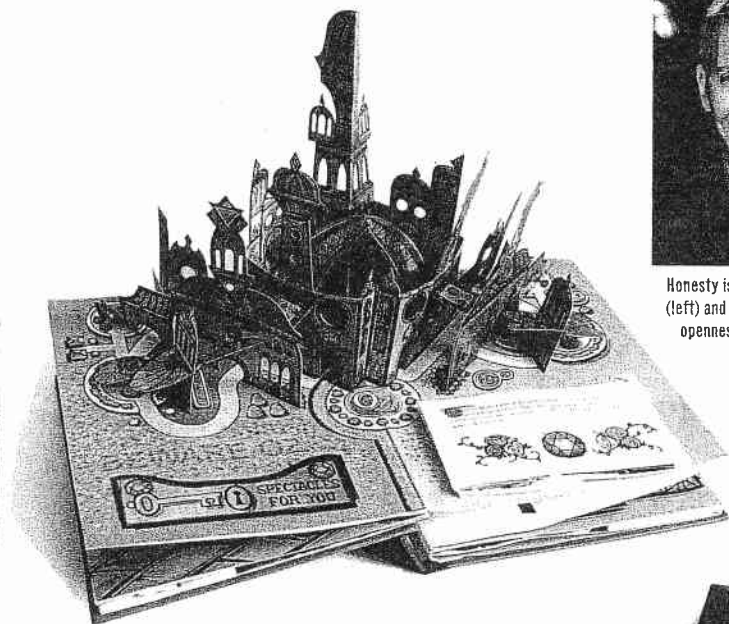


# Not just kid stuff

Robert Sabuda and James Howe, two successful creators of children's books, talk about coming out in their corner of the publishing world **By Michael Giltz**



Honesty is their policy: By being out in their careers, Sabuda (left) and Howe have contributed to an atmosphere of greater openness in the children's and young adult book industries.

Children's books have always benefited from the talent of queer authors and illustrators—on the QT, that is. But a new generation of artists no longer feel the need to be discreet. They're breaking free of the old restrictions and creating work that accurately reflects their lives.

Take James Howe, 55-year-old author of the beloved *Bunnacula* series—which has eight million copies in print—and a major figure in the children's book industry for more than 20 years. He's coming out as a gay man with the publication of his new book, *The Misfits* (Atheneum, \$16).

Robert Sabuda, on the other hand,

was never "in." Creator of numerous witty best-sellers—among them *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Little Simon, \$24.95), one of the most complex and commercially successful pop-up books in years—the prolific 36-year-old Sabuda has been open from the start of his career. He even includes the fact in his press biography, sent out to reviewers, reporters, and librarians.

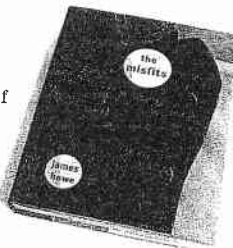
Has this candor cost him? Far from it. Sabuda's newest project, a series of *Young Naturalist Pop-Up Handbooks* (Hyperion, \$19.99 each), is a collaboration with his 30-year-old partner,

Matthew Reinhart (creator of the adult-oriented and hilarious *Pop-Up Book of Phobias* and *Pop-Up Book of Nightmares*).

Sabuda thinks there's one obvious reason that his career comfort level keeps improving. "Children's publishing is populated by 97% women," he offers, "and they have a very different perspective on things, I feel, than men do."

This year it was the much admired James Howe who gave the old ways a thorough shaking up. His coming out was a bombshell in the industry. True, his past work has offered clues

for the analytically minded. He's penned more than 70 titles, including the *Pinky and Rex* series (*Pinky* is a boy who loves stuffed animals and the color pink) and the *Sebastian Barth* mysteries, which feature a girl who wants to play on the school football team. ("She has possibilities," laughs Howe.)



Howe's most famous book, though, is *Bunnacula*, about a bunny rabbit who may be a vampire, written with his first wife while she was dying of cancer. He married again, but after many years he and his wife separated. He has a daughter and is in a committed relationship with a 39-year-old lawyer, Mark Davis.

In the process, he's published a young adult novel, *The Misfits*, which features four middle-school kids, including Joe, a gay boy who proudly embraces his fashion sense and flamboyant persona. The book, it seems, has burnished Howe's reputation brighter than ever.

"James Howe is a god, do you hear me? A god in children's publishing," gushes Sabuda. "Everyone knows *Bunnacula*. Everyone knows his work. He's well-loved, well-appreciated, and well-read. He's legendary, so for him to come out is a big deal."

It's also meant a great deal artistically to Howe, who, since coming out privately to friends and his publishers, has done some of his most challenging and best-reviewed work, including 1997's *The Watcher*, a complex, grippingly plotted young adult novel whose central characters include an adolescent boy who may be gay.

"Being in the closet for a long time," says Howe, "I always had a hard time coming out and saying directly what I wanted and needed to say. *The Misfits* is my first opportunity to do that—not just deal with a boy who's different and kind of hedge the issue, but come right out and say, 'This kid is gay,' and get a message across that this is OK."

To Sabuda, it's no surprise that coming out would help Howe creatively. "I have to be this way in my life in order for me to make good work," he says. Librarians and teachers don't always comment to Sabuda about his being gay, but he knows it's less of an issue now than ever before.

"I don't know whether they close their eyes or whether they just don't care," Sabuda says. "It's like going to Broadway. You're not going to say, 'Oh, this show was fantastic, but I hate it because it was put together by all these gay people.'" ■

Find more on Robert Sabuda, James Howe, and links to related Internet sites at [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com)