

CAN WRITE

Meeting Canadian Writers and Illustrators of Children's Books

What inspires the writers of the books your students read? How does an illustrator decide what to draw? Is it true that most authors and illustrators don't know each other? This column will feature a different Canadian children's book creator in each issue and show you the story beyond the covers.

Linda Bailey, Author Colin Jack, Illustrator

It is very common for the writer and the illustrator of a picture book to not know one another. Generally, after accepting a manuscript, the publisher selects the illustrator. Often writer and illustrator do not even communicate directly with each other. Some of my favourite titles are by Canadian author Linda Bailey, who has received many awards and much recognition for her writing. Two of her newest books are illustrated by Colin Jack, a story artist at DreamWorks Animation. They might not have met prior to sharing a book, but Linda's tongue-in-cheek humour and Colin's quirky art are a match made in book heaven.

Margriet: The hilarious *Toads on Toast* has a distinct fairy tale feel to it.

Linda: Yes, *Toads on Toast* is in "folktale" turf. It started with the title. There was a moment when I happened to notice that two words with very different meanings ("toads" and "toast") had a very similar sound. I went around muttering them in my mind for a few days. Toads. Toast. Toads. Toast. Then one day I heard myself say "toads on toast." Wow! This struck me as a great title for a book—lots of intrigue and humour. But I still didn't have a story...not till I realized that "toads on toast" sounds like a menu item (eggs on toast, beans on toast, etc.). At that point, it became obvious that somebody was going to cook up some toads on toast in my book. Somebody—who? Why not a fox? They'll eat anything! And I was off ...

Colin: *Toads* was great to illustrate. I had just come off of doing a storyboard gig so I had unintentionally storyboarded the whole book. When I submitted my roughs there were literally hundreds of drawings and the art director and editor were forced to go through them all and select what they wanted. A lot of the background jokes were added in the last week before it was submitted for final approval from the editor. They were a lot of fun to come up with!

Margriet: Was *Toads on Toast* the way you pictured it in your head, Linda?

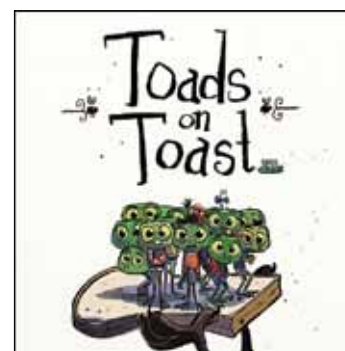
Linda: Yes, only better. My own mental images of the toadlets and their Mamma were not very developed. I was imagining semi-



Margriet Ruurs is the author of 28 books for children. She conducts author presentations in schools around the country. www.margietruurs.com

by Margriet Ruurs

realistic toads. But the moment I saw Colin's wacky, scrawny little toadlets with their ET-looking heads, I laughed and knew they were absolutely right. And Mamma? Well, she's some crazy combo of Lucille Ball and Aretha Franklin. She's adorable. The setting of this toad-and-fox world is a lot of fun, too. Colin did a great job!



Margriet: The story reads smoothly and easily. How long does it take you to get a "simple" picture book text just right?

Linda: I was lucky because it often takes years, but in this case it did not take long at all. I have manuscripts in my computer that have been in "editing stage" for decades. I won't submit them until they're as polished and as strong as they can possibly be.

Margriet: Colin, your aliens in the *Galaxy Zack* books, your *Bad Jack Fox*, your monsters in space, and now your toads make me giggle before I even read the story. What is involved in developing the characters?

Colin: Each picture book will vary depending on page number and the amount of detail in the pictures. On average five months. To develop the characters I start with the manuscript and any ideas the author and art director have about the characters. I sketch out several different versions and from there we hone in on what the character will be.

Margriet: Linda, how important is the art when you are writing picture books? Do you "picture" the book in your mind?

Linda: Yes, I do. Absolutely. Especially if the book is funny. I picture funny images, and if I feel that certain images are integral to

the story, I make sure that the illustrator knows this. The bottom line, though, is that in writing a funny picture book, I am absolutely and totally dependent on having a funny illustrator. Without funny art, the words just lie there. And now we have a new book! *If You Happen To Have a Dinosaur* was released in May 2014.

Margriet: Colin, did you immediately see the possibilities when you read this manuscript?

Colin: Actually, it was Linda who saw the possibilities in one of my drawings from my blog! She loved one of the images of a dinosaur so much she wrote a book based around the idea. I have two sons who delight and exhaust me daily. They give me inspiration and even pop up in the new book. It is handy to have kids! Both my boys love dinosaurs. We read a dinosaur encyclopedia as bedtime stories and they love watching shows about how they lived. My research was done before the manuscript was, on this one!

Margriet: Linda, you have been writing books for children for many years: the popular Stevie Diamond detective series, the Good Times Travel series—fiction, non-fiction, a book of poetry, the award winning Stanley series. Is there one genre you prefer over another?

Linda: I think of myself as a kind of genre-hopper. I love trying new challenges and stretching in different directions. There are many sub-genres of children's literature that interest me, and maybe the only one that doesn't pull me is the one that pulls most other writers—young adult. I doubt I will ever write a YA novel. As for the other sub-genres, I have a wide range of books coming out in the next few years. Stay posted!

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