

LAURA VACCARO SEEGER
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Includes Activities Based on the Books

A CONVERSATION WITH LAURA VACCARO SEEGER



It's clear to all who know your books that you see the world differently than most of us. How did this affect you growing up? How did people respond? What about now?

It's often been said that I live in my own little world. Sometimes the obvious eludes me and it's the not-so-obvious that I see. As a child, I would create grand collages out of things that should not have been cut up and glued to paper. I always found a way to incorporate artwork into every school assignment, and my teachers were usually pleased with the outcome. Eventually, I learned to work within the confines of the real world . . . at least most of the time.

When did you start making picture books? When did you figure out that is what you wanted to do?

I have known that I wanted to write and paint picture books ever since I was a little girl. I began making books of my own at about eight years old. On a shelf in my studio are journals filled with various writings and sketches dating back to my teenage years. Whenever I'd have a children's book idea, I would write it in my journal and draw a bold box around it so that it could be easily retrieved. My journals are filled with picture book ideas. One day I need to sift through them and see if anything is worthwhile!

What inspires you?

Inspiration comes from everywhere! Everything is a potential book. Ideas simply pop into my head, usually when they're least expected. Most of my books begin with a seed of an interesting and intriguing idea, followed by the difficult challenge of turning that idea into a cohesive, well-designed concept. I always see the pictures in my mind before I am able to create them on paper or canvas. There are times when the pictures remain stubbornly blank and I have no choice but to patiently await their arrival. Once an idea is in place, though, I draw a great deal of inspiration from the ocean and try to spend some time there every day.

Your books have gotten such fine reviews all along. And recently they've received important awards: The Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Picture Books for *DOG AND BEAR: TWO FRIENDS, THREE STORIES*; a Caldecott Honor, a Geisel Honor, a New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year for *FIRST THE EGG*. Does this change things for you—the way you work; or the way you think about your audience?

It does. In some ways it's scary. In some ways it's freeing. As authors, (I imagine that I'm not alone in this), we always wonder if anyone else will think that what we've made is any good or not. So, in that respect, it's rewarding and reassuring! One wonderful way that the awards have changed the way I work is that, although I've always been interested in the ways in which my books are used in the classroom, I now have the privilege of hearing from and speaking with so many more librarians and teachers about their needs and what works and what doesn't.

What does “concept book” mean to you?

I think everything is a concept. All my life I've looked at the world that way. And to me, there is no such thing as a simple concept. The simpler it appears, the more I want to explore it in-depth. ONE BOY is a perfect example. On one level, it is a simple counting book; go a little deeper, and you'll see it's also about words within words; go deeper still and it's about loneliness and creativity.

I've been told that the DOG AND BEAR books are departures for me because they are not concept books, but for me they are about the concepts of friendship, bravery, understanding, loyalty, and love. The possibilities for exploring the concept of friendship are endless. I even find the concept of concepts intriguing. Hmmm . . . maybe there's a new book there!

When you're working on a concept book—LEMONS ARE NOT RED, for example—what comes first? The idea (let's learn about color and shape), or the format (let's use die cuts)?

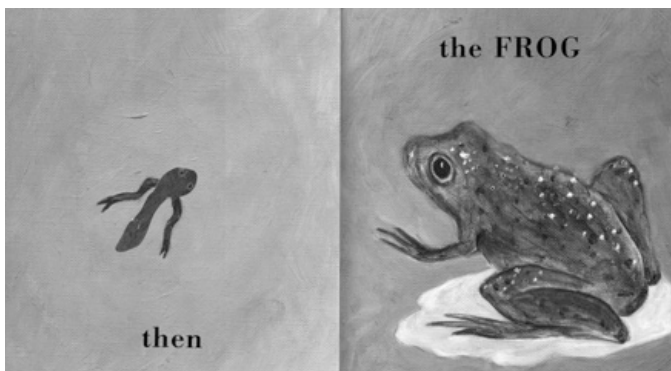
In LEMONS ARE NOT RED, it was the concept of “not” that intrigued me the most. What else is not red? What is never red? What else IS red? I always imagine the conversations that might evolve based on the words and pictures in my books, and I try to add something that will encourage such discussion.

FIRST THE EGG was created with this in mind. I wanted to spark discussion about the process of metamorphosis. With the help of die cuts, the reader is given an opportunity to guess, for example, that an egg will become a chicken. To further encourage such discussion, a chick hatching from the egg is illustrated between the paintings of the egg and the chicken.

We read a lot about “aha” moments these days—mostly for adults. Have you ever seen a child have one of those moments while reading a book of yours, or working on a craft project with you?

Oh, yes, and those moments are wonderful! I call it the “Oh, cool!” moment. When I hear a child (or an adult) say, “Oh, cool!” I know that they are seeing something in a way that they hadn't before.

Once I was working with 8th grade art students over a period of time. They each made their own picture books and I was their “editor”. There was one girl who sat with blank paper in front of her and insisted that she couldn't write or draw. We sat for a while and talked. I suggested that there are stories everywhere, but she still insisted that she wouldn't be able to complete the assignment. So we stopped discussing the project and I asked her to tell me about something or someone she loves. She told me all about her cat and when she was finished, we looked at each other and at the same moment said, “There's the story!” Weeks later, when it was time to illustrate her story, she worried that she couldn't draw or paint well enough. I asked her if she had a camera at home, and we decided that she would photograph her cat and make collages, combining photos with line drawings. Hers was one of the most beautiful and well-written picture books of all. And she saw that, as is also the case for me, there are often multiple “aha” moments during the production of a book.



And do YOU have “aha” moments when you are working on a book—struggling to make it work? What happens?

ALWAYS! Sometimes those moments arrive earlier than others. Sometimes my brain hurts while waiting for that moment to arrive. Sometimes there are false "aha" moments—those that seem so real until a few hours later when I realize that I was mistaken! But when a true "aha" moment finally arrives, it is a wonderful combination of joy, excitement, and relief!

Your DOG AND BEAR books are different from the die-cut concept books. How is creating a picture book for emerging readers the same and different from making your other books?

Creating a concept book always begins with an idea, and once the text is written, the book ultimately becomes a challenge of design and composition. The paintings are the very last step. With a picture book, I think about the characters, their interactions and expressions, and how the paintings will convey all these things.

And who are Dog and Bear, anyway?



Ah . . . those characters are very dear to my heart! One day my editor, Neal Porter, was visiting, and I left him alone for a minute to answer the phone. When I hung up, I found him in my living room holding a multicolored stuffed bear. He asked if there was a story behind it, and I said no. I'd simply found it in an antique shop and sat it on a tall chair in my living room. End of story. Or so I thought! Neal asked me to write about the bear, and soon DOG AND BEAR was born, with my pet dachshund as Dog.

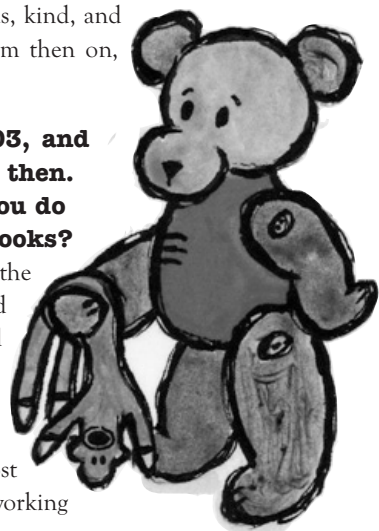
As the three stories developed, it became clear that these two personalities bore a striking resemblance to Neal and me, with Neal the cautious, kind, and loyal Bear and me the impulsive, playful, and energetic Dog. From then on, writing about these two close friends came naturally.

THE HIDDEN ALPHABET was published in 2003, and you've had a new book (or two!) each year since then. Making books is now your full-time job. What did you do before? How has that work found its way into your books?

Immediately after graduating from art school, I began working in the network television business, creating animated show openings and special segments. I lived in Manhattan, worked long hours, and loved every minute of it. I used to say that I was the luckiest person in the world because I was paid to play all day. Once a show opening or animation is complete, it's televised within days and in some cases, minutes! When I finish creating a book, though, almost an entire year goes by before its release, and by then, I'm usually working on the next two or three!

When my children were born, working 70, 80, and sometimes 90-hour weeks became very difficult. What was once fun and exciting had become stressful. Finally, I decided to try what I had always wanted to do—create books. I figured that even if I were unable to find a publisher, I could still give them to my children. I was incredibly lucky to have met my editor almost immediately.

My experience as an animator played an important role in becoming a children's book author and illustrator. I love graphic design and fine art, and I am able to combine both in all my books. To me, a picture book is simply an animation with fewer frames!



What book (or event, or person) made the greatest impression on you as a child?

I vividly remember sitting on my grandmother's lap in her living room as she read *THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD* by Watty Piper. I remember being so impressed with that little engine's confidence and perseverance.

What three books would you take with you on a journey to another world?

Piece of music? Painting?

Well, since I have such a difficult time choosing favorites, I would have to say that the three books I would take with me would be a journal, a sketchbook, and a canvas pad! (Of course, I would need a pen, a few pencils, and some paints and brushes, too!) Music comes with me everywhere I go, so I would definitely need to bring my entire music collection.

What are you reading now?

JAZZ MODERNISM, FROM ELLINGTON AND ARMSTRONG TO MATISSE AND JOYCE. I love to read books about artists and musicians and this one compares jazz musicians and artists of the 1920's through the 1950's.

What's your favorite word?

I've got two favorite words: Imagine and Wonder.

Color?

I love them all and would feel dreadfully disloyal if I picked just one!

Season?

SUMMER! I love sunshine, ocean water, bathing suits, and bare feet!

Time of day?

Between 5:00 and 7:30 PM, especially at the beach during sunset. I try to go there every evening at that time.

What qualities or accomplishments do you most admire in others?

Confidence and humility.

What other career (or task, or adventure) would you like to attempt?

I would love to live on a boat, traveling from one beautiful waterway to another. The only problem is, it would have to be a very large boat with enough room for an art studio and a grand piano!

What are you working on now? Is there something else on the horizon?

I am always working on something new. I tend to work on many books at a time, mostly in my head. Among Neal Porter's many talents, one that I depend upon, is that he helps me to focus on the books that are actually due! One book that I have been working on for many months is a book called *GREEN*. I've spent a great deal of time on this book and the only thing that I'm really set on is the title! I guess that's a start, but I anxiously await the "aha" moment on this one.

Laura Vaccaro Seeger was born on Long Island, New York, and after spending many years in Manhattan, she and her family moved back to Long Island to the town of Rockville Centre. She received a BFA in Fine Art and Graphic Design from The School of Art and Design at Purchase, New York, and has worked as an animator and producer for NBC-TV and ABC-TV in New York City, receiving an EMMY Award for her work on an animated show opening for an NBC Special. Laura lists her hobbies as music, surfing, tennis, jogging, scuba diving, boating, playing the piano, and playing games. She and her husband, Chris, have two sons, Drew and Dylan, and a dachshund named Copper.

PROJECTS

BLACK? WHITE! DAY? NIGHT! and **THE HIDDEN ALPHABET** ask readers to look at the space in a picture most people ignore: background space, or negative space. Sometimes that's far more interesting than the positive space of the objects themselves, and the challenge of switching one's viewpoint between the two can be most interesting of all.

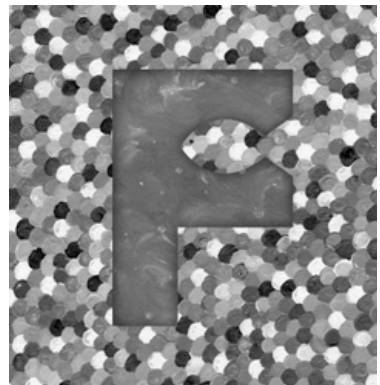
Project:

Students explore the negative space surrounding everyday objects by creating their own opposite pair or using a letter of the alphabet.

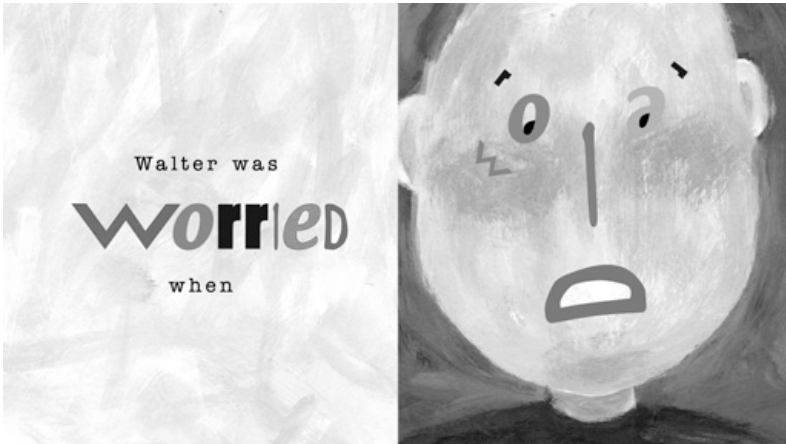
Take a large piece of paper (8" x 16") and create two pages by folding it in half vertically. Cut out a square (2" x 2") in the center of the top page. Now the students should think up of a pair of opposites, knowing that the back page is where they will paint, draw, or make a collage to express the pair. The open square on the front flap will show just a piece of the whole picture—a piece that expresses the opposite of that shown on the bottom page. Or the students may use this exercise to paint a letter on the back page and a corresponding object created by the letter's negative space as viewed through the square. Students may use the first letter of his/her name and an object that symbolizes his/her interests, talents, or personality.

Upon completion, "seeing the unseen" is further discussed and explored.

From **BLACK? WHITE! DAY?NIGHT!**



From **THE HIDDEN ALPHABET**



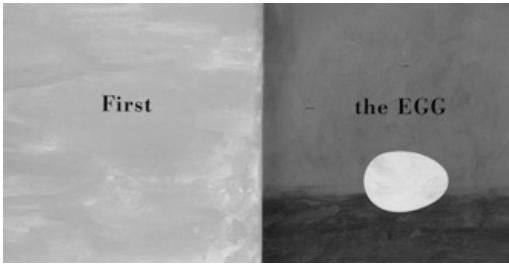
WALTER WAS WORRIED was inspired by a game I used to play with my children when they were younger. I'd make an exaggerated expression on my face and ask them to identify the emotion. I tried creating a readable emotion using as few graphic elements as possible, and so was born the idea of creating Walter, using the letters of the word "worried" as his facial features. Readers are challenged to find letters in the faces of Walter and his friends. I also added, "Walter was worried when" alongside a painting of a very worried Walter. It is not until the page is turned that we learn Walter was worried when "the sky grew dark". In this way, the reader may be asked, "When do you think Walter was worried?" and "When are YOU worried?"

Project:

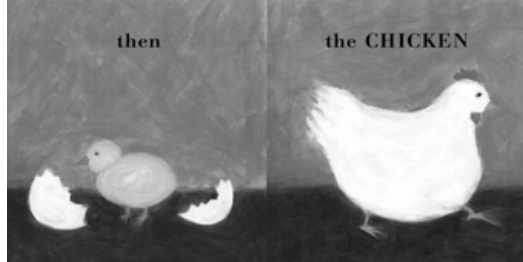
Students express their feelings through art. Using paint and canvas paper, children create self-portraits, leaving out their facial features. They then add letters that spell the emotion they are feeling. Students are challenged to use the letters to create facial features while showing, artistically and graphically, their particular emotion. They may also write an alliterative sentence, for example: "Tommy was terrified when his lizard was lost." A few hints: the letter "c" on its back can make a smile, turn it the other way and it's a frown; the letter "r" on its side can become an eyebrow, and an upside-down "D" an eye. . . .

Upon completion, the children discuss their reasons for selecting each emotion and speak about their feelings.





From FIRST THE EGG



FIRST THE EGG explores transformation by showing things that begin in one form and become something else in a format of “first/then”. **LEMONS ARE NOT RED** explores color and the concept of “not”. What is not red? What is never red? This concept can be further explored: What is not fun or easy or difficult? What is not soft or rough or furry? What is not loud or quiet or silent? Finding the answers to these questions can be a challenge for children and adults alike.

Project:

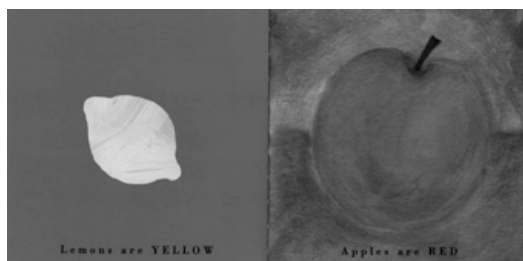
Students explore color and the concepts of "first/then" and “not”.

Start with three pieces of 8” x 8” paper and staple them together. In the center of the middle page, make a die-cut shape of an everyday object (lemon, apple, banana, ball, fish, etc.). Using paint, or collage paper and glue, students are challenged to illustrate objects whose colors are at first shown incorrectly through the die-cut hole, and then correctly when the die-cut page is turned or they may illustrate an object which appears to be one thing through the die-cut hole and becomes another when the page is turned.

Upon completion, the concepts of “first/then” and “not” are discussed further.



From LEMONS ARE NOT RED



DOG AND BEAR

Project

Students write and illustrate their own Dog and Bear stories based on their personal experiences. Upon completion, students act out the stories using handmade or actual Dog and Bear puppets.

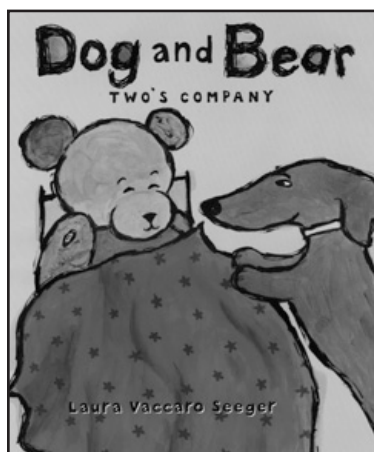


The real Dog (Copper)



The real stuffed bear

LAURA VACCARO SEEGER



★ "PERFECT"

KIRKUS REVIEWS starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO'S COMPANY

★ "READ IT AGAIN AND AGAIN"

HORN BOOK starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO'S COMPANY

★ "DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE"

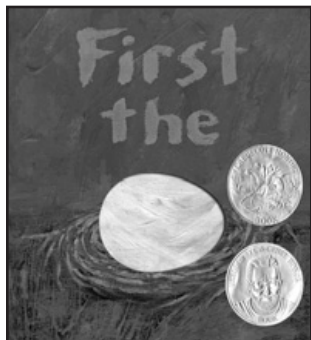
BOOKLIST starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO'S COMPANY

★ "HOMESPUN WARMTH"

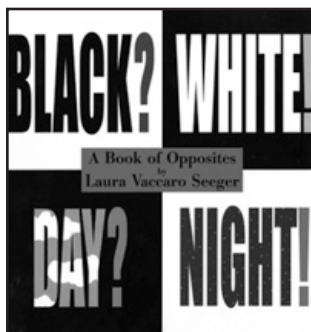
PUBLISHERS WEEKLY starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO'S COMPANY



**ALA NOTABLE BOOK
WINNER BOSTON GLOBE-
HORN BOOK AWARD
KIRKUS REVIEWS BEST BOOK
OF THE YEAR
PUBLISHER WEEKLY
BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR**



**CALDECOTT HONOR
THEODORE GEISEL HONOR
NEW YORK TIMES
BEST ILLUSTRATED BOOK
OF THE YEAR
ALA NOTABLE BOOK
HORN BOOK FANFARE**



**ALA NOTABLE BOOK
BOOKLIST EDITORS' CHOICE
KIRKUS REVIEWS BEST BOOK
OF THE YEAR**

★ "SATISFYING"

HORN BOOK starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO FRIENDS, THREE STORIES

★ "ENCHANTING"

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO FRIENDS, THREE STORIES

★ "WINNING"

BOOKLIST starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO FRIENDS, THREE STORIES

★ "A GREAT GIFT"

KIRKUS REVIEWS starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO FRIENDS, THREE STORIES

★ "ENDEARING"

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL starred review of
DOG AND BEAR: TWO FRIENDS, THREE STORIES

★ "A TOUR DE FORCE"

HORN BOOK starred review of FIRST THE EGG

★ "VIBRANT"

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL starred review of
FIRST THE EGG

★ "PERFECTLY PITCHED"

KIRKUS REVIEWS starred review of FIRST THE EGG

★ "ANOTHER WINNER"

BOOKLIST starred review of
BLACK? WHITE! DAY? NIGHT!

★ "EYE-CATCHING"

KIRKUS REVIEWS starred review of
BLACK? WHITE! DAY? NIGHT!

★ "PLAYFUL"

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL starred review of
BLACK? WHITE! DAY? NIGHT!



ALA NOTABLE BOOK
KIRKUS REVIEWS BEST BOOK
OF THE YEAR



ALA NOTABLE BOOK



ALA NOTABLE BOOK

★ **"FAULTLESS"**

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY starred review of LEMONS ARE NOT RED

★ **"BEGUILING"**

KIRKUS REVIEWS starred review of LEMONS ARE NOT RED

★ **"ARTFUL"**

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY starred review of THE HIDDEN ALPHABET

★ **"OUTSTANDING"**

KIRKUS REVIEWS starred review of THE HIDDEN ALPHABET

★ **"A DELIGHT"**

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL starred review of THE HIDDEN ALPHABET

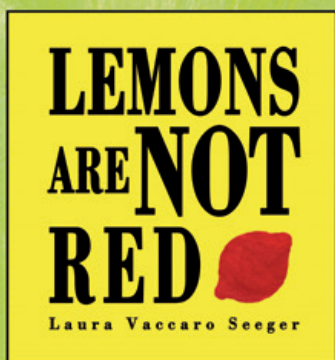
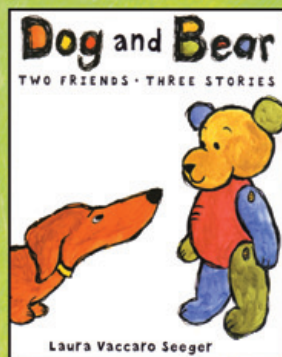
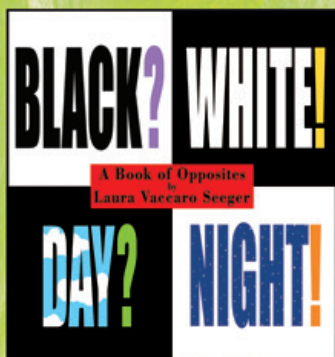


NEW BY LAURA VACCARO SEEGER

ONE BOY

SEPTEMBER 2008





Roaring Brook Press
www.roaringbrookpress.com
Includes Activities Based on the Books