

An interview with Paulette Bourgeois

Catherine Sheldrick Ross

This interview took place while Paulette Bourgeois was in London, Ontario, on a reading tour funded by the Canada Council. On Tuesday evening, January 19, 1988, the author spoke to the newly formed London Children's Literature Roundtable. A highlight was her reading of a new story, "The old lady with no teeth," in which a young boy disobeys an injunction against going down to the basement (The old lady says, "I wouldn't go down there if I was you. There's a bear down there"). Like Bluebeard's wife, the boy finds out something he'd rather not know. During the interview which took place the next day, we talked about this story and what it represents for Paulette Bourgeois's own development as a writer. But we also ranged over a wide number of other topics related to the making of a children's author in Canada: the outstandingly positive critical reception of her first picture book (*Quill & Quire* called Franklin "possibly the season's most endearing picture book character" — Aug. '86); the contributions to the final form of picture book made by the editors and the illustrator; the challenge of doing sequels; international markets; journalism as a training ground for doing children's nonfiction; and Paulette Bourgeois' own favorite children's books.

ROSS: You had the sort of experience with *Franklin in the dark* the first-time writers would give their eye-teeth for. Just everything worked. Was it as easy as it looked from the outside?

BOURGEOIS: Well, no. I'm glad it looks that smooth now — that's in large part due to my editors, who really helped shape the book and smooth it with me. They guided me through that book. *Franklin* started as a very short manuscript, with the same kernel of thought and the same flow that it has now. But I didn't have nearly as many animals through it; I didn't have the same pacing; and I didn't have the same repetition. Franklin was fairly ill-defined as a character. He had far too many problems, far too many neuroses. I didn't quite know how to set him on a path that was narrow and yet interesting enough for a reader. My editors and I went through four or five complete edits on it and then there were some minor changes at the end. So some people might consider that smooth going, but it wasn't a one-shot deal.

ROSS: You mentioned that your editors helped. What specific changes did they suggest?

BOURGEOIS: Franklin was fairly neurotic in the first draft. He was afraid of far more than just a small dark place. He was afraid of mountain ledges and deep-sea diving — some fairly bizarre and unchildlike and unturtle-like fears. In the first draft, he went seeking help because everyone abused him. They made fun of all his fears; they heaped abuse on him; they said, “You yellow-bellied, chicken-livered, scairdy turtle.” My editors said, “Could Franklin please not be such a wimp?” And second they felt that every child would feel Franklin’s humiliation enough without having this abuse heaped on him.

ROSS: Don’t overdo it.

BOURGEOIS: [laughter] Don’t overdo it at all. That’s what I’ve been learning through the editing process: to see that more is less; to pare down my own work and simplify it; to try hard to capture in one word what may have taken ten. I’m now doing that part of the process myself. The other thing that needed changing was the language. Not only was the language more elaborate than it needed to be but I had tried to introduce words that might expand a child’s vocabulary. I would throw in words like “claustrophobic.” I still believe that it doesn’t do a kid any harm at all: a foreign word really does expand his or her vocabulary and it’s helpful. On the other hand, if you have to stumble over a word, if it stops the flow, then the word is perhaps not appropriate. What I’m trying to do now is use words that have more innate expressiveness but aren’t too heavy-handed. So it doesn’t jump out at you that “I see, Paulette’s trying to teach us a new word here.”

ROSS: Now the other part of picture book is, of course, the pictures. These pictures [Brenda Clark’s illustrations for *Franklin*] suit the text.

BOURGEOIS: Kids Can Press did well in choosing an illustrator.

ROSS: You didn’t have any control over the illustrations?

BOURGEOIS: I certainly didn’t in *Franklin*. I didn’t see the illustrations until the final proofs. I was, however, delighted by them. I understand now that that’s an unusual experience.

ROSS: Quite rare. Did you have any surprises when you first saw the illustrations?

BOURGEOIS: They did surprise me. Franklin goes off and meets these animal helpers. In my own mind, these animals were other childlike figures. The illustrations made them into adults. Momentarily this disturbed me because, if I want to do anything in my books, it’s to give children a sense of their own power and a sense that they have their own resources; that they may need some guidance, but that they have the resources they need within them. So going to adults for help was not at all what I had in mind. On the other hand, in this particular book, the adults themselves have problems.

ROSS: The adults, in fact, are not much direct help to Franklin.

BOURGEOIS: That's right. That's why I said momentarily, because I soon realized that the flavor of what I had written had not been changed. And they're such delightful creatures.

ROSS: This one [the bird in a parachute] is wonderfully expressive.

BOURGEOIS: That happens to be my favorite one as well. Now *Big Sarah's little boots* was much more of a collaborative effort. Brenda and I discussed many elements of it. We're now doing a sequel to Franklin. Brenda called me this week and said, "Now look. In this Franklin, do you want the animals he meets (He does meet another sequence of animals) do you want them to be child animals or adult animals?" I said, "I leave that up to you." She'll be able to judge. She did ask me to change one animal character, a fish. All the animals go on a journey and end up in a house. It was going to be impossible for her — she felt impossible or a least very difficult — to get the fish into the house. So we've changed the fish to an otter at her suggestion, because she likes the playfulness. I can make those compromises and she will make compromises, so we do work well together.

ROSS: You've moved from working completely separately to this collaborative give-and-take. Do you think this new working arrangement will change the style of the books you do together?

BOURGEOIS: I don't think so. I don't think I'll have any different feeling about it. Brenda may. Perhaps with the first book she would have felt, "This character is set in stone. It has to be a polar bear." This time she has felt free to say, "A fish isn't working. Could you change it?" Which is nice.

ROSS: The idea of sequels is interesting. Readers who have enjoyed something want more of it. But writers sometimes say, "Well I'm bored with that. Don't make me write another Anne book." [laughter] So how did you feel about the prospect of a sequel?

BOURGEOIS: I didn't want to do it at all. I didn't want to do it **at all**. It wasn't my idea. Kids Can Press approached me and begged me to do another Franklin because the first book was popular and sold well. I didn't have another idea for Franklin. I didn't do Franklin in the first place because he was a character. I focussed on the problem rather than on the character. He **became** a character because of what Brenda did. There's very little about Franklin in the text — I don't describe him. But she gave him the character. I had seen him as a turtle with the problem.

ROSS: Which was resolved, so that was that.

BOURGEOIS: That's right. But as I started thinking about it, writing a sequel became a challenge. So I thought "What possibly could we do here?" I didn't want it to be just another problem. I didn't want Franklin suddenly to go off to nursery school or meet a bully. I didn't want to get Franklin into issue books.

ROSS: You didn't want to have to teach him toilet training.

BOURGEOIS: You're absolutely right. [laughter] In fact they did say — and I'm not kidding here — “Does Franklin bed-wet?” I said, “NO! Absolutely not.” I think it was done tongue-in-cheek, but I'm not quite sure. Franklin, I decided, was slow. This was perfectly appropriate, because I have two toddlers, who dawdle. And so Franklin dawdles, which gets him into problems in this book. He has to find a way, once again within himself, of deciding that there is a reason for hurrying — sometimes. He finds the solution himself; it's not an adult who imposes a solution on him. In that respect, the book is similar to *Franklin in the dark*. There are enough new elements for me not to be bored with it and for Brenda not be bored with it. But it is **the last**. There will be no more Franklins.

ROSS: Your readers will be glad to get at least one more Franklin.

BOURGEOIS: I hope so. I'll be interested in how it's received by kids, their parents, and the people who review books. People tend to be much, much tougher on you with sequels. They have expectations, and it's important that a writer meets those expectations. A sequel is really a tough test for a writer.

ROSS: You said that your publishers encouraged the sequel because the sales of the first *Franklin* were so good. Can you talk about where the books have sold?

BOURGEOIS: I have been told that for a first book *Franklin* did extraordinarily well. It certainly did well in Canadian sales. That was because it was a fall book and it was well received by some major publications that parents and teachers and librarians read. It got very nice reviews in major things like *Canadian Living*, *Chatelaine*, and *Macleans*, and it was on *The Journal*. The Children's Book Centre gave it a review and an “Our Choice” stamp.

ROSS: You couldn't beat that.

BOURGEOIS: No. Well, there is one thing I would have liked. It is always wonderful to have a book mentioned on the *Morningside* review panel. It wasn't mentioned. Sales really do skyrocket after a book is mentioned there. But I was pleased that people whose opinions I respected liked it. I think critics have something to offer. I know very little about children's literature, so when reviewers say something, I read it and try to absorb it. So anyway it got great reviews and sold well and has gone through a couple of printings in Canada. Scholastic-Tab picked up *Franklin* for the French version, as they did *Sarah*. Scholastic in the United States bought the American paperback rights and that's done extraordinary well.

ROSS: Have you a sales figure for the American paperback?

BOURGEOIS: I have heard about 180,000 in the first six months. Now those are paperback sales, so I don't get a great return. *Franklin* was also purchased by Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, I believe Britain, and Scandinavia or Holland. The international sales have been good for *Sarah*

as well, although no one in the United States has picked it up for soft cover rights. *The amazing apple* has been a surprise — to Kids Can Press and to me. It's done very well and has gone through two full printings. They did a large first printing on the Olympic book and it appears to be doing well. And the sales continue. Unlike some adult books that have a peak season soon after they're released, children's books, for me anyway, seem to reach their peak almost a year or two after they were first released. A lot of it is word of mouth.

ROSS: You didn't go through that long period of struggle that some people do to get recognized.

BOURGEOIS: No, I guess not. No. . . . I certainly had to struggle in my journalistic writing. I have worked briefly for newspapers and then did television as a reporter and then started doing magazine writing as a freelancer. And **that** is a struggle. It truly is. I think I've paid my dues in adult magazine writing. I have been writing for some of the major magazines in Canada and I still get many, many pieces back that have to be completely rewritten. Each of my books, of course, goes through a number of edits and rewriting.

ROSS: Would you see those years spent as a journalist as helpful training for writing your children's books?

BOURGEOIS: Absolutely, absolutely.

ROSS: How would you say the journalistic experience helped?

BOURGEOIS: I think there are two things. I've had two or three different kinds of careers. My training was as an occupational therapist, and I worked as an occupational therapist in psychiatry, mostly with adolescents but also with some adults and children. That way of being able to sit and listen to people; being able to sort out in a very methodical way life, problems, issues — all that was wonderful training in terms of building characters. I have met a lot of characters. Secondly, my journalistic training has helped me doing the nonfiction books. I know how to research; I know who to call and how to ask questions; and I know how to write quickly. You can't work at a newspaper with a deadline everyday and not learn how to write quickly. People keep saying to me, "How quickly did you do that book?" I do a book like *The amazing apple book* in two or three months, from start to finish. I have a system and a way of doing the nonfiction books. I struggle far more over the picture books, and I don't know that the journalistic experience has helped at all with them. I can't find any direct link between the two. But having the discipline to sit down at a word processor and being comfortable with the editing process have both helped me enormously.

ROSS: Many writers regard their stories as their children and feel that all editorial changes are amputations. You seem to have an approach that says, "I'm a craftsperson as well as a creator. If someone can make a

suggestion that I can use, I'll use it."

BOURGEOIS: Absolutely. Many people may fault me for that. They may think it's not pure enough. It works for me, I can't do anything other than that. However I have a book coming out in 1989 which is the one piece of writing into which I've poured a little bit more of me and my soul. It's a longer piece and far more personal. After writing that particular piece, I now have a greater understanding of writers who find the editing process difficult. Perhaps, as I grow more as a writer — and believe me I am growing — I may become more and more protective. I hope not. I hope I become more open to suggestion, more able to know what I want myself, and am able to blend the two.

ROSS: This more personal piece — is it the story you read last night about the old lady and the bear?

BOURGEOIS: Yes, it's about an old lady with no teeth and a boy who lives in her house. It's hard to read a new piece to people. One feels very vulnerable.

ROSS: What I liked about that story was the sense of place that I got from it. At the centre of that story, there seems to be a core of your own childhood experience of growing up — quite possibly changed and re-worked.

BOURGEOIS: Absolutely. Everyone says, "You have to deal with the familiar if you're going to write. You have to go inside yourself." Of course you do change it, expand it, manipulate it; you do things to it.

ROSS: As I heard you read that story I wondered: What makes this a children's piece?

BOURGEOIS: I don't know. When I first wrote it, I wrote it because I wanted to write it. I needed to write it. It's a story that's been in my head as long as I can remember. I never knew how to tell it before it came to me. But it's a story that's been with me for a very, very long time. I don't know what makes it a children's piece, other than that it's about a child and about something universal in childhood. It's about that point where you're no longer a child: you're not adult; you've begun to understand why people you've trusted have lied to you, but you don't fully understand it and wish you didn't understand it. You're not sure that you want to move on with that understanding. We all go through this experience. I don't see it necessarily as a children's book, though I think it will work well with children. I hope adults who read it will feel something in it.

ROSS: The narrator doesn't seem to be a child but an adult looking back at a significant moment in his rite of passage.

BOURGEOIS: I was afraid that Kids Can wouldn't publish it, that they would say it's not a children's book. Then I didn't know what I would do with it, because it's the only short story I've written. Perhaps it could have launched a short story collection for young adults or adults. But I'm glad

they decided to do it as a children's book. We'll have to see: it may just flop or it may be a wonderful success. It's a risk we'll have to take.

ROSS: We'll wait for 1989. How did you finally find the right shape for this story that had been so long in your head?

BOURGEOIS: I had been at a story telling workshop where I had been looking at Haitian tales. Unfortunately I kept focussing in my head on this other story, which was just going round and round and I desperately wanted to write it. So I didn't learn what I had come to learn about storytelling, because I was thinking the whole time about how to write "The old lady." It often happens with me, that a story spins in my head for a very long time. When it comes, it comes in almost its final form. I'm not a person to sit and write notes and have huge filefolders of ideas for a story. It's all in my head, and then it spits itself out on the wordprocessor.

ROSS: Let's talk now about *The amazing apple book*, your first nonfiction book. I liked the structure of that book, which is a mosaic. On every page you open up, there is some fact or some activity that is interesting.

BOURGEOIS: That's the way it was meant to be.

ROSS: How did you get started on it? Your publisher said to you, "We have an idea that we think may work?"

BOURGEOIS: That's right. They said, "Would you do an apple book?" I had told them that I was getting frustrated because I wanted to start moving away from the magazine writing. That can be a real struggle sometimes: it takes a lot of effort setting up interviews, doing interviews, waiting for phone calls back, going out to places, writing the stories, going through the editing process, and then doing it all again. I like children's books because it's not a constant back and forth. I can do it at home. I have more control over the final content of a book than I have over a magazine article. You have to conform to the various styles of magazines, so you never really have your own style. At any rate, Kids Can Press did call and say, "I know you want to be doing more work. You can only do one, or at the very most two, picture books a year for us. You can't glut the market with you own stuff. Would you like to do some nonfiction?" I said, "I'd be delighted." They said, "How about doing a book on apples?" They had published a book called *The maple syrup book* along the same lines. So I looked at *The maple syrup book* and got some ideas. I have a particularly good editor named Val Wyatt, whose background is from both *Owl* and *Chickadee*. She came up with some wonderful suggestions. My method of working is to lay the book out chapter by chapter. Then I sit down and make a list of questions that I want answered.

ROSS: Can you give some examples?

BOURGEOIS: I can give more examples from a book I'm just doing called *The paper book*, which will be very similar in format to *The amazing apple book*. I wrote down questions like: Why does a paper cut hurt so much? At

what point in the process does a tree become a log? Why is cardboard so strong? Which paper tissue really is the most absorbent?

ROSS: And what about those wasps that make paper?

BOURGEOIS: I've got them. I like to look at the topic from every conceivable perspective. From the science angle, I've got experiments on fibers within paper, the strength of paper, the absorbency of paper. Maybe I'll get the Science Centre to help me develop experiments, and then I'll do them with my own kids. We have a great time. Then I'll do a biological approach and look at Nature's paper-makers: birch bark and wasps. We'll go inside a newspaper or inside a book publishing operation to see how newspapers are made and how books are made. We'll go from the tree to the notebook, every stage in the process — done as a double or quadruple spread with just captions. And there will be all sorts of paper facts: how many serviettes can you make from a tree? And then there's paper bag cookery. And crafts you can make from paper like *papier maché* or a *pinata*. That's the sort of thing that sparks a kid's interest. I think it's helpful for teachers and for parents.

ROSS: Have you found teachers responsive to *The apple book*?

BOURGEOIS: Very. They're wonderfully responsive. Teachers could do this kind of book themselves, because they tend to think this way in the classroom to keep the grade threes interested. But you can't expect teachers to have the time for the leg-work involved. So I think this sort of book is a useful tool for many of them. I've had gratifying letters from kids and I've seen school projects. Or they've done their own book. In one school in Saskatchewan I visited this year, kids had done their own book of amazing apple recipes. They had taken favorite recipes through the generations and had thrown in fun things like a poison apple — things I wish I had done in the book.

ROSS: You mentioned growing as a writer. Where do you see yourself moving next with your writing?

BOURGEOIS: That's a hard question for me to answer, Catherine. I will continue to write. I don't think my nonfiction will change much. In my picture books, after the story of "The old lady with no teeth" I'll have to sit down and really decide where I'm going. I don't have any new picture books in mind. I do have a drawer full of picture books that I've written that are frankly dreadful. And I don't know if I can go through them again and pick out elements that I think are good to expand on them and make new stories. I think an element of growth is being able to look at your own stuff and say, "That's awful." I used to send off practically anything I wrote to Kids Can. They were very generous in saying, "Well. . . No." They never just threw it back and said, "Are you kidding?"

ROSS: This drawer full of stories were all written after you did *Franklin*?

BOURGEOIS: Yes. *Franklin* was my very first attempt. I was very lucky.

The drawer full of dreadful things — some came after *Franklin* and before *Sarah*; some came after *Sarah* and before “The old lady.” I do have an idea now which also has a grain of experience from my past. I guess we do have to reach back into ourselves. It’s a very different thing from *Sarah* or *Franklin* — much more aligned to “The old lady” in the style and the pace. So I may develop a whole new genre for myself, the older child’s picture book.

ROSS: So you’re experimenting. You’re still exploring what may turn out to be a new genre for you.

BOURGEOIS: Absolutely. I had a wonderful time writing “The old lady” and now that I’ve done the first public reading of it, there are some things I’ll change — minor things that didn’t flow as well as I would have liked. I don’t like the sequence of the child on the basement stairs when he’s had the realization that it wasn’t a real bear; I’ll rework that slightly. It didn’t ring true to me when I was reading it last night. It was awkward. I find that I can rework things much more easily after reading them aloud or telling them.

ROSS: Is it the audience response that helps? Or your own response as you read?

BOURGEOIS: I think it’s my own response. It’s how I want it to sound. Surely the audience response can’t help but affect me — you have these eyes looking at you and you get a sense of how the story is getting across. This is true particularly with children because their body language leaves no secrets.

ROSS: They all walk off.

BOURGEOIS: Exactly. But with adults, it’s far more subtle.

ROSS: It’s more the voice as you’re reading it: you think, there’s something wrong with the rhythm here; it’s not flowing.

BOURGEOIS: Yes.

ROSS: You mentioned that you really weren’t a children’s literature specialist when you started.

BOURGEOIS: [laughter] I’m not one now.

ROSS: But you have learned a whole lot about children’s books.

BOURGEOIS: I’m the farthest thing from a children’s specialist. I read as a child and was read to. But I certainly wasn’t reading the classics. I loved reading and I enjoyed writing.

ROSS: Did the idea of being a writer come to you quite early?

BOURGEOIS: I don’t think so. I was writing magazine articles when I was twelve or thirteen and sending them off to *Chatelaine* and *Teen* magazine. They never got published. So I started just shoving them in my drawer. My mother tells me, though I honestly have no recollection of this, that I had drawers and drawers full of stories that I wrote when I was eight, nine, ten. My mother has always thought writing was wonderful.

Teachers encouraged me to write, and I suppose that was why I went into journalism school. I wasn't happy as an occupational therapist. I wanted to explore the possibility of writing, and journalism school seemed a reasonable way of doing it. I don't know why I felt that just because someone told me I could write a nice story in grade eleven that I could be a journalist. The reality hit me smack in the face as I did my first court story. Later, when I had my own children, I went to the library with two thoughts. The first was that I wanted to read a lot to my children. Second, after I had read a few children's books, I thought, "Maybe I won't have to do so much magazine writing. I can write children's books." So, since I do things quite methodically, I went through as much as I could possibly read. I sat in Boys and Girls House and I read. I started with picture books at A and I read them, right through the shelves.

ROSS: You gave yourself a crash course in picture books.

BOURGEOIS: I guess I did.

ROSS: Tell me, who are your favorites?

BOURGEOIS: In picture books, I really enjoy Shirley Hughes. I like James Marshall — *George and Martha*. Chris Van Allsburg is absolutely stunning. And then, is it the Ahlbergs who did *The jolly postman* and *Each peach*. . .

ROSS: *Each peach, pear, plum*.

BOURGEOIS: Yes. And I have some Canadian favorites. I particularly liked *Morgan the magnificent*, which is Ian Wallace's work. When it gets to books for older children, I've been discovering authors that other people have known about for a long, long time. It's wonderful as an adult to read things like C.S. Lewis and find out what Narnia is. I also like. . .the person who wrote *Tom's midnight garden*.

ROSS: Phillipa Pearce.

BOURGEOIS: Yes. And I like Janet Lunn. I think Gord Taylor's doing some really lovely things. I was glad to see Welwyn Katz here last night because I think she's marvelous. I'm just reading as much as I can. I see it as part of my job as a writer to read as much as I can. I don't read academic criticism. I think I'm afraid that it will cramp my style. Others may say that, if it's my craft, I should know it inside-out. I guess I'm afraid to know it inside-out. I'm afraid that then I would have to conform to something. This way, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing, so I just do it. The naïvete, I think, has helped me. And being willing to be helped along has helped me too.

ROSS: I want to thank you very much, Paulette, for talking with me about your writing.

BOURGEOIS: Thank you, Catherine.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS BY PAULETTE BOURGEOIS

- Franklin in the dark*. Illus. Brenda Clark. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1986.
Big Sara's little boots. Illus. Brenda Clark. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1987.
The amazing apple book. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1987.
On your mark, get set. . . : All about the Olympics then and now. Toronto:
Kids Can Press, 1987.

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