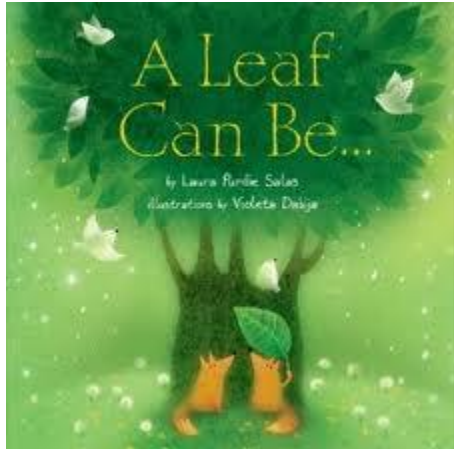


An Interview with the Author and Illustrator of A Leaf Can Be...

Thursday, March 15, 2012

A LEAF CAN BE by Laura Purdie Salas



Today I get to share a beautiful new book with you called A LEAF CAN BE written by [Laura Purdie Salas](#) and illustrated by [Violeta Dabija](#). Being a visual person, the illustrations were the first thing to pull me into this book, but the rhyming text is so charming (and educational - heads up teachers!), the book makes for a lovely and satisfying read. I asked Laura and Violeta about it...

Q. Laura, CONGRATULATIONS on the publication of your latest book A LEAF CAN BE... It seems like such a simple idea, and yet I know looks are deceiving. How did you come up with this story?

A. I wanted to write a rhyming nonfiction picture book. I loved Castles, Caves, and Honeycombs by [Linda Ashman](#)—its simplicity and beauty. I wanted to create something that captured a bit of those qualities, too. I tried a few other topics, topics I already had nonfiction prose manuscripts about, but they weren't right. They required vocabulary I couldn't make work. And they were too complicated. I knew I needed to find a simple, elegant, topic. I needed to write about something kids could already connect with, but then show something new about it. Every kid knows leaves. I hope this book will make them nod in recognition but also make their jaws drop. It's so amazing to me to see all the roles that leaves play. And I hope this book will surprise kids and make them look at leaves in a whole new way.

Q. Laura, I know this isn't your first book, but I'm sure my readers would love to hear about your path to publication for A LEAF CAN BE... and some of your other titles.

A. Well, I love poetry, and I love nonfiction. I had several poetry collections making the rounds, but I wanted to try something different. I so admired the elegance and pared-down beauty of *Castles, Caves, and Honeycombs* and a few other books like that. So I decided to try this form. I had a few misses on topics, as I said above. Once I found the right topic, though, inspired by a single poem about Honduran tent bats that I had written for a previous poetry collection (*Sing, Chatter, Roar, Buzz: Poems About the Rain Forest* – Capstone Press, 2009), the manuscript fell into place quickly.

I always struggle with matching topic to form to audience age. I'll have a fun idea that needs to be a picture book, but the humor level is upper elementary. Or a topic I think works for upper elementary, but it has an element (like a spin on a fairy tale) that my agent or editor thinks makes it too childish. I was really happy with *A LEAF CAN BE...* when I finished it. For once, I felt the form, the information, the voice, and the intended audience age all worked really well together—yay!

My agent and I sent it two places, both to editors whom had expressed interest in my work before. One editor passed, saying she had several other leaf/tree books already. The other, Carol Hinz at [Millbrook Press](#), loved it and took it to acquisitions. They gave it a thumbs-up, and I started celebrating! This was the fastest I've ever had a trade book (a book I wrote first and then sent to publishers, rather than one I wrote on assignment) sell.

And I'm excited to share that I'm working on the end matter right now for a follow-up book, which Violeta Dabija will also illustrate!

As for my other books...An editor picked my first trade picture book poetry collection, *STAMPEDE! POEMS TO CELEBRATE THE WILD SIDE OF SCHOOL* (Clarion, 2011), out of the slush pile. I had been sending it out for a little more than a year. My new one, *BOOKSPEAK! POEMS ABOUT BOOKS*, also sold to Clarion.

Gosh, I'm making it sound way too easy! All of this was after almost 10 years of submitting manuscripts to publishers. The acceptance of *STAMPEDE* was my 794th response in my submissions database. Some of those were magazine articles and such, but I sent out about 700 picture book submissions from 1996 to 2007, when *STAMPEDE* was accepted.

My other 100+ books have almost all been written on assignment for educational publishers. I enjoy that and have written a mix of straight



nonfiction, easy readers, poetry, alphabet books, Q&A—all sorts of different forms and formats.

Q. Laura, A LEAF CAN BE... will be a wonderful resource for teachers. Do you have any suggestions for them?

A. Thanks! I'm really excited about the possibilities for LEAF in the classroom. I've had a number of teachers tell me they're planning to use it as a mentor text in their classrooms. They'll have kids research a topic of their choice and write about it following a similar format. I also think it would be extremely cool to have kids brainstorm and write about all the different things they themselves can be!

I have a teaching guide for it here:

[http://www.laurasalas.com/pdfs/Leaf/Leaf TG.pdf](http://www.laurasalas.com/pdfs/Leaf/Leaf%20TG.pdf)

There's a book trailer to introduce the book to kids: And in my online notebook of reviews at <https://www.evernote.com/pub/salasp/leafcanbe...reviews>, I've put (with classroom ideas) in the title of those blog reviews that mention ways to use it in the classroom.

Q. Violeta (pictured), Your illustrations are just luscious. Do you mind describing your method?

A. My method is very simple but it took me some years and a couple dozen books to get to it. In my first books I experimented with many techniques like gouache, colored pencils, watercolor, oil, digital... but none of them fully allowed me to get the desired atmosphere in my work. So I started mixing them and it worked. I love the delicate traditional feel and texture of the watercolor on paper. On the other hand the computer is a wonderful tool with endless possibilities when it comes to experimenting with color schemes. So I decided to take the best of both and it "clicked." I felt that's the way to go. Usually I start with a detailed pencil sketch on paper. I scan it into Photoshop, put in on a separate layer (that is going to be hidden at the end) and then the fun begins. Working with textures and colors is my favorite part of the process. I have a library of scanned watercolor textures I use for my work. My digital files are a crazy mess of countless layers often exceeding one GB (that's a lot). I'm most interested in getting the right atmosphere in a painting and I find Photoshop the perfect creative tool. Its features allow me to try out as many ideas as I want, play with rich, lush colors and sophisticated color schemes and easily add little touches and details.



Q. Violeta, Some of the text was pretty abstract. How did you figure out how to illustrate some of the more obscure text?

A. Illustrating the more abstract text was the most challenging but also the most interesting part. In fact the most abstract text gives me the greatest freedom to explore my own ideas and bring a personal approach to the project. In everyday life I am continuously inspired by many things, it can be nature's rhythm and moods, textures, color schemes or photos. It's an amalgam of images that sit quietly in my mind and are waiting for the right opportunity to show themselves in my work. Usually one starts from the text and finds the best way to illustrate it. In case of a more abstract text I like to reverse this process: I "flip" through my mental images and choose the one I like and make it work with the text. The result is a very personal piece that reflects my world, my passion for color and beauty.



Q. Laura (pictured), do you have any special marketing plans for A LEAF CAN BE...?

A. Oh, how I wish I could say I was putting together some fantastic contest that will have the whole world talking about LEAF. But I'm not (I'm open to ideas, though!). Really, my marketing is about creating materials for the book and trying to get the word out through teachers, bloggers, kidlit people (thank you, e!), etc. I am so not an entertainer that I don't have any splashy launch party or anything going on. (Hanging my head in shame.)



I feel fortunate that Lerner has very actively promoted the book. Violeta's art is so eye-catching that Lerner used it on its corporate holiday cards and also on the cover of its rights catalog for the Frankfurt Book Fair this fall (do you suppose they'd like me to go in person?). Lerner made some gorgeous bookmarks and sent them to me, too.

And I've given LEAF a nice online presence on my website (laurasalas.com) and created some postcards featuring art from it—they can't help but be beautiful. I'm also going to approach arboretums and public gardens and state/national parks and forests about carrying LEAF in their gift shops. I'm about to start researching those contact names/numbers now. And I'm putting together an updated set of nonfiction-based school visit presentations. That's about as exciting as it gets. Dang. I'm feeling a little inadequate now!

I think that sounds pretty good, Laura! Thanks to you both for stopping by! And here is more information on the other two titles Laura mentioned:

[BOOKSPEAK! POEMS ABOUT BOOKS](#) (Clarion, 2011): In BookSpeak!, 21 wild, wacky, and winsome poems showcase the magic on a single bookshelf. Characters plead for sequels, book jackets strut their stuff, and a raucous party starts when the lights go out at the bookstore! Just named a Finalist for the Minnesota Book Award!

[STAMPEDE! POEMS TO CELEBRATE THE WILD SIDE OF SCHOOL](#) (Clarion, 2009 – Finalist, Minnesota Book Award): 18 imaginative poems observe students in their natural habitat and reveal their unusual behavior, crazy communication, and healthy appetites. Whether they're in the classroom, on the playground, or in the cafeteria, school brings out the animal in all of them. And if you look carefully, you may glimpse the wild side of yourself!

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