

Chatting with Award-winning Children's Author and Poet, DANNA SMITH

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

When Danna was a child, her favorite “toy” was a pencil. Today, she is a poet and award-winning author of over thirty books for children, ranging from board and picture books to poetry collections to a novel in verse, as well as several Little Golden Books. She recently spoke with CBI about her inspirations and writing process.

SHARON BLUMBERG: You have such an amazing, vast background on nature and wildlife. How has that profoundly influenced your writing career?

DANNA SMITH: I grew up in a home where the door was always open to a wild cast of characters. My father spent his days rehabilitating, training, and rehoming a whole menagerie of animals—everything from newborn monkeys to majestic birds of prey. Living alongside these incredible creatures taught me a deep sense of empathy and a love for the natural world that I carry with me to this day. Now, I can't help but let that connection leak into my stories.

SB: What inspired the fun, creative idea behind *Swallow the Leader*?

DS: I love to play with words to find titles for my books. When *Follow the Leader* became *Swallow the Leader* in a brainstorming session, it made me laugh. I thought this could be such a fun book! Naturally, we had to have fish playing Follow the Leader, but oh no! Is that a shark at the end of the line?

When my children were little, we used to march around the house, clapping, hopping, and dancing, playing

a “follow the leader” game they called “do as I do.” I used my kids’ phrase at the beginning of the book, “*Follow the leader. Do as I do. Splash when I’m splashing, then I’ll follow you.*” Again, real life had found its way into my story.

SB: You’ve written several poems and haiku for children. What do you enjoy most about writing in such a short form? For writers who have never tried it before, how would you describe the elements that go into writing an effective one?

DS: To me, poetry is a word puzzle. You have a theme and a cache of related words, and you need to move them around the board to make them fit. When finished, I have a “bite-sized story” that’s packed with heartfelt emotion or humor. Poetry is short and easy to read (unlike a picture book or novel), but it can be powerful just the same.

For writers who have never tried writing poetry, I invite you to join me on my poetry blog at www.poetrypop.com.

I blog about all kinds of poetry forms, give examples, and have created easy-to-follow templates and worksheets for your use.

If haiku is the main interest, my book *How Do You Haiku: A Step-by-Step Guide* is a great place to start writing and sharing this amazing short poetic form.

SB: Your book *Arctic White* introduces readers to animals in a beautiful, poetic way. How did you research and write that story?

DS: Thank you, Sharon! As an artist (just a hobby for now), I love the complexity of “white.” There are so



Danna Smith...continued

many shades of white... this is the germ of the idea behind *Arctic White*. The story begins like this: "When you live in the Arctic in winter, everything is a shade of white. The blue-white of the tundra. The yellow-white of the polar bear. The silver-white of the arctic fox."

I wanted to tell the story in a lyrical, reverent way, to capture the beauty of the tundra and introduce the Northern Lights to the protagonist and her grandfather, who long for color. I've used color as a metaphor for hope.

While much of this story came from my imagination, it is rooted in the wonders of the real world. To bring the setting to life, I spent time exploring library books and researching online videos about the dance of the Northern Lights and the unique ecology of the tundra. As a writer, I know that even the most imaginative fiction shines brightest when it is grounded in real-life detail.

SB: You have authored a YA novel written in verse, *The Complete Book of Aspen*. What inspired you to write this in verse?

DS: *The Complete Book of Aspen* is my first novel and only novel at this point. It is based on my true story. Just a few years back, I learned through a DNA test that the man who raised me was not my biological father. I had no idea and had so many questions. Unfortunately, my mother was not forthcoming with information, so I set out on my own to find answers and track down my biological father.

As a poet, I write poems much like others keep a journal—jotting down my thoughts, but in a lyrical fashion. After writing a dozen poems, I had the idea that this might make a good novel in verse. Most of the time, authors write in this genre to capture emotional topics or stories. I sent my agent the poems and asked her what she thought about the idea. She said, "This is powerful! Keep writing!" I wrote my way through the heartache, helplessness, and hopefulness, putting my protagonist (a 16-year-old girl named Aspen) through the ordeal I was going through. A year later, I had about 250 poems that, together, told my (Aspen's) story.

SB: What's the biggest challenge when writing for younger readers, and how do you make your stories both fun and meaningful, without being preachy?

DS: I love writing for young readers because they're incredibly smart and curious. My goal is always to treat them with respect—never talking down to them,

and truly "getting" them.

I keep my stories fun and focus on the entertainment; if there's a lesson, I prefer to let it grow naturally through the characters rather than make it the main point. While there are so many creative books out there that teach great things, I personally love focusing on cool concepts and making sure kids have a blast while they read!



SB: What new book projects are you excited about sharing with us for the near future?

DS: Keep an eye out for four new books coming in 2026/27!

July 16, 2026: *I'm a Drone* is a Little Golden Book about all the things drones can do to help us. Available for pre-order now.

January 16, 2027: *Grow, Grow, Little Baby*, co-written with Linda Whalen, celebrates all the stages of pregnancy and encourages brothers and sisters to joyfully anticipate the new arrival while marveling at how God knits together each tiny life (Zonderkidz).

Summer 2027: *I Love You A to Z* is a Little Golden Book about all the ways human and animal mommies love their babies.

Summer 2027: *Snorkel Pig* is about a little piggy who learns to swim with the help of his friends (Workman Kids Publishers).

SB: Is there anything else you would like to share with readers, that I have not yet asked you, and how may readers find you?

DS: You can find more about my books on my website at www.dannasmithbooks.com. Be sure to check out my "Writer's Toolbox" for free articles and lessons on all things writing-related.