

by Juanita Havill *illustrated by* Christine Davenier

Just Like a Baby



a conversation with **Juanita Havill and Christine Davenier**



chronicle books

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At first glance, *Just Like a Baby* seems like a charming, though simple and straightforward story about a new baby. But it's also a hilarious, heartwarming, and beautiful look at the bonds of family and—even more importantly—the hopes and dreams families have for their newest little members. Ms. Havill is the author of over 30 books for children, including *I Heard It from Alice Zucchini*, on which she also collaborated with illustrator Christine Davenier. But this upcoming Chronicle title marks their first foray into books for infants and very young readers. We had the chance to speak with them about their work on *Just Like a Baby* and their remarkable creative process.

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How did you come up with the idea for the book? How did the project take shape?

Juanita Havill: My first working title was *A Fine Thing to Do*, and the earlier versions were much longer. This was going to be my “Scottish” story (a nod to the Armstrongs and McCrays on my mother’s side) and the original plot bears only a smidgen of resemblance to the published book. In fact, in earlier versions, Ellen, the baby, actually grew up and became a dancer, a teacher, and, in one version, a young woman who could fly. When my editor suggested that Ellen remain a baby, I took the story in a different direction, and we both agreed that was a fine thing to do.

Christine, did you find the story immediately appealing?

Christine Davenier: I had never illustrated a book about babies before, so that was new and exciting for me! I loved the idea from the start; Juanita had created such a complex, rich, and charming world that drew me in and made it easy to imagine the family of characters—each with their own very distinctive traits. Her wonderful storyline allowed me the opportunity to create connections, details, and even more characters than the text originally called for. It was just what an illustrator dreams about!

Juanita, you're the author of over 30 books for children. What makes this book special for you?

JH: Several reasons. This book is my new baby and babies are always special. The book is a joy to hold and to behold, and I am excited to share it with babies and toddlers, younger audiences than I don't usually write for.

What was it like working together again after *I Heard It from Alice Zucchini*? How was working on this book different?

JH: First came the words. That was the same for both books. After I translated an idea to a story or a number of ideas to individual poems, I revised, revised, revised, revised, and then the manuscript went to Christine for her to work her magic. A big difference the second time around was that after seeing how Christine had interpreted *Alice Zucchini*, I really had trouble waiting to see the dummy and early sketches, let alone the final art for *Just Like a Baby*. I am grateful to have had the chance to see and comment on the illustrations-in-progress of both books.

Although *Alice Zucchini*, a poetry collection, is in a picture book format, the structure is different from *Just Like a Baby*. The chronology and narrative in the poetry collection was suggested by the illustrations, and since some poems no longer suited that narrative, they didn't make the final cut. Only a few changes were made in *Just Like a Baby*. The story that Christine first saw is very close to the published version.

Christine, did anything inspire your art for the book? Did you find anything particularly challenging to illustrate?

CD: I had never done so many portraits, especially close-ups, so that was a big challenge! At the time I was working on the book, there was an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris about an artist I had never heard of before, named Helene Schjerfbeck. The poster promoting the exhibition was a beautiful self-portrait plastered all over Paris. I was immediately drawn to it, and when I saw the show it was a revelation. Her art, especially the colors and expressions she used—became a huge inspiration for me. I bought the catalogue and kept it open next to my table while I worked on the illustrations for the book!

Juanita, what is it about Christine’s art that you feel particularly fits the story?

JH: The rhythm of the art fits both the language and the flow of the unfolding story. The story takes place in one room, but Christine manages to create an illusion of liveliness and movement. She portrays with deft lines and strokes of color distinct and expressive individuals. And I think her decision to withhold portraying baby Ellen until the end was masterful. Truly inspired.

Has this project helped your work evolve?

JH: I have been writing picture book texts for over twenty-five years. This particular text is one of the shortest and “youngest” that I have written. I also used more dialogue than usual to advance the story, and that was new for me. I’m sure I’ll continue to experiment with dialogue and with multiple characters, too. I’ve never introduced so many characters in any of my earlier works.

CD: Of course! Just like any other work I’ve done! But I think this project has influenced my use of color and materials. For instance, I now put more paint on my lines, and I had never added acrylic to my ink before.

Have you tried reading this book aloud to kids? How have they reacted?

JH: I read this book to students at a small school where I was a visiting writer. At the time I had photocopies of the mechanicals and students had a chance to experience Christine’s visualization of the story. The fifth and sixth graders had as much fun with the story as the first and second graders. The younger students were intrigued by what gift each relative brought, while the older students paid more attention to the hobbies and vocations of the relatives.



Do you see more projects together in the future?

CD: I really hope so! I would just love it!

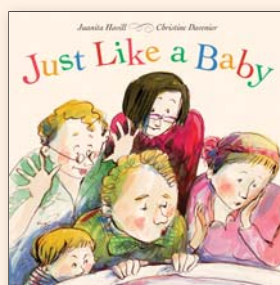
JH: I would like nothing better – maybe something completely different.

Last question: What did you want to be when you grew up?

JH: For a short time when I was very young, about five, I wanted to be an Apache and live in the mountains in the Southwest. By the time I understood that was not going to happen, I had learned to read, and from then on I wanted to be a poet.

CD: My first recollection was that I wanted to be an architect. That eventually changed, and I decided I wanted to be a photographer instead. Growing up, my friends would always ask me, “Will you be a teacher like your parents?” I would always reply, “Never! Are you silly?” It turns out my first job was as an elementary school teacher for several years!

THE END



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By Juanita Havill, Illustrated by Christine Davenier

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9 x 9 inches, 32 pages, full-color

Ages infant to 3

Juanita Havill is the author of more than 30 books for children and young people, including *Jamaica's Find*, which won her the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award. She lives in Arizona.

Christine Davenier and **Juanita Havill** also collaborated on *I Heard It from Alice Zucchini*, in which Christine's illustrations “transport readers to the ground level of the garden alongside mice, snails, crickets, and a busy young fairy” (*School Library Journal*, starred review). She lives in Paris, France.



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