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# Bears' books go on after nearly 50 years

By Joann Loviglio  
Associated Press

SOLEBURY, Pa. (AP)—A recent venture into his mother's basement became a Bear Country moment for Mike Berenstain.

Beyond the shelves of sketches and correspondence from hundreds of his parents' beloved Berenstain Bears books, he found furniture, kitchen appliances and other odds and ends. Why, he gently teased his mother in their studio recently, was she holding onto old stereo consoles and antique toasters?

"It's like the book where Mama Bear has a trunk full of what she calls 'valuable junk,'" Jan Berenstain replied with a laugh. "If it worked, I held onto it."

It's just one example of the connection between art and life in the Berenstain den.

Nearly 50 years after the Berenstain Bears first charmed preschoolers and their parents, the lovable ursine clan remains as close to its Bear Country roots as the Berenstain children remain to the books bearing its family name.

Stan and Jan Berenstain created hundreds of books until Stan Berenstain's death in 2005 at the age of 82. Mike Berenstain, the couple's son,

now collaborates with his mother in writing and illustrating new books at the same studio in an idyllic part of Bucks County, outside Philadelphia, that serves as inspiration for the books' setting.

The gentle stories of Mama Bear, Papa Bear, Brother Bear and Sister Bear, as always, are inspired by the Berenstain family—first the children and now the grandchildren.

"We remain relentlessly focused on the family relationship. There isn't one character who's the star of any of the books," Mike Berenstain said.

Mike Berenstain, 51, started collaborating in the late 1980s on the books with his parents after creating about 30 of his own children's books.

"Their greatest popularity was in the '80s, and now those kids are having children of their own," he said. "Bad economic times also make people want to have more family-oriented time together."

The bears are venturing further afield nowadays, with a website, toys, computer games, TV shows, a touring stage musical, a children's museum exhibit and an iPhone app.

A movie by "Night at the Museum" director Shawn Levy is in the script phase and has a tentative release

date of 2012, the 50th anniversary of the first Berenstain Bears book.

The books have tackled modern subjects such as online safety and childhood obesity, and the bears (or their human helpers) answer children's e-mails and letters, but the goal is to tell enduring, universal stories. Perennial favorites cover challenges of getting kids to do chores, defuse fears of the first day of school and teach values of kindness and generosity.

"They say jokes don't travel well, but family humor does," said Jan Berenstain, 87, who works in her studio daily. "Family values is what we're all about."

Stan and Jan Berenstain, both Philadelphia natives, were 18 when they met on their first day at art school in 1941. They married five years later and had two sons. The elder, writer Leo Berenstain, is involved with the business end of the family franchise.

Before their family of bear books was born, the young couple built a successful career. A cartoon series they produced called "All in the Family" ran in *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping* magazines for 35 years, and their art appeared in magazines including *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

The first Berenstain Bears book, "The Big Honey Hunt," was published in 1962. Over the years, more than 300 titles have been released in 23 languages—most recently in Arabic and Icelandic—touching on topics from patience to pollution and becoming a rite of passage for generations of young readers.

About 260 million copies of Berenstain Bears books have been held in the hands of children and their parents since their earliest books were published with the help of Theodor Geisel, a children's books editor at Random House better known as Dr. Seuss.

"He was a tough editor, but we learned a lot from him," Jan Berenstain said. Geisel's critiques, which the family still has in its large archives, mince no words: "When

weak rhymes are used to the extent these are, the reader feels he's stuck in a rut" is a typical remark.

Geisel also advised the Berenstains to change characters. "There are too many bears.... They'll be a millstone around your neck," Jan Berenstain recalled with a laugh.

The couple began working on their second book—this time with penguins—but took an about-face after "Honey Hunt" became a hit. The Berenstains' current publisher, HarperCollins, plans to release the unpublished "Nothing Ever Happens at the South Pole" next year along with several new Berenstain Bears books in the works.

"It's wonderful to do something you love for so many years," Jan Berenstain said. "Not everyone has that."

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