

AUTHOR'S NONFICTION PICTURE BOOKS BROADEN READERS' WORLDVIEW

interview by Laura Backes

When we first interviewed nonfiction picture book author Barry Wittenstein in August 2018, he had two books out and three more on deck, all sold without an agent. Fast forward to today, and Barry's books have garnered starred reviews, appeared on best book lists, been named a Junior Library Guild selection, and received Children's Choice Awards. His *A Place to Land: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation* won a 2020 Orbis Pictus Award (which recognizes outstanding nonfiction for children). Barry continues his run of nonfiction picture books with social impact with his newest title, *The Day the River Caught Fire: How the Cuyahoga River Exploded and Ignited the Earth Day Movement* (Paula Wiseman Books/Simon & Schuster, March 2023). I recently spoke with Barry about writing picture book nonfiction about those events and people — obscure and famous — that influence our lives.

Laura Backes: When we interviewed you in 2018, you had two published nonfiction picture books out (*Waiting for Pumpsie* and *The Boo-Boos That Changed the World*). You've since published *Sonny's Bridge* about jazz legend Sonny Rollins; *A Place to Land*; *Oscar's American Dream* that follows a corner store over decades; and now *The Day the River Caught Fire*. You said in the previous interview that you didn't have an agent or a critique group. Is that still the case?

Barry Wittenstein: I now have a fantastic agent!

Mona Kanin at Great Dog Literary. She has incredible insight. Mona's been a godsend.

Before I got published, I tried to get representation.

But no one would have me. So I kept writing. I wrote a historical fiction picture book, *Waiting for Pumpsie*, about the Boston Red Sox being the last team in Major League Baseball to integrate. The player's name was Pumpsie Green. It finally happened in 1959, 12 years after Jackie Robinson crossed the color barrier. People think MLB was quickly integrated after Jackie. But 'twas not the case.

I don't recall if it was a wide pitch, but I sent the story to a smaller, independent publisher, Charlesbridge Publishers, in Watertown,

Mass. I figured it was perfect for them.

They passed.

I could not believe it! So, I wrote back. I said something to the effect, You should reconsider because it's a no-brainer. It wasn't angry in tone. But I wanted them to know that they made the wrong decision. I figured I had nothing to lose. They weren't going to un-reject it.

A few days later, I received an email from a second editor at Charlesbridge, Karen Boss. She was a Sox fan; her father knew Pumpsie Green's story.



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Karen signed the book! Then she signed two more of my manuscripts. All three books received Kirkus starred reviews. So, I got in the door.

I didn't even consider trying to get an agent at that point. Why would I? I was getting manuscripts published without one.

Then the pandemic.

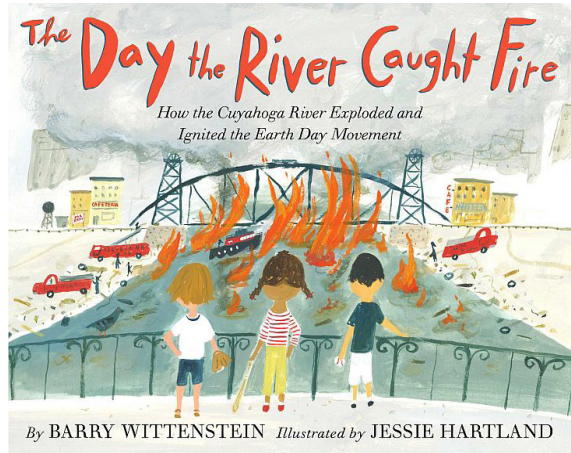
I fell into a funk. I know I wasn't the only one having difficulty placing material. I really felt isolated with the writer's conferences canceled. The biz itself was trying to figure out how to go forward. So much of my self-identity is tied up with being creative and being acknowledged. For the sake of my own fragile (in)sanity, I decided I needed help with my career. While it was true that I had now gotten six books signed pretty quickly, it was rejection after rejection. It was tough. It had become exhausting doing both the writing and the pitching with nothing to show for it. I decided to try again to get an agent interested, you know, to shake things up. As Robert Zimmerman sang, When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose.

But alas, in a cruel twist of fate, agents still wouldn't have me! Even though I have a much better track record now. Even though I won the Orbis Pictus award for *A Place to Land*. No luck. No luck at all.

Until I emailed Mona. It always helps when you introduce yourself, and the response is, "Oh, I know your work!" We hit it off immediately.

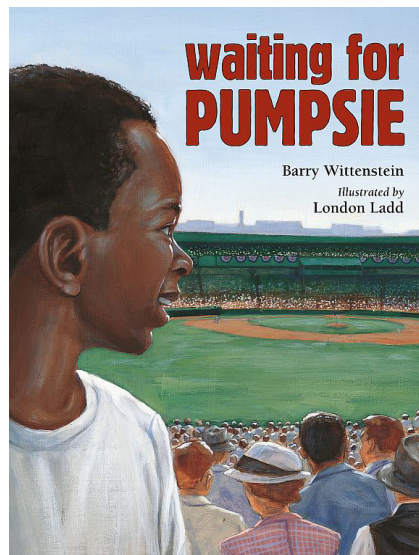
I signed with Great Dog Literary. Mona helped

edit my narrative nonfiction picture book *Food is Love*, about chef and humanitarian Jose Andres. She sent it to Nancy Paulsen [publisher of Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin Young Readers], who was immediately interested. Pre-Mona, on my own, I had pitched that manuscript all over town. No bites. And for years, I'd wanted to sign something with Nancy. So, it all came together. The stars aligned.



LB: *The Day the River Caught Fire* is about when the polluted Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught fire in 1969, which was the tipping point that started the Earth Day Movement. You clearly feel we are getting close to the

point of no return with climate change, yet the text has a conversational and understated humorous tone. How did you settle on a way of telling this story that would help open readers' eyes to this issue without sounding like you have an "agenda"?



BW: I am concerned and scared and pissed off at the world's inaction. So, yeah, I have an agenda—to help.

"Agenda" is such a loaded word!! But don't all books have agendas? The challenge is to disguise the agenda in a story. I know that sounds cynical. Every author asks themselves, What do I want the takeaway to be? What do I want the reader to feel? The reader won't feel anything if the writing isn't engaging. If I'm doing my job, I take the reader on a journey where

they can come to the conclusions I've guided them towards.

The idea of a river burning certainly has a humorous quality. Deadly serious topic, of course, but written with a specific tone, the story is entertaining.

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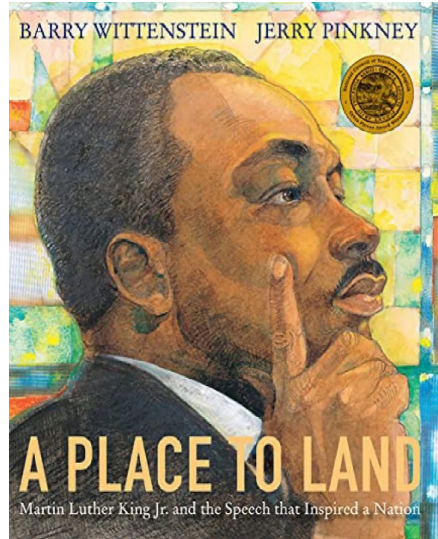
I tend to see life through a somewhat skewed, comic, existential prism. Using humor allows you to see truths. To communicate truths. And many times it's more effective than presenting straight facts. Not for all stories. That's what you have to figure out. Which story gets which treatment? Oy.

I decided that using a wry tone was the best way to captivate kids.

The fire certainly was the tipping point in the environmental movement. Not to say there wasn't already momentum for Earth Day. The Cuyahoga had caught fire over ten times in the preceding one hundred years before 1969. The 1952 fire caused more damage. The photograph with plumes of black smoke is often confused with the '69 fire. The 1969 fire was extinguished so quickly newspaper photographers didn't have enough time to get into their cars, drive over, and take some snaps. It didn't even make the front-page headlines in Cleveland! The feeling was, it's burned before. It will burn again. HO-HUM.

A lot of credit goes to Cleveland's Mayor Carl Stokes. As the first Black elected mayor of a major American city, he was already a national figure. He saw the opportunity to tie together the issues of poverty, health, and the environment. The day after, he held a press conference on the banks of the Cuyahoga. Stokes seized the moment. It worked. People woke up. Clean Water and Clean Air legislation was passed. The Environmental Protection Agency was formed. Sadly, the Supreme Court rolled back federal safeguards for wetlands protected under the Clean Water Act in late May.

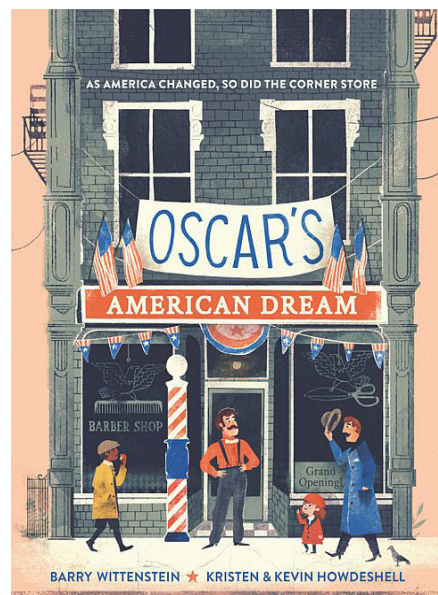
And yes, young people always lead the way. Always marching in the front of the parade. Demanding social justice. Historically. Globally. There's a lot of marching to do around the world these days.



LB: The terrific illustrations by Jessie Hartland (jessiehartland.com) often add a bit of humor to the scene, while still remaining true to the topic. Did you have any input on the tone of the artwork?

BW: Jessie is a unique, amazing, award-winning illustrator. She was the perfect choice to illustrate the book. My input? The words in the manuscript. She took it from there and nailed it.

There is so much positive energy in her work, along with that incredible humor. I've said this in other interviews, but her illustrations in *River* — and all the other books she's illustrated — gently invite readers to live in whatever world she's exploring. Her images are safe. Accessible. So, even though the story is about a stinky river, the carelessness and greed of humans and corporations, and how the world is melting, her work keeps it light enough for kids to learn the facts without having nightmares.



Using humor does not make it more difficult to “stay true to the topic.” It can make it easier to stay on topic, a faster way to get the point across, especially in children's literature. A serious subject doesn't negate the use of any literary devices. Satire, sarcasm, whatever, are entertaining and essential forms of social commentary.

LB: Your Author's Note at the end provides some hope but doesn't pull any punches (*If you're reading this, you still have time to save the planet. But time is*

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running short.) It's a call to action for readers with a ticking clock attached. Was this a hard sell to your publisher? Have you gotten any pushback from reviewers, parents, etc. on laying it out like this to kids 4-8?

BW: The Author's Note was not a hard sell at all. Neither Sylvie Frank (when she was with Paula Wiseman) nor Paula when Sylvie left for Disney, objected. In fact, many of the reviews of the book point out the author's note "call to action." I did not expect that. I'm very proud of writing it the way I did.

I needed to present the dire situation in dire terms. Maybe it was hyperbolic, but I had to communicate, Hey, kids. This is real. This book isn't only about 1969 and the Cuyahoga. This is about today. This is about your future. This is about the significant societal and global changes happening to your world if we don't do something. NOW! EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!

After I finished the manuscript, when it came time to create the Author's Note, I couldn't just write, "The river was polluted, but now you can swim in it. Let's love the Earth." I couldn't. It would have been disingenuous.

So that's where "If the world still exists as you read this..." came from. I hope it gets people's attention.

If I may quote the movie *Animal House*, "Knowledge is Good." Unless you live in certain states where the opposite is true. Which makes it even more urgent for writers to fight back, to push back against those who want to rewrite history. We have the power of the pen. We must keep writing the truth. We

know what happens when inaccurate information gets disseminated.

I hope with all my heart that picture books and author's notes can play a role in solving today's problems. The climate crisis. The inequality in society. Racism. It'll take time. If I can help push that along, I'll be smiling from high above.

But you want to give kids hope. It's a fine line between keeping it real without sugarcoating the issues. Writing the Author's Note as I did solved the problem.

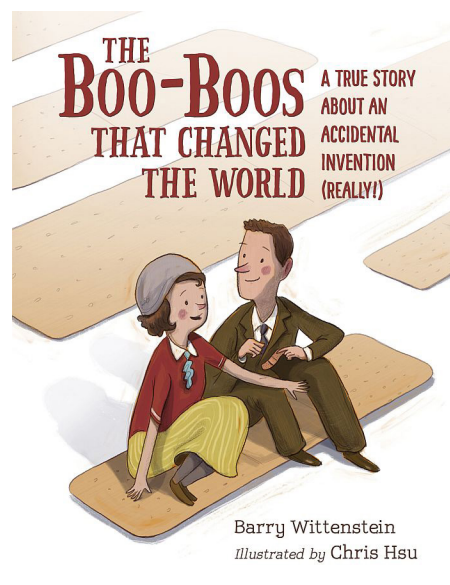
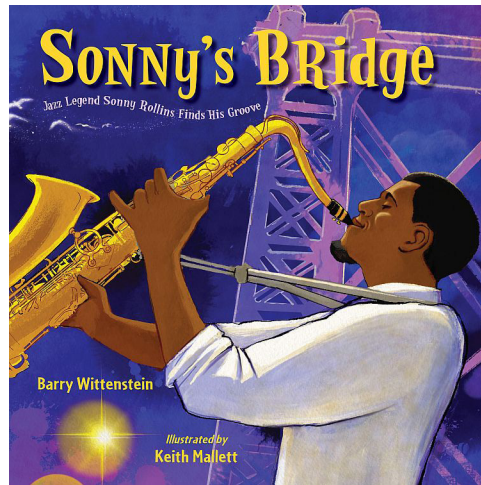
LB: Many of your books portray the lesser-known details of bigger events. For example, *A Place to Land* focuses mainly on the night before Martin Luther King Jr. gave his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington, and how he struggled to craft the right words with the help and advice from other Civil Rights leaders. Do you go looking for these topics, or do they present themselves to you in interesting ways? How do you know they'll resonate with picture book readers?

BW: That's an interesting question regarding stories presenting themselves or whether I actively search for them.

It's probably both.

I never know if the topics I chose will resonate with picture book readers. They resonate with me. That's all I can go on. But I feel an obligation to get unknown stories into the hands of children. Especially stories about social justice.

I was beyond positive that writing about Chef Jose



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Andres would be the perfect picture book for kids. He's a role model. He's an immigrant. He's a leader. He embodies a global perspective. He's an ambassador for peace. For food. For the health of the world. For the people of the world caring for each other.

When I first pitched *Food is Love* pre-agent, the feedback I often received was, "Who? Nobody knows this guy."

But isn't that the job of a writer to introduce an unknown hero to elementary school kids? Don't we all need heroes?

My 2020 book, the historical fiction *Oscar's American Dream* has not sold well.

It didn't get great reviews from the majors. And many ignored it. I was pretty upset. And get this: my hometown library, the New York Public Library, doesn't even carry it. They carry every other book I've written, but not *Oscar*. And it takes place in NY. But talk about resonating! Time does what time does.

A few months ago, a youth theater group in Florida contacted me for permission to put on a musical version of *Oscar*. It'll take two years for them to write, produce, and stage it. Then it'll be licensed out to other youth theatrical groups. As a writer, all you can do is get the material into the world and see what happens. Sometimes the timing isn't right. Sometimes it resonates years after it first appears.

I heard Jerry Seinfeld say that he's always on the lookout for material. He always has his antenna up. Whatever he's doing during the day. It's the answer to "Where do your ideas come from?" I'll overhear a conversation and wonder if any part of that could become a picture book. I'll look at Twitter or read an article, and one thing will capture my attention and I'm off to the races.

Over the years I have accumulated all this info (and garbage!) in my head. Some ideas could make great children's literature if I can ever get around to figuring out how to write them. That's where having an

agent helps.

When you boil it down, everything is a story. Human beings have a thirst for storytelling. It's how we navigate life. From drawings on the walls of prehistoric caves to a meme posted online a few seconds ago, it's all storytelling. And stories are all around you. You just have to pay attention and ask questions.

I am amazed at how many wonderful authors and stories are published yearly. It makes me proud to be a member of the children's literature community. And motivates me to get better.

LB: I also love how you present history through ordinary people who are solving a problem (*The Boo Boos That Changed The World*), or places where lives intersect in interesting ways (*Oscar's American Dream*). Do you think there's an ongoing need for nonfiction and historical fiction picture books that find the magic in regular people?

BW: Yes. We all live incredibly interesting lives. There is too much focus on celebrities in our culture. I get it. I don't like it. But I get it. I think it's important to have heroes. But the biggest heroes aren't only the players who hit the grand slam in the bottom of the ninth or the actor who does his own stunts.

The biggest heroes are those whose names don't fill the headlines or the gossip pages. The mother who raises five kids alone. The worker working two jobs. The scientist who worked behind the scenes to put a man on the moon. The stranger walking down the street who sees a toddler about to fall out a window and climbs on the outside of the building to save that child (this is a true story), healthcare workers during the pandemic! Those are genuine heroes. We need more of their stories to see the morning light.

Children must learn that random acts of kindness and major acts of kindness happen every day. That's why biographies of lesser-known historical characters and everyday Joes are so important. We can model our behaviors from those stories. Maybe we can't achieve notoriety in sports, science, or on Net-

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flix. But as Sly Stone sang, “Everybody is a Star.”

I wonder if anybody reading this knows Jimmy Breslin’s name. He was a great newspaper columnist and author. He was the champion of the little guy. In 1963, Breslin was assigned by the *New York Herald Tribune* to cover the burial of President Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery. But instead of following the herd of other reporters who made a beeline to the gravesite, Breslin did the opposite. He found the man whose job it was to dig JFK’s grave. His name was Clifton Pollard. Breslin tracked him down, interviewed him, and wrote, “[It’s An Honor.](#)” The column is a classic.

LB: Let’s talk a bit about voice. You often have a very conversational tone to your texts, though in *Sonny’s Bridge* you wrote in a jazz-inspired free verse. How does the author’s voice influence the reader’s experience with nonfiction, and should voice be led by subject matter?

BW: Subject matter should NEVER dictate voice. How boring would that be? It’d be a creativity killer. Voice is essential to making any writing come alive! Combined with a winning story, of course. But even an endearing story without voice? Nope. Voice without a winning story? Nope. The voice gives a story its nuances, its color.

That’s always my challenge. What’s the best way to tell the story? Deciding which voice and which structure to use. The bottom line is getting to the promised land. And man, not easy. Not easy at all. That’s why I have 50 unpublished manuscripts silently living in my desk drawer. Great stories (I think), but I can’t find the voice.

Final thought: the best voice and structure to tell a story might not be the one that fits into your intended category. Maybe instead of living within the pages of a picture book, the story deserves a graphic novel approach. Perhaps it’s a magazine article and not a book at all. The writer must honor the story’s needs.

Now for a quick history lesson about Creative Non-

fiction.

In the 1960s, authors and journalists like Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, Gay Talese, and many others rebelled against the dry-matter-of-fact rules of writing nonfiction. They began incorporating the tools of fiction into nonfiction. It was called New Journalism. Think of more contemporary books like *Into Thin Air* by John Krakauer. His style began with these folks. FYI — Talese’s [Frank Sinatra Has A Cold](#) (which everyone should read) is a groundbreaking piece of writing from that era.

LB: What’s next for you?

BW: *Food is Love*, about chef and humanitarian José Andrés, gets published in 2025 by Nancy Paulsen. [Sara Palacios](#) is the illustrator.

In the interim, I am looking forward to following the progress of the [Orlando Repertory Theatre’s](#) youth musical production of my book *Oscar’s American Dream*.

And I’m keeping agent Mona K. super busy with new stuff.

LB: Finally, do you have any advice for authors working on their first nonfiction picture books?

BW: You don’t have to have an agent to be published. More than a handful of publishers are open to non-agented authors. Go to national and local conferences. They’re worth the time and money.

And speaking of voice, tell that annoying, critical voice inside your head to knock it off. Those who break through find a way to decrease the static. Not easy, damn hard. I know from what I speak. Trust me. I’m living proof.

You can follow Barry on Twitter ([@bwittbooks](#)), Instagram ([bwittbooks](#)) and on his website at [one-dogwoof.com](#)