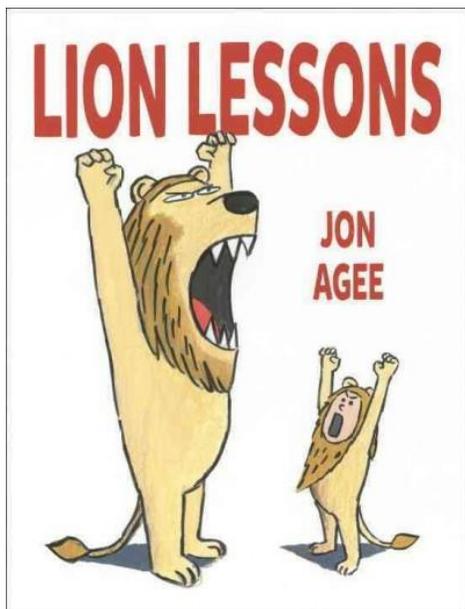


Picture book author and illustrator Jon Agee took some time share some insights about his work and newest title *Lion Lessons* (9780803739086, HRD, \$17.99) which published last month. We hope this interview puts a smile on your face as it did for CATS!



Q: From recent delights like *It's Only Stanley* and *Lion Lessons*, your books balance text with illustration to find a perfect humor: What is your process for accomplishing this so brilliantly?

A: There are many elements at play in a picture book: pacing, timing, scale, perspective, point-of-view, page-turns, typography, book design, and the relationship of words and pictures. Every book has its unique way of using these elements. In *STANLEY*, there was a back-and-forth between single pages – of an increasingly anxious family discussing mysterious late-night sounds – followed by ominous double-page spreads (with no text) – of their dog doing outrageous “renovations” to the house. In *LION LESSONS*, the story had a built-in, seven-step lesson, with each ending in a punch line.

Q: Where do you get the fun ideas for your stories and characters? What is your writing process? What inspires you?

A: I usually end up in the living room, with my pad of paper, semi-reclined on the couch. I once tried the Nabakov method, writing on index cards in a parked car. It might have worked if my car had thick curtains. Another famous author whose name escapes me used to write in bed. I tried that too, and I always fell right to sleep. The goal is the same: finding the best way to let your mind open up, allowing idle thoughts to form, mingle, and maybe – luckily! – turn into something.

My “method” is doodling. Doodling is a looser form of sketching, which is why most doodles end up in the trash. I usually begin with a character – a person, a creature, a child-creature, something that walks and talks – and juxtapose it with something unusual or arbitrary, and I ask questions: who or what is this person/thing/relationship and what makes it unique/different/worth writing about? Will it challenge me? Is it genuinely funny?

I get inspiration from other picture books, from other illustrators and artists, from movies, theater, music, the news, from observing life, how people interact, the stories that are playing out right in front of me. And other places too.



Q: What sort of writing environment do you like to work in? Is there a certain place you like to go to work?

A: I work in a room/studio where I can pin pictures up on the wall and see my whole book progressing. There are also bookshelves filled with lots of material to reference. And, a computer, printer, and all sorts of art supplies. And a view out the window of the woods, which is nice to look at when I remember to.

Q: What is your favorite thing about being a children's book author?

A: There is certainly something satisfying about creating stories and characters that appeal to children (and adults too) in ways that I might never have expected. There are many satisfying moments in the life of a picture book. There's great joy – and relief! – when I finally figure out how to solve a particularly difficult picture, or revise an aggravating section of clunky text. I often get the most satisfaction when a barely discernible story idea suddenly begins to stick together and I realize that I might have a great book project in front of me.



Q: What did you like to read as a child? Does that factor into the sort of books you write for children today?

A: When I was very young, I read or was read Edward Lear's Book of Nonsense, specifically, the limericks. The limericks featured grown-ups doing ridiculous things to themselves and each other, and I found this very liberating. In fact, it must have informed the kind of picture books I wrote – for at least twenty years – because my protagonists were mostly middle-aged men in comically, absurd situations.

Q: What message do you want readers to take away from your stories?

A: Of course, I always hope that children will find my stories amusing, that they'll be captivated by the pictures, that they may laugh, or be surprised, or even better: that the story might stir up ideas and thoughts in their imagination that they'd never considered before.

Q: Librarians from all over the world will read this interview. Do you have something you'd like to tell them?

A: When I was a kid, our public library had a fabulous children's librarian: Betty Brock. I can't remember exactly what she did other than being patient, smart, thoughtful and many other things while lots of excited children orbited around her. Many years later, as a children's author, I've come to understand how fortunate we all are to have librarians. So many of them are passionate, bright, caring people – about books, of course, and other things too. Meanwhile, the environment has become progressively more challenging to the work they do. So, I mean it when I say: Thank you!