



## Author Spotlight with **Kathryn Selbert**

*War Dogs* grew out of a project you did for a class while you were an undergrad at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Did you have any thoughts while you were doing the assignment that perhaps one day it could be a published picture book?

I knew that books from past students had been published, but was so immersed in the process of refining the book that I couldn't focus on the idea of getting it printed. The idea was very intimidating and it was easier just to draw and focus on the opinion of my classmates and teachers. That said, while we were writing and drafting the illustrations for our books in class, we always had an audience in mind. We would read our stories to each other, show our rough drawings, and constantly ask our classmates if the story made sense, if the drawings told the story on their own, and if they enjoyed the book. We were creating these projects so they would be seen by an audience. It is a wonderfully unique feeling to hold the finished product.

**How did the book evolve from when you first began working on it in class to the final version?**

The original version of the book focused more on the relationship between Rufus and Churchill in a day-to-day sort of way. Much of the information I had about Rufus was anecdotal—Churchill covering Rufus's eyes while they watched a difficult part of a movie together, Rufus eating with the Churchill family, and other notes from Clementine's letters to Winston. My writing focused more on those intimate moments between man and beast. Overtime the focus shifted and took on a more educational motive. The book still follows Rufus and Winston, but it is more of an introduction to WWII than it used to be. The illustrations have changed because the text has—but their spirit is the same.

**When did you first decide that you wanted to be a children's book illustrator? Was that part of the plan when you enrolled at RISD?**

I've always had a love of children's books and often wrote and illustrated my own stories in elementary school. But pursuing that field when I entered RISD was not my intention. My freshman year, I was hoping to go into graphic design. As I completed projects, I realized that drawing and narrative were my strengths—not a love of organization, type, and other elements that lead to a good graphic designer. When I entered the illustration program, I realized over time that I loved the fun nature and subject matter of children's illustration, design, and writing. After I completed an internship in children's book design, I was hooked. You can do anything with children's books. You can explore so many subjects in so many ways. I love everything about them.

## What made you so interested in Winston Churchill and World War II?

I've always had a love of history (especially Revolutionary War and WWII history) and was hoping to find a historical topic to focus a children's book on. While researching topics, I found an anecdote about Winston Churchill and his dog Rufus and became incredibly excited about their relationship and the historical backdrop for it. I have a great respect for Churchill's oratory ability and was well aware of what a difference he had made in encouraging the war effort against the Nazis.

The rich visual history of WWII also interested me. I'd seen so many old photographs of the Blitz, Londoners taking shelter in subway tunnels, the rationing and preparation for invasion. These were all in the back of my mind. I was happy to have found a way I could include it in a book. The possibility of painting scenes of the Normandy invasion (Operation Overlord) and the air battle over Britain only excited me more.

## Which aspect of creating *War Dogs* was more difficult for you—writing it or illustrating it? Do you think you'll continue to both write and illustrate books for children, or would you rather do one or the other?

Writing the book was definitely more difficult. I used to be an avid writer of short stories but never refined the skill. Returning to writing was very difficult. Regardless, I knew the images I wanted to give to readers and focused on developing the story with only illustrations first—working from a sparsely written outline of the events I wanted to cover. I then tried to write what wasn't shown in the illustrations—Churchill's words and moments between Rufus and Churchill during this difficult period of time. It was a fantastic challenge. With the help of my editor, Yolanda Scott, I feel the text has transformed into a full, rich tale.

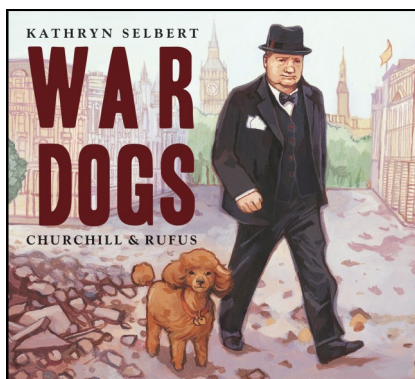
## Do you have any other projects in the works?

At the moment I'm working on a few picture books. I'm hoping to finish books in the next few years on the childhood of Roald Dahl and a book of short historical stories about some very interesting dogs. I'd also like to work on a book about food—but have no idea what it will be about yet.

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## By Kathryn Selbert

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Ages 7-10

It's 1940, and Great Britain is at war with Germany and the Axis powers. Prime minister Winston Churchill must lead his country through the second World War. By his side is his faithful miniature poodle, Rufus.

Readers follow Churchill's and Rufus's friendship through the bombings of London, the invasion of Normandy, and post-war reconstruction. Quotations from Churchill appear as secondary text and underscore the prime minister's trademark eloquence and forceful personality.

★ "The combination of thoughtful design, compelling illustrations and a winsome canine companion make this beginning biography stand out."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review