

Words from the Author

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Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel

One day, as the Little Red Pen was scratching on our perfect manuscript, she came to a really bad sentence.

"Who will help me fix this sentence?" asked the Little Red Pen.

"Not I," said the Pencil.

"Not I," said the Stapler.

"Not I," said the Highlighter.

"Then I'll do it myself," said the Little Red Pen. And so she did . . .

And so the seed was planted.

Ten years ago, we wrote this parody to tease our editor, Jeannette Larson. Jeannette has the dubious honor of trying to keep the lid on two over-the-top sisters who share the same outrageous sense of humor. She does it masterfully with her little red pen—thus the nickname and the parody. For years the idea of a *Little Red Pen* picture book simmered on the back burner as other stories took precedence. Finally, in the summer of 2007, the story began to take shape.

We decided that the setting would be an elementary classroom, as school is such an integral part of a child's life. Susan, a high school math teacher for thirty-one years, and Janet, a visiting author for twenty-five years, were quite familiar with those surroundings. Furthermore, Susan can attest to the correlation between grading papers and the end of the world. While dramatic, this cause and effect emphasizes the necessity of grading/feedback for student achievement. In many illustrations in our book, actual student papers are being graded.

As we brainstormed, a slew of characters emerged. Each had a tryout for the coveted spots, with some not making the cut (i.e. a hole punch that says, “Holey Moley!”), thanks to the real Little Red Pen who actually edited *The Little Red Pen*. (Is that cannibalism?) The characters that did survive have personalities that relate to their functions. Stapler is a whiner because he has back problems and is always in pain. Highlighter is an optimist with never-ending bright ideas. Scissors is a sharp guy, but he’s always cutting up. Eraser has short-term memory loss because his head’s disappearing. Pencil is neurotic—Sharpener’s after him. Ruler is stubborn, won’t budge an inch. We created the text together, but it was Janet who brought the characters to life—and personifying a stapler, eraser, scissors, etc., was no cakewalk. She made small 3-D clay models to help her draw them.

The original plot was relatively simple, following along the lines of *The Little Red Hen*. The plot thickened as we added an element of fear with the trash can (The Pit of No Return). The message took on an air of mortality, as each character bemoaned the fact that volunteering to help would hasten their inevitable journey into the Pit. Sound like a “people” excuse? It’s easier to close the curtains and play it safe. With the Little Red Pen’s descent into the Pit, the student papers remain ungraded and the characters must decide what to do. Leave well enough alone and risk the end of the world? Try to grade the papers themselves? Rescue the Little Red Pen?

What about the ending? It couldn’t be a simple rescue. It had to involve a paper clip chain, a bridge across the Pit, and a hamster wheel (notice the pulley—Susan minored in physics). But is it the hamster, Tank, who actually runs on the wheel? NO! That would be too predictable, as Jeannette suggested with her LRP. It’s a terrorized group of school supplies running for their lives! Janet had to draw all of this insane action. She actually studied a hamster cage and wheel to get the right perspective.

Teamwork is a central theme of *The Little Red Pen*. While the characters are reluctant to help at first, they soon begin to work together. We feel strongly about teamwork and try to incorporate that message into many of our books. It is the essence of how we work as authors. The two of us collaborate. Add the editor, and it’s a team of three. Throw in the staff at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and soon there are many working on a common goal—to make the best book possible! We hope the reader learns that whether at home, school, or ultimately a job, working together is vital. So vital that it just might save the world!