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>> This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Each year, thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival, sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its 8th year, this free event, held on the National Mall Saturday, September 27th, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators, and poets. Even if you can't attend in person, you can still participate online. These pod casts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor and privilege to talk with the famed children's author and illustrator Jan Brett. In addition to illustrating classic stories such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and "Town Mouse, Country Mouse," Ms. Brett has a long list of her own original books she's both written and illustrated. Among them are "Berlioz the Bear, Hedgie's Surprise and The Umbrella." Her illustrations, well known and much loved for their colorful depictions of animals, add a unique dimension to her storytelling. Ms. Brett's talents can also be seen in this year's signature National Book Festival poster in which individual animals represent unique regions of our country. Ms. Brett, welcome. It's a pleasure to talk with you.

>> Well thank you very much.

>> Let me ask you first of all about that poster design. All of us here at the Library of Congress were excited to receive that. It's stunning and it's beautiful. Can you tell us about it and how you were inspired to create it?

>> Well I have spent quite a lot of time in Washington since our children have lived there at different times and so it was great to try to draw, which I'm never good at buildings, but to draw the Capital and see the Library of Congress is in the background but the part that was really fun with choosing the animals that are each state, has its own animal or if it doesn't have an animal, it has a bird and flower but I chose the animal or bird and they're carrying books in different ways as if they're in a big train, carrying the books to the Capital. So they are coming away from the Capital, down the mall and it's a place I've been before and have lots of happy memories for me. The best part, of course, was choosing the animals although a lot of states have white-tail deer. So I had to put a lot of deer in there.

>> There's a lot of cardinals too.

>> A lot of states have cardinals and a lot of states have whales and, you know, I thought, well, you know, how could I put a whale in there and I thought well, it's not going to happen, just no place you could put-- I think there's like five states that have whales.

>> Have whales as a--

>> Yeah!

>> State animal.

>> Yep.

>> Interesting. They must be coastal, I assume.

>> I hope they are. I mean one is Louisiana. I think they have a whale and they do have a coastline but I never realized that they came in, you know, very close to the coastline, but I guess they do.

>> Well I'd remind folks that they can see that poster and download it at the book festival website at loc.gov/bookfest. We are very much looking forward to your appearance at the National Book Festival. Why do you feel it's important to participate?

>> Well, I think not everybody is lucky enough to be given books as a child. And a lot of that job is teachers and librarians because they're teaching kids how to read and I know that they will be part of this event too and I love to be able to connect with them as well as connect with children, who are our future, and they may be the ones who will be inspired to be illustrators or writers themselves and often that's what happens is a child will say to their parents they want to go the event like this or a book signing. And they're curious and at the root of that curiosity is their own creativity that they may want to have kind of like how does this work and they want to meet an illustrator, so if I have that chance to connect with a child that will someday write their own story, that's probably the best possible thing that could ever happen.

>> And what do you tell them? How do you help inspire or prod on, I guess, someone else's creative talents, perhaps a young person's?

>> Two ways, in general I say make a time that you don't have another activity. I mean sometimes it's hard for kids when they've got soccer and they've got music lessons to just have some time to create because sometimes a good idea doesn't come right away. You've just got to kind of relax and turn off all the other noise, no sisters and brothers, no TV, radio, and listen to your own voice because you might find that it's telling you something very strongly about what kind of things that should go down on the paper or you should write about. And that's what happens to me, that a lot of times I'll sit down and especially at night and work away and then go to bed, dig off and then wake up in the morning and go, oh my gosh, look what appeared last night! It's almost as if they, you know, surfaced on their own, these characters and settings and everything, and it's kind of magical when it happens, kind of, but I think it's something that happens to all human beings and you just got to give it space for that creativity to percolate. And then the other thing is I will give them some helpful hints, like one of my favorites is if you're drawing something and it looks funny, you're not happy but you can't figure out what's wrong, you can put it in a mirror and then it's backwards and sometimes you can see right away, oh my gosh, one leg is shorter than the other or oh my gosh, the nose is not in the middle of the face, it's off to the one side. And I even use that technique as an adult.

>> Let's talk about you and your own career a little bit. How did you decide to become a children's author and illustrator? Does someone just wake up one day and say, I can do this and I can do it well?

>> Well, when I was little I was very shy and when I drew, I felt like I could, you know, tell what I really wanted to say in the drawing because it wasn't so much not only was I shy but when I said something, it came out wrong. So I had the time, I guess it's because I'm a slow thinker, so when I drew, I, you know, really felt like I could express myself and then my teachers would always say, you should be a children's book illustrator or else I said I was, I was just so long ago, it was like kindergarten and I wanted to be an illustrator and I knew that was what I was going to do. And the bad thing was I didn't think I needed to study as hard as I should've because I thought, oh, be a children's book illustrator, only to find out when I really had that as a profession that everything that you express, it has to come from this well inside yourself, this frame of reference and that's why it's so important to become educated in order to, you know, have this vast knowledge that you can work from and take away some of those ideas that you find from other cultures and different, other people's writings and the way it's organized so that you're not, you know, redoing that someone else has done or if you are redoing it, at least you're aware of it, so I always wanted to be an illustrator.

>> From my own childhood, I think, you know, the most vivid memories I have of picture books are obviously Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak and some of those classics. Were there any author and illustrators that inspired you as you were growing up and developing into your career?

>> Yeah. I would say Beatrix Potter very much so because for two reasons. When she-- I love animals and her animals had that, they wore clothes and they talked but they definitely had that, they looked like animals. The drawing was very accurate. I appreciated that. And the other thing that she did, which I love and I try to do myself, is that she would put words in her books that weren't like three-letter, four-letter words, they were difficult words but somehow in the context, you could sound them out and you could understand their meaning and you left the book feeling like you knew a new word. Like I can remember, let's see, it would be Peter Rabbit. The sparrows implored Peter to exert himself, so I had not-- I remember thinking, well I don't know what implored means. I don't know what exert means but I could kind of figure it out and I loved collecting these words. So that was why I just adored her.

>> Let's talk a little bit about your new book, "Gingerbread Friends," which is due out in September. Tell us a little bit about that book.

>> Well when I was little, it's kind of a long story. They-- I used to read the traditional tale and the gingerbread baby gets eaten and I always felt bad about him because he was teasy and bratty and that was exactly the way I was. I was the oldest and I would tease my sisters but I felt that the fox eating the gingerbread was a little harsh and he should get a second chance. So when I wrote my first book, "Gingerbread Baby," he gets saved in a very creative way by this little boy Matti, who

makes a gingerbread house for him, and then he gets in the house and he gets whisked away and saved. Well, he ends up in Matti's house, in this little gingerbread house, which is great. He has everything he wants except for friends and I left him there thinking, hmm, there's going to be a second chapter to this. And the second chapter turned out to be "Gingerbread Friends" because Matti, you can see in the borders, you can kind of tell as the book progresses, as he goes looking for friends that Matti's actually making him friends and part of the thing is the recipe says do not peek. Well he peeks and of course the friends come alive.

>> Is there a, I guess, a deeper tale or a moral that you're trying to impart to your young readers with this story or actually your stories in general I suppose I would ask?

>> Well, I guess being creative can be a solution because you know a lot of problems in your life, I mean they seem really challenging but sometimes it's the creative solution that, you know, makes everything okay and a lot of times we miss that just because we're so used to doing things in a certain way. And so many times in my life I've gotten these really pleasant surprises just by being observant and looking a little closer, a little further, and then trying the kind of off the wall solution. Sometimes that will help but the solution you don't think of at first, at the first chance you get and so I guess that would be what happens with Matti is that he saves the gingerbread baby by making a little house and enticing him into the house instead of chasing him and trying to eat him. And then in the end, he makes the friends out of gingerbread.

>> And where do your ideas come from? I always like to ask authors if, you know, they sit bolt upright in bed at 3 o'clock in the morning and start scribbling on a pad.

>> You know that's really not far from the truth. A lot of times they'll - there's like two ways. One is your kind of mind territory that you already know and just always keep in the front part of your brain, you know, you've got this situation with a character that you want to solve or all of the sudden an idea will come. Well, I try the trick where you go to sleep and you say, okay, I want the solution to this problem and then your unconscious kind of will discover the answer. I mean, so that if it doesn't happen the first night, but if you do it consistently, all of the sudden sometimes you wake up or a little bit later, you go, hmm, I just figured out how that can happen. But I'll do that or listening to music is another good way, I'll tell kinds, make sure mind go in different paths sometimes and let's see, sometimes it's just like a thunderbolt, just like you said. You know, just whoa-- But it often involves eating a lot of sugar.

>> Well hopefully your young fans won't take that away from it.

>> Yeah, the best story idea ever was, let's see was the hat and I remember being at a hotel. I had gotten lots of sleep and I had like pancakes with maple syrup or waffles or something really sugary and, you know, hot tea with honey and then all of the sudden I'm going up on the elevator. I thought the whole book up in one elevator ride.

>> Is there a special challenge in taking classic stories and retelling them as you do through illustrations?

>> Yeah, I think because the reason they're classics is there's something embedded in that story that people just attach R wave you know, emotionally because you have to think about it like one story can die if no one in the younger generation decides to tell it to the next one. Well, that's not totally true. You can always rediscover it in a book. But generally the best stories are so good that you've got to tell, you know, your kids or some little kids that you know, you say, oh, you've got to hear this story. And so they survive or you'll see similarities between different cultures will have, you know, this same story and it will be because it will be perhaps, you know, a tale that will give some sort of advice about, you know, how you're going to live your life. And I think the reason that a lot of times you use animals to illustrate it is because if it's people, well you say, well, I'm not a boy. This might be me talking or I'm not from this culture, so maybe that's not going to go for me but if it's an animal, it just kind of serves the purpose of working for everybody. And it takes the onus off it a little bit, so you can have the animal get in a situation that might be a little bit touchy if you put the child in it.

>> Do your readers ever provide inspiration for your work or, you know, have they ever suggested an idea and you said, you know, I'm going to move on that?

>> Well, one time I had some teachers that came to a book signing and they suggested "The Mitten," which is my most loved book and they told me it had animals and snow in it and I should check it out. Really, it's been a wonderful book, but mostly it has to come from within me. Like a lot of times people think that I have like focus groups for kids or that I really love kids but it's really me that's the child. That's just the way that my mind works. It's that I like stories with pictures and they satisfy me-- I mean I do read adult books but they really-- The books that I illustrate, they satisfy something deep in me, that it's that part of me that's the child that I've always wanted to hold onto because the thing I loved about being a child was that feeling of discovery every day and everything being new and having all that energy to explore things, which kind of like gets a dull edge as you get older. So it kind of renews me in a way. So I don't ever really have focus groups. As a matter of a fact, my daughter, I like to hear her opinion and now I have these two little grandsons and I have-- They'll give me their opinions, but I'm always cautious with it because I have to balance it with other things. My husband always chimes in and then there's my editor, so I listen to my own voice as much as I can.

>> You've also said that you're travels are an inspiration for your work. How is that reflected in your books and are there any special places that have really had sort of resounding effect when you--

>> Yeah.

>> Start out writing?

>> Okay, I would say when I go to a different place, you know, if I want to set a story in a different place, you just get a rush of creativity when you just see how things are done in different ways. I've always liked Europe and I guess Asia and Africa would also work the same way. Cultures are so old that there's this wonderful handcraft and folk art tradition in these countries and there's something very exciting to me about that just because the idea that human beings, even in, you know, kind of dire circumstances or like just surviving, let's say there's a Norwegian farmer that lived in this off in a valley, far away and they're just making food for their family, this would be 100 years ago, but yet there's something in the human being that wants to carve the spoon so they look beautiful, that wants to make the beautiful wedding or christening dress for the child or for the bride or groom because they want this occasion is so special to them that they do this wonderful work. So when I love to [inaudible] these museums, these old museums. And the US has some of that but it's a little bit more back in time when you come to go the Europeans cultures now. I would love to do a Native American book but there's some problems with that in that the culture is not for everybody to use. I get that feeling from Native Americans, like you better be of our culture if you're going to draw from it. So that's why I have loved to go to Europe and China and I have not done a Japanese book but I am very intrigued by their art traditions. So that helps and I think all those little details, it kind of when you look at the page, those weird little details that might not have a whole lot of meaning about the story itself, it just kind of creates this world that you feel like you can, you know, walk into. So the kids to me that are very-- I always say, oh I think you're going to be an illustrator. They're the ones who love to assemble a world. Now it could be an imaginary world or it could be a world based on a real culture and not fiction kind of world. But it's like adding those little pieces and that's-- I don't know if that answers your questions or not.

>> Uh-huh. You know, I've also seen that you've described a lot of the details that you provide in your book, say in the borders or in side panels--

>> Yeah.

>> Over flow of thoughts. Explain that.

>> Well, I think it's just the way I see a story told. I just have too many ideas and, you know, like, it doesn't mean that that's what I think is the correct way either. It's just my own style. Like some artists or writer/illustrators, they might have more of an architectural, you know, strong middle, beginning, end and suspense and turning points, but those books, when I was little, I used to get really anxious, like you mentioned Dr. Seuss who's like a genius, but I would always get so upset about what was going wrong in the story and then he usually resolved it like in the second to last page.

>> Uh-huh.

>> I like had to read the last page first. I was like a high anxiety kid. So in my books, you can kind of tell what's going on and I've always loved that kind of tapestry and there are all these threads in the tapestry that bring the story forward. And that's the kind of story I love to tell. But, you know, now that I'm an adult, I don't read the last page.

>> Now, people always like to ask a composer of popular music, do you write the music or the lyrics first. So I have to ask you, do you write the story or do you draw the pictures first?

>> That's interesting because what I do is I, first I think up the idea. It has to have a turning point or like a plot because it's very easy to think up a great character or a great setting. It's that plot, so get that nailed down, Then, the next step is I usually say to my editor, what do you think, Margaret. And she kind of will give me some feedback, but I would say 99% of the time it's positive. Then, I write down the story to make sure it's viable, knowing that I can draw everything that's in the story because if it's something I don't draw well, then I usually say, well, maybe I won't do it. Like for example, buildings are really hard and interiors of buildings are very hard for me. And, you know, I can draw them. They're just not going to have the buoyancy and the flow and the, you know, excitement of just doing the drawing, as when I'm just drawing animals and outdoor things and stuff like that. So then I will do a book dummy with it once, you know, she okay's the story, then I will do the drawings. But actually right now I'm drawing this story about trolls and I've written it first but I'm just going to do a little few sketches before I send it to Margaret.

>> Now we talked a little bit about the rich detail in your work and how it gives your characters and the surroundings such personality, this might sound like a naive question, but how do you know when they're done?

>> You know, I love-- A lot of kids ask me that. I think it's because they look at my drawings and they say, well I want to do that but it doesn't look like hers. So is it a question of how long she spends and I would say I do spend a long time on my drawings but I wait until I can walk into the page. But, you know, just I have to admit, I never feel like I'm done. If I didn't have a deadline every year, oh my god, I'd probably work on that book for ten years, but something's got to stop the madness because then I would be changing things and it's very hard to let go. That's probably the hardest thing about being an illustrator is letting go of that book. I'll like take it to the post office and I go, oh, no, it's horrible! This is the worst book I've ever done! I have to redo all this and, are you like that with your writing?

>> It sounds like your fears are mostly unfounded.

>> Well, then this is what happens. After I don't see it for a while, then I think it's good.

>> Great.

>> But it's always like process where you're, you know, finally ending it.

>> Let me ask about your website if I could, really quick.

>> Oh, the website is one of my most proud things. My husband does that.

>> Janbrett.com?

>> Yep.

>> And now it includes a lot of interactive activities that are inspired by your books. Why do you think it's important for young people to be hands on and engaged with reading and learning like that?

>> Well, you're very perceptive because one of our tenets for the website is nothing-- you don't buy anything there, you, we change it every two weeks, we add something. We is mostly my husband but I do the artwork and some of the ideas and the third is interactive because I mean we're trying to give people things, not inform people as much about what I'm doing because I'd really like the focus to be on the kids' creativity and giving them the tools so that they can write and to illustrate and to read and to look for things when they're reading. So everything is about them and I think that has made it successful. I mean, we've had, geez, I think about 40 million visitors. There's just been a lot of visitors.

>> Wow. Well, before I let you go Jan Brett, aside from the National Book Festival, what is coming next for you?

>> Let's see, we'll be going on a book tour in the fall. We've done that every year for the last 20 years and we have a giant bus and we have a bus driver that drives us and we go to about 40 different cities. And when I go to these cities, I always before the book signing, I spent about 20 minutes to a half an hour doing a drawing for the kids and giving a little lesson and telling them just some of the questions that you ask me about how do I get ideas for the books and stuff, all so that they can go home and be the next, you know, wonderful illustrator to illustrate a poster for the Library of Congress and, you know, that they'll be part of this world that I love so much. So that's the next big thing.

>> Well, author/illustrator Jan Brett, thank you so much for your time today.

>> You're welcome Matt. It was very good to talk to you and listen to your very perceptive questions.

>> Well, I appreciate that. That's high praise coming from you and we are excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival. That will be Saturday, September 27th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. [Background Music] The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this has been Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

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