

Interview with Valerie Connelly **Author of *Arthur, the Christmas Elf***

Today, Reader Views is talking with Valerie Connelly, author of her third book, “Arthur, the Christmas Elf.” Valerie is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us today Valerie. Please tell us the storyline of “Arthur, The Christmas Elf.”

Valerie: As the blizzard of the century buries the countryside in wind-blown snow and brings life to a standstill on Christmas Eve, Arthur finds the last two Endangered Children and offers them a chance to learn what Christmas is really all about. Snowflake, Arthur’s reindeer, flies through the night, delivering Arthur and his magic to these two especially troubled kids. Timothy Anderson and Angie Smith live on opposite sides of town, but their lives are drawn together by accident when the blizzard puts everyone they love in danger. Can Arthur show them what to do to save Christmas? Will they rise to the challenge? Will this Christmas be one to remember, or one everyone will want to forget?

Juanita: What inspired you to write this book?

Valerie: The very first version was written in 1980 as a simple little story for my then 4 year-old daughter, Katie, hand lettered and hand illustrated just for her and just for fun. She wanted the story read to her again and again. Over the years, as my second daughter arrived on the scene and other kids in the neighborhood wanted to hear the tale, the story changed again and again to suit the times and interests of the children. This latest version brings the adventure up to date and adds the crafts, some of which I had done with my own daughters and my Girl Scout Troops years ago. I added instructions and illustrations for processes appropriate to children seven and older, but younger children can do the simplest crafts with the help of their parents or older siblings.

Juanita: Who are the Endangered Children?

Valerie: Endangered Children are kids who can’t share, who are selfish, who are angry about their circumstances, and generally reject the notion that giving is better than receiving. They don’t believe in Santa Claus or the spirit of giving. They are in danger of becoming permanently self-centered and rude. Often they talk back to adults and boss other kids around, even being openly cruel to other children who, for whatever reason, are weaker than they are.

Juanita: What unique messages does Arthur have for readers about Christmas and the magic of the season?

Valerie: First of all, the most important message is the idea that giving to others is essential to personal happiness. Second, if the giver makes a gift for someone, the meaning and value of that gift is far greater than a store-bought item. Third, greed can be cancelled out by acts of kindness to produce positive results. And fourth, wealth does not guarantee happiness because in the absence of kindness, only sadness and loneliness remain.

Juanita: What do you feel is the importance of Christmas books for children?

v Christmas books can teach children to carry the joy of the season into the rest of the year. They also create traditions for families to enjoy together while the children are young enough to embrace the lessons in the stories. These lessons in turn help parents guide their children's development of thoughtful and generous attitudes towards others.

Juanita: Tell us about the unique addition of a craft section of "Arthur, The Christmas Elf"?

Valerie: What would a story about making gifts be without gifts to make? So, using the crafting skills I developed at my mother's side and taught during my years as a Girl Scout Troop Leader, I decided to provide clearly written and illustrated instructions for children and their parents to use to make any or all of the simple gifts mentioned in the book. Making crafts teaches children many skills such as:

1. artistic planning and imagining to create a finished gift from the many parts of the process,
2. sequencing and crafting step-by-step activities to produce a pre-defined result,
3. eye-hand co-ordination,
4. practical sewing techniques that can be used for life,
5. recycling of old things and using them in new ways,
6. and above all the patience it takes to start the project at the beginning and see it through to the end.

Juanita: What would be the age range for this book?

Valerie: Ideally, this story works best for children seven and older, partly because there are some intense parts that might confuse and upset smaller children, and also because the dexterity required for making the gifts appears at about the age of seven. Younger children can enjoy the simpler craft projects like stringing beads with significant help from parents, and younger children who are more socially developed may be able to enjoy the story as well. But, this is not really a story for toddlers, pre-schoolers or kindergarteners who are too young to understand the "message" and the purpose of the dark moments in the tale.

Juanita: I've read reviews for "Arthur, The Christmas Elf" and from what I hear, your new book is a 'must have' addition to any family's library, and even a great resource for teachers. Where do you see your book being read?

v I am thrilled that the reviewers see this story as a ‘must have.’ I can see this being read wherever and however children read: at home, in school, in church, at the library, in scout troops, alone, in groups, with a parent or older sibling, aunt or uncle, grandmother or grandfather. I also hope the crafts will inspire giving the year round. All of the crafts can be used for many occasions, not just for Christmas.

Juanita: This is your third book, but a divergence from the content of your other novels. Why did you decide to write a children’s book at this time?

Valerie: This story has been with me for over 25 years. I decided it was time to bring it to life in a way others could enjoy. As an artist, I wanted to do the illustrations in acrylic on canvas to bring them into full color. Previously, the illustrations were line drawings and block prints, all in black and white. As an educator, I have seen so many harried parents struggling with the very issues presented in this book, I felt it would help them address some of their own need to do something fun and productive together with their children. Our electronic-age life style is pretty much devoid of the kinds of slower paced activities with one-on-one interaction that sewing, painting, making collages, and baking represent. It’s time to simplify family life at least around the holidays.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about “Arthur, The Christmas Elf?”

Valerie: They can go directly to Arthur’s website at www.arthurthechristmaself.com to purchase the book at a 30% special holiday discount and for more all kinds of information and fun. There is a CONTEST for kids who make gifts using the book, there are lots more HOLIDAY DECORATION IDEAS and instructions, LESSON PLANS for home school and after school programs, a RESOURCES and more. “Arthur, the Christmas Elf” was released November 1, 2006 and www.arthurthechristmaself.com is in full operation. The bookstore at www.nightengalepress.com also carries the book, along with all the other online bookstores and upon request at local bricks and mortar bookstores.

Juanita: I understand that you just received an award for “Arthur, The Christmas Elf.” Would you tell us more about this wonderful accomplishment?

Valerie: Yes, Parent to Parent awards the Adding Wisdom Award to children’s books and products that their testers rate and approve. Here is what Jodie Lynn syndicated parenting/health expert, CEO/founder of www.AddingWisdomAward.com, and author of parenting book, Mom CEO (Chief Everything Officer) - Having, Doing and Surviving It All! (June 2006) said about Arthur, the Christmas Elf:

"Our Family Testers found a hidden treasure in the beautifully illustrated story of Arthur, the Christmas Elf. The heart-warming Christmas adventure followed by a family-friendly craft section based on the story is really awesome. Everyone loved it! Arthur, the Christmas Elf is a proud winner of the 2006 Parent to Parent Adding Wisdom Award, the only award program to ever be honored by Disney.com."

Juanita: Tell us about your other two books.

Valerie: Both SACRED NIGHT and SIDETRACKS are mystery/thrillers meant for adult readers. They address issues of longevity, life choice, second chances, risk taking, greed versus altruism and love's triumph over evil. Both books are set in Chicago and take the characters to foreign lands (Brazil and the Amazon River Basin in Sacred Night; France in Sidetracks) as well as into a fantasy layer where the protagonists must struggle to return to the 'real' world by overcoming conflict and adversity. The real world and fantasy world aspects of these thrillers weave together ever more tightly as the action moves forward.

Juanita: What has been the inspiration for your writing career?

Valerie: I have always been an avid reader and an aspiring writer in one form or another since I was a child. I had a solid educational foundation in the liberal arts, and love literature of all kinds, including poetry, novels, short stories, drama and musical theatre in both English and French. By the time I had taught French Literature for nearly 20 years, the urge to write overpowered the reluctance to begin, and so I began by developing Sacred Night. It took nearly five years to bring this manuscript to a point where I thought I might try to publish it. Then it took another three years of rejection to motivate me to really do something about the problems a good, but unknown writer has in getting published.

Juanita: You have been an educator and an international traveler. Tell us about your unique history that has led you to your writing pursuits and the formation of Nightengale Press?

Valerie: After college, I joined the American Peace Corps and went to live and work for two years in Togo, West Africa, where I taught English as a Second language to French-speaking West African students. Life in the Third World is at once simpler and more complicated; simpler because the pace of life is slower; more complicated because survival is harder at the subsistence level without electricity, running water, sanitation and reliable communications. So, I learned there what I could never have learned in the United States: that poverty is relative, that wealth does not necessarily produce the happiest way of life, that true generosity comes from giving what you can even when you have less to give, and that human beings are essentially all the same, no matter what their race, creed, nationality, or economic status. The need for food, safety, love and nurture is in evidence in every culture. How these essentials in life are manifested is governed by the rules of the society in which the people are living. But, the human drive for survival is the single unifying factor of human existence; how people in different circumstances go about surviving is the only variable.

Learning these realities early in my own life directed my choices in career and avocation. In the early 1970's I worked in international business as an advertising copywriter researching and writing about far-flung parts of the world for a major wholesale luxury tour operator, and as a training course developer for a company to set up language training schools in Iran before the fall of the Shah of Iran. From the mid-1970's I became a language educator, teaching both French and English as a Second Language as well as cultural understanding in the classroom. Then in the 1980's I developed a not-for-profit organization: Overseas Alliance. My company took American students to France for a month long travel-study seminar and family home stay experience, and brought French students to

the United States for the same. Then President of France François Mitterrand invited our groups to the Elysée Palace for the 14th of July celebrations for five years in a row.

In the 1990's I returned to my first love, music, and became the co-creator of ValPro Studios where I co-produced a full length musical, wrote commercial jingles and enjoyed a singing/songwriting career that generated 100's of songs for my ASCAP file. I also owned a print business, BlockArt Prints, Inc, where I produced custom greeting cards using a unique medieval block print and crash print process and also computer graphic design services that served small and medium-sized businesses in the Chicagoland area as diverse as American Express, Lincoln Park Zoo, Brookfield Zoo, and Koenig and Strey Real Estate.

All of these experiences came together as I began to write and to create Nightengale Press. Writers are urged to write what they know, and I am able to bring many aspects of my international career into my stories, using my artistic skills as a graphic designer and painter for illustration as well as book layout and design. Advertising background helps greatly when producing promotional materials and press releases, and performing skills make being a radio talk show host and conference speaker a natural addition to my publishing business.

Juanita: Thank you for talking with us today Valerie. Valerie, you certainly have an impressive history that has significantly contributed to your writings and Nightengale Press. Where can our readers purchase your other books and learn more about your endeavors?

v They can go to www.valerieconnelly.npauthors.com for more information.

Juanita: Your new book would be a great addition to all children's holiday reading favorites. Do you have any last thoughts for your readers?

v You are most welcome. It has been my pleasure to answer your questions. Well, as a last thought, even though it may seem a bit old-fashioned, I believe the most important thing in working with and writing for children is that they learn skills to create something that is meant for others as well as for themselves. For too many years, American society has focused on largely self-centered ways of viewing the world. This has made the teacher's work harder, the parent's job harder and has turned out a crop or two of unhappy kids. Not all kids, mind you, but many more than before the over-stimulating, high-tech revolution. I encourage parents to slow down with their children, read, make some fun things and get to know each other better while doing so. That's what "Arthur, the Christmas Elf" is all about.