



## Author Spotlight with **Elizabeth Rusch**

### **How did you go from majoring in economics at college to becoming a full-time writer of books for children?**

If I explain how I decided to major in economics in college that might make the connection a little more obvious. In college, I wanted to study absolutely everything. I took pre-med courses because I think the human body is amazing. I took art history, music history, political science, philosophy, religious studies, calculus, public policy, education, psychology . . . the list goes on and on. I had a really hard time choosing a major because it felt too confining. I loved reading and writing, but I figured I would keep exploring those areas whether I took classes in them or not (so I took very few literature or writing classes, a choice I now regret).

I ultimately decided on economics for two reasons: it had the fewest required credits so it gave me the most flexibility to take a wide variety of classes. And it was the subject that I knew the least about so I would learn the most. While I found my economics classes fascinating (and I did gain insight I use daily while reading the newspaper), I now know that my logic was flawed. Of course I should have majored in writing or literature! I guess I really needed some guidance . . .

So anyway, back to your original question. How did I become a writer? Well, what does someone who loves reading and writing and learning do for a living? Write! I can read about and learn about and write about anything in the whole world that interests me. There is no limit. I don't have to declare a major!

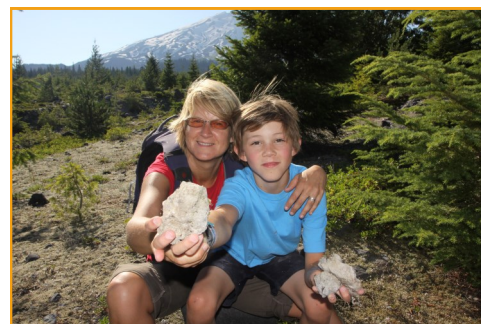
I got a job straight out of college working at *Teacher Magazine*, where I learned journalism from an amazing staff of writers and editors. Aside from a two-year detour to get my master's in public policy (crazy, I know, but I LOVE school and I had full fellowship), I've been writing ever since. In addition to writing kids' books, I also write magazine articles for young readers and adults.

### **You are a self-proclaimed volcano enthusiast. When did your fascination with this phenomenon begin? What prompted it?**

I can give an exact date—two actually: the first was May 18, 1980, the day of Mount St. Helens' cataclysmic eruption. I was thirteen years old, and I lived in Connecticut. Watching on TV as the volcano spewed ash and steam in a huge, black, billowing mushroom cloud, I was completely awestruck. But somehow I missed the fact that this volcano was in our country. I figured it was somewhere really remote, like Greenland.

When I moved to Portland as an adult in 1997, I was stunned to see the volcano’s lopped-off peak looming over the city. I thought living so close to volcanoes was pretty cool, but my fascination really deepened in October 2004, when Mount St. Helens rumbled back to life, shaking with earthquakes and spitting steam. On October 5, the volcano shot off its biggest plume since the 1980s. A week later, the newspaper ran an aerial photo of a 100-foot-high, fin-shaped slab of solid magma jutting from the crater floor. Mount St. Helens was making a new lava dome! It was shoving out enough solid lava to fill a house every ten minutes. I was fascinated by the idea of a volcano rebuilding itself and I wanted to see it close-up. I coaxed my then four-year-old son Cobi into the car for the two-hour drive up to the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. At the Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center, as we checked out some displays, someone yelled: “We’re having an event!” The back of my neck prickled. Everyone froze. I wondered if we should crawl under the chairs . . . or run for our car . . . or press our noses to the window to watch . . .

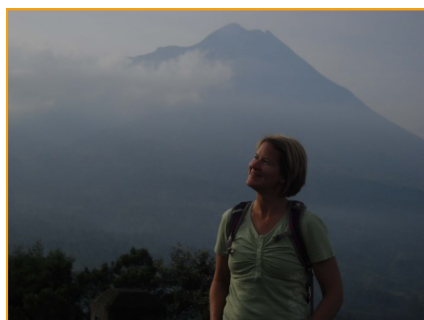
The rangers invited us outside to witness the steam and ash eruption. As we stood on the deck, a whitish-greyish plume just rose from the crater, right before our eyes. Then, to top it off, a ranger handed Cobi a hunk of lava. “This is a brand new rock, born yesterday,” she said. “It was still warm from the heat inside the earth when the scientist handed it to me.” Cobi’s eyes widened and so did mine. I was hooked. I knew I wanted to write a book about volcanoes, and I’ve ended up writing three.



*Elizabeth and her son holding pumice from Mount St. Helens*

### **Most of your books are nonfiction. What is it about this genre that you find most interesting? Do you think you’ll write more fiction in the future?**

I enjoy reading and writing both fiction and nonfiction. I have a fiction picture book published called *A Day with No Crayons* and others in the works; a middle-grade graphic novel called *Muddy Max* about a kid who gets superpowers from mud, due out in 2014; and I’m working on a middle-grade novel called *April Fool*.



*Elizabeth and Mount Merapi, a volcano in Indonesia*

But, yes, I love writing nonfiction. For one, I get to really delve into topics that fascinate me, like volcanology, space exploration, music, art, and history. To do the research, I get to interview really interesting people like Steve Squyres (the man behind the Mars rovers); spend hours reading cool primary sources like the Mozart family letters; and travel to amazing places like NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Mount Merapi, a volcano in Indonesia.

Finally, I love the creative challenge of writing really compelling nonfiction. Some people consider only fiction to be creative writing. But the level of creativity in a piece of writing does not depend on whether it is based in fact or is made up. It depends on the creativity of the writer. Fiction can be written with or without an inspired approach, artistry, and beautiful language—and so can nonfiction.

I think the best nonfiction inspires, entertains, and challenges—and the options for structuring nonfiction to do this are endless. I can be creative, literary, artistic, poetic, humorous, vivid, and suspenseful. I can use metaphor, imagery, narrative, voice, or any other tool I'd like. So half the fun is figuring out: What is the best way to tell this story? What cool or clever structure will make this amazing material come to life for readers?

**In addition to *Volcano Rising*, you have published a few other books about volcanoes. How are they different from each other, and from other books about volcanoes? Do you think you'll be writing more about this topic?**

My three volcano books are three quite different stories for different age groups. I joke that I offer cradle to grave volcanology. The cradle starts with *Volcano Rising*, which is a picture book for young kids, age five to nine. *Volcano Rising* focuses on the creative force of volcanoes, how volcanoes shape the landscape, building mountains and creating islands where there were none before. I employ lyrical language so that it's lovely to read aloud. And there is a second layer of more detailed text for parents or teachers to share with kids or for independent readers to explore on their own.

*Will It Blow?* is designed to be a fun, interactive way for kids age six to ten to understand and use cutting-edge volcano monitoring by drawing a playful parallel between volcano monitoring and detective work. The book introduces Mount St. Helens as the suspect, and the chapters describe clues that volcanologists gather. Each chapter ends with a real case study from Mount St. Helens' 2004-2008 eruption where kids apply what they learned about clues to guess what Mount St. Helens might do next. *Will It Blow?* offers pretty hefty scientific material presented playfully.

*Eruption!* is for older readers, kids age ten and up. It's a no-holds-barred immersion into the destructive power of volcanoes and the intense challenge of predicting deadly violent eruptions. I follow a small team of scientists as they work on the flanks of steaming, quaking, ash-spewing volcanoes all over the world—from Colombia and the Philippines to Chile and Indonesia—as they struggle to predict eruptions and prevent tragedies. It's suspenseful, nail-biting stuff, and dramatic photos by Tom Uhlman and others bring readers even closer to these awesome volcanoes and their destructive power.

I think what distinguishes my three volcano books from other kids' books on volcanoes is also what unites them. I think my books cover some key aspects of volcanology that have been overlooked. Before writing my first book, I read all the kids books on volcanoes I could find. (There are loads of them.) I found that, for the most part, they present similar information in a similar way. None showcased the creative force of volcanoes—that the most common kind of eruption is a dome-building eruption. None delved into cutting-edge volcano monitoring, made the connection between volcano monitoring and detective work, or gave readers a chance to do volcanology. And none covered the work of this amazing group of volcanologists who have saved tens of thousands of people lives. So while there are lots of other volcano books out there, none told some really important stories that I thought needed to be told.

And, yes, I do have another volcano book in the works, a quirky book to introduce volcanoes to even younger kids . . .

## Have you visited any of the volcanoes featured in *Volcano Rising*?

I have explored in the Three Sisters area (Oregon) a bit. My favorite trip was a four-mile hike up to Black Butte, a smaller stratovolcano covered with lava rocks, which has a 360-degree view of the Sisters and other volcanoes all around. I've done some backpacking in a remote corner of Yellowstone. Though we were far from the famous geysers, we were certainly in an area covered by the lava flows. I've been to the Hawaiian Islands, all of which were formed by creative eruptions, though I've never been to Kilauea on the Big Island. I hope to swing a trip there someday soon.

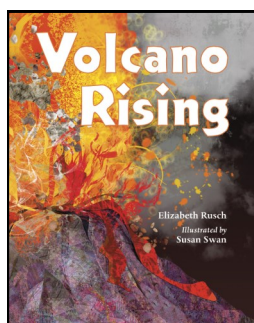


Elizabeth hiking Mount St. Helens

But my real muse for *Volcano Rising* has been Mount St. Helens. It's one of the volcanoes I can see from where I live in Portland, and I've hiked there quite a bit. Two trips are most memorable. In 2007, while St. Helens was still in active dome-building eruption, the forest service reopened the summit, and I climbed with my husband and some friends to the rim. To get there, we scrambled over porous boulders and trudged up massive ash fields. The ground was soft and loose like sand dunes on a beach—but steep. Near the crater rim, we could see yellowish steam rising from the crater. As we peered over the edge, our nostrils filled with the rotten egg stench of hydrogen sulfide. The new dome was massive, a steaming, jagged mound. Hissing fumaroles leaked billowing white and yellowish gas. We heard a rumble. It wasn't an explosion—it was a rock fall. When new lava shoves up from below, rubble at the top of the pile tumbles off, knocking other rocks down and kicking up ash. Mount St. Helens was growing back, shaping our very landscape. I was witnessing geologic history in the making. It was SO COOL.

I also did another huge day hike on Mount St. Helens (more challenging than the climb to the rim) while researching my book *Eruption!*. I recount this trip in a blog I wrote for Interesting Nonfiction for Kids (INK) called “On How Research Can Make You Throw Up.” You can read the grueling story here: <http://inkrethink.blogspot.com/2013/06/on-how-research-can-make-you-throw-up.html>

Also, be sure to visit my new, improved website: [www.elizabethrusch.com](http://www.elizabethrusch.com), where you can learn more about my background, my books and magazine articles, and find resources for teachers and interesting tidbits for kids. Thanks for reading!



Thought you knew all about volcanoes? Think again!

“A clever and appealing introduction to a remarkable natural phenomenon.”  
—*Kirkus Reviews*



*A Junior Library Guild Selection*

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Ages 6–9

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