

# *A Conversation with Terry Pierce* *author of Blackberry Banquet*



## **Where did the idea for Blackberry Banquet originate?**



*Blackberry Banquet* came to me one day when I was approaching my favorite wild blackberry bush (in Oregon) to pick berries for making a pie. As I neared the bush, a flurry of animals fled from it, which led me to think about how my family wasn't the only ones who enjoyed the berries. The more I pondered this, the more I realized that the same scenario (big, lumbering animal approaching the bush and disrupting the smaller animals' feast) could be applied to a children's story. I substituted a bear in place of myself (not a far stretch!), added some playfulness and hence *Blackberry Banquet* was on its way to ripened perfection.

## **What are the most frequently asked questions you encounter as an author?**

The question that most kids ask me is where I get my ideas. The answer: everywhere! Ideas can come from something as mundane as a ceiling fan (yes, I actually got an idea from my ceiling fan), to amazing life experiences (like when I hiked 3 miles to see Kilauea volcano erupting in Hawaii). All you have to do is see things in a new light. Of course, once the idea strikes, it could take anywhere from weeks to years for the story to be completed and ready to submit to a publisher.

The question I get from most adults relates to publishing. Many "closet writers" are curious about how to get their work published. For anyone seriously interested in writing for children, I recommend joining the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. They're a highly respected organization that can help anyone get started with their writing career, plus they serve as a great source of networking and providing writers with a sense of community. I currently serve on my regional board (the Ventura/Santa Barbara chapter).

## **What gets your creative juices flowing?**

This is a bit of a tough question, because it depends on what I'm working on. For my novel, it involved getting up early (around 5:00 a.m. when it feels like the rest of the world is still asleep), sipping on coffee and pouring myself into the manuscript at the computer. Of course, with my two cats nearby! However, for picture book and easy reader writing, I love taking a big chunk of time and letting my mind wander. I often plop down in my comfy chair and write by hand on a notepad (for some reason, I can't seem to write for young children on the computer—it's too stifling). I've found that my most inspirational places for picture book writing are outdoors, whether it's on a walk/hike, at the beach or mountains, or just sitting in my own backyard.

## **As an author, you probably spend a lot of time around kids. What advice do you have for their parents?**

Read to your kids! Parents have probably heard this a million times, but it's true. From the time they are babies, read to them. Reading to babies/toddlers helps them to learn to focus, encourages parent-child bonding and familiarizes them with books. For preschoolers, reading does the above things, plus it helps them to appreciate what books can offer them. Reading imparts knowledge, provides entertainment, encourages family bonding and exposes children to a whole new world to explore that they might not otherwise know about. Parents can also do all kinds of additional follow-up activities to keep kids turned onto books (visit <http://www.terrypiercebooks.com> and check out the "Parents" page with "Ten Things to Do With a Book"). Why not bake some blackberry muffins after reading *Blackberry Banquet*? Or how about a little math? Buy a packet of blackberries from the store and estimate how many berries are in the pack. Count them and see how close you are. How about having your child paint a picture of his favorite illustration from *Blackberry Banquet*? You get the idea—the possibilities are only limited by our imaginations.

## **What's it like being a writer?**

I think many people mistakenly believe that being a writer means wealth, fame, and tapping at the keyboard all day with a fabulous ocean view (sipping on a latte, of course).

For me, writing is a lot of hard work. Yes, I do have those moments where I'm clicking in full creative mode and get to sip a latte, but more often, I'm working on the multiple revisions and rewrites of a story, sorting through my writing library or the web trying to find some nugget of information that will help me. Sculpting and molding each word and sentence to be its best. And if I'm not in the midst of revising, I'm marketing my work — sending out submissions, working on my Web site or my blog, setting up speaking engagements, practicing presentations, reading journals and industry news, attending conferences and workshops, working with my publishers, volunteering for the SCBWI—all for the sake of it furthering my writing career. It's all very time consuming (and doesn't leave much time for looking at the view or sipping anything except a bottle of water that I keep at my desk)! But I love it! I've been "officially" writing since 1999 (when I stopped teaching) and don't see myself doing anything else in the future.

## **What was most challenging or rewarding in writing *Blackberry Banquet*?**

Good question! *Blackberry Banquet* took approximately three years to write, but I put it aside for about a year, in the middle. I originally wrote it in prose and had some interest from a couple of publishers. But when they declined it, I wasn't sure where to go with it. I knew it was a good concept, but something needed to change with the writing. I set it aside (what I call letting a story "simmer"). After many months, I pulled it out again and it struck me that the story had to be written in verse. So I did. It took some time for me to complete it (contrary to what many people think, writing in rhyme is NOT easy).

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**Contact Sylvan Dell's publicist**  
PR@SylvanDellPublishing.com  
(877) 243-3457