It's a Friday afternoon after a solid week of sessions at the International Reading Association. You've arranged an interview with Tomie dePaola, virtually a household name in the children's book world. With tape recorder in hand, you meet and look for a spot in the Meridien Hotel ending up on some easy chairs near a deserted piano bar. You have a chance to chat with a writer and artist whose work encompasses picture books, easy nonfiction, wordless books, concept books, poetry, and folktales. Where do you begin? Not to worry, he's easygoing, forthcoming with stories (if rambling a bit), but hey, it's been a week of conventioneering. And he's absolutely charming, just like his books.
We talked about a lot of things—about ideas, the process of writing, and the role of the editor in his work. We talked about his art, the people who have influenced his artistic vision, and fellow illustrators he admires. And we talked about how books once published take on a life of their own, how teachers share his books with kids, and the children’s responses. It was a wonderful afternoon, looking back and looking ahead.

The where-do-you-get-your-ideas question, revisited

I never intended to ask Tomie where he gets his ideas, knowing that most authors despise that question. Indeed he’s already ably answered it in an author profile printed by one of his publishers. “I guess [ideas] ultimately come from inside myself. All my characters seem to be parts of me, even Helga and Strega Nona. It can be one of those ‘light bulb’ situations like in the comic strips, or sometimes just plain tedious coaxing. A piece of music—a painting—a cup of coffee—whenever the idea or character is ready to pop out, I’d better be ready to grab it.”

Yet despite my not asking this most-asked question—where do you get your ideas?—much of our discussion that afternoon focused on just that. In his autobiographical sketch in Something About the Author, (the bulk of which he wrote for a souvenir book for a celebration in his hometown, Meredin) dePaola recounts events of his life many of which are immortalized in his picture books. He enjoyed writing the sketch, he said “because it was like stream of consciousness writing, remembering everything I could.” Interestingly enough, I noted that although the autobiographical sketch was written prior to the publication of The Art Lesson, one of his memoirs, the words were almost exactly the same. “What happened,” Tomie said, “was that The Art Lesson came out of writing and talking about the whole experience. I thought I ought to write this as a book. It’d be cute with pictures.” Other books that fall into that memoir category include The Baby Sister, which was published in 1996, Oliver Button is a Sissy (1979), Now One Foot, Now the Other (1981), and Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs (1973). “I’ve found quite by accident, from talking at places like IRA, that people love to hear stories about my childhood,” Tomie said.

Figuring that writers live in a way that makes them recognize ideas and pretty much assuming that getting ideas is never really a problem, I asked dePaola how he decides which idea to work on next. “I used to sit down and write the idea because I was so afraid I’d lose it. Now I work a little bit differently. I get the idea and I let it simmer. I think about it and invariably what will happen is another idea will come popping into my head almost full-blown. I can give you a very good example. It isn’t a book yet; it’s not even a word on a piece of paper. I was having a friend of mine in for dinner and I went to the one supermarket in my town. There’s also a very good bakery nearby. Anyway, I came out of the supermarket with a bag and a loaf of bread under my arm and it was like—wait a minute I remember doing this as a kid. My Italian grandmother would give me twenty cents when the church bells rang. She turned the fire on under the pasta, she would give me twenty cents, and I would go across the baseball field to the little bakery and get two loaves of really hot fresh bread. And on the bread bag was a little street urchin running, his socks down around his ankle, loaves of bread under his arm. So I thought I’m going to do a story about this little boy, this little urchin that delivers the bread. As the kid gets more business, he eventually gets roller skates and then he gets a bicycle. But then the baker gets a bread truck, and the kid’s out of a job. I can see this drawing—a double-page spread of all these old Italian ladies, [since named in his book—Signora Meoni, Signora Melazzi, Signora Moleti, Signora Bosi, Signora Amoroso and Signorina Philomena] all standing around. Then at the end the baker puts the little kid’s picture on the bread bag. Now I haven’t written it yet, but that’s where these ideas come from. And in a very funny way, they do all fun-
When I asked Tomie when he might get to the point of writing this particular story, wondering whether it would be months or even years from now, he said he suggested the idea to his editor at Putnam, Margaret Frith, and she liked the idea. "What we do now is discuss [ideas]," he said. "I really try to take advantage of time to make things efficient and I don't write anything down until we've talked about it. More or less, it's like telling a story to an audience in a way. Does this story work or doesn't it work? Once we get a manuscript in shape, then I get past Margaret [Frith] to Cecilia Young, who is the art director at Putnam. Cecilia and Margaret come up to the house and we start talking out the book—the basic design. While we are working on the format, we do some more editing of the text. And I find I make a few editorial changes as I'm working on the art."

Pursuing his lead, I pressed to find out even more of how dePaola perceives the role of the editor. He has worked with Margaret Frith for thirty-two years. "I kind of force feedback and input," Tomie said. "I don't mind criticism at all. I'm not like some of my colleagues who don't want editors to touch a word. I don't feel that arrogant about my writing; I don't feel that good about it. Paula Danziger and I were commiserating about Margaret [Frith] and how she's really tough as an editor. Margaret has this wonderful line, and you know when it's coming. His voice became slow and deliberate. 'Tomie, it's a very good book, but I think if you make these changes, it will be even better.' As Paula says, how can you resist that? We all want to do the perfect book." Tomie laughed. "Margaret isn't worried that I won't be able to write a story. She can often help me to pare it down and make it more direct. For her, less is certainly more. And I think she's right."

As dePaola himself noted, he likes to offer a "full service menu." He said that one of the decisions he made career-wise and business-wise is to insist on doing projects with Grosset, the more mass market part of Putnam. "I like doing those books because it gets my work to a younger audience. I don't want my books just to be available to the high tone literati."

Ah good, an opening to a question I really wanted to ask—what about creating board
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books? On the surface, they look so simple, the kind of books that many of my students look at and think—"People get paid to do this?" They look like they could be done in a day.

“Well, actually,” Tomie admitted, “Maybe three days. Now when I say they're easy to do, instead of 32 pictures, I only have to do 6 and of course I use a very simple direct interface style. There is a thinking process that goes into these books though. What's difficult about writing a board book is getting the concept. I wanted to do a book on the Christmas symbols because I thought kids were growing up not knowing the symbols. So out of that came Baby's First Christmas and after that came books on other holidays—Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and Easter. Somewhere along the line Margaret and I decided it would be fun to put some children in these books. In My First Thanksgiving we had Native Americans and Pilgrims and because it's a family holiday, I had to create a family. Instead of one baby, I made two babies, twins—a boy and a girl. Another hard part is coming up with what are the six major things about the holiday? What we do is we make lists. Then we pick out the ones that are the best. For Easter, for example, do we say we go to church on Easter? Well, if you say you go to church, you're going to have all the people who don't go to church say, 'I'm not going to buy this book because they go to church and we don't.' Then what about the people who go to church? We got a few letters on the Easter one. Because board books are so simple, you have to get to the beginning and middle and end quickly, but they have to be rich because otherwise a child will look at it and throw it down.”

dePaola had just illustrated a board book and was eager to talk about it. “Someone in the office at Putnam came up with the concept and it was written in-house. It’s called, Get Dressed Santa. It’s Christmas Eve and it’s late and Santa’s getting dressed. Finally he’s gotten all dressed, he’s ready to hop into his sleigh, and he has to go. There isn’t a child in the Northeast that hasn’t been dressed up in a snowsuit that hasn’t gone—oops, gotta go to the bathroom. So it’s very funny.”

In contrast to board books which are the easiest kinds of books he creates, dePaola claims that “the hardest kind of books to do are wordless books. The thing about a wordless book is that I have to write almost a whole movie script, because the reader doesn't have any words to go on. How is my editor going to make a judgment and help me out with it unless I tell the whole story? So, I really work like a movie shooting script, like a silent movie.” His wordless books include Flicks, Pancakes for Breakfast, and Sing, Pierrot Sing.

Also, I wondered and asked about his folktales, among which are Strega Nona, Big Anthony and the Magic Ring, Strega Nona Her Story, Tony's Bread, The Clown of God, and Jamie O'Rourke and the Big Potato just to name a few. “The folktales that I'm interested in are obscure ones and I always change them.” The amount of research behind the folktales varies. “It depends upon how much I'm going to retell it in my own voice because I don't ever take a folktale as is. I want to tell it in my own way or bring out the humor of a particular tale to a present-day audience. That's what a storyteller is; a storyteller always makes a tale his own. What's really arduous for me though, is the art research. I just steep myself with pages and pages out of art books.” When he chooses a folktale to retell, dePaola wants to be sure he includes a child or a child-like character. “Every child [for instance] relates to Jamie O'Rourke because he's lazy.”

Yet again on the ubiquitous theme of how writers get ideas, dePaola shared how a folktale that he just finished, The Days of the Blackbird, had its beginnings. The seed was planted with the remark of an Italian restaurant owner in his home town. dePaola commented how cold it was and the owner said, “It's what we call le giornate de la merla. January 29, 30, 31.” dePaola wondered what it meant. It sounded interesting. “Days of the blackbird,’ the owner said, ’We say that because those are the coldest days of the year. It's so cold that all of the white
doves fly into the chimneys and when they come out they're all black with soot.' I started thinking that this idea could go in any direction, hysterically funny or I could retell a tale based on this little funny folklore of days of the blackbird that might be like an Italian Emperor's nightingale type of story. And that's what I did.

For a while dePaola was Creative Director of Whitebird Books, a division of Putnam that was focusing on making folktales from around the world available to a new generation of young readers. The plan was to work with new, undiscovered talent as well as already published authors and artists. "Well," Tomie explained "Whitebird books were conceptualized at absolutely the wrong time. These beautiful books just sat there. Didn't sell. They sold to schools and libraries, not in huge numbers, but the big bookstore sales just weren't there. People weren't interested in stories by [writers and artists] that they didn't know. When we started out, there were no other ethnic books out there. Now the market's flooded with them. So that's on hold."

At one point, dePaola began a novel, although it's only half finished and he says he'll "probably never go back to it. It was about two young boys and one of them dies of AIDS. It's almost at the point where it's too late to publish it now. It was triggered by two completely different things. One was that I have had a lot of friends die of AIDS and another was, I got a letter from a little boy that said 'Dear Tomie dePaola, My best friend died and I was very upset. Can you write a book about this?' And so, it was that combination of AIDS and childhood death. I was trying to keep up with my audience.

Kids write and say, 'When are you going to write chapter books?' They get to fourth grade and they feel I've abandoned them."

"I probably shouldn't have shown [the novel] to Margaret [his editor] when I did. She didn't like it. Margaret just thought I was getting too complicated, too involved with the writing, that I was losing any kind of passion. I didn't make the characters real enough. I knew she was right. It was also a kind of blow to my ego in a sense."

"I have a manuscript of another longer book I did years ago. I have four rewrites on it with three different editors and who knows? It may surface again one of these days. It isn't a topical
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book as such like the AIDS book.”

When dePaola mentioned that a trigger behind one of the novel ideas had been a child’s letter, I asked if any of the books he’d published had grown out of children’s suggestions. “The one that really turned into something was The Quicksand Book. You know, when someone sends me an idea, I read it and I say ok. That’s a good idea; or that’s not a good idea; or that may be a good idea but I don’t want to touch it. I try to keep an open mind about it because you never know.”

“Recently,” he continued, “I asked a friend, ‘What do kids in third grade love?’ She said they love mysteries. ‘What kind of mysteries?’ I asked. She said, ‘Any kind of mysteries—detective.’ And I said, ‘Do they have to be complicated?’ And she said, ‘No, they can be pretty simple.’ So I thought okay, I’ll come up with something.”

So this is literally the way it works? I wondered aloud. “Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes,” Tomie said. “I’ve got a little idea. But I want to wait until I have two or three ideas with the same character. It’s a bunny, a rabbit. He’s got a little sister and he’s got a best friend who’s a sheep. I thought it would be fun to have animal characters that might go into more than one book. I just have to come up with some more ideas about mysteries. One’s going to be the case of the missing Easter drawing. You know how kids do these drawings and they put them on the windows in school? This is going to be the case of the missing drawing, but the little bunny comes bobbing along, a bunny detective. His sister’s drawing is stolen from a window in the classroom and the reason why it was stolen is that the principal saw it and loved it so much she put it in her office. But she didn’t tell she was taking it. How the bunny detective finds it, I don’t know. Whether he does something bad and has to go to the principal’s office and there it is on the wall, I don’t know. But that’s how some things happen. You never know.”

In the autobiographical sketch in Something

About the Author, dePaola mentioned a plan for a sequel to Helga, and in fact, he never wrote it. “There are sometime projects I just don’t finish. I start them and when I get into them, for some reason, they just don’t get resolved.”

The who-has-influenced-your-work as an artist question, revisited

Since dePaola considers himself foremost an artist, we spent time talking specifically about his art as well. In the wonderfully roundabout way in which Tomie tells a story, he talked, in fact, about the mentoring relationship and about Ben Shahn.

“I was at a summer art school and I was being kind of ignored by the faculty there because, first of all, I came from Pratt. And Pratt was known as a technical art school, a commercial art school, instead” he said with an affected accent, “of the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts.”

“There were visiting artists who came in and Ben Shahn was one of them. I was at this school because I was going to go into a monastery and I wanted to learn the technique of true Frescoes. I had some sort of idea that maybe the Benedictines would send me all over the world and I’d be doing frescoes, not realizing,” he said with a smile, “that this may have been a past life, that I had indeed been a monk artist and done frescoes. It was a wonderful ten weeks. We lived, ate, and slept art. Someone had given me a funny little book of psalms and they were illustrated weirdly with engravings that were really abstract. I wanted to make them concrete.”

“Anyway, our paintings were lined up and Ben Shahn said, ‘No one’s talked about these three paintings. I want to talk about these because they are the only paintings up here that don’t look like art school paintings.’ Well, I burst into tears and ran from the room. My friends had to drag me back in saying, ‘Listen to what
he's saying about your work.' It's not that he thought my work was so fabulous, but it was that I was doing what artists really have to do and that's find their own vision, from in here and out, not from out there and through the hand. Shahn told the faculty, 'I want to meet this young man.'"

Although dePaola had been sharing a painting shed with some Boston Museum School artists, "lo and behold I had my own studio the next morning," he recalled. And Ben Shahn worked with him every morning. "Shahn didn't say, 'This is how you paint this; this is how you paint that. Rather he said to me once, 'You know what would be fun? Let's find some sticks and use them to draw with.' And we found some sticks and dipped them into India ink and we drew. 'What you're doing is you're being a rebel,' Shahn told me, 'because nobody understands that you want to do these paintings of these psalms. I think it's a wonderful idea if you want to do these paintings and I think it's a wonderful idea that you want them to have an archaic look like Piero de la Francesca. And I think it's wonderful that you're exploring what happens with your palette knife. But the important thing is that being an artist is the way you live and think your life and feel.' What better mentor can you hope for? And he was really my mentor."

"Sometimes the word mentor gets so misused," dePaola continued, "especially in education. All the mentors want is little carbon copies of themselves. I see this all the time. Excuse me, but in this whole language movement, there are all these mini mentors and the mini mini mentors. I think what a real mentor does is to say to a young person, 'You like my work so you give me a certain respect. You're in awe of me, but I love your work.' And a real mentor does that, helps the person come up with his own ideas. I loved Shahn's work. That was what was so important to me. I was such an avid fan of his that I used to try to copy his stuff. But then I realized I didn't have to. I mean," Tomie laughed, "why should I copy his when he likes mine? That's exciting mentoring."

"When I went to Pratt I did take illustration but we also had a very heavy fine art focus.

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Ideally, you give a child a book; let the child read the book and then if they want to talk about the book, you talk about the book. You don’t ask them questions, because the minute you say, ‘Read this book and I’m going to ask you questions,’ [you ruin it].

Oddly enough, when I do my fine art—and I have a gallery again—I find I work best when I work in sequential stuff. If I start painting pears, then I’ll do forty paintings of pears until I’ve exhausted my obsession with them. With illustration, it’s a whole different process. I refrain from thinking of the images because I like the discipline of the story. I feel like I can be three separate people, maybe even four. I can be a writer, which is very different from being an illustrator, which is very different from being a fine artist. The fine artist is the freest because I’m only being limited by what I impose on my own work. Sometimes the fine art will trigger either a technique or a focus on something that ends up as a children’s book. The painterly techniques that I used in Bonjour Mr. Satie and in Rabbit and Coyote and to a lesser extent in Alice Nizzy Nazy all came out of what I was doing with my fine art. Rabbit and Coyote especially.”

Tomie interrupted his train of thought. “That book. It’s so funny. You read your reviews and the critics say, ‘his rounded warm usual style’. Or they say ‘We’re so tired of this art work. Why doesn’t he grow?’ Then you take a little leap like I did in Rabbit and Coyote and the critics say, ‘What is he up to? This doesn’t look anything like his work.’ You can’t win. You can’t win.”

As an artist, dePaola feels that he has two or three basic styles. “I have the style I call my coloring-book style. I know this is going to make some children’s literature specialists go cringing in the grave. But that’s the way I do it. I do a line drawing and then I color it in. Then I have my more opaque style which is like Country Angel Christmas. I do opaque paintings—get more painterly. I use transparent media for my coloring-book style. It’s all acrylic, but I use this stuff called Rotring artist colors which are transparent and there are about nine of them and they’re intermixable. So I can get lots of mixtures. What I like about them is that they’re not watercolors. You put down a watercolor, like a green, and you put a blue glaze over it and it’ll pick up the green, but with acrylic, they become waterproof when they dry. You put down a green and then you can literally put down a blue glaze over it. Then I also use opaque acrylics, like Liquitex or Golden. It’s more like what we think of as painting. Layered. That’s an easier technique because if you make a mistake, you can work into it. Whereas with my coloring-book style, I have to rip it up and start again.” In any event, dePaola states, “I’m not interested in making things look like they actually look. If I were, I’d get a camera.”

In his fine art, dePaola is fascinated by tiny paintings. A recent body of work included dozens of Indian paintings 1 1/2 inches square. He’s also started doing shadowboxes. He wouldn’t use that kind of medium for a picture book, however, because he feels strongly that so
much is lost when a three-dimensional medium is photographed. “The whole thing with the shadowbox is that when you look at it this way or move your head an inch, it looks different. If you photograph it, you’re going to make it static. Not every medium is appropriate for illustration. There are interesting clay sculpture or cloth sculpture kind of books, but I personally think they lose in translation. You lose all the tactile stuff, being able to touch the fabric. So I don’t know of any book that’s ever been done successfully photographing sculpture because of just that.”

I asked who the artists are in picture books right now that he admires and asked if certain illustrators have affected his work. “I can honestly say [other illustrators] don’t affect what I do anymore. I think when I first started out I was affected. I don’t know if it was in an early book, but sure I wanted to crosshatch like Maurice [Sendak]. Everybody did. I wanted to design as well as the Provensons. These books attracted me. I love Trina’s work, Trina Shart Hyman. Charles Mikolaycak’s books are beautifully designed and beautifully rendered. Carolyn Croll. She has a new book out on Redoute. Carolyn is often accused in reviews of being terribly influenced by my work, Carolyn Croll. Everybody did. I wanted to design as well as the Provensons. These books attracted me. I love Trina’s work, Trina Shart Hyman. Charles Mikolaycak’s books are beautifully designed and beautifully rendered. Carolyn Croll. She has a new book out on Redoute. Carolyn is often accused in reviews of being terribly influenced by my work. Trina Shart Hyman, who has a new book out on Redoute. Carolyn is often accused in reviews of being terribly influenced by my work. Trina Shart Hyman, who has a new book out on Redoute. Carolyn is often accused in reviews of being terribly influenced by my work. But there’s a perfect way that you can get 5th and 6th graders into the world of art by getting a lot of children’s books and saying this one is done in collage, now how’s that done? You know, Eric Carle paints the paper and cuts it out in shapes. Go through a variety of styles that are available in books. I think children get stuck—even grownups get stuck in a particular kind of book.”

dePaola feels it’s not necessary for children in the younger grades to know or notice the elements of art. “It’s more important that the art in the book is accessible to them.”

“Books—taking on a life of their own”

A continual theme that I return to when I chat with authors is how children receive their books and how they hope that teachers will share their books. dePaola hopes that children will react to his illustrations the way he, himself reacts when he walks into a museum. “I want to have a picture grab me, grab me by the throat, and really move me. The second step is analyzing. What I would do if I were a teacher is to have tons of books in my room and let the children be exposed to all different kinds of art. Teachers are always telling me that kids recognize my art. Well, that’s because I have a very distinctive but very accessible style for young children. But there’s a perfect way that you can get 5th and 6th graders into the world of art by getting a lot of children’s books and saying this one is done in collage, now how’s that done? You know, Eric Carle paints the paper and cuts it out in shapes. Go through a variety of styles that are available in books. I think children get stuck—even grownups get stuck in a particular kind of book.”

dePaola feels it’s not necessary for children in the younger grades to know or notice the elements of art. “It’s more important that the art in the book is accessible to them.”

“One of the things about the picture book is that we put so much in the art that isn’t in the text.” Sometimes the art enhances the story or in some cases, the art creates a sub-story. One day, when dePaola used to visit classrooms, a teacher was reading Charlie Needs a Cloak and the kindergartners were all giggling while she was reading. “She finally stopped and said, ‘You children are being very rude. I want you to stop this laughing right this minute.’ And this one little boy spoke up and said, ‘We’re laughing at the mouse.’ The teacher’s response was, ‘What mouse?’”


dePaola reported another occasion when children see elements in art that adults don’t see. “I was at Jane Yolen’s house and we were looking at the proofs of Helga’s Dowry. She was looking at them and said, ‘Tomie you don’t do that. You don’t suddenly introduce a character that hasn’t been in the book. You can’t introduce
a character in the end.' Jane's daughter spoke up and said, 'Mommy, [the character's] been there all along.' But you see, Jane was reading the words and not looking at the pictures. I defy grownups who read to their own children to say that at least once in their experience they were getting ready to turn the page and the kid says, 'No, no, I'm not finished yet.' The parent says, 'What do you mean you're not finished yet?' They're not finished looking at the pictures. That gets educated out of kids. By third grade, they don't know how to look at pictures anymore."

While we seemed to have hit on a topic of how teachers both educate and miseducate, I asked Tomie what led him to endorse On the Wing of a Whitebird, A Tomie dePaola Resource Book, a book literally advertised as "the first resource guide that has been approved by Tomie dePaola himself."

"On the Wing of a Whitebird is compiled by Val Hornberg. She's a big fan of mine. I visited her when she was teaching in Portland, Oregon, and I was so impressed with what she was doing with her class. Val's book is not a manual. It's a source book. She gives some suggestions for projects. She gives no clip art and that sort of stuff. Val agrees with me that the best teachers in the world wouldn't even bother buying [this book], but I approved of it because I had to stop this other shit—and you can use that word in your article because it is shit. There are people who take my stuff, create manuals, and have no more idea of what my books are about than the man on the moon. They are absolutely wrecking them. And there's nothing we can do to stop those. They are perfectly legal as long as they don't use the art." Clearly, I had hit a raw nerve. "How would you feel?" he continued ranting. "There's a manual on Strega Nona—they should know better than trying to draw Strega Nona. She looks a certain way and you can't just put any old witch in there and call it Strega Nona. Besides," Tomie added adamantly, "leave her alone. She's mine."

"What I worry about," he continued, "is the teachers that aren't naturally creative. Where do they go? What sources do they go to? At least Val [Hornberg] is approaching the work in a way that I would want my work to be handled. I don't make any money on it, but it has my approval."

"Ideally, you give a child a book; let the child read the book and then if they want to talk about the book, you talk about the book. You don't ask them questions, because the minute you say, 'Read this book and I'm going to ask you questions,' [you ruin it]. That's how literature nearly got ruined for me in high school or junior high school actually. 'You'll be given four essay questions on chapter 5 of Ivanhoe.'"

Tomie did go on to relate a couple activities that teachers have done that he rather appreciates. "I'm not opposed to teachers taking a good book like The Art Lesson and getting as much mileage out of it as they possibly can. I've heard of some teachers who have brought sheets into the classroom and let the kids get a flashlight and go under the counter and draw on the sheets. I think that's fun. I think that's brilliant. Don't tell me that after you read The Brothers Karamazov you didn't want to go off and ride in a troika rushing through Moscow drinking vodka, 'cause I did. And I don't know why, but when I went to Europe for the first time I had to sit on the banks of the Seine with a baguette, Camembert cheese, wine, and a pear. Now somewhere I read that. Somewhere somebody pictured that and in my romantic period, I wanted to do it."

On another occasion, a class activity included Tomie. "When I was going to be 60, one class made this birthday chain. Now, I know they didn't invent it. These have been done before. But it was 365 links and they sent it to me for my 59th birthday. And every day, I had to rip off a link until I got to 60."

"Did you do it?" I interrupted, incredulous. "Of course I did it. One way to keep track of what day it was. Winters get real long in New
Hampshire. One gray day goes into another.

dePaola mentioned the more than 100,000 letters a year that he gets from fans. I think my mouth fell open and I asked him, "Would you like this to stop?"

One thing he would like to stop is the teachers who write letters asking if he has any old art work lying around that they could sell at their bake sales to raise money. He got diverted from the question itself and talked about the letters he receives. "That many letters," he said, "you'd think you couldn't read them all; but I have help and it's easy to do. The letters fall into three major categories—the form letter that the teacher has written on the board and [the kids] all copied it. Or they've copied it and they've filled in the blanks. I love it when the kids draw the lines under the blanks," he said sarcastically, readily recognizing that the children had no clue of the meaning of what they were writing. "Then there are the letters that come from the teachers that say to kids, 'Write your own letter.' You still know it's a class project. Those are the teachers that have every kid send the letter in a different envelope hoping that each child will get an individual response. Well, when it's from a class, I don't. I send a class response. I have a bookmark, the design changes every two years and that's sent to those children. That's the only way they can get it, by sending a letter. That's what they want anyway. It's got my autograph on it. Then there are the letters that are really genuine letters. Quite a few letters from grownups fall into that category as well. The teachers may relate a story—this book did this for my family, or this book saved my life. There are children that write you these strange things. I got a letter from a little girl who said that she wants to date this little boy and I said to my sister Maureen, 'What do we say? This is dangerous stuff to get into.' And this is like from a seven year old. 'I really love this little boy,' the child wrote. 'I want him to kiss me and I want him to put his arms around me.' You know, it's like Dear Abby, 'What should I do?' Tomie continued quoting the child's letter, 'Did you and Jeannie kiss and
Talking with Tomie  PATRICIA AUSTIN

hug?' Fortunately my sister said, 'I think I can answer this for you.' She's a grandmother now.

Maureen's letter was very thoughtful. 'When you're young,' she wrote, 'you should have as many friends as possible. Maybe hugging and kissing isn't always the best thing.'"

As we wrapped up our delightful chat, Tomie made "a plea to classroom teachers to try to be creative and inventive. Kids are curious little beings; they want to learn stuff but they can be bored and turned off so easily. They're so fragile." This Tomie readily sees from the letters children write and we see in dePaola's tender stories of his own childhood.

"If teachers feel they want to expand a book," Tomie said, "I'm into that now too. The Art Lesson is being made into a CD Rom and it's going to be fabulous." While the book of The Art Lesson itself shows a picture of a juggling clown, which of course dePaola put in for some young readers to notice and connect to one of dePaola's other books, Clown of God, the CD Rom has the little kid saying, 'I think I'd like to write a story about a juggler some day when I grow up.'

In a fitting closing from an author whose autograph more often than not includes a heart, from an artist who painted 2,347 hearts in Helga's Dowry (a class counted them and wrote to tell him!), Tomie extends this invitation, "I'd like to encourage teachers to follow their own hearts."

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