



Vera B. Williams

TeachingBooks Movie Transcript

Vera B. Williams, interviewed in her studio in New York, New York on October 10, 2001.

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I can't remember a time in my life when I was not in love with the visual world, and very moved by it and very desirous of representing it. And I took pleasure in what we would have called "piatchkying"; playing around in paint and colors and little images.

On Composition

When you're designing a book, every element is very important. It makes a difference whether someone is in the center, whether they're in the corner, whether there's a border, whether there's not a border, whether the color goes right to the edges. It has very many elements, and almost all of them have an emotional weight.

I have used borders in different forms. In the *Chair* trilogy they're very important. The pictures are crammed full of details, and somehow the borders keep them from falling off the page. I used magic markers in *Cherries and Cherry Pits*, because Bidemmi liked them. She's my character who draws, so I had to give her what she wanted to draw with, even though she's a fictional character. So she drew with magic markers and I painted with watercolors.

In *Lucky Song*, I wanted very much for the color to sweep all the way to the edges and right off the page. But I wanted the kid to be as close to the middle of the page as I could get her, because she's the center of the world. *Scooter* had a very interesting graphic problem. It was already a long story, yet I wanted the life of the people in the words to spring to life in pictures all along the margins, so that's what I did.

On *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart*

The story of Amber and Essie is the story of two little girls whose father is in jail. I didn't know how I was going to handle that, but the characters handle it very easily in their conversations. One of them had one attitude, one of them had another. And they managed to talk about it. They are coping with the absence of their father; there's no question that they're going to go on longing for him to come back. And he does come back at the end. Here's an early one [illustration] of Amber and her father, but she's too young. I love this picture, but I couldn't use it.

I did something very different in the book than I've done before, both graphically and in the writing. I wrote the whole book in unrhymed verse. I had written it previously in prose but it didn't quite work. And then graphically, other than four introductory portraits in color at the beginning of the book, all of the colored pencil paintings are at the end where you get to go through the poems again — this time in the form of the pictures. I did not want colored pictures of the kind that I often do, which are very rich and varied and full of decoration and borders and life. I didn't want those to draw away from the poems.

Here is the dummy of *Amber and Essie*. But this dummy shows the colored pictures being amongst the poems. I tried putting in the colored pictures, but I just knew that they were going to over-weigh the poems, so I'm really glad I didn't do that.

On Stories

In my stories there's a strain of utopianism and pedagogy. The stories are inspired by people and events and inner feelings, but they're also moved along by language. And it is this mixture of language, of feeling, of actual events, of memories, of desires for things to have been other than they were. When people say, "Well, did that really happen?" Well, no, it didn't really happen, but I wanted it to happen. The story of being loved, being able to be creative, being able to move, being able to be curious, being able to expand. How could you ever hear that enough?

Books by Vera B. Williams

- AMBER WAS BRAVE, ESSIE WAS SMART: THE STORY OF AMBER AND ESSIE TOLD HERE IN POEMS AND PICTURES, Greenwillow Books / HarperCollins Publishers, 2001
- LUCKY SONG, Greenwillow Books, 1997
- LONG WALKS AND INTIMATE TALKS (stories and poems by Grace Paley), The Feminist Press, 1993
- SCOOTER, Greenwillow Books, 1993
- "MORE MORE MORE," SAID THE BABY: 3 LOVE STORIES, Greenwillow Books, 1990
- STRINGBEAN'S TRIP TO THE SHINING SEA (illustrated with Jennifer Williams), Greenwillow Books, 1988
- CHERRIES AND CHERRY PITS, Greenwillow Books, 1986
- MUSIC, MUSIC FOR EVERYONE, Greenwillow Books, 1984
- SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR ME, Greenwillow Books, 1983
- CHAIR FOR MY MOTHER, A, Greenwillow Books, 1982
- THREE DAYS ON A RIVER IN A RED CANOE, Greenwillow Books, 1981
- HOORAY FOR ME! (written by Remy Charlip & Lilian Moore), Four Winds Press, 1980
- GREAT WATERMELON BIRTHDAY, THE, Greenwillow Books, 1980
- IT'S A GINGERBREAD HOUSE: BAKE IT! BUILD IT! EAT IT! Greenwillow Books, 1978

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Please note that this interview took place on October 10, 2001 in lower Manhattan, New York. The events of September 11, 2001 were fresh in the hearts and minds of both Vera B. Williams and Nick Glass.

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