



Author Spotlight with **Dawn Cusick**

When did you start writing science books for children? What inspired you to do so?

I started jotting down ideas for children’s science books about fifteen years ago, when I was taking science classes on my lunch hour. At the time, I worked as an editor for a nonfiction publisher. We were always searching for new book ideas, so almost everything that passed through my mind was evaluated for its book potential. I also had young children then, and our weekends were spent in the local public library searching for fun books and trying to convince the check-out librarian that yes, we really would read every one of them. We also spent a lot of time at zoos and aquariums. Ironically, I originally viewed those first children’s science book ideas as books that someone else would write.

How do you come up with ideas for the subjects of your books?

It sounds like such a cliché, but book ideas are everywhere! Some ideas come from personal experiences. My interests in animal eggs, for instance, began when I was counting and measuring katydid eggs and egg-laying locations as part of my graduate work.

Ideas also come from interesting photographs, or from information that extends the very simplistic generalizations some people have about the natural world. Ideas such as “Birds eat worms,” “Eggs are white,” or “Feces is gross” are all correct statements on one level, but the natural world is so much more complex—and fascinating—than that.

Other book ideas begin with a single adaptation. Because competition in the natural world is so incredibly intense, almost every interesting behavior or body form you see has a great story behind it.

In 2007, you started a publishing company called EarlyLight Books that produces quality, award-winning science and nature books for young readers. How do you think these books differ from other science texts that are out there today? What makes them so successful and loved by children (and adults!) of all ages?

I started EarlyLight because I believe there is a niche for books that provide accessible science in fun formats. Science and science-related thinking skills offer so many opportunities for

children, and have such wide-ranging implications for the quality of future life. We cannot afford for our children to think that science is boring or one-dimensional. There are other publishers doing this type of work, thankfully—including Charlesbridge—but the world needs more!

In part, I think EarlyLight books have been well received by both children and adults because of the world's relationship with factual information today. The internet provides almost instant access to millions of facts. Putting aside the valid issues of unvetted material on the Web, we still have access to an almost incomprehensible body of knowledge. It's exhilarating and frustrating at the same time. All of those facts don't do you any good unless you have a framework for connecting information and concepts. One of our upcoming books, *Animal Geometry* by elementary school teacher Jeff Barger, is a good example of how EarlyLight approaches topics. The geometry facts in the book aren't any different than you would find on the Web or in a textbook, but there is nothing textbook-like about this book. Jeff connects geometry with the natural world in a storytelling format that is quite amazing—you leave the book a different person than when you entered it.

In addition to writing and publishing books for children, you are also a college biology instructor. Have you ever taught science to young children, or written science books for older students?

My children were in elementary school when I first started taking science classes, and I did presentations in their classrooms as part of my weekly volunteer time. It was a great way to learn the material, because you find out very quickly what you don't understand when you try to explain it to elementary school students! It was a big challenge in those days to distill the science down to very simple concepts because I didn't have enough core science education yet. In many ways, simplifying science is a translation issue—if you oversimplify, you sacrifice the accuracy of the content; if you under simplify, you lose your audience. I do elementary school workshops now and it's so much easier than it used to be.

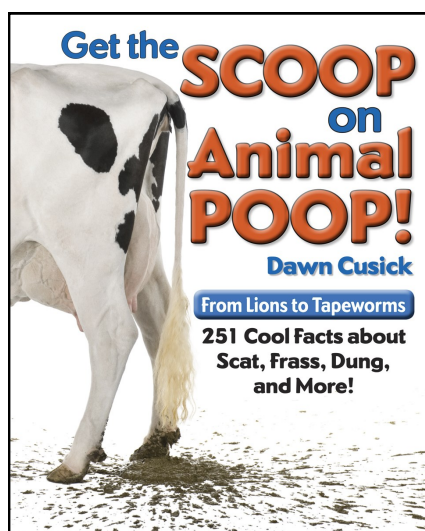
I haven't written a science book for older students (yet!), but developing lecture material for college students is a lot like writing children's science books. The material needs to be fun and accessible, with just the right blend of big-picture concepts and supporting detail. (Well, okay, college science classes don't *have* to be fun, but when they are, it changes the dynamic in a wonderful way for everyone.)

Many college students have the same passionate interests in animals that elementary students have. An off-topic question about whether insects have ears or whether fish have noses is equally likely to come from a college student as an elementary student. Unfortunately, many college students have little interest in the mechanisms that drive biological processes, and they usually view mechanisms as the “boring” part of science. The challenge, just like in children's science books, is to dazzle them with whole organisms and then make the mechanisms and the connections relevant.

Your book, *Get the Scoop on Animal Poop!*, is a finalist in the 2013 Children's Choice Book Awards. How long did it take you to write this book? Did you have any input from your target audience (i.e. children!) during the process?

I was thrilled to learn the book is a finalist! The book took about a thousand hours over several years. Much of that time was in editorial research, photo research, and finding the best way to structure the material.

I beta tested the book as it was coming together at several local elementary schools because it was very important to do a book that would work on both an ewww-gross-fun level *and* as a showcase for some pretty amazing animal behavior and ecology. Seeing children interact with the material was a big help in making sure both goals were achieved. It also helped me realize that kids would view the omission of snake poop as a huge, huge crime. Thank goodness my beta group pointed out the error in time to correct it!



Written by Dawn Cusick

ISBN 978-1-62354-014-2 \$9.95 PB
 ISBN 978-1-60734-344-8 \$9.99 E-book
 Ages 7–11 • 8 x 10 • 80 pages

**2013 Children’s Choice Book Award Finalist,
 3rd to 4th Grade category**
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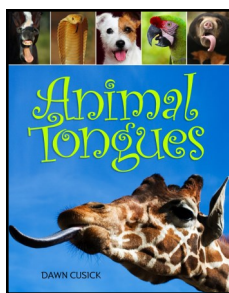


“Ewwwww” might be the first thought that comes to mind when you think of feces, but animals use poop in dozens of cool ways. They use it to trick predators and prey, send messages, feed themselves and their babies, build homes, mark their territories, and so much more.

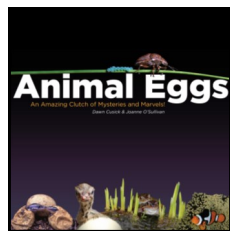
“[A] bright and inviting treatment of an unusual subject.”
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“[I]t is bound to get even the most reluctant reader to actually read a book.”
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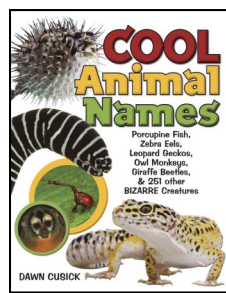
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