

# Rosemary Wells

Award-winning author and illustrator

*It was a simpler time in America when Rosemary Wells transformed from a bright-eyed youngster to a well-read, talented writer and illustrator. Many of her books, however, transport the young reader back to those days filled with optimism, simplicity, exploration, common sense and hard work. Here Rosemary chats with Mackin's Lori Tracy about those "golden years" in America, how today's students and education system have changed, how she can continually create award-winners, and why children shouldn't read about vampires.*



## CHILDHOOD THEN AND NOW

**L:** You grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in rural New Jersey (as you call it, the "golden years"). How did your upbringing shape who you are today and what you write about? Did you have any illustrators in the family?

**R:** No illustrators. I was very lucky to be born into a family where my parents were extremely well-read. They were older than most parents of my peers, and I was the only child. My father was a playwright; my mother was in the Russian ballet. When I was born, they started a new life. Yet it wasn't as if I had a romantic theatre background at all. I grew up in a small town and went to public schools. **I had a pretty good education in America's public schools, and that had a huge effect on me.**

**L:** Did you ever try ballet?

**R:** Oh no. I am probably the world's worst dancer. I didn't get a single chromosome of this. The whole atmosphere of my young years was "I loved books." Of course we didn't have the books then that kids do now. There weren't any children's bookstores. Usually kids just didn't have that many books, so we read them over and over. But I was a talented artist, and I loved fabricating stories, and I learned to do it very early, very convincingly. So I became a writer and illustrator.

It was a very simple time. We didn't have childhood entertainment; we made our own. We had a lot more freedom than we do now. I grew up in a calmer,

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◀ Rosemary lives in Connecticut. She has two grown daughters, Victoria and Meg, a.k.a. "Max" and "Ruby."



steadier, more confident America that had a better sense of itself. America was happy in its own skin. So that was the world around me. And my parents did a great job, too.

**L:** It's always fascinating to hear how a successful person's parents had such a positive influence on them.

**R:** I was a happy child. I think the fact that my parents gave me unconditional love has given my books a boost of optimism and cheerfulness. That's how I see the world. **I couldn't write a dystopian novel or some story about vampires, and I don't think kids should read them. I think kids need positive encouragement, and I try in all my work to do that.** You'll find that in "On the Blue Comet," my newest novel.

Growing up in that era has made me an author of wholesome and positive stories, and what I bring to it, too, is a sense of humor, that always makes it a little different. But behind it all is the love I had from my parents and a decent, responsible America.

**L:** Are children's needs today really different than 60 years ago?

**R:** I have four grandchildren, and this world is exponentially different than the one I brought my kids up in. You don't spoil your kids; you don't buy them everything they want. Kids used to work every Saturday; everyone had chores until about 3:00. **I think this is the huge difference now: the lack of meaningful work for children, so that they can feel like they're contributing to their family's well-being.** We weren't farm kids, but we still all worked. If we were lucky, we'd get a quarter and go to the movies. Clean movies, very little TV, lots of reading, and no exposure to the ugliness of the adult world.

**With boys today, keep the video games out of the house.** Make sure they only have one hour of TV a day and know what it is. Bring books into your home and read them yourself and read them aloud.

## THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

**L:** Many of your books are written for preschool-aged children. Tell me about the importance of getting children interested in reading at an early age.

**R:** The well-prepared child comes to kindergarten with 3,000 books under his/her belt. That doesn't mean 3,000 different books – maybe they have read their favorite books dozens of times, but they have those hours. And they see those pages turn, they see the pictures, they hear their parents' voices.

My co-interest along with my own books is reading aloud to children – extending "Read to Your Bunny" (1999) into making sure your child is prepared to learn by the time he/she gets to school. **I don't believe we should burden our teachers with children who are not anywhere ready to learn, and we do.**

The Los Angeles Times decided to take all the teachers in some primary schools in L.A. and rank them, according to test scores of their kids, as to whether they were good teachers or bad teachers. They published it in the newspaper, which was very humiliating to a lot of teachers who had classrooms of hopelessly-not-ready-to-learn kids. I

think that's the most unfair thing I've ever heard.

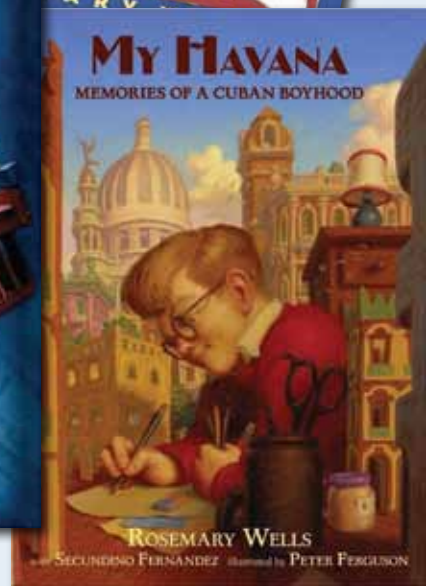
Instead, I'd like to see the parents ranked! **I had my share of good and bad teachers, but I came out okay because of my parents.**

## HER LATEST SUCCESSES

**L:** "On the Blue Comet" (2010) received a starred review before it was even published (see page 59). Tell me about this story. How long did it take you to write? Model trains and time travel are an interesting combination for you!

**R:** It is a departure. I haven't done time travel before because I never knew how to make it convincing. Everything in my books has to be convincing. One of my favorite books is "Time and Again" by Jack Finney. It's time travel so beautifully explained and convincingly done that you just swallow

*(continued)*





the whole thing. I wanted to do that. The funny thing is I wrote this book 30 years ago, the first 45 pages, but couldn't resolve it.

It's about an 11-year-old boy, Oscar, who has a wonderful relationship with his father, a widower. They have a good life, then the Great Depression hits and they lose everything, and the father must go to California to work. They have to sell their model trains to the bank president. Oscar has to go live with his aunt. His aunt teaches piano and declamation, which was very popular back in the '20s and '30s.

One night when Oscar is visiting the bank and looking at his model trains, which are now in a Christmas display at the bank, two men come in to rob the bank. Just as Oscar sees the robber pulling the trigger on the gun pointed right at him, he jumps into the model train display and becomes very small, part of the display. He sits on the train bench, then gets on a train, and his journey begins....

**L:** What an exciting and dramatic story! "My Havana," which was released in 2010, received a starred review, too (see page 43). Tell me about the importance of this story and what research you had to do to write it.

**R:** I did this book because I heard a 5-minute interview on NPR [National Public Radio] with a Cuban expat who came here at the time Castro took over. New York City 1958 – not welcoming to Hispanic kids. He came from one of the most beautiful areas in the world to New York, where everything was black and gray, sleet and ice. No one is friendly. His 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher sent him back down to kindergarten because he couldn't speak English. So what he did

to feel better was build a model city of Havana in his bedroom. He eventually meets a friend and, when spring arrives, realizes New York City can be beautiful. He grew up to be an architect. It's a book about childhood survival, and it has a happy ending.

**L:** Okay, on to another one of your creations from last year: "Max & Ruby's Bedtime Book." What made you decide to do a 3-in-1 bedtime, oversized picture book, and how do you keep coming up with new story ideas after oodles of books in this series?

**R:** Max and Ruby come from my own two kids. It's completely nonfiction. They're not books about how kids should be, they're books about how kids ARE. And that's why they're popular.

My editor and I wanted to do a big Ruby and Max book. We didn't want to do a really long story, so we thought let's do three stories and 48 pages. I took a couple of story ideas that I was never able to make into longer 32-page picture books; they didn't have the substance, but they work very well in the context of a shorter story in a bigger book. There are 104 drawings in this book!

**L:** Wow! So how long did that take to illustrate?

**R:** A lo-o-long time.

## THE GIFT OF WRITING AND ILLUSTRATING

**L:** You've been drawing Max and Ruby, Yoko, Timothy and other characters for such a long time. Do you ever wish you could change some things about them? For example, I wish their ears were bigger, or I wish they were a different color.

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**R:** I did re-illustrate some of my books from earlier years, because I realized I was a much better illustrator later on. I didn't change a word of the text, but I re-did the illustrations so they would have new life and new color. But no, I don't live in the past and wish I did something differently. I always look forward. The job is too hard and too demanding to keep a fresh edge. I happen to be a very happy and cheerful person. Que será, será.

**L:** You've had 24 starred reviews since 1998. This is truly amazing. What makes your books so well-reviewed and also popular with children?

**R:** There isn't a day that goes by when I'm not thankful for having the gift of drawing and the gift of storytelling. I seem to be able to make things up quite convincingly. And after 120+ books, I really know how to do it, and I work quickly. I know when I'm on the right track and when I'm not. For the first 25 years of my career I had a wonderful editor, Phyllis Fogelman, and she really taught me how to do this. We did a lot of books together, and I used to laugh and joke with her and say I have this little miniature Phyllis sitting on my typewriter, and if I come up with something good, she'll say, "Okay, that's good enough." And if I don't she'll say,





## A GOOD TEACHER IS PRICELESS

*I had a wonderful teacher my junior year in high school. Every week she'd give us a book and say, "Write something about this book." Then we'd have to start reducing what we wrote, from a 10-sentence mini-essay to a five-sentence one, without losing the idea. Eliminate extra words and adjectives. It was wonderful! That taught me how to write short stories and get right to the point.*

*I thank her forever."*

"No, no, no, start again." I really know now when I have something that's ready to be submitted.

**L:** Do you ever feel the pressure when you're working on a new book that it has to be as exceptional as the last one?

**R:** No, I don't like pressure, so I don't feel it! It's sort of like saying I don't like tight shoes so I don't wear them. But if you're a success in this business, you're first a business person, and I am. It's not just sitting back and being inspired. Publishing is a difficult business. It's not like any others because your product is new every year, and there are about 500 new products every year. It's like a company putting out 500 new soaps this year, then next year putting out 500 new soaps again. It's taken me years to learn it.

**L:** Your "My Very First Mother Goose" book was one I read to my children when they were young. They loved the pictures! What an honor it must have been to illustrate classic nursery rhymes.

**R:** It was! At the time I decided to make an in-depth study of the

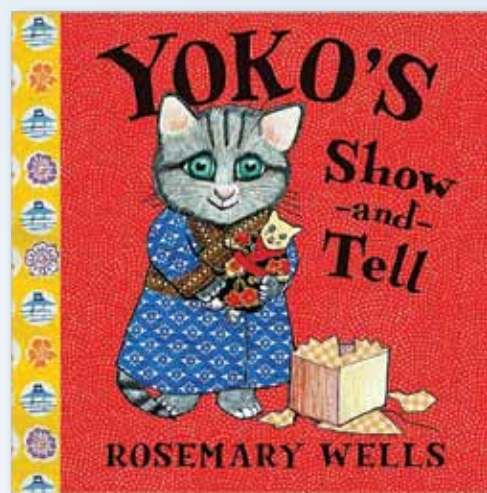
trademarks of the 1920s and 1930s and extrapolated from that. I used some characters that I made up and some characters I found elsewhere.

**L:** Do you think there will come a day when nursery rhymes aren't around?

**R:** I hope not. You know, it's the greatest short poetry in the world. I don't like to think that children don't know anything about Mother Goose or Jack and Jill or any of those classic nursery rhyme characters and the staples of our early childhood language.

**L:** I was very surprised to discover your name is tied to the "Charlotte's Web" and "Stuart Little" books. What's the story there?

**R:** Oh but I hate that! I had a project for Harper, a Rodgers and Hammerstein compendium. It was about the same time that a Stuart Little movie was coming out. The editors were saying they might need to take the original Stuart Little out of the list and create new illustrations from the movie. Well I just about had a conniption. But they said it's very hard to keep books in print with black-and-white drawings because kids don't relate to black-and-white art anymore. So long story short, I volunteered to research Garth Williams' colors and technique, and to color his illustrations. I had to look at it in a positive light, which was at the time Harper didn't have the money to print color illustrations for that book. Garth had to do black-and-white art. So I did color it in as I thought he might have done. And I did Charlotte's Web, too. But I didn't want them to put my name on it. Once I went to a bookstore and they had 25 of these books for me to sign, and I refused. I said, "This is Garth's work."



**L:** It's really fascinating that you ended up with this talent of writing and illustrating, yet never went to college for either.

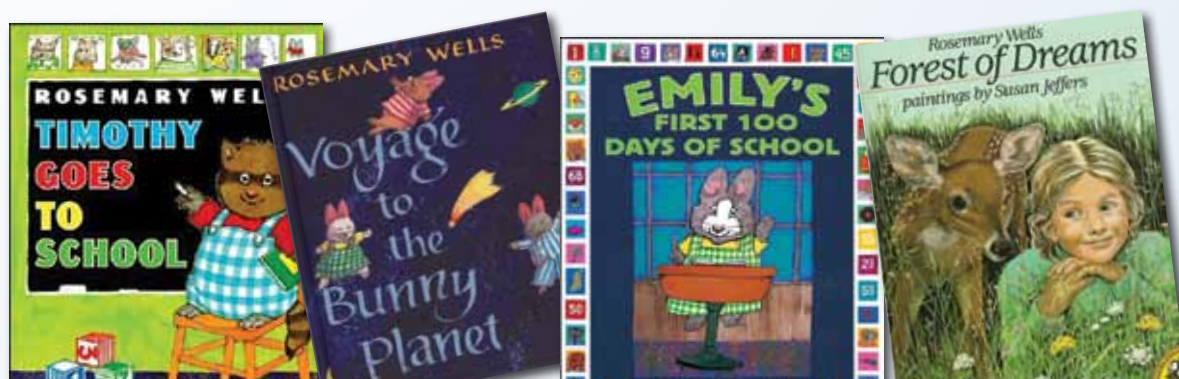
**R:** It's more than a skill, it's an art. You know, my mother could dance like nothing you have ever seen. She could, in a pair of shorts and a halter, just take over the living room dancing. She had a natural grace and a center of being that natural dancers have. My mother did not have to sit down in a chair to put on her socks. It was a gift. That's what my talent is, too.

## THE RAPIDLY CHANGING BOOK INDUSTRY

**L:** You've been in the picture book industry for more than 40 years. Chain bookstores are struggling. Independent bookstores are going out of business. How has the industry changed?

**R:** It's changed for the better and it's changed for the worse, like everything else. By and large, the field of children's books has transformed into a major industry, and I applaud that.

We now have full color, and the size of the printing has improved. Today's picture books are very beautiful, and one of the reasons is they are printed with fluorescent inks that make everything brighter and the ink pop off the page. But these inks are prohibited in



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the United States because they get into the water table and they're poisonous. So we go to China and have the books printed there. However, publishers have cut back on the number of books they publish.

You can make a living now being an illustrator. It's opened the door to people who may not have chosen this as a career initially. The publishers take us seriously because we sell books.

When I first came into publishing in 1968, 95% of the sales of books were to librarians. They didn't need fancy jackets. Then came the rise of the independent bookstores in the '80s, and then fancy jackets mattered and covers looked like posters. It was the golden age of publishing because you had the quality of books and the money to make

them beautiful and print large numbers. Then the chain bookstores got into the market and they took aim at putting the independent bookstores out of business, although they did increase sales for some authors, some publishers, and some kinds of books.

Overall, publishing has improved since I've been in it, but it's also become more commercialized with more TV tie-ins. I think a lot of negative fiction should be out. But mostly it's the violence in books and explicit sexuality that is not attached to some kind of value system. That doesn't mean an abstinence system, but a responsibility system. I think publishers need to sit back and say, "How are we going to be responsible as publishers? We can't just publish gross and indecent things because it sells."

And I'm not immune to this. I was asked to allow the "Max & Ruby" TV tie-ins.

**L:** So you weren't on board with your books being turned into TV programs?

**R:** It's a long and complex story. They did a fair job. It was early in my

career and I thought it was a good way to sell books, but it wasn't. They did do a much better job with "Max and Ruby" versus "Timothy Goes to School." It's wholesome. **And if there's anything I want people to know about Rosemary Wells' books is that they're wholesome.** There are many wonderful picture books and artists and writers that continue to get published, and I would discourage all the commercialization. If TV wants to use books for their inspiration, that's good. If books use TV for their inspiration, that's not good.

## RIDING THE EBOOK WAVE

**L:** How do you feel about the growth of ebooks and how they might affect the picture/board book industry?

**R:** The first thing I'll tell you is it's what's next. Two years from now it may not be what's next. It may go the route of the CD-ROM. One thing I've learned in my many years is don't put all your money on the course that just looks like it can't be beat, because there might be something you can't foresee. Everything is very fluid, and in this country we just fall over backwards over any new technology. I will tell you "Max and Ruby" will be apps. I do know that beautiful art and good stories are the essence of what children love, and whether they have them on paper or on screen may not in the end make too much of a difference.

One thing I do like is that when Mom's in the supermarket line or in the dentist office and the child is restless or bored, in her purse she has a library of children's books available. I hope that ebooks will actually increase sales in the hardcover book business because when children see something in one version they tend to want it in another. Making the stories and the pictures available to more children is what we want to do, and whether this stays around and becomes what the publishers think it will be, I don't know.

I'm a businesswoman, this is an industry, and I can't just write sweet

## Just for Fun

*What one person would you most like to meet, from today or years past?*

Two people actually, John Kennedy and FDR.

*What do you like to read in your spare time?*

I read a great deal of history, pretty much 20<sup>th</sup>-century history and politics.

*If someone wrote a biography on you, what would the title be?*

Eavesdropper's Confidential

*Relating to your "On the Blue Comet" book, if you could go back to any time period, when would it be and what would you be doing?*

I would go back to 1916 and tell Allen Dulles, who was a youngster in the State Department, to please take the call from Vladimir Lenin and have dinner with him, and don't let him go to Finland without trying to get the United States involved. I would go back to 1919 and tell Woodrow Wilson to not be so high and mighty, to cooperate with Republicans and disarm Germany so they could never do harm again.



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little stories and put my heart into them. They have to sell, they have to be out there.

**L:** Do you have an ebook reader?

**R:** No, I don't like it myself. I tote around hardcover books in airplanes. I like to turn pages. But I do listen to a lot of audiobooks.

### WHAT'S AHEAD FOR ROSEMARY

**L:** How long do you see yourself continuing to put out new books?

**R:** If the books keep coming to me, I'll keep doing them. One night my husband and I were just driving home from downtown New York, and just outside Radio City there was a man with a gun, and he had just shot the gun and we heard it, and my husband immediately pulled over. Everyone scattered, except two cops, who ran toward the danger. I thought, "Look at them! Bless them! I'm so glad we have police officers." I could never do something like that! So other people's jobs are unlike anything we can imagine. Writing and illustrating is my job. It's what I do.

**L:** Lastly, what does 2011 look like for Rosemary Wells?

**R:** I have another Max book to do. I have a new Yoko book that I'm very excited about called "Yoko Learns to Read," where Yoko teaches her mother how to read in English. **I have a new ongoing series coming out called Kindergators.** Brilliant green alligators covered with bumps, and they just do all kinds of stuff!



## ROSEMARY WELLS COMPENDIUM TITLES

### 1998-2010

My Havana: Memories of a Cuban Boyhood (New!)

On the Blue Comet (New!)

Lincoln and His Boys

Max Counts His Chickens

Yoko

Yoko's Paper Cranes

Max's ABC

Red Moon at Sharpsburg

Voyage to the Bunny Planet

Yoko Writes Her Name

Mother Goose's Little Treasures

My Kindergarten

Carry Me!

Miraculous Tale of the Two Maries

Emily's First 100 Days of School

McDuff Moves In

Max's Toys

Wingwalker

Noisy Nora

Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina

Bunny Money

Mary on Horseback: Three Mountain Stories

Here Comes Mother Goose

Rachel Field's Hitty: Her First Hundred Years

Streets of Gold

Max's Bath

Max's Bedtime

Max's Birthday

Max's Breakfast

Max's First Word

Max's Ride



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### LOOK INSIDE:

Page 43

"My Havana"

Page 59

"On the Blue Comet"

