



Where do you live?

Northern Utah. In a place called Cache Valley that offers mountain views in all directions.

What were you like at the age of your target audience?

Imaginative and adventurous. We lived in a rural area of New Hampshire, and I spent much of my time exploring the outdoors. Because old carriage roads dotted the woodlands in the region, I'd often walk on those to get from one place to another and wonder about the people and animals that traveled them. Wildlife was plentiful, although amphibians of the local wetlands most often captured my attention. Especially tadpoles, turtles, frogs, and fish! When I wasn't running around outdoors, I either had my nose in a book, crafts at my fingertips, or some kind of batter getting mixed in a bowl.

Tell us about *Chicken Frank, Dinosaur!*

It's quirky and fun!

Determined to embrace his ancestry, Chicken Frank tries to convince his barnyard friends that he is related to a *T-rex*. But no one believes him. When DNA results inspire Frank to have a reunion with alligators, his friends fear he may become a tasty chicken nugget. Surprisingly, Frank's quest for relatives doesn't end there. He's inspired to connect with others that may be equally fearsome.

Comic-style books and graphic novels are increasingly popular. There has been mixed reception to them from parents/adults in the past. What are their benefits for emerging readers?

Great question! There are many! Despite what seems to be sparse text, they build vocabulary because the number of rare words per 1,000 is nearly as high as an adult book¹. For *Chicken Frank, Dinosaur!* we aimed to introduce readers to scientific words like evidence, evolution, mutation, and trait. The text repeats these words through the dialogue so readers are exposed to them in different contexts to gain understanding. One mother who visited with me at a book-signing said her five year old daughter learned to read with Chicken Frank, which made my heart sing. Some of her first words that she recognized for reading included scientific terms!

Another benefit of comic-style books is that they appeal to reluctant readers. However, it's not because they are necessarily easy to read. The illustration component actually demands visual engagement in comprehension of the story, which in turn, strengthens STEM practice in inference and sequencing as readers move through the story from panel to panel.² This element of reader interaction with the book reinforces my love for comic-style books. The combination of scientific content and comic structure in *Chicken Frank, Dinosaur!* is a win-win for young learners.

¹ *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (2019). ²“*Why Teach with Comics*” by Jennifer Haines, ReadingWithPictures.org and “Raising Super Readers: Benefits of Comic Books & Graphic Novels” by Melanie English

In education, instruction and learning are the goal through the daily delivery of content. As a teacher, what do you think are the benefits of combining information with humor?

When students are laughing together with a shared joke or at a surprise twist in how information is delivered, it promotes a feeling of unity in a classroom. It relaxes the atmosphere, which provides an environment where kids can feel safe and comfortable. When kids feel safe, they are able to learn more readily as other worries fade away. When kids share joy collectively, they are brought together and collaborate more fluidly, which deepens the learning process. Not only are they connecting with the content, but also with their teacher and each other.

How did you get the idea for *Chicken Frank, Dinosaur*?

From a joke. Many of my stories start with an initial spark of inspiration in the form of an image or feeling. *Chicken Frank, Dinosaur!* started with a joke shared by paleontologist Jack Horner in his Ted Talk video about scientists not needing to re-engineer dinosaurs from dormant genes and bring them back to life because they already existed... as chickens! As the students and I chuckled together at that idea, I was struck by image of a character (Chicken Frank) who believed the same thing – that he was a dinosaur.

What do you hope your readers take away from reading *Chicken Frank*?

First and foremost, laughter.

Second, knowledge and understanding.

Third, curiosity, in that they will be drawn to discovering other books about the topic of evolution, changes in nature, or how DNA is used with wildlife and research today.

What challenges did you face writing a book entirely in dialogue?

Re-Re-Vision. The original manuscript was conceived and drafted in traditional narrative prose. However, the publisher wanted the story to move more quickly with snappy dialogue. I suppose sometimes we creatives need incentive in the form of a “hard push.” For me, that hard push was a rejection letter. My first revision hadn’t quite met their goal. I was disappointed, but the “hard push” worked. Inspiration struck at 3am with wake-up call from my muse. I wrote a new draft of the story as a script in about an hour.

In hind-sight, when it comes to writing dialogue-only stories, my advice is to write a solid story in narrative-form first. Shape up the character development, arc, and emotional layers. Then transform it into a comic-book/graphic novel style. By this stage, you’ll know what needs to be seen in the text and what can be supported by illustrations.

What brought you to children's books?

The sound of my mother's voice. We didn't have many picture books in our home while growing up. Instead, my mother read to my brother and I on most nights from a hardbound collection of classic children's stories and poems. Favorites included *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Henny Penny*, *Over in the Meadow*, and poems like *The Sugarplum Tree*, *The Goops*, *The Queen of Hearts*, and *Little Tommy Tucker*.

When did you know you wanted to write your own books?

In elementary school. One of my teachers introduced our class to book-making. She brought us through the creation of our own books. We developed our story ideas, created first and final drafts with illustrations, and then bound the whole book together with stitching between cardboard covers that were decorated with wallpaper. Before that experience I had never thought about how books (which I loved!) were written and created. I became hooked and started making my own books at home. I still have some of them.

Tell us about your road to publication, what did that involve for you?

Persistence and Patience. My journey began about 25 years ago when author Jim Fergus reached out while I was finishing my MS at Colorado State University. He wanted someone to collaborate with him on a natural history guide of Rocky Mountain National Park, and I had spent 2 years doing research there. Although Jim eventually stepped away from that project to focus on *One Thousand White Women*, the spark for publication had been ignited by writing for him and receiving his praise and encouragement. I went on to find writing events in Utah which were led by the late Rick Walton and Carol Lynch Williams, as well as SCBWI. Over the years I took classes, attended conferences, and developed an appreciation for the friendships I made along the way. Currently, I interact with four major groups: SCBWI, Julie Hedlund's PB 12x12, Bethany Hegedus's The Writing Barn, and Utah's WIFYR, which continue to offer education and support. In 2019 a submission opportunity through a writing event with the Utah/Idaho chapter of SCBWI captured the interest of an editor at Albert Whitman, and the rest fell into place.

Chicken Frank, Dinosaur! is your debut picture book. Were there other publications before this one?

Yes! I sold my first children's story to The Mailbox Company in 2000. It was informational fiction called, "Why So Brown, Isabelle?" and was included in a collective book for 3rd Grade readers called: *Short-Short Stories for Reading Aloud*. After that my experiences grew to include publication of magazine articles and poems, recorded essays on Utah Public Radio, and four leveled-readers with Benchmark Education: *Caterpillar Can't Wait!*, *Watch a Butterfly Grow!*, *Farm Stand Mystery*, and *How Many Muffins?* Writing these four books opened me up to the importance of word choice, specificity, intense deadlines, and collaboration with an editorial team

One of the other hats you wear is that of classroom science teacher. How does your work as an educator influence your writing?

It provides roots for emotion. I love teaching and I enjoy interacting with students. I'm lucky for that. Finding joy in the classroom fuels the energy that I carry into my writing space.

What other things inspire you?

Changes in nature and beautiful landscapes. Whether it be growth of a young fledging bird into an adult, metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, or migration of a meandering river channel across a wide open valley, change is fascinating. I love the challenge of putting my outdoor experiences and curiosities on paper in a way that readers might understand.

With your science background, you've had the opportunity to work in other careers. How have those other careers contributed to your success as an author?

Through hands-on knowledge. Aside from teaching, my other careers involved environmental consulting, research, and motherhood. The motherhood speaks for itself, right? Consulting and research involved a lot of time spent outdoors in different habitats in all seasons, both on my own and working with others. Those experiences often contribute to my ability to set a scene or emotion, as well as tap into unusual details. I know what it's like to hold a bat in my hands, walk across a bright snowfield alone, get caught in a thunderstorm on a 13,000-foot peak, be nearly stampeded by a herd of territorial bulls (don't wear red), and have the earth open up beneath me at a hidden (and thankfully, small) sinkhole. So far, these experiences have fed my fiction, which I think pivots on surprise. Many of my most memorable experiences have been ones I wasn't expecting. In turn, I look forward to being surprised in my writing and by my characters.

Can you share a bit about your process?

It spins on prioritization. Each day I schedule my writing time based on the list of chores or work that needs to get done. Based on the length of that list, I decide how much time I'll put toward writing. Depending on how well the muse cooperates, the to-do list might get truncated. Aside from my hours dedicated to teaching, my writing time has become the priority. Chores and to-do's come second. Getting dinner on the table (now that I'm an empty nester), third. As for writing, I often start with a mental image. Once I have an idea, I decide on setting and the feeling it evokes. Then I focus on character—what the character wants and what obstacles stand in the way. Lastly, free-writing allows voice to emerge.

What do you do to shake the rust off or get new ideas?

Outdoor activity. Walking, gardening, hiking, floating on a lake in summer. Getting myself moving outside clears my mind, rejuvenates my spirit, and opens the way for creative ideas to flow.

Anything you can't live without while you write/draw?

A notebook and pen. Although I type my manuscripts and their revisions in the computer, nearly all of my drafts begin with initial lines and thoughts written down on paper.

Any authors and/or illustrators who inspire you?

Many! Far more than I can name here. Those that come to mind today include: Beth Ferry, Bethany Hegedus, Jackie Azua Kramer, Juana Martinez-Neal, Kathi Appelt, Katherine Applegate, Carol Lynch Williams, Dianne White, Adam Rex, Jon Klassen, Kevin Hawkes, and the late Rick Walton.

Share some fun facts about yourself

First, there is escargot. When I was a young--*too young*--an appetizer that I ordered from restaurant menus was escargot. Why? Because originally, eating one resulted from a dare given by my father. I suppose I kept going with it.

Then, liver. Yes, I liked liver dinners that my mother made. My brother didn't share my enthusiasm. However, I never introduced my own children to this fine cuisine.

And perhaps, there was a foreshadowing, i.e., The Reptile Room. Prior to attending Colorado State University, I visited the area to find an apartment. To save money, rather than stay at a hotel, one of those nights I slept in a "reptile room" full of snakes and lizards. Some of the enclosures were actually placed on the floor under the raised bed. Somehow, I survived. And even got some shut-eye.