

Storytime

Steve Ross' lively readings at Vroman's bring children's lit to life.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ILSA SETZIOL

TWICE A WEEK, THE USUAL HUSHED, CONTEMPLATIVE AIR OF VROMAN'S BOOKSTORE IN PASADENA RUPTURES AS LITTLE WILD THINGS STORM THE PLACE. THEY HUFF UP THE BIG STAIRS TO THE CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT AND HOME IN ON THE GUY KNOWN FOR HIS SHIRTS WITH BRIGHT GRAPHIC PRINTS. (THEY'LL EAT HIM UP, THEY LOVE HIM SO.) IT'S STORYTIME WITH MR. STEVE, WHERE HE DEFTLY PERFORMS THE MAGIC TRICK OF BECALMING THEM WITH FANTASTIC TALES.

For a quarter century, Steve Ross has delighted children (and parents) with his readings at Vroman's. In the late '80s, when he took a job selling books there, he had no inkling he would become an influential educator, even drawing classes from nearby McKinley Elementary. At 46, he still has a youthful demeanor and unflagging enthusiasm for a good story. (He's also the store's bargain book buyer, which explains Vroman's fantastic selection of bargain kids' books.)

On a Wednesday in June, his audience consists of half a dozen girls in headbands, pink shirts and sparkly shoes, plus boys sporting Disney Cars tennis shoes and superhero shirts. Most listen attentively for an entire hour as Ross bursts into highly interactive and animated readings of *Mouse Paint*, *The Day Louis Got Eaten*, *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons*, *Dragons Love Tacos*, *Fish Out of Water* and other books for kids under six. He voices the mice in squeaky tones, punctuates the action with vocal pops and *boings*, renders Pete the Cat with a surfer dude voice, gets the kids to count Pete's buttons, prompts them to identify colors in the pictures and encourages the audience to shout out the stories' refrains.

"The more parts there are to the story that you can engage the kids in [the better]," he says. "If there's a phrase that gets repeated a lot, that's fantastic. My storytime's full of these pregnant pauses while I wait for the kids to chime in."

Parents sip lattes and check email, but they're listening too, smiling at twists on familiar fairy tales (*The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*) and humorous asides added for their amusement. Robert Baumgartner brings his three-year-old daughter nearly every week. "It's helped me tell stories better at home," he says, noting that he has become a more animated reader himself, copying some of the voices Ross uses. "And we've actually gotten books I wouldn't have picked up if he hadn't read them."

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with Mr. Steve!





Ninja High School Preview artwork
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Art by Greg Espinoza

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Ross' storytelling panache owes a debt to his mother, Irene, who he says has a vivid imagination and a passion for entertainment — books, movies, stories of all stripes. She read to her two young sons about pretty much whatever they were interested in, deploying a range of goofy voices and accents. "Her Dracula was Bela Lugosi on steroids," he recalls, "and she did [Boris] Karloff for Frankenstein." He can still hear the sound effects she made for vampire hunter Van Helsing stabbing Dracula, "Once you hear [that]," he laughs, "you know your mom is really, really cool."

Ross' readings are more than entertainment — reading aloud to little kids not only helps them build linguistic skills, it also correlates strongly with their future school success, according to Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Among the many research papers that back this assertion is a 1985 National Academy of Education report, *Becoming A Nation of Readers*, which concluded "the single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children."

Ross grew up in San Gabriel and Temple City, where he still lives behind his parents' home. Young Ross loved action TV shows and movies, such as *Sbazam* and *Star Wars*, which debuted when he was 10 and "changed everything." "I wanted to read stuff that was like *Star Wars*," he recalls. "But the pulp magazines that it was based on weren't considered good literature." Teachers tried to steer him to classic books like *A Wrinkle in Time*, but they bored him. "With all due respect to *Wrinkle in Time*," he says with a laugh, "it's hippie, touchy-feely sci-fi, not blowing-up-robots-and-spaceship sci-fi. There's not a sword fight to be found."

Then he discovered Hey Kids, Comics! at the grocery store. They cost only 25 cents and were action-packed. For the first time, he became an avid reader, albeit of comic

books. "But the way comics were written then, the vocabulary was so sophisticated," he says, explaining that they were penned by recent college grads who hadn't really had such a young audience in mind.

Ross' hip mom, who worked briefly as a substitute teacher, thought many classics were overrated and encouraged his interest in pop culture and science fiction. He remembers the copies of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter of Mars* series she picked up for him at a garage sale. They became "the Rosetta Stone to just about everything I had loved before and since," he says.

These days Ross is pleased to be able to refer middle school boys to a banquet of adventure stories, including series like Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Alex Rider, Skulduggery Pleasant and Ranger's Apprentice. And comics and graphic novels are now more acceptable. But he regrets that popular superhero stories are no longer the complex and subversive lore he remembers. "When I read an old Avengers or Spider-Man comic, I often felt like Stan Lee was trying to impart a message to me amidst the mayhem," he says. "Now I feel like the message is: Buy more products."

Vroman's sells plenty of classics, and Ross recommends those too, but he's still most passionate about exciting books with interesting visuals, even for little kids. His storytime picks are usually funny, sound-rich and brilliantly illustrated. They're mostly recent releases — books parents often don't know of and libraries might not offer. (But, of course, no violence or scary stuff for the little ones.) Among his signature read-alouds are Mo Willems' goofy, interactive, comic-style pigeon books (e.g. *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*).

Ross' passion inspired him to create his own comics and movies, so as a teenager, he took Saturday classes at Art Center College of Design, which he hoped to attend after

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Mr. Steve's Read-For-Fun Storytime Playlist (In No Particular Order)

WARNING: May not (necessarily) be educational!

1. *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* by Mo Willems

Sometimes we don't get to live our dreams, no matter how hard we attempt to bargain, trick, cajole or throw a tantrum. But sometimes, not living our dreams is actually for the best. (To be honest, almost all of Mo Willems' books are storytime favorites.)

2. *A Fish Out of Water* by Helen Palmer

Long in page count, but using short words and repetitive language, this is a brilliant, blazingly fast-paced comedy of escalation [in which a boy ignores advice not to overfeed his fish and it grows to epic proportions].

3. *The Mud Fairy* by Amy L. Young

On the surface, *The Mud Fairy* has all the pink and girly-girl trappings shared by books about corporate-owned princesses and fairies. However, the message here is that it's okay to be a tomboy, and to get a little muddy along the way.

4. *I Want My Hat Back* by Jon Klassen

A bear has lost his hat; he wants it back. That simple premise leads to a jaw-dropping conclusion (which is told so obliquely, it's actually implied — "off-camera" gruesomeness shouldn't upset most readers).

5. *Ladybug Girl and Bumblebee Boy* by David Soman, illustrated by Jacky Davis

I love all of the Ladybug Girl books, but this superhero mash-up rivals *The Avengers!* (Okay, not really.) A spunky heroine — who bucks [princess] stereotypes — and her playmate Sam learn to resolve conflicts and discover common ground by playing superheroes.

6. *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson, illustrated by Tara King

Written before bullying officially became an issue, this brilliant and wickedly clever story of conflict resolution is practically a manual for "getting rid" of your worst enemy (by making him a best friend).

7. *The Dumb Bunnies* by Sue Denim, pictures by Dav Pilkey

The cover blurb declares, "This Book Is Too Dumb to Win an Award," but it's actually chock-full of doublespeak, puns, sly visual gags and hilarious surprises.

8. *I Hate Picture Books* by Timothy Young

Reluctant readers, your "voice" has arrived! The author makes many valid points as to why some kids have a hard time relating to classic stories. I believe that most reluctant readers just haven't found that perfect book among the mainstream's approved offerings.

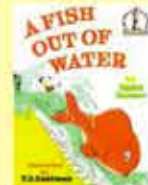
9. *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Alex Schaffer

A mouse tricks his way out of being eaten. Clever mouse, clever scam, clever story, clever rhyme scheme, clever illustrations. I just love to read this one out loud!

10. *Lost and Found* by Oliver Jeffers

I wanted to have an Oliver Jeffers book on this list, and it was a toss-up between this one and *Stuck*. After recommending so many books about conflict resolution, superheroes, subversion and animals trying to eat each other, I thought I'd pick a nice friendship story about a boy and a lost (actually, lonely) penguin that ends with a hug and makes you go, "Awwwww." — Steve Ross

All books are carried by Vroman's Bookstore, 695 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena. Call (626) 449-5320 or visit vromansbookstore.com.



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coursework at Pasadena City College. But after a financial setback, his family couldn't swing Art Center tuition, leading Ross to seek out collaborators to illustrate and publish his stories. Comics artist Ben Dunn invited him to contribute stories and dialogue to his Ninja High School series (Eternity Comics), one of the first anime/magma-inspired comics published in the U.S. The resulting series, about a trio of Ninjas, was called Zetraman. Ross, whose maternal great-grandparents wrestled from Mexico, also collaborated on one of the first comics with a *lucha libre*/Mexican wrestling theme. He's currently working on a steampunk version of Tom Sawyer. (Steampunk is a science-fiction subgenre that melds Victorian and futuristic technologies.)

Any portrait of Mr. Steve would be incomplete without a nod to his passion for guinea pigs. He's been a "pig daddy" to 10 and recommends Paddington Bear creator Michael Bond's *The Tales of Olga de Polga* (out of print in the U.S., but easy to buy online from the U.K.). "When the time is right," he says only half-joking, "I will write The Great Guinea Pig Epic Saga. It will be a cross between *Watership Down*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Road Warrior* and *Atlas Shrugged*."

After all these years, it's clear Ross still enjoys reading children's books. That's not only a blessing for kids, but a boon to Vroman's. In this era of electronic media, children's books are an expanding piece of the store's sales. "Parents still want to share beautiful picture books with their children," says Allison Hill, Vroman's president and COO, adding "there are children who have grown up with [his] storytime and grew into teenagers who would only take recommendations from Mr. Steve."

True, some teens want to forget that they ever liked Peter Rabbit (or the guy who wedged into Peter Rabbit and other character costumes at storytime special events). "They hit this age where they don't want to know me," he says with a laugh, "but I'm hoping as they get closer to college age, I'll become ironic like Mr. Rogers."

Whether they're reluctant or eager, Ross enjoys chatting with his alums (some are now in college) when they visit the store. Many are doing well in school, he notes, "and are reading tomes that are hefty than *Where the Wild Things Are* — for pleasure!" He credits the family members who brought his brood to storytime, but he also feels proud that he helped show them that reading can be fun. ■