

• Meet the Author •

Susanna Reich

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

Grades
K–2, 3–5



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Susanna Reich is the award-winning author of *Minette's Feast: The Delicious Story of Julia Child and Her Cat*; *Painting the Wild Frontier: The Art and Adventures of George Catlin*; *Penelope Bailey Takes the Stage*; *José! Born to Dance*; and *Clara Schumann: Piano Virtuoso*. Among her honors are the Tomás Rivera Award, International Latino Book Award, NCTE Orbis Pictus Honor, ALA Notable, YALSA Best Books for Young Adults, *SLJ* Best Books, *Kirkus* Best Young Adult Books, and *Booklist* Top Ten Arts Books. A former professional dancer, Reich is Chair of the Children's and Young Adult Authors Committee of PEN

American Center and lives in Ossining, New York, with her husband, children's book author Gary Golio.

How did you first encounter José Limón and decide to write this picture book biography? What most attracted you to him?

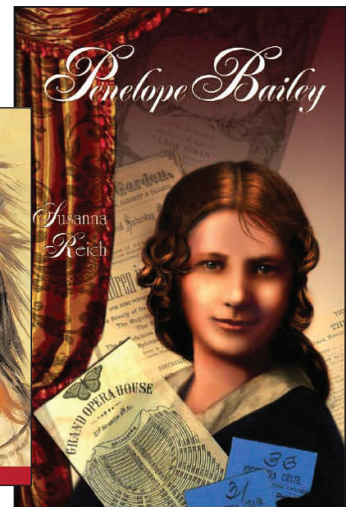
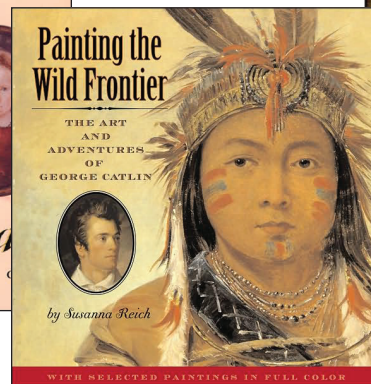
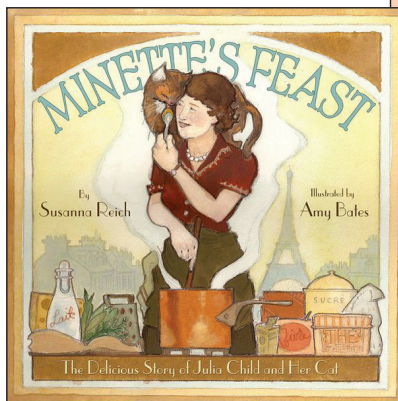
SR: As a student at Bennington College, I took classes with members of the Limón dance company, including Carla Maxwell, the current director. I went on to receive a BFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, where the emphasis was more on the modern dance style of Martha Graham. But I never forgot how much I loved Limón technique, and after I graduated I went back to study with the Limón Company. Unfortunately José had passed away by that time, but his spirit was very much alive in the studio. So I first got to know him through his dance technique. I just loved how it felt to move that way—the complex rhythms, the use of breath as an impetus for movement, the concept of fall and recovery. It's a very ecstatic dance style.

Years later, after I'd published my first book, *Clara Schumann: Piano Virtuoso*, I wanted to fol-

low up with a biography of a dancer, because dance was my first love. José was a natural choice. I had a deep connection to his creative work, and his personal story was so interesting. I wanted to show kids how and why he became a dancer and choreographer, and how his early years in Mexico and his experiences as an immigrant child shaped the man he became.

One of the challenges of a biography in picture book format is that the text must be so spare. What things did you originally hope to include in the text but ultimately have to exclude? Would you like to tell us more about those things here?

SR: I had actually written a YA book on José (still unpublished) before I wrote the picture book, and an editor had suggested rewriting it for younger readers. Instead I wrote a picture book. It came together fairly quickly, because I'd already spent two years immersed in the material and done a tremendous amount of historical research. Once I decided on the picture book format, I knew I'd have to distill the story down to the essentials. I focused on the phrasing and rhythm of the language in order



to convey a sense of movement and musicality, and tried to create a visual picture with words in each section of the text, so that the illustrator would have something to work with.

In the editing process there are almost always some words or sentences that have to be cut, especially in a picture book. It can be hard to let those go. But often the art takes the place of those words, and the finished book is stronger without them.

While authors don't necessarily write books for young people to impart a "lesson" or message, what do you hope that children will understand about the nature of aspirations, commitment, and success after reading *José! Born to Dance*? What sorts of discussions do you hope your book leads to in the library and classroom setting? Do you have any suggestions to facilitate that discussion?

SR: José experienced great loss at an early age. War, poverty, and illness took a great toll on his family. Yet his inner

strength, pride, and resilience enabled him to succeed. He overcame tremendous odds and rose to become a world-renowned dancer and choreographer because of his drive, determination, and perseverance. It would be interesting to ask kids to talk or write about a challenging experience in their lives and how they overcame it.

The story could also be used as a springboard for discussion of immigration and family roots, or as a way to begin an exploration of the music, art, and dance of different cultures. Make it experiential by having the kids draw or paint. Listen to recordings, watch a dance video, and have them write about what they hear and see. Picture book biographies about artists can be very useful in working with the National Standards for Arts Education.

You've written two acclaimed full-length biographies for young people, one about piano virtuoso Clara Schumann and one about artist George Catlin. Can you compare the writing of these two

longer biographies with the writing of your two picture book biographies, *José! Born to Dance* and the upcoming *Minette's Feast*, a picture book biography of Julia Child and her cat?

SR: Writing a picture book is like writing poetry. Every word counts. I pay a lot of attention to the rhythm and sound of the language. I'm also conscious of the pacing of the story, where the page turns might come, and how each section of text needs a central image or focus that the artist will be able to illustrate. In a longer biography, I still pay attention to the details of language, sentence structure, etc., but I'm working on a much larger canvas. I can develop ideas at greater length. In musical terms, it's like the difference between writing a song and writing a symphony. Also, for the longer biographies, I'm responsible for choosing and getting permissions for all the illustrations myself, so I have more control over the visual aspects of the book.

You have published a middle grade novel as well as your biographies. How was that writing experience the same as, and different from, writing biography?

SR: My novel, *Penelope Bailey Takes the Stage*, is historical fiction, set in 1889 San Francisco. It's about a young girl who wants to become an actress, at a time when a career in the theater wasn't an appropriate choice for a proper young lady. She meets a character based on Isadora Duncan, the "mother" of modern dance, who serves as an inspiration. The experience was similar to writing biography, in that I had to do a lot of historical research.

In biography, you still have characters, setting, and plot, but the narrative arc is built from the facts of a real person's life. You have to find the theme and connecting threads and moments of suspense within that life that will propel the story forward, and everything has to be documented from reliable sources. In writing a novel, you have much greater freedom, which can actually be more difficult. You have to create your own parameters, build characters and plot from scratch. It's a different kind of challenge.

How can readers learn more about you?

SR: Readers can visit my website, www.susannareich.com.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of seventeen picture books, most recently *Inside the Books* (Upstart, 2012) and *Stay Close to Mama* (Hyperion, 2012) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.