

Joey Benun

Encourages Kids to Think Big

by Marcella Comerford

Joey Benun found himself in a conversation one day with his niece and nephews, puzzling over the succession of really big numbers—think, more than trillions—and found his little relatives getting so excited over the idea of figuring out and understanding big numbers that he started thinking about them a bunch, too. Benun saw what he describes as “non-math loving kids” going gaga over big numbers and began doing some research.

Benun came up with the character of Pebbles to lead the way through his ideas and lessons, and before long, *Pebbles and the Biggest Number* was on its way to becoming a real-live children’s book and Benun’s goals of explaining math and engaging kids became a reality. As a first-time author, Benun was also the recipient of the Purple Dragonfly Book Awards Grand Prize, which is kind of a really big deal.

It’s easy to see why *Pebbles and the Biggest Number* earned the grand prize—Benun has some big takeaways he wants to see kids gain from his book, and clearly did a lot of thinking, research,

learning, and investing thought and care into the effect his book would have on children.

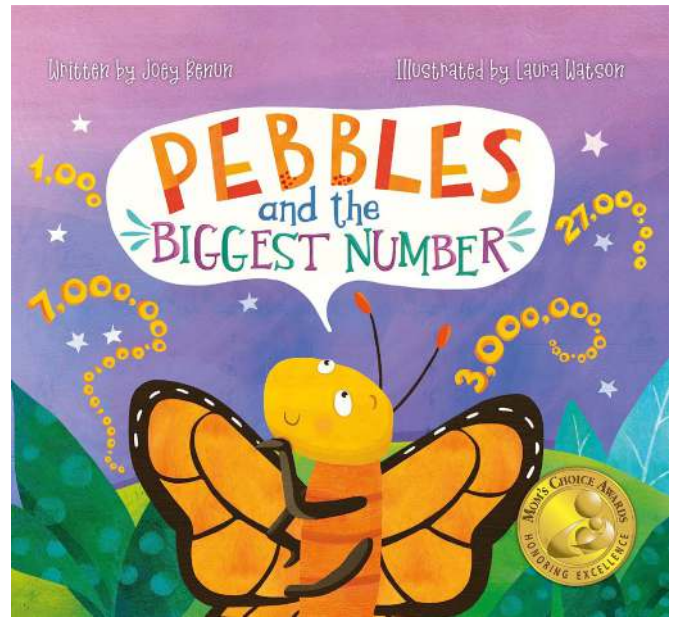
One of those main messages, for Benun, was to give kids the go-ahead to “Think big.” Benun says, “As a child, I was puzzled by the fact that many grown adults were unaware of the names of numbers beyond a trillion. The concept of using prefixes to understand big numbers, like ‘bi’ for 2 and ‘tri’ for 3, and ‘quad’ for 4 to form ‘quadrillion,’ seemed like basic knowledge that many adults overlooked. Thinking big can be seen as stretching one’s imagination just a little bit further, like bridging the gap between



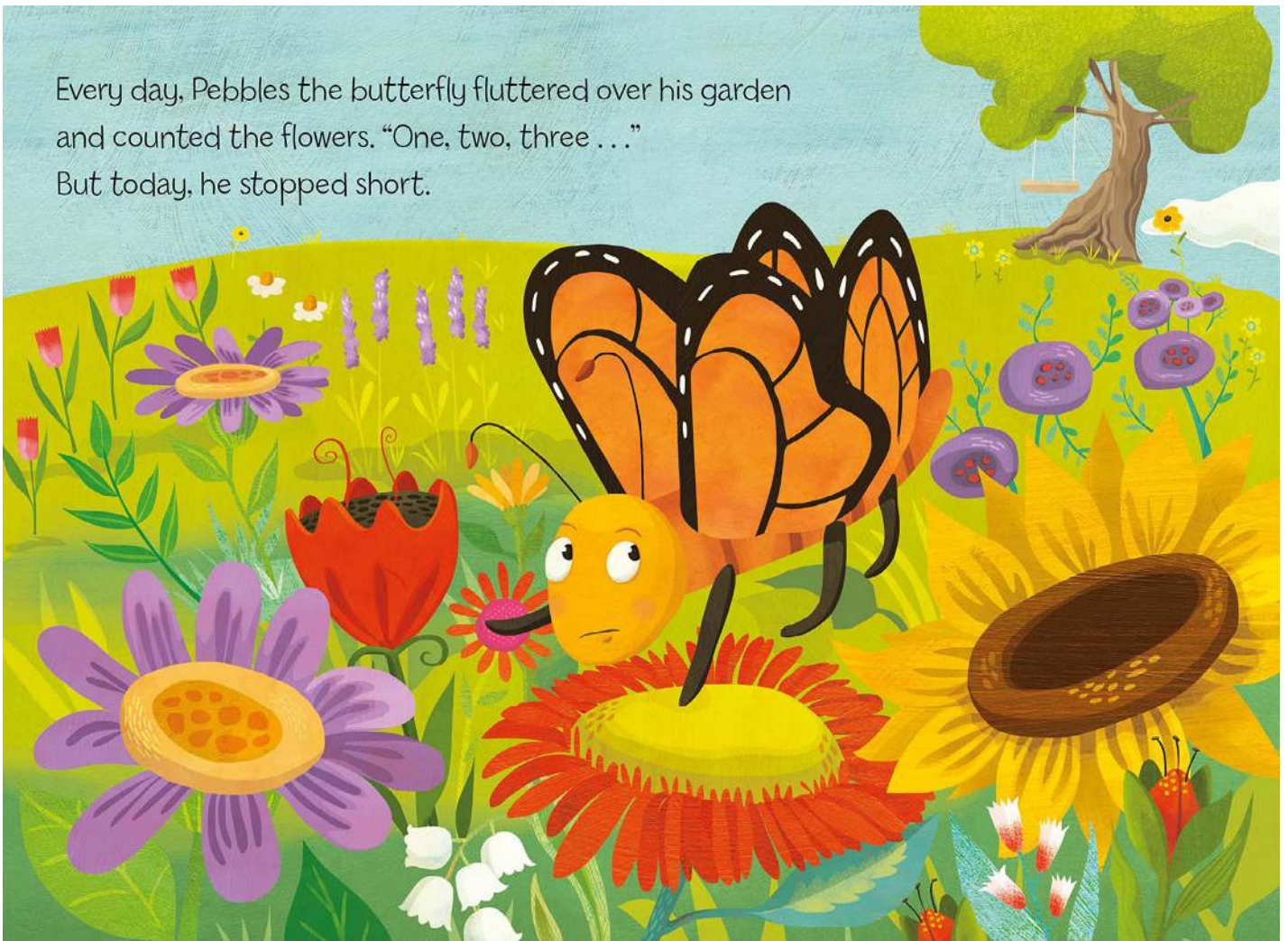
trillion and quadrillion. Once that gap is uncovered, it opens the door to boundless discovery.” How cool of a concept is that? One that is applicable to adults as well, and really a fun thing to think about.

“And who better to stretch their imaginations than children?” Benun continues. “It’s what they love to do—thinking in terms of the biggest, the strongest, the tallest. If we can train kids from a young age to think big and expand their imaginations, they will grow accustomed to doing so as adults. These skills can then be utilized to teach, build, create innovative things, and ultimately contribute to improving society as a whole.”

Big-picture thinking is Benun’s specialty, and if he can get kids to think big, he can effectively help make the world a better place, too. All within an entertaining, colorful, and fast-paced book—which remarkably appeals to not only little kids, but their big brothers and sisters, too. Everyone in the family can get



Every day, Pebbles the butterfly fluttered over his garden and counted the flowers. “One, two, three . . .” But today, he stopped short.

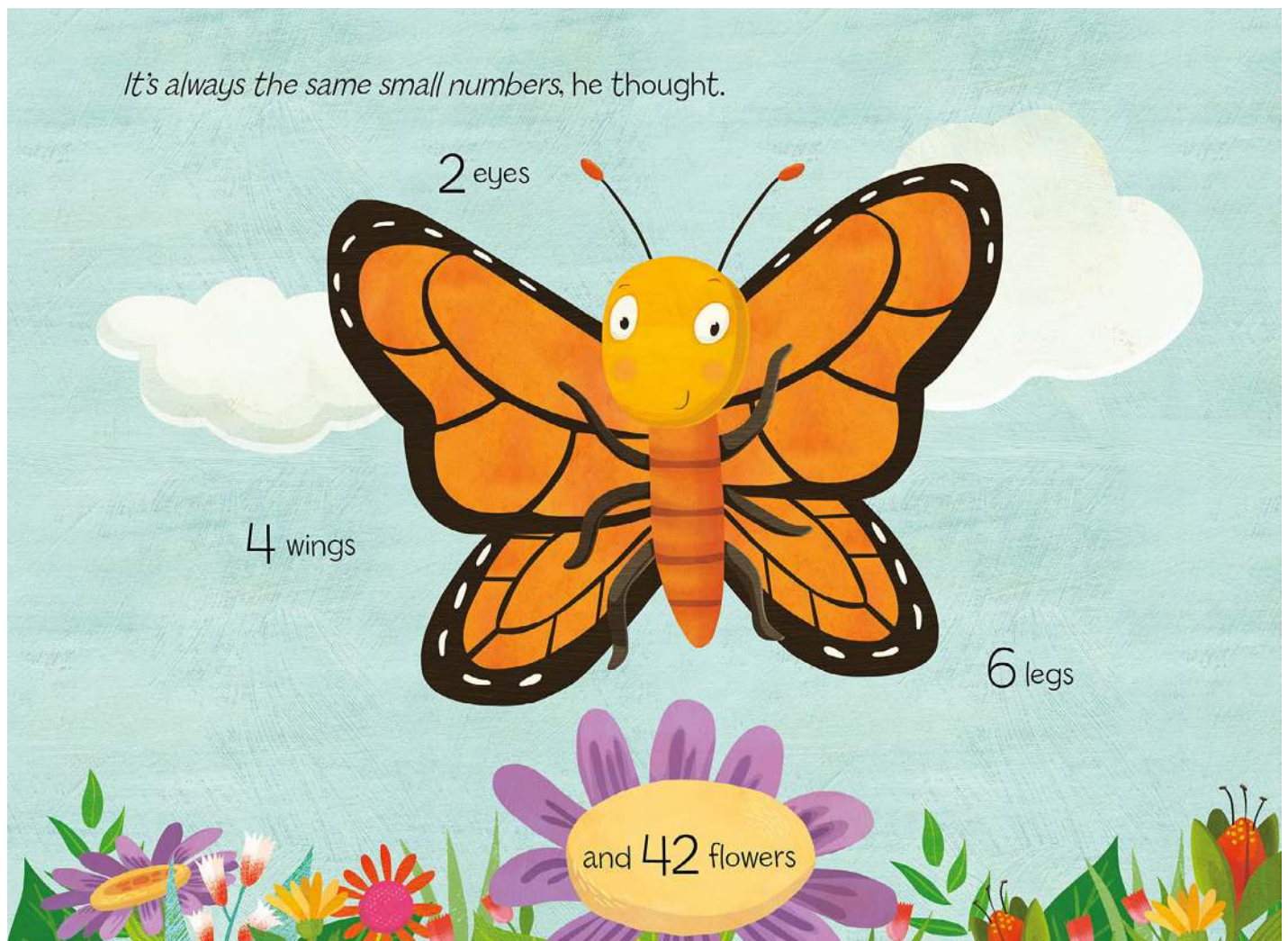


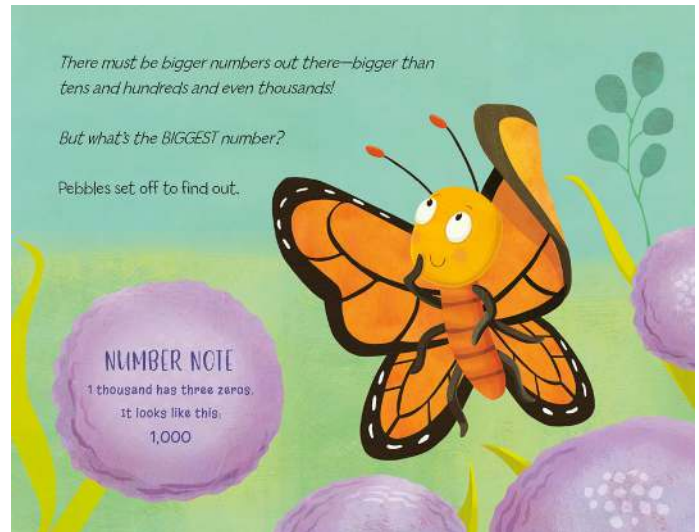
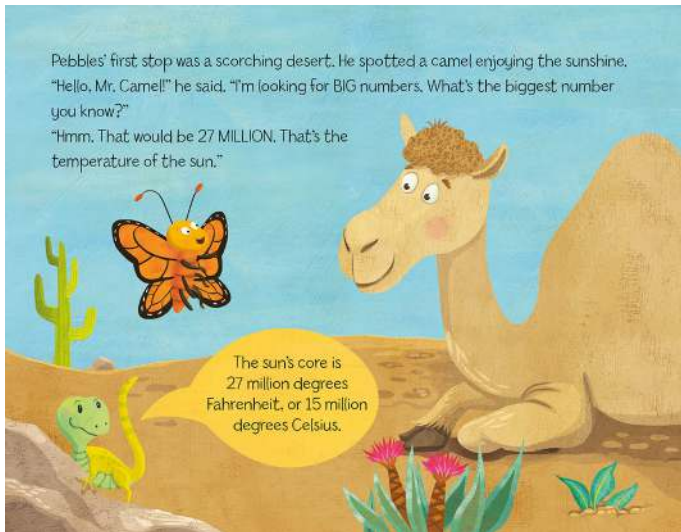
something out of sharing this book, and the conversations and questions sparked from it have an ageless status.

It should be noted that Benun actually started quite early in the publishing game, having completed a series of comic books by age nine—a cosmic glimpse of what was to come. Comic books still hold a place in his heart, but time manages to keep that love to a fond memory. “I still do love comics, although my busy schedule doesn’t allow me as much leisure time to enjoy them as I used to. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Captain Underpants* were some of my childhood favorites. I loved the carefree feeling they brought while reading, and I appreciated how they opened my mind in a fun and engaging way. I’d really love to get back into comic writing again. Many readers have urged me to bring back *The Ketchup Monster*, it’s something I’ve been considering.” One can only hope he will revive his comic obsession. It certainly would be interesting to see what Benun would do with it now!

Benun had to learn a few things of his own before finding out what was important to teach the next generations. He says some of the most important things that have shaped his character and who he is in the world is being able to “Believe in myself and ignore the naysayers. The first two people I approached about writing a children’s book wrote me off as foolish and naive. I won’t sell any copies. There are billions of books out there. Why waste my time? My response was ‘I don’t need you to believe in me. I believe in myself. And that’s all that I need.’ I felt powerful at that moment, that I could do anything I put my mind to. This was a turning point for me. I started to dive headfirst into exciting ideas, rather than sitting back and letting others discourage me.”

He says he also learned the art of writing for kids. “It is easy to ramble on when writing for adults, but when writing for kids, every word carries a lot of weight. My limit was 1,000 words, excluding the fun facts, so there were times where I literally spent hours discussing with my editors the perfect word or words to be





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used. One of my best ‘aha’ moments was when my editor and I coined the phrase ‘dazzling display,’ capturing the magical moment when Pebbles and Ms. Eagle gaze at the stars.”

Benun seems to have no end of teachable moments in life, and that is because he takes every chance he gets to learn, and enthusiasm like that is palpable in a book. For new and aspiring writers, Benun offers, “Before you inspire others, you need to inspire yourself. Your writing will naturally resonate with others then, making it all the more impactful and meaningful.”

It’s no surprise that reading was a big part of his own life growing up, judging by his impeccable memory of his favorite book as a kid, *The Series of Unfortunate Events*. “I was intrigued by the diabolical plots of Count Olaf and the clever ways the lovable Baudelaires managed to escape each and every situation. One memorable moment was when two-year-old Sunny Baudelaire climbed out of the Ersatz Elevator with her razor-sharp teeth, retrieving the rope to save her siblings below.”

But as an adult, Benun leans toward—and this may be no surprise, given the intensity with which he pursues goals, learning, and ideas—motivational books. “I love a good,

motivational book that spurs me to action. I recently read *Originals* by Adam Grant and really enjoyed it. One highlight for me was how the book debunked the criticism I often received from my school teachers while growing up. I tend to procrastinate when it comes to creative tasks, and Adam notes that there is a positive side to this practice—creativity often peaks under pressure. This realization allowed me to embrace my creative process with a new perspective.”

Benun does relax though, and he can prove it. “The most enjoyable part of my day has got to be sitting at my work desk, sipping a piping cup of freshly brewed La Colombe coffee while cracking jokes with my coworkers.”

A glimpse into this author’s personal life shows a love for and importance placed on family, faith, and tradition. Benun says, “As for my meaningful times, it’s definitely Saturdays, or as we Jews call it “Shabbat.” It’s a time where I gather with my extended family for an elaborate meal prepared by my mother or grandmother and catch up with everyone. We also disconnect from technology, which means I get to take a much-needed break from my three jobs, allowing me to relax and recharge.”

Pebbles and the Biggest Number has had an enormous impact on Benun, who says he is so grateful for the 500 reviews and counting that the book has received. “Thankfully, it’s been overwhelmingly positive. I’ve heard from a few parents that after reading this book to their kids, their kids started asking out-of-the-box questions, applying the ‘Think Big’ philosophy to the world around them. I’ve also heard some kids say, ‘I want to be an author too!’ It brings me great joy to see this making a mark on others. It’s hard to express in words.”

Benun says he found out about winning the Purple Dragonfly Grand Prize when a friend texted him with a big congratulations on winning. “I scrambled to see what she was talking about. I remember smiling really big and walking around work not being able to contain myself. It felt awesome.”

As for what’s next? Will there be more books in the future to look forward to? For Benun, it’s a resounding “Yes! Hard to say (what it will be.) My imagination is always running wild so it can literally be anything up next. But most likely it will be a sequel, with Pebbles exploring a familiar topic while uncovering novel information, much like in the first book.” Benun’s addition to the children’s literary world will continue to have far-reaching benefits, and seeing what he’s going to get us all thinking about next is sure to be a treat.

For more information about Joey Benun and his books, visit biggestnumber.com. ●