Tomie dePaola is the winner of the 2011 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 26, 2011.
I'd smile and say, “Hello, Liberry Lady.” She'd wave back. One day she came over to me, smiling.

“Little boy,” she whispered. “It’s pronounced library.”

“Hello, Library Lady.” I said the next week. She blew me a kiss.

By the time I was in second grade, even though I couldn't be a monitor, I could help carry in books. I could bend her ear a little about how much I loved books.

In September, it came as no surprise when Miss Bailey, my third grade teacher, read out that I would be a library monitor.

On Friday mornings I would meet the jalopy, carry boxes of books up to the library room, and set books out on tables, all the time taking a peek inside the covers.

Because I was a monitor, I would be there all morning. I got to peek at fourth grade books, fifth grade books, and sixth grade books. What glorious Fridays! For the next three years, I'd hang around and talk with Mrs. Cowing. She put into my hands Hitty, Her First Hundred Years by Rachel Field with illustrations by Dorothy Lathrop, Make Way for Ducklings and Homer Price by Robert McCloskey, and the beautiful books by the d’Aulaires.

She pointed out the books that had won Newbery and Caldecott Medals. What riches Mrs. Cowing gave me.

Junior high was everything I had hoped for. We had art three times a week with Miss Goldman. She taught painting techniques, puppetry, jewelry-making—all sorts of things.

And any time a student wanted to spend time after school doing art, Miss Goldman welcomed us with open arms.

Miss Cole, the school librarian, was always happy to recommend just the right books. She encouraged me to read everything from Lewis Carroll to Robert Louis Stevenson to Alcott, Dickens, and the Brontës to Armstrong Sperry and—yes—Gone with the Wind. She introduced me to the illustrations of Rackham, Tenniel, Doyle, Kay Nielsen, Edward Kemble, and countless others.

I so admired the illustration work of Alice and Martin Provensen, Sheilah Beckett, Feodor Rojankovsky, Leo Lionni, and of course this new guy who put little boys in ballet slippers in his illustrations for Ruth Krauss’s I'll Be You and You Be Me, Maurice... Sondheim, or... Steinbeck—you know who I mean.

I wouldn't have had the success that I did at Pratt if it weren't for my painting instructors, Roger Crossgrove and Federico Castellon. Richard Lindner and Enrico Arno taught illustration.

In 1955, I received a summer scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. It was there that I met the mentor of all time, Ben Shahn. He said to me the words that have meant the most to me: Being an artist is not only what you do, but how you live your life.

Then I took a brief detour. I was now an artist, but instead of becoming a children’s book illustrator as well as a painter, I decided to become a monk—a Benedictine monk, a Benedictine artist-monk. And so after graduation from Pratt, I entered a small, very primitive Benedictine monastery in the Green Mountains of Vermont.

I was awarded an important scholarship from the city of Meriden. Pratt was a certainty.

I was the best artist in my high school. But at Pratt Institute in 1952, I was suddenly in a freshman class with 500 other best artists in their high schools. Only 125 would make it to sophomore year. Miraculously, I made it.

My idols ranged from Norman Rockwell and Jon Whitcomb (known for his “pretty girl” illustrations), to Rouault, Matisse, Modigliani, and Ben Shahn.

Needless to say, I didn't stay. The silence got to me. So with the blessings of the Prior, I left to be just an artist. That was 1957.

Yearly, I would take the bus from Vermont to New York to show my portfolio to publishers. The editors—most of them—were really nice. I was told over and over, “If you ever move back to New York...”

I spent the years painting, designing Christmas cards, and doing set design for the summer theater in my small...
Laura Ingalls Wilder Acceptance Speech

“I call little four-year-old Tomie to sit on my lap when I write and when I draw. He tells me what is true.”

In 1963, I moved back to New York.

Then a miracle happened. I met Florence Alexander. She was an artist’s representative. When I brought her my portfolio, she said, after looking at the hot pink and orange tigers and other creative stuff, “Dear, I’ll need some more samples—samples of children waving at fire trucks, mothers ironing. You know, ordinary things.”

I wanted to draw foreign-looking little boys wearing ballet slippers like Maurice Sendak did. I said I’d work on it and get back to her. I figured three weeks would be long enough and then I’d call her and pick up my portfolio.

It didn’t work that way. Florence called me before I had a chance to call her. “Hello, dear,” she said. “Hi-ho, hi-ho, I think it’s off to work we go. Can you be at my office tomorrow around ten?”

“Of course,” I answered.

“Good,” she replied, “and by the way do you have those new samples ready?”

I muttered some false excuse.

The next morning at the office I met the person who gave me my big break. Her name was Bernice Kohn—now Hunt. She was starting a new list of science picture books for Coward-McCann. She was doing the writing, and there would be two books each list. Four in a year. She wanted an established illustrator for one and a newcomer for the other. I was possibly going to be the “newbie.” I was asked to do a couple of samples.

During the process, Bernice became a dear, dear friend. So did Florence and also the in-house editor at Coward-McCann, Margaret Frith. I worked with Margaret at Coward and eventually at Putnam for forty-some years.

Well, it all began! I got the job. But there was a hitch. I also had a job for ten weeks in Provincetown for—you guessed it—a musical revue in which I would sing and dance on the stage.

Okay—the deadline would work. I had to produce the dummy, the sketch form with words in place. No problem. I had until September.

So there I was in Provincetown, dancing and singing at night and working on the illustrations for my first book, Sound, during the day.

I heard four-year-old Tomie saying, “When I grow up, I’m going to be an artist. I’m going to write stories and draw pictures for books, and sing and dance on the stage.” Suddenly, this was my life!

Sound was reviewed in The New York Times Book Review when it was published a year and a half later. “Good facts, but the illustrations by first time illustrator dePaola are far too imaginative for a science book.”

“Far too imaginative.” I was thrilled, and so was Bernice. Florence was energized, and the jobs started rolling in. The next was from Jeanne Vestal at Lippincott.

Don’t worry. I’m not going through all 250 titles. But I am going to mention some of the people who guided me through this complicated, fickle, dangerous, and exalting field of children’s books.

Mary Russell at Bobbs-Merrill taught me to write with martinis. Eunice Holsaert told me I had stories to tell. Ellen Roberts and Sue Jennings helped me give birth to Strega Nona. Barbara Lucas published Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs at Putnam and then The Clown of God at Harcourt.

Margery Cuyler let me explore my Catholic childhood. John and Kate Briggs of Holiday House not only published my books but partied with me, too. Maria Modugno was like my much-younger little sister when I first met her. There were others, too—all wonderful people.

Nanette Stevenson was my first art director at Putnam. Cecilia Yung is my art director now and my muse, and Marikka Tamura is my designer of choice.
Laura Ingalls Wilder Acceptance Speech

I have the best publisher in the world—Penguin Putnam. I love everyone there so much—David Shanks, Doug Whiteman, Don Weisberg, Jen Haller, Emily Romero, and Felicia Frazier, to name a few. They are all in my heart.

And I have a new editor, Nancy Paulsen, and even though I’m an old guy, I know I still have more books in me.

I wouldn’t be up here if not for all of you who have gotten my books into the hands of children over the forty-plus years that I’ve been doing what I do.

Thank you, Millie Nichols, Carolyn Field, Augusta Baker, Pura Belpré, Effie Lee Morris, Ann Kalkhoff, Caroline Ward, June Level, Barbara Elleman, Grace Ruth, Norine Odland, Carolyn Brodie, Elizabeth Bird, and all my other friends in ALA. A piece of this medal belongs to all of you.

So, you can see that with me it didn’t take a village—it took a metropolis.

* * * * *

At the end of the movie Nine, based on the Broadway show and the Fellini film 8½, little Guido runs down this huge set to sit on the lap of “old” Guido as the camera crane moves up. Filming is about to begin.

This is what I do. I call little four-year-old Tomie to sit on my lap when I write and when I draw. He tells me what is true.

* * * * *

I know you all like to hear about “The Call.” Mine came on Sunday night, January 9. I was having my annual holiday party, and the house was filled with over seventy people. Fortunately, I was standing by the bar waiting for a drink. The phone was right there. It rang, and I answered it through the din. The voice said, “You might want to take this call.”

I retreated into my bedroom, and Megan gave me the news! I was totally blown away. The Wilder Award was not on my radar. I started to cry and told the committee that their taste was impeccable. But then I was told I had to keep it a secret until the next day. I could tell my assistant, Bob Hechtel, but no one else.

* * * * *

Little Tomie joins me in saying “thank you” to Bob for everything you do and especially to the committee—Megan Schliesman, JoAnn Jonas, Andrew Medlar, Martha V. Parravano, and Angela J. Reynolds—who chose to honor me with this award.

I am extremely humbled and totally grateful.

You have given me and my work eternity.

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