

LOOKING BACK ON 20 YEARS  
*A Note from Author Sam McBratney*

One day, my editor at Walker Books in London said, “Why don’t you write a picture book, Sam?”

I said, “Do I not need to know an illustrator, Caroline?”

“No.”

“Wouldn’t I have to work with an illustrator? You know, match text with drawing sort of thing.”

She shook her head.

I said, “You mean, you want me to send you . . . a *page*?”

“Sam,” said Caroline, “we have illustrators who can render in exquisite detail whatever your imagination can dream up. What we *don’t* have are people who can write a powerful story using hardly any words at all. It looks as though it should be easy, Sam, but it’s not easy.”

What she was saying was what I later came to believe: it’s as difficult to write a fine picture book, one that stands out from the crowd, as it is to write a fine novel.

I took up the challenge, and the result was *Guess How Much I Love You*, published in 1994. About four hundred words. And Caroline was right, it wasn’t easy—it was a new experience over six months to have every word fighting for its existence in the finished text. But that’s another story, a different story.

The book was put up for an award in the autumn of its publication. . . . At the ceremony, my agent was talking to my wife while I was away talking to somebody else.

My agent said, “Is he disappointed, Maralyn, that he didn’t win?”

Maralyn said, “Well, now that he’s actually *here* and the book hasn’t *won*, he’ll not be well pleased—but it won’t fizz on him tomorrow.”

“But he’s a winner already,” said my agent. “It has sold a hundred thousand copies.”

“Well *he* doesn’t know,” said my wife.

And I didn’t. They went and got me.

My reaction? “A hundred thousand copies?” Stunned silence. Pause.  
“Nobody never tells me nothin’!”



Sometimes—this is inevitable—I ask myself: Why? I don't have an answer, but what I can say is that four things came together in the creation of this work.

First: yes, in the beginning is the word. The words are simple, direct, and true. The words came first.

Secondly, the drawings. There's a gangly awkwardness, a boneyness, about hares, that Anita Jeram has captured, and with such a lovely soft palette. She has also perfectly caught throughout the intimacy between a big one and a wee one.

Thirdly, the design. Such thought has gone into the whole package. My two favorite aspects of design are the lettering of the cover, which for me has a quaint old-fashioned feel, and also the half-title page. This is where Little Nutbrown Hare and Big Nutbrown Hare are looking out at you. "We're off on a journey," they seem to be saying. "Are you coming with us?"

Fourthly, those who brought the book to the marketplace.

But there's a fifth factor. I have to tell you that in my opinion, the booksellers of America made this book what it is today, and I don't just mean the initial big orders from major players in the business. I include the independent bookshops, who awarded the book the ABBY in 1995.

Creed, color, nationality—it doesn't matter. . . . This is a book that travels. The best thing about books like *Guess*, books which are very popular, is this: I know that somewhere in the world a mum or dad will reach for a copy of something I've written and read it to the most precious thing they have in the world. That thought really pleases me. . . .

"Mister, why do you write books?" children often ask me. It's because the act of imagining makes me feel good. It makes me feel good to wonder what it's like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

