

Excerpts from Keiko Kasza's acceptance speech at the NLA/NEMA Conference
October 26, 2007
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I want to thank the students of Nebraska for selecting my book for this prestigious award. This type of award is very meaningful because it is the children for whom the book was written who chose my book.



As you can imagine, I work through many, many revisions during the course of creating a book, from concept all the way to the finished paintings. For example, the early version of this book had a completely different opening. It went something like this: “One chilly morning a fox went hunting. He caught a piglet, very fat, very round.” Nothing like what you saw in the book where the piglet goes to the fox's house and knocks on the door.

It had a different ending, too. The original story ended at the page where the piglet goes home saying, “This is my lucky day.” My editor needed a little more meat here. The book even had a different title. It was originally called “What a Pig.” You see it would take me a whole day just to list all the revisions this book went through.

Today I want to concentrate on the artwork revisions. This is what happened. When I first submitted the sketches for My Lucky Day, my art director Cecelia Young asked me to redo one page—the page where the fox is massaging the piglet. When I asked her why, she didn't want to give me a reason. I pushed her. She finally said, “Well, Keiko, it looks like these two animals are mating.” I was shocked! “Cecelia!” I said. “What a dirty mind you have!” She said, “Yeah, my head is always in the gutter.” We laughed, and I changed it. Even though I changed the sketch as she wanted, I wasn't convinced that she was right.

That was just the first stage of doing the illustrations, and it got worse. When I finished all my paintings, Cecelia suggested that I redo five paintings. Usually one, at most two, but five? This was her reasoning: She said that the piglet aged as the book progressed. She said that it's essential that the piglet look cute, innocent, and childlike throughout. Otherwise the book will fall apart. “And,” she continued to say, “the piglet in those paintings I rejected looks like a fat, hairy, middle-aged stalker.” Here we go again! Not only had the piglet gotten involved in immoral activities three pages before, but now suddenly he was a middle-aged pervert!

Finally all of the paintings were done and had met with Cecelia's approval. Normally, when the artwork is accepted my part is done. I have lunch, shop, play tennis with my friends. While the book is getting printed, it's a happy time. But not in the case of My Lucky Day. I faced another challenge, a challenge so unique to this book that I didn't know what to do. I suddenly got cold feet. I thought maybe this book is not giving the right message to kids. Maybe I'm encouraging them to be con artists. Maybe I'll be bombarded with harsh criticism and bad reviews once the book is published. Maybe I

shouldn't publish this at all. I recall a three-way phone conversation with Cecelia and my editor. They persuaded me not to worry about it and go ahead and publish it. They said the book would give the right message to kids, a message that being weak and small does not always mean they'll be victimized. It's a triumph of the disadvantaged against all odds.

Well, am I glad I listened to them and published it! Not only did it win ten state awards including Nebraska (thank you!), but the book was adapted into a children's musical by Dolly Parton. She herself wrote the music for the play, if you can believe that. This book, My Lucky Day, has truly been my lucky book.

I hope you can see that authors and illustrators jump through many hoops to create a book. The whole process, from the initial concept to the finished paintings, takes me about 1 ½ to 2 years—I am slow. Of course, children don't see the sweat that goes into each book. They just see the finished product. Many kids I meet when I do school visits think that we are special people who have magic hands. I have to convince them that we're not special, that we are probably very determined and hard working and passionate.

If creating a book were a car, this determination and effort are the fuel that runs it. Then what is the engine. To me, my rich childhood growing up in Japan would be the engine. I was born six years after the war ended. The whole country was still poor and our parents were struggling to survive and bring food to the table. They didn't have time to interact with children, have quality time with children, or become soccer moms or dads. As a result, my neighborhood friends and I played every day without much adult interference. We roamed around the neighborhood as if we owned it. We played, laughed, fought, made up, and played together again. We lived in a wonderful world of imagination. That is the engine—the source of my books. Then what is the steering wheel. I have the engine and fuel, but I need a steering wheel to guide me to where I want to go. I would say that must be the tons of reading material when I was a kid. I loved to read when I was young. While I was reading I blocked out everything around me, including my mother calling me for dinner! She used to get mad at me for not responding, but I really did not hear her. I also remember that I used to walk to and from school reading a book. This reading and walking at the same time caused occasional accidents. Once I walked straight into a telephone pole!

In retrospect, it was the reading in my youth that helped me to become a writer. I cannot emphasize enough how important your job is—the job which connects young people and books. No matter how good a book is, without you, without the bridge to connect to our readers, it wouldn't be worth much. So I want to thank you for that. And my special and sincere gratitude to all the children in the state of Nebraska. They are the ones who remind us constantly why we write and for whom.
Thank you



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