

Becoming a Children's Book Illustrator

"I think that all artists regardless of degree of talent, are a painful, paradoxical combination of certainty and uncertainty, of arrogance and humility, constantly in need of reassurance, and yet with a stubborn streak of faith in their validity, no matter what."

—Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*

For 20 years now I have remembered these words because they ring true for me. At age 10, I decided I wanted to be an illustrator. When I was 38, I finally published my first picture book, *Juan Bobo and the Pig: A Puerto Rican Folktale* retold by Felix Pitre. It took a long time to gather experiences and develop enough confidence to find my way to this dream. I am thankful for "a stubborn streak," a small voice inside that kept sounding its yearning.

I do not like to feel limited by anyone. My mother, aware of this, helped me overcome my fear of riding a bike by seeming to doubt my abilities. Her challenge drove my success as she knew it would. In reality she had great confidence in me. There have been other instances throughout life when I've worked hard to prove myself—sometimes for others, sometimes to discover my own capacities. I've especially flourished in the company of those who believed in me and gave me opportunities to reach higher levels of achievement. I encourage you to believe in yourself, challenge and educate yourself and seek out the company of others who will provide support in attaining your goals.

I was fortunate to know what I wanted in life. It is not always easy to define goals. We can't see the end of a

path, only the little ground that lies immediately before us. Be curious! Watch and listen for guidance step by step. If you are open and alert to what is around you opportunities will not pass you by.

My parents did not go to college, but they were determined that I would have this opportunity despite limited resources. I worked after school and summers to save money, kept my grades up and applied for financial aid. I attended college in Portland, Oregon, on a full tuition grant. I was drawn to

the overseas studies program at Lewis & Clark College after developing the travel bug on a high school summer exchange program to Oaxaca, Mexico. College provided both intense study and more chances to explore the world.



From *Juan Bobo and the Pig* (Lodestar/Dutton)



Elizabeth wiped Obedi's face and got ready to do her chores. She tied Obedi onto her back with a kanga, just like she did with Eva. But Obedi was heavy and his arms and legs stuck out when he squirmed, which was all the time.

Illustration from *Elizabeth's Doll* by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen (Lee & Low)

After finishing my degree I worked for seven years as a middle school art instructor in West Linn, Oregon. I continued taking evening art courses and exploring the world in the summers. One travel companion enjoyed sketching with me. As we spent hours visually recording new sights, my hunger for illustrating grew stronger. I wanted more commercial training and a larger artist community for an illustration career.

I didn't know anyone in New York City. I needed a transition period to reconceive myself as an illustrator. I moved to Brooklyn in 1984 and attended Pratt Institute to study illustration and design. After two years I completed a B.F.A., but I was still years away from illustrating. I needed a job. Illustration is a freelance career. As a new graduate, I had no client basis for support.

I worked as an art assistant at Dutton Children's Books. Working with a variety of publishers proved the best training ground for understanding the illustration process. Finally I



But on this day there was no time to think about fiestas. Tonight there was to be *una fiesta*, with many friends and relatives. The *lola*, Paco's uncle, always brought an *guitarra*, his guitar. Father would then reach for his favorite instrument, *el güiro*, a beautifully decorated gourd that hung on the living room wall. Soon *agustador*, happy folk songs of the country people, *los jibaras*, would fill the evening air.

From *Paco and the Witch* by Felix Pitre (Lodestar/Penguin)

gained the confidence and experience to approach an editor with my illustrations. I was staff art director for Four Winds Press when my first book was released. During the next year I became a freelancer.

I have since illustrated books set in Puerto Rico, Nigeria and Tanzania. I also work as a freelance art director for Lee & Low Books, a publisher of books for children of color. It's a privilege to work with artists and authors from many cultures. Currently this publisher has a "New Voices" contest. They are always eager to see new authors and artists.

Life unfolds at different rates. Be patient and constant. Listen to and feed your yearnings. Don't limit yourself and don't let anyone else either!

—Christy Hale, Brooklyn, New York. Below: Illustration from *Elizabeth's Doll* (Lee & Low).



From *The Ancestor Tree* by E. Obinkaram Echewa, Lodestar/Dutton



