

## **Author Spotlight**

A two-time Grammy award-winning artist, Bill Harley uses song and story to paint a vibrant and hilarious picture of growing up, schooling and family life. Harley is the author of a number of picture books and novels, including the popular Charlie Bumpers series. His first book in that series, *Charlie Bumpers vs. The Teacher of the Year*, won the Beverly Cleary Children's Choice Award.

**The Charlie Bumpers novels have proved very popular with young readers. What do you think draws them to Charlie as a character?**

They will give you a better answer than I can, but: I think Charlie's dilemmas are relatable – they're possible, and even probable for many kids – dealing with annoying siblings and relatives, negotiating your way through peer relationships, not being able to control events, and having to deal with adults – some on your side, and some not. I think adults often forget that negotiating childhood, even a childhood surrounded by well-meaning adults, is a tricky business. We see Charlie wrestling with all these things. He's also a pretty astute observer of people's behavior, and even his own. Plus, he's got a pretty sardonic view of the world. He's funny without trying to be.

**What interests you about writing for younger readers?**

Having been a performer for many years, I know that children are immediate in their responses to things, and pretty honest about them. I feel very comfortable in their company. Honestly, their approval is based on my ability to reach them – the adult world is much more measured in its response, taking many things into consideration before they give approval (like where something fits in the marketplace, for instance). One of my main jobs is to honor the emotional life of children – so I am interested in trying to see the world through their eyes.

**In your interactions with your readers, what have you found they most embrace about your books? Do your readers inspire or influence you when you sit down to create a new work?**

They like the humor, which is not outright wacky, but more situational or observational. I've had a number of parents and teachers say that their child "feels like they've found a friend" in Charlie. As far as influence, I watch what children go through, ask them what's important to them and what concerns them, and also draw on my own experiences from childhood and my experiences as a father.

**Humor is a key element of your writing, both for music and books. Why do you think it's an important piece of your storytelling style?**

The well-placed wisecrack has been part of my repertoire since second grade – making someone laugh is something I'm able to do, and it's only been reinforced over the years. The

ability to laugh at oneself, and the situation, shows an ability to hold the world at a slight distance and observe it. If I can make myself laugh at something I've written, it's a very good sign. I also believe that laughter opens people up, makes them vulnerable, and with that vulnerability, that openness, you're allowed to say things that get inside the heart a little better.

**Do you worry about maintaining a balance between entertaining and teaching your readers?**

I don't worry about it, but I think about it. I'm not interested in being "educational" per se, but in trying to show the world honestly and openly. Everything is "educational", and I'm suspect of stories that are intentionally didactic. I've often said I'm more interested in being descriptive than prescriptive, and leave the audience or reader the space to take the step of making meaning. Most of the Charlie books have to do with Charlie making a deal with the world – he can't always get what he wants, but he can find something that's worthwhile and satisfying. Borges said about poetry "It's not an argument, but a suggestion," and I feel that way about good stories – they're one possible way of looking at the world, and I assume the intelligence of my audience in drawing the connections. But if a child just likes it because it's funny or a good story, that has an important function, too. Really, if you get a child to love reading, that may be more important, in that instance, than teaching them a lesson. The lesson is in the action.

**What has been the most rewarding part of finding an audience with your books?**

As a storyteller, both oral and written, it's still amazing to me that a world I make up in my head comes to life in the mind of someone else. This is one of the true mysteries of language, and I never get tired of it. When you realize that, it becomes an incredible responsibility – if this is true, don't I need to be careful what I say about the world? If I've encouraged someone to read, that is a huge thing. If I've made someone aware that other people are going through similar experiences, then that's a good thing. If I've given someone a reaffirmation that kindness has a place in the world, that's a good thing too.

**What has been your experience with Read to Them's *One School, One Book* program?**

As an author, the *One School, One Book* program has been one of the best things that has happened to me. That I've been able to write something that has resonance with a broad group of children, both in age and diversity, is really gratifying – I know from speaking with teachers that they look long and hard to find a book that will fit their whole school. And in my visits to schools that have read the book, I get to feel like a rock star for the school day. And after a day of assemblies and an evening concert at the school I can even be in bed at a reasonable hour!

**Were you a big reader as a child? Which books most inspired you growing up?**

I was a good reader, but I was also very active – outside a lot and involved in sports – so not the kind that disappeared for days, hidden in a world of books -- (I have a son who IS like that). My mom, Ruth Harley, wrote for children and my dad was an editor, so books and words were part

of my life from an early age – it was the water I swam in. Being a sports nut early on, Matt Christopher was my favorite author, but I also loved Beverly Cleary (and I see a direct relationship between her work and the Charlie Bumpers series), Madeline L'Engle (*A Wrinkle in Time* was newly published), Robert McCloskey (I loved Homer Price and *Centerburg Tales*), William Pene Dubois's *The Twenty-One Balloons* and later on, Tolkien and Mark Twain. I became a serious reader with Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Today, two of my favorite children's authors are Roald Dahl and Kate DeCamillo.

**How do you think you have evolved as a writer since your first novel, *The Amazing Flight of Darius Frobisher*?**

First, my discipline is better and I have a much better understanding of the craft – how a story gets put together and the process of editing. *Darius* took a long time being born and went through many, many edits and rewrites. That process is still long for each book, but I understand it as a process. Now, I have names for things I was unconsciously trying to do in *Darius* as well as a toolbox of skills to use in my writing. That said, *Darius* had a strong voice from the very beginning and there's an irreverence I truly love but I haven't gotten to flex much since then. It will return in future books. I'm a better writer now, and intend to get even better.

**Can you tell us about your new book *Charlie Bumpers vs. the Puny Pirates* and what fans of the character can expect?**

I knew I had to write a Charlie Bumpers book about sports -- it's such a great lens to use in looking at children's lives and what they're going through. In *Puny Pirates*, Charlie gets his wish and is put on a soccer team with his best friends, Tommy and Hector. In addition to playing together they join forces to sell candy bars to raise money for the league – not a good idea. As with the other Charlie books, Charlie's expectations are not met in his real-life experience and catastrophe ensues. There's been a natural growth in his friendship with both Tommy and Hector and here they combine their weaknesses and strengths, to both good and bad effect. Tommy's more and more of an uncertainty factor and I love that about him (I think of Mouse in Walter Mosley's "Easy Rawlins" novels – he's always there for the main character, but there's trouble every time he shows up). There's also some really good sibling interactions. I love writing about Matt and Mabel – they're both predictable and surprising in their interactions with Charlie. I didn't play soccer growing up (football and baseball), so had a chance to really immerse myself in the youth soccer world, and enjoyed the sections I wrote about the actual games – there's a natural energy and forward movement in sports narrative, since the main thing about sports is – *we don't know how it's going to turn out!* I worked hard to get the two plots of the book – the soccer team and the candy sales – to complement each other and work together, and hope it strikes a chord with kids (and parents) who have wrestled with both. Plus, it's pretty funny.