

Journals Matter

BY LITA JUDGE



Red Sled, to be released by Simon & Schuster this fall, is another book inspired by the animals I observed and sketched as a child.

I'm currently working on my 12th book as author and illustrator, and it recently occurred to me that six of my books were inspired directly from my childhood journals. I was fortunate to have both a simple and stimulating childhood. My parents were wildlife photographers, and my family spent much of our time in the outdoors, often sitting quietly in wildlife blinds watching animals. This lifestyle provided moments of sheer excitement, like when we watched grizzly bears play in the snow or saw the elegant courtship rituals of sandhill cranes. But most of the time, we waited for something interesting to happen. We waited and stayed very, very quiet.

To fill the endless hours, my mother gave me a journal. I thought I was a very bad writer, so I filled the pages of my first journals with pictures of birds and animals, flowers, mushrooms, and bits of lichen. Then I started writing about the things I observed. I took field notes of the animals we watched. I soon began experimenting with words by writing poems next to my drawings and, eventually, I dared to write whimsical tales about the animals. I daydreamed and sketched dinosaurs and clipper ships and other things I found fascinating. My imagination and my writing skills flourished in the blank pages of those early journals.

Like many kids, writing for a classroom assignment was a terrifying task. I lacked confidence and skills. I struggled to the point of tears and was convinced I was never, ever going to be a writer. But the world within my journal was separate from all of that. It was my safe harbor. It was

a judgment-free zone. I didn't have to share it with others and it didn't have to be anything other than what it was: a place to dream and imagine.

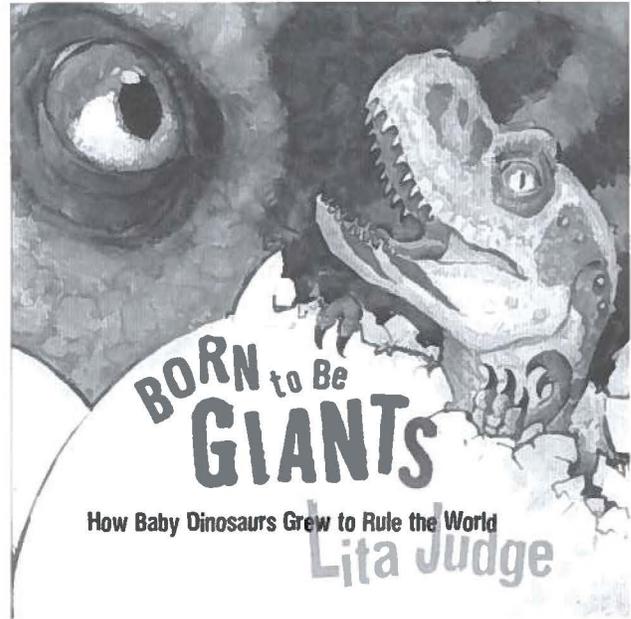
Now I realize just how lucky I was. I learned many writing skills in the classroom, but I built the tools of my imagination within the pages of my journal, and the most important ingredient of them all was confidence. A journal allows a very special opportunity to see one's skills grow over time. By practicing on an almost daily basis, my ability to record what I observed intensified, and without fail the end of the journal contained writing and drawings that showed improvement. This is a great confidence booster. And confidence harbored perseverance, the second most important ingredient for an artist and a writer. By having the freedom to write about whatever ignited my passion, I was inspired to keep filling journals.

I kept my journals, reluctant to let go of the contents that had become so dear. But, eventually, I didn't look at them and they just sat gathering dust on the bookshelves. Following an interest in paleontology and dinosaurs that had started with childhood musings—little sketches of *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *Triceratops* within the pages of my journals—I became a geologist. But slowly I began to realize I wanted to share the stories I had sketched. I began opening the old journals.

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I'm startled at how much the writer I am today was inspired by the child that I was. The things that excited me and fueled my imagination at 6, 9, and 12 years of age are the same things that drive me to create today. Even if I had never become an author, my life is richer for having recorded my childhood. It preserved my memories and fostered my creative adulthood. But I am an author, and thank goodness I have the journals. I look through them and directly lift ideas from those pages that turn into books.

When I talk to young readers in classrooms, I'm passionate about showing them my childhood journals as well as the books I create today. I want them to see how the stories and poems I wrote when I was their age were the building blocks of my artistic



Born to Be Giants, published in 2010 by Roaring Brook Press, was inspired directly from my childhood journal.

life. Encourage your students to keep a journal. Welcome it as a judgment-free zone. Allow them to record, through drawings and words, what they see and feel in whatever form grips them. And trust that by encouraging a child to keep a journal, you are inspiring lifetime readers, writers, and creative adults.

Lita Judge's first picture book, One Thousand Tracings, won the 2008 International Reading Association Children's Book Award and was selected as an ALA Notable Children's Book. Her next book, Red Sled, will be coming out this fall. She lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. For more information, visit her Web site at LitaJudge.com.