

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## TODAY'S QUOTE

"You cannot write for children. . . They're much too complicated.

You can only write books that are of interest to them."

— Maurice Sendak, author and illustrator

COMING FRIDAY

Justin time: Timberlake emerges  
with star power. In *Variety FreeTime*



**F**  
SUNDAY  
August 24, 2003

There's a bounty of new picture books by Twin Cities writers and artists, amid signs of a growing children's-literature scene.

# Picture this

By Colleen Kelly  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

**M**innetonka author Marsha Wilson Chall's father was as proud as anyone when her first picture book was published in 1992.

"How many pages is it?" he asked.  
"Thirty-two," she said. "But half of them are pictures."

"He just rolled his eyes," she said dryly.  
Because slapping together a picture book is easy, right?

After all, it seems that every celebrity with some time to kill and a "message" is doing the short, heavily illustrated books.



Detail from an illustration by John Thompson

### 'Prairie Train'

Minnetonka author Marsha Wilson Chall says her story ideas "germinate on scraps of paper and grow or die in file folders."

Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, kicked off the trend in 1989. But the trickle turned into a torrent — with Will Smith, John Lithgow, Julie Andrews and Jamie Lee Curtis joining in. Never one to miss a bandwagon, Madonna is releasing "The English Roses" on Sept. 15 in a rollout worthy of "Harry Potter" — simultaneous publication in 100 countries and 42 languages, no advance copies, thank you very much. The children's books currently available are "vapid and vacant," Madonna recently told the VH-1 cable network.

Well then.

But Chall, whose poetic new book, "Prairie Train," was 10 years in the making, knows that picture books aren't just something you toss off during breaks taping your new Gap commercial.

There's an art to these little treasures, the best of which pack an emotional wallop that dwarfs their size — usually 32 to 48 pages.

"It's not just a trivial form but a serious realm of creative expression," said Martha Davis Beck, editor of the Riverbank Review, a respected children's literary magazine based in Minneapolis.

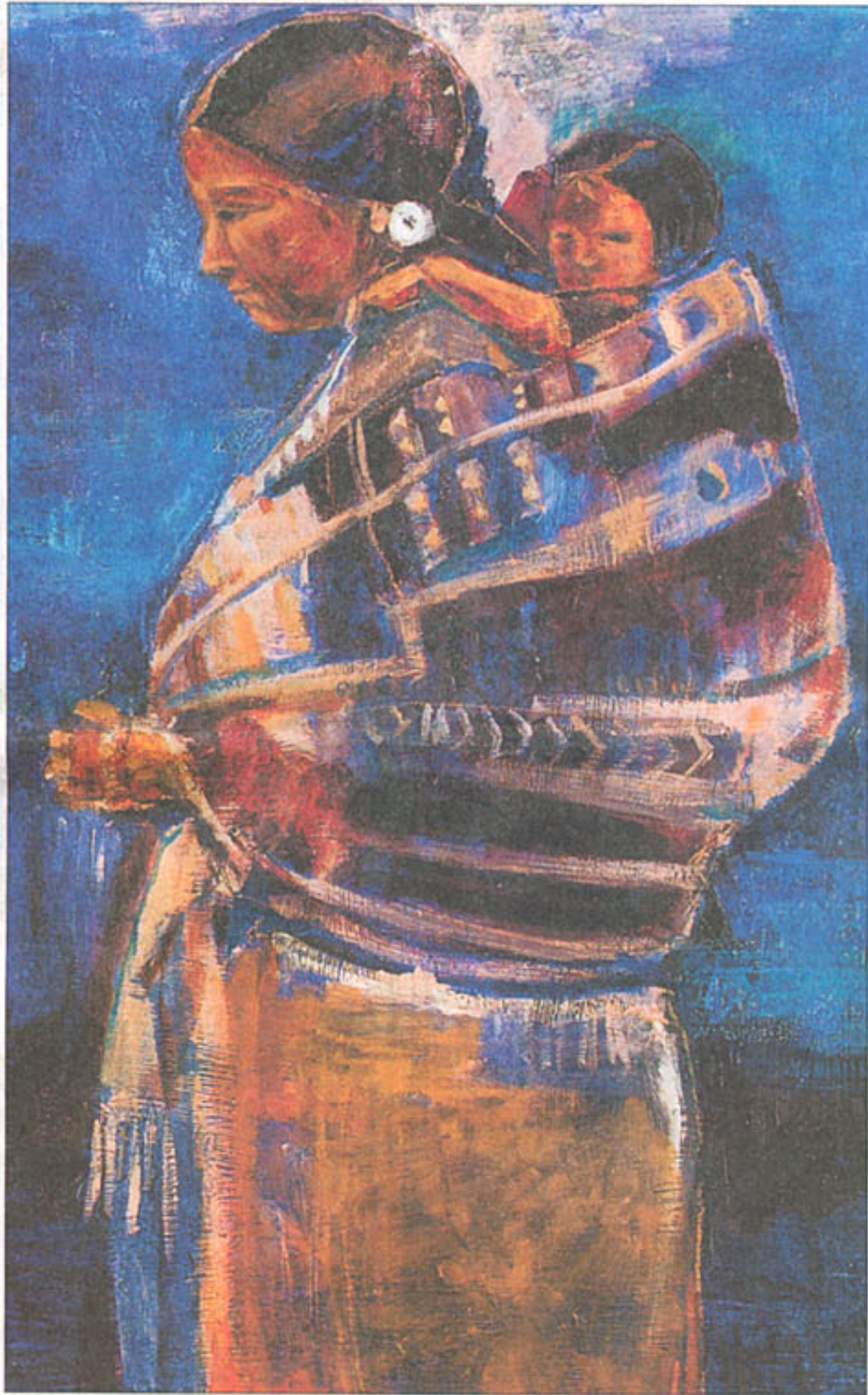
**BOOKS continues on F6**

**ALSO INSIDE:** Capsule reviews of the books, **F6**

### 'You're a Bear'

Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher, a husband-and-wife illustrating team from Minneapolis, modeled the child after their 4-year-old son, Nicholas.

Illustration by Steve Johnson  
and Lou Fancher



Detail from an illustration by Julie Buffalohead

### 'Sacagawea'

Minnesota native Lise Erdrich's story of Sacagawea — who set off with the Lewis and Clark expedition when her son was just 2 months old — is paired with moody paintings by St. Paul artist Julie Buffalohead.



Detail from an illustration by Stephen Gammell

### 'Hey, Pancakes!'

St. Paul artist Stephen Gammell, a Caldecott Medal-winner for "Song and Dance Man," offers a bright and breezy look at childhood fun in the kitchen.



COVER STORY



John Thompson's evocative paintings capture the drama of a girl's solo train trip during the early part of the 20th century. Detail from an illustration by John Thompson

BOOKS from F1

Twin Cities are home to deep pool of talent

And Chall, who has written seven books, is not alone. Top-flight picture books by a distinguished crowd of Twin Cities authors and illustrators are being published in August and September:

- > "Hey, Pancakes!" illustrated by Stephen Gammell (St. Paul), a Caldecott Medal-winner;
- > "Sacagawea," written by Minnesota native Lise Erdrich and illustrated by McKnight Fellowship-winner Julie Buffalohead (St. Paul);
- > "You're a Bear," illustrated by the acclaimed team of Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher (Minneapolis);
- > "Tell Me What We Did Today," written by KARE-TV anchor Rick Kupchella (Golden Valley) and illustrated by Warren Hanson (St. Paul).

(See accompanying story for mini-reviews and a more complete list.)

10 years in the making

"Prairie Train," a rite-of-passage story about a rural girl's solo journey to visit her grandma in St. Paul, is rooted in Chall's own memories of childhood and the trips she took with her mother between Iowa and Minnesota.

She still writes longhand, and the story took about a year to massage into its final form. But the publication process was a stop-and-go affair, stalling first over creative differences with an artist, who left the project.

Then illustrator John Thompson, who had signed on, called Chall seeking more information about the precise shade of green for the Empire Builder's engine. That prompted more research by Chall — including trips to the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul and the Kandiyohi Museum in Willmar, Minn. But Thompson wasn't just looking for help with the facts.



Chall



Detail of an illustration by Warren Hanson

'Tell Me What We Did Today'

For KARE-TV news anchor Rick Kupchella of Golden Valley, the process of writing and publishing this book was a bit surreal: "It's almost like I'm doing a big television project in which . . . I end up an author," he said.

IF YOU GO

Celebration of Minnesota Children's Authors and Illustrators

**What:** This free family event will feature book-making workshops, story-telling, face-painting, animals, music and refreshments. Kate DiCamillo, Stephen Gammell, Marsha Wilson Chall, Betsy Bowen, John Coy, Lisa Westberg Peters and William Durbin will be among the authors and illustrators reading and signing books.

**When:** 1-5 p.m. Sept. 13.

**Where:** The Anderson Center, at the intersection of Hwys. 61 & 19, 5 miles north of Red Wing, Minn.

**Tickets:** Free. 651-224-8320 or 1-651-388-2009.

"He asked what color cranberry I thought the girl's coat should be," she said. The artist, whose "Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters" drew raves for its authenticity, planned to have his costumer make the girl's coat for a model to wear.

"That's when I thought . . . this is going to be a meticulous process," Chall said.

And a lengthy one, as Thompson took a yearlong sabbatical in Italy. A burst pipe back at his home in New York destroyed much of the book research.

The book finally arrived in stores, on its own timetable, last week.

Two art forms

The best picture books should do more than juxtapose the writing and the artwork: each element should play off the other, advancing the entire package.

"You're a Bear," by the husband-and-wife team of Johnson and Fancher, is one such book. They even illustrated the story twice to get it right.

The first, more literal set of paintings focused on a mother and baby bear. The second had a child (modeled on their 4-year-old son, Nicholas) creating an imaginary world, one where the bear's characteristics are transferred into his world: fishing in a bathtub, burrowing under the bedcovers.

In the book's final version, which took about six months to illustrate, the bear paintings are used as vignettes across from full-page artwork of the child, an approach that adds depth to the story and allows children to imagine themselves in the story more easily.

Johnson and Fancher, who have worked together on such acclaimed books as Dr. Seuss' "My Many-Colored Days" and Louise Erdrich's "The Range Eternal," say that they try to select stories that resonate with them.

"It's kind of like inviting someone to live in your house for eight months," Fancher said.

The ingredients

So what is it that makes the literary landscape so rich in the Twin Cities area?

"Cold weather," Chall answers with a laugh.

Riverbank editor Beck credits "a remarkable pool of talent" and a nurturing scene that sustains talented people and attracts outsiders. Topnotch independent bookstores like Wild Rumpus (Minneapolis) and the Red Balloon Bookshop (St. Paul) serve as "anchors and beacons," Beck said.

With a children's literature scene this vibrant, it's not surprising that new professional societies, festivals and awards are cropping up to help sustain it.

Last year, the Children's Literature Network was launched locally to foster communication among authors, illustrators, educators and parents in the Upper Midwest. Its Web site (<http://www.childrensliteraturenetwork.org>) provides an online meeting ground and resource center that includes author biographies and information about events, including the group's Nov. 22 festival in Minneapolis.

A statewide celebration of children's authors and illustrators in Red Wing, Minn., has flourished since its founding in 2000. Last year, more than 1,000 people turned out for free readings, workshops and children's activities at the Anderson Center. (See accompanying box for information on this year's event, which will be held on Sept. 13.)

And how to reward all of this talent? That's where the McKnight Artist Fellowship for Writers/Loft Award in Children's Literature comes in. The \$25,000 prize, created in 2000, gives writers the time and money to pursue their craft.

And the list of award-winning authors and illustrators with a national profile is growing. Kate DiCamillo, a Newbery Honor-winner and National Book Award finalist, was discovered after she moved here from Florida. Her highly anticipated young-adult book, "The Tale of Despereaux," will be in stores this week. Phyllis Root, a Minneapolis writer with more than 30 books to her credit, won national recognition in June when her sassy creation myth, "Big Momma Makes the World," took the prestigious Boston Globe-Horn Book picture-book award.

More than 20 years ago, when Chall thought "all writers were dead guys," she bumped into Root, who was brimming with excitement after signing a book contract.

The memory sticks with Chall because at the time "being a writer" seemed too daunting — even dangerous. Realizing that someone she knew, a regular person, could be an author brought the possibility closer to home.

If the current crop of children's literature by Minnesota writers and artists is any indication, it's a position in which more and more people will be finding themselves.

Colleen Kelly is at [ckelly@startribune.com](mailto:ckelly@startribune.com)

IF YOU GO

Rick Kupchella & Warren Hanson

**What:** Kupchella and Hanson will read and sign "Tell Me What We Did Today."

**When:** 1-3 p.m. today.

**Where:** Red Balloon Bookshop, 891 Grand Av., St. Paul. 651-224-8320.

REVIEW



Illustration by Cathie Felstead

'Earthshake'

St. Paul author Lisa Westberg Peters' latest picture book includes 22 poems that celebrate the Earth. Earlier this year, she published "Our Family Tree," a picture book about evolution.

Stories to savor, from silly to sharp

"Earthshake: Poems From the Ground Up" by Lisa Westberg Peters, illustrated by Cathie Felstead (Greenwillow, \$16.99). The St. Paul writer celebrates the beauty — and humor — she sees in the natural world. In "Instructions for the Earth's Dishwasher," she writes: "Please set the/ continental plates/ gently on the/ continental shelves. . . . As for the forks/ in the river,/ just let them soak."

"Hey, Pancakes!" by Tamson Weston, illustrated by Stephen Gammell (Silver Whistle, \$16). Pancakes — and people — fly in this exuberant tale of kitchen misadventures that has three children going about the messy work of making pancakes. Gammell, a St. Paul artist and Caldecott Medal winner, displays a light touch and bright palette in this breezy story, which is sure to produce giggles.

"It's Not My Fault" written and illustrated by Nancy Carlson (Carolrhoda, \$15.95). The Bloomington author's 49th book, rendered in her signature bold style, has George struggling after a series of mishaps at school, most of which actually were his fault.



"Prairie Train" by Marsha Wilson Chall, illustrated by John Thompson (HarperCollins, \$15.99). The Minnetonka author's poetic text captures the drama of a girl's solo journey in early 1900s to visit her grandmother in St. Paul. "I ride on a throne of velvet, / on cushions as soft as caterpillars, / brass fittings polished to gold; / here on the Great Northern / heading far away from home — / shined shoes, / white gloves, / . . . Grandma's girl, / city queen." Thompson's rich paintings are filled with emotion and energy. Highly recommended.

"Sacagawea" by Lise Erdrich, illustrated by Julie Buffalohead (Carolrhoda, \$16.95). There is no shortage of books on Sacagawea's life, but this one stands out for its straightforward yet affecting style. The text by Erdrich, a Minnesota native and member of the Turtle Mountain band of Plains-Ojibway, ably conveys the story's drama. The paintings by Buffalohead, a St. Paul artist and McKnight Fellowship winner, are moody ruminations on the girl's sometimes difficult life. An afterword, map and timeline offer more fodder for discussion.

"Tell Me What We Did Today" by Rick Kupchella, illustrated by Warren Hanson (Tristan, \$15.95). The Golden Valley author's debut is a cozy bedtime story inspired by talks he had with his two daughters. As a father recounts the events of the day — with plenty of exaggerations mixed in — parents and children are invited to share their own stories. Hanson, a St. Paul artist, adds bright pictures that have plenty of kid appeal.

"You're a Bear" by Mavis Jukes, illustrated by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher (Knopf, \$16.95). The award-winning husband-and-wife artistic team from Minneapolis used themselves and their 4-year-old son, Nicholas, as models for this winning storybook. In it, vignettes of a bear are mirrored by a child's actions on the opposite page. The paintings add depth to Jukes' sophisticated rhymes.

Colleen Kelly