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# showtime

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**Rick Kupchella**, KARE-TV weekend anchor and award-winning reporter, reads from his debut picture book to daughters Caroline, 8, and Elizabeth, 5, in the family's Golden Valley home. Kupchella will be master of ceremonies at next Sunday's Minnesota Book Awards ceremony.

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## Book's Success Is Good News for Anchor

BY MARY ANN GROSSMANN  
*Book Critic*

**R**ick Kupchella, KARE-TV weekend anchor, is grateful for his television career. But writing children's books has given his life a new creative dimension.

"It's a huge gift to have the opportunity to talk to thousands of Twin Citians on the news about what we believe are important issues of the day," says Kupchella, who's also an award-winning reporter.

"But there is something almost holy about being able to focus specific messages to young children, to know that children and their parents will find value in your book's message." Kupchella's first book is "Tell Me What We Did Today," and its message is that parents and kids need to come together at bedtime to share their experiences. Published in November by Golden Valley-based Tristan Publishing, the picture book sold out its first 10,000 copies and is back to press for another 10,000.

As a successful author and a personable television guy, Kupchella is a natural to be master of ceremonies at next Sunday's 16th annual Minnesota Book Awards ceremony, which concludes the Minnesota Celebration of Books at Landmark Center.



**Rick Kupchella**

■ **What:** Minnesota Celebration of Books followed by the Minnesota Book Awards

■ **When:** Celebration noon-5 p.m. next Sunday; awards 5:15 p.m.-6:15 p.m.

■ **Where:** Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth St., St. Paul

■ **Tickets:** Free

### READING AND SIGNING

TV news anchor and children's author Rick Kupchella hosts the Minnesota Book Awards next Sunday. In addition, Kupchella and St. Paul illustrator Warren Hanson will read from their book, "Tell Me What We Did Today," at 3:45 p.m. as part of the Minnesota Celebration of Books; they will also sign books for 15 minutes before and after their presentation.

**INSIDE:** Next Sunday will be a big day for books. Story, Page 3E

*The bedtime stories KARE's Rick Kupchella told his daughters provided the inspiration for his first children's book.*

## Good news

(continued)

"I've reined in my personal appearances since my daughters came along, but I made an exception to host the Book Awards," Kupchella says. "I'm looking at doing more with literacy, reading, education. That line of issues is a big one with me."

"Tell Me What We Did Today" is a tender/goofy story about a dad who makes up silly scenarios for his daughter: "And Mom called on the phone./And she said/she'd come home/And she'd meet us/for lunch. And we had alligators ... /on crackers! They are so fun to munch!" Almost every page ends with "Do you remember that part?" And the laughing little girl is howling "NOOOOOOOO" across most pages.

In the end, Dad is in a rocking chair, holding his sleeping daughter, saying "No more games left to play." Kupchella says this book (he has about nine others in his computer) grew out of bedtime rituals he and his wife began with daughter Caroline, now 8, and continued when Elizabeth was born five years ago.

"We read to the girls every night, and they always wanted one more, like every kid," Kupchella recalls. "We'd lie in bed with the lights out, just talking, and on the nights when we were totally mentally fried and there was no creative juice left, we would talk about what we did that day. It became our favorite thing to do."

### A NATURAL TEACHER

It isn't surprising that Kupchella wants to write books that teach in a subtle way. His father, Charles, is president of the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. And one of his heroes is David Walsh, founder of the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family. Kupchella has worked with Walsh on several stories about how watching television affects children.

"One of David's great truths is that whatever young children are doing, they are learning something," Kupchella says. "The question is, what are we going to give them? That has a lot to do with why I got into writing children's books and the things I do with my children."

Kupchella's writing career began with "a stack of rejection letters" he got when an agent was trying to sell



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**Rick Kupchella's book, "Tell Me What We Did Today,"** grew out of bedtime rituals during which Kupchella and his wife, Leslie, talked to daughters Caroline, left, and Elizabeth about what happened to them every day. That covers a lot of territory, since the girls' mother is spokeswoman for Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

one of his other manuscripts. Then, a local author gave him the telephone number of Warren Hanson, St. Paul illustrator of the "Cup of Christmas Tea" books, as well as best sellers he wrote and illustrated, including "Older Love" and "The Next Place."

"When I called Warren, he thought he was in trouble and was going to be on TV," Kupchella recalls with a laugh. "I asked him if we could meet for coffee, promising I wouldn't ask him to illustrate any books. We connected, even though we are very different. I love this guy. He is one of the most gentle souls and an extraordinary illustrator." Hanson says the feeling's mutual.

"I've been concentrating on my own work, but I'm open to collaboration with other people," he says. "I get lots of calls from people with ideas, but I thought Rick's were great." Hanson offered to introduce Kupchella to Tristan Publishing founder Brett Waldman, who was then president of Minneapolis-based Bookmen book distributor. When they met around a card table in

the middle of the big old warehouse, Waldman surprised Kupchella by asking him to read a couple of his stories aloud.

"I saw that as a very good sign," Kupchella recalls. "Brett understood intuitively that the story was meant to be read aloud. When I do big TV projects, I read (the script) to editors and explain where pictures will go. There are a lot of parallels between writing for TV and writing children's books. The biggest is that both are made up of a simple message driven by visual image." Kupchella brought several

manuscripts to that meeting, and Waldman liked "Tell Me What We Did Today" the best. So did Hanson, who agreed to do the artwork.

### PLAYFUL IMAGES

Hanson's bright, bold images convey the playfulness of Kupchella's story.

"I let stories tell me how to do the illustrations, and I wanted to capture the wacky, fanciful tone of Rick's book," Hanson says.

"I thought back to my childhood, when I'd go to church basement suppers with my parents in Yankton, S.D. The long tables were covered with a big roll of paper, and when I got bored, I'd draw on that. The ink would be absorbed and sort of blob up. That's the feel I wanted for 'Tell Me ...,' but most tablecloths are plastic these days. I finally found one roll in a Paper Warehouse, and I drew all the illustrations on it. It was fun."

Kupchella and Hanson collaborated

on every page of the book, which is not the way big children's publishers do things. In most cases, writer and illustrator do not communicate until after the book comes out.

"That makes zero sense to me," Kupchella admits. "There is a synergy, a momentum, when you work together. When a photographer shoots dozens of hours of video for one of my stories, I look through every frame and write down everything everybody said. We sit down and find the best pictures and the best words to go with them. Teamwork is what makes great television, and it should be no different in books."

He credits Hanson with bringing things to the book that weren't even in the text, such as a busy, diaper-clad baby with a blanket.

"There is no written reference to that child anywhere," Kupchella says, "but Warren knows that among the things that make children's books successful is planting things not referenced, essentially allowing children to find things on their own."

Hanson says the baby represents "sort of that Greek chorus idea of having somebody off to the side commenting on the action. And part of it was to try to get a little more gender balance. The baby is genderless, but you could believe it's a boy."

### CREATING A DIALOGUE

Now that "Tell Me ..." is selling well, Kupchella is getting feedback "that blows my mind." He's especially happy to hear from child-development professionals who appreciate the participatory aspect of his book.

"The value is in creating a dialogue between parents and children," he says. "And the book gets children to practice comprehension by recalling specific things that happened during the day. Comprehension, I've been told, is a major developmental building block for children. It's like a precursor to becoming good readers. The book also helps children separate what really happened from fantasy, something they do at about age 5."

Best of all, Kupchella knew he had hit it big with his most important audience — children — when he began hearing from parents that their kids want to take the book to bed with them.

"My colleague Julie Nelson told me, 'My children loved your book so much I am beginning to hate it,'" Kupchella recalls with amusement. "I said I was so glad it was giving her fits."

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### MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE ONLINE

■ For a complete schedule of Book Celebration events, go to [www.minnesotahumanities.commission.org](http://www.minnesotahumanities.commission.org).