

Eric A. Kimmel (1946–)

By Ulrich H. Hardt

Eric A. Kimmel is Oregon's most prolific writer of children's and young adult books, with more than 120 books published and over half of them in print in 2015. He has been called "Oregon's teller of tales" and is known for his adaptations and retellings of folktales, especially Yiddish tales. His books have won praise from young readers and reviewers alike and have received state and national awards.

Kimmel was born on October 30, 1946, in Brooklyn, New York, and attended public school there. An important part of his education included classes at the East Midwood Jewish Center, where he learned legends and history and heard Hasidic stories. With a bachelor's degree (cum laude) in English from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania in 1967, he taught elementary school in Manhattan while completing a master's degree in education at New York University. After working as a teacher-librarian in the U.S. Virgin Islands, he completed his doctorate in education at the University of Illinois in 1973.

Beginning in 1973, Kimmel taught children's and young adult literature, creative writing, storytelling, library materials, and language arts at Indiana University South Bend. He began teaching in the College of Education at Portland State University in 1978. His articles in professional journals soon gave way to stories for children, published in magazines such as *Cricket*. His first novel, *The Tartar's Sword* (1974), received the Friends of American Writers award, and he has been writing award-winning children's books ever since. He retired from Portland State in 1993 and is now professor emeritus.

Many of Kimmel's stories are based on Ukrainian tales he heard from his maternal grandmother, from whom he also got a sense of oral storytelling. Many of his books are retellings of European folktales and fairytales, including those from the Grimm Brothers' collections, the African continent, China and Japan, Mexico, the Aztecs, and the Tlingit on the Pacific Northwest coast. Kimmel believes that stories change with time and with the storyteller, and earmarks of his adaptations of tales are sardonic wit and surprise endings.

Kimmel's books also celebrate legends and myths, wonders and miracles, and Jewish holidays. The Jewish folk hero Hershel, who is known for his ability to make arrogant and pompous people look foolish through witty retorts and funny sayings, appears in a number of his books. *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* (1989) won a Caldecott Honor award.

Kimmel's original stories, which are often set in the United States, include *Charlie Drives the Stage* (1989), partly set in La Grande; *The Great Texas Hamster Drive* (2007), which won the Oregon Spirit Book Award; *The Erie Canal Pirates* (2002); *A Horn for Louis* (2005); and *Four Dollars and Fifty Cents* (1990), which won the Paul A. Witty Short Story Award and the Mary Jane Carr Award (now the Oregon Book Award).

Among his other awards are the Caldecott Honor Medal, multiple National Jewish Book awards, and Sydney Taylor Picture Book awards. His books have been named to lists of "best books," "children's choice," and "teachers' choice" by the New York Public Library, the American Library Association, and the International Reading Association. He has been nominated or won awards in twelve states, including the Oregon Book Awards in 1991 and 2003; the Oregon Spirit Book Awards in 2007, 2010, 2013, and 2014; and the Ulrich H. Hardt Literacy Award from the Oregon Reading Association in 1989.

When not writing or posting on his blog, Kimmel visits schools throughout the United States and other countries, always looking for material for his next books. He lived with his wife Doris in Northeast Portland until her passing in 2025. They have one daughter and grandson.

Sources

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