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Adventures of a Research Geek

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Confession: I am a card-carrying research geek. It was apparent way back in elementary school, when I'd spend the summer months assigning myself research projects so that I could spend more time at the public library in my small western New York town.

"You need to write a five-page report about gorillas," I'd tell myself and then giddily pull primate books from the shelves until they were stacked to a dangerous, teetering height.

Even when I went to the library looking for my favorite works of fiction—Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* books and almost anything by Judy Blume—I'd always leave with something else, something unexpected, a book I hadn't intended to check out. One day, it might be a collection of poetry.

Another day, it would be a book about volcanoes or skydiving or snakes. It was out of this wild variety reading that my first book was born.

I'd just finished reading a pile of shark books and decided I'd write one of my own. I compiled a whole bunch of facts, made a construction paper cover for the collection, and called it *Shark: Terror of the Sea*. My mother "published" it with a magnet on our refrigerator, and, for the rest of that year, whenever my folks were hosting a dinner party, I'd wait for the doorbell to ring. I'd race to answer it and take each unsuspecting guest by the hand. "Hi there! Can I take your coat? Great! Now come to the refrigerator and read my book."

In my adult life I've been fortunate enough to have three careers that have fed that enthusiasm and love

of learning—first as a TV news reporter, then as a middle school English teacher, and now as a writer of books for kids. When I do school visits as an author and we get to the question and answer period, kids inevitably ask about the best part of my job. I tell them that while going to work barefoot is a great perk, my favorite thing is the learning—the gift of being able to explore anything that fascinates me, every single day.

I went snowshoeing in the Adirondack Mountains and learned about the secret world of animals living under the snow—a field trip that led to my picture book *Over and Under the Snow*. I traveled to Oklahoma's storm country to learn about tornadoes for my futuristic weather novel, *Eye of the Storm*, and kayaked among the alligators in the Everglades to capture a stronger

sense of place for my science thriller *Wake Up Missing*. The kid-sleuths in my Silver Jaguar Society Mysteries (*Capture the Flag*, *Hide and Seek*, and *Manhunt*) have gone on secret missions that took them to Washington, DC, the Costa Rica rainforest, the historic sites of Boston, and the deep dark tunnels below the streets of Paris. In researching those books, I had incredible opportunities to explore those places and probe their mysteries, too.

But my favorite research journeys have grown from the new chapter book series I'm writing for Scholastic about a time-traveling search and rescue dog named Ranger. Ranger, a golden retriever who's full of energy and heart, has been through all the training to be a search and rescue dog, but there's just one problem—he can't resist chasing squirrels and doesn't pass his test. But then in his family's garden Ranger digs up a mysterious first-aid kit—one that transports him to other places and times, where his help is very much needed.

In the first book, *Ranger in Time: Rescue on the Oregon Trail*, Ranger travels with a pioneer family making the long, dangerous journey west to the Oregon Territory. Researching this book brought me to an incredible library—a small, cozy room in the back of a museum in Independence, Missouri, dedicated entirely to Oregon Trail resources. I'd been searching for some trail diaries left behind by young people but wasn't coming up with much before I called this library. When I explained what I was looking for, the man in charge said, "Oh...well, we don't have much. Except for Lizzy," he added as an afterthought.

"Lizzy?"



I tell her the truth. It sure is. It's the best job I could ever imagine for a kid who longs to explore the world and still loves wandering the library more than almost anything else.



"Lizzy Charlton. She was a teenager on the Oregon Trail, but her diary's just awful."

"Awful how?" I asked.

He explained that Lizzy hadn't written much, and what she did share was short, curt, and ill-tempered. "She hated it. She was cold and bored," he said. "She didn't want to come."

Lizzy's "awful" diary turned out to be a rare gift—the voice of an actual teenager of the time period, with all of her teenaged attitude. Lizzy was whiny. She was surly. And she was real. She ended up being the inspiration for the older sister in my Oregon Trail book—a story I share with readers in the author's note,

along with an excerpt from the real Lizzy's diary.

From the Oregon Trail, Ranger goes on to a rescue mission in ancient Rome. ("It's funny," my husband remarked one day, "how this time traveling search and rescue dog seems to be magically called to all of the places you want to visit." I had to agree—the coincidences are uncanny.) My time in Rome and Pompeii brought the world of the gladiators to life for me. It is one thing to read about the games and wild animal fights that took place in Rome's great amphitheater but another to stand and look out over the massive arena.

Likewise, it's one thing to read slave narratives and quite another

to walk through a tobacco field for yourself. I did both when I was researching the third title in this series, *Ranger in Time: Long Road to Freedom*. While primary sources—real diaries, documents, letters, and remembrances—feed the heart of my historical fiction, if I can I also try to visit the places my characters inhabit. There is something about standing in a place that brings out the richest details—whether that's the feel of the Roman sun beating down on stone seats in a grand arena or the damp-smelling air of a cramped basement hiding place in a cobweb-filled barn.

I always hope that those details will bring places to life for my readers as well. When I visit schools to talk about my books and research and revising, I get so excited telling stories that I can never quite manage to stand still. Inevitably, at the end of the Q and A period, some kid raises her hand and says, "It's fun being an author, isn't it?"

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Kate Messner is the award-winning author of more than twenty current and forthcoming books for young readers. Her debut novel, *The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z.*, won the *E. B. White Read Aloud Award for Older Readers*, and her picture book *Over and Under the Snow* was an *E. B. White Finalist* as well as a *New York Times*, *ALSC*, and *NCTE* notable book. Kate's other books for young readers include *Capture the Flag*, *Hide and Seek*, *Manhunt*, *Eye of the Storm*, *Wake Up Missing*, *All the Answers*, *Sea Monster's First Day*, and the popular *Marty McGuire* chapter book series. Her newest project is her *Ranger in Time* Scholastic chapter book series.

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