

Author Spotlight on



Sarah Wones Tomp

Photo Source: SCBWI.org

By Grace Nall

"I think I'm a Sassafras Tree," stated children's book author **Sarah Wones Tomp** in response to the question, "Which tree best describes you?"

"I grew up in the East Coast where they are more common. They are ordinary at first glance, but they have three different shaped leaves: an oval, a mitten-shape and three fingers," stated Tomp, author of *Red, White, and Blue Goodbye*. "They must want to blend in and get along with all kinds of other trees—or else they are easily distracted or indecisive. Either way, that sounds like me."

Tomp's roots are well grounded. Her writing reflects her own unique ideas and experiences turned into books. She's also taken a leap of faith and is co-author of the blog *Writing on the Sidewalk* which debuted August 2009, with her "Super Blog Buddy" children's book author Suzanne Santillan.

"Suzanne and I have been friends for a long time. First as moms, but we've shared our writing journey ever since my oldest son told Suzanne I was probably writing while he was away at her house for a play date – this allowed us to admit our secret writing habits to each other," stated Tomp. "When Suzanne's book, *Abuela's Pear Tree*, was published, we wanted a way to help her celebrate it and the whole writing life. So we started our *Writing on the Sidewalk* blog."

In one of Tomp's earlier blogs, dated May 17, 2010, she wrote about the "sentimental milestones" with her oldest son, who was 18 years old at the time. "Because he was our first baby, we learned about books together. I'd read some of the new books in children's literature for my degree in special education, but most of those had been learning-to-read series or novels. I didn't know picture books at all. We fell in love with them together..."

Tomp's reflective nature comes to light when asked about her advice for balancing life as an author and mother. "I think it's always a challenge to balance writing with life—whatever your distractions may be—because writing is hard. Joyous, fulfilling, worthwhile ...," stated Tomp.

Tomp's writing began at an early age. "Love of story is the short answer," stated Tomp when asked about what influenced or motivated her to become a writer. Her "long" version is another story.

"My parents had stringent, complicated, ever-changing rules regarding watching our black-and-white television,

so I read a lot as a child," stated Tomp. "My father, a scientist by profession, read us poetry at the dinner table and told us wonderfully scary ghost stories incorporating things from our lives. And so I always imagined and wrote stories myself—even if they were only in my head. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized not everyone else eavesdrops shamelessly and makes up pasts for people they see in passing. As an undergrad, I received a scholarship award, primarily because of a reading program I created using my own fictional stories. As a teacher, I was terrible about letting read-aloud and free writing times seep into other instructional times."

Tomp has taken her teaching a step further with another writing buddy, children's book author Andrea Zimmerman. They've teamed up to teach the University of California, San Diego's Summer Extension Course, *Writing Children's Picture Books*.

From children's books to writing novels, she offers several helpful tips. "I love all kinds of genres and want to play with them all," stated Tomp, who has an MFA from Vermont College. "...Sometimes if I get bogged down writing a difficult scene, I will try to write it as a poem—this helps me to distill the most important elements and frees me up to get rid of things I don't need. It helps open my mind to new ideas."

As for how she came up with the idea for writing *Red, White and Blue Goodbye*, Tomp refers to the advice she received from former SCBWI Regional Advisor Arlene Bartle, which was to look "around your own life and see what problems and issues are around you."

Tomp is busier than ever these days as a writing coach and professor, a mom, and writing her blogs and books. Coincidentally, she adds "trees are significant" in her upcoming novels. Her contemporary young adult novel, *Like a Streak*, has passed two rounds of judging in the *Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award*. Visit Sarah Wones Tomp at:

<http://writingonthesidewalk.wordpress.com>.

Info on the UCSD Extension course can be found at <http://extension.ucsd.edu>. UCSD Summer Extension Course: *Writing Children's Picture Books*. Instructors: Sarah Wones Tomp and Andrea Zimmerman. Dates: June 30 - August 25, 2012, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Cost: \$270 (Register early).