

Lessons from a raccoon

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■ Author Lyn Hancock, with the help of illustrator Loraine Kemp, has turned her extraordinary experiences with a tame raccoon into a children's book. Both Hancock and Kemp are passionate about encouraging parents to get their children hooked on writing at an early age.



PHOTO SPECIAL

By CHERYL CLOCK
Standard Staff

It's not a happy ending. Tabasco the raccoon dies. Shot to death by a man worried that the friendly critter was getting a little too friendly with his kids.

He's likely thinking rabies. Or some other kind of disease.

So, he pulls out a gun and bang. Tabasco is dead.

Lyn Hancock hears about the fate of her beloved raccoon, the one she nurtured, and loved, and fell in love with from the day it was handed to her by a small zoo in Vancouver's Stanley Park, through the grapevine.

Days before, she had released it back to the wilderness, through a type of animal halfway house.

It was friendly. And liked people.

"It chose the wrong feet to follow me," she says.

Lyn later found out it had followed some children home from school and wanted to play with them. Their father got it.

News of Tabasco's untimely demise in 1978 hit newspapers across Canada.

While it's not a happy ending, children appreciate the truth, says the 68-year-old author from British Columbia.

"All the books had Disney endings," she says. "The raccoon would be set free, go off into the wild, have lots of raccoon sex and be happy."

"I wanted to write books where the truth could stand out."

Lyn and Tabasco first met in 1974. It was just days old. A tiny, one-pound ball of fluff. Its mother was dead.

Lyn had just returned from a quarter century of living and writing about life in northern Canada to study cougars at Simon Fraser University.

She'd been married to Canadian biologist David Hancock, noted for his study of eagles and "Eagle cam," a weather-proof camera mounted next to an eagle's nest that beamed live images around the world earlier this year, through his website.

For almost 30 years, Lyn, a retired teacher and foster parent to assorted wildlife, told the story of Tabasco to children and people she met in her travels.

Now, the adventurer is sharing it through her newest book, *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon*.

Lyn and illustrator, Loraine Kemp, will be in Niagara this week to launch their book in this area of the country.

They will appear at Vineland Estates Winery's Carriage House in Vineland on Oct. 13 at 7 p.m. (The winery is managed by Loraine's nephews.) Hancock will also be taking part in a book signing, Oct. 13 at Chestnut Lane Books in Merritton.

And, the pair will be talking to children in Grimsby schools this week about how to put their own stories on paper.

Plus, on Wednesday, Oct. 18, Lyn will be speaking during a meeting of the local Canadian Authors Association starting at 7:30 p.m.

The pair encourage parents to get their children hooked on writing from a young age.

Loraine, 49, started drawing books when she was three.

"Kids have an insatiable appetite for drawing, reading and writing," she says.

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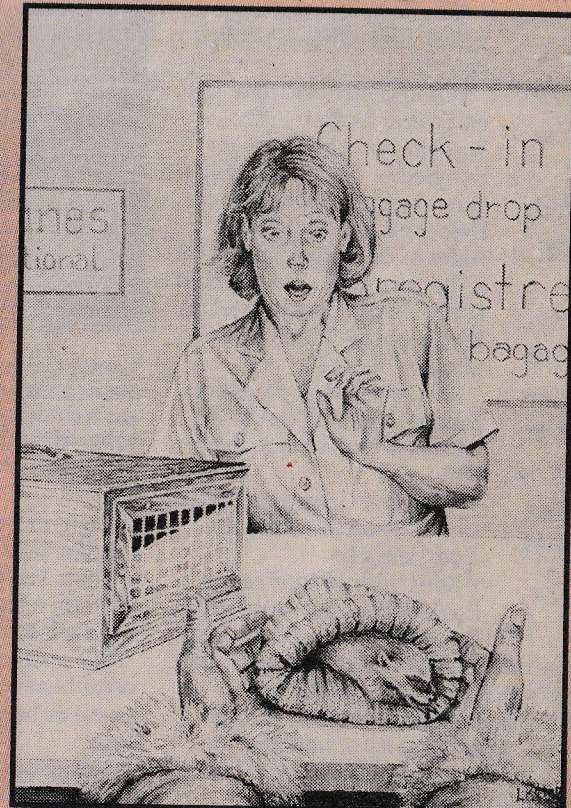


ILLUSTRATION BY LORAIN KEMP,
FROM *TABASCO THE SAUCY RACCOON*

"Two tickets to Toronto, please, for me and my pet raccoon," I said to the lady at the Air Canada ticket counter in Vancouver. I tried to sound nonchalant, as if this were something I asked for every day. She looked up, startled, then drew back in alarm as I placed a wooden box in front of her.

"I know he has to go in the baggage compartment," I continued. "So, I brought my own carrying case — unless, of course, you want me to use yours."

My parents had brought me to the airport early this Sunday morning, and, as expected, the terminal was almost deserted. Still, Dad couldn't help looking embarrassed. He and Mom were visiting me from Australia and, once again, they were being dragged into one of their daughter's "crazy" schemes. "When will you ever grow up?" my mother would often sigh. She looked at the agent apologetically.

The lady behind the ticket counter stared at the box as if any minute it might explode. I felt that if she'd been a bank teller she would have reached for an alarm. "Where is your ... your raccoon?" she asked fearfully, not really believing that I had one.

"Here," I said, reaching into the pocket of my parka and pulling out a red woolen toque. "Meet Tabasco."

The lump of grizzled fur snuffling sleepily into the wool in the palm of my hand looked more like a pin cushion than a one-pound, week-old, orphaned raccoon.

The airline lady's manner changed. "Oh, it's just a baby," she crooned. "It's adorable." Then, remembering where she was, she looked horrified. "You can't put that little raccoon in the baggage compartment, it's too tiny. It might die!"

"Then what do you suggest," I asked innocently.

The ticket agent's voice dropped suddenly. Looking quickly behind her to make sure nobody was listening, she whispered, "Wrap it up in a blanket and pretend it's your baby."

— from *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon*

Encouraging your children to write

CONTINUED FROM

Here is some of their advice for taking advantage of that enthusiasm:

- Books begin in your backyard. Simply put, write about your passions. There was a time when Lyn never imagined she could be a writer because she thought authors only wrote from their imagination.

Then she realized her own life was a filled with the stuff that makes good books.

So, she began writing about her own experiences with nature.

"You find things in your backyard, literally and factually," she says.

"Find what fascinates you. Write about what you know best."

Granted, not everyone has had a seal turn up in their backyard or a baby cougar dumped on their bed at night, she says. Even so, children's lives are filled with multitudes of rich experiences that if they just took time to think about them, those everyday life events could easily turn into mini-novels.

She encourages parents to expose their children to a wealth of experiences every day.

"You give them experiences so they want to communicate," she says.

- Start with an interesting hook or lead. Make sure the beginning of your story is interesting. That way, the reader will actually read beyond the first paragraph, she says.

Instead of beginning her book, *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon*, with the story of how she was given *Tabasco*, she began with the story of taking the tiny raccoon on its first airplane flight.

In other words, don't start with what you had for breakfast just because it came first, when you really had something incredibly exciting for lunch.

To put it another way: "When I can almost feel the claws of the grizzly in my backside, that's where I start the story," she says.

- Read poetry. Lyn has read poetry all her life. It's helped her to develop her own personal style and incorporate all sorts wonderful poetic techniques into her own writing.

"Poetry is where the written word sings," she says.

- Take pictures with a camera. Lyn is both a writer and photographer. When she writes, she thinks like a photographer.

What she means is this: use words to describe something in such detail that the reader feels like



Author Lyn Hancock is shown with two baby raccoons that are bound for a wildlife rehabilitation centre run by Hancock's friend. (Hancock's just babysitting them.) They will be released into the wild next spring.

PHOTO SPECIAL

its right in front of them, or that they're feeling it too, she says.

Think verbal image.

"Paint a picture with your words," she says.

"And tell stories with your pictures."

- Use zoom techniques. "Start a story with the polar bear a dot in the distance and increase suspense as he comes nearer — or in reverse," she says.

"Write what you see. See the details."

Find comparisons to make unfamiliar things, familiar.

It once took her a day to write a paragraph. She toiled. Struggled. Typed words onto the page. Toiled some more. And rewrote. Again. And again.

"I couldn't finish a sentence," she says. "It was a mess."

Finally, by day's end, she had the opening paragraph to her book, *An Ape Came out of my Hatbox*.

She struggled to describe how she felt when she first met the tiny little creature. How she was almost repulsed by its ugliness, but drawn to it by its vulnerability.

- Use all your senses. Remember to describe not only how something looked with your eyes, but how it sounded, tasted, smelled and felt, she says.

- Remember the five w's. Answer questions not only concerning "what" you're writing about, but about who, where, when, why — and how.

Encourage kids to ask questions and get from one sentence to another using them.

- Read it out loud. Commit it to paper, then read it out loud to someone. You'll get a better sense of the rhythm and flow by speaking your written words, she says.

"I hear the sound of the language in my writing," she says. She often breaks grammatical rules, like omitting verbs, for balance.

- Keep a writer's journal. Think of this as a personal thesaurus. Learn a new and interesting word every day and write it down. Find alternatives to overworked and overused words.

Write down catchy phrases you hear or read.

Lyn keeps hers by her bed. "I have my best ideas in bed or just when waking up," she says.

- Act it out. Lyn believes in seeing, acting out and speaking before writing. "I spent a morning once trying to describe creeping up on a walrus and describing its body," she says.

"I acted it out, I visualized it, I looked at my photos."

- Keep file cards. Lyn organizes her stories on cards: one box of cards for locations, another on characters, plot starters and themes.

- Practise, practise, practise. You can only teach someone how to write to an extent, she says. After that, it's up to children to develop their skills through trial and error, and just plain having fun with the written word.

"You teach yourself writing by writing," she says.

"It's caught, not taught."

- Surround children with books. One of the best ways to get children interested in illustrations is to expose them to a multitude of books with great pictures, says Loraine.

Talk about the pictures and have your children describe what's happening simply by what they see.

- Get them hooked on crafts. There's no shortage of places to buy art supplies these days. Even if you don't have an artistic side, encourage your children to explore theirs, says Loraine.

Colour, paint by number, connect dot puzzles and build models. Post their artwork on the fridge or frame it on the walls.

"Make a big thing of their attempts," she says.

Encourage children to make their own cards for special occasions. "Not many parents I know would rather get a bought card than one made by their child," she says.

- Start young. Even if your children can't read or write, they can still make their own books. Children have a natural inclination to pick up a pencil and scribble. Go with the flow.

Print their thoughts on paper, then have them draw pictures to go with the words. You can buy

special paper with a blank area on top and on the bottom.

Start with a picture journal. Write a what happened to your child today.

- Think outside the tree. "Look beyond what you see," says Loraine.

Children will draw a tree exactly the every time — a brown rectangle with stuff on the top. Get them outside to look at a real tree. Draw it differently. Include more details.

"An artist looks at the world in a far way than most people," she says.

"An artist pulls viewers into the world details.

"Help them look at nature the way it is the way they think it is."

For more information on Lyn Hancock's book time for her to come talk with children, call her at 1-250-390-9075, e-mail her at hancock@shaw.ca or visit her website at www.lynhancock.com. She also provides an activity book of ideas to teachers who use her book.

What: *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon*, a book by Lyn Hancock and Loraine Kemp, is available at book signings in British Columbia. The pair will tell the story of how the book came to be at a book launch in Niagara.

When: They will be in Niagara to launch the book on Friday, Oct. 13.

Time: 7 p.m.

Where: Vineland Estates Winery, 3620 Moyer Rd., Vineland. Bookings available for purchase and signing.

What: Book signing by Lyn Hancock for her books including *Tabasco the Saucy Raccoon* and *There's a Seal in my Sleeping Bag*.

When: Saturday, Oct. 14.

Time: 1-3 p.m.

Where: A Chestnut Lane Books, 311 St. Catharines.

Call: The bookstore can be reached at 227-1622.

What: Books *Begin in Backyards*, a book by Canadian author Lyn Hancock about writing about what you know best. She will be speaking during a regular meeting of the local Ontario Authors Association.

When: Wednesday, Oct. 18.

Time: 7:30 p.m.

Where: St. Catharines Public Library, 1000