

# Mo Willems

Writer and illustrator

**Date of birth:** February 11, 1968

**Place of birth:** Des Plaines, Illinois

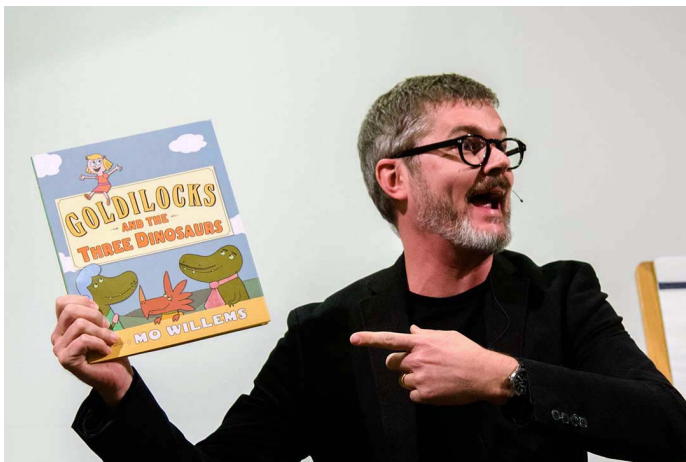
**Education:** New York University

**Significance:** Mo Willems is best known as an award-winning author and illustrator of children's books. He received three Caldecott Honors for his work on the Pigeon and Knuffle Bunny series and shared in six Daytime Emmy Awards during his time as a writer and animator for *Sesame Street*.

## Background

Mo Willems was born in Des Plaines, Illinois, a northern suburb of Chicago, in 1968. His parents, recent immigrants from the Netherlands, moved to New Orleans in 1972. Willems was their only child. His father, Casey, worked in hotels, while his mother, Constance, earned her law degree and became a successful corporate attorney and honorary consul to the Dutch Embassy. As soon as his mother earned her law degree, his father quit his hotel job to be a potter.

## Mo Willems



Alvintrusty, CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>).

Willems had an early love for drawing and writing, and a natural ambition. At the age of five, he wrote to Charles Schulz of *Peanuts* cartoon fame and asked if he could have Schulz's job when Schulz died. Willems also traveled extensively with his

father—at fifteen, walking the route of Napoleon Bonaparte's return from Elba to Paris and, at seventeen, kayaking the Rhine River from the Bodensee, Germany, to Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He was involved in community theater, worked on ceramics with his father, did stand-up comedy, and always drew. When Willems was sixteen, he wrote a regular comic, *Surrealty*, for a real-estate magazine. Willems attended the Trinity Episcopal School for primary school and graduated from the Isidore Newman School in 1986. He moved to London briefly and did stand-up comedy there for a year.

## Education and Early Career

Willems went on to study film and animation at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, producing several short films that were included in national animation festivals, including the 1995 Spike and Mike's Festival of Animation. After graduating with honors in 1990, he backpacked around the world for a year, producing a comic a day, a collection published in 2006 as *You Can Never Find a Rickshaw When It Monsoons*.

Willems returned to New York and held various jobs, including as a bubble-gum card illustrator, comic, radio commentator, and animator. While working for the Children's Television Network, he was invited to work for the legendary children's television program *Sesame Street* as a scriptwriter and freelance animator, which he did from 1994 until around 2003. During that time, he and his team earned six Daytime Emmy Awards for various segments he wrote, including a series centered around the character Susie Kabloomie and her cat Feff.

At the same time Willems also worked on animations for Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. In 1996 he created *The Off-Beats*, a series of animated shorts for Nickelodeon, leading to *Sheep in the Big City* for Cartoon Network in 2000. Two seasons later, *Sheep* was cancelled, and he began work on the series *Codename: Kids Next Door*, which became a major hit for Cartoon Network.

## Author and Illustrator

In 1999 Willems and his wife spent a month in Oxford, England. He was determined to write a great children's book, and though the ideas that came from that month did not come to fruition, a doodle he drew then in his sketchbook impressed a literary agent some years later. Willems's debut picture book, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, was released in 2003 and became a best-seller. Willems, overworked in television and wanting to spend time with his young daughter, made the leap to full-time children's book author and illustrator, primarily to spend time

at home with her. In 2004 the first Pigeon book was named a Caldecott Honor Book, a rare award for a first book. In 2005 Willems also won a Caldecott Honor for his first book about Knuffle Bunny, a favorite stuffed animal that gets lost. Knuffle Bunny, like Pigeon, spawned a series, and *Knuffle Bunny Too* also became a Caldecott Honor Book.

In 2007 Willems launched the Elephant and Piggie series for early readers, which eventually grew to twenty-five books, ending in 2016 with *The Thank You Book*. Another series of his, Cat the Cat, launched in 2009. Willems has also made some of his books into musical-theatrical productions and short films, three of which have been awarded the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Children's Video. His work has been the subject of museum exhibitions as well. In 2019 Willems was named the inaugural education artist-in-residence at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

In addition to his illustration and animation work, Willems is also a metal sculptor and ceramicist.

## Impact

By 2019 Willems had written and illustrated over fifty books and sold millions of copies. His characters are funny, irreverent, sometimes naughty, and ubiquitous. More than half of his books have spent time on the New York Times Best Seller list, and his characters are recognized around the world. Willems work deals with frustration, conflict, mistakes, failure, and resilience, and his books have been praised for their humor and emotional accessibility for children.

## Personal Life

Mo Willems lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wife, Cheryl Lynn "Cher" Camp. The couple have one daughter, Trixie (b. 2001), who has assisted with several of her father's film adaptations and other works.

## Principal Works

### Books

*Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, 2003

*Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*, 2004

*You Can Never Find a Rickshaw When It Monsoons: The World on One Cartoon a Day*, 2006

*Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity*, 2007

*Today I Will Fly!*, 2007

*Are You Ready to Play Outside?*, 2008

*Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed*, 2009

*I Am Going! An Elephant & Piggie Book*, 2010

*Don't Pigeonhole Me! Two Decades of the Mo Willems Sketchbook*, 2013

*Nanette's Baguette*, 2016

*The Thank You Book*, 2016

### Animation

*The Man Who Yelled*, 1990

*The Off-Beats*, 1996–99

*Sheep in the Big City*, 2000–2002

*Codename: Kids Next Door*, 2002–5

## Bibliography

Galchen, Rivka. "Mo Willems's Funny Failures." *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2019, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/06/mo-willems-funny-failures](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/06/mo-willems-funny-failures). Accessed 11 June 2019.

Goodnow, Cecelia. "Mo Willems' Childhood Ambition 'to Draw and Be Funny' Pays Off with His Popular Picture Books." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 22 Mar. 2011, [www.seattlepi.com/ae/article/Mo-Willems-childhood-ambition-to-draw-and-be-1249855.php](http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/article/Mo-Willems-childhood-ambition-to-draw-and-be-1249855.php). Accessed 11 June 2019.

Hesse, Monica. "Mo Willems Is the Go-To Author for Children—and Their Parents." *The Washington Post*, 6 Jan. 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/mo-willems-is-the-go-to-author-for-children--and-their-parents/2012/01/06/gIQAFLztFP\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/mo-willems-is-the-go-to-author-for-children--and-their-parents/2012/01/06/gIQAFLztFP_story.html). Accessed 11 June 2019.

"Mo Willems and Cheryl Camp." *The New York Times*, 28 Sept. 1997, [www.nytimes.com/1997/09/28/style/weddings-mo-willems-and-cheryl-camp.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/28/style/weddings-mo-willems-and-cheryl-camp.html). Accessed 11 June 2019.

Willems, Mo. "A Conversation with Mo Willems." Interview. *Scholastic*, [www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/conversation-mo-willems.html](http://www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/conversation-mo-willems.html). Accessed 11 June 2019.

Willems, Mo. "Don't Pigeonhole Him: An Interview with Kids Book Author Mo Willems." Interview by Greg Cook. *The ARtery*, WBUR, 25 June 2013, [www.wbur.org/artery/2013/06/25/interview-mo-willems](http://www.wbur.org/artery/2013/06/25/interview-mo-willems). Accessed 11 June 2019.

Willems, Mo. "Transcript from an Interview with Mo Willems." Interview. *Reading Rockets*, 2013, [www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/willems/transcript](http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/willems/transcript). Accessed 11 June 2019.

Bethany Groff Dorau