

Guest Post for The Baltimore Sun's Read Street Blog
(<http://www.baltimoresun.com/features/books/read-street/>)

I've gotten a lot of questions since the publication of my first novel, *Standing for Socks*. How did you get into writing for children? Where did you get the idea for this book? How long did it take you to write it? But there is one question that I have gotten, hands down, more than any other. So when Nancy so kindly invited me to guest-blog for Read Street, I decided to use this wonderful opportunity to address this crazy question once and for all. It's a question that I never saw coming but have been asked by nearly everyone I know or meet: *Are those your legs on the cover?*

The answer, and the reason I find the question so strange, is *no*, they're not my legs. At first I was totally thrown off guard when people asked. But now that I've been asked so frequently, I've convinced myself to put aside the creepiness factor—Why have all of these people been checking out my legs?—and take it as a compliment. I mean, they are pretty nice legs. But the cover model is probably about 14 years old, and the character she's portraying is only 11. (Do my 25-year-old legs look like a pre-teen's? This is part of the creepiness that I have decided to ignore.) Oftentimes when friends ask if they're my legs and I disappoint them with the answer, they then say, "But those look like your shorts!" This is a fair point—I do own a few pairs of shorts that look like the shorts on the cover, and they are probably just as wrinkled when I wear them—but I find it really funny, because that's just not how book publishing works. The design department doesn't call you up and say, "Come pose for your book cover, and bring your own shorts!"

The process of publishing a book is a really long one. (Simon & Schuster bought my book in September 2006 and it only hit shelves a couple weeks ago.) A lot of the reason it takes so long is that every component of the book, from the legs on the cover to the blurb on the back, is strategically designed and carefully scrutinized by the professionals at the publishing company. It takes a whole team of people to put out a book, and at large publishing houses the author essentially gets benched once the text is finalized. It's rare that an author gets much of a say in what his book cover looks like, and even rarer that he's asked to pose for it (book jacket models have headshots and agents—who knew?). Picture book authors don't get to choose their illustrators, and the publisher usually has final say on even a book's title. It may sound unfair, and sometimes it does feel that way as an author. I'm still not thrilled with the amount of pink on my book jacket—I think it makes the book look girly and frivolous, though really it's got some substance and would appeal, I hope, to boys as well as girls—but the truth is that these people are specialists, and they give a lot of thought to things that are beyond the scope of the authors' mind.

Quick example: In the first version of my book cover that I saw (a "final" version—I didn't get to see anything until it was considered done), the model was standing with less conviction, her right hand hanging out of her pocket and her left knee bent. After the designers and editors met with the sales team, though, they decided that the position was too provocative for a book for this age group. The original didn't look sexy to me, but I do like that the character appears more confident and willful in the photo that made the cut. (And imagine the comments I'd be getting if people thought it were me and my shorts in such a scandalous pose!)

The publishing process is one of those things that's a total mystery to people outside it. I mean, I've gone through it now and I don't totally get it. (I think it's even something of a mystery to the people who work there. I interned in publishing one summer and got to learn

about each department during weekly presentations. But not just interns attended—full-time employees would show up regularly, fascinated by what they learned about how the other parts of the company functioned.) But I do trust that the people over there are as thoughtful and dedicated to their jobs as I am to mine. I write, they publish, and the girl on the cover models. And on Saturday, I get to sit on a panel with a group of talented writers who, if they're like me, are still in a state of elation/disbelief at having their first book published. I can't wait for my first "appearance" as a published author. One thing's for sure, though. I'll be wearing pants.