



Steven Kellogg

Jack and the Beanstalk
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Q: HarperCollins asked: Steven, what are some recollections from your childhood that might explain the fact that you've created over one hundred popular children's books? Is there anything in your background that would explain your career choice?

A: As a child, I loved the times when an adult would read a story to me. I remember being fascinated with the chance to study each illustration spread out before me, and how excited I got when the page turned and a new picture appeared.

Other formative memories center around a beautiful woodland that was near my house in Connecticut where I spent countless tranquil hours sketching birds, animals, and trees. I began collecting magazines and books about wildlife, and the illustrations inspired me to turn out drawings and paintings of animals from all over the world. I wallpapered my room with my pictures, continually replacing the older ones with my latest work until finally, to my parents' dismay, the walls were peppered with thousands of thumbtack holes. As a boy I was also an enthusiastic storyteller. I would sit between my younger sister with a stack of paper in my lap concocting a convoluted tale while busily scribbling illustrations to accompany the narration. The drawings were passed alternately to my audience of two, and the story rattled along nonstop until my poor sisters were buried under piles of paper. We called this activity "telling stories on paper."

Q: And since then, you have persisted in "telling stories on paper!" How did that come about?

A: I continued to draw compulsively throughout my years at school, and then I entered the Rhode Island School of Design on a Pitney Bowes scholarship. I enjoyed illustration classes as well as courses in history, literature, and art history. But the highlight of that college period came when I was awarded a fellowship that sent me to Italy for my senior year. I was fascinated by everything that I saw and learned and experienced there, and I came back with the feeling that I had been given a wonderful gift. With my own adulthood looming before me, I recalled my disquieting childhood observation that most of the grown-ups in my neighborhood were not happy with their jobs. I returned from Italy determined to find a way to make a living that would be in harmony with the person I was then discovering myself to be. I decided to combine my love of creating stories and pictures with my strong feelings about the importance of books and education, and to make an all-out effort to establish a career in children's books. I began writing stories and submitting them to major publishers and traveling to New York to show them samples of my artwork. There were some disheartening rejections, but I kept trying to improve the quality of my work. I was overjoyed when I received some concrete encouragement and even more thrilled when my first books were published.

Q: What intrigues you about writing and illustrating picture books?

A: I am fascinated by the breadth of opportunities for exploration that are available to the picture-books artist. Essentially the illustrated book is a duet between words and images and I try to blend the visual and verbal voices so that they support and enhance each other. My goal is to propel the book forward as an integrated whole that soars above the sum of its parts and becomes a feast for the eye and the ear. The creation of each book is a new adventure for me, and I try to energize the melding of the writing and illustrations with that sense of excitement and discovery so that the reader will be eager to turn the next page and become more deeply involved in the story.

Q: Among your best-known and most-loved books are your retellings of American tall tales. How did that series come about?

A: The project was suggested to me by an editor who confirmed an impression I recalled from my childhood that most of the existing editions of the American tall tales tended to be parsimoniously illustrated. I eagerly accepted the assignment to retell and illustrate Paul Bunyan's adventures in full color, and then I went on to do books about Pecos Bill, Johnny Appleseed, Mike Fink, and Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett. My approach is to read everything about each character that I can get my hands on, and then sort out the accumulated anecdotes and incidents to decide which ones will function most successfully in the picture-book format. Some sources give conflicting details (like the descriptions they provide of Johnny Appleseed's headgear), and that requires a judgement on my part. My principal concern in presenting the tall tales is to infuse them with the zaniness and high-spirited energy that, to me, is the essence of the genre.

Q: You have been recognized for your body of work by such awards as the Regina Medal, the David McCord Citation, the New England Booksellers Award, and the Jo Osborne Award for Humor in Children's Literature. What do you think when you look back over the more than thirty years that you have been publishing books for children?

A: Well, at some mysterious point it seems that I was no longer the bewildered recruit that I felt myself to be; suddenly I found myself reclassified as a grizzled veteran! The awards you mentioned were all very moving, gratifying, and thrilling landmarks in my career, but the Jo Osborne Award was particularly meaningful because I believe so strongly in the importance of humor. Children, like all of us, need to have a chance to benefit from a ready access to all the positive effects of laughter. There are so many tension-producing realities in our society, and certainly these cannot be ignored, but humor gives us a crucial, compensating balance and it should not be trivialized. I believe in the healing powers of humor, in its ability to lubricate our passage through the ongoing frustrations and difficulties that life contrives, and I feel we must not deprive children of its benefits. In my books I try to provide young readers with a sense of fun and a positive interaction with literature in the hope that they will incorporate an ongoing relationship with reading and the visual arts into their lives and will enjoy all of the enrichment and benefits that they provide.

Q: How would you describe your life outside of the details of your career?

A: For over thirty years I have been married to my best friend, Helen, and I have been lucky enough to have my life further enhanced by six wonderful step-children, eight amazing grandchildren, a number of extraordinary Great Danes (including the real Pinkerton), and an impressive contingent of personable cats. We have divided our time between an old farmhouse that was built beside a brook in rural Connecticut back in 1742, and the place in the Adirondack Mountains on the shores of Lake Champlain where my sisters and I spent the happiest times in our childhood.