

Author Spotlight

with

Katherine B. Hauth

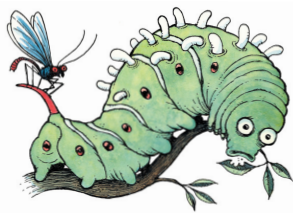


Photograph by Drew Nelson

What made you want to become a poet?

I'm an accidental poet. Unlike many writers who wrote poems or stories from an early age, I'm definitely a late bloomer.

My husband was an engineer and I was a personnel analyst in the Seattle area when we realized that the quality of our personal lives was being managed by the quality of our material lives. It was time to change priorities, so we "dropped out." At age thirty-five I started a journal. I read articles about writing and I took a class in photography. I was ready to capture whatever adventures lay ahead—in prose.



We camped in Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, exploring places where we might resettle. Finally, we set down roots in the broad red-mesa ranch land of New Mexico. Although I'd never been there, I felt connected with the place in a way I never had before. Nature in all its desert guises, and an occasional rancher, were our neighbors. I saw my first roadrunner and my first tarantula crossing the road—so big I could see daylight beneath it. I saw my first black widow spider looking freshly scrubbed in her unmistakable shiny black-with-red hourglass insignia. The black widow spider and raising a raven to return to the wild were the inspiration for my first articles for children—in prose.

The longer I lived away from city noises and distractions, the more I found nature to be essentially poetic, but I don't mean that in a sentimental sense. I responded to its patterns, rhythms, sensuous qualities, hyperbole, and onomatopoeia. As I became more in tune with the land, it seemed natural to write its stories in the language of poetry. And so—aided by reading poetry and taking poetry classes and workshops—I became a poet.

Why do you like to write nonfiction as opposed to fiction?

My inspiration to write comes primarily from nature, with its many amazing and weird true stories. I feel no need to create alternative realities. What can be more exciting, more marvelous, than metamorphosis? What would it feel like to taste things with our feet? What would it be like to be a sloth whose metabolism is so slow that it only needs to eliminate waste once a week?

Some people crave dragons. I find dragonflies intriguing enough. Between their aquatic young lives and their aerial adult stage, they look and act as if they were separate species. I like to discover the marvels and eccentricities that abound and share them with children through my writing.

What inspired the poems in *What's For Dinner?*

"Fast Food" and "Road-Toad Restaurant" originated from walking near home. Seeing a hawk air-drop a snake to its mate remained with me for over thirty years before it became a poem about an unusual feeding behavior. I never would have noticed the toad roadkill from a car. As I walked by, however, I was drawn to the amount of activity on this carcass, and that different species ate separately from one another—as if in separate rooms at a restaurant.

"Spinning for Supper" and "Wood Turtle Stomp" were inspired by magazine articles that introduced me to these behaviors. A museum display of a variety of animal skulls included a note that the Chicago Field Museum employed dermestid beetles to clean bones. I immediately thought of how that want-ad might read.



How did the food chain develop as the theme of the book?

This, too, was somewhat accidental. I had submitted a collection of poems about interesting animal behaviors to Charlesbridge. The editor liked the poems but said they needed to be more tightly focused. She noted that several of the poems were about eating. I knew there was abundant interesting material on the subject that would be great fun to find, so I started hunting for it.

Insects provided some of the most unusual feeding behaviors, but the editor wanted a broader representation that included more mammals. Among five options I considered to round out the collection, I successfully developed "Four Ways to Catch a Seal," "Age-Old Alliance," and "Inside and Outside the Sloth." These were fortuitous choices that represented the lone predator, cooperative interspecies feeding, and commensalism, where many creatures eat together without competition or injury. As we developed "More Words About the Poems" for the back matter, the vocabulary and the food chain theme came together naturally.



How do you think David Clark's illustrations complement your poems?

His art seems a natural fit for my somewhat slantwise take on the eating scenes in these poems. I especially love the wonderful shapes of the cover art that draw the viewer into the complexity of the food-chain theme.

It's fun watching people look at *What's for Dinner?* to see where they stop and where they laugh. "Wood Turtle Stomp" and "The Nose Knows" images are consistently arresting.

The specific poems are framed by two general poems. David's use of the stork-as-butler for both of those illustrations complements this framing and results in a good giggle at the end.

What is your favorite thing to have for dinner?

Because I enjoy eating, this is the most difficult question for me. An answer requires eliminating many wonderful options. Perhaps because it's holiday time, I'll settle on Cornish game hen stuffed with wild rice and dried fruit. I'll choose a red cabbage/cranberry dish with cloves and cinnamon on the side.

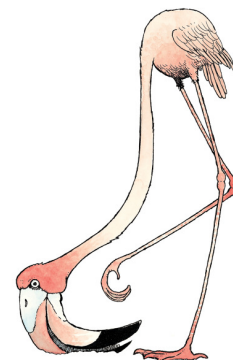
By Katherine B. Hauth



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What in nature could be more poetic than the hunt for food and the struggle for survival? In twenty-nine poems readers will squirm at the realities of how the animal world catches food, eats it, and becomes dinner in turn. In these quirky poems readers are introduced to many animals with disgusting eating habits, such as the marabou stork, which lurks on the periphery like a vampire in the shadows, waiting for a chance to pick at a rotting carcass. The dermestid beetle does not mind doing the dirty work, cleaning up animals on the roadside and often made busy at museums cleaning up bones for exhibits. Baby wasps hatch inside an unsuspecting caterpillar and eat their way out.

Gross, cool, and extremely funny, David Clark's illustrations get to the heart (and skin and guts) of the food chain and the web of life, depicting the animal world at dinner time in all its gory glory. Back matter includes further information about the animals in the poems and the scientific terms used.



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