

Author's note: In 2022, Bonnie Rose Sullivan, a teaching artist at the New Britain Museum of American Art and The Wadsworth Atheneum of Art, was one of three artists chosen for the Connecticut Sea Grant Arts Support Award.

The Connecticut Sea Grant Arts Support Award, which began in 2010, awards up to \$1,000 to an artist or group of artists whose work features the Connecticut coastal and marine environment. Awardees are selected based on aesthetic quality, relevance to Connecticut Sea Grant themes, and the potential for their work to reach non-traditional audiences.

For her project, Sullivan wrote and illustrated a children's picture book titled, Rory and Mo Are Ocean Farmers! The book follows the titular characters as they go about their jobs farming for sugar kelp while experiencing the joys and intricacies of the marine and coastal environment.

Sullivan, originally from Connecticut, has been painting and drawing since childhood.

Connecticut Sea Grant recently sat down with Bonnie to discuss her work, her sources of inspiration, and the importance of encouraging joy in today's world.

10 Questions with Bonnie Rose Sullivan

With playful illustrations, engaging characters, she shares her love of sugar kelp.

By Maggie Cozens



Bonnie Rose Sullivan works with some of the paints and other art supplies she used to illustrate *Rory and Mo are Ocean Farmers!*
Photo: Maggie Cozens

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

I'm originally from Connecticut and I went to three state schools. I attended UConn for my BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts). Then I went to Central to become a certified K-12 teacher. After that, I went to Western Connecticut University for my MFA (Master of Fine Arts).

I've always loved drawing. I was shy as a kid, so I was kind of always drawing from the beginning as a way of making sense of any situation I was in, and to have fun. It's still the same now really. I love the process of drawing and painting and creating characters and mini worlds.

2. What was the process for developing your book? What drew you to this story and why sugar kelp?

I learned about ocean farms and sugar kelp about 10 years ago and I have been on a low boil about it ever since. I love the fact that it can be grown and harvested right here in Connecticut on Long Island Sound, and that it and other algae were among the first forms of life on Earth: it has an ancient, almost mythic quality much like the old bedrocks here in Connecticut, and our prehistoric-looking horseshoe crabs. What drew me the most though is that sugar kelp doesn't need any fresh water, soil or fertilizer to grow, which is a very exciting and hopeful solution to many challenges we face both right now and in the future with climate change.

When it came to the book, I wanted it to be "ficto-informational," a.k.a., something imaginative and character-driven, but also usable in a classroom with students.

One of the pages from *Rory and Mo are Ocean Farmers!* Image courtesy of Bonnie Rose Sullivan

3. Can you describe the timeline of your work and how you got involved with the Sea Grant project?

Before applying for the program, I had already created some sketches of the characters. I knew I wanted the main characters to be a tiger and a turtle. I think the turtle also kind of looks like Jake from *The Blues Brothers*. Like Jake, he's always wearing sunglasses. So, I had sketched the characters first, and then I saw the Sea Grant opportunity. It was perfect timing. I thought 'I'm just going to do it. I'm going to just try to do this.'

I ran this opportunity by the two museums that I work at, and they were very receptive and supportive. So, I got to work! Essentially, the timeline was a little bit here, a little bit there, then all at once.

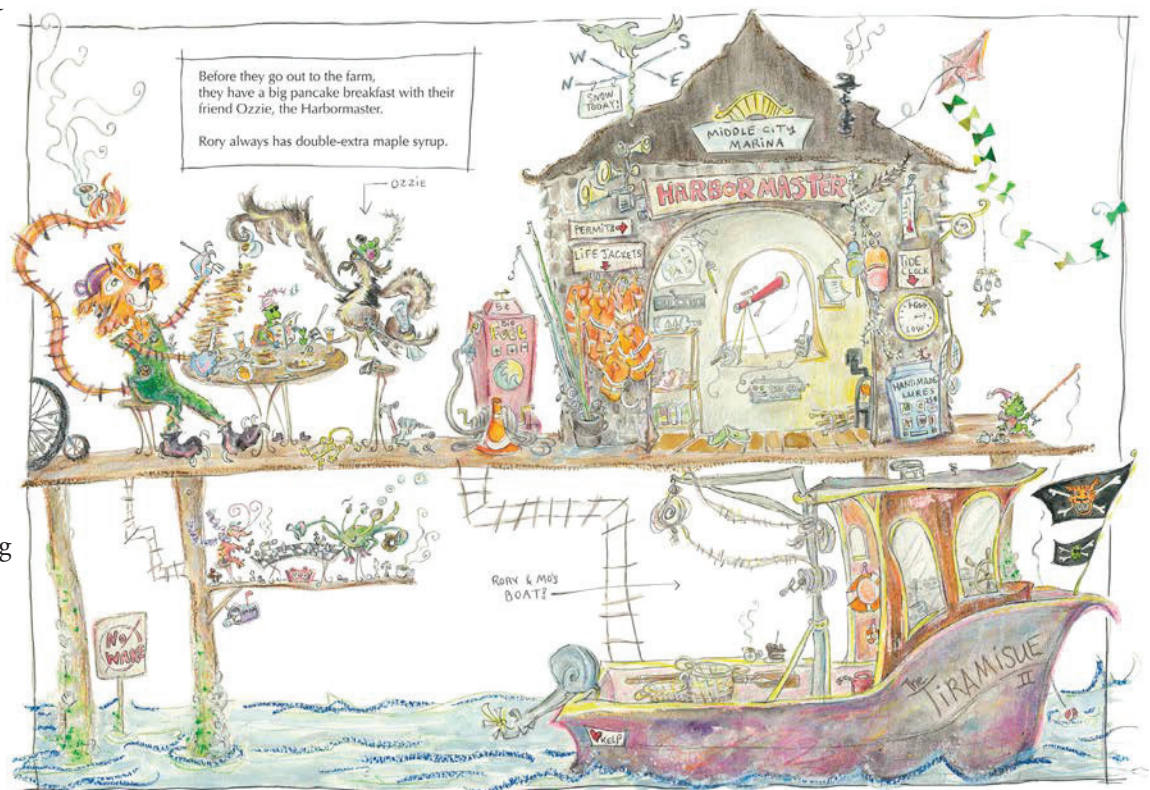
4. When it comes to science and education, art is a powerful way to connect the two. How does science motivate you in your work?

My best friend is a geologist, and she was the STEM teacher at the Savannah Children's Museum in Georgia. She'd always say: art and science, they're not that different.

And I agree: they're really not that different! There's a real opportunity for science to be as accessible as possible, but it's almost like you need a translator to do so. I think visual translation—art—can resonate with so many people. When it comes to real world problems, there's a lot of opportunity for everybody, but especially for illustrators, writers and educators, to help people understand not only the negatives but to also appreciate the positive; especially when it comes to demonstrating the possibilities for positive change.

5. How did you find the process of translating sugar kelp farming to an artistic medium?

I loved the process. Sugar kelp's colors and shape are unusual, beautiful, and full of movement—I can't look away! It's like dancing stained glass just



growing in the ocean, ready to solve lots of problems all at once by being a relatively low-maintenance supernova of nutrients and versatility. *Rory and Mo are Ocean Farmers!* was created with ink, watercolor, crayon, colored pencil, and cut-paper collage.

6. What surprised you the most about sugar kelp?

Historically and in other cultures, sugar kelp and other seaweeds have served a greater purpose and have been recognized for their incredible benefits for a long time. I feel lucky to have been able to learn about sugar kelp over the past 10 years, and luckier still to live in a place like Connecticut where it is grown and harvested. I love that sugar kelp can multitask and make everything better: it can be used to create everything from a delicious dinner to a powerhouse organic fertilizer. Plus, the fact that sugar kelp can simultaneously capture carbon and help Mama otters take care of their kids by effectively hugging them until she comes back adds a... moon-landing level of awe for me.

7. Can you talk a little bit about how you draw inspiration from Connecticut and Long Island Sound?

The Sound is an integral part of Connecticut, and it shapes our lives more than we know. Even if you live, say, in New Britain, or in Hartford: Long Island Sound and the watershed affect you. Even if you don't live right next to it, or even if you didn't go to Rocky Neck State Park every day.

I'm proud to be from Connecticut. And to me, Long Island Sound feels like home. I think there's a sense of freedom being close to the ocean and it is something that is tied to Connecticut's identity. I draw a lot of inspiration from that.

Also, I think especially after we're seeing some of the effects of climate change it is clearer than ever that we're all connected.

The watershed—rivers, streams, etc.—are a connecting thread between all of us to the Sound and the ocean. At the risk of sounding eye-rollingly obvious, I think the connections we have to each other at the watershed level reverberate throughout our communities and landscapes in a very beneficial way, so it's important that we celebrate and encourage those connections.

8. Looking at your art, it's clear there's a lot of vibrance and joy. Is 'joy' something you intentionally try to cultivate in your work?

I think it's very clear to kids when a book is trying to push a very serious concept on them in a heavy-handed, didactic way. They don't like it. Children are very smart. And so are the parents who are reading to them, or the librarians, or the teachers.

But at the same time, one of the reasons why I wanted to demystify ocean farming and make it accessible was, first, because you're not going to be interested in doing something unless you know the terminology and understand the opportunities. I couldn't find a book teaching children about a job like 'ocean farming.' I was wondering, if you could read a book about being a postal worker, for example, why not also be able to read about being an ocean farmer? You never know what might pique somebody's interest. And as a teacher, I am a big fan of using a colorful, imaginative example to dive deeper into a larger concept.

Now, will ocean farming look different in 20 years when that child grows up due to climate change and other issues? Of course. But I think it's less scary when it's presented in a friendly, positive, and inclusive way. If kids know the message is heavy-handed, I think it closes the door for them. I want my ideas to open the door.

If children are taught about different possibilities in a way that is joyful, I think is very powerful. Joy is sorely needed.

9. Do you have a favorite place to visit on Long Island Sound? Do you have a favorite animal in the Sound?

For my favorite place, I would say Rocky Neck or Hammonasset Beach State Park. Everywhere you look, there are birds, crabs, there are these rocks that have been tumbling in the waves for 500 years. Both places are just gorgeous.

As for an animal...it's hard to choose just one! I love ospreys. I respect their authority. I walk by their nest, and I think, 'I see you; I respect you. Thank you for letting me walk here.'

10. What do you hope people will walk away with after reading your book?

A love for sugar kelp and Long Island Sound, and maybe a bit of hope for the future!

I want children to walk away feeling empowered. That's what I'm trying to do in my very small way: empower children to not be as scared of the future and all the things happening in the world today.

At the same time, I also want them to wonder: what can we do about it?

I want people to know that there's a lot that we can do, and it's important that we do something. And it can be done in a joyful way. You can, for example, eat some pancakes and then go farm for sugar kelp.

Look for Rory and Mo are Ocean Farmers! on bookstore shelves, Internet sites and in libraries in the near future.

