

## INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR TARJA NEVALA



**Welcome, Tarja. I'm so glad you could stop by!**

**Tarja and I are in a marketing group together. She is very talented and I now you will enjoy her interview.**

**Where are you from and where do you live?** When asked where I am from, I think about where I belong more than where I came from. I was born in Finland, raised on three continents, and have a feeling of belonging to Finland, Australia, Canada, and the United States. People often ask why I lived my childhood in four countries. My father was a war child who was separated from his family and sent to Sweden during WWII. This impacted his life and the lives of his children. He was a restless man who moved often. The Inland Pacific Northwest is my home.

**When did you know you wanted to become a writer?** Authors often tell of wanting to be a writer at an early age. My writer ambition came later in life. As an immigrant child, I had challenging language barriers. I don't remember visiting public libraries as a small child, and there were few books at home. My parents spoke and read limited English, and Finnish written material was scarce in Australia and Canada. Finnish books for children were even scarcer. This was before the internet and eBooks. The stories I knew as a young child were mostly oral stories told by my father. He was, and still is an exceptional storyteller like our Sami (Reindeer People) ancestors. I wanted to tell tales, but not write stories.

My interest in books began when my fourth-grade teacher read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to his class. I then had a home printing press like countless kids around the world; a set of twelve colored pencils, butcher paper left over from the grocery run, scissors, a stapler, and sometimes needle and thread to sew book pages together. As a teenager, I wrote simple poems, but never intended my scribblings to be shared. My writer ambition arrived when I was a young

mother. I took a college-level English class and LOVED it. The teacher encouraged me to pursue creative writing. This was a new compliment. She planted the seed. “Thank you.”

**What do you write?** I am still an immigrant kid inside. I’m a wife, mother, grandmother, and a member of a large extended family. My roles in life, personal interests, and life experiences are an active part of my writer brain and are woven into my simple poems and stories for children and adults — adults who have kept a little bit of kiddo inside. When I write, I try to keep this audience in mind, hoping to create a fun story that is delightful to listening ears. I feel good when I know my book has brought shared giggles and conversations about a deeper meaning. I write picture books.

**Do you belong to a critique group?** I don’t currently belong to a critique group but have participated in a Mindy Alyse Weiss’s Picture Book Critique Train event, and writer groups in the past. These groups and events have been invaluable. I have also paid for professional critique through SCBWI.

I would love to join a rhyming picture book critique group. Please contact me if you have room for another rhymers.

**How did you get the idea for your books?** My stories are mostly about real-life happenings, written with imagination and surprise. I want readers and listeners to experience a story to which they can relate. For example, in *Baking Day at Belle’s*, the main character Belle was so focused on baking for a party, that she didn’t notice the farm animals gathered at the window. The animals tried to politely get her attention. It’s as if Belle was a parent who ignored the children and her kitchen turned into chaos. The animals helped themselves to treats.

**How long did it take you to write your books?** Currently, I have two published books. I began writing both manuscripts in 2020 and the books were self-published in the fall of 2022.

**Do you remember the time you actually said, “I’m an author!” What was that feeling like?** Saying “I’m an author” is still difficult for me. I don’t want to take away from the honor of being a traditionally published author, and because I’m self-published, I think of myself as a published writer. Being a published writer (author) comes with a feeling of vulnerability and sense of duty.

I have not taken time to celebrate being a published writer. My readers, family, and friends call me an author. They are my best fans and I celebrate them.

**You’re a busy woman, how do you handle juggling writing, publishing, and grandparent duties?** Leslie, your description of juggling is perfect. Life is a busy juggling of duties for creative people, yet we manage to fit in time for writing, self-publishing (or querying), marketing, and taking care of personal life. It is a skill I continue to improve by paying attention to prioritizing, time management, and flexibility. Prioritizing and time management include the usual to-do lists and calendars. Flexibility means, I allow myself to be spontaneous. I amend my daily plan when life happens, reminding myself there is a tomorrow. My husband is supportive of my writing hobby. I sometimes hand him one of my juggling balls.

**How do you clear your head?** I love to walk, play piano, sing, call my parents who live far away, or pop in on local grandkids. The Littles in my life give me good belly laughs. Deep breaths, hugs, smiles, and a cup of coffee with people I love, bring joy, and recharge my emotional and mental batteries.

**What is positive and what is negative about being self-published?** Self-publishing is still a new and exciting experience for me. It is a wide learning curve that has not straightened out into an easy path yet. Along my self-publishing route, I've enjoyed working directly with a talented editor and two fabulous illustrators, which is not always possible with traditional publishers.

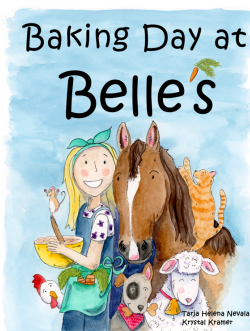
Self-publishing has allowed me to write about what is important to me and not what the market trends indicate. This sounds risky for book sales, but it really is not when my publishing goals are personal and long term. I can keep my books on the market for as long as I want, and release paperback, hardcover, and eBook versions simultaneously. Most traditional publishers do not follow this plan.

When self-publishing, I can find an illustrator who fits the story, be involved as an art director of the project, finalize page layout, set my own pricing and global distribution discounts, decide when to release my new book, and just do it! I do not spend emotional time in the “query trenches.” Books can be published sooner rather than later.

My most challenging part of self-publishing is marketing. Successful marketing requires self-promotion by the author, and a plan for book launches. I need to work on all aspects of marketing.

One last thought about publishing — I have heard of changes in the publishing world. All changes are not clear to me however, it is safe to say, self-published books and indie authors are becoming more visible. I welcome this.

**Tell us about your books.** *Baking Day at Belle's* is dedicated to my niece who loves to bake for her horse. It's a story about country kitchen chaos, farm animals, friendship, sharing, creative problem solving, and speaking up when you want to be heard. The book is a 32-page children's picture book written in easy-to-read rhyme for ages 4 and up. A fun horse biscuit recipe is included.



*Fillip Woke Up on Christmas Eve* is my debut picture book for ages 4 and up. It is a rhyming story inspired by a real-life happening when a fly woke up in our organically growth Christmas tree. In the story, Fillip the fly has a delightfully optimistic attitude and thinks Nana's Christmas feast is a picnic made for him. Nana had a different thought and made a clever choice on how to get rid of the annoying guest who sat on her favorite cake. The story has layers of learning, and the most significant lesson to me is a retelling of my immigrant childhood. Immigrant children do not always feel welcome. They have different customs and celebrations. They do not always fit in. Fillip is like an immigrant child in an unfamiliar environment. He excitedly accepted his new world, ate cake, and moved on with a smile and cheerful "bye-bye." It is okay to be different and not liked by everyone. It unfortunately happens. I speak from experience when I say, teaching a child to love their heritage and uniqueness is far more important than teaching them to change who they are so they can fit in — OR, teaching a child to try change people around them. There are deep concerns in society that should never be child's problem to solve. It is okay to move on and find a better friend — a cozy place of acceptance. Nana and Fillip departed on good terms. The book includes Nana's mantecada (cake) recipe and fun fly facts.



**What is next for you?** It is always exciting to think of what is next. Thank you, Leslie, for the opportunity to talk about 2023. I hope to have two picture books published. Readers have asked for more Belle's busy farm stories, and I have a heartstring tugging tale about a mini pincher who lost her bark. Sophie met a firefly who had also lost something important. Sophie and James become friends and solve their problems. The book is in rhyme and includes interesting firefly facts.

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