

Author Spotlight with Sallie Wolf



As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a boy, and not just a boy, but a Mohawk Indian of the Wolf clan. I wanted the freedom to roam the outdoors and had almost no interest in traditional girls' activities, such as dolls or housework or sewing. As I grew a little older I tried out lots of ideas—I wanted to be a scientist, a jockey (there were no female jockeys when I was young and I wanted to be the first), or a farmer. Eventually I settled on three career choices: I wanted to teach, to work in publishing, and to write and illustrate children's books.

How did you become an artist and writer?

I started writing seriously in the eighth grade—endless stories and weird poems. But it wasn't until I had my first child that I became a really disciplined writer. I began to keep a journal, which I thought of as a writer's notebook. When my son would nap I would write. My first stories grew out of watching my son, his friends, and the kids on our block. A great bonus of writing for children is that it brought me back to things I used to love but had lost touch with—raking leaves and jumping in the leaf piles, building snowmen and going sledding, and planting marigold seeds. I kept at the writing, and as my children got older I was finally successful in selling my first picture book.



With one book under my belt I felt it was time to think about illustration. I had been painting in watercolors ever since my father gave me paints when I was a child. But my painting had been fairly sporadic until I became a stay-at-home mom. When Peter, my second son, entered first grade, I decided to go to art school at the Art Institute of Chicago. I thought I would learn to draw people so I could illustrate, but I got seduced by the larger art world and became immersed in art projects of all types. I did not write very much during the eight years it took me to complete a BFA degree as a part-time student.

Since my graduation almost eleven years ago, I have sought to find a balance between my art and my writing. It is my journals that have provided the key. I mostly write in them, but often sketch.

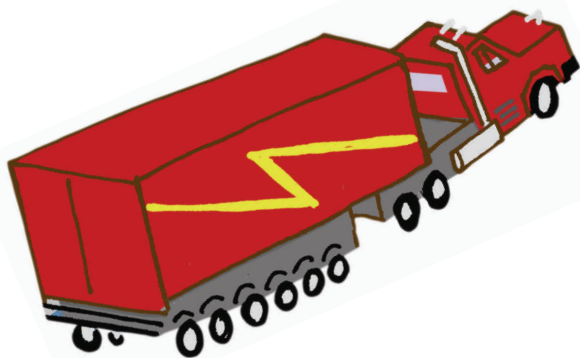
My forthcoming book, *The Robin Makes A Laughing Sound*, grew out of bird sketches that I had in my journals and on handmade sheets of paper. I made the sketches because I was leading art workshops for children related to their science unit on birds. I also made collaged birds on an old calendar. As I looked at the twelve different birds I realized I had the structure for a children's picture book. I started to write in prose, but realized poetry would tighten the text and add interest. As I worked on the poems, I broke free of the twelve birds in the collages and wrote about many birds. Then I began to sketch birds to go with the poetry. This will be the first book I illustrate myself, with help from Micah Bornstein, who is designing the pages with me using Photoshop. I find that the art I make is beginning to suggest the writing I want to do. My journals are where the writing and the art come together in a natural, organic mix, focused on my activities, travels, and deepest interests.



You studied anthropology in college. How has your education in this field informed your career as an artist and writer?

Anthropology is the study of how different peoples live, and their customs, tools, and beliefs. To be an anthropologist one must be a good observer and take careful notes. My journals are where I record my observations, often about how I live, and my customs, beliefs, and home. I also look for story ideas in what I see around me—kids at play, adults at work, trucks, construction, our holidays, and seasonal observations. My art and my writing are where I express these observations. Both *Peter's Trucks* (Albert Whitman & Company), and *Truck Stuck* are stories inspired by true incidents. To choose which vehicles to include in both books, I looked at the trucks and vehicles around my neighborhood.

My art is also based on observation and the collection of artifacts. I use many found objects and materials in my collages. My landscapes are all based on sketches from life. And my moon project is most directly related to anthropology. For over thirteen years I have been observing the moon, charting my observations in my journals, and then compiling my findings into larger installations. My methodology is influenced by my training in anthropology, and I have purposely refrained from doing research. I have tried to put myself in the place of preliterate people who observed the skies and pieced together a very sophisticated understanding of astronomical events long before there was writing to record their findings.



What inspired the idea for Truck Stuck?

I live in a town that is divided by elevated train tracks. There are many viaducts under the tracks, and not infrequently, trucks get stuck. I have a vague recollection of being stuck behind a stuck truck and noticing a girl scout troop in a car in front of me. I could be making this up. However, after I started working on the story I came across a truck which was stuck and I stopped, bought a disposable camera at the corner drug store, and stayed for quite some time taking pictures as a large tow truck came to the rescue.

In Truck Stuck, children bring the community together in a chaotic situation. Did you grow up in a close-knit community?

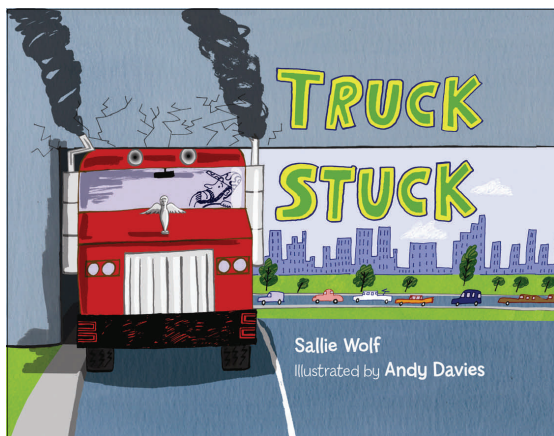
I grew up on a campus where all the adults knew who the children were, and as a kid I knew many adults who were not my parents. It was a great place to be a kid—I could roam a large area at a young age, and felt that all the adults were looking out for me. I had a lot of freedom at an early age.

Now I live in a “village” of 54,000 people. It is fairly close-knit—I know many people, shop locally, feel involved with the community. My children grew up here. We have block parties. There are kids’ sports teams that involve huge numbers of families. The schools all feed into two junior highs and one high school. When I see a lemonade stand run by kids, I usually stop to give them some business, even though I don’t know the kids.

You are a devoted journal keeper. Why is it important for you to keep a journal and how does it contribute to your writing?

I first began keeping a journal because I thought that was what writers did. As I grew more disciplined with my journal writing it became more and more important to me. Writing a story sometimes feels like work to me, but writing in my journal feels like play, a place to have fun, something I like to do. Now I find that writing in my journal helps me organize and focus my ideas. I write about what I did the day before (I sometimes jokingly refer to that in my journal as “the narrative.” I often write about what I intend to do today. I find that taking thirty to sixty minutes each morning to write actually makes me more efficient and productive. I clear my mind, order my thoughts, set my priorities, and sometimes solve problems or emotional issues by writing them out. I write myself into energy and action. I also switch often from writing about what I want to write about, to actually writing the story, or poem or developing sketches and ideas for an art project. My journals are filled with rough drafts, partial ideas, diagrams. Then when I really focus on one story idea, I have to sift back through my journals to find all my buried thoughts about it. This puts me back in touch with many ideas and adds depth to what I am working on and direction to new projects. My journals are the source for all the art and writing I do.

Books by Sallie Wolf



ISBN: 978-1-58089-119-6 • HC • \$14.95
Ages 2–5

Move that truck!

When a truck gets stuck under a bridge, it causes a terrible traffic jam that soon turns into a block party. When attempts to remove the truck fail, two kids, some balloons, and a dog save the day.

Sparse text, energetic rhyme, and clever illustrations bring depth to this simple tale.