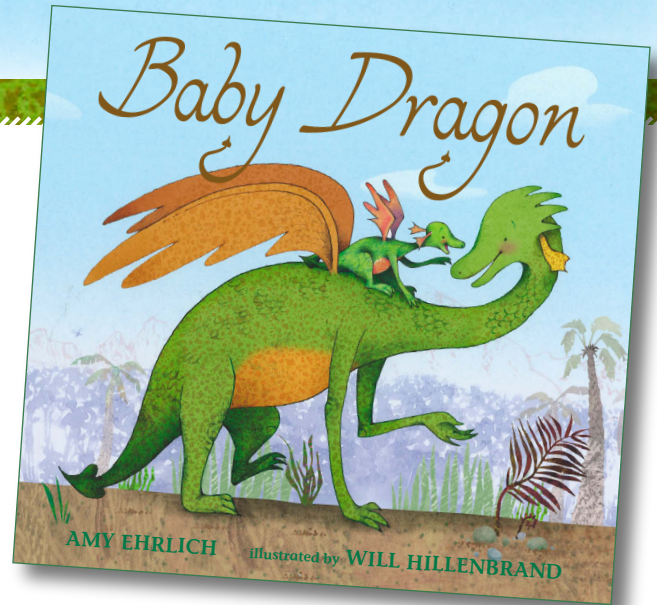


## BEHIND THE SCENES

# with *Baby Dragon* author **AMY EHRLICH**

**AMY EHRLICH**, the author of more than thirty books for children, was the founding editor of Candlewick Press and remained an editor at large until her retirement in 2007. *Baby Dragon* is her first picture book to be published by Candlewick.



### *What inspired you to write a picture book about a baby dragon?*

A baby dragon just appeared to me as I was out in the woods near my house going for a run. It was springtime, and the ferns had just uncurled. They looked like miniature palm trees, and I wondered if a very small creature would see them that way. *What if the creature was a little dragon?* I asked myself. And there he was: Baby Dragon. I tried to write this book as a fantasy for middle-graders, but it didn't work. I put it away for many years, and then sat down to write a picture book, and there he was again. Baby Dragon.

*In the story of Little Red Riding Hood, the mother sends Red Riding Hood into the forest to help her sick grandmother. In Baby Dragon, the mother goes herself to help her sick mother. Both Little Red Riding Hood and Baby Dragon confront duplicitous strangers. Did you intentionally create this traditional-tale twist?*

Not at all. I never even thought of it. Rather I asked myself, *Why would Baby Dragon be alone under this fern?* And the answer came to me simply. He's waiting for his mother.

*Of course, as you know, telling a good story is always more important than imparting a lesson. Did you know all along that this story would have lessons (don't talk to strangers, listen to your mother), or did they evolve as you worked on the story?*

I hate lessons. I never put them in my books. I set out to tell the story of Baby Dragon. All his mother says to him is, "Wait here for me. I'll be back by morning." But Baby Dragon can't wait. Small children have only a very primitive sense of time, and he has no idea when morning will come. So when the crocodile comes along and says he'll take Baby Dragon to his mother, the young dragon goes. Of course he soon realizes his mistake! And then he acts bravely to save himself and returns to wait to for his mother.

*If dragons existed, they surely would leave their young alone as other animals do to search for food, and so on. But Baby Dragon seems more child than dragon. How do you think children will react to a story about a mother leaving him behind?*

Baby Dragon certainly is more child than dragon. This question goes right to the heart of fairy tales and how they work. Adults are more fearful of children being exposed to "scary" things than children themselves are. Children enjoy being scared, or at least they are tantalized by it, even of something as scary as being left by your mother. But then they realize that this is only Baby Dragon, and look, he acts bravely and he survives.

All you need to do is to think of fairy tales such as “Hansel and Gretel” or “Snow White.” So many of these involve abandonment and bravery, and really they are much darker than *Baby Dragon* because the mothers in them (disguised as stepmothers) leave their children in the woods to die. I retold many of the classic fairy tales in a book called *The Random House Book of Fairy Tales*. Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, wrote an introduction about the place of fairy tales in child development, and here’s something he says: “Encountering his anxieties in story form permits the child to familiarize himself with them in an area once removed from his immediate experience, a most important first step toward objectifying and conquering them.”

***You worked for years as an editor at Candlewick Press. How has the experience of being an editor and working on other people’s stories affected the way you write? Which hat do you prefer?***

Many editors who write suffer from the problem of self-editing. Instead of writing messy-but-free first drafts, they’ll struggle over every word. This sometimes—but not always—happens to me. In the case of *Baby Dragon*, I wrote a complete and very serviceable first draft in an hour and a half, but I already had the character and the basic situation. As for which hat I prefer—editing is definitely easier because there’s something on the page already, and also because it’s collaborative: you’re working with an author and also with art directors, designers, marketing people, all kinds of people. But on the other hand, when you’re writing, your work is all your own—it comes from inside you, and it involves exploration and discovery, both very exciting processes.

***When working on a picture book, you create images for your characters and settings. Then an artist illustrates your words. Were you involved in the selection of illustrator Will Hillenbrand? Were you surprised by his work? Did your initial visions of *Baby Dragon* and his home change when you saw his art?***

At Candlewick, authors are always consulted in the choice of an illustrator. I’ve always loved Will Hillenbrand’s work, and in fact I had worked with him many years ago on a picture book by Phyllis Root called *Kiss the Cow!* I was thrilled when Will said he would illustrate *Baby Dragon*, and even more thrilled when I saw the world he had created for the story. I loved the mystery and beauty of Will’s riverbank and its creatures, and I especially loved the vulnerability and toddler-ness of *Baby Dragon*. When Will’s first drawings were sent to me, I felt I had met my characters at last. The only thing that surprised me was that he had made *Baby Dragon*’s fern red. I changed the description of it to reflect that in the story.

***What authors or books had the most powerful effect on you as a child? Do you think they still influence your writing?***

I loved so many books! P. L. Travers’s *Mary Poppins* books, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* books, and when I was younger, all the *Babar* books—these are just a few. I always tell young writers that the best thing to do is to read and read and read. Because everything you read enters you in some way—the rhythm of sentences, the vividness of description, the unstated depths of characters—and it’s all inside to draw on when you sit down to write.

***You’ve been a children’s book author for more than thirty-five years. What do you consider to be the most significant changes to childhood in the United States during that time?***

Children have far less independence and freedom now than they did when I was growing up in the 1950s, or even when my son was growing up in the 1980s. Everyone is very worried, and so parents seem to want to control their children’s lives more. On the other hand, parents and children are closer than they were when I was young. There’s less of a distinction between generations somehow; families do things together more.

***What has been one of your most satisfying moments as a writer?***

I can answer this one very easily. I was in a grocery store in our town, and a woman whom I knew slightly—I knew she was a foster parent to children who were in state custody—came over to me and began talking about one of the girls she had taken in. She said that this girl had loved my middle-grade novel *Joyride*. The girl was fourteen years old, and it was the first book she had ever managed to read. I have vivid memories of my own childhood and how important books were to me. Connecting with children more than a half-century later through books—what could possibly be better?

