

Meet This Issue's Featured Author/Illustrator: Brian P. Cleary
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Stop and Go, Yes and No: What Is an Antonym?, How Much Can a Bare Bear Bear? What Are Homonyms and Homophones?, Rhyme & Punishment: Adventures in Wordplay and **The Mission of Addition** are Brian Cleary's newest contributions to making the obscure accessible for kids. The author of wickedly funny takes on parts of speech, poetic forms and now math operations brings a breath of fresh air to topics often considered humdrum. Sometimes called the word nerd, Cleary's sheer delight in his subject is infectious.

Cleary was a curious, inventive child who loved to play with language at home: "humor and reading and wordplay were encouraged. I'm one of nine kids so it was pretty much an asylum where I grew up. From my earliest memories, I played with words. I remember hearing the name Zsa Zsa Gabor, and saying Zsa Zsa The Bore when I was maybe 4 years old. At about six, when I was in the car with my dad, I saw a sign that said NO U TURN and I said, That sign should say 'DON'T you turn.'"

In spite of his powerful gift, Cleary had difficulty in the formal, educational setting. "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, while I was struggling to decode the simplest instructions, as if they were being given in Mandarin or Aramaic. 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 student."

Cleary went on to great academic and career achievements; still, his early experiences gave him insight into children's lives. "I think a strength of mine is that I don't talk down to kids, and haven't forgotten life on that side of the desk. I love visiting schools because, in a sense, I'm making peace with something that wasn't always a safe, happy place for me. I'm warmly greeted, and appreciated for who I am - someone who loves language and has fun working with words. Although I'm considered a children's author, I write for everyone. 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. I think anything that helps students learn is a useful element in education. People learn so differently! 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."

When asked whether teachers responded to his gifts Cleary says, "Some did, some didn't. Even though there was less of a premium on creativity than on conformity when I was in grade school, my teachers were mostly patient and nurturing. School just wasn't my thing. I occasionally got papers back that said Head in the Clouds! and, Daydreamer! I didn't even know to be offended by them at the time. I think there's nothing wrong with telling someone to 'focus,' but it's daydreaming and having your head in the clouds that made giant mainframes into desktop computers and I-Pods. It's wondering if prescription windshields would really be a good idea (the up side? No one would steal your car. The downside? Well there's a lot on the downside.) that might get you to invent something else entirely. I mean, we live in America, a place that was 'discovered' by accident because some men didn't want to ask for directions. We certainly have room for dreamers. On the final day of 8th grade, I received a note from my teacher, Mrs. Tama. It read:

Dear Dreamer —

Some day you're going to

be very successful, but please —

hurry up and start!

God Bless You,

Mrs. Tama

Keenly aware of teachers' power, Cleary says, "I don't presume for a second to know as much about kids as any teacher, but I do know how little insignificant acts can make the day, the week, the year way more tolerable for a kid who feels like school is an undershirt that just doesn't fit right."

"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." Poetry was the key for Cleary. "To me, learning about poets and poetry was akin to being in a very foreign country, surrounded by unfriendly faces and a language I didn't understand, and suddenly hearing, in English, someone talking about baseball and American movies. I felt like I was home."

His many books that bring abstract subjects into focus are cleverly rhymed. Cleary is most proud of *Rainbow Soup: Adventures in Poetry* — a volume of poetry critics have compared to *Shel Silverstein's*, which also explains the poetic forms and terms. Of his books in the *Words Are Categorical™* series, Cleary says, "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."

Baseball is a significant life theme for Cleary. "Babe Ruth was the first person I ever wrote about, when I was 7 or 8. My paper was called 'Babe Ruth — A Person I Admire.' I liked that he could go from being lost to being on top of the world, just because he could do one thing well. He wasn't weighed down by ideas; he just went out there and put the whole sport on its ear. He swung big and sometimes missed big."

Cleary shares possibilities with his readers. "Unlike almost everyone my age (46), I DON'T tell my kids (or anyone else's) that if they just try hard enough, and work tirelessly that they can reach their goal. It isn't just desire that separates me from, say Julio Franco, who at 48 is still playing Major League Baseball. It's talent. I was in perfect shape when I was 18. I was the captain of the track team, a good high jumper and one of the best 2-mile runners in the city. But, if my dream was to someday play shortstop for the Cleveland Indians, the baseball coach could have hit ground balls at me all day long and I would never have made a junior varsity team, let alone a professional one. I just wasn't good enough. And we don't like to tell people that they aren't good enough at things."

"Having said that, here is what I WILL say. It's okay to dream big, impossible dreams. Not because you'll ever make them come true necessarily, but because it's important to articulate what you want out of life: what you have to contribute, and what you'd like to gain from it. What if what I wanted from being a baseball player (I never really entertained the thought, this is just to make the point) was to entertain thousands of people, have my work publicly praised

and scrutinized, to have kids look up to me, to make enough money to help people I love, sign autographs, have in the public record something that will outlive me, feel fulfilled, and visit cities all over America? Well, you don't have to be a ballplayer to accomplish that. I have all of that in my life as an author. If I don't dream, and shoot for something, if I don't 'frame in' the WHYS along with the WHATS, I accomplish less of the things that really matter to me. I love Shel Silverstein's *Listen to the Mustn'ts*. The last lines are:

Listen to the 'never haves'

Then listen close to me:

Anything can happen, Child,

Anything can be."

...notice he doesn't say YOU can do anything. It's similar, but note the difference: You can do anything you set your mind to isn't true. But Anything can be, well, that's a different story! Neil Armstrong didn't know when he was 5 that not only would man walk on the moon in his lifetime, but that HE'D be the first to do it. If Babe Ruth were born 50 years earlier (or in any other country on the face of the earth), there wouldn't have been this sport that gave him satisfaction, riches, fame and identity. That's what Anything can be means to me. It's that situations and opportunities can emerge - not just us working harder to reach our goals." Cleary and Silverstein both won International Reading Association Children's Choice Awards in 1996, as did Roald Dahl.

"Anything can be" also reminds me that if things are pretty lousy in the life of a kid, it's up to adults to point out to him or her that things won't always be the way they are now. Not only will we change, but the world around us will too. So, kids SHOULD dream, not because that dream WILL or even SHOULD come true, but because it's part of a process that allows us to find what we love."

Cleary is working on a new book that will explain linear measurement in both English and metric terms (in verse, of course) as well as an alphabet book in rhyme called Peanutbutter and Jellyfishes. Look for both sometime next year. Kids and adults alike will find Cleary a kindred spirit and the clarion voice of their hopes and humor. His Web site is: WWW.BRIANCLEARY.COM.

Bibliography

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