

This interview was for Bookbeat, the Junior Members Newsletter of Children's Book Council (NSW) in 1997 while I was still working at Taronga Zoo.

It is pretty cool being asked by me to interview me. Now I get to answer questions that I want to answer about me and I know that the interviewer won't ask me silly questions. So here goes...

Christopher: So Chris, first question - how old are you?

CC: You aren't supposed to ask silly questions.

Christopher: Okay, you write animal books so you must have a fave animal. What is it?

CC: Much better. My favourite animal would be Australian and probably my bat Ding - he's a grey headed flying fox that I hand raised at Taronga. He's on the cover of Night Creatures. Or maybe Corky, he's my corella; or Monty, he's my python; or ...

Christopher: Did you love animals as a child?

CC: Like most kids I think that I liked having them around for a little while - until I had to scrape up the poo, or clean the cage, or wash the bowl or do the actual cleaning stuff ... that's why I don't think I would have been a very good zoo keeper.

Christopher: What pets did you keep?

CC: I had the usual pets lots of kids have. I had a puppy dog - a silky terrier, (I don't remember much about him except for photo of him sitting on my chair.) I had a goldfish and a budgie (whose cage I only sometimes cleaned out. My mum did most of the cleaning and talking to my bird. But when I had my budgie there were no books like Ginger Meggs and Friends Pet Care Book to tell me what to do.) I didn't spend days hunting through the backyard, or turning over rock and wood piles trying to catch lizards and insects to study them. In fact, I think that I would have gone nuts at the thought of studying bugs and bug life. No bug-catching stuff for me. Yuk. I would have to get my hands dirty to do that ... and I used to hate getting dirty hands. I still hate getting dirty hands!!!

Christopher: You must have spent heaps of time in zoos.

CC: I went to Taronga Zoo a few times - mostly for school excursions and I even did the things that kids do on zoo excursions - eat lots of junk food, poke faces at the chimpanzees and make stupid animal sounds. Then when I was teaching Taronga most people who knew me usually tried to catch me at the

zoo before trying to get call me at home. (Maybe they just hated talking to my answering machine).

Christopher: How old are you?

CC: Haven't you asked that one?

Christopher: What else did you do as a kid?

CC: As a kid I also spent oodles of time watching people, talking to people, but I didn't read heaps and heaps ... my sister did enough of that for all of my family put together. I think I bugged my sisters a bit too ... but they still love me, my brother was too young to bug. I also read a few animal books, but it always seemed strange that the books were often about animals from other countries. I sometimes used to think that we didn't have any animals of our own - but we certainly do and they are fantastic, and that is why I probably like talking and writing so much about Australian animals. My family will probably tell you other things about me ... but don't ask them because they'll tell lies.

Christopher: How come you were at Taronga Zoo?

CC: Most people think I began at the zoo as a teacher - Not true. Before I was a teacher I used to sing songs on the giraffe lawns in the school holidays. It was called SINGALONG WITH CHRIS. I also worked in public relations taking film crews on the rounds through the zoo, that's how I did a singalong on the BBC documentary Zoo 2000. I also engraved the plant labels -- all before I was teaching there.

Christopher: What was the Zoomobile?

CC: It was a van that I drove to schools around NSW. I would teach about animals (naturally). Most people driving on the road knew I came from the zoo (the Zoomobile really stood out with spider monkey pictures) but I don't think they realised that in the van were live animals. On any trip I could have had quite a few "strange" passengers, maybe a diamond python, possum, wombat, kangaroo, tawny frogmouth, cockatoo all in specially built cages and lots of animal bits like bones and skins. And there was my corella. He didn't travel in a cage. The van was his and he travelled on the bar between the driver and passenger seats. If ever I drove too fast he would let me know - by flapping, squawking and a bite on the ear.

Christopher: You taught in normal schools too didn't you?

CC: Before the Zoomobile I taught in city schools and also as District Relief Teacher (DiRT ... and it was!!) out in Bourke. I used to drive to and from the small schools close to Bourke (187km away in western NSW is close). After teaching at the zoo with the wondrous animals I taught kindergarten children for a little while in Sydney. I loved teaching.

Christopher: What do you do now?

CC: My daytime job is working from Dymocks head office helping the stores with books ... especially kids books. But my night time, weekend and any spare time I've got task (it's not a job) is writing books.

Christopher: How did you learn so much about animals?

CC: Working at Taronga and spending time with the keepers - people who really know about the animals made animal learning a snap. Reading heaps of animal books - I used to read as a kid but now I read oodles and oodles and heaps (just to keep up with what is happening in the animal world). Watching very closely animals as they do their own thing in the zoo and in the bush is a great way of learning; and asking lots of questions - lots and lots of questions. I some of the keepers got sick of Cheng's questions - but it worked!!

Christopher: Why do you love animals so much?

CC: I wasn't born loving animals, or the bush, or wanting to be a "nature" person, but I was taught very early on to have respect for all living things, then once I started at the zoo I just haven't stopped admiring the wonder and the awesomeness of all of nature - but especially the animals. All the different types of animals, the birds and the way their feathers are structured, the mammals on the land and in the water, snakes that slither with their glistening bodies, fish that inflate, amphibians and their amazing life patterns. The animal kingdom is just so magic. And now, well I just love being a "natural" person and writing books.

Christopher: How did you start writing?

CC: I probably started writing when my teachers taught me how to write. I think that's a question you'd better ask my kindergarten teacher Miss Egan (She's now Mrs Kane - and I still know her. We have dinner sometimes!!) or my third class and fifth class teacher Mr Bradburn - or was that Dr Waddington (I still know him too and visit his family - he was a really gas teacher!!). When I was learning to be a teacher one of my lecturers, who is now a wonderful friend, was Maurice Saxby - he was a big part of turning me onto the wonder of children's books.

Christopher: What writing do you do?

CC: For absolute ages I have been writing - not books but letters. I write letters to my relatives overseas. I write letters to friends who have moved away. I write letters to the kids I used to teach (when they write letters to me). And when I had no one else to write to - I wrote things that I saw. Maybe that was the start of book writing. I have written a book for teachers, and books for

kids to use in classrooms and my Eyespy animal books ... and a few new ones that are really different. They're nothing like I've done before.

Christopher: Do you still write letters?

CC: I love writing letters. One or two very close friends get lots of letters from me - big long letters, written backwards, or in fading ink, or by words cut from magazines and stuck onto paper, or spread around the page so that the reader has to turn the page to read it - some of these letters I send by fax. It's lots of fun writing letters. It's a great way to keep in touch. And it's cool getting them too. I still have nearly every hand written letter that I has been sent to me (there's a stack too!!!)

Christopher: What is the strangest letter that you have received?

CC: I've had a few strange letters from kids (and lots of strange letters from adults). One girl asked me to write the answers to a school assignment - I think not!! Another asked for my help to get them a kangaroo - that boy lived in New Zealand. One girl wrote to me asking me what animal I had discovered. I had to tell her that I hadn't discovered any - I hope that she wasn't too upset. She didn't write back and tell me.

Christopher: What about writing books. Where do you get all those cool ideas from in your animal books?

CC: Cool ideas - you bet. I started writing books when I was asked by Scholastic to write the things that kids would like to know about animals of the night. I had been working with animals in Taronga for a few years by then and there were some strange things about animals that I had learnt. So, I put them in a book - with activities to make it fun!! That was Night Creatures, then Endangered Animals, then Pets (I had to read a lot of Ginger Meggs books for that), then Rainforest Animals and Party Animals. And then in 1997 came my first picture book (I can't draw for peanuts let alone illustrate my own story. I think I failed art in kindergarten - that's Miss Egan's fault.) That book is called One Child. Steven Woolman illustrated my text. His illustrations are really magical and he has turned my simple text into an ace book.

Christopher: So what is your next book?

CC: Excellent question. I have a few books that are being worked on now that are really different from my animal information books that I have written so far. I am working on a book that at the moment is called Zoo-U-Later. It was going to be called Great Escapes but we had to change the name because there was a television show with that title and then a picture book came out with a similar title. It is being illustrated by Kerry Millard. She's sure to add her own wonderful quirky, zany humour to my stories. It's about animal escapes. The stories are based on real animal escapes - and my zoo friends are helping me with these too.

Christopher: What are some of the things you remember about the zoo?

CC: Being bitten by snakes, birds, wombats, kangaroos, possums, and kids - in one class a child was so surprised seeing the wombat that she turned around and bit me!! Chasing wombats (you might even find that in Zoo-U-Later). Trying to teach birds to fly (I failed). The wonderful people I worked with. The smell of the zoo poo pit. Lots and lots of smiling faces on kids. The Zoomobile. Taking the animals into the television stations and being on TV. Having a young orangutan wee on me - and that was after I let it pick my nose (sort of) and clean my ear. Handraising animals and having to feed them late at night and very early in the morning, wiping bottoms, making formulas, giving them baths, snuggling them in bed ... all those things about being a dad!!

Christopher: What advice can you give to young authors?

CC: This is the deep questions part obviously ... My advice is to enjoy what you do, listen to what others have to say about your writing and respond to it. Believe in your writing, and believe in YOU.

Christopher: Last thing that you want to say?

CC: How cool - I get the final words. Visit your Zoo and our magical Australian bush. Smile heaps ... smiling is so infectious. It looks good too. Take care of our Australian animals and the environment - it won't ever come like this again. And read lots of books.