

# Kids, Books, and a little Vaudeville

BY SUSAN SALZMAN RAAB

ANYONE WHO'S PRESENTED to an audience of kindergartners and preschoolers knows it can be a challenge to keep little kids engaged. Ventriloquist and author Karen Rostoker-Gruber, [www.karenrostoker-gruber.com](http://www.karenrostoker-gruber.com), mixes good storytelling with puppetry, and she brings along her side-kick, Maria (shh! who doesn't know she's a puppet). Together they've accrued a fan base and have begun branching out beyond schools and libraries to perform for kids and adults.

"It's amazing to see how kids respond to Maria, and how curious they are about her," says Rostoker-Gruber. "I present to audiences from preschool to fifth grade, and she's a big hit. Most have never seen a talking puppet before, and I often tell them, I bought the last talking doll on the Internet."

"The little kids believe Maria's real, and ask what her favorite food is, what color she likes best (pink), and which stories she knows, that sort of thing and she's happy to tell them. The older kids ask how Maria can talk, and are sure I have a tape recorder playing, or that she's connected to a computer. They'll look under the table for that.

I feel it's important to keep the magic intact, so I don't answer, but I tell them they can ask their teacher later. Oftentimes, the kids will follow me to the car, and I don't want to spoil it by having them see me put Maria in a trunk, so I've set up a car seat in the back for her to sit in."

Karen has had a love of puppetry from her own childhood. She asked her

mother for a ventriloquism puppet at the age of eight, and she also began making her own puppets out of Styrofoam, socks, and other materials. Once she began writing for kids, Karen used puppets in presentations; beginning with one called Boris the Bat. She started bringing Boris and his cave-dwelling puppet friends to libraries to tie in with her nonfiction manuscript.



She got a great reception and over a year worked her way through more than thirty libraries around New Jersey. "I learned that once you get in with a particular library, you may be asked to do appearances for multiple venues in the system, and could keep getting referred on. I also did a lot to promote myself for school visits, but with school funding these days, it's much tougher for them to bring authors in. So I've had

to try new things. Fortunately, I've found that schools, libraries, and other venues are looking for good afterschool and even nighttime/p.j. programs. Many at schools are run and funded by the PTO/PTA, so that's who I contact,"

Karen's also looking to organizations and businesses as possible venues. Two of her books, *Tea Time* and *Rooster Can't Cock-a-Doodle-Do*, have a connection to tea, so Karen's been booking herself and Maria to perform at tea houses, where they have mother-daughter programs. She's also looking to do programming with Girl Scout troops and how her various book topics and talks can tie-in with the badges Girl Scouts can earn.

Finally, Karen's also giving talks for adults. She's developed a program on how to get published and found that colleges, particularly the community colleges, are looking for good guest lecturers to give one-time, three-hour presentations. For the older set, she and Maria have been performing at senior centers, particularly around Grandparents Day and when they have family programs. So, there are more trips ahead for them both and also chances for Maria to wear her new pink dress.

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