

The Secret Admirer

By Donna W. Guthrie

Illustrated by
Tony Sansevero



The Secret Admirer was one of the top-selling books last month at Barnes & Noble bookstore in Vestal. Tony Sansevero, who used Binghamton-area residents as models for the characters in the book, illustrated *The Secret Admirer*. It is his first book.

In the book biz

By CRAIG SCHNEIDER
Staff Writer

If you ever thought illustrating picture books was child's play, Tony Sansevero's experience in the industry should sway you from that.

Sansevero, 30, last month had his illustrations published for the first time in a children's picture book, *The Secret Admirer* (Ideals Children's Books, Nashville, Tenn., \$14.95). The author is Donna W. Guthrie of Colorado, who has written several previous books.

Most people don't realize all the homework that comes with the territory, Sansevero said. Illustrators not only need to know how to draw, they must research the details that make for realistic illustrations, learn how to market themselves to publishers and keep tabs on trends in the industry.

"I bought or borrowed every book I could find, not only on illustration, but mar-

Do your homework before your artwork, illustrator suggests

keting as well," Sansevero said. "The more research you do of the business, the less time it will take to succeed."

Sansevero, who recently moved from Binghamton to the Syracuse area, said he started with a marketing campaign to promote himself to prospective employers. It was two years before he received his first assignment.

"It was a long time before I got someone to give me a chance," he said.

Before he started illustrating children's books, Sansevero was a general illustrator, designing everything from Egyptian scrolls for the opera *Aida* to parade floats to fruit

for jelly jars.

Although the illustrator and the author rarely meet during the process of creating a picture book, both work within the same difficult market.

Lois Grambling, a veteran children's book author from Binghamton, said the market is more competitive than ever.

"Publishers are downsizing and big ones are buying out smaller ones; not as many books are published each year," said Grambling, who currently has four books under contract.

Tam Montgomery, acquisitions and development director at Ideals, said the company has to reject most of what

comes in its door.

Figures vary from publisher to publisher, but Ideals gets about 500 new illustrators' portfolios each year and hires about 20. Out of some 4,000 unsolicited manuscripts, the company chooses about five new writers each year.

Ideals publishes about 40 children's books each year and works mostly with previously published authors or people represented by agents, Montgomery said.

That makes it more important than ever for would-be illustrators to research trends in the industry. One, both Grambling and Sansevero agree, is multicultural children's books.

"If you're going to illustrate from another culture, do your research," Sansevero said.

For *The Secret Admirer*, an intergenerational story of how one girl plays matchmaker to her great-grandmother, San-

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Artist's book deal isn't child's play -

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severo created 32 detailed color pencil illustrations.

Specific research is needed for every illustration so that it accurately represents the text. Sansevero's research for *The Secret Admirer* included finding a bird feeder design that a child could make and learning the shapes and markings of North American birds.

Sansevero also used real-life people — residents of the Binghamton area — as models for characters in *The Secret Admirer*.

"You have to make your characters as believable as possible," he said.

Personalities are formed through the illustrator's interpretation: the items in a character's room or the clothes he or she wears. "Working with live models helped me create those personalities," he said.

"One of the many great things about being a children's book illustrator and worth all the rejection and aggravation is that you're constantly learning," said Sansevero. "You're always going to be creatively challenged."

Part of that challenge is illustrating from a child's perspective, he said. Whether talking with kids, watching Saturday morning cartoons with a notebook in hand, or going to the library, it's all research.

"You have to look at books that you might not be personally into,



Sansevero

but will give you an overall view."

In the illustrations of his upcoming picture book *Sing Henrietta, Sing*, due out in the spring, Sansevero hid animals and faces on every page although they were not specified in the story.

"An illustration must be faithful to the spirit and mood of the text," said Sansevero. "At the same time a good illustrator will also add a piece of his personality."

"I have to leave enough space in my story for the illustrator to complete the reading process," said Grambling. "Kids do a lot of interpretation from the pictures."

Sansevero gave an advance copy of *Sing Henrietta, Sing* to a teacher to read to children while he worked on a mural for a classroom at the

YWCA in Binghamton.

"They were all laughing and picking out the animals that I had put in (the illustrations) and tried to hide there for the children to find," said Sansevero. "I get to give something to children. What can be more rewarding than that?"

Thoughts like that are what keep a beginning — and not-so-beginning — illustrator going.

"I thought that as soon as I got my book, it would be a piece of cake," Sansevero said, but then he found he had only two months to complete *Admirer*. Illustrators who can't work within a deadline often find their careers at a standstill after the first assignment, he said.

"Take a couple of illustration jobs for free when you first start out," he recommended. "I did some magazine covers just to get the printed 'tear sheets' for my portfolio."

Now, Sansevero is working on a yet-untitled children's book he is both writing and illustrating. He also does work as varied as postcard, pet portraits and architectural renderings.

Sansevero has his goals set for the future. "There are different degrees of success," he said: creating a beautiful final copy of a book, having it become a best-seller, or seeing children enjoy it.

"When an illustrator has all three of those successes, it's a piece of heaven."