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How to do 'Jazzy Philosophy': An Interview with Maria daVenza Tillmanns

by [Nathan Eckstrand](#) and [Maria daVenza Tillmanns](#)

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WHY WE ARE IN NEED OF TAILS



Maria daVenza Tillmanns does philosophy with children in an underserved school in San Diego. She says of her work, “Doing philosophy with young children is like painting with ideas, giving us a fuller and richer sense of their world. Philosophy is no longer grey, but bursting with color.” This interview focuses on her most recent work, *Why We Are in Need of Tails* (which was illustrated by the award-winning Blair Thornley). The book discusses how to build meaningful relationships; you can learn more about it [here](#).

What is *Why We Are in Need of Tails* about? Why did you decide to write it?

The story is about the need to reconnect to others, the world around us, and ourselves. We have become too susceptible to empty rhetoric and others telling us what to think and do. The influence of advertising is overwhelming in ways we might not even be aware of. Increasingly, we have more reasons to distrust rather than trust each other.

And if we trust, it often takes on the form of blind trust. We want to have blind trust and become cynical if we feel betrayed. How can we learn to trust again but with our eyes wide open instead of closed? How can we feel we belong to the world trustingly yet wisely? Huk and Tuk show how we can find ways to reconnect and develop meaningful relationships. Relationships we can build on in a constructive and creative way, open to change and integrating the wonders of being alive.

I had been writing articles based on my work doing philosophy with children in an underserved school in San Diego, when out of the blue, this whimsical story emerged, as if to take a break from all the heady stuff. This short story presents philosophical ideas in a playful, uncomplicated way. It is my way of painting with ideas, and an invitation for others to do the same. Philosophy is about life and cannot be purely theoretical, which it became when it became an ivory tower discipline. Apart from Nietzsche being a fascinating philosopher, he is also a literary genius. His writing is inspirational, it's provocative and puzzling; it makes you think and rethink. He has tremendous insight into the human condition and human psychology. This insight is best conveyed through creative writing. It develops a deeper understanding. It is similar to zen koans which by creating doubt and perplexity force you to think at deeper levels in order to create a sense of aha! Understanding exists on a level that goes beyond knowing. My hope is that more philosophers will engage in philosophizing on paper. There really is no method to this kind of writing. Just as in art, artists develop their own style. And philosophers should also be able to develop their own style of philosophizing.

Your book is categorized as fiction. While philosophers (Sartre, Kierkegaard) have written fiction in the past as a way to convey philosophical ideas, it is rarely used. What led you to choose it?

I think fiction is more accessible to people of all walks of life and can be more fun to read. My short story is meant as a picture book for adults and young adults. And as in the case of picture books although meant for children – I am thinking of authors such as Arnold Lobel and Leo Lionni – picture books are metaphorical and can be interpreted and understood in many ways by all ages. They are a great resource for engaging in dialogue. I plan to write a next picture book with Blair Thornley in which I will give a short summary of one of Lobel's or Lionni's stories and have the characters Huk and Tuk discuss them in a way to promote philosophical dialogue. I hope this would give parents and teachers new ways of discussing complex life issues such as what it means to be brave, or why is being different considered with apprehension and distrust?

I like to think of my style of writing as jazzy philosophy, in that it is improvisational. As in jazz there are themes running across the story, but these themes are improvised on. And I'm not quite sure myself what direction it will go in until I'm actually writing it. In this way, it has a way of writing itself. This is stark contrast to academic writing, which is research-based. My writing has never been strictly academic, but still found enough interest among several academic journals and professional magazines to be published. My guess is because my writing is philosophical and not strictly academic. Philosophical issues focus on questions regarding the human condition, regarding reality, how we know things, morality. While many academics do focus on these topics as well, I rarely see anyone among my colleagues philosophizing on these topics and just giving a stab at what they think about these topics. The research is very impressive and certainly indicates their focus and interest in what they are writing about. But what do *they* think? How is climate change influencing their thinking? How does the present human condition worry them or not? Do trans people change their thinking about what it is to be a human being?



Maria daVenza Tillmanns

What is the audience for the book?

The book is mostly for adults and inviting them to play along with me while thinking about complex issues around the difference between knowing and understanding or between monologue and dialogue or what it means to truly listen to another person and being able to hear them the way they hear themselves. It's about polyphonic listening. It's about feeling at home in the world we are already a part of. So often people see the meaning of life originating in the after-life or in reincarnation or in life being predetermined. The meaning of life, for me, comes from being alive. I'm amazed what it means to be alive and breathing, period. I don't need any other explanations to give meaning and value to this life. So often people, who are close to death, value life for its own sake. This story invites people to enjoy life for its own sake. To live a full life, a life rich in meaning, which really means taking little for granted. Sure, we need to take

certain things for granted to get through the day, but we also seem to take much for granted by not questioning things more. Children question everything; they are curious about everything and bombard you with questions to engage you in this mysterious world. They are not necessarily looking for answers, as much as they want to explore the world with you. And children are quite alive. They live a life of curiosity and engagement. And so should we.

Explain the purpose of your “Philosophy with Children” program. How did your work with that program influence this book?

Doing philosophy with children showed me how entrenched children are in life, if not more so than most adults. It also shows me that they have deeply insightful ideas about people and the world they live in simply because they are alive. Life itself informs them of what matters in life. We may think of morality as learned but I strongly believe it is an aspect of being alive. Children not only have ideas about the world, but also have a knack for connecting the dots, so to speak, in a way many adults have lost. Children’s imagination should be fostered not tamed. We become very knowledgeable about the world, but often at the expense of our deeper understanding of the world. Doing philosophy with children enables them to further develop their imagination and innate understanding of the world.

Why We are in Need of Tails aspires to our imaginary world and hopes to create deeper understanding and with it a greater sense of emotional intelligence. We have created a world where knowledge is often gained at the expense of emotional intelligence or spiritual intelligence. Intelligence requires deep thinking and deep questioning which starts with creative imagination.

Your bio on the [publisher’s website](#) makes a notable claim, that philosophy for you is an “art form.” Describe what you see as the aesthetics dimension of philosophy.

Philosophy as an art form is related to philosophy as a way of life. Just as artists develop their particular styles, people should also be free to develop their own thinking. Just as being an artist requires much practice and training, so does developing your thinking. But in school we are mostly taught not just what to think but also how to think rather than how to develop our own thinking. We advocate for independent thinking, but much of independent thinking amounts to conforming to the thinking we were taught in school, at universities, in the communities, country and culture we grew up in and end up making our own. When children try to branch out on their own, families and society at large often try to reel them back in. Eventually society “wins.” Once

settled into a steady job, money issues a level of conformity that washes out the thrill and excitement that inspired so many people during their younger years. Philosophy should be the discipline through which young people learn to develop their own thinking. Just as we have an art academy, we should have a philosophy academy. Because just as being an art historian does not an artist make, so does being a scholar in the history of philosophy not make a philosopher. The question here could be: what made Socrates a philosopher?

Your bio also makes clear that philosophy is a way of life, inasmuch as it helps to wrestle with complexity. What advice do you have for people interested in using philosophy in this way?

I think life lived demands that you connect and re-connect the dots constantly. Conformist behavior comes from connecting the dots once and then imposing that framework upon everything else. That does not work. When we live our lives that way, we end up in conflict with people who do not conform to our way of thinking. If our thinking lacks flexibility, it cannot accommodate and appreciate how others think. It will exclude them from their fixed mind-set. Novel thinkers end up crashing against their conformist thinking. When doing philosophy with children it is so refreshing to see how flexible they are in their thinking, how easily they can change their minds when they hear something a peer said that somehow makes more sense to them. We lose our ability to connect to people, when we end up seeing them only through the fixed lens we have created for ourselves to give us a sense of certainty and purpose. If we disagree with someone's thinking, it stifles our ability to relate and connect to him. Our inflexible thinking gets in the way. So we need to learn to constantly see things from different angles, to constantly look for the bigger picture, to constantly reconnect the dots of what matters to us. Philosophy should be about flexible thinking, the aerobics of thinking, if you will.

So with this short picture book story, I would like to invite others to philosophize using creative writing as a means to express their thoughts and ideas. Fictional writing or poetry lends itself well for letting thoughts wander as they wonder.



Maria daVenza Tillmanns

Maria daVenza Tillmanns does philosophy with children in an underserved school in San Diego. In 2020 she published *Why We Are in Need of Tails*, a book that discusses how to build meaningful relationships.

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