

Picture Book Author

BARRY WITTENSTEIN

Brings Nonfiction and Historical Fiction to Life

interview by PJ McIlvaine

A child of the sixties, Barry Wittenstein (www.onedogwoof.com) followed his muse wherever it led him. He knew he was a creative soul, but in what form and shape, took him decades to hone. But now he's an honest-to-God, certified published and praised "picture book writer", and yes, all without a literary agent. His debut picture book *Waiting for Pumpsie* (Charlesbridge 2017), an inspirational story of a young African-American Boston Red Sox fan when the team integrated in 1959, was a 2017 Junior Library Guild Selection. His second published picture book, *The Boo Boos That Changed The World* (Charlesbridge, 2018), takes a fun and engaging look at the inventors of the ubiquitous Band Aid. On deck is *A Place To Land*, a nonfiction picture book about Martin Luther King and his legendary "I Have A Dream" speech (Neil Porter/Holiday House, October 2019), historical fiction book *Oscar's American Dream* (Schwartz & Wade, 2020), and *Sonny's Bridge*, a nonfiction picture book about jazz great Sonny Rollins (Charlesbridge, 2019). A die-hard New Yorker, Wittenstein makes his home in the Bronx and roots for the New York Mets.



PJ McIlvaine: Your background, to say the least, is quite eclectic: songwriter, bartender, taxi driver, writer, poet, and substitute teacher. How did those disciplines help you to become an acclaimed nonfiction picture book author?

Barry Wittenstein: Well, I like to think of myself as somewhat eclectic. Or somewhat very eclectic. Or sometimes, extremely somewhat definitely eclectic. But being "acclaimed"? Fughetaboutit.

My experience in writing poetry and music & lyrics helps. Oh, and of course, substituting in NYC elemen-

tary schools. I learned a lot about both kids and myself. Reminded me how much I like little human beings, and how we share a common sense of humor.

PM: Growing up in the sixties, how has that influenced your writing?

BW: The non-traditional thinking that permeated the era really resonated with me. It was a decade of taking chances, of pushing the edge of the envelope. It spoke to me. So, when it was time to go to college and get a job, I went for a liberal arts background. I knew I was a creative person but didn't know where I would end up. I think a liberal arts background is something that's underrated. It taught me how to be an outside-the-box thinker. The downside was that I've had the typical, struggling artist type jobs that didn't pay well. Next time around, I'll have some sort of backup gig that will allow me to have a few dollars in the bank. Honestly, I was afraid that if I got too comfortable in a straight job, I would never be able to get out of it.

PM: With your first book, *Waiting for Pumpsie*, how long did it take from the initial first draft to option/sale to publication?

BW: About three years. I wrote it, hired a couple of freelance editors who guided me, sent it around to editors, and nothing. I could not believe nobody wanted it. Charlesbridge even rejected it at first. It kinda made me laugh, since the story takes place in Boston and Charlesbridge is in Watertown. I sent back a note expressing my surprise. I kept pitching it to editors and agents. One agent wanted to sign it along with another manuscript.

Barry Wittenstein continued

I was this close to signing with that agent when Karen Boss, an editor at Charlesbridge, contacted me saying she was interested. It's been a great partnership.

PM: You will, at this writing, have two nonfiction books published by Charlesbridge and others are under contract. How did the initial contact come about? Do you propose ideas to your editor there or completed works? What is the editorial process like? Do you get input about the illustrations?

BW: My only two published books (you want to rethink the “acclaimed” compliment?) are with Charlesbridge. I have another under contract with them, as well as one with Neal Porter at Holiday House, and Anne Schwartz at Schwartz & Wade. All are nonfiction.

Now that I have a bit of a track record, I usually send a query listing my credentials, asking if I may submit to them. Most of the time it's “yes.” Though I met Neal Porter at an SCBWI Conference in LA in 2016.

I do not pitch ideas. I pitch complete manuscripts. And in terms of illustrator input, Charlesbridge has been great in asking my opinions and listening to my feedback.

PM: Do you have an agent?

BW: I do not. Not that I won't in the future. At this point, I'm getting stories published...and no agent is banging down my door to represent me.

PM: You seem to have a particular affinity for books with sports themes and/or subjects. Did you love sports as a kid? Were you an athlete?

BW: I did love sports as a kid. Athlete? Does Little League count? But Pumpsie is my only book that uses sports as a backdrop.

PM: Do you have a writing routine? Do you belong to a critique group? Are you a panster or a plotter?

BW: No routine. No critique group. I definitely don't plot. I just go for it. I get an idea, do some research, try to come up with an angle, and dive in. Then, when I have a version on paper, I rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. It is interesting that some stories take a long time to come to fruition; others just pop out, pretty complete. Right now, I'm pitching a sports story that I began five years ago. I could never nail the form. Recently I've adopted a free verse

style, and this story works very well with that treatment.

PM: Where do you get your ideas? What makes you choose one idea over another? When do you know when a manuscript is done?

BW: Like any writer, ideas come from anywhere and everywhere. TV, Twitter, overheard conversations, memories, and more. Little lightbulbs going off above my head all day long. I never know when a manuscript is done. When it's published, I guess. I can go to sleep at night thinking a piece is finished, then wake up and want to make a zillion edits. At some point, you just have to send it out. I've heard stories of manuscripts arriving in agents or editor's office 99 percent complete. I usually end up closer to 75 percent.

PM: What or who inspires you in your writing? Favorite author or book?

BW: I love finding nonfiction stories of people who are not well known, especially to elementary school kids. The challenge is to be able to make those stories accessible to children. The challenge inspires me, too. Favorite authors are too many to list. Everything from poets Bill Knott and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, to David Sadaris, Jon Scieszka, and on and on.

PM: What are you currently working on? Do you work on one thing at a time or do you juggle multiple projects? Do you see yourself expanding into other genres?

BW: I like to work on a few things at a time. Usually in different stages of completion. I can't reveal the subjects I'm working on! I kind of pride myself on finding unique stories. I love to write in my queries that the subject of what I'm submitting has never been addressed in picture book format.

PM: If you were stuck on a deserted island, what three books would you bring with you?

BW: That's actually one of my biggest fears. So, I've done a bit of research, and purchased a few books that I always carry with me.

1. *What to Do If You're Stuck on a Deserted Island*
2. *Who Moved My Compass? Volume 1*
3. *Loser's Guide to Getting Stuck on a Deserted Island*

Because you never know.

