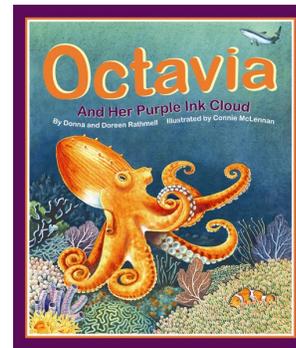
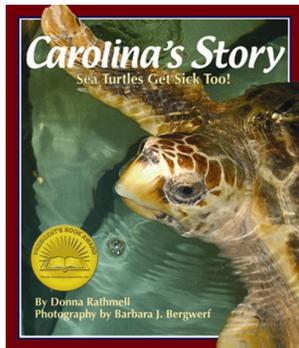


*A Conversation with Donna Rathmell, author of *Carolina's Story* and *Octavia*!*



Where did the idea for *Carolina's Story: Sea Turtles Get Sick Too!* originate?

There are two reasons why I wrote *Carolina's Story*. First, I wanted to help children be aware of the animals that share the earth with us and be able to sympathize with ill and injured animals – especially endangered loggerhead sea turtles. As a volunteer at my local aquarium, I was invited down to see the “Sea Turtle Hospital” in the basement of the building. I was immediately struck by the fact that the sea turtles received identical treatment as ill or injured humans: x-rays, penicillin shots, etc. I recalled an event years earlier when my then five-year-old daughter was rushed to a trauma center after falling out of a second story window. During her subsequent hospitalization and recovery, I was surprised at the lack of books available to help young children deal with hospitalization. Yet, it was not until I attended Carolina’s release that I connected the two events and decided to write her story.

The second reason I wrote *Carolina's Story* was based upon my experience with my daughter’s hospitalization. I wanted to provide a story to help hospitalized children deal with some of the medical procedures they must endure. When I described the various treatments that the turtles received, one specialist begged me to include the “showering” with a hose. Apparently, hydrotherapy is very common for burn victims and is considered to be one of the most painful experiences that a child (or adult) may have to endure. This specialist now keeps a copy of the book in the burn unit at all times. Carolina did not have to undergo surgery. However, because I wanted to help children deal with a variety of potential medical procedures, Barbara and I included photos of some of the other turtles undergoing surgery, getting a transfusion (blood is donated by a healthy turtle ready for release), and with an IV. What I did not anticipate was that the book would end up being read to children whose parents or grandparents are in the hospital or simply for children who are afraid of going to the doctor.

Why did you write *Octavia and Her Purple Ink Cloud*?

Actually, my sister and I wrote this story years ago when our children were little. One summer we saw a documentary on octopuses, and all six of our children were absolutely mesmerized! I honestly can’t remember when we decided to write *Octavia*, but I do remember getting very excited about the storyline and the concept of her not being able to shoot the right color ink cloud.

We initially wrote the story to be very repetitive to help beginning readers. Maybe it was because our children were growing as we were still working on this, but we ended up changing two word themes throughout the book. At first, Octavia “brags” that she can shoot her purple ink cloud, but by the end of the story, she is merely “hoping” that she can. Children watch as she turns from a bit of a braggart into a “humble” animal, thankful that she was able to do what she was supposed to do. Octavia also cries, whines and moans when she shoots the wrong color. We wanted children to be able to identify with the feelings of dealing with frustration. We didn’t set out for it to have the moral lesson of practice makes perfect, but that just fell into place.

What kind of research did you do for the story?

We wanted to make sure that all information was as accurate as possible. It was important to us that none of Octavia's "friends" would actually be in her food chain. I do remember that we wanted to have a dolphin in the story, because so many children are fascinated by dolphins. However, a dolphin would have eaten Octavia, so that wouldn't work. Likewise, we had to do away with "Libby Lobster," because Octavia would have eaten her! We spent months researching the octopus' eating habits, from reading books to studying on-line scientific journals and research projects.

I really became fascinated by the animals and how incredibly smart they are. There are several research studies that are, quite frankly, mind blowing. Did you know that an octopus in an aquarium will use its arms to open a jar to get food? An octopus can crawl out of its tank at night to snack on animals in other tanks but will then be right back in its own tank in the morning! Apparently, the only way to stop that is by putting carpet on the outside of the tank so they can't hold onto anything – but carpet has to be on anything within jumping distance too!

What is the most frequently asked question you encounter as an author?

I would have to answer this from two perspectives. The most frequent question from adults has to do with the children's book publishing process. For instance, most people aren't aware that authors generally have nothing to do with the illustrations; the publisher handles that. I must say that I think Connie McLennan did a fabulous job with *Octavia*. I absolutely love the way she has the shark in the background getting bigger and more visible as the story progresses.

Children, on the other hand, are more interested in the animals. Yes, I have seen an octopus in the wild – a friend found one in a discarded beer bottle while we were snorkeling. I've also been fortunate enough to see a large group of squid (cousins to the octopus) while snorkeling. I must have scared them because several of them squirted ink to try to get away!

What sparks your creativity?

Anything and everything! I think that I'm addicted to wanting to learn things, and I can honestly say that I learn something new every single day. I frequently find myself thinking "that would make a great story," or "suppose..." or "if..."

In your experience as a children's author, you've had the opportunity to be around lots of children. Do you have any advice for their parents?

READ! Read to them from the time they are born! But don't stop reading to them when they start to read on their own. Keep reading aloud, and as they become better readers, let them read to you. I remember a summer car trip after the 4th *Harry Potter* came out. All five of us wanted to read it, so we ended up having a family read aloud as we drove. Each child would read a chapter aloud as we drove. When we finished that, we picked up some other books and continued our family read aloud time. If not up to that, listen to audio books on car trips. I remember listening to audio of the series for *Indian in the Cupboard* on a two-day car trip. Unfortunately, we didn't finish before getting home, and we didn't have a tape recorder in the house. The girls refused to get out of the car until they finished listening to the story! When not reading with them, let them see you reading instead of watching TV.

Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

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