

Book Links

BOOKS AND AUTHORS:
TALKING WITH KATE BANKS
BY MONIKA SCHRODER

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Talking with Kate Banks



Kate Banks is the author of many distinguished books for children, including *And If the Moon Could Talk* (winner of the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award in 1998) and *The Night Worker* (winner of the Charlotte Zolotow Award in 2001). In addition to a long list of exceptional picture books, she has also written novels, most recently *The Magician's Apprentice*. Here Banks talks about her path to publication, her writing process, and her cooperation with the illustrator Georg Hallensleben.

BKL: *You used to be an editorial assistant and worked with Frances Foster, your current editor. How did you make the transition from helping others publish books to becoming an author yourself?*

BANKS: I always wanted to write children's books, and I think from an early age, I was unknowingly gravitating toward that. My work with Frances was really more of an apprenticeship than an assistantship in that I was given the opportunity to observe and participate in the entire process of bookmaking. Back in those days, it was more of an artisan endeavor, with each piece meted out to a craftsman. Both Frances and Dinah Stevenson, whom I worked for as well, were generous in allowing me responsibility and the privilege of making mistakes (of which I made plenty, one of the worst being to send a scathing reader's report back to a published writer along with the rejection notice!).

I relish these memories because they are such a shining example of working together toward a common goal—good preparation not only for writing books but for living life. My first book, *Alphabet Soup* (1988), came to me in a dream after I had been working with Frances for several years. The entire story unfolded one night in a series of colorful images. But there were no words. I suppose if I had been given the text as well, it would have been too easy. I mustered up the courage to construct a small wordless dummy to show Frances, who gently encouraged me to put some words to it—which I did. Meanwhile, Peter Sís had recently arrived in New York and was seeking work as an illustrator, so Frances paired us up. It was a perfect example of synchronicity, a coming together or aligning of events in a way that makes you know it's right. I think it was this experience more than anything else that encouraged me to continue writing.

BKL: *You write mostly picture books, but you have also published novels. What are the most rewarding and challenging aspects for you in these forms?*

BANKS: When I began my career, the most challenging part of writing was having the patience to remain in a state of receptivity long enough for an idea to materialize and take root, which sometimes took weeks or months. But as I matured both professionally and personally, the shift from being an initiator to being a witness became one of the most enjoyable aspects of the process. To watch an idea blossom into consciousness and feel it take hold is nothing short of exhilarating.

For me, the most challenging part of writing a picture book is to fit a big idea into a small format in a way that small children can relate to. Whether writing a picture book or a novel, I tend to be spare with language so that every word counts. With a picture book, I strive to string the words together, somewhat like beads, so that they create a harmony, a rhythm, and a whole. Of course, in picture books, there is a fine line between telling too much and allowing the artist to fill in the blanks. And there has to be an ongoing process of give-and-take as the story unfolds both in words and pictures. Novels present a different challenge—fitting smaller ideas into a larger format. Organization is key, and because there are no pictures, the words must be precise enough to convey and create a world for the reader. Whether through a picture book or a novel, the chance to revisit childhood, recapture its innocence, and view things as though for the first time is a privilege for me and a reminder of how amazing life is.

BKL: *Your picture books express so precisely the observations, thoughts, and emotions of your young audience. How do you achieve this authenticity?*

BANKS: An astrologist in Rome's Piazza Navona once read my horoscope and told me that I was someone who would be eternally young. Then she quickly cautioned that I ran the risk of not acting my age. So perhaps I should credit the stars. Apart from that, I loved my own childhood and can still remember in vivid details the unveiling of the world around me. I have always loved children and been a keen observer of them. It comes very naturally to me, and for whatever reason, I have never lost the ability to see the world through a child's eyes.

BKL: *You have worked on several books with the illustrator Georg Hallensleben. How did this collaboration develop, and what is your working relationship like?*

BANKS: Georg and I met through a mutual friend when we were both living in Rome. He was a studio artist at the time, and I'd been doing picture books for some years. I saw an exhibition of his and was drawn to his work, so I asked him if he would like to collaborate on a project. *Baboon* (1997) was our first book together. I admire Georg's ability to depict color and mood, and

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I think his illustrations reflect a sensitivity to place and feeling that complement my writing. From our first collaboration, we have sought to construct a thoughtful back-and-forth dialogue that begins with the text and continues to the completion of the final art, often changing words or pictures as we progress. This is lucky because that doesn't happen often. But I think it can make a difference in the final book.

IN the early days in Rome, Georg would drive over in his van, which he had equipped as a studio, and he would park under my apartment and paint. Then he would come up for lunch, and we would spend the afternoon reviewing what he had done. Often we would make our own dummies for submission.

WE both ended up in France—synchronicity again—but Georg went to Paris and I went south. With the growth of technology and families, we began to do more of our work through correspondence. But we have still kept a dialogue running for each book from beginning to end.

BKL: *Can you describe your creative process? How do you nurture and develop your ideas?*

BANKS: I want to say it's very much like gardening, except that I don't have much of a green thumb. A seed is planted, and there is a period of gestation when I become receptive, waiting for the infinite invisible to unfold. I'm not very methodical or systematic in the way I work, at least in the initial stages of a project. When I feel I have enough pieces, I start putting them together until I have a story line. Then I become more organized in my thinking and attentive to detail and choice of words—the way they sound by themselves, together, and within the context of the whole. I love words, and I always want to get them just right.

THEN I sit back and watch what happens. Again, it's a process of give-and-take, but this time with the universe. It took me a while to acquire the faith that I would “write another book”—and I think that only happened when I was able to admit to myself that maybe I wouldn't. I did spend a few years looking at blank pages and trying to muster something from nothing, much like a magician, but soon it became clear that wasn't how it worked.

I am often asked where I get ideas for my stories. I used to think that inspiration was a product of my experiences, big and small. And while I still believe that to be true to some extent, my own journey has taught me that there is a larger force at work, and I am but the vehicle of an expression that belongs to something collective as well as individual.

BKL: *Do you have a writing routine? What do you do when you get stuck?*

BANKS: I have a loose routine in that I write for a few hours every morning. I am a nomad, and I always have notebooks in my bag and am ready to take down an idea or a thought wherever I am. Oftentimes, this happens at night, and I'll wake up and flick on the light just long enough to take a few notes. I write

wherever I go—in airports, while on holiday. New places and movement seem to keep the flow going. I usually have several projects in the works at any one time. I like to know that I don't have to return to the same thing that I was doing the previous day. I tend to get bored laboring over a single story week after week, month after month, so I jump around a lot. That enables me to distance myself from each project and go back to it again and again with a fresh eye. And if I'm stuck on one project, I put it aside and move on to something else. If nothing works, then I play the piano or try a new recipe. I'm always planning future books, and I have many ideas in the cupboard. Some I put aside for months, even years. Some may never be realized, but that's OK. It's all part of what I do.

BKL: *The Magician's Apprentice is an unusual novel with a spiritual message for young readers. What prompted you to write this story?*

BANKS: The story came to me in a series of visions in a period of my life, almost 10 years ago, when I was very ill. I had caught a hospital infection and, despite all efforts, was not recovering from the infection or the debilitating pain. It was a deeply transformational time for me as it changed the way I looked at and experienced the world, and I guess you could say I had an epiphany of sorts as I realized I might not survive. Over a period of three years, I experienced a series of events that led to my recovery and my work as a healer. Part of these happenings was having *The Magician's Apprentice* channeled to me. I was told that two more books would follow: *The Key to the Kingdom*, which came to me two years later, and *Warriors of Light*, which I have yet to write. Day after day, I sat down and became a scribe to a higher voice. In retrospect, I see that period as one of inner expansion in which I journeyed deep within my soul and was initiated into a space of grace, learning that that is from where my work and life unfolds.

BKL: *Do you see a common theme among your books?*

BANKS: Connectedness is a theme that runs through all of my books—our connectedness to our outer worlds, inner worlds, and one another. Oftentimes in my books, this notion is expressed through relationships, early ones especially, and it reflects my belief that healthy relationships form the foundation for healthy beings. We are all connected, and wholeness is how we work best.

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Sampling Banks

The Bear in the Book. Illus. by Georg Hallensleben. 2012. 36p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.99 (9780374305918). PreS–K.

The Eraserheads. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. 2010. 40p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.99 (9780374399207). PreS–Gr. 2.

The Magician's Apprentice. Illus. by Peter Sís. 2012. 224p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.99 (9780374347161). Gr. 5–8.

Mama's Coming Home. Illus. by Tomek Bogacki. 2003. 32p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16 (9780374347475). PreS.

Max's Castle. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. 2011. 40p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.99 (9780374399191). K–Gr. 3.

Max's Dragon. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. 2008. 32p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.95 (9780374399214). K–Gr. 3.

Max's Words. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. 2006. 32p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.99 (9780374399498). Also available in a DVD edition from Weston Woods. K–Gr. 3.

The Night Worker. Illus. by Georg Hallensleben. 2000. 40p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16 (9780374355203); Square Fish, paper, \$8.99 (9780374400002). PreS–Gr. 2.

That's Papa's Way. Illus. by Lauren Castillo. 2009. 40p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16.95 (9780374374457). PreS–Gr. 1.

Monika Schröder's third novel for middle-grade readers, *My Brother's Shadow*, was published in September 2012. Visit her at www.monikaschroeder.com.

Common Core Connections: Kate Banks' Novels and Picture Books

Several of Kate Banks' picture books emphasize the importance of play and encourage young readers to use and expand their imaginations. She gives everyday objects—erasers, newspaper clippings, or letter blocks—lives of their own and has her books' characters interact with or dream up adventures for these newly animated objects. In her other picture books, she celebrates the importance of ordinary events in a child's life and provides good models for personal-narrative writing for primary students. Banks frequently describes small, intimate moments between parents and children, such as reading books together, preparing dinner, or going fishing. With masterful similes and a poet's sensitivity, she shows young readers how to listen and pay attention to the sights and sounds around them. Here are Common

Core-linked ideas for classroom use of a selection of Banks' books. Log on to www.booklistonline.com/commoncore for additional suggestions.

In the Classroom: In *The Night Worker*, a father takes his son on a surprise nighttime visit to his construction jobsite, and as "they survey the work site, stars shine like beacons for the night workers." The father explains the functions of the different heavy machinery, such as bulldozers, cranes, and cement mixers, while the son listens, captured by the new experience. This title can kick off a writing exercise for first- and second-graders in which students describe their parents' workplaces. Invite students to make a text-to-self connection: "Who has accompanied their parents to work, and what did you see?" A lively discussion will ensue among those who have seen their mothers and fathers perform different tasks. Compare *The Night Worker* to Sherri Duskey Rinker's *Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site* (2011), or for lessons on the different features of fiction and nonfiction texts, pair it with the First Facts: Transportation Zone series title *Bulldozers in Action*, by Peter Brady (2012).

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.K.3.** Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2.** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.5.** Explain major differences between books that tell stories and books that give information, drawing on a wide reading of a range of text types.

In the Classroom: *Mama's Coming Home* depicts a mother closing her pet shop and making her way home through the bustling city while, in a parallel narrative, Dad and the kids are at home, cleaning up, cooking dinner, and setting the table to prepare for Mom's arrival. The rhythmic story makes a great read-aloud, and children will happily call out the book's title as the refrain. Encourage students to retell the story and draw their attention to the parallel events in the two different settings. You could compare this with the board book *Mama's Home!*, by Paul Vos Benkowski (2004), a story of a stay-at-home dad and a toddler waiting for a mom to come home from work. You could also use this as an example in primary-grade units on teamwork.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1.** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2.** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.3.** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.

In the Classroom: In *That's Papa's Way*, a young girl and her father head out for a fishing trip in the early morning. Told in the girl's voice, the story chronicles her enjoyment of this special time with her dad. This is a slow-moving story, and the main event is the bonding between father and daughter that happens by spending time together. He whistles as he rows, because "that's Papa's way," while she says "whoosh" with the waves, because that's her way. Use *That's Papa's Way* as a model to practice personal-narrative writing with primary students. The snapshot of the father and daughter's time together is full of small, warm moments and enhanced by detailed observations. Ask students to recall a special time with a parent and to write a narrative about it. Encourage students to think about their parents' unique expressions, gestures, or routines and to juxtapose those with their own. This could also lead to speaking and listening practice if students tell their stories aloud, supported by drawings or items that relate to an event. For another look at a special parent-child time, read Dan Yaccarino's *Every Friday* (2007), about a father and son's weekly trip to a diner.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.3.** Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.5.** Create audio recordings of stories or poems; add drawings or other visual displays to stories or recounts of experiences when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

In the Classroom: *The Bear in the Book* focuses on another parent-child ritual: bedtime reading. A boy snuggles up to his mother as she reads him a book about a bear preparing to hibernate. Other animals explore the wintry landscape while mother and son identify them on the pages. When the bear comes out of his winter sleep, the boy doses off. This book celebrates the act of reading together as well as the tactile pleasure of interacting with a book. Ask students to share their own feelings and memories about reading at bedtime and to list the different ways in which the boy and his mother relate to the book: touching and turning pages, talking about the story and comparing it to their own situation, and so on. As additional exercises, you could use the story to supplement science units about sleep cycles, seasons, and hibernation. It could also serve as an excellent example of metafiction for young readers, and it would partner well with Mordicai Gerstein's *A Book* (2009) and Mo Willems' *We Are in a Book* (2010). Discuss the story-within-a-story concept with students and analyze how the story about the bear in the book relates to the mother reading to her child.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.7.** With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1.** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

Common Core Connections: Kate Banks' Novels and Picture Books

- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.2.** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.3.** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.7.** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.3.3.** Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

In the Classroom: In *Max's Dragon*, Max is looking for words that rhyme. Max shows his creative mind when his imaginary dragon leads him in and out of a game of croquet while Max speaks in simple couplets. He watches the clouds and tells his brothers, "If my dragon isn't faster, there'll be a big disaster." The brothers, initially annoyed, join the fun, and soon they even change the weather and save the dragon with another rhyme. Ask students if they have ever watched clouds and imagined what their shapes could be. Discuss why Max speaks in rhyme. Copy some of the rhymes in *Max's Dragon* on the board. Encourage students to come up with their own. Introduce the terms *couplet* and *anagram*, giving examples of each. Students could find more examples of the terms from the text before writing their own. Divide students into small groups and ask them to come up with a similar story that includes simple rhymes.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.2.4.** Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.2.5.** Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action.

In the Classroom: Boris Kulikov's colorful illustrations offer a great opportunity for an "illustration walk" through *Max's Dragon*. Ask students to find the dragon in each of the double-page spreads and discuss how perspective and color might depict mood.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.K.7.** With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.7.** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.

In the Classroom: In *Max's Castle*, Max goes on a word-filled adventure with a box of letter blocks he pulls out from under his bed. Just as in the other two books, the brothers scoff at Max at first, but soon they join him in "building" a castle from blocks. The wordplay invites teachers to use the book to teach anagrams, and older readers might detect more "words within words" and hidden solutions for the riddles the book poses.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.2.** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.3.** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.2.3.** Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.3.3.** Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

In the Classroom: After reading all three Max stories with the class, discuss differences and similarities in the adventures. Why do Max's brothers join him in each of the books after they initially react with skepticism? Do the books have a common theme? Use a Venn diagram with three circles to illustrate the results of the classroom discussion.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.K.9.** With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.1.9.** Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.3.9.** Compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters (e.g., in books from a series).

In the Classroom: Banks' novel *The Magician's Apprentice* is set in an unnamed desert country. A young man named Baz leaves his home, travels with a stranger, is apprenticed to a cruel master, and is bought by an itinerant magician, Tadis, who then takes him on travels through the countryside. While enduring hardships together on their journey, Baz learns from the wise man many important life lessons about knowing oneself and the power of love and forgiveness. Students will need guidance to understand the powerful message of this book. Chart Baz's journey on the board: Who is he at the beginning of the story? What does he learn along the way? How does he learn those lessons? How does Tadis teach Baz to open his heart to life's possibilities? What are the magician's secrets? Ask students to support their statements with quotes from the text. Invite personal responses in writing to the many profound statements Tadis makes. Draw students' attention to Peter Sis' intricate illustrations and discuss how they enhance the text's meaning and theme.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.5.2.** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- **CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RL.5.7.** Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).