



# A Conversation with Nancy Kelly Allen

Author of  
*First Fire: A Cherokee Folktale*

*Author Nancy Kelly Allen discovers her ancestry through her most recent picture book First Fire. Find out how the retelling of a folktale impacted this author, and where she draws her inspiration from to write for children.*

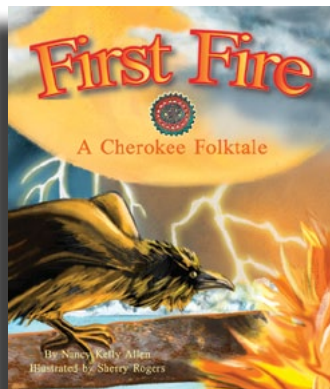
*When did you become interested in writing?*

My route to writing has more twists and turns than a winding mountain road. I grew up in Kentucky where storytelling is a way of life. After working as a social worker and elementary school teacher, I changed career paths and became a school librarian. This route led her straight to the world of picture books. I spent my days introducing books to children and nights writing books for children. Eventually, writing led me down the route to publication.

*When are you most creative?*

I'm definitely a morning person, but my lightbulb moment can occur at any time or place. Sometimes just a change in routine can cultivate creativity. A walk through the woods or a trip to

a new location triggers thoughts I would never have had otherwise. Reading and listening to music have the same effect.



*What was your incentive to write this particular book?*

As a person who is of Cherokee ancestry but grew up outside the culture, my goal was to write with mystery and wonder, much as the Indians did in their oral storytelling. My hope is that younger generations can gain an insight into the fascinating world of traditional tales to ensure a thriving future for this and similar stories.

*What did you learn from writing First Fire that was most surprising to you?*

As I began writing children's books, I always planned to pay tribute to my Cherokee great-

grandmother at some point in my career. The natural place to start is with books, so I read lots of Cherokee myths. I had never realized that Native Americans were master storytellers. I knew of the oral tradition of handing down stories from generation to generation, but as I began reading, the quality of the storytelling drew my attention and enthusiasm. Storytelling was a way of life. Stories provided entertainment, a tool for teaching morals and values, and a way to pass down the history and culture of the people.

Creation stories, such as First Fire, was my choice for retelling because children are always interested in firsts and how things happen. How did animals get their characteristics? Why are an owl's eyes circled with white rings? The story has a gripping power to hold the reader, and I simply loved it.



*After learning about the Cherokee culture through writing this book, have you explored your ancestry further?*

I have talked with family members about our heritage. Also, I've become more interested in Native American myths. As I discover more about my heritage, I strive to affirm the value of the culture through my writing, whether I'm retelling a myth or writing a story with Appalachian flavor.

*What is most rewarding and/or challenging about writing children's books?*

The most rewarding is meeting children who are fans of my books. When a child tells me s/he loved reading my book, I glow from inside out.

*What is the most frequently asked question you encounter as an author and what is your answer?*  
One question I'm often asked is "Are you rich?" My answer: If I'm counting money, the answer is NO, but if I'm counting new friends I've made through my books, the answer is YES. As with many words, the word "rich" has multiple meanings.

Another frequent question: How do you get ideas for books? I use bits and pieces of my life in many of my fiction stories. Ideas can come from my imagination; some from discovering an interesting bit of information; and others from a comment I read or hear. I'd love to find an Idea Shop.



*What is coming up next for you?*

I have a book, AMAZING GRACE, for middle grade readers that will be released in early 2014. I'm so excited to have a picture book and a novel released in a short time span.

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Email: [PR@Arbordalepublishing.com](mailto:PR@Arbordalepublishing.com)  
Phone: (843) 971-6722

