

Interview: Rachel Rodriguez on Planning School Visits

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LAURA: Hi, this is Laura. And today, I'm speaking with author, Rachel Rodriguez who is quickly making a name for herself as the writer of spear lyrical picture book biographies. Her first book, '*Through Georgia's Eyes*' was a biography of the artist Georgia O'Keefe and was published by Henry Holt in February of 2006.

Her second book, '*Building on Nature: The Life of Antoni Gaudi*' was also published by Holt in September of 2009. It looks at the life of the revolutionary Spanish architect. Both books were illustrated by the immensely talented Julie Paschkis and earned star reviews from Booklist, as well as stellar reviews from other review journals.

My print interview with Rachel runs in this month's *Children's Book Insider*. I'm happy to have her here with us today to talk some more about being a children's book author. So Rachel, thank you for being here with us today.

RACHEL: Thank you, Laura. It's a pleasure.

LAURA: I had never heard of Antoni Gaudi until I read your book. So, I wanted to thank you for exposing me to this wonderful architect. And then, of course, I went on the Internet and had to look at all of his buildings.

RACHEL: Oh, great!

LAURA: And now, I have to go to Spain.

RACHEL: Yes.

LAURA: And see them in person because they're just wonderful. So, I really appreciate your opening our eyes to this subject. Now, your books are for children as young as kindergarten because they're picture book biographies. When you go into schools and talk to these kids, have you found that even the youngest kids are interested in subjects like architecture?

RACHEL: I have to tell you that I had something of the same question in my mind before I went and did my first school visit with the book. Gaudi is an architect. Like you mentioned, he's somebody that not so many Americans even know about and it really is a brand new introduction to somebody that people often have never heard of. I was thrilled though at the first school visit that I did with the book, the world premiere (it was at an elementary school here in my neighborhood in San Francisco) and was just amazed actually at the reaction of this very group that you're asking about, the kindergarten and first graders.

Well, what happened was at the beginning of my assembly, I showed a few photographs in my flag show that this gave a very quick view of his famous Church in Barcelona, the *Sagrada Familia* Church and one of the houses that he renovated or built in Barcelona, Spain and then, his very beautiful city park, urban park called *Park Guell*. This was a quick series of about five slides and the children, the kindergarteners and the first graders literally began screaming at each image that they saw. And the screams were of amazement and delight. It was as if a rock star had entered the building. The faculty, the teachers and the other staff and other adults in the assembly room and I were all looking at each other like, "Oh, my gosh! What is this reaction?" But I think Gaudi has that effect on people when people take the time and whether young readers or adults to discover the amazing buildings that he created in Spain.

What really helped (and to the point of helping especially young children) connect with Gaudi as an architect is a couple of things. One is sharing with them visuals. Of course, that really helps them get a sense of what it is that we're talking about. And then, I think with those younger readers and those younger grades, it's making it relevant to their

life. I'll often also start with just looking at the space that we're in for the presentation and say, "Who helped to create this room? Who helped to build this school?" We eventually come to the job of architecture. There was a person who decided where the doors and the walls would go, where the windows would be, that there would be a stage here, et cetera. And so, that helps them. Make it a connection to their own lives and their own reality.

LAURA: That's a really great way of bringing the subject home to them. It's making that connection to their own lives. And tying it in with something they can touch and see, I think is a really great way to approach it in the presentations.

Now, your presentations are for kids anywhere from kindergarten up to about eighth grade. Are there ways that you alter your presentations to fit the different age groups?

RACHEL: Definitely! For all of the assemblies and presentations I do -- and I speak a lot to kindergarten through eighth grade and even to adult groups, as well whether it's aspiring writers at conferences or aspiring authors, I should say, at conferences to educators, et cetera. For all of those groups, in each group, I think that everybody appreciates visuals. And certainly for the younger grades when I go and speak to them, it's a lot about the slideshow. I bring in props. I have blown-up posters of the art of the group and we get a lot of volunteer helpers to hold that thing, then to look at the visual aspect of the making of the book.

For the older students when I speak to even fifth grade, sixth, seventh and eighth, it starts to tilt more toward a sophisticated view of that same process. And often with even the seventh and eighth grade (or sixth grade), I'll spend and devote a little bit more time talking about career options, looking at what is that job like of writer and author. And I've gotten the kids to learn about the illustrator, Julie Paschkis for both of my books. I've gotten to hear from her a lot about her process behind-the-scenes with the making of these two books. And I like to also spotlight as much as I can as a writer and not the illustrator what that job is like. Those are some of the things we do.

We also spend more time talking about the revision process, about some of the types of language that's used in the books and about the two individuals that my books are

about, *Georgia O'Keefe* and *Antoni Gaudi*. We can get a little bit more into some depths or detail about their lives as people and as an artist and architect.

LAURA: Do you find these older kids are really interested in the behind-the-scenes workings of the author (the revision process, what it's like to be edited, that kind of thing)? Are they aware of all those steps the book goes through before you even get to the schools or do you have to educate them on all of that?

RACHEL: I think most of them are aware of the process and that, I think, a huge credit and applause have to go to their wonderful teachers who, even from as early as first grade, second grade, kids are already having to engage in revision process with their works that they're writing for their teachers. So, it's great especially by the time you get to the older grades, these are seasoned pros that whether they want to be or not, they've had to go through that process with writing reports and other writing assignments that they have. So, I think they're very familiar. And I especially like to support teachers. I am a former highschool teacher. I very much like to emphasize that no matter what grade I'm speaking to. The number of revisions, of drafts that I went through with both of my books. I'll even share that process that Julie went through with her art that even a professional artist who is a New York Times' Best Illustrated Book Award winner like Julie Paschkis still does her drafts. And it's part of the process of producing something of quality.

LAURA: It's probably nice for kids to see an adult have a manuscript with a dreaded red pen marking up from the editor or with lots of revisions on it so that they then feel when they get their own papers back, they realize, "This is just part of what every writer goes through."

RACHEL: That's right! And I'll even tell them with my book, *'Through Georgia's Eyes'*, I did probably about twelve drafts of that very spare, very short manuscript. And I'll say to them, "So, the next time your teacher ask you to do a revision, you can't complain because I have to do twelve," and that it's important for them to really understand that people who work as professionals in the publishing fields or as an artist/illustrator, this is what you do.

LAURA: Now, you also work as a professional facilitator and presentation skills workshop leader. So, what skills can authors utilize when speaking in front of groups of kids that you might also teach professionals to use? And are there different skills that you would use if you were speaking to a group of adults like teacher and librarians?

RACHEL: There are so much I can say on this topic because it is a part-time job that I do with mostly employees and corporations around the country and even around the world. So, a couple of highlights I would recommend, for those speaking to a group of kids, a content that I talk about in the coaching and training I do with adults who are presenting is pattern disruption. It's that you want to disrupt the pattern of what you're doing, meaning the pattern whether you're doing the same thing over and over again. An example of that would be showing slide after slide after slide without turning off the slide deck. It could be the opposite, just speaking at students without visuals at all. And so, you want to continuously change the activity that you're doing. This helps to snap people's attention back. And if those little minds are wandering that they see you upfront, now bringing up some posters to look up or engaging a volunteer to come up front and help hold something or now, looking at slides, then that's going to continuously engage the listeners.

And I would say, two, for the younger students (and I think really *all* students), they're going to appreciate the visual aspect of -- especially talking about picture books, it's easy to do -- but just to look at how you can vary the type of activities, if you will, that you're doing within the presentation.

I would say with those that are speaking to groups of adults, a lot of the same applies actually. Again, it's just having a mix of information and the types of ways that you show that. Also, if it's a mixed group where you might be speaking to a group of students and then, there are also parents or adults (librarians, teachers) in the crowd, as well, I will set up my presentation such that there's information that's going to appeal to the very youngest kids, but then I'll also throw in and weave in some bits that are much more sophisticated. I might even call those to their attention; going from showing a group how the mosaic process works for Gaudi's buildings where he have tiles and broken pieces of glass and wine bottles and I've got a hammer up front that I'll tow, then I'll switch to mentioning something about Gaudi, for example, the fact that his building in Spain have garnered seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites status honors (the most of any architects in the world). That probably appeals more to the adults than to the kids, that information.

LAURA: Even if people just take away that one tip of breaking the pattern, I think that is gold.

RACHEL: Right! I would just add that for anybody who's dealing with nerves (I know this is a big thing that comes up for a lot of the speakers that I coach and train) is a couple of things. One is to attend Toast Master meeting. It's an international speaking club. It's free. There are meeting everywhere around you. Just go to their website Toast Master and you can practice your presentation and practice your teaching skills in front of group.

And the last thing that I'll add about nerve is that your audience doesn't know. They have no clue. I could be having a meltdown inside, a million butterflies in the stomach, it really comes down to what are the behaviors that you're showing on the outside because that's what people will see. Can you show behaviors that look confident and relaxed?

LAURA: Great advice! Have you noticed any changes in the number of school or library visits that you've gotten recently due to budget cuts? And if so, have you had to adjust your marketing of yourself in any way to compensate for that?

RACHEL: It is such a difficult time with the economy for so many people. I've definitely seen that for a lot of children's books authors that I know. My own experience, it has been that there are actually -- we actually have less request happening this year. I think that the stories that I hear from principals and librarians and parent contacts from PTAs is that there's just so much less money to work with. It means that schools have to get a little bit more creative about their funding and raising money to have authors come. I think that's been pretty across the board for a lot of authors this year. The bigger picture is that some challenges that schools are facing with having so much of their budgets cuts and restricted.

The things that I've done to adjust marketing has simply been to do a bit more of the outreach effort for myself. That could be extending emails, making phone calls, reaching out to school librarians, to school art teachers. Also, making my connections through friends who are parents at elementary schools, those who have contacts in that way. There is another way that a lot of children's book authors can tap into even more visits

and that's booking agents. I do have a booking agent. There's many out there. It can be another way to increase the volume of request that you get.

And another way -- I know of a children's author friend who uses some of the online sources where I think you can pay a certain amount of money to have your information posted. And these are nationally-accessed websites where librarians, teachers are going to these websites and looking for authors to come to their schools. That can be another way.

I haven't done this last one yet, but I've also heard of some authors using Skype as a way to deliver an assembly, a presentation to a school where it's a virtual presentation. It's something that I haven't yet tapped into, but I'm very intrigued by this. I think it probably is something that will continue to be prevalent especially a lot of the economy stays necessarily weak at this time.

LAURA: Shifting gears a little bit. When you initially submitted to your agent or were first contacting your agent, how did you contact her? Did you send her a full manuscript? Did you have a proposal? A query letter? How did you go about making that initial contact?

RACHEL: Well Laura, I have to tell you that my process for engaging an agent happened in a little bit of a perhaps unusual way. I was indifferent I think from the experience of a lot of people and other friends of mine who are engaging agents at this time. I was at the Big Sur Children's Writing Conference, which happened here in California in December of the year. This was probably about four years ago at this time. This is a conference where you're in small working groups during the weekend and you bring whether it's a picture book manuscript or a chapter from a middle-grader teen novel that you're working on. The facilitators of these small groups, critique groups were agents from the Andrea Brown Literary Agency, as well as Editors from New York and then, published children's book authors. I brought a couple of picture book manuscripts to one of my groups that I was in that was facilitated by Laura Rennert who was an agent there. I was delighted and thrilled and very surprised partly through the weekend when Laura approached me and asked if she could represent me. And so, it was a reversal I believe of what has been the usual way that these things happen.

So, I can tell you though that with my many other friends who are writing books for kids and they have manuscripts, they're developing that, what I hear a lot of them talking about is going to the website of the agency and agent that they're interested in and what's so great with the Internet now. A lot of the agents and agencies have these submission guidelines on their website. It's the fast and direct way to simply find out what do they require. Do they want a query letter? Do they want a manuscript, a proposal, et cetera? So, that's how it worked for me.

LAURA: Great! Well, that says a lot about networking and how important that is an author; getting out, going to conferences. I think that a lot of people actually make valuable connections with agents and editors in that same way.

RACHEL: I agree!

LAURA: And I think even if you can go to one a year, I think it's really, really valuable. And also, the agent's website is a really good point. Agents are wonderful in that they put their submission guidelines on their websites and they are very, very specific. And I think every publisher should go and read a bunch of agents' submission guidelines on their websites to see the kinds of things that are useful for authors to know because a lot of publishers' guidelines are very vague in general. The agents are always wonderful about being specific. So, that is a great way to find out if the agent is right for your work before you even submit it.

Okay! Great! Well, do you have any final advice for new authors? Anything we haven't talked about?

RACHEL: I would say a few things. One is congratulations and kudos to you for -- the new authors -- for getting published and also to those who are still aspiring and they have works that they're submitting and sending out. I want to say that if you haven't done it yet, again, use the Internet as the wonderful tool that it is. There's so much information out there, whether it's on the Write4Kids website, the many others that are out there. I really take the time to educate myself about the children's book industry.

I think for some of us who are just starting into learning about kids books and wanting to write for kids, we can hurry a bit and want to jump over that step, but I think it's a vital one to inform yourself and learn the industry inside and out. I think that is critical if you're serious about publishing a book.

And as you mentioned earlier, Laura, I would say attending those workshops and conferences is critical to not just connecting with and networking with editors and agents, but also again to inform yourself, to network with other writers who you might join in critique groups with, which I would say would be my last piece of advice for any aspiring author for kids. Find a critique group (if you haven't yet), one that's on your area, people that you can meet with once a month or twice a month, whatever it may be to workshop your manuscripts and to help get support to strengthen your writing. You can even find people through online networking, as well, that you could do some online critiquing with.

But I think that all of those things really support anybody to set yourselves up for success and have a long and prolific career with writing for kids.

LAURA: Well, thank you so much for your time and for all your wonderful advice. We're really looking forward to your next book. Whatever you choose to write about, I'm sure you'll do a wonderful job. I'm really excited to see what you do next. So, thank you very much.

RACHEL: Thank you, Laura. It's a pleasure talking with you.