

# • Meet the Author •

## Jennifer Ward

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com)).



Photo courtesy of [www.jenniferwardbooks.com](http://www.jenniferwardbooks.com)

Jennifer Ward is the author of numerous wildly fun picture books for children, including *Because You Are My Baby*, *There Was a Coyote Who Swallowed a Flea*, *Way Out in the Desert*, *Over in the Garden*, *Forest Bright/Forest Night*, *The Seed and the Giant Saguaro*, *The Little Creek* and forthcoming, *The Busy Tree* (Marshall Cavendish, 2009).

Her books have received many honors, including a Governor's First Grade Pick for the states of Arizona and New Jersey, a Parents' Choice Award, recommendation by the National Science Teacher's Association, a Book Sense Summer Pick, and a Teachers' Choice Award for best children's book. Her writing often rollicks with rhythm and rhyme while instilling a love of the great outdoors. She lives in Illinois.

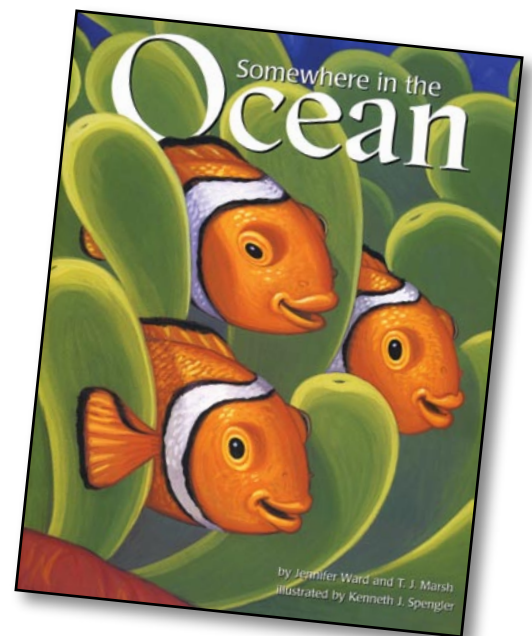
**How did you make the leap from the song "Over in the Meadow" to the text of *Somewhere in the Ocean*? What inspired you to turn it into an ocean poem and then a picture book?**

**JW:** *Somewhere in the Ocean* is the second book in a series of companion titles I translated from the original Olive Wadsworth song "Over in the Meadow." Living way out in the desert for several years, I spent many a day tiptoeing through tarantulas and wrestling rattlesnakes, which led to my first published translation, *Way Out in the Desert*. Following its success, my publisher was eager for a companion title, and the ocean biome seemed like the next natural choice.

For *Somewhere in the Ocean*, I swam with sharks in Belize, and actually photographed an octopus living in a coral reef den, just as is written in the book. I also knew an ocean theme would tie in well to curriculum, and trade books are such an asset to curriculum! The hardest part about writing *Somewhere in the Ocean* was limiting the featured animals to ten characters. There are so many amazing ocean species!

**What things did you have to consider and research as you built the list of parent and baby ocean animals for this book?**

**JW:** Word choice was a strong consideration, as it is with all picture books, where each and every word is heavily weighted. For this book in particular, many ocean species give birth to just one baby (manatees, orcas, otters, etc.) and it's a counting book, with a growing set of offspring per page! That said, it made sense to employ collective nouns, such as a "pod" of orca whales with their "set" of offspring, or a "raft" of sea otters and their "set" of offspring. This allowed for an accurate portrayal

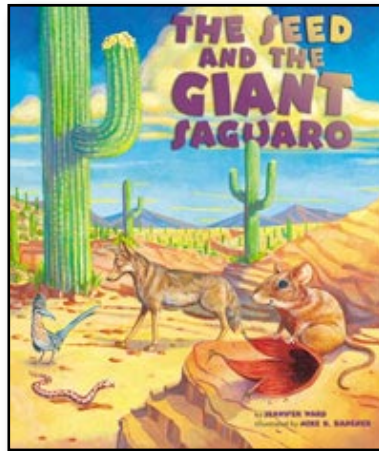


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of each species, while still keeping the language simple and fun. When translating various biomes to suit the “Over in the Meadow” organization—or structure—I try to balance the class of animal used, as well, representing a balance birds, fish, mammals, and reptiles as best as I can for the particular biome. I also consult with a professional in the field I write about, to make certain my glossary and word choice is accurate.

**Many of your successful picture books are based on familiar songs or poems of childhood. What makes writing them so much fun and what makes them especially useful in the classroom?**

**JW:** Part of the reason might be that music is an integral part of my daily life. It's not at all uncommon for me to listen to music as I write. That aside, as an educator I also understand that text written in rhythm, pattern, and rhyme lends itself to higher levels of literacy engagement and comprehension for



the youngest readers. Young readers pick up the rhythm and the pattern while they're reading or being read to, and before they know it, they've “tuned into” the text and soon mastered it much more quickly than when reading a picture book written in prose. It's not unlike the way people subconsciously memorize the lyrics to music they listen to; the accompanying melody and pattern work in harmony to imprint the text in our minds. Picture books set to melody and rhythm work in the same way. The fact that they're also fun to read aloud and again and again is just icing on the cake.

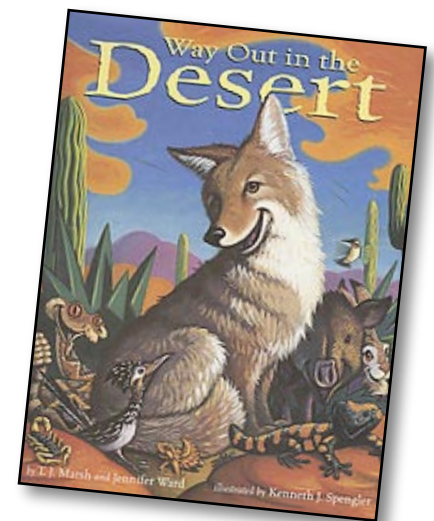
**I know that you were a public school primary grade teacher. How does this influence your writing of books for young children?**

**JW:** My primary goal is that children read my books for enjoyment. However, I also work to include as many layers into the overall book as I can, so that children can engage on many levels. This might include writing a book that not only tells a story, but also encourages chanting, visual discrimination or learning various concepts (counting,

rhyming, and geography, for instance.) It's the teacher in me working in a subtle way as I write so that my stories entertain and educate simultaneously.

**You worked with a co-author on *Somewhere in the Ocean*. What was this experience like and how did you divide up the job?**

**JW:** T.J. Marsh and I collaborated on the first two books in this series, *Way Out in the Desert* and *Somewhere in the Ocean*. Together we brainstormed which animals we'd like to write about. From there, we worked



in person for portions of the text and also worked individually for various stanzas. We would then schedule time together to determine which stanzas created individually worked best for the story, sometimes merging portions of individually-created stanzas. We divided up the glossary. Collaborating on a manuscript with another writer can be fun because it's interesting when two creative minds work together.

**Your books all center on nature and animals. Please talk about your reasons for this focus in your writing.**

**JW:** When I encourage children to write their own stories, I emphasize how important it is that they write what they know and what they love. I have held an affinity for animals and nature for as long as I can remember, and nature inspires my writing. I enjoy reading nonfiction as it relates to animal life, and observing wildlife in my surroundings. My Tucson, Arizona backyard was a certified wildlife habitat for Gila monsters and cactus wrens by the National Wildlife Federation, and was also featured on Animal Planet's *Backyard Habitat*. Nature is what I know and love, so it's what I write about, naturally. I hope my books instill curiosity and a greater understanding for all walks of life: furry, feathered, scaled or otherwise!

**How can readers learn more about you and your books?**

**JW:** I maintain a website, [www.jenniferwardbooks.com](http://www.jenniferwardbooks.com), where readers of all ages can learn about my books and me. And if visitors are really curious, they can see actual pictures of the wildlife I mentioned above, the very animals featured in many of the books I've written.

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*Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of ten picture books, most recently *The Great Dewey Hunt* (UpstartBooks, 2009) and many professional books and articles. Visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com) or e-mail Toni at [tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com](mailto:tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com).*

