


Outstanding

IN HER FIELD

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a yellow and blue plaid shirt and blue jeans, stands smiling in a lush green field. She is leaning against a rustic wooden fence made of three horizontal rails. The field is filled with tall grasses and wildflowers. In the background, there is a dense line of trees under a bright, slightly overcast sky.

How Sandra Boynton, who felt she wasn't particularly good at anything, wound up at the top of her game—and a household name—by doing it her way.

By Meg Cohen Ragas '85 | Photographs by Scott B. Foley

HERE IS A LEGENDARY TALE THAT THE LATE HEAD OF GERMANTOWN FRIENDS

School, Dick Wade, liked to tell about author, illustrator, and songwriter Sandra Boynton '70's visit to campus in 2005, when she read from her new book-and-CD combo, *Dog Train*. After she had finished, she asked her captivated Lower School audience if anyone had a question. As the story goes, a third grader raised their hand and said, "I have a question *and* a comment."

On the one hand, this is illustrative of the quintessential GFS student: engaged, inquisitive, assertive, self-assured. But it also speaks to the broad appeal of Boynton's empire: lovable picture books like *The Going to Bed Book*, *Moo, Baa, La, La, La!*, *Snuggle Puppy*, *Barnyard Dance*, and countless others that have sold more than 75 million copies over the past four decades; award-winning albums like *Philadelphia Chickens*, *Blue Moo*, and *Frog Trouble*, featuring musical greats ranging from Blues Traveler and Kasey Musgraves to Ryan Adams and B.B. King; greeting cards and plush toys, calendars and sock puppets; almost 500,000 followers on Facebook. Who wouldn't be inspired by Boynton's mere presence to offer both a question and a comment?

Last summer, two colleagues and I had the privilege of taking a road trip to rural northwestern Connecticut to meet the prolific Sandy Boynton, where we spent a few short hours basking in her creative presence. When we pulled up to the gate at the foot of a long driveway, we were met, not surprisingly, by two, plump, cartoonish Boynton chickens sitting atop the pillars that flanked the entrance, announcing that we had arrived. This touch of whimsy amidst the woodsy landscape hinted at the delights that awaited us at the end of the drive: a picturesque, red two-story barn, Boynton's studio, tucked behind a charming, centuries-old farmhouse, where she spends 12-plus-hour workdays on a multitude of creative projects. The interior is a tribute to her empire: the entrance hall



A Boynton chicken sentry guards the entrance to her home and studio.

bears wooden display racks, which hold dozens of her signature greeting cards intended for the taking; the '50s diner kitchen is an assemblage of the eBay paraphernalia she collected as inspiration for her favorite album, *Blue Moo*; the small screening room hosts a permanent patron—the overstuffed puppy star of Boynton's many cards and board books. Upstairs houses her sacred work space, where everywhere you look, every single surface, is covered with the tools of her trade, each with its own story and coveted place in Boynton's legacy.

People think they know Boynton from her large and varied body of work—more than 70 illustrated books, six albums and songbooks, hundreds of greeting cards, music videos; her hand-drawn characters have populated many of our childhoods as well as our children's. And yet, during the course of our visit, we learned so many interesting tidbits and details about Boynton's life, her work habits, her inspiration, her quirks—and her formative years spent at GFS. She served us tea, talked shop, dispensed advice, all with a healthy dose of her signature, wry humor.

It's hard to adequately describe the feeling of being in the presence of true creative genius, although the novelist Ann Patchett (who was actually at Boynton's studio just days before our visit reporting a story for *The Washington Post*) came pretty close in a piece she wrote in 2018: "Sandra Boynton

is to the board book what Dr. Seuss was to the picture book, what Maurice Sendak was to illustration, what Shel Silverstein was to children's poetry. It's just her up there at the top and then a whole lot of other people sharing second place." A morning spent with Sandy Boynton is better than receiving an advanced copy of her new board book *Dinosnores*, better than learning the intended tune for *Snuggle Puppy* (and realizing you were singing it to your children close to perfect all along), better than hearing B.B. King's soulful voice croon "One Shoe Blues." It's simply the best—only better.

Forgive me as I devolve into a bit of fan-girling, but here are seven reasons why I am now the new, self-appointed president of the Sandy Boynton Fan Club.

SHE WAS FIRST PUBLISHED AS A THIRD GRADER AT GFS.

Before there was *Earthquake*, the GFS student newspaper that launched in 1972, there was the *Pastorian*, which, from 1897 to 1963, functioned variously as a news publication, alumni magazine, yearbook, and literary magazine—sometimes all at once. When Boynton was in third grade, the *Pastorian* published her first poem, "Billy's Lost Train."

"It started out something like, 'Little boy Billy played with his train, it got smaller and smaller and went down the drain. Little boy Billy started to cry, his mother got nervous and baked him a pie.' I think I was more for the rhythm and rhyme than trying to figure out the sense of it," she says.

Fast forward to high school, and Boynton saw her first illustrations published in the *Philadelphia Bulletin*

IT ALL STARTED WITH GREETING CARDS.

Boynton began selling her greeting cards while she was an undergraduate at Yale University. Her spare drawings of animals in often silly situations set against sparse white backgrounds had

"It's kind of cool that I had to cobble things together," says Boynton of her prolific career. "Interest matters more than talent."

in 1968 when she was a tenth-grade art major. For a class book assignment, she had created a "bestiary," a compendium of imaginary animals. Boynton's were car-themed: Ferrari, Droll's Voice, Revolve.

"The pages from the completed bestiaries were displayed in the GFS front hall," Boynton recalls. "A reporter from the *Philadelphia Bulletin* saw mine and asked if they could print them in their weekly magazine. I got paid \$40 for it. I was 15, and [the experience] gave me two valuable life lessons: one, you can get paid for cartooning, and two, newspapers will distressingly misquote both your work and your interview."

For Boynton, the GFS art department was a haven, and she took every course offered. "My teachers, Mary Lou Scull and Jayne Wilhelm, were just amazing and so excited about art and what everyone was doing. There wasn't any sense that this person was 'the talented person' and that person was not, everyone was appreciated. When you go to Germantown Friends, you think, 'This is just the way school is,' until you find out what other schools are like."

not become a cult hit yet, and after graduation, she attended a trade show where she spoke to a lot of companies about selling her designs. "Everyone tried to argue with me," she says. "They said, 'The white background isn't working and your characters need to have names.' I was about to leave the show when someone said, 'Have you talked to Recycled Paper Products? You should talk to them. They're different.'"

That first encounter at the trade show resulted in a 20-year working relationship. Not only did Recycled Paper Products not care if Boynton named her characters ("Why would you name the characters?") or kept her white backgrounds ("They might get dirty more quickly, but on the other hand, they're going to stand out from all the other cards"), they agreed, at her insistence, to pay her a royalty instead of a flat rate—even though, they told her, she could potentially make less money if her cards didn't sell. Between 1973 and 2003, Recycled Paper Products sold nearly 500 million copies of Boynton's signature droll greeting cards; the best known, "Hippo Birdie Two Ewes," a pun on the phrase "Happy Birthday to You," has sold more than

10 million copies to date.

So what gave a college girl in 1973 the confidence to go out and peddle her handmade creations?

"GFS was a place that fostered individuality, independence, and creativity," she explains. "I always knew I wanted to be independent. After my junior year in college, I thought to myself, 'What can I do? What can I make?' My sister, Pam [GFS Class of 1969], was making this wonderful jewelry and selling it to gift stores in Chestnut Hill. I tried to figure out what I could do, and I realized I could do cartoon kind of drawings, like my bestiary [in tenth grade]. My uncle was a printer in Clinton, NY, we were close, and I asked him, 'If I draw some cards, would you print them so I could sell them?' He extended me the credit to print them, and showed me how to do color separations. That became my summer job: I went around selling my cards to stores. I made cold calls. I learned a lot about the business that way."

HER FORAY INTO MUSIC PRODUCTION IS NOT AS OUT OF LEFT FIELD AS IT MIGHT SEEM.

Boynton is a music lover but does not consider herself a natural musician. She describes herself as "the least talented member, seriously" in Mary Brewer's choir at GFS. When she arrived at Yale, she was too overwhelmed during her first year to audition for a singing group. But during her sophomore year, posters went up around campus announcing that Leopold Stowkowski was going to conduct Beethoven's Ninth at Carnegie Hall in New York and needed more singers for the production.

She still vividly remembers the audition. Feeno Heath, Yale Glee Club's director at the time, asked if



she had any experience singing, and she replied, “I sang in high school.”

“Where did you go?” he asked.
“Germantown Friends School.”

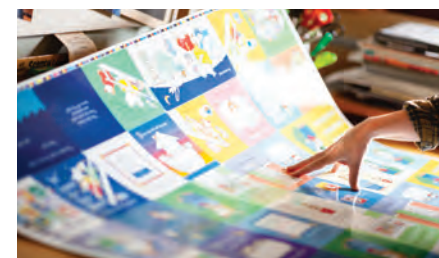
“You sang with Mary Brewer! I don’t need to audition you,” he said.

“I learned more from Mary Brewer than anyone I can think of in my life,” Boynton declares. “She was so much about getting it right for every single person in the choir. We would be singing a Brahms motet and she would say, ‘Okay, you, alto, soprano, tenor, bass—all of sudden, the four of you were singing your parts in the motet. You had to hold your own; you learn so much about the music that way and where you fit in the harmony. The sound is better. The precision of the singers is better, too.’”

Based on her deep appreciation for music, it seemed inevitable that she would eventually lend her voice to the recording world. From her first CD, *Philadelphia Chickens* (2004), which earned her a Grammy nomination, to her most recent *Hog Wild* (2017), a “frenzy of dance music,” Boynton’s projects have been star-studded collaborations with some of the music industry’s greatest talent. Spanning the genres of rock and roll, ’50s and ’60s jukebox-era music, blues, and country, Boynton recruited the best and the brightest for each project, with her musical journey peaking with her partnership with B.B. King on “One Shoe Blues.”

She emailed his manager and heard back right away. “He had grandchildren,” recalls Boynton, “and he said, ‘I’m going to make this happen.’”

King was going to be in New York, so Boynton met him at a studio for a recording session. “I was immediately intimidated, but he’s just the sweetest man,” Boynton shares. “He says, ‘I’m not going to be able to get this right. I don’t read music and you’re not going to be able to count me in. I won’t play the guitar at the same time as I sing.’ And all those things turned out to be true! He didn’t read music, but, obviously, he’s an unbelievable musician. He would just tap, and then start



Boynton’s studio is a treasure-trove of creativity and inspiration: “Everywhere you look is covered with the tools of her trade.”

singing along. There was something so endearing and ‘Aw, shucks’ about it. Working with him was probably the high point of my career.”

4 HER FAMILY COMES FIRST. AND FRIENDS.

Boynton grew up with three sisters, whom she got along with “pretty darn well,” a happy child with a happy childhood (all four girls attended GFS). Her parents moved to Philadelphia in 1954 so her dad, Robert Boynton, could teach English and history at GFS, where he eventually served as the head of the history and English departments as well as the principal of the Upper School during his 16-year tenure.

She met her late husband, Jamie McEwan, while both were students at Yale. McEwan, also one of four children, was an Olympic slalom canoeist and won a bronze medal at Munich in 1972 and a World Championship title in 1987. (Boynton first saw him on TV, competing in the ’72 Olympics, before realizing he was in one of her classes.) They eventually married and had four children of their own: Caitlin, Keith,

Devin, and Darcy. All are involved in some aspect of the family business and currently live within a 30-minute radius of Boynton.

“My kids are in and out of here all of the time, or [granddaughter] Remy comes and visits, and I will drop everything happily,” she says. “I’m compulsive about work, but I’m happy to drop those things for family.”

Her family circle is wider than most, and includes friends and colleagues, mentors and partners. During the course of our visit, we hear so many stories about the amazing, inspiring people she has worked with over the years, from Terry, her beloved printer in Buffalo, to *New Yorker* cartoonist George Booth, who she describes as “the best person in the whole nation” and collaborated with on *Here, George* (she did the words, he did the illustrations). Mark Lanegan, the former lead singer for the ’90s grunge band The Screaming Trees, who she has teamed up with for three different projects. Even Mike Tait, the producer of the tiny Discovery Film Festival in Scotland, who invited her to premier one of her short films and sent her a superior bottle of scotch as a thank you.

Boynton also spoke about her classmates from GFS, whom she sees periodically (“not as often as I’d like”) and met up with in Northampton last

spring: Hannah Kalkstein, Cara Lee, Kathy Scott, Laura Evans, Emily Joyce, and Lucy Binzer Wildrick. “It’s such an important time in your life,” she says, nostalgically, of GFS. “You feel like you know all of these people, even if you haven’t seen them in years. You feel like you can just pick up with them, like you know them and they know you. And everyone’s doing something they love and that interests them.”

“That’s my one regret about not staying in Philadelphia,” she adds. “I would have loved to have sent my kids to GFS.”

5 SHE TAKES PERFECTIONISM TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL.

Boynton is having a banner year. *Silly Lullaby* and *Dinosnores* were published in August and September, respectively. *Your Nose*—loosely based on a song Neil Sedaka recorded for the *Blue Moo* album—will be released this March, and *How Big is Zagnodd* will hit the shelves in December 2020. (*Didn’t I say she was prolific?*) During our visit, we got to see freshly-printed

proofs for *Dinosnores*, which Boynton checked and re-checked with an accountant's attention to detail. But even while taking four steps (books) forward, she is revisiting the early years of her career by redrawing some of her first published works. Why?

"I didn't really want to change them, but there were a few things that I thought looked awkward, so I changed those things," she explains. For a few straight months, Boynton worked crazy-long hours, from early in the morning until midnight some days, recreating her masterpieces. As of June, she had redrawn 11 of her classics, sharpening the lines, correcting the "awkward" bits, adjusting the color in some cases.

Boynton is the first to admit that it's somewhat of a vanity project. Although most people won't even notice the changes—which Boynton is fine with, even happy about—she feels that these corrections make the books look right to her discerning eye.

"Over time, publishers change printers, and sometimes lines thicken or colors look dense," she says. "Now these books finally look like they're meant to again. I did it for me."

SHE GIVES GREAT ADVICE; HER BOOKS OFFER SURPRISING WISDOM.

If Boynton had to coin her life's philosophy, she might boil it down to this: "You don't need to know what to say 'yes' to, you need to know what to say 'no' to." Wise words to live by. A year ago, she said no to a Netflix series; she thought it would be a collaboration, but quickly realized that they just wanted her to hand over the rights to her characters and grant them toy licensing opportunities.

"Even if it looks like a good or strategic move, but you feel like, 'Well, I don't really want to do that, but I want to get to this place and that's how you get there,' you're going to end up on



Puppy Love: Boynton shares her home theater with one of her star characters.

the wrong path," she says. "That's my feeling."

Her unconventional approach to business—focus on what makes you happy, not on what makes you the most money—has proved more successful than she could have ever imagined, and she has the awards, accolades, fan base, social media followers, and life experiences to prove it. For Boynton, it's all about the journey. Which is a message that can be found in many of her books, in unexpected ways that respect children and don't dumb things down.

"When I wrote *But Not the Hippopotamus* [1982], a lot of people described it as being about exclusion, but there's nothing exclusionary about that book," Boynton explains. "From my point of view, the hippo is self-excluding and is reluctant to join in with the other animals. It's a book about jumping in... When I wrote *But Not the Armadillo* [2018], it wasn't the story people expected from me: I wanted to legitimize the idea of going your own way. Liking to be on your own is an important message, and you should be respected for that."

SHE'S THE REASON "HUMBLE" AND "ARTISTIC GENIUS" CAN EXIST IN THE SAME SENTENCE.

During the nearly three hours we spent with Boynton, she expressed more than once that she always felt

like she wasn't naturally good at anything, that she didn't think of herself as a traditional artist. And yet, she has excelled in so many different mediums, across multiple platforms, proving that her immense talent defies definition.

"My son Keith once gave me a quote by [comic book artist] Alan Davis about style being the result of shortfalls and limitations in an artist's approach," she shares. "It was good for me that I wasn't able to draw in the way other people do. I admire people who are more deft cartoonists than I am, or are more deft writers, but it's kind of cool that I had to cobble it all together. I think interest matters more than talent."

When I bring up Anne Patchett's quote, comparing her to Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak (one of her cherished advisors while an undergraduate at Yale), Boynton responds, without skipping a beat, with one of her classic zingers: "It cost me a huge amount to have her say those things."

She laughs, takes a moment to reflect, then offers a more heartfelt response. "It's a little surreal. It doesn't quite register."

Boynton sits back at her desk, surrounded by her books and stuffed versions of her characters, her sock puppets and page proofs, everything that comforts and inspires her and brings her true happiness and joy.

"I like where I live, I like what I do. It has all been so much fun."

CLASS NOTES

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GARRETT DUTTON '91 shares, "This has been a great year for the Duttons. Kelsey and I were married by my father at our house in Orleans, MA, and Kelsey is pregnant with our third son. My oldest son Aiden, 18, is a freshman at MassArt in Boston. My new G. Love record *The Juice* features the protest song "The Juice" and dropped in January 2020." Garrett's wedding was attended by GFS alumni, including **JASON BROWN, JOHN LONG**, his sister **JAIME DUTTON '94**, and **DAVID KATOWITZ** (pictured above, left, in hat).

CLASS NOTES IN THE BULLETIN: It is sometimes necessary to edit notes to reduce the length so that we can accommodate as many entries as possible. We hope we have retained the essence of your news while also providing space to include messages from your classmates. Please contact us at 215-941-2340 or alumni@germantownfriends.org if you have questions or want more information.

1939

DICK CLOSE turned 96 on April 20, 2019. He's still singing!

1945

SAM LUKENS writes, "I shout at the TV: *number of people, not amount of people!* Some things I learned I will never forget. Thanks!"

1946

ROBERT (BOB) FORSTER shares, "I remember jumping out of the second story window into the coal bin in the eleventh grade with some of my friends. It amused the students in the math class below as we passed their windows."