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Jim Arnosky:
The Independent Artist Who Shares a Passion for Nature With Children
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Jim Arnosky told his audience at the Summer 2000 Brigham Young University Symposium on Books for Young Readers that he has a free lancer's mentality. He doesn't wait for help from anyone. He is a bobcat; those who wait are house cats. This independent artist has a passion for nature; he paints from experience, traveling all over the country to research and observe before writing about a particular animal.

Arnosky has published over fifty-seven books, but it hasn't been easy. At the beginning of his career, he and his wife sent out two hundred mailings a month for two years with no results. He finally sold something to the children's magazine *Jack and Jill*. He began to focus on magazines; eventually, through his work with *Cricket*, he started illustrating books. His illustrations convinced publishers he knew about animals, and they approached him to do books but left the subjects up to him. Arnosky says it takes six years to know enough about an animal to write about it.

Arnosky loves observing nature and communicating his love through picture books. He told the conference audience that working is like floating—it buoys him up. In an interview with *Horn Book Magazine*, Arnosky observed, “through my study of nature I have become convinced that every little thing is part of some whole, and if you look closely enough and think well enough, you will recognize the scheme of things. You may even find a place for yourself in that order. I have found my place. It is outdoors near the earth and its waters, near the birds and beasts.” (“The Moon in My Net,” *Horn Book*, Sept-Oct., 1989)

Asked if he had ever had injuries while working with animals, he said no, because he is very careful. He doesn't like animals to be aware of him because that ruins what he is trying to do—learn about their way of life. Arnosky admits he is sometimes compelled to overwork.

When he snowshoed three and a half miles downhill for an observation, he didn't think about the three and a half miles he would have to go up to get out. Anyone who has snowshoed knows this is overwork!

In speaking about his illustration process, Arnosky explained that when he is paid to write a book on rattlesnakes, he is not paid to look up information about rattlesnakes on the Internet. He goes out to observe them in their habitat. A self-taught artist, who began drawing at a young age, he says he was twenty-five before he ever used color. He learned to draw from his father, a patent artist, and he used pencils. It was ten years before he started to use brushes. He learned how to make things and then drew them, inspiring one friend to ask if he had an engineering background because he knew how things worked. One way he learns how “things work” is through videos. When he realized he could freeze frame a single picture on video, he used the sequence of frames to see how animals move. That helps explain his wonderful book on drawing moving things (*Drawing Life in Motion*, Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1987).

His favorite animals are snakes, but he is afraid of them, pelicans, and seagulls because he enjoys the way seagulls own every place on which they land. When asked if Crinkleroot was modeled after him, Arnosky said that at twenty he knew more about nature than anyone he knew, so he hid behind the character of an old man who should know a lot. Unlike Crinkleroot, Arnosky never had a beard until he saw himself on a television series and hated the way he looked. He grew a beard so he wouldn't look like the guy in the television series.

Arnosky doesn't slant his books toward saving endangered species; he purposely doesn't mention if a species is endangered because he doesn't want to tell children about something beautiful only to inform them that the animal is

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gone or almost gone. He did include a notice about a Save the Manatee Club at the back of his manatee book and felt that the notice worked well.

Arnosky, with all his passion for nature, wants children to have fun and enjoy the outdoors. He commented that many people seem to be convinced that we have to know everything. His work certainly shows the importance of having accurate knowledge, but he loves his work and is convinced that children need to have fun as they study nature. Arnosky probably hopes their studies will buoy them up so that studying nature will be like “floating” for them as well. If readers want more information on Arnosky, they can go to his website, www.JimArnosky.com.