



Jim Arnosky

**Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

Jim Arnosky, interviewed in his home in the Florida Keys on March 24, 2008.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're a naturalist, an artist, a musician, and the author of over 100 books about nature for children. When people who don't know you ask what you do for a living, what do you tell them?

JIM ARNOSKY: I make books about wild animals in wild places for young people. A lot of my work has won science awards, but I've never felt like a scientist. I've always identified more closely with fishermen, park rangers, and people who work in the outdoors.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books reveal to young readers many details about the natural world. Do you see yourself at all as a teacher?

JIM ARNOSKY: I didn't, until I saw the wonderful things that teachers do with my work. I went into the Navy instead of college. So I educated myself as I went along. I didn't realize it, but I was creating a very accessible way to learn. This process of learning things myself made what I was saying very understandable to readers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Were you outdoorsy while you were growing up?

JIM ARNOSKY: I grew up in rural Pennsylvania. Then my family moved to Philadelphia, where I went to high school. But I always retained my interest and curiosity about wild things. Luckily, I met my wife, Deanna, when I was 19, and she had the same interests. She didn't mind my spending a whole evening at a beaver pond waiting for the animals to come out so I could photograph them. We've been sharing an adventure of exploring nature for 41 years. We're always a team.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you always want to be an artist?

JIM ARNOSKY: I just wanted to get paid to draw pictures. My father was a machine illustrator, and I saw that he got paid to work on the drawing board and make pictures. When I was a kid, I drew cartoons of animals. As an adult, while I was with *Ranger Rick* magazine, my assignments were always essentially cartooned versions of animals. But I would be very careful to make sure they looked like the animals rather than a cartoon of something that might be a mouse or another animal.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you start writing books?

JIM ARNOSKY: I decided that I wanted to keep bees. I found an ad in the paper from a fellow who was selling his beekeeping equipment. He was an elderly man who had had a stroke, and he said, “I wish I could tell you how to use all this, but I don’t remember.” He said, “If you want my advice, keep a journal so that you’ll always know what you’ve done.”

I had a leather-bound journal made, and I thought I would use it as a sketchbook. I found that I was writing more than I was drawing. A couple of years went by, and I had written about almost every wildlife encounter I’ve had. It taught me to be a writer. After I started illustrating for *Cricket* magazine, a publisher asked me to come in, and I began to try to voice my own knowledge of animals.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You’ve written fourteen books featuring the beloved Crinkleroot character, beginning with your first published book, *I Was Born in a Tree and Raised by Bees* (1977). Besides the bee-raising experience you shared previously, where did Crinkleroot come from?

JIM ARNOSKY: When I got out of the Navy, I bought a set of books at a flea market by John Burroughs, a nature writer from the late 1800s and early 1900s. Through Burroughs I discovered John Muir, Thoreau, and Emerson. I was also at a point in my life when I was meeting some very interesting people—leftover mountain men types, famous bird watchers, and other people that I really looked up to. Crinkleroot was a mixture of all of that.

Crinkleroot’s hands are from my father-in-law. He was a laborer who had the biggest, coarsest, hard-knuckled hands. When he came home from work, he would go to his greenhouse and take the tiniest seedlings and transplant them with such a loving touch. I said, “Those are the hands I will give Crinkleroot, because that will teach children that no matter how big you are or how strong you are, you can be gentle.” So Crinkleroot kind of became his own self. I named him after a wildflower that grew around our cabin in Pennsylvania.

When my editor at Putnam, Margaret Frith, asked me if I would write a book, the first thing I thought of was Crinkleroot. I had never written a book, and I was nervous. Margaret said, “Pretend you’re writing me a letter.” So I wrote, “Dear Margaret: I was born in a tree and raised by bees. I can whistle in 100 languages, and I speak caterpillar, turtle, and salamander all at once ...” At the end I wrote, “Your friend, Jim Arnosky.” She took out the end and the “Dear Margaret” and published it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What’s the relationship between Crinkleroot and Jim Arnosky?

JIM ARNOSKY: When I was in my 30s, I would go to schools and get an immediate look of disappointment. I didn’t look like Crinkleroot. Little by little, I got to resemble him. Now when I go to schools they all laugh and point and say, “Crinkleroot!”

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the balance between the narrative and the informational aspect of the “Crinkleroot” books?

JIM ARNOSKY: The books are stories of Crinkleroot’s experiences, and because Crinkleroot was an old woodsman, you believed that he knew everything—that he adds knowledge to the facts in the books.

I always loved the way old-fashioned books could take a page and squeeze a million things on it, with arrows and circles. So I decided that the “Crinkleroot” books, which were only 48 pages long when I started, would have as much nature in them as other books would need 100 pages to squeeze in. The “Crinkleroot” books are a perfect example of condensed knowledge.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your other titles, like *Watching Foxes* (1985), are lyrical books that convey little moments in an animal’s life. How did you come to this type of writing?

JIM ARNOSKY: Those came directly from a rejection I got early in my career. I brought my work into *Humpty Dumpty’s Magazine*. The editor said, “There’s no story here. This is just about a goose that wakes up late, and the rest of flock is flying, and he tries to catch up.” I said, “Every time I spend a whole day outdoors, I don’t think I’ve seen a story. There’s never a plot in nature.” He rejected it.

I turned around and wrote *Watching Foxes*. It got the same reviews: “There’s no story here.” I insisted that nature is a series of ongoing vignettes. That’s what’s beautiful about it. I stuck to my guns, and little by little, people came around. I knew that if a man was curious enough to go out every day with a spotting scope and stared at a fox den for eight hours, then kids would be interested in that too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *All Night Near the Water* (1999) conveys that same kind of experience.

JIM ARNOSKY: Imagine you’re a baby duck that just hatched. Your mother takes you to the edge of the water, and out there is your future. You don’t know this yet, since you’re just a duckling. That’s what made me think about writing *All Night Near the Water*.

To write the series of essays in *Nearer Nature* (1996), I took a year and did nothing but walk the same path, an oval pathway, through our property and up into the woods and around the farmlands every day as if I were a cat hunting. *Nearer Nature* is based on those observations.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Will you speak about some of your books about animals that relate to children’s experience, like *Otters Under Water* (1999) and *Raccoon on his Own* (2003)?

JIM ARNOSKY: *Otters Under Water* was simply a child’s experience that I translated to wildlife. If a child goes in the water and wants to dunk his head under, he first checks to

see if his mom or dad is watching. Then the child dunks his head and opens his eyes to see the world under there. He does this as long as he dares and then pops up. He looks to see if his mom and dad saw him. That's what *Otters Under Water* is about.

Raccoon on his Own is about a child getting on a school bus for the first time to go to kindergarten. The things that raccoon goes through parallel the fearful situation that children experience—the eventual adjustment and finally the return. When you come home from school, your mom and your little brother and sister are waiting at the bus stop.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are also a musician. How does your music relate to your books?

JIM ARNOSKY: I taught myself to play the guitar when I was around 14. I wrote songs, and I still play every day. A lot of my books came from songs that I started writing and then made into books. *Gobble It Up! A Fun Song About Eating (2008)* is from a song that I wrote in the mid-1990s. I must have sung it to thousands of children, and I knew they liked it. It is about animals eating up other animals—a good message about what they eat. There's an accompanying CD in the back of each book.

Songs are written in a language everyone understands. Young children understand *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, and yet the song is not babyish. My picture books are written in that kind of fully realized adult voice. I'm saying things in simple declarative sentences, but that doesn't mean it's kiddy talk.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your very popular "All About ..." series focuses each title on an individual animal (Deer, Frogs, Lizards, Manatees, Sharks, and so forth). What do you want readers to take away after reading each of these books?

JIM ARNOSKY: The "All About ..." books show children how to look at an animal in a thorough fashion, the way a naturalist would study it. I like the challenge of getting the title fully realized in 32 pages. I also hope that children will want to make their own "All About ..." book. I give them a way to examine any subject that interests them in an organized fashion.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Will you share your process of creating a book about a specific animal?

JIM ARNOSKY: Well, to take a recent example, five or six years ago, I discovered that there were a significant number of crocodiles in the Florida Everglades. I was determined to find them. The first ones Deanna and I discovered were in a trash-filled creek in Key Largo. Three crocodiles were sunning themselves on some upturned aluminum rowboats. I thought, "Why would these crocodiles be in this terrible trash-filled stream?" It was because the sun on the aluminum boats made the boats hot, and the crocodiles loved it.

I then realized that animals have different criteria for what is acceptable than we people do. I started to look for them in unlikely places. That led Deanna and me into years of various forays into crocodile habitat. Eventually we videotaped everything we

saw, and I wrote *A Crocodile Safari*, coming out in 2009. There's an accompanying DVD. I reintroduce the word "Safari" into North American wildlife as often as I can because it simply means to go into a remote and wild place and immerse yourself in it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How has your artistic process of using sketches, photographs, and video evolved?

JIM ARNOSKY: When I was a young man, I had a deer blind on a hillside in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. As many as 70 deer would come out in the evening, and I would photograph them with a 35-millimeter camera for fun. I was also drawing pictures for *Ranger Rick*. I decided that I ought to try serious wildlife photography, and I met one of the greatest wildlife photographers in the country, Leonard Lee Rue III. He convinced me that if a person had my painting skills, it would be a waste for me to just take pictures of the animals. But I kept the camera in my bag and started to take pictures of animals for my own reference. Years later, I bought a video camera and taught myself to use it. I played my videos in slow motion and learned how animals move. My paintings got better. This was all in order to bring home the living animal so that my painting would look as real to my young readers as possible.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What advice do you have for nature observers?

JIM ARNOSKY: Go out into nature with an open mind. For example, I was painting a picture the other day of a Galapagos giant tortoise. I put him on a seaside knoll under a blue sky. After I finished the painting I said to Deanna, I said, "The sky looks so empty to me." So we got on the boat again, and a frigate bird circled above our heads. I painted the frigate bird flying over the turtle.

When I got up that morning, I never imagined there would be a frigate bird in that painting. But rather than trying to invent something, I just said, "Let's go out." Nature gives you gifts every day. That's how all my paintings and paragraphs get created.

I was teaching drawing at Penn State a number of years ago, and I tried to tell the students that if you look at a book and you see that all the trees look exactly the same, the artist hasn't seen enough real trees. That's what I try to do with my books, to put people in an open frame of mind instead of looking at nature with a preconceived idea.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your 100th book, *Wild Tracks! A Guide to Nature's Footprints* came out in April of 2008. What did you do to mark this occasion?

JIM ARNOSKY: I went back to the woods, to the northern forests, to celebrate and to create this book. I'm very proud of it. This is a book about animal tracks. They are all life-size, and there are gatefolds. You've got a life-size buffalo track and a life-size horse with a shoe on its foot, and a life-size burro without a shoe on its foot. There are polar bears tracks and mouse tracks.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If you had to summarize, what would you say you want to convey to readers in your books?

JIM ARNOSKY: I'm teaching readers to be open—to stop trying to make everything fit a prescribed view and just live in this world. This is an absolutely marvelous place. It's the same way I think when I put my line in the water and I'm fishing. I'm always casting and hoping that something interesting will end up on my line.

When I was a kid, no one else in my family was interested in the outdoors. I would be sort of alone in my learning and my wonder. With my books, I want to have somebody there for the kid who is like I was.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you go into schools, what do you like to tell students?

JIM ARNOSKY: Teachers usually prime the kids to think that I'm famous, so the first thing I like to do is go in and just *be* Jim Arnosky. I don't talk to them in a literary way. I bring my guitar and sing songs that I wrote about animals. I draw pictures, and I tell them lots of stories about Deanna and me in the wild. I want them to know that we are husband and wife who love each other and also love being outside together.

I'll do anything I can to open the eyes of those few reluctant kids in the back of the room. When I'm playing my guitar, for example, soon they're playing air guitar and singing "Counting Crocodiles" and taking part in a literary event ... and they don't even know it.

I also like them to know that what they learn from me is the beginning of their adventure. They can say, "When I grow up I want to see those ponies on Assateague Island. Or, "As soon as I get a car I'm going to drive down to Florida to see those snakes."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

JIM ARNOSKY: I want them to understand that they're looking at a man who was an absolutely horrible student, and yet somehow I took my skills and natural talents and made something of myself, and that maybe there are a lot of children like me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe a typical workday.

JIM ARNOSKY: Well, in the Florida Keys, where we spend two months of our year, I'll write until about 11:00 in the morning. Then we go out for the whole day. At around 8:00 at night, I sit at the drawing board and work for about two or two-and-a-half more hours.

At home in Vermont, I write in the morning only. Then in the afternoons I work on the drawing board, unless it's a good day for fishing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

JIM ARNOSKY: I don't get stuck, because I'm not making anything up. I allow things to happen. If I can't think of anything, then I'll just put down my work and in a couple days it'll start again. I just wait.

I recently watched a heron standing behind a bunch of cattails. I was waiting and waiting, and finally the bird stepped out after about 45 minutes, and I saw it swallow a fish. That's how I am with my writing. I'm very patient.

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

For more information about Jim Arnosky and his books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

Copyright ©2010 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.