



Transcript for “Words With Wings”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I’m your host doctor Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children’s librarianship. I’m a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That’s why we’re happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their paper with Purpose Promise, Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. A few weeks ago, I came across a very, very brief mention in The New York Times about a newly published children’s book. The description said die cut portals into themed sections with titles like Welcome, Windows and Wonders make this artful poetry collection the perfect book to show kids that writing and drawing can transport them to new worlds.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:38] I have to admit, they had me at die cut portals, but the poetry, of course, is appealing as well. Perhaps because, well, I have to say, many folks can’t find poetry a challenge to access and to write excellent poems for children. Takes special talent. Our next guests have created a book of magical poems that, as the publisher tells us, takes young readers on an uplifting journey through everyday moments, moods and experiences, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. Our guests today are Matthew Burgess and Doug Salati. Matthew is a poet, educator, and the author of many picture books, including Enormous Smallness: A story of E.E. Cummings, Drawing on the Walls: A Story of Keith Haring, and The Bear and the Moon. His books have received starred reviews, a Eureka Gold Award for excellence in nonfiction, and have been featured on best of lists from the New York Public Library, Chicago Public Library, Boston Globe, Washington Post, and many others. And Doug, who is the author and illustrator of Hot Dog, winner of the 2023 Caldecott

Medal and the 2023 Ezra Jack Keats Illustrator Award, and named one of the best books of the year by The Washington Post, Publishers Weekly, and the New York Public Library, among others. Their new book is Words with Wings and Magic Things Poems by Matthew Burgess and pictures by Doug Salati. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Matthew Burgess: [00:03:06] Thank you.

Doug Salati: [00:03:07] Thank you so much.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:09] So before we get into the poems and illustrations, how you got started working on the book together is a story in and of itself. Can you share that with us, Matthew?

Matthew Burgess: [00:03:22] Sure, I'd love to. So Doug and I share the same agent, Erica Silverman. And in January 2020, she suggested that we meet and have coffee and so during our conversation, it was the first time we'd ever met. I asked Doug at some point what he was interested in working on. I was like, what do you want to work on? What do you want to make? And Doug said, I'd like to illustrate poems. And I immediately raised my hand and said, I've got poems. And I was excited to hear that because I had looked at his work and admired it. And also because I've had this dream since childhood to write poetry collection for kids. So I sent him a collection of poems, and when he responded favorably, I sent some more. And then this volley began where I would send Doug a poem that I had just written, or in some cases, I would record an audio text and send it to him of a poem that had just come up, and Doug would sometimes send sketches back, or there'd be the printed out poem and there'd be a sketch on it. And so it really was a volley, which is somewhat unusual for a book like this, where more often than not the manuscript is completed, and then the illustrator is found and those things happen rather separately.

Matthew Burgess: [00:04:58] But in this case, we were really playing. We were really sending things back and forth and responding to each other. And then one other part of the story that I think is worth mentioning is that about a month and a half into this exchange, we were all facing Covid and there was a lockdown. And so I was alone in my apartment in Brooklyn, and Doug was a couple of neighborhoods away. And, you know, during that period, because I had less to do because I was stuck at home and I think I was probably sublimating and just taking this on in order to not think about all the other things. But anyways, the poem production increased. And so we really had this period where the momentum kind of picked up. And so by June of that year, we had something that we felt excited about. And then the process really continued for another year or so of us finding the form and continuing the conversation and developing it further until we discovered the structure that you see when you read the book.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:13] Yeah, indeed. We've had many author illustrator pairings on this show, and sometimes they tell us like, yeah, we only met each other like two months ago or something like that. So this seems like it really was a genuine collaboration from the beginning.

Matthew Burgess: [00:06:30] Absolutely. And it's kind of, you know, our friendship grew and kind of bloomed through the process of making the book. We were kind of getting to know each other as it was happening.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:42] Doug, is that your experience as well, or are you saying what for, friends? I didn't know that.

Doug Salati: [00:06:49] I think, you know, it was one of those lovely happenings in life. When you meet someone who just really seems to get it, or to get the type of art that you want to make, the type of books that you would have loved to read as a kid. And so when I think about this book for me, you know, as the illustrator, as the person making it, it was an ideal project. You know, I mean, I sometimes call books projects. I think maybe to take the pressure off. This is a project, you know, this is just a little thing we're working on. But that's how it started. It really started as, yeah, us getting to know each other, how we communicate, how we like to work. And the book itself, before it was the published book, it was really this idea that we were just throwing back and forth, seeing how it expanded, how it developed, how it changed. And so that was a lot of fun.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:02] Yeah, indeed. So you've both written and Doug, you've written and illustrated books before, and Matthew mentioned that you had said, you know, you really wanted to work on poetry. What drew you to poetry?

Doug Salati: [00:08:18] Well, I think I knew that this was a specialty of Matthew's. I knew that it was a passion. I knew that he was an educator and that this was something that I thought, well, this is going to be great, you know, because I'm asking this person to create this book that is based on something he really, really loves and feels passionate about. And for me, as a kid, my mother was an elementary school teacher, reading picture books, chapter books. That was a big, big part of our lives. Poetry collections was a part of that. So I think that that was something I grew up loving and was happy to return to.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:07] Excellent. Matthew, I was thinking about children's poetry and just poetry, in general. I said in the introduction that I think many adults find poetry difficult to engage with. Right? They feel that it's not something that they can easily get. So I think people shy away from it often. And then I was thinking about children and I thought,

well, is poetry easier for children to engage with because they have fewer negative associations? Or maybe it's more challenging to write great poetry for children, especially when you consider all the really bad, kind of sing songy poetry that's out there for kids. What are your thoughts?

Matthew Burgess: [00:09:50] I think in part it depends on the age of the child. Something happens to us in school often where we start to get the idea that poetry and listen, there are many amazing educators out there who are working counter to this tendency. So I just want to say that out loud. It's not everybody's doing this, but people with very good intentions are teaching poetry in a way that makes it seem as if there's something that you need to get. And so when the poem is presented to the child, it can almost be like, oh God, what am I supposed to say? You know, as if it's a contest to say the most insightful or succinct thing about the poem, rather than to experience the poem first and foremost. So I think, you know, for me, this book grew out of being Mr. Matthew, basically being a teaching artist in New York City public schools. I started out as a poet with no ambitions to write for kids that I remembered, but it was through teaching poetry in the schools that I kind of realized what amazing readers kids are of poetry, and how immediate and visceral their experience of it is when it's presented as something that is open and fun and something to be played with and responded to.

Matthew Burgess: [00:11:20] So that was kind of a revelation for me and really inspired this book, because at some point, I kind of changed lanes a bit from writing for grown ups to this discovery that kids are actually, in some ways, more interesting readers for me, because of their openness, because of the immediate, visceral delight they take in language when language is dancing. And then further to that, my job was to read poems aloud to them and then to get them writing. So that pivot from listening to poetry, letting it kind of inhabit you, or letting it kind of quicken your pulse, or letting it raise questions up to then pivoting to the page and then setting them free to play on the page. And then what kids write, especially, you know, early, elementary, first, second, third, fourth graders, many of them don't yet have. The idea of the poem has to be like this.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:28] Right, right.

Matthew Burgess: [00:12:29] And if you message carefully and enthusiastically and strategically, you can kind of hold at bay. The idea, you know, that it has to be spelled correctly. You know, kids in school are getting these ideas. And some of those restrictions are the enemy of creativity, as we know. So my job was to kind of free them and get them playing.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:55] Yeah. It seems like clearly onelet's get to people before their conceptions of what poetry is or isn't have been ruined and really helped them. I like the idea of poetry as experience rather than poetry as something you must analyze or walk away with. Like, this is the message, and if you don't get it, then you're doing it wrong.

Matthew Burgess: [00:13:20] So and I would just say you can do both because it can be really fun to interrogate or explore. Explore is a better word. To explore a poem with other people can be incredibly pleasurable experience. So it's not about dismissing analysis, but I think the primary thing is to experience it and enjoy it. And then out of that enjoyment or out of that bewilderment, to then kind of move into exploration, but not with the idea that there's one right answer, of course.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:56] Indeed, indeed. Let's talk now about the book itself. Starting with the word themes that you have there. The book, the poems are arranged in seven portals and they're titled Welcome, Wonder, Wild, Weee!, Whoops & Wallops, Windows and Whispers & Well Wishes. So aside from the fact that much like Sesame Street, this book was clearly sponsored by the letter W, what binds these portals together? I don't know, actually. Whose conceptual frame was that? Or did it come together between the two of you?

Matthew Burgess: [00:14:41] I came up with that spontaneously kind of late in the game once. I already had a selection of poems. I did have a moment when the W started raining, and I was picking them up off the ground and putting them on the wall, and then the poems that I had started reconfiguring around these different sections. But we also think of them as portals. I appreciate that you used that word, because I don't think of them as discrete sections. I think of them more. I like portal as a metaphor. Because I don't with a book like this, I don't want the child to feel that they need to start at the beginning and move through in any linear way whatsoever. And so Doug's genius die cut illustrations kind of implicitly reinforce that permission to dive through and to open up in different places. And the other thing I'll say about it, and then I'd love to hear from Doug is that I really wanted the book to be various because of my like two decades teaching poetry to kids, it felt important to me that there was a collection of poems that was both super silly, super playful, also sincere, also mystical. I wanted the different forms, and I wanted just the book to demonstrate that a kid reading it would walk away understanding that, you know, poetry doesn't have to be pretty. Like one thing some people grow up with, like poems about pretty things. It absolutely can be about a pretty thing, but it can also be about pizza or ice cream, you know, and so that variety felt really important to me, probably because of my background teaching poetry. And then Doug came through with the dyke illustrations, which just felt like the perfect formal metaphor.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:51] Yeah, I really want to talk about the illustrations and particularly those die cut elements. And for listeners who may not have already hit pause and run out and purchased the book before they finished listening, each of the beginnings of those sections has a literal hole in the page that's been cut out and lets you look forward into the next pages illustration, but then also backwards into the previous page. Tell us about those.

Doug Salati: [00:17:27] Oh, well, you know, I think it all comes back to that idea of poetry being such a great gateway to the imagination and to fantasy or the ability and the encouragement, I guess, of really priming that pump. And I'd love that. I mean, that's kind of why I was like, yes, Matthew, let's do this poetry book, because that's what I got to do for me. And I'm hoping those die cuts really help the reader understand that this is what you're diving into. This is the experience that we want you to have. But it was a good example of the back and forth that Matthew and I had because he started at some point, you know, things kept changing and evolving, and at some point he introduced the couplets or the two lines that started, and I just kept reading and rereading those two lines. So that idea of Matthew introducing this line that for me was kind of based in our reality, our everyday experience. And then there was that second line that seemed to transport you to another place. And so for me, that was the perfect setup in terms of a visual and sometimes with writing for an illustrator. They were very open. They were extremely open and they could be interpreted in many, many, many ways. So that was great for me because I got to decide, okay, how am I going to set the scene? What is the character going to look like? What is the first world and where are we going to land? So it was a lot of fun. It was a game of trying to come up with that, and then it's all a game of figuring out how those pictures will connect through that opening of the die cut.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:46] Yeah, for our listeners, I'll give an example here. I kind of randomly opened the book as you were speaking, and the section marked wild. The couplet is the animal inside of us who longs to wander free, the speckle, the sparkling specks of stardust that make up you and me. And the image is of a child on a slide, on a playground, or in a backyard with a dog at the bottom. And who appears to be howling at the moon. And the moon is a die cut. And then you turn the page. And what it was looking forward into was actually the fur of a polar bear. And there are all these creatures running around and the child and the dog are there and the cut. The die cut looks back into an owl that was on the previous page that you may not have even really noticed. So yeah, it really is that sudden, like everyday backyard life to suddenly just this riot of imagination just visually there.

Doug Salati: [00:20:51] I feel like when I think about that, when you were describing that, I was just remembering how as a kid, I was obsessed with the wardrobe of Narnia. The idea of being in a real place and then simply being able to open the door and walk through into the

most unbelievable, magical place you could imagine. And so I think I'm sure something that idea, that concept, I'm sure was working, you know, and I was thinking about these pages.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:24] Well, the image with all these different animals together actually reminded me of the creation scenes from Milton's Paradise Lost, which is going to cause our producer to roll her eyes right now. She knows I go on about Paradise Lost, so.

Matthew Burgess: [00:21:39] I was going to say the other thing you know about the die cut page turns is one of the sort of parts of picture books, like the basic technology of a picture book that I love so much is the page turn.

Doug Salati: [00:21:53] Yes.

Matthew Burgess: [00:21:53] How much can happen across a page turn and how much we think about that? Those of us who make picture books, it's so important. And these die cuts gave us a chance to really take that, or Doug specifically, a chance to really take that far. And, you know, we also put the word magic in the title. So we got to deliver. And I think Doug, with these different seven die cut illustrations, it's seven moments that you kind of anticipate rush forward to. And each one of them deliver and feel magical, so it adds just so much to the book.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:22:36] It also adds a natural moment that's inviting you and encouraging you to really savor what's on the page in front of you, as opposed to what I worry that reading often turns for too many people into. I need to get through x number of pages. You know? I need to finish this chapter. I need to finish this book. I've been told I must read 50 pages a night or whatever. And it's about that amount and not really about the experience.

Matthew Burgess: [00:23:05] Right.

Doug Salati: [00:23:07] You know, I think that's you've got to linger. I love doing that with picture books, with illustrations. I think that's where I am now and in the profession that I'm in, because we read these books in bed, you know, with my mom or my dad, I would just travel along the page and pause and take it in. And I think that's such a big part of the role of that. The book, you know, and I think in some ways we're, you know, with illustration, picture book illustration, it's for some kids, that's their main source of looking at art at an early age and experiencing narrative art. And so that's a big, big part of it.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:59] Well, and so much of what we talk about at Reach Out and Read is how beautiful illustrations with amazing words, you know, allow this thing we call

dialogic reading to happen where the adult and the child are talking about the book, as opposed to merely only reading what the text says on the page. And when you have things like those portal pages in particular, right. There's so much that a parent and child can talk about, even if that child is an infant or toddler. If you pick up this book, you wouldn't think, oh, I'm going to give this to a toddler. But to read it out loud to a toddler may actually work for that back and forth dialogue.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: Speaking of the words, reading aloud is, as I just noted, fundamental to Reach Out and Read. We'd love to hear you read a few poems, Matthew. Would you be willing to read the dedication out loud?

Matthew Burgess: [00:24:59] I'd be delighted. Thank you. So I'll just say briefly as I wind up, that this poem also arrived kind of late as we were thinking about how the book is organized and who we might dedicate it to. And the poem just kind of rose up in response to that question, and it felt very right to dedicate the poem to the reader. Whoever you are, wherever you are, however near or far. You're welcome here to peek in. Peer with eyes and ears where words appear. And fly you far beyond all fear of who you are. This is for you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:54] What a lovely invitation to continue on this journey. And then you have another poem called Zero.

Matthew Burgess: [00:26:06] Yes, Zero is the first poem in the Welcome section, and I know I don't have the image to show to the listener, but this is one of Doug's illustrations where I just kept discovering different elements of ways that he took the poem and really contributed to it and did something else with the illustrations. That felt very magical to me. Zero is a porthole through which we see the sea. Zero is a hula hoop we wear when we shimmy. Zero is a bracelet dangling on a wrist. Zero is a doughnut you don't want to miss. Zero is the owl's eyes open wide at night. Zero is the halo of the firelight. Zero is a crater on the surface of the moon. Zero is the singer's mouth crooning out of tune. Zero is a vanilla scoop perched atop a cone. Zero is the rock. You skip. A smooth and polished stone. Sometimes zero finds a friend with a mysterious affinity. And when the two connect, at last they become infinity.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:27:42] Indeed. And I agree, those small illustrations interspersing every two lines just bring it to life in so many different ways. And then, perhaps in closing, we have one more poem here, Some Will Say.

Matthew Burgess: [00:28:01] Some will say, some will say the sky is blue, but that is only partly true. If you take a peek above. The clouds are dusty as a dove. And last night when I stepped out back, the dome was silver dotted black. Then daylight was eventually made with pastel streaks of marmalade. I've seen a storm so deeply green it casts the clearest emerald

sheen I've seen. A sunset bloom, A rose to kiss my sister on the nose. So those who say the sky is blue. May need to think the matter through. But this is not the way we think. Look up right now. It's purplish pink.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:56] Indeed. Very last question for both of you. If you had anything to say to people about the world of poetry and writing and illustrating for children, what would be the short bit of insight or advice that you'd most like to convey?

Doug Salati: [00:29:16] Oh, you know, what I what comes back to me about this project was the idea of creation and the idea that I feel like. We really want to resist. I want to resist. As a kid, I wish I resisted more the self-criticism or the idea of saying, oh, that's not good enough or that's not the right way to draw something. And I think, you know what? This project was a reminder for me that you don't know what's going to happen. So draw it out and draw it again and again and again and keep going. And, you know, eventually it's going to lead to something you love because you don't know where it's going to lead you. So I think that's not a short answer at all. But, you know, I think that's the thing that I love about this book is this idea of creation, you know, that drawing pictures, telling stories, kind of getting into your imagination, is a great thing to do as a practice, whether you're a kid or an adult, I guess.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:34] Indeed, Matthew.

Matthew Burgess: [00:30:36] I think for me, one of the most important things is to play. And I think that's something that kids can teach us that they know how to do it, you know, and they can. They're always happy to invite us in to play. And when we lose our capacity to play or when we get a little rusty, I think it's one of the most important things to do. And even creating anything, you know, creating a meal, creating a book, creating a painting. I think that the impulse to play is. You know, it involves experimentation and a willingness to make mistakes and total absorption in what you're doing. So I guess I'm underscoring some of the things that Doug said. But when I was teaching poetry in New York City public schools and observing and being invited into play with those kids, it was one of the things that I most felt I wanted to bring back to my students at Brooklyn College, because I was seeing them at this other end of the educational experience, and how so many of them had sort of lost the freshness or lost the desire or capacity to play. But actually, everyone wants to everyone wants to get back into that space. And so my whole educational approach really centered around inviting people to play and creating the conditions in which people felt comfortable and safe enough and to play.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:32:18] Indeed. Never stop playing. Both of you, thank you so much for this wonderful book. It's such a gift to the world. And it was a delight to experience it and to have this conversation with you today.

Matthew Burgess: [00:32:35] Thank you so much.

Doug Salati: [00:32:36] Thank you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:32:41] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. There's many wonderful poems in the book we discussed today, and I thought I'd share one more with you. This one is called a terrible, Horrible Idea. It's definitely not a good idea to put toothpaste on your toast to swing so high. Your sneakers fly from here to the West coast. I wouldn't suggest you rest your head on the prickly porcupine's belly. Or feed the ravenous platypus a piece of your PB and jelly. Most people would advise against unlatching the gate in the fence and letting the wild stallions run free to trample everything we see. You should think twice before waking the snoring dinosaur. By knocking loudly on the door with a wooden two by four. Don't you think it would be cuckoo to invite a giant to the barbecue? Especially when he has an appetite and eats up every single bite? I think you would know better than sticking your finger in the fan, or walking inside, all covered with sand and telling your dad talk to the hand. So take my advice, buckaroos, and don't behave like kangaroos by hopping in your underwear here and there and everywhere.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:33:59] And with that advice, that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read podcast. Reach Out and Read is a non profit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports coaches and celebrates engaging in those language rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and early relational health. Visit us at. Org to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lori Brooks is our Chief External Affairs Officer. Special thanks to our Communications Manager, Niels Delmar Torres and Digital Content Coordinator, Aarthi Varshini. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper, for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Doctor Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.