

Book Links

BOOKS AND AUTHORS:
TALKING WITH JAN GREENBERG
BY SYLVIA M. VARDELL

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Talking with Jan Greenberg



Jan Greenberg has created a long list of acclaimed titles that introduce contemporary art to young readers. Often working with her frequent collaborator Sandra Jordan, she has explored ways of looking at art, as in *The Painter's Eye* (1991), and presented the lives of individual artists, such as Romare Bearden, Andy Warhol, Chuck Close, Louise Bourgeois, and Jackson Pollock; in books that are rich mini-museums of images and insights, complete with glossaries of art terms, time lines, and bibliographies. Here, Greenberg talks about her passion for art and education and the process of translating that passion into print for young readers.

BKL: *What are the roots of your interest in art and artists, particularly in contemporary art?*

GREENBERG: When I was a child growing up in Saint Louis, my mother often took me to the art museum on Saturday afternoons. These excursions were great fun, as my mother had a creative mind and invented games for us to play. Find the Painting, a kind of treasure hunt with clues, was my favorite. I would run around trying to discover the clown in Max Beckmann's self-portrait or the turtle with Matisse's bathers. I played this game years later with my own children. My husband, Ronnie, an art dealer, added to the challenge by asking them, "Which is the best picture in the gallery?" Usually we were in exhibitions of contemporary art. This was in the 1960s and '70s. The works in question were by such artists as Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, and Frank Stella. His exercise always stimulated questions, debates, and a few disagreements. It crystallized into a way of looking at art that I used as a teacher in the aesthetic-education MAT program at Webster University.

BKL: *Your collaboration with Sandra Jordan is clearly very effective; most recently, for example, you were named the 2013 Children's Book Guild Nonfiction Award winners. What does teamwork offer you that solo writing does not?*

GREENBERG: From the very beginning of our collaboration on the first book, *The Painter's Eye*, Sandra and I would haunt galleries and museums, asking each other questions, engaging in a conversation about the art. We would begin with the question, "What do you see?" This moved into a discussion of the formal aspects of a work of art: color, line, texture, or shape, followed by a list of sensory words and more questions, such as "How

does the artist use line or color to balance the painting or for emphasis?" and so on. Finally, we would get to the most important question: "What is the feeling expressed in the painting?" These discussions served as a basis for our books about art and artists. Of course, art preferences are subjective. But we were trying to get at the meaning of the artwork beyond our personal biases and experiences.

We still go on these field trips, not only in New York, where Sandra lives, and in Saint Louis, where I live, but also in whatever cities we find ourselves when we attend American Library Association or National Council of Teachers of English conferences.

BKL: *Could you speak more about the inspiration behind some of your titles?*

GREENBERG: Our idea for *Ballet for Martha* was inspired by a visit to the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, New York, where there was an exhibition of the sets the artist had designed for Martha Graham dances. Our forthcoming book, *The Mad Potter: George E. Ohr Eccentric Genius*, which will be released in 2013, was inspired by a trip to Biloxi, Mississippi, to see Ohr's pottery and the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, designed by Frank Gehry. We did a book on Gehry and his architecture (*Frank O. Gehry: Outside In*) some years ago, and we have continued to follow his work. George Ohr was a controversial character in his day (the late 1800s and beginning of the twentieth century), and his abstract, uniquely glazed pottery was forgotten, hidden away in his family's attic for many years, until he was rediscovered in the 1970s. Ohr's fascinating story is uniquely American in terms of his spirit of adventure and his aspiration to be the "Greatest Potter in the World." He created totally original work that is much admired today. The combination of a great story and great art is hard for us to resist, especially in an individual who endured so many disappointments trying to succeed.

BKL: *How did the biographical focus emerge in your first collaborations with Sandra Jordan?*

GREENBERG: In those first books on painting and sculpture, we wanted to give young people an entry into a dialogue with art, but we realized the text would be too dry without anecdotal material. We wrote to many of the artists whose works we highlighted and asked them about their childhood experiences with art or where they got their ideas, which is the first question most children ask me when I visit classrooms. We loved the stories. The childhood anecdotes clearly showed a relationship to the artists' mature works. Christo, who loved to draw as a child, pored over his parents' art books, which were eventually confiscated by an invading army in Bulgaria. When he escaped the Communists and went to Paris and later to the U.S., the freedom to make art motivated his large-scale works with his wife and creative partner, Jeanne-Claude.

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BKL: *What research do you do to inform your writing when you are tackling art-related topics?*

GREENBERG: When we write about living artists, such as Christo, Louise Bourgeois (now deceased), or Chuck Close, we set up personal interviews. Before we meet the artist at his or her studio, we read all the reference books and articles we can find. We hope to get new material from the artist. We hope to be surprised. So, we go into the interview prepared and loaded with questions. These encounters with artists in their own spaces inspire us.

IN *Ballet for Martha*, Martha Graham, the dancer-choreographer; Isamu Noguchi, the sculptor–set designer; and Aaron Copland, the composer, had died many years before. There, we relied on biographies and critical essays as well as interviews. At the beginning of the project, Neal Porter, our editor at Roaring Brook Press, took us to see a performance of *Appalachian Spring* by the Graham troupe. We met the illustrator, Brian Floca, that night. Sharing the performance together was a great motivating experience. We also attended dress rehearsals and looked at videos of Martha being interviewed and dancing in the original piece. We talked to members of the troupe, past and present. Floca’s amazing illustrations were based on similar research.

BKL: *Do you try your hand at the various art media you write about?*

GREENBERG: I think it’s important when one writes about any of the arts to try one’s hand at the creative process. I’ve taken classes in drawing, printmaking, and dance. I’ve written poetry since I was a little girl. My attempts to form clay into a pot on the potter’s wheel were a disaster; just at the moment the bowl seemed to take shape, it collapsed. How George Ohr made such thin-walled objects is a mystery. Not only did I learn to appreciate this art form but I also realized how difficult it is to master.

BKL: *Blending art and poetry is a unique challenge that you showcase beautifully in *Heart to Heart and Side by Side*. How were these pieces of art and these particular poets selected among a multitude of choices?*

GREENBERG: *Heart to Heart* involved collecting a list of my favorite poets for children and adults, finding their addresses (I was working without the Internet back then), writing letters, and waiting for responses. I sent more than 100 requests for submissions and received 65 poems back. X. J. Kennedy wrote to tell me he had broken his leg and was not up to writing a poem at that time. I quickly sent him a book of paintings by Stuart Davis to cheer him up. Three weeks later, I received a poem from Kennedy that is delightful, fun, and appealing to young readers. Fortunately, the best poems were inspired by artworks throughout the twentieth century. I have always been fascinated by ekphrastic poetry, and an anthology of American poets inspired by American artworks was an idea that had not been done before.

Side by Side was a challenge. The idea to have poets from all over the world write poems about artworks from their own

countries seemed so simple at first. Poems in their original language, the English translations, and the artworks would be printed “side by side.” But where to begin? Fortunately, I had Internet access by then. There is a society of English translators and a website, Words without Borders, that offers wonderful resources. Friends who are children’s book editors helped as well. It took a long time to track down poets and their translators, but I believe in a quote I once heard: “A problem quickly solved is uninteresting.” I am grateful to Howard Reeves, at Abrams, for believing in both of these projects.

BKL: *You’ve done extensive work with arts education. Would you share a few thoughts about the role of arts education in the classroom?*

GREENBERG: Although I believe in the arts for their own sake, I know what a wonderful teaching tool the visual arts are for stimulating discussion in the classroom. That the Common Core State Standards has created renewed interest in nonfiction across the curriculum is also gratifying to me.

As a visiting author in schools around the country, I’ve seen that children have different learning styles in their responses to art. I think of these learning styles as entry points through which students can engage in an arts experience. Storytelling is probably the most common entry point, for example, the legend or myth depicted in a painting, the story behind the creation of a piece of sculpture, or the period in history in which the artwork was created. A related question might be, “If you were to give this work of art a title, what would it be?”

ANOTHER entry point is what I call the hands-on approach. Children respond to the work of art by actually making or doing something with their hands or bodies, for example, doing an improvisation about a painting, creating a work of art with the same materials used in an artwork, or writing a poem inspired by a painting. Related questions might be, “How would you move following the lines in this painting? Fast or slow? Fluid or staccato?” Responding to the formal or sensory qualities of a work of art offers an aesthetic approach, one that formed the basis of our first book, *The Painter’s Eye*.

SOME students respond to art through discussions of broader concepts or philosophical issues; for example, ask questions, such as, “Why is a contemporary painting of a soup can considered art?” “Why do we look at art?” “Can a poem, a painting, or a play change our lives?”

ONE more window or entry point to understanding a work of art is through feelings or emotions, for example, the way an artist uses color or shape to convey anger or happiness or the emotions expressed by a piece of music through tempo, rhythm, or harmony.

SATISFYING the various learning styles of our young readers can serve as an underpinning not only for the books we write on the arts but also for the teaching methods we use in the classroom.

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Sampling Greenberg

Action Jackson. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. Illus. by Robert Andrew Parker. 2002. 32p. Roaring Brook, \$16.95 (9780761316824); paper, \$7.99 (9780312367510). 759.13. Gr. 2–5.

Andy Warhol: Prince of Pop. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. 2004. 176p. illus. Delacorte, \$16.95 (9780385730563). 770. Gr. 8–12.

Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. Illus. by Brian Floca. 2010. 48p. Roaring Brook/Flash Point, \$17.99 (9781596433380). 792.8. Gr. 2–4.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Through the Gates and Beyond. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. 2008. 50p. illus. Roaring Brook, \$19.95 (9781596430716). 709.2. Gr. 6–9.

Chuck Close Up Close. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. 1998. 48p. illus. DK, o.p.. 759.13. Gr. 4–7.

Frank O. Gehry: Outside In. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. 2000. 48p. illus. DK, o.p. 720. Gr. 7–12.

Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art. Ed. by Jan Greenberg, 2001. 80p. illus. Abrams, \$21.95 (9780810943865). 811. Gr. 5–12.

The Painter's Eye: By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. 1991. 96p. illus. Delacorte, o.p. 701. Gr. 6–9.

Romare Bearden: Collage of Memories. By Jan Greenberg. 2003. 52p. illus. Abrams, o.p. 709. Gr. 3–9.

Runaway Girl: The Artist Louise Bourgeois. By Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. 2003. 80p. illus. Abrams, \$19.95 (9780810942370). 730. Gr. 8–12.

Side by Side: New Poems Inspired by Art from around the World. Ed. by Jan Greenberg. 2008. 88p. illus. Abrams, \$21.95 (9780810994713). 811. Gr. 8–12.

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Common Core Connections

Following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with books by or coauthored by Jan Greenberg.

In the Classroom: Use *Ballet for Martha* as a springboard for discussing the power of collaboration in creating a work of art. This is the behind-the-scenes story of how the famous Martha Graham ballet *Appalachian Spring* came to be, from its inception through the composition of the score, by Aaron Copland, to the design of the innovative sets, by Isamu Noguchi. Invite students to identify key moments of interaction between the players in the narrative and in direct quotes (such as when Graham gives Copland a script, and he responds with comments that motivate her to rewrite it). But this book provides additional examples of collaboration, too. Check out Greenberg and Jordan's website (www.jangreenbergsandrajordan.com) for the backstory on Greenberg's collaboration with writing partner Sandra Jordan, editor Neal Porter, illustrator Brian Floca, and book designer Jennifer Browne. Or share the audiobook adaptation, narrated by actress Sarah Jessica Parker, which includes a performance by the Seattle Symphony of the score that inspired the ballet. As a natural follow-up, invite students to form partnerships or small groups for their own collaborative projects, such as creating a picture book, digital trailer, or audio podcast.

Common Core Connections

- **RI.5.3.** Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

In the Classroom: Asking questions is a big part of how Jan Greenberg approaches art and writing about art and artists. While she was growing up, her parents encouraged her with questions, which she and her husband continued to ask their own children, such as these:

- What do you see?
- What is the feeling expressed in the painting?
- Which is the best picture in the gallery?

Even within the narrative of several of her books, she frequently poses questions to invite the reader to wonder, interpret, and speculate. On p.11 of *Frank O. Gehry: Outside In*, for example, she uses Gehry's famous Guggenheim Bilbao Museum in Bilbao, Spain, to ask a series of questions that guide readers in "breaking down" the building and considering it from multiple angles. Walk through these questions with students to talk about the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum or apply the same questions to the buildings that are right there in their own environments (such as their school building).

Common Core Connections

- **RI.3.1.** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- **RI.3.6.** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.

In the Classroom: Pairing informational texts and poetry may seem to be an unlikely partnership at first, but these two different genres can complement one another by showing children how writers approach the same topic in very different and distinctive ways while still conveying key concepts in clear language. After sharing some of Greenberg's picture-book biographies, such as *Action Jackson*; *Ballet for Martha*; *Frank O. Gehry: Outside In*; and *Romare Bearden* guide students in discussing key ideas in the lives and works of the books' subjects. Jot those ideas down, focusing on keywords that are particularly vivid and descriptive. Then challenge students to create found poems by arranging words (of their choosing) from the list into poems. Share the poems, and then add them to a library or classroom display of the books. For examples of found poems from a variety of sources, see *The Arrow Finds Its Mark*, edited by Georgia Heard (2012).

Common Core Connections

- **RI.4.2.** Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

In the Classroom: After reading selections and sharing art images from Greenberg's *Heart to Heart* and *Side by Side*, invite students to talk about their favorite poem selections. Which key aspects of the art does the poem showcase? The image itself? The story behind the art? The emotional impact of the art? How does the poet arrange the words, lines, and stanzas to create the poem?

Poets arrange words on the page much like artists use various media to create their art. Discuss the choices in spacing, line breaks, and stanzas that the students notice in the poems. Then invite students to try creating their own ekphrastic poems in response to artworks. Begin by looking for compelling images from print resources, such as magazines, newspapers, or family photos, or online resources, like Flickr, Google Images, or the Google Art Project. Students can work with a partner to choose a favorite piece, talk about the art, and create a poem inspired by the art. Then come together as a group to share art selections and new poems, and post the pairs together in a class display.

Common Core Connections

- **RI.5.5.** Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.
- **RI.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).