



AB(zero)C teaches the alphabet
and environmental awareness

Description

Author Randi Hacker on writing for children and how parents can discuss climate issues

By Irwin Rapoport

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I first learned about Montpelier, Vermont-based children's author **Randi Hacker** on June 19 when I heard an [interview](#) with her on **Vermont Public's Vermont Edition** program. Host **Mikaela Lafrak** spoke with her about her new book **AB(zero)C** and career as an author and journalist.



Randi Hacker

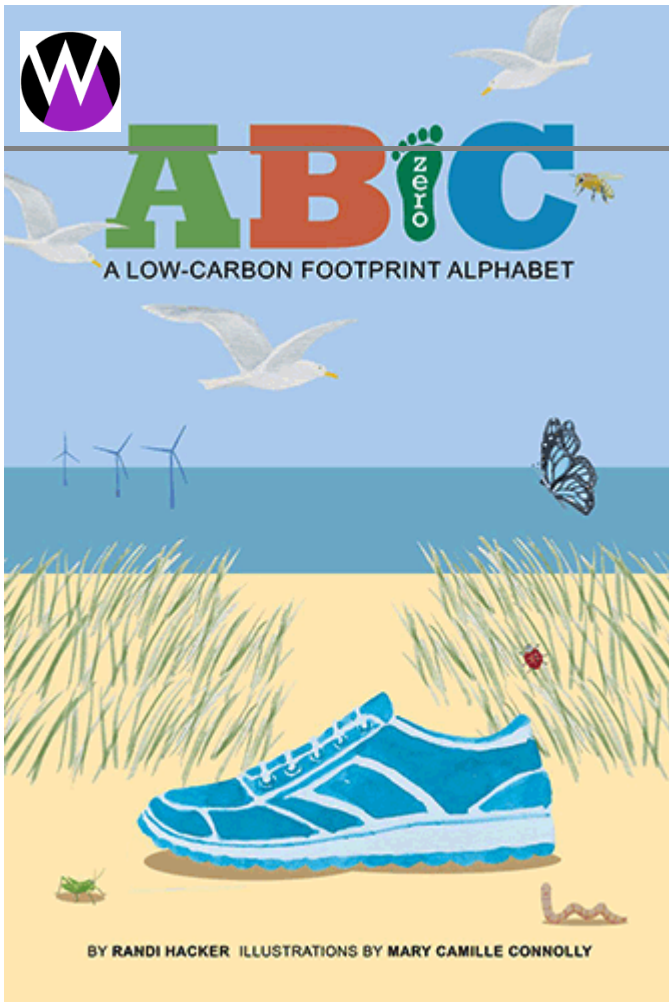
AB(zero)C, a children's book illustrated by **Mary Connolly**, teaches the alphabet to children based on the premise of caring about the environment and biodiversity.

Like Vermont Senator **Bernie Sanders**, Hacker is from the Big Apple – Brooklyn, to be precise. Here is how she describes herself:

“I am a New Yorker, born in Brooklyn, raised mostly on Long Island though our family spent several years in Cortland, NY, and a year in London, England. I have a BA in English from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and an MA in TEFL from St. Michael's College in Colchester, VT. I lived in Montgomery, VT, from 1989 until 2002.”

“In 1995, I adopted a baby girl from China and raised her on my own. When she was 8, we moved to Lawrence, Kansas, where I worked as the Director of Education Outreach at the University of Kansas Center for East Asian Studies. It was the second best job I ever had: the first was editor of publishing at **Children's Television Workshop**.”

“I currently work as a resolutions copy editor at the Vermont State House. It has its moments.”



The web page for [Home Planet Books](#) goes further:

“Randi Hacker has been giving children a voice in their future since 1989, when, after quitting her job as Editor of **The Electric Company Magazine** (published by Children’s Television Workshop), she and her former partner, **Jackie Kaufman**, created, wrote, edited and published **Planet Three: The Earth-based Magazine for Kids**. *P3* was an influential (if short-lived) eco-magazine that empowered children to act on behalf of their home planet. At its peak, it reached 20,000 readers worldwide. *P3* received hundreds of letters from children of all ages that spoke of their fears, their worries and their gratitude that the magazine took them seriously and gave them an ear and a means of making themselves heard. *P3* had a profound and lasting influence on at least two of its readers, both now young men in their thirties, who, at different times, contacted Randi to tell her just that. That was wonderful.”

“Randi is the author of **How to Live Green, Cheap and Happy** (Stackpole Books), a book for adults, which enjoyed a small cult following, and the young adult novel **Life As I Knew It**, released by Simon & Schuster in 2006 and named one of the **Best Books for Teens** by the **New York Public Library** in 2007.”

“Not long after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Randi founded **Kids of the United States (KOTUS)**, a postcard-writing initiative to empower kids to write and send postcards to people in power. Recently, KOTUS sent more than 400 postcards to Donald J. Trump, asking him not to gut the Endangered Species Act. This call to action was promoted by the local Sierra Club.”



The letter H as depicted in AB(zero)C

“Randi has not yet saved the world, and that is a real thorn in her side. Home Planet Books is her most recent initiative aimed at rectifying this unfortunate situation.”

Home Planet Books’ mission statement notes that it “publishes climate crisis handbooks for kids. Our books aim to empower youth by preparing them for life on what will essentially be a different planet, by encouraging them to believe that individual action counts, and by working with them to envision and create a future that is better than the one they are being handed.”

Suffice it to say, Hacker knows journalism and the literary world, is an accomplished author and cares about the environment. This is illustrated daily via her emails, which always end with “I dream of a world in which a chicken can cross the road without having its motives – or its reasons – questioned.”

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I had an opportunity to speak with Randi Hacker, and here is that discussion:

WM: *What inspired you to become an author of children’s books, and how would you describe your progress as an author?*

Hacker: I didn’t set out to be a children’s author – I kind of fell into it. After I moved to New York City from Los Angeles, where I had hoped to write movie scripts but ended up as a personal assistant to several fairly popular TV stars, I took a job at a consumer electronics magazine which spawned a video games magazine which folded, so I had to look for another job. I applied for the assistant editor position of the **Electric Company Magazine**, published by **Children’s Television Workshop**, and I got it.

It was a great job: my co-workers were smart and funny, I learned a lot about writing for kids, and I found that I liked it. As for my progress as an author, if you mean progress as measured by traditional publishing contracts, then it ground to a halt in 2006 after my YA novel was published by Simon & Schuster. I haven’t sold a single other thing I’ve written. Traditional publishers are simply not interested in the things I write.

If you mean progress as measured by the books I’ve written and published myself, then I have to say that my



progress as an author has been steady.

WM: *Could you tell us about some of your previously published books and the themes they covered?*

Hacker: I would say the strongest overall theme is giving kids agency and a voice in their future, but my earlier books are really all over the place in terms of theme.

Grown-ups, especially parents, must make it clear that they will work together with their children to save the planet. Now, more than ever, children need their parents to talk to, to trust, to rely on.

– Randi Hacker

WM: *The world of children's books is limitless. What led to your focus on instilling a concern for the environment among children?*

Hacker: Sadness at the havoc and destruction we humans are causing here on Planet Earth. A wish to empower kids by telling them the truth and suggesting ways they can live on our wounded planet without wounding it further.

WM: *Why should everyone be concerned about the environment, and do you find that children will develop a greater concern and passion for it if they see that their parents and teachers feel the same way?*

Hacker: This is our only home planet, that's why. And yes. Grown-ups, especially parents, must make it clear that they will work together with their children to save the planet. Now, more than ever, children need their parents to talk to, to trust, to rely on. Kids need to know that their parents are concerned, are listening, and are invested in working with them to create and ensure insofar as they are able, a viable future.

WM: *What are the keys to writing for children, and what age range do you write for?*

Hacker: Short declarative sentences. This, in my opinion, is also the key to writing for adults. I write for all age ranges.

WM: *How would you describe your writing style and how crucial is it to ensure that you employ language and dialogue that children can fully comprehend, flows easily, and does not overwhelm them?*

Hacker: I would describe my writing style as sparse. Many people think you have to employ a different language style for kids, but I don't think you do. You just have to write clearly. I think if you find the story you're telling engaging and not overwhelming, it's likely a child will too.

'... can we really over-emphasize taking personal responsibility for our actions? I don't think so. Many individual actions add up to effects that are greater than the sum of the parts.'

– Randi Hacker

WM: *How important is it for the text to be lyrical and easy to read so that children want to hear stories over and over again?*

Hacker: Rhythm is always important. As for easy to read, I'm not sure what that really means.

WM: Do you illustrate your books, and what is the secret to matching text to images? To what extent is the dialogue and text designed to help children learn to recognize objects and colours, get to know the alphabet and teach themselves how to read?



Life on a Different Planet book cover

Hacker: I do not. **Ron Barrett** illustrated Home Planet Books' first release, *Life on a Different Planet*, and Mary Connolly illustrated the award-winning *M is for Masks* and *AB(zero)C*. I had no plan to teach the kids colours or objects or to teach them to read. It will certainly teach them the alphabet. That is, of course, the foundational purpose of an alphabet book. And, you know, you can write an alphabet book about any subject. My alphabet book is about thinking differently about how to live on our planet.

WM: How should we speak to our children about climate change without frightening them? How honest should we be?

Hacker: We must speak to them honestly about it. We must let them know that we are there for them and with them. To do this is to show them that we love them. As Heather White, founder of OneGreenThing.org said on



NBC LX recently, “What kind of ancestors do we want to be?”

WM: *What is your response to those who say individual actions are pointless?*

Hacker: I say, “I don’t agree.” Certainly, a shift in the very basis of economics is the key to big change. But can we really over-emphasize taking personal responsibility for our actions? I don’t think so. Many individual actions add up to effects that are greater than the sum of the parts.

WM: *You have stated that we need to revise our notion of what it means to “protect” our children. Can you elaborate on that?*

Hacker: Many parents think they are protecting their kids by not talking to them about climate change because they don’t want to frighten them. This is not protection. Protection is acknowledging that it’s going to be life on a different planet in your kids’ future, and in acknowledging that, talking to them about what is happening, and working with them to think of ways to stop contributing to the destruction, and incorporating those ways into your life. Protection is letting them know that you are working with them and for them.

It’s a daunting conversation to have but so important.

*Feature image: cover illustration from AB(zero)C by Randi Hacker
Images: courtesy of Randi Hacker*

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