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Illustrated by John Bendall-Brunello.

#### WHAT IF . . .

As a storyteller and a writer, I read a lot of stories. One common bit of action in many children's books is the series of events in which smaller animals get swallowed whole by successively bigger animals. Then at the end an incident occurs causing each animal to spring forth from the animal that swallowed it, until they are all accounted for and safe--*The End*.

I wasn't satisfied with that kind of plot. I began to imagine, what if... What if a chick thought the animal who was about to swallow him was his papa? After all, when chickens hatch they imprint on other animals. So then I wondered what if a fox couldn't bring himself to swallow a little one who calls him *Papa*?

These thoughts helped me begin my story. As I wrote, I kept in mind the tradition of things happening in threes. Three times Fox has a difficult time catching anything for dinner when he has Fluff as his sidekick. Then Fluff "misbehaves" three times before he is kicked out of the henhouse and reunited with his papa.

I had a strong feeling for Fox's character. He needed to be a tough guy, but one who had a soft heart and a real concern for doing the right thing. He also had to be unaware of his good qualities. So Fox says, "What can I give you if you stay with me, huh? Zip. Zilch!"

I wanted Fluff to have a mind of his own. In many ways he's a typical "terrible two." He mimics adult behavior, and he's very stubborn. I like Fluff's character a lot--perhaps because I was a stubborn child, too!

I think John Bendall-Brunello's illustrations perfectly capture the nature of both these characters. Also, I love the looks on the faces of the hens; first when they wonder what in the world a little one is doing with a fox, and then when they are angry and kick him out.

I believe the theme of a story makes itself known as a writer writes and as a reader reads and takes from the story what is important to him or her. Some may say FOX AND FLUFF is about choosing one's path in life, adoption, blended families, home schooling, or even vegetarianism. But I never started out to write about any of those things. In fact it was my editor, Abby Levine, who suggested that the sign on the last page include the words, "Vegetarian meals served."

My intention in writing FOX AND FLUFF was to write a story that would be fun and would be about a determined little one and the positive impact he would have on a hardened adult. I am always pleased when I witness the innocence of youth cracking through the shell many adults grow about them as they age.

Which brings up an important point: picture books are for all ages. When I write, I write for the child listener as well as for the adult reader. After all, if an adult is going to read a book over and over at the request of a young listener, there must be material in the story to appeal to the adult. I think this book works well for young and old readers.

I hope you enjoy reading FOX AND FLUFF as much as I enjoyed writing it, John enjoyed illustrating it, and Abby Levine (our editor), enjoyed editing it.

Happy reading!  
Shutta