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Q & A with Carter Higgins

By Patricia J. Murphy | Oct 26, 2020

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Carter Higgins is the author of a parade of popular picture books, including This Is Not a Valentine, Everything You Need for a Treehouse, and Bikes for Sale, and a middle grade novel, A Rambler Steals Home. She's also a former school librarian, and an Emmy-

winning visual effects and motion graphics artist. Higgins spoke with PW about how her multifaceted background and experience have helped shape her work, and how she wrote and illustrated her upcoming picture book, Circle Under Berry, by using glue sticks, paper, and paints, and playing with shapes—and hopes her readers will be encouraged to do the same.

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I've always been a reader, and I was that kid always with an armful of books. So during my undergraduate years, because I had a limited point of view of what I wanted to do, I tested out the school of education and worked at a public library. And, then, right before my senior year, I made a connection between education and books. I was always studying at Barnes & Noble, and *not* studying at Barnes & Noble reading all of their picture books—and I fell in love with them! Two picture books in particular had a major impact in my wanting to become a school librarian, and later to explore motion graphics. They were *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, and *The Jolly Postman and Other People's Letters* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. I'm not sure what it was about them at that time, but in hindsight it's their unusual structures and inventive formats that appeal to the librarian, motion graphics artist, and children's author-illustrator in me.

Looking back, it's clear to me that these two books, those that I read at Barnes & Noble, and the ones I read as a child drew me into becoming a school librarian. My first school librarian job was in a small school in Goochland County, Va., where I worked for five years; and my second librarian job, also for five years, was in an independent school in Los Angeles. But sandwiched in between was my work in motion graphics. I worked for six years for a post-production studio for the History Channel, and won an Emmy for my work on a documentary series called *Big History*.

What made you leave the library, and then return?

While I had enormous freedom to create my collection and to design the reading spaces for my first library, and I enjoyed the creative problem solving of getting the right books into the right hands—I soon discovered that my favorite project was helping kids create digital portfolios as a way to synthesize and showcase all of their learning across content areas. This obsession became the topic of my master's thesis as well. It was then that I realized the power of storytelling on screens, learned more about visual effects and motion graphics, and wanted to further explore these areas of interest. That's when I left the library, moved to Los Angeles, and began a career in film and television. But, it wasn't long until I started missing the kids—and picture books—and returned to the library as a school librarian in L.A.

When did you decide to try writing children's books?

I started writing for kids while I was working in motion graphics because I really missed being around picture books. I wondered to myself, "What if I could write, too?" But I didn't write my first successful manuscript until I was in my second library. I think this is because I had forgotten how kids sounded—there's a particular balance of precision and chaos in the poetry of how kids speak. Hearing that cadence again was an inspiration. My favorite children's author, Ruth Krauss (*The Carrot Seed, A Hole Is to Dig*), called this "writing from the inside out." It was essential to tap into that because I believe it's a true way to affirm their humanity.

How has your experience in the library and with motion graphics shaped or influenced your writing?

My experience as a librarian has allowed me to see many things: the importance of books, how immersive kids' reading experiences can be, how pre-readers are picture readers, and that the picture book is the perfect place for visual storytelling. My motion graphics work opened my eyes to see how text and pictures ask a lot from readers, how to best pace my stories, and to create tension, and to explore the many different ways in which stories can be created.

Can you tell us about some of your recent titles?

My first picture book was *This Is Not a Valentine*, illustrated by Lucy Ruth Cummins [Chronicle]. The title came to me first, and the text sounds like how kids talk, rambling—that "balance of precision and chaos." *Everything You*



Need for a Treehouse, illustrated by Emily Hughes, is more mindful of language, as one reader named Katerina said, “It has the coolest words I’ve ever heard!” It is because of her that I have the confidence to use big, complicated words, and lyrical language. I call it the “Katerina Effect.” The book is also more intimate because it’s written in second person, for readers who have never had treehouses. I never had a treehouse either, but now with this book, we all have 14! *Bikes for Sale*, illustrated by Zachariah OHora, is my only picture book (so far) with a traditional story arc, which is hard for me, and came from seeing a “Bikes for Sale” sign one day. I always tell kids you never know when story ideas will come stapled to a telephone pole—and that’s become a great writing workshop to use with this book, writing stories inspired by signs.



I think the common thread in all of my books is big childhood moments, seeing things differently—and seeing things like a kid. My hope for my books is that they make readers slow down, ask them to do some thinking—like evaluating a picture, or lingering on the text—and invite them to stay a bit.

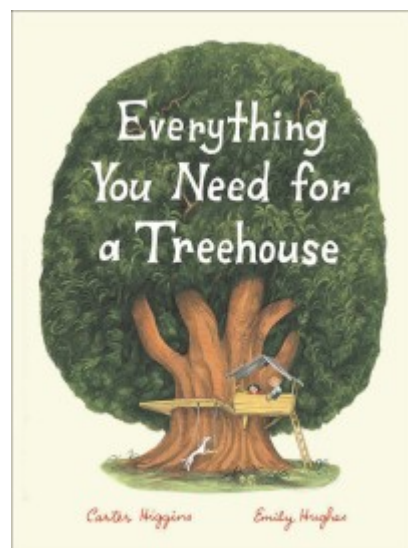
“What are you working on now?”

I have two books coming out in 2021 that are both new storytelling formats for me—a chapter book called *Audrey L and Audrey W: Best Friends-ish*, illustrated by Jennifer K. Man, and my first book as both author and illustrator, *Circle Under Berry*.

Audrey L and Audrey W is about navigating the highest stakes of second grade and finding friends in the middle of it all, especially when someone shares your name and therefore your whole world and identity. I couldn’t have written this book without knowing how kids truly speak and I hope teachers and students find a joyful reflection of life in second grade.

Can you tell us more about your experience writing/illustrating *Circle Under Berry*?

Because I worked a long time as an illustrator in motion graphics doing work for someone else’s vision, it took a while to shift to my own voice as an illustrator, and to believe that I could do this. *Circle Under Berry* is a true concept picture book that to me is an exploration of visual literacy which stretches back to my time in the library where I taught kids about reading, interpreting, and creating their own images. Using glue sticks, paint, and paper, I played with shapes and explored how they can transform into something else. Think Hervé Tullet meets Ruth Krauss. It’s both the most complicated and most straightforward book I’ve written.



What are some of the best and hardest parts of writing for kids?

Sure, I enjoy writing my books, seeing them out in the world, and hoping that might change lives. But the best part of writing for kids is connecting with kids like Katerina. The hardest part is how intimidating it is to connect with kids on the page and not getting it right—because getting it right matters. I am trying to create something that I hope someone will love. It doesn’t have to be millions of readers; it could be just one. And that would be okay.

Some say, ‘Once a librarian always a librarian.’ Do you still find your way into school libraries offering author visits, library programs, etc.?

Yes, I do! I love visiting schools—they are like going home for me and a real joy. When I am able to visit schools, I tell the kids that they are my “coworkers” because we have the same job every day—writing and illustrating and working hard on our stories.

Now, with the pandemic, I've been doing virtual art classes with kids. My goal is to offer something of value. But I can't wait to get back into schools.

How has the pandemic affected your writing?

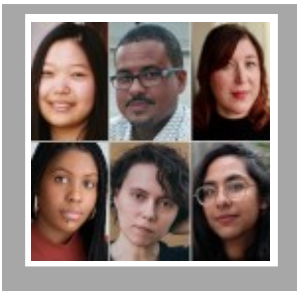
Some days it is hard to be hopeful, and to create something that is hopeful. But it's helpful that I already have projects in motion. Right now, I am working on a story that is musical, and just right for storytimes. I am drawn to happy projects these days.

Any advice for teachers and librarians who might want to write, too?

Teachers and librarians have a front-row seat to see how kids talk, and act, and how they react to the books they are reading to them. So I'd suggest studying what is working or what they find successful in the books they are sharing in their classrooms or libraries to write their own stories. It's like reverse engineering!

I would also tell them to do what I do—follow your heart. Write something that you love, don't chase a formula, structure or trend. And, then plant the story where kids reside—in the universality of childhood— and you just might have something.

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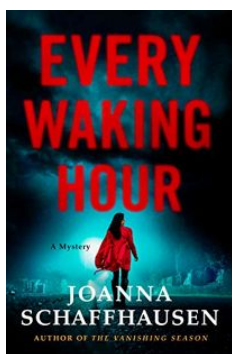
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