

Young at Heart

Kevin Henkes writes books to express children's feelings — and illustrates them with Caldecott Honor-winning art.

BY SUSAN PIGORSCH '80

Sure, Kevin Henkes x'83 went to a toga party his freshman year (for a little while). He also paused on his way to the library to admire the flamingos that unexpectedly flocked to Bascom Hill. And he couldn't help but notice Madison's monumental creation — the Statue of Liberty, whose head rose above Lake Mendota's icy expanse. But none of the Wisconsin Student Association's wild ways could change how the then-nineteen-year-old would spend his days: reading and researching children's literature at the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in Helen C. White Hall.

"I think it's amazing that I didn't partake in it all," Henkes says of his

student days. "But I was driven. I think I always have been."

The soft-spoken creator of the Caldecott Honor-winning *Owen*, and of the American Bookseller's hit pick of 1997, *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, in fact landed his first contract in the summer following his freshman year. He went to New York and sold an illustrated story that had begun as a class project, then took off the fall semester of his sophomore year to finish it.

"*All Alone* was a young book, but a very finished book,"

I'm Lilly!
I am the Queen!
I like EVERYTHING!

says Susan Hirschman, Henkes's longtime editor at Greenwillow Books. "What I knew back in 1980 when I first met Kevin was that he was immensely tal-

Kevin Henkes (above) took every available UW course that related to children's literature, warehousing knowledge gleaned from the Departments of Art, Library Science, and Curriculum and Instruction, and the School of Education. He also met his spouse, artist and alumna Laura Dronzek, in Madison. She created the pictures for their new book, *Oh!*, as well as for the couple's dining room, shown above.



ented and knew what he wanted — to be a children's book author and illustrator." Greenwillow, which markets about fifty new titles a year, was looking then as they do now for a new voice.

about imaginary play — is anything but lonely. It is crowded among nearly twenty Henkes titles on library shelves all across America.



Tick . . . tock. Tick . . . tock. The mouse is running out the clock — and she's the star of the Seattle Children's Theatre production of *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. She's stuck in the dark at the top of a pyramid of stairs — in none other than the "uncooperative chair" — for singing unflattering lyrics about her baby brother, Julius.

Suddenly, strobe lights flash upon the antics of the defiant mouse, whose ears seem to amplify her anger. Why do her parents call Julius the "Baby of the World"? Then all goes black again as the clock goes *tick . . . tock*. The scene repeats as Lilly broods in numerous petulant positions for "what seems like ten years," says the character's creator.

"Then Lilly says, 'How much time is left?' Of course, only half a minute has passed. It's *very* funny," laughs Henkes. It's so very Lilly.

Later on, when the personified Henkes characters of Wendell and Owen

pedal a huge, Rousseaulike painting across the stage, subtly nodding to Henkes's own practice of exposing readers to the great masters — the author is ready to approve a plan to take the theater adaptation of *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* on the road.

"They were very nice about it," Henkes says in a voice that's humble and vulnerable — yet exacting. "I really dragged my heels about saying yes. Then we came up with a great compromise, which was that the Seattle Children's Theatre could perform the first round of the production. And if I liked it, and gave it my approval, then it could travel." He liked it! This fall, *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, the stage production, will travel around the nation, animating the humor, the conflict, and the resolutions machinated by Henkes and his mercurial mice.

"Kevin does a marvelous job of taking children's feelings and finding a way to express them in pictures and text," says Jack Kean, the associate dean of the School of Education, who says he was "lucky enough to be present" while Henkes created *All Alone* in his class on children's literature. "Kevin's books give children a good feeling about themselves, and help validate their feelings."

"Whether or not every family has an uncooperative chair, every family has some means to encourage young children to cooperate," adds the CCBC's Ginny Moore Kruse MA'76. "Kevin knows about parenting

mechanisms, and children know that he understands *them*."

The author's insights into children's fears — about the comings of new siblings or the goings of their baby blankets — will soon be translated to a musical score, in addition to the theatrical stage. The Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra (WYSO) commissioned composer Daron Hagen to bring Henkes's characters to life in the tradition of the classic children's symphony *Peter and the Wolf*.

"They commissioned the music for *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* for their holiday concert," says Henkes. "In November, they'll play the music while images from the book will be projected behind the musicians somehow . . . and I will narrate the story," he adds shyly.

For someone who writes in the car once his baby and preschooler fall asleep, and who dips his watercolor brush into the same lucky, plastic Imperial Margarine tub that he has used since he was a boy, such a public appearance — no, performance — is no doubt intimidating. But since WYSO plans to premiere the symphony in Racine, where Henkes and his four siblings grew up, and where he began to dream of becoming a children's book author, he had a hard time saying no. Likewise, he had a hard time saying no to a second performance of the work in Madison, since that is where Henkes realized his dream, met

Why do Lilly's parents call her new brother, Julius, the "Baby of the World"? A stint in the uncooperative chair provides Henkes's main character with nary a clue — while giving readers all the right answers.



Illustrations by Kevin Henkes. Copyright © by Kevin Henkes, from *Chester's Way*, 1988; *Owen*, 1993; *Julius, Baby of the World*, 1990; *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, 1996; and from *Chrysanthemum*, 1991, all from Greenwillow Books.

his wife, had his children, and began to live an otherwise quite ordinary life.



"The snow falls and falls all night. In the morning everything is white. And everyone wants to play. Oh!" The scene could take place in Henkes's own back yard, in a graceful, old Madison neighborhood. But this time, he will not paint it. The illustrations for *Oh!*, a new book that will be released this fall, were created by his spouse, Laura Dronzek '82, MFA'93.

"I'd seen Laura's work in Madison, in murals in the kids' rooms and in their dining room," remembers Greenwillow's Hirschman. "*Oh!* was in the file, and we didn't have an illustrator [which means that Henkes was busy writing another novel for young readers]. Then one day Kevin said, 'Why not Laura?'" After all, they had collaborated as a pair before, on the jacket cover of Henkes's novel, *Sun & Spoon*, which won Wisconsin's Elizabeth Burr award for writing.

"We wanted to do a book together, for our children," says Henkes, so *Oh!* is written uncharacteristically for the very young. It's also one of the only books that Henkes has read out loud to their two children, Will and Clara.

"I don't like reading my books that much," the author/illustrator confesses. Perhaps it's because he enjoys an excuse to explore the full universe of children's



Kevin Henkes's *Chrysanthemum* feels great about herself in her favorite dress on the first day of school — until the other kids make her feel like a fool. Who knew that *Chrysanthemum* is too long to write on a nametag, and too hard for the average kid to pronounce?

literature. Every night, he and Dronzek share in the parental pleasure of reading three books to each child, one-on-one. Six titles and maybe sixty minutes later, they will have successfully surveyed the landscape of their profession — and observed their children's reactions to various authors and art.

"People ask me all the time if my kids have given me lots of new ideas for books," Henkes says. "They haven't, probably because my books come from within. Some of the best people who write these books for children never had kids. Yet they treat kids' feelings with great respect."

Authors such as Charlotte Zolotow x'37, who has written at least sixty-five books and edited works by the likes of Nathaniel Benchley and Louise Fitzhugh for Harper & Row, are not writing to teach "those little beasts a lesson," says the UW's expert on children's literature, Ginny Moore Kruse. "Somehow inside of them, somewhere, is a memory from childhood." Again and again, she says, they find "that moment, that instant, that

appeals to children, and then they develop it and make it something a parent would *want* to read, and a child would want to see and hear."

Henkes's ability to set a narrative pace, and to acknowledge that children are important people, is at the core of his popularity. But he's also not afraid to use big words in context if the rhythm is right, and the words are appropriate.

"Oh, pish," says the mother in *Chrysanthemum*, when her little mouseling comes home from school indignant about being named after a flower. "Your name is beautiful." "And precious and priceless and fascinating and winsome," says her father.

Later on, *Chrysanthemum*'s mother says "Oh, pish" again, in reference to the taunting schoolmates. "They're just jealous," she says. "And envious and begrudging and discontented and jaundiced," says her father. Henkes's picture books gain strength through his ingenious use of internal repetition. What's more, as a writer who can illustrate his own work, he's able to gain momentum without describing every detail.

For example, the author never mentions Lilly's crown or cape or boots in *Julius, Baby of the World*, even though he "knew she would have them" — in fact, *must* have them. In *Owen*, he shows Mrs. Tweezers tottering on flower pots to peer over a fence so that the reader knows that she's impossibly nosy. He foreshadows her meddling by painting a scene of the fence on the first page of the book, and repeating it again on the last. And he uses the end papers to demonstrate how much the whimsical Owen loves his baby blanket — the one he *can't* take to school with him.



"If you have a mouse, jumping for joy, three feet up in the air — in a kind of contorted posture — it looks joyful," writes Henkes. "But if you try to draw realistically a human child doing the same thing, it looks all wrong."

Animals gave this creator of children's books the means to express his characters — from their highest highs to their lowest lows. They freed him from his serious, *All Alone* persona — from the determined young man whose campus experience was more about reading the

works of award-winning alumni such as Ellen Raskin x'48 and Nancy Ekholm Burkert '54, MS'55 than about turning bed sheets into togas.

Henkes's affinity for animals started with *Bailey Goes Camping*. "It was the first book in which I used animals, and they were a family of rabbits," Henkes explains. "I wanted to do another book using animals, and I ended up choosing mice, because there's something about them. They are vulnerable creatures in a certain way," he says. Like kids. And when washed in soft watercolors with delicate pen and pencil lines, they take on expressive qualities that transcend the medium.

Still, what holds readers through repeated readings are Henkes's characters, from Bailey and Owen to Chester and *Chrysanthemum*. But who could have predicted the public's instant infatuation with Lilly?

"Only several other characters have been taken into people's hearts like that," says Hirschman, still awed by Lilly's success. "There's *Madeline*, for example, and Arthur. Now Kevin is one of the pillars of the industry, which is unusual because he is so young" — and thankfully, so young at heart.

Lilly Takes Another Lead

Lilly, the star of Kevin Henkes's children's book *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, will head across the country this fall to light up a number of new venues. From September 7 to November 7, she'll take to the stage in Minneapolis for a children's theater production of her namesake story [for tickets, call (612) 874-0400], and then appear at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. from November 26 to December 28 [contact (800) 444-1324]. In mid-November, Lilly will alight within a Daron Hagen score commissioned by the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra. Performances will be held in Racine and Madison [call (608) 263-3320]. Meanwhile, Lilly will be stealing the show at the National Center for Children's Illustrated Literature in Abilene, Texas, where she will be featured with other illustrations created by Henkes and his spouse, Laura Dronzek, from October 14 to December 5.



A Legacy of Children's Literature

Kevin Henkes x'83 could have attended Pratt or Parsons School of Design in New York. But he chose instead to attend Wisconsin, and to follow in the footsteps of the luminaries — and UW-Madison alumni — in his field. They

include: Charlotte Zolotow x'37, author of some sixty-five picture books, including *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*; Ellen Raskin x'48, winner of the 1979 Newbery Medal for *The Westing Game*; illustrator Nancy



Zolotow

Ekholm Burkert '54, MS '55, best known for her striking *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; Arthur Dorros '72, creator of *Abuela*; Barbara Monnot Joosse '71, author of



Raskin

Mama, Do You Love Me?; and Avi [Edward Wortis] '59, MA'62, known for his novels for young readers, such as *Nothing But the Truth*.

For more information about Wisconsin authors and recommended books for youth, contact the School of Education's Cooperative Children's Book Center at www.soemadison.wisc.edu/ccbc/, or call (608) 263-3720.

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In honor of their young children, Henkes and Dronzek collaborated on *Oh!*, a book that celebrates the wonder of a perfect winter's day.