The illustration depicts a warm scene between a young girl and her grandmother. The girl, with dark hair and rosy cheeks, is wearing a blue patterned dress and is being held in a close embrace by the grandmother. The grandmother has white hair, a large orange hibiscus flower tucked behind her ear, and is wearing a pink dress with a floral pattern. They are set against a background of a large orange sun, palm trees, and tropical foliage. The title 'Grandma Calls Me Beautiful' is written in blue, slanted text in the upper left corner.

# Grandma Calls Me Beautiful

**A Conversation with Barbara Josse**  
by Barbara M. Josse *illustrated by Barbara Lavalley*



chronicle books

**Author Barbara Josse**, and her husband C.T. Whitehouse, a noted bronze sculptor, live in a small stone house beside a wide creek in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. She has three grown children: Maaike, Anneke, and Robert. Barbara and C.T. have two large dogs, Nugget and Poppy. Her hobbies include art, gardening, walking, cooking, and traveling. Barbara Josse has published thirty-two books for children, including both picture and chapter books. Through her writing, she aspires to find the things that are the same, and those that are different, between us all. Her books have been translated into twenty-six languages. *Grandma Calls Me Beautiful* is the newest addition to what she calls “our big family” of books (*Mama, Do You Love Me?* and *Papa, Do You Love Me?* are the other two in this series). When asked from where this expression comes, she notes: “When my children were small, they referred to our extended family as ‘our big family.’ They wanted us all to live together, along with all the pets. It seems just right to refer to the series in this way: ‘our big family.’”



## Our Big Family: A Conversation with Barbara Josse

Chronicle Books (red) Barbara Josse (black)



**When you set out to write a third story detailing the relationship between parent and child, what led you to set it in Hawai‘i? What came first, the idea for the setting or the idea for the story? And do you have a personal connection to Hawai‘i?**

Before choosing a setting for books in this series, I think about the role of a family member in raising a child. I talk to mothers, fathers, or grandmothers. How is a mother’s love different from a father’s? Or a grandmother’s? What gifts does this family member offer a beloved child? Competence? Confidence? Connection? These conversations ramble around in my mind for a long while; sometimes for as long as 7 years! In the case of *Grandma*, I also thought about my own childhood and what my grandma gave to me. I finally decided that the special contribution of a grandmother includes: connecting generations, passing along family traditions and stories, connecting a child to the earth, and celebrating a child’s delightful, beautiful self. Next, I searched for a traditional culture and special place that would breathe life into these ideas. The choice of a culture and place is never slight, but the discovery is sometimes a happy accident.

**With each book in the “our big family” series, you’ve placed the characters in locations that for most of us are far away and often shrouded by a magical aura of mystery and beauty. What does this do for the books, in your view?**

Most of us have impressions of many parts of the world, but I try to dig deeper and find the “essence” of a place and culture. Then I write a story that celebrates the things that are different, and the things that are the same, between us all. I believe my



particular gift as an author is to serve as a bridge. I can never be an expert on any culture that is not my own. But I happen to be good at finding common ground between my culture and another, in a way that is respectful to both. While each book stands on its own, I hope the series demonstrates that we are, indeed, a big family.

**How much research did you have to do for this book?**

In general, my research begins with analyzing the role of a family member. Once I've identified the characteristics and the place and culture, I dig deeper. I buy books that tell me about a culture and place, along with maps, dictionaries, historical, and autobiographical accounts. I try to absorb the spirit of a place and culture through its art and music, so I surround my studio with these things. But I don't want my stories to be about a place, culture, or family member. I want them to focus on a particular child—in this case, Beautiful—so that when I write the story, I allow her voice to take over. While it's too great a burden for a single book or a single child to carry the whole weight of a culture and place, it is possible for a single child to tell her story. When one writes about a culture other than their own, it's important to understand one's limitations, so I find an expert reader—someone who's an academic expert and also native to the culture—to ensure that my text is accurate and respectful in every way. Overall, I try to make sure that each book accurately portrays a culture in spirit and detail, understanding that these things will allow a child to absorb the very essence of a culture, whether he consciously knows it or not. I do this out of respect for my child readers and the culture that I pay homage to in my book. In the case of *Grandma Calls Me Beautiful*, that person was Ka'ohua Lucas, who is both an authority on Pacific cultures and a native Hawaiian.



**In *Grandma* you depart from *Mama and Papa* by focusing not just on the grandmother-child relationship, but also on the beauty of the child. What brought about the shift in focus?**

I focused on the beauty of a child, because that's how my grandma made me feel—beautiful. At nine, I was a puny, dirtball kid with curly hair, scabby knees and crooked teeth. I wanted a pink, ruffly formal dress in the worst way, an unorthodox request given my dirtball nature, and that is exactly what I received from my grandmother. She thought me beautiful, inside and out, even when that wasn't so evident to the rest of the world. In my book, Grandma says, "Open your eyes, so I can see who you are." When she looks inside, she sees exactly who Beautiful is and exclaims, "I will call you Beautiful, because you are." A grandmother's unwavering confidence in a child's inherent beauty helped many of us get through some clumsy years.

I also believe that when a child recognizes her own beauty, she recognizes it in others. If beauty is a birthright—and it is—it is the birthright of every child in every place. That's the foundation of this series.





**Most children like to know the story of the day they were born. What inspired you to tell it in *Grandma* though the use of hei (string design)?**

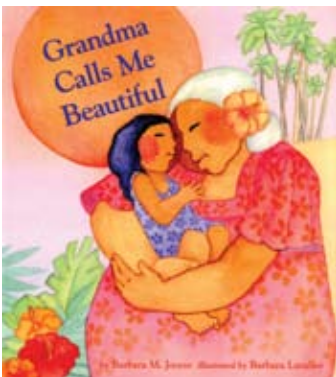
In each of the books I searched for an iconic design element. Inuit masks are woven throughout *Mama*, and Maasai shields throughout *Papa*. I think hei was a fitting metaphor for Hawaiian culture. It represents the thread of life that is woven through generations. The final design looks like a hammock, suggesting the unwavering support of a grandmother. Hei is a way to illustrate a story—just like a picture book. Finally, the string is always there, in Grandmother’s pocket, ready for another talk-story.

**What aspects of writing for children continue to draw you back?**

We’re connected to and supported by those who lived before us and those who will follow, *Our Big Family*. A shared earth is what connects us all, wherever and whenever we live. This is why we need to be wise stewards, to leave small footprints as we pass, in order to leave the world a beautiful place for our children’s grandchildren. The Hawaiians have a saying: “The earth is the chief. We are its servants.”

I write for children because I like them. I find children interesting, funny, and heroic. It is an honor to drop into their lives through a book. There’s nothing I’d rather do. And, like the string in *Grandma’s* pocket, there’s always another story to tell.

## A Few Titles by Barbara Josse



**Grandma Calls Me Beautiful**

978-0-8118-5815-1

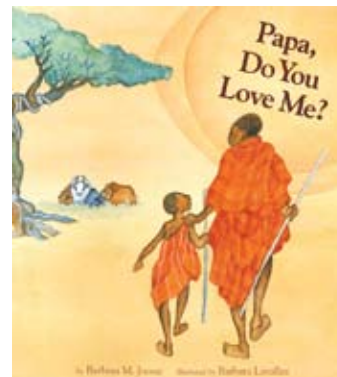
\$16.99 • Ages 4–8



**Mama, Do You Love Me?**

978-0-87701-759-2

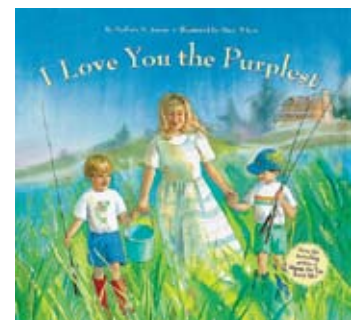
\$15.95 • Ages 4–8



**Papa, Do You Love Me?**

978-0-8118-4265-5

\$15.95 • Ages 4–8



**I Love You the Purplest**

978-0-8118-0718-0

\$16.95 • Ages 3–8

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