



A Conversation with Jean Heilprín Díehl, author of Three Little Beavers

What kind of research do you do for your books?

I love research! I research online, in physical libraries and in the field. I also conduct interviews. The research stage offers up so much fascinating information, that it can be hard to pull away from. Too much research can be a distraction from writing, so the trick is to do the right amount...whatever that is. For the novel I'm writing now, I studied



fireflies and a rare pediatric neurological disorder. To characterize the protagonist's best friend, I learned what virga is and who invented the paper clip and where the digit 'one' repeats three times in a row in the infinite number pi. For *Three Little Beavers*, I observed beavers swimming in a lake, kayaked up a stream where beavers live and visited a series of ponds dotted with old beaver lodges and dams. I interviewed a park service officer who had resolved an urban wildlife conflict involving beavers and also a professional trapper who had humanely trapped beavers with the square, box-like Hancock traps described in the

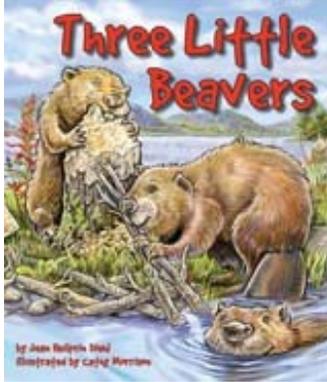
story. I checked out books from libraries, read online articles and websites and watched video clips.

How did you know you wanted to be a writer?

When I was growing up, I loved to read, and I especially loved adventure books with maps of imaginary lands printed inside the front and back covers. Some kids put up posters of athletes or musicians or actors on their bedroom walls; I had the map of Middle Earth. I guess it was natural to want to do what I admired so much. In sixth grade I wrote a series of poems that a teacher suggested I pull together into a book. After that, I knew I wanted to be a writer.

How do your own experiences shape your writing?

Experience is to writing like air is to lungs. Experience inevitably and perhaps inadvertently shapes what I'm drawn to write about and the process by which I go about writing. I think the human imagination is piqued by non sequiturs. A random image, headline, anecdote or event I read or hear about but haven't personally witnessed can also get me thinking. Experience includes all five senses. It also includes reading.

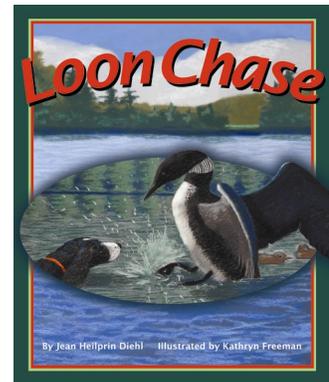


What inspired you to write *Three Little Beavers*?

Raising kids can mean a lot of time spent driving them around! I'd been thinking about how often young children, when riding in cars or on school buses, see dead animals along the road, which can be pretty upsetting. Then my local children's librarian happened to mention that her collection lacked a book about urban wildlife conflicts, and she didn't know if there were any books for kids on the subject. I decided to write one. I went looking for stories with happy endings and found one about beavers. I learned that there is a lot humans can do to co-exist with North America's largest rodent. Beaver families typically consist of multiple kits, so that got me thinking about siblings and a line I'd read once that had stuck in my head: 'the goal of middle childhood is to differentiate the self.' That's how I got the idea to write about Bevan, Beverly and Beatrix.

What inspired you to write *Loon Chase*?

I am fascinated by loons. I was also inspired by a lifetime of experiences on lakes in Maine and New Hampshire and the exploits of a memorable English Springer Spaniel—a champion swimmer about whom many tales could be told, from three continents.



What are the most frequently asked questions you encounter as an author?

I am frequently asked what I am working on at the moment. The answer is that I am usually working on more than one book at a time.

What sparks your creativity?

I am often drawn to unexpected juxtapositions: they are everywhere!

What has writing taught you about yourself?

I never expected to live in Buenos Aires, London, Warsaw, or Jerusalem, yet those are all places that life has taken me to for long periods. Likewise, I never expected to write about loons, fireflies, or a host of other subjects I've found myself researching. So writing has shown me something that Wendell Berry writes about in his essay, 'Poetry and Marriage: The Use of Old Forms' (1982). He says: "in life, in the world, we are never given two known results to choose between, but only one result that we choose without knowing what it is." That's what happens when a writer selects certain subjects and not others, certain words and not others, and embarks on a story. I have also learned that I often figure out what I am trying to say only after I have said it; that I hate

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What is your favorite aspect of writing?

I enjoy the research, as I mentioned, and I enjoy finding a word or set of words to fit an image or an insight or a moment in nature or an emotion or an interaction. I like voicing what it is I have to say to other people through written words, and I like being finished with writing, because writing is hard.

What is the most challenging part of writing a book?

For me, the most challenging part of writing a picture book is to tell a complete story, with fully developed characters, with an economy of language. The old adage is true: it's much easier to write long than short. I'm still learning how to leave enough space - and the right space - for an illustrator to tell the story visually. Images create the story's visual complexity, which is delightfully true of Cathy Morrison's wonderful illustrations for *Three Little Beavers*.

What do you hope children will learn from your story?



I hope the book conveys how amazing it is to experience a moment close to a wild creature. I tried to convey the majesty of the loon, whose existence depends on human stewardship of wild habitats. I hope the book makes kids think about the importance of preserving wildlife habitats in the face of increased development, warming, and other human threats. I also hope the book lets kids think about the similarities and differences between wildlife and domesticated pets they may be familiar with from home or school; about

the simple pleasures of spending a summer afternoon on a lake; and about how people and animals sometimes do things that you cannot stop or prevent.

Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

Contact Sylvan Dell's publicist

PR@SylvanDellPublishing.com

(877) 243-3457