

Where Did Baby Bear (and All Those Other Stories) Come From? Writer Shares Sources of Her Ideas

Beverley Randell, Children's Author, New Zealand

Editor's note:

Beverley Randell's PM Storybooks have delighted students as well as teachers for over 50 years. The New Zealand author and editor realized that young readers needed stories with satisfying endings about situations they understood. And so, Randell dedicated her career to researching, writing, and editing books that have made a difference in the literate lives of children.

What Reading Recovery® student hasn't read such titles as *Tom is Brave*, *The Merry-go-round*, *The Lazy Pig*, and *Father Bear Goes Fishing*, to name a few? In this article, Beverley shares how her books came to be and what/who influenced her to write them. Enjoy!

I am often asked: "Where did Baby Bear (and all those other stories) come from?"

The answers—as you might expect—reflect many influences.

Chance—

Being in the right place in the right time, with help from the right people

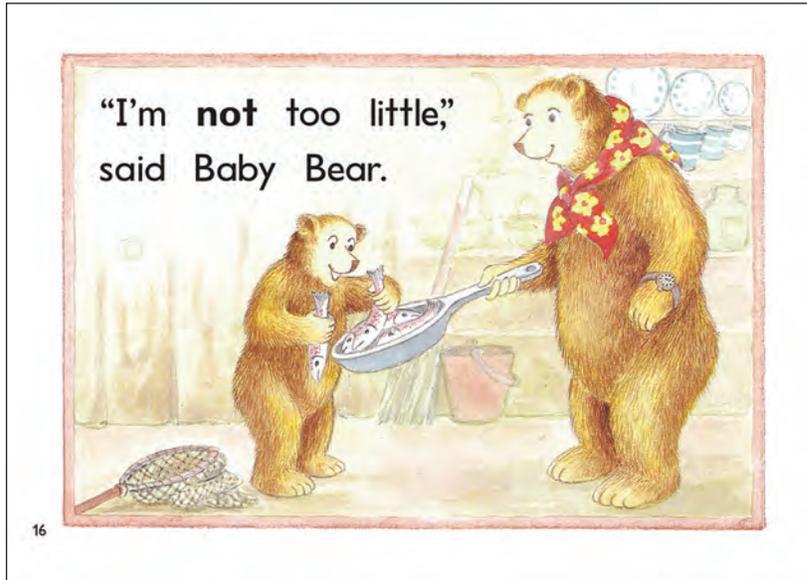
If I had not loved teaching small children, and if I had not married a sympathetic publisher, there would have been no stories about Baby Bear.

In 1958, in a one-teacher country school, with 27 children aged 5–13, I learned something about the teaching of reading — not nearly enough, of course, but it was a mind-stretching year. At the same time Hugh Price, whom I would soon marry, was on a steep learning curve of his own. With a friend and a tiny capital of about \$100, he had just founded Price Milburn Publishers (PM) as an evening hobby and was bringing out his first titles, mostly tertiary textbooks.

Hugh and I had first met in 1950 at teachers' college and university, and he, like me, had enjoyed teaching beginners to read. Hugh remembered asking his class of 6-year-olds what a *surprise* was — what did the word mean? And treasured the answer: "Mis'er price is our teacher." Not

many publishers bring firsthand knowledge of teaching small children into their decision making. You can imagine how our shared understanding helped us to design and edit books for the young. Our long publishing life together, before he died in 2009, was a happy partnership full of "serprices," not the least of which was the popularity of Baby Bear.

My next piece of good luck was a change in the way reading was taught in New Zealand. In 1960, the government wanted to produce local books to replace the imported Janet and John scheme (similar in style to Dick and Jane) that schools had been using for 10 years. The reasons were partly financial — a need to conserve overseas funds. Pat Hattaway of School Publications Branch, Department of Education, was the editor in charge of the project, called Ready to Read. She was an encouraging person with high literary standards. Hattaway and a colleague, the reading specialist Myrtle Simpson, began work but soon realized that schools would need more books—easier books—than the 18 they were funded to produce. Well before the publication date in 1963, letters were sent to New Zealand's four educational publishers, giving permission to bring out small supporting books, provided the spirit of Ready to Read was respected.



Without Ready to Read, which caused a major change in the way reading was taught in New Zealand, Baby Bear and the PM Story Books would never have been born. Baby Bear has always been his own person, eager to show his parents how much he can do to support himself, as illustrated here in Baby Bear Goes Fishing (Level 7).

Hattaway asked us to grade our books through vocabulary control. (The Ready to Read word list was provided, but new ‘interest words’ could be used to introduce changes of subject.) She requested definite story content and understandable situations, and asked us to respect *natural language*.

By natural language Hattaway meant that writers should use familiar, normally constructed sentences. Phonic control (*Pat and Dan ran* style) had not been in favor for years and was unwanted. Hattaway disliked the imperative tense: “Look, John, look! See Spot jump!” She called this stilted style *infant readerese*, and did not want it to reappear in books written to support her new story-based scheme, which began with a refreshingly normal sentence: “Bill is asleep.”

Without Ready to Read, which caused a major change in the way reading was taught in New Zealand, Baby Bear and the PM Story Books would never have been born. Relatively meaningless reading exercises were ‘out’ and real stories, told in clear simple English, were ‘in.’ I was given my chance.

Hugh and I published *Wake up, Father* (later renamed *Wake up, Dad*) and *Honey for Baby Bear* in January 1963, and, as requested, the books were tailored to match words used in the Ready to Read books. The list of words requiring practice at Level 9 included *Father, for, get, help, like, make, me, Mother, please, said, who ...* the only ‘new’ words on the first page of *Honey for Baby Bear* were the interest words *honey* and *bees*:

“I like honey,” said Baby Bear.

*Honey for me,
Honey for me,
Honey for breakfast
And honey for tea.*

“Who makes honey?” said Baby Bear.

“Bees make honey,” said Mother Bear.

Vocabulary control was important, but the fact that the book was a complete story with an emotionally satisfying ending was even more vital. *Honey for Baby Bear*, now 50 years old, is still going strong.

An emphasis on preselected vocabulary could have meant an arid beginning for the PM Story Books, but, as it turned out, the limitations were perfectly manageable. I was lucky to have a crossword puzzle mind and enjoyed the challenges. I was as determined then, as I have been ever since, that the strength of the story and the natural rhythm of the prose would make the strict word control almost unnoticeable — always in place, but unobtrusive. Pat Hattaway liked the efforts we made to support her books, and when she was preparing Ready to Read for a sales launch by Methuen Educational in the United Kingdom a few years later, she decided to include the PM Story Books, creating a joint worldwide scheme.

Since 1963, *Honey for Baby Bear* has had three different artists. One obvious change is the location. The jungle has become a forest; the story was first set in an Indian jungle, with a resident elephant to rescue Baby Bear. In those days the Wolf Cub (scouting) movement, based on the *Jungle Books* by Rudyard Kipling, was strong and because of this, children had no

trouble linking bears with Indian elephants. Boys knew about Baloo, the Indian bear. But Kipling is less well known today, and some teachers think that bears and elephants never meet in the wild. In 1992, partly because of this, we decided to move the Baby Bear stories to North America, which is more strongly associated with bears.

So much for the chance beginnings of Baby Bear. Without the professionalism and encouragement of Pat Hattaway, there would have been no Baby Bear stories. I shall always be grateful for her generosity of spirit. Her attitude opened the door for the little firm of Price Milburn, made it financially successful, and turned me into a writer.

It was even more fortunate for the development of the PM Story Books that Dr. Marie Clay wrote *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour* (1972). For some time Clay had



Marie Clay's influence on Beverley's writing began with a meeting at a reading conference in the early 1970s, "when she asked permission to use a favorite book of ours in a lecture. She also explained that it would be helpful if we exaggerated all our word spacing — and how right she was!" Here, Beverley attends the 2007 Marie Clay memorial service in Auckland.

observed and recorded children's reading behaviors, and her findings endorsed my attempts to supply closely graded books and enough of them. Our philosophies matched, as these quotations show:

Above 95% accuracy represents pleasure reading; 90-95% accuracy represents teaching level (at the completion of the learning task); below this represents frustration level. (p. 131)

It would be consistent with much that it written about reading to argue that the rate at which errors are made causes success or failure, and that merely selecting appropriate material will enable the child to perform above a level of 95% accuracy. (p. 114)

When a graded sequence of reading is available children must not be given a book that calls for too great a step forward... the options are more often how many extra books the child will need at each level rather than how many books he can skip. (p. 92)

Clay observed that a child's search for meaning created the feedback that made self-correction possible. She encouraged teachers to say, "Try that again and think what would sound right" (Clay, 1993, p. 42.) It followed that, as a writer of stories, I had to be certain that every word, phrase, sentence, page and the story as a whole made perfect sense and did 'sound right.'

Hugh and I first met Clay at a reading conference in the early 1970s, when she asked permission to use a

favorite book of ours in a lecture. She also explained that it would be helpful if we exaggerated all our word spacing — and how right she was! We had failed to see that, for beginners, standard (narrow) word spacing was confusing. We followed her advice, resetting every little book — a major task in those days when type was handset in lead. Where children had 'seen' *Wake up* they could now see *Wake up ...* It was a timely wake up call!

Clay's opinions were based on meticulous observation, and I read and reread *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour*. Her approval gave me the courage to stick to our shared conviction: Frustration level texts taught children nothing. To be quite sure that new words came in slowly enough to allow children to achieve 95% accuracy I broadened each platform — by 1976, we had at least eight stories at each level, avoiding steep increases in difficulty. I aimed at a 1:20 ratio of new to known words.

I needed courage because reading strategies were being hotly debated and a new school of theorists believed that Hattaway's natural language, renamed *whole language*, was the most vital ingredient in books for beginners. Enthusiasts explained that if a sentence reappeared on several pages, it could be half memorized. Reciting a familiar text together, partly by heart, would be enjoyable and easy and children's personal language storehouses would be enriched by this relaxed approach, called *shared reading*. Converts believed that graded readers, demanding close focus on print and individual effort, were unnecessary. They told

teachers to make much less use of graded books — at a time when Clay was advising massive practice on leveled texts!

In the early 1980s, the New Zealand Ministry of Education replaced their original Ready to Read books, following the fashion for shared reading. Most books had repeated refrains that were easily memorized. However, teachers who tried the new methods found that to master high-frequency words little by little, children *did* need to focus on print, and *did* need well-graded stories that they could read with 95% accuracy. Battered copies of the PM Story Books, now out of print, were carefully hoarded. At the same time, Clay, who had just founded Reading Recovery, documented the failure of many children as they struggled to learn to read and observed that some children chose to memorize texts, neglecting to look at print. In *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training* she stated, very clearly, that

Memorizing is not the place to begin because it gives the novice reader an incorrect impression of what the task is. (Clay, 1993, p. 39)

Clay, like me, believed that some children needed to read broad platforms of stories at each level. This helped them, amongst other skills, to secure a growing number of high-frequency words. She advised teachers to “...cautiously increase the text difficulty... give massive practice on texts at this next level before you increase the difficulty level again” (p. 15).

Clay’s detailed observations about the ways in which children learned to read, and the experience of class-

room teachers, created a renewed demand for graded stories. Thomas Nelson Australia, who now owned Price Milburn, decided to publish a revised and much extended edition of the PM Story Books in 1992. What is more, Nelson’s production team was determined to do everything they could to be sure each book reached the highest possible standard in both text and design. Without the dedication that Nelson (later renamed Nelson Cengage Learning) brought to the task, there would be no Baby Bear stories in print today.

The Editorial Furnace

When revision of the PM Story Books (some over 25 years old) began in 1992, Nelson invited me to lead a small editorial team of New Zealand teachers who had been using the books for years. The teachers could identify all the places where small children lost the thread of the plot or faltered because a language structure was awkward or unfamiliar.

We updated 60% of the original PM Story Books (including the first seven Baby Bear stories). The plots were vetted first — if tension was weak, a satisfying conclusion was impossible, and we abandoned the story. We changed the paging to fit a new larger format, and Nelson found many brilliant artists to whom we owe a massive debt. When we started to add new titles to the series, my colleagues Annette Smith and Jenny Giles began to write, too. All our stories were forged in the editorial furnace. The three of us knew that we were not writing to gratify ourselves but to produce books that would help children love reading and grow in skill.

To become fluent, children need to master high-frequency words, and the choice of these words should not be left to chance. What words did 7- to 12-year-old children use most often in their own writing? We consulted some useful research: *A New Zealand Basic Word List* (Elley & Croft, 1977) and *Spell-Write* (Croft, 1983). Together Elley and Croft sampled and analyzed thousands of words. They listed the most-frequently used 340, and we made sure that most of them (98%) appeared in the PM Story Books by the end of Level 18, and all by Level 20. Croft explained: “Together, they make up about 75% of most writing, so they are important.” (This holds true for most adult writing, as well as children’s. For example, the first 200 words in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* include 150 from this list.)

Annette Smith was familiar with Clay’s studies of children’s oral language and knew which language structures were hard for them to control. Between 1992 and 2002, Annette, Jenny, and I edited every story meticulously, until all three of us were satisfied we had done as much as we could to help—and not confuse—young learners. Reading every page aloud alerted us to problems that would otherwise have escaped notice, and we considered every criticism and suggestion intently. Three writer editors working together turned out to be the ideal number. We avoided majority decisions, preferring to reach consensus. *All* of us had to be satisfied. We changed sentences around many times as we tried to *make each page sound right*. If it didn’t sound right to us, how could a child be expected to self-correct?

In *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*, Clay wrote:

For it is the meaning which provides the context in which the word is embedded, the basis for anticipation of what comes next, and the signals of possible error that trigger a checking process. (Clay, 1991, p. 337)

Every alteration we made was designed to enhance meaning. This method of working was tough on other writers, some of whom did not understand why we insisted on so many changes. Artists, too, had to revise their roughs if mismatches appeared. But we could not compromise. If we let a story be published without this attention to detail, we knew that some children would flounder.

Arthur Quiller-Couch, a Cambridge professor, described the writing process in *On The Art of Writing* (Lecture XII, *On Style*):

... the business of writing demands two, the author and the reader... in writing, we, as authors, have an obligation to put ourselves into the reader's place. It is his comfort, his convenience, we have to consult... the more difficulties we obtrude on him by obscure or careless writing, the more we blunt the edge of his attention... We should study to anticipate his comfort... Style comes of endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them, rather than for yourself. (1916, pp. 243–248)

Quiller-Couch gave this advice to adults writing for mature adults. It was even more necessary to follow it when writing for the very young!

Every editorial change we made to the PM Story Books was the result 'of endeavouring to understand others' — beginners. We tried to anticipate and remove every possible obscurity.

In books for experienced readers, an author's quirky individual voice matters; and editorial changes may be few. But in books for fledgling readers this is not an option. When writing for very young learners, sensitive adult egos do not matter. One thing matters and one thing only: the elimination of 'obscure or careless writing'. As we listened to reasoned, positive criticism, and acted upon it, meaning emerged more strongly. Our stories became easier for children to understand, and that was our purpose.

My Childhood Reading and the Influence of Other Writers

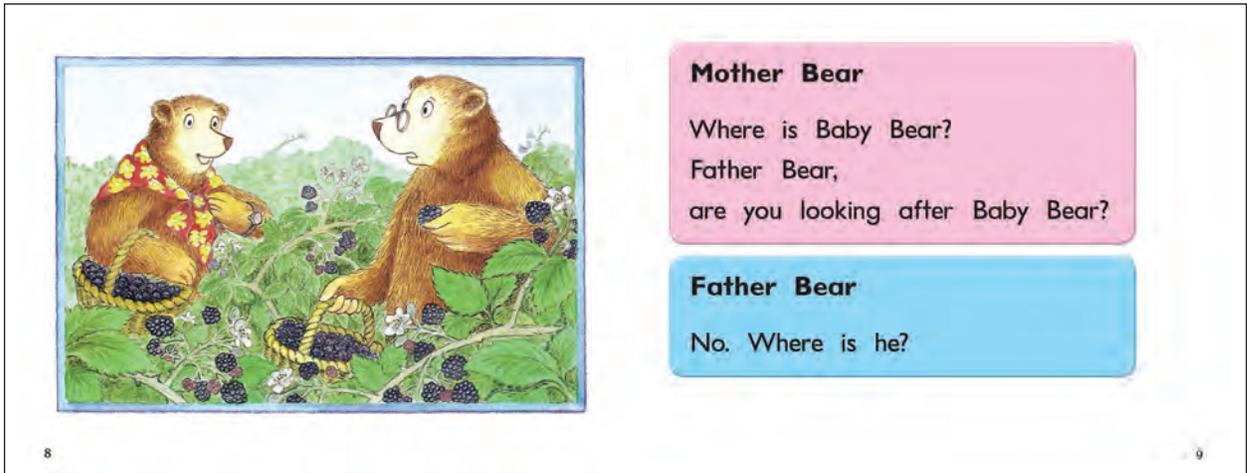
"Once upon a time there were three bears..." These timeless characters were ready made. There is an ongoing European tradition of taking a folk tale and reshaping it in any way that seems appropriate — think of pantomime. Baby Bear was an obvious choice for a hero because thousands of small children identified with him. And he needed no introduction, which made children confident before they began.

When I was a small child, I found the naughty behavior of Goldilocks distressing, but I loved the cozy domestic setting — a dear little house with three of everything; three bowls, three spoons, three chairs, three beds. I kept this part of the folk tale intact in the Baby Bear stories; three mugs, three beds, and three baskets in descending order of size.

Long after the first Baby Bear stories were published I rediscovered another half-forgotten influence. It was a boxed set of three 'shape books,' called *Father Bear*, *Mother Bear*, and *Baby Bear* (Durick, 1932). The three books were expendable paperbacks, designed to be colored in on alternate pages. ("Color the chair red," said the instructions.) I had adored them when I was 5. The author was Agnes York Durick, who explained in an introduction that her books told children "what the three bears did on days other than the memorable one on which Goldilocks visited them."

Durick knew what had inspired *her*, and when I started to write, Durick's books were part of the child inside me. My three bears were not closely modeled on Durick's bears, any more than her bears were close copies of the three bears in the folk tale. Hers were very smartly dressed on Sundays (bow ties! snow-white ankle socks!) and would never have plunged naked into an ice-cold river to catch fish. In spite of Mother Bear's watch, Father Bear's glasses, and Baby Bear's pedal car, my bears have strong links to the world of wild bears. And my Baby Bear has always been his own person, eager to show his parents how much he can do to support himself.

To return to *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*; this tale does not quite fit traditional story structure, in which, stated very simply, something is wrong and is put right. Without this model to follow, I would just be a bore because my stories would end without resolution. Ever since the early Greek storytellers hit upon the idea, story grammar—with tension, turning point, and resolution—has proved deeply satisfying. Homer followed it long ago when he wrote



The Baby Bear stories were based on real characters and incidents in Beverley's life. "Many teachers tell children to use their imaginations, but almost all my stories are sparked by observation rather than invention," she said. In Blackberries (Level 6), she weaves the story of neighbors gathering fruit into a Baby Bear story.

The Odyssey. But in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, things are not put right (although the mischievous intruder does finally run away). Baby Bear's chair remains broken and there is no porridge left for him to eat! When I write a story for beginners to enjoy I have to make the resolution more satisfying than this.

I am not alone in my criticism. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), defined a properly constructed, satisfying fairy tale, and said that Goldilocks failed to meet his criteria, too. Bettelheim thought that fairy tales were worthwhile when they encouraged children to try to solve, one at a time, the problems of growing up.

I did not read Bettelheim's definition of a good story until well after my Baby Bear stories were written. So why did I write so many stories that show this small determined character trying to solve, one at a time, the problems of growing up? There he is, in book after book, learning vital skills — asserting himself, finding

honey, picking blackberries, hunting for eggs, and above all, showing that he is getting better and better at catching fish. Where did my sense of story come from?

A glance around our home, where my daughter Susan's collection of 22,000 children's books is housed (the Susan Price Collection has now been gifted to the National Library of New Zealand) shows that our family members delight in stories for children and have done so for three generations. Baby Bear came from a home where stories are valued, and that is part of the answer.

By the time I was 5 years old, I understood that meaning mattered. I can vividly remember my first attempt at writing a proper story and my frustration when my teacher almost destroyed the essential ending. Miss Gallagher told us to write a sentence beginning with *When*. I wrote, *When I was two we went to the beach*. "Now write a sentence beginning with *After*," she said, and I managed that — *After I got out of the car I ran into the sea*. But her

third 'sentence beginning' stumped me. I couldn't fit *Suddenly* into the story I was trying to tell and had to ask for help. "It doesn't have to follow on from the other sentences," she explained kindly. "Just any sentence will do." I looked at her with shock and disbelief. What had writing to do with unrelated sentences? I didn't want to write nonsense! I was trying to tell a story with an ending. It is extraordinary, but this conversation, still etched in my mind, indicated my future career. Miss Gallagher did help me, and my (true) story ended something like this: *Suddenly my mother saw me and she ran into the sea to save me, with all her clothes on*.

Stories were part of my life, and not only at bedtime. Compared with today's riches there were fewer titles available in the 1930s, but those few were read to me again and again until they were absorbed. My favorite author shaped my thinking. Her name was Joyce Lankester Brisley, and the books were the *Milly-Molly-Mandy Stories* (1928) and sequels. Their in-built quality has kept them

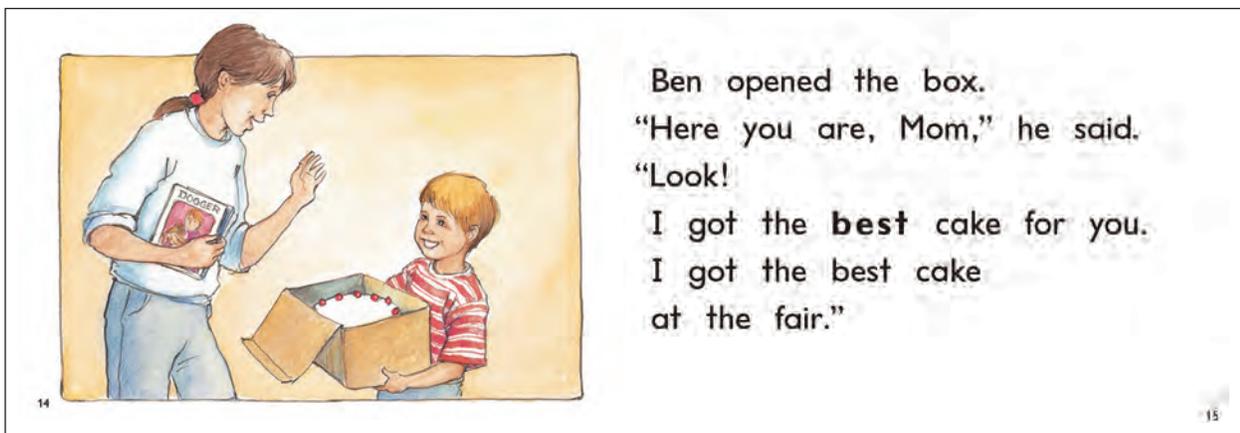
in print ever since. And although they were written about English village children, the tales were first published in the USA (*Christian Science Monitor*). What has given them such an unusually wide and enduring appeal? Analyzing them now, I realize that they, too, matched Bettelheim's definition. In every story, Milly-Molly-Mandy tries to solve one of the problems of growing up.

Milly-Molly-Mandy tried to do the things I wanted to do, and sometimes *could* do. In the first story she enjoyed going shopping all by herself, but almost forgot one item... she helped clean an attic storeroom... she made a miniature garden in a bowl... she went away for a weekend and tried to bring back a present for everyone in her family... she struggled to ride a bicycle... Each one of these realistic adventures involved an unexpected difficulty before everything was happily resolved. Brisley's well-constructed stories showed that effort was part of daily living, and problems could be overcome. Traditional story structure is an enduring form because it reflects life itself.

At 4 years old I thought that it was exciting to do all these lovely things, and there is a clear connection between these plots and the type of plot found in many of the PM Story Books. Bettelheim was right — solving the problems of life, one way or another, is an important theme. Bettelheim was thinking of (say) Jack's struggles to chop down the beanstalk and kill the giant, but Milly-Molly-Mandy's struggle to ride a bike is equally satisfying for many children—perhaps more satisfying because that is a genuine problem — one they are likely to face for themselves!

Consider my Ben stories for a moment. None echo the subjects of Brisley's plots, but they all have satisfying resolutions and reflect the same deep interest in the small problems that shape a child's life, such as shedding a tooth at school and taking it safely home (*Ben's Tooth*). Brisley understood the importance of making choices and would have sympathized with Ben as he considered the cakes on the school cake stall (*The Best Cake*).

Brisley was utterly consistent. Each story contained references to people or events from earlier stories, all in a most-convincing way. Brisley's stories were linked tightly together, and the Ben stories are linked, too. In *Dad's Ship*, Ben and Mum wave Dad goodbye as his ship goes out to sea. A photo of his absent Dad can be seen in *A Birthday Cake for Ben*. In *Ben's Dad*, the sailor comes home at last and an excited Ben paints him in his uniform. The painting can be seen pinned on the wall in *Candle-light*. The importance of books is another recurring theme in the Ben stories: Ben's Mum, closely modeled on me, is shown with a pile of books on her desk in *Ben's Tooth*, and she is even shown buying a picture book in *The Best Cake*. Then, in *Candle-light*, she reads it to Ben. Consistency helps make characters and plots credible. The frying pan full of fish, which is central to the first Baby Bear story, *Father Bear Goes Fishing*, is still there in the last, *Baby Bear's Real Name*. We tried to make satisfying consistency a PM trademark.



*Beverley's thinking was shaped by her favorite childhood author, whose well-constructed stories showed that effort was part of daily living and problems could be overcome. Her Ben stories reflect that same deep interest in the small problems that shape a child's life; like the importance of making choices in *The Best Cake* (Level 10).*

Another literary influence was A. A. Milne, whose *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories were read to me when I was very young. The importance of being brave and clever was deeply planted in my mind by the time I was 4 years old. I loved hearing chapter IX, in which Piglet is entirely surrounded by water, again and again. It told the story of Pooh's improvised boat:

The more he [Christopher Robin] looked at it [the empty honey jar] the more he thought what a Brave and Clever bear Pooh was ...

Tom is *Brave, Clever* Fox — I used those two strong adjectives, unconsciously echoing *Winnie-the-Pooh*, in several of the early PM Story Books.

Milne helped develop my sense of humor and doubtless inspired my occasional use of rhyme. Baby Bear would never have dug his spoon into the honey, saying, "Honey for me, honey for me, honey for breakfast and honey for tea," if I had not loved *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

There is no writer in the world whose work has not been partly shaped by other writers, but it is hard for outsiders to identify buried influences. I have been able to reveal a few of them, having inside knowledge of my mind-forming preschool years!

My Own Experiences and Observations

I absorbed trickles of influence from other writers, but originality is an essential ingredient in any good story. It is intimately related to a writer's own experiences; without this to draw upon, few stories are fresh and new. Experience is the fuel that drives the writing engine. We all (especially school teachers!) observe little dra-

mas (as I did in *Ben's Tooth* and *Ben's Dad*), and these are often a source of inspiration. Here are a few examples:

Baby Lamb's First Drink, *The Baby Owls*, *Cows in the Garden*, *The Little Red Bus*, and *The Waving Sheep* all sprang from my experiences in an isolated country school. Hugh worked late at night on his publishing problems and often slept in; this led to *Wake up, Dad*. Another story that was closely based on fact was *Pepper's Adventure*: one day our pet mouse escaped but found his way back to his old cage. Other true incidents inspired *Sally's Red Pail*, *Ben's Teddy Bear*, *Sam's Picnic*, and *Birthday Balloons*. My mother witnessed the events that triggered *Locked Out* and *The Best Cake*, and her amusing dramatizations when we played board games gave me the idea for *The Race to Green End* (set in England, where she was born).

Memorable incidents that spark stories are charged with emotion — usually amazement, joy, amusement, or fear. One day, near a tidal creek, I noticed a male New Zealand shelduck running along ahead of me, trailing a damaged wing. I realized that the bird was trying to divert attention from his nest or his ducklings. I had read about this instinctive behavior, but it was sheer delight to see it! I never forgot the incident, and 40 years later, after some extra research, I wrote *The Duck with a Broken Wing*.

Father Bear Goes Fishing is founded on the fact that wild bears catch fish in rivers. I have never visited bear country, so the story's setting did not spring from personal experience. However, my three bears are really human beings in disguise. Human behavior gives *Father Bear Goes Fish-*

ing its emotional punch; Mother Bear becomes anxious when Father Bear has not come back from the river. Glancing at her watch, she sets out to find him. My mother was always worried, just like this, when my father was late home, and this familiar, universal situation helps readers identify with the Bear family.

Baby Bear himself was inspired by an engaging and determined toddler. Ruthie's impassioned, often repeated cry was "Let Roofie do it!" and her other frequent remark expanded on her desire for independence: "I'm a big girl now, I'm two." When Baby Bear insisted on going fishing with Father Bear he was modeled on Ruthie. Baby Bear wants to be accepted as a capable member of the family in all the Bear books (except the first, where he is a genuine baby, wearing a bib). In story after story, Baby Bear manages to show his kindly parents that he is growing up and can do things for himself. He gets a special thrill when he manages to outshine them, and I engineered several plots to make this happen, starting with *Baby Bear Goes Fishing*.

As the series developed it became very clear that Baby Bear was an independent character who wanted his parents to accept him as an equal. He was not the sort who would want to be called Baby forever! The final story, *Baby Bear's Real Name*, grew from the earlier books, and it almost wrote itself.

Real incidents sparked other Baby Bear stories. One young father we knew bought an elaborate model train set for his 2-year-old, who was not allowed to touch it! In *Baby Bear's Present* I gave this drama the happy ending it ought to have had — a sturdy pedal car, a much more suit-

able toy, was bought instead. However, Father Bear looked so forlorn in the illustrations that I knew he had to have that train after all. In *Father Bear's Surprise* (four levels later) he buys it secretly, and Baby Bear, now old enough to be careful, enjoys helping him play with his wind-up train. I said earlier that associated emotions help us recall incidents. As a child I adored model railways, but in the sexist 1930s that wonderful train set with stations and signals and tunnels never came my way. Some of that longing helped seed these two stories. *Father Bear's Surprise* is a story that was partly written for the child within.

I wrote *House Hunting* soon after we moved to Australia. When at last we found the right house, we bought the beds and the tables and the chairs as well, just as the Bears did. Years later Isabel Lowe, the new artist, said that when she drew Father Bear looking

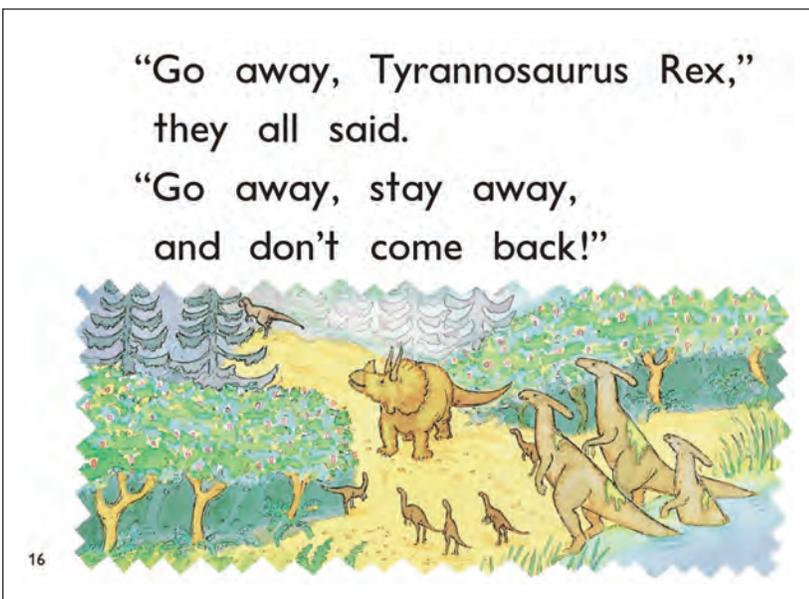
up at the ceiling, she was thinking of the way her husband, an engineer, had checked for tell-tale cracks in *their* new home.

A perfectly formed ring of mushrooms once sprang up on our back lawn. In *Mushrooms for Dinner* I used this real event to add interest to the story. Books about fungi explain why mushrooms grow in circles, but it was the real thing, not the scientific description, that prompted me. And when Father Bear rolled with delight in the dandelions, the artist knew exactly how he felt — her own young family loved playing in a patch of dandelions in a nearby park. Those yellow flowers in *Eggs and Dandelions* were real.

Blackberries, too, was based on a real incident. When our neighbors went to gather fruit, everyone filled containers, but Shelley's plastic box was merely stained, as was her mouth. It

was easy to weave this into a Baby Bear story. Many teachers tell children to use their imaginations, but almost all my stories are sparked by observation rather than invention. Writing stories is not so very different from telling anecdotes, "You'll never guess what happened to me yesterday..." When we have been delighted, amused or distressed, we find we have a story to tell.

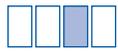
I became an interested observer of the life around me when I was a university student. It was refreshing, a break from studying history, to slip outside and focus on small wild creatures for a few minutes. Out of this came, years later, *Hedgehog is Hungry*, *Lizard Loses his Tail*, *Seagull is Clever*, *Mrs. Spider's Beautiful Web*, and *Ten Little Garden Snails*. All these stories were researched before publication (snails are hermaphrodites!) but each book began with firsthand observation.



Brave Triceratops (Level 12) was Beverley's first dinosaur story. As new discoveries were publicized in the 1990s, she and Hugh wove the information into other stories about how the prehistoric creatures might have reacted to each other, the world, and its dangers.

Deliberate Research

Brave Triceratops was my first dinosaur story. Hugh and I thought that schools would welcome more, as so many children are enthralled by prehistoric animals. It was fortunate that a great number of new discoveries were being publicized in the 1990s. I bought dozens of well-illustrated books and videos because each one contained something relevant. We looked out for dinosaur species that lived in the same continent in the same era, and then invented stories about how they might have reacted to each other, the world, and its dangers. Gorgo the young *Albertosaurus* lived in western Canada in the Late Cretaceous, and so did *Ankylosaurus*. *Gorgo Meets her Match* became an exciting story as Gorgo learned (the hard way) about swinging tail clubs.



Detailed observations of today's animals and their struggles have given Beverly new stories to write about and stir the emotions of readers. Nelson the Baby Elephant (Level 17) reflects the work of an American researcher living in Tanzania.

When Hugh worked out the plot for *A Lucky Day for Little Dinosaur* he sketched Little Dinosaur's shelter in the rock before he began. With the Jurassic giant, *Megalosaurus*, thundering after him, tiny *Compsognathus* had to have a handy bolt hole waiting! Research gave us accurate information about Little Dinosaur's diet—a European discovery shows the bones of a lizard inside the skeleton of a *Compsognathus*—and we used this fact in *Little Dinosaur Escapes*. A hundred million years after *Compsognathus* and his last meal were fossilized together, we watched the beautiful bold kingfishers swooping down to attack basking lizards in our New Zealand garden. Perhaps (as birds are descended from the dinosaurs) a small part of the inspiration for our dinosaur stories came from firsthand observation after all!

In 1991–92, a team of geologists led by Luis Alvarez discovered the impact crater of a giant asteroid which struck

near the coast of Mexico 65 million years ago. Debris from the colossal explosion and ensuing firestorms darkened and chilled the world, killing millions of plants and starving the dinosaurs and all other huge prehistoric creatures into extinction. Before 1992, the asteroid theory was just one of many, but this new geological evidence turned surmise to certainty. This allowed us to write *The Asteroid*, confident that the plot was based on sound research and not merely on imaginative guesswork.

Learning about dinosaurs was stimulating, but I have been equally fascinated by today's animals and their struggles. Detailed observations made by biologists have aroused my emotions and given me so much to write about.

One devoted American researcher, Cynthia Moss, lived beside herds of elephants in Tanzania, making daily observations for so long (nearly 40 years) that she was able to recognize

every individual. The BBC documentary film, "Echo of the Elephants," with her commentary, is a masterpiece. And heart rending. When already a matriarch, Echo gave birth to a large bull calf, Ely, whose legs would not straighten enough to let him stand and suckle. The elephant herd stayed near him and his mother for 3 days before he was able to struggle up from his knees and walk... and he survived into adulthood. I was so enthralled by this film that I wrote *Nelson the Baby Elephant*. I gave Nelson normal legs, as the efforts made by any newborn elephant calf trying to stand, suckle, walk, and finally keep up with the herd, are amazing.

Jane Goodall, another passionate scientist, observed chimpanzees using tools, and this led to *Little Chimp and the Termites*. David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries were equally riveting. In the 1990s, thanks to research by knowledgeable enthusiasts, I was able to find out what I needed to know about many different animals. When a Reading Recovery tutor told me that she and a pupil were both in tears when they reached the crisis in *Mother Tiger and Her Cubs*, I knew I must be doing something right. Stories are *meant* to stir the emotions.

Bears, beavers, buffaloes, chimpanzees, crocodiles, deer, elephants, foxes, gibbons, harvest mice, hedgehogs, hermit crabs, hippos, kangaroos, kingfishers, lions, lizards, magpies, meerkats, owls, pandas, pelicans, penguins, polar bears, rabbits, racoons, seagulls, sea otters, shelducks, snails, spiders, squirrels, swans, tigers and wolves — all these creatures intrigued me. Often the information in a book or the extraor-

dinary photography on a DVD was inspirational: the fawn in the forest who stays utterly still to avoid betraying his hiding place; the beavers who fell trees, build dams, and create lakes; the gibbons who perform wonderful acrobatics and should never be caged; the male Emperor penguins who spend winter in appalling conditions, starving, keeping their eggs on their feet to stop them from freezing; the sea otters who lie on their backs in the waves using rocks to open clam shells; the pelicans who work as a team herding fish to make them easier to catch; the crocodile who protects her hatchlings between her jaws... the natural world is full of extraordinary efforts, and I wanted children to share my *respect* for wildlife.

Although the Baby Bear stories are largely fantasy, they too have been helped along by research. I had to find out if blackberries grow in North America for brown bears to feast upon... and yes, they do. It was satisfying to be told by a teacher that *Blackberries* was her favorite bear story, as it evoked childhood memories of the wild bears in the blackberry patches near her home. She thought that I, like her, had been Wisconsin born.

Baby Bear and his parents have very human ways, but to avoid over-cuteness the artist Isabel Lowe and I did not forget real bear behavior. Wild bears don't wear scarves, but they do plunge into rivers to catch salmon. Some photographs in an old *National Geographic* showed us exactly how a bold young bear leapt into the river to grab a fish, and Isabel drew Baby Bear trying the same technique in *Baby Bear's Real Name*.

Feedback from the Artists, the Children, and Their Teachers

Much of Baby Bear's charm comes from Isabel Lowe's immense skills; few artists are so good at giving characters meaningful expressions. We agreed not to dress our bears, but they needed some accessories to distinguish them. Isabel decided that glasses for Father Bear, and a scarf and a watch for anxious Mother Bear, would do the trick. I found that I could make more use of these humorous touches and Isabel's deft characterization; Father Bear's dejection in *Baby Bear's Present* led to *Father Bear's Surprise*; Mother Bear's watch, which first appeared in *Father Bear Goes Fishing*, sparked *The Bears and the Magpie*. Because Mother Bear wore her scarves every day I thought they would need washing, and this led to the windy day adventure called *Mother Bear's Scarf*.

Nor would there have been as many stories if teachers and children had not been enthusiastic, and sometimes wrote to let me know. Writing is essentially a lonely job and it is easy to succumb to self-doubt, not being sure whether a piece of work has hit the mark. So it has been heartening, a boost to the spirit, to receive letters from young readers and their teachers every now and again.

One child absorbed so much of the spirit of the Baby Bear stories that she was able to write one herself:

The Bears Go to the Park

The bears are going to the park. "Can I go on the swing?" said Baby Bear. Father Bear wanted to go on the slide. Mother Bear found some fish in the big, big lake. Mother Bear caught some

fish. When Mother Bear was not looking, Father Bear went down the slide! Baby Bear was swinging very high. Suddenly he fell out, splash, into the lake. Mother Bear caught him.

In just nine short sentences the young writer has pinned down each character. Father Bear is fun loving and carefree. (I love the way this is made clear: 'when Mother Bear was not looking, Father Bear...') Mother Bear is the family fish-winner, but being responsible, manages to keep one eye on Baby Bear at the same time... and Baby Bear, as usual, is brave and independent. You can feel the sure handling of the underlying story structure, with its tension and resolution: Baby Bear runs into danger, but Mother Bear saves him. It was great to see how much understanding this capable child had about writing stories, at such a young age.

Another small child wrote this moving letter about my very simple fantasy, *A Friend for Little White Rabbit*:

I like the book very much because it has a happy ending. When I first started school I also felt like little white rabbit. Looking for a friend was very hard and I nearly gave up because my insides were hurting so much I could of [sic] jumped off a cliff. Then someone came close to me. She was lonely too. We made friends just like white and brown rabbit.

The one criterion that really matters, when any story is assessed, is a ring of truth. To work, fantasy must have an *underlying* truth. It was satisfying to know that, for this child, *A Friend for Little White Rabbit* did have the right ring.

And I loved the final comment in a letter I received from a pair of 12-year-olds:

Our favorite books would be the Bear stories... We remember reading these books when we, too, were young.

It is this sort of feedback that has given me the will to keep going. I wrote the first books when I, too, was young. Looking back over a lifetime of writing, I know I was very lucky to have been in the right place at the right time, with encouraging people around me.

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About the Author



A New Zealander, Beverley Randell was born in 1931. After graduating from college, marrying a publisher, and having a child, she became a full-time writer and editor, producing books with international appeal. As a teacher she had observed that reading was learned by reading, but she was frustrated by the shortage of well-plotted, easy books. Her carefully leveled PM Story Books first appeared in 1963, with many new titles added in the 1970s. Marie Clay was encouraging and wrote, "The gradient of difficulty problem is helped by having many texts available at any one level" (1991, p. 197). In the 1990s, Beverley headed a team of talented writers. Today, although no longer an editor, she continues to write, and her *Rhymes about Baby Bear* have recently been published (PM Oral Literacy, Melbourne: Nelson Cengage Learning, 2013).



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<http://readingrecovery.org/reading-recovery/resources-for-parents>