Nancy Carlson: I guess I got my start in picture books because I was read to at an early age. So I loved picture books at a very early age. My parents read to me; even my dad read to me, and that was in the 60s. Dads didn’t very often take their children on their lap and read to them. So I was read to. I also loved a book that you still see but was really popular in the 50s called the Little Golden Book. The Golden Books were my love. I loved them. When we went to the grocery store, we’d be sitting in the cart, and then she’d buy us a Golden Book or hand us a Golden Book, and we’d look at it. My favorite books were those back then. I think those things led me to really fall in love with what I’m doing now. I also was a draw-er early in life. I loved art, and I think I got exposed to it because my older sister was an artist – still is. So I copied her. The little sister likes copying the big sister. So, since my sister drew all the time, that meant I drew. We would lay on our beds and sketch and then make up stories about the girls we were sketching or the animals – mostly girls: we liked drawing girls in cute clothes. And we’d talk back-and-forth and tell our stories about the girls we were imagining as we drew. I guess you can just go back to when I was just tiny, a little girl. I had parents that read to me and nurtured our art. They let us draw all day long. Of course, there weren’t activities back then. Nobody went and took a class or did anything. We just came home. There were only a few channels on TV, so we never really watched TV after school. We drew or played outside. I guess that’s the beginning of my career – age 5.

Peter Shea: Which Little Golden books?

Nancy Carlson: Pokey Little Puppy: I loved Pokey Little Puppy. The Happy Dump Truck Driver – I still carry it around when I speak. I loved that book, because he takes them for a ride. He picks up all the animals through the village, and he has a dump truck and the animals are – they’re drawn as animals, but they kind of talk a little, so it’s kind of a mix of real and humanlike animals. He keeps dumping the dump truck up-and-down, and they slide down it. To me as a little girl, that sounded really fun: to be on a dump truck and then to slide down it. My dad was in construction, so it was even more appealing to see the dump truck and the animals. That one was, I guess, my very favorite. There are just so many: even the stereotypic ones where the babies are perfect and the little children are perfect – they’re praying or whatever – I still have to respect the art in those. They’re just fabulous. Early on, even Richard Scary was doing some of the Little Golden Books. I loved his work. I just loved them.

Peter Shea: I was permanently imprinted by Rabbit and His Friends.

Nancy Carlson: That's interesting. I just gave the board book – it isn’t Rabbit and His Friends; it's the one that introduces him – I just gave it to my granddaughter in a board book form. But it’s the original Golden Book art. It’s really pretty.

Peter Shea: And those things will be in print three days after the New Testament goes out-of-print.
Nancy Carlson: It’s amazing. And it really started an era were books were no longer just to learn to read; they were for entertainment. Childhood was changing when the Golden Books started. Children were suddenly in the suburbs. They had freedom. They had playtime. If you look back in the 40s, a lot of kids work. It was just a different time for children. Leisure time grew and the suburbs grew and economics – people were making more money, and so kids had books in their bedrooms, and the Golden books kind of started that era.

Peter Shea: Were you a suburban kid?

Nancy Carlson: I was. I grew up in Edina. My parents moved there when I was, I think, about three. It was a new neighborhood. It was just very symbolic of the times, 1956 – there was just nothing out there. We could see Southdale was starting; it was there in the distance. There were no freeways yet; the hospital hadn’t been built. And from my house now, where I grew up, you look out and you see Southdale, Fairview Southdale Hospital, and all this hubbub, but back then, it was all farms and just dirt. There was some gravel pits out there, and so it was an awesome place to play. There was nothing out there but open; you could just run forever. No roads to worry about, and the trees were teeny, tiny little trees. My brother bought my parents’ house, and the trees are huge. They’re just old old pine trees, but, when we were little, we were taller than the trees that were there.

Peter Shea: An Edina childhood, when you were in Edina, is perhaps quite different from an Edina childhood today?

Nancy Carlson: I think it is. The new Edina – the fancy part – wasn’t even built yet. In fact, our library in Edina, when I was a little girl, was in a house. Think of that for a suburb. You think, “Edina!” – you know. It was an old, Victorian house, and that was our public library. I could ride my bike there. It was probably a couple miles. You’d just jump on your bike and ride down France and get to the library. Yes, it was a different time. It was an innocent time, and carefree, which I think reflects in my work.

Peter Shea: You started out drawing cute girls in nice clothes. So far as I can see, all 50 of your books that I looked at are animals. Where was the move to dressed animals?

Nancy Carlson: That is honestly really strange, because I did not draw many animals. I drew horses. All the girls in my class, they liked me to draw for them. They’d say, “Oh, draw a horse, draw a horse!” They were into horses; I wasn’t. I can’t think of that many animals I drew. It happened just after I graduated from college, when I really started getting into drawing animals. Although, I did find an old drawing I did when I was ten, and, honest to God, it looks just like my art today. I haven’t even improved that much. It was just a copy of something I ended up putting in my book called A Visit to Grandma’s, where they go visit their grandma in Florida. In there, I have them imagining life at the farm when they rode on a sleigh through the countryside. Well, the sleigh is drawn exactly like the sleigh in my 10-year-old drawing. The little girl in the sleigh in my 10-year-old drawing is imagining a doll for Christmas. I put bunnies under the snow in this
10-year-old drawing, and they are dreaming of carrots, and wishing that Santa would bring them carrots. This drawing is so similar to the one I did in my 30s. I’m still using the same techniques: a bunny thinking of a carrot. It was amazing that I found that; I was pretty excited. It was done in color crayon, which I don’t use. Actually, in reality, I was a very serious fine artist all through college. I still loved illustrations in books, and I loved picture books, but I wanted to be a fine artist, so I really didn’t do animal stuff til I graduated.

Peter Shea: Can you tell us a little bit about that art education and that other path that is maybe in the basement somewhere?

Nancy Carlson: I’m still hauling around that old art from that era. I was so lucky, because I was able to go the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Since I had decided at five that I want to be an artist, it just made sense that that was the place for me to go. I did end up going to the University of Minnesota Duluth for one year. I’m really thankful I was there, because I had to take a writing class there. The teacher said to me, “You are going to be a writer someday.” I went, “No way, I want to be an artist”. She goes, “You will.” I said, “I can't spell,” because I was a horrible speller. She said, “You’ll have an editor to help you with that.” So I kind of put it in the back of my mind. I did enjoy that writing class a lot. But then I transferred to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design where I dabbled in many different subjects, but really found a love in printmaking. I loved my teacher there; he was a big influence on my art. There were some other awesome teachers there; Kinji Akagawa just really helped me as a fine artist. I did take one illustration class there. The teacher said, “You shouldn’t be an illustrator; you should be a fine artist.” I loved the freedom of being a fine artist, because I could do whatever popped into my head. I do have to say: my fine art tended always to have writing underneath it. My last senior project was a lot of writing, mixed in with my printmaking. So who knows? I went and traveled after graduating from the College; I traveled in Europe for about eight to nine months, and it was there that I started drawing bunnies and dogs and things like that. It stuck; I just loved doing it. Making it as a fine artist is pretty tough, especially if you want to stay in Minnesota, which I did. I started getting a portfolio together of illustration, and I started illustrating for Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine, for Minnesota Monthly, a little bit for the Trib, did some advertising work – product design for stores of my art on T-shirts. And then, I did a really good job – I’ll tell you people, if you ever want to get into the field, do free things – I illustrated for free the poster for the Children’s Museum, the very first Children’s Museum poster in Minnesota. I had all these animals playing in this building that was the Children’s Museum. I showed that poster to a publisher, and that’s how I got my first job.

Peter Shea: Was it a big move from illustrating to writing your own books?

Nancy Carlson: Thank God for a good editor. My editor, Susan Pearson, really was my guide. It was like going to a master class at Hamline or the U of M. My first book I tried to write was Harriet’s Recital, and it was 80 pages long. I learned: picture books are 32 pages. She helped me on my first 16 books. It was learning more and more. Each book, I learned a little bit more. My editor at the time, Susan Pearson – this was through Lerner
in Minneapolis – she had a really good instinct about what was happening in the book business. She could see that the big chains were starting to grow and that, pretty soon, these chains are going to need books. Also, at the time there were lots of independents. We were filled with bookstores. There were children’s bookstores. She had me do five books my first year, and the second year, I did five, and the third year, I did five. In three years, I had a shelf of books at the bookstore that were all Nancy Carlson books. It was really hard to do five books a year for three years, but I did it, and I’m really glad I did. It really established me quickly – much quicker than if I was doing one or two a year.

**Peter Shea:** Did you have an overarching intention with these books, doing multiple things, or was each one its own book?

**Nancy Carlson:** Now, since I know so much more about what I do, and I teach writing, I teach children’s book illustration – I didn’t know at the time, but each series helped give birth to the next series, because I was doing character development. You introduce the character in one book; well, pretty soon, that character is like, “Me, Me, me! I want to book of my own.” And then they jump out, and pretty soon you’re writing about that character. And then you introduce another character. It was just amazing. I’m a big fan of Annie Lamotte’s books. She says the characters will take over. A lot of authors don’t believe that. For me, they did. When I introduced Loudmouth George in the Harriet books, it was just a natural for him to be the next series. Since I knew him, since I had been thinking about him when I was writing the Harriet books, it was really easy to come up with subject matters for George. In the George books, I introduced Louanne the pig. Louanne the pig just took over too, because part of the character development with Louanne was: I decided she was an only child. That led to *The Perfect Family*. And that led to other story ideas because of the character development I did with her. It was really fun. I just struggled along with it, with the help of this editor. She really, really, really guided me.

**Peter Shea:** Where was your relation to kids during this time?

**Nancy Carlson:** All of my jobs, except when I was a waitress, were working with kids. I never babysat in my life. I babysat one time; they never hired me back. I did babysit my little brother a little bit. I just let him run wild; I didn’t really watch him as carefully as I should have. I didn’t have a lot of experience with little ones. However, when I was old enough to work, my first big job was as a playground director. That was my first big job. I was playing with kids all day. Then I got my water safety instruction for lifeguarding; I became a swimming instructor, and I actually taught swimming all through art school years. I was a camp counselor right after college. I look back and it’s like: I’ve always worked with kids, as I was trying to pursue my art. I was always thinking more as being an artist, but here I was, working with kids. When it came time to write for them, I really had a keen understanding of children: how they moved and how they talked – plus, I had a wonderful childhood. I had something really positive to look back on and write about.
Peter Shea: I see some of your books as trying to solve problems that kids have, especially bullying, feeling inadequate, feeling shy. Did you get ideas from what happened as a camp counselor or as a swimming teacher?

Nancy Carlson: And my own past. I was bullied, and I was a bully. I was bullied by this kid in my neighborhood; it wasn’t long-lasting. That was my idea for Loudmouth George and the Sixth Grade Bully. My newer bully book is actually a girl bully, and that could easily have been me. There were some times in my life when I wasn’t as nice as I could’ve been to some kids. In my first five books, the Harriets are all my experiences growing up. But as I progressed— I have 65 books – so as I move forward through life, I’ve used my children. I’ve used experiences as a camp counselor or teacher. Arnie Goes to Camp is my camp, when I was a camp counselor. Everything in there happened to me and my kids at camp. Now I have a granddaughter. Is she going to end up in books? I hope so. I’m already looking at her, thinking of some ideas. Ideas are everywhere, but I think that the easiest place to gather your ideas and thoughts for books is your life. I use my family a lot.

Peter Shea: Does the family tend to go along with this procedure?

Nancy Carlson: They like it. They do. I have one that you’d think might be kind of embarrassing; my son was really short when he was little. He didn’t grow. Now he’s like the tallest one in the family. But he grew late, like in college. So I did a book called Think Big. He’s represented as tiny little frog. The kid who he hung out with ended up in the NBA. I’m not sure who he plays for now, but in college, he played for Kansas. He was so much taller than my son. Seeing them together, it was hysterical. That visual stayed with me, and I put it in the book: Think Big. My son loved being in it. He doesn’t care at all.

Peter Shea: Was there anybody in particular, as you came to work with this, that you came to admire or wanted to be like, as a writer, as an illustrator?

Nancy Carlson: I’ve always really respected my editors. As far as people working in the field right now: I really love Kate DeCamillo’s work. I wish I could do a chapter book. Maybe I will someday. I like the sense of her writing and characters. I feel they’re really well understood by her. As far as art: there are so many wonderful artists living here in Minnesota. I love so many. I love Steven Gambel’s work – definitely a color scheme I adore. There are so many; I hate to leave anybody out. I’m a big fan of poetry; I don’t write it myself, but I love some of the wonderful poem books that are coming out right now for children. Joyce Sidman, for example, has written some wonderful poem books – poetry for children, usually around nature, and they always seem to find the best illustrators for her books. They’re beautiful. The great thing about here in Minnesota: we’ve got a lot of really great people working in the field.

Peter Shea: Do you talk to each other much?

Nancy Carlson: It’s not like we hang out all the time. There are times when we are all at the same conferences. We end up at the Children’s Literature Network breakfast together.
We sit by each other, chat a little bit. There is a really cool thing happening now at the Loft. There are salons for people: there’s a picture book salon, which I will be going to. It’s fun to share and talk with other illustrators. You can’t really live in a vacuum. I kind of did for a while with my work, because I didn’t want to be influenced by other people. But now I’m much more open to talking and sharing and getting help on things. Maybe if you can’t figure out your ending, it’s kind of nice to share it with others and see what they come up with.

**Peter Shea:** Do you work steady on these things for long periods? How does that go?

**Nancy Carlson:** Once the idea you have is starting to take hold and it’s starting to work, then I just concentrate on that one idea, because it kind of bugs you if you can’t quite figure it out. When you’re really bored with it, then that’s my sign, “It’s not going to work; it’s done! Move on.” But when it’s still exciting you, and you’re still like, “How am I going to get this middle part working?” then I really just keep at it. I keep at it to the point where I need an editor to look at it. And then I send it off to – well, now I have an agent. I’ll send it to my agent, and she’ll send it to people who I think might be interested in it. Through the grace of God they buy it! Then the back-and-forth goes. Editor will say, “How about this ending? How about the change in that picture?” – back-and-forth. And then, that’s really all you’re concentrating on, because you would have gotten an advance by then. You want to keep it going. I guess when I am writing, if it hasn’t taken hold yet, I kind of do bounce around a bit. Once it starts working, then I really focus in on it.

**Peter Shea:** Does it ever happen that stuff that you’ve abandoned comes back?

**Nancy Carlson:** Yes. Yes, yes, yes. I send them back all the time.

**Peter Shea:** Throw the raccoon in again.

**Nancy Carlson:** *My Family is Forever* is a book on adoption. It probably took me 18 years to get it right. The little girl in the book was just adopted when I started it, and when I finished it, she had graduated high school. That one I put aside for a long time, then brought it out again. After reworking it, the company decided to publish it. I keep bringing that one back. There is one I keep bringing back, nobody seems to want to publish. I swear I’m going to get that book out someday. It’s called *Sometimes You Just Need a Cookie*. It’s just basically a book about the joys of a cookie: it makes you feel better when you have a cookie. That wouldn’t sell. I keep rewriting, and we will see.

**Peter Shea:** There is a strain – just looking through the titles – of medicine for depression kinds of books. *Sometimes You Just Need a Cookie* sounds like that, but there’s a fistful of such books.

**Nancy Carlson:** *Think Happy, Smile a Lot, I Like Me* – I try to keep a positive attitude.

**Peter Shea:** One thing you’re doing is writing to actually be helpful.
Nancy Carlson: That’s my mission. I enjoy doing that. I do. Believe me, it would be much easier to be a fine artist and just draw all day and not worry about a book. But I do have a feeling that, when an issue comes up, I want to help children with it. Maybe I am an old hippie. I know I am. I want to change the world. I’m trying, with little ones, to just be a positive influence. That’s what I do.

Peter Shea: That’s what I find so admirable about your work. It’s so much in a great tradition of children’s literature, going back to the really moralistic stuff from the 19th Century, but especially going back to Margaret Wise Brown and some other splendidly helpful people. I’m imagining that it must be good, if it ever happens, that the people you were trying to help actually tell you.

Nancy Carlson: It happens all the time. It’s amazing how many people make an effort to come to a signing, “My daughter was scared of kindergarten, and she read your book, and she loved it. She ended up able to conquer that.” My book, I Like Me, not so much now, but when it first came out, within 10 years of when it first came out, women with eating disorders would write and tell me, “The book helped me.” I had an amazing group come one time to a book signing. They were a therapy group who had just horrible childhods. They didn’t have a childhood really; nothing positive happened. They were reading my books and reliving a positive childhood through my books. I was amazed at that. It really felt good. It was like, “Wow, that really makes my life worth living!”– And worth doing, for sure.

Peter Shea: I am sure that happens with Laura Ingalls Wilder. People just substitute a childhood they can stand.

Nancy Carlson: It’s the same with books that influenced me a lot. I had a happy childhood, but I loved the Betsy Tacy books when I was little girl, imagining that carefree childhood. I bet those books helped a lot of little girls, too.

Peter Shea: I find myself admiring things in my childhood which I can find no redeeming social value in now. The Bobbsey Twins were really important to me growing up. It’s almost as if they work on a formula for being boring; anything that moves above mildly interesting is edited out. But they were very helpful.

Nancy Carlson: And you are probably proud to be able to read them, too.

Peter Shea: That’s the big thing. They were fat.

Nancy Carlson: Yeah, they were. I wasn’t a big Bobbsey Twins, but I was Nancy Drew; I really enjoyed her. I loved those books. Are they great literature? No, but she was a good role model for us girls, growing up. I guess some people might say that my guilty pleasure of the Golden Books <are that>; like I said in the beginning, I even liked the Golden Book prayers where there are perfect children going like this. There’s something that makes me feel really good when I look at them. Are they politically correct? No,
they’re not. They’re not at all politically correct for this day. There are no different races in there. Moms are always staying home. The dad comes home: “Daddy works, and daddy has his pipe at night.” Oh my God. I guess I like looking at them, because that’s my childhood.

**Peter Shea:** You wonder whether that can be translated or maintained: the particular charm of those things, Into the 2000s.

**Nancy Carlson:** I wish they could keep the style of art and make them more politically acceptable to everybody who lives in America now. There is a different aesthetic now. Kids, young mothers with children, they have a different idea of color than I had growing up, and I’m even noticing my color palette’s changing, because I see different colors together for children that were never put together when I had children. I have a line of posters. Even though they stand the test of time subject wise, color wise, the bedrooms are not those colors anymore. You do not see a bedroom that’s primary colors. And mine were so many primaries. You see a baby bedroom that’s gray. We would never have painted a baby’s room gray. They’ll have a gray bedroom and slight pink or slight blue highlights. It certainly doesn’t match the posters I did in the 80s.

**Peter Shea:** Do you feel at least a certain urge to keep up with the times?

**Nancy Carlson:** Yeah, I still love doing what I do, and plus, I’m influenced. I read a lot of picture books now. I teach it, or used to teach it, at MCAD. I don’t know if I’ll be back next year. And I teach it at art centers. Since I look at so many new picture books that have come out, sure, I’m influenced by the different colors. In fact, a lot of the new stuff coming out kind of looks a little bit like the olden days, because, in the olden days, we couldn’t do full-color. We had a limited palette. And a limited palette now is coming back, so it’s maybe just three colors. There is this similar, nostalgic look back with some of the new stuff.

**Peter Shea:** I remember how bright those colors were: the old Dick and Jane readers. And if you look at the early Margaret Wise Brown things: so bright! What’s teaching done to you?

**Nancy Carlson:** I think teaching has made me understand how I do what I do, better. It has certainly made me more aware of what’s happening in the business. It has kind of gotten me out of my studio, which I was in for 25 years. I never left it, hardly. I didn’t teach. The last 10 years, I’ve been out there. I always learn more from my students… I hope they learn from me, but I learn a lot from them; I really do.

**Peter Shea:** So they come to you with fairly well-established projects, or?

**Nancy Carlson:** Sometimes, my classes are well-established. Sometimes, it’s just writers, and my mission is to help them understand how the pictures work in a picture book; that helps them write it a little differently and edit themselves a little more, since they know the picture will take the place of some of the words. And, when I do it at the
Minneapolis College of Art and Design, I have really good, top-notch illustrators that are taking it just as an elective; maybe it’s something they can get into. I don’t know if many will get into it; I’ve had like three students that are published now. That’s pretty good. At least, if they get that opportunity to illustrate a book, they’ll at least know how to do it and come in with a real professional attitude and understand how the book is put together: the terminology, how the pictures work in the book. That’s my goal: they all are ready; if a job should come their way, they’ll get it.

Peter Shea: So you're working with kids who want to write and need to make space for pictures and with kids who want to draw but might need to make money

Nancy Carlson: And who might end up writing, as well.

Peter Shea: Do you ever teach a class for somebody just like you, who wants to put the two things together?

Nancy Carlson: There are many that come in and think they want to, and they realize quickly that their art maybe isn't as professional as it should be. Sometimes, there are artists that I work with that are fantastic, and they try writing and they go, “That’s not my bag.” So it’s kind of a discovery process. Sixty percent of the classes I teach are people who think they want to do both.

Peter Shea: And you help them sort out who could really do that, who can do just the one but not the other.

Nancy Carlson: It’s the journey.

Peter Shea: What kind of intentions are you bumping into these days, among the people who come to you and want to write for children? Are they like you? Do you recognize yourself in the writers coming up, or is there something else going on?

Nancy Carlson: Yeah, I recognize a few of them. There’s a couple of them that I look at and I say, “You’re a young me. You’re me, when I was in art school, when I was 20, 25, 30.” There are some.

Peter Shea: Rowling, after killing more trees than anybody in the history of tree killing, making Harry Potter happen, has now gone for adult stuff, an adult market. People jump ship sometimes, way jump ship. Have you ever been tempted to do something that’s weirdly different from anything you’ve ever done?

Nancy Carlson: I am really branched off in the last 10 years into different areas. I do fine art now and have shows; I have a show up right now. I do something called a doodle a day, which is really skewed. It’s fun for kids, but some of them are edgy for adults. I would love to put together a book of art for adults that’s more edgy, or do a weekly comic of these doodles and have adults as my audience. In the meantime, I’m doing a blog right now which I would love to turn into a memoir. So, if I do anything, I think I
would try memoir for adults. I’m hiking 60 trails, in celebration of my 60th birthday, which was in October. I’m hiking, and then, along with this hiking, I’m also dealing with my husband, who is suffering from a bad form of dementia called FTD, frontal temporal dementia. It’s really a bad one, and so, along with that diagnosis, this hiking thing started. It’s called “Putting One Foot in Front of the Other.” I’m hoping this blog will turn into a memoir. I feel like I need to take a class with somebody really good. I am kind of seeing where it’s going, now that I’ve been at it since October writing it. I’m seeing a common thread that I didn’t even know was there in the beginning– of this walk. I didn’t even know that there was going to be this common thread through it. That’s something I’m going to concentrate on and hope that maybe I can find an agent to shop it around. I think in the future – I hate to sound like Debbie Downer here – with the boomers aging – this is a very uncommon form of dementia; however, they’re seeing more, because there are more of us turning. It affects the 50s and 60s, so, now that so many of us are getting to that age, it’s going to be more common, I think.

Peter Shea: I am sorry to hear that.

Nancy Carlson: Yeah, it’s been bad, but in other ways, it’s been an interesting journey. Let’s put it that way. And it’s made me a better artist, a better communicator, and man, have I worked hard. Along with this, he was getting us into debt. There has been an uphill battle, but I think that I’ve got the big picture, at least for now. The blog has been very helpful. Maybe I can even do a book on it for children.

Peter Shea: Wow. That would be exciting. As the baby boomers age, their parents, their grandparents, are going to have all kinds of conditions. Am I to understand that this memoir project and the blog move entirely away from visual arts?

Nancy Carlson: No, I’m drawing everything. It’s funny; I was at a library, and someone was doing a workshop on illustrated memoirs. I couldn’t go to it. I wish I had been able to. Everything on my blog is illustrated by me. Some of them are really funny illustrations. If you can’t laugh, you’ll just weep all day, so you have to learn to laugh. Basically, every image is a different type of image of my husband, through all these changes. And other things too – and I illustrate my hikes, seen through my way of thinking. I’ll do slugs hiking. I’m still using my imagination, so, as you’re reading this deep paragraph about this journey I’m on, you’ll look over and there are slugs hiking up a trail or a bunny dancing on the top of a mountain. It’s just this weird contrast as you look through it, but yes, I am drawing it, and trying my hardest to write it.

Peter Shea: It will be exciting to see what comes of that. You mentioned, in our preliminary conversation, that you been doing some work with Asperger’s, autism the last while. Can you tell us about how that came to be and what you’re up to there?

Nancy Carlson: I met a boy at the Loft; he took my class. He was seven or eight. He took my class called, “Use your imagination.” He loved it; he took it with his sister Mary, who was awesome too. They just loved my books through the years, when they were little, and as they grew, they loved my books. They’d come to signings and they’d just
would turn up places – just a really nice family. They have an older sister who also likes my books. I got to know the family, and the mom, and emailed once in a while, or we’d meet up somewhere. And then he got diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome. It was pretty devastating for the family, but it explained a lot too, because he was having some social problems; it was a tough time for him. He’s really doing great now. Back then, it was a little scary. He was irritated that there were no books for him to read, no picture books that he could find that helped him. There were books written by adults about it, but there wasn’t anything that told his story. So he wrote his story, and I looked at it and I gave him some editing advice, and he wrote it again. Then it became clear that, probably, I should be writing it along with him. Then I found a publisher through a good friend, Free Spirit, she was actually working for them at the time. I pitched the idea to them, and they were really open to it. In the meantime, I did another book, before the Asperger’s one, on ADHD. And then we finally got to the Asperger’s one and it was an amazing journey. Earlier I talked about character development and the backstory and creating this realistic character, which was easy on this book because I just took his writing about who he is and how he feels. That’s all I did was take bits and pieces from what he wrote and put it into a picture book. The book just came out last week, so we are in the beginning of promoting it all over.

Peter Shea: How was the collaboration?

Nancy Carlson: The collaboration was really tight in the beginning, when he was writing. Then she handed me over everything, and then I didn’t meet with him again for a year. I just kept rewriting and rewriting. That was the time when I’d gotten everything I needed. I needed to be the person to turn it into a picture book. I don’t think it could’ve been just written by him. It was going to be his writing and my illustrating, but they wanted – Free Spirit, and rightly so; I think with this was really good advice – they wanted a plot to it. They wanted a problem presented, where we could show some of the characteristics that Armand – the boy’s name is Armand – displayed. The only way we could show a variety of different coping skills with Asperger’s was: I needed to do a story. That was my job. But he did all the backstory and all the details.

Peter Shea: That must’ve been a high-tension meeting, when he got to see what you’d done.

Nancy Carlson: It was interesting, because he wasn’t there. He saw bits and pieces. I sat down with him two and a half years ago, and I literally had 20 different versions. I had playing baseball, I had going to a party, I had going to school, I had all these different scenarios. He liked them all. I even had him going to Mars. I had everything. The publisher wanted a party, because that would be a really typical problem for someone with Asperger’s: the balloons and all the hubbub. So, the party won. And Armand liked the party scene too. He’s been a good sport. There’s some things I’ve had to make up to put in there. He’s not particularly into dinosaurs, but the character in the book is a dinosaur lover. I wanted to show: he’s obsessed with dinosaurs; this character in the book loves dinosaurs. Armand, on the other hand, is a real big Lego and reader. He just reads
everything. But you can’t have a character just reading in the book. That’s not interesting story. So I had to put some fiction in there. He was really, really good about it.

But the day I showed the final dummy, his mother showed up, and they couldn’t find him; he was out riding his bike with his babysitter, and they just didn’t appear. We were at Barnes and Noble’s having coffee, and I was showing her the dummy that was accepted, and I was soon to start the art. And then, all of a sudden, this young man comes over, and he says, “Hello, my name is Ryan. I overheard you talking about Asperger’s. I am 20-something, and I have Asperger’s. Would you mind if I look at the book? Today is the day that I am supposed to go out and interact with people. My mom makes me, one time a month. Usually, this is hard for me, to be out, to go up to someone. But when I heard you talking, I knew you would be the right people to talk to.” He read the book; he gave me some tips, from his point of view. We were just shivering. I just shiver when I think about it, because, what are the chances, at that moment of time, that I’m sitting next to a young man who has Asperger’s, he’s in a group home, this was his day to go out, and we were there. And then he emailed me and he goes, “You didn’t tell me you were Nancy Carlson. I read your books when I was little. I’m so embarrassed that I asked to give you tips.” I said, “No, don’t be embarrassed; we needed your tips. It was wonderful that you reached out.” This was fun. That was a really fun meeting. We love that.

Peter Shea: You have any social anxiety yourself? I was just thinking: we go back to the people scared about performing in the early books, and then this.

Nancy Carlson: I didn’t like speaking in front of people, but if you publish a book, you’d better get over that right away. My first speech was at the library on Lake Street. I was so terrified that I would’ve preferred there have been a tornado that day – anything, so that it would be canceled. Nobody showed up except some seniors from a senior home, so I got through it. The next time I spoke – and this is the absolute truth – I was speaking at the reading association, the Minneapolis chapter, and they had rented out this restaurant. Halfway through my speech, tornado, and we had to cancel. Everybody had to go home. So it was like, “Okay, don’t ever wish for that again. It really happened.” I’m not afraid to speak now, in any shape or form. Social anxiety: before I started my career, I probably wouldn’t have gone up and introduced myself to a stranger and said, “Hi, I’m Nancy Carlson. I hear you are an editor.” I have had to teach myself that. It’s still not the easiest thing to do, but I’m not afraid to do it, now. My husband is in a care facility, so I go out by myself – with groups, but still by myself – so I’ve had to learn to be someone by myself meeting people, which is new, and it’s kind of hard, but it’s fine.

Peter Shea: So you’re a little bit in the position of showing people how to do something that you’ve had to learn how to do? What an astonishing ride, from beginning to end: 65 books. Does the number intimidate you? Do you think, “I’m 60 years old; I’ve got 65 books. I need to get 100.”

Nancy Carlson: It would really be fun to keep at it until I can’t draw anymore. It would be really cool to do 100 books in my lifetime but – never say never, but – the publishing world has slowed down. They’re not publishing as many titles, and, the way the business
is right now, if you publish more than two a year, you’re kind of competing with yourself. You don’t want two out at the same season. But, that said, there’s early readers to write, which I would love to try. There’s board books it would be fun to try. Never say never. Keep at it, and see where it goes.

**Peter Shea:** You mentioned being 60. I am 62, I guess, now; it’s almost robbed me of my ability to subtract, my unwillingness to confront my age. We are very much of an age. I remember the Little Golden Books. I remember bringing a wagon of Little Golden Books out to my mother in the field, while she was picking cucumbers, “Read to me.” I couldn’t even stand them; I’d heard them so many times. Does being 60 do something to you, for you? How do you think about that?

**Nancy Carlson:** For teaching, I feel old when I teach, especially at the art school, not other places. Being 60, I remember thinking that people over 40 were really out of it. It’s as distinct as can be. I’m sure that some of my students look at me and think “Wow, she’s so old. She doesn’t understand digital art. She doesn’t know the latest band. She doesn’t even know the new Disney movies.” You’re right; I don’t. And in that way, I feel old. A part of me too: at 60, I really have a lot of information. I’m really proud that I am still in the business; I’ve been at it for 35 years. If the young people can look past the fact that I'm 60 and realize that, although I don't understand the latest music, I do understand my craft, <they’ll realize that> I have an interesting story to tell and teach about writing and illustrating. I’m not sure how much longer I can take being the old gal. When I teach community classes, I don’t get that. We’re about the same age. There are a lot of people 50 or 60 who take my class. They know I have information they can learn from. I must say, when I travel and speak in schools, it’s a lot easier. People do things for me. “Let me help you with your bag! Let’s get her some water!” When I was younger, speaking, I'd be hauling books and doing all this stuff. Now people are more apt to help me. I kind of like that.

**Peter Shea:** Coming home for Easter, I was talking to my spouse about things we remembered from our childhoods. Most of it is still around; some things have disappeared. Is there anything from that early Edina childhood, from your memories there, that you wish had hung on the little longer, that you’d like to bring back?

**Nancy Carlson:** Toy wise, I can’t think of anything. But, I think, the freedom that we had, the innocence. Now you go back and you think, I know what was going on. Yes, it was an innocent time, but there were bad things happening, but we didn’t know. The house next-door: something was happening. In that way, it was bad for some kids. Things were shoved under. You didn’t talk about things that might be bad, happening. But, that aside: the freedom to run and to play and to bike and to hang out. I remember parents saying, and I’m sure my mom did too, “Don’t come back til it’s dark. If you hear me yell, come in, but otherwise, stay outside!” We loved it; we just played and played and played and played. I remember coming in just filthy in the summer. My mom would wash our feet. We never had shoes on. We’d wash them in the bathtub and then go to bed. I could ride my bike to the pool – go there, leave my bike, no lock, swim all day – and then ride home. I look back on it as being so wonderful. It was so fun, just to be free like that. My
kids didn’t even have that. My kids are in their 30s, 28, and 25, and they were so structured. They had this class, they had sports – I guess mostly sports. I had a figure skater, so I was constantly going to the rink. I’m not saying that wasn’t fun; it was wonderful. But the amount of free play just wasn’t there. We made up our own games. We learned to negotiate with others. When there’d be a fight in the neighborhood – somebody did something – you solved it yourself. No parents came out and said, “What’s happening here?” I remember complaining about my teachers, and my parents would go, “No, they’re right and you’re wrong. You’re going to have to learn to deal with that teacher. If you don’t like her, big deal!” It was so much fun just to be running around. We got into some problems here or there, got our bikes run over, parked it behind the car. Nobody was there telling us, “Do this, do that, have this structured game.” It was a fun time. I miss that.