

Today on the podcast, we're joined by Maria Gianferrari, author of *Play Like an Animal*. Thank you for joining us today, Maria.

Thanks for having me, Rachel. I appreciate it.

Why do you write the kinds of books that you write?

Well, generally, I write about what I love, things that are inspiring. Most of my books are about animals or creatures in the natural world. I grew up in a small town in New Hampshire, across the street from farms, mom used to ring the bell when it was time for us to come in. I used to slap cow patties for fun and climb trees, and we had a sugar house across the street from us which was my playground. So I was outside all the time playing rain or shine pretty much. And so I think that inspired me to be a writer, in many ways. I'm a shy person and being out in nature is a place that I feel most comfortable.

Where do you get the information for your book?

Basically the same kind of thing, like things that I might be passionate about or curious about, things that I see in nature or here. For example, my book, *Coyote Moon*, was inspired by an actual coyote encounter when I used to live in Massachusetts. And then I kind of became obsessed with coyotes and had to learn everything I could. So I interviewed a scientist and did a bunch of reading for my book. *Terrific Tongues* was inspired by my then toddlers obsession with tongues living in Germany at the time. And so the German word is *zunge* and every time that my daughter would see a dog walking on the street or reading a book, and she pointed, "*zunge, zunge*". So I started to think about tongues and then I found a wealth of information that was so cool and interesting that inspired that book.

How did you become a writer in the first place?

Well, writing was something I really always wanted to do. And it's, you know, there's a lot of failure involved. First from just rejections, getting rejections from editors. But it starts even earlier, you know you're meeting with the writing group and they don't like something. So I think that by the time my daughter was born and I was reading children's books again and realizing how much I love them, I just thought, what am I

waiting for? Time is passing on and I'm not actually trying. So I was, I think, afraid to fail and then not even trying. So then I actually started to try. And yes, there was still failure involved, but then eventually there was success. And just the fun part is learning about different things and being inspired and having your critique group that supports you as well. There's still rejection involved and still failure, but luckily I've had some external validation. So that kind of helps you, though, as well. But also the passion and the obsession and the curiosity is another thing that keeps me going.

Children's books are so short. How do you pack so much information and emotion into a limited word count?

I think really, for me, poetry is key to writing picture books because you're distilling the language to its most essential parts in a poem, and you're sort of doing the same thing as a writer of picture books because you want to leave enough space for the illustrator as well, so that that white space can create emotion and tension and it also leaves a place for the reader to reflect and pause. And I think with my nonfiction books that are sort of scientific or nature based, that science and poetry really go hand in hand. Scientific language can also be poetic. For example, in my book, *Hawk Rising*, there is a term when hawks are flying in the sky and kind of hovering. They hold their wings and it's called **kiting**, which is very poetic. You know, imagine a kite that are flying in the sky. And so it's technically accurate. And yet it's also kind of poetic and beautiful in the same way. So it's an interesting way to approach writing and the way picture books.

You've touched on this a little bit, how do you choose the specific subjects for your books?

It's about, you know, what I'm curious about, I might see something and say, oh, that's an interesting creature or observing. I remember driving my daughter to school and there used to be a tree where these hawks would hang out. And one morning I saw this hawk just holding its wings out and I wondered what it was doing. And I did some research and found out that that's how they sometimes dry dew from their wings. So that made it into the scene of *Hawk Rising*. So it's I think it's just, again, what I'm curious about and passion about. And then you get a little bit of obsessive as well as I did with my coyote, just trying to find out as much as you can, then I think that obsession and

passion and energy keeps you going despite the constant failure because it's out there and available. And so when you have that interest and obsession for that can be helpful.

What was your inspiration for *Play Like an Animal*?

I was seeing in schools the emphasis on testing and having heard at some schools that this was on the need for efficiency purposes and drilling more information into kids. And I just thought, oh, you're kind of missing the point, play can be fun, but it's also educational. There's so many things that you learn, your curiosity about something, experimenting with things, taking them apart, putting them together. You know, that's Legos, building stuff. And so I think part of it was wanting to inspire play and making it, sort of legitimizing it in a way as an educational thing, but also just it is fun. So I think the idea of trying to sort of combat the worksheets, my daughter, when she went to public school and she was getting worksheets to do for science. That's like the antithesis of science, experiment and exploration and the hands-on stuff. So I guess I wanted to inspire kids to get out and be active and that sort of thing.

What is the most surprising thing that you discovered while researching this book?

I think one of the most surprising things was that animals in captivity play a lot. And it really makes sense because they're not you know, on one hand, I'm not a huge fan of zoos. Like I get their educational purposes, it's helping to perpetuate a species. But as an animal lover, it makes me feel sad to visit zoos and see animals that are enclosed. But, you know, zoo keepers and the scientists that work there are trying to help animals as well, and so one of the things they do to stimulate them is to put toys in and play with them. And so animals in captivity are extremely playful and it makes sense because they're not worried about their safety. They're not worried about finding those things are taken care of. And so I think it was something that I had never really thought of. But it makes perfect sense. And it also makes sense for people to know when kids are on a schedule or when kids maybe don't have a lot of resources available to you that play can seem like it's a privilege. It should be sort of a right that everybody has, if that makes sense. And so, yeah, that was kind of interesting thing. And I guess I've been thinking about it a lot now during this time of COVID, when people are inside, they might play more if they have a safe space. That's very important. And the privilege to really

have a safe space inside. You can't play in the same way, but you might be able to if you do. But if you do, you know, I think boredom can be one thing that can inspire you to creativity. There has to be that opportunity to have time to be bored and to tinker with things. So you might not have a constant schedule with sports or classes that you leave your kids in and things like that.

I have noticed that very much--I agree during the pandemic time, I have small children and they're really creative in their play. They got really creative in the first couple of months when it was still winter here in Minnesota and they played outside, but they couldn't play outside all day. Now that it's summer, they're outside much more often. But the creativity that came out of "there's nothing else to do. But you're safe at home, so go find something."

Bunch of boxes or something.

Yes, the salad spinner! The spinner disappeared from my kitchen and it has not come back.

Kids don't need expensive toys. So you just need some spoons and some boxes and some Legos and blocks and you can do wonders with that. And you know, kids that are more artistic, crayons and paper.

Many of those things you described are the same kinds of toys they give to the animals in the zoo, boxes and things to knock down.

Yes. And they have a grand old time right now. And just also observing creatures playing, watching animals play brings a lot of joy. Your household pets, whether it's your cat that you're teasing with a toy or your dog that you're playing on tug of war with or something like that for fun and just relaxing as well.

Right. You had sent us a link to some zoo animals playing in the snow from The Animal Channel, which we will put in the podcast notes so anyone who's listening can go and get a little of snow.

I think snow, just, I feel like a kid when it snows out. I want to go out and play. And I remember my dog Becca, whenever there was snow on the ground, you know, she'd start, like, dragging her jaw, eating it and then immediately wanting to roll in it. And it's just fun. And of course, building forts and snow people and all that kind of stuff, too.

Well, if any of our listeners have not yet checked out *Play Like an Animal*, you can see a short excerpt on our website, LernerBooks.com. And the book is available wherever books are sold now. Thank you so much, Maria, for joining us today.

Take care. Thank you.