

## **An Interview with Sheryl Hershey**

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/interview-sheryl-hershey/>

This entry is part 4 of 8 in the series [GSB Interview](#)

[GSB Interview](#)

- [Interview with Non-fiction Illustrator Konrad Algermissen](#)
- [Jordan Scavone and being Might-E](#)
- [Author Rob Skead: Submarines & Secrets](#)
- An Interview with Sheryl Hershey
- [An Interview with Jo Marshall: Bringing nature to story and story to nature](#)
- [Interview with MG Novelist Shelley Tougas](#)
- [Special Interview with Author/Artist Lita Judge](#)
- [Interview with YA Novelist Patti Buff](#)

Sheryl Hershey's debut children's book, [Lila and the Dandelion](#), has encouraged hearing children to learn sign language, it has invited teachers to use the book inside their classrooms, and most recently, [Nick Baker](#), a talented musician (who is autistic and blind) is currently writing a song about Sheryl's book.

**Nick Baker's song will be performed at a fundraising concert this Summer at the [Washington State School for the Blind](#). Though known for a wide repertoire at the piano, Nick Baker also writes social and politically driven songs. As Sheryl says, "He [Baker] seems to have a better vision of our current congress than all the congressional members with 20/20 eyesight."**

I've never met Sheryl personally, but I'd really like to someday. She's got an interesting series of books ahead of her, and she's driven.

### **A few personal tidbits...**

Sheryl can't tell you why her favorite colors are pink and purple, but they are and always have been. Her favorite food: artichoke hearts. Favorite drink: Diet Pepsi, because "it feels sinful, but isn't." She has Type 1 Diabetes and this doesn't stop her one bit.

**I have a copy of Lila and the Dandelion, one that Sheryl inscribed to my daughter.** It's a good, solid piece of work. I've since read the book to several kids and they all (girls *and* boys) love both it and the activities included at the end of the book.

**GSB: Sheryl, what was your inspiration for writing Lila and the Dandelion?**

Sheryl: My grandmother and granddaughter were the inspiration for this book. I wanted my granddaughter to know what type of women she came from, so I wrote Lila and the Dandelion for her based on the teachings of my grandmother, Lila Ahlsten. Lila dedicated her life to teaching children who were blind, deaf and couldn't speak. She believed that every child, no matter their challenges, had an important place in the world.

**How was the contract arranged with your illustrator, Michael James Marshall?**

Michael and I don't have a written contract. After discussing Lila and the Dandelion for several months with my friend, Yvonne Cartwright, a marketing executive, she introduced Mike and me. I gave him a copy of the text. He sketched a quick concept drawing for me.

I told him how much money I had to spend on illustrations, and we agreed then and there to work together. Mike just instantly understood what I wanted, and I knew that he was the illustrator I wanted to work with on the book. I believe that God gives us nudges in the right direction, and that was definitely a nudge.

**Did you work directly with Marshall or through your editor?**

I am lucky enough to work directly with Michael. He, Yvonne and I meet every week to review new ideas, status updates, drawings, etc. The three of us have developed a close relationship based on our shared ridiculous sense of humor and our belief in the potential of the Lila Books.

**What kind of relationship do you have with your publisher?**

I love the relationship that I have with Mascot Books. They're a small company, so I'm able to easily get in touch with whomever I need at Mascot. The first person that I "met" was Naren Aryal, the owner of the company. I researched children's book publishers online, and thought that Mascot Books would be a good fit for me. I emailed my book idea to Naren. He liked my idea, and asked to see whatever text and drawings I had, so I sent them to him.

Once he decided that they would be willing to publish Lila and the Dandelion, he introduced me (via email and text) to Laura, my project manager. From there, Laura has directed me to whichever member of the Mascot Books team whose help I need. They're personable, helpful and professional. I haven't met any of them face to face, but I have sent them chocolate chip cookies! You can't really have a relationship with someone without sharing cookies, you know.

**You added questions and activities at the end of the book. I think this is really terrific. Did you come up with that idea yourself or did your publisher ask you to do that?**

Originally, I wanted Lila and the Dandelion to be a short board book. The publisher advised me that this would be very limiting, and encouraged me to make the book longer. Since the text was pretty well finalized already, I needed to find a way to lengthen the book without changing the text.

A neighbor of mine who is a retired teacher, was the first one to suggest that I add questions at the end of the book. This adds an element that can help make Lila and the Dandelion easily adaptable to a classroom curriculum. It also makes it so easy for a parent to have a real conversation with their child about the book. From there, Mascot Books and I worked together to come up with the questions we used.

**What is the thing you are most proud of with this book?**

I am most proud of the message that Lila and the Dandelion has for all children: “You don’t have to be perfect to be important in this world. The world is a better place simply because you are in it.” My grandmother would be so proud that her message is still vital even all these years after her death.

**Is there anything you wish were different about the book, and if so, what?**

Well, let me think. I wish that I knew how to put this book in front of millions of parents, grandparents, children, teachers, etc. It’s so positive, bright and cheerful that I can’t imagine a child not being touched in a positive way by reading Lila and the Dandelion. I guess that’s my way of saying that I love the book exactly as it is.

**Are you touring the book? Where – and what has your experience been like?**

I actually am touring the book.. For starters, Lila and the Dandelion was presented to the mayor of Tateyama, Japan, with an inscription written in Japanese: “To the people of Tateyama: The world is a better place because you are in it.” This presentation was made by Bellingham’s Sister Cities Association. The mayor of Tateyama has now donated the book to their city library.

Next, [the book] spent 10 days in Orange County, California. On Valentine’ Day, I did a book signing/tea party at a wonderful independent book store in Tustin, CA. This darling store was called Once Upon A Storybook. I then visited each Barnes and Noble Store in the area. 8 out of the 11 stores that I visited agreed to carry Lila and the Dandelion in stock. Next weekend I will be in the Portland, OR area.

I have a meeting at the WA State School for the Blind to see about doing a fundraiser for them through sales of the book. There’s actually a building there named after my grandmother. After that, I have a radio interview scheduled for the Columbia River Gorge area, and will be doing a book signing in Goldendale, WA. When I can get another week or two off work, I plan to hit up every Barnes and Noble store and independent bookstore on the I-5 corridor in Washington and Oregon.

**What are your favorite shoes?**

What a great question!! My favorite shoes are bright red pumps with red and white striped bow ties. They’re made of recycled materials, and can be washed in the dishwasher. I do children’s tea parties, and these are extremely comfortable and showy for that.

My granddaughter, Skylar, has her own favorites though, that are actually inspired by the Lila Books. They're bright pink sequined high-top sneakers that she calls "Lilas." She thinks it's wonderful that the character of Lila, who is drawn to look like Skylar, always wears pink sneakers.

### **What is your favorite place in the world?**

My favorite place is Whistler, British Columbia. My husband and I spend the American Thanksgiving up there every year. The atmosphere is heavenly, the scenery is beautiful, and it's a perfect place to relax. Plus, it's only a 3 hour drive from where we live, so it's not hard for us to get there.

### **Where did you write and edit your story?**

My backyard cottage is my workspace. I put everything that I love into that building. Bless the contractor who built it for me. I didn't even have a drawing for him. I just explained to him that I wanted a 6-sided building, with windows on 5 of those sides. He did a perfect job. It's warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Most people would call it a storybook cottage. It's very girly, with teacups and teapots. Even the chandelier is made of teacups. My worktable is bright pink. Everything in the cottage, except for my Lazy Boy recliner and the area rug, is repurposed.

### **What is for you the most challenging aspect of creating an illustrated storybook like this? Was this a surprise for you?**

The actual creation of the book, with the team that I have, was a dream. Mike Marshall, Yvonne Cartwright and the crew from Mascot Books made that a wonderful experience. Marketing, though, is a challenge. I didn't realize how much time it would take, or how hard I would have to work to get Lila and the Dandelion in front of people who could spread the word about this book. (Thank you, Chazda!) Thankfully, I'm happy to talk about the Lila Books, so it's never a chore for me. I just wish that I had 100 hours/day to do all of the marketing that I would like to do!

### **You have a new story coming soon. Can you talk about that a bit?**

The next book in the Lila Books Series is called Lila and the Stinkbug. It was a pure joy to write. Once again, Michael Marshall has hit the nail on the head in his illustrations of Esby, the Stinkbug. Esby has a bit of an attitude, and Mike captures this perfectly in his illustrations. In this book, Lila, Dandelion and Esby work together to figure out how to get Esby's stinker unstuck. The outcome and the lesson learned are adorable, if I do say so myself!

### **What kind of writing did you do before launching the Lila series?**

Most of the writing I did before launching the Lila series was in the form of written warning, union contracts and policy handbooks. I have spent the majority of my life as an H.R. Director for a cold storage/food processing company. In my spare time, though, I enjoyed writing humorous articles for the company newsletter, as well as being the ghostwriter for my dog's blog. I think the only way to find that would be to google "[Bellingham's Buddy Hershey](#)." It's so old that it may no longer appear online. [It does!]

**Do you know how many Lila books you want to write?**

I already have solid ideas for at least 10 more Lila books. The stories all deal with things that actually affect my family. Needless to say, my family is very large and very interesting! When you stop to consider all of the challenges that we face in our lives, there are an untold number of stories to be told to children about how these challenges enrich our lives.

Through my marketing of Lila and the Dandelion, I have discovered that children love to learn sign language. Taking their feedback to heart, we have decided to use more sign language in the upcoming Lila Books. You will see this in Lila's use of sign language, as well as in the interactive teachings at the end of the books.

**If I remember correctly, your book is part of a school curriculum in the US, which is fantastic. Can you give some detail on that?**

I wish that our book was part of a standard school curriculum in the US. As it is, there are some elementary schools which have begun using our book. The questions in the book make it very easy for teachers to incorporate our book into their classroom planning. It also encourages children of all types to give their thoughts regarding the story.

Mascot Books hasn't done any of the marketing with individual schools. They did try to become a vendor of Lakeshore Learning Centers, which is a store used by teachers, but weren't successful in that endeavor. Instead, I am going to individual schools to encourage their use of Lila and the Dandelion.

**Who would you say has been your greatest inspiration in life (not just for this book series)?**

There is no doubt as to my greatest inspiration in life: my family. From my daughter and grandchildren, to my husband, parents, brothers and sisters, I have been incredibly blessed in the depth and variety of my family. I'll never forget when one of my siblings told my father something about herself that she had hidden all of her life. She truly feared being banished from the family. My father's take on it? "Oh, well. What's one more weirdo in the family?!" We love each other unconditionally, and I could never ask for more than that. I believe that my grandmother, Lila, would be very happy to see this unconditional love.

**If you could read your story to any particular person in the world, who would it be?**

This is easy. I would read the story to my grandmother. She had such a hard life, but did so much good for the children that she taught. I just want her to know what a difference her life made.

My grandmother's sister, Alta Lampman, is still alive at age 103. My mother read the book to Auntie Alta, who loved it. She thought that it was a book for all ages, and had much to teach adults as well as children. She does want to know, though, how dandelions are used as medicine. I'll be giving her the answer to that question next weekend when I go down to visit.

**Important Links:**

[Mascot Books](#) (Sheryl's publisher)

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[The Lila Books](#) (Sheryl's official website for this series)

[The Washington State School for the Blind](#) (and also where Sheryl's grandmother taught back in the 40's, 50's and 60's)

[Signing Savvy](#) (to improve your signing ability)

[Nick Baker](#) (the pianist who is writing a song about Lila and the Dandelion)

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