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# Lights! Camera! Read!

## Terry John Barto Encourages Children to Dream Big

by Rachel Koestler-Grack

**On Read Across America Day**, children's author Terry John Barto read his books, *Gollywood, Here I Come!* and *Nickerbacher, The Funniest Dragon*, to a group of second graders. Afterwards, the kids rattled off all sorts of ideas they had for stories. One student asked Terry if he would write a story about a leprechaun. "Why don't you write that story?" Terry responded. "Well—I can't," said the child, believing that writing a book was somehow an impossible dream. Terry jumped at the opportunity to inspire this child and quickly shot back, "Yes you can!" All of a sudden, Terry felt like a character from one of his books. He was like Anamazie, the aspiring young turkey actress who dreamed of being a movie star, and in *Gollywood, Here I Come!*, she makes her dream come true. When she returns from Gollywood, she encourages her friends to follow their dreams, too. At the elementary school that day, Terry was playing the part of Anamazie, trying to encourage the children to follow their dreams. "I wanted to show them that it doesn't have to be a movie star," he says. "It could be anything ... a fireman or a writer or whatever. Go after your dreams."

Born and raised in California, Terry grew up with parents who also believed in following dreams. His mother was a model and his father was a musician who earned a living playing the piano. "My childhood was incredible," Terry says. "It was very creative." In high school, he joined the band as a saxophone player. The camaraderie of his bandmates brought him out of his shell. "I was really good at it, too," he admits. "I was very dedicated." He also joined the Mariners, the high school show choir, and with this select group of entertainers, he toured Europe, performing sing-and-dance numbers.



Terry's participation with the Mariners sparked a passion for dance and choreography. After high school, he started taking serious dance classes—tap, jazz, ballet and modern dance. He began performing with the Great American Entertainment Company and in musical theater shows. His love for the stage inspired him to dabble in his own choreography, putting together shows with all of his dance friends. Terry began creating shows and doing choreography for the Great American Entertainment Company. Suddenly, he was choreographing the musicals he once performed, and it didn't stop there. "Then I was both the director and choreographer for a lot of productions," he says.

For a number of years, Terry worked as a freelance director and choreographer, overlapping shows and staging a wide variety of musicals. "I was doing wholesome stuff like *Hello, Dolly!* and *Annie*, which I love," recalls Terry. "Then, I'd turn around and do a *West Side Story* or *Tommy* (a rock musical based on



The Who's 1969 album of the same name).” He started choreographing and later directing for Shakespeare Santa Cruz, an annual professional theatre festival in Santa Cruz, California. During the holiday season, the group performed original musicals based

on fairytales, such as Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast, but with a twist inspired by English pantomime. “They were just wild and crazy versions of these fairytales,” Terry explains. “It was really neat. The audience could participate with the actors, and the whole family could come.”

Around 2000, an actress from one of Terry's shows approached him with some animation ideas. “As a director, I always had a really good sense of storytelling abilities,” Terry says. “And she recognized that.” She was starting a company called Wings of Dreams Productions and wanted Terry to help develop her ideas. Wings of Dreams Productions didn't stay above ground for long, even though the team presented their ideas to Mattel—complete with dolls and action figures, but Terry's experience with the company paved the way for his own creative endeavors. During his flight with Wings of Dreams, Terry had honed his skills for storytelling, as well as writing for animation. He decided to send out resumes—98 to be exact—to animation companies. He received two responses: one from the Jim Henson Company and the other from Walt Disney Television Animation. Terry met with the vice president of Disney's animation company, presenting everything he had done with Wings of Dreams Productions. The vice president responded, “What if you came up with your own ideas?” Terry thought for a moment and said, “Well, you know ... I do kind of have some ideas.” While things didn't work out with Disney, this meeting sparked a new dream for Terry—to write his own stories.

With the encouragement of an editor, Pam Halter, Terry started writing children's books. “She really encouraged me and loved my ideas,” he says. “If it wasn't for her, I don't know if I would have kept going because it's a lot of rejection, and it's tough.”

Anyone who reads *Gollywood, Here I Come!* immediately gets the feeling that there is more to “Gobbleville” than just this one story. In fact, this book is an episode plucked from an animated TV series Terry developed called *Gobbleville*. “I have a whole environment and background, characters and episode ideas,” Terry explains. “Anamazie's father is the mayor of Gobbleville, Henrietta Pearl is the mom, Anamazie, of course, the little child star, and she has a brother, Tommy, Jr., who's always getting into trouble.”

In *Nickerbacher, The Funniest Dragon*, the main character also follows his dream, but this story shares another important message. The book is about being true to who you are. Even the prince in the story, Prince Happenstance, or as Nickerbacher calls him, Prince Fancypants, really wants to be a baseball

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player. But he's stuck being a prince. Terry says, “The twist of it is that everybody would think, ‘Who wouldn't want to be a prince?’”

Both books are Story Monster Approved! and both received Mom's Choice awards. While Terry is truly honored by both awards, he's especially thrilled by the Story Monster approval. “The thing about Story Monsters is that kids choose it,” he says. “And that's what makes me so happy.”

Getting kids' approval is inspiring for Terry, and that's exactly what happened on Read Across America Day, which was the first time he'd read his books to children. “You're at your computer, in your little room, reading [the book] aloud to yourself or your dog (when she's not asleep), so to finally get the chance to read it to kids was so neat,” he says. “Every time I said ‘Prince Fancypants,’ they would laugh.” But Terry wasn't the only one inspired. He inspired those kids to follow their dreams. “Talk about rewarding!” he says, “It meant the world to me, and I really look forward to doing it again!”

To learn more about Terry and his books, visit [www.tjbkids.com](http://www.tjbkids.com).