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Q & A with Ron Grady

By Patricia J. Murphy | Feb 27, 2023

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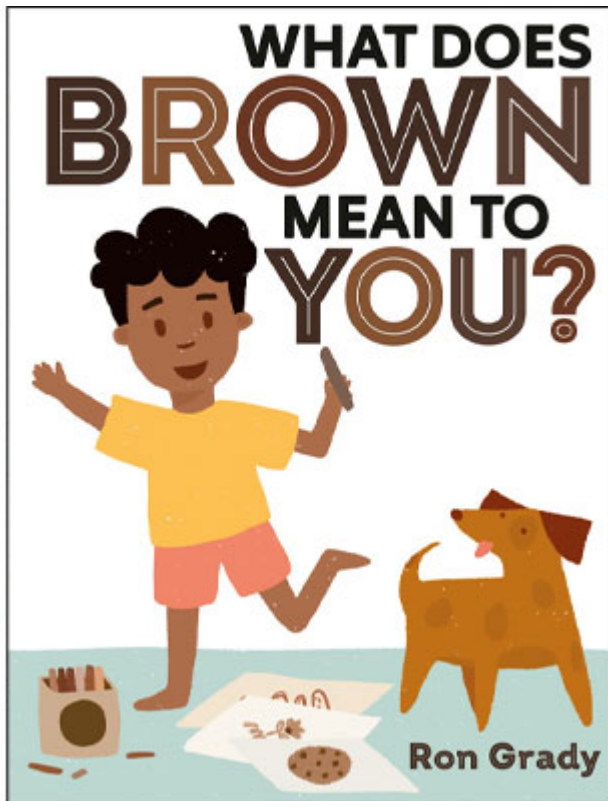
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Ron Grady sees children not as tiny adults, but as human beings with complex abilities and rich social lives. As an early childhood educator, a current PhD student, and the debut author-illustrator of the picture book *What Does Brown Mean to You?*, Grady is determined to uncover everything he can about preschoolers to embolden them

and to help those who surround them do the same. PW spoke with Grady about how he hopes to impact the way we view preschoolers and how they see themselves—and why this should matter to all of us.

How did you decide to become a preschool teacher, and who has been your biggest influence in the field?

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I've taught preschool for six years in New Orleans. I worked at many Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools that focused on constructivist education where learners actively build their own knowledge vs. passively taking in information. Inquiry is a huge part of the curriculum as well as play and the arts. Children's everyday experiences and lives are front and center and celebrated for their richness. Emilia's work recognizes the complexity and ingenuity of young children. It also gives us the space to understand and support children—and to let them thrive.

What can you tell us about your current research in your doctoral program? What was the impetus to get your PhD?

I am a PhD student at the High School of Education at Harvard. Right now, I am taking classes and trying out different research methods. I'm interested in studying and unpacking young children's social world and what we can learn about them through their play, artwork, and the connections that they make with

one another. In addition, I hope to discover how both adults' and children's lives respond to children's social multimodal sites of meaning. After years of teaching preschool, I learned what I thought were some of the most important features of young children's lives, but I wanted to know more. I also realized that if I wanted to speak to adults (e.g. teachers, parents, and caretakers) in compelling ways about this, that I needed to go back to school. Moving forward, my plan is to better understand and help others understand, to serve kids better—and be more responsive in their day-to-day lives. I believe that if teachers of young children, myself included, understand that we're dealing with really complex human beings—and if parents understand how important their roles are in contributing to the lives of their young children—we can see children as genuine collaborators, and all benefit from this collaboration.

You also have a website called Childology.co. When did you start it and why?

I started my website about three and half years ago, initially as a holding space for my reflections about teaching—part portfolio and part online journal. But now it has also become a spot to discover different resources, blog postings and artwork, and learn about the professional development workshops that I'm doing. It's my desire that those who drop by will find valuable strategies and activities that will allow them to look more closely at children... and come away with a deeper view of children's lives beyond just reaching milestones.

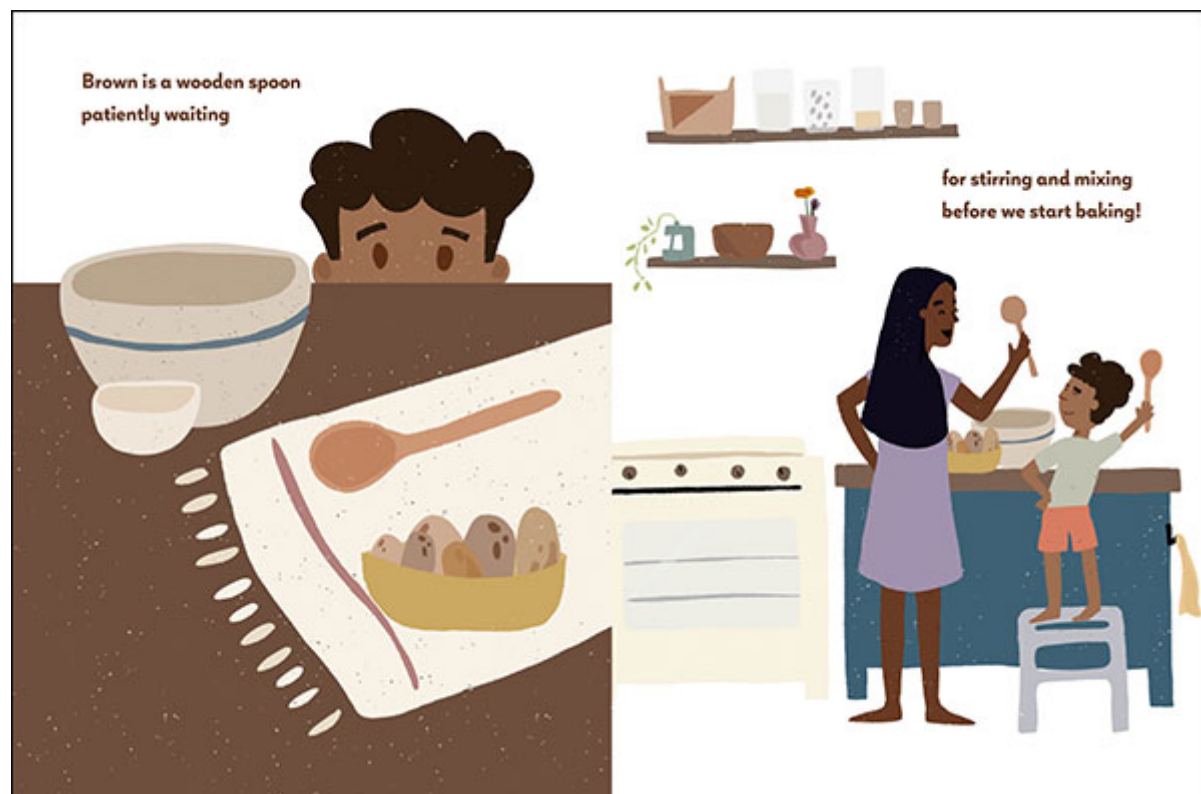
Can you expand upon this "deeper view of children's lives?"

When I'm talking to friends or parents about their kids, they're always really excited to tell me all about how many letters or colors that their kid knows. These things really don't matter much to me. What I want to know is, what artistic forms are your children interested in? How are your children expressing themselves? With my work, I hope to create a *shift* in this conversation. For example, I'm happy that a child knows the letter "A," but it's really much more interesting that they've been trying out paint and/or using the triangular form to make different things. This deeper view also includes how young children are expressing themselves when they come together. Another influence of mine, sociologist William Corsaro, calls this "peer culture." It's when children create these cultural movements and ways of speaking and being that are entirely different from adults. I believe that we miss a lot of the richness of childhood if we don't actually look and acknowledge those things alongside learning letters and colors. We truly need to have a greater interest in the complexities of young children.

Do you remember the exact moment you became interested in early education and devoting your life's work to children?

I first became interested in child development when my niece, Nandi, had just been born, and I was taking a psychology class in college. When we had a unit on child development, I remember thinking it was so cool that "this" or "that" was going on in a baby's brain. And, then when I went home to visit family and saw her, she had made these developmental leaps. There was so much happening! I was, and continue to be, fascinated by all of these processes. I think a lot of what happens in young children—so much of its richness, unfolds whether or not we explicitly support it. But I think that

we don't often celebrate it the way we should. It seems like it's often sort of kicked to the side. So I'd like to see us celebrate it, and then it can become part of our ongoing life celebration as a community and a society as a whole. Sure, the phase of childhood is much shorter than the others, but it deserves the same respect.



From *What Does Brown Mean to You?*

To celebrate brown children in particular, you've written *What Does Brown Mean to You?* How did the idea for this book emerge?

It was in the middle of the pandemic and right after the horror of George Floyd's murder. I was thinking a great deal about young people, world issues, as well as ethnicity, identity, and

creating spaces for children to feel safe and seen. And I was also teaching virtually and thinking about how one could help combat the implicit racial bias that young children have when they see skin color. So, I decided to write *What Does Brown Mean to You?* [Penguin/Paulsen] It started as a thought, turned into a little poem, and then became a book. I was most definitely inspired by my early childhood background and experiences.

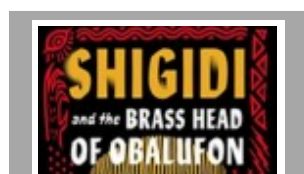
How do you think your preschool teaching and early childhood research have influenced your picture book writing?

My preschool teaching and my research give me an appreciation of how rich a child's everyday life is. Through the right lens, I think you can make a book about a child's life; and like all of those everyday things, this can make an amazing impact. With this book and my next book, *Beatrice Looks for Home* [Penguin/Paulsen], I want to focus on the wonder of what it means to be a child. I'm grateful, feel privileged, and love everything I'm doing. It all feels nourishing, inspiring, and exciting. I see no divisions in the work that I'm doing. It all feels so unified.

What are your hopes for your debut picture book and for your readers?

I hope that it invites everyone to see the beauty of brown skin and to engage with all its beauty. There's not only one shade of brown skin; there are many. My greatest hope for my readers is that they have a group of people who love and care for them, can enjoy good meals, and know what it's like to get a really good hug in the morning, and learn how to create something beautiful and exciting.

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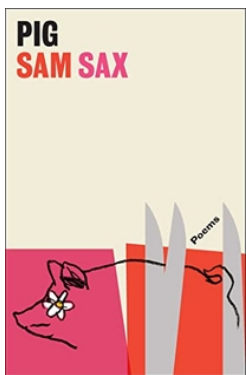
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