

# Author/Illustrator Spotlight on

# Lori Mitchell

By Grace Nall



"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." – Eleanor Roosevelt

Children's book author and illustrator Lori Mitchell reflects on her favorite quote. "Just because someone says something, that doesn't make it true. Only if you choose to believe what others say about you can it affect you."

Mitchell's award-winning book, *Different Just Like Me*, was inspired by her daughter, April, who has vitiligo, a skin condition causing white patches to appear due to lack of skin pigmentation. "I had the idea to write a story about how we are all different but still so much alike," stated Mitchell. "The pictures just came to me and I fit the words to the images."

Mitchell visited San Diego locations to capture the images representing the diverse group of people found throughout her book. "I took my camera to Street Scene, the big concert put on every year in the Gaslamp Quarter downtown," stated Mitchell. "I use photos as a reference for my illustrations. I would have April kind of sneak over next to them so I could act like I was taking her picture but get the other person in the frame, too."

Mitchell's art interest began at five years old. Her mother, a fashion designer, taught art to neighborhood kids and their art was showcased in the family's backyard. Childhood bedtime stories helped to influence Mitchell's artistic craft. "I have always liked Maurice Sendak's work," stated Mitchell. "I could relate to his way of drawing."

As a teen, Mitchell garnered her first recognition as a professional illustrator. "My first paid job was in high school for an educational packet about Africa." In fact, Mitchell recalled how illustrators Leo and Diane Dillon influenced her artistic style. "I first discovered their book, *Ashanti to Zulu*. I was so thrilled to see how they designed the figures and African patterns."

When it comes to which artists inspire Mitchell, she refers to the Pinterest website at <http://pinterest.com/lorisstory/art-i-admire/> which reflects a panorama of intriguing artistic metaphors. The diversity in her art interests range from fine art and abstract paintings to mosaic art.

Of all the illustrators who influenced Mitchell, perhaps illustrator E.H. Shepard led the way when she wrote

*Different Just Like Me*. "I remember *Winnie the Pooh* by A.A. Milne and *Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, and both were illustrated by Shepard," stated Mitchell. "My mom would read them to my sisters and me before bed...I don't know which I loved more, the words or the illustration. I'm just realizing that I sort of draw in Shepard's pen and ink style, so maybe it was the pictures that got me."

Or was it the words? Flash forward to the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. "I couldn't believe it was all really happening," stated Mitchell. "The show's topic was gratitude. I had been following Oprah's idea to keep a gratitude journal every night and it changed my life. I wrote her a letter of thanks and got a call from the producer about two weeks later. I told him how the gratitude journal helped me get the book done and he asked me to send him a video of me working on the book and hanging out with April. During the show, Oprah showed the cover of my book full screen for a few seconds, which helped the book's rating on Amazon.com. It was on Oprah's website book list for over eight years."

Fate turned into reality. One of A.A. Milne's famous quotes is "Piglet noticed that even though he had a very small heart, it could hold a rather large amount of gratitude."

Mitchell's gratitude journal came full circle. Since writing *Different Just Like Me*, she inspired her daughter, April, to take on art. April was featured in a documentary short about vitiligo on YouTube.com, showcasing her artistic talents, along with a quote by actress Salma Hayek, "People often say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I say that the most liberating thing about beauty is realizing that you are the beholder."

Aside from teaching art at Palomar College and the Athenaeum, Lori Mitchell is a member of both SCBWI and The Society of Illustrators, San Diego. She is currently working with Leah Allen on a picture book about "tattling." Visit Lori Mitchell's website <http://www.differentjustlikeme.cc>

