

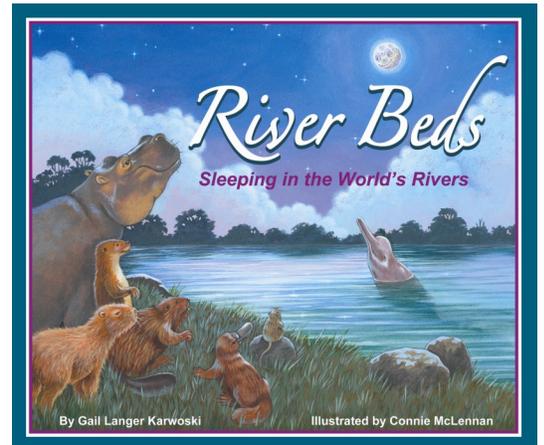


## *A Conversation with Gail Langer Karwoski author of River Beds; Sleeping in the World's Rivers*

**You have written two bedtime storybooks - *Water Beds; Sleeping in the Ocean* and its new, "big brother," *River Beds; Sleeping in the World's Rivers*. How were they "born"?**

I already had several published children's books (novels and nonfiction narratives), and I present a lot of programs at schools. The youngest readers in my audiences inspired me - picture books introduce children to the magic of books, and I wanted to be part of that important first step. I decided to start with a bedtime storybook because that's where the love of reading begins.

What makes the 'ideal' bedtime storybook? At the local library, I examined the available 'evidence.' To the chagrin of the children's librarian, I removed every bedtime story from the picture book shelves and piled them onto a table! As I read through the towering stack, I imagined myself reading each book to a tired child. Which bedtime story would I want to read again? I sorted the books into piles. With notebook and pen in hand, I analyzed what I liked about the best of the bedtime storybooks. I preferred a brief text with an endearing tone and gentle wording, as well as rich illustrations. Why? A parent reads a bedtime story to ease a tired child into sleep, so the story should be brief enough to share before yawning turns into snoozing. The story should help the child feel safe and loved, so the solo journey into the World of Sleep is not frightening. The story should contain lovely images – both words and pictures – so the child will be transported into lovely dreams.

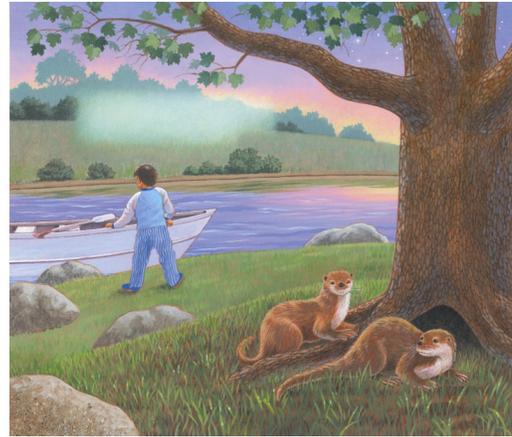


I realized that the most effective bedtime storybooks create a sleepy atmosphere by considering how animals sleep. How could I do this in a NEW way? My two children adored marine mammals, but none of the storybooks examined the sleep habits of these animals. How do dolphins and whales and seals and manatees – marine mammals - sleep, when they have to breathe air just as we do? These thoughts led me into a lengthy, fascinating, and sometimes frustrating quest for scientific information.

My quest took me to libraries, zoos and aquariums. I interviewed the caretaker of the beluga whales at the Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut, I went on a whale watch at the New England Aquarium in Boston, I shadowed an interpreter at Sea World in Orlando. (Hey, it was a hard job but SOMEBODY had to do it!) I read scientific papers, contacted scientists through email and telephone. I spoke to park rangers at an Arctic preserve and wrote to the education department at the Smithsonian.

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Once I had the facts, I began writing, trimming, rewriting. A picture book is like a poem – every word matters. I submitted my story to Sylvan Dell Publishing, and they found a wonderful artist, Connie McLennan, to illustrate it. Talk about falling in love with your words! That’s got to be the result of seeing a gifted artist make your meager letters into full-color images. *Water Beds; Sleeping in the Ocean* was ‘born’ in 2005. Like a proud parent, I took my new book to schools and libraries, stores and conferences.



And then I had another thought: Could I do it again? The world is full of rivers, and unusual mammals live and breathe and sleep in them ... Maybe Sylvan Dell would listen to me again? Maybe Connie would have time to give color and beauty to my words, again? Maybe children and parents would love to have another story that informs while it soothes at bedtime....

And that’s how *River Beds; Sleeping in the World’s Rivers* was born.

### **What about *Julie the Rockhound*? Why did you write this story?**

When I was teaching, my students were always bringing me sparkly rocks that they found in the playground. There’s a treasure-hunter in all of us, and I ought to know, because I married a rockhound. He introduced me to the amazing world of crystals and minerals, and we’ve dug for these treasures up and down the Eastern seaboard, out West, in Canada, even in Spain. We actually own a mine – the Diamond Hill Quartz Mine in South Carolina – which we operate as a dig-your-own place, to the immense delight of rockhounds and their families.

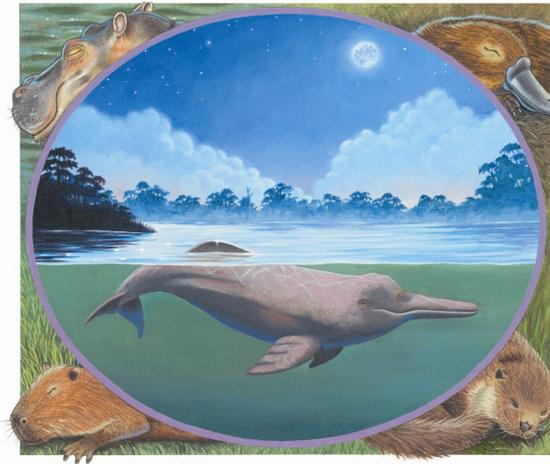
But there aren’t any storybooks about this amazing hobby. So I decided to write one. I made my young rockhound a girl because today’s kids are wide-open to new adventures, and girls as well as boys eagerly explore our world. I gave the scientific information a light-hearted twist with word-plays, because the vocabulary of this specialized field can be confusing. And I invited the wonderful illustrator, Lisa Downey, to spend a day at our mine, so she could experience the thrill of finding treasures in the dirt and show young readers what rockhounding looks like.

### **You present lots of programs at schools and libraries. What are the toughest questions that children ask you?**

“Are you famous?” Talk about a tough question! How do you judge? As far as I know, I’ve never been a clue in a crossword puzzle. I’ve never crooned on *American Idol*, danced with the stars or sweated on *Survivor*. But my name is on the spine of 9 books that have opened windows for more than a hundred-thousand wide-eyed boys and girls. Is that fame? I usually answer, “Well, I guess I’m famous here, today ... because you’re all sitting there and listening to me!”

“Are you rich?” Another tough question! What does it mean to be rich? I earn about as much money as I did when I was teaching, but most people don’t consider teachers to be rich. On the other hand, I have plenty to eat, a safe place to sleep, as well as clothes and shoes, a car and a refrigerator – that’s richer than most of the people in our world. I usually answer, “Yes, I’m rich because I’m doing what I love and enriching the lives of children ... how could anybody be richer than that?”

“What is your favorite book that you’ve written?” Oh, dear! How can I answer this tough question without making my other “book children” feel terrible? Besides, all of my books have brought me joy and satisfaction (especially when I receive fan mail from readers), as well as grief and aggravation (especially when I don’t see eye-to-eye with an editor). How can a book’s “mother” choose a favorite? I usually answer, “The book we’re talking about today. Because I love to share my books with readers - that’s the reason I write. It’s thrilling that children all over the world enjoy stories that I’ve created!”



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