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Q & A with Heather Ayris Burnell

By Patricia J. Murphy | Oct 24, 2022

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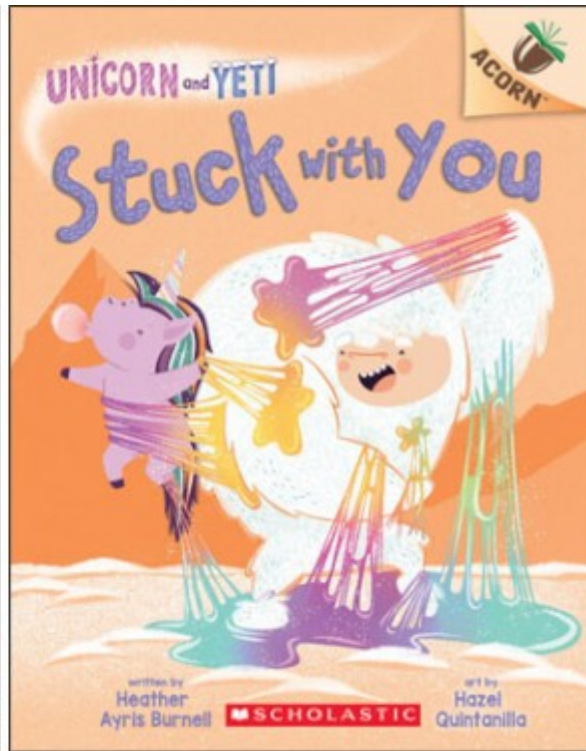
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Heather Ayris Burnell grows book collections, readers... and garlic. As a children's author, Washington State librarian, and a garlic farmer, she gets books into kids' hands and garlic on tables across the U.S. with her family-run garlic farm. Burnell works with the North Central Washington Libraries as the branch librarian at

the Oroville Branch, in Oroville, Wash. She is also the author of the picture books Kick! Jump! Chop! The Adventures of the Ninjabread Man and Bedtime Monster, and the chapter book series Unicorn and Yeti. The series' seventh title, Stuck on You, will be out December 6. PW spoke with Burnell about her roles as a librarian and children's author, the influence her library work has on her writing, and the life lessons she's learned from being a farmer.

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a lot of different opportunities to create stories. I remember making books in class, including poetry books. I'd create covers made with cloth and tie the pages together. I also took part in community cookbook and historical writing contests, and I got my writing in a couple of small publications. This felt very special to me at that age.

As a teen, I didn't write for any real purpose except to relax, which I did mostly through journaling. I'd write about what was on my mind, and occasional stories. At that time, I was writing for myself. I didn't really think about writing for publication until I had a family of my own. And, it occurred to me, I could be a writer.

Naturally, I headed to my library, and checked out many craft books on writing for children and publishing, and it kind of went from there. It took a while to learn what I needed to know. If writing has taught me anything, it's that good things take time—and that the time it takes is worth it.

Can you tell us how your stories about a sparkly unicorn and a furry yeti came to be?

These stories began with a singular story about a unicorn, which was first a picture book. Many revisions later, I thought about "What is the opposite of a unicorn?" And a yeti popped up in the story. As my readers can tell you, Unicorn is sparkly, happy, outgoing, and enthusiastic. And Yeti does things in a different way. Like when he says, "Okay, I don't brush my fur very much." He doesn't have to be fancy like Unicorn because he's more realistic and down to Earth. And, while the two characters are different, they show readers that we don't have to be the same to be friends and work together.

How did you find a home for Unicorn and Yeti?

After working on the initial picture book manuscript, my agent, Sean McCarthy, suggested that I try creating an early reader story collection. I loved the idea because many of my favorite books growing up were early reader type books (e.g. Arnold Lobel, Syd Hoff, and P.D. Eastman). In addition, I'd always wanted to write early readers because they are often the first books that a child reads to themselves. So, of course, I said, "OK, I'll do that!" I came up with a few stories about Unicorn and Yeti who are complete opposites.

What else can you tell us about Unicorn, Yeti, and the series?

In my original Unicorn story, Unicorn was an imaginary friend to a little girl, and I liked the idea of imaginary friends being real. I had a Unicorn that was an imaginary friend, too. So this series takes this story one step further. In the series, Unicorn and Yeti may be imaginary characters, but they're true friends. Each book has three stories in it about the two of them that can be read independently of each other.

How long have you been a librarian? When did you begin?

I started working at the Oroville branch about 15 years ago as a substitute librarian. I filled in for the branch librarian when they needed it—and I came in whenever they needed an extra pair of hands. When the branch librarian retired, I took over the position, and I've been in this role for the last five years. As branch librarian in a small rural library, I get to do everything from programming and storytime to outreach and community engagement to reader's advisory, and working the desk, and much more.

When did you first become a writer, and what made you decide to start writing books for kids?

I've been writing my whole life. I could read from a very young age, so I've always liked reading books. But I think that something about first grade flipped a switch for me, and I just liked writing things down. At my elementary school, I had

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Every day seems to hold a lot of story potential that I have scarcely tapped into.

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What's nice about the books being split into separate stories is that readers can read one story at a time and feel accomplished. Or, they can read all the stories in a row. While the stories are related, readers don't have to read one story before reading the others. The adorable artwork is done by Hazel Quintanilla, and the color-coded speech bubbles help reinforce comprehension.

And, when readers are through reading a book, there's a place in the back where they can draw and be inspired to write stories of their own.

I wrote the first six books between 2019 and 2022. It's been a quick turn around. But it's a great way to keep the excitement going for emerging readers.



© Jennifer Haddad

Burnell reading aloud.

emerge, there's joy and hope; but you have to keep working. You water and weed and worry. You may work until your muscles ache and your hands don't want to move. You come back again and again to see what more you can do. And you also wait, patiently, until finally it is time to harvest. It's all hard work. And with the harvest, more work has begun! You learn something new every season, and get better at what you do with each crop. It feels a lot like process of creating a book.

What's next for Unicorn and Yeti—and for you? And what are your hopes for these stories?

Of course, I hope that some readers feel that sparkle with Unicorn and Yeti books that leads them to find their love of reading, but most of all, I hope that readers just have fun reading them!

I've just turned in my manuscripts for books eight and nine—that equals 27 Unicorn and Yeti stories! Moving forward, writing Unicorn and Yeti stories and working at the library are taking most of my time these days, but I'm doing my best to work on other early reader and picture book ideas. And there are always so many possibilities for new stories. With being librarian, living in the mountains off grid for a time, and my farm life—every day seems to hold a lot of story potential that I have scarcely tapped into.

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How has being a librarian influenced your children's stories?

While prepping for my story times every week, I sometimes notice holes where I can't find a book on a particular subject, or I can't find enough good read alouds for a theme. And, I think to myself, "Maybe I should write a story about this... or that." Also, as a librarian, I am always reading lots and lots of new picture books. I think this gives me an advantage of seeing what makes a good picture book and/or early reader. On top of that, being around books all day is inspiring, hopeful, and fun! There's just so much possibility! Books can open up our world, teach us about empathy—and so many things that we don't know.

Speaking of learning, what lessons have you learned from garlic farming?

It's a lot like writing. Growing garlic is a process that you need to be in for the long haul. You plant one year and harvest the next. You have to trust that under all of that dirt something is taking shape. When the garlic tops start to



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