

A Decade of *The Underneath*

A Conversation with Kathi Appelt

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If you were like me, you likely hooted with excitement when you heard that Kathi Appelt's *The Underneath* had received a Newbery Honor in 2009. My enthusiasm was tempered only by the fact that it didn't win the Newbery Medal itself.

It's hard to believe it's been a decade since the notable book was published—garnering much praise (including being a 2008 National Book Award finalist) but also trigger warnings about its graphic depictions of animal abuse.

While Appelt has had much literary success—including a second National Book Award finalist (2013) with *The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp*—*The Underneath* was her debut novel. She's come a long way from coloring on the garage wall as a child—don't worry, that creativity was, thankfully, encouraged by her parents!

I was honored to speak with the very polite, present, and encouraging author by phone from her home in Texas recently.

Congrats on the anniversary and enduring success of *The Underneath* and your ensuing books. Did your parents always encourage your creativity?

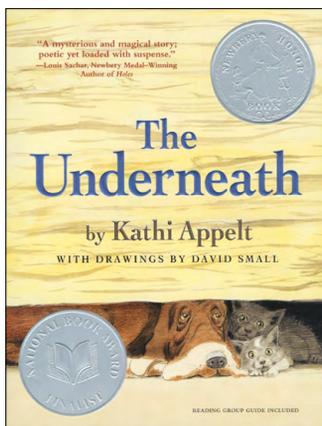
KA: They were all about it. My dad read tons of Rudyard Kipling poetry to me growing up.

Did you always want to be a writer?

KA: I wanted to be a vet, but chemistry was not my forte. I always wanted to be a writer—but also a cowgirl! I have two grown boys, but I probably wouldn't have written for children if I hadn't had my own kids.

You've written more than forty books, many of them picturebooks. Do you prefer a particular format?

KA: In 2003, I was hired to serve on the faculty at Vermont College. They brought me in as a picturebook person, but I hadn't written a novel yet. It actually became a matter of honor. The novel code just kept eluding me. It wasn't that I didn't want to write a novel; I certainly did. When *The Underneath* came out, many people didn't know I had this whole body of work in picturebooks.



So one day, I wrote a memoir in prose poetry style. That book gave me some courage. I finally one day decided if I ever wanted to do it, I'd have to do it in these tiny chunks. Extended narrative still is hard for me. I kind of taught myself how to recognize what worked for me.

Many of your books feature animals; was that a natural subject for you?

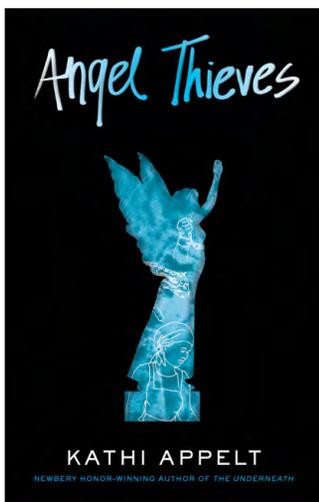
KA: I'm an animal lover; I've always been an animal lover; I was a crazy horse girl. I have five cats—they showed up on our door. I'm right on the verge of being a crazy cat woman.

Some readers/adults expressed initial concern about the animal abuse depicted in *The Underneath*.

KA: When the book first came out, I had some hate mail...feelings were very strong. But animal abuse is very real. Kids need to know that—those emotional rehearsals where they can experience sadness and grief. A book is a safe place to have those experiences.

The Underneath takes place in a very distinct setting; how did you come to set it in a bayou near the Louisiana/Texas border?

KA: The natural world intrigues me. In college, I moved to East Texas with my sister; we lived in this tiny cabin. It was really back in the woods. Once you lived there . . . it has this sense of being old and remote and it feels like anything can happen



back there, and probably does. It's so mysterious at the same time. When I was writing *The Underneath*, I recalled those feelings. Who's to say there aren't ancient alligators in the swamps of East Texas?

What did winning a Newbery Honor mean to you?

KA: That was life changing; it was amazing. I worked hard to put my heart in that book. It had so much of me in it. Things from my past were in it; it meant a lot to me.

What's next for you?

KA: *Max Attacks* is a picturebook in the pipeline with Simon & Schuster, as well as a young adult novel in spring 2019 with a magical realism bent, *Angel Thieves*. It has contemporary and historical storylines about a man and his son who live in an antiques store and they steal cemetery angels. The back story is based on a true story about a slave who lived in pre-Civil War Houston. 📖

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are resources that can be easily leveraged to support STEM initiatives. 📖

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