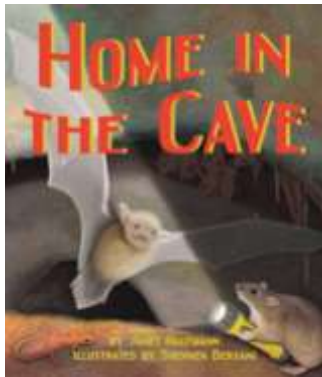


A Conversation with Janet Halfmann



What is your favorite part of the writing process?



I like the surprises that occur as I'm writing my first draft of a story. Sometimes the characters just seem to come up with ideas on their own, such as Sophia does in *Fur and Feathers* when she adds her own special touches to the animals' coats. But I think my favorite part of writing is the revising. I love finding just the right word to bring a character or action to life. I love making each sentence sound and flow just right.

What topics do you most enjoy writing about?

I enjoy writing about animals and nature. I never cease to be amazed at the intricacies of each animal's life and how all of life is intertwined. For example, when researching and writing *Home in the Cave*, I was amazed to find out how important bat droppings or guano are to the other animals in the cave.

When did you become interested in writing?

I have loved to write all my life, but it wasn't until after I graduated from college and took a writing course by mail that I decided I wanted a career as a writer. To accomplish that, I went back to school and got a second degree in Journalism (I had originally studied to be a Spanish and English teacher). The second degree led to jobs as a daily newspaper reporter, managing editor of a national magazine for kids who live in the country, and many years as a creator of coloring and activity books for Golden Books. When my position at Golden Books was eliminated about 15 years ago, I set out to become a children's author, my original dream!



What is a typical writing day like for you?

First, I check my e-mail and social media sites to see if there is anything I need to take care of right away. Then, if I'm working on a story, most of my day is spent on that story. To create the best story, I have to completely immerse myself in it and let it become part of me. Then ideas come to me while I'm taking a walk, or making supper, or doing any number of things. When I'm not working on a story, I promote my books through social media and other ways, look for new markets, fine-tune my old manuscripts, read picture books, etc. I work in an upstairs home office next to a window overlooking a huge, old maple tree. I spend 50 to 60 hours a week working on writing or business related to writing. And I consider myself one of the luckiest people in the world—to have reached my dream of being a children's author!



What is the most frequently asked question you encounter as an author?



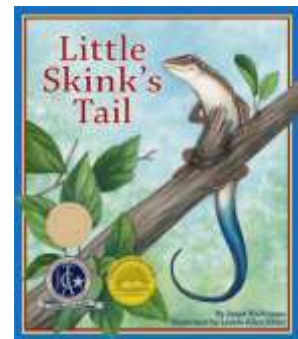
People often ask me how long it takes to write a book. I tell them that each story is different. Many require lots of research. Even for a fiction picture book, I often have a pile of research books several feet high, in addition to research I do on the Internet. And often story ideas bounce around in my head for a long time before I start to write them down. People also ask how I found my illustrator. I tell them that the publisher usually chooses the illustrator. The publishers know which of the many illustrators they work with will be best for the story. Usually, the artist and illustrator do not even meet. That way, the writer can do her creative thing and the illustrator is free to do his or her creative thing. And I've never been disappointed. Often an illustrator adds some touch that never even entered my mind. For example, in ***Little Skink's Tail***, illustrator Laurie Allen Klein showed a caterpillar changing into a butterfly throughout the book. Children love finding this additional surprise!

Most of your books are about animals and nature. Why is that?

I grew up on a farm in Michigan. My dad loved farming, and I think his love for animals and nature rubbed off on me. After supper, the whole family would often pile into the pickup to go to the back forty to see how much the corn or soybeans had grown. Today, whenever I go on a walk, I have to pause several times to watch a dragonfly or butterfly, check out a new blossom or try to find the bird that's singing. I'm constantly amazed by the stories that nature has to tell.

What was your incentive to write *Little Skink's Tail*?

I got the inspiration for *Little Skink's Tail* from researching my book, *Nature's Predators: Lizards*. I was amazed by how common it is for a lizard to snap off its tail to escape a predator. The lost tail continues to wriggle, distracting the enemy and often allowing the lizard to sneak away. This practice is so common that in some species it is hard to find a lizard with its original tail. I was especially fascinated by the young of lizards called skinks, which often have flashy, bright blue tails. Young skinks are especially attractive to predators, and a brightly colored tail helps them survive. Enemies notice the flash of color first and attack the tail. The youngster escapes tail-less, but alive. And the tail grows back!



When was your inspiration for *Fur and Feathers*?

I noticed on Sylvan Dell Publishing's website that the editor was looking for a story on animal "wraps." Right away that topic fascinated me. As I brainstormed possibilities, I came up with the idea of having a storm blow off all of the animals' coverings, and that worked perfectly. I decided it would be fun to dress the "naked" animals in kid clothes, which I did, but I thought the story needed something more. Then I remembered the big sewing basket filled with odds and ends that I always kept handy for creating or fixing whatever while my kids were growing up. Sophia could find things in the basket and create new coats just right for the animals. As she made the new coats, Sophia just seemed to start adding her own special touches, such as the little red heart behind the polar bear's ear. In writing the story, I used each class of animals so the story would not only be fun, but as educational as possible.

What tips do you have for parents regarding instilling a love of reading in their children?

Parents and other caregivers can give children so much by starting to read to them at a very young age. Reading opens up so many avenues for children and is a wonderful bonding experience between caregiver and child. A child who is read to is much more likely to become a reader. And a child who can read well is likely to have an easier time in school. Also, a story is a great way for everyone to wind down after a busy, hectic day.

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Visit Laurie's Web Site: <http://www.lauriekleinart.com>

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