

Robbi and Matthew Q&A -- Jan 4, 2023

• How often do you have to fill your gas tank, and how many gallons does it take to fill it?

The bus gas tank holds 50 gallons, but we try never to let it drop below half full—both to make sure we never run out and also because gunk gathers at the bottom of diesel gas tanks, and we don't want it getting into our nice, clean engine.

• Where do you shower?

Wherever we can! We've been staying in lots of state parks, most of which have showers. But also, at friends' houses and the occasional motel. Matthew sheepishly admits he went an entire week without a shower in early December. He likes to think no one noticed.

• What's your favorite state so far?

Whichever state we're standing in when someone asks that question! But seriously, every state has had something unique and interesting to offer. And usually something delicious. Favorite moments have been touring a cranberry bog in Wisconsin, kayaking with manatees in Florida, and visiting a cattle ranch in New Mexico.

• How long do you stay at each school?

Our visits usually last from 7:30 in the morning to 2:00 in the afternoon. During that time, we give two assemblies, invite all the kids and teachers out to see the bus and meet our kids and dog, and have lunch discussion with a group of 10-12 students. We've also spent time touring the school, paying special classroom visits, and, on one occasion, doing fashion model moves on an impromptu red carpet.

• How many schools do you visit in a week?

Our average is 1.5 schools a week, though we've done as many as three in one week. We visited ten schools in the first month of the tour, but our pace has slowed a bit since then, thank goodness. We're not sure we could have kept that up.

• How many school kids have you met on your trip so far?

So far, we've visited 28 schools, and our thoroughly unscientific estimate is that we've met 14,000 students and teachers.

• Are you going to Hawaii and Alaska? How are you going to get the bus to Hawaii?

We will be going to Hawaii, but the bus will not! We're going to leave it with my cousin in Atlanta and fly from there. Our dog will also be staying in Atlanta with my uncle. We'll be going to Alaska as well, and so will the bus. After visiting our school in central Washington state in May, we'll drive north through British Columbia and the Yukon to Anchorage, where we'll leave the bus and catch a flight to our final stop on the tour, a 12-student, one-room schoolhouse in Port Heiden. From there, we'll take a bush plane up the peninsula to our tundra compound where Robbi's family has been running a commercial salmon fishing operation since she was two years old. If you're interested in knowing any more about our adventures in Alaska, check out our picture book *Sunrise Summer*.

• Are you learning anything about America you didn't already know?

We've learned all sorts of wonderful facts about specific places, but the encouraging thing we've discovered is that there are wonderful people everywhere, there are certain things we all seem to share, and we're not as hopelessly divided as we're often told.

• **How do your kids pass the time when you're driving for long stretches?**

All sorts of ways. Reading, playing games, doing homework, drawing, snacking, sleeping, watching YouTube, staring out the window, and relentlessly poking each other. As book people, we hate to admit that they spend an extraordinary amount of time playing and talking about video games.

• **Do you have family game night on the road?**

We just completed our annual Super Smash Brothers Tournament, in which we all choose different characters and battle through a multi-round battle until just one of us remains standing. We also have a bunch of board games on the bus, most of which give Matthew headaches because he crumbles in the face of complexity.

• **What time do you get up in the morning and go to sleep at night?**

On school visit mornings, we wake up no later than 6am, and sometimes sooner. We have to get the bus ready, eat breakfast, push our hair into a semi-neat state, and arrive at the school by 7:30. Other mornings, we tend to ease out of bed a bit more slowly, but we're usually up and started on the day's adventure no later than 9am. Our pace is so relentless that even when we want to stay up late, we usually can't stay awake past 10:00pm.

• **What are the biggest and smallest schools you've visited so far?**

Our biggest was our very first. Mt. Pleasant Elementary in Wilmington, Delaware has 900 students. Our smallest so far was Dirks-Anderson Elementary in Fort Davis Texas, which had 70. Our final school is the smallest—a 12-student one room schoolhouse in the Alaskan bush.

• **Do you have any pets? If so, what are their names and why did you pick out the name?**

We have a Boston Terrier named Dumbles, which happens to be the name of the dog in our Cookie Chronicles series. The fictional Dumbles is a French Bulldog who looks almost-but-not-quite like the real Dumbles, so Robbi worries people will read the book and think she did a terrible job of drawing our dog. The truth is our kids named the real Dumbles after the Dumbles in the book.

• **What is your dog's favorite snack?**

Anything remotely edible and even a few things that aren't. Apples are his absolute favorite. When someone eats an apple, he whines and even barks to show how offended he is no one is sharing with him.

• **Who takes your dog for his first walk of the day?**

Whoever gets up first, which is usually Matthew or sometimes our son August.

• **What is your favorite series...other than Cookie Chronicles?**

Matthew loves A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket.

Robbi loves The Mysterious Benedict Society by Trenton Lee Stewart.

Alden is into standalone novels these days.

Kato loves The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins.

August loves My Hero Academia by Kohei Horikoshi.

Jasper loves Cornbread and Poppy by Matthew Cordell

• **Who is your favorite author?**

Matthew's favorite author is Kurt Vonnegut.

Robbi's is John Irving.

Alden's are John Greene and Jasmine Warga.

Kato's is Tui T. Sutherland.

Augie's is Christina Uss.

Jasper's is Matthew Cordell.

• **What has been your favorite site that you have seen so far on your trip?**

The Peace and Justice Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama was a powerful reminder of a tragic and shameful aspect of our country's history. It's a beautiful tribute to horrific acts and a gesture of hope to a better future.

We also loved the Museum of Indian Artifacts in Bentonsport, Iowa. It's a collection of more than 15,000 Native spear tips and arrowheads.

• **Do you hold your breath when you go through tunnels? If so, who has the record for the longest time?**

We do not. We did not know this was a thing. Have we consigned ourselves to eternal bad luck? Why did no one tell us about this?!? We do sing the Oscar Meyer Weiner song when we go over bridges. Perhaps that keeps things in balance.

• **Did you bring any board games with you on your trip?**

So many! And not the usual ones. Robbi did lots of online research (which is her way) and purchased games that met the following three criteria:

- 1) pretty boxes,
- 2) small boxes that would fit in our small bus overhead cabinet,
- 3) so complicated as to give Matthew fits.

She succeeded beautifully on all fronts.

• **Robbi, are you illustrating a new book while on this journey?**

Heck no. I can barely find time to wipe my nose.

• **Matthew, are you writing a new book while on this journey?**

Yes and no. I'm supposed to be making revisions to the sixth Cookie Chronicles book (The Cookie War), but living in a small bus with four children and a dog has proved challenging. My brain is working on two future books—a picture book that includes voices from kids all over the country and my first book for non-kids, a meditation on the transformative nature of generosity, a thing I'm learning a lot about this year.

- **Robbi, what is your art process? What types of media do you use and why? When did you create your first work of art? What inspired you to create? Who was your first motivational supporter regarding your artistic abilities?**

I actually have two different processes: one for picture books and another for our middle grade novels. For the picture books, I often use a combination of quill-pen-and-ink linework with gouache coloring for my characters and digital artwork for my backgrounds. For this “digital collage” technique, I paint a bunch of different textures and colors on paper and then place them into shapes I’ve made on my computer that make up a collage-like background. Some are simple and others become quite complex. For our middle grade novels, I work in black and white and do all the linework digitally, with a line that imitates a pencil. I also use digital collage for the backgrounds but have a catalog of textures I’ve made that I keep on my computer and apply those to the shapes. Keeping everything on the computer saves me a LOT of time for books that have hundreds of illustrations in them!

When I was in second grade, I checked out a book “Draw 50 Dinosaurs” and drew a decent triceratops by following the step-by-step directions. I brought it in and gave it to my art teacher, Ms. Chauvenet. She framed it and put it on her desk and it was the best feeling ever, I was so proud. From then on I considered myself an “art person” and it really carried me all the way through school.

- **Matthew, what is your writing process? How old were you when you wrote your first book? What and who are your writing inspirations?**

I wrote my first book with my friend Jason when I was twelve. It was really fun. We created three copies. While not a New York Times bestseller, this project planted a seed that keeps growing to this day. My kid lit heroes are Beverly Cleary and Daniel Handler. I love how both employ humor in their storytelling.

- **What are your favorite songs to sing individually and as a family? Can your dog sing?**

Matthew has a terrible habit of starting to whistle or hum as soon as Robbi starts to whistle or hum, except he will whistle or hum a different song than the song Robbi is whistling or humming. When Robbi points out how annoying and awful this is, Matthew will insist he started whistling or humming first, which Robbi finds even more annoying and awful but does not seem to stop Matthew from doing it again and again.

Our dog does not sing, but he does make a mournful sound when no one shares apples with him.

- **Robbi, what was life like growing up at home and at school? What was your favorite thing to do at home after school, on the weekends, and during summer break?**

My parents were both very creative. My mother was a potter and my father was always coming up with fun things to do and was a great illustrator, even though he would say he wasn’t and never did anything artistic professionally. They also did a lot of just leaving us alone to entertain ourselves, so I think that helped me find my own way creatively.

Not to be too predictable with the answer, but my favorite thing to do was to read. I still think my favorite Christmas ever was when I got about 12 books and just spent the entire break lounging and reading.

- **Matthew, what was life like growing up at home and at school? What was your favorite thing to do at home after school, on the weekends, and during summer break?**

I grew up as an only child raised by a single dad. I walked home after school, made myself pickle-and-bologna roll-ups for a snack, and watched He-Man, G.I. JOE, and Little House on the Prairie until my dad came home from work. Otherwise, I loved to read, play with my Legos, and make forts in the woods across the street from my house. I spent my summers with my mom on Mt. Desert Island in Maine. There, I loved to scramble on the rocks and look for things that wriggled in the tidepools.

· **Robbi, Matthew, Alden, Jasper, Kato, and August, what is your favorite color and why**

Matthew loves dark, dark blue—the color of the night sky right before it turns black because he finds it calming and cozy. This is the color of his office at home.

Robbi's favorite color is red because it is fiery and so is she.

Alden's favorite color is purple because she finds it calming and it goes with a lot of things on the clothing front.

Kato's favorite color is purple because it looks cool.

Augie's favorite color is orange because it looks good with any other color.

Jasper's favorite color is black "because it's pitch dark."

Dumbles' favorite color is the color of whatever food he is currently eating or thinking about eating or remembering having eaten. If he remembers anything, which we seriously doubt. Dumbles is a "live in the moment" kind of guy, especially when the moment involves apples.

· **Robbi, Matthew, Alden, Jasper, Kato, and August, what is your favorite food so far on the trip and why do you like it?**

Matthew loved the homemade crawfish pie made by a school nurse in Louisiana.

Robbi enjoyed bison sausage in North Dakota.

Alden enjoyed eating fried alligator in New Orleans.

Kato enjoyed mac and cheese pizza in Wisconsin

Augie enjoyed ramen in Palo Alto.

Jasper enjoyed popcorn balls from the Corn Palace in South Dakota.

Dumbles enjoyed eating all the bits of apples our children drop on the floor, which happens fairly often, it seems.

· **Have you found a place on your trip you want to visit again and why?**

We loved our visit to Short Line Elementary School in Reader, West Virginia. The entire community was so welcoming and excited about our visit. The cafeteria staff made West Virginia specialty pepperoni rolls and three hundred kids sang Take Me Home, Country Roads to us in unison. This made us cry uncontrollably. Even though they didn't have much in the way of resources, the shared pride of the teachers and students was contagious. Fortunately, the school is within driving distance of our home in Maryland, so we're already planning on coming back next year and hope to build a long-term relationship.

· **How did you choose the names for your children?**

Our daughter Alden is 14. Matthew's middle name is Alden.

Our son Kato is 12. Robbi's middle name is Kato.

Our son August is 11. Matthew's paternal great grandfather was named August.

Jasper is 5. No one in our family is named Jasper, but Robbi's mom loved the name, and so do we. Jasper's middle name is John, which is Matthew's dad's name.

Dumbles is named Dumbles because he's such a total Dumbles, though we live with constant worry that his name is actually Murphy.