

CAN WRITE

Meeting Canadian writers and illustrators of children's books.

What inspires the writers of the books your students read? How does an illustrator decide what to draw? Is it true that most authors and illustrators don't know each other? This column will feature a different Canadian children's book creator in each issue and show you the story beyond the covers.

by Margriet Ruurs



Margriet Ruurs is the Canadian author of over 27 books for children and educators, including fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Margriet conducts author visits to schools around the world. www.margietruurs.com

Meet Canadian author Chris McMahan

Margriet: You are surrounded by books every day as a teacher-librarian. What prompted you to start writing your own?

Chris: My accountant told me writers could get really sweet tax deductions. Just kidding!

I started writing when I was a grade three teacher. I discovered that the best way to motivate students in any subject area was for them to see me not only as a teacher but as a participant. In phys. ed., I'd be doing the Canada Fitness test. In art, I'd be attempting a self-portrait (with desperately drastic results, I might add). In writing, I'd be scribbling a short story. Not only did my students love hearing my stories, I also discovered I actually loved the creative process of writing. I became a teacher-librarian a few years later, so being immersed in the world of children's literature day after day gave me plenty of inspiration to pursue my writing.

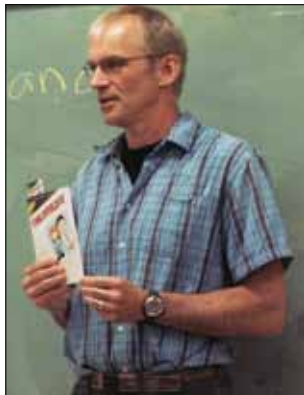
Not only is being surrounded by books every day a great place for a writer to be, I'm also interacting with my audience. As I work with children ages five to eleven, it really helps me to gain an appreciation for how they view their world—what they find hilarious, what is meaningful to them, and how they interact with each other. When I'm writing dialogue, it's easy to imagine a conversation between two ten year olds, as I hear them arguing over a book in the library, shouting at each other on the playground during a soccer game, or riding the bus on a field trip.

Margriet: As a full-time teacher-librarian, how do you find time to write? Do you write daily? Late at night?

Chris: I wish I could write daily, but I certainly don't. When I started to write more seriously, I still had a young family, a day job, and everything else life threw at me. The only time I found to write was late at night. Now, I'm able to write during more civilized hours and get more than five hours of sleep a night.

When I work on a writing project, I'm more like a sprinter than a long distance runner. I can work very intensively for an hour or two at the most, then my brain decides enough is enough.

I find writing incredibly exhilarating. To be completely immersed in writing, lost in a world of images and words, is something I absolutely love. Even though I don't write every day, I certainly know when I've missed a few days in a row. I get an itch to write that needs scratching.



Margriet: Do your students know that you write, and how, do you think, does it influence them to be readers and writers themselves?

Chris: Yes, my students all know that I write. I read my most recent book, *Box of Shocks*, to my grade four class before it was published, and they gave me some insightful feedback. Also, when the book was accepted for publication, I shared with them the whole process an author goes through when a book is published. They found the interactions with my editor particularly fascinating.

Part of my teaching assignment is working in a classroom teaching creative writing. I love this part of my job as I get to try out some experimental, unorthodox writing activities with my students. We have a ton of fun creating wild and crazy pieces of writing, and I find it very rewarding when reluctant writers in September transform into enthusiastic authors as the year progresses.

Margriet: Do students help you with ideas for new stories?

Chris: I've never had an idea specifically come from students. Usually, it's a circumstance within a school that gives me an idea for a story. In my second novel, *Klutzhood*, I wanted to write about a student moving to a new school in a new town in the middle of the year. I've seen so many students go through this very trying experience, so I thought it was an important topic to write about. In my third novel, *Tabloidology*, I wanted to take a look at the media bombardment our students are experiencing and give it some perspective in a school setting.

Margriet: What do you do during an author visit?

Chris: First and foremost, I try to bring enthusiasm, energy and a sense of playful fun to my performances. I like to engage the young readers with as much audience participation as possible with activities like *The Great Klutzhood Trivia Challenge*, and Story in a Box. Of course, I also share with them insights into the creative joys of writing, how to avoid writer's block, and give other pointers to budding authors.

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Books written by Chris McMahan

Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventure (Coteau Books)
Klutzhood (Orca Book Publishers)
Tabloidology (Orca Book Publishers)
Box of Shocks (Orca Book Publishers)

Find out more about Canadian author Chris McMahan here

<http://www.chris McMahan.blogspot.com/>
http://www.cwill.bc.ca/search/member_detail/174





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