

CAN WRITE

Meeting Canadian writers and illustrators of children's books.

Getting to Know Deborah Hodge

by Margriet Ruurs

Margriet: Your website mentions books about bears and birds, books about Canadian history, stories about immigration, adoption and reading disorders... Does this wide range of your books reflect your own variety of interests?

Deborah: It's true that I have a wide range of interests, but I think that a book for children works best when their interests intersect with mine. For example, young children are keen nature lovers and they experience a genuine sense of wonder as they observe and interact with the natural world. I try very hard to capture this sense of wonder when I write about nature and all of its creatures. I, too, love to observe the cycles of the seasons and the earth, and learn about the plants and animals that share our earthly home. It's fun to think (as I write a book) that the children and I are watching and learning together.

I also have a strong sense of social justice—as many intermediate children do. Older children are acutely aware of what is fair and right. When I choose book topics for them, I often focus on social issues that explore fairness, justice and acceptance of one another. My history books don't shy away from pointing out the discrimination and intolerance that exists in our society today. Even so, I always feel it's important (for the children and myself) to include many examples of what is hopeful and good in our world.



Margriet Ruurs is the Canadian author of over 27 books for children and educators, including fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Margriet conducts author visits to schools around the world.

www.margrietruurs.com

Margriet: You have worked as a classroom teacher. Do you feel that this experience helps you in your writing for children?

Deborah: I was a teacher in primary and early intermediate classrooms for over a decade and I loved every minute of it. I know that the books I write are strongly influenced by my teaching experience. I have never forgotten my students—how they read, how they play, and what interests and excites them. I hear their voices in my head when I write and I always remember what matters to them. I feel very fortunate to have had those years in the classroom.

Margriet: Tell us about your process. When you have an idea, what happens next? How do you decide if this will be fiction or nonfiction? Tell us about the research you do.

Deborah: I am lucky to have many ideas, but I find that the one I usually end up writing about is the idea that sticks with me—the one that just won't go away. I end up thinking and dreaming about it, and it becomes very insistent, and won't leave me alone until I start to write it down. Often an idea comes from the news or current affairs, and sometimes it arises from a compelling experience that I, or someone close to me, has had. For example, *Lily and the Mixed-up Letters* is the story of a little girl with dyslexia. She is based on my own daughter, who struggled with reading all through school, but never gave up. I was so moved by her courage that I knew I had to write a book about her. I debated for a long time about whether to write it as fiction or nonfiction and eventually realized that the book would have more power if it came in the form of a story.

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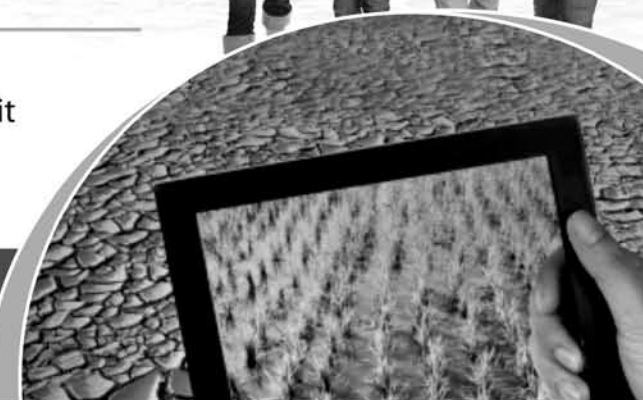
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The Kids Book of Canadian Immigration came about because I was visiting many schools in Vancouver and meeting children from all over the world. I realized that there wasn't a book that reflected their experience of leaving family and friends and a home country to come here, nor was there a book that celebrated the rich diversity that exists in Canada today. I wrote the book for them.

I do a tremendous amount of research to write my books and I read as much as I can on a topic. I also interview people, speak to experts, visit museums or other historical sites and gather copious amounts of information (much more than I will ever use). Then I figure out what is essential and try to distill the information and shape it in a way that is meaningful to children. I believe this process of "distilling" is the key job of a children's nonfiction author.

Margriet: Tell us about an amazing thing that happened during the research/writing of one of your books.

Deborah: I just finished writing *Rescuing the Children: The Story of the Kindertransport* (to be published by Tundra Books in Fall 2012.) It is the account of 10,000 Jewish children who were rescued out of Nazi Germany

just before World War II. In the course of writing the book, I had the privilege of getting to know a group of senior citizens (now in their 80s), who were some of the children rescued on the Kindertransport. These people (called Kinder) generously shared their stories, memories and family photos with me. Meeting them was a profound and life-changing experience.

Margriet: You do many school presentations. What impact do you feel this has on students and their reading habits?

Deborah: I love to visit schools! It reminds me of why I do what I do. The children are keen and enthusiastic, and the teachers tell me that my books are in high demand after a visit. I know that meeting a "real" author is helpful in creating student excitement for reading and books. I think it's eye-opening for children to see that authors and illustrators are "regular people." I always tell the children that when I was their age, I had no idea I'd become an author—but I did know that I loved to read more than anything else. Now that I'm an adult (I tell them), I realize that children who love to read often become writers. The children are always very excited by this news!

Margriet: What do you do to relax when you are not writing or speaking?

Deborah: I go for a long walk every day to help me think. I also like to cook meals and bake pies for my family and friends. I am an avid reader and movie watcher. But, most of all, I love to play with my two-year-old twin grandsons. They remind me of what's important in life.

CONTACT Deborah Hodge
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