



## Ed Young

### Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Ed Young, interviewed in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York on February 7, 2005.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You won the Caldecott Medal in 1990 for *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China*. The artwork is stunning and the story captures young peoples' imaginations.

**ED YOUNG:** *Lon Po Po* is a story that I heard when I was small, and I didn't know then that it was a rare version of the Red Riding Hood story. It wasn't until I came to this country and I became a children's book author that it occurred to me that it was only one version of the widely known story. In the Western or European version, Red Riding Hood needed the hunter to come and save her. The three girls in *Lon Po Po* actually handle the wolf themselves. This approach not only gives a boost to children that they can handle problems on their own, but it also tells them that they don't really need an adult around to do the job.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your Caldecott honor book, *Seven Blind Mice*, is a creative and appealing approach to the proverb about six blind men. How did you conceive your version?

**ED YOUNG:** The proverb that became *Seven Blind Mice* was attractive to me since I was a child.

I decided that the story would work better in illustration if it had a small animal, rather than a person, feeling the different parts of the elephant, especially with a seventh one roaming the entire animal to discover what it was. The first thing that came to me was a monkey, but gradually it became evident that the monkey was still too big. So, it became a story of mice.

Then I thought, "Why not include the seven colors; the white mouse could be the white light and the others could be the rainbow colors." And then the seven days of the week occurred to me: "Why not introduce each one as being in sequence of the seven days of the week?" So each element gradually became a part of the book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you create the art for *Seven Blind Mice*?

**ED YOUNG:** The medium for *Seven Blind Mice* is cut paper. I thought in the beginning that paper cutting would be a very easy thing to do; I thought it was just a matter of cutting the paper. But, then I found out that it was very hard to do. It's not so hard to draw the tail, but to cut it, I had to cut two lines that sort of tapered off at the tip and make it appear as if there was flesh inside. If I made a nick or something, the tail wasn't right. So, for all the tails that got onto the page, you should see how many tails I cut that didn't get in. It was a very difficult book to make.

Although they all look the same, the mice are made to show varying emotions. Each mouse has his own statement, his own mood and his own emotions. I showed the emotions by the way the ears and the tails were positioned. When an animal is angry or fearful, the ears flap back. And when the tail is excited, it goes straight up. So, I had a lot of tails to cut.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** In *Lon Po Po*, you used panels to help illustrate your story — this is common in Asian art, but not often seen in American children’s books. Please discuss the effects this technique creates.

**ED YOUNG:** Oftentimes, panels are useful for me. One reason is because books have a gutter which bridges across two pages, and you don’t want important art to be caught in the gutter. When you use two panels, one on each side of the gutter, it’s almost like looking through a window without looking at the divider. You just look through the window, ignoring what is interrupting your view. Also, having a panel or two in a page lends itself to showing more than one moment at the same time.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You illustrated the film, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. What was it like to be part of such a moving, impacting project, especially as a Chinese man working on a story about a WWII Japanese girl?

**ED YOUNG:** I initially turned down the story, because first of all, I’d never done a movie. And second, it was a story about a real person, and I would need a lot of photographs of that person for me to do a good job. And, thirdly, I needed to know everything about the Japanese culture; I’m Chinese and I did not know enough. But another reason I rejected it — that I didn’t share at the time — was that I felt funny about being Chinese and doing a Japanese story, especially about World War II.

But then I heard a reading of the manuscript and a lot of things came alive for me; I began to think that perhaps I could use the crane as the underlying symbol for all of the pictures. Once that thought crossed my mind, I started to see that it was possible for me to do it. Then, I went to Hiroshima to visit with people there and to see the interiors of Japanese houses and the layout of the rooms. The movie takes you into different rooms, and you have to believe that you are moving inside a room.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Then, you recreated the illustrations for the book, *Sadako*.

**ED YOUNG:** Yes. The film’s pictures couldn’t be used in the book. When making the movie, the most important part of the illustration was placed in the center. For the book, the center is folded into the gutter, so I had to make the illustrations all over again.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many of your books illuminate universal sentiments. The *Sadako* story, for example, is about the universal truth of peace.

**ED YOUNG:** A statement comes from a place where you are comfortable, and what you think is important. In making a book, I hope to find a way of transforming the reader just even a little bit into thinking that it’s possible to do something that connects the reader back to his or herself.

If you have something that you like to share with the world, then that's a piece of peace. It's connected to the peace that you feel. And if you have that, people will get it.

I think that real peace comes from oneself. You can put it out there. You can wear it on your shirt. You can stick in on the car. But it's still not your own peace. The only peace that you can have is yourself.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What is the relationship between Tai Chi — which you practice regularly — and your art?

**ED YOUNG:** The practice of Tai Chi is about discovering yourself. It's about forces of the world — both natural and unnatural and how one relates to them. It's about focus and about balance. It's the understanding that things change and knowing how to stay centered throughout the changes.

Art is about the same thing — find out about yourself. How do you produce something that is satisfying? How do you state something in the simplest manner for the maximum effect? How do you use a moment? How do you wait for the opportunity?

I think they're both about the same thing — being patient, being trustworthy. Doing what you can for the moment.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Beyond the Great Mountains: A Visual Poem About China* is a very rich and multi-dimensional book that you've been developing in your mind for over 20 years. Where did the idea originate?

**ED YOUNG:** *Beyond the Great Mountains* originated with a lecture that I gave in Boulder, Colorado in the 1980s. I wanted to introduce to the audience Chinese characters, or radicals, and the way they are put together — taking symbols and putting them in positions that are easy to understand. At the time, the only thing that was available for me to show this was the roll of paper towels in the men's room. I just unrolled a whole lot, started writing and made up the verse.

*Beyond the Great Mountains* introduces not only the way the Chinese experience nature, but how the Chinese express nature by visual means. It also demonstrates how the Chinese take the experience and wed it to other experiences to create characters and convey their meanings.

*Beyond the Great Mountains* is a bridge — it bridges the ancient Chinese character to the Chinese character of today. It also bridges ancient Chinese characters to Western modern art, allowing the Western reader to appreciate them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** So, Chinese characters are a way of communicating via pictures?

**ED YOUNG:** Yes. The very beginning of Chinese writing is really drawing pictures. The sages who created these character pictures oftentimes put the spirit in them — for instance, the drawing of the cloud would have the dragon inside. They were elaborate drawings.

Over time, the people wanted to just convey the point without doing a tremendous, elaborate drawing. So, the characters became simpler and simpler. Nowadays, a character oftentimes does not resemble the original picture. But if you know where it came from, you can almost see the picture in it.

*Beyond the Great Mountains* illustrates the characters as pictures.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** In *Beyond the Great Mountains*, your poem appears in four different forms — making it a comprehensive visual poem.

**ED YOUNG:** Each page in *Beyond the Great Mountains* includes the ancient Chinese character (2,500 years old), the modern Chinese character, artwork depicting the character as well as the character's meaning and the words written out in English.

I believe a visual poem is something to be experienced. Poetry is like music. When you hear a piece of music, it's hard for you to describe it in words. When you see a beautiful picture, it's hard for you to describe it in words. Pictures, sounds, words, none of them alone can convey the entire expression — so I show how they work together in this book. I think that art is one area where one can create something much more whole.

I enjoy teaching people how to use symbols as a language, become artists and use art to communicate with other people. That's my wish, and it is a very pleasurable thing to share that with people in this country.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What media did you use in creating your illustrations for *Beyond the Great Mountains*?

**ED YOUNG:** The media is paper. When I created the picture of the mountain, I wanted the texture of the mountain to be rocklike. So, I used bark paper — a bark that resembles rocks. I used rice paper for the clouds, allowing the reader to see through them. The mist is made of a thin fiber. Sometimes I make my own paper, too.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Beyond the Great Mountains* is produced in a very unusual format. How did this decision come about?

**ED YOUNG:** My original design for the book was a scroll. But, we all know that a scroll cannot be a book. And, the closest thing to it is an accordion format, where the scroll is folded back and forth until it becomes sort of like a book. That kind of book is not easily assimilated into a library, because it's very easily broken. So, the editor and the designer came up with the idea for index pages, and it worked out perfectly for this.

You open up the front cover, and each page beyond the first page is bigger than the last one. It's almost like going down steps, and each step has one line on it. So, you can actually read the whole poem just by opening up the book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You grew up in wartime China during the Japanese occupation. What was life like for you?

**ED YOUNG:** Luckily, during the war my family was not affected in a drastic way by the Japanese occupation. My family did move several times, retreating from the Japanese, but I was brought up in Shanghai, where my father built a house and we stayed there until I left China.

We had a chance to meet many different kinds of people. A Jewish family that escaped Nazi Germany stayed with us, and they had a young baby. The baby was treated like a part of our family, and she's now an elementary school principal in Ohio. Whenever I'm in the area, I go visit her. She still misses Chinese food.

It was a pretty rich kind of experience. We had a Chinese man married to an English woman living with us; they were very poor and needed a place, so they took refuge in part of the house. We found out after the war that he was actually working for the underground.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How was it that all these people came to live in your house?

**ED YOUNG:** My parents were very outgoing and my father loved people. So, whenever there were people that were in need of help, he always overextended himself. My mother did this, too. She sometimes brought back people to stay with us a while that she'd meet on the train and took a liking to. Oftentimes, they were social outcasts. For my parents, it was just natural that when they saw people in need and they had the means to help, they just did it.

There was a teacher that had gotten pregnant from a student, and their families were not happy about it, so my mother took them in. We had a swimming pool with changing rooms below, and they made shelter there. My mother took care of the baby when the baby's mother went to work. I didn't know about them when I was small; I visited my mother in Beijing recently and she told me. I have encouraged her to write a story about the house, saying that I would illustrate it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What brought you to the United States?

**ED YOUNG:** I came as a student. It was not easy for me to come to this country — I waited three years to get a visa, and I had very limited funds. I earned money as I studied, and without knowing it, I actually got to know a lot more about this culture than I had planned through the work I did.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kinds of jobs did you have?

**ED YOUNG:** I first lived in San Francisco and went to City College. I lived with an American family as a cook and a housekeeper. I cooked for them, both breakfast and supper, and then did housecleaning on the weekend. The rest of the time was my own to pursue my studies.

They had three boys younger than me, and the youngest boy had mathematical problems. Sometimes I tutored him or took him roller-skating. On the weekends, when I finish my work, I would occasionally go to their country house. I got to know a lot about the American family that way.

I then went to art school in Los Angeles, and I stayed in boarding houses, where I learned more about people and the American culture.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What were you studying, and how did you begin your career in children's books?

**ED YOUNG:** I never really made long-range professional plans; things simply moved along. I had a trust that things would be okay. I just followed what seemed to be right for me at the moment.

I was studying architecture, simply because my father (who was in a building business and dean of architecture and engineering at a university), hoped that I would graduate and go back to China to help him. While at the University of Illinois studying architecture, I just had a feeling that architecture wasn't my thing. I entered and won a contest designing a homecoming

badge, and I was in the paper. One thing led to another, and I went into advertising after art school.

However, I did not look forward to doing advertising for the rest of my life. So, when the company closed, people said, “You like to draw animals, maybe you should go into children’s books.” I had nothing better to do, so I took a few of my drawings that I did in my spare time to an editor at Harper & Row. They were brush drawings on paper napkins and that kind of stuff. I didn’t expect to get a book; I didn’t even know what children’s books were like. I didn’t know that the editor, Ursula Nordstrom, was well known in the field. I didn’t know Harper & Row was a prominent company.

She paged through the drawings very carefully and then she said, “I have something here for you.” So she opened a drawer, and gave me a manuscript. And it came that easy. I just took the book and gave it a try. It won a prize, and agents sought me out and wanted to represent me. That was in 1962.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** When you illustrated your first children’s books, what approach did you take?

**ED YOUNG:** I was trying different techniques to make books more exciting, because up to that point, it seemed like there were not that many people who were really experimenting with the different media that could be used in illustrating children’s books.

Cut paper was one technique that people weren’t using, and I had wanted to learn paper cutting. So when I was given Jane Yolen’s manuscript for *The Emperor and the Kite*, it seemed like the story was perfect for a technique of that sort. It was a folk tale, and I wanted to use a folk art from China to do the book.

I had never done paper cutting before; I just guessed how. And after I did it, I didn’t want to do it again because now I had learned how to do it, and I was ready for something new.

*[Editor’s Note: The Emperor and the Kite received a Caldecott honor in 1968.]*

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you now approach the media you use in your illustrations?

**ED YOUNG:** I like to compare media to food ingredients. It is the job of the artist to get to know the media so that when he has a dish that he wants to produce, he will know what kind of ingredients to serve. But before he can serve it, he has to pay respect to them and to learn how they would like to be treated. Art education helps the artist get to know each media as much as he can.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Have you ever illustrated a book with a certain technique, then changed your mind and re-illustrated using something different?

**ED YOUNG:** Yes, I did that when I illustrated Rafe Martin’s book called *Foolish Rabbit’s Big Mistake*. It was an Indian tale, and up to that point, I had illustrated Indian folk tales in Indian formats — usually miniature paintings. They are very elaborate, with decorative borders and little images. I first illustrated the Martin book in miniatures. It was a Chicken Little story, with drama and fear. And I realized that I couldn’t get that feeling through the miniature paintings.

So when I submitted my work to the art director, I said, “This is what it looks like, but I’m not satisfied with the way that it’s portrayed; the Indian paintings will not allow me to scream and

make huge, dramatic pictures.” And the art director just looked at me and said, “Why don’t you do it the way you think it ought to be?” I had never even thought of that possibility, because I was respecting the Indian way of telling stories.

I went home and started to experiment with pastels. I had big strokes with big colors — everything was big. I exploded, and I looked to Gauguin’s work and said, “That’s the way to go,” and I did the whole thing all over again in pastel. That’s how I got into pastels, and I’ve done several books in pastel since that time.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many of your books are folk tales. What about that genre appeals to you?

**ED YOUNG:** Folk tales are a living art. They reveal what a culture is about, and they are universal. Each culture has their own telling and their own values, but many of the basic stories are the same. So, for me to go into each culture and tell the same story, I get to share the different cultural version with others and get to know about the other culture.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your book, *Voices of the Heart*, is a cross-cultural work.

**ED YOUNG:** Yes. To make it easy to understand Chinese characters, the Chinese created categories called “radicals.” So for “tree,” for example, you have the character for “wood” in that word. Anything that’s made out of wood has the radical “wood” in it. If you are making the word “steam,” or “gravy,” or “waterfall,” then you have the radical “water” in them. There are 214 radicals or categories; any word you want to create fits into one of the 214 categories. Once you have those categories down pat, then you can wed them together to create any Chinese character.

*Voices of the Heart* takes the radical “heart” and weds it with other radicals to make many different emotions. For instance, the word “shame” is composed of the ear and the heart. When they’re put together side by side, it means putting one’s ear to one’s heart. My intention for *Voices of the Heart* was to put symbols in positions that could be easily understood. And the person who reads the book can be introduced to the basic radicals in this fashion.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe a typical workday for you.

**ED YOUNG:** I think about my work each workday; sometimes nothing is put down on paper. The only routine I have is getting up at 6:00 in the morning and going to bed around 10:00. What happens in the middle is not predictable.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you get stuck?

**ED YOUNG:** When I get stuck, I just do something else. Read something, take a walk or visit with some people.

Oftentimes, getting stuck is like asking yourself a question without words — like knowing where you want to go, but not which route to take — where the intention is clear, but the process is unknown. What’s important is to know that eventually you will get there. It may take a little bit more time, but in the meantime, you will gain an awful lot more by the route of an unfamiliar path.

I trust that stuckness is something that is given to me to help me grow a little bit.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell students?

**ED YOUNG:** They should find out what they love and they ought to just stick to it and do a lot of it. The discipline is built into what they love most. Any other discipline that is given as a “should” is not true discipline. They should follow their heart and their gut feeling.

Also, I think one ought to be open to many different ways people live; if one can actually put oneself in those people’s shoes, one can come away becoming a bigger person and understand why people think and feel the way they do.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Is that what you strive to do as an illustrator?

**ED YOUNG:** Yes, it’s my job, because if I cannot put myself in other people’s shoes and tell their story, then I’m not a good illustrator. It’s really about being where they are and feel the way they do because they are what they are.

I feel that my job to be in this country is to learn as much about the West as I can and introduce the East as much as I can. So, my books are a study of cultures and of hearts from both sides, and introducing one to the other.

### **Books by Ed Young**

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- BICYCLE RIDER (written by Mary Scioscia), Harper & Row, 1993
- MOON MOTHER: A NATIVE AMERICAN CREATION TALE, HarperCollins, 1993
- READER'S COMPANION TO THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, THE, Houghton Mifflin, 1993
- RED THREAD, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1993
- SADAKO (written by Eleanor Coerr), G. P. Putnam's Sons / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1993
- DREAMCATCHER (written by Audrey Osofsky), Orchard Books, 1992
- GOODBYE GEESE (written by Nancy White Carlstrom), Scholastic, 1992
- RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER, THE (written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / a division of Simon & Schuster, 1992
- SEVEN BLIND MICE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1992
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- WHILE I SLEEP (written by Mary Calhoun), Morrow Junior Books, 1992
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- WHITE WAVE: A CHINESE TALE (written by Diane Wolkstein), Crowell, 1979
- TALES FROM THE ARABIAN NIGHTS (written by N. J. Dawood), Doubleday, 1978
- TERRIBLE NUNG GWAMA, THE: A CHINESE FOLKTALE, Collins, 1978
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- RED LION: A TALE OF ANCIENT PERSIA, THE (written by Diane Wolkstein), Crowell, 1977
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- EMPEROR AND THE KITE, THE (written by Jane Yolen), Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1967
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*Note: Bibliography created in 2005.*

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