

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



Why did you write *Little Skink's Tail* ?

I got the idea for *Little Skink's Tail* while I was researching a book I wrote about lizards. I was fascinated by the number of lizards that snap off their tails to escape an enemy. The broken-off tail continues to wriggle, distracting the predator and often allowing the lizard to sneak away to safety. I had long known that lizards lose their tails, but I didn't know how common it was. I was especially fascinated by the young of lizards called skinks, which often have flashy, bright blue tails that twitch while hunting. Enemies notice the flash of color first and attack the tail rather than the little skink's body or head. The youngster escapes tailless, but alive. And the tail grows back! Right away, I knew that this little skink with the twitching blue tail had a story to tell.



When I started the story, I knew that Little Skink would lose her tail and that it would grow back by the end of the story. But what would happen in between? As I pondered the missing tail along with Little Skink, I remembered how my four children and now my grandchildren love to play dress-up and pretend. Like them, Little Skink soon began pretending, trying on the tails of all the animals in the forest. As I wrote, I pictured my granddaughter Monae, one of the world's greatest pretenders, dancing about, showing off each tail. Earlier research on animal tails for another project also came into play.

My favorite part of writing the story was figuring out what Little Skink would say about each tail. I've always loved language and playing with words, so coming up with "puffy-fluffy" and "stickly-prickly" to describe the tails was pure joy!

What are the most frequently asked questions 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 gets your creative juices flowing?

I get my ideas from many places— remembering my children's and my own childhoods, from my grandchildren, observing nature, taking trips, doing new things, reading. Often I get an idea from something interesting I learn while researching another project.

When I'm stuck on where a story should go, I often find the answer if I take a walk, hang the laundry on the line outdoors, lie down to rest or gaze at the big maple tree outside my home office window.

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

I especially like that *Little Skink's Tail* is a great read-aloud story. 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.

What has been the most challenging or rewarding in writing *Little Skink's Tail* ?

I am proud that *Little Skink's Tail* encourages children to be comfortable with themselves as they are. Although I wrote the story primarily to be fun and to introduce children to the wonderful skink and its amazing tail, I'm glad that the story unfolded on its own to convey this important message about diversity.

Another highlight of *Little Skink's Tail* was receiving an e-mail a few days before Christmas of 2005 that the story had been accepted for publication. That news was and will always be one of the best Christmas presents ever!

Little Skink's Tail is also my first fiction picture book. Although I have written many nonfiction books, including nonfiction picture book stories, my dream has always been to publish a fiction picture book. It's a dream-come-true many years in the making!

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.

Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

Contact Sylvan Dell's publicist:

AngieDzalamanow@SylvanDellPublishing.com, (877) 958-2600