

Q&A with author Brian P. Cleary

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Q: Your bio notes that you were a reluctant reader and you wrote "I'm just a guy with the IQ of a BLT who barely knows his ABCs, and is full of BS on topics from A to Z." What inspired that drastic turnaround, and continues to motivate you to write?

A: I remember from the first week of kindergarten, feeling like the whole class must have been meeting for lessons in the evening with our teacher while I was home watching "To Tell The Truth." The other kids just seemed to know things, as if it were a review, while I was struggling to decode the simplest instructions, as if they were being given in Mandarin or Aramaic. I remember the teacher taking the little name cards we had on our desks and rearranging them, to see if we could recognize our names and sit at the appropriate desk. I stalled and circled until everyone else had a seat and then slid into the only remaining desk. The fact that I went to elementary schools in three different states by the time I was nine only compounded that feeling of being adrift. I was lost until I stumbled on to the joy of language in about third grade.

Discovering that I was good at something (writing quirky verse) gave me more confidence, and, over time I became an average elementary school student. In high school, I studied Latin, which added to my interest in words and love of language. I finished college a whole semester early, and applied to one of the 5 largest creative divisions in the world, went on one interview and got the job. Now, in a great twist of irony, I visit classrooms all over the country (I've been in 40 states, last count!), trying to kickstart a similar fascination with words among today's elementary schoolers.

Q: Why do you write for children?

A: I write for everyone. In the past month, I've gotten fan emails from a 2nd grader, a 5th grader, a grad student and several librarians. My books are aimed at people who have retained the elasticity of mind that children organically have, so kids are a natural audience for me.

Q: Your work is often very clever, fun, and inspires chuckles. Do you think that humor is a useful element in educating and telling stories? Please elaborate:

A: I think anything that helps students learn is a useful element in education. People learn so differently! Some people are visual learners, others can only learn by doing. Humor will be the key for some people to read and retain things, so for them it's a great fit for the way they think and learn.

Q: What inspired you to write the "Words are Categorical" series?

A: I thought it would be great to author a series which would serve as a little rhyming sound byte-filled cheat sheet to help students master these sometimes tricky grammatical concepts. Again, my reluctant learner past is relevant.

Q: Who are your favorite poets? Why?

A: Until about 2nd or 3rd grade, I thought of our language as being made from something like fine crystal – it was handed down, fully formed and unchangeable. Then I read Ogden Nash and I realized that language was malleable – able to adapt, to be stretched and pulled apart and put back together. More like Silly Putty than crystal. His work, along with e. e. cummings' taught me that, just as an artist can add a little more yellow or a little more blue to change the shade of green, so can words, letters, syllables and sounds be altered to create something interesting. At the end of one of Nash's famous poems he writes, "When called by a panther, don't anther."

Brilliant!

Dr. Seuss was an influence on nearly every rhymer in the back half of the 20th Century. I discovered Shel Silverstein when I was maybe 20. My younger brothers (I'm one of 9 kids), Owen and Danny were into Silverstein, and so he influenced me long after the others. Today, I enjoy reading Anne Lamott, Raymond Carver, Roger Angell and Tobias Wolff. There's a poetry to the lyrics of Tom Waits' music which shows an amazing understanding of the human condition and celebrates the wonder of words. I'd stand in line to hear David Sedaris read his grocery list.

Q: Of all your work, what published work for children are you most proud of? Please elaborate:

A: As far as single titles, it would definitely be RAINBOW SOUP: ADVENTURES IN POETRY, because it showcases many different styles of poems and explains the different forms and poetic terms. From a series standpoint, it's the Words Are CATegorical books which explain in fun, rhyming verse all about nouns, verbs, adjectives all the way through synonyms and homonyms.

Q: What are you books are you working on now?

A: Fall of 2005, the homonym book HOW MUCH CAN A BARE BEAR BEAR? will be out along with THE MISSION OF ADDITION, the first title in a rhyming math series. I'm currently writing a series of books called "Sounds Like Reading" which uses phonics, rhyme, repetition and illustration to teach reading. Look for RHYME AND PUN-ISHMENT: ADVENTURES IN WORDPLAY in 2006.