



A Conversation with Jen Funk Weber

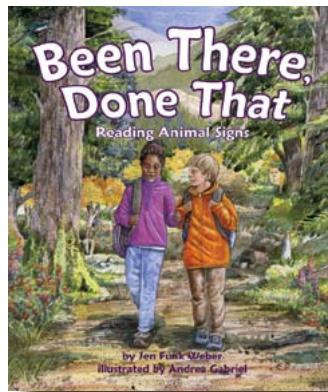
Author of
*Been There, Done That: Reading
Animal Signs*

What was your incentive to write this particular book?

Having worked as a natural history guide in Alaska, I know that people want to see exciting things when they take the time and make the effort to get out in nature, but that's not the way nature works. Flowers and wild animals don't perform on command. In fact, most wild animals prefer to avoid humans.

But things are happening all the time in nature, and there are clues all around that can help us "see" what's happening, even if we don't actually witness it. It's fun looking for these clues and trying to figure out what happened. It's like snooping on neighbors, except the animals don't seem to mind. If we spend enough time out there, we might get lucky and see some of those really exciting, once-in-a-lifetime events.

And, of course, hiking, searching for animal signs, and watching wildlife are some of my favorite things to do, but you guessed that, right?



When did you become interested in writing?

I enjoyed writing in school, but it wasn't something I pursued outside school—I didn't write for fun when I was a kid.

What really kicked off my writing was journaling about winter caretaking in remote Alaska. My husband and I spent ten years as winter caretakers.

Lodge owners would fly us out to their lodge in September or October, and we'd stay there, just the two of us, for six to eight months. Most of the time, we had no electricity or running water. No phone. No tv. No grocery store. No neighbors. To keep my family back in Maryland from worrying too much about us, I kept a daily journal that I would mail to them whenever I could.

Of course, we didn't have daily mail service, either, so it wasn't especially often, but it was enough.

I liked the daily writing, and I liked sharing our experiences, explaining things that happened. I find I process information and think best by writing.

Also during the caretaking years, we had lots of

time to read, and reading stories made me want to write stories.

When are you most creative?

Around 4 a.m. No, really. I love getting up in the wee hours to write. Picture this: It's zero degrees outside, snowy, and dark. But it's warm enough inside—at least it is at my desk, two feet from the heater. The sky is full of stars and maybe northern lights. It won't get light for hours. I turn on colored lights that rim the ceiling and light fragrant candles on the windowsills. I make a pot of jasmine tea. I sit. It's quiet and still. I imagine. I write.

Okay, it's not always that way, but sometimes it is.

As for what sparks my creativity; that would be new ideas and experiences. It can be something as small as a headline or a fascinating fact, or it can be a trip to someplace new, or it can be thinking about something in a new way, i.e., a new perspective. Every new thought or experience gets processed into past thoughts and experiences, and this synthesis triggers the creative process.

For instance, while converting feet to meters, I wondered why the US has never really converted to the metric system. When I was a kid, we were told we needed to switch because the whole country would soon switch.

I began to wonder why time has never been converted to the metric system, even where the metric system is used. Instead of 24 hours in a day, we could have 10 or 100 some-other-unit-of-measure.

Now I'm motivated to do some research about metrics. An old idea—converting to the metric system—leads to creative thinking when applied in a new way—to time.

What is the most frequently asked question you encounter as an author and what is your answer?

Do you know J. K. Rowling?

No.

I have an idea for a story. Will you write it?

No.

Are you famous?

No.

Do you make a lot of money?

No.

Can you help me get my book published?

No.



So . . . why do you write for kids?

I like the way kids think, their perspective. I like the things kids do and the things they contemplate. I like their curiosity, enthusiasm, and energy. Kids are interested and interesting.

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