



Kate McMullan

I Stink!
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I Stink! Author Note

From Kate McMullan's speech at the Bank Street College of Education's presentation of the 2006 Irma S. and James H. Black Award for Excellence in Children's Literature, May 10, 2007 I came to write the first draft of a picture book about a garbage truck for two reasons: One, I had a deadline. Two, I had a problem. The deadline was that an editor had invited me to an authors' tea. Each author was to bring a picture book manuscript suitable for very young children to read out loud. I'd tried writing about bananas and bumblebees and saying NO! to naps, but my ideas weren't working, so I was open—desperately open—to any idea that might come my way. The problem was that a garbage truck had

started compacting trash directly under my window at six o'clock every morning, and even though I lived on the twelfth floor, it was waking me up. No wonder I couldn't write a decent picture book script—I was sleep deprived! The night before the authors' tea, I still had no manuscript. When the roaring truck woke me the next morning, that was it. I threw on my clothes, took the elevator down, and charged out into the freezing February dawn—fuming—to tell those sanitation workers to move their truck and wake somebody else up for a change. I turned the corner of our building, and there, illuminated by a streetlight, was this behemoth white truck slowly and LOUDLY crunching up a couch. As I watched, my fury evaporated. I ran upstairs and wrote a first draft. That afternoon, I got all dressed up and went to the Helmsley Palace for the authors' tea. We had little sandwiches and scones, and after the teapots were empty, we ordered sherry. When my turn came, I read my title: *The Sanitation Truck*. I thought I heard the editor sigh. I read on: *A key turns.*

My engine starts.

My headlights shine like moons in the dark. When I finished, the editor tossed back her sherry and called for the check. I had bombed at the authors' tea—big-time. But still, I liked the idea of a monologue by a garbage truck. And there were two lines I liked in that first draft. When the truck is being really loud, it says, "Did I wake you? Too bad." These two lines made me press on. In the weeks that followed, I became She Who Waits for the Garbage Truck. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings, I got up early and, notebook in hand, went outside and sat on this little red pipe that sticks out from our building. When the truck showed up, I wrote down which levers the sanitation workers pulled, which lights flashed. I tried to capture the roaring, wheezing, clanking noises, the splat of a garbage bag landing. One morning as I scribbled away a sanitation worker came over and said, "Are you from central office? Are you spying on us?" I said, "No, I want to write a picture book about a garbage truck, but I don't know how it works." And he said, "We'll show you how it works." That was Earl Harrington. He and his partner, Billy King, showed me that their truck had two steering wheels, two gas pedals, and two sets of brakes, which made it "dual operational." It could drive close to the right-hand or left-hand curb to pick up garbage bags. Billy and Earl told me that the back of the truck is the hopper. There were pistons. And a crusher blade. I worked on and off for over a year on this story, inching ever closer to the voice of the truck. My agent, Holly McGhee, read draft after draft, urging me onward: More attitude! More edge! It is my great good fortune to have married an amazing illustrator, Jim McMullan, and once I had a manuscript that was pretty much working, he agreed to collaborate with me and did some sketches. Holly sent the project to Joanna Cotler at HarperCollins. (She was not the sherry-swilling editor who had hosted the tea.) Lucky for us, Joanna bought the book. The title at that point had evolved to *Trash-o-Rama*, but Joanna said, "What would you say to calling it *I Stink!*?" How could I resist? It was the perfect title—but I was not looking forward to telling Earl and Billy because I didn't want to offend them. Finally I told them, and Billy said, "I hate to tell you, Kate, but that's a much better title than that one you had." I had written *Apple Cores*, *Banana Peels*, *Candy Wrappers* . . . stopping with the letter G for Garbage. Joanna asked me to go all the way to Z, which gave the book an internal garbage alphabet—a definite crowd-pleaser. Joanna asked Jim, who is known for his ability to draw the human figure, not to put any humans into the book, but to let the garbage truck be the hero. At the time, that seemed like a radical idea, but it made Jim find the face in the truck—windshield eyes, a snow-plow hitch nose, and his favorite feature, the front bumper with lots of rivets in it that looked to him like a jaw with stubble, as if the truck hadn't shaved in a few days. It gave him what he needed to start making the truck into a character. I got a hot-off-the-press *I Stink!* cover on September 10, 2001. The next morning I took it down and showed it to Earl and Billy. They were crazy about it, and I went back up to my apartment feeling really happy. An hour later, I looked out my south-facing window and saw smoke pouring from the World Trade Center. I didn't see Earl or Billy again for about three months after that because they were down at the WTC site, carting away debris. The sanitation workers really were some of the unsung heroes of 9/11. From that first night when I went downstairs to yell at the garbage truck, to the publication of the book, took three years. By the time we gave Billy and Earl their copies of *I Stink!*, which of course we dedicated to them, it started like this: *Who am I?*

I've got lights.

Ten WIDE tires.

No A.C., not me.

I've got doubles:

steering wheels,

gas pedals,

brakes.

I am totally DUAL OP.

Know what I do at night while you're asleep?

Eat your TRASH, that's what.—Kate McMullan