

Excerpts from Betty Birney's acceptance speech at the NLA/NEMA Conference  
October 17, 2008  
Transcribed with the author's permission

THANK YOU-THANK YOU-THANK YOU, everyone. It's a great thrill and a great honor to be here, and I'm standing here because of the young readers of Nebraska – you – who read the book and participated in the voting. I've received other honors for books and for television writing, but there's really no higher honor than an award like this, where the readers of the book make their choice. That's what counts, and I'm just bursting with proud and thanks to you all.

Of course, this award really isn't for me. It's for Humphrey. It's all about him, and I know that you'd all like to meet him – right?

Well, he's here today! Would you like to see him?

It's me. The truth is, I am Humphrey. Disappointing, I know. The truth is, I don't have a real hamster named Humphrey. How many of you thought I did? I'm not surprised.

OK, I know I don't look like a cute little hamster, but I'm the one who sees the world through Humphrey's eyes and puts it all on paper. So when I'm writing the Humphrey books, I really do think and feel like a hamster, and that's what makes it so much fun.

But in the beginning, when *The World According to Humphrey* was published, I started getting fan mail and I'm embarrassed to admit that I got a little annoyed sometimes when all the fan mail was "say hi to Humphrey for me" or "Humphrey is awesome." And I definitely didn't like it when someone called me "Humphrey's mom." I'm "mom" to my son and that's it.

Not to sound ungrateful, but why was everybody complimenting Humphrey and loving him so much? *I'm* the one who did the work. *I'm* the one who sweated through the many rewrites and wondered if it would ever get published. Writing is hard work!

*I'm* the one who gave that hamster a lock-that-doesn't-lock so he can get out of his cage and have big adventures. So while Humphrey was happily spinning his wheel, *I* was stuck at the computer. *I* was the one staying awake at 4 o'clock in the morning, wondering why doesn't Sayeh ever speak or why doesn't Mrs. Brisbane want a hamster in her classroom.

And, by the way, *I'm* the one who made him so doggone cute!

So why was it all about Humphrey and nothing about Betty?

It took me a long time to get around to writing that book about Humphrey ... and then he stole the show right out from under me and took all the credit, too!

Besides, I actually have never had a hamster – I know that's shocking, but it would be even more shocking to my dog if I ever turned up with one! Sweet as Desi is, she loves to chase furry little things around the back yard. I think if she met a hamster, she'd act a lot like Miranda's dog, Clem, whom you probably remember, doggy breath and all. As beautiful and smart as Desi is, I'm afraid from a hamster's point of view, she might seem like Clem. And Desi does occasionally need a breath mint, too.

So, I don't have a hamster. Then where did Humphrey come from?

Well, I think Humphrey had been simmering in my brain for a long, long time before I wrote his first story in 2003. Bit by bit, he grew in my imagination.

Many of the incidents and characters that show up in Room 26 of Longfellow School are things that I remember from back when I was in school.

Sally was a girl in my class who never answered a teacher's question in six years no matter how hard the teacher tried. It really used to get on my nerves, the way she'd just stare at her desk and never say a word. She did speak outside of class so I know she didn't have the

same problem as Speak-Up-Sayeh in *The World According to Humphrey*. But trying to solve the mystery of Sally led me to helping Sayeh solve her problem.

I also had a terrible bully on my school bus, just as bad as Mean Martin Green in the second book, *Friendship According to Humphrey*. His name is Steve Mitchell. I hope and assume he's locked up somewhere today, but I'm kind of grateful he was there waiting in my brain for me to remember him when I was writing the book.

I started gathering material when I was 7 because that's when I decided to become a writer. I loved books so much, I knew right away I didn't just want to read them, I wanted to figure out how to write them, too. I told my parents I was going to be a writer, and I wrote a book called "Teddy Bear in the Woods," and that started it all. I wrote a sequel, too.

I lived in Affton, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri – Missouri is a neighbor to Nebraska, you know. We had no library in Affton until I was in seventh grade. And we had no school library either.

But that was okay, because every two weeks, a bookmobile chugged down Gravois Road and parked next to Affton Pharmacy. My older sister, Janet, and I would walk to the bookmobile and enter a magical world. The bookmobile was a truck – like an extra big van – with a whole library inside. They crammed a lot of books into that bookmobile and the librarians changed the books often, so I was able to find just about all the great children's books available at that time. With the help of librarians who noticed what I liked to read and pointed me in the right direction, Janet and I walked home with armloads of books which we returned two weeks later.

I loved *Little Women*, *Nancy Drew*, *Betsy-Tacy*, anything by Lois Lenski. I adored the Little House books and books about a quirky town named Centerburg and a boy named Homer Price.

I especially enjoyed the Dr. Doolittle books. How cool was that – a human who could talk to the animals?

Most of all, I enjoyed books with a different point of view. The clever adventures of a mouse named Stuart Little born into a human family intrigued me. I was so tickled by *Ben and Me* – I thought that was so clever and funny that this little mouse named Amos gave Ben Franklin all his great ideas!

I remember walking around the house while reading Mrs. Piggle Wiggle’s inventive schemes for helping children with their problems. If I bumped into a piece of furniture, I just turned the page and kept on going. It can be a little dangerous, though.

I cannot recall a birthday present, a piece of clothing, a party, a movie or a song that delighted me more than the books I read as a child. When people ask me why I write for children, that’s the reason why.

When I was a young girl writing, I wrote poems and stories all the time – not for school, just for fun. I tried stories like “Aloha, Leilani,” about a little girl who lives in Hawaii who wanted to win the village lei-making contest. I didn’t let the fact that I lived in Missouri and knew nothing about Hawaii or villages or leis stop me. I’d never even seen an ocean then! And how to make a lei – I still don’t have a clue!

That story wasn’t all that successful ... but I just kept on writing and never gave up. And surprise – my writing got better! The more you write, the better you’ll get – that’s the secret to writing.

A lot of my writing shows up in the letters I wrote to my Aunt Marie. I didn’t know it then but she saved every little drawing, card, letter – and story – that I ever wrote her and later presented them to me in a scrapbook when I was about 30.

It was a great gift, because now I can look back and hear myself as a child.

I tried all kinds of things. I wrote one letter in circles getting smaller and smaller – you have to keep turning the page and reading it makes me dizzy. I wrote in rhyme a lot because it was fun.

I often wrote my aunt from the point of view of my dog, Mitzi. Yes, from a very early age I was writing from the point of view of an animal!

In these letters, Mitzi had very poor spelling and bad handwriting – or paw writing, I guess you'd say. She wrote a lot of her letters backwards.

But it was an interesting way to tell a story, trying to see the world through somebody else's eyes. I often tell kids who are having a hard time coming up with a story to try writing from another point of view, like a pet or an alien from another planet. It really gives the story a twist.

It was many, many years later that I again wrote from the point of view of an animal.

You know who – Humphrey.

I was living in Los Angeles by then, married with a son and two stepdaughters and writing for television. I wrote over 200 episodes of children's TV shows, things like Madeline, Winnie the Pooh, and Clifford the Big Red Dog. I won many awards, including an Emmy award for Madeline. I also wrote a lot of books: Disney books – three series of Winnie the Pooh books – and some picture books.

One day, I was in my son's science classroom and this particular room was lined with cages and tanks. They had cute furry things like hamsters and mice, and slippery things like lizards and frogs and they even had a boa constrictor ... which the teacher liked to wear draped around her waist. I always tell teachers if they want to get their students' attention, that boa

constrictor really worked! It might even work in the library. Wouldn't you like a boa constrictor in the library?

I remember standing in that classroom and wondering what all those classroom pets thought about what they saw and heard in the classroom. I thought it would be fun to write a book looking at a classroom from the viewpoint of a classroom pet.

Here's what I wrote in my notebook:

*The story of a pet hamster or mouse that lives in a classroom but goes home with a different student each weekend. Could be a chapter book where each chapter is an incident in a house where the pet stays.*

That little snippet in my notebook slowly grew over a number of years as I added notes about the no-nonsense teacher who doesn't like Humphrey ... Aldo who comes in to clean at night ... and the almost perfect Golden Miranda. And since I'd wondered what those animals overheard in my son's classroom, I decided he'd hear the teacher repeating things, like RAISE-YOUR-HAND HEIDI, LOWER-YOUR-VOICE A.J and SPEAK-UP-SAYEH and not knowing anything about humans, he thinks those are the students' names.

I also decided he liked to repeat things three times, much as I do when I'm excited. I REALLY-REALLY-REALLY do! Because I am Humphrey.

When I was almost ready to write the book, I had to do a lot of research to learn about hamsters... in books, on the Internet, and I even called my dog Desi's vet and asked if they examined hamsters. She said "yes" and when I told her about the book, she said come on in, they'd bring in some hamsters and I could ask all the questions I wanted.

A hamster exam is just like when you go to the doctor. They had a tiny little stethoscope to listen to his heart ... and they shined a little light in his eye. They had trouble weighing him

because hamsters don't like to sit still and he wouldn't stay on the scale. So they put food on the scale and he sat there and ate while they weighed him.

The woman assisting the vet, Judy Brady, also rescues hamsters. I said rescues them from what? Who's out to get hamsters?

From pet stores. Because if they get a hamster that's not perfect, they don't want it so they call Judy and she tries to find a home for it. The last time I talked to her this year, she had 17 hamsters. She's a real expert!

She brought in two hamsters. One was rejected from the pet store because he was born with one eye. But he was very healthy and very cute – he just looked like he was winking.

So if you read *Trouble According to Humphrey*, the third book, and meet a one-eyed hamster named Winky when Humphrey visits the veterinarian, you'll know where he came from.

After I learned about hamsters and figured out the story, I really had fun writing the book. If you want your readers to enjoy your book, you'd better enjoy it yourself.

I was only planning to write one book, but before the first book was even out, the publisher asked me to write another one, which became *Friendship According to Humphrey*, where I added a frog named Og. For some reason, I give Humphrey a hard time. After all, I was the one who sent Ms. Mac away and broke his heart! Then came *Trouble According to Humphrey* – and in that one I gave him a hard time, too, because Miranda gets in terrible trouble because of something Humphrey did.

Now the fourth book, *Surprises According to Humphrey*, is out – where Humphrey gets a hamster ball, runs into an unfriendly cat and also is afraid he's going to be abducted by aliens. I just finished the fifth book, *Adventure According to Humphrey*. You can see from the cover what kind of adventure he has – yes, there are pirates.

I'm also starting a new series of younger Humphrey books – very short chapter books with illustrations. The *According to Humphrey* books have won 9 children's choice awards, which I'm very proud of.

They are also bestsellers in the United Kingdom. I was in England for two weeks in March for an event called World Book Day. I was one of nine authors asked to write a special short book for World Book Day. I visited all kinds of schools there – a royal school, a village school in the country, an abbey school, and inner city schools in London.

I found out that the kids there are just like the kids in the U.S., and they have really taken Humphrey into their hearts.

And so are the kids in Belgium where the first two books have already been published, and Germany, Japan and Hungary, where the books will be published soon.

Getting a book published and getting good reviews, which *The World According to Humphrey* did, don't make a book a success. Sales do, and it takes a while for sales to get going. It takes teachers and librarians to start sharing the book and spreading the word. But *real* success has nothing to do with numbers or dollars. I wrote a book for children, and knowing that the book connected with the children of Nebraska and young readers in other parts of the world, makes me feel that Humphrey is a success.

So now I've really changed my tune. I don't mind if Humphrey gets all the credit anymore.

In fact, I believe Humphrey *is* real, because there's a real connection with this character I created and the readers.

So I now say bring it on. Bring on all the emails saying, "Humphrey rocks my socks," or "Humphrey, I am your Number One Fan." Bring on those personal stories about hamsters that

play, hamsters that bite (which Humphrey will never do), hamsters giving birth in vivid detail, hamsters that die and children that mourn, classroom hamsters taken home for the weekend and being eaten by the family cat. (I have gotten two of those so far.) So many hamsters named Humphrey and – oops – hamsters that were named Humphrey but turned out to be Henriettas. I hear about hamsters at various Longfellow Schools across the country and in various Room 26s.

Most often I hear about hamsters who are loved, missed, remembered.

And mostly I hear from children who say: *I LOVE-LOVE-LOVE Humphrey. PLEASE-PLEASE-PLEASE write more Humphrey books.* I think if someone is loved like that, he *must* be real.

Now to all the librarians and media specialists who pointed a child toward Humphrey, I thank you.

To the Golden Sower Award committee and readers for selecting *The World According to Humphrey* for your list, I am very, very grateful.

To Kathy Schultz, who made the arrangements for this and made it easy for me, I thank you.

To all the children in this wonderful state who not only embraced Humphrey, but voted for his book, I thank you. I hope all your dreams come true, just like my dream of being a writer came true.

Maybe a real hamster named Humphrey couldn't make it today in person but he is out there, alive and well in the hearts of kids!

So, squeaking on behalf of my funny, furry friend, I extend the paw of friendship and I thank you all.

(But please, don't call me Humphrey's mom.)