” sheets) arrive. The hardbound book should follow soon.

### **And Into the World**

It does in early July. My excitement grows as the production process comes to a close. Now I await its distribution prior to the new school year, as well as any reviews that might be forthcoming. Most importantly, however, I begin to get excited about sharing my new book. With a new school year around the corner, I know that this book will be at the top of my book bag as I begin again the ritual of sharing my books and new book ideas with children around the country.

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