



Robie Harris

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Robie Harris, interviewed in her studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts on August 16, 2001.
Additional questions and answers added on December 7, 2005.

Program available at www.TeachingBooks.net beginning October 2001.

The answers shown here are transcriptions of the spoken word and are edited by TeachingBooks.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You used to be a teacher. Is this when and how you became fascinated with children's growth and development?

ROBIE HARRIS: Yes, I was a teacher in New York City at a place called Bank Street School for Children. One of the things we did all the time was to observe the children and have meetings and talk about children's behavior. I was absolutely fascinated with growth and development.

I then ran a program for the kids in the Head Start program, and I wanted teachers and parents and anybody who was with these kids to know what their day-to-day lives were like. So I got a grant and I worked with a filmmaker to reveal this, because I felt with this insight the teachers could be better teachers.

I got super eight cameras and gave them to the kids, who filmed their neighborhoods and came back and we talked about what they saw. We began to design and do a whole curriculum with 5, 6, 7 and 8 year olds and with a filmmaker who followed me with 35 mm black and white film. We did a whole film together that even ended up in the Lincoln Center Film Festival. It's a beautiful film, and it really tells about the kids that are in your classroom day in and day out.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What led to your first children's book?

ROBIE HARRIS: I did a book many, many years ago called *Before You Were Three* with another children's book author named Elizabeth Levy. We thought that a new child was absolutely fascinating, so we decided to do a book on the first three years of life. I then moved here to Cambridge, Massachusetts. There are so many early childhood and infant specialists here, and I realized as I was writing that there are a lot of things I understood and other things I didn't understand about this development period. So I just picked up the phone, cold-calling people, and saying, "Hi, my name is Robie Harris, I'm writing a children's book about the first three years of life. Could I come in and talk to you about your research? Would you be willing to take a look at the manuscript? Could I ask you some questions?" This is something that I do all the time with my books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why did you write *It's Perfectly Normal*?

ROBIE HARRIS: I was sitting in an editor's office in New York City, and we were talking about the state of children in America. My editor looked at me and said, "How would you like to do a book on HIV and AIDS for elementary school-age kids?" I said, "Well, you know, if I'm doing a book, I wouldn't do a book just on HIV and AIDS," even though I think there should be lots of books just on HIV and AIDS for kids. I said I would do a book on healthy sexuality that includes HIV and AIDS. He said, "What would be in it?" and I outlined the book. Then he said, "Send me an outline of three chapters." I went home, and that night I sat down with my husband and my kids, who were in their late teens, and I said, "I have this book I want to do. It fascinates me. I don't know enough to do it. I'm going to need to talk to a lot of people."

I then called our pediatricians, my kids' elementary school science teacher, anybody who had to do with the health and well-being of kids. I made two weeks' worth of appointments. I wrote an outline, and I launched into doing this book. It took five years from start to finish.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Research is such a vital component of your work. Can you share how you researched and decided what to include in *It's Perfectly Normal*?

ROBIE HARRIS: When I was working on gathering information for *It's Perfectly Normal*, I probably talked to 40 or 50 people. I read everything I could. I read all the reports on what kids need to know in order to stay healthy. I then had to make decisions. I couldn't write an encyclopedia about this, but I wanted the book to be comprehensive and I wanted it to be a place where kids, pre-teens and teens could go and find the answer to almost every question that they might ask. Now kids are fascinated by all the abnormalities and some of the "gross stuff" as they call it, but I felt that many of those were not things that contributed to helping them to make healthy decisions and having the information they needed, so I made some choices about what to put in and what to leave out.

A number of people told me not to put in abortion, that we would sell less books, that it would be controversial. Any book on sex in the USA is controversial if it has to do with reproduction and about making choices. I knew it was important to present both sides of the issue – pro-choice, pro-life. If I left it out or if we left out particular drawings or other topics – I mentioned sexual abuse or sexually transmitted diseases – it would be saying, "We can't talk about those things. You shouldn't know about them."

Our kids already know about 99.9% of this stuff. What concerned me is that they have a lot of misinformation, no matter how much they tell us, and I wanted them to get accurate information. So I think the litmus test for me was, "What's in the best interest of the child? What's going to help a child stay healthy?"

TEACHINGBOOKS: What led to you write *It's So Amazing*?

ROBIE HARRIS: Well, I had only expected to do *It's Perfectly Normal*. However, when I went out to speak across the country and in the UK, parents would show up sometimes having a six year old or an eight year old or a three year old. Grandparents showed up and people said, "My six year old is asking about abortion. My six year old is asking about exactly how is a baby made. They want to know the facts. I don't know what to say. Please do a book for younger kids." I'd say, "What age?" They'd say "Five, six and seven and up. There's nothing out there for them." There are some good books out there for them. Yet, I began to think about how I would do this book. How would it be different than other material? I didn't want to do a dumbed-down version of *It's Perfectly Normal* and just make it simpler. I thought if I wrote through the lens of

reproduction and how babies are born, I could talk about all the other topics and that would be the lens. That would be the way I would talk about it.

Then I sat down and talked with Michael Emberley and said, "I'm going to have to write it simply, but we're going to have to break it up with lots of images." So we came up with the idea of having this comic book format within which we had text, the extraordinary bird and bee illustrations, and that would mean that a child who couldn't read very well could just look at the book and gain a lot of information visually. The bird and bee talk about cells, and all kinds of scientific things. Or kids could read the whole text. We wanted to do a book in which kids could start at page one and read through the whole book; another child would just flip through and look at the pages that were interesting. That's how I made the decision to do that book. Again, there were many naysayers who said, "Children that age aren't interested in this." Not true, they're fascinated.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You chose to discuss sexual abuse and AIDS in your writing on sexuality; are these tough decisions on what to include and not to include?

ROBIE HARRIS: When I met with Michael Emberley about doing the books on sexuality, I said, "We have to think about what's in the best interests of the child. And if somebody tells us, 'Gee, you can't put in this topic, you can't talk about sexual abuse because it's scary,' how can you talk about bodies without talking about abuse?"

The text and the drawings must show what is in the best interests of the child, and if it's going to help kids to stay healthy and to stay safe, then we put it in. How can you responsibly talk about bodies, how can you responsibly talk about sexual health without talking about all of these issues?

When I was writing *It's So Amazing*, we came to the question about including HIV and AIDS. "Do we really want to talk to 6, 7 and 8 year olds about HIV and AIDS?" Well, first of all, there are kids who were born infected. They are living in this country much longer, 9, 10, 11, 12 years, even longer, many more years beyond that. It's possible a child might have a relative who has HIV and AIDS — an adult or a child, and they've seen television. They've heard the radio. They've heard about HIV and AIDS. And I would rather talk about it very simply and say, "you've heard about this. Perhaps, you would like to hear more."

Here is another way to describe this: *It's So Amazing* is a "how things work" ... how babies are made, how a virus is transmitted. There's nothing wrong with learning about viruses. It's great science, and, in the long run, when those 6- to 9-year-old kids are 13, 14, 15, 16 and they're having to make decisions, I want them to know about HIV so that they can stay healthy.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're insistent about having accurate and appropriate information in your books — and one way you do that is thoroughly research and review your work. Can you share your research process with an example from *It's So Amazing*.

ROBIE HARRIS: I seemed to have developed this process that I use over and over again in writing my books. What I do is I actually get on the telephone and I find people. Sometimes I write them a letter first, but mostly I get on the phone and I say, "I'm writing a book on sexual health, on where babies come from for kids age 6, 7 and up, and you've written about adoption and you're an expert on adoption and I would like to include adoption in this book because many of these books don't include adoption. I'd like to know how you talked to parents and how you talked to kids about it. Would you have time to meet with me for an hour?" And everyone says yes.

Why do they say yes? Because I think there are a lot of people who care about kids. I then go talk to this person about adoption. I also realized that I needed to talk about genes and chromosomes. Those are very complicated issues for 7, 8 and 9 year olds, so I went and talked to a geneticist and I said, "What is the simplest way that I can talk about the X and Y chromosome?" They will often give me things to read. I will then go back and write it and then call that person and e-mail what I have written. When you simplify science, if you take out certain things, you can immediately become inaccurate, so then I e-mail it back to them or I fax it back to them and they tell whether my science is accurate or not.

Now I do that about everything and it's not just about the science. I then talk about miscarriages in this book, because in talking to pediatricians about what's on the minds of kids, kids come in their office and say, "My aunt was pregnant and she's no longer pregnant. What happened?" So how do I figure out a way to talk to children about this without being scary but to really be reassuring and say what I learned pediatricians often say to kids — that most women who become pregnant and have had a miscarriage can have a healthy baby again.

Again, I'm constantly going back to people, constantly refining and also spending an enormous amount of time reading what I've written to myself, reading it over and over and over again. Once I have the science down, then I can go around with the words so that, in fact, it is easy to read, easy to say out loud, and once you can say it out loud and read it out loud without stumbling, then you know you've got it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is *It's Not the Stork! A Books About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends* the youngest sibling of *It's Perfectly Normal* and *It's So Amazing*? What was the inspiration for this book?

ROBIE HARRIS: Yes, *It's Not the Stork!* is the younger sibling. But it's a different book from the older books in so many ways. Here's how this book came about. Ever since *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing up, Sex, and Sexual Health* was first published in 1994, parents, teachers, librarians, health professionals, and even clergy have asked me to write books on healthy sexuality for even younger ages. So I have had it in my head for many years to write *It's Not the Stork!* for children age four and up.

First, I went back to the drawing boards to write a book on sexuality for children ages seven and up. I had written the older book for children ages ten and up, *It's Perfectly Normal*, through the lens of puberty. And I figured out that the lens for the book for children seven and up, which became *It's So Amazing! A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families*, would focus on the amazing science story of how an egg and sperm meet and eventually over nine months' time grow into a baby. After all, children in this age-range are concrete thinkers and want the know the answers to the question, "How does it work?" And among the things they are so interested in is how do bodies work to make a baby, and in particular "How was I made?"

So when I began to think about and work on the youngest book, *It's Not the Stork!*, I realized that what would work for even younger children would be to write a book through the dual lens of gender — what makes a boy a boy or a girl a girl — and that age-old question "Where did I come from." This is exactly what they wonder about and want to know.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *It's Perfectly Normal* and *It's So Amazing* are not included in some schools' collections. They've even been mentioned on lists of challenged titles. How do you respond to this?

ROBIE HARRIS: I think that in this country there's a range of opinions about what it is children should know, and I think that many people feel that our children shouldn't know about some of these things that have to do with sexuality, because, as adults, many of us weren't talked to about these things. But what I say to kids when I speak in school is that knowing how your body works, knowing the difference between a male and a female and how those changes take place in puberty, knowing how not to make a baby, knowing how to make a baby at the right time, all of that is information that I think children have a right to know.

My feeling is that through books and talking with our kids, if they can understand and learn about these things early on, when they get to the tough years, which are the teenage years — I mean, let's not fool ourselves, it's hard to be a teenager these days with the specter of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases — then we've already had the dialogue and the dialogue can happen through a book if we feel uncomfortable talking to our kids. We know from what's happened with *It's Perfectly Normal* and *It's So Amazing*, not just in this country and around the world, that kids crave this information and parents, for the most part, want their kids to have it, and if a librarian doesn't feel comfortable buying this book, I respect that. That's her choice. She makes a choice for her collection.

I'll just tell you one other interesting side point. I will often have a teacher, a librarian or a school superintendent come up to me and say, "If you will take out the following topics, your books on sex could be in every school in my district and I'm sure you'd be happy to do that." The first topic always is homosexuality, the next is abuse, the next is HIV and AIDS, abortion and miscarriage, and there always a surprising look at me when I say, "Well, it's not something that I can do and here's why."

I say again, "I would personally do a disservice to the kids who read this book if I leave these things out. How can you responsibly talk about bodies, how can you responsibly talk about sexual health without talking about all of these issues?" Do I wish that we never, ever had to talk about abuse or think about it? Of course I do, but we have to help kids to understand how to take care of themselves and how to protect their bodies.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Very True Story of My Cozy Quilt* begins with the day of the boy's birth. You did this so well and with such vivid illustrations in your first birth "day" books. What happens in this one?

ROBIE HARRIS: Yes, I did begin *Happy Birth Day!* with the words "I will never, ever forget the moment you were born." And then when you add Michael Emberley's exquisite photo-realistic drawing of the moment of birth, how can you not fall in love with babies? Again, in a warm and accurate drawing of that same moment in our nonfiction picture book, *Hello Benny, What It's Like To Be A Baby*, Michael draws in cartoon style, a baby's first cry at the moment of birth and I write, "When Benny opened his eyes, his Mommy was holding him tight. Benny looked at her face — for the very first time. He had never seen her face before!"

What makes that moment so special to me is the vivid memories of the births of my own two children, and now my four grandchildren. These moments were some of the most amazing and happiest events of my life. And I am also fascinated by the fact that when a new baby is born, he or she is so capable in so many ways, even at the moment of birth and on the first day of one's life. I think every one of us wants to know what we were like when we were born. And since we, and that includes young children as well, can't and do not remember that moment, I felt that a picture book could capture that moment, and fill in the story for young children, and also let them know how amazing and loved they were from the moment of birth and that even on the day they were born, already they could do so many things — they can see, hear, cry, suck, and even turn their heads toward their mother's voice.

In *The Very True Story of My Cozy Quilt*, I write about the day of a child's birth, but not about the moment birth. The story starts before birth, when the child in the story tells us his grandmother made a quilt for him before he was born. And then I wrote the following about the day of birth: "On the day I was born, Daddy and Mommy wrapped me up in my big, cozy quilt to keep me comfy — to keep me warm. From then on wherever I went, my cozy quilt went with me." And the book goes on to tell the story, from the child's point of view, of how of how his quilt grew down as he grew up. At one point, after his quilt has ripped and is even more diminished, he tells his grandmother the following. "I told her I was very, very big now, so I didn't need my quilt. She said I was very big now — but not ALL big. She said I didn't have to be ALL big yet — so I could still snuggle up with my quilt...."

TEACHINGBOOKS: The baby books have a completely different feel and design than your other books. What were you trying to accomplish with the feel and experience of these titles?

ROBIE HARRIS: One of the most interesting things for me was working with Michael Emberley on finding a way for the baby to be central in *Happy Birth Day!*. The baby is the center of this book. I wanted to do a big book, I mean physically big, so when you open it up, you have almost a life-size baby or even a baby that's bigger.

It's very interesting to me to see very young children, like two year olds, just practically crawl into the book to get very, very close to that baby. I mean they want to touch that baby. They want to hold that baby, and they pull the book almost around them. They almost get into the book, which is great because that's the way they experience a baby.

Shane Evans' warm, simple, yet deeply emotional illustrations for *The Very True Story of My Cozy Quilt* are not one bit like Michael Emberley's illustrations, but they too show the attachment of this baby and child to his parents, and this time his grandmother, as he grows up. And the text and art intertwine to tell the story about how this child's grandmother is always there to help him, no matter what happens to him — or his cozy quilt.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What motivated you to write *Goodbye Mousie*?

ROBIE HARRIS: *Goodbye Mousie* is a book I began writing many, many years ago. As a child, I remember having three dogs and feeling very, very sad about them when they died. We buried the dogs in our backyard. We also had mice. We had guinea pigs. When I became a parent, my children had, you know, goldfish, guinea pigs, gerbils. We had a dog. They all died. These were very, very sad moments.

My mother died when I was 21. I was young. I was not a child, but it was very, very sad and a big loss for me. So about 15 years ago I began to compile these feelings and write *Goodbye Mousie*. Then in 1997, I decided I'd like to tell the story about a little boy discovering that something's wrong with his mouse, and then his father tells him that the mouse has died. But this little boy doesn't quite come to terms with the fact that his mouse has died. I don't think that any of us do when something or someone we love dies. We never come fully to terms with it. It's a loss, and I was very interested in the process.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What discussions come from *Goodbye Mousie*?

ROBIE HARRIS: Well, one of the questions that comes up about this book is, "How will children react, how will they feel about it?" I spent four days in a school this last spring in Portland,

Oregon, and I actually read the book to kids from kindergarten through eighth grade. What was fascinating was the youngest children were riveted by the topic and began to talk about all their pets and then their grandparents. Then a little girl raised her hand. I think she was one of the first graders and said, "You've helped me make a decision." And I said, "What decision?" She said, "Well, my guinea pig died two weeks ago and you know what you wrote in that book, you said something like, 'maybe someday I'll get a new mouse but not yet.' Well, I will never get a new guinea pig. But I think I could get a goldfish," and then she sat down. So again, I think that books about these difficult topics help kids realize that they're not all alone in their feelings, that they're legitimate, healthy, normal feelings and it's okay to have them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You do a great job making complicated information accessible and playful for kids. What's the trick?

ROBIE HARRIS: One way to do that is through humor. How can you have humor about such various things? Well, people make jokes about bodies all the time. They make jokes about sex. Seven-year-old kids make jokes and yet, they're partially serious about how a baby is born and where it comes out. You know sometimes they say, "Oh, the baby was pooped out" and they talk about how gross that is. That's in *It's So Amazing*. It's child humor and it lightens it. They make jokes about body parts. The bee doesn't want to talk about them anymore and he says, "Enough about all these body parts." The bird says, "I can't wait to hear more about these body parts." I use puns as often as I can. The bird and bee, who are really best friends, also really egg each other along.

In *It's So Amazing*, there's a science point about "how long until it's a baby." So we show a human; nine months. We also show an armadillo; I think it's five months of pregnancy. We show an elephant, and the reader laughs for a moment and then they look at it and read: two-year pregnancy.

I think it's the combination of serious text along with a bird and bee who are at times serious and at times joking around, and then the illustrations are fun and funny and marvy and cartoony.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You wrote a series of books for young children called the Just Being Me series. What was it like to write a series?

ROBIE HARRIS: I loved writing the Just Being Me books knowing all the while in my head that the talented creator of the comic strip character "Sylvia" would be illustrating these four books — *I'm So Mad! I'm Not Sleepy, I Love Messes, and I'm All Dressed!* The idea for *I'm So Mad!* came to me one week when I made several trips to our local supermarket and witnessed so many tantrums. And I thought, "Here is a book for me to write, again from the point of view of a child."

And one of the things I wanted to portray in this series, through the stories I would write, is that we all get mad some of the time, and there are just times that we do NOT want to go to bed, and that making a mess is NOT the worst thing in the whole wide world, and that getting dressed MY way is okay. Those are my values. I also thought each story in each of the four books would resonate and strike a responsive chord in almost every young child because these four books are about the relationships and feelings they deal with almost every day of their lives.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you work with Linda C. Mayes, MD when writing the Just Being Me series? What types of questions did you ask her?

ROBIE HARRIS: Dr. Linda Mayes, at the Yale University Child Study Center, is one of the people I consult with from time to time on whatever book I am working on. In all my books, I always want to make sure that I write from the point of view of a child, and while writing, that I keep “what is in the best interests of the child” in the forefront of my mind at all times. That means writing books for children — fiction or nonfiction — that are honest. For as we all know, if we are not honest with our children in all matters, we the adults in their lives will have no credibility with them. And the same holds true when you write a book for children. The types of questions I ask Linda are: “Is this really how a four-year-old feels when he is very angry with his mom?” “Is this information about how a baby is made age-appropriate?” “Is this behavior that I have written normal, real?” “Is the way this mommy or daddy responds what actually happen in real life?”

When I talk with experts such as Linda, and it is a real privilege to do so, what I am most always trying to find out about is if what I have written in a picture book is “emotionally-true” for a young child. After all, what I do write about in my pictures books are the powerful feelings of young children. When writing nonfiction, what I am always trying to find out from experts such as Linda is if what I am writing is emotionally-appropriate, age-appropriate, and scientific-accurate for the age-range of children I writing for.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There is a child development piece at the end of each Just Being Me book called “What’s Going On?” that’s contributed by Dr. Mayes.

ROBIE HARRIS: Yes. That section talks about why young children act in the ways they do. For example, “Why is bedtime often so hard for a young child?” “Or why do young children make messes?” Linda helps us understand what it is like for a young child to go through the daily ups and downs of their lives. And she does this in a way that shows us that when young children do things in “their way” they are not being bad, rather they are just being themselves — just being ME!

TEACHINGBOOKS: The theme of *I Am Not Going to School Today!* is such a universal issue for first-time school goers, and you and Jan Ormerod seemed to hit it just right in your tone and focus.

ROBIE HARRIS: *I Am Not Going to School Today!* was a picture book that had been it my head for ages. The idea came from the night that one of my own children at a young age was about to go off to the first day of a new school, and told me in quite a matter-of- fact way that he was NOT going to go to the first day of school because on the first day of school you don’t know where your cubby is, or where the toilets or crayons are, or if you can play outside in the rain and his list went on and on. But then he said, “But don’t worry, I’ll go to school on the second day because on the second day — you know everything!” Isn’t that how we all feel when we are about to do something new? I certainly do.

So I knew that there was a story there for young children about all the feelings surrounding separation that they have and I didn’t worry at all that there are many other books on the topics. Each author has her own take on this and her own story to tell, so I never even considered not writing this book. And Jan Ormerod so aptly and beautifully captures the feelings a young child has when he decides that NOT going to is a very GOOD idea.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Don't Forget to Come Back!*, illustrated by Harry Bliss is also about separation.

ROBIE HARRIS: *Don't Forget to Come Back!*, is the story of a child who does everything possible — from telling her parents, “If you go out, a the biggest baddest moose will walk into the kitchen — and eat me all up!” to saying “I'll come with you!” to threatening to run away to the South Pole — to get her parents NOT to leave her with the babysitter and NOT to go out. Harry Bliss’ pictures for this book keep me in stitches and I know that children laugh out loud at the humor in his insightful drawings.

In my picture books, I often write about separation. Perhaps I do that because separation is something that starts at birth and something we deal with all through our lives. It is a main them of adult literature, so why not write about it in children’s books as well? They too deserve to see their feelings legitimized in the books that are created for them, for the stories that are read to them, and that later on, they will read by themselves.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have just finished writing another picture book that is due out in 2007, illustrated by Michael Emberley, called *Mail Harry to the Moon*. Who is Harry, and why is he being mailed to the moon?

ROBIE HARRIS: This book comes from a visit I made to meet my nephew’s new baby. Just as I arrived, a houseguest picked up her suitcase and headed to the door. That’s when the baby’s the older brother asked her “Where are you going?” and she replied, “To Chicago.” He then asked, “Is Chicago very, very, VERY far away from New York?” And when she answered, “Yes, it is very far away from New York and it is very windy in Chicago and even little things blow away.” That’s when the older brother said without a moment’s hesitation, “Then take Harry to Chicago with you!” And I knew at that very moment, I had just “seen and heard” the beginning of a picture book I had to write — the wish to get rid of the adored, adorable baby in the house. And that is the story I have written.

It is the story of a young boy whose baby brother does all the kinds of things baby siblings do at around nine months — take a bite of big brother’s banana, crawl across big brother’s painting and wrecking it, spit up yucky, cheesey stuff, and sit on Grandma’s lap. The big brother, who is the narrator of this story, sends baby Harry to all kinds of places when he does these things, and ultimately sends Harry to the moon.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you give some insight into your writing process?

ROBIE HARRIS: A good example of the process that I use in writing is for my book, *Hello Benny*. Now here’s a book that was about the whole first year of life. It’s written for kids roughly 3–6, and I wanted to write about all these fascinating things that happen in the first year of life. You learn to cry; you start making sounds. You possibly say your first words. There are a million things that happen over that time that are interesting and that’s a story about all of us. I had no idea what the book would look like, so I read a lot about infant development, about the first year of life. Then I went and talked with a lot of people. Then I realized I wasn’t just going to write this sort of boring set of facts about the first year of life. But, how could I make it fun for kids, and I thought, “Well, what if I wrote the story of one baby and that baby turns out to be Benny?”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where do you do your writing?

ROBIE HARRIS: I get up very, very early in the morning and I sometimes go right to my computer. Sometimes I start with a yellow legal pad and I write down a whole lot of ideas and then I just type them onto the computer, and I keep adding ideas. For example, with *It's So Amazing*, I added all the topics; I added knock-knock jokes, jokes that the bird and bee might make to each other, ideas about the fact that the bird and bee would have to sound younger. They'd have to look a little younger. They would have to be sillier, so I make this list of things and then I divide them up into sections, like the bird and bee topics. I also come up with phrases about how I might want to discuss things and then I do an outline just the way I was taught at elementary school, and that outline changes from day to day.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck in your writing?

ROBIE HARRIS: Well, when I'm stuck, I just take a deep breath — sometimes I go down into my kitchen and have a cup of tea. I will often make a phone call to a friend. I will find something else to do for about 10 or 15 minutes, but then I make myself go back to my desk, sit in front of my computer and just keep rewriting that paragraph over and over again. There's no magic. I think it's just putting in the time and the thinking. One of the interesting things for me is that I will get a certain part of a book and I really think it works and I put all my energy in that and I think the book is finished, and then I read through the book and there are four other sections that just don't make any sense or are boring or too long. I can only really work on one section at a time and that book could take me two days or a month.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How has your writing for children evolved over time?

ROBIE HARRIS: I think my writing is clearer, more interesting and more fun now than it used to be. However, every time I start a new book, I have big doubts about that because I find it very, very hard to start a new book and to get the age level and the voice that can talk to a child that age. For me, every book is a challenge and every book is difficult to do, and the first few weeks, sometime few months, I'm tearing my hair out because I have all these fragments of a book and it doesn't make any sense and the story doesn't quite work and the child who is supposed to sound like four sounds like ten or two. What I find is that it's like any job in a way. You have to just go back to it day after day after day, and work on it day after day. And one section will suddenly begin to work and fall in place. It's constant, constant revision.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do your books have in common?

ROBIE HARRIS: I think what my books have in common, whether they're fiction or nonfiction, there's something that underlies them about health and about the health and well-being of our kids. I'm trying to tell a story that somehow makes a child understand something better about himself or herself.... They are universal stories to let children know that it's okay, it's really fine, in fact, to have thoughts and feelings about these topics, which we, as adults, often find very, very difficult.

Books by Robie Harris

- MAIL HARRY TO THE MOON (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Little, Brown & Company, 2007
- VERY TRUE STORY OF MY COZY QUILT, THE (illustrated by Shane Evans), Candlewick Press, 2007
- IT'S NOT THE STORK! ! A BOOK ABOUT GIRLS, BOYS, BABIES, BODIES, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Candlewick Press, 2006
- I'M ALL DRESSED! (illustrated by Nicole Hollander), Little, Brown & Company, 2005
- I LOVE MESSES! (illustrated by Nicole Hollander), Little, Brown & Company, 2005
- I'M SO MAD! (illustrated by Nicole Hollander), Little, Brown & Company, 2005
- I'M NOT SLEEPY! (illustrated by Nicole Hollander), Little, Brown & Company, 2005
- GROWING UP STORIES: DAVID DINOSAUR-RRR! WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 3! (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2005
- DON'T FORGET TO COME BACK! (illustrated by Harry Bliss), Candlewick Press, 2004
- GROWING UP STORIES: SWEET JASMINE, NICE JACKSON. WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 2-- AND TO BE TWINS! (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2004
- IT'S PERFECTLY NORMAL: CHANGING BODIES, GROWING UP, SEX, AND SEXUAL HEALTH, Second Ed. (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Candlewick Press, 2004
- GROWING UP STORIES: GO! GO! MARIA! WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 1 (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2003
- I AM NOT GOING TO SCHOOL TODAY! (illustrated by Jan Ormerod), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2003
- GROWING UP STORIES: HELLO BENNY! WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A BABY (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2002
- GOODBYE MOUSIE (illustrated by Jan Ormerod), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2001
- HI NEW BABY! (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Candlewick Press, 2000
- IT'S SO AMAZING! A BOOK ABOUT EGGS, SPERM, BIRTH, BABIES, AND FAMILIES (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Candlewick Press, 1999
- HAPPY BIRTH DAY! (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Candlewick Press, 1996
- IT'S PERFECTLY NORMAL: CHANGING BODIES, GROWING UP, SEX, AND SEXUAL HEALTH (illustrated by Michael Emberley), Candlewick Press, 1994
- ROSIE'S SECRET SPELL (illustrated by Robert Tanenbaum), Pocket Books, 1991
- HOT HENRY (illustrated by Nicole Hollander), St. Martin's Press 1987
- MESSY JESSIE (illustrated by Nicole Hollander), St. Martin's Press, 1987
- ROSIE'S RAZZLE DAZZLE DEAL (illustrated by Tony DeLuna), Alfred A. Knopf, 1982
- I HATE KISSES (illustrated by Diane Paterson), Alfred A. Knopf, 1981
- ROSIE'S DOUBLE DARE (illustrated by Tony DeLuna), Alfred A. Knopf, 1980
- DON'T FORGET TO COME BACK (illustrated by Tony DeLuna), Alfred A. Knopf, 1978
- BEFORE YOU WERE THREE: HOW YOU BEGAN TO WALK, TALK, EXPLORE, AND HAVE FEELINGS (co-written with Elizabeth Levy, photos by Henry E. F. Gordillo), Delacorte Press, 1977
- ROSIE'S ROCK N' ROLL RIOT (illustrated by Robert Tanenbaum), Pocket Books, 1975

This In-depth Interview transcript is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net

Copyright ©2005 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.



© 2005 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.