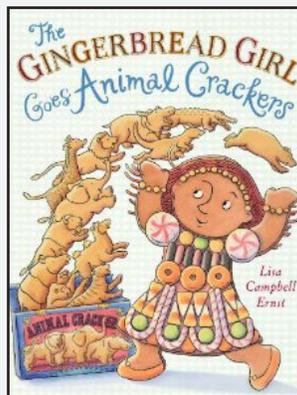


Words from the Author

Campbell Ernst, Lisa. *The Gingerbread Girl Goes Animal Crackers*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 2011.

Lisa Campbell Ernst



A box of animal crackers is magical. When I was growing up, it was a big thrill to be allowed to buy animal crackers at the grocery store. I remember skipping down the aisle in Safeway with the string handle of a new box of animal crackers draped across my wrist like it was a little Easter purse. The box itself was exotic, brightly decorated like an antique circus car with lions, bears, gorillas, and elephants shown as mothers and babies. In the car on the way home, the unveiling began. Coaxing up the lid and trying not to tear the artwork was always delicate work. The waxy paper bag inside was the last obstacle to overcome, but far less precious. Finally, there they were: a little menagerie, ready to be set free. First, the whole cookies were sorted from the broken bits, with like animals grouped together. Then, the broken pieces were sorted, to reunite some and make new animals with others: an elephant with a tiger head, or a monkey with kangaroo feet. From there, conversations would begin between the cast of characters, resulting in friendships, games of leap-frog, quarrels, marriages, family reunions, and the like. I don't actually remember eating any of them, but surely at some point I did.

Given my infatuation, it comes as no surprise that my long-time friends, animal crackers, would eventually turn up in my writing. *The Gingerbread Girl goes Animal Crackers* was a great deal of fun to write, because it continued the stories begun so long ago.

The books that I sit down to write are usually ideas I have been mulling over for several years: ideas that keep tapping me on the shoulder, saying, "this could happen, that could

happen." An earlier book, *The Gingerbread Girl*, was based on the premise that the same elderly couple that baked the ill-fated Gingerbread Boy decided to bake a girl, thinking, "Surely a sweet little girl would never try to run away." Of course she does run away, because apparently in Gingerbread Land that's just what cookies do, but not before hearing what happened to her big brother and devising a plan that eventually outfoxes the villainous fox. After finishing the book, I discovered that I missed the Gingerbread Girl. She kept dancing around in my brain long after I had said goodbye. I wondered how she was doing. I wondered what she was up to. So, the mulling began, and the idea of that sweet elderly couple giving the Gingerbread Girl a birthday celebration, including a mysteriously growling wrapped gift, was the result.

What thrills me about creating picture books is the magic that can occur by telling the story two different ways: with words and with pictures. My ultimate goal is to weave those elements together so that each strengthens the other, making the story spring to life.

I almost always begin by writing, but it is a chaotic, brainstorming type of writing. Eventually, I start mapping out how my concepts will fit into the picture book format, drawing thumbnail sketches on a huge sheet of paper so I can see everything together, writing in the margins, taping on layers and layers of words and pictures. It's a messy, serendipitous process, sprinkled with frustration, euphoria, and everything in between. As I write, rewrite, and rewrite, I continually read the text out loud, an incredibly important element in a picture book.

My favorite part of making *The Gingerbread Girl Goes Animal Crackers* was creating the animal crackers' different personalities and songs. I assumed after being boxed up in the cramped dark for so long, they would resemble kindergartners who have gone far too long without recess: an explosion of energy, celebration, very much drunk on freedom. I confess I also enjoyed the fact that the Gingerbread Girl, who thought nothing of worrying her parents when she ran away, now had to chase after her own wayward flock.

Ultimately, my goal is to tell a good story. I hope all my books are read-out-loud stories that make people smile, and most of all, connect with one another.

About the Author

Lisa Campbell Ernst has written over twenty picture books, including *Stella Louella's Runaway Book*, which won the Children's Choice Award in Kansas, and the ever-popular *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt*. She lives with her husband and two daughters in Kansas City, Missouri.