

Q&A with Bill Harley about Lost and Found

Where'd you get the idea for the book?

I visit schools a lot, and I'm often in a place (like the gym or cafeteria) where I see the lost and found box. It's always a little scary what's in there. When my younger son Dylan was in school, one day he came home with a hat that wasn't his. He said he got it in the lost and found box, and that led to a long discussion about what was in there. And then, the other thing the book is about is the adults that are in a school, and how they appear to children. I wanted to tell a story about someone who is really different from how they appear.

Did you have a custodian like him?

To be completely honest, I don't remember my elementary school custodian. But because I'm in so many schools performing, I almost always end up dealing with the custodian. I run into many who have been doing it a long, long time, just like Mr. Rumkowski.

Did you lose your hat?

Of course I did. And my gloves, and my gym shoes, and my jacket, too. My grandmother didn't knit me a hat, but my mom did, and I lost them, somewhere. Oddly enough, I don't think many kids actually go to the lost and found box. I don't think I did. In a way, it's what makes Justin different from other kids.

Where'd you get the idea for all the stuff in the box?

Many of the things in the box are not from my imagination, but from Adam Gustavson who did the illustrations. I did send suggestions for the kind of things that might be found in the box – I was interested in the idea that the box had been around for centuries (which is, of course, ridiculous) so I wanted Greek statues and dinosaur bones. To me, the weirdest thing in the box is an artificial hip (a long metal spiky thing) which Adam put in there. I had to ask him what it was. He said his dad designed them for work, so they were always lying around his house.

How do you work with the illustrator?

A good picture book is really the joining of two minds – the author and illustrator and I think Lost and Found is a good example of that. As with most illustrators of my picture books, I didn't communicate directly with Adam – the editor, Vicky Hollifield did. But she asked me for ideas, and then sent me pictures for comment. I feel very lucky that I get as much input as I do – sometimes the writer is completely in the dark about the illustrations until the book comes out. It can be a big surprise, and not always a happy one. We went back and forth a lot about specific pictures, and mostly, they listened if I had a strong opinion.

Adam's imagination is great. I love the things that Justin finds (I had no idea!) and while I had a rough idea of what I wanted to happen at the very end of the book, when Mr. Rumkowski is shown wearing Justin's hat, I wasn't sure exactly how he was going to get it. I like how the last page is a cartoon strip, and all along through the book, you see comic books in Mr. Rumkowski's office. It's those little details that make it fun to look at (and hopefully read) over and over again.

One other illustration that's great is a little secret. On the cover, you will see a painting lying outside the lost and found box. The painting shown is a famous painting by the Dutch artist Vermeer that was stolen from the Gardiner museum in Boston many years ago. No one knows where it is. It was Adam's idea to put it in the lost and found box.

What's the weird animal on pages 21-22? When Justin is sitting in the box with that thing in his hands?

There has been a lot of speculation about that! We even had a contest to name it, and got some amazing answers. Adam tells me it's a flying badger. You could write a whole book on how that thing came to be in the box. I guess the book would be called "Show and Tell".

How did you figure out what happened? Was it hard to come up with the plot?

I spend a lot of time thinking about how stories fit together, and really want something that happened or is mentioned at the beginning to come back at the end in a surprising way. I wrestled for a while with the series of events, but it all opened up for me when I realized he was going to find his mom's hat. There are all these wonderful parallels when you make a connection like that. Life isn't always so tidy, but as a writer and storyteller, I love those delightful turns. I'm always looking for reversals, in which the opposite of what you expect to occur happens. So finding out that his mom was afraid of Mr. Rumkowski, too, was really a surprise – even for me.

A lot of time when I'm trying to figure out the plotting of a story, I will take long walks and try to think it through – what if this happened? What about trying it this way? Or that way? I come at the story from a lot of different angles. When I see how the plotting will work, the writing is a lot easier.