300-plus Books and Counting: Bill Martin Jr.

How does Bill Martin Jr. do it? In 1945, his first children's book, The Little Squeegee Bug, was published. Fifty-two years and more than 300 titles later, he's still going strong.

There's no telling how many kids, teachers and parents have enjoyed Bill Martin's books to date, but it's probably well into the millions. Brown Bear; Brown Bear; What Do You See? (Henry Holt) alone has sold more than a million copies since its publication in 1967.

It's just as probable that some of the kids reading his books today are the grandchildren of kids who were reading them way back when. That's staying power - big time.

How does Bill do it? In search of an answer, Teaching K-8 caught up with him last year at the International Reading Association convention in New Orleans. He had come to the convention to sign copies of his books for his publisher, Henry Holt and Company, and it was clear that he'd brought his popularity with him. Teachers were lining up, books in hand, for a signature and a few words with Bill Martin Jr: Not just a few teachers, mind you. Teachers by the score.

Rhythm and sound. There are all sorts of reasons why Bill continues to be at the top of everybody's favorite author list, but one reason is certainly his careful use of language.

Bill worries about every word he writes. He tinkers with sentences, tries them on for size and tinkers with them again. In a Bill Martin book, even the simplest of sentences may be the end-product of countless revisions. Why bother? Because, Bill believes, the rhythm and sound of language resonate somehow in children, even if the full meaning of the words is beyond them.

"I think the thing that I do is listen to the sentences that I write," he told us. "I'm always reading aloud."

Bill Martin has been in love with the sound of language all of his life. He grew up in a small Kansas town - Hiawatha, population 2,000 - in what was essentially a non-reading family. He himself was a non-reader until he went to college, although he was able to hide it from his professors and fellow students.

"The teachers would read poems aloud in class," he said. "I loved the sound of the poems so much that I wanted to reproduce the sound, so I'd borrow the poems from the teachers and take them home and copy them. Then I'd memorize them."

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"It got so that I had a pretty good repertoire - great, wonderful poems by Stephen Vincent Benet, Robert Frost and Christina Rossetti. Those are wonderful voices to have bouncing around in your head.

"In my speech classes, whenever I had to read something aloud, I'd go to the podium and put my manuscript down, but I had it all memorized so I sounded like a reader. If there's anything a non-reader does, it's to try to act like a reader."

With the help and encouragement of his professors, he eventually learned to enjoy reading, but that early love of the way words and sentences sound never left him. Any doubts? Just open a Bill Martin book and read a sentence or two aloud. Any sentence, any book. You'll find that each sentence has a life of its own.

Getting started. Bill's half-century career as an author of children's books began modestly enough. As he tells it, he had just gotten out of the Air Force in 1945 when his brother asked him to write a story. They decided on a children's book they would publish themselves.

"I had no plan, nothing at all. I just sat down and wrote, 'Once upon a time, there was a little squeegee bug...' I think I probably read the story through a couple of times and sent it off to my brother.

"In those days, there was very little cardboard available for making the covers of our books, so we signed an agreement with the Coca-Cola Company and bought their old advertising displays. Some people who looked closely could see the letters C-O-C-A embedded in our covers."

Back to school. Bill believes that the early books he wrote were not all that good. ("The most wonderful thing about them was that they went out of print," he told us.) He decided that if he was going to be in the children's book business, he'd better learn something about children and about reading, so he enrolled in graduate school to get his Master's and Doctorate at Northwestern University.

Following graduate school, he spent five years as principal of an elementary school in Winnetka, Illinois, and seven years as head of the elementary school books division of Holt, Rinehart and Winston. In 1967, he decided to devote all of his time to writing children's books, and he's never looked back.

Reading aloud. How does Bill feel about the state of literacy teaching today? He's sold on it - particularly the emphasis on reading aloud to children.

He put it this way: "Now we have research that validates that when children are listening to the teacher read aloud, they're learning more about language and how it works than at any other time. They're learning more than when they're studying the rules of how to write and how to make language behave."

Bill recommends four read-aloud sessions a day: one to start the day (perhaps a chapter from a book); another later in the day with the teacher focusing on the sounds of language; still another with the teacher sharing his or her personal reading; and finally one at the end of the school day to free the children from all of the educational tension they've accumulated. Parents must understand that reading aloud is a necessary enrichment that makes readers of children.

Who knows? Listening to language might make writers of children, too, although don't bet the farm that they'll ever write 300-plus books over a span of 52 years. That's Bill Martin Jr. territory.