

• Meet the Author •

Janet S. Wong

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).



Photo from <http://bluerosegirls.blogspot.com>

Janet S. Wong (www.janet-wong.com) is the author of twenty-one books for children and teens, including *TWIST: Yoga Poems* and *Homegrown House*. Her work has been featured on the Oprah Show, CNN, and on posters in the subways of New York City. Janet Wong's most recent book is *Me and Rolly Maloo*, a book about cheating, popularity, and doing the right thing.

One has to ask: Did an actual Dumpster Diver inspire this story? If so, can you tell us more about him or her? If not, where did you get this idea for the ultimate recycling team?

JSW: I dedicated the book to an artist named Kerry Wade,

a real-life Dumpster Diver who makes furniture out of things like skis—but the more I talk about the book, the more I realize that my grandfather was a big source of inspiration, too. My grandfather never climbed into a dumpster, but he was the ultimate do-it-yourself recycler. He found creative ways to reuse all kinds of things, from jam jars to lobster shells. I really admire people with “Dumpster Diver Spirit”!

What an intrepid group of characters comprises the diving team! Are any of these characters based on actual people?

JSW: One of my friends once joked that she didn't feel safe around me, because she worried that she would end up in my books. I think I often “cobble together” characters from people I know (including myself). There's no one particular person depicted in the Diving Team, but if you asked my teen son, he would say that I am a lot like The Grouch.

Do you ever host a dumpster dive—or something similar—when you visit schools? How have kids responded to the idea of the radical repurposing the diving team does?

JSW: I've seen some wonderful Dumpster Diver-inspired

creations at schools, libraries, and bookstores. One of my favorite pieces was a baby boat made out of an infant car seat that was duct-taped to large pieces of styrofoam (trash). My all-time favorite work of “junk art,” though, is a four-foot tall “dummy” of Steve the Dumpster Diver dressed in yellow diving gear. A librarian (who is also an artist and art teacher) made him out of old milk jugs, juice cartons, toilet paper rolls, soda cans, and paint. He has become my Garage King, ruler of all my junk.

Many of your published books are poetry and you are well known as a poet. How does writing your picture books differ from the writing of poetry?

JSW: The first five books of mine that were published were poetry books, so most people think of me as a poet, especially because the picture books that followed (*Buzz* and *The Trip Back Home*) make use of poetic elements such as rhyme, repetition, and rhythm and were written in lines of varying length. My Minn and Jake chapter books were also written in lines of varying length because I wanted them to be quick-and-easy. This makes the Minn and Jake books seem like poems, too, though they're really stories.

Meet the Author

My most recent book, *Me and Rolly Maloo*, is a departure for me because it is a story written in prose—regular sentences and paragraphs. I think it's easier to write a poem than a story because, with poems, anything goes. You don't have to worry about making sense.

What role do you feel that David Roberts's illustrations play in making *The Dumpster Diver* the book it is? And in what ways do you feel his art is particularly well-suited to your text?

JSW: David Roberts is a genius with true Dumpster Diver Spirit. A perfect example is the illustration where I talk about how a ripped crib mat-

ress (plus a shower head plus a bunch of stuff) can become "anything we want it to be." I never would've visualized a shower head that was hooked up to a hose so the Crib-mobile could chase kids and squirt them. Brilliant!

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

JSW: Please ask your librarian to show my books to you! My books are scattered all over the library—you'll find them with poetry books, with picture books, with chapter books, and "Meet the Author" books.

I think kids should explore the library shelves more, and grab a wide variety of books. You're

never too old for a picture book, and because it only takes five minutes to read one, you should check one out every week, even if you are sixteen years old!

The neat thing about a poetry collection is that you can read it backwards, or read every other page; you don't need to read the whole thing. If you like even just one poem in a book, that book has still been useful to you!

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of twelve picture books, most recently Adventure Annie Goes to Kindergarten (Dial, 2010) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

