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Interview with Paul Brett Johnson

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Interview

RENEÉ CRITCHER

Interview with Paul Brett Johnson, Children's Author & Illustrator

Reneé Critcher is a native of Watauga County, North Carolina, where her family has resided for over 200 years. She holds a Master's in Library Science from Appalachian State University and is employed in Wilkes County as a Children's Librarian for the North Carolina Public School System. She is a creative writer, dancer, and singer, who often attends the Appalachian Writers' Workshop at the Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky.

INTRODUCTION

Paul Brett Johnson, a nationally acclaimed children's writer and illustrator, is a native of Eastern Kentucky. He currently resides in Lexington, Kentucky. Since 1993, with the introduction of *The Cow Who Wouldn't Come Down*, he has published more than 20 children's books. The *School Library Journal*, *American Bookseller*, *Bulletin*, and *Smithsonian* magazines have selected his works as "noteworthy" titles. Johnson's *Fearless Jack* is included on the New York Public Library's Top 100 List, and several of his books have earned recognition from the International Reading Association and Children's Book Council. Of greatest delight to Johnson is the honor of twice receiving the Kentucky Bluegrass Award, an award based on the votes of Kentucky's schoolchildren, for *A Perfect Pork Stew* and *The Cow Who Wouldn't Come Down*, as well as California's similar award, the Young Readers' Medal. In spring of 2003, Johnson also won the vote of North Carolina's school children as his *Fearless Jack* became the 2002-2003 North Carolina Junior Book Award winner.

He has illustrated children's books for Appalachian authors James Still (*An Appalachian Mother Goose* and *Sporty Creek*) and George Ella Lyon (*A Traveling Cat*).

Paul Brett Johnson's career has been profiled in the *2000 Children's Writers and Illustrators Market* and *Writers' Digest*.

CRITCHER: You were born and reared in Mousie in Eastern Kentucky. Would you locate Mousie for us, describe its location?

JOHNSON: Mousie is over there around Onion Blade, Dismal, Possum Trot, Sassafras, and Right and Left Beaver. But, if you haven't been to Knott County, you may not be able to locate those places, either. Most folks have heard of Hazard in Perry County. Mousie lies about 30 minutes' drive east of Hazard on



Paul Brett Johnson

old Route 80. It's smack in the middle of Eastern Kentucky coal country. By the way, Mousie got its name not from scampering little critters, but from a real person. Her name was Mousie Martin, and she was the first postmaster's daughter. Mousie had a sister whose name was Kitty. Go figure.

CRITCHER: You have stated that you "grew up alongside coal trains, annual hog killings, Sunday dinners on the ground, and a whole lot of whittling and spitting." How do you locate Mousie on a cultural map?

JOHNSON: Culturally speaking, I think life in Mousie was very similar to that of most other small mountain communities. The traditions that marked us as being Appalachian were shared over a large area. Even so, I think that identity had begun to erode even back in the 1950s and 60s when I was a youngster. We were becoming more connected to the rest of the world via TV and improving roads.

CRITCHER: How did the setting/topography and culture of your early youth influence your artistic and literary creativity?

JOHNSON: I think our formative years imprint our lives indelibly. We almost always think of "home" as the place where we grew up. And we always seem to go back there, if not literally, then figuratively. So a lot of what I produce draws on those patterns established early on—even in ways I'm not always aware of, quite often at an intuitive level.

CRITCHER: You have said that you spent long summer days with your grandfather "helping him tend to honeybees and listening to his doubtful tales." What were some of these "doubtful tales" and how have they contributed to the hyperbole found in your work? In other words, did your grandfather ever speak of such things as flying cows or of Jack "killing ten at a whack"?

JOHNSON: My grandfather was not a storyteller per se. He mostly stretched the truth in a grand and entertaining style. And his wit provided a sharp, but caring, commentary on the people he knew and the life around him. I try to bring his verve to my stories—some of which I create myself, others of which I retell from the regional literature.

CRITCHER: Will you tell us a story about your grandfather that illustrates his wit?

JOHNSON: My grandfather had something wrong with his left arm—an old war wound or some such. When people asked him how it was coming along, he would lift it high saying, "I used to be able to reach way up here." Then he would lower his arm to half-mast. "Now I can only reach about here."

CRITCHER: Do the children you visit in schools, who frequently see disturbing images on television, such as the destruction of the Twin Towers, crave books rich in humorous exaggeration?

JOHNSON: Since I don't see these children day to day, I don't know to what extent that terrible event has had an impact on their lives. I do know that, in a general sense, people of all ages love to laugh, and exaggeration is one way to make that happen.

CRITCHER: What character or event in your life most directly contributed to the sense of wonder and beauty evident in your books *Farmer's Market*, *Lost*, and *Saint Patrick and the Peddler*?

JOHNSON: Early on, when I first began to draw and paint, my subject matter was the mountain landscape that surrounded me. I remain, at heart, a landscape painter. If, indeed, I am able to articulate a sense of wonder and beauty in my work, then it is directly related to the wonder and beauty I see in nature itself.

CRITCHER: Tell us about your trips to other “landscapes,” several of which have led to the retelling of folktales from other cultures. I’m specifically thinking of *A Perfect Pork Stew*.

JOHNSON: That story was inspired by a trip to Russia, but it’s not a retelling. I used a couple of stock characters from Russian folklore—Baba Yaga the witch and Ivan the simpleton—and combined them with a swapping motif, which seems to be universal, to come up with an original tale. If it sounds like a retelling, that’s good. That’s what I was after.

CRITCHER: How would you say the oral traditions of the different cultures you experience in your travels compare with Appalachian traditions?

JOHNSON: As a tourist I do not, of course, get to experience a region’s culture in depth. And I am not fluent in any foreign language. So I don’t really get exposed to the oral tradition when I visit another country. When I return from a trip, I often read English versions of that country’s folk tales, looking for something that might be adapted to a picture book. As for comparing these to the Appalachian traditions, you do see quite a few story lines and motifs that cross cultural boundaries.

CRITCHER: Does the landscape itself inspire your choice of story?

JOHNSON: I think it’s more art and architecture that sets the stage, though the landscape itself certainly plays a vital role.

CRITCHER: I believe your mother was a school librarian. What books do you remember your mother first sharing with you? What characters, incidents, or illustrations from those books trigger your memories?

JOHNSON: There was a built-in bookcase at the top of the stairs going up to my bedroom, and it was jam-packed with books. I spent countless hours absorbed by the pages within those books. My earliest memories are of several Mother Goose books. I think I learned all the rhymes by heart. Later I became engrossed in a giant, ten-volume collection of classic stories called *Journeys through Bookland*. It had just about every author you can remember—Rudyard Kipling, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, Jonathan Swift, the Brothers Grimm, and many, many others. I also adored the Oz books. My very favorites, though, were “Grandfather Tales” and “The Jack Tales.” These were Appalachian stories collected and retold by Richard Chase.

CRITCHER: Do these memories influence your current characterizations and illustrations?

JOHNSON: Well, three of my published picture books are based on material from the Richard Chase stories. But, in a more general sense, anything that an artist produces springs from the composite of their experiences. So yes, in that respect, these early experiences with literature do inform my current writing and illustrating.

CRITCHER: What other family or community member influenced your artistic perception and/or sense of story?

JOHNSON: A lot of my stories are humorous in nature. I guess that comes from my mother's side of the family, including my truth-stretching grandfather. They surely were, and are, a laughing lot. My father's side may have been a bit more serious-minded, but both sides put great store in education and learning. Both encouraged and rewarded achievement. I think that general attitude of support had more impact on my development than did a particular person or event.

CRITCHER: In what ways did your family support and encourage your writing and art?

JOHNSON: They always voiced their pride in my accomplishments. And they always tried to provide opportunities for learning, even when those opportunities had to be rooted out. For instance, since public school art was nearly non-existent, my parents secured private art lessons for me from the art instructors at Alice Lloyd College.

CRITCHER: You have stated that you visualize stories before they are written. Why do you think that is?

JOHNSON: It's just the way I'm wired up. I tend to think in pictures. As I'm writing, the pictures that I see in my head very often inform the words that get put down on paper. The words and mind-pictures sort of play off each other, back and forth. However, I rarely start drawing or painting until I've got the story nailed.

CRITCHER: Do you sketch "thumbnail" illustrations for your books and then write the story, or do you write the story first?

JOHNSON: I always write the story before I start any actual artwork.

CRITCHER: Is your original art part of any institutional collection, or are there any plans along those lines?

JOHNSON: I have quite a few private collectors and several corporate ones, but I'm not in any museums, other than one or two regional ones. That's an aspect of marketing to which I have devoted very little time or effort. It's not that I wouldn't like to have my work in major collections; it's just that I don't have the time myself and have not met or sought out any agents or artists' representative who might be able to place my work.

CRITCHER: How do you believe your books will influence "budding" artists and writers, whom you have said "are always in the crowd"?

JOHNSON: I never know what buttons I might be pushing because every individual is different. It may well be something as simple as just striking a chord with the reader. Whenever I do school visits, I try to keep an eye out for the student who seems more keenly interested, or who has a more perceptive question, or who has that "needy" look. Just a word of encouragement may go far, just implying "I was able to achieve some of my dreams, maybe you can too if you dare to try."

CRITCHER: Speaking again about the picture books of your youth, do you remember any of them giving you a sense of identity or self-awareness?

JOHNSON: One of my favorite childhood picture books was “The Story of Ferdinand.” Ferdinand was a young bull who was expected to grow up and fight in the bullring. However, Ferdinand had his own agenda, which was to sit quietly and smell the flowers in the meadow. I felt empowered by Ferdinand’s will to go his own way.

CRITCHER: Yes, we all have a book like that. Mine was *Mop Top* by Don Freeman. Of all your books, which one do you think will impress children, become something they will remember?

JOHNSON: From what I can tell, *The Cow Who Wouldn’t Come Down* seems to elicit the most response.

CRITCHER: Do you remember Appalachian characters in books you read as a child, other than Chase’s *Jack* and *Grandfather Tales*?

JOHNSON: No single character stands out as someone whom I felt was just like me. I probably related to individual aspects of a number of characters.

CRITCHER: As an adult, does the fact that books with Appalachian characters were either non-existent or few in number during your childhood “stoke the furnace” so to speak? In other words, do you believe this might be the reason why your creative abilities were directed towards the field of children’s literature?

JOHNSON: Not really. To be quite honest, I create my picture books more for me than my audience. With picture books, I have a vehicle that allows me to use both words and pictures to scratch the creative itch.

CRITCHER: You have stated that you draw upon “lessons learned” from your childhood, placing them into each new book. How so?

JOHNSON: I didn’t mean that literally. It’s more the combination of experiences and memories. When I write, I draw upon that reservoir, but I don’t set out to base a story on a “lesson learned.”

CRITCHER: Are you hoping to teach lessons yourself through your books?

JOHNSON: I’m not sure I’m qualified to teach anybody anything. But I do hope the themes that are present in my stories help the reader take a look back at him or herself.

CRITCHER: You have said that when you wrote *The Cow Who Wouldn’t Come Down* you realized it contained a “folk heritage that was my own.” Do you feel your books are helping today’s native Appalachian child retain a swiftly disappearing heritage?

JOHNSON: I would like to think so. Many, if not most, of the traditions and folkways that make up the Appalachian identity are no longer practiced. We have become a very homogenized country. I do try to create a sense of place and culture in a number of my books.

CRITCHER: In your opinion, are you saving a culture or simply recording one that is gone?

JOHNSON: Nothing as ambitious or directed as either of those. I merely tell stories using the language and the images with which I am familiar. I guess that is a type of record-making, but I doubt if it’s all that objective. As far as saving a culture, I don’t think anyone can do that.

CRITCHER: After writing and illustrating your own stories, why did you return to the Jack Tales as a source for material?

JOHNSON: I truly believe that there is nothing original under the sun. Even my stories that are not retellings have borrowed bits and pieces from who-knows-where. So borrowing from the Jack cycle is not such a departure, really. The trick is to make the material your own, bring your own voice to it. Tell it in such a way that it feels original. I hope I have done that in all cases.

CRITCHER: What reactions have you received from folklorists regarding your retelling of the Jack Tales? What reactions have you received from children?

JOHNSON: By and large, my Jack stories have been met with great enthusiasm from children and educators as well as reviewers. There is the occasional purist who feels that taking material from the oral tradition and bending it to your own purposes amounts to exploitation. (Richard Chase certainly had his detractors.) Obviously, I don't agree. I think my stories have brought the character, Jack, to an audience that might not otherwise have known him.

CRITCHER: I'm sure you receive correspondence from children. Tell us (1) what's the most profound statement and (2) the most profound question you have received from a child.

JOHNSON: (1) I love your books. (2) Will you write a book about me?

CRITCHER: In these same letters, have children talked about how your books affect or influence them?

JOHNSON: Mostly, students tell me in their letters which books and which parts they like best—and why (usually because it made them laugh). Sometimes students say they want to be writers or illustrators when they grow up. Before I get too smug, I remind myself that they have plenty of time to change their minds.

CRITCHER: One of the many aspects of your work that I love is your use of the Appalachian vernacular, for example, such words as “tizzy,” “plumb,” “widder,” and “commenced.” What are children's reactions to this use of language? Do any of the children you meet still use this language? How have editors and/or others reacted to the use of traditional language?

JOHNSON: Using vernacular in writing is a balancing act. My Appalachian-based stories are read by children from many other backgrounds. If I feel a certain word or phrase draws too much attention, or if it cannot be somewhat understood in context, then I tend to leave it out. Actually, I think the rhythms and cadences of speech contribute as much to vernacular as do specific words. I do think traditional speech patterns persist in Appalachia, perhaps more so than in a lot of other traditions. Editors with whom I have worked all seem to appreciate the peculiarities of “mountain talk,” even if they don't always tune in to the nuances.

CRITCHER: Turning to the publishing aspects of your work, how did you convince the publishers of New York City that the stories of Mousie, Kentucky, were of value? In other words, to what do you attribute your breakthrough?

JOHNSON: My first book, *The Cow Who Wouldn't Come Down*, did not name any particular place. However, its rural, mountain setting was apparent. Publishers are very open to diverse ethnic and cultural stories as long as they work on other fronts as well. A good story is universal, really, no matter what its setting is.

CRITCHER: Have you dealt with any stereotypical attitudes within the industry and how did you overcome them?

JOHNSON: Stereotypes don't materialize out of thin air, and I don't have anything against using stereotypes as long as you respect and care for the character and the situation, as long as you render them as real and multi-dimensional. On two occasions I have felt uncomfortable with what editors suggested. I felt they wanted to go a little too far over the top for a laugh. But both times the editor was quick to respect my objections.

CRITCHER: What is an example of an editorial suggestion you resisted?

JOHNSON: For *Old Dry Frye*, an editor suggested that I show the mother with a kid on her hip and several children on the floor. That image seemed too derisive.

CRITCHER: Have you fought the battle of artistic license vs. marketability? If so, how did you prevail?

JOHNSON: More and more, the "bottom line" seems to rear its ugly head in publishing. Most publishing houses are now owned by mega-companies who are calling for higher profit margins. It used to be that manuscript acquisition was mostly editor-driven. Now it's most often by committee, with the marketing department having a huge say. So, if a literary piece doesn't also promise market viability, it may well be passed over. Even after a story has been bought, an editor feels enormous pressure to ensure its marketability. Changes may be brought to bear that compromise the author or illustrator's artistic vision. Sometimes you can hold your ground, but other times you just have to let it go.

CRITCHER: Which of your published works do you cherish the most, and why?

JOHNSON: I have several personal favorites, but if I had to choose just one I guess it would be *The Cow Who Wouldn't Come Down*. That was my first published book, and I still recall vividly the thrill of seeing it in print. That moment was the fulfillment of a dream. Authors and artists are not always the best judge of their own work, but I think that first effort may still be my best, overall.

CRITCHER: You have won several prestigious awards. In your opinion, how do awards contribute to both the quality of children's literature and to the artist's/writer's sense of purpose?

JOHNSON: I have mixed feelings about awards. They certainly make you feel good if you get them, but you must guard against working toward them. Their greatest worth is probably in the marketing department.

CRITCHER: How has the receipt of these awards affected your work?

JOHNSON: While I admit to an occasional pie-in-the-sky fantasy trip (in the same vein that I might contemplate winning the lottery jackpot), I don't think the business of awards has affected my work—at least I hope not.

CRITCHER: Tell us a bit about your future projects.

JOHNSON: I'm pretty much a picture book kind of guy, so I doubt if I'll venture too far into other formats. I do have an eclectic bent, however. So I will no doubt continue to visit a variety of subjects and styles within the picture book category. I will certainly continue to draw from the Appalachian folkways and folklore.

CRITCHER: At this point in your career, what are your hopes and dreams?

JOHNSON: I am often amazed that I have been able to make a living writing stories and painting pictures. For that I feel truly blessed. I enjoy what I do so much I hesitate to call it "work." My hopes and dreams include a lot more of the same, along with new growth and learning.

CRITCHER: The dreams of artists have always been heeded, sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly, depending upon the times. Will you tell us your specific dream for Appalachia's future, its people and its children?

JOHNSON: I would like to see a time when people of all walks of life are free of want and free to grow to their fullest potential.

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