

About Diane deGroat



Me in first grade

When I was a kid there were no computers or DVD's or video games. We drew with crayons, not markers, and the blackboard in school was black, not green or white. The sidewalk in front of my house was made of slate, just like the blackboard in school, and I drew on the sidewalk with chalk. When it rained, my drawings washed away, and then I drew some more.

I have loved drawing for as long as I can remember.

I also loved watching television. The shows were in black and white, not color, and you had to get up to change the channels. There were only five channels. I watched cartoons in the morning, "The Mickey Mouse Club" after school, and my favorite show in the evening was "The Wonderful World of Disney." I didn't like to read. I didn't grow up in a house full of books - my father read the newspaper; my mother read the TV Guide.

I walked to elementary school - we didn't have school buses. It was called a "grammar school" and we went from kindergarten to eighth grade all in one building. It was the same school that both my mother and my father went to when they were little. I also walked home for lunch, because the school didn't have a cafeteria. They didn't need one, because everyone lived close enough to walk to their neighborhood school. At lunchtime I watched "Truth or Consequences" on TV.

In first grade my favorite thing was the painting corner in the back of the classroom. If you finished your work early, you could paint on the big newsprint paper that was attached to an easel. I loved the smell and the feel of the mushy poster paint. I always rushed through my spelling and my math so that I could be the first one in the painting corner. I wasn't a good student, but I was fast.

In second grade my favorite things to draw were Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, even on my schoolwork. My teacher wasn't happy about that, but the other kids in the class thought I was a good artist. That made me feel special so I drew some more. The more I drew, the more I learned about drawing. Every time I illustrate a book, I'm still learning something new.

My grandmother was an artist. She painted scenery that she copied from postcards and magazines. Since I was so good at drawing Mickey Mouse, she thought I should take art lessons. So every week I rode my bicycle to the other side of town, balancing a big wooden paint box across the handlebars, all the way to Mrs. Clark's house. She had real artist easels set up in her basement.



I learned how to use oil paint, and how to copy postcards and pictures from magazines. I loved the smell of the turpentine and the way the oil paint spread across the canvas. I took painting lessons from Mrs. Clark for 11 years. I only missed a class when she was on vacation, or when I had the chicken pox. Sometimes I would enter my paintings in local art shows and sometimes I would win an award.



One of my grandmother's paintings



View from my bedroom window that I painted when I was about 12

I grew up in Belleville, New Jersey. Belleville is only 45 minutes from New York City, but I went there only on school field trips. One of these trips was to the Metropolitan Museum of Art when I was about 9. I loved seeing the paintings, and I didn't want to leave. I bought a book on the history of art in the souvenir shop.



It was the only book I owned, and I loved looking at the pictures. I even read the words. I tried to copy some of these pictures using a pencil or watercolor paint. I learned to draw people, trees, boats, animals - everything. By the time I went to art school the book was completely worn out.



In 1965 I went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. It was only 30 minutes from the Metropolitan Museum, and I spent all my spare time there, sketching and looking at the beautiful paintings. Many years later I read E. L. Konigsburg's book, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, about two children who secretly live in the museum. I knew exactly which rooms they were in, and where the great fountain was. I wish I had read that book when I was a child. But I wasn't a reader. And Ms. Konigsburg hadn't written it yet.

Sketch done at Pratt

When I finished college, my first job was designing basic reading books for a publishing company. The stories in the books were chapters from well-known children's books, and it was the first time I had the opportunity to read really great children's literature. I became acquainted with *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Flat Stanley*, and many other award winning books. I loved reading them, and decided that I wanted to be a children's book illustrator. And a children's book reader.



For 20 years I illustrated for many different publishers and many different authors. When illustrating was no longer a challenge to me, I decided I would become a writer. But I didn't know how to write, and all my stories got rejected. I joined writers' groups and took writing classes. And I read. The more I read, the more I learned about writing. When *Annie Pitts*, *Artichoke* was published in 1992, I finally got the chance to illustrate my own chapter book. *Roses Are Pink*, *Your Feet Really Stink* was the first picture book that I wrote and illustrated. I'm working on the twelfth in the Gilbert series now, and I plan to do many more.

Thank you for liking Gilbert. And thank you for being a reader.

Diane de Groat

P. S. You can read about my work in books, my school visits and frequently asked questions on my website:
www.dianedegroat.com