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Jennifer Dewey: The Eyewitness Observer of Nature

by Lillian Heil, Professor Emeritus

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Jennifer Owings Dewey writes and illustrates children’s books about the natural world. Her intense interest in the outdoors has taken her below the earth, high above the treeline, and as far south as Antarctica. Dewey has been drawing and writing down her observations of the wilderness since she was a child.

She was born in Chicago, but her family moved to New Mexico when she was three. Her architect father had explored the Southwest as a young man and always wanted to return. Her memories of growing up center around animals and nature. "My twin sisters and brother and I each had our own horse. Parental guidance was minimal. We roamed the hills; we hiked and rode our horses. No one ever counted how many cats, dogs, puppies, or kittens we happened to have. My sisters loved white rats. I was interested in pigs" (Something About the Author, Vol. 58, p. 53). Dewey attended the Rhode Island School of Design and the University of New Mexico.

Her love for nature is reflected in all her writing and drawings, beginning with illustrations for Frosty: A Raccoon to Remember by Harriet Weaver (1977). After Frosty, Dewey illustrated ten other books before 1987. In 1987 she wrote and illustrated Clem: The Story of a Raven. The story of Clem began in 1961 when she and her first husband, Keith Monroe, worked together to build a house, start a family, and care for an owl and a raven. This part of her life ended with her husband’s death, and she realized later that Clem’s story had to complete a process of incubation. "Life had to go a certain distance before I was ready to put it all down" (Something about the Author, Vol. 58, p. 54).

For Dewey, observing nature is a very personal and aesthetic process. She is a scientist who wants children to see the connections "between one part of life and another, one creature and another, one environment and another" (Ibid). In 1985 Dewey obtained a grant from the National Science Foundation and spent two months at Palmer Station on the Antarctic Peninsula. She finds delight in exploring the delicate balance that permits animals to survive in the harshest of environments, saying, "My favorite thing to do is research in some incredible place, such as Antarctica, then writing and drawing as a result of the trip"
Two books give children an eyewitness record of what Dewey learned: *The Adele Penguin* (1989) and *The Wandering Albatross* (1989), a large seabird with a twelve-foot wingspan. The first picture reproduced from Dewey’s books shows the graceful flight position of the albatross, which spends most of its life in the air over the ocean. It is able to do this by taking advantage of the west winds, even napping and resting on the wing. The albatross appears to be in complete “harmony with wind and sea” (*The Wandering Albatross*, p. 6).

“But the albatross must return to land to breed; the breeding island is just off the western coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, Palmer Station on one of these islands. Here Dewey observed an albatross pair’s reunion as the female came to take her two-week turn at brooding her first egg while her mate flew off in search of food. Dewey observed the hatching after seventy-eight days. She knew the chick must work fast when it was ready to hatch because after it began breathing, the oxygen supply inside the shell was limited. After two days the exhausted chick broke free of the shell. Dewey has captured the look of utter weariness in her drawing of the scruffy newly hatched bird, eyes closed, lying half out of its shell. She observed the male albatross push his nine-ounce offspring under white breast feathers to allow the chick to rest and dry out. The parents frequently fed the chick regurgitated food during January and February (midsummer in Antarctica) and less often as winter approached. In Dewey’s account the male bird died in a winter storm at sea; only the mother returned to feed the baby and watch as it learned to fly. In this issue, study her drawing of...
the baby’s crash into a crowd of startled penguins as one of his awkward flying attempts ends.


Dewey’s words and pictures have captured the life cycle of a bird that lives in a most forbidding environment above the sea. Her drawings do more than show their graceful flight, awkward swaying gait on land, the bonding ritual, and the exhausted male bird’s final struggle with a winter storm. Her book makes these birds of personal interest to readers just as they were to her. In Dewey’s words, "My primary interest is natural science for children, an aesthetic, but still real approach with the aim of making clear the connections" (Ibid.). When you see new books by Dewey, expect an expert eyewitness description by a scientist-artist who will invite her readers to care about nature.