

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.



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

Lee Edward Födi: Teaching a Magic Potions Class

by Margriet Ruurs

I first met Lee Edward Födi at a literacy event in Vancouver. Since then I keep seeing his name and his books. I wanted to find out more about this interesting author and am happy to share my discoveries with you.



Margriet: What comes first, the words or the pictures?

Lee: I am both an author and an illustrator, though I mostly think of myself as a storyteller. Sometimes I tell stories with words, sometimes with pictures, and sometimes with both. I'm very visual in my approach. I find it difficult to write without some form of drawing. All of my stories begin in my sketchbook. I start with doodles, charts, maps, diagrams, character sketches—anything that helps to generate as many good ideas as possible.

Once I feel I have enough “fuel,” I begin writing in a more formal way, which usually means typing on my computer. But I still often turn back to my sketchbook. Whenever I feel that the words aren't flowing, or I'm struggling with a character, I begin drawing. I can't tell you the number of times I've drawn a character and unlocked the “magic” of that character's personality. Then I'm able to translate that magic into words.

In my fantasy writing, it also helps me to build props and models. Building unusual things like a dragon's egg or a steampunk key helps me to visualize my world. I suppose it's a technique to keep me motivated and inspired throughout the arduous process of writing.

Margriet: You teach writing to children. How does that work?

Lee: Ten years ago I started a program for kids called Creative Writing for Children (CWC). It's kind of like soccer for writers—it gives kids tools to help them write, illustrate and desktop publish their own books. I designed it with my ten-year-old self in mind; wanting to foster an environment where kids could be inspired and create in a way that treated them (and their work) seriously and professionally. We have many mentors in this program, but I am still the main one.

Teaching certainly keeps me immersed in that childhood

world of discovery and wonder. For example, I created a magic potions class as a way to help my students explore the five senses. I have a treasure chest full of magical ingredients (mummy dust, goblin eyeballs and dragon tears—that sort of thing) that I bring to class. The students love it! They select different ingredients, write a recipe, and then brew their own potions, all the while recording their observations. There have even been a few “explosions!”

Margriet: Tell us about your books.

Lee: I'm a fantasy writer. I think that's because I always love to escape reality. As a visual person, it's more fun to create characters that aren't human. The books I'm best known for are the *Kendra Candlestar* books. There are four books currently in the series, with the fifth and final book, *Kendra Candlestar* and the *Search for Arazeen*, due to come out this spring. The *Kendra* books are kind of like *The Wizard of Oz* meets *The Hobbit*. They are full of talking animals, mythical creatures and quests to dangerous lands.

Margriet: How did you come to be a writer/illustrator?

Lee: I was always a writer. I still have a copy of the very first book I wrote at the age of six or seven. It's called *The Farm 7720*. I think 7720 was part of my phone number when I was a kid.

I grew up on a farm in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia. It was a busy life for my family, especially in summer! Most of my friends went on vacation, but for us that was the time to work the hardest. I spent long hours picking fruit or tending to chickens. Doing these repetitive tasks helped me become an expert daydreamer. I would just float off into my own imaginary worlds. When the work was done, I'd head to my bedroom and make my own books. My books had covers, illustrations and even copyright pages.

Margriet: Do you do author visits?

Lee: I love to be in the classroom. I'm a big kid, so it's pretty easy to be in front of a group of children and share the things I love—talking animals and dragons—because children generally love those things, too. I feel that my job as a visiting author is to show kids a glimpse of a different world—a world that is creative and unusual. I bring as many different props and models as I can to

a school, because I think a gallery of magical artifacts helps take students out of their everyday worlds and enflames their imaginations.

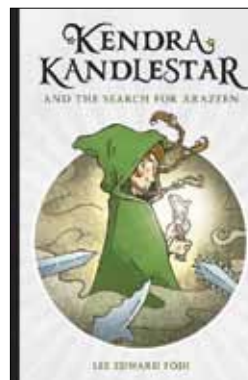
I know there are kids out there who dream of becoming writers and artists, so I think a visit from a creative person is life-giving fuel. I really believe in visual literacy, so many of my activities have a certain immediacy and impact. For example, I have one workshop where we plot out a story by designing a character's epic quest to recover a stolen item. In between we get to throw all sorts of problem at that character and we do it with symbols on a map. Anyone can participate in this activity, even a student who typically has poor written output, or one who comes from a different language background. By the end of this activity, we've created an entire story with a problem, a solution, and a journey in between. It may not be a story strictly of words, but it's a story nonetheless, and that can be a powerful step towards greater writing proficiency.

Margriet: Are there new books in your future?

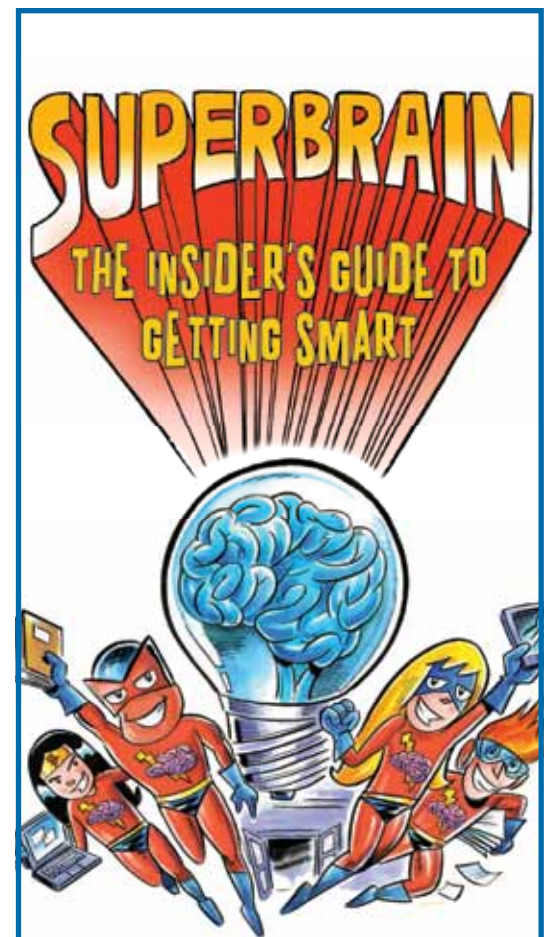
Lee: My new *Kendra Kandlestar* book is the last in that series, and it's coming out this spring. I've been working on two other books. They don't have publishing homes yet, but they are both in the realm of fantasy for children.

Margriet: What are some of the books that you love to read?

Lee: I read mostly children's middle-grade literature, as I'm constantly evaluating books for my students and developing mini study guides for them. My guilty pleasure is to read material that many people might find quite dry, such as mythology or philosophy.



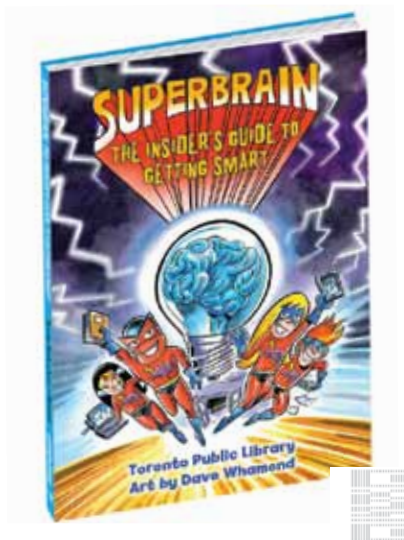
Check out Lee Edward Födi's website: www.kendrakandlestar.com



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