



Inside
THE HELPFUL PUPPY
An interview with
author
Kim Zarins

Q: *What was the inspiration behind the book?*

A: A few things came together to make this book, but mostly it was a memory and a dog. First, the memory: I am eight years older than my little brother, and I remember a phase he went through when he really wanted to be helpful to his older sisters. Once we were watching TV, and I asked him for milk; and he scampered into the kitchen and with great effort (I don't know how he did it) poured the milk and held the glass with both hands as he carried it across the hall.

That memory of effort and eagerness stayed with me, and later in life I understood that we all are like that, no matter how old we are. Everyone wants to feel like he or she is contributing, and we feel insecure if our efforts fail. Adults feel that way all the time, and I think every writer I know in some ways is the Helpful Puppy. It's just that the failures or mishaps of kids are so cute. A young child might bend the nail he's trying to hammer for you, or spill the milk he's trying to pour. He'll use every paper towel in the house to clean it up too. I wanted to celebrate those earnest intentions but also affirm and validate children's true contribution to our world: it's not how helpful they are at selling lemonade or cleaning messes that matters, but the loving relationships we share.

And my dog Teddy had something to do with this book. He was my childhood companion, a loving, huggable dog. I started thinking about a puppy that was eager to help but seemed too small and insignificant to do so. Once I had a happy ending in mind, I was ready to write.

Q: *What makes this book special to you? What important message do you feel it brings to young readers?*

A: It's the ending that makes the book special to me: putting a child (and his puppy!) to bed with love. As a parent, the ending feels richer to me because of my own bedtime rituals with my son. He gives me so much love, and I treasure that. The ending of the book is basically a big hug to the loving little ones in our lives. The message is that it's not what you do to help out; it's about being the loving person who you are that matters so much. Even adults need to know that—we work so hard to make things perfect for the people in our lives, but it is hard to improve upon hugs and play.

Q: *What was your favorite book growing up?*

A: I really liked animals as a child and connected best with stories about animals. *Where the Red Fern Grows* was the first book that made me cry, and C. S. Lewis's classic *The Horse and His Boy* made me long for other worlds and officially turned me into a reader (incidentally, *The Horse and His Boy* is #5 in the Narnia series, but I read it first because it had the word "horse" in the title—horses sounded much more interesting than wardrobes!).

Q: *What is your favorite memory from childhood?*

A: It is hard to choose. I have a zillion fun memories with my dog (see below). I also have lots of memories in which I tried to do the impossible, like taping cardboard wings to my arms and launching off the slide ladder, or making a stone circle and jumping to get to Narnia. My most exciting memory might be sliding down the ice plant hill in a giant cardboard box with my sisters and neighbor kids. Nothing beats a cardboard box.

Q: *Did you have any pets? If so, which one was your favorite?*

A: I've had many different pets, but the one I loved best was a Labrador retriever named Teddy. He was my best pal. He was a big, fat dog—fun to hug and to use as a giant pillow. He loved retrieving tennis balls, but you had to pry them out of his jaws—which was part of the fun—for him. He was scared of water, but he went into the ocean when he mistakenly thought I was drowning; as soon as I grabbed his collar, he tugged me to shore. Even when he was an older dog and not as quick at getting up off the floor, his tail thumped with love every time we kids came home from school. In terms of *The Helpful Puppy's* plotline, Teddy did nothing useful pragmatically but was perfect at giving love. Teddy was my helpful puppy!

Q: *What inspired you to write and when did you know you would become an author?*

A: I remember writing my first poem, or at least the first one that mattered to me. I was about eleven, and I was watching my little brother and sister at play in the snow; and it felt like a poem was the best way to capture the moment. I wrote poems ever since. But when I was in college, I wrote pathetic, navel-contemplating poems. My boyfriend suggested I try writing for children, and it's the best advice I ever received, not only because navel contemplating is hard to do in a children's book, but because children's books are not about me. They're about kids. That's refreshing! But writing for children took a long time of submitting and revising. I never knew I'd become an author until I got a contract. I'm still surprised about that.

Q: *If there is one thing you could tell your readers about life, what would you say?*

A: Life is precious, and young people teach this to us best.

THE HELPFUL PUPPY

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