

Infant Industry: St. Elmo's Fire

Jennifer Baumgardner

Like most human beings born before 1983, I had no understanding of the Muppet phenomenon known as Elmo until 2005, when my one-year-old helped me come to terms with the glory of this red monster. Most other kids characters — from Barney to Dora to the Teletubbies — have voices that make me want to rip my hair out and eat it. Elmo sounds like a high-pitched RuPaul with the message of Jesus (Elmo Loves You!). I defy anyone not to laugh at the *Elmo's World* where Elmo explores dancing.

And it turns out the man at the heart of Elmo is as engaging as the muppet himself. As a youngun in 1970s Baltimore, Kevin Clash begged his parents to take him to the local Joann Fabrics on the weekend to buy fake fur for his hand-puppets. He kept an eye on his mom as she did housework so he could nab the paper towel dowels as soon as the last sheet was ripped from the tube. By high school, he starred as Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* (enduring a white co-star who gave up her lead role rather than face kissing a black Sky) and produced local talent shows to raise money for muscular dystrophy. At sixteen, he performed Cookie Monster in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade; by eighteen, he was working in New York City on *Captain Kangaroo* and freelancing for Jim Henson.

Kevin Clash wasn't the first Elmo, but when he donned the red puppet in 1983 (and that signature giggle came spilling forth), he helped to usher in *Sesame Street's* new audience, which was years younger than the grade-school children for whom the show was originally created. *Elmo's World* debuted in 1998 and was an instant success. Tickle Me Elmo was one of the craziest toy launches in history. In the fall of 2006, Kevin Clash came out with *My Life As A Furry Red Monster*, an as-told-to memoir (with Gary Brozek as ghost-writer) conveying the serendipitous and charming rise of the Elmo juggernaut.

Clash himself is intriguing — a skinny kid with a puppet obsession whose working class parents supported his passions, a high-school graduate who has never held a non-puppet job — but the book is *E.T.*-level tear-jerking when it comes to Elmo's ability to bring joy — or at least bear witness — to those whose lives are rough. Like the elderly lady who lost everything in Katrina, including her Hokey Pokey Elmo, the one being she spoke to daily. (Don't worry: Sesame Street's V.P. of Global Affairs heard of her plight and sent her a new one.) Or the little girls who came to see Elmo during a post-Katrina tour but wouldn't sit down to watch because, while the shelter provided them with skirts and sweatshirts, it didn't give them any underwear.

In late April, I met Kevin Clash at the Sesame Workshop Offices across from Lincoln Center (the *Sesame Street* set is at Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens). Clash, age forty-six, is trim and handsome. He breezed in, signaling for me to follow him into his office, which was appointed with toys featuring Elmo's visage, from a balance bike to videos to a camping set that Clash kindly offered for me take home to my son. I snatched the toys up like a greedy two-year-old — Elmo means the world to me now.
— Jennifer Baumgardner

My son's first word was "Elmo." What do you make of that?

For some reason, this character connects like crazy. I do hear from parents that they are upset because their child's first word isn't "mama" or "dada," but "Elmo." Jim [Henson] always believed that if it made him laugh and it was silly enough for him, everyone else would laugh, too.

In your book, I found it touching that you could help children have fun and regain normalcy after upheaval, like when you went to shelters in New Orleans after Katrina.

Sesame just did an outreach video for the military to help children cope when parents are deployed. We did another video for critical care, because often doctors don't really know how to relate to children who are dying. We did another video for autism. That is what is so great about this show — when there is a tragedy, parents know that this is a safe haven.

Has there ever been a time when you were performing for a child and felt like you were going to cry?

Oh, sure. We had a child visit who they said only had a week to live. Beautiful child. She came in, her eyes weren't open, she was in a wheel chair, and her mom and dad were there. When you get the parents coming in, you know that they have been through so much, but here they are on *Sesame Street*, this place that their child wanted to go to so badly. It's very emotional. It's a challenge, because I have a healthy child who is now fourteen. So, that day, I put Elmo close to the little girl's ear and sang "Sing" and then I sang "Elmo's World," but I put her name into it. I saw a smile come over her face and I felt happy because I knew she understood what Elmo was saying to her.

Do parents often write to you or make contact again after an experience like that?

No, and I think it's because they don't realize that they can. As performers, we are so overwhelmed with emotion at that point, we don't say, "You know, you can connect again and let us know if your child [died] and know that we are there for you." During one shooting, though, a young lady was visiting the set who used to work with Sesame Workshop. She pulled me aside during a break and said, "Listen, I want you to know how much of an impact you have had on me. A friend of mine had a little boy," who was maybe three or four, "who went out to the park to play, his mommy and daddy was there and everything and when he got home, he complained of a stomachache and he passed away that night." She then showed me a photo of this cute little child with curly brown hair whose favorite thing in the world was Elmo.

It's just devastating to hear about a child dying like that, but I had to go back on set right then. So, I told the director and the crew about this child and I said, "I really want to give something back to the mom and dad." I took the little photo of that cute child and I put it in Elmo's hands. When Elmo went back into *Elmo's World*, he addressed the boy's parents: "Elmo is going to miss your son, too. We are going to miss him. We loved him, and we love you, too." And then we all had to take a break, it was too emotional — whew. But to be able to be connected to people that way is amazing.

The actors on *Sesame Street* are ethnically diverse. Are the puppeteers?

Oh, yeah. Carmen Osbahr who plays Rosita is from Mexico. I'm African-American. Hmm. Actually, there aren't that many in the U.S. production. It's Carmen and me, I guess, and Nora McNeil, who is mixed African-American and white.

Do you feel like Elmo has an African-American cultural sensibility?

Everybody says his dancing seems black. What's really funny is that I am not that good of a dancer when using my body, but I can do it with my arm. People tend to be very, very surprised when they see that I am an African-American. They think that I am a little short white guy, with glasses, bald headed. I'm totally different. But you know what? When you meet all of us, you can't tell which puppet we do.

Are there issues you want to address with Elmo that you feel you can't?

The thing that frustrates me is not even having the opportunity to address an issue. Like when 9/11 happened, the network put on this show where they had celebrities read letters from parents, but they didn't have the child represented. They didn't ask *Sesame Street*. We are the children's entity and you

need to have that presence.

Let's talk about your daughter. Does Shannon come hang out with you?

Shannon comes here all the time. Her mom and I are like sister and brother, so it works really, really well.

Meaning, despite being divorced you can all stay in the same apartment and it's not WWII?

Yes. Genia and I, we grew up together and just because we couldn't work out being married doesn't mean that we can't be really close — and that shows Shannon the importance of that decision. Instead of the whole Alec Baldwin situation — which is so sad. I have no idea what it going on there, but I just know that it is sad for the child. I'm not passing judgment on either one of them, because I don't know them, but I think it's wrong, just *wrong*, to go to the extremes of letting that stuff come out like that.

Meaning the public release [of Baldwin's irate voicemail to his daughter] is wrong?

Yes, wrong, wrong, wrong. Because what does that do for anybody? It's something that the public doesn't need to know at all. It doesn't help those parents help that child.

You believe you have had a really healthy co-parenting situation.

We are truly close-knit. When the divorce proceedings happened, my sister went with Genia. That said, there were a couple of times when we fought in front of Shannon, and hurt her, and we said, "We're not going to do this again." The hardest thing is facing your child, because they just cling to you — "Daddy, Mommy don't do this, can't you just be friends?" And it is the saddest thing.

But you think remaining married would have caused more tension?

Oh, totally. One hundred percent. Since then, if we do get in a situation where we are angry at each other — we stop, take a look at where Shannon is, and we pick it up later when she is not around.

Topic change: How was it working with a ghostwriter for *My Life as a Furry Red Monster*?

I went through four writers before it started working well. It was scary, because it wasn't coming together right. Fifty percent was okay, the other fifty percent was *terrible*. It wasn't until this woman, Becky Cabaza, a mom, came in and shaped it. The book has done fine, but it hasn't done very well.

Maybe it's confusing, since it's Elmo for grown-ups.

That's the thing. I would love to know how many parents bought it for their kids thinking it was a children's book.

I loved your book. I cried like eighteen times.

Oh, stop.

I'm serious. I related to it a lot. I also was a theater kid growing up and I also starred in *Guys and Dolls* and sang "Corner of the Sky" from *Pippin*.

[*laughs*] I think all of us sang "Corner of the Sky" at some point.

Really? I don't meet too many people who admit to it. In the book, you describe your mother,

who ran a daycare center out of your home, as hanging a framed portrait of Angela Davis over the TV. Did Elmo ever get to meet Angela — or did your mother?

No, none of us ever did. I think the closest we ever came was Whoopi, who is an incredible person and a good friend. There are some wonderful human beings who just happen to be in movies, but that isn't the end all and be all for them. Like Rosie. I love her dearly. She has a forum that she feels she should use to get her point across [her blog] and I just think, who else is even doing that?

Who else do you admire?

Martha Stewart. She is fabulous — unbelievable! I love being inspired by people who just go crazy with what they do. She is so excited. She turns into me when I put Elmo on my arm — she just gets so excited about food and design. We shot out at her original show — and the whole facility was so immaculate, you could eat off of the floor. She was so wonderful in how she worked with Elmo.

Really, she was comfortable with him?

Yes, her producers always love it when we come, because you can just feel the connection. I just think, how brilliant can you be? But in a way that is still very approachable.

Do you feel people understand that more now, since she went to prison?

Yes, because that experience showed you her sense of humor. I was on one of the first episodes of her new show. It was the day that everyone in the audience had on one of the crocheted parkas that someone had made for her in prison. Even Elmo had one on.

Can you imagine handing Elmo over to another performer?

No.