

# Digging in the Dirt: Potatoes and Books

by John Coy

If a man really likes potatoes,  
he must be a pretty decent sort of  
fellow.

-A. A. Milne

In the spring of 1999, I planted my entire garden with potatoes. I was going to be in Europe for five weeks that summer, and I wanted a crop that would fill my plot at the Mulberry Junction Community Garden in Minneapolis and not require too much care. I composted the plants well and hoped we'd have regular rain.

When I returned, I was pleased to see how well the potatoes had done. Other gardeners commented on them and asked how to plant them. As I weeded and added more compost, I felt connected to my dad, my grandpa and all my Irish and Polish ancestors who dug in the dirt.

When I harvested the potatoes, I had more than I could eat, so I gave some to friends. Norton Stillman, a bookstore owner, called after eating the potatoes.

"You should write about growing potatoes," he said. "That would make a good picture book for children." Normally when people suggest a topic I should write about, nothing comes of it. Usually it is the person who suggests the story who should write it. But the next day, I set my other work aside and started writing about potatoes.

After numerous revisions, excellent editing by Nancy Hinkel, and stunning illustrations by Carolyn Fisher, that story became *Two Old Potatoes And Me* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). On the dedication page Carolyn made a sprout coming off a potato that says, "Thanks to Norton Stillman for the idea."

The book was published in the summer of 2003. To celebrate, Amy Baum, a bookseller at the Red Balloon Bookshop in St. Paul, suggested I plant potatoes at the Anderson Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Red Wing, Minnesota. Each September, the Anderson Center hosts a Festival of Children's Authors and Illustrators. Amy thought it would be great to have kids listen to *Two Old Potatoes And Me* and then dig up potatoes.

I loved the idea and contacted Susan Richardson, a librarian in Red Wing. She connected me with two fourth grade teachers at Jefferson Elementary School, Mary Trapanese and John Schegelmilch, who were eager to have their classes involved. Susan and I developed ideas to prepare the students, not only for the planting, but for the



Illustration by Carolyn Fisher for  
*Digging in the Dirt* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003)

arrival of a new book.

Students researched the origin of the potato among the Inca, developed interesting potato facts, made potato prints, and talked about the process of planting and harvesting. Susan read the manuscript of *Two Old Potatoes And Me* to students and asked them to draw pictures. The students had worked recently with illustrator Lauren Stringer who had talked about the challenge of illustrating somebody else's words. Now they were getting a chance to do exactly that. I told them I would bring Carolyn's pictures to show how she illustrated the story.

On May 22, we met at the Anderson Center to discuss the process of making the book. I showed students my first draft, revisions, suggestions from the

editor, and possible titles. Then I showed them print sheets, jacket copy, and folded and gathered pages of Carolyn's illustrations. The students were delighted with Carolyn's bright, bold illustrations. They were surprised that she does most of her work on the computer.

After our discussion and questions, we went out to the garden. Robert Hedin, the director of the Anderson Center, had asked a local farmer to plow the potato patch. Students brought old potatoes with sprouts. Parents produced shovels, rakes and hoes. Students dug into the earth on the cloudy day and I hoped the rain would hold while we planted our spuds.

The students worked together to plant one hundred hills of potatoes. At my request, Robert had bales of hay delivered, and students placed these around the hills to keep down the weeds. As we were planting, a light rain began to fall — perfect for growing. I was impressed as the students pulled out their jackets, and not a single one complained about the rain.

After the planting, it was time for potato races. Students held one hand behind their back and carried a potato in a spoon with the other. Students improvised variations: backwards, sideways, twirls, and jumps. Afterwards at lunch, everybody had potato chips.

Over the summer, Jefferson families weeded, mulched, and watered the potato patch. Robert and I added more compost in July. Thanks to the volunteers, I was optimistic that we'd have potatoes for the festival.

On September 13, I read *Two Old Potatoes And Me*

in the potato patch at the Anderson Center. Afterwards everybody dug up some spuds. What a wonderful scene of kids digging in the dirt to discover treasure. Kids compared different potato varieties, shapes and sizes. Some found funny faces, as they had in the book, and decided who they resembled. Kids carried off paper bags of potatoes with their books about potatoes.

One of the main reasons to establish a planting project is that many kids don't know much about where food comes from. As America has become urbanized, fewer students live on farms or visit relatives on farms. I have been amazed that some students don't know that bread is made from wheat or that french fries are made from potatoes. A planting project helps connect kids to the earth and to the food they eat.

Another important link between growing and making a book is time. In a culture where change happens with the click of a mouse, presenting students with activities that require patience and perseverance is extremely important.

Books take time. Potatoes take time. And both are delicious.



Photo by Dodie and Mike Harris

*John Coy is the author of the award winning picture books Night Driving, Strong to the Hoop, Vroomaloom Zoom and Two Old Potatoes and Me. Both Night Driving and Strong to the Hoop have been adapted as plays, and Strong to the Hoop has been published in Spanish as Directo al Aro. As part of the Read to Achieve Program, John is a member of the Minnesota Timberwolves and NBA All-Star Reading Teams.*

*John's most recent book, Two Old Potatoes and Me was nominated for a Minnesota Book Award and chosen as a Charlotte Zolotow Honor Book for picture book text. It will be featured on Reading Rainbow in the fall of 2004. John lives in Minneapolis and works as a visiting author and writing specialist in schools around the country.*

## Quizzical Quotations

Here's a chance to test your knowledge of children's literature. All of the quotations below come from famous children's books, and all refer to food. See if you can identify the books from which these quotations are taken. You are allowed to ask children for help.

1. It's nothing but limes now, for everyone is sucking them in their desks in school time, and trading them off for pencils, bead rings, paper dolls, or something else, at recess.
2. You've taken a tomato sandwich to school every day for five years. Don't you ever get tired of them?
3. Chocolate Frogs have cards inside them, you know, to collect—famous witches and wizards.
4. "It is a lovely place, my house," said the Queen. "I am sure you would like it. There are whole rooms full of Turkish Delight."
5. Then old Mrs. Rabbit took a basket and her umbrella, and went through the wood to the baker's. She bought a loaf of brown bread and five current buns.

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1. Little Women by Louisa May Alcott
  2. Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh
  3. Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J. K. Rowling
  4. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C. S. Lewis
  5. The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter