

## **What is the book about?**

DON'T FEED THE BOY is a heart-touching tale like the recent ONE AND ONLY IVAN by Katherine Applegate with the behind-the-scenes magic of THE MIXED UP FILES OF MRS. BASIL E. FRANKWEILER by E.L. Konigsburg. It's about a lonely eleven-year-old boy who's the son of zoo director mom and elephant keeper dad who feels trapped by the rules and routine of zoo life -- and along comes the Bird Girl who changes his life forever. Ultimately it's about the human struggle to find one's place in the world. It's rooted in friendship and adventure, and it's the kind of story that families can read and enjoy together.

## **Tell us about the main character.**

What to say about Whit? He's smart. He's funny. He's socially awkward. He's eleven years old, and he sleeps, eats and even attends school at the Meadowbrook Zoo. With so many exotic animals, it's easy to get overlooked – and the animals don't make very good friends. Whit prefers humans. And he wants desperately to find a real friend.

## **What inspired you to write this book?**

It has been my honor and privilege to shepherd three sons through struggles with school and friends as they have worked to find their own places in the world. They inspire me every day. As for the zoo piece, I remember thinking about how as parents, we have these obsessions. Then along comes children, and they are thrust into those obsessions whether they like it or not. I remember the first time I pitched the idea aloud: I was with my father in a bookstore over the Christmas holidays. I said, "what do you think about a story about a boy who lives at the zoo, and he feels like he was born the wrong species?" My father laughed. That's when I knew it was a good concept. I thought, wouldn't that be unfortunate, to be born to zoo people, but feel trapped by the zoo? What if you wanted a different life for yourself? What kind of adventures would ensue as you tried to pursue something counter to your parents' intentions?

## **Why did you want to write this book?**

I wrote it for my sons, and for others like them -- kids who feel things deeply and fiercely, who are quietly thirsting for all the world can offer them. And it also has to do with me. I was that kind of kid, too. While I didn't live at the zoo, I was sheltered by a loving family. It was shocking for me to learn that other people's lives weren't as carefree as mine, that some other kids didn't experience the same sort of love that I did. There was a Bird Girl in my life whose father was injured in a trucking accident and whose mother quietly endured the abuse he doled out as she ironed blue jeans. This book is a way to discover all the ways that particular friendship and others since then have impacted my world-view.

## **What message do you hope readers will take away from this book?**

Most of all, I hope readers leave these pages satisfied with their peek into Whit's heart and this part of his life-adventure. And if, by some miracle, they come away from the reading experience inspired to create the life they want, to actively pursue that instead of just waiting around for it to happen – well, that would be lovely and inspiring.

### **What personal experiences did you draw upon when writing this book?**

I've spent a lifetime being quietly rebellious and like a little bit of disobedience in my characters. I remembered a younger me who wanted to be a veterinarian, and even trained at the Birmingham Zoo as a teen volunteer. I remember how monotonous it all was, how different from the excitement I'd anticipated. And I remember how the reality of my friendships often didn't match my idea of them. I was often disappointed. And this is a big driving force in Whit's life as well -- this tension between wanting to be his own person and wanting to fit in with others.

### **What research did you do?**

I started with zookeeper diaries, like DR. FISHERS LIFE ON THE ARK, and went from there. It was my first time to try a research cataloguing technique that involves index cards, a highlighter pen and a recipe box. I was looking for specific facts about animals that would be interesting to kids. Given the theme of escape in Whit's life, I especially latched on to zoo escape stories. I learned that escapes are more common than most of us realize – one zoo in California reported thirteen escapes in one year!

### **Is the Meadowbrook Zoo modeled after any particular zoo?**

The Meadowbrook Zoo is named for the neighborhood near my home, and it is most certainly modeled after *my* zoo, the Birmingham Zoo. The Birmingham Zoo is also a mid-sized zoo with approximately 750 animals in its collection, and geographically it is situated just across the street from the Botanical Gardens. It has a new exhibit called Trails of Africa, which is like Savannah Point in the book. The train, the carousel, the spiderweb playground – all exist at the Birmingham Zoo. I even named one of the animals after one at the Birmingham Zoo: Nut Nut, the blue hyacinth macaw. Nut Nut lives in the Education Building, and she is often brought out for visits with children. I did take many liberties with the behind-the-scenes aspects of Whit's life. I gave Whit lots of freedom and simply used my imagination to create an environment that served Whit's story best.

### **The book features a non-traditional school experience. Do you have any personal experience with this?**

One of my earliest school memories is of being on an airplane with my siblings while my mother quizzed us with flash cards. She took responsibility for our education while we were overseas. Upon our return to the U.S., I attended public schools. As a parent, I have experience with public, private and home-schooling. I've learned that different kids thrive in different educational environments. What works for one kid doesn't necessarily

work for the next. But I think any kid would be lucky to have a Ms. Connie in their lives, as Whit does.

**The book shows zoos in both favorable and unfavorable lights. What is your position on wild animals in captivity?**

It's not my job to take sides; it's my job to tell a story. I hope the book shows both sides of the issue. Like Whit, I have seen first-hand the loving care with which zoo professionals and other supporters approach their work with these animals. I have long enjoyed visiting zoos, and I appreciate the effort zoos make to educate people, conserve species and inspire passion for the natural world.

**Tell us about the road to publication.**

I wrote the first draft of this book during 2009. I submitted it in 2010 as my option book over at Putnam, to the wonderful editor with whom I worked on LEAVING GEE'S BEND. While she loved the story, the book was rejected at Acquisitions. So my agent sent it over to Nancy Mercado at Roaring Brook Press who read it, loved it, and said, *I want to publish it with interior illustrations*. I was thrilled! The release date for DON'T FEED THE BOY falls almost exactly two years after the sale.