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**KEVIN KEEPS UP**  
**An interview with**  
**award-winning author**  
**Ann Whitehead Nagda**

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

**A:** The book was inspired by several experiences. In 2005, I helped a local fifth-grade class write animal math books. One student had ADHD and didn't complete his book with the rest of the class, so I worked with him to finish it. He was thrilled when he could finally show *Chihuahua Math* to his classmates. The reason I had Kevin, the main character in *Kevin Keeps Up*, write about cheetahs is that I'm fascinated by them. I met two cheetahs at the San Diego Zoo when I was researching my math book, *Cheetah Math: Learning about Division from Baby Cheetahs*. Then in 2006, I spent two weeks volunteering at the De Wildt Cheetah Center in South Africa and worked on efforts to protect cheetahs in the wild. My two favorite experiences at De Wildt were accompanying a cheetah and his trainers on a school visit and photographing trained cheetahs running.

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

**A:** For young readers, my message is that every child has unique talents and strengths, and often a special teacher or librarian can help them capitalize on

those strengths. This book is special to me because I love to share my enthusiasm about African animals. I am continually drawn to Africa to photograph the animals, particularly cheetahs, lions, and leopards. In fact, I'll be returning to Kenya and Tanzania to view the wildebeest migration this coming September with my Danish "sister," Hanne Lindeman, who is a wildlife biologist and has been leading tours in Africa for thirty-five years. (See last page for my Danish connection.)

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

**A:** I loved *The Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. When I read the book, I was probably ten years old. Like Sara Crewe, who was forced into servitude, I often felt like a servant. My mother had frequent migraines and even called me home from school to take care of my three younger siblings. While cooking dinner, I would have to keep my two wild brothers from killing each other and destroying the house. I did manage to get dinner on the table, even though the peas were often charred and the overcooked meat was as tough as shoe leather. Books were my escape during that time and still are. (As an adult, I've taken many gourmet cooking classes.)

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

**A:** My maternal grandparents often took me on trips, but I think my favorite trip was to a resort on Muskoka Lake in Canada when I was nine. We swam in the lake, played shuffleboard, and had delicious meals served in the elegant dining room. My grandfather often played Ping Pong with me in the evening, and I felt special. It was such a change from the frenetic atmosphere at home. That was my last trip with my grandfather, because he died a year later.

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

**A:** When I was a child, I had a hamster. We had a dog briefly, but my mother took it to the pound because it wasn't a nice dog. I, however, loved that dog. Recently, we had a wonderful cat named Tigger, who lived with us for fourteen years and was my favorite pet. I still miss her.

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

**A:** I was inspired to write after my first child was born and I began reading to him. I knew I would become an author after Marilyn Malin became my agent.

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

**A:** I would tell readers not to be afraid to take on a challenge (not a challenge that is life-threatening, of course, but one that offers growth). When I was a high school junior, I decided I wanted to go abroad with American Field Service for the half-year school program, and I was thrilled when I was selected to go to Denmark. Even though it was a bit scary to leave my family and go so far away for seven months, I took on the challenge and plunged into the unknown. This was during the '60s, when there were no cell phones or e-mail, and phone calls from abroad were very expensive. Living with my Danish family was delightful, even though going to a Danish school was demanding. The experience truly changed my life. I came back home with new confidence in myself and my ability to be successful in a society with different customs while learning to speak a new language. I still keep in touch with my Danish family. I feel it's important to challenge yourself, to strike out on your own, and to dare to be different.

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by Ann Whitehead Nagda

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