

The Little Red Fort

AUTHOR & ARTIST Q&A

**A CONVERSATION
WITH AUTHOR
BRENDA MAIER**



Did you always want to be a writer?

I grew up poor, had no plans to go to college, and certainly didn't plan on becoming a writer. Neither my parents nor grandparents went to college. Even if it was in my dreams, it just didn't seem like an option for someone like me. I'm so grateful that one of my high school teachers believed in me and helped me realize I could make college a reality.

In a way, my whole life has prepared me to be a writer, though. Since I didn't have my own books, I spent my summers walking to the local library. As a teenager, I wrote stories, poems, and plays. If I didn't write in my journal, I couldn't sleep. I wrote because I had to. When I became a mom, I bought my children the picture books I wish I'd had as a child, and we read them over and over. I was drawn to picture books and their happy endings, and that's what inspired me to write them.

What made you decide to pursue publishing?

I had no idea how to be a professional writer. So I bought a notebook, went to a writing conference, and began writing picture books. I wrote, revised, and participated in critiques. When the next conference rolled around six months later, I had a manuscript called *THE LITTLE RED FORT*. The critiquer who read it said I should get an agent, and I thought, "I am going to make this happen." It took months of revising and streamlining the story with my editor to get the text just right. That was all done without a contract, too. There are a lot of disappointments in this business, and that's not easy, but the worst disappointment would have been not trying at all.

Where did you get the idea for *THE LITTLE RED FORT*?

A few years ago, my youngest son wanted me to read *LITTLE RED HEN* every day at naptime. So the story was perpetually present in my mind. One afternoon, I discovered my other four children in the backyard, playing in a structure they deemed their "fort." It was made from boards and lattice—nothing fancy—but the fact that they'd collaborated and created a structure by themselves impressed me. Somehow, those two ideas crossed, and the thought popped into my head. "What if the hen was a girl who wanted to make a fort and her brothers wouldn't help her?"

Ruby is such an inspiring heroine! Is she modeled on anyone you know?

Ruby is modeled after one of my daughters. She's intelligent, but she's also creative and persistent. In my work as a teacher, I have observed that a person's success is more dependent on persistence and creative thinking than almost anything else.

Ruby doesn't know how to build a fort, but she figures it out without her brothers' ideas, help, or approval. She shows her creativity by designing the fort herself and her persistence by not giving up. And by letting the boys make amends, she ensures they'll be there to help with her next project!

***THE LITTLE RED FORT* stays true to the storyline of *THE LITTLE RED HEN* with one surprising twist at the end. Why did you make this choice?**

Well, the original ending left me a bit. . . unsettled. Unsatisfied. In the original *THE LITTLE RED HEN*, there's a moment in which the other characters (often a pig, dog, and cat) have a chance to earn their redemption, but they don't even try. This is what educators call a "teachable moment." In *THE LITTLE RED FORT*, I wanted the brothers to be proactive, to figure out how to make amends for the way they dismissed their sister and her dream. These characters make choices that ultimately result in good outcomes for everyone. I hope kids find this ending even more satisfying than the original.

What appeals to you about retelling folktales?

Folktales have timeless and universal themes. There's comfort in these storytelling traditions and familiar phrases. Readers today might not grasp the relevance of growing crops, going to the mill, or baking their own bread – activities that routinely appear in traditional versions of the tales – but they can relate to a sibling or friend who won't help them. Retelling folktales is a way to make a story relatable and authentic for today's readers while retaining its timeless message.

Fort-building is such a fun activity with endless possibilities. Can you share some ideas that might challenge kids?

Definitely check out the fun fort ideas in the back of *THE LITTLE RED FORT*—all of which we've made at our house.

Use your imagination to come up with something that excites you. If you have a big box or two, you can use duct tape to make a little reading fort with walls you can actually write or doodle on. If you're a teacher or parent, I hope you'll also check out the interdisciplinary fort-building challenges that are available as a part of a free *THE LITTLE RED FORT* teaching guide (web address TK). As for me, I'm thinking I might make a gingerbread fort!

**A CONVERSATION
WITH ARTIST
SONIA SÁNCHEZ**



What appealed to you about THE LITTLE RED FORT and made you want to illustrate it?

I adore Ruby's determination and personality. She is such a strong lead character who does not give up. She will do anything to achieve her goals. That's incredibly inspiring.

When did you start drawing? Did you always know you wanted to be an artist?

I never wanted to be anything else! As a child, I had more fun drawing stories than playing with toys. When I was five years old, my teacher told my mother that one day I might grow up to be a cartoonist or illustrator. My mother did not like that idea at the time. Today, she is very proud.

Can you tell us a little bit about your process for creating the art in this book?

As I read the story, images popped into my head. I then started sketching those ideas by creating a loose storyboard with pencil and paper. Once the images took shape on the paper, I scanned the pencil drawings into the computer where I mixed in different techniques to create layers and textures.

The characters in THE LITTLE RED FORT really come alive on the page. Are they based on anyone you know?

The characters are not based on any one particular child. I get my inspiration from everywhere: on the street, in the store, at the park, etc. But from the moment I read the manuscript, I could already imagine Ruby and her brothers' expressions and actions. I did not want them to be stereotyped characters, so I made sure to make each child unique in his/her emotions and actions.

How did the characters and visual style for this book evolve over time?

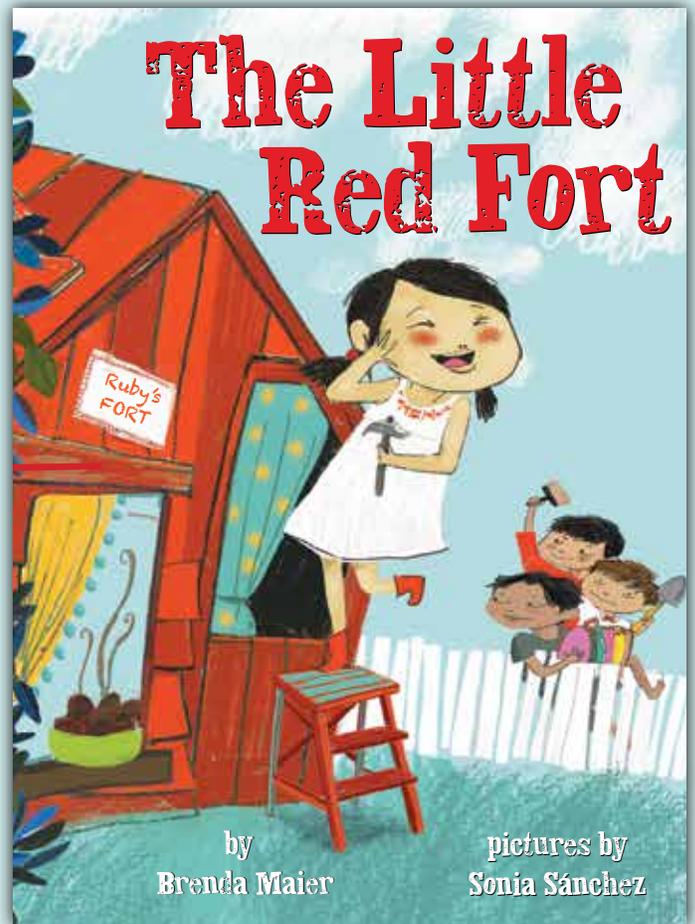
Building a strong fort was important to Ruby, and I wanted that process to be highlighted on each page. For this reason, I included details and textures to show the craftsmanship. Then I went back and added more details and layers, just as one adds nails to wood, to build up the art and add dimension.

What medium did you use to create the artwork for this book? Do you typically use the same drawing tools, or do they vary by project?

I usually vary my technique slightly for each book. For this particular project I used color pencils and digital drawing on the computer. I wanted to give the art a touch of "Latin flair." This meant adding an air of artistry in the details, like the embroidery on Ruby's dress, and using colors throughout the book that are bold and cheerful.

Do you have a favorite illustration?

My favorite is the last fort drawing in the book. I finished it the day before our son was born. It reminds me of that special day. I am looking forward to one day helping my son create a strong and beautiful fort, just like Ruby.



SCHOLASTIC PRESS
AN IMPRINT OF

SCHOLASTIC

40 pages / Ages 4-8 / Pre-K - Grade 3

Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-545-85919-6, \$17.99

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-338-25716-8, \$17.99