



## Author Spotlight on

# Cindy Jenson-Elliott

Jenson-Elliott

By Grace Nall

How can you turn ordinary things in nature into something amazing? In the tender moments of calmness, nature can take any writer on a journey of the senses. Go outside, close your eyes, and hear a chirping bird or a trickling stream. Feel the breeze rustling the tree leaves. Touch the morning's misty dew on rose petals. Smell the minty, pine scent of eucalyptus trees. Open your senses to the beauty around you.

Children's book author and environmental educator, Cindy Jenson-Elliott, shows us how the wonder of nature can be amazing. "I think the garden is my favorite place to get ideas when I am relaxed and just noticing what is around me," said Elliott. "I like writing and learning about ordinary things. I have seen the wonder myself. I would love to enrich others' lives by sharing this wonder with them."

Whether it's insects, chickens, a Cooper's hawk, or a rainbow, Elliott likes to write about the extraordinary aspects of everyday things in her blog, books and articles. Her current interests include flies, pollen and grass. She's interested in garden plants, too.

Elliott's first children's picture book, *Weeds Find a Way* (Beach Lane Books) is slated for publication Spring 2014. "Instead of bemoaning the weeds in our school garden, I could teach about plant adaptations using the weeds," said Elliott, an environmental educator at Explorer Elementary Charter School. "I looked for a book on weeds for children and found none. Like many of my books, I spent a long time sitting with, and pondering, the question of how to approach the concept of weeds. It was sort of koan, a zen puzzle."

In fact, Elliott's writing career is similar to a zen puzzle. A single question leads to thinking, exploring, and researching. "When I was very small, my family lived in a tiny town in Wyoming, just outside of Yellowstone," stated Elliott. "The first Earth Day in 1971 really made an impact on me. I think I have a natural longing for connection with the natural world, and writing is the best way for me to express that longing and fulfill that connection. Richard Louv's work *Last*

*Child in the Woods* had an impact on me."

Elliott wrote her first poems in second grade. "I fell in love with reading after finding I could become lost in a book and see a whole new world scrolling before my eyes," she stated. "That first book was a biography—which I still own—entitled *Annie Oakley, Little Sure Shot*."

Non-fiction genres influenced other writing ambitions. She wrote *Cheetahs* (c1990) when she was an editorial assistant at Zoobooks. More opportunities followed.

"*East Africa* (Lucent Books, c2002) was my first book. I was staying home with a baby for the first time, having quit my job, and wanted to keep working," she said. "I had studied African History in college and had spent a semester in East Africa. After much free labor and several complete rewrites, I got the contract. It was a few years and two books later that I found SCBWI." Elliott followed up with *Southern Africa* (c2002) and *Zombies* (c2006), both for Lucent Books.

Elliott offers insight on work-for-hire. "The payments are so low it barely covered the childcare I needed to work on the books, so there's usually no chance to visit the places you write about. For most companies that do work-for-hire, it's just a flat fee, no royalties, but you only provide text backed up with documented research. Usually you are paid in parts—1/3 for the outline, 1/3 for the manuscript, and 1/3 for revisions. I feel proud of any writing I do. All writing is an opportunity to learn, to practice writing, to improve my work, and to be paid to do the most fun thing in the world, that's even better."

Elliott expanded her interests. She's written about 150 articles and about 700-800 passages for educational testing companies. "Being edited by a demanding editor is good for any other writing I do. I learn from everyone who edits me," said Elliott.

Her latest endeavors include: 1) *CLASH*, a story, adapted and performed at the Birch Aquarium (Scripps Institute of Oceanography, UCSD) and several Capstone Press books, titled *Camping* (c2012), *Flyfishing* (c2012), and a series on *Pirates* (c2013).

Visit her website at <http://cindyjensonelliott.com/> and blog at <http://>

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