



Spotlight on Author/Publisher Eric Drachman

1. What inspired you to become a writer?

I needed a holiday present for my niece and nephew. First I created some very rough books-on-tape based on already published books. These were just personal presents, but the kids loved them and over a few years, those projects evolved into fully edited books-on-CD complete with sound effects, audible page turns and my niece and nephew playing the kids' roles. Everyone who heard them, wanted to buy them, but these were not my books, so I decided to write my own... and found that it was something that came naturally.

2. What process do you use to begin a story? Do you begin with a character or subject and then shape a story around it, or are you swept away by the urge to create and the story is a result?

Stories will come to me in a variety of ways. With *Leo the Lightning Bug*, I was watching a tremendous lightning storm from the porch of a cottage in the countryside north of New York City. When I saw a little lightning bug, flashing his light by the screen, I wondered if he thought he was making all the lightning...and that was the start. With *Ellison the Elephant*, it grew out of my love of music, my odd propensity to make all kinds of noises and sounds, and my desire to create another book with a similar theme to *Leo*. With *It's Me!*, it was a voicemail message I got from my cousin's daughter. First, she just said, "Hi." I could hear my cousin in the background, suggesting that she tell me who it was, to which she responded, "It's Me!" as if it should have been obvious. It was, and it also inspired the title of that book, and from the title, came the story. *Bad Rats* was originally called "The Learning Curb", a little phrase that I liked for its silliness. I developed a story around that title – after all, who better to learn on a curb than a rat?!? *Bad Rats* did make a better title, though.

3. What advice do you have for parents and teachers to help kids get the most out of these books?

Rather than explaining to kids what the "message" is – I like to let them come up with it on their own. First of all, they'll surprise you with how sharp they are – culling the message is, after all, their job in life. Second, the message that they take from it might be different (and more appropriate) than the one that immediately jumped to your mind. In my experience, the message we take seems to be the one that we need to hear.

Also, enjoy the audio CD with your kids! You can read the book to them yourself and then when you listen to the CD with them, you will see them making that leap from the written (or spoken) word to a fully realized character, supported with sound effects to give a sense of place. Imagining fully developed characters is the job that actors (and writers) have every time they read a script (or write a story.)

4. If there is one lesson you hope children will learn from Kidwick Books what will it be?

Play and dream. Oops, that's two. And believe in yourself. Three. Basically they're all the same lesson, though. It takes a great deal of self-esteem to be free enough to play and dream and believe in yourself. By inhibiting these traits (or activities) we limit ourselves and our children. How can you teach self-esteem, though? While it might seem like it's about strength, I think it's really delicate and it needs to be coaxed. Perhaps learning by example is the best way – even if the example is set by a lightning bug or an elephant!

5. What is the best reaction from a child you have ever received after reading one of your books?

“You’re a really nice stranger.”

During my tour for *A Frog Thing*, I posted some quotes from the kids along with some pictures. You can find those at : http://www.kidwick.com/slideshow_FTTour_2006.html.

6. What is your theatrical background and how has it influenced your publishing process and helped you break into the children’s market?

I have an MFA in acting from The California Institute of the Arts. I studied with acclaimed acting teacher, Larry Moss in Los Angeles and have performed quite a bit in the Los Angeles theater scene. Acting is about telling a story, understanding characters’ motivations and crystallizing the essence of the inherent conflict. All of these skills are employed in creating a good children’s book. I like to say that my illustrators play all the roles and I write direct and produce children’s picture books. I would add that being able to play – to think in a childlike manner – and to adopt different roles is not only a benefit in writing a children’s book, but also in reading to my audience. Kids love to listen to an adult who has no qualms with being silly!

7. How were you inspired to include a companion CD with each book? What do you feel the “Book-on-CD” adds to the reading experience?

As I explained earlier, the idea for the audio came first - when I needed to find gifts for my niece and nephew. In fact, I was in a book store with a friend, reading books aloud to her, trying to choose one, when she suggested that I record them. That idea snowballed and after a couple of years and about five audio book gifts, the production value had greatly improved, and more and more friends and family were asking for copies. It was time to turn this playful past time into a business.

8. How do you decide who will be cast as the character voices in your books?

Luckily I have a very talented family! Leo and Ellison are both boys, so my only nephew at the time took on that role. His performance as Leo has been described as “beyond cute!” Patricia’s character in *It’s Me!* was inspired by my cousin’s daughter, Sivan, so she was a natural to play that part, although it was contested by another niece. Everyone pitches in. I have used my brother, my cousin, his wife and daughter, two nieces and my nephew, not to mention myself and some of my alter-egos. The music in the introduction and tag on the CDs is from a piece called “Scherzo” that was composed by my late grandfather, the world-renowned cellist, Gregor Piatigorsky, and performed by my exceedingly talented brother, Evan Drachman and his wonderful accompanist, Richard Dowling. Their CD, *Pairs of Pieces* is available from Amazon.com. All of the talent who have helped to create our books are featured on our website <http://www.kidwick.com>. Come see who they all are!

9. After authoring your first book, how did you decide to take on the entire publishing process?

I learned a little bit about the publishing business and decided that I better publish myself. First of all, I wanted to record and edit the audio myself and to use my family. Especially at that time, there was a great deal of resistance to including CDs with books. Even if I were to have retained the rights to the audio in a publishing deal, there was no guarantee that the CDs would be packaged with the books, and that's what I wanted.

I also discovered that frequently authors never get to meet the people who illustrate their books, especially if they are, as I was, unknown. I had envisioned a kind of improvisation between author and illustrator, where we feed off of each other's inspirations. This has worked well for me and so far, my illustrators have been quite receptive to my ideas as well as generous in offering their own.

10. What is your recipe for a successful story?

I write for myself and find that it tends to appeal to 3-7 year olds. Seriously, I have to get into the mindset of a child that age. Luckily, that comes easily to me and I find that while the resulting story has to be fairly simple, the underlying themes and concepts are quite complex. Ironically, kids get it more easily than adults. They are more facile with their imaginations and less critical. That said, I won't settle for "good enough." So often it feels like that's what's happening either with the author or illustrator or editor. Kids get it and we owe it to them to follow through.

In a more concrete way, in the writing, I make sure that I am VERY clear about what the stories are about and that everything hangs on that skeleton, including the illustrations. Every element of the book helps to tell the story: meaning of the words as well as the rhythm and connotations of the words, everything about the illustrations and even the text layout on the page! As the publisher, it's my job to make sure that everything comes together in a way that I feel best tells the story and will be most appealing to kids. After all, it's for them.

11. Where did you find your illustrators and how did you decide that they would be perfect for your stories?

James Muscarello attended The California Institute of the Arts, studying animation at the same time that I was there studying acting. I did not meet him then, but was introduced to him by a mutual friend, years later, when I was looking for an illustrator for *Leo the Lightning Bug*.

Isabelle Decenci re was exhibiting her work at the annual conference for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. I spotted her work, there, and kept coming back to it. I loved her playfulness and her use of perspective.

They had to be open to a lot of creative input from a very involved author/publisher (me) and beyond that, it was just intuition. I was certain that I wanted to work with them as soon as I saw their work... and I was right! I've worked four times with James now and once with Isabelle and I can't wait to develop future projects with both of them!

12. *Frogs are very appealing to young children...why?*

Good question! I had no idea how many people — children and adults — had a thing for frogs before I wrote this book. I am certainly a fan of frogs now! Maybe people like the way frogs fly...? ;-)

13. *With Bad Rats, you've just completed your fourth Kidwick title with illustrator James Muscarello. (The previous three are Leo the Lightning Bug, Ellison the Elephant and A Frog Thing.) What do you appreciate most about James' artistry?*

James cares a lot about our books. He takes pride in the work and he enjoys the process. He loves the craft and the art of illustrating. He is an artist. He is also patient and when I'm trying to figure out how the words and the illustrations can best work together to tell the story, he is open to suggestions and to playing out different scenarios. It's not completely an improvisation, but there is definitely a lot of give and take. Sometimes I'm more clear on what I don't want than what I do want. Deciding on the color of green for Frank in *A Frog Thing* was tricky, but we finally settled on the color of a leaf we found in the parking lot where we were meeting.

14. *Do you think that rats can be as appealing as frogs and lightning bugs and elephants?*

Choosing rats was very intentional. I was playing the opposite here. These rats are creative and open-minded and are open to the idea of art and culture — more so than a lot of humans! People sometimes have a knee-jerk reaction to the idea of rats — that they are dirty and unpleasant...until they see the cute little rats that James created! Also, in the wake of the success of Disney's animated film, *Ratatouille*, I think it's safe to say that rats, as an endearing subject matter, have made their way into the mainstream!

15. *Do you identify, personally, with any of the characters in your books and why?*

Gosh, I think I identify with *all* of them. When I wrote *Ellison the Elephant*, it was important to me that Weasel was Ellison's imaginary friend. I liked the fact that Ellison was beating himself up and then, in the end, helping himself. I think we can all be a bit hard on ourselves at times. Another example might be Frank in *A Frog Thing* — yes, my parents always told me I could do whatever I set my mind to, but publishing your own picture books, with the hopes of getting wide distribution is almost as unlikely as a flying frog!

16. *How important do you think imaginary adventures are to a child's development?*

That's like asking if I think creativity is important. Of course! I think that our creative abilities help us in every aspect of life. If you can imagine a fantastic story, then you can also better understand your partner in a relationship, or your political opponent, or wrap your brain around an idea for a new invention or business plan! I think that creativity is like a muscle that needs to be exercised and developed and "imaginary adventures" are great practice, I say!

17. *What are your plans for the future of Kidwick books?*

I want to continue creating quality picture books and audio CDs with respect and admiration for my little readers. I could see the books being developed into TV shows, or short films, and while I would love to license that, I would like to stick to what I do best, which is what I'm doing now.