

OTTER BARRY BOOKS: Q&A WITH HOLLIS KURMAN ON *COUNTING IN GREEN*

What inspired you to write this book?

It's always hard to pinpoint just one trigger for writing a book, as inspiration generally comes from cross-fertilization. There were probably three main sources for 'Counting in Green':

- 'Counting in Green' is a follow-up to 'Hello! A Counting Book of Kindnesses' in the counting book series. Each of these books takes an important, complex, and sensitive topic and makes it accessible, engaging, and motivating to the youngest readers. Climate is of course an urgent issue that affects children most – yet also inspires them to act. In many ways, kids have taken the lead! This book leverages their positive energy and hopes to fuel it, in turn.
- As is often the case, my non-writing work inspires my writing. In my role on the Board of Trustees of Save the Children Netherlands, I am keenly aware of the impact of environmental issues on the world's children. Children are the main victims of Climate change, along with Conflict and COVID (the dreaded '3 C's'), and they will bear much of the responsibility for having to heal our planet. Another part of my work, moderating literary events, offered me the privilege of interviewing Jonathan Safran Foer about his thought-provoking book, 'We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast'. His main message in the book is that we can all make the biggest difference by eating less meat.
- Most importantly, this book is very personal to me. Many of the 10 actions proposed in the book draw directly from my own passions and experience. A few examples: I stopped eating meat at age 18 and am a big believer in plant-based eating. I am a lifelong animal lover and will even go to great lengths to welcome and rescue insects despite my terrible entomophobia (irrational fear of insects). I am constantly picking up plastic and other rubbish from beaches, and I never head to the beach without a bag (and disposable gloves) to collect it. I am a rather obsessive recycler and re-purposer! I'm always inventing ways to turn old things into new things rather than throw them away. My family makes fun of me for this trait, but they've come to support it and join in over time. Christmas wrappings are a perfect example. Every salvageable bit of wrapping paper, ribbon, or other packaging gets saved and artistically re-used for the next crop of holiday gifts. My daughter, now a university student and climate advocate, recently researched and quantified the total amount of Christmas waste in the UK, and it was stunning!

What were your favourite books as a child?

I loved lots of classics!

Among picture books, 'Harold and the Purple Crayon' has remained one of my favourites into adulthood, and I've gifted it often. I love its simple message on the power of the imagination in creative problem-solving. I also of course loved 'Where the Wild Things Are' (one of the most quotable, universal, and yet unique books ever written for children) and 'Eloise' (for her New York City girl sass!). I was a huge fan of Winnie the Pooh stories from early on. They walk a brilliant line between appealing to children and older readers. I secretly worry that Pooh wouldn't have gotten published today: 'too long', 'too sophisticated', 'too quiet'. And finally, Dr. Seuss' 'The Lorax' remains one of the best books on the environment. It was certainly my first exposure to climate issues in a children's book, and I later gifted it to the former Minister of the Environment in The Netherlands, where I live.

I also absolutely loved books with a bit of adventure, like 'A Wrinkle in Time', 'The Phantom Toll Booth' and 'James and the Giant Peach.'

Finally, there was always poetry in our house. My mother read to us all the time, including American poets such as Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, and e.e. cummings (whose poem 'Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town' fascinated me before I understood what it was about). I, in turn, read poetry to our children from the time they were born. I remember reading T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to my son as a baby, and it stuck with him. I was thrilled when his little toddler self started reciting bits of it back to me.

What did you discover in writing this book that you didn't already know?

Even the simplest seeming books require lots of research behind the scenes, and I take this responsibility seriously. In writing 'Counting in Green', I discovered several things both big and small. Two examples:

First, the downside: in the 'Did you know?' section of the book (included in each of my counting books), I was shocked to learn the pace and magnitude of animal species' disappearance. *Animal populations have fallen almost 70% in just 50 years, and many species have gone forever.* We know these things in a vague sense, but the numbers tell it all. Facts and figures matter. In deciding among the many jarring climate facts to include, I felt that children would feel this animal loss most keenly and want to do something about it.

On the positive side, though, I discovered how *easy* it is for all of us to help! Healing a hurting earth seems so daunting, but I realised how much impact all the 'little ways' can have on our 'big planet' – especially when we act together. I chose to feature ten of the most important yet easiest actions that would also be the most logical fit with the numbers in a 1-10 counting book ('2 breezy wheels', for example, to use a bike rather than more polluting transport, or '3 meatless meals'), but there are so many more ways to help beyond these ten. And that's the last question in the book: '*How many ways can you think of to go green?*'

What is the main message of your story?

Mother Earth (urgently) needs our help – and it's easy for all of us to do our part at any age. No matter how small or young we are, we can help make a change that matters.

Implicitly, the book also shows how *fun* it can be to pitch in and do these things! Making birdbaths, planting pollinator-friendly gardens, eating the rainbow, or crafting creative new uses for old things rather than throwing them away are all wonderfully appealing activities for children whether at home or at school. These will be included in an accompanying activity sheet for the book.

What is the best thing about being an author?

Sharing what I write with young readers and engaging in a dialogue with them about the book's message. It's exciting to see them make new connections. I also learn so much from children and am often quite literally moved to tears by their comments, questions, and insights.

I have always loved writing and have been a poet for a long time. But I've only recently become a published children's book author ('Counting in Green' is my second book, following 'Hello! A Counting Book of Kindnesses'). There's a joy in collaborating with such a talented illustrator and

publishing team to bring a book to life. Writing poetry or adult non-fiction is far more solitary!

Which contemporary children's books can you recommend?

There are so many wonderful children's books out there – and fortunately the crop is growing ever more diverse. It's hard to pick favourites, but here are a few special books that come to mind: 'Last Stop on Market Street' by Matt De La Peña is a gem that I can read over and over. Joseph Coelho's book 'The Tower' shares some of 'Last Stop's' spirit in finding beauty where there seems at first to be none. I love 'Julián is a Mermaid' by Jessica Love and 'Thank You, Omu!' by Oge Mora. Like 'Last Stop', they also feature wonderful older characters. 'The Paper Kingdom' by Helena Ku Rhee and 'The Suitcase' by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros are heartwarming and say so much with so little. It's almost a cliché at this point to rave about 'Hair Love' by Matthew A. Cherry, but this book is pitch perfect and feels as important as it is delightful. And then, of course, is Barroux's latest beauty and ode to our ocean creatures: 'I Love You, Blue'!