

tomie boy

AN INTERVIEW BY KATY BEEBE



When Tomie de Paola was little, he told his parents that when he grew up he was going to be an artist, write books, and tap dance on stage. Sixty years later, not only has he illustrated over 200 books, writing 90 of them, and tap danced from time to time, his book "Strega Nona" won the Caldecott Medal in 1976 — the

highest award a children's picture book can receive. His first chapter book, "26 Fairmount Avenue," was recently named a 2000 Newbery Honor Book. His distinctive illustrations have introduced many of us to beloved characters like Strega Nona, whose magic pasta pot requires three kisses to forestall a voluminous pasta invasion. I spoke with Mr. de Paola about his life and work in an interview at Wild Rumpus, a children's bookstore in Minneapolis, where he was promoting his newest book, "Here We All Are," the autobiographical sequel to "26 Fairmount Avenue." A few excerpts:

Even in your early twenties, you knew that you wanted to be an illustrator?

I knew at four years old what I wanted to do. I did not make any changes in my career decision. I thought you had to have made a career decision to be allowed into kindergarten.

What were your years at the Pratt Institute (1952-1956) like?

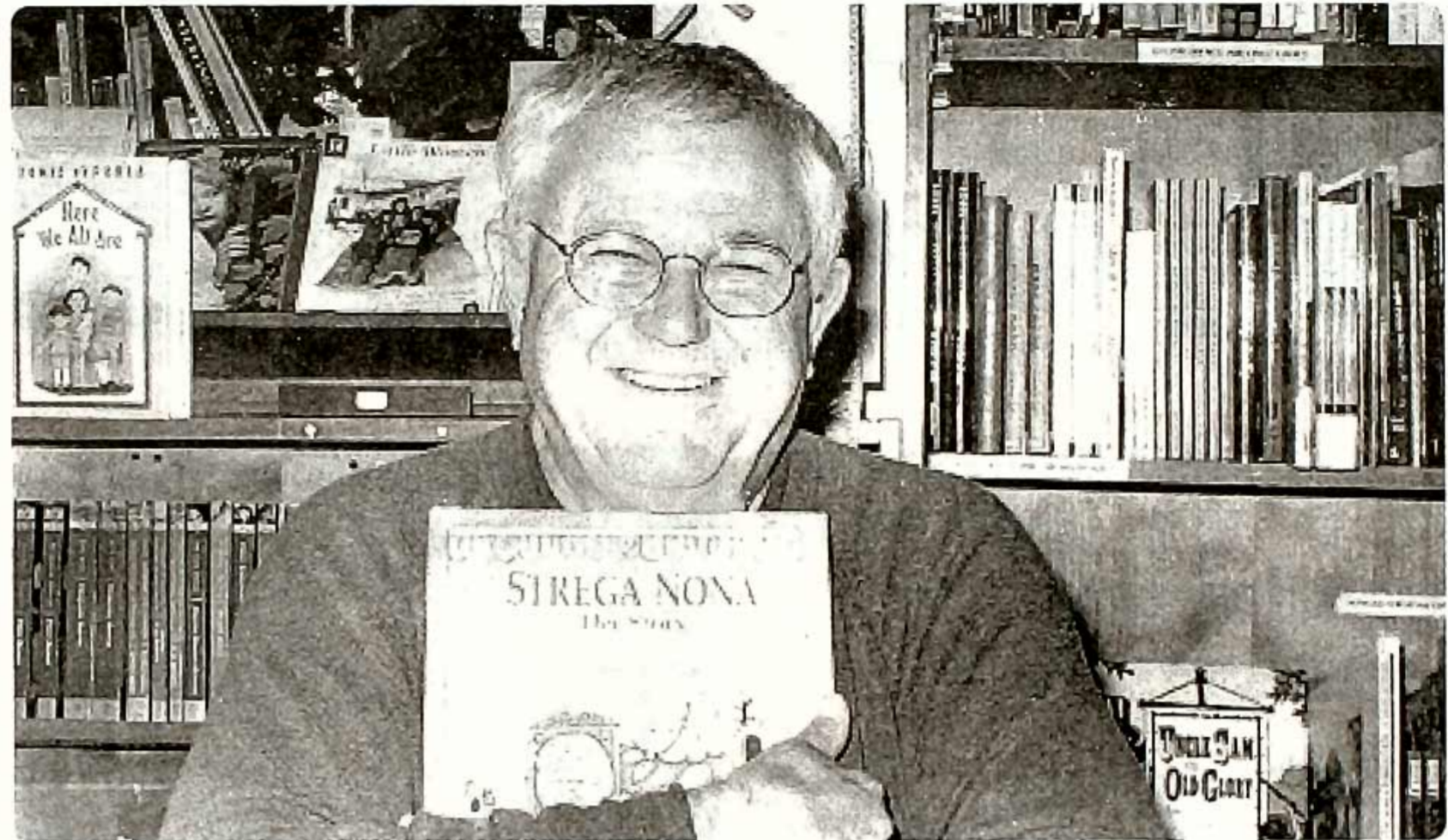
Well, it was very different than it is now, because we went to school five days a week, nine hours a day, and then eight hours of homework every night. One year, I had 27 hours of drawing from the human figure, in various figure studies, so it was really like I had died and gone to heaven.

What did you find most inspiring there?

Oh, my teachers. I had some incredible, incredible teachers that taught me so much. It was so intense. Now, I see these college kids on television programs [saying], "It's the time of our life; we're supposed to have fun." And I think, "Ooh, good for you. I worked my ass off." And everybody at Pratt did. We just worked, worked, worked. And we had a wonderful time. It wasn't that we were drones. New York was out there. New York was wonderful in the late '50s. I think that because I went to an art school, and not a liberal arts college, I was really training for a profession. I was in the first graduating class from Pratt that got a degree. ... That extra fourth year was so wonderful. Everything kind of came together. I think that the study of art, of music, of theatre, can't be rushed. It's like cooking. It has to cook for a long enough time.

Would you have any advice for college students today who want to be authors or illustrators?

If they want to be illustrators, there's no substitute for a very intensive training in art, and also the use of computers. There are adjunct jobs that are available in publishing that get your foot in the door, and there isn't a designer that doesn't have to use the computer these days. But they have to learn how to draw as well. I'm old-fashioned. I think there's no substitute for basic skills. And I



Suraj Prasannakumar/carl; all other images (c) Tomie de Paola, from "26 Fairmount Avenue" (1999), "Strega Nona" (1975), and "Big Anthony: His Story" (1998). Used with permission.

think that if you want to be a writer, you have to be able to put a sentence together.

I read that you once said that you kept ideas for books going like a "bit of sourdough bread."

Yes, sometimes I just put ideas away and I put things up on my bulletin board — especially doodles. I doodle a lot. And I think that that's the way ideas really do work best. You have to take care of the a little bit, throw them into a big pot of flour, dough, and hopefully someday it will be good bread.

And blow three magic kisses.

Right! I wish it was that easy. Where's Strega Nona when you need her?

Along with your folktales like "Strega Nona" and religious stories such as "The Clown of God" or "St. Francis," a lot of your work is autobiographical. Do you get a lot of inspiration from your family?

A lot of ideas [laughs]. And the more people die, the more I get ideas, because I don't have to worry about lawsuits. I never thought of that, really, when I was younger, but when I started doing some of the autobiographical picture books, I realized that my family was a great treasure trove. We were pretty ordinary — we weren't really exceptional. I don't think my life growing up was really too much different from the average kid in Meriden, Connecticut at that time. But it's very different from young people today, so I like it that older people my age feel that it's helping them to remember their childhood. Little kids think it's like life on a different planet.

I noticed too that even though you have this wonderful voice for children, you also put little visual jokes in for the adults.

Sure. I feel for the parents that have to read the same book over and over again 500 times to their kids. I think I do that for myself, too. I think so long as nothing gets too arch, children are going to enjoy the book.

Older children also appreciate the jokes when they go back and reread your books.

I think that is true. I had a fifth-grade teacher say that she read "Strega Nona" to her fifth-grade class, and the kids just got hysterical. Now, you read it to first-graders, they don't get hysterical. This is serious business. Once, I was reading and Big Anthony was just about to do something. This little boy stood up and said [shouting] "Oh no! He's going to do it again!" The characters in "Strega Nona" are true to their origins; they're classic characters — Big Anthony is the fool or the sorcerer's apprentice, so he's very predictable. And in myth and legend, the characters are. Their behavior is predictable; that's part of the fun of it. No matter how hard they try, it doesn't work.

Do you find that it's different thinking not in terms of narrative pictures for your chapter books?

It's a totally different discipline. When I work on my picture book texts, I'm constantly editing words out and making it as simple as possible. I had to remember adjectives again. In a picture book, the illustrations are totally narrative; they have to tell part of the story as well. "26 Fairmount Avenue" was a new venue for me. The wonderful thing is that it was chosen as a Newbery Honor book, so it's given me such confidence to think of myself more as a writer. I've always thought of myself as an artist, though — an artist who wrote words that he could draw pictures for, but this is a little different, a little stronger. ©

