

A Conversation with Laura Goering, author of Whistling Wings!



What is the story of *Whistling Wings*?

Marcel is a young tundra swan on his way from the Canadian coast where he was born to wintering grounds on the Chesapeake Bay. There's only one problem—when the flock stops off to rest on a lake near the Mississippi River in northern Wisconsin, he can't think of a single reason why he shouldn't just stay put. Why fly another thousand miles when their temporary home seems so perfect?

When his parents prepare to leave, Marcel hides in the rushes and the flock leaves without him. But with the lake nearly frozen over, he soon realizes that he is not cut out for a Wisconsin winter. Marcel gets a few lessons in winter survival from three of the year-round residents. A muskrat shows him how to make a feeding station in the ice; a bald eagle points him to fishing grounds on the Mississippi; and a raccoon suggests an extended nap in a hollow log. None of these, however, is "a swan's way." A swan's way, as his parents tried to tell him, is to fly—to fly a thousand miles to more temperate climes.

Swans mate for life and migrate in family units, so it is fitting that Marcel's parents return to the lake to rescue him. Once he is reunited with his family, the thousand-mile trip he had sought to avoid no longer seems so impossible. *Keep flapping*, he tells himself. *Just keep flapping*.

What was your incentive to write this particular book?

Every fall, people come from all over the Upper Midwest to Rieck's Lake in Alma, Wisconsin, to view thousands of whistling swans, or *tundra* swans, who stop there on the way from their breeding grounds in northern Canada and Alaska to their wintering grounds in the Chesapeake Bay area. It was this spectacle that inspired me to write *Whistling Wings*.

What do you believe is the best thing about your book?

It lends itself to use in the classroom in conjunction with NSES Life Science standards that require an understanding of how organisms interact with their environments. In the lower grades it can be used as an introduction to migration, hibernation and other wintering behaviors. For older elementary students, it can also be linked with

discussions of changes in animal behavior that occur when the habitat is modified (climate change, wetland drainage, damming of rivers and streams). Its educational goals are subordinate, though, to an engaging story with a likable main character.

How did you become a children's book author?

Since 1988 I have been a professor of Russian language and literature at Carleton College, a small liberal arts college in Northfield, Minnesota. I have always loved languages and in addition to speaking fluent Russian and German, I have studied bits of French, Spanish, Italian and Serbo-Croatian.

My interest in children's literature grew out of a course I teach at Carleton called "Russian Literature for Children." There are so many splendid Russian children's writers, I at first planned to translate their work into English. As I learned more about the children's market in the US, I decided to try my hand at writing stories and poems for children myself, spurred on, in part, by spending hours reading picture books of varying quality to my young daughter.

Before I started writing seriously, I spent most of my free time playing competitive ultimate Frisbee. I even played in the 1992 World Championships in Utsunomiya, Japan! Now that I've retired from ultimate, I avoid the tedium of the treadmill by playing volleyball, tennis and squash.

Since one of my earliest career goals was never to have to commute to work, I feel fortunate to live in a 100-year-old Tudor-style house within walking distance of my job, the public library, the swimming pool, and my favorite coffee shop. Add to that easy access to Minneapolis and St. Paul, and it's a pretty idyllic life. Winters can be long, but I confess that I love the brilliant blue sky and sparkling hoarfrost of sub-zero days in January.



Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

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