

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 features a different Canadian children's book creator in each issue and shows you the story beyond the covers.

Kari-Lynn Winters

I met author Kari-Lynn Winters on several occasions and was struck by her beaming smile and bubbly personality. Besides, I love the books she writes, like *aRHYTHMetric: A book and a half of poetry about math* and *Gift Days*, an African story. So I asked her some questions to share with you.

After finishing her doctoral program at UBC in literacy education, Kari-Lynn assumed her position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, where she teaches language arts and drama-in-education, and mentors teacher candidates in their elementary cohort. She is the author of fourteen books for children.

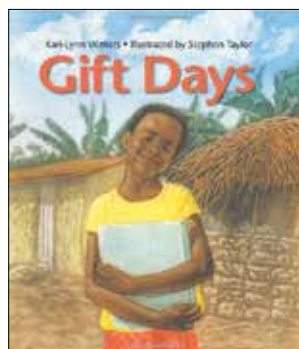


Margriet: As a child you were not fond of writing. What changed your mind?

Kari-Lynn: I was a late bloomer; I didn't start enjoying writing until I was in university and was learning about theatre and writing plays. It was at this time in my life when I began visualizing scenes and paying attention to conversations and dialogue. I started to see how my words could touch others. I noticed how people would wipe a tear or belly laugh because of MY words. It was astounding and made me question why I hadn't started earlier. Through writing for the stage, I gained access to a unique form of expression that I hadn't known before. Indeed, coming to the realization that writing is actually artful, creative and imaginative was eye-opening for me!

Margriet: Your books include a vast variety of topics and genres. Where do your stories come from?

Kari-Lynn: Stories are found in the culmination of my life experiences: my travels, past conversations, feelings, beliefs, but mostly through the questions that I ponder. *Gift Days*, for example (a story I wrote about a girl who wanted to go to school), came from an international literacy course I took at UBC. It was



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by Margriet Ruurs

here that I met Samuel Andema from Africa. He spoke about literacy inequities for girls in Uganda. I had so many questions. I felt compelled to write about it.

No-Matter-What Friend, on the other hand, stems from a childhood of having dogs as pets. Every story I write has a behind-the-scenes story—an idea or journey that helped form it. I always know where my stories come from, but I never know what I will be writing in the future because I haven't yet lived those moments. As I tell my students, I'll know a good story when I feel it, embody it, live it!

Margriet: You also teach as a professor in education. How do you use books in your work with teachers?

Kari-Lynn: Teaching and authorship go hand in hand. Not only do I use my books (and the books of others) to teach the teacher candidates instructional strategies like Q charts, tableaux, and writing in role, for example. I also use books to evoke emotions, discuss difficult subject matter, and help them empathize with the universal experiences of their own students. Books provide opportunities to become closer with our students and better teachers too. They make us more human.

I use books, those written by me and by others, to demonstrate to teacher candidates how to teach reading and writing. As well, I use books to strengthen literature discussions, develop understandings, and to show my students how to build the speaking and viewing skills of their own students.

Margriet: What is your advice to teachers with regard to getting kids to read and write?

Kari-Lynn: My advice to teachers is to remember the ARTS in Language Arts. Reading and writing is about creative expression and meaning making (even when you are writing non-fiction or informational text). Literacy is about the assemblages of life that culminate and interweave. It is about connection and understanding, not about grammar, deconstruction of texts and rules. Reading and writing happen throughout the day, every day—in print, but also on screens, through visual art and with your body.

When you start to love what you are reading/writing about, you start to become invested. When you become invested and

try to understand or communicate ideas and thoughts, you become a better reader/writer. In other words, get kids invested in purposeful, authentic literacy projects where they can't wait to research, read more, act on their feelings, refute inequities, express themselves and share their own experiences.

Margriet: How do you manage time to write with such a busy schedule of family, teaching and speaking engagements?

Kari-Lynn: In our busy lives, we make time for the things that are important to us. I can't not write. It is my passion. Therefore, I make time for it. I get up earlier than most to have opportunities to practise writing. I dedicate blocks of time to learn the craft of writing, to engage in it, and to know the world through words. I manage to find time for writing because writing makes my life manageable—without it, I would be lost.

Margriet: One of your newest books is *Bad Pirate*. Tell us about it!

Kari-Lynn: *Bad Pirate* was a fun one to write. Believe it or not, I started writing it in 2008. I was thinking about character stereotypes and their opposite actions. I guess that is what inspired the writing. The Captain character is loosely based on my father. He



has a tough shell, but he is kind of a softie. And he has always been so proud of me. I wanted to write a book where two ways of looking at things (e.g., Garrick's and Augusta's perspectives) could both be right and true and where neither needs to compromise their identities.

I was also inspired by the early Berenstain Bear Books (not the later ones, which I find didactic) where the father bear tries to teach the young cub brother some things, but always messes things up. I still love those books.

I love the illustrations for *Bad Pirate*—absolutely love them! I adore the details Dean Griffiths included, the characters themselves, the vividness of the colour, and the constant sense of motion they portray. I am lucky to be paired up with such a talented artist. It is my hope that we will create a sequel together or maybe a trilogy. I am thankful to Pajama Press and to all my publishers for the opportunities to work with fine Canadian illustrators. I have never been disappointed.

Kari-Lynn Winters offers a mentorship program for schools where classrooms view and comment on her work before it gets published. Students get opportunities to learn about editing and comprehension, as well as help shape the book itself. In return, Kari tries to visit the school when the book comes out and offers the school the book dedication. To find out more, check out the website: <http://kariwinters.com/mentors>.



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