

## How it all started ...

Adapted and excerpted from Stan and Jan Berenstain's *Down a Sunny Dirt Road: an Autobiography*, published by Random House in 2002.

It was when Stan and Jan's then four-year-old son Leo asked for Dr. Seuss' *McElligot's Pool* for Christmas that it all started.

We became Dr. Seuss fans. But more than that, his books scratched an old itch. We had for some time been thinking of doing a children's book, perhaps even two or three. Dr. Seuss scratched that itch.

We knew from our first noodlings that our book would be about bears — a family of bears. We knew they would live in a tree. We don't know how we knew, but we knew. We knew we'd have three characters: a bluff, overenthusiastic Papa Bear who wore his overalls and a plaid shirt and was a little like Stan, a wise Mama Bear who wore a blue dress with white polka dots and a similarly polka-dotted dust cap and was very like Jan, and a bright, lively little cub (Small Bear) who was a lot like Leo. Michael, not yet one, didn't make the cut.



It took us two months to write and illustrate the manuscript of our first children's book.

At the same time, *The Cat in the Hat*, Dr. Seuss's epoch-making response to "Why Johnny can't read" controversy was sweeping the country. In seventy-two pages of rhymed, limited-vocabulary text, Dr. Seuss changed the way children learn to read in America. The book was so successful that it led to the development of Beginner Books, a revolutionary new line of easy-to-read children's books. Beginner Books was a new division of Random House. Its trademark (and battle cry) was "I can read it all by myself," and its president and editor-in-chief was Theodor Seuss Geisel, otherwise known as Dr. Seuss.

Beginner Books sounded like a good destination for our own children's book. Our would-be Beginner Book was called *Freddy Bear's Spanking*. It told the story of Freddy Bear, who, having misbehaved, attempts to negotiate himself out of a spanking by proposing a series of alternative punishments. After much negotiation with Mama and Papa Bear, he says, "Oh, the heck with it. Let's go ahead with the spanking."

After a contract was signed, we were summoned to New York for a meeting with the editorial board of Beginner Books. The board consisted of Ted (Dr. Seuss); Helen Palmer, Ted's wife and a longtime children's author in her own right; and Phyllis Cerf, wife of the chairman and co-founder of Random House (Bennett Cerf of *What's My Line*).

Though Ted didn't wear a big red-and-white-striped top hat like the Cat in the Hat, he shared many characteristics with his feline alter ego. Like the Cat, he could be charming, courtly, congenial, and delightful to be with; also like the Cat, he could be demanding, dismissive, and downright difficult.

Our first meeting began with introductions and pleasantries. However, a slightly disquieting sense of déjà vu hung over the exchange of pleasantries. No wonder. We were literally surrounded by *Freddy Bear's Spanking*. It was plastered all over the walls—thumb tacked in sequence to large corkboards mounted on three walls of the small room.

"It's called storyboarding," explained Ted. "It's a movie technique. I learned it from Frank Capra. It really lets you get a sense of how the story's working." If it was good enough for Frank Capra, it was good enough for us.

"We like your bears. We think they're fun," Ted continued. "We like the idea of a family.

"And we love your drawings," said Helen.

Hooray for Helen.

"But we need to know more about them."



Ted smoked. We didn't. There was no way Papa Bear was going to smoke.

We moved to the wall display of *Freddy Bear's Spanking*, where Ted conducted a guided tour of the thousand and one things wrong with our book. It was too long. It was too complicated. Didn't we

realize these books were supposed to help kids learn to read? Remember the Beginner Book slogan: “I can read it all by myself.” We had too many contractions. We had too many female rhymes. We didn’t know rhymes had gender. But they did. The sentences were much too long—some of them looked like the long, long trail a winding. “Think short sentences—easy words and short sentences. Think beginning, middle, and end. As the story stands now, you’ve got a good beginning and a good end. But your middle needs work ... a lot of work.”

“Well, Berenstains,” said Ted, coming up for air, “what do you think so far?”

What did we think? We didn’t know *what* to think. But Ted was all smiles and warmth as he took our hands in his. “Berenstains,” he said, “I can’t tell you how happy I am to be working with you. I just know we’re going to get a wonderful book.”

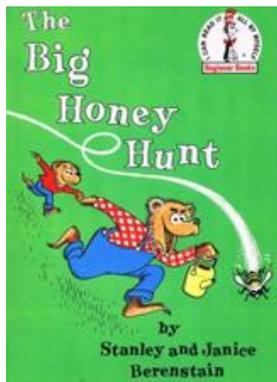


After nursing our wounds and feeling sorry for ourselves for a few days, we got to work on draft number two, which, over the months, was followed by draft number three and draft number four. Our modest dream of doing a funny book about a family of bears who lived in a tree was turning into a walking nightmare. We were dutifully cranking Ted’s recommendations into draft after draft.

Helen and Phyllis finally called a halt to all the changes. They suggested that the honey-hunting sequence in the original story had survived all the changes. Why not, they suggested, take that sequence and expand it into a whole book?

And that’s exactly what we did.

We went home and started from scratch. The new story told about the Bear family’s waking up to an empty honey pot one morning. Papa and Small Bear take the empty pot and set out in search of honey. A bee flies by. Papa and Small Bear “follow that bee and follow that bee and follow that bee to its honey tree.” But when they get there, the bees rise up and chase Papa into a pond. On their way home,



Papa and Small Bear buy some honey at the honey store, which was what Mama wanted them to do in the first place.

We roughed out the story and sent it to Ted, who thought it was just fine. “Go ahead with the finish,” he said.

The fever had broken. The crisis was past. We had our Bears back and all was right in the tree house.

***The Big Honey Hunt* was published in the spring of 1962.**