

# What's all the hoot about Katie Davis?

BY ELLEN S. BEST

**"D**on't call me Mrs. Davis. Call me Katie. The front office at my kids' school still won't do it," author and illustrator Katie Davis told a student audience at Pound Ridge Elementary School recently.

Mrs. Davis, of Bedford Hills, is forthright and immediately likable. She is in her element amongst children — a 43-year-old mother and professional with the angst of an eight-year old always looking for that perfect tree to climb, still rejoicing with each snowflake on a school night.

Mrs. Davis wore blue jeans, a man-style dark vest buttons of all sizes and colors in a line down the front — and high-top sneakers, which she had decorated. As the guest author for two days, she was speaking to the kindergartners at PRES about creating stories and illustrations, but she would have been just as happy wriggling among them. Afterwards, she sat cross legged on a chair to be interviewed.

So we'll call her "Katie" here. Happy, Katie? For many of us, our plea for informality and straightforward talk hovers only with puberty or being young. It gives way to getting older and being proper. But for Katie, it's refreshingly still her, and she puts a positive spin on it. Writing and illustrating are perfect vehicles for her childlike wonder, emotions and gut feelings.

"I'm so blessed to have found a career I feel passionate about," she said. "I need options, not one answer

like in math. I was never good at math."

Since 1998, Katie, 43, has had four children's books published by Harcourt: "Who Hops?" "I Hate to Go to Bed," "Who Hoots?" and "Scared Stiff." In the fall, "Who Hops?" and "Who Hoots?" are coming out as board books and "I Hate to Go to Bed" will be available in paperback. A new book, "Party Animals," is also being released.

"Scared Stiff" will be read on the PBS television show "Reading Rainbow" sometime this year — a tremendous boost for an author. It will be part of a series of books that deal with children's fears, a by-product of Sept. 11. In the story, the girl empowers herself to face her fears.

Katie, too, has had to face her reactions to Sept. 11. "Suddenly, on that day, writing books meant nothing at all in the scope of things," she said. "I felt hopeless, with nothing to give, unlike the firefighters and police. It hit me hard. Then five days later an eight-year-old girl from New York City e-mailed me. I cry just thinking about it."

"She wrote, 'Dear Katie Davis: I'm so excited that you're coming to my school. We're writing a lot in school. And maybe — just maybe — if I get to meet you next week, I'll be able to write my autobiography.'"

"That little girl made me feel like a hero. If I could get a kid like her excited about reading, then it made me feel that what I do is valuable. I met her a week later, but she will never truly know what she did for me. I'll never be able to give as much as she gave to



Katie Davis of Bedford Hills takes easily to child's play and children's books. ELLEN S. BEST PHOTO

me, to other children."

Katie's creative drive is like an itch that won't go away — and it didn't jive with more formal work environments before she buckled down to writing children's books professionally. "After graduating from Boston University, I got fired six or seven times from public relations and advertising jobs," she said. "So I figured I should be working for myself. Besides, I hated wearing pantyhose."

She created a line of hand-painted ceramics and a successful design, "Scared Guy," which was licensed for use all over the world. Her husband, Jerry Davis, a producer of animated feature films, suggested she attend a conference given by the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. There she learned how to submit her work to be published.

Katie gets her story ideas from her own kids — Benny, eight, and Ruby, almost six years old. "Who Hops?" began as a way to distract them when they were restless in their car seats. "I Hate to Go to Bed!" came from a night when Benny got out of bed 37 times, which she counted during that sleepless night.

Katie's personal, humorous colloquial style permeates her books, Web site and school visits. Schools looking for authors to visit immediately get the feeling that this author would give the type of presentation that students would like.

And they do. Together with up to 100 children at a time, she writes and illustrates a story with the aid of an

# Children's book creator is an anomaly

overhead projector, teaching even the youngest students about beginning, middle and end.

"If you just had a beginning, the story would be 'Once upon a time, once upon a time, once upon a time,'" she told the rapt group of kindergart-

ners in the PRES library recently.

"The first story I ever wrote — with a beginning, middle and end — was in first grade. It went like this: 'Papa Louie. He has fake teeth. He takes them out. He makes me laugh.'"

Katie travels all around the country visiting schools, and was also invited to Argentina to talk about her books and to promote reading, writing and drawing. Local communities are just beginning to realize how much she has to offer to schools, and also to college events and teacher conferences.

"Katie Davis was engaging and appropriate, and had the skills to make the kids sit and listen," said Marie Plonowski, a first-grade teacher at PRES. "My class loves her books because they are funny and predictable, so they not only read, but participate."

In "Who Hops?" the narrative goes

through a list of animals and how they move, in Katie's style of conversing. "Elephants slither." Next page: "No they don't! Me? Slither? C'mon? You're cracking me up! Stop... I can't take it anymore. Elephants have hairy babies and wiggly trunks, but they don't slither!"

Katie is melded with her work. The studio above her garage in Bedford Hills is her playground. Funky blue and purple stairs lead to her workspace, with fan letters and drawings lining the walls. A retractable clothesline with clothespins on it is ready to hold the next series of drawings that will eventually become a book. Her computer area in the corner is chock full of papers and personal mementos. Containers of paints cover much of a rolling table that she converts to an easel. There's evidence of several projects being worked on.

"I love the editing process, making it better. It's like going up a staircase

and getting to the next landing — and then I go toward the next landing. From idea to finished product can take years, including the time it just cooks in my brain. I've learned to trust my own process," Katie said.

Katie Davis is an anomaly: a high-top sneaker mom in Westchester, a party-going gal who also craves solitude, and a woman who speaks her humble and self-deprecating mind. Hmm, sounds like a good idea for a book or television series. For now, she is working with a major studio on developing two animated series based upon her characters she has created.

"While I'm in the supermarket choosing between low-fat and non-fat mayonnaise, someone in Idaho is reading "Who Hops?" and learning to read. It's humbling. I'm just me."

Visit [katedavis.com](http://katedavis.com) for information on books, school visits and e-mail.