

*"I like the book that the audience at the time favors. I love them all. They are like kids. They often surprise you and sometimes they disappoint you..."*

*-Bill Martin, Jr.  
June 18, 1998*

Bill Martin, Jr.

The Bag of Books: In His Own Words

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*On Sounds in the Wind*

This is one of the textbooks. I think that we called it a second grade book. These were just rhythmic things that were put together; for example, *Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer*. On the foggy night, the type all but disappears. And I would encourage children to rely on their memory (here Bill Martin, Jr. flipped through the pages slowly, but he did not say anything else).

*On Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*

This book has created its own language tradition. And it's only because it has been told and told and told, chorally, dramatically... I wrote it on a train, and it took me just minutes to write. I had no idea what this book would become, even while it was happening. Teachers do the most logical thing with the pattern of that kind. They make it say different things. That's the way we develop a language repertoire.

*On Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?*

Well, I didn't want to publish another book that just repeated *Brown Bear*. People would say, "What a rip off." So it took the longest time to get the change in the pattern which came with the verbs and not with the nouns. (from memory) "Polar bear, polar bear, what do you hear? I hear a chimpanzee shouting in my ear, braying in my ear, whistling in my ear." And then in the reprise in the finale, then all of those sounds become added in together. And I was pleased with that.

*On Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*

That was happenstance. I, in my journal, had written "A told B and B told C." One day, Houghton Mifflin called and they had had a book ready to go to press but they had to pull one story for some reason and said, "Could you write us a story?" almost overnight. And I said, "Yes," having no idea what it would be. And I told them it would be expensive. When, in three or four days, the book was finished, I knew it was good, but I didn't know how good. It has a magic to it, and you repeat it.

*On The Maestro Plays*

An artist came in with a picture of a maestro directing an orchestra. He had no legend. I told him if he would leave it for a week, I would write a story to it. So I did *The Maestro Plays*. (from memory) "He plays knowingly, showingly, flowingly, glowingly..." I just started using adverbs. It was printed in a very simple little book. Henry Holt, years later, had this artist do it. Lovely art...



### *On Barn Dance!*

In college, I had to take, among other courses during the four-year term, a course on reading aloud in the classroom. And one of my favorite poetic publications of the day was Marianne Moore's *Poetry Magazine*. And there I became acquainted, through the professor reading to us in class, with a lot of poets, a lot of poetry. And when I started collecting the poetry, and reading it, learning to read, "Light has loveliness to sell. Oh, beautiful and splendid things. New waves whitened on a cliff, soaring higher than sways and swings. And for your spirits still delight holy thoughts that star the night." Amy Lowell. Now whether this was where I got the introduction to Stephen Vincent Benet, somewhere or other, one of the teachers in that course read this poem (from memory):

Up in the mountain, the mountains in the fog,  
everything's as lazy as an old houn' dog.  
Born in the mountains, lonesome-born,  
Born runnin' ragged thu' the cockleburrs and corn.  
Never knew my mammy, mebbe never should.  
Think she was a fiddle made of mountain laurel-wood.  
Never had a pappy to teach me pretty-please.  
Think it was a whippoorwill, a-skitin' thu' the trees.  
Never had a brother ner a whole pair of pants,  
But when I start to fiddle, why, yuh got to start to dance.  
Listen to my fiddle- Kingdom Come- Kingdom Come!  
Hear the frogs a-chunkin', "Jug o' rum, Jug o' rum..."

"Full moon shinin', shinin' big and bright. Pushin' back the shadows, holdin' back the night..." Same one, it's just that poem over. I had liked that poem so much, I memorized it. I didn't realize that, when I wrote *Barn Dance!*, subconsciously, I was hearing the poem of the mountains. This book was out for years, like five, before I ever realized what I had done.

The surprising thing about this book is that I predicted that the big sales would be at 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. They're not. They're at kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. They like the rhythm; they don't have to understand it.

### *On The Ghost Eye Tree*

*The Ghost Eye Tree* was a true experience. We did go for milk down a very dark road to a farmer's barn where we got a pale full of milk-a bucket full, and carried home. And it was dark and spooky. A little light, a little 40 watt light, maybe 25 watt, hung at the intersection of this dirt road, out over here (lifting his hand to the side) with a reflector over it. My brother went with me, and some kid behind the trees was the sound saying "Whooooo." It scared the life out of us. But, I decided to change the character. The older brother became the older sister.



### *On Knots on a Counting Rope*

This was written in two versions. *Knots on a Counting Rope*, the first time, was an American Indian setting and it was the grandfather talking to the boy, telling him why he should be honest and hardworking and so forth. I never did like this book because the grandfather was such a disciplinarian, and I thought the old man had more to him than that. So, eventually, we rewrote this into this version.

It was badly reviewed, not bad writing but ugly reviews by a Navajo political group. They didn't like it that I had chosen an Indian boy to be blind. I violated their way of naming children when I said, "We'll name him Boy, Strength of Blue Horses." They said no Indian would ever choose that name, which is probably true. And they said the counting rope was not part of Navajo history, but part of the American Indian. Well, I didn't defend it. I didn't talk about it at all. There's no point. The storyteller tells the story. I didn't say I was writing history.

### *On Up and Down on the Merry-Go-Round*

We were in Portland, Oregon and it is the merry-go-round capital of the world. That's where that book came from. We visited the merry-go-rounds and came up with this book.

### *On Listen to the Rain*

We owed a publisher, DLM, a book. In other words, we were putting ten books together, and we had done nine. And, one rainy afternoon, we finished about 1:00, and our flight didn't leave until 6:00 from Dallas. Andy Bingham told us, "Get into that room and don't come out until you've finished writing a book." (laughing) So it's dedicated to Andy Bingham. Let's see (flipping through the book), "To Andy Bingham, who on a rainy day locked us in a room and said 'Write.'"

I'm sure all of this poetic influence in the children's books comes from my college education at Emporia with all of those people interested in poetry. I kept a notebook of poems, and even though I knew them by heart, I often would take the notebook with me, just to appear to be reading.

### *On Here Are My Hands*

This was a commercial job, no question about it. We were thinking of the next book. I said, "Let's do something that teachers will use to help children, young children, learn the parts of the body." It's not very good and it's surprising that it's lasted so long. (reading) "Here's my elbow my arm and my chin..." I wonder why we used "here's" - "Here's my elbow": h-e-r-e-apostrophe-s. All the rest of them are "here is" or "here are." I don't know why we did it. We probably weren't conscious of it.

### *On Old Devil Wind*

*Old Devil Wind* is just an old folk tale style. It's not as dramatic as the other books because it gets too long. But in the classroom when children are doing it, they love the repetition, they love the candles... I love the art.

### *On Freedom's Child*

Well, Sammy Davis had just had a big hit with *I Gotta Be Me*. And we were writing a collection of freedom books. I wanted one that was personalized, self-affirming. I love it because it's so honest. It's a simple "I like me, no doubt about it. I like me, can't live without it. I like me, let's shout about it." But then you get to the bridge. "We need all the different kinds of people we can find, to make freedom's dream come true. And as I learn to like all the differences in me, I learn to like the differences in you." That's pretty weighty...