

The Art and Whimsy of Mo Willems

Like many who are drawn to New York City, Mo Willems reveled in its cultural richness and creative opportunities. Here, he was a student, a struggling comic, a juggler of gigs, and eventually, an award-winning TV writer and brownstone Brooklyn dad.



While studying animation at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the 1980s, the New Orleans native discovered cartoon anthologies from the *New Yorker*—work by Saul Steinberg, Ronald Searle, and Jean-Jacques Sempé—and *Punch* from a bookseller on Astor Place. Like his childhood hero, *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles Schulz, these artists inspired Willems to pursue emotionally focused drawings through economy of line and the wit of a well-honed visual gag.

Willems' ambition took him to *Sesame Street* for nine seasons (1994–2002), where he wrote scripts for many characters including Elmo, the red-furred Muppet, and created animated shorts. His other projects during that period included animated series for Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network.

Yet the artistic freedom of children's picture books beckoned. Willems' first picture book, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (2003), received a Caldecott Honor—a sign of things to come. To date, Willems has written and illustrated more than fifty books.

Mo's World

“All of my characters are thoroughly neurotic, and have very deep emotional lives.”

Mo Willems is best known for his four children's picture book series:

- The **Knuffle Bunny** trilogy follows the relationship between a young Brooklynite, Trixie, and her beloved stuffed animal, Knuffle Bunny, from temporary losses to finally letting go. The bunny's name is from the Dutch word *knuffel* (“ka-nuff-el”), which means to “snuggle” or “hug.” It also means “stuffed animal.”
 - Willems' **Pigeon** series revolves around a wily, unpredictable urban bird with wants, needs, and chutzpah aplenty. The strong-willed character was the subject of Willems' first picture book, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (2003), and has made “uninvited” cameo appearances in all of his picture books since.
 - The **Elephant and Piggie** books are aimed at early readers, ages four to eight. They revolve around the exploits of two unlikely friends—Elephant Gerald and the pig Piggie. Willems, who quips that easy reader books are “hard writers,” enjoys the challenge of conveying stories using a limited vocabulary, generally no more than fifty unique words.
 - The **Cat the Cat** series—with its bright colors and simple yet engaging themes—is geared toward emergent readers, ages two to five.
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Creative Process

“This stuff for kids, it’s a great responsibility. I’m making something that has to hold a story. It has to be something that can be read a billion times. It has to be a kid’s friend. You don’t just knock that out.”

While Mo Willems’ process varies between his series, or even from book to book, his basic working method stems from his training and early career in animation. For a **preliminary sketch**, he begins by drafting with a blue pencil (non-reproducing blue was traditionally used because it was undetected by photocopiers). He then refines the same drawing with corrections in red. The different colors help him keep track of the revisions.

Over a lightbox, he uses the preliminary drawing to create his **final illustration** by tracing (“inking,” in animation and cartoon terms) the lines in his chosen medium, making changes where needed.

Willems then scans the final drawing and adds color digitally to create the **published illustration**. At this point, he is also able to add layers for other elements, such as text or backgrounds, or make further drawing edits.

Building Character

As he takes his characters from first doodle to published page, Mo Willems creatively imagines that he is trying to understand their identities, and that they are becoming more themselves—even to the point where they make demands of him: “These characters get to decide what they want to do,” he says.

Understanding yourself in relation to society, controlling selfish impulses, wrestling demons of self-doubt, feeling alienated and finding acceptance: these are weighty issues faced by Pigeons, five-year-olds, and adults alike.

Willems tackles the big questions with empathy and a wacky sense of humor. He maps behavioral ideals in his books without finger-wagging, an approach summed up by his motto to “always think *of* your audience, but never think *for* your audience.”

Journey's End

The first Elephant and Piggie book was published in 2007. The twenty-fifth—and final—book, *The Thank You Book*, is due in May 2016. “It was born,” he says, “from a real sense of gratitude toward my readers.” Every secondary character from the series makes a reappearance. For Willems, the trick was to make this a book that would stand alone while also functioning as a final bow to the series.

Willems notes that across this decade-long project, the way he drew the characters changed. The lines darkened and Piggie's ears grew larger. “Elephant put on a few pounds and became more neurotic,” he says, “and therefore, his eyes started to get a little bit bigger. But I have no control over that.”
