

Interview for “The Secret Cave” by Lisa Maria Lanno

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Lisa Maria Lanno, who is here to discuss her new children’s book “The Secret Cave.” We are also joined today by Brianne Plach, our ten-year old reviewer of “The Secret Cave” who will ask Lisa a few questions to begin.

Lisa Maria Lanno was born in 1954 in Boston, MA, an only child of first generation Italian-Americans. She was married in 1976 to her late husband, Frank, and they had three children, Genevieve, Joe, and Valerie, born in Hawaii, where the family resided for 5 years. She has one grandson, Jedai, and she has three large dogs who live with her, along with Joe, Valerie, and two cats.

Lisa is trained in motivational speaking and graphology (handwriting analysis). She loves to cook, enjoys her family and has a passion for animals. She makes homemade, healthy dog cookies for her dogs, gifts, and for sale. You can purchase her dog cookies at www.puppylovecookies.com where some of the profit goes to animals in need. Since age sixteen, Lisa knew she wanted to be a writer. “The Secret Cave” is her first published book, but she has more on the way.

Tyler: Thank you, Lisa, for joining us today. Brianne, I’ll let you ask your questions first.

Brianne: Did you have any fun family vacations that inspired you to write about two cousins exploring a mystery on their vacation?

Lisa: That’s a good question! Actually, as an “only child,” my family vacations consisted of my mom, dad, myself and occasionally other family members. As my parents were in their mid-40’s when I was born, all my cousins were much older, which I think helped to cultivate my already active imagination. You think up all sorts of fun things when you’re the only kid around!

Brianne: Did you have a cousin close in age to you while growing up? If so, is that who Joe and Ronnie are based on?

Lisa: No, I really didn’t have anyone in my family that was close in age, but I did have a friend who lived one house away. She was the more “logical” of the two of us, but was always willing to participate in my “imaginary” adventures. (Maybe that’s ‘cause she was a year and a half younger than I was, and more easily convinced!)

I'd drag her up the big hill behind my house and she'd play "archeologist" or "detective" with me. That is, until I fell down the hill head first, broke a tooth, and hurt my foot! Here's one that my kids still tease me about: We'd go to a store with our parents, and off on our own, we'd "follow" people, pretending to be detectives. I had a pen, yes a pen, which I'd talk into, as it was my secret phone. Sometimes when I misplace a phone, my kids will hand me a pen, and say, "Here, use this"!

Brianne: Did you always want to be an author?

Lisa: You know, now that I really look back, I think I always did (when I realized the "Princess" thing was probably out of the question). My first choice was to work with animals, but I'm SO sensitive to them, that I knew I'd take sad cases to heart, which would probably break. That's why I work with them as a hobby and/or volunteer, not to mention all the strays I've picked up in all these years!

Brianne: Do you plan on writing more books like "The Secret Cave" with great mysteries to uncover?

Lisa: Absolutely! I have an idea swimming in my head (and partly on paper), about three teenage girls, who happen to get their phone "wires" crossed. Every day at the same time, they can "listen in" on a conversation between a man and woman. When the woman decides she'd actually like to go on a date with the man, the girls hear more of his conversations, and realize he may be a killer! They have to find out who he is and who she is, before he possibly kills this innocent woman. How's that for starters?

Brianne: What gave you the idea for setting the mystery in the 1700's?

Lisa: Well, when the boys find the "mystery note," and the "diary," there is mention of the famous pirate "Blackbeard." I did my research to find out when he was alive and active. That's how I came up with the year 1710.

Brianne: Thanks, Ms. Lanno. I simply loved this book and hope you write more books in the future. You are very talented and can captivate kids' imaginations.

Lisa: Thank you Brianne, as well. You are an amazing young lady, who can truly "see" what an author is trying to say and do. I truly believe you are going to be an amazing adult as well, and I hope all your dreams come true!

Tyler: Thank you, Brienne, for helping us out. I really appreciate it. Lisa, I understand “The Secret Cave” is an exciting adventure story about seeking treasure and that it involves pirates. Will you tell us a little bit about the book’s plot and setting?

Lisa: The book takes place in the summer, on a scenic lake in New England. Two families join in for a fun-filled vacation. Joe and Ronnie, both thirteen, are cousins, their younger sisters, Anna & Emily are eight and ten, while their older sisters, Valerie and Genevieve, are fifteen and sixteen.

The boys take their first day of vacation quite seriously, venturing deep into the woods to collect anything they might find interesting. They have NO idea of the journey that lies ahead. While at the top of a tree, trying to retrieve a birds’ nest, they notice something very strange in the distance. They see huge, white rocks that appear to be shaped like a skull. Of course, the curious youngsters decide to investigate. This leads to a number of adventures including: *A mysterious note, *An old cup, *A diary, *Skeletons, *A secret cave, *A pirate named “Spike”, *Possible treasure, and *Lots of danger and excitement.

The clues, which are written in rhyme, will have you scratching your head, as the boys try to decipher them. You will feel exhilaration each time a mystery is solved and anticipation as the boys try to figure out the next.

Each day, the boys get closer to solving each clue, while trying to keep their parents and nosey little sisters out of it. Their older sisters become involved and help them plot a midnight adventure that will have the hair on the back of your neck standing up!

At one point, Ronnie and Joe run into a very serious hazard. Your heart will race as they try to escape a terrible fate.

The book ends with some very satisfactory, mystery solving, but just when you think it is over, there is another clue to be found, another secret to be found. It will all be revealed to you in the “Secret Cave Two.”

Tyler: Lisa, where did you come up with the idea for “The Secret Cave”?

Lisa: Since childhood, I’ve always been fascinated by mystery and adventure. There was a hill behind my house, where I’d play and pretend I was on some adventure or another, even trying to find dinosaur bones in my yard. My poor mother had to deal with me digging in her garden! I also lived near the ocean and would imagine what it was like hundreds of years ago, and would make up places where there would be a secret caves that hid treasure, but it was a trip to Disney World that made the pirate theme stand out. I took my kids on all the rides and simply fell in love with the “Pirates” ride. As we rode through (over and over), a story started to emerge. I pictured my kids going on an adventure and finding treasure. Maybe I was living my imaginative fantasies through them. I wrote a draft of the story years ago, but didn’t do anything seriously with it until now.

Tyler: What is your favorite part of the book, or what do you think is the most exciting part of the mystery?

Lisa: I’d have to say that I have three favorite parts that I consider most exciting. The first is at the beginning, when Joe and Ronnie literally stumble upon a skeleton hand, the remains of the first pirate in the cave. Although they already knew there was some sort of mystery, this is a part that makes you “hold your breath” and wonder what is going to happen next. Is someone going to pop

out and “get them”? Are the boys going to run, or continue on? Now they know for sure it’s going to be more frightening than just finding an old note or dented cup.

The second part is when there is a cave-in that traps the boys. They think things are just fine until they realize they have a limited air supply. The more frenzied the boys become, the faster your heart will beat as you read!

The third part is the ending (which, of course, I won’t reveal). In the last chapter, even though the mystery is “solved,” you, as the reader, know there is something that isn’t quite right. Something in your stomach will say to you, “There’s got to be something missing here.” When you see a brand new mystery unveiled, your excitement will build, making you want to find out what will happen in the next book.

Tyler: What do you feel sets “The Secret Cave” apart from other children’s books that involve mysteries and adventure?

Lisa: I feel the characters are very relatable to children and the story is quite believable. Readers will actually be able to picture themselves in the mystery. As the clues are revealed, the reader will find that he or she will be thinking about what each clue could mean and how to solve each riddle, as well as how to get out of the jams the characters find themselves in.

I’m “all about imagination” and creative thinking, and this book will make people, young and old, use their imaginations. The best part is, you don’t even realize you’re doing it! The questions that the characters ask each other will prompt the reader to immediately respond, mentally, and make choices in their own minds as to what “they” would do in the same situation. If that doesn’t do it, the “Stop & Think” questions at the end of each chapter will certainly spark your imagination.

Another thing I tried to accomplish while writing this book was to keep it neutral. There is no mention of any holidays (for anyone of any religion) and the characters are simply described by hair & eye color. Although I did have people in mind while writing the book, I want kids to be able to see themselves. Example: “Joe” is simply described as having very dark, curly hair, dark brown eyes, and a darker complexion, which is exactly what my Italian son has. However, any boy of any race might be able to picture himself as the character. There goes the “imagination” thing again!

Tyler: Lisa, your descriptions of how children will be able to see themselves in the characters reminds me of how children will play out their favorite roles. For example, I remember pretending to be characters from *Star Wars* as a child. I have often thought that imaginative child’s play was an early form of my becoming a writer. Besides digging for dinosaur bones, what kind of an imaginative world did you live in as a child, and how do you think that has influenced you as a writer?

Lisa: Well, one thing immediately brings me right back to being quite young, maybe six or seven. I would watch TV at night with my parents and many times, fall asleep on the sofa. But, it was NEVER a sofa to me. Sometimes, I was flying high above the ground on a magic carpet, or on a raft in the ocean. I would wrap my blankets so that they formed a fin, pretending to be a mermaid, floating on the ocean floor. Even something as simple as a bath towel wasn’t a towel to me. It might

have been a long, flowing gown, and the towel on my head was long, beautiful hair. Of course, I was a Princess in Hawaii!

At about age nine (boy, you sure are jogging the memory banks), I started watching any detective mystery I could find and by age eleven, there was a short lived TV series called “Honey West” with Anne Francis as the beautiful detective. That did it, and I’ve loved mystery and adventure ever since.

On a more educational note, at age nine, I was fortunate enough to see the actual “King Tut” exhibit at a Boston museum. It was the most fascinating thing I’d ever seen, and I think that’s when I stopped looking for dinosaur bones and started hoping to find some kind of ancient treasure. (There goes mom’s garden again!)

Always being able to make things up and “see” through my mind’s eye has certainly been an influence in becoming a writer, aside from the fact that I always did like to write, even as a youngster.

Tyler: Lisa, am I correct that the children in the book—I noticed they share your children’s names—were inspired by your own children? What was your children’s reaction to their mother becoming an author and turning them into characters in a book?

Lisa: The children in the book are based upon my own children, and “Ronnie” is actually my sons’ best friend (to this day). His name is also “Joe,” so we used his middle name. It’s so much easier to “picture” your characters if they are real people, and trust me, the kids really act like the characters in the book. “Anna and Emily” were based upon stories told to me by a friend about two lovely sisters, with very different personalities.

My “kids,” now in their twenties, think it rather amusing to read about themselves as they were over ten years ago. They laugh at the characteristics of the children, seeing their own personalities as youngsters. There are some differences, however. Valerie is actually “the baby” and Genevieve is the eldest, with Joe stuck in the middle. In the book, Valerie is older than Joe. I have “thumbs up” from all three.

Tyler: Although they usually pretend to make everything up, writers typically do draw on real-life experiences they have had, and it sounds like you’ve done the same. What challenges or difficulties did you find in taking people you knew and recasting them into fictional characters? For example, what made you make the changes in the children’s ages or sibling order?

Lisa: Taking my real kids and casting them into roles wasn’t too difficult, because I kept their personalities (flaws included) as they really are. The younger girls I did have to “make up” a bit more, as I don’t know them personally. I got some basics and built on how I think they’d interact. As for the ages: I thought that 13 would be good ages for a believable adventure. The boys aren’t too young, yet not too old. I wanted younger sisters so that younger readers could relate, and there had to be the annoying older sisters to antagonize the boys. I changed the ages of my girls because

I'd already decided on the boys' ages and didn't want to cast Valerie as the younger sister. I liked her better as a bit older.

As for "real life" experiences, I WISH I could have done the things the kids in *The Secret Cave* did!

Tyler: Lisa, I understand "The Secret Cave" is not just a straight story, but has educational supplements included. Will you tell us a little bit about those?

Lisa: Of course! I feel it has a lot of educational value. I put in the "Stop and Think" section at the end of each chapter to ignite the imagination of the reader. The questions are not the typical "what happened on page 2" questions, rather, questions that will make you think. "What would YOU do in this situation?" "What would you have happen if YOU wrote the book?" "Do you think there is danger ahead? Should they check things out?" "Why do YOU think *this or that* happened?"

I'm not asking the reader to predict what I wrote, but to think of how *they* would tell it if they were writing the book. *My* imagination told me what to write and it's fun to find out what *your* imagination will tell you to write.

I have also added a "Vocabulary Section" at the end of the book. Vocabulary words are in *bold, italics* throughout the book, helping youngsters to learn and appreciate new words. The younger readers may just learn the meaning. A mid-level reader may learn the meaning and spelling, while the higher-level reader might learn the meaning, spelling, and be able to put the word into a sentence. I feel it's a good learning tool for teachers and parents, as well as the children themselves.

Tyler: Why did you decide to include the educational supplements? You mentioned they are not the "typical" questions, but ones that make you think. Did you feel some of the reading materials used by schools was deficient?

Lisa: Although I'm not as "in tune" with the school system as I was when my children were young, I decided to put the educational supplements in for various reasons. My main focus is on the youngsters and helping them to "see" in their minds eye, as I did.

I also wanted the book to be appealing to parents and teachers, as well as the students. Everyone wins this way! The kids get a mystery to read and help solve, and the questions are really just prompts to help them to learn to do just that. Same with the Vocabulary Section; kids can look up words on their own, or a parent/teacher may want to use them as well.

As for reading materials being deficient, I really couldn't say, but believe that things in the schools are fine. What I do know is that there is a lot of testing done these days (MCAS, I believe) and many teachers say that there is less room for creative writing. his way, they can get a little of included in their reading.

Tyler: I understand you actually work with schools and reading programs. Would you tell us a bit about your work?

Lisa: Certainly! I am presently working with libraries, schools and bookstores, with Author Readings, Motivational Talks, and Creative Writer's Workshops. I have my own little "twist" on the traditional "author reading." I'll generally read the first chapter of "The Secret Cave," and ask one of the "Stop and Think" questions to the audience. (Hint: it's about several, huge, white rocks in the distance that are shaped like a skull). They get to tell me what *they* think the white rocks could be. The responses are amazing! There's everything from "monsters," to "Indian burial grounds," to "doorways to other dimensions," to "ghosts and goblins," or "dinosaur bones." Everyone has something different to contribute.

Now that they are enthused and having fun, sharing ideas, we'll talk a bit about motivation and how to apply what they've just learned to every day life. Some youngsters don't find it as easy to write as others, but now they know how easy it is to imagine, which is all that is needed to start the process! I'll work this into a motivational talk about life in general. Then, they can ask any questions they'd like.

My goal is to have the young ones feel good about reading, writing, and about their self worth.

The Creative Writer's Workshops that follow are also very interactive with what I call "brain exercises." Example: Children (and grown ups) are asked to picture themselves under a table, with a black sheet over it. I ask them questions like: "Where are you?" "Are you inside or outside?" "Who are you?" "What noises do you hear?" From there, we learn how to add and build to our story, and how to conclude. There's a lot of audience participation and youngsters "feed" off of each other's ideas, creating a very energetic atmosphere. I also have "exercises" for younger children involving drawing, rather than writing. As of September 2007, I'll be teaching an eight-week course to children ages 6-12. By the end, they'll all have their own stories completed! You can see the website, www.SecretCave1.com for more details about my work.

Tyler: Lisa, you've mentioned imagination several times. A lot of parents think what's important is math and science, and when school budgets are cut, it's usually the arts, which allow children to express themselves, that are the first to go. Why do you think having strong imaginations are so important for children and for their growth into adults?

Well, I believe math and science are very important, and necessary, but why take the things away that make us who we are? We all need to learn to read and write, learn math, etc, but our imaginations are "our own." They make us individual and unique, something that cannot be taught in a math class. For example, there may be a child who loves science, but with imagination added, he/she may become a great inventor. With imagination, there is truly no limit.

Sometimes as adults, life gets difficult. I've heard many people say that when they are stressed, they just "picture" themselves on a beautiful beach somewhere, with the gentle wind blowing on them, while they soak up the rays of the sun. Our imaginations can be of a healing nature as we mature and "take us away" at times. Now maybe some of those people will take it a step further and paint a

lovely picture, write a poem or even find that pretty beach to photograph. It all leads to positive things.

Tyler: Lisa, how has imagination helped you in your journey through life?

As I mentioned, we are all unique, we all have our own special abilities, and I was blessed with a vivid imagination (although don't ask me for directions or to balance a check book). I struggled in school with math and science, but any English and/or writing project was not difficult, with creative writing being very easy. Knowing I had this one good ability got me through feeling rather "dumb" when it came to other subjects. I focused my goals on what I was best at, and it all involved imagination (cooking, art projects, writing, painting, and newly added, web design).

What I didn't realize was how it can help give confidence in life as a whole! I may have to work harder at math than other people, but I know I can do it if I try.

Another way it's helped is with my own children. As an example, when they were very little, (1, 3 & 5), I had to think of inventive ways to entertain them all together. I'd cut different shapes out of construction paper and have the kids glue them to make faces. While one child learned words, one would learn colors, and the other learned shapes. So, imagination helped us all (and kept three little ones all at one table!)

Tyler: Lisa, what do you find most rewarding about being a children's author?

Lisa: I find it most rewarding to be able to reach children as an author, an educator and as a motivational speaker. I truly feel that if the kids have self-esteem, they won't need all the "bad" things the world has to offer.

I completely enjoy my talks and workshops, no matter how many or how few are in attendance. In a recent workshop, a mom with two very creative daughters said she was very "mathematical" and had "no creative abilities." After the workshop, even she realized she could find her creativity and help understand her girls better. Now, that's rewarding!

Tyler: Lisa, did you always want to be a writer? What influenced you in choosing to become an author?

Lisa: I have always been creative and as I got older, I found that putting things into words was the easiest and most natural way for me to create. For example, I can paint, but it takes a lot of effort. Writing comes naturally to me and I absolutely love it. Everyone has some natural talent; they just need to find it. I've had serious thoughts of becoming an author for about 15 years, but I guess now was the right time to do it.

As for becoming a "real" author, I was at a turning point in my life. My husband passed away suddenly, and of course, that brought some difficulties. I had a choice: get a job that I'd probably be unhappy with, OR go for my goal. I decided to "practice what I preach" and go for it. It's taken a lot of work, but if you believe in yourself, you can do it! If you can be happy with the work you do, then every day becomes a wonder, rather than a task.

Tyler: I understand "The Secret Cave" has a forthcoming sequel. Will you tell us a little bit about what we can expect from the sequel?

Lisa: It will be the same cast of characters, this time, with more involvement from the sisters, now that they are aware of what's going on. Although the first book has an actual ending, I threw in a cliff-hanger for everyone to think about. The children will return to their vacation spot, this time as "celebrities," but they will secretly be trying to solve a huge mystery without letting anyone else in on it.

This one will be a little more "creepy," with plenty of secrets and adventure, chills and thrills, and dangerous escapades. The pirates will "visit" the kids, (I won't tell you just how), but are they *really* visiting the children, are the kids dreaming, imagining, or are there ghosts? Once again, the "Stop and Think" questions will make you wonder.

The ending will surprise you, as it's not what you would completely expect. I'm not 100% sure yet, but I may add a character or two. See, I have this habit of first writing the beginning, then the ending, and then filling in the middle!

Tyler: Lisa, before we go, would you tell our readers a little bit about your website? I checked it out myself and saw that it contains several attractions for your young readers.

Lisa: Oh yes, the website: www.SecretCave1.com I'm very proud of it because I designed it myself and do all the website work. My new motto is "you CAN teach an old dog new tricks!" (Remember, I'm over 50 and learned web design without any instruction).

I have two "kids' pages" so far, with animated clipart that relates to the book, with questions and quotes from the book as well. There is a page for jokes and facts that I update each month, keeping youngsters aware of historical events of the month, as well as family friendly jokes (for kids, by kids), all with corresponding clipart. More kids' pages are in the planning stages.

There is a calendar listing of events, photos of events, and my family, press and reviews, tips for teachers, parents, and a "motivate" section. I've made it quite personal with family photos, because I want children to see that I'm a "real, normal" person with a regular life.

Tyler: I would say you're normal, yet extraordinary, Lisa. Thank you for joining me today. Before we go, do you have any last words you would like to say to your young readers?

Lisa: First, I would like to say to Brianne: "Thank you" for seeing the value in "The Secret Cave." I'm so happy that you enjoyed it. You are a very smart young lady!

To the youngsters: Here's a quote to remember (although I didn't make it up)

"Whatever the mind can believe, it can achieve."

Keep that attitude in all that you do.

As for "The Secret Cave," please get out of it what is best for YOU. Perhaps it will inspire you to write, or just take you away on an adventure. Maybe you'll become a treasure hunter! Please enjoy, and happy reading!

Tyler: Thank you, Lisa. I hope you have lots of success with your future books and the kids love them even more than they already love "The Secret Cave."