



WHEN I GROW UP

By Al Yankovic

Questions for Al:

How did you come to write When I Grow Up?

A lot of people think that I was inspired to write a children's book because I have a young daughter of my own. Actually, it's the other way around. I've *always* wanted to write a children's book, but I wanted to wait until I reproduced—so I actually had a kid just so I could write this book.

Seriously, my decision to jump into children's lit was not all that calculated. I've always been interested in it, but it wasn't something that I actively pursued until HarperCollins editor Anne Hoppe extended an invitation for me to try my hand at writing for children. I submitted several story ideas, and the one that seemed to resonate with everybody was about an imaginative eight-year-old boy who riffs on what he wants to be when he grows up during his class show-and-tell.

What was the inspiration for the story?

In a way, this is a very personal book for me, because there was a time in my life when I was very much at a crossroads career-wise. When I was twelve years old, my school guidance counselor encouraged students to decide on their future vocations so that they could plan their lives accordingly. He pointed out that I was very good in math and that I enjoyed my drafting class, so he suggested that I become an architect. That seemed logical, and after I graduated from high school, I went off to college to major in architecture. Shortly before receiving my degree, however, I had an epiphany: architecture wasn't my true passion. I had spent four years studying something that I wasn't particularly excited about, or honestly, very good at. But my parents were extremely supportive of me. Perhaps the greatest thing my dad ever did for me was tell me that the secret of true success is just being able to make a living doing whatever it is that truly makes you happy. So, luckily for me, this whole "Weird Al" thing worked out!

I'd like to think that my dad's wisdom is evident in my book. Hopefully, the story will be empowering to kids, and help them to realize that there is a whole world of wonderful options and unlimited possibilities out there in life.

When did kids start showing up in your audiences, and how does the existence of younger fans impact your work?

Ever since I started doing concert tours in 1983, I've been fortunate enough to have an audience consisting of an impressively wide demographic range—including a sizable chunk of young kids. The fan mail that I've received over the last three decades would support this observation as well, and I would venture to say that my most enthusiastic and devoted fans are probably the young ones. Maybe there's a biological reason for it—perhaps some chemical gets released into your brain at a tender age which

makes you appreciate a particular brand of irreverence and silliness. At any rate, I've always been cognizant of the fact that a lot of my fans are kids, but I've never specifically geared my material toward them. I always just write what I think is funny, and happily, a lot of kids seem to think that stuff is funny too.

Even with *When I Grow Up*, while I made sure to pick subject matter that I thought would be appealing to young readers, otherwise I just wrote the way that I always do. I have a knee-jerk reaction to "dumbing things down"—when I had my own Saturday morning TV show a few years ago, the network and I were continually battling because they didn't buy into my theory that "kids are smarter than you think."

Are there similarities and/or differences between writing a children's picture-book text and writing song lyrics?

For me, the mechanics of writing verse for a song and writing verse for a children's book are very similar indeed. In writing *When I Grow Up*, I applied the same technique, craft, and obsessive-compulsive attention to detail that I do to my music. The main difference in the process is that for this book, I had incredible editorial assistance. It was a real joy to work with my editor—I never thought it was possible to have a months-long conversation about whether or not a sentence should include a semicolon.

Also, this experience has allowed me to work with an amazing illustrator: Wes Hargis. It was a real thrill to see him bring my ideas to life in such a creative and whimsical way on the printed page. Wes was really an inspired choice and a great match for the text.

Who are your influences in children's books? Are there particular books or authors you have especially enjoyed sharing with your daughter?

When I was very young, I was enthralled by Dr. Seuss. I checked every single one of his books out of the local library numerous times, and I'm sure I even memorized some of them. A few years later I was struck by the genius of Shel Silverstein after hearing a recording of him performing "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out"; I didn't realize until much later that that was just the tip of an iceberg, and that Shel was responsible for some of the greatest children's literature ever written.

Thanks to my daughter, Nina, I'm now quite familiar with many contemporary authors as well: Mo Willems (the Pigeon and Knuffle Bunny series) is wonderful, as is Anne Gutman (Gaspard & Lisa) and I also discovered Russell Hoban's classic Frances books. Perhaps my favorite bedtime story to read Nina is *Bark, George* by Jules Feiffer. And Jon Scieszka is well established as the definitive parody artist of the children's book world.

I'm also fortunate that some of my favorite authors are also personal friends: *Simpsons* writer-producer Mike Reiss, the great Jamie Lee Curtis, and the incomparable Sandra Boynton (on whose children's CD *Dog Train* I can be heard singing a duet with Kate Winslet!).

When I Grow Up is dedicated to your daughter—what does she think of it?

She doesn't care for it. But she thinks it's a decent first effort.

No, of course she loves it. (If she didn't, I would have swiftly removed the dedication!). When I first started writing the book, I imagined I'd be reading her the book at bedtime, but she's so grown-up now, she's already reading it to me! In fact, when the book is published, she'll be as old as the precocious boy in the story.

Nina particularly loved listening in on headphones while I was editing my recording of the audiobook—sometimes she even helped me pick takes. So I get a thumbs-up—I'd say I'm definitely one of her top five favorite children's authors.