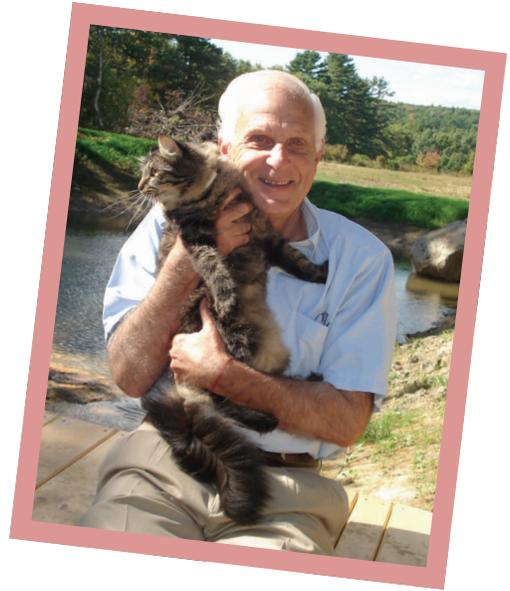




## Author Spotlight with

# Fred Lipp



**As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?**

As a child all I wanted was to survive school. Although now I feel blessed with being born dyslexic and a habitual daydreamer, at the time all my energy and innocence was daily invested in telling stories to get me through. In the third grade I was an inveterate story teller. My mother refused to listen to teachers in 1946 who were convinced I didn't know how to pay attention and would never properly learn to read and write, let alone spell.

Over after-school cups of tea and chocolate chip cookies, Mother listened to my tales. I lacked the courage to tell Mother of the rattan thrashings administered by the principal, who was also my third-grade teacher. Despite years of hell, I continued to find ways to compensate for my birthright to see numbers, sentences, and words in a different light.

Finally at fifteen I discovered the English Speaking Union in Boston, which generously supported my education in an English boarding school. On vacations I hitch hiked across Europe and listened to the stories of shepherds, truck drivers, cooks, and farmers. I wanted to unlock some of the mystery of life and see how others came to terms with joy and suffering, compassion and indifference—the quest, and not necessarily the answers, thoroughly intrigued me in what became a “Life Verdict” and adventure. As a result of this odyssey I decided I could continue this quest by becoming a minister.

**You spent most of your career as a minister in the Unitarian Church. How did you make the transition to writing stories for children? How do your experiences as a minister inform your writing?**

The prelude for the transition was fueled on a ministerial sabbatical in Hastings, England. There were inordinate amounts of time to shiver in my winter flat and write. My background of spending twenty hours a week researching and writing sermons now focused on crafting children's texts for picture books. My first book, still unpublished, was called *Poppet and Tiddles*—a tale about two cats that lived in a deserted chapel. By some blind act of fate, the book led me to my friend and agent Clare Pearson, who at the time was an editor with a London publishing house. Clare became my mentor and muse for writing. By this time I had honed my skill through years of writing and delivering sermons, finally making the transition a liberating experience.

When I came home from England, I gently announced to my active congregation in Portland, Maine, that I would be resigning to devote my life to writing children's books. All that I learned in the ministry was yeast for this new endeavor. I am intrigued that nearing seventy, I write for children: when I was their age, I suffered most completely. I wonder about the alchemy our early life plays in our becoming who we are. My mother's trust in me was finally vindicated in my seven books—some of them published from English into Korean, Catalan, Spanish, French, Khmer, and Portuguese. Thanks, Mum!



You've written several books for children, most of which are set in Southeast Asia. How did you become interested and involved in this region of the world? What difficulties do you face when writing about such distant places for an American audience?

I like to say, "Be careful what you write, because it might change your life." After transitioning from the ministry, and after a serious bout of prostate cancer, I listened to my congressman tell of his adventures overseeing elections in Cambodia. As he flipped through photos, one caught my attention.

"Tom, what's that all about?"

"Oh, that's the bird lady at Wat Phnom. . . you pay her twenty-five cents to choose a bird and set it free for your wishes to come true. If the finch flies back to the cage, your wish doesn't come true!"

The image immediately unlocked a story that, after months of research with the Cambodian community in Portland, Maine, became the award winning picture book, *The Caged Bird of Phnom Penh* (IRA Notable Books for a Global Society).

Following the book's publication, I wondered how in the world I would be able to visit classrooms without ever having visited Cambodia.

With my wife's blessings, and some savings, I went, I witnessed, and I was changed forever! How would any author guess his book would not only be autobiographical, but change his life and the lives of those he came to visit?

When you wrote *The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh* (Holiday House), set in Cambodia, you had never visited the country. Today you run a non profit organization providing educational opportunities for underprivileged children there. How did visiting Cambodia change your perception of it as well as your writing?

While I was on my first visit to Cambodia, The National Democratic Institute representatives were my guides. Each day at dawn, we visited refugee resettlement camps, city hospitals, orphanages, squatter camps, remote villages, and survivors of landmines and the Khmer Rouge. I visited a school and the Killing Fields next door, where there were mountains of skulls under a glass tomb. I heard stories by NGOs of sex trafficking of young girls and the trafficking of consciousness by those who treated girls and women as second-class citizens.



I was haunted by nightmares after seeing and hearing the post-traumatic shock of an entire nation. I was horrified that between 1975 and 1979 anyone who was educated or even wore glasses could be killed.

These accounts overwhelmed my protected Western consciousness until suddenly what I feared in the third grade appeared miniscule before the ravages of evil in a country swallowed by war over the past decades.

On my last night in Phnom Penh, I visited the bird lady, just like in my story *The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh*. I paid her twenty-five cents and released a bird. It flew away, but I was so excited I forgot to make a wish. On my second try, I made a wish to set up a non profit (501c3) to educate poor, at-risk girls and young women in Cambodia.

On September 11, 2001 with an anonymous gift of \$50.00, and twenty-five cents I found on a sidewalk along Congress Street in Portland, the IRS approved our non profit status. We began with three girls almost seven years ago to a program now with thirty women in university and one hundred more coming along through public schools near their villages.

*Running Shoes* is the story of a girl who gets the chance to go to school only after a kind census taker gives her a pair of shoes. Do you consider this to be a version of your own efforts in Cambodia?

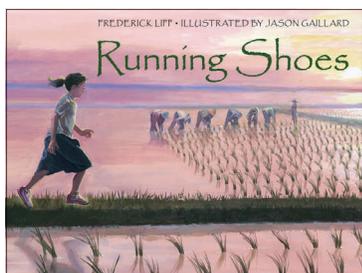
Yes. *Running Shoes* is in fact a partly true story that takes place in a remote village in Mondolkiri. Sophy asked for a pair of running shoes to make her run to school faster and easier on her feet.

Thinking we achieve success only by our own efforts is an illusion. If my own mother did not encourage me to persevere when I was nine, along with those who invested in my education and encouragement as an author, I would have been a casualty.

I truly believe in the child who asked me in her classroom this poignant question, “Mr. Lipp, isn’t Ary in your book *The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh* really about you? Aren’t you in some way the little girl Ary, who has a dream?” My breath was taken away by this insight. In fact, I am Ary who wished to not only read and write, but as a result identifies now worldwide with students who struggle with similar issues on the other side of the world.

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## Books by Frederick Lipp



978-1-58089-175-2 • HC • \$16.95  
978-1-58089-176-9 • PB • \$ 6.95  
Ages 5–8

All it takes is a pair of sneakers...

Sophy's secret wish is to be able to go to school one day. But Sophy and her mother live in a poor village in Cambodia where there is no doctor, no hospital, and no school. When Sophy receives a pair of running shoes, her life changes forever.