

*A Conversation with Janet Halfmann author of *Little Skink's Tail* and *Fur and Feathers**



What was your incentive to write *Little Skink's Tail*?

I got the inspiration for *Little Skink's Tail* from researching my book, *Nature's Predators: Lizards*. I was amazed by how common it is for a lizard to snap off its tail to escape a predator. The lost tail continues to wriggle, distracting the enemy and often allowing the lizard to sneak away. This practice is so common that in some species it is hard to find a lizard with its original tail. I was especially fascinated by the young of lizards called skinks, which often have flashy, bright blue tails. Young skinks are especially attractive to predators, and

a brightly colored tail helps them survive. Enemies notice the flash of color first and attack the tail. The youngster escapes tail-less, but alive. And the tail grows back!

When was your inspiration for *Fur and Feathers*?

I noticed on Sylvan Dell Publishing's website that the editor was looking for a story on animal "wraps." Right away that topic fascinated me. As I brainstormed possibilities, I came up with the idea of having a storm blow off all of the animals' coverings, and that worked perfectly. I decided it would be fun to dress the "naked" animals in kid clothes, which I did, but I thought the story needed something more. Then I remembered the big sewing basket filled with odds and ends that I always kept handy for creating or fixing whatever while my kids were growing up. Sophia could find things in the basket and create new coats just right for the animals. As she made the new coats, Sophia just seemed to start adding her own special touches, such as the little red heart behind the polar bear's ear. In writing the story, I used each class of animals so the story would not only be fun, but as educational as possible.



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

People often ask me how long it takes to write a book. I tell them that each story is different. Many require lots of research. Even for a fiction picture book, I often have a pile of research books several feet high, in addition to research I do on the Internet. And often story ideas bounce around in my head for a long time before I start to write them down. People also ask how I found my illustrator. I tell them that the publisher usually chooses the illustrator. The publishers know which of the many illustrators they work with will be best for the story. Usually, the artist and illustrator do not even meet. That way, the writer can do her creative thing and the illustrator is free to do his or her creative thing. And I've never been disappointed. Often an illustrator adds some touch that never even entered my mind. For example, in *Little Skink's Tail*, illustrator Laurie Allen Klein showed a caterpillar changing into a butterfly throughout the book. Children love finding this additional surprise!

What tips do you have for parents regarding instilling a love of reading in their children?

Parents and other caregivers can give children so much by starting to read to them at a very young age. Reading opens up so many avenues for children and is a wonderful bonding experience between caregiver and child. A child who is read to is much more likely to become a reader. And a child who can read well is likely to have an easier time in school. Also, a story is a great way for everyone to wind down after a busy, hectic day.

Most of your books are about animals and nature. Why is that?

I grew up on a farm in Michigan. My dad loved farming, and I think his love for animals and nature rubbed off on me. After supper, the whole family would often pile into the pickup to go to the back forty to see how much the corn or soybeans had grown. Today, whenever I go on a walk, I have to pause several times to watch a dragonfly or butterfly, check out a new blossom or try to find the bird that's singing. I'm constantly amazed by the stories that nature has to tell.

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