
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Suzanne Slade on *Mars Is*

ABOUT THE BOOK

For centuries, people have been intrigued by Mars, and over time, scientists have made exciting discoveries, such as the planet's Earth-like weather and seasons. But curious earthlings want to know more. Does Mars have deserts? Volcanos? Or signs of life? Could people live there someday?

Scientists decided to take a closer look. They built a powerful camera called the HiRISE (High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment) and loaded it onto a rocket. The rocket blasted off on August 12, 2005, and seven months later, the camera began orbiting Mars. It sent back astounding, revealing photos showing the world what Mars really is.

With elegant spare prose, award-winning nonfiction author and former rocket engineer Suzanne Slade leads readers through some of these stunning photos taken by the most advanced camera ever sent to another planet. A visual feast for space enthusiasts and STEAM fans that will expand readers' assumptions and understanding of Mars.

Q: Out of all the planets in our solar system, what inspired you to write about Mars?

A: A few years ago when I discovered the stunning Mars photos taken by HiRISE, the most powerful camera ever sent to another planet, I knew young readers would love them! Plus, I've always been very curious and wanted to learn more about Mars, our next-door-neighbor in the solar system.

Q: Your previous book *Countdown: 2979 Days to the Moon* featured realistic art from illustrator Thomas Gonzalez, but *Mars Is* includes photos taken by NASA's HiRISE camera. How did using photos instead of illustrations affect your creative process?

A: In most children's books, the author's story drives the illustrations. But HiRISE's gorgeous photos really drove the content of *Mars Is*. I spent months studying HiRISE pictures (there are over 69,000!) as I gathered my favorites. Then I began the difficult task of narrowing down which ones would work best for the book based on appearance and content of the photo. My goal was to include the most visually appealing pictures, while also sharing a wide variety of Mars' amazing features such as volcanos, craters, windswept dunes, ice, and more.

Q: What is so special about HiRISE photos of Mars?

A: HiRISE photos are extremely sharp and detailed, plus they're color-enhanced to allow scientists to detect important information about Mars their eyes could not ordinarily see. The pictures are also special because they're mesmerizingly beautiful!

Q: What was your research process like?

A: The research for *Mars Is* was extensive and incredibly fascinating. I learned a lot of new information about Mars by studying the details of the HiRISE photos, especially the ones I ultimately chose to include in the book. The process also included researching the HiRISE (High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment) camera itself and the spacecraft it's riding on called MRO (Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter). Additionally, I enjoyed working with two HiRISE experts from the University of Arizona's Lunar and Planetary Lab. Working with specialists always brings a greater

understanding and depth to research, which hopefully shows in the content of the book.

Q: *What does a day in your life look like when you're writing?*

A: Interestingly, as a full-time author there aren't nearly as many book writing days as I'd like. Other author "tasks," most of which I greatly enjoy, such as traveling to research a topic, corresponding with experts, reviewing book sketches, doing school visits, creating book trailers, updating my website, writing blog posts, responding to teacher emails, speaking at conferences, and so on, take up the bulk of my time. But when I finally get ready to write, I try to carve out a large block of time, like a few days or a week if possible. That amount of time helps me get my head into the topic and stay there while I flesh out a first draft. It's often helpful for me to step away from my computer and write a first draft by hand. When I write on the computer my words feel boxed in. Writing by hand seems to help "free" the words and the flow is more creative for me.

Q: *What was your favorite thing you learned while researching for Mars Is?*

A: It's hard to pick just one, but I guess it would be that Mars is much more like Earth than I thought. As the book explains, Mars has wind, weather, and seasons. I also learned it has many of the Earth's geographic features such as volcanoes, mesas, canyons, sandy deserts, landslides, ice (frozen carbon dioxide), and much more.

Q: *Which Mars image was most surprising to you?*

A: Again, it's really difficult to name only one. But I'd go with the image of dirt peeking out of small cracks in the ice on page 30 (with accompanying text, "Mars is shifting."). That photo is greatly magnified so the bits of dirt look like tiny trees growing on pink hills in a Dr. Seuss book.

Q: *After working as a mechanical engineer, how did you start writing nonfiction books for children?*

A: My journey to become an author started with my own love of children's books when I was young. When I began reading picture books to my own children years later, that passion was reignited, which led to writing

classes, critique groups, hundreds of rejection letters, and finally my first book contract (and a career I love!).

Q: *What advice would you give to aspiring nonfiction authors?*

A: Write about topics you are passionate about and/or have a meaningful connection to, such as an educational background, work experience, or personal connection (like a hobby, sport, etc.). Being connected to the subject you are researching and writing about will naturally make your story more exciting and accurate.

Q: *If you could travel to any planet, which would it be and why?*

A: Definitely Mars! I'd love to see the fascinating features I've enjoyed studying in the HiRISE photos with my own eyes. (Plus, it's a shorter trip than any other planet—only about 7 months!)

Q: *How do you hope Mars Is will be used in classrooms?*

A: I hope the incredible photos (and informative sidebars and back matter pages) will generate more curiosity about Mars and will answer many questions readers already have about the Red Planet.

Q: *Why do you think it's important to share nonfiction books like Mars Is with young readers?*

A: An interesting nonfiction book sparks a child's imagination and creates curiosity, which often leads them to do more research on their own, and it inspires them to write about their findings!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suzanne Slade is the award-winning author of over one hundred children's books including *Countdown: 2979 Days to the Moon* and *Dangerous Jane*. She lives in Illinois.

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