

# Wilder Award Acceptance Speech

## Portrait of a Young Boy . . . and His Dreams Come True

Tomie dePaola

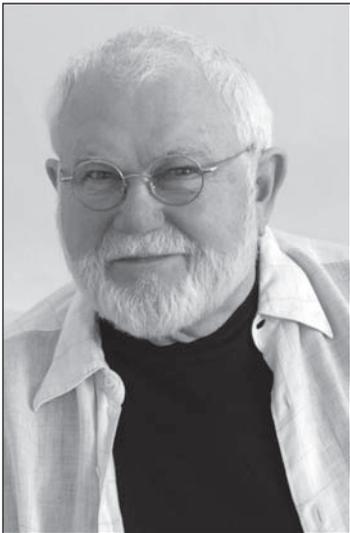


Photo Credit: Julie Maris Semel

*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.*

This whole thing started when I was only four years old. Some relatives came to visit us in Meriden, Connecticut, where we lived.

My older brother, Joseph Jr., who was nicknamed Buddy, was the firstborn. So he was “super child,” the heir apparent. I, four years younger, was “the mistake.”

My brother was asked, “Buddy, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I want to be Dick Tracy, Joe Palooka, and Buck Rogers,” Buddy answered.

*Great, I thought. He wants to be a comic strip.*

Even though no one asked *me*, I announced, “When I grow up, I am going to be an artist. I’m going to write stories and draw pictures for books, and I’m going to sing and tap dance on the stage.”

You see, I had twin cousins who were in art school. They were very glamorous. My mother read to me every night, and I loved books. And I was a *huge* fan of Shirley Temple movies.

Every chance I got over the next few years, I would tell the grownups around me what the future held for me, and they all took me seriously.

Mrs. Beulah Bowers, the art teacher who came to our school periodically, made sure I got extra pieces of paper and could use my own crayons.

Miss Leah Grossman, my tap-dancing teacher, gave me special roles in the annual recital, so in my heart I could rival Shirley Temple. Then when I was older and paired with Carol Morrissey, my dancing partner, we were Meriden’s answer to Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland.

My grandfather was a butcher and owned a grocery store. His response was to give me a small roll of white butcher paper and a Listo Pencil (“It Can Write on Anything”), so I could draw to my heart’s content and not on the sheets under the covers of my bed.

My parents, Flossie and Joe, and my uncle Charles were the best. Uncle Charles asked me one time when we were alone,

“So, you really want to be an artist?” I answered, “Yes.” He grabbed the Sunday comics that were lying around and said, “Can you copy the Katzenjammer Kids?”

“Uncle Charles,” I answered, “Franny and Fuffy [my Irish twin cousins who were artists and had recently graduated from Pratt Institute] told me to practice, practice, practice and *never* copy. Ask me to draw something else and I will.”

After I finished my drawing, Uncle Charles took it into the kitchen, and I could hear him talking to my mother. “He’s good. We have to do something about this,” he said.

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Segue to Christmas morning, 1945, when I was eleven.

Because I had two younger sisters, Santa Claus still came to our house. So the best presents were under the tree Christmas morning.

I remember it so clearly. There under the tree were my gifts—all art supplies, books on how to draw, paints, pads, and even an easel. I was set to go!

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Let me back up a little. Mrs. Cowing, the “liberry lady,” came every Friday morning to King Street School. The third through sixth grades would go to the “liberry” room on the second floor where they could check out two or three books for a week.

I first noticed Mrs. Cowing in first grade. I’d see her park her old jalopy in front of school and then call some older boys to help her unload boxes of books and bring them to the “liberry.” I found out that certain kids would be chosen to be “liberry” monitors, and they would help Mrs. Cowing set out the books. And sometimes Mrs. Cowing would bring special books just for the monitors. I had a goal: I would become a “liberry” monitor. I had almost two years to work on this.

Nothing works quite as well as charm, and *I had plenty of that*. I’d stand so she could see me when she drove up.

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

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

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

*"My mentor Ben Shahn said the words that have meant the most to me: Being an artist is not only what you do, but how you live your life."*

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*

Rackham, Tenniel, Doyle, Kay Nielsen, Edward Kemble, and countless others. And I could check out all the books I wanted.

In eighth grade, we had a class called guidance. We had to write a biography of someone in the profession we might aspire to. I chose Grant Wood. I even stated that I wanted to attend Pratt Institute.

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High school was easy. I was really good at English, history, social studies, music (I hadn't lost any of my singing and dancing abilities), art, of course, and French. Dr. Michel, my French teacher, introduced me to the works of the Impressionists, Picasso, Matisse, and many others.

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.

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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.

*"Nothing works quite as well as charm, and I had plenty of that."*

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.

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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.

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.

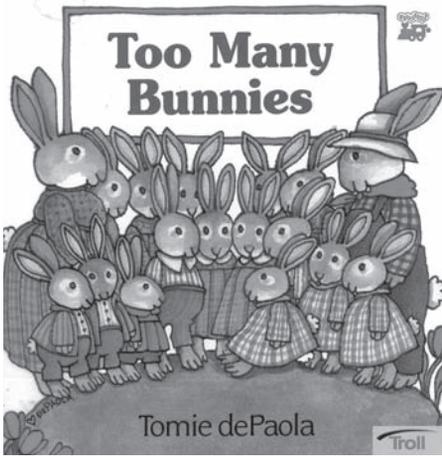
My idols ranged from Norman Rockwell and Jon Whitcomb (known for his "pretty girl" illustrations), to Rouault, Matisse, Modigliani, and Ben Shahn.

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.

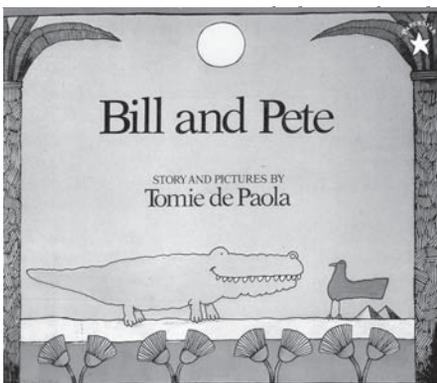
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Yearly, I would take the bus from Vermont to New York to show my portfolio to publishers. The editors—most of them—were really nice. I was told over and over, "If you ever move back to New York . . ."

I spent the years painting, designing Christmas cards, and doing set design for the summer theater in my small



*“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.”*



good commissions, too, and I was producing a modestly successful card line.

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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.

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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!

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*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.

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.

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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.

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2011 Wilder Committee chair Megan Schliesman and Tomie dePaola at the Newbery Caldecott Wilder Banquet, June 26, 2011. Photo Credit: Alexandra and Michael Buxbaum.

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.

That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I wanted to run back to the party and yell, “Drinks on the house!”

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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.

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I am extremely humbled and totally grateful.

You have given me and my work eternity. &

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