



Antoinette Portis

Not a Box
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Q&A with Antoinette Portis

Q: Your book, *Not a Box*, is a powerful testament to children's imaginations. Were you an imaginative child?

A: I don't think I had an exceptional imagination but I think I had an exceptional commitment to inhabiting it. Being the oldest of five, I lived in kid chaos. My three brothers were loud. They were loud when they didn't get along and just as loud when they did.

I didn't have my own bedroom, so my imagination was my room. I had tea with the Easter bunny there or hunted woolly mammoths. I would get a flutter of excitement in my stomach setting out to play Pueblo Indian or Pirate or Prima Ballerina--I was about to have an adventure! My imagination never let me down; it always took me to a place that I loved to be.

The things that you make up are the only things you have complete control over as a child (let's face it, as an adult, too). You can imagine anything you want.

Q: What were some of your favorite books as a child?

A: I was completely book-obsessed. I could go on and on about my favorite books, of which there are hundreds.

My grandmother Edna had a glass cabinet in the far corner of her living room filled with beautifully illustrated children's books, mostly from my mom's childhood, but some from hers. There were lots of books illustrated by Arthur Rackham and Kay Nielsen. She gave me permission to read them if I handled them carefully. I'd walk across the oriental carpets in the dim room and turn the brass key till there was the heavy click. The doors would swing open on their own (part of the magic!). And I would choose.

We had tons of books at our house, too, and there was the wonder of the public library. I read and loved all the classics. *The Secret Garden* fueled a love of gardening that is still with me.

My favorite shelves of the library were the magic section. I read and reread all the *Mary Poppins*, *Narnia*, *Green Knowe*, and *Edward Eager* books. I adored *The Princess and the Goblin* by George MacDonald, (delightfully mystical), *The Gammage Cup* by Carol Kendall (eccentric outcasts save the day), and *The Diamond in the Window* by Jane Langton (loved the mix of the Transcendentalists and surreal dreamscapes).

Books were not just great for disappearing into; they gave me lots of themes for play. *The Little House in the Big Woods*, *The Boxcar Children*, and *My Side of the Mountain* all mixed together in my own *Green Caves* fantasy, in which the bushes outside my house were our home and we had to live off the land. I had my entire neighborhood playing that for years.

By fourth and fifth grade, I was writing and illustrating my own stories, too. My best friend Jeanette and I planned on being a writing and illustrating team when we grew up, but we never could agree about who would do which job.

Q: What are your first memories of making art?

A: It was raining outside and my mom sat me down at the kitchen table to paint. There were only 2 pots of poster paint: green and pure glorious red. I remember how satisfying the thick, smooth paint felt on the brush and then smearing across the rough, white paper. The red and green together on the page, the push and pull between these two complementary colors, cool and hot, was utterly gripping. It's my first memory of the power of color alone. A few years ago, I looked around my living room and noticed that the color scheme (underneath the piles of books and magazines) is red and green.

My second art memory is from first grade. We were all drawing at our desks. I made a person, the standard circle for a body and stick arms and legs. But Debbie V., a few desks over, had figured out that you could draw legs using 2 lines each so they had thickness and then you could color them in! And you made white socks by letting the white paper show through. (This was killing two birds with one stone; she was clearly a genius.) I looked down at the stick legs on my own drawing, which had seemed perfectly satisfactory a moment before, and thought, these gotta go!

So I asked her if I could use her innovation and she said, sure, which seemed incredibly generous (I would not have been so kind.) So we became friends and played *Secret Garden* together and both grew up to be artists.

That was the first inkling I ever had that ideas were part of the creative process. Debbie had made an intellectual leap that made her picture better. I wanted to do that too.

Q: Why did you decide to make the main character of the book a bunny instead of a child or a different kind of animal?

A: When I did the first sketch of the idea, it was a child. But I didn't want the gender to be an issue, so I tried various animals. My daughter had a pet rabbit, so I'm partial to them. Plus, you've got to love a creature so well punctuated: a period for a tail and exclamation points for ears. Q: Writing books is a second career for you. Did you always suspect that you might want to be an artist and a writer? How did your first career help to prepare you for a career in writing children's books? A: I graduated from UCLA art school, and I thought: OK, I'll be a starving artist until I'm a famous artist. I knew how to make performance art videos, but not how to make a living. So, after the abject poverty idea got boring (about a month after graduation) I ended up in the world of applied art: I became a graphic designer, then an advertising art director. Making commercials was really fun. It was all about ideas (ok, they weren't important ideas, but they were ideas that communicated) and the atmosphere was lively and madcap. Then I had a baby and the idea of pulling all-nighters for new business pitches seemed less appealing. I switched to the client side and became a creative director in Disney Consumer Products (out of the frying pan, into the fire!) Being a creative exec there was intense. But part of the job was to think about children, imagination, magic, wonder all day long. I started to reconnect to my childhood dream of writing and illustrating books. The dream called me with a very loud voice, until I couldn't ignore it anymore. I left corporate life. And corporate perks. No more business trips to Japan, car allowances, stock options, bonuses. But how could I pass the chance, after all these years, to finally become a starving artist?

So it's been five years since I left and claimed my quiet room. I haven't regretted my new life for a moment. I've watched my daughter mature into an artist herself, I've taken classes, met fantastic mentors and fellow writers, and re-met my inner 7 year old, who is a darn chipper little bunny.