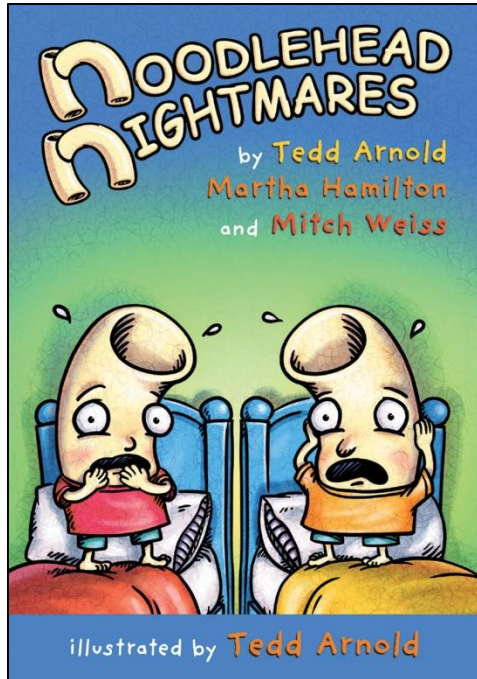


*A conversation with creators*

# Tedd Arnold, Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss



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*Mac and Mac, who love pie and hate making their beds, are hollow-headed. "See in here? Nothing! Zippo! Nada!" Mac explains. That's why they get duped by their friend Meatball and fooled out of their fair shares of apple pie. Slapstick humor, puns and wacky fun abound as the empty-headed duo comes up with outlandish solutions for everyday problems. Written in a comic-book style, this book will have young readers rolling on the floor, and educators rethinking their approaches to folklore.*

## **Tedd, Martha and Mitch, please tell us about your new book, NOODLEHEAD NIGHTMARES.**

People of all ages enjoy a good numskull tale—because we've all been caught not using our brains at one time or another! When we hear a story in which someone *else* is the fool, we are reminded that we're not alone. In *NOODLEHEAD NIGHTMARES*, we have used some of these traditional tales, often referred to as "noodlehead stories," as inspiration. By freely reworking and recombining parts from three or four folktales, we have created a single story in three chapters, where each chapter has a conclusion, followed by an ending that ties everything together. For the curious minded, we've also included a page that details the origins of each story we've borrowed from.

### **Where did you get your inspiration for this story?**

**Mitch:** As storytellers, we have always loved the "noodlehead" genre. One of our collections is called *Noodlehead Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read & Tell*. If we say, "We're going to tell a noodlehead story," to any group of elementary school children, we always get a big laugh. Before telling one of these stories, we ask our listeners if they have ever done something foolish—and every hand goes up. We also share a silly thing that we have done to make clear that the whole idea of

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these stories is never to make fun of someone who might not be as smart as you, but rather to laugh at the “noodlehead” in all of us. It would be hard to insult someone by calling them a “noodlehead” because the word itself makes people laugh.

**Martha:** While doing research for *Noodlehead Stories*, we found *The Book of Noodles* by W.A. Clouston, a scholarly work published in 1888 on the history of these stories. (Even the idea that such a book existed was funny!) One of the most interesting things is how often the same noodle stories are told in different cultures. Joseph Jacobs, the famous collector of English folktales, noted, “It is indeed curious how little originality there is among mankind when it comes to stupidity.”

**Mitch:** Many of the stories in *The Book of Noodles* were mere snippets or motifs. For example, one was about a fool from ancient Greece who dreamed that he stepped on a rusty nail while barefooted, and as a result, decided to always wear his boots to bed. Another was about a fool who put feathers into a jar, thinking that this would make a good pillow. Our first draft of *Noodlehead Nightmares* included these motifs—and children loved the story when we told it in schools. We thought the story would be perfect for a book and that Tedd Arnold’s buggy-eyed, whimsical illustrations would be perfect for it.

### WHO IS A NOODLEHEAD?



**Tedd:** I've known Martha and Mitch as storytellers for a long time. Some of my favorite tales were their renditions of traditional noodlehead stories—tales about foolish people doing foolish things. I had previously known of a category called “silly Jack tales” and one of my earliest books, *Ollie Forgot*, was just such a story. In recent years, my wife, Carol, and I became close friends with Martha and Mitch. They brought up the idea of collaborating. I was intrigued by the possibilities and of course I loved the name “Noodleheads!”

**The stories of Mac and Mac are based on folklore. What made you decide to tell these stories in comic-book style?**

**Tedd:** These stories are so hilariously visual. I wanted to capture all the great slapstick images behind the words. The comic book form is perfect for that. And although these are based on old folktales, I wanted to create a more modern-day context for our readers—to remove the Noodleheads from “the old days” and place them closer to, oh, I don't know, Spongebob maybe. The comic book form does that for me.

**Martha and Mitch, how did your experience in professional storytelling translate into writing?**

**Martha:** Our work in classrooms teaching storytelling and public speaking skills to children has inspired and informed all of our writing. When we saw the tremendous benefits of children telling

stories orally, we wanted to provide teachers with all the information they would need to teach storytelling without having a visiting storyteller, so we wrote *Children Tell Stories*.

**Mitch:** We also saw the need for conversational retellings of short, simple folktales so that all children could find a story they loved and were capable of telling. That's how we came to write our six collections of world tales.

**Martha:** The latest incarnation of storytelling translating into writing—*Noodlehead Nightmares*—is the most exciting. We hope to show children that anyone can find inspiration in these stories that are as old as the world—and turn them into something as fresh as morning dew. We always tell children that this is what many great authors have done. Now we have done the same—taken inspiration from old ideas and created a new story that sprang from our own imaginations. Of course, now it is a collaboration with Tedd—whose imagination is truly one of a kind!

**Mitch:** It has been so much fun to work with Tedd. Our strengths are in telling stories using our voices, faces, and body language, while Tedd is a master at making a story work with images and words on the printed page. His suggestions for reworking the story and adding more chapters have been spot on, and his illustrations, although they are completely different from what we imagined, could not be more perfect. All of us have worked extensively with children and know what makes them laugh. We share a similar sense of the ridiculous. Belly laughs have been frequent during this project. Noodleheads are fun! We have already started another book, *Noodleheads See the Future*.

### **Tedd, how is illustrating a story in comic form different from illustrating a traditional picture book?**

**Tedd:** As I said before, in comic form I am able to depict so many more scenes. A picture book may have one scene per page—or less—but my comic pages often have five or six scenes each. I am also able to depict many, many changes in facial expression. So much humor can be conveyed in a character's face. The text of the story needs to be adapted to comic word bubbles. All of the words like "He said..." and "She asked..." get eliminated. And so many action scenes are depicted that fewer words are needed to describe the action. I will confess that the comic form is a *lot more work* for me but it was my suggestion so I guess that makes me a noodlehead!

### **What do you hope readers learn from NOODLEHEAD NIGHTMARES?**

**Martha:** There is an old expression, "Fortune, that favors fools." This is certainly true in the classic noodlehead genre of folktales where everything seems to turn out okay for fools in spite of the mistakes they have made. Perhaps this is because noodleheads always are kind and well meaning, so we don't want to see them punished. For example, Jack foolishly trades the valuable family cow for a few beans, but the beans turn out to be magical. So one message that we hope kids take away is that it's okay to make a mistake, and that it will not mean the end of the world. Mistakes are how we learn, after all. And sometimes a mistake will eventually lead to something better—and that would not have happened but for the mistake.

**Mitch:** I hope that they learn that books are fun and that they can make you laugh till your belly hurts. Everyone has awakened from a dream and thought, even if only for a moment, "Was that

real? Did that really happen?" When we told our original version of *Noodlehead Nightmares* to children, they immediately got the humor in the idea that someone would assume a dream was real.

**Tedd:** My only hope with ANY of my books is that young children learn books can be fun and reading is what makes that fun possible.

### What advice would you give to young authors or illustrators?

**Martha:** If you want to write a good story, learn to *tell* a good story. Although these two skills are totally different in many ways, they are inextricably linked. And if you get better at one, you will get better at the other. So, when you have an idea for a story, tell the story to family and friends before you even write it down, and your first draft will be much stronger. An added benefit is that you will be comfortable speaking in front of a group, a valuable skill for all of us to have. And it will come in handy when you go out to promote your book!

**Mitch:** We can all learn a great deal from the body language and reactions of others. If listeners seem to lose interest during a part of the story, that's a sign that we might want to shorten that part—or leave it out. And a listener's question can make us aware of an important detail that we forgot, and without which the story will not make sense.

**Tedd:** To aspiring young authors and illustrators I say simply—read and draw!!! And absolutely keep a journal in which you write, draw or do both.



**TEDD ARNOLD**  
is the creator of scores of picture books and easy readers. His most recent book is *Vincent Paints His House*, an homage to Van Gogh. He splits his time between Florida and upstate New York.



**MARTHA HAMILTON and MITCH WEISS**  
perform in the U.S. and abroad as Beauty & the Beast Storytellers. They live in New York.