

# Pets Gone Wild

Nelvana develops a new preschool toon based on Dan Yaccarino's charming book about a feisty little girl and the wild animals that share her home. **by Ramin Zahed**

Zahed

If you've ever leafed through a Dan Yaccarino book or watched his popular preschool show *Oswald* on Noggin, you know that he's a true American original. Praised for his brilliant jelly-bean colors, his retro design scheme and his charming children's books that stick with you no matter how old you are, the New York-based author/illustrator/TV producer is ready to launch a new animated series, produced by Toronto studio Nelvana.

The 26X30 toon is called *Willa's Wild Life* and centers on a charming six-year-old girl who lives with her dad and insists on bringing all kinds of animals home to live with them. "She's a little red-haired girl with a big personality," says Irene Weibel, Nelvana's VP of development and the show's exec producer. "Her dad has a hard time saying no to her, so they have animals like penguins, giraffes, elephants and seals

living with them!" Weibel also likens her heroine to another red-head, Lucy Ricardo. "She is nice and means well, but chaos always seems to follow her!" explains Weibel, who discovered the property in its book form under the title *An Octopus Followed Me Home*. "She also has that affinity with animals, a bit like Christopher Robin in the Winnie the Pooh books."

Yaccarino remembers the exact time he actually came up with the idea of the show. "I remember I was at this performance with my wife, and to be honest, I was very bored, so I looked at the program and discreetly scribbled some ideas on it," says the author. "The ideas were all about this little girl who keeps dragging these huge animals home and they all end up being integrated at this kid's home."

After he fleshed out the story, Yaccarino also wanted it be a sort of homage to the wonderful Little Golden Books he was fond of as a kid. "I was fortunate to do a Little Golden Book recently, and it was a great honor," he notes. "That's what I mostly think about when I want to write a book or create a TV series. It's all about what I would enjoy, what did I like to watch as a kid!"

Weibel is certainly on the same wavelength. "The most important thing to me when

I look at a property is does it tell a compelling story for kids? Is it unique in the marketplace? Although Willa didn't have a name in the book, she was such a great character that you knew she could carry a show. You

combine that with a great design, and you're very lucky when you have those two

elements in

one show."

It's also

about pre-

senting a great

story. "We are all

drawn to great stories,

even if you're

two years old!"

The preschool

crowd

will

certainly

get a big

kick

out of the menagerie of animals Willa entertains at home. There's Jenny the Giraffe, Coco the Kangaroo, the elephants Dinky and Ro, the penguins Inky, Blinky and Bob (who live in the freezer), Samuel the Camel and, a couple of seals known as Steve and Eydie!

According to Weibel, one of the central themes of the series is that everyone has a different learning style and a different personality. "Some of the animals are childlike and some are adults," she notes. "For example, Jenny the Giraffe is more like a substitute. We embrace the fact that everyone doesn't learn or communicate the same way."

"I believe in creating things for kids that are in the highest



Dan Yaccarino in his New York studio.



caliber,” says Yaccarino. “I don’t think you can slack off just because you’re writing for kids. I want the show to be as beautiful and stylish as can be. We’ve come up with some great motifs and backgrounds for the show. I also want the writing to be sharp and entertaining on different levels, because both kids and their parents are watching the shows. You can also make the show more palatable with the voice casting and the music.”

The author and illustrator of over 30 children’s books (including *Good Night, Mr. Night*; *Unlovable* and *Zoom! Zoom! Zoom! I’m Off to the Moon!*), Yaccarino is very hands-on when it comes to producing a TV show. “He created

*Oswald* for Nick and he was very involved with that project. He’s a very detailed producer,” says Weibel. Before entering the children’s TV world, Yaccarino produced a couple of animated commercials, but *Oswald* taught him about the day-to-day challenges of overseeing an animated show. “It was a huge learning curve for me,” says Yaccarino. “At this point, I’ve become far more sure of what I’m doing. Now I know if you hire someone to do x, I know exactly what they’ll be doing.”

At MIPTV, a two-minute promo of

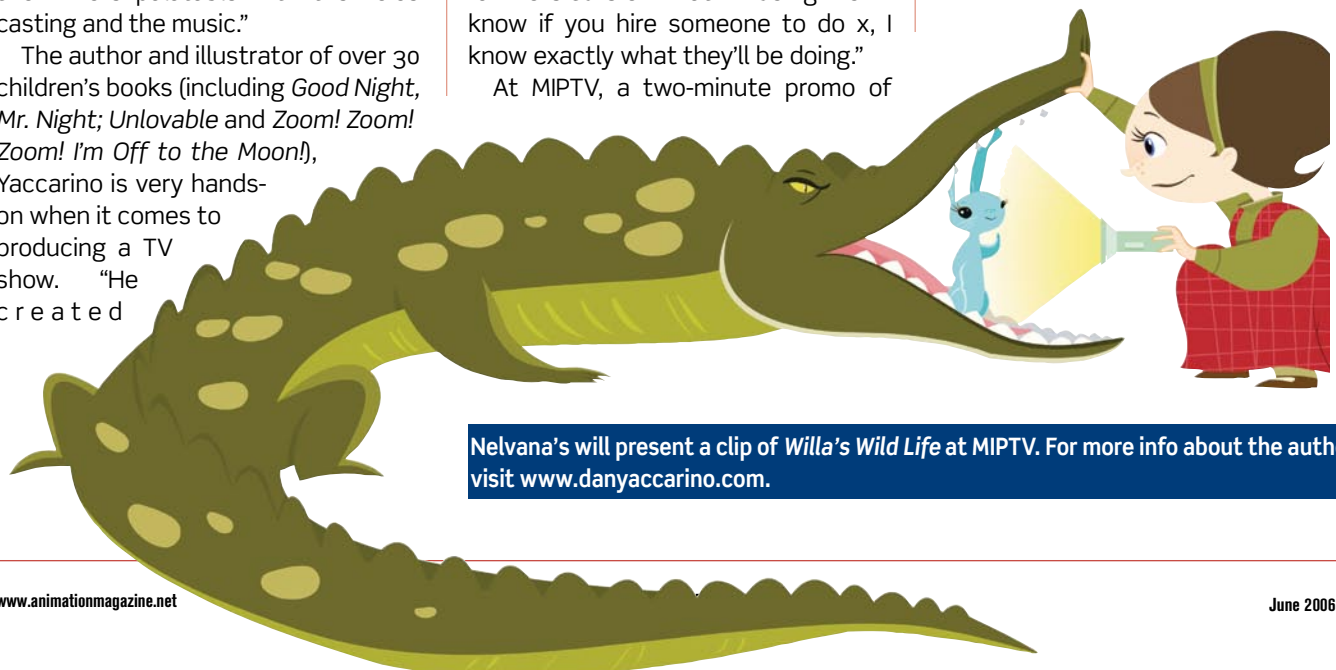


Irene Weibel

the show will be available for prospective international buyers and partners. The producers believe that the show will be animated in 2D digital, using Toon Boom’s popular animation software.

No matter how many viewers discover the show in the years to come, there’s one five-year-old girl who can’t wait for the toon to be completed. That’s Lucy, Yaccarino’s daughter, who is both the inspiration and target audience for the toon. “She has the ability to wrap me around her fingers,” says Yaccarino. “Just like the book, her father does anything she wants her to. She also adores animals and we often go the Bronx zoo or the San Diego zoo when we’re in California.”

Of course, life has a way of cramping art’s style, because Yaccarino is allergic to cats and dogs. “We will be taking Lucy to the pet store in a week or so for her birthday, but I have a feeling that we may end up with either a parakeet or a goldfish—nothing with fur!” Then, he pauses for a bit and adds, “Just to let you know, I had *many* pets growing up: fish, parakeets, a parrot, a snake, a chameleon, mice, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, cats and a terrier who gave birth to 11 healthy puppies on Christmas morning, 1972!” Now Willa would definitely approve of that! ■



Nelvana’s will present a clip of *Willa’s Wild Life* at MIPTV. For more info about the author, visit [www.danyaccarino.com](http://www.danyaccarino.com).