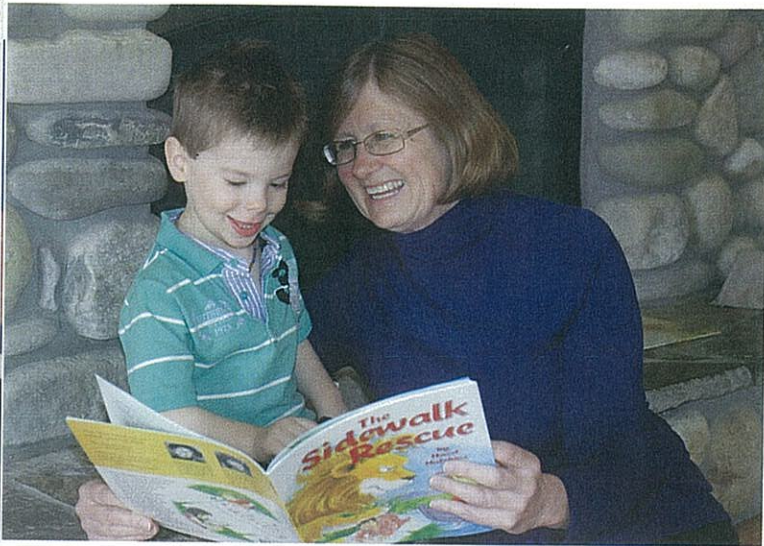


Hazel Hutchins

UNWRAPS THE STORY | BY LIAN GOODALL



For Hazel Hutchins, writing a story is like holding “a big parcel, wrapped up in many layers. Sometimes I take one off, and find that it’s still wrapped up. Then I take off another layer, and another until I have found the wonderful little core. To me it’s about ‘refining’ to say exactly what the story is.”

After 27 years of publishing children’s magazine pieces, middle-grade fiction, a young adult novel and numerous picture books, Alberta’s Hazel Hutchins is still on the look out for good stories. With more than 40 published books, she has a confident and marvellous idea of how the process will unfold.

In the early 1980s, Hutchins was writing short stories for adults. However, having young children herself, she was always “bringing home stacks of kids’ books from the library. One day the librarian said to me ‘You should be writing some of these.’ I thought ‘Oh no. I write to have a separate life!’”

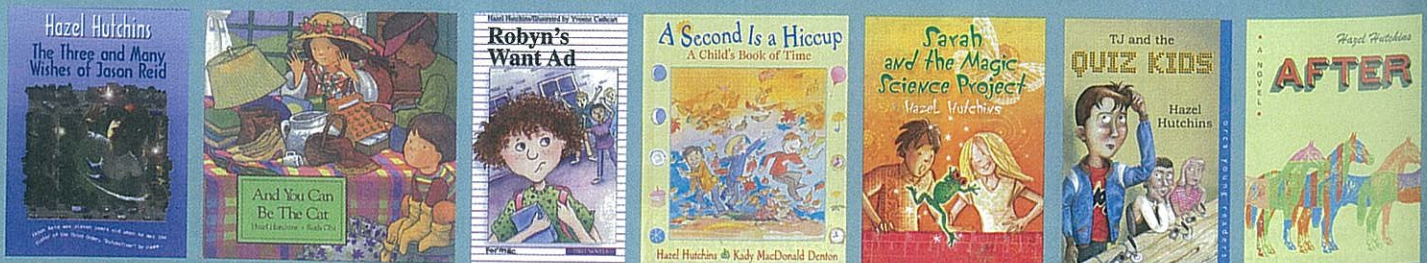
Then, Hutchins recounts, “the next day the perfect idea came into my head for a picture book.” She shared the draft with her husband, a great supporter of hers until his death eight years ago. “He kind of looked at me and I knew I had something.”

Annick Press was soon seriously considering Hutchins’ submissions. “But Annick had too many picture books, so they asked me if I could write a middle-grade novel. And I believe that if a door opens a crack, you jump in with both feet.” In 1983, Hutchins’ first published book appeared: a fantasy titled *The Three and Many Wishes of Jason Reid*.

She spent her first publishing decade with Annick and currently has 26 novels and picture books with them. Hutchins cites Anne Millyard, one of Annick’s founders, as the person who fostered her career. The relationship continued even after Millyard left Annick. Hutchins had set aside a manuscript about a girl whose brother was murdered in a convenience store shooting. One day, Millyard contacted her. “Remember that story?” she asked. “It’s time.” After several conversations, Hutchins realized the voice of the gunman’s brother had been missing. Hutchins explored what she terms a “lost area” — the feelings of shock-wave-hit siblings on both sides of such a tragedy. In 2008, a dozen years from its inception, Smith, Bonappetit & Son published Hutchins’ first young adult novel, *After*, and gained immediate positive attention.

Hutchins has also published with Scholastic Canada, Viking Canada and other houses. Her middle-grade series about adventure-some Robyn — for Formac Publishing — comprises eight books, beginning with *Shoot for the Moon, Robyn* (1997). Her five best-selling TJ books for Grades 4 to 6 with Orca Book Publishers kicked off with *TJ and the Cats* (2002). Even a much-published author still receives rejections, something that makes Hutchins feel “sick, physically sick!” Yet, she encourages writers to mail out their stories because “if a manuscript stays in the bottom drawer it’s not going to be accepted.”

The author notes she became published without a university degree. “You don’t need one to know a good story,” she affirms. For example, one day she overheard her children playing. “The younger one wasn’t very happy when one of the older ones said ‘and you can be the cat.’” Annick published the picture book about a disgruntled younger sibling, *And You Can Be the Cat*, in 1992. Now that Wil, Leanna and Ben are grown, other children inspire Hutchins. A young friend playing with the buttons on her sweater prompted her 2009 picture book about fasteners *Together*, dedicated “For Isaac.”



HOW SHE WRITES

Hazel Hutchins collects ideas in a notebook before they vapourize. When she “has more time,” sometimes three years later, she takes up a story. She also makes lists that help her visualize her character’s world: the names of her friends or the things that were important to her in Grade Three. As she writes, Hutchins chuckles away “when I do the funny parts.” But some sections she finds difficult, especially the dreaded second chapter, the one that sets up the rest of the book. She keeps working, “pulling stuff out of inside,” trying to get at the core of her story. The author revises parts by hand before going back (yet again) to the computer. One day, she realized that she also doodles while she drafts. “When I pulled out *The Prince of Tarn* for a school presentation, I saw that the whole page was covered. And I’m not an artist! It’s like my imagination had taken over the page, almost like the way the trees take over in the story!”

“It’s interesting how brains put things together,” Hutchins muses, stating that she sometimes works on three projects at once. “After I’ve been tearing my hair out with a novel of 14,000 words, I’m exhausted,” she confesses. “But when I stop, the ideas for five little picture books come flying out the back of my head. We never know how our minds are working.”

In all her diversified works, kids are front and centre from pre-publication to finish. The TJ series began when her youngest son was in Grade 6. “He just didn’t like issue novels. So I thought, ‘Well, what would Ben like? He likes cats.’ And I went back from there.” However humorous, “cats aren’t enough to make a book.” An important theme — friendship — was added. TJ and his fact-citing friend, Seymour, test and reaffirm their relationship, adding meaningful layers to the story. Hutchins has no patience for “fluff,” perhaps because her mother “knew what good writing was” and modelled a dislike for “pithless” books. Hutchins designs her works to entertain, as well as engage the reader on different levels.

When Hutchins’ friend, Gail Herbert, came to visit, the week became a ‘working’ holiday! “After she got off the plane, I asked her ‘What do you want to do, write poetry or a kid’s book?’ She said, ‘Poetry is too personal,’ so we did a kid’s book, *Mattland*.” Hebert’s memories of summers on construction sites where her father worked building isolated roads are the roots of Matt’s loneliness as a new kid in a just-built neighbourhood.

Hutchins was “totally, totally pleased” that *Mattland*, illustrated by talented Dušan Petričić, has won awards including the 2009 Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award, a national book award for text and illustration. She describes the story of a lonely child in a recently constructed subdivision as “deceptively simple, yet many-layered. The strong words and strong pictures go together quite well.”

Her talented writing has garnered Hutchins numerous Canadian Children’s Book Centre citations and other honours. She has won Saskatchewan’s Shining Willow Award and repeatedly received the Writers’ Guild of Alberta’s R. Ross Annett Award for Children’s Literature. An endearing book about a boy who would rather build book forts than read books, *Nicholas at the Library*, was given to every Grade One student in Canada through the 2000 TD Grade One Book Giveaway Program. At school visits a decade later, Hutchins often hears that brothers and sisters have passed this book on to new readers in their families.

WORKING WITH ILLUSTRATORS

Hazel Hutchins acknowledges the special relationship between authors and picture book illustrators. She admits that at first she “didn’t know how books were put together, but I knew that there had to be ten ‘thought’ packages.” As her career advanced, she gained more knowledge. “I read that drawing the same house over and over again was hard. So I thought, ‘Why have all the action in the house? Bear and Yancy [her popular picture book duo] could be out in the garden.’ Things need to keep moving for an illustrator.” She was delighted by the way Ruth Ohi, illustrator of 22 of Hutchins’ books, approached Bear and Yancy. “I like how she makes the grandfather more of a character.”

Book settings echo Hutchins’ own rural and urban living experiences. One book, *After*, begins in the city, but later Kate’s emotional healing comes through riding horses at her new home in the foothills. Hutchins has lived 30 years in the Rocky Mountain town of Canmore, Alberta. Her childhood was spent outside of Strathmore in southern Alberta, riding horses and enjoying farm life.

During Hutchins’ childhood, Canadian children’s books were scarce. Hutchins’ mother read *Little House on the Prairie* and other books to her. She wrote as a girl, but had not defined her desire to be a writer and never shared her writing. Hutchins hastens to say that her parents “were not discouraging,” and would have certainly supported almost any endeavour of their youngest child, their son or their two other daughters. Some time later, her mother bought Hutchins a typewriter with money from her own meagre savings.

Years down the road, Hazel Hutchins steadily produces writing that is acclaimed and enjoyed across the country. She has “faith” that she can find a story and work on it until it’s a good story. Hutchins keeps writing even though “there are better and sweeter ways to make money. I know *I*’m the only one that can write that story and write it well.” Long, and happily, may she write. ☺

lian goodall is an author, historian and heritage consultant.

SELECTED TITLES BY HAZEL HUTCHINS

- The Three and Many Wishes of Jason Reid* ANNICK PRESS, 1983
- And You Can Be the Cat*, illustrated by Ruth Ohi ANNICK PRESS, 1992
- Robyn’s Want Ad*, illustrated by Yvonne Cathcart FORMAC PUBLISHING, 1998
- A Second is a Hiccup: A Child’s Book of Time*, illustrated by Kady MacDonald Denton SCHOLASTIC/NORTH WINDS PRESS, 2004
- Sarah and the Magic Science Project*, illustrated by Christine Delezenne ANNICK PRESS, 2005
- TJ and the Quiz Kids* ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2007
- Mattland*, with Gail Herbert, illustrated by Dušan Petričić ANNICK PRESS, 2008
- After*, SMITH, BONAPPETIT & SON, 2008
- Together*, illustrated by Alice Priestley ANNICK PRESS, 2009

