

Mary Amato Talks with Roger

by [Roger Sutton](#)

Nov 18, 2014 | Filed in [Authors & Illustrators](#)



Talks with Roger *is a sponsored supplement to our free monthly e-newsletter, Notes from the Horn Book. To receive Notes, sign up [here](#).*

Sponsored by

Egmont



Mary Amato follows up *Guitar Notes* with...a novel about a ukulele? Not exactly — while *Get Happy's* protagonist, Minerva, does pine for one as a sixteenth birthday present, a ukulele is just one of the things her life is missing. How about a guy? And what's the deal with her much-reviled, long-absent father?

Roger Sutton: What is the significance of place in *Get Happy*? I see a lot of books where, unless it's New York, the setting tends to be vaguely sketched. Whereas here, Chicago plays a big part in the story.

Mary Amato: I grew up in Illinois, and I love the Chicago area as a setting for this novel. It's landlocked, yet you have this beautiful large body of water. Minerva is wrestling with her absentee marine-biologist father and her (half) Hawaiian roots, so I really wanted to have her live in a place that was landlocked but has some connection to water. I'm also playing with allusions to *The Little Mermaid*. And of course the Shedd Aquarium is a place every kid who grows up near Chicago visits.

RS: Chicago is my favorite city. When I arrived in Chicago for graduate school and saw the lake for the first time — I'd only known lakes from New England, where you can see across them — I didn't have any idea that a lake could be so big.

MA: Yes, and I see Minerva's mother as a real Midwesterner. I grew up with the Midwestern Protestant view of not expressing your feelings, keeping everything locked inside. You just work hard and be a good person.

RS: You say you're a stoic Midwesterner, but you write this book in which the climax is a girl screaming at her father in a lecture hall. What does that say about you, Mary?

MA: The notion of finding your true voice and allowing it to come out is, to me, a central theme of not only this book but also of adolescence. The poignancy of Andersen's *Little Mermaid*, of the girl essentially sacrificing her voice, always stuck with me. I was haunted by that as a child, growing up in a household, and in a time, when we were taught not to speak our true voice. It was really in books that I discovered life could be different. There were characters who yelled

and cried and screamed. In almost all of my own books, there is that moment when the main character finally says what he or she has been bottling up. That, for me, is a moment of great relief.

RS: Neither Minerva nor her parents could be described as role models in the way we tend to think of them. Each one is deeply flawed.

MA: Adolescence is when you start to discover that the adults around you are flawed. You start to notice, hey, that adult just lied. Or, that adult is lying right now by hiding his or her true feelings. It's a pretty big moment when teens begin to understand that adults are not infallible — in fact, they're people, and they have struggles. At first there can be anger and resentment, but goodhearted teens do come to empathize with their parents. That's a moment of growing up.

RS: But Minerva can be pretty mean, too.

MA: She makes a lot of mistakes. To me, the saddest mistake she makes is letting her best friend, Fin, kind of fall off the face of the earth. But you know, Roger, I've been thinking a lot about mistakes and about this kind of culture we're in right now, which is all about being perfect and achieving — getting those high test scores — and we're forgetting that mistakes are the way you learn, that mistakes are essential. I don't think we're teaching kids that mistakes are not only things you occasionally have to suffer through, but that they're your opportunities for growth. For me, it's important that the characters make mistakes and then they have to face them. And hopefully grow from them.

RS: Mistakes are so much more public now than when we were kids.

MA: Absolutely. That adds a level of anxiety that our generation didn't really have to deal with, which could also make teens less inclined to take risks. It's funny — my father-in-law, bless his heart, he didn't really understand children's literature. He would read my books and say, "But Mary, why did the character have to misbehave?" I would try to explain, "Don't you see that the character has to misbehave? Otherwise, where is there any opportunity for growth and learning?"

RS: Or story.

MA: Yes. But getting back to childhood and the issue of speaking your voice, *Harriet the Spy* was my breakthrough book as a kid, as a reader. It was the book that I always say made me into a writer. The thing that was astounding to me about *Harriet the Spy* was that she was horribly mean. She had tantrums, and she locked herself in her room, and she wrote these nasty things about her friends, and she learned from it. To me, that was just so revelatory.

RS: There are readers who hate Harriet, but I think most of us maintain our empathy with her. Your book is in the first person, and I'm wondering how you keep the reader empathizing with your protagonist — and rooting for her — while at the same time exposing her flaws.

MA: This might sound really corny, but I think there is love at the root of the writing process. And I really do love my characters — I've never said that out loud before! If you love someone, you see through their foibles to their better self, to who they really, truly are deep down. That's my attitude toward my characters. I don't think, "Gee, I wonder if the reader is going to empathize with and keep rooting for Minerva." It's more just that I am doing those things as I'm writing.

RS: And you think that empathy communicates itself to the reader? If you're in love, they'll be in love?

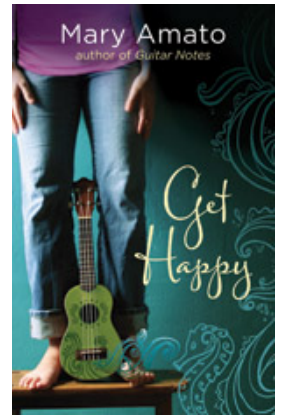
MA: There's a lot of subjectivity involved, so my guess is there are going to be readers who hear Minerva's whining about not getting the birthday present she wants and just decide that they're not going to like her and not even bother to hear her story. Part of it has to do with personality. Does this personality resonate with you at all? If it does, as a reader, then you'll stick with that character as she makes mistakes.

RS: Do you ever wonder about how much you can trust your readers? Do you think, "Oh, I've got to make sure they get this," and underline something in one way or another?

MA: I don't think that comes into my mind. I get a lot of messages from teens and preteens via my website. Their letters and comments are so profound. They never really talk about anything minor, or anything that has to do with writing, really. What they talk to me about is what from the book inspired them, what has changed them. What I try to do as a writer is make sure I'm speaking an emotional truth. I don't worry, is the reader going to get this? I just hope that if it

feels real to me, it'll feel real to my reader.

RS: In some ways, this book is what we used to call a problem novel. You have this kid, and there's this problem, and then things get more or less resolved in some way. I'm not putting down the genre (or your book) by any means. In an era where there's so much fantasy, and so much romance-fantasy, it's refreshing to read such an unassuming story in which ordinary life can be the subject.



MA: I think ordinary life is an amazing subject. In your teen years there is a kind of emotional tsunami. You're doing this new job of trying to figure out who you are, and it's also all about connection. It's a very scary, very turbulent time. It has to do with separating from your parents, and with peer influences, and with juggling all of the things that are happening in your life. And these big emotions like jealousy. And you're also doing things like getting your first job.

RS: A lot of teenagers have jobs, but rarely is much attention given to that in fiction we write for them.

MA: First jobs are a fascinating topic. First jobs can really shape you. It's the first time you're doing something outside of the household. There are different rules, different adults you have to deal with.

RS: Minerva's job — children's party entertainer, dressed as the Little Mermaid — is unusual.

MA: Didn't you love her job? My niece, many years ago, told me about her new job: "Aunt Mary, I'm a princess at children's birthday parties. I put on this Cinderella costume, and all the little girls fawn over me." I thought that was a hoot and a half. When you're a writer all these things go into your brain, and when you least expect it they pop out in a different form. So when Minerva's life started to unfold before my eyes, and I knew that she really wanted a ukulele, it emerged very naturally that this would be her first job. It's funny how fiction and the subconscious work. What happens to Minerva when I put the Little Mermaid costume on her? There's this extra layer of resonance. To me, that's the thrill of writing.

RS: It must be hard when you have a realization like that late in the process. I

would imagine you'd have to change a lot.

MA: Everything. You can't imagine how many times I go back and rewrite a book. I am what I call a radical reviser, in the sense that if I do get an idea late in the process, I really try to force myself to be open to going back and starting all over. When I teach writing, I talk about how not-attached you have to be to your work so you can embrace something new. It's a slog to have to go back to the beginning, but it's also really, really exciting.

RS: When you started the book, did you already know how to play the ukulele?

MA: No, but I hinted to my family, and they very kindly got me one for my birthday. Have you ever played one?

RS: I haven't.

MA: The minute you hold a ukulele in your arms, you just start smiling.

RS: They're so tiny.

MA: And they're so easy to play. I wish I had had one as a teen. I would have loved it. I tried and failed to play the guitar when I was a teenager, because it's big, and it's hard, and wow, maybe if I had had a ukulele, my whole life would have been so much easier. I'd been doing all this thinking, and this character began to emerge, a girl who thinks: "If I can just get a ukulele, I'll be happy."

RS: Little does she know. Ukuleles are hip again.

MA: They are. We're going to see all these kids playing the accordion next.

RS: Is that your next book?

Sponsored by

Egmont



Roger Sutton

Roger Sutton has been the editor in chief of The Horn Book, Inc, since 1996. He was previously editor of *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* and a children's and young adult librarian. He received his M.A. in library science from the University of Chicago in 1982 and a B.A. from Pitzer

College in 1978. Follow him on Twitter: @RogerReads.

get happy

mary amato

Talks with Roger
