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PICTURE THIS:

PLNs from Authors' Perspectives

Alison Formento

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Young adult authors have multitudes of blogging crowds anxious to gab about the newest zombie or steampunk hottie. In the picture book world, a very fancy girl and one spunky pigeon make news whenever they appear in a new book or as a new plush toy. Though it's hard to compete with zombies and spunky pigeons for the spotlight, picture books with social, historical, or environmental topics (trees, bees, and seas in my case), can still benefit from social networking through personal learning networks, or PLNs, in a big way. PLNs consist of people and networks that a learner interacts with, derives knowledge from, and shares information with. This sharing and learning can occur through an online environment such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, site-specific chatrooms, and the like, and may also include in-person social contacts, professional peers, and experts.

My books (*This Tree Counts!*; *This Tree*, 1, 2, 3; *These Bees Count!*) feature green topics about the importance of taking care of our natural world. For me, developing a strong PLN must begin at the ground level or (pun-intended) grassroots, where interest in my books will sprout and grow. Librarians, teachers, and parents are like farmers—they nurture reading in children, and I want to connect with educators and parents in any way possible. With every picture book I write, I first talk face-to-face with librarians and teachers—who are often parents, too—about their wish list for new books. Next, I begin an extensive search on these suggestions to see if there is an interest or need in the general market, too. That initial search is one that helps spark the flame under my story idea, and I bookmark and connect with websites that will help me expand my story as I begin the

first draft. Forming a personal learning network like this is exactly how I met my expert oceanographer for my upcoming book *These Seas Count!* (Albert Whitman 2013).

A personal learning network is an essential tool for authors, especially for the latest information and up-to-the-moment buzz about important topics such as colony collapse disorder or ocean pollution (which I've been following for my new book on seas). I've linked up to various environmental organizations such as American Forests and Oceana, as well as every buzzing and honey-sweet site possible for *These Bees Count!* These are online links, but real connections are a vital part of most authors' personal learning networks. I've connected with amazing botanists, oceanographers, and apiarists, including the White House beekeeper.

Like most authors, I follow library and publishing news, but I also follow environmental news about places starting a “green team” or some kind of green initiative in their schools and communities. Several of my author friends also published through Albert Whitman & Company have worked hard, albeit through different and unique paths, to create their own personal learning networks.

Mike Allegra edits and writes for an alumni magazine. He is also the author of *Sarah Gives Thanks* (Albert Whitman 2012). When asked about PLNs, he responded:

“PLNs are a big reason why I love my work. I get paid to learn new things and meet interesting people. [For the alumni magazine] I’ve written feature stories on agriculture, aviation, technology, the Middle East, and solar power to name a few—that’s where the PLNs come in. For my article on agriculture, for example, I consulted with farmers from all different walks of life: corn guys, cattle guys, tomato guys, apple guys, and many others.

The process behind writing my picture book biography, *Sarah Gives Thanks*, was not much

different from my agriculture example. My PLN, in this case, consisted mostly of historians, librarians, and archivists. I even consulted with a librarian who was an expert on the history of fashion, which was invaluable as Sarah Hale, the subject of my book, was the editor of a women’s magazine.”

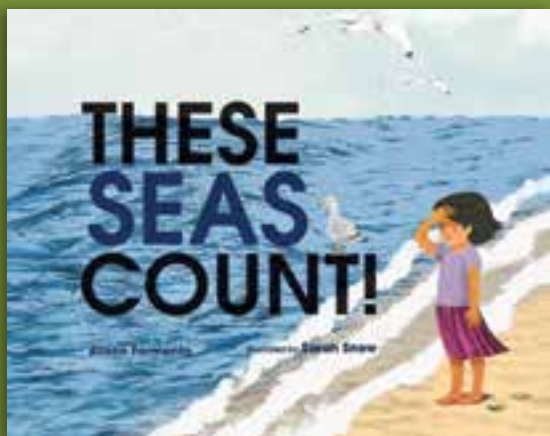
Ann Malaspina has written numerous picture books. Her newest, *Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President* (Albert Whitman 2012), is a fresh look at Anthony’s quiet determination and courage as she worked to secure a woman’s right to vote. Ann shared:

“People love to help authors with picture books, especially if the topic has a personal connection for them. I’ve always found people willing to give me time and information for my picture book research. By targeting groups and people with a special interest or expertise in the topic, children’s authors not only get a chance for extra publicity and sales, but also find the enthusiasm and support that is so helpful in what can be a long, lonely journey to publication.

When I was researching *Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic*

High Jumper I reached out to Olympic historians, the U.S. Olympic Committee, and the International Olympic Committee, as well as to local track and field coaches. They gave me little-known facts about the 1948 Summer Olympics in London where [Coachman] won her gold medal, information about the high jump, and details about Alice’s career and performance that I couldn’t have found anywhere else.

For my latest book *Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President*, I found a lot of support in Rochester, New York, where Anthony lived. The staff at the National Susan B. Anthony House, a museum and national historic monument dedicated to Anthony, was very helpful when I had questions about her clothing, where she went to vote that day, and the house itself, which plays a part in the story. Rochester-area historians were also very enthusiastic in supporting my research. The librarians at the University of Rochester and the Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County were invaluable in helping me find photos and primary sources.



Alison Formento’s books, *This Tree Counts!* (Albert Whitman, 2010), *These Bees Count!* (Albert Whitman, 2012), and *These Seas Count!* (Albert Whitman, March 2013), bring environmental issues to life for kids.

I'm planning to send copies of the book to all these people, in appreciation. I hope that they'll pass it on so that *Heart on Fire* will find a readership among people who might not have known about the book otherwise. I'm doing the same for women's history and voting rights organizations."

Jacqueline Jules, author of several picture books and chapter books (Zapato Power series), clearly understands the importance of connecting with librarians.

"As a former school librarian with an MLS, I have developed personal learning networks through library organizations such as ALA, VAASL (Virginia Association of School Librarians), and other state library organizations. Through the Children's Book Guild and my website, I have made contacts with local literacy organizations like Reading Connection, Turning the Page, Literacy and Prose, Partners in Print, Hope for Henry, Literacy Council of

Northern Virginia, and For Love of Children. All of these organizations create literacy programming and/or provide books to children who have limited access to reading material in the Washington, DC, area. Last Thanksgiving, I went to Georgetown Hospital to read *Duck for Turkey Day* to the children in the Hope for Henry program. I've also done guest posts on *Duck for Turkey Day* for IRA (International Reading Association) and other literacy blogs. In general, I reach out and try to connect online whenever I am asked or see an opportunity."

My fellow-author friends and I have learned that PLNs are an important tool, particularly because of the unusual topics

we cover in our books. My personal learning network led me to several oceanographers for *These Seas Count!* Without the help of Dr. Thomas Grothues at the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences at Rutgers and the cooperative help of the other marine scientists with whom I connected, my new picture book would not have the accuracy and authority required to show how seas really do count in our world. Because of these connections, exciting plans are in the works to share my new book on World Oceans Day on June 8, 2013. The environmental topics I write about can be every bit as thrilling as a zombie attack or a pigeon riding a bus, especially to those who are part of my personal learning network.

Alison Formento is the author of *This Tree Counts!* (Albert Whitman 2010), *This Tree, 1, 2, 3* (Albert Whitman 2011), *These Bees Count!* (Albert Whitman 2012), and *These Seas Count!* (Albert Whitman 2013). She is a former journalist whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Writer*, *Parenting Magazine*, *New Jersey Monthly*, *MacDirectory* magazine, *Parent Paper*, and several other publications. She lives in New Jersey with her family.

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EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

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