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Q & A with Beth Kephart

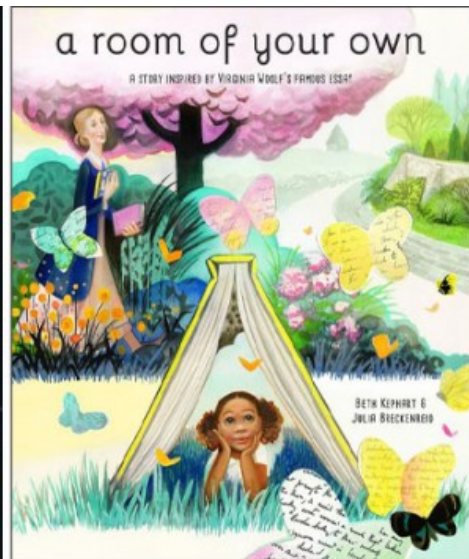
By Patricia J. Murphy | Jul 25, 2022

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Beth Kephart can handle the truth. She is an award-winning author of more than 36 nonfiction and fiction titles, including Handling the Truth and We Are the Words: The Master Memoir Class, collections of essays and poetry, and middle grade and YA novels. Recently she added picture

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books to her publication list, including two picture book biographies: And I Paint It: Henriette Wyeth's World and Beautiful Useful Things: What William Morris Made; and another, A Room of Your Own: A Story Inspired by Virginia Woolf's Famous Essay coming in early August. She is also a professor of creative nonfiction at the University of Pennsylvania, a teacher of writing workshops, classes, and seminars for writers from 7-90 years old, and an avid creator of handmade books. PW spoke with Kephart about what ice skating has to do with her writing, how her obsessions fuel and inform her work, and the truths behind why she does what she does and who it's all for.

When did you first discover you wanted to be a writer?

When I was eight years old, I started to skate on a pond in Boston. I continued skating in a rink upon our family's return to Wilmington, Delaware. For me, these two things—skating and writing—have always been linked, for writing is, to me, like choreographing your moves on the ice—the slowness, the quickness, the

extensions, and the compressions.

What did you first write as a kid?

I wrote awful poetry. I'd watercolor the pages of blank books until they were all buckled and ripple-y, and wrote on them. I had to have color. I've always been interested in the saturation of words and color. I'd write poems that were inflated, audacious, and deeply *purple* in terms of the language. It was where I began.

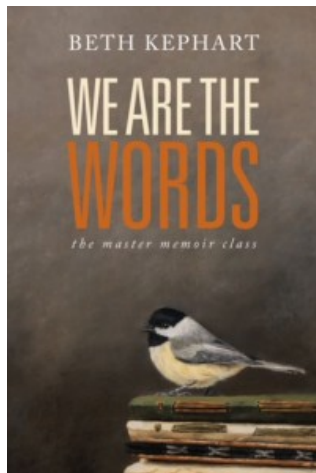
How did you first start teaching writing?

I began teaching my son and his friends when he was in third grade. I would go to his elementary school and talk about various stories that I love, and give them writing exercises. Then in the summer, when my son had a group of his friends come to our house, I'd roll out huge pieces of paper, give them assignments, and have them write stories. I felt at the time like they were always being asked to compete against each other, and I wanted to show them that imagination and writing were not competitive. I also wanted to create an environment where they were free to ask questions, write stories, and be inspired by music. I did this for many years.



After teaching your son and his friends, you took your writing workshops on the road. What did you teach and where?

I began to teach writing workshops at a local garden called Chanticleer in Wayne, Pennsylvania. We brought together kids from West Philadelphia, many of whom had English as a second or third language, with students from my area, and we would write and have extraordinary conversations. It was then that I discovered that I loved building curriculum. I especially loved seeing what would happen with my students' writing, and the end-of-session celebrations. We would invite the children's families; they would all get dressed up and come listen to their children read their work.



I've also had the pleasure of creating a workshop for the National Young Arts Foundation in Miami as a memoir-writing mentor, where I worked with 20 young writers. One of the many projects that I gave them was to write an autobiography of their hair. I remember it was a very windy day when we got into Miami. So, we took the young people out into the wind; and my husband, Bill, took photos of each of them and their hair flying around. I chose the topic of hair because I've always had a ruinous relationship with my own, and I thought that it would be a fun way to get them writing. I also believe that oftentimes we get to our work in a sideways fashion. It's often hard for writers to sit down to write, but it can be fun to *slide toward stories*.

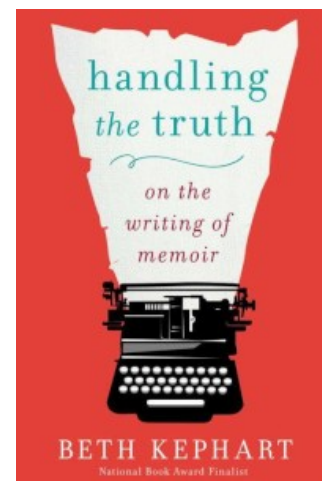
In addition to teaching children and young adults, you also teach at the university level. How did this come about, and what subjects do you teach?

Once I began publishing books, I was invited to do all kinds of workshops, including visiting a classroom at the University of Pennsylvania to talk about my book *Flow*. Unbeknownst to me, the head of the university's creative writing department was sitting in the room as I interacted with the wonderful students. A few weeks later, he wrote and asked me if I'd teach a creative nonfiction class. And I said yes!

I have taught creative nonfiction for several years, and middle grade/young adult literature. But right now, I'm taking a short break from the creative nonfiction class, although I'll probably still teach honors thesis and independent studies. Through juncture workshops, I teach a master level class to women.

How else do your teaching and writing intersect and inform each other?

I could answer this question in a number of different ways. This is because the topics that I have pursued, especially with my new picture books, are of extreme personal interest—they represent my obsessions. And, when I have these interests, I want to share what I've learned about the subject, and how I ultimately wrestled it to the page. So, when I'm excited about the work that I'm doing, the work alone is never enough. I want to share with others how it came about, the struggles I had, the walls that I had to break down to get to the story. I don't want to leave anything to the side in my process. I've also always been a big reader, and I love to share the books that have taught me with others. With my book *Handling the Truth*, I include dozens of books to read in the back. And with *We Are the Words*, I quote from more than 100 books that I have read. It's not enough to just do the work. I want to share all of these things that intersect with my work—and my energy for the work itself.



How did you make the transition to kids' books? What can you tell us about your current and/or upcoming titles?

I first began to write for children with my middle grade novels and wrote my first picture book, *Trini's Big Leap*, with my husband. And, now, I have published two picture book biographies, and I have two others coming out. Like with all of my work, I'm drawn to memoir and personal stories. My first picture book biography is about Henriette Wyeth, the eldest daughter of artist N.C. Wyeth. I developed a great affection and love for her, a great identification with her, and it became so great that my husband and I drove out to San Patricio, New Mexico, where she lived for much of her life. I later wrote a chapter about her in my book *Wife | Daughter | Self: A Memoir in Essays*. And, one day, I wondered if there was a way that I could distill a single day [in her life]—an imagined day of when Henriette was learning to paint with her father, and she chooses to paint in her own way. I give her that fictional moment [in my book].



As for William Morris in my *With Beautiful Useful Things: What William Morris Made*, I've always been interested in him. He was a complex man. He made wallpaper and tapestries and books. My primary interest was in the books that he made.

For my book *A Room of Your Own*, I've had a long history with Virginia Woolf. I had studied a lot about Virginia: her diaries, her writing, her books, and I've written about her. I also went to the Kislak Library at the University of Pennsylvania that houses some of the books that she hand-printed with her husband, Leonard, through the early days of her Hogarth Press. And I became equally obsessed with her and the relationship she had with her own work. I knew she had something to teach kids of today. In the early 1930s, Woolf was thinking about rooms of her own, and rooms that women could have. She wanted women to have a place where they could create. I think that we can encourage and inspire children to imagine that anything could be a room of their own.

What are your hopes for these books and those who read them?

I think we have responsibilities when we write a picture book to think about how this can spur or spark a conversation between an older friend or a parent, a teacher or librarian and the child. And so it can't just simply be, for example, the history of William Morris; it has to be a start of a conversation. "What beautiful, useful things can we make? How does one thing connect to another thing?" With Virginia Woolf's book, it's not about that she wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*. The conversation is "Where does your imagination live?" And with Henriette Wyeth, it's about how parents can try to teach children something, and how children can always take their own paths.

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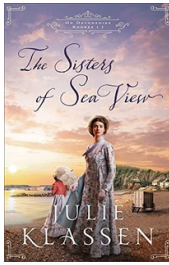
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