

MEET THE AUTHOR



Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Matt Tavares in his studio in Ogunquit, Maine, on February 25, 2015.

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MATT TAVARES

You are the illustrator and author-illustrator of numerous beloved picture books, including several fiction and nonfiction stories about baseball. Your very first book, *Zachary's Ball*, is set in Fenway Park and won several awards. Has baseball always been a passion of yours?

MT: For me, baseball is like drawing: it's always been a part of my life. I loved playing Wiffle ball with my friends as a kid and, later, youth baseball. Baseball cards were a huge craze in the late '80s when I was growing up, so I was into them too.

I grew up in Winchester, Massachusetts, and I think being raised so close to Boston, where the Red Sox are this omnipresent entity from spring until fall, had a big effect on me. I always dreamed of playing for the Red Sox someday and seeing myself on a baseball card. In fact, I would design my own baseball cards.

I liked reading as a kid, but mostly I'd use free time for drawing. I'd read anything if it was about baseball, though, and, as I've gotten older, I still love reading about the sport—especially the history of baseball. I think that's where a lot of my book ideas come from. Using baseball as sort of a launching pad, I can go off into all different subjects and time periods, from fiction books to nonfiction biographies.

What are your earliest memories of drawing?

MT: For as long as I can remember, I've loved to draw. It's been a part of who I am, I think, from the time I was a very little kid. I always felt like an artist—and I remember grown-ups were always asking me if I was going to be an artist when I grew up because I was always drawing. I remember getting attention from other kids for my artwork, and I really liked that. It gave me confidence. Whatever else may have been going on in my life, I always had this one thing that I was pretty good at.

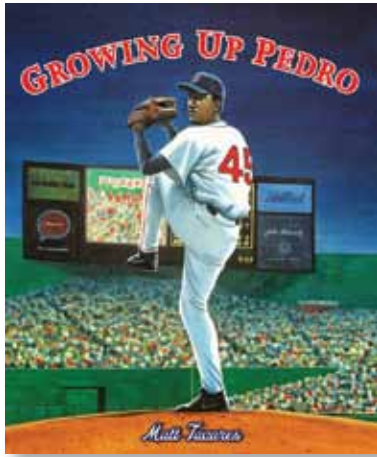
I think a lot of how I learned to draw came from looking carefully at the world around me and studying photographs. We always had a big stack of the *Boston Globe* newspapers in my house, and I'd sift through them, looking for pictures of Carl Yastrzemski and Jim Rice and all my favorite Red Sox players, so I could try to copy them. I'd study my Michael Jackson albums and try to copy them, too.

I wasn't really a big doodler. I was more the type to spend three hours after school sitting there, drawing. I always, always had some crayons and paper on me.

When you were growing up, was your family supportive of your artistic streak?

MT: My family is wonderful. My parents were always incredibly supportive of me being an artist. I knew a lot of people who wanted to be art majors in college whose parents were not supportive of them, because so often parents worry

that their kids are going to end up a starving artist. But from the time I was very young, my parents did everything to try to help me along.



In fact, even before I started kindergarten, my mom went to my elementary school to speak with the art teacher. She brought along this aerial drawing I'd done of a beach and hotel where we used to go during the summer, and she basically said, my kid drew this picture, and I feel like I don't know what to do. And the art teacher told my mom to just keep letting me do what I was doing, and not to worry, she wouldn't mess me up in school. And she didn't—she was amazing. From the very first day, she took me under her wing. As I got older, she would regularly let me invite a friend to accompany us to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where I saw great art. And for a while she came over once a week to give me an extra art lesson. It gave me a huge boost, as a kid, to be introduced to this wide artistic world, and I wanted to be a part of it.

Your body of work encompasses a number of biographies on a diverse crowd of historical and contemporary figures, including Pedro Martinez, John F. Kennedy, and Helen Keller. How important is it to you to feel a connection

to the subject matter that you illustrate?

MT: It's very important for me to feel connected to the subject of my books, even for the books I don't author. For books that I've done where the subject hasn't initially been as close to my heart as some of the others, I've found I really need to immerse myself in the subject and get close, because books take a long time to make. If I'm going to spend ten months or a year working on a book, I need to have energy and passion behind my work. I can't just go through the motions.

For me, of all the books I've done so far, I've felt most connected to *Growing Up Pedro*. That's because I wasn't just growing close to a certain time and person in history through research. With *Pedro*, I actually witnessed it. I was at Fenway Park watching Pedro pitch, so I knew what it was like to be there and feel that electricity in the ballpark.

Whenever I can, I travel to the location where a story took place, which helps me feel closer to it. When I visit, not only do I know what the place looked like from photographs, I then know what it smelled like and what it felt like to be there. For *Pedro*, I actually went to the Dominican Republic and traveled around a bit, took a bunch of pictures, and soaked in the atmosphere. And when I went home to paint the pictures, I felt just as connected to it as I did when I was there.

That's the kind of connection and passion that I hope translates to the reader. Sometimes I worry it doesn't because it can be difficult to keep that energy up the whole year long, but I think people can tell when the artist has a personal connection to his or her work, and it's not just an assignment.

Is there an illustration in *Growing Up Pedro* that you're particularly fond of?

MT: Yes, there is one where you see a full-page close-up of Pedro's face, and his expression is something I noticed again and again while I was researching. I'd watch and rewatch Pedro's previous games, and the TV camera crew would do this super-extreme close-up shot on that great and intense Pedro stare at the batter and catcher.

What made that expression of his stand out to me was what a contrast it was to what his face looked like when he wasn't on the mound. Between innings, the cameras would show him in the dugout, sitting with his brother, Ramón, who was on the Red Sox from 1999 to 2000. Ramón would be talking to him, giving him advice. And Pedro's whole face would soften. He would look like a little kid, just listening to his big brother with admiration and respect. I thought that was so amazing, how he could turn the intensity on and off. And I was also amazed to see so plainly how much his brother meant to him, and the role Ramón played in his story.

Your first book, *Zachary's Ball*, started out as a senior thesis project when you were in college.

MT: I first had the thought that I might want to be a children's book illustrator during my junior year in college, because at that point I knew I liked drawing pictures that told stories, and I especially liked drawing people. So I went to the college library's picture book section, and I found Chris Van Allsburg's books. I'd known many of them as a kid, but revisiting them as a college student, I was absolutely amazed. I then knew for certain this was what I wanted to do: make something permanent that kids would be reading over and over.

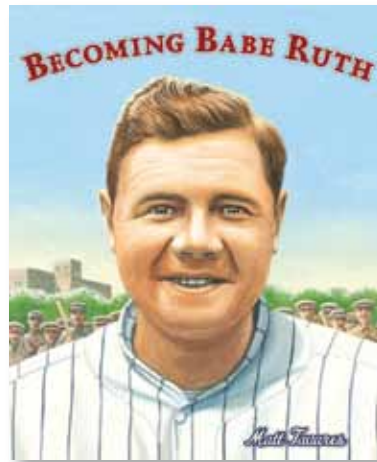
To get started, I needed something to illustrate, but the idea that I'd write my own books didn't initially cross my mind. So, at first, I tried to find some poem or fairy tale I could illustrate. But I didn't discover anything that really interested me, so I set about writing my own story, just to be a vehicle for my illustrations.

I tried to write a story that would have excited me as a kid, so of course it was about baseball. I used my imagination, but I also used a lot of my own memories of going to games with my dad. I immediately discovered one of the great things about writing fiction: you can incorporate real-life memories, but then you can change them a little bit.

I thought a lot about how special it is to get a foul ball at a baseball game—and how, if you catch it or if your dad gives it to you, you get to keep it. All of a sudden, this little piece of the game actually belongs to you. It's such a great experience, and it's kind of magical. I ran with the idea and wrote a story about a kid who gets a foul ball, and when he does, he actually becomes part of the game and finds himself pitching for the Red Sox.

I spent my whole senior school year working on that book, and the exercise was such a gift, because it let me go through the process without the pressure of having to support myself with the book, or worry about real publishing deadlines. I'd taken a lot of fundamental art classes by that point, but I'd never taken any specific illustration or children's book course. And, in the end, I think that might have been a benefit. I was clueless enough to dive in and think, Sure, I can make a book and get it published. I didn't know how unlikely it was to happen, and I might have been more discouraged if I did. It was only through sheer luck that I found an agent after I graduated who was willing to take

me on and who found me a fantastic publisher that saw potential in what I'd done and was willing to help me rework it into a book.



How has your storytelling process changed over the years?

MT: I think early on, the biggest lesson I needed to learn was how to tell the story through the pictures. When I made my first picture book in college, I was thinking that the words told the story, and the pictures just went along with the text. It took some time for me to really understand that the pictures aren't just showing what's in the words; they're doing a lot of the storytelling, too.

For instance, in the original draft of *Zachary's Ball*, the opening paragraph talked about how much the kid loved baseball. And my editor pointed out that if the illustration showed his bedroom with baseball wallpaper, baseball posters, a Red Sox cap, maybe a baseball bedspread, and so on, then I really didn't need that whole paragraph.

After a whole bunch of examples like that, it started to seem more obvious to me, and the lesson became internalized. So now, when I'm working on a book, I get as much as I can into the pictures so I can keep crossing out words in the text. My original text always starts out pretty

long, but it gets shorter and shorter as I figure out the illustrations.

Do you write or illustrate first? What triggers a book for you?

MT: For the most part, I write first, though I'll always do little sketches as I'm writing. I'll have an idea in my mind of what the pictures will be like, but I generally do the writing up front and, once I get it squared away, move on to sketches. Then I'll go back to the text and start cutting things I don't need. There's always a lot of back-and-forth.

Please talk about your interest in biographies.

MT: My interest in biographies started when my publisher asked me to illustrate *Lady Liberty*, a biography by Doreen Rappaport. It was my first nonfiction book, and it was definitely the most challenging book I'd ever worked on, especially because back then I hadn't done nonfiction before. It involved so much research, and the book changed my whole process. With previous books, once I moved on to final art, I would just kind of go with my painting. But with *Lady Liberty*, I was constantly double- and triple-checking all my facts to make sure every little detail was accurate.

Painstaking as it was, I found I really loved the process. So I started looking at different nonfiction subjects I could write about, and, naturally, baseball came to mind. I went on to do *Henry Aaron's Dream*, and then I did *There Goes Ted Williams*. Of course, researching Ted Williams, I came across Babe Ruth's name everywhere because Ted Williams was constantly comparing himself to Babe Ruth and trying to better him. So I started reading about Babe Ruth and then wrote and illustrated *Becoming Babe Ruth*.

I've had plenty of ideas for biographical subjects I'd like to pursue, but once I start reading books about them, I can't always find a

new or fresh angle on their stories that I'd like to tell. So I'll move on to something else because I don't want to make a book if I'm just rehashing the same story that's been told before. Which is why, for *Becoming Babe Ruth*, I decided to focus on his childhood and tell the story of how he transitioned from being a troubled kid who was sent away to reform school to a legendary baseball player, and he ultimately ended up supporting the school that helped him when he was a kid.

Hank Aaron electrified the sports world when he surpassed Babe Ruth's home-run record on April 8, 1974. But in your biography of the famed outfielder, you opted to focus on an earlier, and deeply painful, part of his life.

MT: When I set out to write about Henry ["Hank"] Aaron, I imagined the story would end with him breaking Babe Ruth's home-run record, because that's the thing he's most famous for. But once I started reading more about him and learning about his life, I became fascinated by his early years. Here was a kid who grew up in the Deep South, at a time when he wasn't even allowed to play on the fields in his own city, and who went on not only to become a Major League Baseball player but to become an all-time great.

So I ended up focusing on those early years—and the racial injustice that he faced was a huge part of that story because, even though Jackie Robinson came along when he was thirteen years old, he was still on the early side of black athletes playing organized professional baseball in something other than the Negro leagues. In fact, when he was in the minors for the Braves, he broke the color barrier in the South Atlantic League when he played for Jacksonville in 1953.

So he experienced a lot of what Jackie Robinson went through. He was playing in all cities in the Deep South where people weren't too pleased to see a black player out on the field. He had to face unspeakable hatred every single day, just by trying to go out there and play baseball and pursue his dream. This was a part of Hank Aaron's story that I never heard before. So I decided to tell the story of those years, and I ended *Henry Aaron's Dream* with that spring training in 1954 and him finally making the team as a big league player.

How do you approach illustrating another author's text, versus your own?

MT: I find it more challenging to illustrate a book that someone else writes. When I'm illustrating a story that I wrote, I feel like everything is on the table. Anything can be changed. But when I'm illustrating something that someone else wrote, I treat the text a little more gently and take more of an it-is-what-it-is sort of approach. There have been very few times when I've suggested text changes, when I've realized that if I could draw something in particular, it would be really great—but the text would have to be tweaked a bit to match up. When that happens, it usually turns out well. For example, I've worked on a few books with Doreen Rappaport where we've had a back-and-forth like that during the process; I've suggested an idea and she's gone along with it. We don't always agree about everything, but I think it's great to be able to have that exchange.

It definitely takes me longer to get a good grip on what the pictures are supposed to look like and how the book is supposed to feel when I'm illustrating someone else's text. But then I guess the flip side of that is, I end up making a book I never would have made on my own, which is great.

Take *Lady Liberty*, which I illustrated. Without that text, I never would have gone down a path of writing and illustrating my own nonfiction books. And then, on the other end of the spectrum, take *The Gingerbread Pirates* by Kristin Kladstrup, which I also illustrated. It was a crazy transition; I'd just finished *Lady Liberty*, which was a very intense nonfiction book that required tons of research, and then I went right into *The Gingerbread Pirates*, where all my characters are cookies. I suddenly have to design characters, figure out how to draw these little cookie guys, and figure out how they show emotion on their faces and how they run and move.


It was such a different kind of challenge, but, like *Lady Liberty*, it was a book that I never would have thought to write on my own. So that's a huge plus to collaborating with other people. Together you come up with this book that neither person could have made without the other.

Who do you think of as your audience when you're working on a book?

MT: When I'm working on a book, I'm not always conscious of who my audience will be. I just try to make a really great book, and then I hope that people like it. But when I do think purposefully about it, I remember that my audience is kids—and that kids are intelligent readers who need a real story. I think a mistake some people make going into children's books is assuming that just because a book is for a child, it has to be overly simple or cute or happy. Kids are complex people who want a good story.

How do you create your illustrations?

MT: My first two books were done in all pencil because at that point I felt I did my strongest work in pencil. Around the time I did my first book,



Zachary's Ball, I was trying to get better with color, but I didn't feel it was strong enough. So I illustrated the story in a way that I thought felt right, with these black-and-white, kind of grainy, old-fashioned looking pencil drawings.

After a couple of books, I came to *Jack and the Beanstalk* [by E. Nesbit], and that was sort of a transition for me. I started the book in black and white, but after a while, I started feeling that the beanstalk really needed some green, and the golden harp needed to glow yellow. It suddenly seemed color was essential to the story, so I just kept adding more.

More recently, I've been transitioning to using more watercolors, and I use gouache, too, quite a bit, which is opaque watercolor.

Do you ever work digitally?

MT: I've started doing all my preliminary sketches on the computer, mostly because I can move things around. I like having that capability when I'm in the planning stage. If I do a sketch on a piece of paper, my instinct is to make that sketch work because the alternative is starting a whole new sketch. And as much as I know starting over is part of the process sometimes, I can't help but want to go with the original, because I have deadlines to meet and I need to be as productive as possible.

But when I sketch digitally, I find my instinct is the opposite. I'm always wondering what it'll look like if I try it another way. What if I flip this around? What if I zoom in on this little part? Working digitally allows me to work in layers, and I can constantly change things. I can even put the text right where it belongs, to see whether the layout works. So I've found that sketching digitally is a great tool. But I still do the final step the old-fashioned way: I work on real paper with real paint and pencils.

People are the subject matter of many of your illustrations. Do you use models?

MT: Sometimes I'll just pose myself to get a position right, even if I'm posing for a character who looks nothing like me. So I'll often be dressing up in different costumes and acting out different scenes, and then using the photos I take as references.

But also, a lot of times, I'll have real people pose for me, especially for those projects that require the same character in fifteen or twenty different illustrations, because I need to make sure the character looks like the same person on each page.

My decision to use models or not also depends a bit on the book. For example, I originally started sketching *Jack and the Beanstalk* using models, and everything started looking very real. In fact, my editor actually told me it looked a little too real. She suggested I try to go with my imagination a little more. In the end, for a fairy tale, that actually worked. For my nonfiction books, though, I'll usually want the illustration to look more realistic. So I always try to let the book lead the way in terms of how I go about rendering my characters.

What do you do when you get stuck?

MT: This is actually a bit of advice I got from one of my college painting professors. He told us, if you get stuck, sweep the floor.

What he meant by that was, as a professional artist, you need to be productive every day. But you're not always going to have your A game. You're not always going to be feeling inspired and have amazing work flowing out of you. So his point was, if the work's not going right, if it's not productive, go do something else that is.

I don't actually sweep my floor very often, but I do follow the advice of taking a break and doing something else for a while. That's usually all it takes for me to get going again when I come back to it.

What do you like to tell students when you speak to them?

MT: I do a lot of school visits, and my presentations are always changing, book to book, project to project. But one thing that is consistent about my talks with kids is the message that I don't always get it right, and I never get it right the first try. I have to redo things and fix things and change things on a regular basis, whether it's the text or the art.

I try to help [students] understand this by showing them rough drafts of my work, which have my editor's marks all over them. I point out that even professional writers don't just sit down and write a story and have it come out the way you see in the final book. I have to read through all kinds of comments and suggestions, and then, rather than taking it personally, I have to use the feedback constructively, and go back to work, and keep working, until it's as good as it can be.

I think that is probably the most important thing I want kids to hear because I know a lot of them get frustrated when a first draft seems perfect in their eyes and then comes back with the teacher's marks all over it. It's important for them to know most things aren't perfect the first time around, and what's important is sticking with something until it is as good as it can be. You have to be able and willing to work at something to make it better.

What do you like to tell educators?

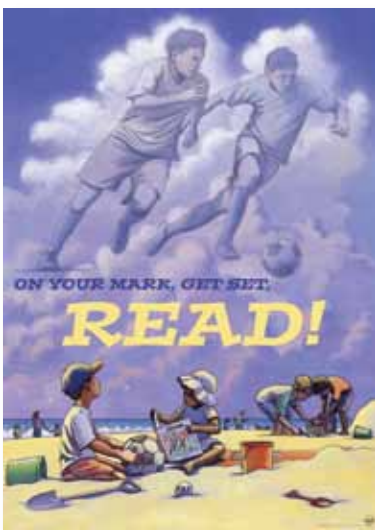
MT: Mostly, I like to give teachers a little behind-the-scenes look at the work I do to make my books,

including all the revising I do, because they tell me they enjoy passing along that kind of information to their students. I think sometimes, when kids hear from the author of a book they know about persevering and rewriting or redrawing, it maybe resonates a little more than hearing it from their teacher, even though the teacher is likely giving them the very same advice.

You are the illustrator for the 2016 Collaborative Summer Library Program (CSLP). Please tell us about the two themes you're working with.

MT: It was such an honor to be asked to be the artist for the 2016 CSLP. I had seen my friend Dan Santat's artwork for the 2014 program all over the place, so I knew it was a big deal. The theme for 2016 is "On Your Mark, Get Set, READ!" For my illustrations, I tried to combine the idea of summer reading with images of fun summer sports—especially Olympic sports, since 2016 is an Olympic year.

My artwork was inspired by one of my favorite paintings by one of my all-time favorite illustrators: *Giant* by N.C. Wyeth. In his painting, a group of children are playing on the beach, looking up at the sky, as an enormous image of a giant emerges from the



clouds. I love this painting because it captures the magic and wonder of childhood by showing the real and the imagined in one powerful image.

I tried to come up with pictures that also combined the real—with kids reading in summery settings—with the imagined, where the subjects of their books are coming to life around them. For my poster for younger children, two kids are on the beach, playing with a soccer ball and reading a book about soccer, while an image of two soccer players looms above them in the clouds. And in my poster for older children, two kids are enjoying a lazy summer day, sitting in inflatable tubes in a pool, reading books that have pictures of Olympic swimmers on the jacket. And underwater we see a group of swimmers racing past.

I also did fourteen pieces of spot art, and for those I built on the same theme, showing images of summer reading and fun summer sports.

Please describe a few elements of the illustrations you made for the 2016 CSLP that you particularly enjoy.

MT: It was summertime when I was first asked to do this project, so the first step in my process was just to keep my eyes open for anything I thought might make a good subject for these illustrations. So a lot of the illustrations just happened naturally, without any planning. For example, I was at my parents' house and happened to notice my book-loving nephew sitting on his father's lap, and they were reading a story together. I snapped a photo and used it as a reference for one of my illustrations. There is also an image of my younger daughter surfing and my older daughter playing soccer. Most of the pictures are based on my friends and family, and almost all of

them are of fun summer activities I captured just because I was paying attention, not because I planned for them to happen.



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