

Arts

HUDSON VALLEY TALENT | People are talking about ... Thomas Rockwell

An American Classic

by Stephen Haggerty

Quite a few nationally known writers have been enchanted by the quaint villages and scenic countryside of Dutchess County and have decided to nestle here. Thomas Rockwell, author of the American children's classic, *How to Eat Fried Worms*, is one of them. He came to Dutchess County to attend Bard College during the early 1950s from Vermont, and never left.

At 84, slender and of medium height, Tom moves easily about his country home in rural Poughkeepsie. *Fried Worms*, too, remains nimble. Published in 1973, the book sold

"Trying to write books is like eating worms."

several million copies during its first decade, and the author continues to harvest royalties sufficient to pay for a mid-class new car every two or three years.

Soft spoken and friendly, Tom punctuates conversation with chuckles and bursts of laughter in the manner of his father, America's most beloved illustrator, Norman Rockwell.

For this article, groups of local teenagers were asked if they knew of the famous book, which tells the tale of a bully named Tom who

coaxes a neighbor, Billy, into the promise of eating 15 night crawlers in 15 days. Tom agrees to pay \$50 if Billy succeeds. Many, indeed, had read it – and seen the 2006 motion picture. "It was great!" One tall, rugged boy blurted out. Another grinned. "I loved it." But one girl exclaimed, "That book was weird."

The face of Pawling resident John Brockway, a retired Carmel public school system teacher, curved into a smile when he explained how he used the book in class many times. "The kids loved it."

Tom Rockwell has enjoyed the emotion and commotion *Fried Worms* has stirred over the years. He read from his book at schools in Dutchess County for a while. He chuckles as he tells how some principals promised students that if the kids all did their summer reading, the principals would eat a fried worm during an assembly – and they did.

Tom first dreamed of being a writer during his childhood in West Arlington, Vermont, as his father created some of America's most beloved paintings, such as *The Four Freedoms*. Tom modeled for his father's 1942 *Saturday Evening Post* cover, *Reading His Sister's Diary*. He plays a grinning boy seated at the girl's dressing table. For *The Graduate*, June 1959, his father painted Tom in a cap and gown.

Tom's mother, Mary, aspired to write a kid's book one day, passing the aspiration along to Tom. She liked to read *The Hobbit* to neighborhood children, sometimes at the one-room schoolhouse adjoining her property.



The author, left, with Thomas Rockwell | PHOTO COURTESY STEPHEN HAGGERTY

Tom served as editor of his high school newspaper and yearbook and graduated as Valedictorian of Arlington Memorial High School in Vermont in 1951.

For his first book project, Tom ghostwrote the popular 1960 biography of his father, called *My Adventures as an Illustrator*. While he and his father had plenty of saleable material, creating a children's book became an ordeal. Tom endured years of writing stacks of pages that did not amount to a published book. Finally, one day a children's book editor in New York invited him for a consultation. But she pointed out flaws, splashing his enthusiasm with cold water. "Trying to write books is like eating worms," the voice in his head told him at the time. Then the magical happened. The voice added, "Why not write a book about a boy who eats worms."

Yet even with his native creativ-

ity, he found it agonizing to come up with exciting events for each chapter. "You'd just have to sit there and come up with them. Sometimes reject them. You just keep trying." For example, he devised a chapter where the bully, Tom, plans an action-packed day as an effort to make Billy fall asleep before eating his daily worm. The bully fails – and the chapter succeeds.

At one point, however, the book hit a potential snag. Tom thought his book might be doomed. "I thought a worm might poison a child." Despite fearing his physician might kill the dream, he confronted him. The doctor laughed and told Tom that eating worms won't hurt humans. "In fact, there's a lot of protein in them."

Many publishers turned down this work of genius, believing teachers would find the fare unappetizing. One wise executive at Random House conceded that point, but

published it because he sensed that kids would love it. Though unusual, it teaches kids a way to stand up to bullies and even to befriend them.

As a children's writer, Tom possesses an extraordinary ability to portray kids as they act in real-life, much as his father did in his paintings. Tom says he never thought about it much, but agrees that his father's depictions of spirited youth – such as children scurrying past a "No Swimming" sign and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* – must have rubbed off on him. "I suppose I picked up something from my father. He studied kids since he was 15. He understood people. That's what his career was based on. It's the family business."

It makes complete sense that 4th through 6th graders in Missouri voted *Fried Worms* their favorite book two years after its publication. What is the name of the award they bestowed on him? The Mark Twain Award, of course.

With all the discussion with Tom about eating fried worms, who could resist asking, "Tom, have you ever eaten a Fried Worm?"

He bursts into the Rockwell laugh. "No. I felt bad about it, though. I meant to, but never got around to it." Another laugh. "I should."

Would you like to ease your guilty conscience and eat a fried worm for this interview?

"No. No. Ha, ha, ha!" he demurred.

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Worth getting up for!

Pawling Farmers Market



Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

June 17 - September 30

On the Pawling Green Charles Colman Blvd

pawlingfarmersmarket.org

Pets of The Month

PEPPER & PUMPKIN

Breed: American Short Hair

Owners: Samantha and Alex Torricos

Age: 9 years old

Natural Habitat: Love to lounge on any bed or couch

Personality: These two big-boy brothers couldn't be any more different! They are each cuddly and loving but only with their favorite humans. Both can be a "scaredy cat" at times, but mostly Pumpkin is soft-spoken and young at heart, while Pepper is generally reserved and will loudly remind you when it's time to eat. They love to hang out, watching wildlife pass them by on their screened-in porch. Sleeping on every bed in the house is their favorite pastime.



If you would like to submit a picture for Pet of the Week, please send a digital image to submissions@pawlingrecord.org with the above information and a telephone number where we can reach you for confirmation. We welcome all submissions and regret that we will not be able to print every entry.