

AUTHOR Q&A - Heidi Mayo on NELSON TELSON – The Story of a True Blue Blood

Q Why did you write this book?

A This book just had to be written. When an artist has a painting that needs to be painted, or a writer has a book that needs to be written, it happens. As an artist, writer, teacher, and activist, I had this story, all these words and pictures that needed to come out, so I let them.

Q How long did it take you to write the book?

A I wrote the main book over a period of about nine years. I started making the illustrations during that time, too. Then it sat for another seven. The world wasn't ready for the book yet. Relativity theory hadn't become popular; people weren't so interested in horseshoe crabs, and independent publishing was still looked down upon as "vanity" publishing. But when I brought it back out to publish it, when I read it I was amazed. I asked myself, "Where did this come from? Who wrote this?" I'd find myself crying at certain heartfelt parts, laughing at word play, and such. That's how cool and surprising whole the process was.

Q How did you become interested in the topic?

A Having spent much of my childhood and adult life in and around the waters of Duxbury, Massachusetts, where much of the book takes place, I always felt great affinity for the natural world and its creatures. I have a strong sense of the interdependency of all living things on the planet, the web of life, and a special concern for how our species is forcing itself into extinction by disregarding this fact.

Q What did you hope to accomplish by publishing your book?

A As I say to my students all the time, "It isn't about the product; it's about the process." Like any artwork, the process itself is the accomplishment, but to be able to share the work with the world is the bigger reason. Kids (and grownups) today are especially disconnected from the outdoors, from the natural world that sustains us. This work serves to reconnect us.

Q Who is your intended readership?

A The book's tag line is: "A must read for humans of all ages, this middle grade novel grows up before your very eyes." The book is intended for everyone, and is accessible for readers around fourth grade and up, though some of my younger students are able to read it too. It's also the kind of book that a parent or teacher can read to younger kids.

Q When did you realize you wanted to be a writer?

A I loved writing in high school, and had a fabulous English teacher who encouraged me. I was also the unwilling editor of the high school newspaper. I went to Emerson College in Boston ten years later than my peers (and graduated as valedictorian, woo woo). My concentration was in scriptwriting and filmmaking. I did a lot of fiction writing at that time, too. Again in college I had one teacher in particular who really validated me as a writer. My writing is very cinematic, and NELSON TELSON will make a great movie. I actually started writing the screenplay at one point.

Q How did you research your book?

A Over the years of the writing, I referred to many books, articles, web sites, and scientists for information about horseshoe crabs, medicine, relativity theory, the first Thanksgiving, and the Wampanoag People. These appear in the book's Acknowledgements. But most of all, I referred to my intuition and direct experience.

Q What traits and other tidbits do you share with your main character?

A Mariah isn't so keen on being a member of the human species. She's sensitive to noises and sights and smells, and is sort of an outsider in the human realm. She doesn't like being cooped up in school when it's nice outside. In fact, she'd rather be an animal so she wouldn't be related to these human creatures that wreak such havoc on the planet. As solitary as I feel, paradoxically I'm also a big communicator and clearly see how we are all connected.

Q On page 42, Neslon says, "We're 'fifth business' in the great dramas of the earth, always in the background, never starring in a leading role..." What's that all about?

A One of my favorite books is *Fifth Business* by Canadian writer Robertson Davies. The idea of one small character who threw a rock in a snowball, or in the case of John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, a baseball, can have such impact on the story even when the thrower of the rock seems to have no role in the drama; not the hero or heroine, lover or rival, but the story can't unfold or conclude without him. He knows secrets that nobody else knows. And it's no coincidence that Nelson is a baritone.

Q What surprised you about the process of writing your book?

A I was always amazed at how the story just took on a life of its own. Although I wrote it, it was more like I facilitated it. I'd get completely lost in the process, just as I do when painting. It came through me. Over the years of writing, so many serendipitous coincidences lead me—and the characters—in the right direction. When I started making the illustrations, I was suddenly struck with the need to create art, just for the sake of it. So, I took a little detour and became a pastel painter and art teacher as a result of that. And when the time was right to publish, I picked it up again, did the illustrations in ink, made the cover art in watercolor, vetted and edited with a little help from my highly literate and helpful friends; formatted the book, and voila, here we are!

Q Are there any specific authors whose writing styles or subject matter inspired your book?

A I have a soft spot in my heart for E.B. White, everything from *The Trumpet of the Swan* and *Charlotte's Web* to *One Man's Meat*, and *Strunk and White's Elements of Style*. I was delighted when a review started with, "In the tradition of EB White, this beautifully illustrated middle school reader will appeal to all ages." That made my day. I wanted to write a book that has a universal message, that everyone will love, and people across the ages can share. I believe I've done just that.

Q What made you decide to self-publish?

A Publishing is a mean business. If you don't have an agent, no one wants to give your book a look. Just check any publisher's submission information, and you'll see the big guys don't accept unsolicited work. If you don't have representation or haven't already sold a bunch of books, they aren't interested no matter how great the work. Back when I finished the meat of the book, that's how it was. I'm pretty thin-skinned, and after approaching a bunch of agents and publishers, jumping through the hoops, giving each one the submission just the way they wanted it, and getting rejected, I figured my time is better spent at creative endeavors. Seven years went by, and during that time self-publishing became acceptable. One really neat thing is that I was able to do it all, from writing and illustrating, to making the cover and formatting the interior all by myself. Just finding the right font for the drop caps took me hours, but I knew what I wanted. I feel very fortunate to have that skill set, and/or the willingness to figure out how to get the book to look the way I want it.

Q What do you like to do when you're not writing?

A Like Mariah, I need to be outside a lot. I have a running route that takes me along my local shoreline, so I keep in touch with all those animal characters that appear in the book. I also like to row in my shell on the Billington Sea, the pond mentioned in the book. I teach art around three times a week, and sometimes even get to make a painting now and then.

Q Where do you see this book going?

A Firstly, it's a great book for summer reading, no matter what your age. I see the book in schools from the east coast of Canada down to Florida as a starter. As one reviewer said, it should be in the core reading curriculum of middle school science teachers of ecology, biology, marine science, or even Einstein's theory of relativity. I also see it on the shelves of public libraries and reading families. I am working with Ecological Research & Development Group of Dover, Delaware and their www.horseshoecrab.org to make sure a portion of Amazon sales through the Amazon Smile program to further the protection of the world's horseshoe crab population. I also see the movie!

Q Are you working on another book?

A I am playing with many ideas right now, about whether to write a sequel to this book or to just make another stand alone book. If there's another one needing to happen, it certainly will.

Any more questions?