



# A Conversation with Jennifer Keats Curtis

Author of

*Animal Helpers, Primate School, The Lucky Litter, Kali's Story, Baby Owl's Rescue and Turtles in my Sandbox*

*How is the Animal Helpers series different from the other books you have written for Arbordale?*

Animal Helpers is very different from the realistic fiction (*Turtles In My Sandbox; Baby Owl's Rescue*) that I've written for Arbordale.

With realistic fiction, I research my topic first and then combine what I've learned with my imagination to write my story. The illustrator then uses my words to paint or draw the images. But, with this series, this writing process is essentially flipped. I'm using organizations' photos to tell a story so I need the images before I can come up with the words. After initial conversations with staff at each organization, they begin submitting photos that help explain the type of work they do. I interview staff and volunteers to learn how the animals are injured, why they are ill, and how they came to be at the center. Then, I learn about the assessment, evaluation, treatment, and care. The editors and

I work together to select the images. I then use those images to come up with the words that help tell the behind-the-scenes tales of these animal helper organizations.

*Are there tidbits of information that you learn from the animal helpers that does not make it into the books?*



Absolutely! Because we are limited to a certain number of pages, there will always be nuggets that just don't make it into print. However, I am convinced that the reason that I am a writer is because I'm nosy. I LOVE knowing

stuff and thoroughly enjoy all aspects of the research. I love the writing process because the research from different sources allows me to familiarize myself with a topic and really become comfortable with a topic. Of course, I also find those exciting chunks and unusual details as I gather information. As I edit and revise the book, I cannot include everything that I learn but knowing that information helps

me to give precision and focus to the words that eventually make it into print.

***When you work with an organization, do you get hands on experience? If so, what is your most memorable animal encounter while researching animal helper jobs?***

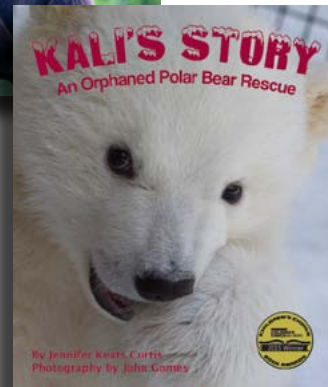
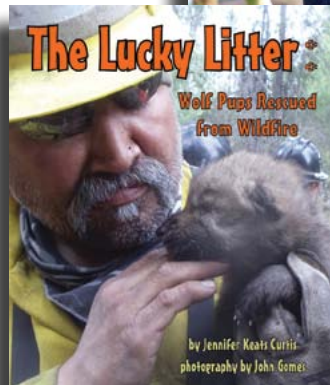
I wish I always had a chance to get hands-on experience. Like many telecommuters, I live vicariously through the experts with whom I work. Whenever I am able, I do love to go on site, to see the animals for myself, and to make those personal connections with the keepers and animal helpers. Kathy Woods, the inspiration for *Baby Owl's Rescue*, and who appears as herself in the series' first book *Animal Helpers: Wildlife Rehabilitators*, is a great source of knowledge for me. I try to work with her whenever my schedule permits. I learn from her every time I'm in the clinic so I have many memorable encounters! Thanks to these experiences, I have a deep respect for her expertise and a healthy dose of respect for the animals in her care.

One of my fondest memories is of my daughter and I trying to wrestle this full-grown turkey vulture back into his cage. We both still laugh when we think of him!

***How did you become inspired to write Kali's Story?***

I have been so lucky to work with incredible staff and volunteers at the animal helper organizations as I write the new nonfiction stories. While working on the Zoos book, the Alaska Zoo

photographer John Gomes and I really connected. His work is extraordinary and I'd really been enjoying his photos. He works hard to capture life in Alaska and I feel like I just cannot get enough of his images! He brought Kali to my attention as he had a chance to take numerous photos of this baby bear during his stay at that zoo. I was intrigued by the fact that this bear would not have been able to survive on his own in the wild and impressed by the caring staff at that zoo. (Polar bear cubs stay with their mothers for up to 30 months to learn life skills.) I wanted to help tell this bear's story. We also hope that this book will raise more awareness about the plight of this species while bringing more recognition and hopefully funds for the Alaska and Buffalo Zoos. (Kali now lives at the zoo in Buffalo with a girl polar bear named Luna.)



***What was the most surprising, funny or interesting thing that you learned about polar bear cubs?***

I still cannot get over the fact that the largest land carnivore is the cutest

baby I've ever seen! I laughed aloud to see the images of this baby sucking his paw and crashing into sleep much like a toddler!

***So many of your books feature animals in need of help, was this inspired by an encounter you had with a wild animal, or just a natural love of helping others?***

Like the kids for whom I write, I love animals and want to do what I can to help them, when they need it. When I was young, my brother and I found a rabbit that had been attacked by a cat and we desperately tried to save it...to no avail. I grew

up to write about animals. My brother became a vet. I think that is one of the experiences that shaped both of us.

***Do you have a favorite wild animal?***

I confess that dogs are still my favorite animal but I think the racoon might be my favorite wild animal. (I need to say might in case I change my mind next time I go into the clinic to volunteer!)

***You present to so many schools throughout the year, is there one question that you are asked frequently by children?***

After reading *Turtles in My Sandbox*, younger kids regularly ask me why the mama turtle didn't stay with the babies after she laid her eggs! This was one question I didn't anticipate but I have learned how to answer it!

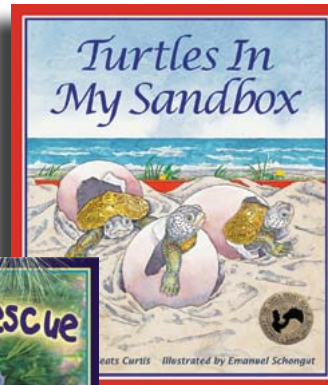
***Kids are very inquisitive. Was this part of your inspiration for Turtles in My Sandbox?***

I think it's important to help kids understand you don't have to be a grown up to make a difference to another living thing. When I learned that kids were raising terps in their classroom and then releasing them, and that this program was possibly helping save these animals from endangerment, I jumped at the chance to share it with other kids in a "Once upon a time" setting.

***This was your first book with Arbordale Publishing, what was most challenging and rewarding about writing Turtles in My Sandbox?***

The most challenging part of writing the book for me was making sure that the language was right

for my audience. I do have kids within the target age range, but I took the draft to my daughters' school and read with the first and third graders (my oldest was a 3rd grader at the time) for help! The most rewarding is, of course, are the unsolicited letters and emails that I get from kids who tell me how much they like the book and how they want to be writers, too. I also love hearing how many kids want to help turtles and other creatures in their backyards!



***A lot of Parents would like to help their children improve upon their writing. Do you have any advice for them?***

My best advice - and something I help kids work on during writing workshops - is encouraging kids to "throw up" on paper. We talk about making a mess to be creative! A lot of kids also seem to think that as soon as pen hits the paper (or font hits the computer screen), they can't make any changes. Of course, this is not so! Brain dumping helps break that habit by encouraging kids to stop editing in their heads. Get all of those great thoughts down on paper and then rearrange, organize and edit.

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