

Jean Craighead George on Writing



"I first became aware of the delights of the natural world when my father, an entomologist, presented me with what looked like a twig. When it got up and walked, my delight was such that I wrote a poem, 'To a Walking Stick.' I was in the third grade and have been writing ever since."

—Jean Craighead George

When she wants to write, Jean Craighead George begins by taking a journal into nature and taking notes about what she sees and how she feels. She wants to make sure she accurately remembers all the details so that when she writes a story, it is real and true. She even takes the time to sketch some of what she sees. George comes to know the settings so well that she is able to guide her characters in and out of believable situations in which they must use their survival instinct and skills. Her love of nature makes this easy: "Some books are harder to write than others, but the books I write from love and experience go easily. I can't wait to get up in the morning and write. At 5 A.M. I'm off to the shower, the teapot, and my

computer. It is quiet at that time of day, I have energy and I can write to my heart's content."

Jean Craighead George decided to become a writer when she was in the third grade. She and her brothers had spent weekends camping and observing nature with their parents. After coming home from such family outings in the wilderness, George would write about her experiences. She has said that, at first, she only wrote poems because she was "unable to sit still very long."

Later, in junior high school, her writing grew into longer poems and then short stories. In college she wrote essays and, after graduating, she wrote articles as a journalist. "Finally, at the age of twenty-four," she says, "I took on the novel. I have been writing novels for young people ever since."

George is fascinated by animals, their habitats, and their interactions with people. Her experiences with nature directly influence all of the writing she does. In fact, she says that she has spent time in every location she writes about, and that all her characters are based on herself or on friends, family members, or animals she has known. "I have discovered I cannot dream up [animal] characters as incredible as the ones I meet in the wilderness," she says. George says that she's always thinking, always looking out for new ideas, always taking notes in her head. "Ideas are everywhere," she says. "Your shoes must have been many places with tales to tell. The rain coming down the windowpane is a tale to tell—and on and on."

You Be the Author!



- **The end: Or is it?:** Were you disappointed that Sam's family comes to live with him? How would you have ended the book? Rewrite it another way and see if you're satisfied with the new ending.
- **Get the scoop:** Pretend you are a reporter like Matt Spell. Write an article for the newspaper about Sam Gribley. Check out your local newspaper to see how news articles are written and try to imitate the style. How would you report on Sam's living quarters and his lifestyle? What would your headline be?
- **Change the setting:** How would Sam's story change if the setting were different? What might have happened if he had run to the desert, or to a tropical climate? What would Sam have to eat? What types of animals would he encounter? Do you think it would be easier or more difficult for Sam to survive in *your* location than it was in the Catskills? Write a few paragraphs about Sam's new survival challenges.
- **Look into the fictional future:** At the end of *My Side of the Mountain*, Sam's mother tells him that he's stuck with them until he's eighteen. What do you think Sam will do when he is really allowed to be independent? Write a short story that features Sam as he makes an important choice about his future.

- **Start a nature journal:** One way to connect with nature is to write about it. Take a few minutes each day to go outside and observe what's going on around you. Try to ignore honking horns and other modern interruptions! Take notes and make drawings of your surroundings. Write down what kinds of birds you see or make a note of which is your favorite tree or even your favorite sound. What does the wind sound like? Remember that Jean Craighead George's nature journals contain more than just words, so try drawing some of the animals you see.

- **Keep a journal of your life:** Jean Craighead George writes mostly from personal experience. She thinks that when you write about things that you care passionately about, you do your best writing. She has always kept a journal of her personal experiences so that when she sits down to write a story she will remember what the air felt like, how the trees moved, and what kind of mood it created. If you want to write, make sure to take notes of your thoughts and feelings as well as daily events. And write often so it becomes a habit!

Activities



- **Visit the library:** Just like Sam, you can go to the library and find all kinds of fascinating facts about the outdoors. If your school has a library, that's a great place to start your research. If not, ask a parent to take you to your public library. A librarian will be able to help you find exactly what you are looking for: wildlife guides, maps, books on living in nature, etc.

- **Plan a camping trip with your family:** You can get a taste of what Sam's life on the mountain was like by simply planning an outdoor adventure with friends or family. Find an area nearby that interests you. See if there are public campgrounds and, if so, find out what the rules and regulations are. Make a list of what you'll need and head on out!

If you can't get to the wilderness, make your own! With the permission of your parents, pitch a tent in the backyard or go to the roof of your building and spend the night outdoors under the stars. Bring along a nature guide or a favorite outdoor adventure story.

- **Learn to use your surroundings as your barometer:** Like Sam, pay close attention to the sky, the birds, the animals, and the water. Watch the ways that they move. Make notes when the sky shifts suddenly or when the birds' behavior changes. At the

same time, observe what's happening with the weather. Is there a breeze? Does the air feel heavy? Is it raining? Based on your notes, can you see a relationship between the animals' behavior and the weather? Try to see if you can predict the weather. Can you do better than the meteorologist on the news?

- **Take a hike!:** If you can't make it to the mountains, hike around other natural settings. Take a trip to . . .

the botanical gardens

the zoo

a park

the city streets—just make sure to check out some trees along the way. Observe how people in the city manage to keep nature in their lives—window boxes filled with flowers, ivy growing up the sides of buildings, etc.

- **Draw the seasons:** Go outside and choose your favorite outdoor scene to draw. Then, use your knowledge of the season, plus a little imagination, to draw what that same location might look like in each season.

- **Volunteer at a nature conservatory:** If you are interested in learning how to conserve and preserve our natural surroundings, look up a local nature conservancy and see if there is a way you can get involved.

- **Visit the Catskills:** The Catskill Mountains region is a beautiful part of New York State. With more than 700,000 acres

of land filled with picture-perfect waterfalls and crystal-clear streams, the Catskills are a vacation destination for thousands of people every year. Even if you and your family can't arrange to visit the area in person, you can still find out all about its vast natural resources. To do this, check out The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development at www.catskillcenter.org.