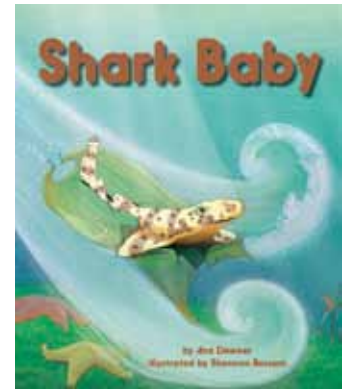




An interview with Ann Downer author of Shark Baby



What was your incentive to write this particular book?

I have been working for several years on books about the ocean, and ways to save the creatures in it. I learned how threatened sharks are, all around the world. I wanted to help young readers realize that there is more to sharks than Jaws and big teeth!

What is the most frequently asked question you encounter as an author and what is your answer?



The most common question HAS to be "Where do you get your ideas?" On walks, often. Or something I read will stick with me. An actual glass salamander in an art museum in Chicago gave me the title for my novel *The Glass Salamander* and the character of Newt. An interest in stories about the famous Wild Boy of Avignon gave me the idea for the character of Ulfra in the *Spellkey* books, and another museum visit, to the National Museum of Natural History in D.C., introduced me to the real

Direwolves of the Ice Age. I'm a big believer in "white space," the writing that gets done by your subconscious when you aren't at the computer. All kinds of experiences get stored and filtered in the brain and come out later. Just being out and about, noticing little random things, most especially observing and listening to people--these are the ways I recharge my creative batteries.

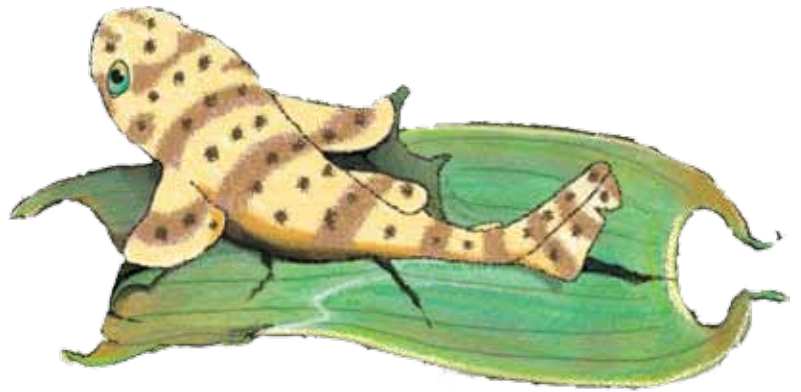
When did you become interested in writing?

I started my first novel when I was 13, shortly after finishing one of my very favorite books, *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula LeGuin.

What first sparked your curiosity in sharks, and how did you get involved in conservation?

I got to know about the plight of sharks by working with marine biologists on a book (Underwater Eden) about the Phoenix Islands in the Pacific, where a shark-finning boat came and nearly wiped out the reef sharks there. I did a lot of research for that book about the issue of shark finning and looked at hundreds of images of sharks. I'm also interested in the huge variety of sharks, rays, and their cousins the chimeras. Most kids' books and media attention in general focuses on sharks as bloodthirsty killing machines, when they're actually this ancient group of amazingly diverse animals: all kinds of shapes and sizes and patterns, many different ways of "making a living" as a shark.

My involvement in conservation is through my writing and editing work, bringing the story of imperiled animals and places to a wide audience of kids and grown-ups. I've written about elephants and salamanders as well as ocean life more generally. I'm finishing up a book for teens on urban wildlife around the world and the conflict that happens when wildlife and people have to share our suburban and urban spaces. Sometimes I write the story, and sometimes I work with scientists all around the world to help them tell their own stories.



How much research did you do before writing Shark Baby?

I really led with my heart rather than my head when writing Shark Baby, which is more the way I write fiction than nonfiction. The read-aloud rhythm of the book came first, and idea of his story and the other characters, and the scientific details were worked out later. Shennen, the illustrator, and Donna, my editor, were really full partners in getting it right! It sounds odd, but when I began writing the book, I really wasn't thinking of writing a conservation story, but a different kind of shark book that would appeal to kids. I liked the words "shark" and "baby" together. It seemed to me to have possibilities for being both a different kind of baby-animal book and a different kind of shark book.

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

Writing the story that you really have to tell, telling it in your own voice, and creating characters that readers will care about.