

A Conversation with Terry Catasús Jennings



Author of
Sounds of the Savanna
and *Gopher to the Rescue*

How did you first become interested in writing, and writing for children's picture books?

When I read *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott as a very young girl, I knew I wanted to be a writer, just like Jo March. I believe though, that I would have ended up being a writer even if I hadn't read the book. Stories are always rolling around in my head. Whenever something happens I like to report on it, like writing a newspaper story, in my head. I also like to figure out why people may have acted in a particular way, so I take what happens and I figure out a plot line that may have led them to their actions. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? What I like best of all is figuring out the very best way to convey each message—the best words to use, how to form each sentence and that is especially important in a picture book. I love to use the rhythm of language when I write a picture book. It's almost like writing a poem.

What gets your creative juices flowing?

I love to find an interesting nugget of truth, like

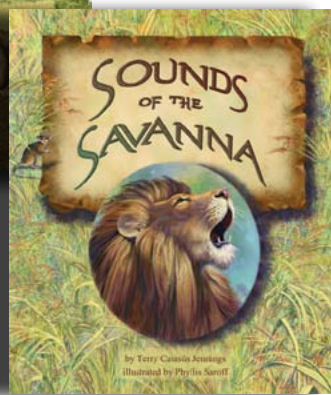
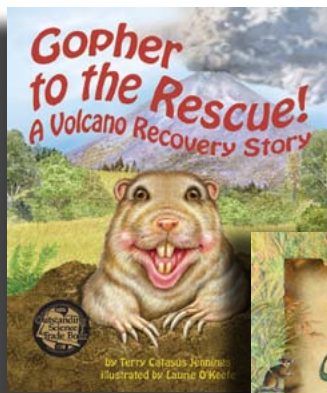
the effect that gophers had on Mount St. Helens recovery, and weave a fun story around it.

'Gopher to the Rescue!' is certainly not a traditional story for a picture book. What inspired you to write this story?

I was doing research for a nonfiction book about Mount St. Helens when I ran across the unexpected role that gophers played in the mountain's recovery. It was such a wonderful fact to know that such a humble little creature could have such a huge impact, that I knew I had to write about it. The story came to me very quickly because the research was already done and all I had to do was put myself in the place of the animals that lived on the mountain. It was downright fun!

What do you hope children learn from 'Gopher to the Rescue!'?

The most important lesson I learned in doing the research is how connected each part of nature is to the other. That's what I hope my readers learn. The recovery after a volcano is not set, or planned, rather it is a jumble. Life returns when



and where the conditions for that particular type of life occur. A seed that finds a gopher tunnel will flourish, but a seed that lands on hard, crusty ash will not. Animals can return to the mountain only when they have food, shady places to rest and sleep, and places to nest. The interesting thing is that what happened in Mount St. Helen on a big scale happens everyday, everywhere in nature. Since all living things are so connected, it is important that we be very careful with each habitat and avoid taking actions that can harm Earth, our home.



never knew. I am putting the finishing touches on two picture books. One about how wood ducks are born high up on trees and on their first day of life their mother pushes them out and they flutter down to the ground. The other one is about how animals prepare for the seasons. I have just started writing a picture book about “The Problem with Word Problems,” a book to help children figure out how to solve word and other problems.

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Do you have any tips for aspiring writers?

Read, read, read. Write, write, write. Look at the world with curiosity and try to figure out why things happen the way they do and why people act the way they do. Listen to people talk. Pay special attention to how they move. Capture a scene as if you were a movie camera and store it in your mind. You’ll use all those things that you have stored in your mind when you write your books.

What do you have coming up next?

I’m working on several projects right now. My biggest project is a novel about a twelve-year-old girl who lives through the Cuban revolution from 1958-1961. It’s very exciting to me because writing it has forced me to learn things about my heritage and about my country’s history that I

