

arts & entertainment

**“If I can inspire one child to pick up a book and read, my life is worthwhile.”**

Max Tell  
storyteller

**Alex Browne**  
Arts Reporter

White Rock's Max Tell (a.k.a. Robert Stelmach) is a master in the magic of storytelling.

While his tales are directed at children, his soft voice and easy manner can captivate the child in all of us. Before you know it, an intriguing snippet of conversation can turn into a story or a song.

But – as with everything in the creative realm that seems so easy, so simple and so effortless – there is a great deal of art in what he does. And Tell has worked very hard to make his simple, evocative language flow from point to point, carrying his gleeful readers – or listeners – along in its spell.

Tell, 63 – one of the writers highlighted in Black Bond Books' upcoming March 29 Local Authors Day (1:30-3:30 p.m., 1-15562 24 Ave.) – has just released a new book/audio book combination in English and Spanish: *Little Johnny Small and Other Stories (El Pequeno Juan Diminuto y otras historias)*.

A collaboration with Argentinian-Canadian author Silvana Goldemberg, the book includes Tell's stories, *Little Johnny Small* and *Rodney Scribble*, and Goldemberg's *The Smile Plant and Martin, The Brave Prince*, in both English and Spanish versions prepared by the authors.

Like other Tell works (including *Dragon With A Flagon, A Fist Of Bees* and *The Land of Graws*) the book and disc have all the charm of Tell's live performance – and an unerring sense of the fanciful words and repeated phrases that involve children, while imparting positive, subtle messages that tend to empower children and make them comfortable about their own individuality.

“It's quite a thrill – I've always wanted to have my stories in another language,” said Tell, who in his other working life is a busy ESL teacher – when he's not conducting workshops or writing philosophical essays about education, or keeping a busy schedule of appearances (he logged 100 last year).



**Max Tell's (a.k.a. Robert Stelmach) masterful and imaginative storytelling has captured the hearts of countless children.**

said. “He's a Japanese Fighting Fish. They're so people-oriented they're almost like dogs.”

That's about all it took for Tell's highly attuned story-sense to take over. Suddenly Barnabas became the central character in the song *Barnabas, The Fishie*, about a fish who wants to become a boy.

“There are old legends – tall tales, really – about a fish that walks, and because Barney is such a playful, friendly fish – and because Japanese Fighting Fish actually can come out of the water and breathe the air for a little bit, it seemed natural to think of Barney learning how to breathe, getting up each morning and going to school.”

Tell tested the song last week with a Grade 2 class at Peace Arch Elementary and was gratified at the reception.

“It's so difficult to get kids to sing along when they don't know the chorus, but after a couple of verses,

they were all singing,” he said, launching into an a cappella version in his pleasing baritone.

At one time, Tell used to try out his stories and songs on his own children Anna and Aaron – “but, I lost that audience a long time ago when they became teenagers,” he said.

“Because I'm not performing constantly, I miss the presence of children – to see them moving with my stories, to see them smile and their eyes brighten up.”

There's been a lot of preparation and dues-paying behind Tell's seemingly effortless process.

Trained in theatre arts (his play *Wild Rose and Half Step* was nominated for a Jessie Richardson Award for best Children's Play of the Year in 1991), he also studied creative writing at the Banff School of Fine Arts under such hard taskmasters as novelist W.O. Mitchell (*Who Has Seen The Wind*).

“You don't begin with imagination,” he said. “You have a feeling for it, a sense that there's something out there you want to perform, but imagination comes from a lot of work, a lot of craft.”

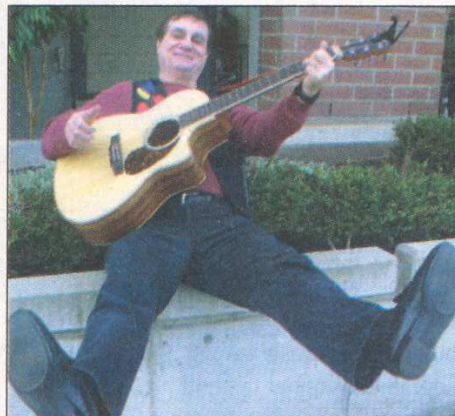
## A Tell-tale art

Finding time to write is a constant challenge, Tell agreed.

“That's probably why I've concentrated on shorter forms,” he said.

But how many writers can say, as he does, casually: “I wrote a song for my wife's fish” – and mean it?

“His name is Barnabas, Barney for short,” he



Alex Browne photos



# Storyteller strives to inspire a love of books in children

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The process was all the harder for Tell who, as a boy and a young man in his native Ontario, struggled with a learning disability – problems with his short term memory that made reading and writing and passing tests almost impossible.

When he was 16 a teacher – he can't now remember her name – turned his life around by capturing his imagination with the works of Shakespeare, and he remains indebted to her to this day.

One of Tell's most recent stories, *Fiezo, The Book Burro*, was runner up for the 2007 Writing For Children competition sponsored by the Writers' Union of Canada – and it, too, had a very simple inception.

"I was listening to CBC Radio and there was an interview with the Argentinian author Alberto Manguel. He said that in Argentina they didn't have book mobiles, because a lot of villages were on mountain paths, so they had book burros instead."

It inspired a touching tale of a grumpy burro named Fiezo, who is always complaining about having to carry the librarian and his books from village to village.

One day, when they've finished their rounds, Fiezo is summoned by

the librarian to take him all the way up a mountain with one book, for one boy.

"He wonders, what's so special about this book, and what's so special about this boy," Tell said.

After an arduous journey, Fiezo and the librarian come to the village, and when Fiezo sees the young boy is confined to a wheelchair, he begins to realize why the journey was so important.

For the first time he sits down and listens to the old librarian read and understands the power of his storytelling as he makes the story come alive – and from that day on he listens to all of the stories.

"My story was like Fiezo's story," Tell said.

"I was miserable – grumpy – all the time at school. And then something happened and I started listening. But I'm also the old librarian. I'm getting up there. In public I can look pretty conservative, but give me a story and a song and, like the old librarian, I become alive.

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For more information about Max Tell's books and workshops, including a summer camp at Southridge Junior School this July, visit [www.maxtell.ca](http://www.maxtell.ca)



Alex Browne photo

**Max Tell will lead a workshop at Southridge Junior School in July.**