



A Conversation with Anna Forrester

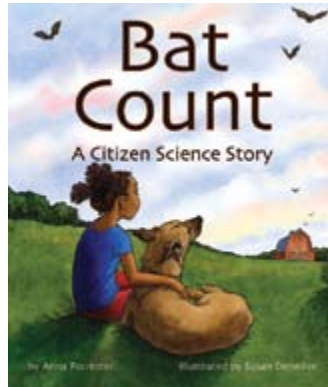
Author of
Bat Count: A Citizen Science Story

What was your incentive to write this particular book?

My family bought a dilapidated old farmhouse in Central Pennsylvania in 2009, and the house came with a barn that was loaded with literally tons of stuff – including a summer colony of bats. A few years into our “project” I began hearing and reading about white nose syndrome, and later learned about the Appalachian Bat Count. The count is an effort to track bat populations around the state in order to understand the disease better and hopefully develop a cure. (New Jersey, British Columbia, Georgia, New Hampshire and lots of other states and provinces run them too!) We signed up to get involved and gather data. It just so happened that our fire pit sits next to the barn on the side where the bats usually come out at dusk, and counting became this kind of relaxing, quiet – and at the same time exciting – thing to do. Cooking over the fire and then laying back in the grass to count as the sun faded and the bats emerged has become one of our favorite summertime rituals, and we do it many times, every summer.

Before buying your farm were you interested in bats?

I’m interested in all animals, but before I discovered the colony of bats that inspired BAT COUNT, I’d only had a couple of close-up encounters with bats. When I was young, I went to a camp where there was flypaper hanging up in the dining hall to catch flies, and one day a bat got stuck in it. It squealed and suffered and it was just an all-around awful experience – though probably more so for the bat than for me. Then once, when I was a young adult, I found a little bat tucked in to a crack in the siding of a house. It was SO tiny -- I couldn’t believe it. I thought a lot about that bat when I was writing about the bat that Jolie and her mom saw in their barn. Finally, my family lives close to The Philadelphia Zoo. When my younger daughter was three we spent a lot of winter afternoons in the Rare Animal Conservation Center – which was indoors – and became acquainted with a colony of Rodrigues fruit bats. We liked watching them, but I always felt like we were keeping them awake.



Have you ever touched a bat?

Not a live one -- no! (Unfortunately, I've found dead ones on the floor of our barn.) And I would really like to -- if it wouldn't harm the bat. When I've looked at bats up close they really do look so fragile and delicate! I've always marvelled at the fact that people find them scary and spooky. I think that part of why people get so freaked out by them must be because they are nocturnal and they dart around in the night in these unpredictable ways.

Do you have any advice for parents about getting kids involved in citizen science?

Pick something that YOU are excited about and/or that THEY are excited about – something that you feel a personal connection to or that resonates with you or with them – even if you're not sure why!

If the project you pick has some real, personal relevance everyone is likely to get a lot more excited and a lot more engaged. Kids follow our leads on this stuff, and enthusiasm is contagious.



When did you become interested in writing?

I've been writing for my whole life! Even in my work as a landscape architect, I've always been just as likely to write as a way of working through an idea as to sketch and draw. As for writing and publishing children's books: I wrote my first children's book as my Masters thesis when I studied Early Childhood Education at Bank Street College in New York. I kept working on kids books for a couple years but stopped when I decided to study Landscape Architecture. I love being back to it again after taking time off – and I

love being able to now, as a more mature person, juggle both of these work-things that I love doing!

What advice would you give an aspiring writer?

Writers write. If you want to be a writer, you have to write. It sounds so simple, but there are a million obstacles we throw up in front of ourselves to keep us from writing. So my advice is: write every day. Give your self writing prompts, and do writing challenges, and join a writing or critique group. Write for yourself, not for the market. And read like crazy too.

What is coming up next?

I work on a lot of books all at the same time – both fiction and nonfiction. I'm working on a nonfiction book about fairy shrimp, which are these magical little creatures that live in vernal pools. On the fiction front I have a bunch of projects in the works: one about a stuffed animal fish who wants to swim in the sea; one about a book who's fed up with people paying attention to the stories on her pages and never to HER;

one about a shy, water-ballet obsessed squid who can't make the syncro team because she can't squirt; and lots of others.

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