

An Interview with Jo Marshall: Bringing nature to story and story to nature

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/an-interview-with-jo-marshall-bringing-nature-to-story-and-story-to-nature/>

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Leaf, Star and the Stickytoes from Leaf and the Sky of Fire

Lilac is her favorite color, salted butter popcorn and Diet Coke are her indulgences, and she insists on wearing her old blue loafers even though a hole in the right shoe lets water in every time she wears them. Jo Marshall is a woman who loves to spend her time alone, writing, surrounded by various adopted pets her family has rescued. Just outside her window: the green of Washington State. No wonder then that it is heavily featured as both theme and character in her Leaf novels for young readers.

When Jo Marshall describes where she lives, you get a picturesque image in your mind, and a tangible understanding of where her inspiration for storytelling hails. In **Leaf**, Marshall writes fantasy stories about little creatures called Twigs, adventurous imps who live in the knotholes of old trees. The problem for our Twigs: climate change. Currently a series of four books, Jo Marshall is happily surprised at her success.

“...I thought, perhaps, my daughter might be the only one who liked them. I mean, really, who knew? The nice things people say about the books is a huge surprise and reward. I’m always grateful to hear an encouraging comment. I never take it for granted that a reader will like the stories.”

For anyone who loves adventure and the outdoors, or for anyone concerned about nature, the stories about

Leaf (the main protagonist) are a fun and informative read.

Getting the Book onto Shelves: Who's Involved

Getting a story onto the market is a group effort and the same is true for Marshall's novels, especially given their eco-literary concern. Marshall gets help and guidance from various conservation and science experts. Her two kids, John and Ali, who Marshall claims are better writers than she, are her detail-oriented editors, who have her "obsessing over minutia."

Rustles Escape, from Leaf and the Rushing Waters

Beautifully executed action-oriented illustrations are drawn by Disney veteran illustrator, D. W. Murray. I asked Jo how she met him, and the story of how these two creatives determined to collaborate is just terrific. Here's what she wrote me:

"I met David through an author's group (he's an author, too) when I asked his opinion of a publisher. He told me he was a freelance illustrator and offered to send me a concept of my main dude, Leaf. Of course, I was thrilled, and he committed to do the whole series. It was a plus that he gave me the rights with each illustration. Only later, when I asked for his bio for the books and website, I found out he was a Disney and Universal Pictures long-time career artist, and had credits like Tarzan, Mulan, Brother Bear, Curious George, etc. etc."

In our email correspondences, I've found [Jo Marshall](#) to be gracious, patient and very ready to be helpful in any way she can. Contrary to many writers I've encountered, who border on narcissistic, Marshall has no ego at all. It's no wonder then that people want to work with her, want to help her out in some way.

"The wonderful people involved in the whole process are the biggest surprise of all. The unexpected expertise and encouragement they gave stunned me – praise and guidance from conservation nonprofit officers, scientists, professors, biologists, and educators, who read the manuscripts, and provided science fact for the fantasies... The support of friends, reviewers, and people just popping up out of the blue, who actually love the stories!"

Cover Artwork by D. W. Murray

A Way of Life

When I asked Jo Marshall how she lives and what her workspace is like – as the voyeur in me always wants to know this about other creative people – she sent me some beautiful pictures of Washington State and described a writerly setting that sounds quite inviting.

"My writing spot is either on the lazy boy in the living room in front of the fireplace with a dog sleeping on the floor, or upstairs in a rocker near dozing cats. Fortunately, it's often overcast in Snohomish, Washington where I live so I have an excuse to keep the fire going and stay indoors."

"I live about two hours south of Canada on a hillside in Snohomish, Washington, above a wide, flat

valley that has a huge, deep river flowing through it. The valley is a prehistoric lava flow, but is now green and agricultural. Surrounding our rural community, are three active volcanoes (meaning they have the possibility of erupting again) – Mount Rainier, Glacier Peak, and Mount Baker with jagged peaks of the Cascadia mountain range linking them all. Snohomish is a peaceful area with many wildlife refuges and old growth forested parks. The valley and river flow into the Puget Sound, where it's not unusual to see beluga whales and orcas. The Sound is scattered with islands, and when foggy, absolutely mesmerizing. It rains a lot in Snohomish, and when it's not raining the sun shines through mist and fog. There are huge, protected, old growth trees in my back yard where the Twigs live and play.”

Mount Rainier

As she explains, Marshall has been writing since she was a little girl.

“I started writing stories when my mom trusted me enough with a pencil to not write on the walls. She jokes that I read the dictionary when I was five. I do remember puzzling over the tiny print in it. I made up stories, cut up paper, and created mini-books – fully illustrated or pasted with cut-outs from the Sears & Roebuck catalogue. I thought my stories were just terrific. I'd read them to any unsuspecting family member good-natured enough to listen.”

When it comes to how she learned the craft of writing, Marshall is strictly old school:

“After the ten years and endless class hours it took for me to achieve a BA listening to a seminar on the subject of writing sounds ghastly, although I do seek critiques from conservation nonprofit officers and university research professors. The best way to study creative writing, I think, is to read other books in your genre, and figure out why they are popular or influence you.”

Inspired By Family and Beauty

When I asked about her inspiration, what drives her, Marshall's response was very personal. She wrote these books primarily for her daughter. As a fellow mom, this rang very true for me. When I write, I think about reading the story to my girl. Marshall's daughter is a teenager in eighth grade, so the Leaf novels are just right for her.

Rusty the dog and Ali, daughter and editor

“I want to reassure my daughter that *there are ways* to deal with climate change, especially if we focus our concern on events happening right in front of us. Twigs are small but stubborn, optimistic, and effective.”

“My inspiration is absolutely my daughter, Al. Without her crazy, joyful imagination and hopeful view of the world, I doubt Twigs would have been so funny, clever, or brave. Al believes Twigs make a difference in their world, thus so can we.”

When Marshall discusses some of the immediate threats to wildlife in her area, the problems are clearly and quite literally at her door. Instead of shaking her head and wishing things were different, she is doing

something about it.

“Al and I want to contribute more to nonprofits that are making a difference in their local battles to protect wildlife and forests, so naturally we hoped writing and publishing our own books would allow us to do that. We also give books away for fundraising efforts by many environmental nonprofits with youth programs, and that’s helpful, too.”

Leaf and the Long Ice

What’s Coming Next

I asked Marshall, “What other book projects are on the horizon? How are they similar and how do they differ from what you’ve done so far?” Happily, she is quite busy with more nature-conscientious adventures featuring two **Leaf** spin-off characters.

“I have two more collections of four books each I’d like to write – one about the giant redwood forests in California and Nevada, and the other about the marine ecosystems on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. The first will feature Leaf’s little sister, and become the ‘Fern’ collection, and the second will be about Leaf’s little brothers, the ‘Buddy and Burba’ collection.

“Lately, I’ve talked with Maja Sereda, a talented illustrator in South Africa, about a collaboration to create a Twig series centered on the ecosystems impacted by climate change around Cape Town, an area she loves. That’s just an idea right now, but we’re both excited about the possibility.”

They aren’t the only ones! I too look forward to what Jo Marshall brings us next.

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