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Q & A with Rob Sanders

By Patricia J. Murphy | Oct 22, 2021

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Rob Sanders calls himself "a writer who teaches, and a teacher who writes." Sanders has written many acclaimed titles, including Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag, Stonewall: A Building. An Uprising. A Revolution, Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights, Ruby Rose, Big Bravos, Ruby Rose: Off to School She Goes, and Rodzilla, among others. His latest titles are Two Grooms on a Cake: The Story of America's First Gay Wedding, and Stitch by Stitch: Cleve Jones and the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Sanders taught, coached, and mentored children and fellow teachers in Hillsborough County, Fla., for the last 17 years before taking an early retirement from the classroom last year to write full-time. He continues to teach and mentor adult writers through The Writing Barn, Highlights Foundation, and as a co-regional advisor for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrator's Florida region.

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PW spoke with Sanders about his tightly woven teaching and writing backgrounds, and how a children's author from his youth and two questions from his fourth-grade students opened his eyes to the possibility of becoming an author—and writing books he wished he had when he was growing up

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My whole life, as early as high school, I've worked with kids, whether in volunteer or religious organizations geared toward children, and in public schools. And now I'm writing books for them. So, I've always been teaching in one way or another, have felt most comfortable in educational settings, and have a teacher's heart. When I hear or learn something new, I'm

constantly thinking of ways to share things in the most understandable ways so either adults or children can grasp them. I see myself as a teacher first and foremost, and approach everything from that mindset. It's who I am.

Can you tell us about the path you took to becoming a teacher?

After completing my teaching degree, I went down a different path for a few years. I ended up going into seminary, and then worked for a Christian publisher for 15 years. My work in Christian publishing was my first job in writing, editing, and designing products. Years later, I moved to Florida to be near my family, fell back on my teaching degree, and started teaching fourth grade in an inner-city school.

For all but two years, I worked in Title I schools, mostly teaching fourth grade and Language Arts. I was also a writing resource teacher and coach, traveling to different schools to help both teachers and students.

It sounds like you've influenced the lives of many people. Who has influenced you along the way?

I had many wonderful teachers growing up in Springfield, Mo. One was Mrs. Henley, who read aloud the entire series of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books to my class. She also took us on our first field trip to Wilder's homestead in Mansfield. It was the first time that I had heard novels read in this way, and realized that the books we read were written by authors—and that authors were real people.

When did you first begin writing?

In junior high, I had an English teacher who taught us about letter writing, and I became enthralled with writing block, friendly, and formal correspondence. Then, an English teacher in high school told us that if we published our writing somewhere during the semester, she would give us an automatic "A." So when my poem that I submitted to our local school district's "English Society" annual flyer was accepted for publication, I ended up with an "A" and the writing bug. Having the experience of writing something that people could hold in their hands and read, it was something I've never forgotten. And I haven't stopped writing.

How do you think being a Language Arts teacher has uniquely informed your children's writing?

I used a writer's workshop model where I used "mentor" texts to teach writing, modeled different kinds of genres, and took my students through all of the stages of writing—planning, drafting, writing, rewriting, editing, and publishing. And, when they would write, I would write, too. Each day, we would share and celebrate our stories together. At one point, some of my fourth grade students asked, "Mr. Sanders, where are your books?" I didn't have an answer. I had been published in the religious market many years before, and had thought about writing for children. But it was my students' challenge that encouraged me to learn more about writing and publishing children's books. That was 13 years and 14 books ago.

Hurray for curious fourth graders! How else did your past students help you become a children's author?

Teaching them gave me an "inside track" into their mindsets: how they operate, get along, and function in the world. This helped me discover what they liked and didn't like, what interested them, and what they found funny. And I had the ability to see a variety of books in print, and many ways that authors were exploring different genres. I was also privy to which books kids went back to over and over again, some that they never wanted to read again, and others that caused them to groan when I was reading to them and I had to stop. I've seen firsthand both kids and books in ways most people don't get to see.

How do you decide which stories to tell and books to write?

When I started writing, I saw myself as a fiction writer, and that was the path I followed for several books. But, then the SCOTUS marriage decision happened. It was an unexpected day for a gay man of my age, and one that I thought I'd never see happen.

Kenny Brechner
Bear Is a Bear

Some thoughts on a special picture book.

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BESTSELLERS

As I took in the news report that evening and watched the White House illuminated in the colors of the rainbow flag, I thought about my fourth graders. I knew that some might know that the flag was about being gay, but they probably didn't know who designed it, or why it is important or what its significance is to my community. So, that night I wrote the first draft of what would become *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag*. However, not everything I knew (or thought I knew) about the Rainbow flag turned out to be accurate, but the research that followed corrected that.

How did the writing of *Pride* springboard you to your next books?

It started me off on a path of writing LGBTQ+ history books and other nonfiction books for children. *Pride* was supposed to come out in 2017, but it was delayed and came out in 2018. That turned out to be a great thing because 2018 was the 40th anniversary of the Pride flag. *Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights* came out in 2018. This year came *Two Grooms on a Wedding Cake: The Story of the First Gay Wedding*, and *Stitch by Stitch: Cleve Jones and the AIDS Memorial Quilt*.

Why is it important to you that you write books with LGBTQ+ themes?

My writing has been influenced by LGBTQ+ themes as I've found my voice and become a more honest writer. But at some point I decided since no one had written the story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow flag for kids, I would write that book and get it out there. It was the research for that book that led me to other topics I did (and didn't) know about, including the Stonewall Uprising. No one had written about that event or about a transgender soldier, the first gay marriage, or the AIDS Memorial Quilt for kids either. And I thought that I could tell these stories and fill a space on library shelves that no one knew was empty or that needed books on these topics for kids. I'm glad to be adding books to the canon of stories that are untold or never told at all.

What age groups do you think *Pride* and your other stories are best suited?

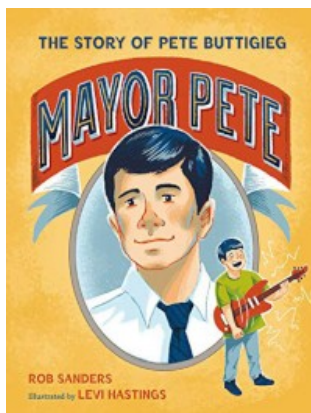
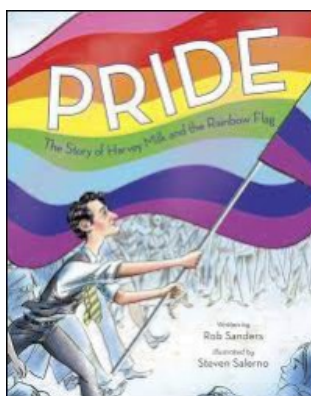
I don't think there is one particular age group or age limit. The books have different meanings for different people. For example, I have read *Pride* to two- and three-year-old children and their parents; and, the kids talked about the colors and rainbows. With fourth graders, they know when things are not fair, so that's their takeaway from this book. I've also read it to middle grade and high school kids, and Gay and Straight Alliances, and some kids talk about coming out and/or what it's like not be accepted in school. Even with adults, many share that they didn't know this or that, and some of them are gay. I think readers of all ages can benefit from hearing these types of stories. These books are entry points and introductions to these topics, and will hopefully encourage people to dig deeper and learn more.

Have you had any pushback for your books?

Yes. I have had some people ask me why I write "controversial" books. My answer is, "I don't write controversial books, I write historical books." What would be controversial is to *not* teach history. Part of this history has not been told for the picture book audience, and I'm happy to tell it.

More specifically, two of my books have received some pushback in the recent past. First, *Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights* caused a great uproar on social media platforms. This was among people who thought the book was encouraging kids to file lawsuits or walk out of school. It is, however, a lyrical list of peaceful ways that people have protested throughout history to advocate for their rights.

Then, when *Pride* came out in 2018, I was teaching fourth grade and was planning my traditional reading of my new book on its release day. While I had the book in my room ahead of time, I never felt like it was "real" until the release day. And, since I was (and still am) a writing teacher, it was important for me to teach all of the stages of writing including sharing published work. It was the first year that I informed parents that I was reading one of my books, what it was about, the date I would read it, and gave an "opt-out" option if there was a parent who didn't want their children to hear the book. Three parents opted out, and one became very vocal. As a result, my reading of



View by genre:

Children's Frontlist Fiction

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- 1 Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Book 16**
Jeff Kinney, Author
- 2 The Christmas Pig**
J. K. Rowling, Author, Jim Field, Illustrator
- 3 Dog Man: Mothering Heights: From the Creator of Captain Underpants (Dog Man #10), Volume 10**
Dav Pilkey, Author, Dav Pilkey, Illustrator
- 4 Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Minalima Edition) (Illustrated Edition), 2**
J. K. Rowling, Author, Minalima Design, Illustrator
- 5 The Smart Cookie**
Jory John, Author, Pete Oswald, Illustrator

Pride was postponed three times by the school district. It took a meeting with the deputy superintendent, the Office of Diversity's officer, my principal, a union representative, and me to finally agree that I could read my book to my students.

What was ironic was that I was allowed to have this book in my classroom for my students to read independently, but I wasn't supposed to read it out loud. My students, even the ones who had parents who opted out of the reading, had already read the book; and the book was being read all over the school district, and in classrooms and libraries. I was the only person being told not to read it. Fortunately, we worked through it. But I never asked permission to read a book again. Deciding which texts are right for one's students is part of being a teacher. That was the approach that I used.

What are your hopes for your books and readers?

Fundamentally, I hope that my books are accessible on library shelves, in classrooms, and in the hands of children and parents. I also hope that my readers will see themselves and their families represented on the page, grow in appreciation of others who are different from them, and/or have books that help them as they discover their own identities in the future.

Can you tell us what you are working on now?

I have five forthcoming releases that are in different stages of production. This includes my first novel in verse entitled *Blood Brothers* (Reycraft, 2022). The novel is about three young hemophiliac brothers who experience hate, prejudice, and ostracism during the approaching AIDS epidemic in 1980s America.

In addition, I am busy teaching and mentoring writers, researching a half dozen other books, jotting down new ideas, and reading about other topics. It seems that one door opens another door, and another. And, I'm in the position to say "Yes!" to opportunities and see where they take me. This year, since I left the classroom, has been my busiest ever.

Do you have any advice for teachers who would like to get busy writing?

I have found that a lot of people who want to write spend a lot of time talking, writing, and blogging about it. Yes, we all have to learn and have a support system around us. But you have to write if you want to be a writer. So, I'd say, get busy writing and telling your story, and learn the craft as you go. There's never a perfect time or schedule; you just have to do it! So, quit thinking and talking about it. Write the stories that only *you* can tell—and need to tell.

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