

Interview with Gregory Turner-Rahman about *Ellabug*

Hello!

Before we start I want to make a comment that, while biased (since I am one of the editors at Diversion Press) it is also true, this is one of my favorite children's books. I say that not just as a publisher, but someone who has three children

That is very kind and I am extremely pleased that you enjoy it. Do the kids like it? I hope so. When you work on something so intensely you never know exactly how it will be received. I have been surprised by how people are responding to it. It has been incredibly positive.

What inspired you to write *Ellabug*?

I think most stories start with a kernel of true-life experience. There are so many families I know that are a mocha-swirl of cultures, races, ethnicities, and even religions – including my own. Sometimes it is easy to take for granted or, worse, to feel self-conscious about the unique and really good aspects of being in such a family. I thought the multi-animal family would be a fun way to talk about the issue. But the story could really be about any family and how wonderfully unique each is. My hope is that the story resonates with everyone.

How long did it take you to conceptualize the project?

Egads. I am not sure. My daughter, when she was young would ask for me to read a bedtime story then, as one of those brilliant kid delay tactics (along with the proverbial glass of water), ask me to make up a story. To be completely candid, I was terrible at doing this. So, being the consummate professional parent (my wife is rolling her eyes right now), I prepared the story ahead of time. The rhyme helped me remember the story. Parts of the final story that appear in the book must be at least 7 years old. Translating it into images and refining the story, however, only took a few weeks.

What is *Ellabug* searching for in the book?

If you dig deep enough, I think, Ella is really looking for assurance that it is ok to be who she is. Through that archetypal hero's journey, however, she has to go through hardship in that search for "normalcy" to realize that what she's got at home IS normal.

In our children's books we strive to only work with books that give a strong positive message. What is that message in *Ellabug*?

Regardless of those things - strange ideas and prejudices - that other people get hung up on, it is really all those crazy people in your life and the great big set of experiences, your life, that really make you who you are. Why not embrace and celebrate that fact?!

What advice would you give to any aspiring children's writers and/or illustrators?

I learned it is very difficult to do both writing and illustrating.

If you do take on both tasks be sure to have the story completed before beginning the drawings.

I kept having to break up the argument between my right and left brain. The left brain always wanted the text to be the whole story. The right brain wanted more explanation through the images. Finally, I had to split them up and left would sit and sulk and the right would listen to jazz and shoot spit wads at the left brain. It would've been much worse if I hadn't had the story somewhat complete.

Anyway, I would also suggest really striving to create a story that could address a particular issue but could also be viewed more universally. The story has to have broad appeal.

As a university professor in an art department, I work with a lot of young artists and illustrators and would say that it is very important for them to remember that the illustrations should be in service of the story and not necessarily a series of masterpieces. There are many extravagantly beautiful children's books on the market. So, the temptation and desire is to put everything into the art work. This is fine as long as it supports the story. As a parent, I can say that, with many of the books we've bought, while the images initially have a "WOW!" factor, it is the stories that remain long after it has been read/viewed. I love those illustrations that are simple yet really give an essence of the story. A classic example is Quentin Blake and his work with Roald Dahl.

If you had to convince someone to purchase a copy of Ellabug in only two sentences what would you say?

"HELP! My kidnappers said they won't release me until you buy my book Ellabug!"

Where can we get a signed copy of Ellabug?

Good question. I am currently setting up signings locally. I live in rural eastern Washington State and teach in rural Idaho so I think I will try to line up some event in Seattle perhaps near the University of Washington, my alma mater.

In the meantime, if you happen to be in the neighborhood...