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Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart
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Q: You came to children's books as a career later in life than some. What did you do before that?

A: I'm now 74—a lot of years of varied passionate interests, founding (with others) a cooperative community, raising three children, starting a school. Lots of kids to do things with: bread sculptures and gingerbread houses, stories, costumes, masks, puppets, hikes, gardens, trips. I also kept journals, wrote poems, studied Japanese calligraphy, designed covers for a pacifist magazine, organized against militarism, injustice, the threat of nuclear destruction. . . . What else? I cooked in a Summerhill school in rural Ontario, Canada; made a 500-mile canoe trip on the Yukon River; moved to a houseboat in Vancouver, B.C.; took to writing short stories; illustrated my first book with Remy Charlip (*Hooray for Me*); found my way to Greenwillow; moved to NYC. On and on . . . too much to tell. But it all added up, and here I am today as excited about *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* —my thirteenth book—as anything I've ever done.

Q: Most of your books look at families closely and lovingly, shedding light on the imperfections, idiosyncrasies, and struggles that real families face. What draws you to this well again and again?

A: I love woods, the moon, rivers. . . . But my being was mostly flavored in the soup pot of family and New York City's multi-ethnic neighborhoods. Mine was a fiercely scrapping, loud-talking, loving but unsettled family struggling to make a living, as were so many around us. We were also radicals, world meddlers, people lovers, and lovers of literature, art, and music. My books seem to be telling something of all that and, at the same time, celebrating it.

Q: You begin *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* with two beautiful, specific portraits—one of each girl. Did you draw these before you began to write? Or did the words come first?

A: The words came first. All the verses had been written. It felt complete, with no need for pictures. Still, I tried watercolors. I wasn't pleased with them, but as soon as I had my fingers around a fat colored pencil, portraits of Amber happened, and then Essie, then lots of other colored pencil paintings. It was exciting. I had a hard time selecting the ones to use. I hadn't wanted any illustrations, and now I love them.

Q: Did you know from the onset that *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* would be written in free verse?

A: About five years ago I wrote a prose version. Greenwillow editors were drawn to the subject but not the telling. It seemed to have a "concocted" quality. I put it away and did *Lucky Song* instead. Last year I found myself setting down bits of verse on scraps of paper. I recognized I was "coming home" to what I had deeply wanted to tell. I wrote the Amber and Essie poems with the same mysterious ease I felt in writing *A Chair for My Mother*. I think that because the story comes out of deeply felt but incomplete memories and impressions of my very early years, it is well served by free verse.

Q: The design of *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* is unlike your other books. Can you tell us about the process you went through to create the final look?

A: In my other books I have tried to create an ensemble in which all elements could sing together. In this book I wanted almost the opposite. I wanted a way for the poems to solo. But I also wanted finally to include the art. The drawings became a set of variations on the theme. I set a very few quiet drawings like occasional notes among the poems. The more vivid colored pencil paintings are in an "album" following the complete verse narrative. This is an unusual arrangement. The drawings are freed from precisely illustrating the text, and the poems get to speak alone, as I wanted them to. Portraits of Amber and Essie do introduce the book, and a hint of color underlines the titles like a little hum connecting the parts.