

# From Cold Feet to Happy Feet

*by Richard Michelson on November 20, 2006*

I've gotten close to stardom. When my daughter attended the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, I went to see her introduce the person who was going to introduce Bill Cosby. But I missed her minute of fame because I had excused myself to the men's room, where I found myself standing at a urinal alongside Billy Crystal. After we both returned to our seats (he up front, me to the nosebleed section), I could see him settling in next to Robin Williams and doubtless mentioning meeting me, just as I was mentioning our encounter to my wife.

This is the only story I have to tell, when kids ask me if I got to hang out with Robin Williams. Why do they ask? Because lately, when I speak at schools, I am introduced as the author of, among other books, *Happy Feet*. *Happy Feet*? The movie with Robin Williams as the voice of the dancing penguins Ramón and Lovelace, which opened Friday?

Well, no. My *Happy Feet* is a story of Harlem's old Savoy Ballroom. It's about a father who gives up his dream of stardom as a dancer so that he can provide a stable life for his son (much as my father gave up his fantasies for me). He opens his own business—a shoe-shine shop—across the street from the legendary ballroom. *Happy Feet* was published last year to good reviews and middling sales. It was praised in African-American and trade publications, and last fall, when the New York Times Book Review featured one of E.B. Lewis's brilliant illustrations from the book, I watched the book's sales ranking climb from the mid-700,000s on Amazon to the top 7,000s. And then I watched it quickly return to where it had started. There was a much smaller spike after I published an essay titled, "No, I'm Not Black and I Can't Dance Either," to answer those critics who felt Jews (like me) should stick to writing stories about Jews, and leave children's tales of African-American history to African-Americans.

But it seems nobody has reservations about Jews writing in the voice of penguins. Maybe it's the black-and-white tuxedo look that allows all races to identify. "I can't wait to see your movie," the kids say, and I've even received an errant e-mail asking for my autograph. Suddenly, my book sales are picking up momentum, so I have hatched this plan to help them along. I am urging all booksellers to set my *Happy Feet* amid their *Happy Feet* merchandising displays. There are enough similarities to mislead even an astute shopper.

The Warner Bros. film's tag line is "Warning: May Cause Toe-Tapping." My story begins, "My toes are tappin' and my knees are swingin'." In the movie, Lovelace says, "Turn to the penguin next to you... and give him a great big hug!" The boy nicknamed Happy Feet in my book says, "Daddy catches me and holds me close." It's almost a case of pure plagiarism, but rather than sue, I am planning on selling more books by mistake than I previously had by design. Maybe my publisher can print a new dust jacket alluding to the tie-in. It was, after all, the actress Lana Turner who named the Savoy "the home of the happy feet," so the Hollywood pedigree

already exists. I do regret not cybersquatting on the Web site Happyfeet.com, but Birkenstock got there before me.

I'm not bitter, though. I'm too busy working on my next picture book. I'm calling it Soon to Be a Major Motion Picture – Coming to a Bookstore Near You.