



Born:

Hiawatha, KANSAS
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

A blessed thing happened to me.
I had a teacher who read to me.

There were no books in our home when I was a child. I didn't learn to read until I was in college. Even so, from the beginning I associated the ability to read with lifelong well-being. The only children's book that impressed my young life was *The Brownies* by Palmer Cox. I checked it out of the Morrill Free Public Library in our small town, Hiawatha, Kansas. Palmer Cox wrote in verse that I couldn't read, but his pen-and-ink illustrations filled my life to overflowing with visions of wee brownies engaging in all the happy dreams of childhood — going to the circus, sailing a o-mast ship at sea, visiting a cattle ranch, slipping into the zoo at night, and so on.

Then a blessed thing happened to me. I had a teacher who read to me. Of course, she was reading to all the other children in the classroom, too, but I believed she was reading just to me because I was a nonreader. Miss Davis never missed a day reading to us. Reading aloud was an integral part of her ambitions for us kids. When we begged her to continue a reading session, she often complied, knowing (as children do) that a good story refuses to be left alone. It keeps nagging one to continue. That kind of nagging is life's most pleasant reading instruction.

Even when type on a page didn't make sense to me, I considered myself a reader — because I loved the sound and the cadence of the language, the power of narrative, and the images words concocted in my mind.

My first book reading came when I was twenty. In college. Yes, then even nonreaders were admitted to college if they could muster tuition fees. By this time in my life, I was so skilled in masking my print blindness that most teachers thought I was lazy, unprepared, never suspecting that it was my ears, not my eyes, that opened sesame. I have Miss Davis to thank. She tuned my ears to literate language, to the voice of the text. Not to the voice of Jack London, but to the voice of his story "To Build a Fire." Not to the voice of Robert Louis Stevenson, but to the voice of *Treasure Island*. Now, years later, I have learned to search the page for the voice of the text in determining whether to devote reading time to an unfamiliar book. In this context, voice and comprehension are synonymous.

Courtesy of Scholastic

I went on to finish my college education, and to earn a master's degree and a doctoral degree in early childhood education from Northwestern University. I've been a teacher, a school principal, a textbook editor, and a writer.

The things I believe about language have become so much a part of the way I think and write that it's hard for me to sort them out and talk about them separately, I guess I've become integrated, sort of like the curriculum.

I don't write books, I *talk* them. Of course, words do get set down on paper at some point, but that's not where I begin. My writing process is talking; I talk a story through many times to see if I'm saying what I mean. I need to hear what I have to say.

I wrote *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* on a Long Island Railroad train. I got on the train at the Plandome station, the first stop after Port Washington, and thirty-three minutes later, when we arrived at Penn Station, I had completed *Brown Bear*. I had the entire story worked out in my head. No one else could share the joy I was feeling about the story until I got to my office; in fact, the person in the seat behind me on the train had glanced at me a few times because I muttered the lines aloud to get the rhythm of the language just right.

Brown Bear was a sort of watershed for me. I saw what children were able to do with that story and I became more courageous in creating rhythmic, highly patterned stories.