

The Edge of the Forest

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Interview with Gail Gauthier

by Camille Powell, *Book Moot*

How does blogging fit with your writing?

I started blogging (at [Original Content](#)) four years ago for two reasons: 1. I thought author websites were rather static—they don't change often, and when they do, they usually don't change much. I wanted to bring some original content to my website, something that would be new a few times a week. 2. I was reading a lot of children's books, I was reading a lot about writing, I was thinking about all these things, but I didn't have anyone to talk to about them. I rarely get together with other writers, and I don't know a lot of people "in the flesh" who are interested in children's literature. So the blog gives me an opportunity to verbalize things I think about in relation to my reading and writing. As a general rule, I blog in the evenings after my workday is over. My mind is still working with writing-related thoughts, but it's definitely a relaxation thing. Maybe it's a bridge activity between hardcore work and collapsing on the couch.



What about blogging has been surprising for you as a writer?

This whole past year has been surprising as far as blogging is concerned. When I first started blogging, there were plenty of litblogs like [Blog of a Bookslut](#), but I couldn't find very many kidlitblogs. I'd had my website, where my blog is located, since around '96, but I never put a counter on it because I didn't want to know how few people were coming to it. So I don't know how many people were reading my blog in 2002 when I began, but I'm sure I was pretty much talking to myself for the first three years.

I broke down and got a counter in March of 2005. Sure enough, I wasn't getting much traffic. But every month since then, the number of visits have gone up. I'm now getting close to four times the number of visits I was getting a year ago. Sometimes five or six times as many. The webstats indicate those visitors are coming for the blog.

The increase came about because I just happened to join a couple of children's literature listservs around the time when I added the counter. That got my name out to people interested in reading about kidlit. Then this past year there has been an absolute explosion in kidlit blogs. It's just incredible the change. There's now definitely a kidlitblog community. Bloggers are almost conversing with one another. That definitely brought my blog to the attention of a lot more people. It's like a chain reaction or snowball effect. Someone mentions my blog and all the people who read that blog will hear about me. Some of them are bloggers and they may mention me, too. It goes both ways. My readers will pick up something I've mentioned about another blog and carry it along, too. That's how blogging works, of course, but before there was all this interest in children's literature blogs I don't think it was happening that much in our field. Certainly not for me.

Has blogging helped you raise your profile and market your writing?

I don't believe it did anything for my profile the first three years or for *Saving the Planet & Stuff*, which came out in 2003. I think the blog is definitely raising my profile now. I don't plan to use the it specifically as a marketing tool for *Happy Kid!*, which is coming out in May. I don't want to turn it into a hardcore "sell Gail" kind of thing. I think the blog will become less interesting if it becomes an infomercial for me. But I do write about what I do professionally, so I'll probably write about how things go at the few bookstore appearances I've scheduled so far. I'm already planning a post about how I don't find publication day all that exciting. Because I don't. So readers will know the book is being published. And since I think a lot of my readers are probably book people—librarians, teachers, reviewers—in a roundabout way the blog probably will help with the marketing of the book.

Is writing your first career? How or why did you become a writer? Was the desire there from childhood?

I've wanted to be a writer since fifth grade. I didn't go about it in a very organized way, though. Not that I expect fifth graders to be organized, but I could have stayed on task a little better when I was in my twenties. I didn't write regularly when I was younger. I didn't study writing the way I should

have. I was an English major within a college of education, and I took a number of writing classes but they were mostly workshop-type classes. We didn't really study writing or talk about it.

I had an awful office job for four years after I got out of college. I spent most of my time after that working as a stay-at-home mom and school volunteer. All the time I was doing that, I was making disorganized, intermittent attempts to write. My children knew I was writing, but after I had my first book accepted for publication when they were in grade school, I found out that they didn't realize that all the time I was writing when they were younger I wasn't selling anything. They were kind of shocked.

I feel that writing is communication. A lot of my relatives are communicators. They like to chat, they like to write letters, they like to get together with friends. They need to communicate. I think I'm a writer because I've taken that need to another level. (Hmmm. Perhaps that's why I blog, too.) I also like being able to create and control a world. I can't control anything off the page.

What is the most difficult and/or most fun thing about being a writer?

There are a couple of difficult things about being a writer, but, of course, the worst has to be rejection. Being told this thing you've spent a great deal of time and energy creating isn't of interest to anyone or isn't good enough is rough. I think I take it better than a lot of people, but it's probably still the worst thing about what I do. It's like getting all dressed up and thinking you look terrific, then going out in public and finding out that you were so very, very wrong. There's definitely some humiliation mixed in with the disappointment.

The best part of being a writer is that now that my children are home less I spend every day doing pretty much whatever I want. I was thinking about trying to find a writers' retreat, the kind where you go somewhere and work. And then I thought, Who am I trying to kid? Every day of my life is a retreat.

What is your work schedule like? Do you listen to music while you write?

I have just recently changed my work schedule. Right now I'm writing for a few hours first thing in the morning, working out for 40 or 50 minutes, and writing some more. Then I sort of randomly hit the shower, find something to eat, work some more. This may actually work for me. I don't seem to be wasting so much time surfing the 'net.

I do like to listen to music while I work, mostly classical music that won't distract me with words. I sometimes will try to come up with music that might inspire me while I'm working. The only time that really worked was while I was writing *The Hero of Ticonderoga*, which has a lot of historical detail about Ethan Allen, though it's not actually a historical novel. I listened to the sound track from a British show called *The Choir*, which was shown on Masterpiece Theatre a number of years ago. The music was probably kind of schmaltzy, but I found it heroic, which was what I was going for with that book.

Oh, and I listened to Sammy Hagar and the Waboritas' Red Voodoo CD while I was writing *Saving the Planet*. I'd forgotten about that.

What sparked the idea for *Happy Kid*? Did news or real events inspire any aspects of *Happy Kid*?

I knew a very, very negative kid who just always saw the worst in every situation. He was really quite striking. Then a few years ago a friend gave me one of those self-help books that has a little tip on each page about how to improve your life. Even though a lot of the advice was sappy and obvious, I had to admit that some of it made sense. So those two elements came together in *Happy Kid!*

Actually, the book also deals with school testing and that was inspired by a news item. I read about some elementary school children who caught some of their teachers cheating on state-mandated tests. My original idea was to do something similar. That was a struggle, though, because I try to write very kid-centered fiction and in many ways the whole state-mandated testing issue is all about adults. The who, what, why, where, and how of testing is all determined by adults. Plus I didn't see how I could use a story line like that and not have the book turn out very anti-testing. I think propaganda doesn't make for good reading, so I tried to go for an ambiguous story line as far as the good or bad of testing is concerned.

I felt like the voice and tone of *Happy Kid!* was "spot on" for junior high. How do you know so much about that world?

We all sound a lot like that at my house.

I also think the voice comes from the sympathy I feel for kids. I do think they are pressured to change and conform as they grow up. To be socialized. Schools are a big part of the socialization process. While I understand that a person who gets with the program and does what she ought to will probably have an easier life than the outsider who keeps fighting the system, there's a part of me that will always root for the kid who doesn't want to give in. Root for him and feel sad for him.

When you are not working do you have time to read for pleasure? What books are you reading now?

Oh, I can always find time to read. And the blog is a great excuse. I really ought to be reading kids' books so I can review them in the blog, right? And if I read books about writing I can write about those. I'm often able to make all kinds of connections between whatever I'm reading and kidlit, which helps to justify the time I spend reading.

I've just started reading *Writing With Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose* by Margaret Atwood and *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan. I also have *Brainboy* and *The Deathmaster* (boy do I love that title) by Tor Seidler waiting for me. I just picked up the audio version of Book One of the Septimus Heap series by Angie Sage to listen to while driving to and from a teachers' conference this week.

This fan of *Happy Kid!* wants to read more by Gail Gauthier. What other books have you written?

In addition to *Saving the Planet & Stuff* (an eco-comedy with a sixteen-year-old main character forced to live with aging hippy environmentalists) and *The Hero of Ticonderoga* (a very autobiographical story regarding my farm-child life, except that none of this stuff actually happened), I have three earlier books. *My Life Among the Aliens* and its sequel, *Club Earth*, are very much about my sons' suburban-child lives, with the addition of aliens. I guess you could say *A Year With Butch And Spike* draws upon my children's lives and my life as a school volunteer. It probably expresses a lot of my feelings about kids and the heartbreak involved with being forced to conform and give up a lot of who you are. In a really funny sort of way, though. The skinny-dipping scene was quite famous in some circles in its day, if I do say so myself.

Is there any other news you would like to add that I have not been clever enough to ask you about?

Well, I'm working on a couple of new books for children in the early grades. We don't have titles yet. It's a little early to be saying much more than that.

Gail Gauthier blogs at [Original Content](#).