



John Briggs

Improvise and Persevere

By Jenna Caputo

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By Kara Grygiel

Sometimes having a big dream can feel like an impossible venture. Anyone who has ever tried to write a novel or star in a Hollywood production knows. John Briggs knows too, which is why he has dedicated his business to helping new authors succeed.

Born in the Philadelphia suburbs, John grew up on baseball and reading. And, in the winter... reading and baseball. “There were summers where I didn’t miss a single Phillies game,” he says. “I grew up on a farm, so my brothers and I turned one of the fields into a ballpark with Major League dimensions in left field. It was a fun way to grow up. And reading was an anytime activity if I didn’t have a ball in my hand or chores to do.”

Besides the baseball field, their 50-acre farm housed an acre of their own veggies while another farmer used part of the cleared land to grow his corn and hay for his cows. John and his brothers picked up extra money by bailing hay for him in the summer. Half of their land was wooded and included a pond for swimming, fishing, ice skating, and attempts at hockey. “Wildlife constantly visited us, and people never did. It was an old farmhouse built in 1865 that the locals said was haunted, but I never saw a thing,” remembers John. “In many ways, it was an idyllic life. Had I dared to go barefoot, I could have been Tom Sawyer. Strangely enough, having lived in Philly for so much of my life, many of my friends can’t believe that’s how I was brought up.”

John wrote his first short story in third grade and continued all through high school, but it wasn’t until he was well into his stand-up comedy career that he realized he actually wanted to be a writer. He discovered he liked writing the jokes more than performing them, often heading back to his hotel room to create more, instead of joining the other comics out on the town after a show.

The stand-up had been the fulfillment of a dream since he stumbled upon it at 12 years old. While in college, he used open mics to perfect his craft, and within three years, he was paying his rent with his stage work and performing all over the country, even appearing on TV and radio. Starting out with contemporary observational humor mostly about



himself, he naturally progressed into political comedy, using his degree in political science. He performed for 21 years, also writing not only his own material, but sketches for others, including shorts for shows like *The Tonight Show* and Comedy Central. Entertainment is in his blood—his cousin, James Rebhorn, was a successful Hollywood actor, acting in movies and shows like *Scent of a Woman*, *Homeland*, *Seinfeld*, *Independence Day*, *Law & Order*, and *My Cousin Vinny*, among many others. John's uncle was a professional magician, and his stepfather was a big-time DJ.

When John retired to focus on writing, he worked as a reporter and editor for both magazines and newspapers. Covering everything from hard news to sports and travel, his biggest success came as a syndicated TV critic reviewing children's television and writing celebrity profiles, covering a who's who of 70s and 80s TV stars. He interviewed people like Leslie Nielsen, William Shatner, George Carlin, Alan Thicke, and many more. His most interesting interview was with Tony Mendez, the man the movie *Argo* was based on. "The stories the CIA permitted him to tell were fascinating—the true story behind rescuing Americans hiding in Iran was better than the movie!" says John. His favorite interview, though, happened spur-of-the-moment at a party in San Francisco with Alan Alda. "Thank God he was famous enough that I could wing one on the spot," remembers John. "I learned so much just watching him

talk with fans of his work, 90% of which was about *M*A*S*H*. He honestly made people feel important even though they wanted to talk about him. I actually apply what I learned from him to authors I work with. Be positive and they'll let you be as honest as you need to be when fixing their work."

In the end, John wrote more than 1,700 articles for publications like the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *USA Today* and everything in between. "It let me see things I would have never seen otherwise, like Woodstock III as a music critic, dozens of concerts at SPAC, and an invite to the 2001 White House Correspondents Dinner from a news program I had covered. I may have been the only person there in a rented tux, but I was there!" John sat three tables behind Colin Powell, attended the after parties, and found out later that one of the things he had said to Betty Rollin—one of the first women in network news—unexpectedly ended up on the show a week later.

But once his son was born, things changed. "I read him books all the time, and one night he asked me to make up a story about dinosaurs. So, I went into improv comic mode and concocted one. So naturally, he then asked for a story about pirates. Eventually, I began to think that some of those stories weren't bad, and I threw myself into studying KidLit. I'd been a writer and editor for more than a decade at that point, so I had some understanding of how to construct a story, but this was a whole new world with a new set of rules, and it fascinated

me. When I thought about the hours I spent reading as a child and realizing I wanted my son to do the same, I was hooked. Been there ever since."

John threw himself into writing and now has several published books including picture books, joke books, an adult political satire, and three biographies for children, including *Judy Garland: Little Woman*, *Big Talent*. The first children's book about Ms. Garland, it has done extremely well and is even available at the Judy Garland Museum in Minnesota.

After working as head of the editorial department for a separate company, John opened his own company, New Author Editing, in 2012. As the name implies, he works mainly with new and pre-published authors looking to break into the business. With each project, he goes through the book thoroughly, performing several types of edits to get it as close to current standards as possible. He works with authors on six continents in all genres, specializing in children's books and humor titles. It's gratifying work that fulfilled a dream he didn't even know he had. "My God, they let me play with words all day," he explains. "I get to deal with ideas and look for new ways to say things. It's fantastic and rewarding. So many writers say, 'I just want to see my name in print. I just want to hold a book that I wrote and give it to my kids.' I get to make that happen all the time."

Through his years editing, John has seen a shift in market trends. The *Chicago Manual of Style* standard is not as strict



as it used to be. And, happily, there is a much-needed explosion in diversity both in authors and in their characters. Publishers are looking for books that truly reflect America today. He's also seeing a trend towards shorter books and serialization of novels as brief eBooks. Picture book text is also condensed with the story now being driven more by illustrations.

John's family now includes Kara Grygiel and his children, Johnny K (18), Hailey (12), and Josephine (6). Kara is a pharmacy tech at Albany Medical Center. Johnny K is a high school senior hoping to go into law enforcement. Hailey is a sixth-grade whiz kid, and Josephine is in kindergarten this year, and apparently also a part-time con artist who relies on being cute to get things. Their household also includes their two cats, Mona and Pepper. In their off-time, Johnny K plays soccer, basketball, track, and participates in the marching band. Hailey likes anime, and Josephine enjoys sneaking off to watch videos when the TV should be off. She's also been known to point out when people aren't wearing masks, since that has now been a big part of her memorable life. The kids all get along and never fight. "I'm not kidding," John says. "I keep checking to make sure they're not Stepford Kids, but they just really get along. Maybe it's the age difference, but I got lucky."

John lives for the moments he gets to connect with the kids. "When my son was about 15, he really got into watching stand-up on YouTube, and one day he says to me, 'Hey Dad, have you ever heard of this guy George Carlin?' I don't know, I guess he thought I had been living under a rock or something, but I said, 'Yeah, I've heard of George Carlin. Talked to him once.' That blew his mind, so I said, 'I interviewed him. Talked to him for about 40 minutes.' And I saw it in his eyes. For about 10 seconds I was the cool dad. I've been trying to get that feeling back ever since—and to remind my kids that I had a life before they were born."

John's life in the Capital District includes visiting our many independent bookstores in the area. He also enjoys visiting the State Museum in Albany and the Hyde Museum in Glens Falls. He volunteers for the local chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. He has also given time to WMHT, the Chapman Museum, and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. He loves doing homework with his kids as well. "Is that weird? It's not a hobby or anything, but I really love seeing what they're working on. The subject doesn't even matter. I just like going over it," he says.

He also loves to travel. His stand-up days offered him a chance to see much of the country and he's now one of those guys that likely has been by all those small towns that we say no one has ever heard of. It's hard for him to pick a favorite place since he says that every place has something about it that can easily make it your favorite. But he definitely enjoyed visiting New Orleans, San Juan, and driving along the Florida Keys. He looks forward to getting back out to in-person visits to schools and other book events. His stand-up techniques have always been an asset when presenting to children, and he loves the energy that comes from those face-to-face interactions. "There's nothing like talking to readers at book fairs and signings or talking to a classroom full of students about a book. Zoom will never have that kind of energy or connectivity or spontaneity. Maybe it's the entertainer in me, but I miss that live interaction."

His advice for new writers is to finish that messy first draft because it gets easier after that. "I read that roughly 90% of writers quit before they finish the first draft. You'll never get published that way. Then revise it at least twice before seeking a critique and if at all possible, have an editor look it over before you submit it to be published," he advises. He has a couple of writing mantras that hold true for life in general—not just for writers. "Writers are not paid for their words, they are paid for their perseverance.' You're going to hear the word 'no' a lot in your life. Don't give up. I also like, 'An outline is a guide, not dogma.' Don't be so rigid. Don't stick to a plan as if it's all you have. *Improvise.*"

As for the future, he has a few thoughts (other than a three-book, million-dollar option deal, of course). "A question like that makes me feel like Miss America, as if I should say, 'World peace.' But what I feel deep down when I think about the future is what every parent wants, and what I hope is more realistic than world peace, John Lennon aside. It's that my kids have great lives. That in their lifetimes we curb climate change, that the country doesn't tear itself apart or dip its toe (waist, neck, you name it) into extremism, that they find ways to adjust to new economic realities, and so on. Pollyanna, I suppose, but that was a book, too, and at least it's heartfelt."

Interested in having John help edit your book? Visit him at NewAuthorEditing.com. Learn more about John's books at johnbriggsbooks.net.