

## C.M. Surrisi And Diane Goode Discuss *The Best Mother*

Author C.M. Surrisi and illustrator Diane Goode discuss their new picture book, *The Best Mother*. For every child who's ever wondered if the grass is greener, *The Best Mother* affirms that there's nothing better than your own mother's love.

### C.M. Surrisi Asks Diane Goode:

**Cynthia: How many books have you illustrated? And how do you think your approach to a story has changed over the years?**

**Diane:** My first thought when I take on a book is always, "Oh, no! Now what am I going to do? Seriously, it's a daunting responsibility, so I just focus, and trust that I've the experience to accept any challenge. I've illustrated over sixty books, seven of which I wrote myself. I used to tackle each story in a linear fashion, one page at a time, starting at the beginning and ending at the end. I've long since approached each book as if it were a single large canvas or scroll, working it all at once. My background was in Fine Arts, I taught myself book illustration, so developing a style and characters suitable for children was a serious challenge!

**Cynthia: Has your style and medium changed over the years? What do you prefer to work in and how does the physical part of the process work from first draft to what you send the editor?**

**Diane:** Absolutely! I had to color separate my first book by hand, the process was explained to me over the phone. It was a three-color separation, it's what we did then, you work in overlays of gray and try to imagine how each overlay will look in color when combined. My first full color books were painted in a tight, detailed style, I never used line to define objects, I never used black anywhere, at all. I next developed a looser, more painterly style. After doing several books together my editor at Scholastic told me she loved my loose preliminary drawings done in heavy black pencil. From that time on I changed my style to what it is now. I've always loved line. It allows me to convey emotion and energy and it feels alive and in the moment. I'd say there's always a major difference from my early drafts to the finished book, it's a process. The characters are the last thing I finalize, it's my way of keeping it fresh.

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**Cynthia: I know you love nature and you live in a beautiful forest environment. Describe the spot in your home where you do your work.**

**Diane:** I listen to jazz while I work and our dog, Briggs, sleeps at my feet and he listens for any passing deer or squirrel. When he hears an animal he barks like mad, so sometimes I work in quiet, sunny solitude and sometimes in a barking frenzy.

**Cynthia: Is it easier or harder to illustrate a story written by someone else?**

**Diane:** Hmmm.... I thought it would be easier with my own but it isn't! The story always dictates what I do. Naturally, if it is mine, and I'm having trouble, I can change it or toss the whole thing out.

**Cynthia: Explain to me, how you could see the same Maxine I could see in my mind's eye. Wow, that blew me away. Have other authors told you that you drew exactly what they imagined?**

**Diane:** That's kind of you to say, Cynthia, the answer is yes! Several authors have told me the same thing, and oddly enough some of them are shocked to see that the character looks like them! I can't explain it. The story must be working its magic on me.

**Cynthia: When I was a kid and I sat at a drawing table, I would crumple up drawings that weren't going well and throw them away. Do you do that? Sometimes I would cry if I couldn't draw my dog right. Does drawing ever make you sad? Laugh? Fill you with joy?**

**Diane:** I do all of those things and I'm not a kid! I make hundreds of preliminary sketches, a few dummies and endless variations. I'm one of those artists who has to try several approaches to each illustration to see what works best. Sometimes the first thing I draw is the one I end up with, sometimes it's not. I'm either satisfied or just exhausted from the attempt. When I tell this to children, they're shocked. It lets them know that they should keep at it until they can't do any better. The joy is being in the moment.

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**Cynthia: I have heard that you have a connection to France. What might that be?**

**Diane:** My mother was French, as a kid everyone said she had a heavy French accent, but I never noticed it! I thought she was perfect. I still think of her as the best possible mother.

**Cynthia: Is it true you make French pastries? If so, will you make me some?**

**Diane:** Well, a pastry chef would dispute that, but yes, of course, I'd love to! I learned to illustrate on my own and I learned to bake from books. And why not? My father said you could learn to do just about anything from a book and he was right!

### **Diane Goode Asks C.M. Surrisi:**

**Diane: I imagine it's hard for any author to trust an illustrator with his or her book. This is your first picture book, just how scared were you to put it in the hands of another artist?**

**Cynthia:** I was a little nervous when the book went out on submission, I talked to my agent about where she was sending it, and I looked at the picture books published by those editors. I felt generally comfortable. But when we had an offer from Tamar Brazis at Abrams, my confidence level went way up, and when I heard it was going to be you, I was over the moon. I had no worries at all after that. I only had great curiosity about how you would conceptualize Maxine and the story.

**Diane: Characters have a funny way of taking on a life of their own. When you write, what comes first, the characters or the story line?**

**Cynthia:** I get an image of a character in a situation, like a tableau. From there I let my imagination wander thinking about what happened before that moment and what happens next. For example, Maxine came to me as an image of a grumpy girl at the breakfast table.

After that, it became a matter of figuring out why she was grumpy, what made her so sensitive to that set of facts, what she would be inclined to do about it, and

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then, how does her family react, knowing her personality. I write little character sketches for the characters, and I plot out a story.

After that, I tinker and tinker and tinker and workshop it, and tinker some more, and show it to my agent, and tinker some more until it tells me the characters are real, the situation is genuine, and there is heart and humor coming through.

**Diane: You've written several books for older readers. Was it difficult to reduce a story to its barest essential to create a picture book? Did your training as an attorney help?**

**Cynthia:** My training as an attorney certainly helped in writing my middle grade mysteries. It also helped me stick to the facts, ma'am, just the facts. Lawyers are required to function with strict word counts on briefs and avoid adjectives that might skew the facts. When I started my MFA, unlike some students who were encouraged to reduce volume, I was encouraged to add volume. I'm still not an expansive writer. I love to make a point concisely.

**Diane: Getting back to trust, it takes a long time between handing off a finished story to the illustrator and seeing the finished art. How tempted were you to pick up the phone and make suggestions or just ask for a peek?**

**Cynthia:** I wasn't tempted to interrupt, but when you put some images up on the wall in your studio and put a picture of that on Facebook, I about jumped out of my skin, I was so excited. I did everything I could to get a close look at them. I fell in love with them through that post. I felt like a new mother looking at a baby through the nursery window. From that point on, I had to control myself from bugging Tamar about the date for a peek.

**Diane: A picture book author has an instinct for what needs to be said and what should be left to the illustrator to show. Was that natural for you?**

**Cynthia:** As I said above, I am not an expansive writer to start with. One thing I do understand from playwriting, and some screenplay writing, is that the set designers don't just fill the stage with furniture. They interpret the work, interact with the characters and dialogue, and contribute fully and equally to the production. I learned early to visualize the picture book as a play and leave room for the illustrator to make a full contribution. I almost enjoy the word count

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limitation that is placed upon me. It's a challenge to do my best with the fewest words and leave wide open space for the illustrator. After all, it's called a PICTURE Book.

**Diane: As a child, I was horribly shy. I would have liked to have been like Maxine, fearless and fun. Something tells me you were just like Maxine. Yes?**

**Cynthia:** I was like Maxine in my mind, if not in action. I know I had a lot of fierce thoughts. Although I must concede that, one time, when I was about Maxine's age, I packed my suitcase and ran away from home because I was mad about something – I can't remember what. I got about five blocks from our house, with my dad darting from bush to tree behind me, before I decided to go back. That was lucky because I had a suitcase full of nothing but socks.

**Diane: What gave you the idea to use the animals at the zoo to create Maxine's, "Ah, ha!" moment?**

**Cynthia:** Ah, there is a book titled *From Where You Dream*, by Robert Olen Butler, on the process of writing fiction, in which he encourages writers to enter a dreamspace or zone where they allow the stories or story solutions to come to them. It's as if you open a door to your mind and let the creativity wander in. He also talks about human yearning and the need for its presence in fiction. I tune in to this method all the time when I am asking myself questions about a character or story. I asked myself, what memories would prompt Maxine into the cognitive process of connecting with her old mother at a yearning level, and the zoo scene wandered into my dreamspace.

**Diane: This is silly, but if you could go back to when you were six years old and had a magic wand, would you want to change your mom? Do you think she dreamed then that you would be the woman you are today? Did you?**

**Cynthia:** My mom had a lively personality and loved to dance. She taught tap dance when she wasn't working in a candy factory – almost like Lucy and Ethel in that one episode. One of the things she did all the time was dance around the house. I loved that, and I danced, too. She didn't have a higher education and she placed a high value on studying. She loved that I loved books but wasn't a voracious reader. I guess I can imagine waving a wand over my mother of that time and turning her into a tap-dancing librarian. That would have satisfied me, and she would have been proud of herself. And

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yes, I think she dreamed big things for me and my sister and wouldn't have been surprised a bit. Me? I'm delighted I found my way back to writing after years practicing law. It took a monumental effort to get here, but it's always worth it when it means that much to you.

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This article was first published in *The Children's Book Review*, 29 April 2018.