
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Rebecca Van Slyke on *Lana Lynn Howls at the Moon*

Lana Lynn is an intrepid sheep. The other members of her flock are content to nibble grass in the pasture, sip water from the pond, and nap in the meadow. But not Lana Lynn. She wants...adventure! So one night, when the moon is high and the other sheep are asleep, she finds a disguise and dashes into the wild woods to see what life is like as a wolf. It's fun to run through the wild woods, stay up very late, and howl at the Moon—but is life with the wolf pack everything it seems?

Q: What inspired you to write *Lana Lynn Howls at the Moon*?

A: You've heard of the saying, "a wolf in sheep's clothing?" I thought it would be funny to have a sheep wearing wolf's clothing. I had to come up with a reason the sheep would want to dress up as a wolf, since sheep are normally fairly contented animals. And then, what would that sheep do when she was among the wolves?

Q: How did you think up the clever pun in the protagonist's name?

A: At first her name was just "Lana," since *lana* is the Spanish word for "wool." But then I noticed the word "lanolin" (the name of the waxy oil that comes from sheep's wool) sounds just like the name "Lana Lynn." I love a good pun, so I couldn't resist changing her name.

Q: *Lana Lynn is not content to nibble grass in the pasture, sip water from the pond, and nap in the meadow. She wants adventure. Do you have an adventurous side?*

A: Absolutely! I love to travel, ride horses, go ziplining and ride ATVs. I overcame a fear of water (I didn't learn how to swim until I was in high school) to earn my scuba diver's license in college. In the winter, I love snowmobiling.

Q: *Sheep? Or wolf?*

A: Definitely wolf! They are such interesting animals, and not at all the bad guys that people portray them as in fairy tales. That's why the wolves in this story aren't bad. (Yes, bunnies and squirrels and sheep are on their menu, but that's what carnivores eat.)

Q: *Anca Sandu's illustrations bring your writing to life. How did you feel when you first saw her interpretation?*

A: I was SO excited to see the first sketches of Lana Lynn! Anca completely understood my intrepid sheep. I love how expressive she made her. With just a few simple lines, she nailed Lana Lynn's many emotions. The tiny details she added, like the snails, and the frog reading a book entitled, *How to Prince* were so much fun. That's the beauty of picture books: The illustrator brings her/his own ideas to take the story beyond what the author imagined. Reading only the text gives you only half of the story.

Q: *What do you hope readers take away from this book?*

A: Be intrepid! Try new things; meet new people! But you can also still be content with your day-to-day life.

Q: You are a second grade teacher. When and how did you decide to write children's books? Does your background influence your writing?

A: I wanted to write children's books long before I became a teacher. I was about four when I learned that books were made by real people. I wanted to do that, too! So my mom wrote down the stories that I told her and I drew the pictures. In college, I had a children's literature professor who gave us a choice: take the final exam, or write and illustrate a children's book. That was an easy decision for me (although I spent way more time writing and illustrating than I would have studying for the final). He liked the book so much that he encouraged me to pursue publication. While *that* book has not been published, it helped me learn about the path to getting a book published.

Being a second grade teacher helps me because I know the kind of books kids like, and what makes them laugh. I want to write books that help kids love to read, even if reading is difficult at first. I also get ideas for stories from watching my students.

Q: What is your favorite book from childhood?

A: I loved books when I was growing up! I remember checking out the same book again and again from the library. It was *Three to Get Ready* by Betty Boegehold. My mom and I laughed and laughed about the three kittens as they were growing up and learning about the world. When I was older, I loved all the horse stories by Marguerite Henry, like *Misty of Chincoteague*.

Q: What do you do when you get a new book idea?

A: I usually brainstorm a list of things that could happen in the story, fun wordplay, characters, or different endings the story could have. Sometimes I have to let the ideas sit around for a bit while I work on other projects. Then I sit down to write a first draft. After that (and more time passes to let things percolate in my brain), I revise. Then I revise again. And again. When I feel like the story is good enough, I share it with people. Then I revise again, based on their feedback. I send it to my agent, who always has good suggestions of how to make the story stronger. So that means more revisions. When she thinks it's ready, the story goes out to editors, who usually have their own feedback. If an editor likes the story enough to offer to publish it, they will definitely

have more ideas for revising it. So by the time a story is published, I may have revised it twenty times or more.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring children's book writers?

A: Writing for children is wonderful, but it is also quite difficult. Adults can be patient readers, willing to slog through less-than-perfect writing and long, tedious passages. But kids will put a book down right away if it's not interesting to them. Getting to the heart of your story immediately and succinctly is crucial, and that takes lots of practice and revision. So write, write, write, and then revise, revise, revise!

Also, join the community of children's writers and illustrators. I've found so much help when I joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). There are some wonderful people there who are very willing to give advice to beginners. Take classes, attend conferences, and join a critique group. But it all depends on your willingness to write, write, write, and revise, revise, revise.

Q: What's next for you?

A: More writing new stories, more revising stories I have written, and a poetry project I am challenging myself to write. I have several stories that are being illustrated now, so look for *Monster's Trucks* and *Goodnight, Alligator* in the next year or so.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Van Slyke studied marine biology at Olympic Community College, received a teaching degree from Western Washington University, and got an MFA in writing for children from Vermont College of Fine Arts. The author of several books for young readers, she teaches second grade.

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