

# David Ezra Stein discusses the story behind the story of *Because Amelia Smiled*



Well, I was coming back to college after having taken a year off. I was now a senior, and I had had a glimpse of the wide world during that past year. I had been a puppeteer, a puppet builder, a restaurant worker, a poet living by myself in Cape Cod. I became interested in Buddhism. I fell for a girl

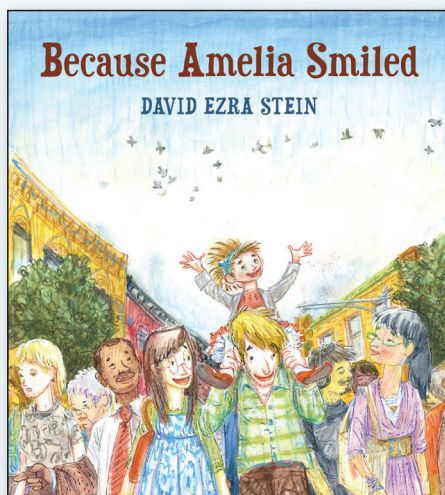
who played the guitar—I never got the girl, but I got a guitar.

So now that I was back at art school again, I saw that children's book illustration was listed as an elective. I thought, *Sure, why not, that sounds like it could be good!* For my first assignment, my teacher, Pat Cummings, had us write a story. She is a published author and illustrator, and she asked us to come up with an idea for a children's book. As it happened, I had been keeping a sketchbook ever since college began. I'd been collecting my stories and thoughts and random phrases and drawing pictures all along.

A week before class started, I had gone to the city to see my sister, and we talked about this and that. We started talking about Buddhism: about how you can choose in every moment how to respond to the things that happen to you. Say for example you're trying to cross the street, and somebody cuts in front of you and won't let you cross. You could get mad at this guy, and you could be mad for the rest of the day. Or you could just let it go.

I was walking home from the subway thinking about this, and suddenly a story started telling itself to me. I didn't have my sketchbook with me that day, but I

did have a large paper bag. As I was walking home, every few blocks I stopped and jotted down the story that was coming to me. It was the story of Amelia. When Pat asked us to write a story, I thought, *What about the one I wrote already?* So I brought it in, and she collected our stories. A week went by, and Pat offered to help me sell the story to a publisher.



Come again? Well, I didn't have too many plans for the future—I was about to graduate that spring with a degree in illustration, I had a part-time job as a puppet painter, and I lived with my mother. So I said, "Yeah, OK!" By the end of that week, a real-life editor e-mailed me! This was too easy! I had an epiphany: I had been writing all my life, and even though I was in art school, I was still allowed to write. Heck, I could even put my writing and art together and make a career.

I went to the bookstore and to the children's library and began to study books. I reread and rediscovered all my favorites from when I was a kid. I remembered that I *loved* books, especially picture books. I was twenty-two years old, and suddenly I knew what I wanted to do, or at least







what I wanted to try. So my writing was apparently ready to go—it was something people wanted—and that was great! But my art, well, that was definitely in a vulnerable place. I hadn't really found my visual voice yet—what to put on the page and what not to put. I didn't know if I wanted to do scratchboard or sculpture, to work on paper bags or wood. I was really into drawing from life and drawing from my imagination, but in terms of being ready to illustrate a book, I wasn't.

I went to this high office building and met this big editor, and she loved my story! She shook my hand and told me I had a wonderful career ahead of me. I went home and started to make art.

I used charcoal, gouache, acrylic! Inks of all kinds! I turned my art supplies inside out, trying to invent myself, trying to will myself to be something I really wasn't yet: an illustrator. Over the next six months, I'd go in once a month to the publisher. Each time the publisher would say, "We see some great stuff here. But it's not quite coming together." And I'd go home, clueless as to how I was going to pull this off.

After months and months, I gave up. The book was set aside. That was in 2000.

Then I graduated. I'd sit at the dining-room table in my mother's house and just write and draw stories, every day. Years passed, and I sold my first book, a different one, one

that was easier to illustrate. I published three books, got my agent, met a new editor, published more books, met Sarah Ketchersid at Candlewick. We did *Interrupting Chicken* together—my seventh book. One day I showed Sarah a batch of book ideas that I had for our next project together. Out of ten ideas, she picked *Amelia*. I thought, *OK, this is it! It's ten years later, and this time I'm ready. Let's do it!*

Now I know that I don't have to pick only one way of working, and the technique doesn't dictate what I do. I decide. The way I use a crayon is not the way someone else does. I even invented a new way to work, just for *Amelia*. I call it Stein-lining. It imitates a printmaking look for the line work of the book by using label paper. I apply crayon to label paper, turn it over, and press on the back to create a line on the artwork. It's like creating my own carbon paper using different colors of crayon.

Thirteen years after I first wrote it, *Amelia's* story is a book! I am so pleased. And I hope you enjoy it!