



A Writer's Story

By Serena Gingold Allen

I grew up at the end of a long dirt road in Midpines. I spent a great deal of my childhood reading, writing, and climbing trees. I loved watching wildlife, splashing through creeks, and finding wildflowers. I was unschooled until high school, so I had plenty of time for these pursuits, as well as many others. My brother and I founded a monthly newsletter called *Homeschoolers for Peace and Justice* in which we wrote research articles along with other homeschooled contributors across the country. I also wrote a lot of fictional stories and dreamed of writing children's books when I grew up.

After attending University of California Santa Cruz for a bachelor's degree in anthropology, I earned a teaching credential from California State University Monterey Bay and, somewhat ironically, I became an elementary school teacher. I later obtained a master's degree in education from San Jose State University with a research project detailing the benefits of daily Sustained Silent Reading for kindergarten through fifth grade students. For ten years I taught kindergarten through third grade and I was lucky enough to get to read picture books aloud to eager children every day.

In 2014, I retired from teaching to pursue my writing career full time. I went to conferences, joined writing critique groups, and read books about the craft of writing. I read and studied tons of picture books and learned how to write them. Now, in addition to writing, my husband and I are raising our two young children. My days are split between crafting stories and chasing after a kindergartner and a toddler.

I feel fortunate that even though I don't have a class anymore, I get to read aloud to my own children every day. Mornings at my house begin with stories and no one even thinks about going to sleep at night before we've read several books. I also still love reading to myself, particularly mysteries and historical fiction. I don't climb trees anymore—I've traded that for climbing rocks. I boulder (climb short rocks that don't require use of a rope) whenever I can with my husband and son, and my two-year-old daughter is already begging to join us.

I have a secret. But in the interest of inspiration, I'll share it with you. I used to dislike board books. Which isn't really a big deal except for the fact that, it turns out, I'm a board book author. I used to think that board books were lame. After my first child was born, I found that my husband also didn't like board books (I think we must

have just had a poor collection of them). But there we were, knee deep in diapers and board books we didn't like. It finally occurred to me that since I was a children's book writer, I could write one. I asked my husband what he would like in a board book. He said something like, "I want a book that has more than one word per page, isn't boring, and is fun to read aloud. Oh, and if I learned something new, that would be great too."

I had exactly zero ideas. But I didn't forget what he said. Some time passed. Then one night, I was awake breastfeeding and I found myself morosely thinking, "I'm the only person awake in the whole world." Then I thought, "Well, who else *is* awake right now?" I started imagining all these nocturnal animals romping around the neighborhood having fun. And then a rhyming couplet popped into my mind (which was really weird because I had never written in rhyme before).

This idea quickly took shape and the couplet became the opening lines of *Moonlight Prance*. Revisions flowed and a few months later, I submitted *Moonlight Prance* to a handful of publishers. It was plucked from the slush pile (where all manuscripts that aren't solicited end up) at Chronicle Books by my editor, Ariel Richardson. She not only wanted to acquire it, but offered me the opportunity to write a companion title. She wanted another book with movement, but this time with a daytime setting and a spring-y feel.

I had absolutely no idea what to write, but I didn't want to miss the opportunity. Also, the idea of writing in rhyme again was daunting because I still didn't consider myself to be a rhymer. I had made it work once by having a pretty good ear for listening, but I wasn't sure I could do it again. I was overcome by feelings of self-doubt. I knew I needed to teach myself more about rhyming, rhythm, and meter. And I needed some inspiration. I remembered how I started *Moonlight Prance* with the idea of writing a book for my husband to enjoy and I thought, "What if I write this one to entertain my son?"

From the time my son learned to crawl, he made a beeline to his bookcase every day upon waking. A lot of the books we had were bedtime books, but we didn't have any books about mornings. That's when I knew I wanted *Sunrise Dance* to not just take place during the day, but first thing in the morning. I wanted more fun words to express movement and settled on a dance theme. It took a lot of revisions, but with my editor's feedback and direction, I eventually wrote a version that we both liked.

Since writing my debut books five years ago, I've read hundreds of board books and I now have a huge appreciation for the genre. It's actually hard to imagine that I used to dislike board books. Being inspired allowed me to write in a style and genre that I never would have otherwise. I'm thankful I took a leap into the unknown and wrote something outside of my comfort zone—without that tiny bit of courage and inspiration, *Moonlight Prance* and *Sunrise Dance* wouldn't have ever existed.