

Christy Hale

Biography



Christy Hale was born in 1955. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees in teaching, and began her career as an art teacher. After earning an additional degree at Pratt Institute of Art, Christy served in the children's publishing field as a designer and an art director. Eventually, in 1990, she followed her childhood dream to write and illustrate books for children when she illustrated *Juan Bobo and the Pig* by Felix Pitre. From this beginning, many others have followed, including a continuing collaboration with Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen on the Elizabethi books. Christy also continues her early work of letterpress printing, publishing limited editions of fine books. Christy spoke at the 2003 Festival.

Selected Bibliography

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| <i>Beloved One: The Black Child's Book of Prayer</i> by Rosemary Bray McNatt | <i>Mama Elizabethi</i> by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen |
| <i>Billy and Emma</i> by Alice Mead | <i>Paco and the Witch</i> by Felix Pitre |
| <i>Elizabethi's Doll</i> by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen | <i>A Safe Place Called Home</i> by Eileen Spinelli |
| <i>Elizabethi's School</i> by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen | <i>Those Calculating Crows</i> by Ali Wakefield |
| <i>Juan Bobo and the Pig</i> by Felix Pitre | <i>Who's in the Hall? A Mystery in Four Chapters</i> by Betsy Hearne |

Website

www.christyhale.com

Interview

- 1. What sort of road led you to be a children's illustrator? How have your early life and education influenced your work?**

I still recall my parents' reading voices of well-loved stories from early childhood. Aware that I should never mark a book, I would draw my version of characters on separate scraps of paper and slip them between the pages—my first illustrations. I decided at age 10 that I wished to write and illustrate books. That was the year my parents divorced and we moved with my mother 3,000 miles away from my father, across the country. This pain was deeply internalized. Fortunately, an active creative life shared with a new best friend, helped me through the worst of this transition. The two of us wrote and illustrated stories almost every day after school. We also acted out stories. We were spies the whole summer after our teacher read us Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy*. The next summer we "lived off the land," camping outdoors for a week and building

fires with pine needles—acting out our teacher's inspiring read of Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*. To this day, when I am illustrating I need to act out the stories.

My parents never went to college so I probably took a circuitous route in my training. After high school I went to Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. I majored in Art, though it was not a particularly strong department. The overseas programs and education department at Lewis & Clark were both strong. I immersed myself in Art History in preparation for travel, and also prepared myself to teach secondary art. Learning about other cultures and travel are lifelong interests, which I believe add depth to my work. Many of my illustrated titles feature other cultures. I have also worked as the Art Director since the inception of Lee & Low Books (multicultural publisher).

I taught art (quite happily) for several years after college before the desire to be an illustrator demanded that I continue to nurture my own (instead of everyone else's) art. I moved 3,000 miles again, sight unseen to Brooklyn, NY, where I studied illustration and design at Pratt Institute. This was a rich and intense time re-conceiving myself professionally. After Pratt, I began work as an Art Assistant at Dutton Children's Books. I worked at a number of children's book publishers, moving up in the design departments until I was the Art Director. I reviewed numerous portfolios and worked with scads of illustrators on their illustrations. Still I was nurturing the art of others. I was timid about my own art. I knew how quickly a portfolio could be dismissed; I wanted to be ready when I presented myself.

I was fortunate to meet kind and wonderful editors at the different children's book publishing jobs I held. They were my friends. They knew my desire to illustrate too. My first break came from Rosemary Brosnan, editor at Lodestar Books (Dutton). At the time I was the Art Director for Four Winds Press. It seemed fitting that my first picture book would be illustrated for the first publisher with whom I'd worked.

It is hard to know precisely which life events and educational opportunities lead me down the road as illustrator. I feel as if I have always been on this road. I have learned an enormous amount about how to illustrate a book by working, designing and art directing other illustrators. My teaching background probably translated very well into art directing.

2. What process do you use when you are working? Do you have special ways in which you find ideas, do research, persevere during hard patches, etc?

I always begin by trying to pace the manuscript, or break it down into scenes to fit the formatted length of the book. I then make verbal notes describing the kind of scene that might work. I make lists of all the visual research I need to complete each scene—specific objects, gestures, expressions, settings, lighting, and so forth. I spend an extended period of time finding visual reference material. When I lived in New York I spent hours upon hours in the Picture Files. For my very first book, *Juan Bobo and the Pig*, I also bought books on Caribbean interior design as well as travel books. My process has changed slightly over the years, as it is possible to do more picture research over the Internet. I look in the mirror or find old photos for expressions, sometimes my husband or daughter have



acted out gestures. I have my own huge library of books showing situations, poses, and expressions. I have visual dictionaries, costume books, bird books, flower books, etc. These are all utilized in creating the initial dummy, but again can be useful references for the finished art.

The finished art I have approached in different mediums, depending on the project. In all situations I experiment a bit to find a look that I like for the book. I usually create a sample piece and once it is approved continue on the other pieces. I do not complete one piece at a time, but work on several, picking them up and putting them down again. Each time I approach a work in progress I see it anew, and can often spot a problem that was not evident the last time. When I am stuck, it is best to move forward to a new piece rather than rework the problem piece. Inspiration for a solution may come in the resolution of another piece.

3. What do you consider to be your best book? Why is that?

The book that has received the most attention is *Elizabeti's Doll*. I do love this book and feel the strongest emotional attachment to this work. My young daughter, like Elizabeti, also loved her dolls. I related to the text strongly because I had my own pet rock as a child. I had tied a rope around it and dragged it behind me as an imaginary skunk! I am forever struggling with the desire to be both graphic and painterly. This is the first "soft" book I illustrated. The intimacy of Stephanie's text called for a quietness, and I listened.

4. What is your favorite work? What was the inspiration for that book? Why is it your favorite?

Though there are numerous problems that I would redo or fix, I still love my first book, *Juan Bobo and the Pig*, because it is vibrant, playful and graphic. This first book was invited to be in the juried Original Art show. I like the limited palette and the folkloric and slightly retro look.

5. Are any of your books autobiographical? In what way?

Seeing as I am not author, only illustrator, the story line is never autobiographical, but sometimes the visuals have hints of my life. In *Juan Bobo* I used a wedding picture as reference for one of the shots of Juan Bobo dressing the pig (I am the pig). In *Elizabeti's School* I used shots of me fixing my daughter's hair, then a shot of her acting out Elizabeti's actions. We don't look like the characters in the book, but the gesture and lighting reference helped. I am completing art now for a riddle book in which I placed the characters in New York because I am so nostalgic for my time living there.

6. Which book was the hardest for you to do? What made it so hard?

There is a book that never was published; the whole project was cancelled. The editor was never clear about what she wanted. We went through numerous page counts, trim sizes, and interior structures of the material. The book was bounced between different art personnel who didn't see eye to eye. There was poor communication from the beginning to the end. It is not easy to do good work in that situation.



7. How has gaining recognition for your work (awards, honors, people who contact you for interviews, etc.) changed you or the work you do?

There are always different sides to every situation. As I mentioned, the book *Elizabethi's Doll* has received the most recognition for me. On the good side, appreciation of this work has allowed new projects to come my way. However, I find that each new project is then compared to Elizabethi, whether the writing or content of the books is remotely related. A recent review complained that I didn't give a book the emotional aspect that was in *Elizabethi's Doll*. The book wasn't written with that kind of emotional content so it seems an unfair comparison. I like to vary my visual approach to a book in response to the text, but I find many people just want my work to look like *Elizabethi's Doll*. That is limiting. On such projects, I become less sure of my voice because I am trying to resolve my visuals by prescription. I would prefer to be contracted with a more open approach.

8. What advice would you give to teachers who want to use your books?

Many publishers now have web sites with related activities and curriculum tie-ins for the books. This can be a great source of inspiration.

9. What advice would you give to would-be children's illustrators who want to follow in your footsteps?

I think it becomes more and more difficult to get attention. There are so many talented people who give up. Number one—persist! I have held on to my dream since I was 10 and have inched my way forward. Number two—prepare. I put myself in training situations that helped me get near to my goal.

10. What have you found to be the most rewarding about your work in children's literature?

I love that I continue to learn about so many things as I prepare my illustrations for books. My mind is stimulated. I feel lucky to use my hands creating a tangible product. I can share my work with others.

11. What is the best thing a child ever said to you?

One young boy asked me to illustrate his stories; that's the ultimate compliment!

12. What is your favorite memory of the Huck Festival or of Charlotte herself?

There were many other inspiring speakers at the festival. I was truly nurtured listening to them all. I enjoyed our dinner event at Charlotte's home and perusing her book collection. I love early, early Maurice Sendak books; Charlotte had a number of them on her shelves. We also discussed at length our mutual appreciation of the late poet, William Stafford. She was so personable.

