



Meet Jane Yolen & Heidi E. Y. Stemple **Authors of many fun & funny Ready-to-Read**

About the Books

Jane and Heidi are mother and daughter authors. They have co-authored about 24 books (including *Not All Princesses Dress In Pink*, and the *Unsolved Mysteries from History* series), but for Simon & Schuster Ready-To-Read, they are both working on early readers separately. They agree, this is some of the most fun bookmaking ever!

Jane Yolen's latest fiction series, *Interrupting Cow*, follows a joke-loving cow around the farm, teaching her jokes and learning new ones from new friends in these Level Two Ready-to-Read books illustrated by Joelle Dreidemy.

Heidi E. Y. Stemple's newest Level One Ready-to-Read, *Toucan with Two Cans*, illustrated by Aaron Spurgeon, is a laugh-out-loud rhyming, counting tale that ends in a colorful surprise!

Ready-to-Read leveled readers include both engaging nonfiction and stories featuring fan favorite characters. They are vetted by educational experts to adhere to the latest beginning reader guidelines and receive official Lexile and F&P reading levels.

Q&A with Jane Yolen & Heidi E. Y. Stemple

Q: The *Interrupting Cow* series takes an old, familiar joke and gives it new life. What inspired you to take on this new twist of an old favorite?

JY: My granddaughter Ari, when she was three or four, used to tell me that joke whenever she saw me, and we would roll on the floor laughing. So one day in her honor I wrote a picture book of the same name. But once I began doing the *School of Fish* books as easy readers, I realized

there was more potential in reaching more new readers with *Interrupting Cow* that way. Fortunately, the editor agreed.

Q: Your *School of Fish* series has our favorite little fish encountering a lot of common school obstacles of anxiety, like taking the bus alone, worrying about their friends, tests, and substitute teachers, and more. Why did you feel it was important to address these issues in this format, and what do you hope readers and educators take away from these tales?

JY: I remember a lot about my elementary school (in New York City), a lot more about my three children's elementary experiences in Northampton, MA, and my grandchildren's early school experiences, as well. So I had a lot of first-hand knowledge, and also as an author have visited many elementary schools, plus I have a Master's in Early Education. It all went into the vast pot I use for stirring memories into stories. But I also remember the places I learned certain big words and concepts, and they were almost always in books. So that is what I *hope* I am passing on!

Q: There's so much rhyming and visual fun in *Toucan with Two Cans*; what was your process for coming up with this exciting story of juggling, entertainment, and excitement?

HS: *Toucan with Two Cans* started with a line. I had no plot, no juggling, entertainment, or excitement—just one funny first line. It was all about the word play. That's usually how I write—I start with no idea where I'm going. As I worked on the story, it became clearer. As I wrote, Toucan got to have his big moment and then everything came crashing down both literally and metaphorically. I was on a train, traveling to New York City with my mother, when I finally finished the full draft of the story. I read it aloud to her and do you know what she said to me? "Delete the first line." She was right. So, I did. If there is a moral to that story, it is that even a great first line that sends you off into creating a story doesn't always make it into the final draft.

Q: What draws you to the early/young reader for your work? How do you decide for which level of reader your story works best?

HS: I love writing funny stories—totally silly stuff. Early readers seem to suit my writing style well. I don't decide which level each book should be. That is the job of my editor (in the case of *Toucan*, the fabulously brilliant Siobhan Ciminera). When she bought *Toucan*, I still had a lot to learn about early readers. She points out when I use a word or phrase that doesn't work for the level, and I change it into something that does. It's like a puzzle. And, I love puzzles!

JY: My sweet spot is short work: poetry, picture books, short stories, songs. So, think how wonderfully easy readers slot in there. You could probably sing the *School of Fish* books. And *Interrupting Cow* is more of a funny picture book than anything else. Yes, I have written novels (over 60 of them evidently!) and some graphic novels and one verse novel,

nonfiction, cookbooks, music books, operas, and lyrics for bands. But writing these Ready-to-Read books is like working at my dream job!

Q: What inspires your stories, and what advice would you give to teachers and librarians looking for ways to spark creativity in their students and patrons?

HS: Absolutely everything around me can inspire a story. A news story, the birds outside my window, a dream... *Toucan* began just playing with fun sounding words. Toucan, two can, I can, you can... After writing *Toucan*, I thought, what if there could be more—all sorts of birds doing funny things. So, I became inspired to create other funny situations where birds are doing human activities when something goes hugely and hilariously wrong—look for *Flamingo Bingo* next.

JY: I agree with Heidi. I tell my writing students that we are going to walk outside for an hour and if they don't come back with ten ideas, they aren't working hard enough. Then I proceed to point out things—birds, animals, anomalies, things left in the garden or behind the barn and propose a possible story (these are picture book writers and illustrators). Of course I have been writing professionally for almost seventy years. So, finding stories is second nature to me. Though to be truthful, if I come back from a walk (with or without students) with my ten ideas, I then have to then put them in piles—triage—the way doctors in the old days in wars used to do with wounded soldiers: these have a good shot at life, these are heavily compromised, these are DOA.

As for instructing teachers, even with my master's in early education and several published books on how to write, I would not do that. I have never spent time teaching in a classroom. That takes knowledge, courage, and fortitude. The books that I write are there for them to do their educational magic with. I wouldn't presume to tell teachers how to do their jobs. But my books might!

HS: I try to never tell teachers what to do—they are the experts. But, if they wanted to take some inspiration from the way I created *Toucan With Two Cans*, I would say let students come at an idea from a totally different angle. It's like that drawing game where you make a squiggle and try to create a picture from it. Take a fun phrase and write from there. Don't get too caught up in needing to have a story idea or plot right away.

Also, I hope all educators can pass on this message to their young writers, and I know my mom agrees—writing is hard work, there are a lot of rules and we authors can spend days, weeks, years, finding just the right word. But, please also remember that writing can be—should be—fun, too! Finding the right word is like solving a puzzle. Bending the rules is sometimes the best way to make a good story. And, taking a blank page and making it into a story is its own kind of very special magic!

To learn more about Ready-to-Read, visit ReadytoRead.com.

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